

“Earth Art” (1969)

Lars Bang Larsen

November 8th 2010, 19 h

MACBA Auditorium

“Earth Art”

Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

February 11th - March 16th, 1969

Curator: Willoughby Sharp

Artists: Jan Dibbets, Hans Haacke, Neil Jenney, Richard Long, David Medalla, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson, Günther Uecker

Walter De Maria and Michael Heizer did exhibit briefly, but both withdrew their participation.

A few statements on “Earth Art”

I.

“The ‘Earth Art’ exhibition was conceived [by Willoughby Sharp] in the summer of 1967 as one of a series of four traveling exhibitions devoted to the elements of air, earth, fire, and water. The problem was to find the most suitable place to initiate these projects. Thomas Leavitt made the realization of the ‘Earth Art’ exhibition a practical possibility through his energy and perceptive interest in the work. Other factors shaping the decision to inaugurate the exhibition at the Andrew Dickinson White Museum of Art were the relative autonomy of the Museum within the Cornell University system and the unique geological and geographical character of Ithaca. The richness of its raw materials is almost unsurpassed in the eastern United States. Financial considerations dictated that the number of participating artists should not exceed a dozen, because a unique feature of the exhibition was that the artists would be invited to Cornell to execute their works *in situ* from locally available rock, soil etc. The invitations sent out to the artists for the February exhibition each contained a small brochure with a floor plan of the available exhibition area and photographs of the land around the Museum which was to serve as exhibition space. Each artist had the choice of doing his piece either indoors or outdoors. (...)

Many of the artists spent several days at Cornell University discussing individual aspects of their work with specialists in various departments (...) The University community thus became involved to an unusual degree in the exhibitions. (...) The execution of the works, performed with the help of many Cornell University students, was complicated by severe weather conditions: frozen ground, snow, and ice.”

Willoughby Sharp, “Notes Towards an Understanding of Earth Art”, in *Earth Art*, exhibition catalogue, Ithaca, NY: Andrew Dickinson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1970, n/p.

2.

“The idea of bringing together the works of a number of artists who use earth as a medium originated with Willoughby Sharp. He knew the artists personally, persuaded them to come to Ithaca to execute new pieces, and acted as coordinator for the exhibition. Most of the artists are Americans; however, Jan Dibbets from Holland, Gunther Uecker from Germany, and Richard Long from England also came to Cornell to participate. David Medalla from the Philippines took part by sending instructions for the execution of his piece. Robert Morris, who could not make it to Ithaca because of a blizzard in New York City shortly before the opening of the exhibition, sent instructions by telephone.

While in Cornell, the artists chose their sites and materials and created their works with the help of students from the University. At one point eight of the artists participated in an informal symposium held in an auditorium filled to capacity with Cornell students and faculty. In this discussion, as well as subsequently in the pieces that they produced, the artists demonstrated that although their material might be similar their aims were very different from one another.

(...)

Many of the artists did not limit their art activities in Ithaca to the one project needed for the exhibition. Their creative energies which were stimulated by the geological conditions and the climate of Ithaca led them to produce additional pieces which provided a dividend to visitors to the exhibition.”

Thomas W. Leavitt, “Foreword”, in *Earth Art*, exhibition catalogue, Ithaca, NY: Andrew Dickinson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1970, n/p.

3.

“The work in this exhibition can be grouped conveniently by manner of presentation: (1) the works which were placed within the existing landscape, (2) works whose components were placed both within and without the boundaries of the museum, and (3) works whose material limits were revealed within the confines of the gallery space. (...) The visual statements at the Earth show not only fall outside the traditional categories of painting and sculpture but also deny altogether the notion of the art object as traditionally displayed.”

William C. Lipke, “Earth Systems”, in *Earth Art*, exhibition catalogue, Ithaca, NY: Andrew Dickinson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1970.

4.

“The exhibition’s scope was dramatic, and included outdoor projects on the campus commons, the adjacent forest, and around the broad, partially frozen creek that ran through it.”

(...)

“As an exhibition, *Earth Art* was unusual in several respects: First, it featured sculpture solely of natural, earthen materials --still rare in early 1969; second, almost all works were made for or set up in response to the spatial or architectural conditions of their particular sites, as determined by the artist and generally formed or installed by him (again, no women in this exhibition); third, the artists made these installations and environments both in the interior spaces of the wooden Victorian building that housed the Andrew Dickson White Museum and in outdoor spaces on the snowy campus; and fourth, the participating artists included Europeans as well as Americans.”

(...)

“Stimulated by the adventure of an afternoon flight in a university airplane to the middle of New York State for the opening reception and dinner in snowy Ithaca, journalists and art critics gave *Earth Art* substantial attention in the New York press. Coming just a few months after the Dwan show [‘Earth Works’, at the Dwan Gallery, New York], the impact of *Earth Art* had the force of a one-two punch in creating the sense of an Earth-works movement prominent in art world discourse.”

Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks. Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, Berkeley and Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 2002, pp. 158, 159, and 167.

