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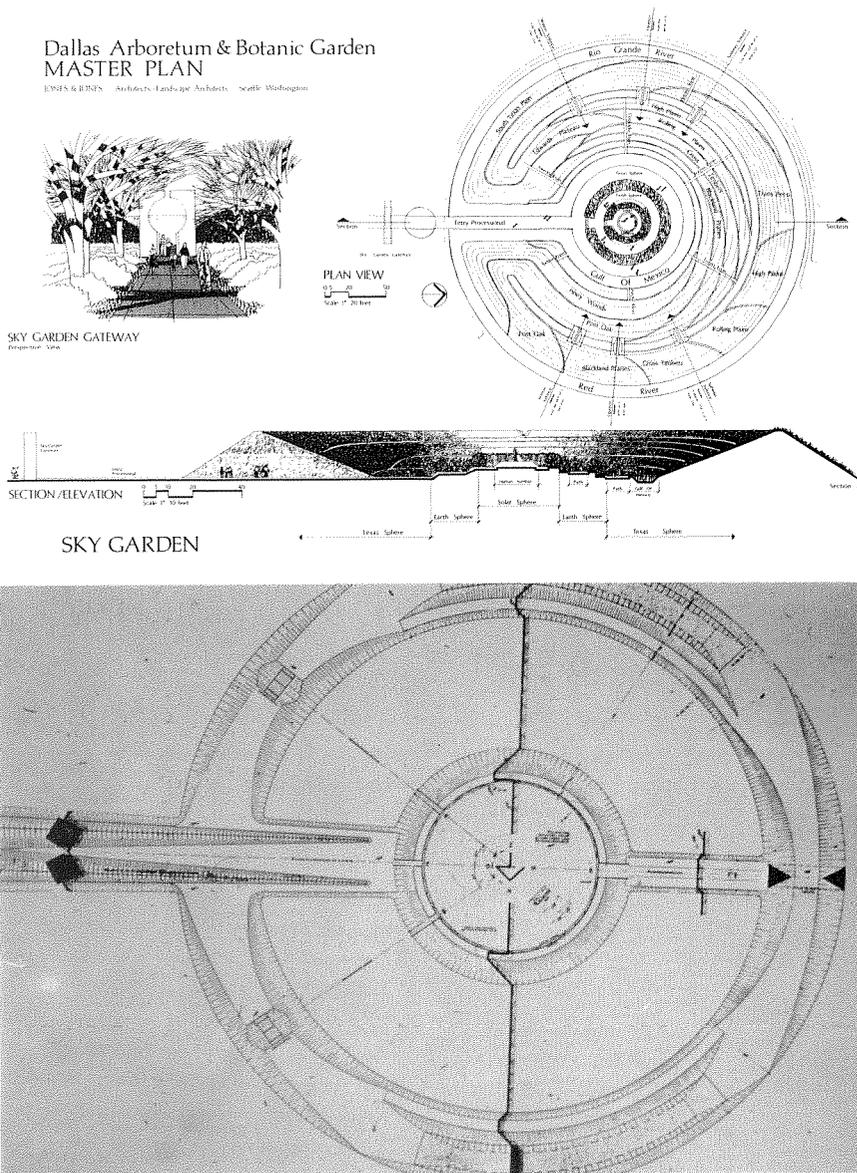
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Landscape Architecture: Making a Place for Art

Catherine M. Howett



It has been well over a decade since the profession of landscape architecture became aware, mostly through the forum provided by its journal *Landscape Architecture*,¹ of how certain developments in the world of art—variously described under the rubrics of “earth art,” “landscape sculpture,” “environmental art,” or, later, “site-specific art”—were increasingly relevant to the profession’s own historic concerns for the design of outdoor space. At first the suggestion that such art represented “the cutting edge of research in environmental design”² seemed absurd, or at least disturbing, to many practitioners. Today, however, there is ample evidence in the juries and journals that reflect current practice that the design intentions and values of this body of work have, indeed, exerted a powerful influence on recent projects in landscape architecture, in spite of any perceived differences in the artists’ outlook, training, or methodology. One might compare, for example, the proposed *Sky Garden* feature in the plan for the Dallas, Texas, botanical garden and arboretum by the Seattle firm of Jones and Jones with the plan of Robert Morris’s 1971 *Observatory* for a site in the Netherlands. Both works use circular earth mounds to orient visitors to particular configurations of the stars and planets, a frequent theme of outdoor art of the seventies. Similarly, Peter Walker’s 1984 design of the *Harvard Fountain* in front of the Science Center on the Cambridge campus is bound to summon up recollections of Carl

