



# A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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- Welcome. This is one of over 200 talks on the history of Western Art. I have arranged the talks chronologically starting with cave art through to art produced in the last few years.

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## 60-12 LAND ART AND EARTH ART

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Robert Smithson

***Spiral Jetty***

1970

Great Salt Lake, Utah

- This is Section 60 on recent art movements and today I am talking about Land Art and Earth Art. The terms are often used interchangeably but Land Art is more to do with the site and massive works and Earth Art nature, ecology and smaller works. Robert Smithson describes his work, like this one, as Earthworks. Both are seen to be with Environmental or Ecological Art. While the pioneers were often criticized for "bulldozing" the land to make a point, today's artists (like Agnes Denes, pronounced AHG-nesh DEH-nesh) use these concepts to heal the land rather than just mark it.

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Robert Smithson (1938–1973)

**Spiral Jetty**

1970

Basalt rock, earth, salt crystals,  
and water

457.2 × 457.2 cm (coil 457 m long  
× 4.6 m wide)

Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah  
(Dia Art Foundation)

Robert Smithson (1938–1973), *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, Basalt rock, earth, salt crystals, and water, 457.2 × 457.2 cm (coil 457 m long × 4.6 m wide), Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah (Dia Art Foundation)

- *Spiral Jetty* is the single most iconic work of the Land Art movement. **Robert Smithson** arranged over 6,000 tonnes of black basalt, earth, and salt crystals into a 457-metre counter-clockwise coil projecting into **Utah's Great Salt Lake**. He chose the site partly because local bacteria tinted the water a vivid pinkish-red. Smithson wrote that "**size determines an object, but scale determines art.**" The spiral form referenced entropy, crystallography, and the mythical whirlpool said to connect the lake to the Pacific Ocean.
- Art critic **Robert Hughes** called it "**a rough, poetic gesture**" that captured something essential about America's relationship with its landscape. The work periodically disappears beneath rising water levels and re-emerges years later, encrusted with salt crystals. This cycle of submersion and revelation was exactly what Smithson intended.
- Smithson was only 32 when he made it, already the movement's leading theorist. His 1968 essay "**The Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects**" provided the intellectual framework for Land Art as a rejection of gallery-bound Modernism. Three years after completing the Jetty, Smithson died aged 35 in a plane crash while surveying a site for a new earthwork, **Amarillo Ramp**, in Texas. His wife, the artist **Nancy Holt**, completed that final work.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Basalt: buh-SAWLT

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Walter De Maria (1935–2013)

**Mile Long Drawing**

1968

Two parallel chalk lines on desert floor

Approximately 0.3 × 321,869 cm (two lines, each 2 miles long)

Mojave Desert, California (no longer extant)

Walter De Maria (1935–2013), Mile Long Drawing, 1968, Two parallel chalk lines on desert floor, Approximately 0.3 × 321,869 cm (two lines, each 2 miles long), Mojave Desert, California (no longer extant)

- *Mile Long Drawing* is one of the earliest and purest gestures of Land Art. **Walter De Maria** drew two parallel chalk lines extending for two miles across the flat floor of the **Mojave Desert** in California. The lines were barely visible, dissolving into the heat haze. It was a radical act: making a drawing so vast it could only be fully comprehended from the air, yet so fragile the next rainfall would erase it entirely.
- The work was documented photographically and became known through images rather than direct experience. Critics saw it as a bridge between **Minimalism** and the emerging Earth Art movement. The gallerist **Virginia Dwan**, who funded much early Land Art, described De Maria's desert works as "**acts of faith in the landscape.**"
- De Maria had been a drummer in a band called **The Primitives** alongside **Lou Reed** and **John Cale**, who later formed The Velvet Underground. That same year, 1968, the landmark "**Earthworks**" exhibition opened at the **Dwan Gallery** in New York, cementing Land Art as a recognised movement. De Maria's spare, mathematical sensibility would lead him, nine years later, to his masterpiece: ***The Lightning Field.***

### Pronunciation Guide

De Maria: deh mah-REE-ah

Mojave: moh-HAH-vee

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Michael Heizer (b. 1944)

