THE SAVAGE GARDEN

Landscape as Metaphor in Recent American Installations

Dan Cameron

During the middle half of this century, one of the more universally accepted tenets of art was that people made two kinds of it: abstract and representational. If a work was abstract, then it was also by definition modern, whereas to produce representational art meant that one's position was defined in terms of a conscious rejection of the modern, and a movement away from it towards the examples and practices of the past. That this distinction held more or less true from the early '20s up through the resurgence of figurative art in the mid-'70s says more about the popular tendency to ascribe to all new forms of expression the conditional status of intruder or interloper than it happens to describe the real state of dialogue which took place between two not-always-opposing camps of artistic practice.

Nevertheless, over the course of the 20th century, as we became more accustomed to abstraction as a way of life, so to speak, this in turn caused a marked reduction in the level of urgency that we came to invest in its definition apart from representation. Perhaps we could say that the category of representation expanded to incorporate abstraction, that abstraction simply became another form of reality. Whatever the explanation, the issue of difference between abstract and representational art may hold some historical interest for us today, but the polarity between the two approaches no longer seems to matter.

If we consider this somewhat outmoded distinction in order to see what could have taken its place in terms of the way we think about art at the present moment, there seems to be as much reason to draw the line today between work that is based in the language of objects (unique or otherwise), and work that occurs more as a situation or event encompassing or involving the viewer. Or we could describe the distinction as being between 'studio' artists and 'post-studio' artists. Considered as an international phenomenon, however, the past five years have probably seen a greater increase in the number of artists working within the field of installation art than perhaps any other increase within a single media since the explosion of painting in the early 1980's.

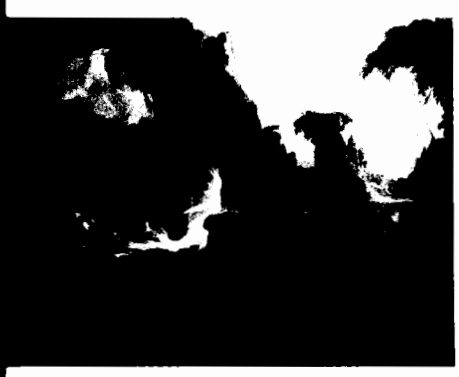
Accompanying this burst of inventive energy is a necessarily complex range of responses on the part of the contemporary art audience. On the one hand it seems to be well understood – just as it was clear with neo-expressionist and neo-conceptual art – that the forms and methods which artists are adapting today have their roots in an earlier, more exploratory moment in recent art history: in this case, the 1960s/'70s post-object art movements typified internationally by Fluxus and Performance Art, in Italy by Arte Povera, in Germany by Beuys, and in the U.S. by the Post-Minimalist and Earthworks artists. On the other hand, this current manifestation of such tendencies brings with it a corresponding realization that the critical language and stylistic categories used to wrest meaning from that work are somewhat inadequate when applied to the art of today. Far from being a new quandary, however, this same critical impasse also presented itself at the dawn of the '80s, when the sudden shift from the modern to the postmodern era – with its accompanying parade of recycled and pastiched forms and styles – caused a similar mixed response of critical anxiety and hope. In the present situation, however, it may be that we are just now becoming used to the idea that we really are living in a different age, one which might continue this barrage of the past until well into the next century.

For the sake of clarity, then, perhaps it is helpful to begin our examination of this work by proposing that the current interest in installation and site-specific art in both Europe and the U.S. should not be conceived of as a rupture with the two forementioned developments (neo-expressionist and neo-conceptual art) at all, but rather as a counterpart to them within the context of a larger, more sweeping transformation that has altered both the relationship between artmaking and society at large, and the way in which the production and dissemination of art in our time contrasts to the way in which stylistic changes in the historical past (including the art of the first 3/4's of the 20th century) have tended to be treated. Subsequently, we should attempt to understand the very temptation to set up such contrasts in our minds between the different manifestations of post-modern art in terms of both a manifestation of resistance to certain fundamental precepts of post-modernity, as well as a remnant of earlier formulae (i.e., the avant-garde) for apprehending and incorporating such changes.

One of the characteristics that comes to mind most readily when we consider the work of the eleven American artists who have been brought together for the present exhibition is the idea that the new installation art is perhaps the first development in recent art history that cannot be traced primarily to either the American or the European side of the Atlantic, and as such encourages us to begin looking at the larger question of stylistic origin from a more open-minded point of view. In other words, while neo-expressionism can be said to have emanated a recognizably European point of view, and while neo-conceptual art was seen as unmistakeably American, the current interest in installation as a primary medium presents itself as a curiously bi-Atlantic phenomenon in the sense of seeming neither American nor European in either its outlook or taste. In fact, even though this is, on the face of it, an exhibition of eleven American artists, one of the artists was born in Europe, another has lived there for the past several years, one holds a Venezuelan passport, and still another fled Cuba as a child.

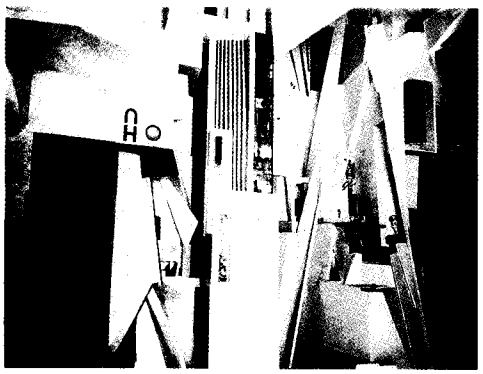
Another quality inherent to much of this installation-based work is the artists' collective sense of operating outside most fixed cultural definitions of what an artist is or does. Although there have certainly been a large number of artists exploring a similar lack of parameters, it bears mentioning that virtually all of those included as part of the present exhibition are quite deliberate in their decision to defy categorization in terms of

THOMAS COLE. La expulsión del Edén, c. 1827-28
Expulsion from the Garden of Eden



Art-as-Art is a creation that revolutionizes creation and judges itself by its destruction. Artists-as-Artists value themselves for what they have gotten rid of and what they refuse to do.
Ad Reinhardt, «Writings», *The New Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton Paperbacks, 1966).

