

Ephemeral Nature of Environmental Art: Collision of Permanence and Value

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What does it mean for art to be permanent? In the world of art history, conservation practices stand as their own discipline as artworks change and weather due to the passage of time. More times than not, those indications of time are attempted to be erased to keep works as pristine as possible making “permanence as the utmost signifier of an object’s historical significance.”¹ In these cases, the ability to defy impermanence becomes an indicator of value. Environmental works that use natural materials or live outdoors are exposed to factors that “impact the possibility of permanence in ways that have little to do with an artist’s creative vision or the strength and importance of their work.”² When land artists have certain intentions for the lasting of their artwork, there will be qualities of the piece that are lost as it is preserved. If significance is indicated by the lasting qualities of an object, environmental works are inherently at a disadvantage.

The aspect of moving parts and natural materials of environmental art are important to the discipline, as having a connection to the environment is fundamental. In some cases, artists let their works intentionally decay, leaning into the ephemeral qualities that institutions try to deter from. Other times, the element of putrefaction is considered, but not an intentional aspect of the work, so it is up to the museums and galleries to protect their installations from the deterioration of the art. Within this spectrum of wanted and unwanted decay, there is also a spectrum of artists whose intentions are fulfilled versus neglected. Beverly Buchanan’s *Marsh Ruins* have successfully been ruined over time where Mary Miss is currently in a legal battle to save her outdoor installation *Greenwood Pond: Double Site*. Walter de Maria’s *Earth Room* falls in the middle, as the foundation which holds the work has made efforts to preserve it while attempting to protect the earth sculpture. In each example, the institution, or lack thereof, plays

¹Jana La. Brasca, “The Paradox of Permanence.” *Public Art Dialogue* 14, no. 1 (2024): 62.

²Brasca, “The Paradox of Permanence.” 62.

an important role with how these artworks have been perceived and determining what their legacy will be.

This paper will explore the qualities of the environment that make environmental works ephemeral, how their lifespan plays a role in their presentation, and how preservation practices that were put in place affected their impermanence. Acts of preservation can cost a lot of money and institutions' relationship with capital has the ability to affect how they approach artworks, regardless of what is necessary to fulfill the mission of the artist. Institutions have consistently shown that they have a difficult time balancing capital and the idea of permanence within environmental art. In many cases, it most often results in the artist's intentions being overridden.

The environmental art movement began in the early 1960s, parallel to the rising political atmosphere and awareness. There began to be a growing concern with the state of the planet as air pollution, nuclear testing, and leaded gasoline became political talking points. The Clean Air Act was enacted in 1963 and America's first Earth Day was instituted in 1970.³ With this emergence of a more ecological thought, art stimulating ideas of nature and the earth rose in popularity. An environmental artist is defined as someone who makes a statement towards the relationship between man and nature.⁴ Land art is a subset of environmental art when the site itself is used in a collaborative way.⁵ It was around this time that conceptual art and the minimalist movement were becoming popularized, so many environmental artists had freedom to explore more unconventional ideas in their work. Minimalism plays a large role in the aesthetic of environmental art in their use of abstract and nonrepresentational forms. The curator of the Groundswell: Women of Land Art exhibition, Leigh A. Arnold, wrote about how land artists

³ Leigh A. Arnold, "Exceeding the Field of Vision" In *Groundswell: Women of Land Art*, (New York: Nasher Sculpture Center, 2023), 19.

⁴ Alan Sonfist, "Introduction" In *Art in the Land*, (New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1983) xi-xii.

⁵ Arnold, "Exceeding the Field of Vision," 14.