***Double Negative***

1969–1970

Displacement of 240,000 tons of rhyolite and sandstone

457.2 × 914.4 × 1524 cm (50 ft deep × 30 ft wide × 1,500 ft long)

Mormon Mesa, Overton, Nevada (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles)

Michael Heizer (b. 1944), *Double Negative*, 1969–1970, Displacement of 240,000 tons of rhyolite and sandstone, 457.2 × 914.4 × 1524 cm (50 ft deep × 30 ft wide × 1,500 ft long), Mormon Mesa, Overton, Nevada (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles)

- *Double Negative* is sculpture by subtraction. **Michael Heizer** used dynamite and bulldozers to blast two enormous trenches into the edge of **Mormon Mesa** in the Nevada desert, displacing 240,000 tons of rock. The two cuts face each other across a natural canyon, forming a single linear void 1,500 feet long, 50 feet deep, and 30 feet wide. The title's double meaning refers both to the paired excavations and to the fact that the artwork is entirely negative space.
- Heizer declared: "**The museums and collections are stuffed, the floors sagging, but the real space still exists.**" The work was funded by the gallerist **Virginia Dwan**, who purchased the 60-acre site. She donated it to **MOCA Los Angeles** in 1984. Under the terms of the gift, Heizer stipulated that no conservation work should be undertaken. Nature would reclaim the trenches through erosion.
- Heizer's father was a prominent archaeologist who took his son on excavations from Egyptian tombs to Native American mound sites. That early exposure to monumental earthworks shaped everything. Heizer famously stated, "**As long as you're going to make a sculpture, why not make one that competes with a 747?**" The work remains in the remote Nevada desert, slowly eroding. Getting there requires a high-clearance vehicle and a willingness to drive unpaved roads for miles across the mesa.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Heizer: HY-zer

Rhyolite: RY-oh-lite

Mesa: MAY-suh

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Richard Long (b. 1945), *A Line Made by Walking*, 1967, Gelatin silver print on paper with graphite on board, 37.5 × 32.4 cm (photograph), Tate, London / ARTIST ROOMS

- *A Line Made by Walking* is the founding work of British Land Art and one of the simplest, most radical gestures in post-war sculpture. **Richard Long**, a 22-year-old student at **Saint Martin's School of Art** in London, caught a train south-east from Waterloo, got off after about twenty miles, found a field in Wiltshire, and walked back and forth in a straight line until the flattened grass became visible. He photographed the result. Art could now be made with the foot as well as the hand.
- The work was a deliberate counterpoint to the monumental, machine-made earthworks emerging in America. Where Heizer used dynamite, Long used shoe leather. Art historian **Ben Tufnell** noted that Long's intervention was "**transient and humble**" compared to the American Land artists. Long himself has been "**somewhat uneasy about being classified as a land artist**", preferring to call himself a sculptor.
- Long's contemporaries at Saint Martin's included **Gilbert & George**, **Barry Flanagan**, and **Hamish Fulton**. The line in the grass would have disappeared within hours or days. That ephemerality was the point. Long went on to make walks across the world, documenting them through photographs, maps, and text works. He won the **Turner Prize** in 1989 and remains one of the most influential British artists of his generation.

## Pronunciation Guide

Wiltshire: WILT-sheer

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Dennis Oppenheim (1938–2011)

**Cancelled Crop**

1969, Harvested grain field

Approximately 45,720 × 82,296 cm (1,500 × 2,700 ft)

Finsterwolde, Netherlands (no longer extant; documented in photographs)



Dennis Oppenheim (1938–2011), *Cancelled Crop*, 1969, Harvested grain field, Approximately 45,720 × 82,296 cm (1,500 × 2,700 ft), Finsterwolde, Netherlands (no longer extant; documented in photographs)