The poor man retains the prejudices of his forefathers without their faith, and their ignorance without their virtues.
Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.



KURT SCHWITTERS. Merzbau. Hannover, c. 1930

KURT SCHWITTERS. Merzbau. Hannover, c. 1930

JEAN TINGUELY. Fontaine IV, 1963

making work which belongs to a specific medium. Among other factors, this means that, far from being an investigation into the mere expansion of sculpture's physical boundaries, the works presented here straddle a number of discrete areas, encompassing architecture, landscape and industrial design, engineering, crafts, music and theater, linguistics, economics and politics, anthropology, communications (including signage and display technology) and even environmental studies.

When we speak of the unfixed nature of the roots for much of this work, however, we must still be careful in the way we implicitly define such a characteristic. Certainly, as with virtually all of the vanguard work being made today, the spirit of hybrid formal invention (if not its actual theoretical precedent) tends to be found primarily in early European modernism, specifically the period between the World Wars commonly referred to as the 'heroic' era of modernist innovation. Marcel Duchamp's 'ready-mades' can probably be singled out as the first dynamic expression of a need to extend the signifying field of art from beyond the realm of taste, preciosity and the artist's handiwork towards a standard drawn more from the mass-produced look of the Machine Age. But unlike later generations of artists who would seek to define the artwork apart from its fixed material state, Duchamp did not invent the ready-made in order in inject a perception of literalized reality into his art, but to extend an almost purely mental aesthetic exercise into the realm of the object.

In order to understand the point at which avant-garde art crossed paths with the unadorned detritus of everyday life, we must move a few years later, into the mid-'20s and the example of the Dadaists. Although there is certainly no lack of serious literature available on the impact of Dada on perhaps every successive movement of the 20th century, a few points are worth bringing up under the present circumstances. The first is that Dada was the first art movement that was truly international, in the sense of taking place simultaneously in such widespread locales as Zurich (where it began), Berlin, Koln, Paris and New York. Secondly, Dada was pioneered by artists who were profoundly disillusioned by the newly-unleashed force of the first World War. Thirdly, and perhaps as a result of the first two points, Dada was unlike such comparatively idealistic movements as Cubism, Constructivism and the Bauhaus to the degree that the artists who gathered together behind the Dadaist creed of absurdist anti-art saw their activities more in terms of liberating the previously constrained definition of artistic production to embrace a radicalized position that was in glaring contrast to the highly conservative spirit of the time. Last but not least, the art made by the Dadaists had the appearance – if not the actual intention – of being highly perishable.

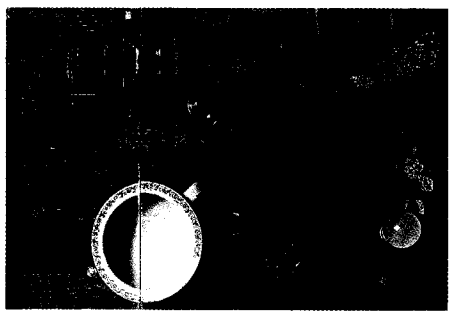
If the literary side of Dada can be distinguished by the apparently limitless imagination of figures like Tristan Tzara, whose nonsense epic, *The Gas Heart*, has had at least as great an effect on the development of experimental theater as the much more widely celebrated work of Frenchman Alfred Jarry, then its visual aspect –or, more accurately, counterpart was the art of Kurt Schwitters, whose collages and assemblages took their modest origins more to heart than did the more formalist-flavored works created by Braque and Picasso in Paris. However, even though Schwitters' studio works presented one of the most convincing arguments yet put forth regarding the meeting of the museum and the street, it is in fact the artist's transformation of his Hanover apartment into a single, monumental, perpetually unfinished accretion of wood, plaster and objects entitled *Merzbau* – two more of which were built in Schwitters' successive homes in Norway and Great Britain – that can be looked toward for the most advanced actualization of the principles of installation art some five decades before the medium even had a name.

One characteristic that Dada shared with other movements from the 'teens and twenties was the central importance of a plan to bring together all art-forms into a single composite medium. If, in fact, the Italian Futurists, Russian Constructivists and Suprematists, and even the German Bauhaus share a single trait in common, it is in the notion of the new century as bringing about a 'marriage' of various media to produce a social utopia whose form and content were largely determined by the artists themselves. Yet the profound sense of nihilism which seemed to be overtaking German society during this period had the additional effect of propelling the Dada artists towards a position where an unfixed point of aesthetic and/or moral reference seemed to embody a more accurate representation of the world than any system of stylistic expression intent on making that same world a better place to live in. As a result, the artists themselves saw their efforts as manifesting a largely destructive social energy, not one that would be categorized in history according to modern principles of aesthetic beauty. Hence, although this strategy came into being as a manifestation of the cruelty which they saw represented all around them, the Dadaists' art was effective largely because of their hard-won freedom to treat beauty as something which largely belonged to the romantic excesses of the past.

