

land art, earthworks, environmental art, ecological art, ecoventions...

SUE SPAID

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It should be stressed that there are several different categories for art that involves nature—land art, Earthworks, environmental art, and ecological art. Where does an ecovention fit within these different categories? An ecovention is the most particular case, since it is designed with some intended ecological function. Though like all art, many ecoventions take on a life of their own to become something unanticipated. In fact, ecoventions fit into each of these categories. Land art, the most general category, encompasses any work that activates the land, however temporarily. Earthworks, ecological art and environmental art are all examples of land art, as are **Dennis Oppenheim's** and **Ana Mendieta's** interventions, most works by **Chris Drury** and **Andy Goldsworthy**, and the nature walks of **Richard Long** and **Hamish Fulton**.

Earthworks, an art historical category, was devised to describe works like **Robert Wilson's** *Poles* (1967-1968), **Michael Heizer's** *Double Negative* (1969-1970), **Robert Smithson's** *Spiral Jetty* (1970), **Walter de Maria's** *Lightning Field* (1974-1977), and many of the works installed at Artpark in Lewiston, New York. Earthworks are primarily permanent, large-scale, non-natural forms sited in "wide open



Herbert Bayer, *grass mound*, 1955
Aspen Art Institute, Colorado
(Photo Credit: Center for Land Use Interpretation, 2001)

Herbert Bayer's *grass mound* (1955), a 40-foot concrete mound at the Aspen Art Institute in Colorado is considered the first example of contemporary environmental art. It offered a balanced opportunity where visitors, sports, culture and art could be pursued amidst the beauty of nature.

The Center for Land Use Interpretation included this work in its 2001 survey of the contemporary Earthworks.

spaces," as opposed to particular natural environments, such as along a river, amidst a field, or in an urban setting. As the Center for Land Use Interpretation's *Formations of Erasure: Earthworks and Entropy* (2001) exploration of the current status of Earthworks demonstrates, several Earthworks have become victims of neglect, vandalism and degradation, not unlike the abandoned industrial sites that dot the landscape. As Roberta Smith noted "most are returning inexorably to the earth whence they came, despite the unchanging nature of the widely reproduced photographs by which nearly everyone knows them."¹⁷

Agnes Denes, *Rice/Tree/Burial* "ricefield" 1977-1979
 Anport, Lowiston, New York (Photo Credit: Agnes Denes)

After planting white *Rice/Tree/Burial*, a second version of her 1968 ritualistic performance, in Anport, Denes was surprised to discover red rice growing, which had her to detect the high level of toxicity in Anport's soil. Knowing how much we do about deforestation, planting Rice/Tree/Burial may have resembled the spoiled soil, though it was about as close as we could get.

Environmental art, like Meg Webster's works or Agnes Denes' ritualistic endeavor *Rice/Tree/Burial* (1977-1979) (a second version of Denes' 1968 performance), is generally less monumental and tends to employ nature as a medium, so as to enhance the viewer's awareness of nature's forces, processes and phenomena, or to demonstrate an indigenous culture's awareness of nature's sway. Denes' rice field, meant to explore the life cycle's process of regeneration, evolved into an ecological work, when her planting of ordinary Louisiana white rice seeds eventually



Agnes Denes *Rice/Tree/Burial* "red rice" detail
 (photo credit: Agnes Denes)

produced rice resembling a variety of Chinese red rice that's technically impossible to grow in New York. This led her to detect nearby Love Canal's long-term impact on the toxicity of Artpark's soil. Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, a breakwater that forms a lagoon, might now be considered an ecovention, given its function and placement near a disused oil-drilling operation. The artist expressed an interest in "the origin of life as well as the devastating forces of entropy and the irreversibility of the loss of energy."¹⁸ However, the environmental hazards associated with Smithson's sculpture make it an unlikely precursor for ecological art.

One of Smithson's last proposals, which entailed reclaiming a strip mine, enabled him to mediate "between ecology and industry by reclaiming the land in terms of art,"¹⁹ and might have been one of the first ecological works – if not an ecovention – had it been built. Certainly, his *Spiral Hill/Broken Circle* (1971), a reclaimed open sand pit in Emmen, Holland, stands as an early example of eco-art. As the section "Valuing Anew" will demonstrate, Smithson, like Morris, thought artists shouldn't clean up or decorate industry's messes, so his notion of reclamation meant re-evaluating a site's ugliness or appreciating its problematic condition for what it is. Ecological artists consider issues of sustainability, adaptability, interdependence, renewable resources, and biodiversity, but they don't necessarily attempt to transform the local ecology. Not all ecological artists employ inventive strategies, nor do they necessarily aim to restore natural resources, stabilize local environments, value anew, or alert people to potentially confrontational conditions, which is why not all eco-artists create ecoventions. Even artists who actually make ecoventions create other kinds of art, too.