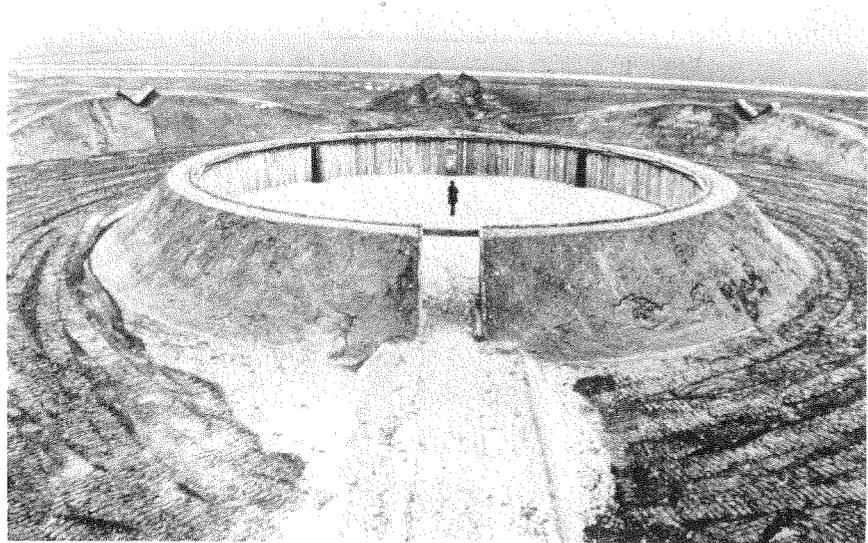
1 **Sky Garden**, plan, for the Dallas, TX, Arboretum and Botanical Garden. Jones and Jones, Architects and Landscape Architects, Seattle, WA.

2 **Observatory** (1971), plan, Robert Morris. Sonsbeek Foundation, The Netherlands. Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery.

Andre's controversial *Stone Field Sculpture* of 1977, a grouping of glacial boulders on the public green in Hartford, Connecticut, or of Michael Heizer's series of works using massive transplanted rock forms.

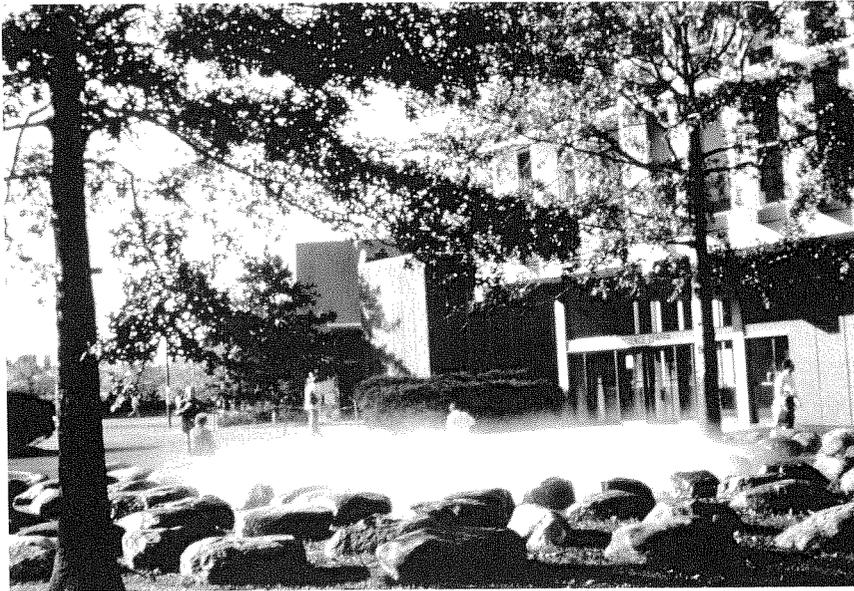
This rapprochement between the world of art and landscape architecture has not been entirely one-sided, however. One of the original motivations for the movement of artists away from studios, galleries, and museums—and away from the limitations of sculpture perceived as three-dimensional precious objects placed in a “setting”—was the desire to force a union of art and the so-called “real world,” the world not only of physical nature and the built environment but of the ordinary human community and everyday life. Robert Smithson was the first to see and propagandize the practical applications that “earth art” might have in the reclamation of landscapes previously devastated by mining or other industrial activities. “Art can become a physical resource,” he argued, “that mediates between the ecologist and the industrialist.”³