“placed less emphasis on the appearance of the discrete object and turned their attention to the encounter with the artwork - however fleeting or permanent that might be.”⁶

Author Alan Sonfist writes about the spectrum of land art in the introduction to the book *Art in the Land*. On one end, land art can be driven by monumentality, labeling them as industrial ‘wide open spaces’ and earthmoving.⁷ Artists like Richard Serra and Michael Heizer live in this category as their works are large and architectural in style. These works could potentially stand on their own when taken out of the site’s context for it is unrestricted to the physical land. The other end of this spectrum are works that have a sense of cooperation with the land, sensitive to the site they were built around. These works have a sense of awareness to the threat of environmental destruction and call to stimulate ideas of ecology between man and nature. Artists like Robert Smithson with his work *Spiral Jetty* (fig. 1), made in 1970, utilizes the earth as the medium, taking the temporality into account.⁸

Environmental art is a lesser known artform due to it being more difficult to exist in a traditional gallery space. Nature has been separated from the metropolitan life over time and the average museum goer may be interested in seeing paintings or sculptures - the items that have been praised throughout the canon of art history. Art museums typically have a mission to conserve historical artifacts as markers of history as societal evidence of human interests through time. Those types of objects are easy to sell, buy, and lend, making them appealing to institutions as they are easily moveable. Site specific land art does not fall under this category. If it is not easily recreated or built on the grounds of the institution, environmental works are not typically part of permanent collections. As environmental art often lives in unconventional spaces, has the

⁶Arnold, “Exceeding the Field of Vision,” 14.

⁷Sonfist, “Introduction” xi-xii.

⁸ "Robert Smithson: Spiral Jetty." *Dia Art Foundation*,
<https://www.diaart.org/visit/visit-our-locations-sites/robert-smithson-spiral-jetty>.

potential to be monumental in size, and is reliant on the viewer to create context from their experience, it can be difficult for typical gallery spaces to house these works.

Capturing land art between four white walls is difficult, but not impossible. Walter de Maria, a pioneering American land artist (b. 1935-2013), set out to capture concepts related to the land within the space of a Manhattan gallery. The New York *Earth Room* (fig. 2) is minimalist in nature as it only consists of 222 cubic yards of soil (peat and bark), 3,600 square feet of floor space, and an average depth of 21 inches of material. The New York room is the third iteration of the work, as it was first created in 1968 for the Heiner Friedrich Gallery in Munich and again in 1974 at the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, Germany. It was finally brought to the Dia Art Foundation, located on 141 Wooster Street in Manhattan, New York, in 1977 and became a permanent part of the collection in 1980.⁹ Although it is an indoor installation, the medium ties it to the land as an ‘earth’ sculpture, referred to as ‘ephemeral’ and minimal.

The poster release for the original installation at the Heiner Friedrich Gallery referenced the room as: PURE DIRT · PURE EARTH · PURE LAND · NOTHING GROWING ON IT · NOTHING GROWING IN IT.¹⁰ As the soil and ‘earth’ is revealed to the air, moisture, mold, and mushrooms have made their way to the surface. In order to mitigate the unwanted outgrowths, the Dia Foundation added an HVAC central air unit as of October 2023, which also removes any odor that will make the viewing experience more comfortable for guests and staff. Maria didn’t make any note of how to maintain the piece as “questions of maintenance were distracting.”¹¹ In

⁹Jeffrey Weiss, “The Principle of Impermanence” *Artforum*, October 2023, <https://www.artforum.com/features/jeffrey-weiss-preservation-walter-de-marias-earth-room-512524/>.

¹⁰Weiss, "The Principle of Impermanence"

¹¹ Weiss, "The Principle of Impermanence"

adding the HVAC unit, the foundation is staying true to keeping things from growing in the room. However, the environment of the room has changed completely: how the soil interacts with the air, the sound of the room, and how visitors feel entering the space. Without the moisture, the air has become thinner and the soil has lost the smell of the earth that would once strike the viewer as soon as they walked into the room.¹² The work was intended to be “pure dirt” and in its ‘preservation’, the ethos of the piece has been changed entirely, becoming a sterile version of what it once was. There is a paradox within the idea of permanence: “renewal is a means of longevity... but acts of preservation and renewal often lead to consequences of loss.”¹³ Here the act of preservation may have increased the longevity of the room, but in taking away the ephemeral qualities of environmental art, one takes away the characteristics of the environment itself.

