

Contemplations on Nature, Landscape and the Environment - On "In an Urbanized Wilderness"

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The title "In an Urbanized Wilderness" was taken from an essay by Robert Smithson about Frederic Law Olmsted, a landscape architect who designed Central Park in New York City. In contrast to Central Park, an artificially created natural environment in the city, Smithson describes Yosemite Valley, the epitome of the American wilderness, as an 'urbanized wilderness' with traces of human presence as a national park and camping site. According to Smithson, on the other hand, the land had been an urban blight before Olmsted landscaped Central Park in the 1850s.

Wilderness means untouched nature, but in the 21st century, pristine, without human involvement, wild nature probably does not exist anywhere on the planet. Nevertheless, when we talk about the natural environment, we tend to envisage something like this nowhere wilderness. On the other hand, we use the word wilderness as a place like once maintained but left to fall into disrepair, overgrown with weeds.

Wilderness away from the city has been mined, dammed, planted, ranched and farmed while sometimes becoming a recreational area for skiing, mountaineering, hiking and river trips. Wilderness and civilization, wilderness and urbanity are often seen as if they correspond to the picture of nature versus artificial. Still, as environmental ethicist Angelica Krebs points out, between polar contraries, 'pure nature' and 'pure artefact', there is a fuzzy boundary between 'nature' and 'artefact'. Moreover our world is surrounded by artificial (made by human beings) or cultivated nature and artefacts made from nature with varying degrees. If so, there is no such thing as wilderness (only an illusion), and there may be only more 'highly natural' wilderness and more 'highly artificial' cities. Alternatively, as Smithson has observed, a 'highly human-made' wilderness exists in between. In other words, wilderness is already a contradictory idea.

The western deserts, where American Earthworks were created, might fit the very image of wilderness. Indeed, the wilderness of the western frontier forms the American people's spiritual backbone. The image of the lone cowboy who tames wild nature must have been quite appealing to the young American artists who were searching for a new American art form. The open desert area, free of other artworks, the physical conditions of the gallery's interior environment, walls and ceilings, and the absence of buildings around it, could have been an ideal space for their work.

The 1960s, when Earthworks began to be produced, was when diverse expressions of contemporary art emerged at once, forming many new genres. In the United States, in particular, artists were at an impasse with the autonomy of art demanded by formalism,

and they pushed forward with the development of materials traditionally considered unsuitable for art. Earth was the material that caught their attention.

Earthworks are large-scale works of art created in the landscape, often in remote locations. Earthworks constructed in wilderness areas of the western deserts involve extensive earthworks using dynamite and bulldozers. The artists who created Earthworks probably started calling them so because of the combination of the words earthwork and earth (soil or dirt) work. Therefore, it is often also referred to as earth art.

In one of the earliest Earthworks exhibitions at Cornell University in 1969, various types of earth, sand and stones were brought into the gallery, making it a construction site farthest from art materials. It was similar to, for example, Arte Povera or Mono-ha, where exhibited materials such as earth and stone in their original state without any processing. For instance, Michael Heizer placed the gigantic granite rock for his *displaced/replaced mass* (1969) into a concrete-covered depression in the Silver Spring Desert in Nevada. The relationship with the surrounding landscape is not particularly emphasized, however. The empty space around the work serves as a stage, so to speak, for the raw materials to stand out.

On the other hand, British Land Art works depend on the landscape in which they are placed or created. The typical British landscape of green meadows where sheep graze is a landscape created over a long time by clearing forests and is far from the pristine wilderness. Unlike the USA, the UK does not have a large land area, and its landscape has already been artificially altered by land clearing and enclosure for dairy and sheep farming. So it is undesirable to impose another human-made form on the landscape from the outset, and how to relate to the current landscape is more important.

Perhaps this is why, in fact, in the UK and Europe, there is a tendency not to call it Earthworks but, in a broader context, to call it Land Art from the genealogy of the landscape tradition. Nevertheless, the terms Earthworks and Land Art are not distinct, and both are often used for the same artistic trend. However, Earthworks are still primarily used to refer exclusively to large-scale works produced in the USA in the late 60s and early 70s. On the other hand, Land Art is slightly broader and often includes contemporary environmental art with an ecological focus.

