

## Language of the Soil

SUZAAN BOETTGER

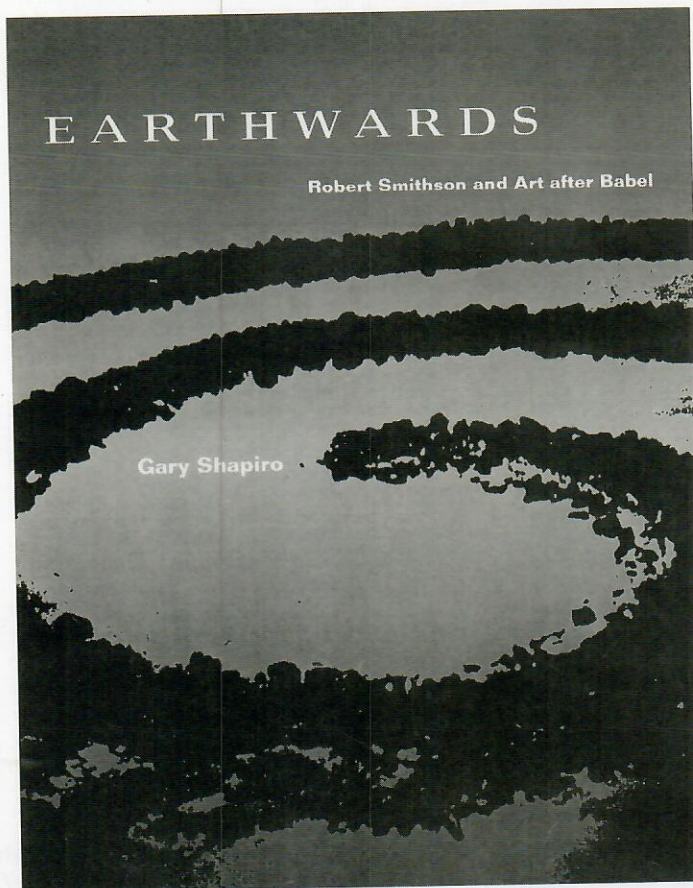
**David Bourdon.** *Designing the Earth: The Human Impulse to Shape Nature.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995. 224 pp.; 24 duotones, 155 b/w ills. \$45.00

**Jack Flam, ed.** *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. 385 pp.; 220 b/w ills. \$24.95 paper

**Baile Oakes, ed.** *Sculpting with the Environment: A Natural Dialogue.* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1995. 256 pp.; 200 color ills. \$59.95

**Gary Shapiro.** *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. 284 pp.; 39 b/w ills. \$34.95

**Gilles A. Tiberghien.** *Land Art.* Trans. Caroline Green. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995. 311 pp.; 150 color ills., 150 b/w. \$65.00



With these five publications, Robert Smithson's complaint about "earth projects"—"To organize this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids, and subdivisions is an esthetic process that has scarcely been touched"—is definitely no longer true. Sure, there is still some "muddy thinking," but these siftings through the sedimentation of what we now call land art more often produce "conceptual crystallizations."<sup>1</sup> Each of these authors offers a useful viewpoint onto the sculptural terrain that since the mid-1960s has produced large-scale, exterior, site-specific environments made in, with, or in reference to, the earth. *Designing the Earth* by the critic David Bourdon, who knew and wrote about earthworkers in the 1960s, takes an archaeological approach, unearthing the ways prehistoric villages and previous civilizations have dug in and piled up soil to produce shelters, sanctuaries, and resources, before recounting the contemporary evolution of those forms in earthworks, land art, and urban public art. *Sculpting with the Environment*, edited by one who does so himself, Baile Oakes, champions ecological enlightenment and provides a compendium of recent environmentally sensitive projects. Gilles A. Tiberghien's *Land Art* and Gary Shapiro's *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* illustrate the risks and benefits of contemporary philosophers' increasing invasion of art history, here snatching the corpus

of earth art for philosophic discourse. Tiberghien's massive tome (12 by 10½ inches), a translation of his 1993 French edition, accommodates his copious visual documentation and broad themes, whereas the unconventional smallness (8 by 6½ inches) of Shapiro's volume belies the thoroughness of his penetration of a single artist's thinking. The last two might be read in tandem with the primary material itself: *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, in which editor Jack Flam brings together a panoply of this innovator's texts, from the didactic to the poetic.

