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LAND/ART

New Mexico

INTRODUCTION

Bill Gilbert

Since the term “Land Art” was coined in the late 1960s, much has happened in the arts to contribute to a change in its definition, including the advent of postmodernism and the emergence of feminist, environmental, and Eco-Art. Yet the term persists, perhaps due to the vagueness of its original definition and its ability to expand and shift to incorporate new developments. Like Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, after years of lying somnolent and below the surface, Land Art has re-emerged with new significance within the larger culture.¹

New Mexico is an ideal place from which to survey the present state of Land Art, while both looking back into its history and forward to its future. Today Land Art is a genre which may include any constructed intervention in an urban or wilderness context, or even work constituted in cyberspace with environmental content. Indeed, as in many things postmodern, “Land Art” has expanded to the point that it is no longer meaningful as a term to describe a particular genre. In recognition of this possibility, “LAND/ART” was chosen as the title for this project to suggest both a disruption of the term and an expansion of its definition to incorporate the many varied relationships between land and art, or nature and culture, which are the project’s focus. Rather than attempt to redefine Land Art as a genre, the LAND/ART project provided a forum for a dialogue using New Mexico as a lens through which to frame an investigation of the relationships among art, nature, and community.

New Mexico’s long, legible history of the relationship between nature and culture makes it representative of many forms of “Land Art,” from Ancestral Puebloan architecture and petroglyphs to the modernist Earthworks of the 1960s and ‘70s to the more conceptual practices of contemporary artists. It is home to a number of such works, including Charles Ross’ *Star Axis* (see figure 1), Chaco Canyon, Three Rivers (see figure 2), Walter De Maria’s *The Lightning Field* (see figure 3), individual works from Ana Mendieta’s *Silveta* series, Dominique Mazeaud’s *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande*, Basia Irland’s *Gathering of Waters*, and Helen and Newton Harrison’s *Santa Fe Watershed: Lessons from the Genius of Place*. New Mexico is also representative of the greater American West, the region where other well-known seminal Earth-

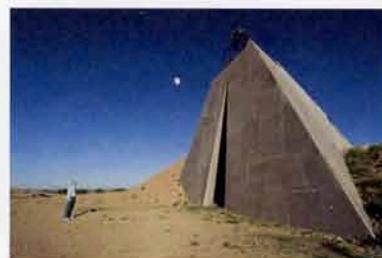


Fig 1 | Solar Pyramid at Star Axis, 1971-2009 (in progress), photo by Jill O'Bryan



Fig 2 | Three Rivers Petroglyph, 1993, by Nick Abdalla

¹ This renewed interest is demonstrated by the publication of feature articles in the *New York Times* on Earthworks artists Heizer and Turrell, an increase in people seeking out the original Earthworks sites, an intensified stewardship exemplified by the cleaning of mining debris from the oil exploration operation next to Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, and the significant sums of money being committed to complete ongoing projects such as Turrell’s *Roden Crater*, Heizer’s *City*, and Ross’ *Star Axis*.



Fig 3 | **The Lightning Field, 1977**, by Walter De Maria, long-term installation near Quemado, New Mexico, photo: John Cliett. © Dia Art Foundation



Fig 4 | **Spiral Jetty, 1970**, by Robert Smithson, photo by Alex Codlin

² Douglas McGill, "Illinois Project to Turn Mined Land into Sculpture", *New York Times*, June 3, 1985, from Ben Tufnell, *Land Art*, London: Tate Publishing, 2006.

works are located: Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* and *City* (Nevada); James Turrell's *Roden Crater Project* (Arizona); and Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (see figure 4) and Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (Utah).

