



## Becoming the Mountain

Angelo Capasso

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By: Angelo Capasso

## Mountain and water: the spirit of *shan shui*

The Chinese expression "shan shui" <sup>1</sup>refers to a form of traditional brush and ink painting that depicts natural scenarios or landscapes (mountains, rivers, waterfalls). The origins of *shan shui* dates back to the V century, under the Southern Song Dynasty founded by Emperor Taizu of Song<sup>2</sup>; its theoretical structure grew out of the three religions that permeate Chinese culture: Confucianism, with its rules for government and social behavior; Taoism with its profound spiritualism; Buddhism and its rich and structured cosmology and idea of the afterlife. There are substantial differences amongst the three religions that need to be stressed.

Confucianism is the religion of good governance: Confucius lived in the VI century b.C. - during the so called Axial Age, the age of the great thinkers in Europe, India and China (Plato, Buddha, etc.). Confucius' Era is known as the most chaotic Era in Chinese history, when the Zhou dynasty (11th-3rd centuries), at the end of its fortune, suffered the continuous military arrogance of other belligerent kingdoms. Since his youth Confucius devoted himself to study, favoring above all the ancient rites, music and poetry. Confucius is known for his theories on social and political behaviors. In the *Dialogues* (*Lunyu*)<sup>3</sup>, a work composed by Confucius' disciples and considered a collection of conversations, aphorisms and anecdotes, the divine entity par excellence, the "heaven" ("*tian*")

recurs very rarely; that did not mean that since he: "never speaks of extraordinary events [...] and of divinities"<sup>4</sup>, he denied the supernatural. Instead, it is the profound political-social crisis of the time that leads him to reserve exclusive attention and concern for the society: "If you do not know how to honor men, how can you think of honoring divinities and spirits?"<sup>5</sup>. On the opposite side of Confucius' attempt to achieve social and political harmony was Tao.

Taoist philosophy was founded by Laozi, a contemporary but also an opponent to Confucius. Tao, "the way", according to Laozi is the absolute principle underlying the universe, combining within itself the principles of "yin" and "yang" and signifying the way, or code of behaviour, that is in harmony with the natural order. The yin-yang principle illustrates the way in which the universe is founded on a balance and harmony between masculine/feminine, positive/negative, light/darkness, active/passive, life/death etc.. The interpretation of Tao contained in the *Tao-te-Ching* developed into the philosophical religion of Taoism, indicating the common goal of the Taoist practice in the self-cultivation to reach the individual ascesis for a deeper appreciation of the Tao and a more harmonious existence. <sup>6</sup>The "way" is therefore a pathway outside of worldly issues and matters: Taoism ethics emphasize such virtues as effortless action, naturalness, simplicity, and the three treasures of compassion, frugality, and humility.

The third spiritual context that signi-

<sup>1</sup> Chinese: 山水; lit. 'mountain-water'

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Song\\_dynasty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Song_dynasty)

<sup>3</sup> [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialoghi\\_\(Confucio\)](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialoghi_(Confucio))

<sup>4</sup> Confucius, *Lunyu* VII, 21

<sup>5</sup> Confucius, *Lunyu* XI, 12

<sup>6</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taoism>

fies Chinese culture is Buddhism. It seeped into China in the 1st century A.D. at the time in which the Han Dynasty reached the Pamir knot.<sup>7</sup> In the beginnings its diffusion was very limited. Buddhism's popularity spread and became the dominant religion during the Three Dynasties (V century). Its good fortune continued with the reunification operated by the Sui (581-618) and then during the Tang Dynasty (618-902), when it reached its cultural peak. In the middle of the 9th century A.D., however, the excessive power of the Buddhist monasteries created a conflict of Buddhism with the Imperial authorities which determined its decline and a rebirth of Confucianism. Buddhists believe that human beings have the potential to become free from suffering by practicing meditation and cultivating a lifestyle prescribed by the Buddha. Buddha's teachings (the *Dharma*) are based on the belief that life does not end with death: after human beings die, they reincarnate into a new form which can be a deity, a human, an animal, or some lower creature like a hungry ghost (a being with a small head and huge stomach, and therefore always hungry), or an inhabitant of hell. It is believed that all positive thoughts and actions cause good *karma* and may direct one into being reborn in a higher form. The consequences of one's negative deeds, bad karma, may result in rebirth in a lower form. This endless cycle of rebirth, called reincarnation, reflects the impermanent nature of human existence. Buddhism is a doctrine that advocates the renunciation of the world; also Buddhism is far away from Confucianism: Buddha wants to "leave the world" that is experienced as pain; Confucius wants to govern it.

