

Art

What Land Art Would You Create If Money Were No Object? Three Artists' Proposals

By Catherine Wagley

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Courtesy Mungo Thomson

Mungo Thomson proposes a piece in which viewers enter to find a cloud of marijuana smoke.

In 1966, Robert Smithson, famous for piling up mud and black basalt in Utah's Great Salt Lake and sculpting it into a 1,500-foot coil called *Spiral Jetty*, went rock hunting with sculptor Donald Judd. They went in New Jersey, where Smithson was from, and spent an hour chopping away at a lump of lava in the center of a Montclair quarry, because they'd heard lava lumps yield quartz crystals.

Then they stopped at a nearby ice cream bar to eat "AWFUL AWFUL" ice cream bars -- "awful big and awful good" -- Smithson writes in an essay on the trip published posthumously (he died in a 1973 plane crash while surveying sites for a Texas earthwork). They also saw flashy roadside signage and abandoned excavation equipment, and visited another quarry that "resembled the moon." For Smithson, rock hunting meant fantasy, infinity and chaos, but also kitsch curiosities.

"Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974," an exhibition about to open at MOCA, aims to show how land art like Smithson's involved so much more than just an "escape to nature" impulse. Curated by Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon, it has been in the works since 2007 and has suffered some hiccups, understandably, given that the show is about artists who make milelong drawings in desert sand or grow hog pastures in galleries. It originally was scheduled to open April 8, but that was pushed to May 28 to make time for more fundraising.

Another hiccup involves a work by Michael Heizer, recently in the news for his \$10 million sculpture, *Levitated Mass*, for which LACMA recently moved that 340-ton rock from Riverside. MOCA owns Heizer's *Double Negative*, two 350-foot-deep trenches the artist blasted across 1,500 feet of Nevada desert in 1969, and wanted to include it in the show, but Heizer does not want visitors to see just photographs. It's meant to be experienced out there, in the landscape. The curators tentatively planned, then canceled trips out to Heizer's sculpture, before accepting that the work would be left out. *Double Negative* looks impossibly effortless, an elegant interruption in a great expanse of desert sand in aerial photographs, but it's unwieldy to visit.

According to the press release, exposing complications like this makes "Ends of the Earth," about a movement whose heyday was the early '70s, "a cultural specimen of the present." In other words, in the present, land art is difficult to view, difficult to preserve (the Dia Art Foundation found out in 2011 that it had accidentally let its lease expire on the *Spiral Jetty* site), and difficult to reconcile with today's economic and environmental concerns. Was it reckless of artists to interfere with nature in such big, bold, often expensive ways?

What would happen now if artists with the benefit of hindsight, fully aware of all these complications, were handed a blank check and asked to imagine a no-holds-barred land art of today? If the "ends of the earth" really were the limit, what would they do?

It turns out it's not easy to find artists who want to imagine working on the scale of *Double Negative* or *Spiral Jetty*. Everyday limits appeal to a lot of art makers. "All of my work ... should be accessible -- projects that anyone could do at home on their own," says artist Fritz Haeg when asked what he'd make. Nothing came to mind.

Plus, technology gives artists access to different terrains than they had 50 years ago. "The spaces we're inhabiting now, they aren't just natural and urban," says Aurora Tang, a researcher at the Center for Land Use Interpretation in Culver City and managing director of High Desert Test Sites, which organizes desert artists' projects and performances. "They're information spaces, outer spaces, the underground, the air." She wonders if "place art" rather than land art is the better term to encompass such nongallery venues.

"Place artist" works as a descriptor for the three artists who did share with the *Weekly* their free-rein ideas. They were as interested in accessing the intangible places -- the past, the Internet, atmosphere, imagination -- as the landscape. Their proposals, detailed here, bring tangible and intangible together in ways so ambitious they're more or less impossible.

Mungo Thomson's proposal

Biggest hotbox ever

Artist Mungo Thomson, whose work often fixates on what's missing or already happened, proposes a different kind of miracle, "a pungent historical-meteorological miracle." It would take the form of "a never-dissipating cloud of marijuana smoke," which he imagines "on the scale of one of those controlled burns of DEA-sized tonnage."

The Drug Enforcement Administration started doing these burns in 2010, collecting unused prescription drugs and then igniting them out in the open somewhere, because destroying drugs deters drug abuse and incineration is among the few approved disposal modes; they call it Operation Take Back. Thomson isn't sure where his cloud would come from, maybe "out of a hole in the ground," or maybe "a whole system of invisible machinery" would generate "finely calibrated air currents" to keep it perfectly in place. Regardless of how it's formed, it should be "hovering, undulating, everlasting," he says. "It should also be out of reach, over the heads of anyone who goes to see it, so it can be smelled but not inhaled."

The work would have a "nonsite," a term Smithson coined for indoor proxies for outdoor earthworks, such as photographs, or rocks and dirt taken from an earthwork's location. Thomson's nonsite would be a room or gallery somewhere that "always, always smells strongly of pot, like someone just got high in there and left, moments before." Perhaps he would collaborate with a perfumer. A fragrance could be atomized constantly in the space, or maybe gallery staff would be required to wear it. "The point is you missed the party," he says. You would know only that something too big to comprehend happened somewhere just beyond your grasp.