

## Artistic approaches to nature and the landscape – a statement

There are two basically different approaches of artists to the landscape. The first group – simplifying we might call it the American or heroic one – wants to change the landscape visibly and permanently through active intervention. Artists as Michael Heizer, whom the New York Times 2005 dubbed “*art’s last lonely cowboy*”<sup>1</sup>, alter chosen parts of the landscape in years of labour, exhausting thereby huge amounts of financial and material resources. With the help of big construction machinery millions of cubic metres of soil are excavated, shifted, mounted up, and tunneled. The lonely artist buys a big piece of land far out of the way in order to subject the landscape to his artistic will. In herculean fight he tries to leave perceptible long- (if not ever-) lasting signs against his own fugacity.

This kind of artistic approach to nature and the landscape seems to be fed from archaic sources: the fight against one’s own transitoriness, smallness, vulnerability, against death by building up monuments that outlast the times. It includes a wish for godlikeness too, the urge to equal the Creator, who decides on life and death, who destroys and creates new things out of destruction. In Heizer’s own words: “*It is interesting to build a sculpture that attempts to create an atmosphere of awe. Small works are said to do this but it is not my experience. Immense, architecturally sized sculpture creates both the object and the atmosphere. Awe is a state of mind equivalent to religious experience...*”.<sup>2</sup>

The landscape is nothing but the rough material and the backdrop for the artist’s work. That it might have a value of its own is not taken account of. Or, as Michael Govan, the former director of the Dia Art Foundation puts it: “...he [Michael Heizer] began a series of trips to his home states of Nevada and California to experiment on the **expansive raw canvas** of the American desert landscape.” (www.diacenter.org/exhibitions/introduction/83, emphasis added by MH)

In this attitude nature and the landscape are merely the hardware for human adaption and shaping. Thoughts as the ones put into word in the first article of the German Federal Law for Nature Conservation<sup>3</sup> are totally strange to such an approach.

The second group – which I would call the European or ephemeralistic one – is solidly different. Artists as Hamish Fulton or Richard Long perambulate the landscape on quiet paths and document their walks just by photography, in texts or drawings. They don’t interfere with the landscape at all or only to a small degree, using found rough materials (Stones, wood, parts of plants...) to build up sculptures with their own hands, marks by the wayside. The traces they actually leave in the landscape are transient, wiped out quickly by wind and weather, nothing to compare to the monumental artifacts of the heroics. Andy Goldsworthy prolongs this ephemeral character to the extreme, some of his works put together from highly fragile natural material (fruits, seeds, caulis, snow, ice...) fall apart just seconds after their finishing and taking a documentary picture.

The here chosen approach is marked by respectfulness and esteem, close looking and perception and a sensitivity for diversity – which finds expression for instance in Goldsworthy’s nearly breathtaking use of manifold natural materials. Here the landscape is not seen as a “raw canvas” to be worked on but as a complex structure which calls for a considerate and respectful approach.

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1 „Art’s Last, Lonely Cowboy“ by Michael Kimmelman, The New York Times, 06.02.2005

2 Michael Heizer, Interview with Julia Brown, in: Brown, J. (1984) (ed.): Michael Heizer: Sculpture in Reverse, Los Angeles, p. 33.

3 § 1 The aims of nature conservation and landscape planning

(1) On the basis of their own value and as foundation for the life and health of human beings as well as in responsibility for future generations nature and the landscape are to be protected in a way that

1. the biological diversity,

2. the capacity and efficiency of the ecosystems including their ability for regeneration and the sustainable usability of natural goods,

3. the diversity, character and beauty of nature and the landscape as well as their value for recreation

are secured in perpetuity (...).“ (Bundesnaturschutzgesetz vom 29. Juli 2009 (BGBl. I S. 2542, Translation: MH)

But of course these two opposite ways of dealing with nature and the landscape are not limited to artists, only. The example can easily be enlarged to other groups working in and with the landscape (landscape architects, architects, city and traffic planners and so on). The two extremes named could even be seen as the two poles between which the relationship of mankind to nature extends.

In the light of the dramatic changes of our natural environment – the climatic change and the serious loss of biological diversity since the 1970ties<sup>4</sup>, a more cautious, gentle and respectful way of treating nature and the landscape seems crucial to me. For this the above simplifying called the European approach might be an example. “Take only photographs – leave only footprints” (one of the opening phrases on Hamish Fulton’s homepage: [www.hamishfulton.com](http://www.hamishfulton.com)).

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<sup>4</sup> According to the recently published Living Planet Report 2010 of the WWF (World Wildlife Foundation) the biological diversity of the earth decreased about 30 % from 1970 till today.  
[http://wwf.panda.org/about\\_our\\_earth/all\\_publications/living\\_planet\\_report/health\\_of\\_our\\_planet/](http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/all_publications/living_planet_report/health_of_our_planet/)