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<sup>7</sup> The Pamir knot separated China from the three regions of Central Asia, Inner Asia, and Northwestern India.

The three religions Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism are in some aspects very far from each other. They became a unified way of thinking under the Song Dynasty, when China was definitively reunified, the same time when *shan shui* grew out of the fusion between the worldly man (Confucius), the hermit (Tao) and the eternal movement of the wheel of life (Buddhism). In fact, although the essential elements of the landscape painting, mountain and water, may seem closest to the spirituality of the Tao and Buddhism, a phrase coined by Confucius "the wise take pleasure in rivers and lakes, the virtuous in mountains" (*Analects*)<sup>8</sup> demonstrates how the Nature represented in *shan shui* is also part of any political philosophy. *Shan shui* then absorbs in itself worldly as well as metaphysical issues. The civil governance finds a unity with the Taoist conception of the worldly man as an inseparable part of the universe and harmony: mountain and water are two indispensable elements for this spiritual goal and consequently play a prominent role in Chinese Art. China's geography inevitably plays a prominent influence on Chinese culture and is the major reason for the spreading of *shan shui* painting: large mountainous terrain makes up most of the country, water is abundant in the Central and Southern regions, and three of the world's greatest streams, the Yellow River, the Yangtze and the West River, define much of the land. This natural environment has shaped China's culture and traditions and molded the minds of her people. Mountain and water are subjects of Chinese mythology and symbolism: ancient Chinese mythology abounds

<sup>8</sup> The *Analects*, also known as the Sayings of Confucius, is an ancient Chinese philosophical text composed of sayings and ideas attributed to Confucius and his contemporaries, traditionally believed to have been compiled by his followers. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analects>



Xu Longsen 徐龙森, *Literary Mind and The Carving of Dragons II* 《文心雕龙》 Ink on paper, 310





with tales of mountain mysticism. Mountains not only offer a life in seclusion, devoid of restraints, but also a wealth of stimulating shapes, a multitude of colors and the ever changing moods so typical of mountainous surroundings-impressions of this kind are apt to reveal the all-pervading spirit of the universe to the perceptive mind. Nature's sheer power and grandeur is more easily comprehended in a setting with rugged peaks capped by misty clouds. The Taoist notion of water is yet more essential: Laozi employed water as their chief metaphor because water is omnipresent, embracing all living things with no trace of partiality; it is also the great mediator between contrasts, forever seeking balance, continuously dissolving and solidifying, it attains an infinite number of fresh manifestations of unity by way of perpetual transformation. The superior qualities of water are to be emulated by man: it follows its own course and always fills the bottom level, equivalent to the wise man being true to himself and maintaining a low profile. Water is the emblem of the unassertive. Taking the path of least resistance, always yielding, its effectiveness is unsurpassed.

Mountains play an important role particularly in Buddhism: with an unerring sense for scenic grandeur, Buddhist monks set up monasteries in the pristine mountain wilderness. These sites became gathering grounds for those seeking spiritual enlightenment, islands of hope for the deprived and the disheartened. The narratives of pilgrims spread the word of the magic spell cast by China's great mountains, of the healing powers of Nature on the soul. For some high-minded literati, seeking refuge in the mountains became the only alternative to compromising their ideals. Individuals who were willing

