

Six Cuts


Jonathan P Watts

‘To step on to a turf is to step out of the everyday.’
Graham Harvey, 2001, *The Story of Grass*.


1 I’m trying not to think of turf as an artistic medium. Instead, the cut and its insertion: the seamless Eisensteinian montage of two film clips to build up a ‘third thing’ (can we ever speak of this third thing?); the Vertovian collage of clips

to destabilise or demolish the prison of story-telling; a horticultural Max Ernst seeking ruptures of the marvelous in the everyday; the injection of politics in Hannah Höch's *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Beer Belly of the Weimar Republic* (1919). Elide the difference between the shovel and the scalpel and turf cutting might be likened to Lucio Fontana's post-World War Two *Concetto Spaziale* (Spatial Concept) paintings. Fontana jabbed, punctured and sliced the canvas weave to open up limitless dimensions beyond. 'My art is... a creative rather than a destructive nothing' Fontana told Carla Lonzi in a 1963 interview. He continued:


The cuts, or rather the hole, the first holes did not signify destruction of the canvas - the abstract gesture of which I have been accused so often... it introduced a dimension beyond the painting itself; this was the freedom to produce art by whatever means and in whatever form.



While not, Fontana claims, a destructive act, his gesture delivered painting to the realm of objects - a project initiated, so Michel Foucault argues, by Manet in the mid-nineteenth century. Abstract painting foregrounded mark making on the surface, dispensing with illusions of depth. Ad Reinhardt's pure colour fields logically concluded painting but Fontana couldn't take for granted a continuous surface. Is this painting or sculpture?



In 'Notes on Sculpture: Part II', first published in *Artforum* in 1966, the American sculptor Robert Morris acknowledged the situatedness of the spectator and specificities of context in the experience of artwork. For Morris the radically reduced Minimalist art object takes 'relationships out of the work' by making them 'a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision', adding that 'one is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying



conditions of light and spatial context'. Morris writes of something we take for granted now: that the specificities of site inflect our experience of artworks. Are we looking at art works?

Richard Serra's *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted* (1970) migrated the simple geometric forms of Minimalism from the gallery into the street. A ring twenty-six feet wide is scraped into a derelict road in the Bronx. This site-specific work is not a manufactured object but the result of space itself harnessed, inscribed into the ground. Its minimal gesture intervenes in the urban setting as a kind of liminally perceived signal of order. Is it enough to know that an artwork lies nearby?

By the early 1970s the freedom to produce art by whatever means and in whatever form seemed manifest. In the Mohave Desert in the U.S. Michael Heizer cut 244,000 tonnes of rock from rock to form the grotesque *Double Negative* (1969). In Britain the scale of emerging

Land Art was proportionate to the England William Morris once described as having ‘not much space for swelling into hugeness; ... no great wastes overwhelming in their dreariness...’ A land in which ‘all is measured; mingled; varied... neither prison, nor palace, but a decent home.’

2 From the window of Willibald Pirckheimer’s house in Nuremburg Albrecht Dürer tossed a coin into the dwindling May evening light. Its face bore the foolish caricatured features of Julius Nepos. It would not be missed: Dürer selected this particular coin from a dense trove of Tremissis pieces kept in a battered wooden box by his friend. It must have been the feel of this one - its peculiar elongated shape, formed by millennial rot in Bavarian topsoil. Beneath the window was a small spring meadow, bordered by a formal lawn, and beyond that, trailing off to the horizon,

a landskip of neat vines and dense wood variegated by inclines. Wherever the coin landed - if indeed he could find it in the morning - would provide the subject of his next work.

That night Dürer dreamt of walled gardens, of specific and imagined places: the Orto Botanico in Padua, secret corners of imitation country in the Tuscan Villa described by Pliny the Younger, walls that transformed into the gaping mouths of mythical beasts. He dreamt of stiffened, naked limbs kicking out of bubbles; a curled-up foetus tipping out of a split uterus that quivered like the flesh of a lychee; unceasing flows of naked men and women marching from a cut in a translucent sphere - when they passed walking on their hands bunched flowers protruded from their rectums. On the spring lawn he saw a circular cut of skin flayed from the head of Saint Michael.

In the morning he took a spade, went directly to where the coin had

landed the evening before and dug loosely around its contour. He removed the coin, put it in his pocket and carried the turf back to a window-lit table in the room he was staying in. The dew had soaked his slippers; he removed them and set to work rendering the likeness of this microcosm of nature on paper with watercolours.