Until the emergence of a first postwar European generation of artists in the mid-1950's – Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni and Yves Tanguy being foremost among them – the seeds of Schwitters' and the Dadaists' example lay mostly dormant. In terms of methodology the work of this generation of artists was based on underlying principles of reconstruction and reclamation – reflecting a process to which the political and economic energies of Europe and the U.S. were already jointly committed[1]. However, since the modernist equation of technical innovation with populist idealism seemed to no longer bear much propagandistic fruit in the wake of the war's incomprehensible destruction, these artists began to find particular relevance in the appearance (if not the substance) of nihilism implicit in the activities of their pre-war predecessors. True, the artists who called

Sexuality and death are simply the culminating points of the holiday nature celebrates with the inexhaustible multitude of living beings, both of them signifying the boundless wastage of nature's resources as opposed to the urge to live on characteristic every living creature.
Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality.*

MERET OPPENHEIM. Ardilla, 1969
Squirrel



DANIEL SPOERRI. El despertar de los leones, 1961
The Awakening of the Lions

YVES KLEIN. Un hombre en el espacio, 1960
Man in Space

themselves "Nouveaux Realistes", or those who formed the membership of the Zero Group, may have been more circumstantially influenced by the philosophical problems of existentialism than by the specific program of objectivity inherent to most realist art. But their surprising extension of avant-garde practice into the culture of the Atomic Age did, in fact, require an unusual reinvestment of collective belief back in the creative process itself, albeit with more of an eye towards violating standards rather than perpetuating them.

The sense of cultural (and, in some cases, material) devastation from which Europe was forced to rebuild itself after the War helps to explain why artists living in Paris, for example, came to develop a vocabulary consisting largely of accumulations of objects, street debris and other conspicuous signs of proletarian culture to produce striking 'slice-of-life' assemblages. Perhaps the most pervasive quality linking the diverse group of artists who emerged during this period was the idea that the energies of life itself should replace the restricted vocabulary of high art and its elitist patronage. Although the spirit of the day seemed to be best captured by the Affichistes' fervent attacks on public billboards, the outer boundaries of new aesthetics were quickly reached with the absolutist vision of Yves Klein, whose anti-art gestures attempted to freeze manifesto and object into a single cathartic moment. Whereas Klein's work required the constant titillation of the intellectual elite, there was also a universal, even populist aspect to his art, reflected in the Merzbau-like spirit of his largest sponge-reliefs, in the entertainment-like atmosphere of his action-spectacles, and in his recycling of certain of art history's most enduring cliches. The counterpart to Klein's smoothly orchestrated, neo-Duchampian art during this period was the more chaotic, environmentally-based art of Jean Tinguely, which acted as a fatalistic homage to the modern cult of science and progress. With such a large number of parallels to be drawn between these two extremes of activity and the art of today, it is interesting to consider the frozen tableaux of Daniel Spoerri, and the work of street collagist Mimmo Rotella in terms of their foreshadowing the broad overlap that has ocurred between different media and stylistic languages today.

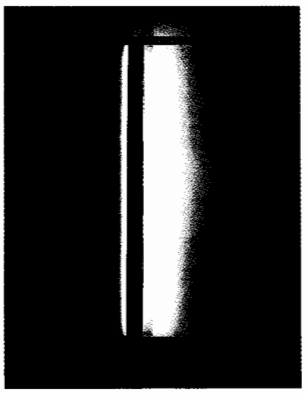
While many revisionist histories of the Paris/New York competition have set out to demonstrate the opposite, the effect which Cold War thinking would have on artists working in the U.S. was at first much less conscious than its impact within Europe[2]. In America, Robert Rauschenberg's unbridled 'combine' structures appeared to link the Paris 'assemblage' generation of the early '60s with the spirit of frontier abstraction found in Pollock, while finding its avant-garde impact in the way in which it paid tribute to the mounting hegemony of American media culture in the Western world. However, whereas Rauschenberg's work from the mid-'50s on can be said to have embraced a number of distinct theoretical possibilities (including the creation of some of the pioneer works of performance art), the first bona-fide installations in the U.S. were both theatrically and sculpturally oriented, beginning with Allan Kaprow's Happenings and continuing with the environments of Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg on the East Coast, and Edward Kienholz on the West. In fact, a seminal work like Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts,* presented in 1959 at New York's Reuben Gallery, shows that the maturation of installation art and avant-garde performance can be seen in retrospect as concurrent processes with parallel roots in the same community. Hence, although we associate Andy Warhol's primarily career with the popularization of Pop Art, his multi-media performances in collaboration with the rock group the Velvet Underground helped set the stage for innumerable interactions between fine artists and the media for decades to come.

During this crucial period from 1955-65, American art began to consciously wean itself of the idea of being dependent on its European counterpart, a change that is most clearly reflected in the developments of Pop and Minimal Art – movements that occurred more decisively in America than anywhere else. As an inevitable result of this shift in American art's self-image, art that was associated with such conspicuously international movements as Fluxus was not always seen as being quite as 'progressive' as the work made by Andy Warhol or Donald Judd. One way of stating the discrepancy was that the conspicuously American art, due to its basis in media and technology, really did look new, while the more European strategies seemed to be based on formulas that belonged to a much older conception of the artist in relationship to his world. Despite the superficiality of such a reading, however, Pop and Minimal art continued to define the official image which American art would have with European curators and collectors, thus allowing for the 'backlash' effect by which certain European artists of the late '60s and early '70s – particularly those of the Arte Povera movement – could define themselves apart from, or even against, the Americanization of art by merely emphasizing stylistic currents that were in turn de-emphasized by the U.S. exports.