to sacrifice careers and luxuries in an immoral world for a frugal, pure existence in the mountains became models and were immortalized in poetry and painting for centuries to come. The Six Dynasties period, then, was a time when a large number of people came to view Nature as a refuge, in a spiritual or political sense. It was also the time when Nature as a motif entered the arts. Landscape painting as a genre was born and would soon outstrip all other forms. Whether creating landscape paintings, gardens or *penjing*<sup>9</sup> - Chinese artists have not sought to recreate Nature in a realistic manner. Never has outward resemblance been a major objective. A superior piece of art possesses the quality to transmit life, to convey the very spirit inherent in Nature. In pursuit of this goal, the artist concentrates on the essential, leaves out all superfluous detail, eliminates anything that would distract the viewer's attention. Mountain and water are the primary compositional elements, the quintessence of Nature, the bones and the blood of the earth. *Shan shui* then celebrates a perfect harmonic marriage in landscape which synthesizes in the two poles of cosmic energy, the yang (positive) and the yin (negative). Yang and yin are mutually generative and mutually supportive, and the key to ultimate wisdom is held by those who know how to keep both principles in their proper balance. Mountains and water form such an ideal yang-yin pair.

*Shan shui* is strongly rooted in China's culture, it represents a form of *ars perennis* in China, interpreting China's soul's aspiration to eternity: infusing historical events with metaphysical inspirations. It is a never ending tradition that continues with contemporary art in the XXI century. There are many examples of *shan shui* painting artworks in the contemporary Chi-  
[9 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penjing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penjing)

nese scene, amongst which the most interesting is Xu Longsen's paintings<sup>10</sup>:

10 On Chinese contemporary art I curated the exhibition "Onda anomala. Il lavoro dell'arte fuori e dentro la Cina: Cao Fei, H.H. Lim, Wang Du, Xu Tan, Yan Pei-Ming, Yang Jiechang, Zheng Guogu", during Manifesta 7 (Trento, 16 July - 10 August 2008) and Xu Longsen's exhibition large retrospective "Xu Longsen - Dall'Alto di Due Imperi", at Museo della Civiltà Romana (Rome 21/06/2011 - 24/07/2011). In 2011 I also took part of the conference "Landscape Reborn", international conference on Landscape in Chinese culture and art, at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. This event is organized by SOAS, the National Art Museum of China, and is sponsored by Asian Art in London (AAL). Participants: Roderick Whitefield (Sinologist, Art Historian), Wang Tao (SOAS-University of London), Shane Mcoslin (SOAS-University of London), Jan Stuart (Director of Asian Art Dept. British Museum), Clarissa Von Spee (Chinese Art Collection, British Museum), Zhang Hongxing (Chinese Art Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum), Jiang Jiehong Curator (Director of Chinese Visual Art Center, Birmingham) Fan Di'an (Director of National Art Museum of China), Chen Lusheng (Deputy Director, China National Museum), Yu Hui (Director of Research Dept., The Palace Museum of China), Chen Kelun (Deputy Director, Shanghai Museum), Li Xiaoshan (Director of Research Center of Contemporary Art), Nanjing Art Academy, (Director of Museum of Nanjiang Art Academy), Wang Yuechuan (Professor of Pecking University, Director of The Art of Calligraphy Research Institute of Pecking University), Li Xianting (Art Critic, Director of Songzhuang Art Museum), Shao Dazhen (Professor of Central Academy of Fine Art of China), Zhu Qingsheng (Art Historian, Professor of Pecking University), Xu Bing (Artist, Deputy Director of Central Academy of Fine Art of China), Cai Guoqiang (Artist), Xu Longsen (Artist), Wang Jianwei (Artist, Art critic), Chang Tsong-zong (Art Critic, Director of HongKong Hanart Gallery, Chairman of Asian Art Archivi), Clare Xu (President of Asian Art Archive), Wan Liqing (Director of Visual Institute, The HongKong Polytechnic University), James Elkins (Art Historian, artcritic, Professor of Chicago Art Institute), Colin Mackenzie (Chief Curator of Chinese Art, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art), Xu Jie (Director of Sanfransisco Asia Art Museum), Angelo Capasso (Professor of Contemporary Art, Art Critic, Curator) Xing Xiaozhou (Curator), Jacques Giès (Director of Musee Guimet, France), Richard Vinograd (Christensen Fund Professor in Asian Art Department of Art & Art History Stanford University), Si Han (Curator, Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm).

