

Colorado State University

Earthworks, Environmental Art,
And Land Art

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Earthworks, Environmental Art,
and Land Art

Art of the late 1960's, 1970's, and early 1980's known as Earthworks, Environmental Art, and Land Art was an art form that allowed artists such as Alice Aycock, Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Long, Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, and Robert Smithson to return to the land. This return, allowed these artists to make sculpture in and of the land. While each artist had his own methods, styles, and intentions in making art in the land, each artist was making a statement about man's relation to nature.¹ The relationships these artists created; Earthworks, Environmental Art, and Land Art evolved through artists' dissatisfaction with American society. "Earth Artists" were reacting against political and aesthetic traditions: the Vietnam War (1961-73),

the assassination of President Kennedy (1969), the first landing on the moon (1969), the oil embargo of 1973, the economical recession of the 1970's, and previous art forms known as Minimal and Conceptual Art.²

Minimal Art is referred to as A.B.C. Art, Geometry Art, and Number Art. It was a style that depicted the artist's obsession with repetition, modules, measurements, and basic geometric shapes. Minimal artists expressed the idea that "less is more."³ Such Minimal artists as Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Tony Smith demonstrated that "less is more" with objects made of ordinary stuff: wood, bricks, rope, metal, and concrete. By virtue of their simplicity these artists appeared to be aspiring toward the condition of non-art, to be breaking down any distinction between the world of art and the world of everyday objects.⁴ (Illustrations 1, 2, and 3.)

While Minimal artists were concerned with the "less is more" idea, Conceptual artists of the 1960's had concerns that were motivated by the idea or concept of an art work rather than its visual presence.⁵ Conceptual Art was a reaction to the materialistic concerns of the time and to the surge of art prices. Conceptual artists such as Lawrence Weiner, Dennis

Oppenheim, and Walter De Maria; claimed that the artists' idea was most important and that the work of art was the proof of the idea, but the concept was its soul.⁶ "What you see is what you get."⁷ (Illustration 4, 5, and 6.)

In returning to the land, "Earth Artists" engaged it as a medium, rather than depicting it; their art wasn't simply of the landscape but in it.⁸ This engagement became a marriage of artist, land, and viewer. Each "Earth Artist" had his own reasons for returning to the land. However, one common reason for the return was a need to escape the gallery and museum. Robert Smithson and Walter De Maria both incorporated the land into galleries. (Illustrations 7 and 8.) While these pieces of art worked within the gallery, most Earthworks did not. The confinement of the gallery was too cramped and cluttered for Earth Art. "Earth Artists" no longer needed the white walls of a gallery and wanted the public to feel "welcomed" to view their art, since many galleries and museums are inhibiting to the general public. "Earth Artists" also felt that city parks, while they were not surrounded by four walls, still did not solve the problem of site. Cities are much too noisy and distracting. City Parks, museums, and galleries

became graveyards above the ground for sculpture and "Earth Artists" felt the need to go beyond the graveyards, they became bound to the land.⁹ Consequently "Earth Artists" marked the present with their presences.¹⁰ The present was a connection of time and a reintroduction of space. History was reevaluated as "Earth Artists" incorporated aspects of archeology, anthropology, geology, mythology, and primitivism into their work. Space never became a problem, in that all Earth Art, Environmental, and Land Art were site specific. The piece of art was conceived from the site and the site was the art. The incorporation of time and site were of the utmost importance to the success of the piece of art. The real challenge however, was placed upon the socially aware artist working in the land to give the resurrected forms present-day meaning, not in terms of nostalgia, but in terms of present struggles, dreams, hopes, and fears.¹¹

The resurrected forms many of these "Earth Artists" gained their inspiration from were the Neolithic rock formation, Stonehenge. (Illustration 9.) Stonehenge was erected in the latter part of the fourth and third B.C. by Neolithic farming communities who begun colonizing Britian. These thirteen foot monoliths (rocks) were

transported from 134 miles away. The energy and ingenuity necessary to move these monoliths such a great distance is remarkable.¹² Obviously, these Neolithic farmers knew a form of measurement and practical geometry. There has also been for 1000's of years, a mystery behind Stonehenge. The rocks are placed in such a way that no one knew why Stonehenge was built, nor did anyone know the meaning of Stonehenge. Many scientists speculated that the rocks were designed for scientific, ritual, lunar, solar, religious, or spiritual use. Not until recently and with the use of highly specialized equipment have scientists discovered that Stonehenge is actually a calendar. While the calendar was functional for these Neolithic people, it was viewed as art. Stonehenge served as a means of organizing ones life and reassured these Neolithic people that the world could be ordered and manageable.¹³

The beauty of Stonehenge is seen in the rocks and in their placement. It is the openness of Stonehenge that is so remarkable, no ancient monument is more see-throughable.¹⁴ The stones are such a size and are raised in such a manner that they resemble doorways. Stonehenge looks like a ring of inviting doorways. Stonehenge was designed to get the viewer to walk through

these doors. Stonehenge is to be experienced and is responsive to human movement.

Like Stonehenge, human involvement through movement is the main function of "Earth Artist" Alice Aycock's earth sculpture Maze. (Illustration 10.) Maze enables the participant to enter and experience a special place. Maze was constructed in 1972 on the Gibney Farm near New Kingston, Pennsylvania. Maze was a twelve-sided wood structure of five concentric rings, approximately 32 feet in diameter and 6 feet high.¹⁵ Maze was inspired by aspects of 14th-century English mazes, American Indian stockades, and African Zulu "Kraals."¹⁶ While Maze was structurally modern, it was emotionally primitive. One walks through Maze and experiences it as the path of life, complete with false starts, complex turns, unclear goals...elements in our lives.¹⁷ You receive signals of frustration as you walk through these tall blank walls.