The Large Turf, as it later became known, looks decidedly prosaic alongside Dürer's unearthly woodcuts of saints battling demons, and yet it equals the visionary force of any of these. Dürer imagines a reduced point of view equivalent to that of plant-life. Species of grass co-mingle with closed-up dandelions and herbs. Fine tendrilled roots are exposed against fine washes of greens and browns. For the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin the impenetrable thicket of the meadow represents the 'remarkable effort of mastering an infinity of small forms' and the 'devoted attempt to do justice to each individual in this miniature-world'. Dürer executed

this work with precision and speed. As dusk fell that evening he carried the withered specimen back out to the garden, dropped the Tremissis coin into the void and plugged it with the turf.

It's not clear whether Dürer intended *The Large Turf* as the model for other works or simply as an end in itself. However, there is an accompanying turf work, known simply as *Piece of Turf*, less well regarded than *The Large Turf*. In this inferior turf work, leaves coated in paint were used to autoprnt actual forms. In the history of art Dürer made significant early developments in the genre of topographical landscapes, of which his turfs are but discrete segments.

3 *Untitled Statement*, Hans Haacke, 1965:

.. make something which experiences, reacts to its environment, changes, is non-stable...

... make something indeterminate,
which always looks different, the
shape of which cannot be predicted
easily...

... make something which cannot
'perform' without the assistance of
its environment...

... make something which reacts to
light and temperature changes, is
subject to air currents and whose
function depends on the forces of
gravity...

... make something which the 'viewer'
handles, with which he plays and
thus animates...

... make something which lives
in time and makes the 'viewer'
experience time...


... articulate something natural...

Haacke's manifesto, with its
desire for relationality, contingency and
liveness, is strikingly contemporary.
In 1969 Haacke, along with Robert



Smithson, Dennis Oppenheim and Robert Morris exhibited in *Earth Art* at Cornell University Gallery, one of the first ecologically-oriented group shows. For this Haacke displayed *Grass Grows*, a fecund mound of grass, free from pesticides, that grew for the duration of the exhibition. The following year Haacke created the conditions for his work *Bowery Seeds*. A circular patch of soil on his studio rooftop would be watered and germinate airborne seeds. *Bowery Seeds* is reactive to climate and atmospheric conditions. Despite Haacke's earlier avowed desire to animate and bring into being, the initially jarring placement of *Bowery Seeds* among the New York skyline isn't so odd: resilient plant life germinates in the strangest of places. Unlike *Grass Grows*, which is contained within the walls of the gallery and requires human intervention, *Bowery Seeds* seems more autonomous. Yet Haacke has chosen the aspect of the mound, the type of soil, the level of water, which is supplemented by

rainfall. *Bowery Seeds* demonstrates the human and non-human entanglement of environment. In works that use living matter as material the artist encounters another living being. It is not inert, plastic matter to be sculpted. Rather it is dynamic matter with its own lively temporality. Barbara Nemitz, in her book *Trans / Plant* (2000), writes ‘Unlike “dead matter” plants exhibit relations of dependence by virtue of the need for suitable living conditions.’ The artist’s intervention is a manipulation of life processes, Nemitz argues, which in turn provide feedback which imposes certain conditions relevant to the artist’s work

Next to Haacke’s work, Britain’s famous land artist Richard Long, who cut turf in the mid-sixties, is curiously unconvincing: maybe it’s the petty rebellion against the English domesticity of tidy lawns; or perhaps it’s a relentless literalism that stunts the ecological relationality inherent to the living medium. Either way his turf works render the complexity of grass



into 'Everyturf'. Critic David Sylvester, writing in 2002, cites Long as follows: 'I think all my works, my actions, have no meaning outside what they are'. In *Turf Sculpture* (1967) and *Water Line* (1967) the meaning is in the cutting of the turf and its temporary displacement; it poses for the camera, then is restored. The work is in the action of making, in friction between the artist as subject and his environment, not in a fragile living system set into play. The absence of transcendence is thrilling. And yet, for example, his *Turf Circle* (1969) at Museum Haus Lange Krefeld escapes into historical transcendence - into ancient earthworks channeling occultish energies.



There's a formal resonance with the abstract compositions of Chris Parsons which lack, however, the physical invasiveness of rearranging matter. Parsons, a groundsman who tended bowling greens, would wake before dawn and sweep into the glistening morning dew with a soft

broom. The lawn was the support and water the medium. The patterns, which lasted between three and five hours, gradually disappeared as the sun evaporated the moisture.

