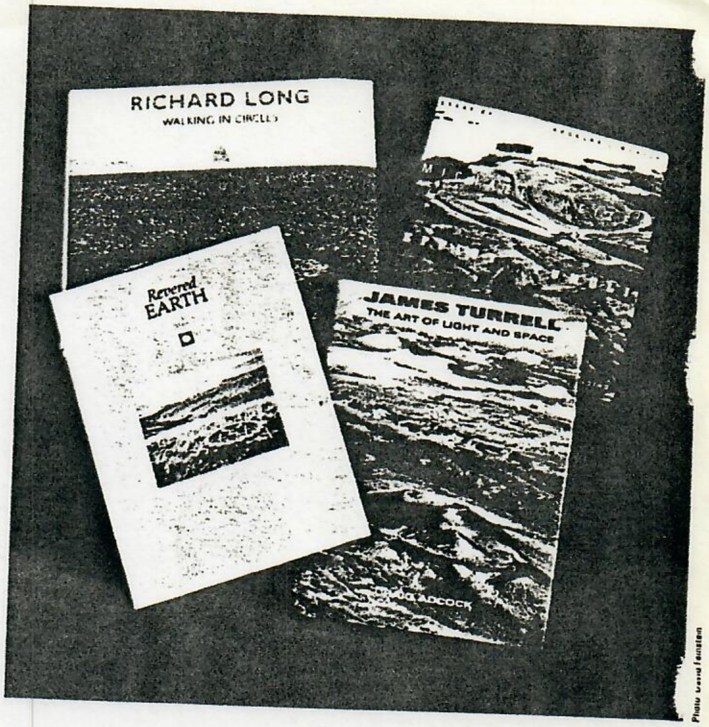

Photo David Feinstein

Writing Home

Artists' land environments could be considered the country cousins of the urban public art movement. Both sprang from the expansive cultural aspirations of the mid-1960s that initiated the National Endowment for the Arts' Art in Public Places program in 1967 and inspired the first exhibition of earthworks in 1968. Both town and country sites require that a viewer move physically through a space to experience its environmental impact. Although audience accessibility alone does not make a work "public," the isolated rural or desert locales of most environmental projects challenge their inclusion in the category of public art. Thus the documentation of land art in publications provides a crucial link between the artworks and their "publics."

The very remoteness of rural or desert projects puts special demands on their literary emissaries. As pictures and data can never really represent "being there," the author must provide both a perceptual account of the experience and a conceptual analysis of it. The author need not only "show" but "tell." It is in the manner of telling that the following publications differ.

The encompassing title of the oversized *James Turrell, The Art of Light and Space* indicates Craig Adcock's ambitious approach to Turrell's work. The book spans Turrell's career, from his experiments in the early '60s with projected light in his southern California studio to his spatially disorienting, interior light environments, to a detailed description of his monumental *Roden Crater* project near Flagstaff, which has been in progress since 1974. Adcock, a historian and critic interested in artists' utilizations of scientific principles, is particularly adept at describing the technology and perceptual effects of Turrell's work, and he gives a clear impression of what being in those unusual environments is like.

Adcock acknowledges that Turrell's cooperation was essential to convey these works' technological intricacies and, beyond that, that his "intention has been to represent [Turrell's] ideas." Thus Adcock frequently substantiates his points with quotes by Turrell and defers to the artist's assessments of his art or his life. For example, he takes at face value Turrell's "skepticism" that his Quaker upbringing, with its light symbolism, had little influence on his own concentration on light. This affiliation also causes Adcock to make spurious comparisons, misleadingly calling earlier earthworks such as Michael Heizer's 1969 excavation *Double Negative* "essentially large sculptures placed in outdoor settings." He also records that in 1975 the artist received a National Endowment for the Arts Art in Public Places grant (matched by the DIA Art Foundation instead of the customary local community) for the *Roden Crater* but does not question why, as of 1992, the observatory spaces he intricately describes are yet to be constructed.

Adcock does succinctly analyze how "Turrell's works ... conjoin the generally disparate components of work and environment into one thing; the object (light) and its surroundings (space) become fundamentally intermeshed. The light, the space, and the object are all part of the same precept." Yet he refuses to consider the metaphorical implications of his astute observations, such as the sense of boundless merging with the surroundings—what Freud called an "oceanic" feeling—engendered by Turrell's interior light environments. Adcock states about Turrell's oeuvre that "its most intriguing aspect is its resistance to simple explanation" but fails to offer a complex or subtle one of his own. At the conclusion of this well-illustrated and fastidiously documented tome, we have little more than a material understanding of Turrell's visionary environment-observatory, *Roden Crater*, and a "simple explanation" of Turrell's art as "pure luminescence"—eerily reminiscent of Clement Greenberg's formalist obfuscation of color field painting as "pure presence."