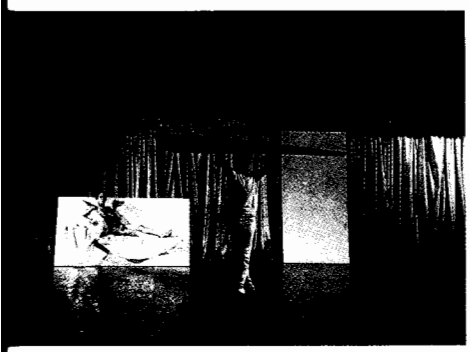
For these among other reasons, the ebullient spirit of creative experimentation which was so vital to the rapid growth of American art through the early 1960s began to transform itself into a noticeably more critical con-

Jackson Pollock, 1950
(Fotografía: Rudolph Burckhardt)

I am imagining an art which by taking up all the expected requirements of our basic modes of perception would, in so doing, render itself invisible.
Mel Bochner, Excerpts from «Speculation» (1967-1970).



DAN FLAVIN. Sin título, 1972



ROBERT MORRIS. Situación, 1964. *Site* (Robert Morris y Carolee Scheemann)

SOL LEWITT. Dibujo en la pared. Spoleto, 1972. *Wall Drawing*

sciousness by 1967 and '68, followed by what can only be called a gradual de-centering of the idea of style itself. The involvement of the American government in Vietnam, itself predicated on the dangerously inflated threat of impending superpower conflict, may have created what might be called a schism of consciousness between artists working in the U.S. and those based in Europe, and it is this factor more than any other which seems responsible for the heavy emphasis on formal over contextual values in American art from this period, while in Europe artists seemed more naturally predisposed towards treating the sociocultural rupture which took place throughout the industrialized world in the spring of 1968 as a catharsis which followed logically on the heels of a larger process of cultural evolution[3]. Certainly, this awareness (or lack thereof) functions as a key turning point in the growing perception of art and the larger world surrounding it as interrelated entities – a point that becomes more palpable as artists of the late '60s and early '70s, on both sides of the Atlantic, sought to de-objectify the artwork and integrate it back into its cultural milieu.

If the advent of minimalism in American art tended to take the form of a clear postulation of sometimes opposing variations on a theme, post-minimalism manifested itself more as a loosely-clustered group of varying ideals and attitudes that seemed as diverse as its many practitioners. Two of the watershed pieces from the early years of this 'movement' – Robert Morris' 1968 anti-form rooms, and Richard Serra's 1969 *Casting* series (hot lead splattered to a wall and dried in place) – were also among the first to actually propel the formal issues involved in room-sized art to the foreground of critical thinking. Nevertheless, we are more likely today to view even these landmark pieces from within a context that includes both the performance-based contributions of a Kaprow, Robert Whitman or Yoko Ono, as well as the more physical work of key post-minimalists like Bruce Nauman, Keith Sonnier, Eva Hesse, Dan Flavin or even Robert Morris (whose work comfortably bridged both groups). Taken as a whole, this generation undertook to de-define rather than re-define the limits of art-making, therein establishing more of a parallel between themselves and Les Nouveaux Realistes, for example, than with more hardcore American conceptualists like Joseph Kosuth, Douglas Heubler and Lawrence Wiener. The problem is that interchange between the U.S. and Europe had by this time become insistently one-sided, which meant that many American artists had little if any way of knowing of the parallels that existed between their work and that of their European counterparts.

As the de-objectification tendency becomes assimilated into the mainstream of American art in the '70s, one factor emerges which makes the early work of Mel Bochner and Barry Le Va, for example, of such interest for us today: namely, their extension of operational aesthetics into three dimensions, with the resultant depiction of the space itself as a conceptual extension of the work, rather than the other way around[4]. In fact, most documentation of the art of the early '70s reveals that the artists of the period were primarily concerned with installation issues. In other words, regardless of whether they were working in painting, sculpture, video, photography or any number of other media, a large number of artists during the period began to address themselves directly to the direct manipulation of the space in which the art was presented. Sol Lewit's wall drawings, which are still created to this day as the result of a series of executed instructions, lent the notion of process extra meaning by seeming to give little attention to the particularity of the work's manifestation: the same 'drawing' could exist simultaneously in more than one site, or from one site to another as the same artwork in every case. Depending on how it was considered, this insistence on art's ephemerality was either a refutation or a logical extension of formalism in the sense that, instead of taking the conditions of the spectator's encounter with the work for granted, these conditions in turn became the actual subject matter of the work. In this way, American sculpture began to move conceptually further away from its existence as a thing, and to gradually transform itself into a site, one that was realized either as an abstraction or idea about place, or as the physical manifestation of form itself, separated conditionally from its context and brought into being as a type of stylized essence of matter.

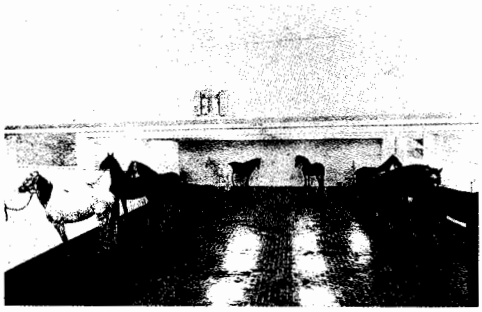
However, if we are to consider the phenomenon of interaction between artist and spectator as a critical factor in our examination of recent issues in installation art, developments occurring during this same period in European art, especially in Germany and Italy, cannot be neglected. Certainly, the art of Joseph Beuys is indispensable in terms of setting new standards for European art. Essentially a utopian artist who staked his creative life on the principle that art is the highest and most urgent form of communication, Beuys' influence can be seen especially today in the recurring problems of representation vs. expression as they appear in the work of innumerable artists working with objects and sites. For Beuys, the object metamorphosed was a type of transfiguration of internal experience which could not be limited by the formal restrictions of late-modernist art. The resulting ephemerality of Beuy's creative process, which (like that of Duchamp) conferred the status of 'art' on a broad range of images, objects and activities, is of particular importance to the present discussion. His ideas thus opened the way towards a new understanding of the artist as a socially responsible agent of higher discourse, and the current profusion of significant sculptors in Germany – Imi Knoebel, Reinhard Mucha, Rebecca Horn, Wolfgang Laib, Katharina Fritsch, Gunter Forg, Rosemarie Trockel, Martin Kippenberger, Hubert Kiecol and Georg Herold, among others – is due largely to Beuys' enduring presence through his emphasis on manifesting a direct, sometimes confrontational, discourse within an art that literally had no boundaries.

