

# Land Art

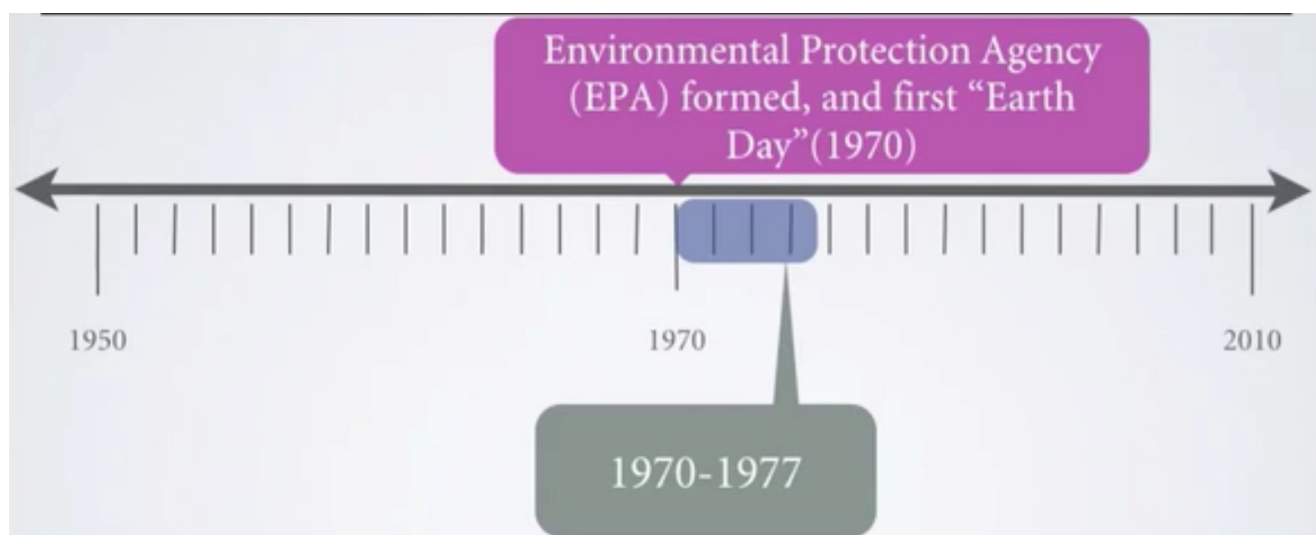
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## WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson is about land art. By the end of the lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the influences on the development of land art, and identify examples of land art. The socio-political climate in the 1960s and the environmental movement were major influences on the development of land art. This lesson covers:

The land art that you're going to be looking at today dates from between 1970 and 1977.



## 1. “Spiral Jetty”

The 1960s have become synonymous with social revolution and counterculture and for very good reason. There were major socio-political movements that took place during this time, including the African American civil rights movement, the Hispanic movement, and the gay rights movement just to name a few.

Along with this came greater attention to and support of the environmental movement in America that can trace its roots back to John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The environmental movement was highly influential in the development of **land art** during the 1970s because there was a desire to bring a greater amount of attention and focus to environmental issues. Land art, in a nutshell, is where the medium is the earth and nature itself. It's often **ephemeral** and site-specific.

The “Spiral Jetty” was one of the first of these works of art, constructed in 1970 near Rozel Point on the Great Salt Lake in Utah.



**Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson**

**1970**

**Great Salt Lake, Utah**

It's a counterclockwise spiral that connects to the shore of the lake. Depending upon the current water level, it's either exposed or submerged. Its status has become something of a point of contention among people in terms of whether it should or shouldn't be preserved, given that the artist, Smithson, alluded to the ephemeral quality of the work.

This ephemeral quality is present in another work of art, called "A Six-Ton Curtain Billows Across Rifle Gap," by the married artistic duo Christo and Jeanne-Claude.



**A Six-Ton Curtain Billows Across Rifle Gap by Christo and Jeanne-Claude**

1972

Really big curtain (installation)

It was exactly that, a giant curtain connected across the canyon. While “Spiral Jetty” draws attention to the fleeting nature of land art in terms of years, “Six-Ton Curtain” explores the idea of disintegration and rapidly succumbing to the elements. It was literally ripped to shreds by gale force winds the day after it was raised.



#### BIG IDEA

The socio-political climate of the 1960s and the environmental movement were major influences on the development of land art.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Land Art**

An art movement wherein the work is characterized by the use of natural materials and qualities of existing landscapes.

##### **Ephemeral**

A term that means “temporary”.

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## 2. “Double Negative”

“Double Negative” is located about an hour northeast of Las Vegas in the Nevada desert. Its name refers to



the fact that it's a 1,500-foot empty trench crossing the empty space of the Nevada desert, hence the term double negative.



**Double Negative by Michael Heizer**

**1969**

**Land art**

It was as much about what isn't there as what is there. Like the two works of art you've already seen, the artists intended for it to eventually be erased by the erosive effects of winds and time.

This brings up an important point about the influence of previous movements, such as Minimalism and Conceptualism, on land art: the idea behind the work of art is often more important than the work of art itself. Heizer's **earth art** questions the idea of art itself and in this work, how it can't be completely appreciated as a whole in person. It's just simply too big.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Earth Art**

A term that describes art made through techniques that alter the environment.

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## 3. “The Lightning Field”

Examples of land art such as “Spiral Jetty,” “Double Negative,” and “The Lightning Field” (pictured below) are located in and integrated into the landscapes of the deserts of the American West. For this reason, they are

site-specific. This means that to change their location, if even possible, would likely change their meaning or at least the idea behind them.



The Lightning Field by Walter De Maria

1977

Installation

“The Lightning Field” was completed in 1977. It is a one-mile-square grid array of 400 steel poles rising some 20 feet high, give or take. It’s a form of immersion art. As people walk within the grid, weather permitting of course, the varying heights of the poles can supposedly cause a disorienting effect when looking at people in the distance.

Because the poles function as lightning rods, it’s also meant to be experienced from a safe distance during cooperating weather when the work of art literally harnesses the power of nature to achieve its effect.



## SUMMARY

Now that you’ve reached the end of the lesson, are you able to identify and define today’s key terms? Can you describe the influences on the development of land art? Can you identify examples of land art? The socio-political climate of the 1960s and the environmental movement were major influences on the development of land art. You saw several examples, including “**Spiral Jetty**”, “**Double Negative**”, and “**The Lightning Field**”.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Earth Art**

A term that describes art made through techniques that alter the environment.

### **Ephemeral**

A term that means temporary.

### **Land Art**

An art movement where the work is characterized by the use of natural materials and qualities of existing landscapes.