- *Cancelled Crop* is one of the most provocative early works of Earth Art. **Dennis Oppenheim** harvested a 1,500 by 2,700-foot section of a Dutch grain field in the shape of a giant "X", a universal sign for cancellation or negation. The harvested wheat was collected and transported to a gallery in Amsterdam, displacing rural produce into an urban art context. The remaining standing crop formed the artwork's visible frame.
- Oppenheim was interested in what he called "**directed seeding**" — using agricultural processes as artistic gestures. The work was both a Land Art intervention and a piece of Conceptual Art, questioning where the artwork actually resided: in the field, in the gallery, or in the documentation. Critics saw it as a commentary on agricultural surplus and economic systems.
- Oppenheim had participated in the crucial 1969 "**Earth Art**" exhibition at **Cornell University**, curated by **Willoughby Sharp**. He was one of the most versatile artists of his generation, moving between Body Art, Land Art, and large-scale installation. His body-based works included *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn* (1970), where he sunburnt himself with an open book on his chest. Oppenheim once said, "**My art is about the absence of boundaries.**"

## Pronunciation Guide

Oppenheim: OP-en-hyme

Finsterwolde: FIN-ster-vol-duh

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Robert Smithson (1938–1973)

***Partially Buried Woodshed***

1970

Woodshed and approximately  
20 truckloads of earth

Approximately 548.6 × 1097.3 ×  
1371.6 cm (18 × 36 × 45 ft)

Kent State University, Ohio (no  
longer extant)

Robert Smithson (1938–1973), *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970, Woodshed and approximately 20 truckloads of earth, Approximately 548.6 × 1097.3 × 1371.6 cm (18 × 36 × 45 ft), Kent State University, Ohio (no longer extant)

- *Partially Buried Woodshed* demonstrates **Robert Smithson's** obsession with entropy — the irreversible tendency of all things towards disorder. During a visiting-artist residency at **Kent State University** in January 1970, Smithson directed a backhoe to pile earth onto an abandoned woodshed until its central beam cracked. That snap was the completion point. He then deeded the work to the university with the stipulation that **"everything in the shed should be left to go back to the earth."**
- The work took on devastating new meaning four months later when Ohio **National Guard troops shot and killed four students** at Kent State during anti-Vietnam War protests on 4 May 1970. Someone spray-painted **"May 4 Kent 70"** on the shed, transforming it into an inadvertent memorial. The graffiti fused political tragedy with Smithson's meditation on collapse and decay.
- Smithson's concept of **"sites"** and **"non-sites"** was central to Land Art theory. A site was the actual location; a non-site was material brought from that location into the gallery. This dialectic ran through all his work. The woodshed slowly deteriorated over the following decades. It was eventually demolished by the university in 1984 and only a plaque remains. The work's destruction only confirmed Smithson's point: entropy wins.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Entropy: EN-truh-pee

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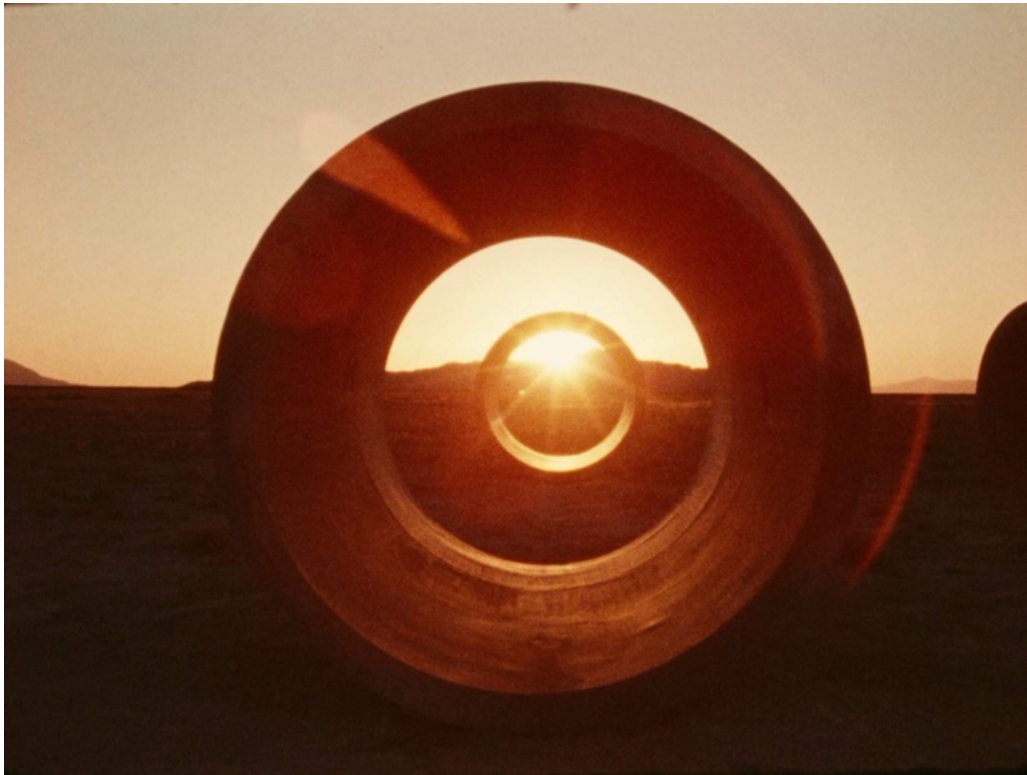
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Nancy Holt (1938–2014)