It has often been said that the most characteristic art-movement of the '60s was probably Fluxus. In keeping

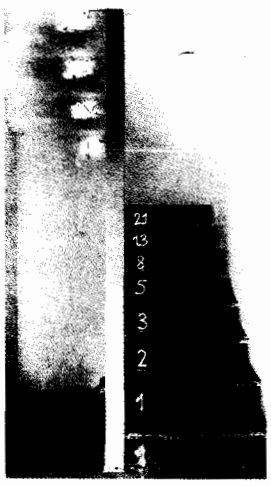
Nature never breaks her own laws.
Leonardo da Vinci.

JOSEPH BEUYS. Acción, 1965
Action
Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal (Alemania)

JANNIS KOUNELLIS. Sin título, 1969
Untitled



LUCIANO FABRO. Habitat 1962, 1981
Galleria Mario Pieroni, Roma



MARIO MERZ. La progresión de Fibonacci sobre una escalera, 1971
Fibonacci's Progression on a Staircase

with that decade's preoccupation with pioneering new relationships, however, it too should probably be seen less as a period when completely new forms and ideas emerged, and more as the expression of a more relaxed relationship between art, music, literature and theater, as well as the first glimmerings of the international sensibility which seems to have lain dormant for a quarter-century before again taking irrevocable hold of the art world's imagination. One intriguing aspect of the Fluxus philosophy was the tendency of its main participants – Ay-O, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, George Maciunas, Charlotte Moorman, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik and Ben Vautrier each had a hand in it at one moment or another – to de-emphasize their individual contributions in favor of the group identity, Fluxus. Furthermore, the activities of the Fluxus artists overlapped with many other groups of the period, lending the whole undertaking an unfixed or scattered identity that today seems almost pious in its self-abnegation. The same cannot be said, however, of Arte Povera, which remains the most concertrated phenomenon of sculptural innovation in Europe in the past half-century. Arte Povera, whose birth was linked to the manifestations of social unrest of 1967 and 1968, was a more ideologically-based expression of similar cultural tendencies, in the sense that in spirit it became a conscious rejection of the industrialized techniques and inhuman scale established by the American Minimalists. However, far from producing a mere exercise in recycled forms, the Arte Povera artists sought to produce an art that neither rejected the modest conditions of street and political culture in favor of an exaggerated presence known as 'art', nor degraded the weighty presence of history and culture in favor of headily pursuing an elitist avant-gardism. Another factor that distances them from the art of the U.S. during the same period was their comparative lack of immediate influence outside of Italy: although Giovanni Anselmo, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Giulio Paolini, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gilberto Zorio received some attention for recycling 'poor' materials into confrontational, site-specific events, their lasting importance as artists has only been recognized internationally since the mid-'80s.

In the present context, however, it is the work of Kounellis and Merz which seems to bear the clearest relationship with recent tendencies in installation. Kounellis in particular has always calibrated the theatrical effect of his work down to the smallest detail, setting up a context in which highly artificial juxtapositions take on the authority of natural phenomena. The artist's pioneering use of live animals within his work, for example, creates a deliberate tension between the installation as a didactic tableau, and as a more emblematic, 'slice-of-life' display. Merz' installations, famed in part for their unusual juxtapositions of materials, make use of large, pre-architectural structures – his *igloos* are the best-known example – that have been augmented with objects and/or arrangements whose function appears to the viewer as being largely ritualistic. The underlying conflict between different, compartmentalized realms of human knowledge is the primary theme in Merz' art, whereas with Kounellis the search for significance within the context of everyday life is what most informs his choices and arrangements of materials.

Although he was a friend and collaborator of Beuys, the art of Marcel Broodthaers remains resolutely and deliberately alone in relation to most artistic production at mid-century. Engaged primarily with understanding art in terms of taxonomy and semantics, Broodthaers created few bona fide installations, but each one is crucial to a view of the European contribution to this phenomenon. The image of the museum as a repository of language, and the implicit contradiction in this image between that which is fundamentally alive but must be dead in order to be appreciated, is echoed in such works as *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1969, although the work exists in many variant forms) and *Le Tapis de sable* (1974), in which the artist is revealed as the ultimate collector of objects, one who anticipates the institution's need to clasify and arrange the artwork as a form of specimen. An iconoclast who saw the separation between artist and museum as a convenient fiction, the influence of Broodthaers can be seen not only in the work of innumerable younger artists working today, but also on artists like James Lee Byars, whose highly emblematic installations continue to mine the broad expanse of meaning between the superficial and the profound.

While American art of the 1970s is generally thought of as eclectic to a fault, one of its most influential figures was an artist and theoretician whose career was brought to a sudden and tragic close before the decade was even a third finished. Robert Smithson's use of a dialectical model to extrapolate his aesthetic position was an important step in the evolution of the idea of installation because, by always positing the environment as one half of the dialectical equation, he was implicity emphasizing the artificiality of the gallery context as a phenomenon which was too constrained by a single idea of literal space. Above all else, Smithson believed that the development of art was not determined by its relation to a rational model of technical progress, but rather by its increasing sensitivity and self-awareness towards the particulars of its own context. However, although his 'non-site' installations are marked by their peculiar quality of wistfulness – the yawning mirrors and geographical references bespeak an invisible dimension, a nod to infinity, that is perhaps best read as a sign for his yearning toward the picturesque – his handful of site-specific works provided both a theoretical basis and a practical example for the generation of Earthworks sculptors. Although most of the significant figures in this movement – Walter de Maria, Michael Heizer, Robert Morris and Dennis Oppenheim – have continued to produce work through to the present, Smithson is the figure whose work casts the longest shadow across its development as a chapter in American art.

