

## Women Land Artists Get Their Day in the Museum

Decades after the movement flourished, its female practitioners are at long last being recognized.



Agnes Denes, in 1979, re-enacting her installation "Rice/Tree/Burial With Time Capsule" in upstate New York.  
Credit: Agnes Denes, "Rice/Tree/Burial (Burial of the Time Capsule)," 1979, courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow

IN 1972, 350 women working in the visual arts descended upon the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to protest and discuss the male-dominated art world and, as reported by The Times, "male discrimination against the exhibition of women's art in museums and galleries ... and the prejudices of the press and critics against women's art." Here, the painter Alice Neel was booed after suggesting that pregnant women should take a break from making art. Judy Chicago discussed defining a kind of art based on "the nature of female identity." Agnes Denes, who had begun what became a little-seen but much-admired 1969 installation in upstate New York that involved planting rice in a field and covering the surrounding trees in chains, was in attendance as well. She was applauded when she denounced a "vaginal sensibility" and proclaimed, "The only inner space I recognize is where my brain is — and my soul."

In the late 1960s and 1970s, when the rules of Western art were being blown up and rewritten, women were far less likely than men to find sufficient funding and representation for their work. While many midcentury women have become near metonyms for this era, including the experimental choreographer Yvonne Rainer and the critic and curator Lucy Lippard, the filmmaker Chantal Akerman and the medium-defining Chicago, a certain cowboy archetype has persisted: the Great Man as a brawny, blue-jeaned wayfarer, striding into a wide-format horizon equipped with welders, bulldozers and manifestoes. It's an ungainly truth that Virginia Dwan, the almost prophetic gallerist and patron of the two most influential

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styles of this era — Minimalism and land art — who bankrolled Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" (1970) and Walter De Maria's "The Lightning Field" (1977), among landmark earthworks, represented few women. But the persistence of a macho archetype also seems to point to a peculiar conservative reading of an avowedly anti-establishment time — and a resistance to dissent or difference within the movements themselves.

LAND ART, WITH its almost mythical clichés of man against nature and heedless Manifest Destiny, is one of the contemporary art movements most urgently in need of reconsideration. The movement both grew out of and was the logical conclusion to the Minimalist painting and sculpture that flourished mostly in New York and Los Angeles beginning in the early '60s. Minimalism's rigorously anti-metaphor, anti-referent stance argued for three-dimensional forms made with industrial fabrication that represented nothing and referred to nothing outside of the objects themselves. These austere objects in galleries led directly to the ambitious installations in the desert. Seen with contemporary eyes, the fact that the backbone of the Minimalist ethos is remembered through three manifestoes written by men — Donald Judd's "Specific Objects" (1965), Robert Morris's "Notes on Sculpture" (1966) and Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967) — feels didactic and historically inaccurate.

We are now beginning to revisit some of the movement's important predecessors, who were written off or purposely left out of this era simply because they were women. Jo Baer, a painter of stark white canvases edged in flashes of intense color that sought to challenge visual perception, has a major display in the works at Dia: Beacon in upstate New York. Largely sidelined in her youth, she was initially dismissed as an outlier ostensibly for being a painter and not, like Judd and Morris, a sculptor. In 1967, she wrote a letter to *Artforum* arguing against Morris and Judd's belief that painting was, in Morris's words, an "antique mode": "For about one hundred years painting has demonstrated the ... radical ideas in art," she wrote. "Painting is best suited for this pursuit, and the best painters are still about it. It is no surprise, however, that an academic, sculptural sensibility is not able to anticipate these new ideas."

Then there's Denes, who will have a long-overdue survey at the New York performing arts venue the Shed in 2019 and may be the ideal person to rescue land art from its associations with male egos. Her show next year will be her largest in New York City to date, though the Hungarian-born Denes, a pioneer in the earthworks movement who has lived in SoHo since the 1980s, made her greatest work there: In 1982, for four months, she cultivated a two-acre field of wheat in Lower Manhattan. "Wheatfield — A Confrontation" grew from the landfill that would eventually become Battery Park City — a grand but ephemeral gesture. In one now poignant photograph of "Wheatfield," the World Trade Center rises incongruously out of the golden waves; in another, Denes strides through the grain, like Demeter in a camp shirt.

While we, too, may cringe at the notion of "vaginal sensibilities," Denes *did* work differently from her male contemporaries, and not just because of the smaller budgets available to her. Compared to the grandiose, earth-gouging works made with bulldozers in inaccessible locales, like Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" or Michael Heizer's "City," a one-and-a-half-mile-long Minimalist sculpture in the Nevada desert that has been under construction and closed to the public since its inception in 1972, Denes's work is both approachable and ecologically minded. "Wheatfield," along with her later work — "The Living Pyramid" (2015), a grassy construction in a Queens park, or "A Forest for Australia" (1998), the reforestation of an Australian water treatment site — aren't solitary confrontations between artist and environment but rather a kind of public offering. Today, land art appears as an almost perfect distillation of the art world's history of male privilege, with its conviction that man is entitled to space to roam, to make his mark; women, however, never enjoyed that privilege. Denes's work is about *how* we look at the earth itself, rather than an attempt to make her mark upon it — which, as we industrialize our planet out of habitability, feels exactly right.