The early Earthworks by Heizer, Smithson, De Maria, and Holt drew on the American fascination with the western frontier, fueled in part by the myth of endless expanse. For Heizer, the only one of the group who had been born in the West, the deserts were huge blank canvases on which to inscribe his ideas. He, however, maintains that he chose to work in Nevada not so much out of a romantic attachment to place but because the land was cheap (he could buy a lot of it) and it had the materials he needed for construction (he could work big). His primary interests lay in the formal concerns of sculpture and the possibilities for a truly American art form free from a reliance on European traditions, in which art could achieve the size of a 747 aircraft or the Empire State Building.² De Maria's early forays into Land Art, *Mile Long Drawing* and *Las Vegas Piece*, were a means of both apprehending and measuring time and space. Later, *The Lightning Field* (see figure 3) manifested his focus on the land combined with an interest in the sciences—mathematics in particular—and a commitment to precise engineering. Holt directed her attention to the heavens, creating with *Sun Tunnels* an instrument for reading solar cycles. Smithson (who is credited with creating the term "Earthworks") took a more complex, postmodernist stance, including in his work ideas about the cyclical nature of time, the possibilities of interdisciplinary practice, and art as a tool for reclamation.

Nascent in these early works of Land Art were many of the ideas that have been brought forward by succeeding generations of contemporary artists through such subcategories as feminist, environmental, and Eco Art. However, the history of significant mark-making in the land did not begin with the Earthworks movement of the 1960s. Native American cultures have been marking the land, in various manners, in New Mexico and throughout the Americas for thousands of years. Their scattered iconography is ubiquitous throughout the landscape of the Southwest and these markings have had a profound effect on the development of contemporary Land Art in our

region (see figure 4). Out of an interest in creating an “American” art form, Heizer has borrowed freely from Mesoamerican architectural forms in designing *City*. He might well have substituted Chaco Canyon for the Empire State Building as his reference for the ambitious size he sought for a truly American art. Turrell has gone even further by referencing the Native American architectural forms of the kiva and sipapu and appropriating Native religions’ spiritual relationship to the land in siting his *Roden Crater* project among the sacred mountains of the Navajo and Hopi.

While such Native artists as Pueblo potters continue to this day the tradition of aesthetic practices based entirely on the resources available in their environment, contemporary Native American artists have brought and continue to bring a new perspective to both their Native heritage and the Euro-American influence through a wide range of media and approaches. Nancy Marie Mithlo’s essay “The Political Aesthetic of Imaginary Landscapes” presented here offers a view of how images and representations of Native Americans have been appropriated by the Anglo culture. She explores through two examples of Native film how contemporary Native “image makers” use monopolized images to create sophisticated reinterpretations revealing the reality and complexity of Native cultures’ relationship to the land.

And yet, the American West of 2009 is neither simply the land of pre-Contact First Nations or of Heizer’s remote, vacant wilderness. Manifest Destiny has run its course, and our country has extended itself “from sea to shining sea.” We are now in a process of infill. The site of an art of the frontier, if one remains, is now the North and South Poles, where artists such as Chris Drury, Lita Albuquerque (see figure 5), Xavier Cortada, Peter Clegg, Antony Gormley, and Alex Hartley³ have joined scientific expeditions to pursue their aesthetic and environmental interests. In his essay “The Art of the Anthropocene,” William Fox looks at how such contemporary forms of Land Art may be seen as evolving from 19th-century geographical explorations of the Earth and representations of it through Earth systems science, landscape painting, and information theory.

In actuality, the contemporary American West of 2009 is much more complicated than the cultural stereotypes of cowboys and Indians and unfenced expanses reveal. The New West has the most



Fig 5 | **Stellar Axis: Antarctica, 2006.**
by Lita Albuquerque, photo by Jean de Pomereu

³ Xavier Cortada, *Ice paintings: Antarctic Sea Ice (ASI) Series*, 2007; Alex Hartley, *Nymark (Undiscovered Island)*, 2005–2006; Peter Clegg & Antony Gormley, *Three Made Places*, 2005; Lita Albuquerque, *Stellar Axis: Antarctica*, 2006; Chris Drury, *Everything Nothing*, 2006–2007

rapidly expanding urban centers in the country and is now the land of suburban ranchettes, shopping malls, soccer moms, and gang bangers as well as cattle ranching, resource extraction, and military maneuvers. Lucy Lippard's essay "Finding a Place for Land Art in the New West" explores what a contemporary indigenous Land Art might be and speaks of the alteration of perspective she experienced as she changed from an outsider looking at Land Art in a foreign landscape to a permanent resident living with Land Art in her home environment.