"In an Urbanized Wilderness" exhibits environmental artworks by two Japanese contemporary artists, Taisuke Makihara and Hatsune Katayama, created in the vicinity of a mountain villa in Minami-Aiki Village, Minami-Saku County, Nagano Prefecture. Minami-Aiki Village is a mountain village located on a plateau at an average altitude of 1,000m. More than 80% of the 66.05 km² is covered with mountain forests and wilderness. The Minami-Aiki River flows from Mt. Takamagahara at the eastern end of the

village, which stretches long and narrow from east to west, through the Minami-Aiki Dam, and crosses almost the entire village in a west-northwest direction, eventually joining the Chikuma River. The villa is situated in a larch forest planted at equal intervals at an altitude of 1,200m, gently climbing up the road along the river that branches off from Prefectural Road No. 2, which runs alongside the river, and then climbing a little higher at a steep angle along a forest track alongside the road. The murmur of the mountain stream and the various kinds of bird songs can be heard constantly. There are also some marks of deer and other 'satoyama' creatures left. Its location, a three-hour drive from Tokyo, is in a kind of ideal natural landscape where city dwellers can temporarily stay away from the hustle and bustle of the city, experience the beauty and energy of nature and become a healing place for physical and spiritual renewal. There is at least a more affluent 'nature' there, inhabited by a greater variety of species of plants and animals than in the city. The works are located on the grounds of the mountain villa and along the paths around its perimeter.

Hatsune Katayama's *Wood deck* is new construction the same size as the mountain villa balcony in a larch grove on the site. The villa balcony provides a clear view of the natural landscape with the larch-grown slope and the babbling brook below it. Landscapes are a part of nature aesthetically looked at that require the viewer's gaze as the subject. As the landscape experience from the balcony typifies, it assumes a one-directional gaze towards a distant mountain over the larch trees, with one's back to the building. The *Wood deck* is detached from the villa and transformed into an autonomous wooden deck on the ground. It seems like a spaceship landed on the Earth. Standing on the *deck*, the branches of the larch tree invade us unobtrusively, placing us undeniably inside nature (the natural environment). Because the *deck* removes the constraints of the line of sight, we can experience no longer the landscape, but the environment of the place, which is open to 360 degrees. It is not a privileged place for humans but an artificial ground that does not exclude all the plants and animals that inhabit it but allows them to lightly intrude from nature while enabling an equivalent, non-anthropocentric perspective.

Taisuke Makihara's *Raw stones* is dotted around the *Wood deck*. Natural stones of various sizes, an artificial boundary marker and a concrete block were all originally there. There are several mines where limestone and granite are mined near the villa. The village of Minami-Aiki is in the Mesozoic - Paleozoic layer (Chichibu Belt) of the Kanto Mountains. It is a source of stones such as garnet, pyrite, magnetite, calcite, quartz and marble, used for mineral specimens and ornamental garden stones. Makihara carefully washed each stone in a high-pressure washer, and the soil and mosses grown on them

over time were removed, leaving the stones bare, so to speak, of their existence. Their surface reveals a geological time that is perhaps millions or even billions of times longer than when the stone was there.

01 Raw stone is a partially exposed stone at the entrance to the villa. It has a complex structure that shows the time after the stone came to be there. Along the line of the villa's shadow cast over it at certain times of the day, natural humus and moss accumulated from the leaves of the trees and plants growing on top of them were left. The stones of various sizes and shapes scattered around the garden and leading to the road may look like Japanese garden stones. However, they are very different from them and are not there as a reference to anything, but they quietly expose the stones' presence.

Two artefacts, *04 Raw stone*, a concrete boundary pile, and *08 Raw stone*, a U-shaped ditch with weathered surfaces, have been washed away. Revealing the gravels and crushed stones contained within back to the surface and echoing the asphalt paved road nearby, they exposed the mixture of the natural and the artificial time. To introduce geological elements with hundreds of millions of years, far beyond human time, into their art was also inevitable for American Earthwork artists. They confronted the length of European history, incorporated wilderness as their subject matter and struggled to create their art with soil and rock. Unlike them, however, Makihara does not use large-scale heavy machinery to move rocks. Instead, he lets them stand out, just as they are. Leaving the villa and walking along a forest track, we come across the *12 Raw stone* in a slightly open area. The majesty of this enormous rock, 4 m high, 6.5 m wide and 4.1 m long, quietly but firmly overwhelms us. Its shape is reminiscent of Heizer's work. However, at the same time, it also reminds us of British land art, which involves walking through the landscape by incorporating the gently ascending woodland path to the work and the surrounding larch forest landscape. A sign on the site of the work indicates that it is a model larch forest thinning site, which conveys that the trees in this forest are maintained and 'artificial'. The word 'wilderness' in the title of this exhibition, from its etymology, means a place inhabited by wildlife and forested land, and the site of the work contains elements that could be called wildlife-inhabited and forested land. However, it is not pristine nature; as already mentioned, such pristine nature does not exist in reality today. To what extent is it natural, and to what extent is it human-made? In a contemporary environment where the natural and the artificial are intricately intertwined, the 12 site-specific works in "In the Urbanized Wilderness" are an effective device to lead us into diverse contemplations on nature, landscape and the environment.

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