Other artists, too, began to pursue opportunities to create a public art that served functional as well as aesthetic purposes. As they succeeded in getting commissions to design such diverse public spaces as parks, play environments, outdoor theaters, urban plazas, and pedestrian walkways, these artists were entering the traditional domain of the landscape architect.



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3 Observatory (1971), Robert Morris.
Sonsbeek Foundation, The Netherlands.
Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery.



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4 Harvard University Science Center Fountain (1984), Peter Walker and SWA Associates. Cambridge, MA.

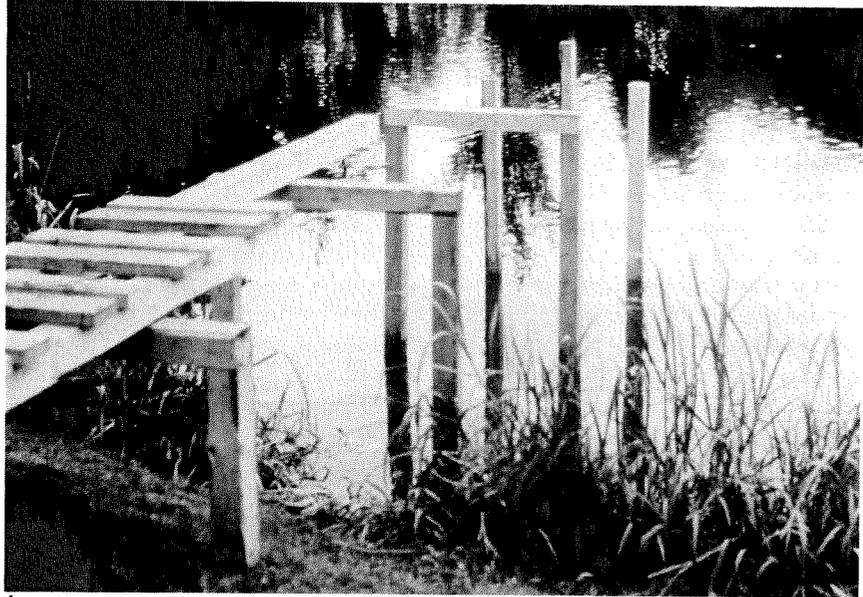
5 Stone Field Sculpture (1977), detail, Carl Andre. Hartford, CT.

Moreover, as John Beardsley has pointed out, their public projects were increasingly made possible by a wide range of public support, especially through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the General Services Administration, state and local arts councils, and other public organizations, as well as by in-kind and financial contributions from private funding sources.⁴ As early as 1976, for example, artist Athena Tacha won a competition for the design of a “pocket” park on Main Street in Smithtown, New York, a pilot project for environmental sculpture sponsored by the New York State Council on the Arts, with help from NEA, the township, and the local arts council. Believing that “contemporary art . . . should be lived with, not stuck in a museum,”⁵ Tacha took special pride in the fact that, although three finalists had been selected by a professional jury, her *Tide Park* was chosen as the winning design by public vote after the community had been given an opportunity to study models of the three proposals.⁶

Increasingly, in recent years, the hope shared by many artists that they might experience this kind of engagement with a sympathetic audience through the medium of a socially useful art—overcoming that alienation of the artist from the larger community that had so often characterized the Modern period—has seemed finally within reach of fulfillment. An artist like Richard Fleischner currently has no less than six major public projects in

the works, including “a courtyard in the new Dallas Museum, . . . a series of modular blocks around a soccer park in Jerusalem, . . . and a sequence of interlocked exterior courtyard spaces at MIT.”⁷ Calvin Tompkins has commented on a situation that has become typical for artists like Fleischner, whose work is centered in the unique character of a given site. “[It] means, for most of them,” Tompkins said, “taking into account a complex of social, political, historical, topographical, and architectural considerations. It means working within limits, and with all sorts of people whose main interests are not aesthetic ones—bureaucrats, safety engineers, union representatives, citizens’ groups.”⁸

