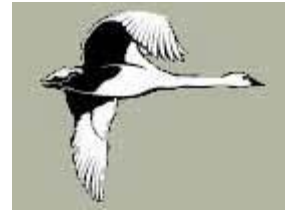


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Revisiting the Artistic Reclamation of Nature



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"The work of art is beautiful to the degree that it opposes its own order to that of reality..."

Herbert Marcuse ¹

Introduction

Despite significant public awareness of the ravages our civilization has caused in the natural environment, the pace of environmental degradation, unfortunately, continues virtually unabated. In this climate attention is increasingly coming to focus on ways in which the effects on the land caused by industrial society may be mitigated. This has spawned a growing interest in environmental restoration. Alongside this (perhaps Pyrrhic) attempt to "make nature whole again," we have witnessed a phenomenon called "Reclamation Art." I visited one of these sites of artistic reclamation of nature recently, and wrote up my impressions. Later, I researched and reflected further on this experience. The result is this two-part account: part narrative, part analysis.

Visiting the Robert Morris Site

Unremarkable from the outside, at first we drive past the site, but then recognize it and double back. The site is located on a steep hillside, half-surrounded by a busy two-lane road. Trucks are heard climbing the escarpment in first gear, strepitously. Airplanes are seen and heard overhead every few minutes, rising from the Seattle-Tacoma airport. A small stretch of the six-lane Interstate-5 highway, with its slowly moving traffic, can be made out in the distance.

Light but steady rain falls out of a grey, darkening afternoon sky. A woman stops to give us a lift as we trudge up the hill, just paces after leaving our vehicle by the side of the road. She thought we had had car trouble. This is local helpfulness.

Looking up, and toward the hill, one finds two sets of powerlines crisscrossing. Bordering the site itself, just beyond a little fence, there is scotch broom. Down in the valley, the flat roofs of the industrial parks of Kent fill the plain.

What is this place? My companion derides my calling it art. Much less does she agree with my exclamation, "Magnificent!" One sees a pit with five broad terraces on the hillside, and three on the valley side. The terraces are covered with tall grass, yellowed and golden, fallen over like tufts of hair. Each of the terraces follows a wavy line connecting two ovals. It reminds me of the way embryos are pictured as lying in the womb; here the "head" is facing up alongside the escarpment, and the "tummy" is cuddled against the hillside.

Standing on the rim of the hillock created by the three terraces facing the valley, one feels exposed, fully available to the roaring surrounds. As soon as one begins descending the terraces to the pit below, the roar of the place becomes muffled. Deep down in the bottom one feels in one's own private space.

The trucks ascend, still visible at the point where one's visual field and the road meet, and the continuing air traffic overhead now matters less. It is a place for looking up at the swinging curves of the terraces, at the bundles of golden grass. As one walks along the surprisingly dry (because well-drained) pit bottom one feels the caresses of the generously undulating terrain. In the lense of this deep and wide hole one suddenly realizes that exposure to prying eyes is greater than before on the rim. The sense of exposure competes with the sense of privacy first noted.

What was this place before it became the "Robert Morris Site"? Apparently it was a gravel pit. Certainly it may have been a gash in the side of the escarpment. And now what is it? Not a celebration of nature. Nature stands stolidly in the background, as my companion points out, represented by a dark wall of needle trees on the top of the hill.

This site does not constitute a "restoration of nature," however we may interpret this paradoxical term. It is a creation that uses the denuded and excavated gravel pit, the roaring "vehicularized" human beings on the adjacent road and in the sky, the brooding needle trees on the hill above and the exotic scotch broom on its side, to, surprisingly, turn it all into a place of sensuousness. It is a place of sensuous beauty despite the ubiquitous turmoil.

As we walk down the steep hill along the shoulder of the road back to our vehicle, we note how the site abruptly hides itself behind its massive outer walls. From outside and below the rim of the pit this is just another pile of pushed gravel, poorly restored, offering the searching eye, at most, a few brambles and some young poplars. From the outside.