In architecture, a wall is a structure. To Aycock, it is charged with psychological and mythological possibilities, haunted, mysterious, threatening, and it is "as full of tales as it is of nails."¹⁸ The feelings of terror, enticement, mystery, anger, and panic motivates the participant to get out. Aycock' Maze

intensified these feelings and Maze intensified the landscape. It did so by making itself into another space. Literally, the site is a visual/tactile sculptural experience.¹⁹ While Maze would appear to have been an architectural piece of sculpture sitting "on" the land, it was actually apart of the land. Aycock's Maze was to be seen from afar, as you neared the Maze it became a wooden sculpture "in" the land that you entered into, moved through, and experienced feelings of wanting to get out. To get out into the vastness of the land. Alice Aycock clearly has been interested in the environments and how they affect people. She has explored her feelings concerning the natural environment, the psychological environment, and the architectural environment.²⁰

Whereas Alice Aycock's Maze is a large obtrusive piece of sculpture in the land, Richard Long's Earth Art ever so lightly touches the land in a very delicate and unobtrusive manner. Long's art emphasizes historical aspects of time. Long does this by walking. Walking is one of Long's chief means of expression. (Illustrations 11 and 12.) Regardless of where Long is walking; Bolivia England, Peru, or Africa Long feels he is getting a history lesson. Long says "A walk is just one more

layer, a mark, laid upon the thousands of other layers of human and geographic history on the surface of the land."²¹ Long's walks, Walking a Line in Peru, 1972 and A Line in Ireland, 1974 were done in remote, exotic, and uninhabited parts of the world. As Long walks he sometimes makes sculptures. Long's Circle in Africa, 1978 and Circle in the Andes, 1972 are created site specifically and are made of earth elements that Long finds along the way. Long never incorporates foreign objects in his art, he uses sticks, rocks, grass, or ashes. Long's sculptures are geometric forms; a circle, line, or a spiral. All of these forms are universal shapes.

(Illustrations 13 and 14.) Long's sculptures appear to be so natural that they become not so much objects in the landscape, but integral parts of the landscape. Long's simple, practical, emotional, quiet, and vigorous art is usually short lived. This is due to the natural elements such as ; wind, rain, snow, sleet, hail, and sun. Consequently, and like many other "Earth Artist" Long uses photography as a means of documentation of his art work. Photography serves as a means of making a record of the work, not as an end in itself.

Long allows his work to stand for itself, but in a rare statement he wrote:

I like the simplicity of walking, the simplicity of stones....I like the idea that stones are what the world is made of....I like sensibility without technique....I like to use the symmetry of patterns between stones and distances, between time and stones. I choose lines and circles because they do the job.... A walk expresses space and freedom and the knowledge of it can live in the imagination of anyone, and that is another space too....A walk traces the surface of the land, it follows an idea, it follows the day and the night. A road is the site of many journeys. The place of a walk is there before the walk and after it.²²

Because Long's sculptures mirror universal shapes and because he only uses organic materials to construct these sculptures, Long is often considered to be a primitive artist. While Long's work does resemble primitive or prehistoric remains, Long claims his work could never be mistaken for the real ruins or site.²³ Long simply walks and creates with the materials he collects along the way. Long's art allows us to use our imaginations freely, to retrace Long's travels, and to share in his past adventures. Therefore, it becomes hard to differentiate art from artist.

Much like Long, Dennis Oppenheim becomes one with the land. Oppenheim's Rocked Hand, is about Oppenheim becoming a bridge between the aspects of nature and aspects of self. Rocked Hand evolved from Oppenheim covering his left hand with leaves and stones until his hand was completely covered and was incorporated into

nature. (Illustration 15.)

Oppenheim works with psychological space as well as three dimensional space. For example, in 1970-75 Oppenheim created a series of artworks titled Identity Transfers. This series or piece is about the transferring of power from his ancestors to present day generations. Psychologically, Oppenheim was overlaying the thumbprints of his father, daughter, son, and himself.²⁴ For Oppenheim, it was a way of going back through his family until an impasse was reached.

A piece of environmental sculpture to evolve out of Identity Transfers was Identity Stretch. Identity Stretch was done at Artpark, Lewistown, New York. It was made of hot sprayed tar, 300' by 1000'. Oppenheim printed his right thumb and his son, Eric's left thumb on elastic material, which Oppenheim stretched to the maximum and slightly overlapped on top of the land. Surprisingly, the tar acted as a fertilizer for the land. Identity Stretch was a means of cultivating part of Oppenheim's and his son's thumbprints into the land and having them grow out of the land as well. (Illustration 16.)

Oppenheim has "touched" the land and sky several

ways with his art. Oppenheim only briefly fell into the land art category and his land art had many aspects of different art movements within them. The simplicity of Minimalism was a factor in Oppenheim's Rocked Hand. The psychological aspects of Identity Stretch stem from Oppenheim's interest in Conceptual Art. Consequently, Oppenheim brought different issues of "Art" to his pieces.

Like Oppenheim, "Earth Artist" Walter De Maria had been involved with the Conceptual Art movement prior to his engagement with Land Art. In their Land Art, conceptualism was used more for the means with Oppenheim and more for the end for De Maria. De Maria barely disturbed the landscape with his art. This disturbance was done in a very orderly and neat manner. De Maria choose sites that were remote, in the west, isolated, empty, flat and featureless, often arid and unmarked by man.²⁵

In 1977, De Maria finished Lightning Field in the valley floor of New Mexico. Lightning Field consist of 400 stainless-steel poles, each sharpened to a needle tip, their spikes forming a level plain (like a bed of nails) one mile long and one kilometre wide, the grid spaced with absolute regularity to a tolerance of

one-sixteenth of an inch.²⁶ These poles were brought to the site to function as indicators; to be seen through, rather than seen as objects blocking the landscape.

These poles are, essentially lightning rods. From the months of May through September as many as two or three storms per week cross this field of poles. Occasionally, poles are struck. (Illustration 17.) When these poles are struck, De Maria has made weather conditions and air movements a visual presence and he has created his own unique lightning patterns.²⁷

Lightning Field impose a considerable amount of anxiety on the viewer. You either wait for a storm to come or you watch and wonder which pole might be struck. Lightning Field also appears to shine and vanish each day as the sun rises and sets. Lightning Field is a contrast between technology and nature. The contrast has become a contract of extreme opposites in the landscape.

Unlike De Maria who barely touched the landscape with his art is probably the most aggressive and prolific "Earth Artist", Michael Heizer. Heizer carves the landscape for purposes of art. Heizer doesn't use hammers

and chisels he carves with drills, earthmovers, and explosives. Because Heizer uses these methods to make art, he has been criticized for rearranging natural formations and for destroying lives that inhabit these barren sites. Heizer argues that "its naive to criticize his art from an ecological standpoint. Given the fact that modern industry rearranges the landscape on a grander scale."²⁸

Heizer's art begins with his search for a particular site. Site choosing is a long and difficult journey for Heizer. Because the site is as vivid as the art, Heizer considers the amount of space, the presences or lack of natural features, the right kind of grade, and the right amount of density and hardness of rock before choosing the site. Once Heizer has chosen the site, he moves himself and his studio there until completion of the piece.

The experience of visiting one of Heizer's works is very complicated. You as the viewer become overwhelmed by the site and the process you go through just to get there. In the beginning of Heizer's career, he would not allow any of his pieces to be open to the public. Eventually, Heizer changed, but the sites were virtually inaccessible. Reviews and photography were

frequently the only means of documentation. Heizer chooses his sites with the piece of art being the primary concern. The site is of the utmost importance, but not in the pictorial sense. The heaviest concern is with structure, materials, and scale.