his work is strictly related to the traditional *shan shui* that he has updated with a new monumental format. The sculpture, calligraphy and painting studies he has carried out over the years are poured into the large rocky landscapes that the artist, and consequently also those who observe them, are called upon to climb with their gaze, climbing up the very long Xuan paper canvases, to undertake an individual journey that leads him to identify with the natural spaces represented. A painting to contemplate that recalls the very essence of oriental spirituality, where only through immersion and contemplation of nature, in particular of the peaks that recall the majesty of the Chinese mountain landscape, man is able to reconcile with nature itself, rediscovering his own balance and inner peace in a sort of regeneration ritual.

Mount Hua is Xu Longsen's favorite natural environment for its landscapes and the setting of his journey. It is one of the five sacred mountains in China, located about 120 km from the city of Xi'an, Shaanxi province; it is a place out of time and dotted with centuries-old Taoist temples immersed in uncontaminated nature. The particular extension of Xu Longsen's canvases absorbs the artist's contemplation and embodies the extension of his thought, which seeks to trace its boundaries through painting. On Mount Hua nature meets beauty, it comprises five summits which give it the appearance of a flower: the Facing Yang Summit, the Jade Maiden Summit, the Lotus Flower Summit, the Cloud Terrace Peak and the highest and most dangerous of them all, the South Peak. Legend has it that Laozi once held a sermon on this mountain. From then on, Taoist temples arose in the area, visited by thousands of people every year, despite the impractica-



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Leonardo da Vinci, Paesaggio con fiume, Ink on paper, 19×28,5 cm, 1473



bility of the route leading to the summit. Sensory perception is transmuted into reality through art that captures the vibration of energy, "resonance" as defined by Xu Longsen, whose work as an artist acts as a modulator that regulates intensity. It is through the mutual exchange of energy that the strength of the mountain becomes perceivable, even by the spectator, as a fertile breath that generates the cosmos. In China, "mountains and water" are combined because they are the origin of the vibration of which the artist is the "resonant", the blade of grass blowing in the wind. Landscape finds its roots in the heart, or rather the mind/heart, which is also an inseparable unit in Chinese landscape, the fusion of oppositions in a unique balancing act: it is the synthesis of the sky with the ground, humankind with nature, the masculine with the feminine, yin with yang.

### **The solitude and the desert: earth-works and land artists**

In the Western World, the first examples of landscape paintings are found as decorations on the Roman villas' walls or on vases and other utensils. It is only at the end of the XV century that the term "landscape" emerged in art to denote a painting whose primary subject matter was the natural scenery. It sprouted in the Dutch language, "landscape", introduced by Dutch painters who used it to refer to paintings of inland natural or rural scenery. Since the XV century landscape paintings grew exponentially in its diffusion in Europe thanks to the vast production in the Netherlands. In that region, the strong influence of Calvinism (which prohibited the diffusion of sacred paintings outside of churches and religious places) favored the flourishing of alternative pictorial images such as peasant life, still life,

country, rural and marine landscapes. Before becoming an art genre, landscape was used in the English speaking world referring to "a system of human-made spaces on the land", or an "area of the Earth's surface and the general being that which can be seen by an observer". With its use in painting, "landscape" becomes the depiction of a portion of Nature according to the artist's sight.

Art history records few examples of landscape painting *ante litteram* before it became a genre. The first example of landscape is generally considered Leonardo da Vinci's *Paesaggio del Valdarno* (1473): it is a drawing which represents a view of the Valdarno (the Arno river's valley, Leonardo's birthplace), showing two rocky promontories, dotted with castles, where the Arno river runs and winds through trees, bushes and fields in the distance. Leonardo did that drawing probably as a sketch for a larger painting; it is also possible that the young Leonardo, at that time a pupil of Andrea del Verrocchio, created the foreshortening for pleasure, according to a habit of the artist which Vasari gives an account of in *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550). Leonardo made a significant contribution to the nascent landscape painting because he made it an archive of natural varieties, just as compositional variants.