It would be naive to imagine that the pressures of having to deal with a battery of other consultants and to grapple with complex design programs for sites in which art must serve functional ends—or, if nonfunctional, at least demonstrate social usefulness, as in the case of monuments—has had no effect at all on the kind of art that is now being produced. At the very least, public spaces designed to accommodate human activity of one sort or another must be safe to use and, generally, pleasant to experience, values that have not always been obtained in a number of significant environmental projects. Alice Aycock’s work, for just one example, has frequently addressed the experience of fear and dread that certain landscape configurations can evoke. She manipulates the conventional



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6 Union Pass (1977), George Trakas. At Documenta 6, Kassel, Germany.

7 Berth Haven (1983), George Trakas. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Seattle, WA.

vocabulary of architecture—doors, walls, roof, floors, stairs, ladders, chimneys—in order to communicate ambiguity and uncertainty, what she calls a “vocabulary of disjunction . . . in the tradition of Bosch, Piranesi, Boullée, Ledoux, Lequeu, Smithson, and many others.”⁹ Artistic intentions of this sort have not found a place in the new public art. A comparison that illustrates this transition might be made between some of George Trakas’s early works for outdoor exhibitions—his *Union Station* for “Projects in Nature” at Merriewolds West in Far Hills, New Jersey, in 1975, or *Union Pass* at Documenta 6 in Kassel, Germany, in 1977—with more recent installations, such as *Source Route* (1979, 1984) on the campus of Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, and *Berth Haven* (1983), on the grounds of the Western Regional Center of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Seattle, Washington. The two earlier works, centered in the experience of passage through a landscape, incorporated as major features watery pits blasted out of the earth with dynamite charges. One reviewer compared the experience of walking toward the deformed junction of Trakas’s two narrow bridges in *Union Station* with “approaching the scene of some violent accident, a collision, perhaps between the industrial and the natural.”¹⁰ *Source Route* and *Berth Haven*, by contrast, both provide visitors with an opportunity for a benign encounter with scenic, emotionally nurturant aspects of nature—“to see at close

hand the wildflowers and, with luck, some of the wildlife,” as Calvin Tompkins remarked of *Berth Haven*.¹¹

So while many landscape architects have been opening themselves to the imaginative challenges of environmental art, artists in their turn have in some measure moved in the direction of more accessible, functional, and collaborative site-specific art. John Beardsley has confirmed this “pronounced merging or at least overlap of intentions” that has inevitably given rise to questions about the classification of given works as art or landscape architecture, an issue, Beardsley wisely observes, that is “at once too large and too fruitless to tackle.”¹² He does admit, however, that when he began work on his catalogue for the 1977 Smithsonian exhibition *Probing the Earth: Contemporary Land Projects*, he worried, “in those less tolerant times,” about whether James Pierce’s works for Pratt Farm and Harvey Fite’s *Opus 40* (1939–1976) would be criticized as being too gardenesque in character.¹³ Robert Smithson had, after all, warned artists against the seductions of idealized, formalized landscapes, the “memory traces of tranquil gardens as ‘ideal nature’—jejune Edens that suggest an ideal of banal quality—[that] persist in popular magazines.”¹⁴ Smithson had even posed the question, writing in 1968, “Could one say that art degenerates as it approaches gardening?”¹⁵

I believe that Smithson’s question

strikes to the very heart of misgivings that many artists and architects share about the profession of landscape architecture, and that it is, moreover, simply a variation of a question that persistently recurs in frequent, anguished self-examinations within the profession: Is landscape architecture an art? One might better ask if landscape architecture is *still* an art, since most of these critiques claim for the modern practice of landscape architecture antecedents in the whole history of outdoor placemaking—in the magnificent ceremonial environments of ancient civilizations, in the triumphs of villa design and urban planning of the Italian Renaissance, in the legacy of French seventeenth-century formalism and the brilliant school of Le Notre, in English eighteenth-century landscape gardening and the development of Picturesque theory. The reason that the painful question repeatedly emerges within the profession is that, with very few exceptions, there seems not to be much continuity between the importance, quality, and public celebration of landscape works produced within these great traditions and contemporary practice. Yet how ironic it is that the figure of Frederick Law Olmsted, “father of American landscape architecture”—whose prodigious career dominated the second half of the nineteenth century, whose claims to continuity with the great traditions just described are unquestioned, whose genius gave form not only to superb landscapes of every sort in hundreds of



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8 **Foreground: Janus** (1978–82).
Background: **Triangular Redoubt** (1971),
Motte (1975), **Earthwoman** (1976–77),
James Pierce. Pratt Farm, Clinton, ME.