***Sun Tunnels***

1973–1976

Concrete, steel, and earth  
281.9 × 2090 × 1620 cm (each  
cylinder 549 cm long × 281.9  
cm diameter)

Great Basin Desert, Utah (Dia  
Art Foundation)

Nancy Holt (1938–2014), *Sun Tunnels*, 1973–1976, Concrete, steel, and earth, 281.9 × 2090 × 1620 cm (each cylinder 549 cm long × 281.9 cm diameter), Great Basin Desert, Utah (Dia Art Foundation)

- *Sun Tunnels* consists of four massive concrete cylinders, each 18 feet long and 9 feet in diameter, arranged in a cross pattern on the floor of **Utah's Great Basin Desert**. Two pairs align with sunrise and sunset at the summer and winter solstices. Each cylinder is pierced with holes representing the constellations **Draco, Perseus, Columba, and Capricorn**. Sunlight passing through the holes casts shifting star patterns inside the tunnels.
- **Nancy Holt** described the work as bringing "**the vast space of the desert back to human scale**." She was one of the very few women working in the male-dominated field of Land Art. Unlike the monumental, aggressive excavations of her male contemporaries, Holt's work was about framing perception rather than dominating landscape. She insisted the work was not explicitly feminist, telling interviewer **Ardele Lister** that art and feminism were separate concerns.
- Holt had married **Robert Smithson** in 1963. She began planning *Sun Tunnels* in 1973, the same year Smithson died in a plane crash in Texas. She spent weeks living alone in a camper in the desert, feeling out the site before construction. Holt worked with engineers and astronomers to ensure the astronomical alignments were precise. She purchased the 40 acres of desert on which the work stands. Each tunnel weighs 22 tonnes.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Draco: DRAY-koh

Perseus: PUR-see-us

Columba: koh-LUM-bah

Capricorn: KAP-rih-korn

Solstice: SOL-stiss

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Walter De Maria (1935–2013)

***The Lightning Field***

1977

400 polished stainless steel poles  
with concrete foundations  
160,934 × 531,084 cm (1 mile × 1  
kilometre grid)

Catron County, New Mexico (Dia  
Art Foundation)

Walter De Maria (1935–2013), *The Lightning Field*, 1977, 400 polished stainless steel poles with concrete foundations, 160,934 × 531,084 cm (1 mile × 1 kilometre grid), Catron County, New Mexico (Dia Art Foundation)