Reviewing the Idea Behind Land Reclamation as Sculpture

The Robert Morris Site (*Untitled*, Johnson Pit #30, 1979) located in the vicinity of Seattle was part of an experiment on a grand scale. The King County Arts Commission and the King County Department of Public Works had agreed to sponsor the reclamation of eight severely stressed sites, ranging from gravel pits to a strip of abandoned noisy land along the Seattle-Tacoma airport. The idea seems to have been to marry the availability of abundant "raw material" for earthworks with the redemptive power of art to bring about a new form of salvage of the land.

We may ask ourselves why artists were engaged in these attempts at reclamation. Why were these sites not left to landscape designers to turn them into "parks," complete with the "pedestrian amenities—benches, picnic tables, parking lots and trash baskets,"² amenities the public probably prefers over art. Maybe the answer is that by allowing artists to take over these places constituted a convenient shift of responsibility away from the actual guardians - the civic authorities that administer, or at least authorize, the transformation of natural spaces into sources and sinks for industrial and consumer throughput.

Perhaps it was held that if a gravel pit or a landfill site can be turned into an artwork, viewers would perhaps forget the troubled history and surrounds of these places. Distraction as a strategy for inducing loss of awareness has worked well enough in other circumstances. Why else is the promise of "recreational facilities," such as boat launches and fish stocking, offered in order to overcome public resistance to the "improvements" of our river valleys with dams that only benefit a minority? This raises the question that my companion considered, namely, "What makes these sites art?" That is, why should one not think of them as highbrow landscape engineering with a pretty label? Moreover, by what standards are these hybrids of land reclamation, sculpture and gardening, to be assessed?

Art distinguishes itself from the rest of what human beings make by its perfection and its

ability to point beyond the everyday. I propose that site-specific artworks are what Michel Foucault calls "heterotopias," spaces that contest all other spaces, spaces that are "as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as our ordinary human-created spaces are messy, ill-constructed and jumbled." One need not suppose, though, that such artworks would necessarily constitute merely "pretty illusions," engendered through their capacity to draw our attention away from the everyday. This is well exemplified in Robert Morris' King County site.

Insofar as this site has a certain perfection exhibited in its design, it provides an encounter with beauty. Insofar as it is an inscription of sensuousness on a heavily disturbed portion of escarpment, it draws us away from the harsh realities of our everyday life. Nonetheless, the artwork only muffles the roar of all-consuming "artificiality" that surrounds it on every side; we continue hearing and seeing the car and airplane traffic in the grey background.

The site teases and pleases the eye with its undulating contours, while we are also staring at man-high tree stumps, coated with dark preservative material, the only reminders that the site may once have been part of the forest. The solemn, brooding wall of needle trees on the top of the hill, located beyond the confines of the site, starkly confirm the anti-illusory character of this artwork.

Robert Morris had warned the public: "It would perhaps be a misguided assumption to suppose that artists hired to work in industrially blasted landscapes would necessarily and invariably choose to convert such sites into idyllic and reassuring places, thereby redeeming those who wasted the landscape in the first place." ⁴ Rather, Robert Morris' artwork performs a sublation (*Aufhebung*), that is, a simultaneous replacement and preservation of the site's history. This earthwork turns the immolation of nature into beauty - while putting that same immolation on view. ³

Endnotes

1. . Herbert Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension* Boston: (Beacon Press. 1978), p. 64.

2. Nancy Foote, "Monument-- Sculpture--Earthwork," *Artforum*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (October 1979), 32-37, p. 37.

3. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *diacritics*. (Spring 1986), 22-27, p. 27.

4. Quoted by John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond* (New York: Abbeville/Cross River Press, 1984), p. 94, from Robert Morris, "Robert Morris Keynote Address," in *Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture*. Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1979, p. 16.

5. I am indebted to Lisa Edwards for stimulating discussions concerning this artwork.

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