

Land, Art, Liberation: Groundings of Revolutionary Ecology

Aaron Katzeman

My dissertation project, presently titled “Land, Art, Liberation: Groundings of Revolutionary Ecology,” examines contemporary artists whose place-based work engages “land” in conversation with revolutionary social movements. Understanding the origins of environmental degradation and climate catastrophe as rooted in the colonial-capitalist dispossession, conquest, and control of land, these artists and movements offer radical alternatives of relating to land through Indigenous, Black, and peasant traditions, locating within land the key to self-determination, food sovereignty, and ecological futurity.

As an entry point into this study, I critically revisit the American Land Art movement of the late 1960s and 1970s to scrutinize both its historical limitations and lingering potentiality. The groundbreaking generation of Land artists—Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter De Maria, among others—were notable for their large-scale and permanent installations in supposedly desolate landscapes of the American West. These works have since been both lauded and critiqued for their perceived environmental considerations or lack thereof.

Intervening in these existing debates, I rearticulate Land Art's underlying motivations within the context of U.S. settler colonialism and imperialism, analyzing the art movement in comparison to visual culture that emerges concurrently but is, instead, produced alongside resistance to military occupation, social movements for agrarian reform, and anti-colonial national liberation struggles. In addition to the continental U.S., I look toward places that have been similarly affected by varying forms of colonial/imperial intervention—including Hawai‘i, Brazil, and Palestine—to examine how artists in these locations have created works about land in a decisively disparate manner than that which currently constitutes the canon of Land Art.

By theorizing land through such examples of global contemporary art and the respective social movements, I aim to reorient the concept of “land” as the physical and theoretical site from which political struggles emerge and in which art and visual culture is utilized to advocate and agitate *for land itself*, often in opposition to those entities currently occupying it. Rather than considering land for its site-specific or material qualities—as were the motivating factors for the progenitors of American Land Art—the artists I highlight maintain a relationship to land that propels them toward revolutionary systematic change.