Heizer's Double Negative, was made in 1969 in the Nevada desert. This now famous Earthwork consist of two slots, each forty feet deep and a hundred feet long, dug into the tops of two mesas, sited opposite one another and separated by a deep ravine.²⁹ 240,000 tons of earth were carved, exploded, and moved by heavy machinery to make Double Negative. (Illustration 18.) Because of its enormous size, and the location, the only way to experience this piece is to be in it. When experiencing Double Negative Heizer wants the viewer to stand in one slot and look across to the other. By doing so it is only way that we can form a picture of the space in which we stand in.³⁰ Because Double Negative is meant to be physically entered, the participant becomes one with the sculpture. Heizer's Double Negative therefore depicts the interventions of the outer world with the body's internal being, taking up residence there and forming motivations and meanings.³¹

Another Earth Work by Heizer is Complex One/City.

Complex One/City stands in a flat desert valley in Nevada. Complex One is a long pyramidlike mound of rammed earth; it has a rectangular base and the long sides slant backward; the ends are squared off triangles of reinforced concrete, inflected by massive cantilevered concrete beams. It is forty metres long, thirty metres wide, and seven metres high. (Illustration 19.)

Heizer draws sources and inspirations for this piece from his interest in archaeological lore and his interest in ancient and primitive cultures. While his references are ancient, this piece is densely contemporary. Complex One is the "integration-disintegration-reintegration of parts in space, the assured fusion of painting, sculpture, and architecture ideas-all reflect an artist confidently manipulating what he knows about contemporary art."³²

Complex One is about art, not the landscape. Some association with landscape is unavoidable; the piece is site specific; situated in the flat Nevada desert. But the purpose of Heizer's work is to create art, not simply a statement about the landscape. When Heizer began Complex One/City he really had little or no desire to incorporate adjacent landscape into the piece. At the time, it was a possible site for an MX

missile base.

While Heizer's primary concern was art, the late Robert Smithson could not separate the art from the earth. Smithson, the most popular "Earth Artist" incorporated many aspects of his environment into his Environmental Art. First, Smithson's art was a reaction to the lack of physical being in Minimal and Conceptual Art. He also disliked the neatness and orderly elements of these art movements. His pieces required the viewer to become a participant. The fact that he could pile, stack, and actually get "dirty" while making art fascinated Smithson. Secondly, the idea of temporality and change due to the natural elements allowed him to photograph and film his work as a means of documentation and as a means of duration. Thirdly, he chose sites that lacked any form of beauty; he preferred disrupted, pulverized, and landscapes that revealed passages of time through episodes of human and natural upheavals. Lastly, Smithson's concern about entropy; the irreversibility of destruction. Smithson's designed jetties, stairs, walls, ramps, mounds, and islands are part of his entropic architecture, in which all order tends to disorder, in which decay is implicit in all growth, in which the future is the past.³³

Smithson's most known Earth Art is the Spiral Jetty. Spiral Jetty was created in the Great Salt Lake, Utah. Smithson was attracted to the Salt Lake for several reasons. One reason was the myth behind the Salt Lake by the early Mormon settlers. They believed that the lake was a freak of nature, bottomless, and connected to the Pacific Ocean by a vast hidden canal whose suction of currents caused whirlpools to form on the surface of the lake. Smithson incorporated the myth into his work by mirroring the whirlpools with the spiral. Another reason he chose the Great Salt Lake was because of the red and pink coloration of the water caused by a micro-organism. And the particular site on the lake was one of the few places where the water actually came up to the mainland. (Illustration 20.)

With all these factors in mind Smithson signed a lease and begun bringing in earth moving equipment. In 1970, 6,650 tons of earth was moved. The jetty is made of mud, salt crystals, rocks, and water. The actual size varied, roughly fifteen hundred feet long and fifteen feet wide according to where one viewed the piece. When a person walked out to the end of the Spiral Jetty, in keeping with Smithson's entropic philosophy he found nothing there.³⁴ Today, the Spiral

Jetty is completed submerged underneath the water.

Smithson's most complex piece, Broken Circle/ Spiral Hill (two part piece) was created in Emmen, Holland. Smithson once again chose a site that was not prime real estate. What intrigued Smithson about this site was that it had strange multicolored layerings of soil; caused by glacial movement. The Broken Circle part of the piece is almost a complete circle of land. A half-circle of the whole has been removed, leaving the outer edge to extend from the edge of the pond this piece of earth floats in. (Illustration 21.) In the center of the remaining whole half-circle stands a large boulder, which turned out to be one of the largest rocks in Holland, and is considered immovable.³⁵

Spiral Hill, the second part of this piece was created by bulldozers making a black cone shape hill made of earth with a white-sand path that cuts into the hill spiraling to the top.³⁶ (Illustration 22.) The hill is vertical where the circle below is horizontal and the hill is counterclockwise (winding back to the past) where the circle reads clockwise (moving into the future). The boulder therefore could be read possibly as an egg or a seed .

Amarillo Ramp, was the Land Art piece Smithson

was working on when he was killed. Smithson and the owner of the site, Stanely Marsh were both killed in a plane crash while flying over the site for Amarillo Ramp. Smithson's wife, Nancy Holt, also an Environmental artist, finished the piece according to Smithson's drawing specifications. Amarillo Ramp is 396 feet long, it's made of red shale and earth. Seen from above its a circle... as you climb it, it becomes a roadway. Like Smithson's Earth Art pieces, the viewer must participate; to move in, on, and through them. (Illustration 23.)

None of Smithson's pieces are located at "picturesque" sites, their all isolated, places of extremes of climates where, the sun changes constantly causing intense shadows and the haze of the heat of the sun seems to flatten the piece of art.³⁷ Indeed, Smithson's pieces do refer to the earth. While Smithson did move his share of earth, he did place one element against another element. Smithson wanted to say something about his interest in entropy, which, depending on the effectiveness of the piece, said something about nature.³⁸

Since, each of these "Earth Artists" wanted to say something about nature it was necessary for them to return to the land. While each had their own reason

to say something about nature, each had their reason for returning to the land. Fortunately there was a degree of diversity, intent, method, and product. They all did though, mark the landscape with their presences.

This presences was very personal and began the moment they chose the site for the piece of art. Regardless of the site choosing the art, or the art choosing the site, marks were made on the land. Alice Aycock, Dennis Oppenheim, and Walter De Maria all brought objects to the land with them. Richard Long chose to use natural objects he found in the land. Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson both, chose to move large amounts of land with machinery. The landscape offered these artist a means of freedom.