The most relevant revolution in landscape art takes place in the in the United States in the second half of the XX century. It origins with the *Earth Art* exhibition, inaugurated on 11 February 1969 at the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. The show exhibited the work of artists such as: Jan Dibbets, Hans Haacke, Neil Jenney, Richard Long, David Medalla, Robert Morris,



Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson, and Gunther Uecker. It defines the beginning of the "Land Art" scene, although the definition "land art" was not used before it became the title of Gerry Schum's film broadcast on the German TV (channel 1 of Sender Freies Berlin SFB) on 15 April 1969 (at 10:40 pm). The documentary "Land Art" records the work of the *Earth Art* exhibition without narration or commentary through a simple reproduction made by a fixed camera and the single shot, following a shooting method in line with the emerging underground cinema. Using television as a medium for art (a TV gallery) was an unusual and experimental approach at the time with the goal of making contemporary art accessible to a wide audience, questioning also the exclusivity of the gallery as an exhibition space for art. Since Gerry Schum's film, "land art" became the name of a trend which identifies art with the real, a new interpretation of landscape painting where the earthworks incarnated the symbolism that lived in landscape painting into the real. Land Art, as a label, was evidently more suitable because it showed an affinity with the traditional landscape paintings in a new relationship with Nature. Actually there is a strong relation with the original landscape painting, as many of the landscape painters were also cartographers, making maps, so they already knew the world in its physical dimensions: Land Art was the attainment of a long time project that brought the art of the artists outside of the picture frame inside the everyday world. The US territory became an open air museum where art works shared their territory with Nature. Since its beginnings Land artists have disseminated the American territory with their interventions. The greatest concentration of Land Art works is in the southwestern area of the United

States, amongst deserts and mountains: Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas and Utah. It is the area marked by large arid and desert spaces: in Nevada there are *Double Negative*, *Complex City* and *Dissipate* by Heizer, a not far from Walter De Maria's *Las Vegas Piece*. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* is located in Utah and Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*. In Arizona, south of Utah, is James Turrell's *Roden Crater*. Near Utah, in New Mexico, Walter De Maria built the *Lightning Field*. That is the area where the Native Americans, about 40,000 years ago, arrived after crossing the Bering Strait from the Asian continent towards North America, then descending from Canada to the South. It is the land of one of the first groups of migrants in the Americas, the Clovis, and the Navajo, Apache, Hopi and Ute. "Should these art forms flourish and develop we shall soon need a kind of National Geographic for Aesthetes"<sup>11</sup>. Earthworks have very strong common characteristics: despite the extremely disparate origins of Earth Art, several sculptural concerns are widely shared by Earth Artists, including a total absence of anthropomorphism and a pervasive conception of the natural order of reality. The conceptual bases of the works vary greatly, but visually they all tend to be unpretentious and relatively unobtrusive. The works are without physical support, without base, grounded in their environment either indoors or out. The result is an unframed experience with no one correct perspective or focus. Each work cannot be taken in at a single glance. The spectator has to experience the different stages of the system if he wants to experience the whole work, which has its own life span.

<sup>11</sup> Hickey, Dave. "Earthscapes, Landworks and Oz.", *Art in America* September-October 1971, 45.









The most common perceptible aspects of earthworks is their straightforward manner: in many cases the medium is presented intact with minimum formal modification; the landscape, as revisited by land artists, opens up to far-reaching cultural implications that concern not only the formal aspect of the work, but also tangential issues, such as its documentation, communication, maintenance, protection and originality. The specific transience of the works on the territory/earth (earthworks) gives a primary role to photography, which becomes the "original copy" of the work. The debate on original/copy intensifies at the end of the sixties, in parallel with the discussions on the "death of art", a political-cultural act with which central issues for art such as the copy, the fake, the multiple, the fetishism of collecting and the object-commodity are summarized in a single question: what is meant by "original"? This debate intensifies around the earthworks and includes them on different fronts: from the choice of photographers (selected by the artist on the basis of their willingness to follow the artist's instructions and to renounce the copyright on the image) to the development of shooting techniques and methods; up to the use of images within the media. Traditional landscape photography for land artists does not have a complete meaning, it is not the cast of reality, it is instead the "trace" of it, it is the "clue/index" of the site, the testimony of its existence.

