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A Critique of Land Art as a ‘Sustainable’ Environmental Art

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Abstract

‘Land Art’ developed as a movement of revolt against the commercialization of art, and artists brought art out of the walls of galleries and museums in 1970’s. It was labeled as environmental art due to the use of natural and local material in creation of these art works and also for bringing to focus many social and environmental issues. Land Art, although subsided as a movement, continues to be practiced by many artists in its various forms around the world even today. For a long time Land art was considered to be non-permanent along with being environment friendly, hailed as a champion of environmental issues in the art world. However with time some aspects of it emerged which pointed to Land art being not as environment friendly as it was considered to be before. In this paper the aim is to critically examine Land Art and its claims of being a sustainable art activity and consequently being termed environmental art. The focus would be mainly on the works of contemporary Indian artists who are practicing this form of art in the country and other parts of the world.

Keywords:- Land Art, Subodh Kerkar, Manjot Kaur, environmental issues



‘The Spiral Jetty’ 1970, Robert Smithson

Introduction

Humans have considered themselves superior to nature throughout history, at least in the western concept of the world this has been followed. It is lately that this age old concept is being challenged and alternative ideas are emerging where nature’s claim to life and survival is seen as an equal to that of humans. Art has always reflected society and its ideology of the time and for most of its history art has been part and confined to human habitation, like caves, houses, places of worship and later on galleries and museums.

In the quest to discover and develop new mediums of artistic expression, artists around the world turn towards new mediums and one such medium is our planet, Earth. Mediums like soil, sand, rocks, twigs, leaves and so on captured the interest of artists in 1970’s, not only

due to their easy availability but also as these were organic material and using them did not seem to harm the environment. Hence Land Art as a genre came into existence. Land Art is also known as 'Earth Art' or 'Earthworks' due to its environment friendly image. Generally this form of art enjoys a reputation of being harmless and most of the time referred to as 'Environment Art' as well.

In 1970's some artists like Robert Smithson, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, James Turrell and others, mainly from America and Europe, started a movement to break out of these confined places and ventured out into nature. These works were generally created on a large scale aiming to be impermanent in nature and essentially made with eco-friendly locally available material. However artist Gordon Matta-Clark in 1970 created a work titled 'Garbage Wall' and included urban space to its canvas as well. Robert Smithson's 'The Spiral Jetty' is probable the most famous example of Land Art, not only due its monumental size but also due to its survival over almost half a century. Made as an impermanent structure with locally found material it has become flag bearer of Land Art. Bulldozers and shifting of earth were used for the construction of this work. This method not only directly harms the ecosystem but also left a permanent scare on the landscape of the Great Salt Lake, located in the northern part of the U.S. state of Utah. It has also become a tourist attraction and footfall to the lake has increased which again negatively affects habitat of birds and marine life there. Likewise Subodh Kerkar's 'The Earth Bowl' made at Ozran, Small Vagator Beach, near Anjuna (Goa), although not made at an extensive scale like 'The Spiral Jetty', has permanently scared the rock and attracts tourists. It is carved as a perfect bowl in a rock, which extends like a ramp into the sea and gets filled with big waves splashing the rock. When the water recedes the bowl gets isolated from the sea and yet stays connected as the water that it holds as a part of the sea is left behind in it and with it sometimes part of the marine life to. Subodh Kerkar is a leading Land Art practitioner of India.