In its earliest modernist conception, Land Art was part of a larger nature/culture dialectic that posited the Earth as a force and presence independent of human definitions. As such, it stood in opposition to the dominant strain of an urban, anthropocentric art. Rooted in the Earthworks, which were in turn rooted in Minimalism, Land Art evolved out of the late-modernist concerns of sculptural practice. Minimalism reduced the art experience to the literal facts of an object (or series of similar objects), a viewer, and the context for the encounter. By moving art from the urban center to the wide open spaces of the western deserts, Earthworks shifted the context from cultural to environmental space while maintaining the Minimalist focus on abstract, reductive forms.

Not all Land Art of this period was based on such Minimalist, large-scale interventions in the land, however. In a powerful expression of an emerging feminist stance, Ana Mendieta aligned her body and identity as a female and ethnic minority with the earth as feminine territory in an investigation of the magical, the sexual, and the regenerative in human and planetary life cycles. Meanwhile, some European artists such as Richard Long and Hamish Fulton took a different tact by pursuing a more modest, ephemeral engagement with the land through walks around their home territory of the British Isles and the world beyond. Their practice evidenced a relationship between humans and nature that reflected the European experience of an environment long since populated, domesticated, and acculturated.

In the hands of other artists on both continents, Land Art had a distinct environmental message, reflecting the emerging environmental awareness in popular American culture of the 1960s. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published in 1962; Glen Canyon Dam, blocking the Colorado

River, was completed in 1963; the *Whole Earth Catalog* with NASA's photograph of the Earth from space was published in 1968.⁴ Also in 1968, American artist Agnes Denes explored the regenerative cycles of nature in *Haiku Poetry Burial, Rice Planting and Tree Chaining*. In 1971 Joseph Beuys proposed an "action" to clean up Germany's Elbe River; his performances *Forest Action* and *Eine Aktion im Moor (Bog Action)* aimed to publicize deforestation and the destruction of European wetlands. These and other early works inform the current Eco Art movement that blossomed some thirty years later.

For most of these early works of Land Art, the shift of the site of the work from the gallery to the natural environment created both gains and losses for the artists. In Europe and America, part of the initial impetus for this new direction was to escape commodification of their artwork. By moving to the deserts of the American West, setting out to walk across the British countryside, or literally placing oneself in the ground of one's home country, these artists conceived of the natural environment as a site for the unfettered pursuit of their ideas. However, in breaking free from the gallery system, these works were also removed from a readily available audience. The works of Mendieta, Fulton, and Long were entirely solitary and ephemeral. The Earthworks were inherently sculptural events to be experienced through space and across time, and yet to this day very few people have actually made the pilgrimage to engage physically with them.

Faced with this problem of representing or translating the event to a predominantly urban audience, artists responded in different ways. Smithson framed the question in terms of "Site and Non-site,"⁵ establishing an equivalence between the site in the environment and the sculptural materials and abstract representations installed in a gallery, while acknowledging the inherent loss in translation between the actual "site" of the work and the "non-site" of the gallery. Heizer's *Double Negative* and Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* are known predominantly through photographs first published in *Artforum* magazine. The graphic power of these aerial photographs was substituted for the physical experience of the works and has been instrumental in promoting the impression of their monumentality, thereby helping to forge the iconic status they have achieved.

⁴The publication of photographs of the Earthworks occurred nearly simultaneously with the first ever photographs of planet Earth from space. This objectification of our planet had a profound impact on human consciousness. In the case of the NASA photographs, what had previously been a haptic experience of planet Earth became purely visual; Earth became an object of contemplation in a radically new way. Similarly Earthworks, an inherently sculptural event to be experienced by engagement, through space and across time, were experienced as graphic images.

⁵A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites, 1968 from Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 364. "By drawing a diagram, a ground plan of a house, a street plan to the location of a site, or a topographic map, one draws a 'logical two dimensional picture.' A 'logical picture' differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for. It is a two dimensional analogy or metaphor—A is Z. The Non-Site (an indoor earthwork)* is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site in N.J. (The Pine Barrens Plains). It is by this dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it—this The Non-Site... Between the actual site in the Pine Barrens and The Non-Site itself exists a space of metaphoric significance."