- *The Lightning Field* is 400 polished stainless steel poles arranged in a precise rectangular grid measuring one mile by one kilometre in the high desert of **western New Mexico**. Each pole is two inches in diameter and averages 20 feet 7½ inches in height, with solid pointed tips. Despite varying terrain, the tips define a perfectly flat horizontal plane. De Maria said the poles could "**support an imaginary sheet of glass.**"
- De Maria and assistants **Robert Fosdick** and **Helen Winkler** searched for five years across California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and Texas before selecting this site at 7,200 feet elevation for its high incidence of electrical storms. The title is somewhat misleading: actual lightning strikes are rare. The true spectacle is how the poles catch and reflect sunlight at dawn and dusk, turning into threads of fire. Only six visitors at a time are permitted, by reservation, for an overnight stay.
- De Maria stated: "**The sum of the facts does not constitute the work or determine its aesthetics.**" Commissioned by the **Dia Art Foundation**, it cost an estimated \$1 million in 1977. Installation took five months and every measurement was triple-checked. A photograph of the work was used as the cover of **Robert Hughes's** 1997 book ***American Visions***. By 2012, the structure needed \$400,000 in restoration, funded by **Larry Gagosian** and **Miuccia Prada**.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Catron: KAT-ron

Quemado: keh-MAH-doh

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James Turrell (b. 1943)

**Roden Crater**

1979–present

Volcanic cinder cone,  
concrete, bronze, and stone

Approximately 304,800 cm  
diameter (crater is c. 3 km  
circumference)

Painted Desert, Flagstaff,  
Arizona



James Turrell (b. 1943), Roden Crater, 1979–present, Volcanic cinder cone, concrete, bronze, and stone, Approximately 304,800 cm diameter (crater is c. 3 km circumference), Painted Desert, Flagstaff, Arizona

- *Roden Crater* is **James Turrell's** life's work: the transformation of an extinct volcanic cinder cone in the Arizona desert into a monumental naked-eye observatory. The crater, nearly 400,000 years old, rises from the **Painted Desert** near Flagstaff. Turrell has been reshaping its interior since 1979, carving tunnels and chambers that frame specific celestial events — solstices, equinoxes, lunar standstills, and particular star alignments.
- Turrell describes the work as using the sky as its material: "**I'm not a Land artist; I use the land as a way to work with light and space.**" The project has cost an estimated \$30 million and has been funded by diverse sources including the **Dia Art Foundation** and the **Lannan Foundation**. Though still officially unfinished, it has become legendary among art lovers and astronomers alike.
- Turrell trained as a perceptual psychologist before becoming an artist. He is a practising **Quaker**, and the silent contemplation of light central to Quaker worship deeply informs his practice. He purchased the crater in 1977 using proceeds from a **Guggenheim Fellowship**. The work has been compared to ancient observatories at Chichén Itzá and Angkor Wat. Unlike most Land Art, which embraces entropy and decay, Roden Crater is designed to endure for centuries, its alignments remaining accurate for at least 2,000 years.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Turrell: tuh-REL

Roden: ROH-den

Chichén Itzá: chee-CHEN eet-SAH

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Agnes Denes (b. 1931)

**Wheatfield — A Confrontation**  
1982

Wheat, earth, and agricultural materials on landfill

Approximately 89,031 × 89,031 cm (2 acres / 0.8 hectares)

Battery Park Landfill, Manhattan, New York (no longer extant; documented in photographs)

Agnes Denes (b. 1931), *Wheatfield — A Confrontation*, 1982, Wheat, earth, and agricultural materials on landfill, Approximately 89,031 × 89,031 cm (2 acres / 0.8 hectares), Battery Park Landfill, Manhattan, New York (no longer extant; documented in photographs)

- **Agnes Denes** planted, maintained, and harvested two acres of golden wheat on a landfill in lower Manhattan, two blocks from **Wall Street** and facing the **Statue of Liberty**. The land had been created from rubble excavated during construction of the **World Trade Center**. At the time, this plot was valued at \$4.5 billion. Two hundred truckloads of soil were brought in, 285 furrows dug by hand, and seeds planted over four months.
- Denes said on NBC's *Today* show: "**I wanted to make a powerful statement for a powerful city.**" She had been invited to create a public sculpture but decided "**we had enough public sculptures, enough men sitting on horses.**" The wheat was harvested on 16 August 1982, yielding over 1,000 pounds of grain. Ships on the Hudson regularly saluted the field with their horns as they passed.
- The grain travelled to 28 cities worldwide in an exhibition called *The International Art Show for the End of World Hunger* (1987–1990), and seeds were given to people to plant. Denes, born in Budapest, had emigrated to America via Sweden. The work's poignancy deepened immeasurably after **9/11**, when the Twin Towers that had overlooked the wheat field were destroyed. Denes reprised the concept in **Dalston, London** in 2009 and in **Milan** in 2015.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Denes: DEH-nesh