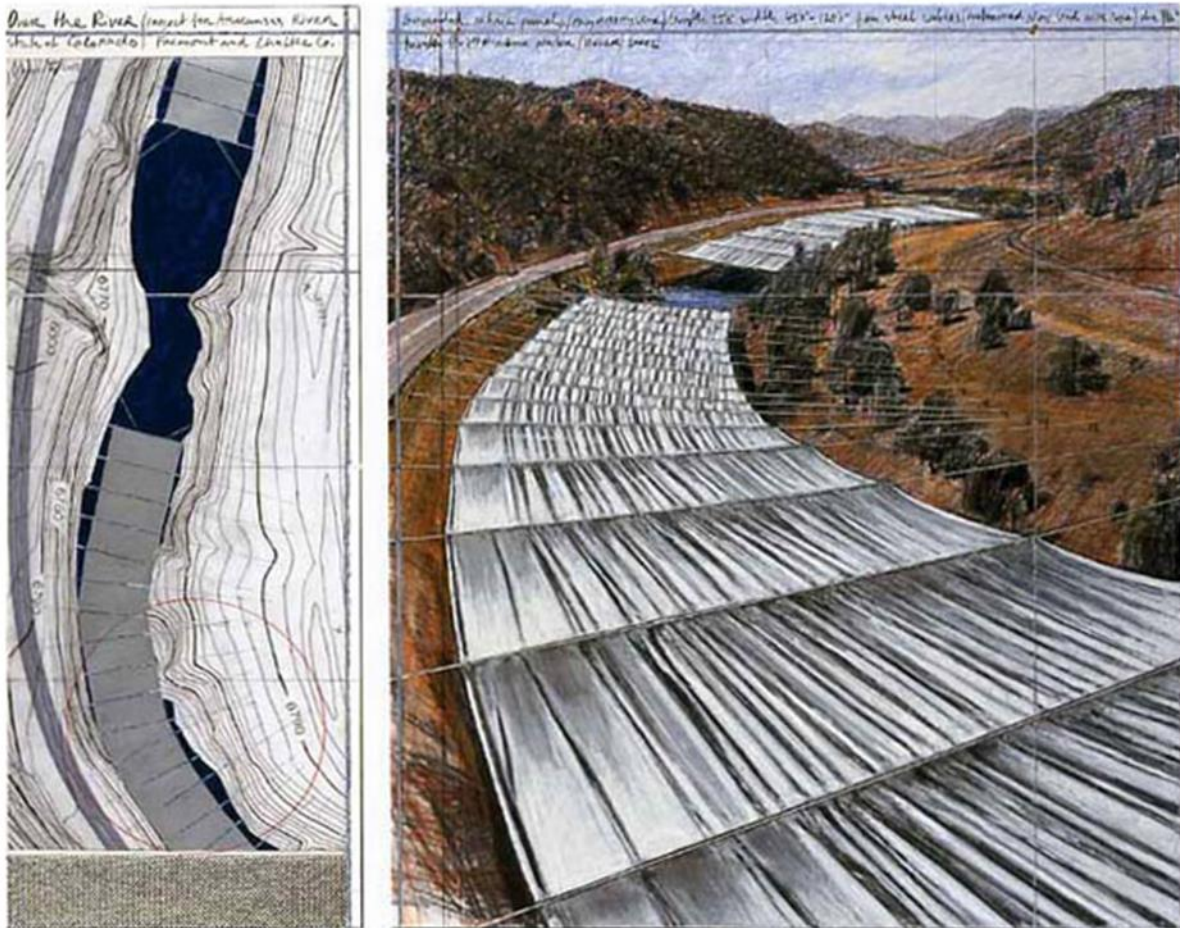
'The Earth Bowl' 2011, Subodh Kerkar

In yet another example in which Kerkar intervened with the indigenous vegetation was by taking rice seeds from Goa to Portugal. He created a route with it around the trees in an old garden called 'The Garden of Necessities' where an exhibition of land Art was being held. In countries like New Zealand such practices are punishable as the authorities there believe doing this harms the local flora resulting in many diseases of the plants. However in India it is not of much concern.



'Rice goes for a walk' 2005, Subodh Kerkar

Kerkar was born in 26th August 1959 in Pernem, Goa. He is a painter, sculptor, installation and land artist who resides in Goa, India. His father was an art teacher so he practically grew up in an artistic surrounding, although he deviated towards medical sciences as he grew up and joined medical school to become a doctor. Art was seen more or less like a hobby by him as he soon settled in his medical practice. However he could not ignore his true calling for very long and soon left his medical practice to become a full-time artists. Since then there has been no looking back for him. His initial medium was water colours but gradually he turned towards other mediums as well. He uses various mediums for creation but his installations and works in Land Art have a distinct appeal which sets him apart from his counterparts. While developing of a concept, environment is one of Kerkar's major concern. He tries to keep his works as environment friendly as he possibly could. However sometimes he falls short in this regard and ends up harming the environment to some degree rather than conserving it. He is not alone in this practice of unknowingly harming the environment.