¹Terry Evans, *Ammunition Storage Bunkers and Hay Bales*, 1995; David Hansen, *Colstrip, Montana: Power plant and waste ponds*, 1983–1985; Michael Light, *Dry Dreams: The Inhabited West*, 2008; David Maisel, *The Mining Project*, 1987–2007, and *Oblivion*, 2004–2006. The history of aerial photography is discussed in Fox's recent book *AERIALITY: Essays on the World from Above*. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2009.

⁷CLUI makes a conscious effort to distance its work from the history of aesthetic photographs. In their projects, the aesthetics of the photograph are secondary to the role of dissemination of information for which the camera is a useful tool.

⁸Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, 1968; Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964–1979*.

Land Art, then, came to incorporate and indeed rely on photography to grant access to what had been a purely sculptural practice, performance, or event. The contemporary aerial photographs of such artists as Terry Evans, David Hansen, David Maisel, and Michael Light continue the interest in a perspective provided by a view from above.⁶ De Maria's *The Lightning Field* was also featured on the cover of *Artforum* in 1980, and the cover of Lucy Lippard's book *Overlay* introduced Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*. More recently, Andy Goldsworthy has captured the attention of the larger culture with his coffee-table books of photographs documenting transitory and ephemeral works that are time-intensive to create but often last for mere moments. Once captured in a photograph, however, they reside in a perpetual present, stripped of the process of their becoming and their inevitable dissolution or decay. This dominance of the mediated experience reflects larger trends in our culture toward technology, and for much of an art-going audience, Land Art is now experienced not as a physical event but as a purely visual photographic image.

Despite the entrenched and generally accepted use of photography, uneasiness about the mediation of Land Art remained. It prompted Hamish Fulton to make the early pronouncement "NO WALK, NO WORK," in part to instill confidence in his audience that his photography and text-based gallery presentations were in fact the product of real experience, not merely conceptual conjecture. This question of veracity is present as well in many of the Center for Land Use Interpretation's projects, in which their stated commitment to "ground truth" serves to verify theory, hypothesis, and story by connecting to real physical evidence in specific places.⁷

The emergence of the environmental movement in the 1960s also influenced the evolving field of Land Art by posing further questions about the relationship between nature and culture, which in this context were seen as equal contestants in a war of attrition. Such writers as Edward Abbey and Gary Snyder⁸ gave voice to this idea of a war between civilization and wilderness. Over time, however, the efficacy of the proposed dialectic between nature and culture has waned. The feminist and environmental art movements promoted an understanding of human culture as only a small part of nature, and suggested that to posit a dialectic between

nature and culture is to institute a false equality. This stance has led to the elimination of a rigid conceptual boundary between nature and culture, or between wilderness and civilization. As one result, the term "environment" may now include both natural and human-constructed spaces. Ironically, this is happening at a time when less and less of our population ever ventures beyond the confines of human-made spaces to engage physically with the planet on its own terms. The net effect may be less to create a seamless connection between nature and culture than to make the natural environment irrelevant to most Americans.

Our postmodernist conception of the natural world has shifted from the blank canvas of open *space* to a multilayered, sociocultural *place*. And as the opposition of human and natural forces is replaced by the interrelationship between them, an interest in the social aspect of place has been greatly amplified, in particular, by feminist artists. Lucy Lippard's books *Overlay* and *The Lure of the Local* build the case for a definition of site-specific work that acknowledges the personal and cultural histories inextricably layered onto environmental place. In the hands of this generation of feminist artists the heroic gesture of the first Earthworks gives way to an engagement with the prosaic acts of daily life and an investment in community: such artists as Mary Beth Edelson and Ana Mendieta commingle art, persona, ritual, and spirituality; Mierle Laderman Ukeles takes this focus on ritual and applies it to the mundane work of public and private urban life; Andrea Zitte focuses on personal rituals situated in constructed domestic spaces.