The ideal case of the longevity to intentionality relationship lives in the work of female land artist Beverly Buchanan. Buchanan was born October 8, 1940, in Fuquay, North Carolina and became interested in land works in the late 1970s.¹⁴ She was fascinated with the intertwining of the ecological and situational contexts, for “there is no way to experience them without also having to deal with their surrounding conditions - conditions which are elemental and ecological as well as sociohistorical.”¹⁵ Off highway 17 on the coast of Georgia are the Marshes of Glynn in Brunswick and it is here that 3 mounds of ‘tabby’ concrete - a mixture of sand, lime, and oyster shells - also known as *Marsh Ruins* (fig. 3), were placed by Buchanan in 1981. There is no clear declaration of their presence, just a small mound of cement a few meters from the stones with the

¹²Weiss, "The Principle of Impermanence"

¹³Weiss, "The Principle of Impermanence"

¹⁴Brasca, Jana La. “Artist Biographies.” In *Groundswell: Women of Land Art*, (New York: Nasher Sculpture Center, 2023), 241

¹⁵Amelia Groom, *Beverly Buchanan: Marsh Ruins* (Cambridge: Afterall Publishing, 2021), 37

artist's inscription (including the name, date, and title) carved into it (fig. 4). At first glance, the stones look like a typical geologic form, weathered by the elements and time, as if it had always been there. Buchanan referred to stones as 'environmental sculpture' and "implied a foregrounding of material vulnerability," for the natural material placed in the biodiverse landscape subjected the stones to a lot of instability.¹⁶ The wetlands themselves have an average tidal range of six to eight feet. In being submerged by the tide everyday, as well as exposure to sun, heat, weather, wildlife, vegetation growth, and more, these created rocks have been through a lot. The word 'ruins' directly in the name invites the processes of exposure and decay.

There is no institution or gallery trying to interfere with *Marsh Ruin's* longevity. In 1980, Buchanan wrote to her friend Lucy Lippard saying, "I don't want to be part of a tourist attraction syndrome."¹⁷ *Marsh Ruins* is not an obvious destination, there was no publication, and it blends in very well with the environment around it. By removing conventional practices, they are able to exist without any external implications. Buchanan was more interested in the social-historical elements of the site and made it a goal to connect the land with the work itself. Firstly, to make the material tabby, she used locally sourced oyster shells to include the physical properties of the marshlands into the work. Tabby speaks to the colonial history of the site, as it was a material historically made by enslaved Africans during the 19th century. It was used as bricks for construction, housing, and to make indigo dye vats. The coastal Gullah-Geechee communities also used the material to mark graves.¹⁸ As a marker of death, the fate of the piece is represented in the material.

¹⁶Groom, *Beverly Buchanan: Marsh Ruins*, 16.

¹⁷Groom, *Beverly Buchanan: Marsh Ruins*, 17.

¹⁸ Siddhartha Mitter, "A Vanishing Masterpiece in the Georgia Marshes" *The New York Times*, July 29, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/29/arts/design/beverly-buchanan-land-art-georgia.html>.

The Latin *ruina* means ‘fallen’ “but Buchanan’s ruins have never pointed to a former state of upright wholeness; they began at the outset as incomplete remnants.”¹⁹ Buchanan included the word ‘ruins’ in many of her works because to be a ruin means that there needs to be a level of persistence in contrast with loss and decay. Her pieces are still standing, in spite of being a site of ruins. The stones will continue to weather and break down, ultimately eroding into the earth completely, but the imprint of their presence in that spot will be everlasting.