Given the variety of artists who have worked in this fashion since the late 1950s, it is truly amazing that so many built projects remain so invisible. Unlike a typical work of art that can move from one community to another, or is part of a body of work that can be discussed as a whole, most of these projects have impacted local communities in rather particular ways and therefore

have remained local. Of course, all of the artists cited have participated in gallery and museum exhibitions, and some have catalogs and articles to support their work, but the majority of their projects are still little known among the art world cognoscenti.

The fact that so many ecoventions have either been folded into public works (sewage and waste-water treatment plants, public gardens, public landfills) or have been initiated by artists locally (brownfields, surface mines) further contributes to their invisibility. Finally, the difficulty of exhibiting, let alone explicating, ecoventions indoors, coupled with their resistance to collecting, has minimized a need to discuss them in mainstream art magazines and books. Even the recent monograph *Transplant* presented primarily indoor examples, despite the reality that plants typically reside outdoors. Baile Oakes' indispensable *Sculpting with the Environment*, featuring thirty-three artists' descriptions of their practice, is the single book devoted to working with nature outdoors.

The *Nation's* architecture critic Jane Holtz Kay similarly laments the absence of any discussion of buildings' environmental aspects in key journals such as *Architecture* and *Architectural Record*, despite *International Design* magazine's recent recognition of eighteen architects for their ecological designs and the American Institute of Architects' (AIA) granting of 2001 Honor Award to the 48-story Condé Nast Building (4 Times Square), designed by Fox and Fowle, for its "elements of new thinking and constructing."²⁰ She comments further that an article dedicated to the use of materials in *Boston Architecture* failed to discuss the materials' sustainability. And *Architectural Record's* "Material Affairs" interview with Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, architects of the American Craft Museum on 53rd Street, acclaimed by some critics as New York City's most important building since Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, failed to discuss the building materials' ecological content or impact.

According to Holtz Kay, only *Landscape Architecture* has addressed ecological concerns, leaving the "would-be earth guardians isolated, only a whit more powerful than [they were] in less ecological times."²¹ On the other hand, **Patricia Johanson** argues that, unlike ordinary art that depends on a body of art history or critical interpretation, an ecovention can be grasped directly — whatever one thinks about it is valid.²² Well it's really not that simple, because the question "Why is it art and not science?" or "not a public garden?" or "not a sewage treatment plant?" still remains. By contrast, one wouldn't enter a green building and doubt whether it's architecture, though one might wonder whether it's finished, as many do with the "earthships" of Taos-based architect **Michael Reynolds**.

