

The "Psychophysical Field" of Spatiotemporal Awareness and the Perceptual Modes of Land Art— A Study on Land Art

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Abstract: Land Art, also known as Earth Art, emerged in the United States in the 1960s against the backdrop of environmental movements and the counter-art zeitgeist. By engaging with the relationship between humans and nature, Land Art employs natural materials to create works that aim to rekindle human attention to and perception of nature. Through a wide variety of creations, Land Art seeks to awaken sensory capacities dulled by industrial civilization. This paper explores Land Art from three perspectives: the body's return to the world and the "site-specificity" of artworks, the "psychophysical field" of perception and the primordial sensing of Land Art, and the temporality of natural spaces and the experiential dimensions of Land Art. By constructing psychophysical fields within natural environments through bodily engagement, Land Artists incorporate temporal and spatial elements to evoke human sensory perception, re-situating the body and its sensory faculties within nature. In the interwoven spatiotemporal field of nature, Land Art establishes an inseparable connection between humans and the natural world.

Keywords: Land Art, Psychophysical Field, Spatiotemporal Awareness, Perception.

1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism Emerging in the late 1960s, Land Art (also referred to as Earth Art or Earthworks) is an art form or movement that explores the relationship between humans and nature by utilizing natural materials—such as soil, rocks, sand, plants, wind, water, rain, snow, and lightning—to create works situated directly on the earth. Land Artists employ their creative practices and environmentally conscious materials to produce diverse forms of Land Art. Through the use of organic materials like the human body, branches, pollen, and flowers, Land Art reactivates the artist's sensory perception and awareness. Although highly varied in form, these practices consistently revolve around the relationship between humans and nature. Land Artists' choices of diverse artistic materials, as well as their understanding and experience of natural environments, are significantly influenced by Gestalt psychology and phenomenology of perception. These intellectual frameworks reshape their self-awareness and sensory engagement with nature, revealing an attentiveness to the shaping and

contemplation of time and space. Land Art can be seen as a critique of industrial civilization and the violent intrusion upon nature, aiming to restore humanity's perceptual capacity as beings of nature. For example, Walter De Maria drove copper rods into the earth to open up a space of imagination about the land, while simultaneously pointing metal rods toward the sky to weave a network of lightning, evoking the power of nature and rendering space visible. Richard Long, on the other hand, measured the earth through his body and footsteps, extending the viewer's gaze and spatial awareness beneath their feet. These intangible and formless works transcend direct emotional expression, embodying characteristics of performance art and process art. With philosophical rigor and deliberate reflection, Land Artists craft "psychophysical fields" that are sensitive to time and space (Koffka, 2013). Through their exploration of perception and expression, Land Artists seek to establish deeper connections between humans and nature, forging inseparable psychophysical fields. Static works of art are no longer sufficient to express the relationship between humans and nature. The meticulous techniques of traditional art often obscure an artist's exploration of the open-ended relationship between nature and humanity. In contrast, the dynamic processes of Land Art, constantly shifting and evolving, are closer to the eternal essence of nature. Motion, as the foundation of existence, becomes central to these artistic processes. Land Artists present this motion while fostering closer interaction between the artist and the artwork. In the primordial phenomena revealed through this interaction, Land Art reawakens humanity's perceptual vitality and spiritual connection to nature. By situating the human body within the "positional spatiality" of objects and external environments, Land Art establishes the "situational spatiality" of human embodiment. This paper seeks to analyze the perceptual modes of Land Art through the concept of the "psychophysical field" drawn from Gestalt psychology. In doing so, it aims to uncover the unique aesthetic characteristics and artistic philosophy of Land Art (Wang, 2007).