To place value and permanence together is a slippery slope, especially when it comes to land art. Not completely accounting for maintenance can create a dark path when looking for immunity. Unfortunately for artist Mary Miss, she has been on this dark path which has turned into a legal battle attempting to save one of her prized installations. Miss is another pioneering land artist, born May 27, 1944, who started her career in the 1960s with outdoor sculptures made of wood, fabric, rope, and other materials, making a point to utilize the space as an aspect of the work.²⁰ Moving forward, Miss has created interactive installations that call on the practice of ecological thinking. Many of her works draw attention to the relationship between the environment and the built world around it.

Looking to “redefine” and “expose” this relationship, Miss utilizes the viewer's experience to shape the meaning of the work as they move through the installations and accumulate sensory information over time.²¹²² From 1989 to 1996, Miss was commissioned by the Des Moines Art Center to create a permanent outdoor installation for their collection. At this time, the DMAC was interested in exploring sculpture outside of the “white-cube gallery space”

¹⁹ Groom, *Beverly Buchanan: Marsh Ruins*, 59.

²⁰ "Early Work," *Mary Miss* <http://marymiss.com/types/early-work/>.

²¹ Mary Miss, “The History Gap,” unpublished manuscript, May 2008

²² “Greenwood Pond: Double Site” *Mary Miss*.

<http://marymiss.com/projects/greenwood-pond-double-site/>

and wanted to develop a site-specific work.²³ *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* (fig. 5) is a 6.5 acre layered environment of wetlands and wooden paths, hence the name, *Double Site*. As Miss describes the location on her website, she mentions how “movement is key to the experience of this project,” and the amalgamation of structures reiterates that.²⁴ A walking path overhangs the edge of the water, and the ramp heading into the pond dips down below the surface once reaching the center. The line of the ramp continues across the water as the wood pilings stick out to emulate the edge of the ramp. Coming in from the other side of the pond, also in line with the wood pilings, a large concrete-lined trough with a bench cuts into the water with the top edge directly in line with the surface (fig. 6). Surrounding the pond includes a covered walkway and a pavilion built up against the curving landscape. Aside from the physical layering of the site, Miss added a non-physical third layer by working with local groups such as the Founders Garden Club, the Des Moines Parks Department and the Des Moines Science Center.²⁵ These groups and their contribution add an importance to the park that is created by invoking the built memories the immediate neighborhood already holds within this site. As the visitor moves through the space, they are able to build their own understanding of how the elements interact with each other.

The entire built environment is made up of cement, steel, and wood, all of which will breakdown over time as they are exposed to outdoor conditions. It was clear to Miss that the wood that makes up the majority of the installation has a lifespan of around 10 years and would need to be replaced accordingly, just as the wood on a backyard deck would need to be

²³ Julia Halperin, “A Leading Land Art Installation Is Imperiled. By Its Patron,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/22/arts/design/mary-miss-land-art-des-moines-museum.html>.

²⁴ “Greenwood Pond: Double Site”

²⁵ “Greenwood Pond: Double Site”

upgraded.²⁶ As a permanent part of the collection, the DMAC has agreed to the maintenance and upkeep of *Double Site* to ensure the condition of the installation. Miss says they were given \$500,000 in 2015 to make any necessary repairs, however there has been a lot of neglect in this area.²⁷ The wood is deteriorating so the walkways on the water are no longer safe to use (fig. 7). The DMAC has closed the site indefinitely as they “conduct a structural review.”²⁸ There currently has been a lot of talk about the dismantling of *Double Site*, as it would cost \$2.7 million to repair. Miss herself thinks this is a ridiculous number and has offered her own solutions regarding increasing the lifespan of her work like slowly replacing the wood in order to work on it over time.²⁹ Despite her suggestion, the DMAC is claiming that they will break down the site instead of repairing it.