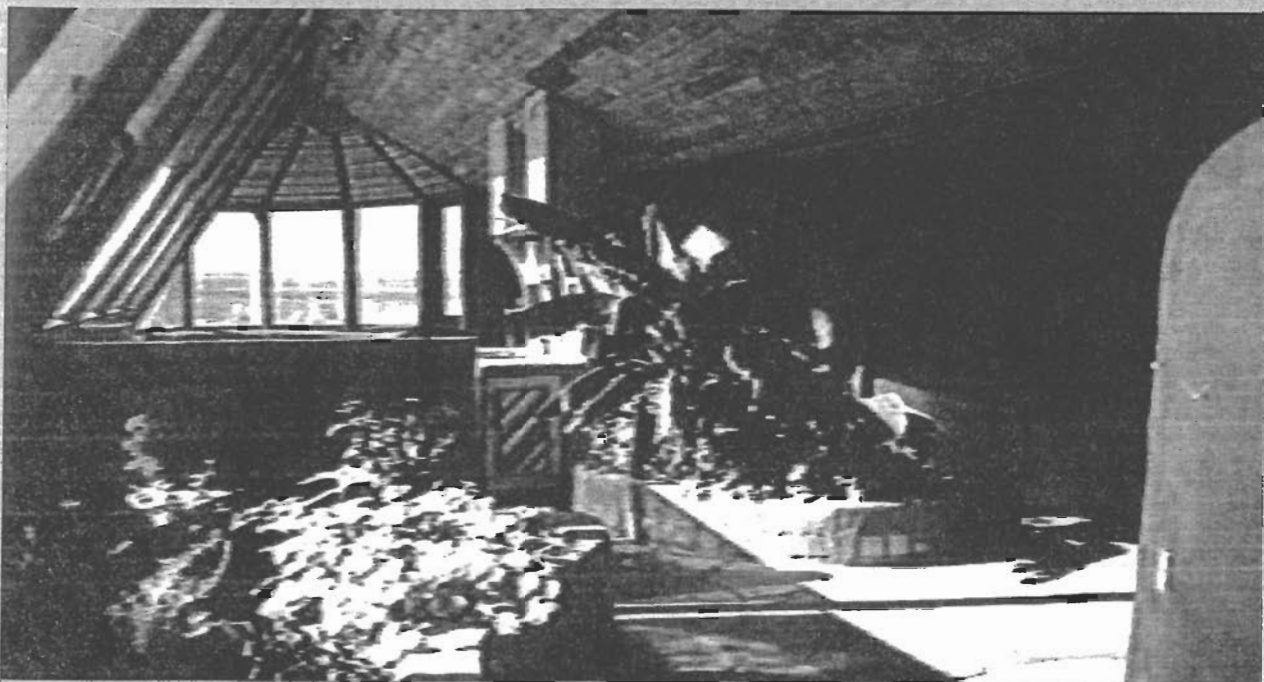


Image of an Earthship's interior, video still image

Passive solar buildings made from natural and recycled materials, including used automobile tires and soda cans. Earthships are built "off the grid." Each home produces electricity and water and uses mechanical to heat their own waste water. Since moving to Taos in 1969, University of Colorado graduate Michael Reynolds has designed several subdivisions of Earthships there. Others have been built around the world.

Certainly, art historical figures like **Joseph Beuys**, Mel Chin, Agnes Denes, Helen and Newton Harrison, **Ocean Earth**, Robert Smithson, Alan Sonfist, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles are known and collected, yet too few in the art world realize the role ecoventions have played in convincing local city planners, landscape architects, civil engineers, and watershed managers to rethink their practices. When one considers the number of projects that some of these artists have realized, it's truly alarming that none has had an exhibition that specifically focuses on their realized projects. There have been several important group exhibitions, such as "Earth Art" (1969) at Cornell University, "Elements of Art: Earth, Air and Fire" (1971) at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, "Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture" (1979) at the Seattle Art Museum, and "Fragile Ecologies" (1992), curated by Barbara Matilsky, the first exhibition to focus exclusively on ecological art, at the Queens Museum of Art. However, the Seattle Art Museum exhibition, initiated by the King County Arts Commission and the Department of Public Works of Washington, which presented proposals for sites slated for reclamation (gravel pits, flood-control sites, surface mines, and landfills) by **Iain Baxter**, Herbert Bayer, **Richard Fleischner**, **Lawrence Hanson**, **Mary Miss**, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, and **Beverly Pepper**, did lead to the realization of proposals by Morris and Bayer.

Rather than provide a definitive summary of every artist-initiated ecological project to date, *Ecovention* seeks to open a door onto this field and to introduce many of the active participants. Rather than focus on historical works, *Ecovention* seeks to expose the large number of ecoventions that have just been completed or will come to fruition within the year. It is hoped that other institutions will build on the research that went into *Ecovention*, just as *Ecovention* has benefited from what came before.

For explanatory ease, ecoventions have been sub-divided into five categories: 1) activism to publicize ecological issues/monitoring ecological problems, 2) valuing anew/living with brown-fields, 3) biodiversity/accommodating species/studying species depletion, 4) urban infrastructure /environmental justice, and 5) reclamation and restoration aesthetics. Of course, these categories are hardly fixed, in that artists who create ecoventions are ready activists who incidentally champion environmental justice. For example, Patricia Johanson's projects function as infrastructure for modern cities and employ inventive reclamation schemes, but her nourishing, life-sustaining habitats are featured in the "Biodiversity" section because her work serves as the benchmark for this particular specialty. Similarly, the Harrisons could be classified in either the "Valuing Anew" or "Biodiversity" sections, but they are included in the "Activism" section since they view their process as a "conversational drift" surrounding discourses of nature.

Such categories should enable newcomers to draw distinctions between artists' intentions and practices. This catalog seeks to flesh out each artist's philosophical perspectives and methodologies. Such divergent practices yield works with quite different focuses. The competing beliefs and attitudes among artists make for a lively field. The following on-line chat among several members of the on-line eco-art dialogue (hosted by Ohio State University) took place January 18-26, 2001, and demonstrates the wide-ranging beliefs and attitudes that influence how one might initiate an ecovention in a city like Cincinnati.