This freedom allowed these artists to make contact with their art. It became a passage, road, and a journey into their art. Emotions of the past and of time were seen. Present dreams and fears were explored: There was a relationship of man and nature formed. It was a coherent relationship between man and nature; a critical element of any progressive view of the future.

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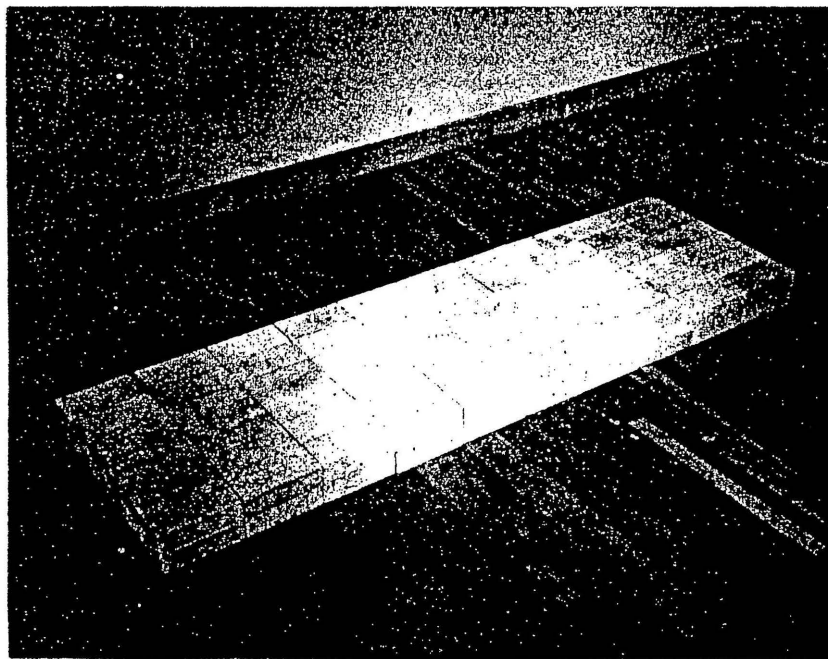
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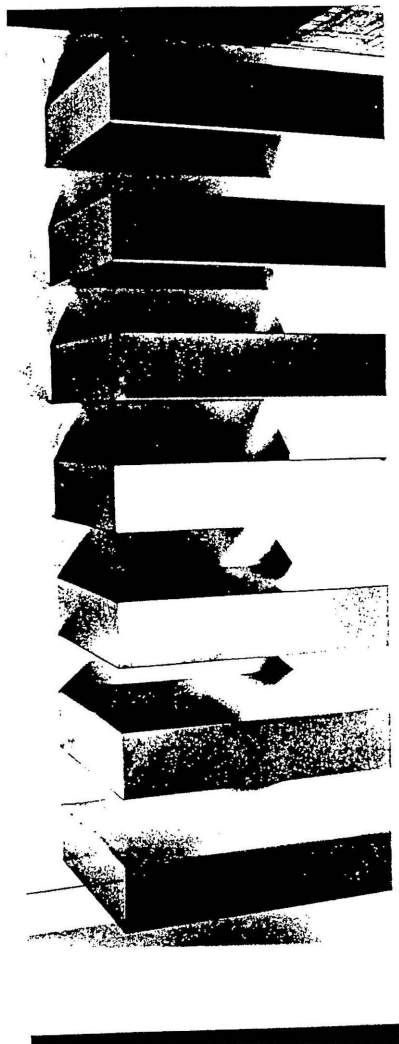
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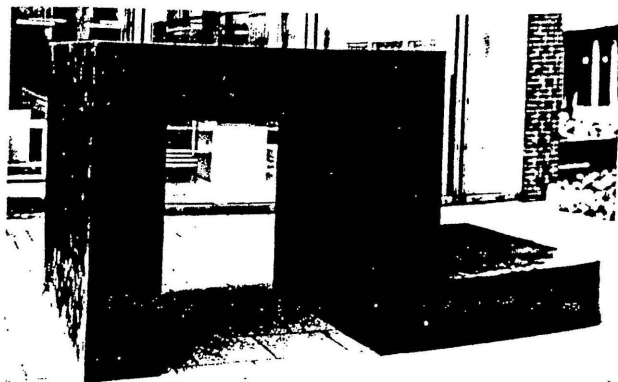
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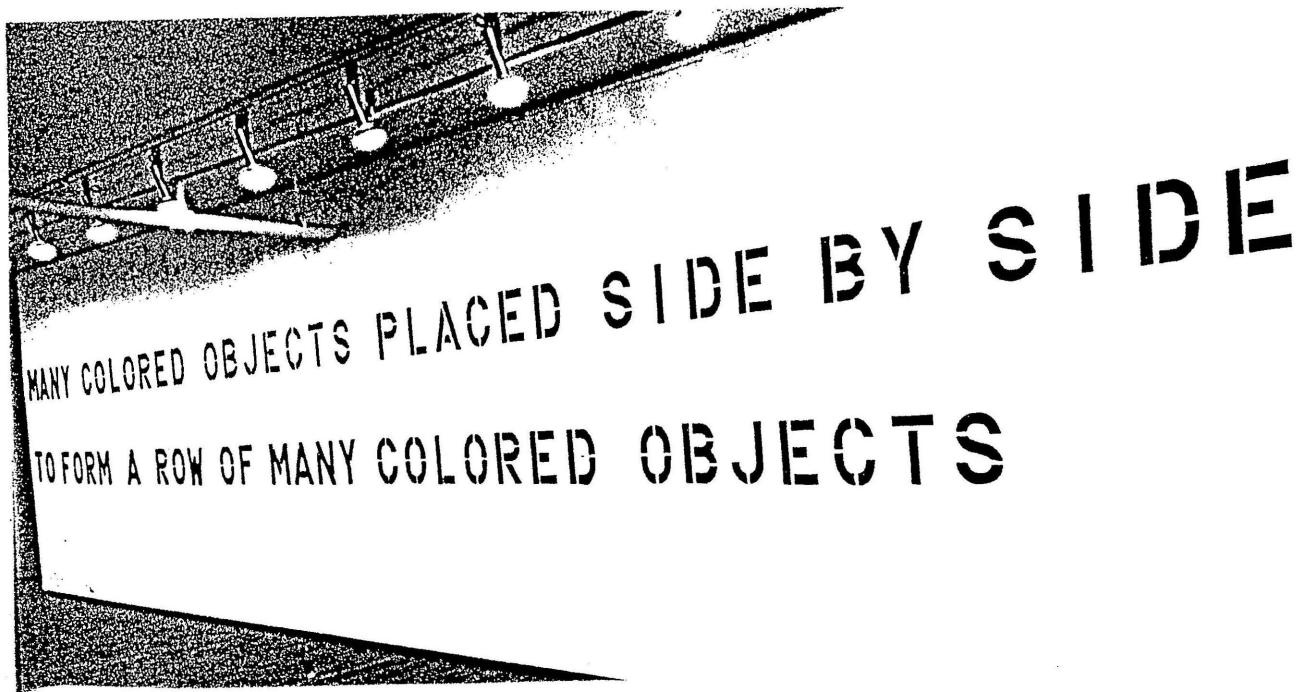
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2. Donald Judd. Untitled