Miss wants *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* to stay standing, as there has been a lot of thought surrounding the specific site in the making of the installation. Almost all of her previous works that have been done to this scale or in this ecological manner have been temporary; having an environmental land art in a permanent collection is no small feat. Other land artists and architects have spoken out about how the DMAC’s decision speaks to a larger issue regarding the undervaluing of environmental art.³⁰ Miss has dedicated much of her career towards advocating for feminist artists and education about climate change, two topics that have time and time again been swept under the rug. Miss has spoken about the struggle of feeling ‘erased’ and the irony of

²⁶Halperin, “A Leading Land Art Installation Is Imperiled. By Its Patron,”

²⁷ “Artist Mary Miss on the Des Moines Art Center’s decision to raze her most significant installation” The Cultural Landscape Foundation, February 8, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_PvkTLTBww

²⁸ “Acclaimed Artist Mary Miss’ Renowned Land Art Installation at Greenwood Pond Double Site to Be Torn Down.” *The Cultural Landscape Foundation*, January 16, 2024. <https://www.tclf.org/acclaimed-artist-mary-miss-renowned-land-art-installation-greenwood-pond-double-site-be-torn-down>.

²⁹Halperin, “A Leading Land Art Installation Is Imperiled. By Its Patron,”

³⁰Halperin, “A Leading Land Art Installation Is Imperiled. By Its Patron,”

her frequent acknowledgments, as she was recently featured in the *Groundswell: Women of Land Art* exhibition just to be pushed to the side again.³¹

Miss was “shocked” by the art center’s decision to take down the work, a decision that was made without her input.³² Recently in April, 2024, Miss filed a lawsuit in the state of Iowa to prevent the museum from demoing the work, and the construction was paused by a federal judge.³³ She filed under the claim that the DMAC did not honor the contract they agreed on which stated that the *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* could not be altered, modified, or changed without her permission. The museum claims that the main issue is a safety one but the city has made no comment about the site as a safety hazard. In their response, the DMAC stated that the installation's “ephemeral nature” is a part of the works aesthetic which is the exact reason for its planned demolition.³⁴ This answer seems like a cop-out, as it was their lack of upkeep that led to the \$2.7 million situation. It feels as if a double standard for environmental art is being created, one that calls for permanence but is unwilling to give it. Overall, this poses an interesting question: should art that has the ability to decay be left to do so?

Land art has a history of being temporary, or at least changing over time due to the nature of putting objects in uncontrolled environments. In the eyes of the DMAC, Mary Miss is asking for something unreasonable by asking for her land art piece to be permanent. In the eyes of Mary

³¹Halperin, “A Leading Land Art Installation Is Imperiled. By Its Patron,”

³²“Artist Mary Miss on the Des Moines Art Center’s decision to raze her most significant installation” The Cultural Landscape Foundation, February 8, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_PvkTLTBww

³³ Adam Schrader, "Demolition of Mary Miss's Des Moines Installation Temporarily Paused." *Artnet News*, April 9, 2024, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/mary-miss-greenwood-pond-des-moines-restraining-order-2466495#:~:text=Law%20%26%20Politics-,Demolition%20of%20Mary%20Miss's%20Des%20Moines%20Installation%20Temporarily%20Paused,courtesy%20the%20Cultural%20Landscape%20Foundation.>

³⁴Schrader, "Demolition of Mary Miss's Des Moines Installation Temporarily Paused."

Miss, however, the issue is not whether *Double Site* should or shouldn't be permanent, but the neglect of upkeep from the DMAC that could have been a factor in making her work last indefinitely. Author Patricia C. Phillips in her article *Temporality and Public Art* writes, "Immunity is valued by society; self contradicting longing that this fresh spontaneity to be protected, made invulnerable to time, in order to assume its place as historical artifact and as concrete evidence of a period's passions and priorities."³⁵ This quote emphasizes the power that institutions have and how they are able to decide how a piece of art in their possession evolves over time. Ultimately, it comes down to money and whether they are willing to pay it, and it seems that the DMAC is calling on the impermanence of environmental art to get out of repairing the work. If there is value in permanence, the DMAC is effectively declaring *Double Site* as disposable. The main reason this case has become so controversial is because the artist herself is speaking out against the decision. When artists are still alive, how much do they get a say over work that is not technically in their hands?