Budapest: BOO-dah-pesht

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Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956)

***Rowan Leaves and Hole***

1987

Rowan leaves, arranged on earth  
Variable (ephemeral site-specific  
installation; photograph 50.5 × 60.5  
cm)

Yorkshire Sculpture Park, England (no  
longer extant; documented in  
photographs)

Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956), *Rowan Leaves and Hole*, 1987, Rowan leaves, arranged on earth, Variable (ephemeral site-specific installation; photograph 50.5 × 60.5 cm), Yorkshire Sculpture Park, England (no longer extant; documented in photographs)

- *Rowan Leaves and Hole* is a quintessential work by the most celebrated practitioner of ephemeral Land Art. **Andy Goldsworthy** arranged fresh rowan leaves in a radiating spiral of colour graduating from green at the edges to vivid red and yellow at the centre, surrounding a dark hole in the earth. The transition of colours mirrors the autumn cycle. Built using only his bare hands, the piece lasted hours at most before wind scattered the leaves.
- Goldsworthy has said: "**Each work grows, stays, decays — integral parts of a cycle which the photograph shows at its height, marking the moment when the work is most alive.**" His approach stands in stark contrast to the heavy machinery and permanent ambitions of American Land Art. He uses only what the landscape offers: leaves, ice, stones, thorns, mud, snow, and his own saliva to bond materials together.
- Goldsworthy grew up in Yorkshire, working on farms from age 13. He has said farm work taught him the rhythm of making: "**A lot of my work is like picking potatoes; you have to get into the rhythm of it.**" He studied at Bradford College of Art and Preston Polytechnic, where a lecture by **Richard Long** proved transformative. He moved to Dumfriesshire, Scotland, in 1985, where he still lives. The 2001 documentary *Rivers and Tides* by **Thomas Riedelsheimer** brought his work to a global audience.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Goldsworthy: GOLDZ-wur-thee

Rowan: ROH-un

Dumfriesshire: dum-FREESS-sheer

Riedelsheimer: REE-dels-hy-mer

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Robert Morris (1931–2018)  
**Untitled (Johnson Pit #30)**  
1979,  
Earth, grass, and trees on  
reclaimed mining pit  
Approximately 37,491 ×  
37,491 cm (3.7 acres / 1.5  
hectares)  
King County, SeaTac,  
Washington



Robert Morris (1931–2018), *Untitled (Johnson Pit #30)*, 1979, Earth, grass, and trees on reclaimed mining pit, Approximately 37,491 × 37,491 cm (3.7 acres / 1.5 hectares), King County, SeaTac, Washington

- *Untitled (Johnson Pit #30)* was one of the first publicly funded Land Art projects in America and a pioneering work of ecological reclamation art. **Robert Morris** won a commission in 1979 from **King County Arts Commission** to rehabilitate a disused gravel pit near Seattle. He moved 16,000 cubic yards of earth to transform the industrial scar into a grassy amphitheatre of concentric terraces, inspired by the Incan mountain complex **Muyu-uray** in Peru.
- Morris, already famous as a leading **Minimalist sculptor**, saw earthworks as extending Minimalism's principles into the landscape. He wrote an influential 1968 essay, "**Anti Form**", arguing that process mattered more than finished object. The Johnson Pit project anticipated today's "**remediation art**" movement, where artists transform damaged landscapes rather than pristine ones.
- The earthwork faced structural complications over the decades. In the 1990s, Morris approved changes to reinforce the terraces and add a walking trail. Threatened by development and vandalism, it was successfully nominated for the **Washington Heritage Register** and the **National Register of Historic Places** in 2021 — a rare honour for a contemporary artwork. Morris once quipped that Land Art was simply "**what happens when sculptors get tired of being indoors.**"

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Muyu-uray: MOO-yoo OO-rye

SeaTac: SEE-tak

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Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956)