Thus the five authors' voices are pitched toward different, albeit overlapping, visually attuned readerships. In 1969 Bourdon wrote about "earthworks" or "dirt art" for *Life*,<sup>2</sup> and for the most part he has adopted the magazine's traditional journalistic format of recessive reportage and prominent photographs; the fact that the book's pictures are all likewise black and white lends it an aura of an older album. Bourdon's descriptions are generally matter-of-fact, the images striking (a number are by either of the well-known aerial photographers Marilyn Bridges or George Gerster). He groups summary explanations of earthen constructions, excavations, and carved living rock by function in six chapters ("Shelter," "Commerce," "Defense," "Tombs," "Sacred Places," and "Land Art"). This thematic structure elucidates the forms' meanings more

clearly than the elaborate historical and geographical sequences in the only similar book, Geoffrey and Susan Jellicoe's *Landscape of Man: Shaping the Environment from Prehistory to the Present Day*,<sup>3</sup> which slights contemporary art. At the same time, Bourdon's ecumenical mixing of hermetic high art, vernacular, and utilitarian genres reintegrates arbitrary categories.

Yet it is in the final chapter that Bourdon offers the most engaged, and thus engaging, narrative. No doubt this was stimulated by his personal acquaintance with earthworks' "ground breakers." Asserting the "pervasive influence" of Carl Andre's minimal works' horizontal orientation (p. 210), Bourdon also emphasizes Smithson's intellectual dominance at Max's Kansas City and praises new approaches to public art by Andy Goldsworthy and Vito Acconci. It's conspicuous, then, when he shatters this smooth approbation with a dig such as calling Christo an "entrepreneur" (p. 220) and Robert Morris's *Observatory*'s "obvious allusions to ancient megalithic monuments . . . somewhat heavy-handed and pedantic" (p. 218). Yet overall, one can savor the large pages of this book for the lively patterns of mounds and furrows on the earth's surface, and appreciate the rich duotone sheen of the printing, beautifully enhanced by the book's well-designed, deep blue-green cover and jacket and its clear blocks of informative text.

# Designing the Earth

The Human Impulse To Shape Nature



96

In Oakes's *Sculpting with the Environment*, the word "earth" is always capitalized. The first line of his foreword describes the book's purview as "past and current public art projects that help us understand our relationship to our biosphere—Earth" (p. 1). Thus the author immediately establishes both a specific thematic orientation and the fact that this contradicts the broader implications of the title, even given its cryptic pun "A Natural Dialogue." (What is an unnatural dialogue?) Smithsonian leased land from the federal government and moved 6,650 tons of indigenous material on the northern edge of the Great Salt Lake to make his *Spiral Jetty*. He did this in April 1970, the same month of the first celebration of Earth Day. That juxtaposition certainly demonstrates a relationship to our biosphere, but none of these five authors and editors address such cultural or social dialogues. In Oakes's book, none of the original earthworkers are even represented; among the artists' pages, the "past" to which he refers seems to go back about fifteen years. The book effectively contextualizes Oakes's own work with that of thirty-four more accomplished artists, ranging from the well known (Nancy Holt, Charles Ross) to the should-be-better-known (Douglas Hollis, Jody Pinto, et al.), all of whom ostensibly enact a reverential attitude toward "Nature." Works by twenty-three of these artists, including Oakes, are on view in the exhibition of the same name he curated being circulated by the International Sculpture Center through 1997.

For the brief introductory essays, Oakes

rounds up the usual suspects, who repeat the ecological exhortations (Suzy Gablik) and insights (Thomas Berry, Fritjof Capra) already familiar from their books. When Oakes isn't acting as a ventriloquist for Gablik (her manifestoes *Has Modernism Failed?* and *The Re-Enchantment of Art* provide the sub- [just barely] texts for his criticism of modernism and call for a holistic view of the cosmos), his discussion of "Ancient and Contemporary Art" solely describes astronomically aligned sculpture, thus providing the historical background for his own work. Each essay concludes with a reproduction of its author's signature—as if bearing witness. Although some have an unpleasantly sermonizing cast, Oakes's book usefully illustrates a spectrum of approaches a community or corporation could adopt in seeking to do the right thing, ecologically as well as artistically. So it's unfortunate that its design suggests a sheep in wolf's clothing. The book is purple, its jacket back a sunburn red, the front a blazing chrome yellow with bold type framing a large, mostly black photograph of light beaming through Oakes's own cedar sculpture *Gestation* (1990). The aggressiveness of these hot, contrasting hues contradicts the gentle receptivity to "Nature" promoted within (but does convey the fervor of Oakes's mission).