4 The word radical derives from *radicalis* which means something that is firmly rooted. Plants are rooted to the earth.

Apart from as seeds spread on wind or in bird shit, they lack the mobility of humans and animals. Plants have a close relationship to their location. Their movement, as one critic writes, is restricted to expansion and unfolding; yet, despite appearing to be still, they are always in movement. In 1983 David Nash exhibited *Sod Swap* as part of the *British Sculpture Show* in Kensington Gardens, London. ‘My experience of group sculpture exhibitions in urban “parkscape” settings’, Nash wrote, ‘is that they tend to look like the arrival of unrelated UFOs, having no indication

of origin or destination. For the public the sculptures arrive suddenly, linger uncomfortably in an alien environment and vanish as suddenly six weeks later'. The work Nash would make needed to be living and unobtrusive, and display its indication of origin in order to be a UFO. Eighty-three 90x30cm strips of Cae'n-y-Coed sod were cut from a ring of 6m in diameter, put in a truck and driven to London. The displaced Kensington turf was put in the returning truck and laid in the vacated space at Cae'n-y-Coed. A botanist identified twenty-six plant species in the Welsh sod and five species in the London sod. The plan to swap the rings back never occurred. The London turf remained in Wales where it is still mown and tended as if it was in London; the Welsh turf was relocated to the middle of a lawn at Kenwood House, London, with a plaque listing the species. The Welsh plants were left alone while the surrounding lawn was mown as usual.

5 In 1815 John Constable painted a pair of views from the from the back of his family home in East Bergholt, Suffolk: *Golding Constable's Kitchen Garden* and *Golding Constable's Flower Garden*. If we could stitch these two paintings together it would describe a sweeping proprietary panoramic of the painter's father's land. The patchwork of small fields are neat and ordered, the lawn manicured and edged. In both of the paintings labourers are at work in the fields: a featureless figure threshes in a barn; a gardener hoes weeds among the vegetables; more than a dozen harvestmen appear as faint flecks in the wheat - all of them employed by Constable's father to work his land. The overwhelming sense of these pictures is of balance, order and contentment, a sober, industrious and submissive underclass, happily serving in a stable society. 'The effort,' John Barrell writes in *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting* (1980) 'is always to claim that

the rural poor are as contented, the rural society as harmonious, as it is possible to claim them to be, in the face of an increasing awareness that all was not as well as it must have been in Arcadia.’

Between 1750 and 1840 more than six million acres of communally owned public land was enclosed and turned into private property in England. Communal land was partitioned up and distributed among major landowners. Social and economic ways of life that had existed for centuries were undone, sometimes in weeks. In 1817 a common at East Bergholt was finally enclosed, and although none of the fields at the back of Golding’s house were newly enclosed, there is a distance from the workers that serves to obscure the real conditions of the workers.

When John Constable’s first biographer C.R. Leslie visited Flatford after the artist’s death, he was amazed to find the subject of so many pictures all in one such small place.

As a local painter Constable would have been conscious of the degree to which a limited area of terrain could be differentiated topographically. In his biography, Leslie suggests that although Constable did visit the Lake District, he was not drawn to grand or sublime landscapes because he needed a landscape of 'human associations', an enclosed landscape around East Bergholt of meadows, arable land, and woodland shaped by man for his convenience; the physical interrelationships of towns, villages, farms and cottages, connected by tracks, roads and lanes. There is an undeniable domestic, provincial quality to Constable's landscapes: his native Suffolk landscape is the antithesis of the transcendental emptiness of the Lake District.


Over 150 years later, in 1987, environmental campaigner Marion Shoard wrote in her book *This Land is Our Land* that eighty seven per cent of

Britain's land was in private ownership. This fact alone made the British landscape inherently political.

6 Over a period of a year the artists Lawrence Bradby and Jevan Watkins Jones, with residents of Colchester, have carried out a series of six sod swaps - or as they call it 'turf twinnings'. The sources of turf have been publicly accessible land, although not necessarily publicly owned, selected for their location or specific uses. In conversation with land users the artists mediate to establish twinning sites. Once twinning sites are established, turfs are cut with land users according to a standard-design template - a 60cm diameter circle - that ensures the twinned turfs plug one another's hole. A gesture made by Richard Long over forty years earlier - that there would be no necessary visible outcome - still proved provocative today.

With no visible outcome or artwork as such, some land users felt the idea was a joke.

On a scale smaller even than Nash's *Sod Swaps*, *Turf Twinning* shares in the British tradition of Land Art's domestic ordinariness - an unconcern for visibility. Besides one plaque to commemorate a twinning in the walled gardens of an art gallery in the town, there are no other indications to announce that you're approaching a *Turf Twinning* site. Unlike Nash there are no botanists. Rather, the turf is a common ground for social interactions: at the very least it unites by shared concern for safe relocation of a living thing. Tracking of the twinned turfs gave rise to conversations about who owned, managed and demarcated space. For example, what one resident described as 'posh turf' swapped for 'working class' turf signaled a perceived social and political difference between the twinning of a lawn outside Colchester's firstsite gallery and the playing field of Greenstead housing estate. But in the



absence of material trace, conversations, recollections and searchings remain. Inherent to *Turf Twinning* is a powerful narrative about close looking, about the segment within the whole. The circular twinned turf represents a dynamic space of co-existence. We're never alone only with ourselves, but with other people, things and circumstances - in a shared environment.

Jonathan P Watts, September 2013





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