Robert Smithson, a protagonist in Land Art, in his essay *Entropy and the New Monuments*<sup>12</sup> calls the Law of Entropy as the main scientific support to his work and to Land Art. Derived from physics, like inertia, the law of entropy describes the decay of energy in a system by measuring the degree

of chaos within it<sup>13</sup>. According to the second law of thermodynamics, an isolated system always loses energy, meaning that its energy is converted into another form - since it can never be lost - and the entropy within the system is maximized until it reaches an equilibrium point. Entropy was a constant issue throughout Smithson's art and writings. He explored his ideas involving decay and renewal, chaos and order through which he became known with his *Nonsites* and *Heathworks*. Smithson spoke at length in his interviews and essays about entropy and his notion of time. In *Entropy and the New Monuments* he wrote: "...the sprawl of urban sprawl, and the infinite number of dwellings produced by the postwar economic boom, contributed to the architecture of entropy" and further "entropy is a condition that is moving toward a gradual equilibrium", he explained that in his art he sought to represent the entropy of existence, the human attempt to uselessly counteract this entropy and the mechanisms that relate man, a finite and mortal being, to nature, a concept that instead borders on the infinite and the unlimited. For Smithson, entropy has become a way to fuel his artistic practice by giving structure to the 'life' of his works excavated in the environment. Essentially, for him, entropy is translated into "time as biological decay or evolution."<sup>14</sup>. This is the essence of Land Art and its evident challenge to the original landscape painting: art that sprout, grows and dies like any other natural being.

Land Art's common features can be summarized in four main features (and four examples):

1. Earthworks as temporary monuments
2. The visible and the invisible

<sup>13</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entropy>

<sup>14</sup> Smithson, Robert, *Entropy and the New Monuments*, 1966.

<sup>12</sup> <https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/entropy-and-new-monuments>

3. Depth and surface: beyond perspective
4. Incarnating ideas: becoming the mountain

# 1. Earthworks as temporary monuments

*Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty (Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970).*

Spiral Jetty is undoubtedly the best-known work of Land Art. It is a great construction work created with the use of approximately six thousand tons of black basalt and earth in the Great Salt Lake, part of the original lake Bonneville (located at an average altitude of 1,280 m, with a length of approximately 120 km and a width that varies between 48 and 80 km, and an average surface area of 4,400 km<sup>2</sup>). The name of the lake underlines its high salinity which is associated with the presence of very few living species (mainly small crustaceans of the *Artemia salina* species). The salinity has increased due to a road intervention which, since 1959, has prevented the introduction of fresh water into the Lake from the Bear, Weber/Ogden and Jordan rivers. They are these geo-environmental conditions and the visual aspect of the overall context, in which the pink color of the water (due to a red pigment in the bacteria and algae that survive in the extreme salinity) contrasts with the white of the salt crystals and the black of the basalt boulders, which contributed to Smithson's choice. But Spiral Jetty is not just the site-specific work. As in the tradition of conceptual art (as teaches the Joseph Kosuth main work *One and Three Chairs*, 1965), the title of the work identifies a stratification of conceptual operations involving other media: specifically, film and writing. Smithson's work, in fact, in addition to being an earthwork, it is a film and an essay. It's Utah's National monument.

# 2. The visible and the invisible

Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field, (Catron County, New Mexico, 1977).*

