



Aesthetics of Solar Energy: Approaches to Site Specific Land Art through Visual Culture and Performance

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Abstract

Solar energy is quickly becoming the leading renewable energy source in the wake of mass climate anxiety with large-scale ‘farms’ installed in remote locations that turn sunlight into consumable energy. Corporate investment sponsors are simultaneously funding fossil fuel industries while paying into solar energy. While the media propagates a world ravaged by fires and melting ice, our anxieties are quasi-quelled by beholding an image of these solar panel farms at work for us. The image is a double entendre: corporations distract from their participation in the fossil fuel industry by using ‘greenwashing’ techniques while ‘consumers’ applaud the advent of solar energy as a means to repair our diminishing environment. Why, then are artists who propose large-scale Land Art works often met with governmental rejection and community outrage when their work is devoid of corporate theatrics? Why does Land Art stimulate fear when the solar energy farms glisten with capitalist destruction? In the following pages, I attempt to demystify the solar energy farms by considering their aesthetic success at surreptitiously distracting us from their corporate sponsorship while using examples of Land Art that have been rejected or threatened by our governments and communities. By acknowledging the performance of images, especially those related to the environment, and how they work on us, I propose that Land Art adopt similar narrative structures from the solar energy farms to advocate for cleaner interventions into the earth and landscape. Land Art is now, more than ever, a practice worth investigating; a reflective surface in

which corporations and communities behold that intervening in the earth has serious ethical implications.

Keywords: Land Art, Political Ecology, Visual Culture, Performance Studies, Art Criticism.

“Irresolution echoes a restlessness which is fundamental to site-specificity itself. Indeed, it is in response to the capacity of a ‘site-specific work’ to transform the very sites it seeks to expose [...] It is in this restlessness, too, that site-specificity defers to the terms and practices of performance, even as it presents itself in relation to explicitly architectural, sculptural, or object-based modes of work. This formal ‘irresolution’ implicates the viewer in a process of locating the limits of their practice [...] precisely in order to expose a place always already being acted out” (Kaye 2013).

“When you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground. In other words, it stops being the environment. It stops being That-Thing-Over-There that surrounds and sustains us. When you think about where your waste goes, your world starts to shrink” (Morton 2007).



Behold: glimmering, smooth glass slices a visual hardline through a backdrop of soft and eroding sand and mountains. The glare from the beaming sun illuminates large panels of dark-purple glass that are quietly (and efficiently) turning sunbeams into energy. The cinematic proportions arrest the eye as the panels fluctuate between cutting-edge technology and a body of crystal-clear water: salvation from the heat and the dry of the desert after walking in it for miles. The juxtaposing physical attributes of the panels and the landscape are in aesthetic harmony.

The visual presence of the solar energy panels in the desert evoke feelings of newness, of opposing angular symmetries, a performance of hard versus soft, hot versus cold. The colours of the natural landscape reflect off of their surfaces. Housed together in large groups, these arrangements offer an architectural approach to enhancing the natural wildness of the landscape. There is a performance happening not only visually here, between the landscape and the geometry of the panels, but also of our cultural understanding of the image. We are offered this: solar energy panels will store energy from solar rays and transfer them into a consumable product that will ameliorate the human experience not only ecologically, but through these technological advances, our very humanity is reinforced. By this, I mean that we behold these spectacular technologies at work for *us*, we see their function in relation to our day-to-day being.

Not surprisingly, these energy initiatives are funded by global corporations who must invest billions of dollars to renewable energy sources in order to balance their heinous use of non-renewable energy in the production of consumer goods. Desert Sunlight Solar Farm is located in River Valley, California and only a short distance away from a host of National Parks in the Mojave Desert. Along with the Obama government in 2011 (First Solar 2019), bank tycoon Goldman Sachs financed the project to cover sixteen kilometers of the Mojave in photovoltaic solar panels, fortifying their commitment to socially responsible investing (SRI). Jinhui Li and Quanyin Tan report that from 2004 to 2015, the demand for photovoltaic solar energy increased by 20%, becoming the leader in renewable energy sources worldwide (2018). This promising rise