The spreading awareness of global climate change has likewise prompted a more political extension of Land Art in the form of environmental art and Eco Art, the roots of which again reach back to the first Earthworks and Smithson's early interest in reclamation projects.⁸ Smithson, however, moved in this direction less from an interest in the politics of environmentalism than from his conceptual interests in decay, entropy, and geologic layering, plus a practical recognition that reclamation offered artists an alternate source of sites and funding. The paths of contemporary American Eco artists seem more closely aligned with such work as Hans Haacke's *Grass Grows*, 1969, *Rhine-Water Purification Plant*, 1972, and Joseph Beuys' *7,000 Eichen (7,000 Oaks)* for

⁸ Bingham Copper Mining Pit—Utah Reclamation Project, 1973.

Documenta VII, 1979, perhaps reflecting sensibilities regarding relationships to the land that are closer to those of their European counterparts.

Some Eco artists participate in interdisciplinary collaboration to make works that function to remediate a situation. These works are often interactive, seeking to move the audience from passive observers to active participants. Helen and Newton Harrison, who have worked on numerous conceptual planning projects in Europe and the United States (including a project in Santa Fe concerning the Santa Fe River watershed),¹⁰ are perhaps the most prominent example of artists working on environmental, sociopolitical issues in a transdisciplinary collaboration with scientists, planners, engineers, and others. The art practices of Mel Chin, Agnes Denes, Basia Irland, Patricia Johanson, and Buster Simpson, among others, address environmental problems through projects that draw attention to issues, involve the local community, and point towards solutions.¹¹ Younger artists such as Amy Franceschini of Future Farmers in the Bay Area bring together environmental politics, contemporary design, and performance with a sense of playful exuberance that is often missing from the art and politics of the environmental movement.¹²

As the nature/culture dialectic dissolves and contemporary artists expand the definition of the environment to include constructed urban spaces as well as wilderness, many artists are moving away from the initial impulse to escape the urban context toward an effort "to attempt a balance of influences"¹³ and are shifting the emphasis from land *art* to land *use*. This change of focus reflects in part an increasing interest in an interdisciplinary approach in which art ceases to function as a discrete practice based on making new interventions in the land to one based on research that then presents information about existing land use. As such, this approach may reflect a kind of cultural pause, an attempt to step back and come to terms with what has already been done with and to the land.

New and various forms of inquiry and artmaking have emerged within this expanded frame of "land use." The Center for Land Use Interpretation has completed projects that focus our attention on human constructions situated along rivers, in seaport areas, and spread across the

¹⁰ Helen & Newton Harrison, *Santa Fe Watershed: Lessons from the Genius of Place*, 2004

¹¹ Mel Chin, *Revival Field*, 1990; Agnes Denes, *Tree Mountain*, 1992; Basia Irland, *A Gathering of Waters*, 1995–2000; Patricia Johanson, *Fair Park Lagoon*, 1987–1986; Buster Simpson, *Hudson River Purge*, 1991

¹² Amy Franceschini, *Rain Water Harvester/Grey Water Feedback Loop*, 2007; *Bingo: Fields of Thought*, 2006; *F.R.U.I.T.*, 2005; *Playshop*, 2004

¹³ Hamish Fulton, in *Richard Long: Walking in Circles*, New York, NY: George Braziller, 1991, pg 242

vast expanse of the western deserts of the United States (see figure 6).¹⁴ Trevor Paglen combines geography and art in his investigation of U.S. military bases and prisons. Mark Dion mixes art and anthropology in creating works that look at the politics behind land use in the Amazon. Lucy Raven tracks the chain of resource extraction to final product across an international network. Other artists and collectives such as Fritz Haeg, Anne Cooper, and FarmLab focus on land use in relationship to food production and distribution in an urban context.¹⁵

This new focus on investigating land use has also engendered a revival of interest in cartography. The exhibition *Experimental Geography* presented by the Albuquerque Museum as part of LAND/ART provides a survey of artists working across the disciplines of art and geography. Contributing artist Lize Mogel's (see figure 7) book *An Atlas of Radical Cartographies* catalogs the proliferation of artists who use the abstraction of mapping to communicate the multilayered dynamics of contemporary land use.