3. Tony Smith. Playground

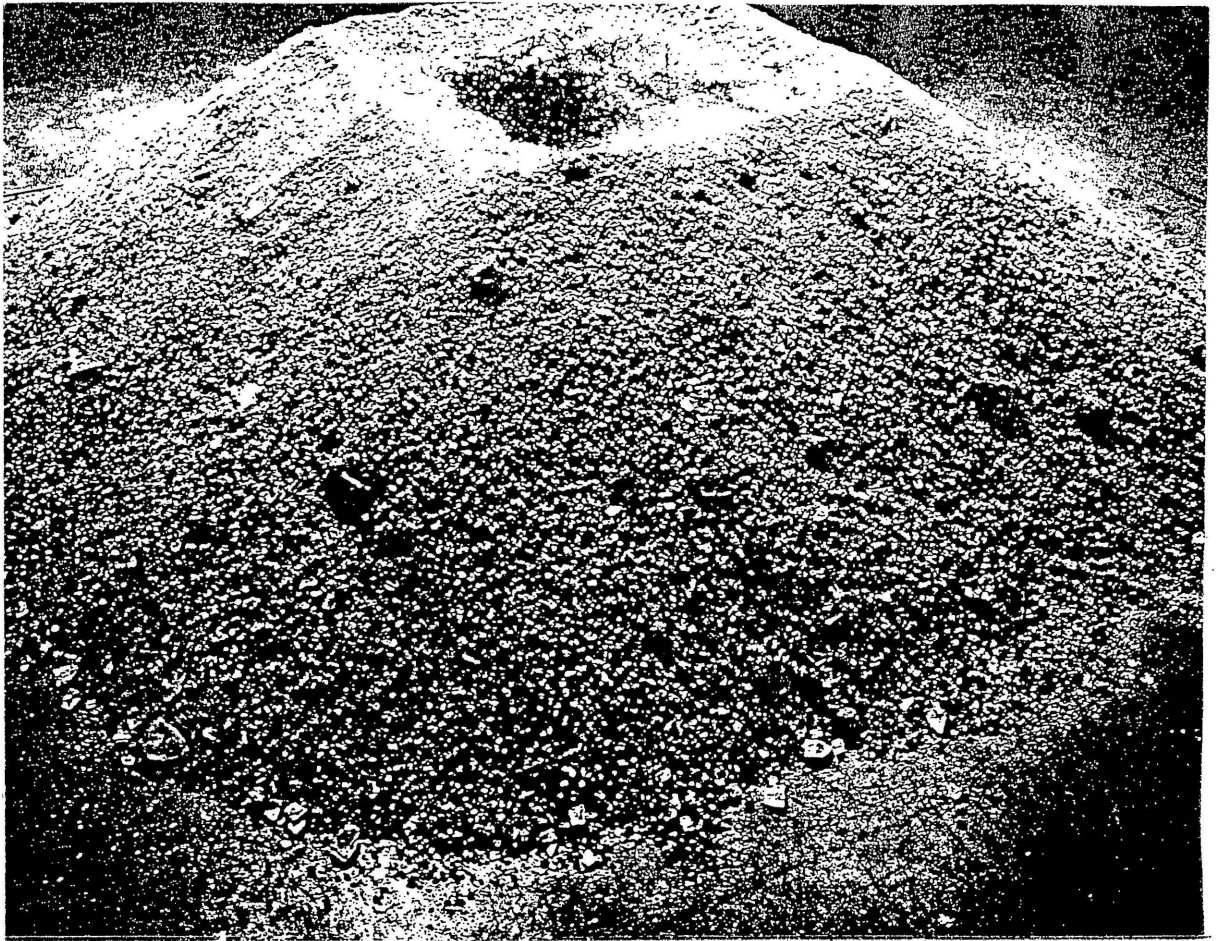


4. Lawrence Weiner. Many Colored Objects Placed Side by Side to Form a Row of Many Colored Objects
5. Dennis Oppenheim. Poison