2. THE BODY'S RETURN TO THE WORLD AND THE "SITE-SPECIFICITY" OF ARTWORKS

Richard Long repositions the human body within the realm of nature through his long-distance walking practices. Andy Goldsworthy, in his work *Hazel Stick Throw* (1980), connects humans with the earth, sky, and natural vegetation by throwing hazel sticks into the air. In another work,

Handstand in Cave Entrance (1978), Goldsworthy performs a handstand at the entrance of a cave in a yoga pose, expressing reverence for nature. Dennis Oppenheim, in *Parallel Stress* (1970), integrates the human body as part of the earth, contorting it into a physically strained position pressed tightly against the ground. This ten-minute performance was recorded on film as an artwork. These artists return their bodies to nature, seeking to activate an inner perception or awareness of the self and the natural world, rather than an object-oriented consciousness. This simple and direct natural perception reflects the intrinsic intention of Land Artists, who aim to express this through the “site-specificity” formed by the interaction of their bodies and the surrounding environment (Metzner, 2023). The relationship between humans and their surrounding world is a central concern of phenomenology. “In natural perception, we initially perceive something as an entity within our surrounding world (Umwelt Ding). This means that in our natural, pre-scientific life, we do not grasp beings in an object-oriented way; they are simply things within our surrounding world” (Barua, 2007). This suggests that in natural perception, the human’s primordial awareness of self and perception of surrounding entities exist on equal footing, rather than making the latter objects of the former’s cognition or control. Such a pre-scientific state of perception is precisely the relationship between humans and nature that Land Artists endeavor to restore. By repositioning their physical bodies in nature, Land Artists evoke a simultaneous awareness of primordial consciousness and natural phenomena, merging the two into a unified whole. The establishment and activation of this site-specificity relies on the vast expanse of the earth, effectively weakening the object-oriented cognitive inertia of people in the scientific era. By employing perception as the mode of consciousness, they create novel spatial fields (Wildgen, 2023). Gestalt psychology, which emerged under the influence of phenomenology, emphasizes the holistic nature of experience and behavior (Koffka, 2013). The holistic nature of Gestalt encompasses both the universal concepts of form and temporal sequences as well as their specific manifestations. This Gestalt-inspired emphasis on “symmetry” is evident in many Land Artworks. Richard Long’s straight lines, circles, and rectangles, along with Robert Morris’s use of mirrors, create a symmetrical interplay that incorporates the surrounding world. Walter De Maria’s evenly segmented lines and spheres not only demonstrate this symmetry but also reflect the Gestalt concept of a “separated whole.” Land Artists’ fascination with geometric forms reveals their pursuit of holistic comprehension, which extends beyond the presentation of two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms to

incorporate the fourth dimension of temporal sequences. This integration creates a more complete spatiotemporal field. Holism in Gestalt theory also manifests in the relationship between humans and nature. "Every phenomenon of experience involves components that are interconnected, where each component derives its characteristics from its relationships with the others. The whole is not determined by its individual elements, but rather the local processes depend on the intrinsic properties of the whole. A complete phenomenon possesses its own holistic characteristics, which cannot be reduced to its elements nor contained within them" (Koffka, 2013). The rupture between humans and nature has not only caused ecological damage but has also left humanity spiritually unanchored. This rupture is not a simple separation of elements or shared characteristics but a complete loss of unified properties, leading to entropy and disorder in the real world. The pursuit of holism reflects the urgency with which Land Artists seek to reintegrate humans into nature, conveying the inseparability of humans and the natural world as a unified whole. When the human self and the natural environment are harmonized, a complete psychophysical field emerges through Land Art (Norberg, 1980). Gestalt's principles of holism and symmetry are not only evident in Land Artists' formal expressions but also in the cohesive unity between humans and the natural environment. The separation of humans from nature and their placement in a position of transcendence disrupts the integrity of nature. During the process of civilization, centered on dominating nature, humans gradually lost their ability to perceive nature and their natural attributes. The homogenization caused by industrial production further eroded the capacity for individualized, free perception. The priestly ideal of communicating with the heavens and earth faded as humanity's reverence for nature diminished, replaced by conquest and exploitation. Humanity thus became a missing piece of nature. Land Artists, through their direct engagement, return to the natural realm. They place the human body back into nature, like a tree or a seed, while simultaneously drawing the viewer's perspective into the natural scene, creating a site-specific environment (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Richard Long is particularly distinctive in integrating Gestalt principles with site-specificity. Immersing himself entirely in nature, Long seeks to connect art and nature through a meditative posture, using his actions and works to gently touch the earth. As Long once remarked: "I spent an entire day walking across the Sahara Desert. Leaving a straight line of footprints as I walked felt mysterious and beautiful. I performed the simple act of walking, ritualizing it, and turning it into art. I feel strongly about my materials and nature. What I aim to do