**Storm King Wall**

1997–1998

Fieldstone (dry stone wall construction)

Approximately 152.4 × 69,494 cm (5 ft high × 2,278 ft long)

Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York

Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956), Storm King Wall, 1997–1998, Fieldstone (dry stone wall construction), Approximately 152.4 × 69,494 cm (5 ft high × 2,278 ft long), Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York

- *Storm King Wall* is **Andy Goldsworthy's** first major permanent work in America and among the finest examples of how Land Art evolved from the desert monoliths of the 1960s into something more nuanced and ecologically integrated. The wall, built without mortar in the ancient **dry-stone method**, winds 2,278 feet through woodland, dips into a pond, disappears beneath the water, and re-emerges on the other side before climbing a hillside.
- Art critic **Doris Lockhart Saatchi** described it as rising from "**an ancient, ruined rock boundary that inspired it**" before winding through trees and "**marching straight up a hill.**" The wall references the historic stone boundaries built by early European settlers in the Hudson Valley, most of which had fallen into disrepair. Goldsworthy was reconnecting with a vernacular landscape tradition.
- Goldsworthy brought five master **dry-stone wallers** from Britain to work on the project. The technique requires no cement: stones are carefully fitted together using gravity and friction alone. Stone walls of this type have stood in northern England for centuries. The moment where the wall enters the pond and vanishes underwater is one of the most magical transitions in all of Land Art. It suggests nature swallowing human effort, then releasing it. **Storm King Art Center**, set in 500 acres of Hudson Valley landscape, is today one of the world's great outdoor sculpture parks.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Mountainville: MOUN-tin-vil

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Christo (1935–2020) and  
Jeanne-Claude (1935–2009)  
**Surrounded Islands**  
1983  
Woven polypropylene fabric  
(bright pink)  
Variable (11 islands in Biscayne  
Bay; 603,870 sq m of fabric)  
Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami,  
Florida (temporary, May 1983)

Christo (1935–2020) and Jeanne-Claude (1935–2009), *Surrounded Islands*, 1983, Woven polypropylene fabric (bright pink), Variable (11 islands in Biscayne Bay; 603,870 sq m of fabric), Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida (temporary, May 1983)

- *Surrounded Islands* was one of the most visually stunning temporary artworks ever created. **Christo and Jeanne-Claude** surrounded eleven islands in Miami's **Biscayne Bay** with 6.5 million square feet of floating bright pink polypropylene fabric. From above, each island appeared to be wearing a vivid pink tutu. The fabric extended 200 feet out from each shoreline, floating on the water's surface. The work existed for only two weeks in May 1983.
- The project took three years of planning, required 430 workers, and cost \$3.5 million — entirely self-funded by the artists through the sale of Christo's preparatory drawings and collages. Art critic **David Bourdon** wrote that the work was "**a series of lilypads designed for a race of giants.**" Before the fabric was deployed, workers removed 40 tonnes of rubbish from the islands, making the artwork an inadvertent environmental clean-up.
- Christo, born **Christo Vladimirov Javacheff** in Bulgaria, and **Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon**, born in Morocco, were born on the same day: 13 June 1935. They always insisted the wrapping projects were joint works. Though often grouped with Land Art, their practice was distinct: they never altered the land permanently. Jeanne-Claude died in 2009; Christo continued working until his death in 2020. Their posthumous final work, *L'Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped*, was realised in Paris in 2021.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Christo: KRIS-toh

Jeanne-Claude: zhahn-KLOHD

Biscayne: bis-KAYN

Javacheff: YAH-vah-cheff

Polypropylene: pol-ee-PROH-puh-leen

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Michael Heizer (b. 1944)

**City**

1970–2022

Compacted earth, rock, concrete, and steel

Approximately 241,402 × 80,467 cm (1.5 miles long × 0.5 miles wide)

Garden Valley, Lincoln County, Nevada (Triple Aught Foundation)



Michael Heizer (b. 1944), *City*, 1970–2022, Compacted earth, rock, concrete, and steel, Approximately 241,402 × 80,467 cm (1.5 miles long × 0.5 miles wide), Garden Valley, Lincoln County, Nevada (Triple Aught Foundation)