Planning drawings over the river by Christo and Jeanne-Claude

Many Land artists use fabric on or in water in their works. Use of fabric hamper movement of marine creatures and also sometimes blocks sun light which threatens life in water. One of Chandigarh's local artist Manjot Kaur has been practicing Land Art of similar nature. In one such work she created an installation in water with a long red fabric and sticks. She worked on this project with another artist Ashraf A. ElHady from Egypt. Along with using fabric land-movers were also used for digging near a stream. Similarly Christo and Jeanne-Claude, an artist duo wraps stuff in fabric for many of their works. They are possibly the best known artist duo who prefer to work outside of the gallery in urban and rural environments. Recently they have been sued on bases of significant environmental damage for a project called 'Over The River' which involved a plan to suspend 5.9 miles of silvery fabric over the Arkansas River in Colorado. This kind of practice or acts harms marine life. Artists should understand the adverse effects of such works on the environment and have a more responsible attitude while executing any such work.



An under construction project of artists Manjot Kaur and Ashraf A. ElHady, 2017

Manjot is a young contemporary artists from Chandigarh, India. She was born on 14th May, 1989 in Ludhiana, India. She did her schooling from Ludhiana and later on came to Chandigarh for higher education in art. She is an alumna of the Government College of Art, Chandigarh. Although she passed out from the college with specialisation in the field of painting in 2012, she at present works in multiple mediums like drawing, video, interactive performance, land art installation and projections. Like Kerkar, Manjot too shows concern towards environment in her works, especially in her Land Art projects. In one another project called 'Farming as Industry', 2016 she was quite careful while choosing her material and method. She only used the crop remains to create her work and her installation was made on the farmland itself. However to some extent she too has not been fully successful in achieving this goal of completely environmentally friendly art.



'Indigo II' 2013, Subodh Kerkar

Use of pigments to colour water or use of paper for effect even if they are eco-friendly hampers marine life, mainly because it is human intervention. Even vegetables like chillies if used in bulk leaves its negative effects on the ecosystem, especially where it does not belong naturally. Subodh Kerkar has been using these materials in many of his works. Three prime examples are 'Indigo II' 2013, 'Gharrane' 2003 and 'The Pepper Cross' 2013. He has used colour pigment, paper and chillies in these three works respectively. He was careful enough to use biodegradable material which is considered eco-friendly but the quantity of the material is so much that it takes time to neutralise the effect.



'Gharrane' 2003. Subodh Kerkar



'The Pepper Cross' 2013, Subodh Kerkar

These are some of the example of Land Art which eventually end up harming environment, however there are many more types of works which embeds the spirit of environmental art by doing no harm to nature.

Conclusion

Changing natural landscape, hampering marine life and ecosystem of a place, use of harmful materials and intervention in nature are all part of Land Art. This authoritarian attitude of humans for a long time went un-noticed but lately has emerge as a concern for environmentalists around the world. Artists, although with best intentions and support for the environment and its issues creates these works, but unknowingly end up harming it instead. Land Art may not be all harmful or damaging to nature, but to consider it as a champion of environment would be debatable. A conflict can be seen in the practice of 'Land Art' or 'Environmental Art' and its intentions. In practice it sometimes ends up harming the environment and on the other hand it calls our attention to various environmental issues. This is also due to lack of a diligent research on part of the artists on their medium and material in context to their effect on the environment. A more responsible approach needs to be undertaken by the artists working in the medium of Land Art. On one hand it is vandalism of nature and on the other it intends to protect the environment instead. This puts a question mark on Land Art's true nature and the answer is, as always, ambiguous. While Land Art has supporters who give value to expression of art, cynics will compare their argument to almost identical statements made by large corporations involved in mining, drilling and other natural resource intensive industries. This makes us ponder on our relationship with the Land and definitely puts a question on Land Art's sustainability.

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