Tiberghien's *Land Art* immediately heralds its ambitions by centering a large picture of Brian W. Aldiss's *Earthworks* on the first page of the foreword. In this country this science fiction novel has been long out of print and its cover has

not been reproduced, and it is exciting to see it. So this is the image (a caked and fissured desert surface superimposed over a close-up of a young man's face) that Smithsonian picked up at the Port Authority before taking the bus to tour the "monuments of Passaic"?<sup>4</sup> Such documentary breadth is the chief benefit of this book, which intersperses the text with sidebars of lengthy excerpts from exhibition reviews, catalogue essays, and additional science-fiction novels. It contains a multitude of breathtaking color and black-and-white photographs of sculptures, environmental projects, preparatory drawings, and artists exploring remote sites. Entire artists' essays and interviews are reprinted, and several large maps and driving directions to the major extant sites are provided.<sup>5</sup> Thus, with almost everything you'd need except the four-wheel drive (from personal experience, a *must*), it's mystifying why the maps remain in French. De Maria's *Lightning Field* located in *Nouveau Mexique*?

This anomaly, though trivial in itself, exemplifies the volume's pervasive editorial carelessness. Sometimes this may be attributed to an uninformed translator, who inverts Tiberghien's sentences to garble chronology, as in "Greenberg, attracted in the late 1950s by painters such as Morris Louis or Kenneth Noland, was—with Harold Rosenberg—the first supporter of the abstract expressionists" (p. 31). She also gives Robert Morris the first name "Richard" (p. 34), "Oppenheim" becomes "Oppenheimer" (p. 186), and "la notion de décentrement," as in the concept of the split or "decentered self," becomes "the idea of decentralization" (p. 48). But it's Tiberghien's own ambiguous account in the next sentence that implies that Morris's "Notes on Sculpture" (1966) came *after* Smithsonian's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) (p. 48). Morris takes the most hits here, with, in both French and English versions, his drawing *Evanston Illinois Earth Project* (1968) attributed to Smithsonian (p. 115); his multiple 21-inch *Mirror Cubes* described as "about one yard ["mètre"] long" (p. 64); and himself identified in a photo as one of the artists in the February 1969 "Earth Art" exhibition at Cornell University when in fact he wasn't there (he had telephoned the instructions for making his interior piles) (p. 55). That person in the group photo is actually Thomas Leavitt, director of the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University (now the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art). Leavitt's name does appear as the curator of that exhibition (p. 59), which he wasn't: it was Willoughby Sharp. Contradictions abound: are land art sites "not difficult to visit" (p. 235) or "only generally accessible through what Smithsonian calls nonsites or through photography" (p. 257)? But the real doozie is the gray photograph captioned "industrial landscape, east coast of the United States" (p. 38). Wondering where they have those odd-shaped road signs, the geographically curious reader could discern them pointing toward Trier and

Mannheim! Mistakes like these—and others too numerous to name—make one feel like the book's first reader. Yet when one cares about the subject, this mangling is less amusing than disheartening.

Tiberghien's commentary frequently provokes a sensation of déjà vu. He has assimilated many secondary analyses on issues now basic to 1960s studies: earthworks as anti- or postmodernist, as conceptual art, as anti-institution, anti-commodity art, the integration of work and locale in site-specific work, the equivocal role of photographic documentation. But he adopts the conceptualizations of others unquestioningly, in particular Rosalind Krauss's ideas of postminimalism as exemplifying meaning discovered in experience and of the "expanded field." His unstructured discussions hop between cursory interpretation, extended quotations, and descriptions of site visits, elliptically circulating through all the chapters, often making nominal themes incomprehensible. Hegel surfaces a few times, but Tiberghien's reference to the philosopher's ideas of symbolic form and the sublime doesn't illuminate the art. The jacket describes Tiberghien as "an assistant professor at the Université de Rennes, Haute-Bretagne, where he teaches philosophy as well as modern and contemporary art history." This book's contribution is its sumptuous pictorial documentation, not its text.