in every work is to make it as beautiful and powerful as possible. 'The function of art is to create new ways of engaging with the world' (Tiberghien, 1996). Through walking, Long establishes a connection between humans and nature. By engaging in simple physical movements, he revives the spirit of traditional nature-worship art. There is no more direct way to express concern for and reflection on nature than to immerse oneself in it. A single photograph or a short piece of writing may be sufficient to exhibit and describe Long's works, but their creation demands relentless commitment and solitary walking over long periods. Long perpetually sets out on journeys, creating a conceptual and artistic framework, setting goals, and embarking on them alone. He is forever on the road.



Figure 1: Richard Long, *A Line Made by Walking* (1967). Source: [<http://www.360.doc.com/>]

Long's footprints traverse nearly all continents. Through his ongoing walks across the globe, he repositions the human body within nature, continuing the ancient path of exploring and measuring the earth with footsteps—a return to origins. In his quiet yet persistent dialogue and coexistence with nature, Long situates the small human mammal within the vast wilderness. His walking journeys expand the existential space of life, offering a source of perception to rediscover nature and life. Long documents his observations during his walks: the time, place, and the rocks, gravel, snow, and dust encountered along the way (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). These materials become records of his engagement with and interpretation of nature. Amid the passage of time and the transformation of space, he perceives the smallness of humanity, experiences the dynamism of nature, and deepens his reverence for its movements. In one exhibition, critic April Kingsley observed: "On the floor of a small gallery lay seven concentric rectangular red mud shapes that seemed to directly interact with the surrounding architecture... Long's works, with their shifting X-shapes,

spirals, rectangles, and so on, evoke a sense of timelessness as if he had been part of this landscape for years. This seems to counter Picasso's famous statement that 'art is what nature is not'" (Kingsley, 1971). The ancient Greek physician Hippocrates proposed the famous theory of "mimesis," attributing the creation and formation of art to inspiration from nature. Heidegger referred to this Greek concept of mimesis as "compliance" and "response," suggesting that art aids nature in realizing human expectations and desires. Long clearly follows this path of mimicking nature, rather than the anthropocentric approach of creating "what nature lacks." This reverence for nature, common among Land Artists, underpins the possibility of reshaping the relationship between humans and nature. It is precisely for this reason that they emphasize the significance of site-specificity in their works (Rorty, 2009).

3. THE "PSYCHOPHYSICAL FIELD" OF PERCEPTION AND THE PRIMORDIAL SENSING IN LAND ART

Kurt Koffka, one of the key figures in Gestalt psychology, asserted that "the world is psychophysical; the experiential world differs from the physical world... What we naturally observe in experience bears the characteristics of Gestalt, belonging to the psychophysical field and the theory of isomorphism" (Koffka, 2013). The perceived reality—the physical field—and the observer's perception of reality—the psychological field—combine to form the psychophysical field. This psychophysical field consists of two components: the ego and the environment, with the environment further divided into the geographical environment and the behavioral environment. The geographical environment refers to the physical, real-world setting, while the behavioral environment refers to the imagined or perceived environment. This conceptual framework imbues the natural geographical environment with human perception and ideas. For Gestalt psychologists, what is perceived extends beyond what the eyes can see: "Although Gestalt principles are not solely a theory of perception, they are derived from the study of perception, and many important Gestalt principles come from perceptual research." This form of perception, which we may term primordial sensing, represents a state of perception that precedes the separation of mind and matter. Land Art is fundamentally rooted in this primordial sensing. In crafting their works, Land Artists emphasize the use of natural elements in their original states to guide the viewer's perceptual openness. This openness repositions the artist's body