American cities but to a theoretical corpus and aesthetic canon that have remained dominant for almost a century after his death—should now be the object of a kind of Oedipal assault from within the ranks of his professional descendents.

A 1981 article by Stephen Krog for *Landscape Architecture*, significantly titled “Is it Art?,” illustrates this reaction very well. Krog expressed his fear that “the art in landscape architecture is experiencing suspended animation. The profession seems to cower in the shadow of Frederick Law Olmsted.”¹⁶ His point was that twentieth-century American landscape architecture had not produced a body of theory and practice equivalent to the achievements of the nineteenth century or of the Modern movements in architecture and the fine arts. “Devoid of movements, eras, dogmatic philosophies,” he complained, “. . . today’s landscape architecture is banished from the higher realms of art; without them, landscape architects will continue to perform competent but tawdry, sycophantic works.”¹⁷ Besides the lack of a critical and theoretical forum within the profession, Krog attributed its failure to achieve high art to the tyrannies of having to serve a design program and clients’ needs. In his view, “the primacy of ‘function’ obviates the regard for artistic merit,” and he seriously proposed that site planning be made an entirely separate discipline devoted to “the technical requirements of

adapting the land to human use” so that “the term ‘landscape architecture’ can be reserved for the artful manipulation of landscape environments for human experience.”¹⁸

Grady Clay, then editor of *Landscape Architecture*, had distributed Krog’s essay before its publication to selected respondents, and eleven letters were published in a subsequent issue of the magazine. While none of those commenting on Krog’s thesis seemed to take exception to his perception of a malaise within the profession, many did deplore the idea that the possibilities for art in the design of outdoor environments could be separated from the demands of program and function. Marc Treib and I both suggested that the profession routinely operates as a *craft* that, in the hands of exceptionally skilled practitioners, can produce genuine art. “When art exists,” Treib wrote, “there is an increase in both scope and refinement, and it offers us richer experiential rewards. Transforming and transcending the requirements of the mundane and pragmatic solution is the key.”¹⁹ Garrett Eckbo, too, emphasized the potential of landscape architecture, in spite of its being rooted in specific programmatic requirements, to become art—even to be, in fact, “the ultimate art, because the landscape, social as well as physical, is the home, and the source of inspiration, for all other arts.” He proposed that the critical attribute to be looked for is the “qualitative experience” that

art generates, “measured by memorability, intensity of response . . . degrees of pleasure, emotion, inspiration, aspiration, new relations between known elements (which bring out previously unnoticed qualities in those elements), and so on.”²⁰

Eckbo’s appraisal of landscape architecture’s place in relation to the world of art seems to me at once wiser and more realistic than Krog’s suggestion that the profession might be redeemed as a legitimate art by handing over its practical, technological side to a separate profession of site planners. This is especially true, since, as we have already seen artists doing site design within the context of a design program for public use have been more and more willing to accommodate themselves and their art to functionalism and responsiveness to social needs. In doing so, they have embraced, and rightly so, the same history that landscape architects claim as their own. Lucy Lippard has amply documented the ways in which the arts and rituals of prehistory have functioned as models for contemporary work in the landscape.²¹ John Beardsley and others have pointed out continuities between the aesthetic of English eighteenth-century Picturesque tradition and the work of such artists as Walter DeMaria, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt, Charles Ross, and James Turrell. Robert Smithson himself celebrated, in a perceptive 1973 essay in *Artforum*, the ways in which Frederick Law Olmsted’s landscape architecture had

embodied more complex and nuanced ecological and expressive values rooted in that same Picturesque tradition, values that Smithson wanted his own work to reflect as well—the art, as he called it, of “the dialectical landscape.”²²