The practice of walking—so popular among America's baby boomer population—is an example of an overlap between the arts and the larger cultural *milieu*.¹⁶ The term "psycho-geography,"¹⁷ as described by European artist/writers such as Will Self, Iain Sinclair, and Francis Alys,¹⁸ has brought Richard Long's and Hamish Fulton's earlier version of walking-as-art to the urban context, updating the Situationist's "derive." American artists and groups such as Proflux, the Urban Rangers, Janet Cardiff, and Kianga Ford take it a step further by adding sound to create a new form of urban walking based on the (self-) guided tour.¹⁹

The list goes on. Such a proliferation of perspectives, attitudes, and approaches may seem far removed from Land Art of the late '60s and early '70s, but its practitioners share a commitment to the fundamental significance of the land in our lives, to forging a relationship with their audience that sidesteps the focus on art as commodity, and to offering an opportunity for engagement

¹⁴ CLUI, *Up River: Points of Interest on the Hudson from Battery to Troy*, 2006; *Birdfoot: Where America's River Dissolves into the Sea*, 2008; *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, 2009

¹⁵ Trevor Paglen, *Restricted Area, The Black Sites*; Mark Dion, *On Tropical Nature*, 1991; *A Meter of Jungle*, 1992; Lucy Raven, *China Town*, 2009; Fritz Haeg, *Edible Estates*, 2005; Anne Cooper, *Anitya*, 2009; FarmLab, *Not a Corn Field*, 2005

¹⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust*, Viking, 2000; *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, New York: Viking, 2005

¹⁷ Psycho-geography was defined in 1955 by Guy Debord as the "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." From Wikipedia.

¹⁸ Will Self, December 2006 walk from home in south London to Heathrow Airport and then from JFK to the Crowne Plaza in Manhattan; Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital*, 2002, *Edge of the Orison*, 2006; Francis Alys, *El Colector 1991–92*, *The Doppelgänger* 1999

¹⁹ Proflux is a weekend-long event dedicated to artistic and social investigations in psycho-geography and intervention. "Urban Rangers are LA-based geographers, environmental and art historians, artists, curators, architects, and others—who aim, with both wit and a healthy dose of sincerity, to facilitate creative, critical, head-on, oblique, and crisscrossed investigations into our sprawling metropolis and its various ecologies." www.laurbanrangers.org. Janet Cardiff, *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)*, 1999; Kianga Ford, *The Story of This Place*, 2003



