

## **FOREWORD**

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### **Strijdom van der Merwe: an artist over land**

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Whenever civilisations come under stress from environmental and social change, new forms of expression tend to evolve in order to provide us with new understandings of our place, and special responsibilities, within nature. In Britain, this typically happened during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the emergence of the Romantic Movement in the arts, notably in painting and poetry, in response to the country's rapid industrialisation and urbanisation.

More recently, this also happened in Britain in the 1960s - a decade during which an awareness of habitat loss and environmental degradation led to the genesis of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. For many artists at that time, painting landscapes or fabricating abstract metal sculptures suddenly seemed incompatible with a sense of the Earth's fragility seen from Space.

My own experience of this new movement began at Arnolfini/Bristol – then the largest contemporary art gallery outside of London - when I curated the exhibition 'Artists Over Land' (1975) which included work by Richard Long and Hamish Fulton. Like several of their fellow students in London in the late Sixties (including the 'living sculptures' Gilbert & George), both artists had reacted to the industrial metal assemblage approach to sculpture promoted by their tutor Anthony Caro. In the following years, I curated solo exhibitions of the work of David Nash and Jan Dibbets, and hosted an exhibition of drawings by Robert Smithson, the American artist best known for 'Spiral Jetty' (1970) and thought to

have coined the terms 'Earth Art' and 'Land Art'. Nash is noted for sculptures which are formed by growing trees and other durational works, and from him I learned of the work of Andy Goldsworthy, whose early career I then helped to develop, having started to manage a private gallery in London in the mid-Eighties.

Whilst still a student, Long had produced one of his most iconic works, 'A Line Made by Walking' (1967), made by walking back and forth in a straight line across a field. Long's walks continued to be recorded by him in photographs, maps or texts, with simple architectural shapes, mostly circles, lines, crosses and spirals most noticeable in his work. He never makes significant alterations to the landscapes he passes through. Instead, he marks the ground or adjusts the natural features of a place by, for example, up-ending stones, or throwing water; temporary works that are then photographed. Unlike many of the American 'land artists', such as Smithson and Michael Heizer, he never shifts quantities of earth or make permanent monumental works.

To give you some idea of how quickly Long's work - and that of other 'land artists' - was embraced by the art world; within a year of graduating he had participated in the first international manifestations of 'Arte Povera' in Italy and 'Earth Art' in New York, had a series of exhibitions in prestigious galleries in Germany, France and Italy, and in 1976 represented Great Britain at the Venice Biennale.

The work of Andy Goldsworthy, coming into prominence a decade later, reflects both the large scale earthworks of the American 'land artists' of the Seventies, and the 'light touch' typical of Long and his European counterparts. Because he works during all seasons with many natural materials which are ephemeral and transient, such as flowers, icicles and leaves, many works are created specifically to be seen through his

photographs and reproduced in his many publications. Early projects that I helped to curate include ones in Japan, and at the North Pole where he created 'Touching North' (1989), comprising of four massive vertical rings made of frozen snow.

So far, so good, but the conventional story of the 'Land Art' movement now requires closer scrutiny. The dominance of American and European - mostly male and exclusively white - artists was certainly assisted by well-developed art markets across both continents, but it is now being recognised that artists - many of them women and from different cultural backgrounds - were working in similar ways in other parts of the world during the Sixties and continue to do so today. Their work was prompted by similar global concerns, and their stories is only now emerging.

Moreover, in the years leading up to the Millennium, the world had become increasingly concerned with specific environmental and social challenges including genetic engineering, species depletion and over-population, but - most of all - climate change, the 'elephant in the room' that now dominates the work of many environmental artists. It was at that time that I became convinced of the need to establish the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World, in the belief that the arts could raise eco-consciousness in ways that science and conventional education frequently fail and that we had a responsibility to encourage emerging artists to engage with ecological issues. Since that time, Land Art developed into often over-lapping movements such as Eco-Art, Bio-Art and Sci-Art and these are increasingly encouraging collaborative working between artists and scientists.

My own first visit to South Africa was in 1995 on the occasion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Johannesburg Biennale, in my capacity as a Commissioner for South

Korea's inaugural Gwangju Biennale and with a responsibility to select artists from countries across the Middle East and Africa. We never met on that occasion, but in the following year, Strijdom van der Merwe became a full-time land artist, with sufficient commissions to give up his work as a graphic designer.

Curiously, it was not in South Africa but during one of my many other visits to Korea that our paths first crossed through our mutual engagement with YATOO, a group of 'Nature Artists' founded in 1981 in Gongju, a city on the Geum River and the ancient capital of the Baekje dynasty. YATOO (meaning to 'throw in the field') is itself one of those groups whose achievements have been virtually unknown outside of Korea until recently. Their practice is best characterised by working together in their local countryside and coast, in harmony with the seasons and often leaving no trace beyond the photograph. In 1991, it organised its first International Nature Art Symposium, in 2004 its first Nature Art Biennale, and in 2009 an International Artist in Residence programme.

In 2014, YATOO launched its first Global Nomadic Art Project (GNAP) in Korea, followed by others in India, Iran, Germany, Lithuania, Eastern Europe, France and Turkey. A successful GNAP was hosted in South Africa in 2016 by **Site-Specific**, an organisation which had been launched five years earlier by Van der Merwe and several fellow artists. Called 'Stories of Rain', the project they organised traced the legacy of the first nomadic peoples of southern Africa. Starting in Johannesburg, local artists guided artists from other countries through varied landscapes and World Heritage 'rock art' sites, creating temporary 'nature art' responses along the way, and ending with a symposium and exhibition in Cape Town. This way of working encouraged both international understanding and multi-racial community engagement, strategies which place less

importance on the individual artist, and the financial value of the unique art object.

Van der Merwe is a prolific and energetic artist whose own work builds on the accomplishments of his 'Land Art' forebears, whilst responding to the unique opportunities afforded by South Africa's vast and varied landscape, alongside work he has created in other countries. Some of my favourite and most memorable temporary works are those made by his subtle marking of the arid sands of Tankwa Karoo National Park, works using red fabric to catch the wind, and works where he has used water as in the 'Cradle of Humankind' project (2008). His largest and most remarkable commission to date, 'am/pm Shadow Lines' (2010), is a beautiful and sensitive earthwork, endlessly casting its shadows across the barren landscape of former mine workings at Koignas on the west coast of South Africa.

By making both temporary and permanent works, Van der Merwe's work is perhaps closest to that of Goldsworthy which, in turn, brings together the practice of Long, Heizer and Smithson. Just as Smithson had become fascinated by prehistoric stone monuments in Britain, he is attracted by the huge isolated rocks in the Tankwa Karoo and made other rock works such as 'Migration' (2012) in Kenya and 'Diaspora' (2013) in Finland in which words are embedded. An ambitious work 'Fragmented/Falling' (2016) which I saw being completed in South Korea incorporates mirrored plates in a way that is also reminiscent of Smithson's 'Mirror Displacements' of the late Sixties.

South Africa, where many of the continent's most important contemporary artists live and work, has a vibrant art scene with successful dealers who have built a global presence. Even so, artists still struggle for recognition and funding. The recent opening in Cape Town of

the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, described as Africa's Tate Modern, is already thought to establish the continent as the 'new hot place for art' and this can be no bad thing for the reputation and future career prospects of Strijdom van der Merwe; its own eminent artist over land.

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