The installation presents itself as a field of approximately three square kilometers where Walter De Maria has placed four hundred high energy bars (metal poles) driven orthogonally into the ground waiting to be captured by the electrical energy released by lightning. It is a natural threat, or rather, in Walter De Maria's theories a *conditio sine qua non* for art, as the artist specifies in his essay *On the Importance of Natural Disasters* (1960). In that text De Maria rehabilitates the Burke's category of the Sublime contained in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the first complete philosophical exposition for separating the beautiful and the sublime into their own respective rational categories. De Maria explains that the land artist's work is not limited to the representation of the Sublime; rather, it is the cause. The compelling and risky experiences of the eighteenth-century Grand Tours carried out across the Alps are transformed, with De Maria's works, into a direct experience of the "mysterium tremendum"<sup>15</sup> inherent in the sacred, into a secular version of it. In the ritual of contemplation of the work, the DIA Art Foundation, which administers its maintenance activities, asks each spectator for a declaration of liability in relation to what could happen. A formality that also recurs in a previous exhibition by the American artist (in the gallery this time), namely in *Bed of Spikes* (1968/69): a minimal object in the shape of a bed, made up of rectangular stainless steel bars on which a regular series of very sharp spikes rises.

<sup>15</sup> Otto, Rudolf, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford University Press, 1923, pp. 12-13.







Jan Dibbets, *A Trace in the Wood in the Form of an Angle of 30° Crossing the Path*, 1969.

### 3. Depth and surface: beyond perspective

*Jan Dibbets, A Trace in the Wood in the Form of an Angle of 30° Crossing the Path (1969).*

After exploring the woodland near Six Mile Creek several miles from the Museum, Dibbets found a large clearing in the forest where a path crossed a naturally beautiful site next to the creek. With a clothesline attached to large rocks, Dibbets and a small crew of students marked out a large V on the ground, each arm of which was approximately five feet wide and one hundred feet long. The turf within each arm of the V was turned over with pickaxes and shovels, except where the V was intersected by the path. Several times during the course of the exhibition, snow fell in the area, giving the work a continually varying appearance. Dibbets considers the long walk through the woods to the site of his work to be part of the piece.<sup>16</sup> The choice of Jan Dibbets, one of the "non-Americans" among the artists participating in the historic Earth Art, falls within the scope of his research focused above all on the photographic process. Jan Dibbets is undoubtedly the artist with the strongest relationship to the origins of landscape painting. Through his work on/with photography Dibbets analyzes its structural elements as already in the paintings of Piet Mondrian and their seventeenth-century Dutch forerunners. The studies that Dibbets carried out between 1967 and 1969 are the basis of the "correction of perspective" of *Those Perspective Corrections* were based on a simple anamorphic principle: using strings, Dibbets "draws" a trapezoid on a lawn, then photographs it from a point of view that allows him to effect its transformation into a square. [...] In the first two *Corrections* the artist is still feign-

16 Sharp, Willoughby e William C. Lipke, (curators) *Earth Art*, Cornell University, 1970. 21

ing ignorance of the consequences of the anamorphic character of the photographs. The photograph relegated to a secondary role seems [...] like the illustration of a process embodying a dual questioning of our way of seeing and our way of transcribing what we see.<sup>17</sup> In *A Trace in the Wood* the correction takes place directly on the landscape: Dibbets creates a transversal passage that intersects and interrupts the forced perspective created by the double path that crosses in depth in a V. In Schum's film, the intervention of the Dutch artist *12 Hours Tide Object with Correction of Perspective* is formalized in a trapezoid traced by a tractor on the sand which optically transforms into a square. Schum masterfully closes that intervention with a non-cinematic fade, but according to a natural process that identifies a peculiarity of Land Art works, that is, their being subject to natural laws: the slow cancellation of the artist's work occurs when the high tide arrives.

### 4. Incarnating ideas: becoming the mountain

*Michael Heizer Levitated Mass (2012 Resnick North Lawn, Los Angeles County Museum of Art).*

With Land Art, the traditional symbolism related to landscape painting inevitably incarnates into real Nature. The wide symbolism which since the first Dutch landscape paintings permeate the artist's imagination, and then flourished with Renaissance, Baroque, Neo-Classical and the Romantic painters, vivifies with land artists in the real world, particularly, because choosing to build their sets in the desert, land artists brought back to life the ancient spirits that were part of the Native Americans. The artists then is a sort of shaman, who gives life to ideas thou his work, healing ideas in