within nature, restoring the body's natural physicality while reawakening its innate spirituality. Guided by this primordial sensing, Land Artists are meticulous in their selection of both geographical and behavioral environments. They prefer natural elements and settings imbued with a sense of vitality to create their works. Natural materials such as branches, wood, stones, soil, and ice remain their primary choices, while organic materials like the human body, flowers, pollen, honey, and rice introduce the vibrancy of nature and the passage of time into their creations. Early Land Artworks often appeared in remote deserts or mountains, where human presence is minimal and the forces of nature are more pronounced. These spiritually resonant materials and locations enhance the environmental aspect of Land Art. The use of organic materials reflects the artists' sensitivity to and reverence for life. As life fades and flows, the psychophysical field created by Land Art ceases to be static but instead becomes fluid, evolving with time. This challenges the fixed nature of the site, transforming it into a "certainty of uncertainty," a kind of "non-site." While the geographical environment's external openness may be severed, it is simultaneously opened internally to higher dimensions. However, this alone is insufficient. The perceptual openness of the artist is not satisfied with merely being a passive perceiver or observer of the earth's evolution. Within these seemingly closed sites, Land Artists establish internal coordinates, enriching their works with a diverse array of forms and actions to create a more dynamic psychophysical field. For example, Agnes Denes transformed a landfill in Manhattan, New York, into a two-acre wheat field in her project *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982). As Denes walked through the golden wheat field with a hoe, art critic Thomas McEvilley evoked *The Iliad* to praise her as a modern-day harvest goddess wielding a golden sickle (McEvilley, 2004). Similarly, Helen and Newton Harrison created *The Lagoon Cycle* (1974–1984) in Sri Lanka, integrating social and ecological considerations into their artistic practice. Newton Harrison remarked: "We are extremely alienated from our resources, and our time of gratitude has passed. It is unrealistic to believe that technology can solve all related problems. We must work to change our consciousness and behavior patterns, for if we do not, we will not survive here" (Glueck, 1980). In such psychophysical fields, Land Artists engage in direct acts of creation, aiming to reveal and emulate nature through their actions. When the Harrisons found it impossible to fully recreate the monsoon season for *The Lagoon Cycle*, it underscored the helplessness of humanity in the face of nature. This further emphasizes the necessity of respecting and revering the natural world. This respect and reverence for the primordial state of nature are

evident in many Land Artworks. In his work *Directed Seeding – Canceled Crop* (1969), Dennis Oppenheim plowed a large “X” into a wheat field measuring 128.63 meters wide and 216.1 meters long, attempting to isolate the crops in their original state. Oppenheim explained that aesthetics lie in raw materials, not in later refinement. Wolfgang Laib created works with pollen, Andy Goldsworthy collected leaves, and Anya Gallaccio arranged 10,000 red roses on a bed of green stems, allowing them to slowly wither and decay (*Red on Green*, 1992). By using these organic materials, Land Artists create living natural sites where the psychophysical field becomes a relinquishment—or rather a return—of the artist’s control over the artwork. These vibrant expressions exhibit the unique temporality of natural sites. The processes of growth, decay, and transformation gradually reveal the temporal sequences and spatial shifts of nature. This not only highlights the process-oriented characteristics of Land Art but also underscores its ephemeral nature, demonstrating the artists’ sensitivity to the perception of temporal sequences. The ephemerality and transformative nature of Land Art are not only reflected in the use of organic materials but also in the incorporation of intangible artistic materials. Examples include Robert Morris’s use of water vapor, Walter De Maria’s lightning, Richard Long’s walking, and Robert Smithson’s pioneering use of mirrors, which Morris later expanded upon. Land Artists seek to create works that are alive, dynamic, and convergent in time and space. These works no longer position the viewer as a mere spectator or the artist’s concepts as something to be passively observed. Instead, the relationship between the artwork and the audience dissolves the dichotomy of subject and object. The use of natural materials no longer serves the creation of a final, polished, and detached object but instead reveals the phenomena and essence of the materials themselves. Alberto Giacometti once remarked that we no longer look directly at an object; instead, we see it through knowledge or theory, which has hijacked our vision. Edmund Husserl, in his concept of eidetic intuition, argued that our understanding and grasp of concepts are immediate and unmediated. When we see something red, we simultaneously perceive the essence of redness—it is a direct apprehension of the idea of red. Through their creation of psychophysical fields rooted in the primordial state of things, Land Artists aim to activate this eidetic intuition in humans, allowing us to perceive the original state of objects. Within this psychophysical field, the artist and the viewer discard the intermediaries of knowledge and interpretation, directly perceiving phenomena. This direct perception of phenomena simplifies the occurrence of ideas and meanings in life, making them immediate rather