Smithson admired the “dialectical” landscapes of Olmsted but deplored the “jejune Edens”—the perfected, idealized, artificial, and gardenesque landscapes of the shelter magazines. Perhaps Olmsted, too, had implicitly voiced the question, “Does art degenerate as it approaches gardening?,” since he and his partner Calvert Vaux are credited with having chosen for their profession the new designation “landscape architecture” at a time, around the middle of the last century,²³ when the terms “landscape gardening” and “landscape gardener” were in common use. In choosing to call themselves “architects,” did they hope to identify themselves with a more virile, rational, technologically based discipline, divorced from the softer-sounding, horticultural associations of the term “gardener”? Whatever the case, by the turn of the century the profession had formed a national association; within the next half-century, apprenticeship as the conventional road to practice had largely been replaced by academic training in any of several new university departments of landscape architecture that were established around the country. These departments were more often associated with agriculture, architecture, and engineering than

they were with art, and the curriculum leading to a degree in landscape architecture has tended to emphasize scientific and technical knowledge as a necessary precondition of good design.

This very process of institutionalization may have exacted a cost, over the course of time, in a needless narrowing of the profession’s vision of its own work, the range of sources on which it might draw, and the freedom with which it pursued new goals or alternative ways of arriving at the same goals. As we move into a new century, the mission of landscape architecture, as I see it, will be to design outdoor places that superbly accommodate our needs as individuals and as members of a community while giving expression to shared values, of which our stewardship of the earth’s natural systems ought to be preeminent. Those needs and values, however, cannot be discovered in isolation from larger currents of ideas and influences in contemporary society or from creative intercourse with artists, architects, theorists, and critics, as well as with scientists and technicians. Art alone, after all, can make those new places meaningful and memorable. Art alone can restore to our culture’s sensibility the most ancient of the metaphors of place-making, the metaphor of the garden—not as a perfected Eden but as a place revealed in process; the sacred space, the place of growth, of beauty, of sensual pleasure; the place of mystery, trial and transformation, transfigured life and death. Newton Harrison, in

describing the sources of his own ecologically based and politically potent art, summed up the complex criteria that can come into play in the design of outdoor environments. He made the point that prehistoric cave paintings were not mere ornaments to the wall but were “survival instructions with references to space, time, movement, magic, location, ordinance and tactics,”—in other words, functional and programmatic public art. “The end game,” Harrison said, stands somewhere “between decoration, special craft and magic.”²⁴

NOTES

- 1 See, especially, “Landscape Sculpture—The New Leap,” *Landscape Architecture* (July 1971), pp. 296–327; and Catherine M. Howett, “New Directions in Environmental Art,” *Landscape Architecture* (January 1977), pp. 38–46.
- 2 Howett, p. 45.
- 3 Robert Smithson, “Untitled, 1971” in Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays With Illustrations* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p. 220.
- 4 John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), p. 100.
- 5 Athena Tacha, “Tidepark, Smithtown, New York,” *Landscape Architecture* (May 1978), p. 202.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Katy Kline, “Space into Place: Richard Fleischner,” *Places* (Winter 1984), p. 64.
- 8 Calvin Tompkins, “The Art World: Perception at All Levels,” *New Yorker* (December 3, 1984), p. 176.
- 9 Alice Aycock, *Project Entitled “The Beginnings of a Complex . . .”* (New York: Lapp Princess Press, 1977), n.p.
- 10 Roberta Smith, “Projects in Nature,” *Artforum* 14, no. 4 (December 1975), p. 69.
- 11 Tompkins, p. 179.

- 12 Beardsley, p. 10.
- 13 Ibid., p. 7.
- 14 Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in Holt, ed., p. 85.
- 15 Ibid., p. 86.
- 16 "Is it Art?," *Landscape Architecture* (May 1981), p. 373.
- 17 Ibid., p. 374.
- 18 Ibid., p. 375.
- 19 Marc Treib, letter to the editor, *Landscape Architecture* (July 1981) p. 446.
- 20 Garrett Eckbo, letter to the editor, *Landscape Architecture* (July 1981), p. 440.
- 21 Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).
- 22 Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," *Artforum* (February 1973), pp. 62–68.
- 23 Norman Newton, *Design on the Land* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971), p. 273.
- 24 Newton Harrison, quoted in Lippard, p. 233.