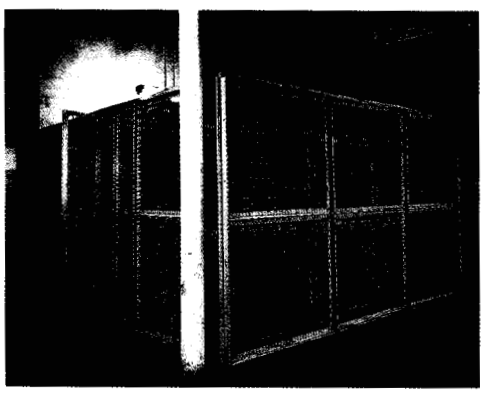
Smithson's example is also cited frequently in terms of

GORDON MATTA-CLARK. Threshole, 1972
Bronx, Nueva York

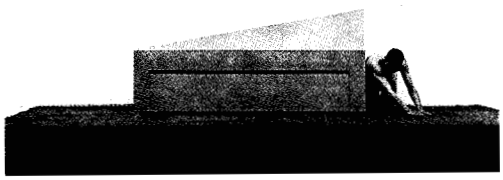
VITO ACCONCI. A Situation Using Room, 1970

BRUCE NAUMAN. Pieza doble de jaula de acero, 1974
Double steel cage piece
(Fotografía: Frank J. Thomas)

SCOTT BURTON. Tableau de conducta individual
Individual Behaviour Tableau
Actuación de Kent Hines. University Art Museum, Berkeley, California, 1980



the architectural 'excavations' made by Gordon Matta-Clark during the mid-'70s, which were among the first manifestations of the artwork as a type of permanent and/or structural intervention upon the site (in his case, abandoned urban structures existing on the periphery of the city's consciousness). Similarly, in the mid-'70s' performances and late-'70s sculpture/objects of Scott Burton, the vernacular flavor of the artist's fluent use of modern design blends with a more theoretical interest in site and context as the pre-eminent conditions of the work's appearance. Whereas both Matta-Clark and Burton created work that could be described in terms of its self-limiting approach to style, the two American artists who can best be credited with providing a continuity between the exploratory work of the '70s and the more conventionalized or solidified genres of installation which exist today are those whose work has most firmly defied classification: Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman. As the only major figure in recent American art whose output over nearly two decades consists almost exclusively of installations, Acconci has also been one of its most innovative practitioners in the late '80s. However, for the sake of establishing consistency with current issues in the medium, it is really only necessary to cite the germinal work *Seedbed* (1972), in which the artist hid from the viewer's sight beneath the false floor built within the Sonnabend Gallery. The fact that Acconci was actually present in the room seemed insignificant with regard to the anxiety which his supposed presence actually caused. It was enough for the spectator to believe that the artist was somewhere nearby, watching, to refute the superior position of inscrutability which a viewer has in front of a painting or sculpture. Reversing this dichotomy in order to stimulate the viewer into seeing the finer points of this interaction, Acconci enclosed the viewer within his work while he, the artist, remained safely outside. With Nauman's work throughout the late '60s and '70s, the viewer is also made acutely aware of the invisible, or hidden aspect of the artist's thinking in terms of describing a highly personal logic that results in the creation of the work itself. Nauman's sprawling, seemingly unfinished room-pieces from this era, as well as his more technically complex video and/or sculptural presentations from the '80s, do not bear the signature presence of style which is so important to the studio-bound artist, but opt instead for a more fleeting identity which hovers midway between the role of scientist and shaman.



«'There's no splendor in it', I answered. 'There is nothing sublime. Fooling helpless mortals, mocking them, and then going out from here at night to take life every night in the same old petty manner, one death after another in all its inevitable creulty and shabbiness so that we can live... Play your violin forever. Dance as you wish. Give them their money's worth if it keeps you busy and eats up eternity! It's simply clever and beautiful. A grove in the Savage Garden. Nothing more'».

Anne Rice, *The Vampire Lestat.*

Setting aside for a moment the formal/historical emphasis to our discussion of the recent return to certain anti-object, or pro-installation, tendencies in American sculpture, let us turn our attention instead to some sociohistorical issues which seem to be raised by the work itself, and examine how the emergence of such a collective point of view may be seen to constitute a bona fide development in American art. It is hoped that, once the larger cultural problem of meaning in this work has been adequately addressed, the need to re-tell the story of the last ten years in American art relative to the output of this particular group of artists will be somewhat lessened. Also, because more than one generation and stylistic group is being considered as a conditional unity within this project, what begins to link the artists' work is a mutual interest in articulating a certain tension that exists between the cultural notions of nature on the one hand, and technology – represented most often by the machine and/or the city – on the other.

Whereas it may at first seem odd to draw upon a tradition of interpretation that is both highly literary in nature and perhaps also somewhat outmoded in the last decade of the 20th century, an important underpinning to this entire thesis is our recognition of the highly self-conscious relationship which much of this art maintains with European aesthetics. In saying this, however, it should be pointed out again that the past work which seems to particularly inform the new American art was made by artists (both European and American) who emerged during the years 1960 to 1975 – in other words, those who represent the last phase of belief in modernity before it gave to the more skeptical ironies embodied by postmodernism.