than mediated. Land Artists strive to reveal the truths of nature and humanity through their works, encouraging a direct engagement with the essence of things.

4. THE TEMPORALITY OF NATURAL SPACE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF LAND ART

The psychophysical field integrates the human body and its environment, reawakening the spiritual perception of the relationship between humans and nature. In unlocking natural spaces, it also incorporates the dimension of time, not only breaking the constraints of traditional artistic spaces to achieve a larger, physical spatial environment but also integrating behavioral environments into Land Art, making them a core characteristic of the work's presentation. Space, as the shell of the geographical environment, becomes nearly infinite when infused with temporal sequences. This infinity is further extended by the imaginative environment. In the psychophysical field of Land Art, filled with time and space, the display of this imaginative environment becomes a form of negative space, evoking a realm for imagination and symbolic meaning. William Malpas has pointed out that Land Art is deeply influenced by Eastern Zen Buddhism and Chinese Taoist thought, including concepts such as intuition, satori (enlightenment), spontaneity, and nature (Malpas, 2008). These terms reflect the "illogicality" of Land Art, introducing sensorial concepts like feeling, emotion, and spirituality into the discourse. This creates an "intermediary" space within Land Art, inviting the viewer's imagination into the work, and allowing the flow of time and space within the artwork. Walter De Maria's famed *The Lightning Field* creates a temporal and spatial interplay between the earth and the heavens. De Maria often uses natural disasters to showcase awe-inspiring beauty. In this work, towering stainless steel poles with sharp tips point skyward, weaving lightning into a network between heaven and earth. At the moment of a lightning strike, the tremendous power of nature is displayed without reservation. However, such shocking scenes are rare. Most of the time, the stainless steel poles simply stand in silent dialogue with the sky. This prolonged negative space enhances the contrast when lightning strikes, enriching the piece with layers of imaginative beauty. While De Maria's steel poles are not natural objects, they serve as mediators for the natural phenomenon of lightning. Although De Maria removes certain attributes of the natural environment of the New Mexico location, he customizes

these stainless-steel poles—a recurring motif in his work—demonstrating Dadaist appropriation. This transcends object aesthetics, leveraging the symbolic resonance of the era while invoking a universal sense of timelessness. The environment, as both a historical and contemporary storyteller, is highlighted by the linear extension of the steel poles across the wilderness, evoking a sense of solemnity within the viewer. The restriction of no more than six visitors at a time further amplifies the reverent experience. Artists often use spatial experiences to provide conceptual understanding. Here, space is no longer a primitive container for objects but is instead rooted in being, becoming an invisible yet integral component of the work itself.



Figure 2: Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field* (1977). Source: [http://image109.360doc.com]

Martin Heidegger asserted that the meaning of being is grounded in temporality: “The philosopher’s ideal is to envision a ‘life eternal’ that exists beyond permanence and change, in which the capacity for time’s emergence is fully encompassed (Martin, 2010). However, the spontaneous consciousness that governs and includes time disrupts the phenomenon of time. If I must encounter eternity, it will be at the center of our experience of time, not in a non-temporal subject that can think and determine time” (Malpas, 2008). Artists attempt to present both the time of consciousness and conceptual time in Land Art, resisting the exclusion of conceptual time from the objective world. By doing so, they pursue the philosopher’s ideal of true “life eternal.” The works of British artists Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long are often created alone in nature, with neither the process nor the result involving the participation of viewers. The artistic process takes on the form of a journey, incorporating the dimension of time. These works vanish as nature changes or as the artist ceases their actions, leaving only photographs and video recordings for viewers to experience the process. This process art is imbued with the marks of time while dissolving