G. Walker De Maria. The Broken Kilometer



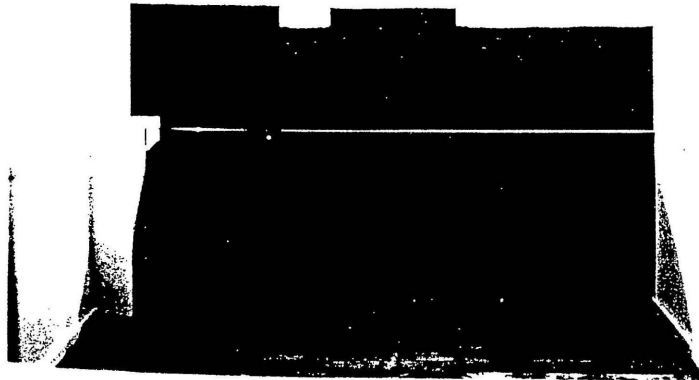


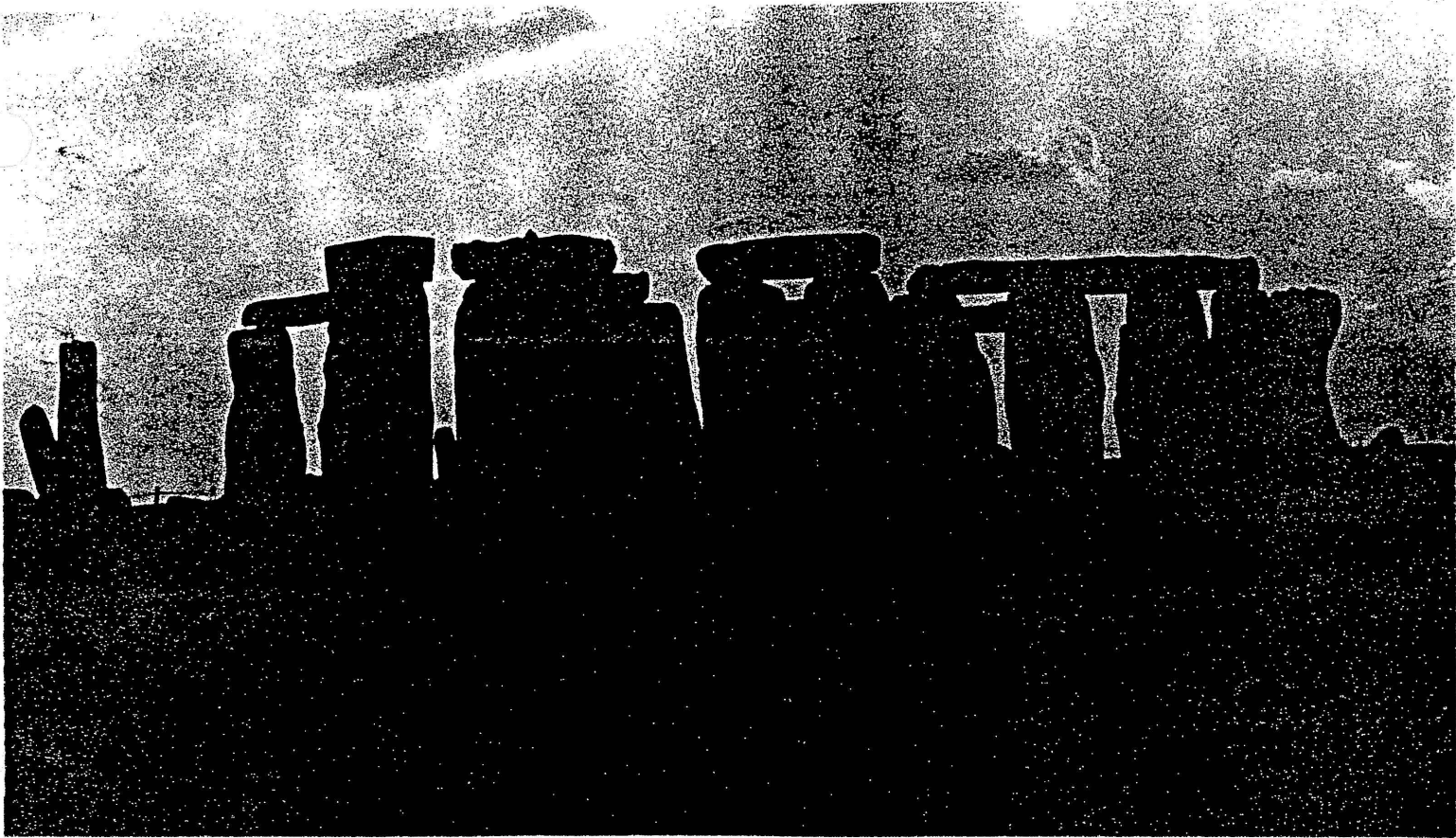
7. Robert Smithsonian.

Closed Misses Square

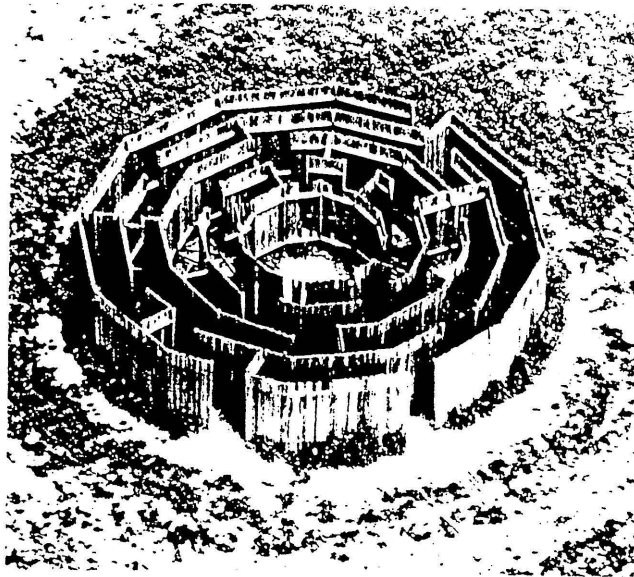
8. Walter De Maria.