Although scholars are often divided on the subject, it is generally conceded that the development of the pastoral mode in European art, beginning with late Renaissance landscape painting and ending with the German romanticists of the mid-19th century – was closely connected to two important events: the discovery of the New World at the end of the 15th century (and its gradual colonization over the succesive 200 years), and the first signs of the belief in science and rationality that would eventually lead to the Industrial Revolution. At the moment, however, it is the former consideration which most concerns us in relation to the rise of the pastoral in European art, for by acknowledging that America the

The use of natural history is to give us aid in supernatural history.
Ralph Waldo Emerson.

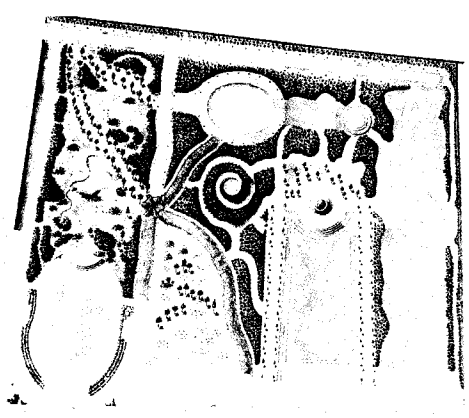
wilderness played an important symbolic role in much of this art by serving as the real-life equivalent to an entity which had previously held the power (but also the distance) of myth, we are able to gain some clues as to how this idea crossed the Atlantic and implanted itself in the colonial imagination. America was, to the European mind, both a lush garden where all the needs and desires of life were there for the asking, as well as a primeval wilderness which had to be tamed by the resources and discipline of man. Hence, a contradiction can already be seen in the fact that while America filled the European need for a pastoral model, it was also generally regarded as an opportunity for man to impose his vision of 'civilization' upon nature. The implied tension between these two ideals is, in fact, an important source of how America continues to see itself in relation to Europe.

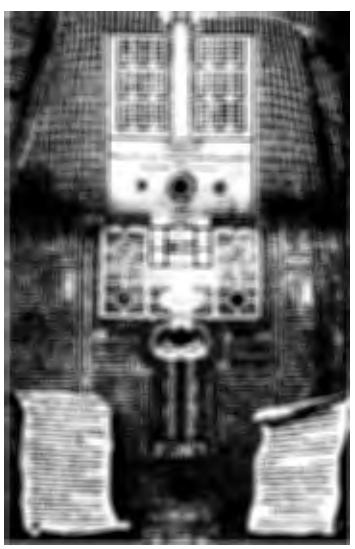
Within American art and literature, however, the idea of the pastoral has always had a very different significance, owing largely to the fact that the gradual encroachment of civilization upon nature – as opposed to the reclamation of the former by the latter – has tended to be measured in American culture by degrees, rather than as two absolutes pitted one against the other. The explanation for this has generally been the extraordinary abundance and variety of willderness and landscape in the U.S. – an endless tabula rasa upon which civilization is somewhat hastily inscribed, writ in a large but seemingly perishable hand. As a result of this difference, which in the final analysis is perhaps nothing more than a difference of scale, the monuments of American civilization seem more temporary than those of Europe, as if they do not need to withstand the same tests of time. The corresponding sense that nature is a disproportionately greater presence in the American psyche coincides ironically with the culture's obsession with speed and banality, expressions of the self as nature personified. Hence, the traditional role of the pastoral in American aesthetics is that which is too large to be considered as an entity in itself, and which therefore is best referred to in the familiar terms of the sublime.

Although by the mid-19th century Europe had more or less discarded the pastoral as an outmoded idiom, it persisted in American art and literature until the early years of the 20th[5]. Not surprisingly, this period coincides with the winding down of the industrial Revolution and the beginning of the Age of Electricity, as well as with an increased pace of migration to America, and a feverish settlement of the West. In others words, whereas Europe was again experiencing the metaphoric shrinking of its own borders, America was deciding quite pragmatically to expand hers. But more importantly, this coincidence signals that the prolonged meditation on man's relationship to nature, which constitutes the fundamental subject of the pastoral mode, seems to take place anytime that a fundamental restructuring occurs in terms of the relationship between American and Europe, or between any old (New) world and any new (Old) one. As economic, political and cultural commentators seem eager to point out, certain changes have taken place across the world in the past two or three years which could seriously after the nature of international relations for a generation or more to come. Hence, if an awakened interest in the pastoral can be said to typify much recent work in the U.S. and Europe, the best place to look for the seeds of its development is not in art theory, but in Europe's renewed self-image, and in America's self-imposed decline.

If we attempt to join together the specific sets or problems relating to separate European and American conceptions of the pastoral, what we are literally left with is the image of the garden. Again, on one side of the Atlantic, this motif exists most commonly as the superimposition of a rational order upon a fragment of landscape, whereas on the other side it is most often used as a metaphor for abundance and bounty – a point in time and space where nature's plenitude spills over into man's waiting hands. In both cases, however, the garden serves to represent the process of man's attempts to make an abiding, utilitarian sense out of nature, which is by definition untamed. The reason it has begun to re-emerge as a motif in the art of the end of this century is that the garden has come to provide a concrete means for bracketing the linguistic idea of nature between two entirely different orders of thought. One order of thought, which we may call historicist or empirical in its leanings, believes (or wants to believe) fervently in the cult of the noble savage, in the trajectory of recorded history as the gradual but irrevocable decline of man as a species, and in nature as a procession of facts fused together inseparably. The other order of thought, which is of more recent vintage than the first, sees the entire dichotomy of nature and culture as little more than a linguistic projection, with man and his accomplishments occupying much the same position within the existing order as the layers of geologic strata in the side of a mountain. For this second group, which

ANÓNIMO. Jardín anglo-chino
Anglo-Chinese Garden
Hotel del Duque de Orleans y Madame de Monteson





OCTAVIO FARNESE. Jardines de Caprarola, c. 1559
Gardens of Caprarola

To call homosexuals liars is equivalent to calling the resistors under a military occupation liars, It's like calling Jews «money lenders» when it was the only profession they were allowed to practice.
Michel Foucault, «Sexual Choice, Social Act: An Interview», *Salamagundi* 58-59 (Fall-Winter 1982-83).