Fig 6 | **Texas Exxon Baytown, 2007,**
by Center for Land Use Interpretation



Fig 7 | **Mappa Mundi, 2008,** by Lize Mogel

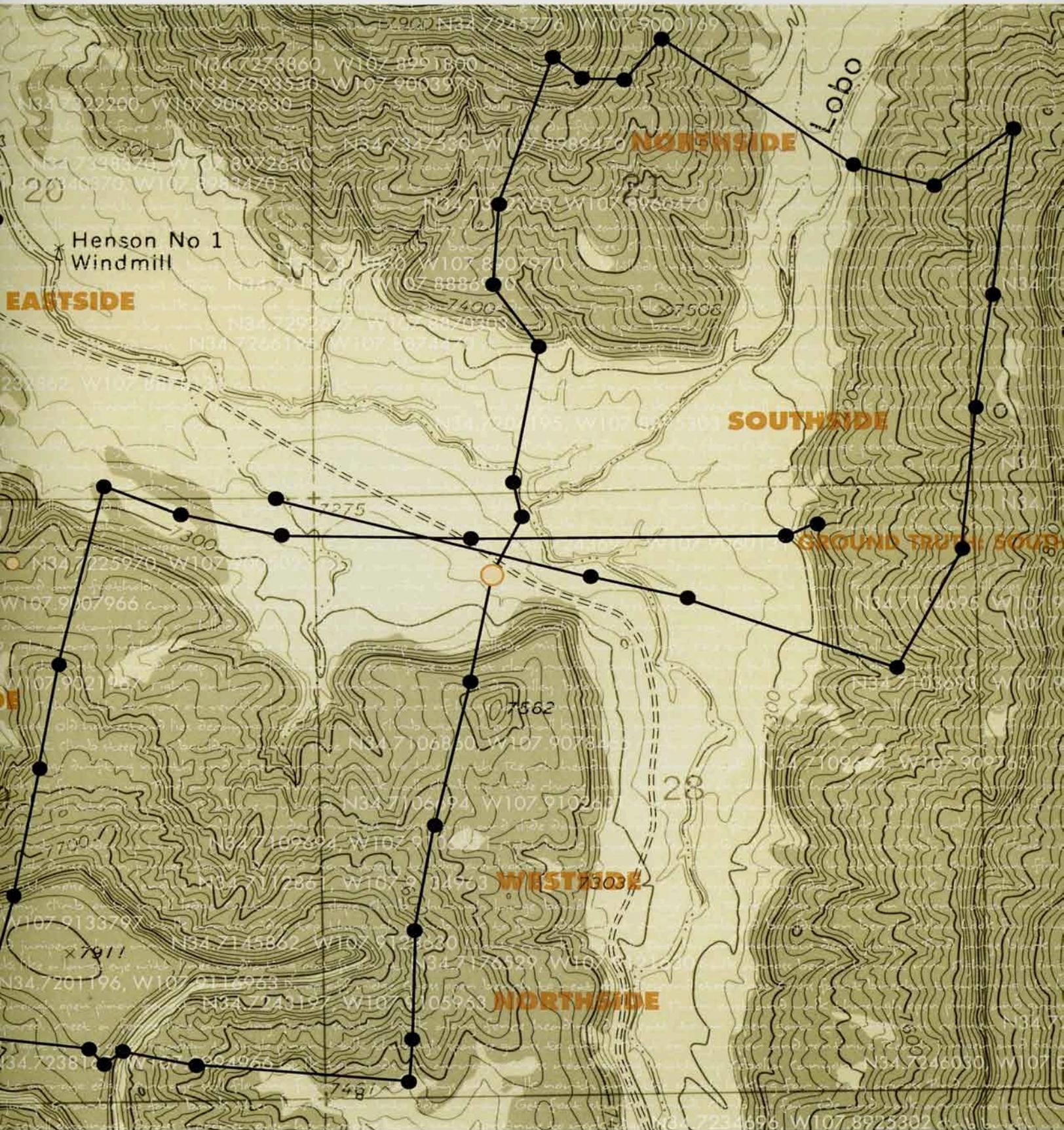
with the world beyond the white cube of the gallery. The LAND/ART project and this publication, while inevitably omitting much that belongs within the expanded frame of contemporary Land Art, provides an opportunity to reflect upon the multitude of art practices—past and present—that address our ever-changing relationship to the land from the unique perspective of New Mexico's place in that continuum.