in popularity surely assured those at Goldman Sachs that their investments in 'greener' energy would become a handsome pay-off in the wake of continued devastation of wildlife and the environment at large. It comes as a surprise then, that in 2019, the Rainforest Action Network reports that Goldman Sachs has invested over 59 billion dollars in the fossil fuel industry since 2015 alone (2019); SRI may be a buzzword, but it's certainly not an ethos this banking corporation takes seriously. These projects are theatrical stagings of power structures that are exerted on our communities by what Bruno Latour calls 'militant political ecology': a claim to defend nature for nature's sake. He writes in *Politics of Nature* that "the mission it has assigned itself is carried out by humans and is justified by the well-being, the pleasure, or the good conscience of a small number of carefully selected humans- usually American, male, rich, educated, and white" (2004). Naturally, the solar panels are installed in monumental proportions for all to see; the desert becomes the obvious backdrop for a global corporation to showcase their commitment to renewable energy sources. In an almost Kubrick fashion, these staged installations of solar panels are at once cultural, cinematic and manipulative.

Once the panels reach the end of their life, they are replaced with new panels. The panels are discarded either because they are defective, damaged or have reached the end of their 20-year life expectancy. Karsten Wombach and Erik Alsema reveal the alarming reality that in Europe alone, panels that reach the end-of-life (EOL) will produce 33, 500 tonnes of landfill waste by 2040 (2005). The solar panels are assessed based on their life cycle as energy converters, but sustainability is quickly forfeited due to the assumption that once a panel has been damaged, it no longer serves a purpose. While Wombach and Alsema propose a meticulous recycling program for the panels, they know there is much more work to be done to make it a reality (2005). The depiction of the solar energy panel as a greener alternative to energy production is built on a tenuous foundation. Landfills are replete with these 'dead' solar panels, contributing to the very thing their invention was allegedly supposed to reduce. This exchange is another opportunity to recognize the success of the visual performance staged by corporations in the desert in California.

The aesthetics of the panels arranged in sculptural columns along the sand and dunes of the desert is the perfect distraction from the underbelly of their intentions.

Why think about the aesthetics of solar energy in relation to site-specific land art?

In 1979, Rosalind Krauss opened the definition of sculpture to include three new sculptural conventions: 'site construction' (landscape and architecture), 'marked site' (landscape and non-landscape) and 'axiomatic structure' (architecture and non-architecture) (1985, 31-44). This supported the development of sculpture as an art form that could and should extend beyond the confines of a gallery, museum or plinth. Aligning with artists like Robert Smithson, Krauss created a structure that called upon the institution to accept Land Art works as worthy of cultural critique and art market value. Smithson himself created his own vernacular of 'non-site' (the institution) and the 'site' (the artwork), where the gallery and the landscape were fundamental to the creation of his oeuvre. Antithetically, the material limits of the site point back to the site by way of negation: the unavailability of the site, the source material, is manifest through the existence of the non-site, a representation, wherein the viewer can never experience the 'real' thing. This dialectic between actual and representational, between large-scale Land Art and small-scale gallery installation reinforces a convergence which is always out of reach (Kaye 2013). Smithson reminds us that to privilege the site as *context*, as a permanent, knowable whole, we repress the potential for all other contexts in which the artwork was created (Kaye 2013). The non-site makes explicit, as de Certeau asserts, the systems of operation which compose a "culture" and bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society is concealed by the euphemistic term "consumers" (1980, 1988). While galleries and museums were adopting corporate ideologies to better sustain themselves under the global umbrella of capitalism (English 2007), it is possible that Smithson also recognized the need for art to be available as a consumer product under the guise of 'culture'. While the site is developed far away from the confines of the gallery, the non-site falls in line with a collection of other artworks that are presented to patrons as markers of culture, and with enough money,

potentially ravishing in a home or office. Krauss' expanded field is undone: artists begin to sacrifice their ambitious creative projects in favor of museum works that are easily digestible and, in turn, drive profits. Taking a trip to the Nevada desert to experience a Land Art work was replaced with the price of museum admission to prove that, like most things, culture is an industry that needs to make money. Subversively, the dialectic between site and non-site addresses the adage that capitalism and art are at odds with one another; Smithson assures that both site and non-site are necessary to make the artwork. Land artists of the 1960s and 1970s weren't concerned that their work be accessible (Rendell 2008), rather they hoped the work would be visited only and have no objects imposed upon it (Smithson ed. Flam, 1996).