Difficult questions have difficult answers and it is not this paper's purpose to solve all of the problems that exist in the world of environmental art history. However, the questions asked here raise awareness to the obstacles that arise when value clashes with permanence. For anything to be immune to the tribulations of time, people have to be willing to spend time and money on the preservation. In these case studies, the only work that fulfilled its mission was the resilient *Marsh Ruins* where there was no interference from external sources hindering the goal; the decay of their physicality has not stopped their presence within the art world. Walter de Maria's *Earth Room* and Mary Miss's *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* are both at risk for the loss of their environmental qualities. In this lasting battle for permanence, it is important to not dilute the reasons the artists made these works, and that is to connect a greater audience with their

³⁵Patricia C. Phillips, "Temporality and Public Art," *Art Journal* 48, no. 4 (1989)

environment to ensure they notice the world around them. It is easy to forget that everything is ecological and nature is not something we built around, it's everywhere. Art history has created a timeline that is obsessed with perfection but anything organic will age and change over time and sometimes it's okay to let things decay.

Appendix



Fig. 1

Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*
(1970), 2019. © Holt/Smithson
Foundation and Dia Art



Fig. 2

Walter De Maria, *Munich
Earth Room*, 1968 © Estate of
Walter De Maria/Walter De
Maria Archive



Fig. 3

Beverly Buchanan, *Marsh Ruins*, 1981. ©
Photo by Amelia Groom, 2019



Fig. 4

Beverly Buchanan, *Marsh Ruins*,
inscription stone, 1981. © Photo by
Amelia Groom, 2019

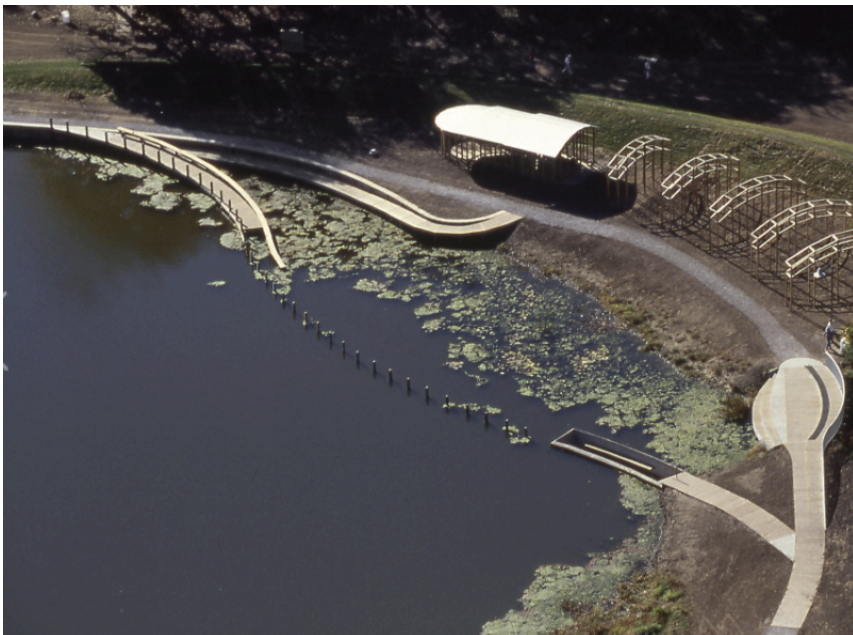


Fig. 5

Mary Miss, *Greenwood Pond: Double
Site*, 1987-1996. © City as Living
Laboratory



Fig. 6

Mary Miss, *Greenwood Pond: Double Site*, 1987-1996. © City as Living Laboratory



Fig. 7

Mary Miss, *Greenwood Pond: Double Site*, 1987-1996 © The Cultural Landscape Foundation, December, 2023.

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