Shapiro's title, *Earthwards*, cannot be spoken without calling up its near homonym, "Earthwords," the title of Craig Owens's influential 1979 review of Smithson's writing as a paragon of postmodernism.<sup>6</sup> Yet the allusion of "earthwards" to a gravitational or primal attraction also foretells the nuances underlying Shapiro's analysis. Initially skeptical of an artist's capabilities, the Tucker Boatwright Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Richmond claims in the foreword that "because of the scope of [Smithson's] vision, we ought to think of [him] not merely as an artist . . ." (p. 4). But the ambivalence serves Shapiro well as he proceeds to give us Smithson the artist, as "writer and thinker," in all of his rich complexity.

Owens describes Smithson's work as demonstrating "the eruption of language into the aesthetic field [and thus] coincident with, if not the definitive index of, the emergence of postmodernism."<sup>7</sup> But Shapiro recognizes the artist's call to "explore the pre- and post-historic mind . . . go[ing] into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts" (p. 44) not as manifesting another sequence progressing from modernism but rather as Smithson's wish to "step outside that [lineage]" or "time stream" (p. 37). Examining Smithson's views in relation to his references to Wyndham Lewis, Michel Foucault, Marcel Duchamp, and George Kubler's *Shape of Time*, and particularly juxtaposing Hegel's historicism against the science fiction writer (and

Smithson favorite) Eric Temple Bell's Nietzschean view of "eternal recurrence," Shapiro demonstrates that Smithson's art and thought display a radically alternate conception of time, a "post-periodization."<sup>8</sup>

Emphasis on such breaches of divisions has been central to analyses of postmodernist work; the imagistic materiality of Smithson's writing and the conceptual textuality of his sculpture epitomize what Jessica Prinz has called Smithson's "continuous crossing of limits and boundaries."<sup>9</sup> Both Shapiro and Prinz, to whom he surprisingly does not refer, link such transgressions by Smithson to poststructuralist and deconstructive practices. She analyzes it from the perspective of literary criticism; he applies Smithson's poetic metaphor of the "idea of the universe as a Babel of printed matter" (p. 186) to philosophy. Referring as well to representations of the Tower of Babel by Borges, Brecht, Brueghel, and Derrida, Shapiro shows the idea of Babel as a schema of "both a destroyed structure and the destruction of the illusion of a single language in control of its own use" (p. 166).

Shapiro recognizes the ground of Smithson's deconstruction as metaphorically as well as literally the earth, just as it was a metaphysical foundation for Martin Heidegger. Disengaging the philosopher from his infamous "bouts of feudal nostalgia" (p. 130) and Smithson's earthwork from being misunderstood as romantic environmentalism, Shapiro sees an apt philosophical parallel between Heidegger's origination of art in a reciprocal striving between the "earth" and the "world" and Smithson's desires for both "mother earth" and excavation machines. The dialectic is forcefully illustrated by the *Spiral Jetty's* monumental mounds—Smithson's own ziggurat-like, albeit flattened, sign of Babel—representing both the artist's act of prominent marking of the earth's surface and the inevitable erasure of authorial presence by entropic erosion. Shapiro's ability to work through Smithson's contradictions, position them in relation to diverse textural sources, and then lucidly convey his imaginative insights makes this book immensely absorbing. It's a monograph, yet not a reductive apotheosis.

The danger for writers outside the discipline focusing on a single artist is that they may not know what is idiosyncratic to the subject or common among contemporaries, and Shapiro's presentation occasionally suffers from this. Smithson's "reject[ion of] the pastoral aesthetics of the garden" (p. 115) was not unique. He was "a," not "the," "pioneer of earthworks," nor was he the "precursor of . . . Christo and [Michael] Heizer" (p. 21). Each of them came to land art through separate artistic, intellectual, and historical routes. Despite these reservations, this small volume, with its soft paper jacket and stunning cover design of black swirl against luminous olive, suggesting Smithson's *Spiral* by starlight, is a pleasure to read and to hold.

Finally, to read all about it in the artist's own words, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* brings together all those from the long out-of-print *Writings of Robert Smithson*,<sup>10</sup> from Eugenie Tsai's exhibition catalogue *Robert Smithson Unearthed*,<sup>11</sup> plus additional material from disparate publications and thirty previously unpublished texts (articles, essays, poetry). The book is part of the Documents of Twentieth Century Art series founded in 1944 by Robert Motherwell, edited since 1979 by Jack Flam, and published since 1995 by the University of California Press.