MALE LAND ARTISTS were championed at the exclusion of women — including Denes, as well as Jeanne-Claude, who worked alongside her husband, Christo, and Nancy Holt, who was married to Smithson and spearheaded the land art movement. For years, critics mostly treated these women as oddities rather than pioneers. Somewhat incredibly, it wasn't until March of this year that Dia, the arts foundation that, along with Dwan, was the primary patron of artists who worked

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outdoors in the '60s and '70s, acquired its first land art installation by a woman: Holt's masterpiece, "Sun Tunnels" (1976). The work, set in the Great Basin Desert of Utah, consists of four long concrete tubes that align with the sunrise and sunset during the summer and winter solstices. The tops of each cylinder are perforated so that during the day, sunshine projects tiny constellations inside the tubes. After Smithson died in a plane crash in 1973 — while scouting a location for a work in Texas — Holt became the necessary caretaker for her husband's work, brokering the deal to leave "Spiral Jetty" to Dia's care in 1999 and staging a protest against exploratory drilling near that work's site in Utah. She never remarried, but she did make her most vital work following Smithson's death, including "Sun Tunnels." "My art was enough for me," she once said.

Male and female artists tended to be accepted by the art world when they fell into certain recognizable gendered roles: The men were bearded, dressed in denim, usually not far from a truck or some other piece of machinery. The women convened panels to discuss discrimination and were allowed a small amount of space so long as their work seemed to blatantly support the aims of second-wave feminism. The career arcs of those who didn't fit — like the 103-year-old Carmen Herrera, whose blazingly bright, color-blocked paintings have really only been embraced in the last decade, or the 73-year-old **Mary Corse**, whose mostly monochrome, often reflective canvases evoke Minimalism's more meditative side — are revealing. Corse, who resisted association with the feminist movement, insisted in a 1971 *Newsweek* article that if her work was good enough, it would get the attention it deserved. This article was recently reprinted in the catalog for her survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art: her first show of this scale, only a few decades delayed. Today, this belief sounds an awful lot like magical thinking, but surely this distancing was motivated by a desire not to be labeled "woman artist," but simply, artist. Decamping from Los Angeles to the more isolated Topanga Canyon allowed Corse to focus on her work and family — and, perhaps, to avoid having to perform a public role as artist and personality.

Operating at a geographic remove is something of a pattern for female artists of this era, including Holt, who remained in the desert after Smithson's death, as well as Agnes Martin, who lived in Taos, N.M., and Baer, who moved to Ireland in 1975, making a dramatic break after her show at the Whitney, her first major success. There is a sense, of course, that this self-imposed isolation was a matter of necessity for women artists — that there were no seats at the table, so all the better to get out of Dodge.

One of the few women included in the landmark 1966 "Primary Structures" exhibition at the Jewish Museum, which acted as a formal announcement of the Minimalist style and suggested its environmental direction in the years to come, was Anne Truitt. Despite this official indoctrination into the boy's club of Minimalism's major players, Truitt, too, was disregarded — by Judd himself. Her glorious, stele-like sculptures, painstakingly hand-sanded and covered in bright bands of paint, were a merging of painting and sculpture, form and meaning. (She had a background in psychology, and her titles, among them a 1981 painting simply called "Memory," seemed, well, meaningful.) Judd described Truitt's early work as "appearing serious without being so" — code for something, I'm sure — but Truitt had an ally in the critic Clement Greenberg, who saw her sculptures as an essential link between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. "Despite their being covered with rectilinear zones of color, I was stopped by their deadpan 'primariness,' and I had to look again and again, and I had to return again, to discover the power of these 'boxes,'" he wrote in 1967.

Truitt, who died in 2004 and was the subject of a solo show this past fall at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, left behind a significant body of work, including a number of nearly forgotten paintings from the 1970s — blocks of primary colors that outdo Judd at his own game. Before her death, she told *The Washington Post*, "I've struggled all my life to get maximum meaning in the simplest possible form." Other struggles eclipsed that one — the struggle an artist must make for her own work — but it's clear that, ideally, this is the only struggle that should matter.

Surely, one reason so many of us continue to look back at these movements of the '60s and '70s with such fascination and enchantment has to do with a longing for a time when art's battles seemed solely aesthetic in nature: the fight for rigorous clarity, for a boundless purity of vision, for freedom from the burdens of history. The reality, of course, is that was never

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really the case, and may not even be possible. Art doesn't liberate everyone equally; it tends to reflect the biases of the culture that produced it as often as it transcends them. We may finally be reconsidering these biases, but anyone who has ever been left outside the canon will always be defined by their otherness. The difference is that we now live in a time where that otherness is itself valuable.

—Megan O'Grady