The New York Earth Room

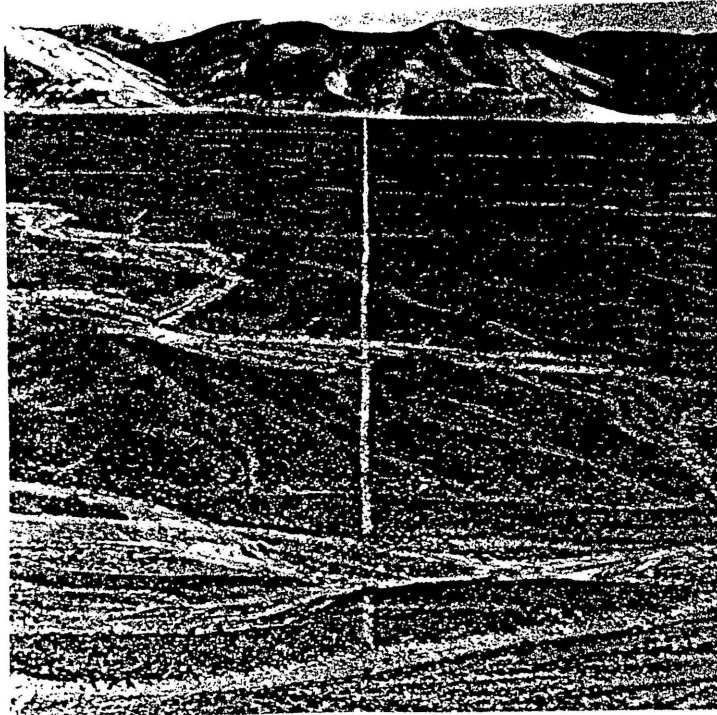




9. Stonehenge



10. Alice Ayrick Maze



11. Richard Long. Walking a Line in Peru



12. Richard Long. A line In Ireland



13. Richard Long. Circle in Africa

14. Richard Long. Circle in The Andes



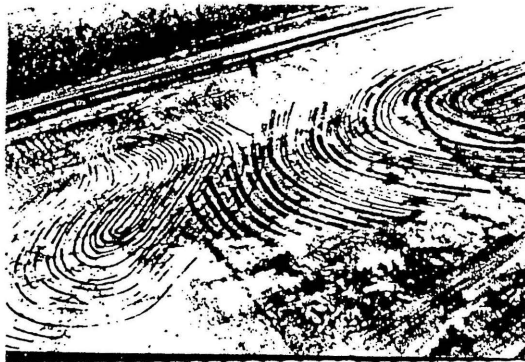


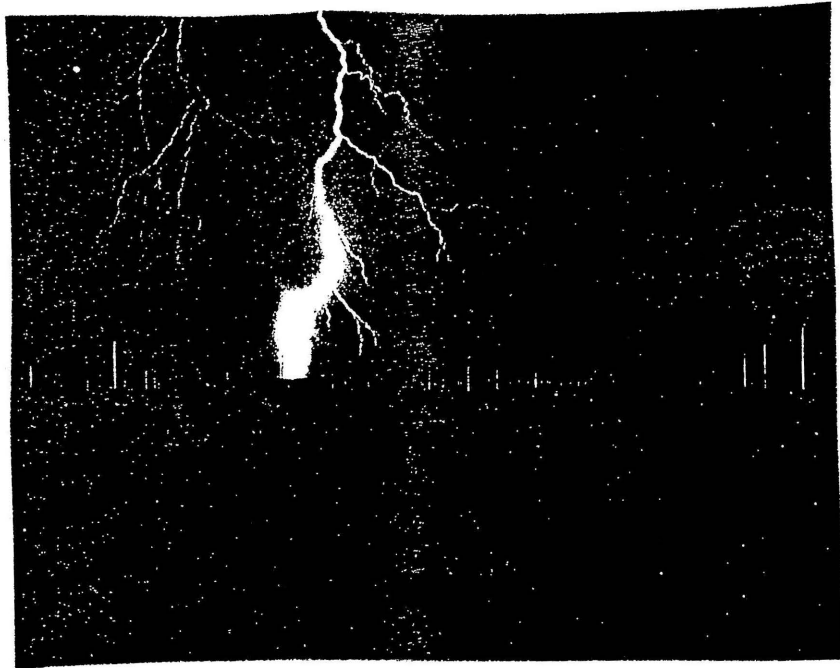
15. Dennis Oppenheim.

Rocked Hand

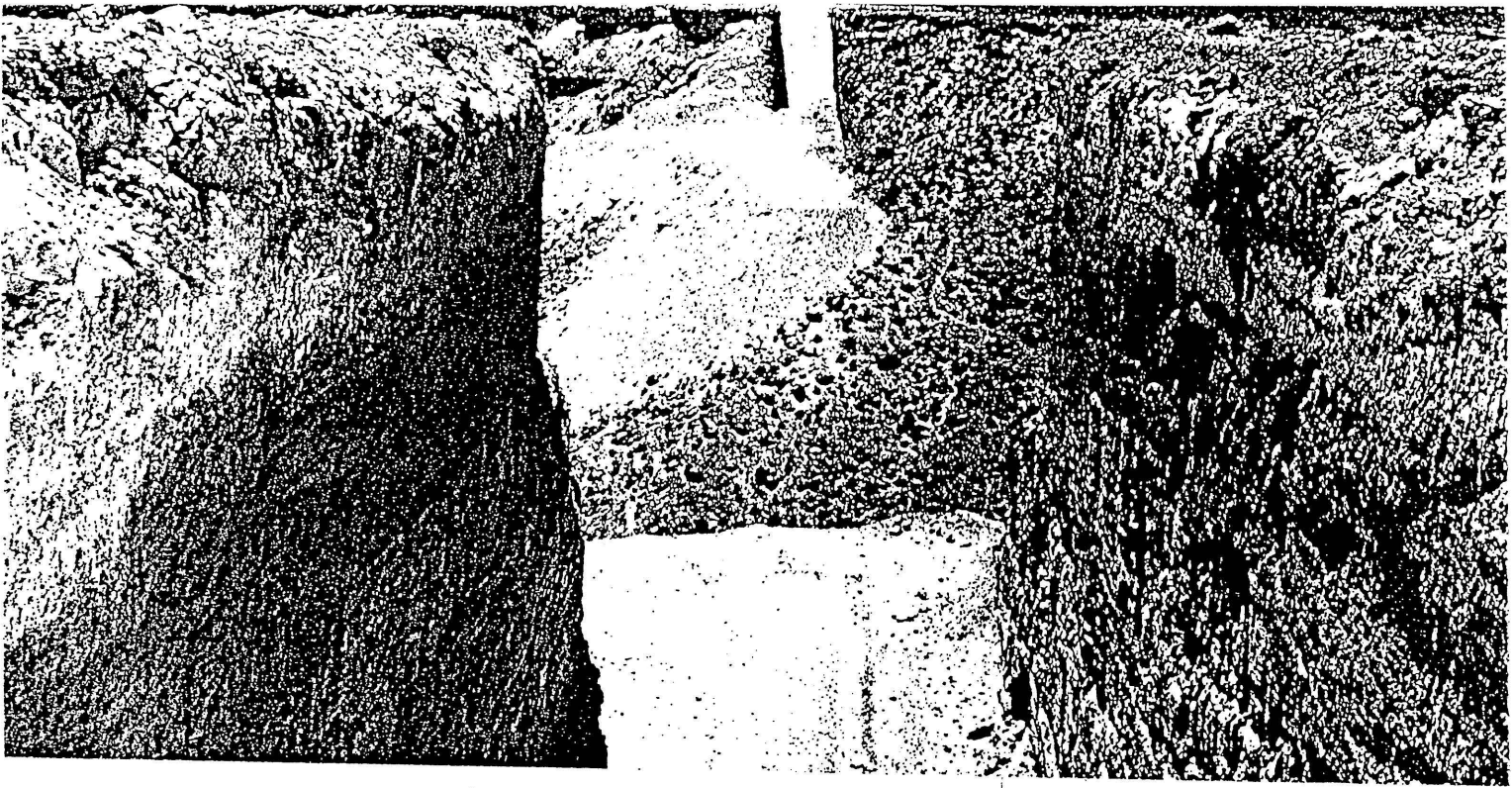
16. Dennis Oppenheim.