17 Verhagen, Erik. Jan Dibbets: *The Photographic Work*. Editions du Panama, 2007, 38







Robert Smithson, *The Annual Summons*, 1970 (Great Salt Lake, Utah)  
(photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni) ©Holt-Smithson Foundation









the capitalist consumerist society. The distance between the Natural (primitive) and the Urban (capitalist) world is overcome by Michael Heizer *Levitated Mass* (2012) with his updated version of land art. With *Levitated Mass*, for the first time Nature becomes part of the urban scape and makes a collision between two worlds. *Levitated Mass* was originally conceived by Heizer in 1969; a drawing of the work is in the collection of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. The original attempt to build the sculpture took place in 1969 when a 120-ton rock was obtained by Heizer in the Sierras above Reno, Nevada. Although a slot depression had been excavated in a northern Nevada dry lakebed to set the megalith on, the rock proved too heavy to load, breaking one of the two cranes being used. The slot was never combined with the megalith. In 2007, Heizer was working at the then *Pyrite-Hubbs Quarry* in nearby Riverside County when a 340 ton megalith came off the quarry wall during a detonation. The large size and im-



pressive scale of the boulder were perfect criteria to realize *Levitated Mass*. It was soon developed between Heizer and LACMA director Michael Govan that this work could be constructed at LACMA. The nature, expense and scale of the installation attracted discussion within the public art world, and its notable 106-mile transit from the Jurupa Valley Quarry in Riverside County. It is a man made Mountain within the urban territory. It is a replica of a work that Heizer did in 1982 in Manhattan, also called *Levitated Mass*, but in a much smaller, carved rock set on hidden supports, and does preserve this "floating" effect. Heizer rarely explains or comments on his work and has never offered a public explanation of *Levitated Mass*'s meaning or significance. He has however described the piece as being "static art" and emphasized the importance of the boulder's size and of the work's longevity, saying that the work is meant to last 3,500 years. Heizer's work is fully documented in *Levitated Mass: The Story of Michael Heizer's Monolithic Sculpture* (2013) a documentary by filmmaker Doug Pray that tells the story of the transportation of the boulder from Riverside to Los Angeles, while also examining Heizer's body of work. The film weaves together the story of the reclusive Heizer, the ambitions of a major metropolitan museum, and the public's reactions to this massive display of modern yet eerily timeless conceptual art. The massive 'land sculpture' by Heizer, references the expanse of art history – from ancient traditions of megalithic stones to modern forms of abstract geometries and cutting-edge feats of engineering. The installation follows a reverse line, not artist to the desert but Nature in the urban scape.

That mass levitating on top of a building proposes an image that is also one

main inspiration of land artists at their beginnings: the first images of the terrestrial globe seen from the moon. On October 24, 1946, NASA took the first images of Earth from outer space, flight monitoring continuous imaging, resulting in a time-lapse-movie reel. Not published as Earth observation images until 1950. Taken by the V-2 No. 13 suborbital spaceflight. In 1972, about twenty years had passed since the first experiments, the satellite photo of planet Earth *Blue Marble*, taken by the Apollo 17 crew at a distance of about 45 thousand kilometers, became a public image. It is the photo that revealed to us the physiognomy of the planet we inhabit. A few years before that ambitious use of photography, the earthworks implemented a project that intended to extend the gaze into the totality of space. A total gaze directed towards a "desolate landscape," the one from the Moon to the Earth, according to a definition by Jay Friedlander. "Isolation is the essence of Land Art"<sup>18</sup>, De Maria says, giving a hint that it comes from a spirituality that has a very long lasting and borderless tradition housed in the human soul.

<sup>18</sup> De Maria, Walter. "Some Facts, Notes, Data, Information, Statistics and Statements." *Artforum* 18:8, April 1980, 58

*"Viewed from a boat, the mountains race  
a hundred herds flash past in an instant.  
Ahead, jagged peaks shift without warning  
behind, chaotic summits charge as if mad*

*I lift my gaze to a winding path climbing high  
where faintly through the mist, wayfarers  
From the boat, I raise my hand, longing to  
but my lone vessel drifts south, a bird in flight*





like galloping horses—

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appear.  
speak—  
ght.”

Su Shi