- *City* is the largest contemporary artwork ever built. **Michael Heizer** spent over 50 years constructing this vast complex of shaped mounds, depressions, and monumental concrete structures in the remote Nevada desert. Stretching 1.5 miles long and half a mile wide — roughly the scale of the **National Mall** in Washington — it evokes ancient ceremonial sites: Egyptian mastabas, Mesoamerican pyramids, and Native American mound complexes.
- Art critic **Dave Hickey** described the experience: "**The roads and domes and pits within the excavation are elegantly curbed into long, quiet Sumerian curves.**" Gallerist **Virginia Dwan** called Heizer "**one of the greatest innovators of our time.**" The work opened to the public on 2 September 2022, limited to six visitors per day by reservation only.
- The project cost over \$40 million, funded by patrons including **Dia Art Foundation**, the **Lannan Foundation**, and major museums. Heizer, famously reclusive and irascible, told the *New York Times*: "**I'm a fool, alone, helplessly watching as they wait for me to die so they can turn my ranch into a gift shop.**" In 2015, the surrounding area was designated the **Basin and Range National Monument** by President Obama, partly to protect *City* from a proposed nuclear waste rail line.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Heizer: HY-zer

Mastaba: MASS-tah-bah

Mesoamerican: mez-oh-uh-MER-ih-kun

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Agnes Denes (b. 1931),  
***The Living Pyramid***,  
2015–present,  
Socrates Sculpture Park, Long  
Island City, New York;

Agnes Denes (b. 1931), *The Living Pyramid*, 2015–present, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York

- Picture **New York Harbour** in 2015. Between the cranes and the container ships, a **nine-metre pyramid of living earth** rises from the grounds of **Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City** — and, somewhat absurdly, it is blooming. Visitors stop in their tracks. One observer reportedly asked a park warden whether the city had accidentally grown a small mountain. It hadn't, of course; it had grown an Agnes Denes.
- Denes, born in **Budapest** in 1931 and now in her **nineties**, has spent a lifetime treating the Earth as both canvas and collaborator. Her *Living Pyramid* — begun in 2015 and, remarkably, still evolving — is perhaps the clearest expression of what land art has become in the half-century since Smithson rolled his boulders into Utah's Great Salt Lake.
- The structure itself is deceptively simple: a **stepped wooden frame**, filled with tons of soil, planted with **thousands of native species** chosen for **each host city**. In New York the wildflowers were local meadow varieties; in **Kassel**, for Documenta, they shifted to European species; and in the 2026 installation at ALUla in **Saudi Arabia's Medina Province**, the planting drew on the native flora of the Arabian desert. Each iteration creates, in Denes' own words, a "micro-ecosystem on a macro-statement" — a living rebuttal to the idea that art and ecology are separate concerns.

- The work's most radical feature is that **it requires people**. A group of **volunteers** plants, waters, and **tends the pyramid** throughout its life. The sculpture cannot exist without collective care — which is, of course, precisely Denes' point about the planet itself.
- Where early land art imposed a human will onto the landscape — often permanently, often at great cost — the *Living Pyramid* **inverts that logic entirely**. It **does not scar; it seeds**. It does not freeze the land in a single gesture; it **lets the land breathe, bloom**, and go to seed on its own schedule. The pyramid will eventually be dismantled, its soil returned, its plants scattered. The only lasting impression is the one it makes on the people who tended it. That, you might say, is the whole point.

### Pronunciation

- Agnes Denes: **AHG-nesh DEH-nesh**
- AlUla: **al-OO-la**



## 60-12 LAND ART AND EARTH ART

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Agnes Denes  
***The Living  
Pyramid,***  
2015-present,

- That brings me to the end of today's talk. Land art's legacy lies in its rejection of the "white cube" gallery, forcing us to view the planet as both canvas and collaborator. Its future now merges with ecological activism, evolving into functional, regenerative works that heal damaged landscapes. It proves that land art no longer needs to be a monument to man's dominance but can instead serve as a living catalyst for landscape healing and environmental awareness.
- Thank you for your time and attention.



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