Identity Sketch



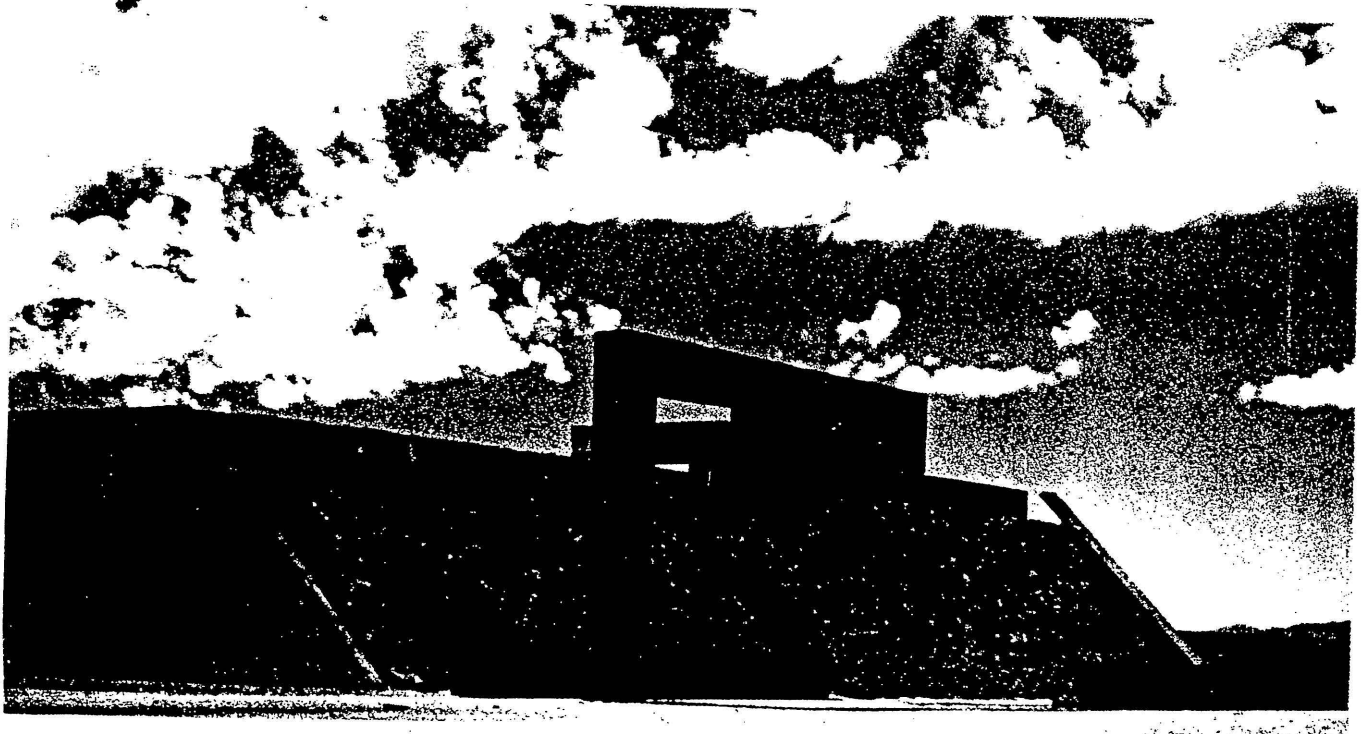


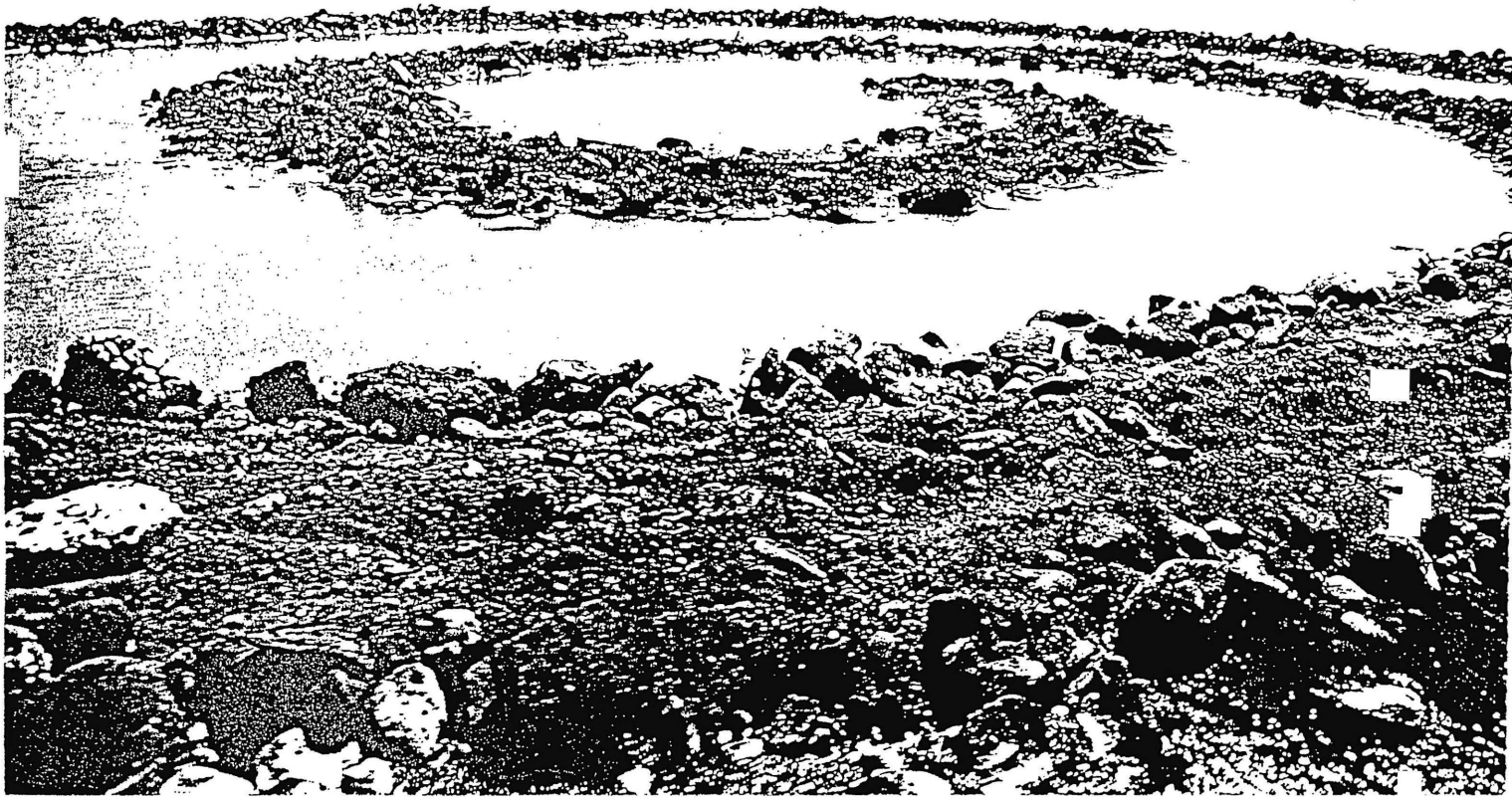
17. Walter De Maria Lightning Field



18. Michael Heizer .
19. Michael Heizer .

Double Negative
Complex one / City





20. Robert Smithson Spiral Jetty



21.- 22. Robert Smithson Broken Circle / Spiral Circle



23. Robert Smithson Amoskeag Dam