the constraints of linear temporality. The interwoven temporal structures convey a sense of eternity—a concept that Land Artists continuously seek. As exemplified by Christo and Jeanne-Claude's ephemeral projects, the fleeting nature of their works conveys the idea that "disappearance is more eternal than existence." This loss of the "concept of eternity" paradoxically points to a true "life eternal," one rooted in the temporal essence of being. Time encompasses not only the present but also the presence of the past and the future. As demonstrated in Land Art, time is no longer excluded from the works. These pieces are not created to resist the passage of time and remain fixed in an eternal moment, nor do they separate the process from the final result. The traditional notion of time as a backdrop against which art exists no longer satisfies the intentions of Land Artists. If the flow of time can be "sliced" through spatial transformation, then the relative, human experience of time becomes the absolute "conceptual time" of localized space, further expanding the river of eternal time. For Land Artists, time is no longer a void, a fixed and neglected background. It becomes visible, tangible, and integral to their creative process—an essential medium for their work. Even when these works are documented and displayed in museums, they draw viewers back into the moment of creation, immersing them in the temporal flow and allowing them to experience the ephemeral moments as eternal. Time is no longer the enemy that causes the disappearance of art. Through the natural passage of time, Land Art reveals the dissolution and transformation of nature. *Spiral Jetty* is submerged by seawater, Long's straight lines vanish as his footsteps continue, and *The Lightning Field* flashes briefly and then fades away. These works present states entirely different from their original creation, but this is not destruction or loss; it is fulfillment. Time carries with it every blade of grass, every stone, every gust of wind, and every flash of lightning, embedding these elements into history as part of the artwork. Time opens the fourth dimension of the artwork, proving that Land Art never truly disappears but continues perpetually, riding the infinite flow of nature. Time also enables the possibility of re-creation and continuous creation. Some Land Artists, such as Richard Long, place great emphasis on documenting their creative process and often use stable materials like stones or wood. These materials are meticulously numbered and arranged, making transportation and re-creation possible. This allows audiences from different regions to experience the works of this renowned artist. In the re-creation of Land Art, the passage of time introduces new viewers from different nations, cultures, and ideologies, creating fresh internal resonances with the works. These pieces, imbued with historical tranquility

and contemporary vibrancy, gain new interpretations and life. Through repeated interactions and re-creations, these seemingly unchanging works incorporate the element of time as an invisible force, infusing them with vitality and temporal texture. Re-creation not only adds the perspectives of viewers from different eras but also reflects the evolving understanding and concepts of the artists themselves. Furthermore, the changes in location and the passage of time imbue these works with renewed significance. Through careful restoration, Land Art gains a reverent quality. By integrating evolving interpretations into static forms, artists collaborate across time and space, layering different artistic movements and styles into their work. Land Art reawakens humanity's pure awareness and wisdom by reactivating the spiritual site of nature. The human body, subject to the entropy of nature, ultimately returns to the earth, where it is rearranged and reabsorbed into the cosmos. Yet, before this return, humans are guided by a primordial instinct to draw closer to nature and the universe. Art serves as the conduit for this connection, channeling the raw impulses and passions of the human spirit. The inspiration for Land Art cannot be analyzed rationally; it arises as if guided by the heavens and earth, resisting humanity's estrangement from nature. As Merleau-Ponty stated: "I possess my body as a whole in a shared existence. I know the position of each limb through the body schema because all my limbs are included within it." Likewise, humanity and all living things are interconnected within this grand "schema of the earth" (Merleau-Ponty, 2001). In this shared existence, humans feel the earth not as fragmented pieces but as a unified whole. By reintegrating humanity into nature, Land Art restores the connection between human perception and the dimensions of natural time and space. In the negative spaces of time and space, Land Art offers richer meanings and a more profound sense of "eternity."

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