Whereas Shapiro's monograph addresses Smithson's verbalized ideas almost exclusively, Flam's introduction to the writings emphasizes Smithson's expansion of "the usual definition of what 'being an artist' entailed . . . as an ongoing process that involved an engagement with both abstract ideas and specific material presences" (p. xvii). This was characteristic rather than atypical in the highly conceptualized art of the mid-1960s, but for the autodidactic Smithson this "reciprocal interaction" (p. xiii) played across unusually wide-ranging literary and artistic genres, resulting in an idiosyncratic polyphony. Flam provides an astute preamble to what he so aptly terms Smithson's "intensely distilled philosophical rumination" (p. xiv), covering considerations of time schemes, the commerce of art, humanist ideology, etc. Yet in his conclusion, Flam pulls back by asserting the distinction, especially questionable for this figure, of Smithson's identity as "above all a practicing artist rather than a theorist" (p. xxv). This position recalls Shapiro's quandary of what an artist is, and demonstrates the multiple identities Smithson's texts evoke.<sup>12</sup>

While not containing every scribble Holt (Smithson's widow) generously deposited as the Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers at the Archives of American Art, this publication is nevertheless a relief for those of us who regularly troll those papers' miles of microfilm; it will undoubtedly inspire another round of Smithson reevaluations and will provide canon fodder for innumerable term papers.<sup>13</sup>

The almost simultaneous recent publication of these five books demonstrates the strong desire among writers to survey and to articulate artists' language of the soil. By focusing on aesthetically sculpted earth, on art amplifying the perception of nature, and on the writings of one of this genre's major artists, this confluence of publications manifests an increasing attention to the environment in our cultural consciousness. Through their presentations of artists' constructions of nature, these heaps of language in the vicinity of land art offer something for almost any desire to mentally and pictorially experience the earth.

#### Notes

1. Quotations are from Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert*

Smithson: *The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 100.

2. David Bourdon, "What on Earth," *Life* 66, no. 16 (April 25, 1969): 80.

3. Geoffrey and Susan Jellicoe, *The Landscape of Man: Shaping the Environment from Prehistory to the Present Day*, 3d ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995).

4. Perhaps. But Tiberghien is oblivious to the discrepancy between the *Earthworks* cover stating "Doubleday Science Fiction" (which was published in 1966) and Smithson's account of purchasing a "Signet paperback" (Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 68), so this image may not have been on his edition.

5. Tiberghien, as well as Shapiro, describes the *Spiral Jetty* as continually under water, thus inaccessible. Not so: depending on the extent of spring rains, by late summer or early fall it generally emerges from the evaporated lake. Call the nearby Golden Spike Monument for current conditions.

6. Originally published in *October* 10 (Fall 1979), Craig Owens's essay has been reprinted in *Beyond Recognition*, ed. Scott Bryson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 40-51. Unaware of Owens's text, my own review was similarly titled "Earthworks and Earthwords," *Artweek* (March 29, 1980): 19.

7. Owens, "Earthwords," in *Beyond Recognition*, 45.

8. His contrast between Clement Greenberg's call for a "self-criticism . . . carried on in a spontaneous and subliminal way" (p. 34) and art's "unmistakable turn to self-consciousness" (p. 35) in the mid-1960s would have been stronger if he had known that Greenberg's "Modernist Painting" had not "first appeared in 1965" (p. 35), but in the *Arts Yearbook*, 1960.

9. Jessica Prinz, "Words in Abime: Smithson's Labyrinth of Signs," *Art Discourse/Discourse in Art* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 79-123.

10. *Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979).

11. Eugenie Tsai, *Robert Smithson Unearthed*, exh. cat. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

12. "Most critics cannot endure the suspension of boundaries between what Ehrenzweig calls the 'self and the non-self'" (Smithson, "Sedimentation," 100).

13. When quoting Smithson, both Shapiro and Flam cite solely the page number of each anthology, making it impossible for the reader to know the quote's year or circumstances without also having that anthology at hand. I hope those who quote from these newly available texts will cite specific titles as well as the anthology itself.