Willoughby Sharp (1936-2008) was a curator, writer and video artist. He obtained an MA in Art History at Columbia University. Since the mid-60s he had a wide-ranging career promoting avant-garde art. The exhibitions he curated include shows as “Pop Art” (Columbia University, N.Y., 1964), “Light, Motion, Space” (Walker Art Center, 1967); “Air Art” (Philadelphia and six other locations, 1968); “Earth Art” (Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., 1969) and “Place and Process” (Edmonton, Canada, 1969); and co-produced a television program on Pop ArtUSA for WDR, Germany. (For a complete list of the exhibitions he curated, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willoughby_Sharp). In the late 1960s he became a video performance artist, showing in the Venice Biennale (1975); he also produced a series of video interviews with Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, and Chris Burden. His 16 mm documentary film *Place and Process* was shown at the “Information” show at the Museum of Modern Art. In the 1980, he opened an art gallery on Spring Street, New York. He taught at Parsons School of Design and the School of Visual Arts and was director of the Fine Arts Centre at the University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI.

Lars Bang Larsen, a Danish independent curator and writer based in Barcelona, is known for his seminal writing on the new generation of artists that emerged from Scandinavia in the 1990s, and subsequently for his exhibitions and books, which offer a fresh approach to artists’ engagement with

social activism and counter cultures from the 1960s on. He has co-curated group exhibitions such as “Pyramids of Mars” (Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 2000, a.o.), “The Echo Show” (Tramway, Glasgow 2003), “Populism” (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 2005, a.o.), “La insurrección invisible de un millón de mentes” (Sala Rekalde, Bilbao, 2005), and “A History of Irritated Material” (Raven Row, London, 2010). In 1998 he was the co-curator for the inaugural Nordic Biennial, and in 2004 he was the curator of the Danish participation in the São Paulo Biennial. His books include *Sture Johannesson* (NIFCA / Lukas & Sternberg 2002), a monograph about Palle Nielsen’s utopian adventure playground at Moderna Museet in Stockholm: *The Model. A Model for a Qualitative Society, 1968* (MACBA 2010), as well as the series of pamphlets *Kunst er Norm*, *Organisationsformer* and *Spredt væren* (‘Art is Norm’, ‘Forms of Organisation’ and ‘Dissipated being’), published by the Art Academy of Jutland (Denmark), which discusses experience economy as a mutation in art’s DNA towards a new normativisation of art. He is also a regular contributor to *Frieze*, *Afterall*, and *Artforum*.

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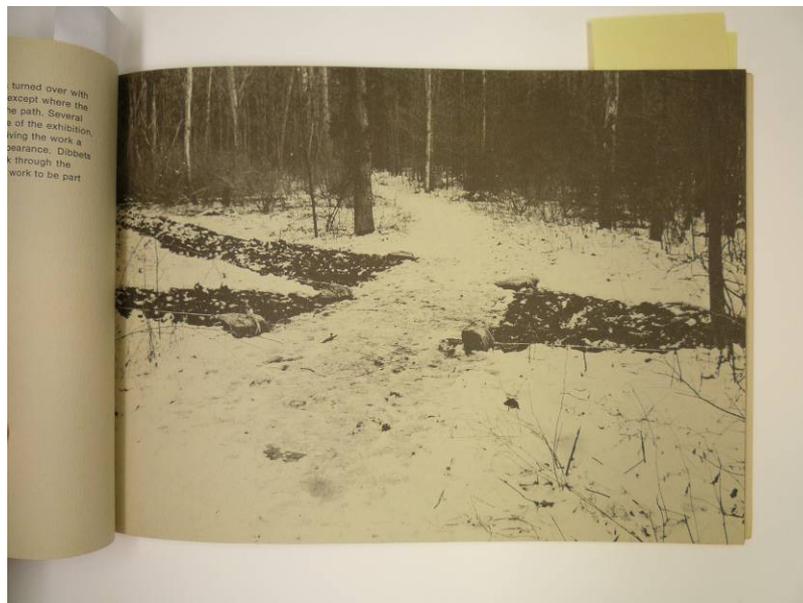
Other sources

<http://sharpville.ning.com/video/earth-art-interviews>

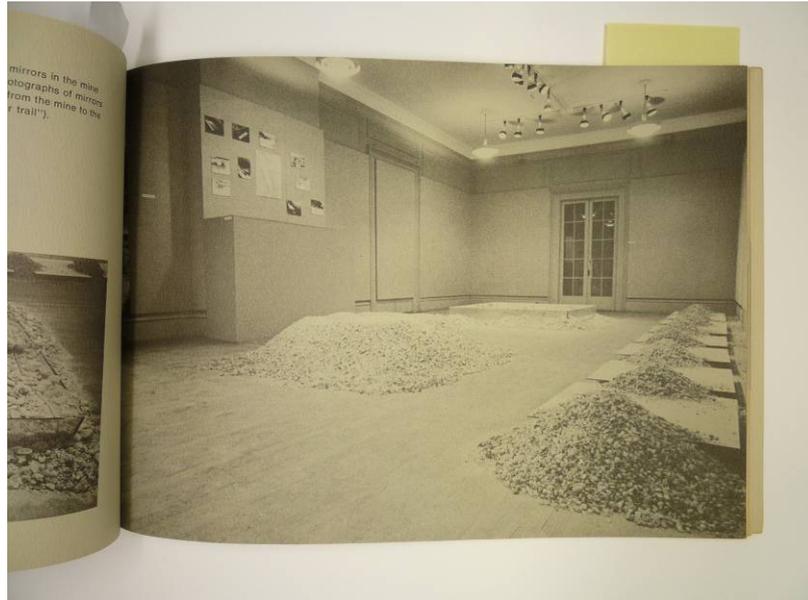
Interviews with Willoughby Sharp and Dennis Oppenheim concerning *Earth Art*, 2008, 20:26