Map of Broken Glass was a project that Smithson was never able to install on the site. Off the coast of Nanaimo in British Columbia, Smithson purchased a small island in which he intended to cover with 90 tonnes of broken glass (Eagland 2016). The glass would serve as a glistening beacon amongst the drab rocks on the Gulf Island Coast, eventually eroding to sand. At the last minute, the Canadian government denounced the project and forbade its making and Smithson was left with only his 'site' in the gallery. Although it would be hopeful that the government was aware and supportive of Indigenous Land Agreements, according to Allan Fotheringham of the Vancouver Sun it was the anxiety around experimental art that threw the baby out with the bathwater.

In 1992, Land Artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude proposed the installation *Over the River* that would involve a number of fabric canopies attached to opposing sides of the Arkansas river, creating a sort of covering that would extend six miles. These large, see-through canopies were designed to mimic bridges that would suspend over the river canyon, high and clear above the water. Although mostly for aesthetic purposes, the artists were interested in the social benefits that Cañon City and Salida in south-central Colorado would reap if their work were to be realized (Worthington 2016). Over 19 years and the passing of Jeanne-Claude, Christo worked with city officials, government bodies and construction aficionados to design, plan and solidify *Over the*

River and, by 2011, it was looking like the project would become a reality. Meanwhile, dwellers of Cañon City were forming Rags Over the Arkansas River (ROAR), an advocacy group committed to the termination of the project for fear of collapsing of eco-systems, prolonged construction and what seemed to them an unnecessary addition to the natural landscape (Worthington 2016). From 2012 to 2017, Christo spent his time in court fighting for the project until he could no longer; he announced it would not continue.

Conversely, Michael Heizer has finally finished his colossal Land Art project *City*: a mile-and-a-half long site meant to mimic an ancient city made from sand, rock and concrete. The artist purchased a piece of land in Lincoln County, Nevada in 1972 where he subsequently moved and began building his masterpiece. Since then, Heizer has been virtually invisible, devoting his time and energy to finishing what he set out to do, which has destroyed his range of movement as well as his spirit (Goodyear 2019). Nonetheless, the project was finished in 2019 and ‘expects’ its first visitors this year. Although the Obama administration approved the 704 000 acres that surround the artwork as a national monument (LA Times, 2015), the secret and unacknowledged Area 51 American military base camp can be seen resting only a few miles away. Recent military activity in which the United States finds itself entangled threatens to deter visitors, as well as Heizer, for fear that the base camp, with its complicated involvement with nuclear power, may have bigger plans. Like *Map of Broken Glass* and *Over the River*, the efforts of Heizer’s *City* are threatened to be rendered moot.

The image of the solar panel ‘farms’ documents a multi-layered performance by a variety of actors. We are complicit in the ‘site’ of the solar energy panels, by way of the ‘non-site’ because of a variety of cultural attachments: climate anxiety supports the desire for renewable energy sources, the abstract location of the panels do not impose on day-to-day life, and we hope that somewhere, one of those panels is benefitting us and our community. Miwon Kwon explains that “the site comes to encompass a relay of several interrelated but different spaces and economies that come together to constitute a system of practices that is not separate from but open to

social, economic, and political pressures” (1997, 85-110). Upon deeper inspection, we see the ethics of these projects are far more sinister than a glass island, a canopy, a city of sand. In the words of David Abram “[they exist in] a world where things hide themselves not just beyond the horizon but behind other things, a world where indeed nothing can be seen all at once, in which objects offer themselves to the gaze only by withholding some aspect of themselves—their other side—for further exploration.” (1988, 101-120) The solar energy panels disguise corporate underpinnings with ‘greenwashing’ and because it’s all in the name of the environment, we remain quite hushed. In her description toward and ontology of performance, Peggy Phelan posits that through a visible and easily located point of view the spectator is provided with a stable point upon which to turn on the machinery of projection, identification, and (inevitable) objectification (2003, 155-175). What is reflected back to us is the narrative that these panels are creating a better world, a vision of sleek technology eliminating harmful emissions from our environment and we choose to believe it.