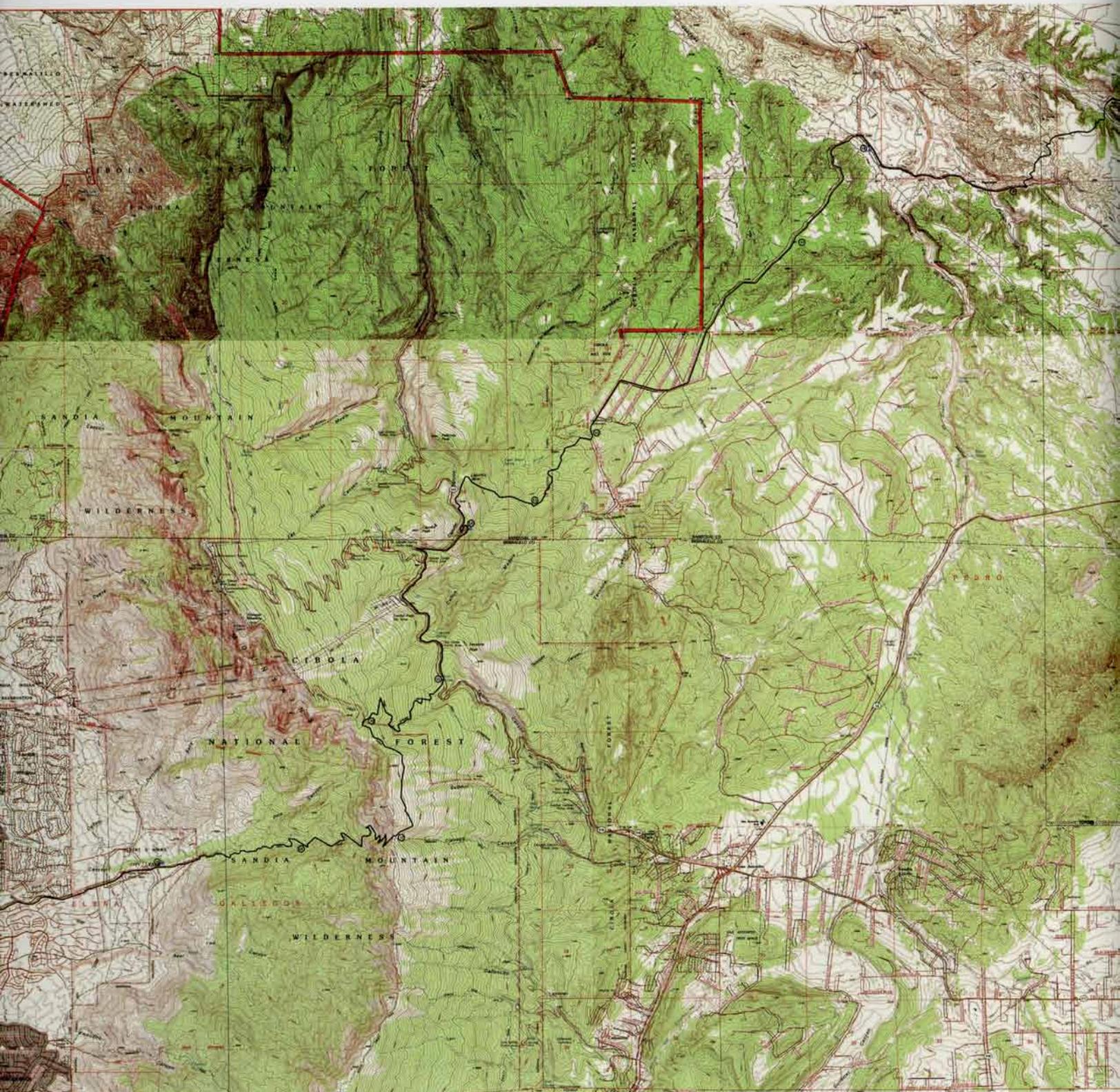
Installation view of **LAND ARTS OF THE AMERICAN WEST: BILL GILBERT: PHYSIOCARTOGRAPHY: 2005–2006, 2009** | by Bill Gilbert

Bill Gilbert's exhibition included a series of maps charting his steps as he walked specific areas of the Southwest and audio recordings of his detailed descriptions of these locations.

above & right: From *Land Arts of the American West: Bill Gilbert: Physiocartography: 2005–2006* at University of New Mexico Art Museum | see index page 162



FOR JOHN WESLEY POWELL, ATTEMPTS TO WALK THE GRID, SEPTEMBER 27, 2006, SAND CANYON, WALK ONE HOUR IN EACH CARDINAL DIRECTION, ORIENTATION: MAGNETIC NORTH, 2006 | by Bill Gilbert with Kyrsten Sanderson | digital print, 40 x 40 inches



above & right: **MATTER OF FACT: WALK TO WORK, 2009** | by Bill Gilbert | installation with natural materials, video, 24 x 4 feet

Bill Gilbert's three-day, 50-mile walk between Cerrillos and Albuquerque was represented by a video and sculpture installation that presented the intersection of personal knowledge, physical experience in time, and the devices used to translate them.