Some images from the exhibition catalogue

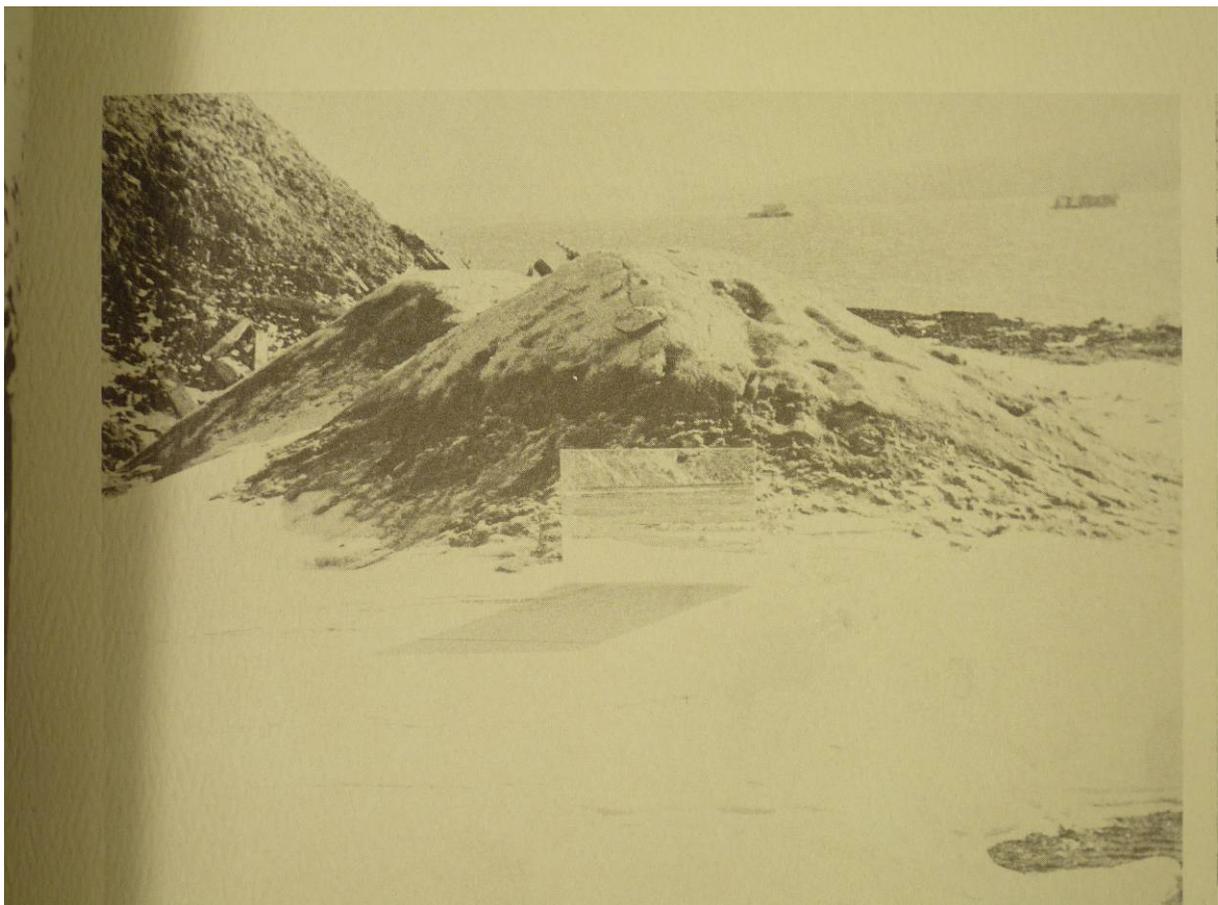
a. Jan Dibbets, *A Trace in the Wood in the form of an Angle of 30° Crossing the path* as reproduced in *Earth Art*, exhibition catalogue, Ithaca, NY: Andrew Dickinson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1970, n/p.



b. Robert Smithson, *Mirror Displacement*, as reproduced in *Earth Art*, exhibition catalogue, Ithaca, NY: Andrew Dickinson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1970, n/p.



c. Robert Smithson, *Mirror Displacement*, as reproduced in *Earth Art*, exhibition catalogue, Ithaca, NY: Andrew Dickinson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1970, n/p.



The history of exhibitions: beyond the white cube ideology (second part)

Course on Contemporary Art and Culture

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Compiled by Karin Jaschke