What if Robert Smithson would have gone ahead and covered the island in glass? The political implications in which the artist would be involved could be monumental: Land Art would experience a surge in visual culture, promulgated by the internet and television news. It is the narrative that surrounds the work, the theatre of politics that makes these pieces so relevant. Heizer’s 47-year feat is threatened by the proximity of a mysterious army base that could turn *City’s* manicured sand into rubble. It is not Christo’s perseverance to drape the Arkansas River in dazzling fabric but ROAR’s vehemence for the project that sparks the dialogue. Site-specific Land Art is at the mercy of zoning and occupancy laws, permits, the increasing price of buying and owning land and naturally, technology. The development of our visual language through culture and society has propelled us toward rapid consumption at the click of a button, and what we skim from the news, or from social media, are bits and pieces of extraordinary stories, glossy and altered imagery, political scandals and missteps. Creating a site-specific piece of Land Art finds its validity in the performance of its contention. A radical approach to altering or enhancing the landscape is a key opportunity to demonstrate the powerful cultural ties we have with the

diminishing environment, one that offers alternate views on land ownerships, history and heritage. Daniel Buren wrote that art, whatever else it may be, is exclusively political; what is called for is the analysis of formal and cultural limits with which art exists and struggles (Kwon 1997).

What is it about the environment, about nature that simultaneously excites us and terrifies us? The world we behold has been carved and traced by generations before, made in the image of man. Nothing is untouched, yet we lament for the state of our world and those who wish to alter it. The environment has been politicized simply by way of the human project to tame it, to create cities and infrastructure, and now, to undo it all. Because what are we without planet earth? Humanity accepts, begrudgingly, that all living things eventually come to perish; however, our living world must never die. What hacks away at ecosystems and water levels has now exchanged its plastic, deranged mask for organic, biodegradable, recycled cardboard and, although materially contrary, a heinous cover for the suspicious underpinnings of our capitalist world it remains. Latour suggests that “there has never been any other politics than the politics of nature, and there has never been any other nature than the nature of politics. Epistemology and politics [...] are one and the same thing, conjoined in (political) epistemology to make both the practice of the sciences and the very object of public life incomprehensible” (2004). Politics has taught us to see things like the solar panels as desirable objects who ameliorate our societies, but art teaches us where the holes are and leaves us paralyzed, outraged. Land Art does what Goldman Sachs does, only art relies on their competitor because that is how ‘culture’ has been organized. I propose an approach to making site-specific Land Art that mimics the strategies of global investment companies so that art may no longer rely on those constraints, that Land Art be given a political arena in which it can respond to deserts of solar energy panels or proximity to army bases. If Land Art were to be encouraged by art institutions, by governments and corporations, there could much to learn about land ownership, sustainability and culture to create dialogue, a narrative. When the viewer is thrust into that narrative by exposure to the non-site through media, it offers the opportunity to share about our relationship to the earth, to

landscape and heritage. The performance no longer belongs to the corporations and investors but to the artists, again, where it is wont to be. When the artwork *performs*, we take notice: we perform, too.

The aesthetic values of the solar energy panels in the desert are rife with beauty and disappointment: a desirable object and an ethical nightmare. As land becomes a more contentious commodity and fewer resources become available, a political approach to making land art seems necessary, if not compulsory. When artworks create knowledge production, when they are nestled in the headlines of our forever frenetic news sources, we will be forced to acknowledge the power with which art can bring awareness to space, place and site-specificity. To encourage the performative potential of Land Artworks beyond the context of art and its making could indeed replace the images of the shiny panels with something transformative.

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