The physician is concerned (unlike the naturalist)... with a single organism, the human subject, struggling to preserve its identity in adverse circumstances.
Ivy **McKenzie**, quoted by Oliver Sacks in *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, 1985.

I should have liked to live in the age of *real* travel, when the spectacle on offer had not been blemished, contaminated, confounded; then I could have seen Lahore not as I saw it but as it appeared to Bernier, Tavernier, Manucci...
Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques.*

Pequeño teatro vegetal
Small plant garden
Villa Marlia, Lucca (Italia)

Jardín chino. Colina artificial de roca
Chinese Garden. Artificial rock hill

we might refer to as representing a simulationist, or more allegorical, perspective, a landscape is no more real than its representation within language, and any attempt to conceptually render man and his accomplishments as being somehow separate from nature is doomed to perpetuate one's felt sense of alientation from the other.

For many of the artists included here, the motif of the failed pastoral, which is probably the only means by which the garden can be dealt with as a signifier, seems to be a direct response to some of the changes which have affected the world order – although they have perhaps registered most acutely in terms of the changing fortunes of the U.S. – over the course of the last several years. The promise of American prosperity, while still intact, was greaty eroded during the 1980s by the U.S.'s willingness to bury itself in debt, just as the numbing force of Reagan-era ideology left the nation unprepared to cope flexibly with the end of the Cold War, and the breakup of the formerly Eastern Bloc nations. On the domestic front, the social devastation of AIDS has recently found its economic counterpart in the massive (up to U.S. $1 trillion) fraud carried out by the architects of the savings-and-loan debacle. Racism, homophobia, anti-abortion activism and censorship all seem to be working together to propel the nation backwards in time, to a point in recent history (the mid-1950s) when fear and xenophobia triumphed soundly over truth, compassion and justice.

Even a casual observer of the New York art scene in the 1980s cannot have helped but observe that, far from groping its way through adversity in the way that new cultural expression has always done in America, the art world thrived on the economics of that decade to a degree that is probably unprecedented in the history of art and its patronage. From Julian Schnabel through Jeff Koons, to be new and different in American art in the 1980s was to become wildly famous and successful almost overnight, with waiting-lists of collectors and upwardly spiraling prices becoming more the rule than the exception. Speculation in new art, which was accompanied by (or fueled by, depending on whom one asks) the unchecked acceleration of the auctions and other secondary markets, was responsible in turn for the launching of hundreds of new galleries, and even an enfirely new gallery neighborhood (the East Village), which flared up and then disappeared over the course of three or four seasons. Although at least some of the problems inherent to this hyper-stimulated situation seem to have been apparent to observers as early as 1983, it was not until a few years later that artists actually began using their art to comment upon the conditions under which the work itself was being bought and sold. Whereas much of this work seems to have been wrongfully critiqued at the time as being too cynical or blase about its own exploitation, the fact remains that the carefully considered position of 'ambivalence' taken by many artists at the time reflects not so much the lack of a collective conscience on their part, but rather the inability of theoretical aesthetics to deal with the realities of the social order which surrounds and supports the art-world, beyond critiquing the image which serves as the most effective representation of that order.

Continuing along this line of thought, if post-modernism can be said to have grown out of the self-proclaimed failure of modernism to adapt and change with the times, then perhaps it can also be said of at least some of this new work that it has developed as a type of response to post-modernism's pre-determined limitations of subject matter and form. In this light, then, we can see that the inclination towards the pastoral occurs as a means of extending the scope of art's discourse beyond the attenuated existence of the image, past the neo-expressionist cult of the self, and towards a range of perception and sensation which is best described as 'engaged'. In other words, while this group of artists has chosen to confront social conditions and issues more directly, they do so by making use of the post-minimalist device of the 'site' – not, however, as an instrument to extend the solipsistic investigation of art's outer limits of signification (limits that have been traversed innumerable times already in the name of the 'avant-garde'), but rather to signify the existence of a tangible, complex world beyond the boundaries of the art gallery.

If at first this work appears to be promoting a predominantly holistic approach to filling the charged discursive gap between nature and culture, it should be remembered that the motif we are working our way towards is not that of a ruined garden – despite the above reference to the 'failed pastoral' as the pervasive mood surrounding the present-day reality of 'America' –, but a garden whose nature is inherently savage. In such an environment, anomy and entropy have begun to take hold of civilization's various mechanisms for self-control, reducing them to chaotic parodies of themselves. In fact, the very co-existence of brutality and beauty side by side in the savage garden suggests that the dialectical structure of aesthetic thought appears to be restored in such an equation. Painted in the broadest of strokes, we can even say that such a formulation allows us to merge, if only fleetingly, the aesthetic concerns facing artists today with ethical ones. Clearly, it is work that reflects the peculiar state of siege existing in American culture at the moment, in which it is no longer necessary to refer to certain kinds of art as 'political art' because everything, in the final analysis, is political. And while it cannot be said of much of this work that if offers an easy way out from any of the specific problems that confront America and the rest of the world at the present transition point in history, its value as art can be found in the surprising frankness with which it tackles these problems head-on. The further merits of the savage garden as a theme, however, lie in its capacity for demonstrating that ecology and democracy are really simply two different names for the exact same thing.

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