Do artists really want writers to serve as their obsequious avatars? There's no doubt about it in Anne Seymour and Hamish Fulton's *Richard Long, Walking in Circles*. The first line of Seymour's essay reads, "The conception and layout of this book are Richard Long's," and three sentences later she is likening him to "[the] gods...capable of sustaining many roles as well as that of artist, including traveler, explorer, pilgrim, shaman, magician, peripatetic poet, hill-walker and ordinary 20th-century person from Bristol." Seymour's ensuing "poetic" apotheosis of Long's solitary walks and his resulting maps, drawings, wall paintings and floor sculptures of rocks and stones from specific sites does n lead to an understanding of the artist or his work. Neither do the offhanded remarks by the artist that are interspersed between illustrations, which, because they offer little insight, are simply pretentious.

Michael Heizer, Effigy Tumuli, The Reemergence of Ancient Mound Building
Essay by Douglas C. McGill. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990, 132 pp., cloth. $39.95.

James Turrell, The Art of Light and Space
Craig Adcock. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, 272 pp., cloth. $80.

Richard Long, Walking in Circles
Essays by Anne Seymour and Hamish Fulton, interview by Richard Cork. New York: George Braziller, 1991, 263 pp., cloth. $80.

Revered Earth
Essay by Suzi Gablik, essays on artists by Diane Armitage, Robert B. Gaylor, Dominique G. W. Mazeaud and Melinda Wortz. Santa Fe: Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, 1990, 78 pp., paper. Out of print.

This weighty volume's chief virtue is its pictorial documentation, with large black-and-white photographs of Long's ephemeral paths and marks in the natural terrain, shown in sharp, crystalline detail. Only on the last page does one realize where this book should have begun. In a 1988 interview the art historian Richard Cork asked Long, "Why do you think that you go out to these remote places again and again?" and, receiving a nebulous reply, futilely insisted, "I want to press you a bit further.... What do you think you gain from this closeness with the natural world?" This analytical pressure is precisely what the book lacks. But when Seymour is described on the back cover as director of the Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, and when Long's résumé shows that he has exhibited with d'Offay since 1979, one realizes that the book's vapidity is due to its function as a vanity publication addressed to the art market.

Similarly *Michael Heizer, Effigy Tumuli, The Reemergence of Ancient Mound Building* by Douglas C. McGill serves as a promotion for Heizer's creative approach to land reclamation-public art, and McGill notes early on that his essay had been solicited by the artist. In spite of its intent, the book is modest in size and tenor; McGill's journalistic naiveté toward land art belies his former role as a *New York Times* reporter. In breezy, first-person narrative, as if for a "Lifestyle" feature, McGill recounts the day he spent traveling with Heizer from New York City to view *Effigy Tumuli,* the artist's five earth mounds southwest of Chicago, which were completed in 1987. In digressions McGill explains how the farmland on this mesa abutting the Illinois River had been destroyed in the 1930s due to strip mining, how the corporation owning it in the mid-1970s had worked with Illinois's Abandoned Mined Lands Reclamation Council to commission Heizer to re-form the earth for the Buffalo Rock State Park, and how Heizer's background as a pioneer earthwork sculptor made him an ideal candidate. McGill does recognize the significance of Heizer's departure from abstract to representational forms when the artist adopted the sculptural mode of earth mounds, or tumuli, of prehistoric American Indians. In some cases those indigenous forms are in the shape of animal effigies, a practice Heizer continued with his geometricized tumuli based on the water strider, frog, turtle, snake and catfish. Heizer himself makes the provocative point that his effigies serve as "political commentary," as they are meant to honor the Native Americans themselves ("a group of people who were *genocided* "). Yet McGill does not develop the potential significance of his comment in relation to the country's increasing sensitization toward minorities. Nor does he discuss Heizer's shift from private earth-moving projects of the 1960s to public reclamation projects in the 1980s and the works' correspondence with the growing global consciousness of ecological issues.

This mixture of environmental and social awareness has had increased emphasis in this decade, inspiring openly partisan exhibitions and catalogues such as *Revered Earth.* Organized by the Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe in 1990 (and traveling to six states), the exhibition brought together 20 artists "whose primary concerns have been an affirmation toward the planet," as Robert B. Gaylor states in the catalogue's introduction. Even before one opens the catalogue, ecological consciousness is signaled by the elegant plainness of the uncoated tan cover, which features a snapshot of one of the works on a parched hilltop. This polemical stance continues with the main essayist, art-world gadfly critic Suzi Gablik, who in recent years has turned her fervor to the environment: "The existing mission of our times is to develop a new cultural coding for the ecological age...." She concludes "[the] exhibition...puts us in the presence of aesthetic consciousness awakening to its moral responsibility for the fate of the earth." The works, ranging from outdoor environments to interior constructions, are well represented in photographs and analytical essays by several critics.

Issued within months of each other, these publications reveal the broadening focus of both sculptors and writers. The abstract "environments" of the early '70s have now become "environmental," spatially and socially. The ecologically conscious constructions of the late '80s demonstrate a new engagement with the political world. Authors' voices now range from self-effacing "possession" by an artist who speakes through them to advocacy of the cultural implications of artists' visual statements. Together these books display not only the current heterogeneity of sculptors' approaches to environmental manipulation, but also the radical differences in the way writers conceive of their relationship to their subject-artist. *—Suzaan Boettger*

Suzaan Boettger, *an art critic and historian in New York City, is working on a book about the early history of contemporary earthworks.*

Photo David Feinstein