



# Art & Place

Site-Specific Art  
of the Americas

PHAIDON



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of the Americas

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*Art & Place* is the first in-depth look at the finest examples of permanently in situ site-specific art in the Americas. Collating over 500 artworks from fifteen different countries, *Art & Place* journeys across these vast continents – from the Queen Charlotte Islands off the west coast of Canada down to Santa Cruz in Patagonia, Argentina – providing a unique opportunity for everyone to see these remarkable pieces in their unconventional settings. Some sites are instantly recognizable – the carved Moai on Easter Island, for example – and others, such as Watts Towers in Los Angeles, are already popular tourist destinations visited by millions of people every year. However, some sites can only be visited on prearranged tours (the Rothko Chapel in Houston or Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* in New Mexico are two such cases), and still others are hard to access, perched high in the Peruvian Andes or, like the Totem Poles of Sḡang Gwaay Llnagaay, in a far-flung and deserted corner of British Columbia.

Site-specific art is a term applied to artworks that are conceived and created for a particular location or environment. Each of the works featured in *Art & Place* was chosen because their meaning or subject is closely intertwined with the place in which they are situated – and the observer's experience and interpretation of the work is unavoidably, and usually intentionally, framed by the political, social or geographic aspects of the location. It is this particular quality that makes these works of art some of the most accessible and involving on the planet. They can be visited in sculpture parks and museums, but they can also be found in open fields, on library ceilings, adorning opera houses, buried deep in caves, next to busy highways, bursting out of city plazas, shimmering in arid deserts, and even appearing in hydroelectric plants. One might even find works on an otherwise ordinary street or in an unremarkable office building. Yet wherever they are, these works have a dramatic impact on the viewer, which is born of uncovering the unexpected in the everyday.

Art brought out of traditional settings into new and unusual places is always exciting and experiential; it is frequently moving and, sometimes, the power of an artwork created specially for a specific venue can be entirely overwhelming.

*Art & Place* is arranged geographically, which creates thought-provoking juxtapositions and allows unexpected opportunities for comparison to arise. In Colombia, the installation *Auras Anónimas* by contemporary artist Beatriz González, housed in the main cemetery in Bogota, carries similar ideas to the carved motifs of the pre-Columbian



tombs of Tierradentro. In Mexico, Diego Rivera's celebrated and vivid murals for the Palacio de Cortés in Cuernavaca contrast with the more sombre grisaille murals of the Monastery of San Nicolas de Tolentino in San Luis Potosí, which depict solemn scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The unique curation and arrangement of *Art & Place* also highlights the myriad ways in which artists have been inspired by very specific settings – the historic Chumash painted caves in California, for example, or Nancy Holt's iconic piece *Sun Tunnels*, created in Utah's Great Basin Desert.

The unconventional road trip of *Art & Place* visits works from all periods: from the earliest instances of human expression created by ancient cultures and lost civilizations, such as the Nazca lines in Peru or the cave paintings in Cueva de las Manos in Argentina, to the very latest in twenty-first century contemporary art. An enormous variety of schools and styles are also examined, as well as a wealth of different techniques and media. Works created from the simplest materials – plant pigments, wood or earth – are juxtaposed with complex structures of polished steel and LED panels. Some of the sites featured contain pieces that are remarkable for their monumental scale (as demonstrated by Michael Heizer's epic *Double Negative* in Nevada, or the Serpent Mound earthwork in Ohio), while other artworks create immersive experiences from the site in which they are situated, as in Dan Flavin's mammoth neon installation at Richmond Hall in Houston, Texas. Many artists seek to create a personal refuge or place of respite in our bustling cities and invite quiet contemplation – as seen in the works gathered by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, for example – while the vast and yet intricate decoration of churches such as Santo Domingo de Guzmán in Oaxaca, Mexico, were specifically designed to stun and overawe the congregations sat before them.

*Art & Place* includes a section devoted to important site-specific works that were ephemeral or have been lost or destroyed, because although they are no longer visible they still have much to tell us about the genre. In addition, the book contains a detailed glossary of styles and movements to assist the reader in navigating the rich variety of works included.

The intentions of the numerous artists featured here and the purpose of their artworks vary dramatically. Whether they are architectural, murals with political themes, decorative ornamentation or urban revitalization and experimentation, all are pieces that serve to inspire us, create a sense of place and provide a crucial reflection of our ever-changing societies.



Through my research I try to find non-traditional solutions to the perception of the chromatic world and to the art concept. I'm a researcher who ... not only makes pieces for collections and museums, but also has to be present in the streets and in any environment that implies a collectivity.

I believe that a piece of art integrated to the city or habitat has to generate unprecedented events, which are in permanent evolution ...

The pieces I make for the habitat and urban surroundings are conceived as a plastic discourse that are generated in a real time and space, creating 'situations' and 'chromatic events' that change the dialectic between the observer and the artwork. My pieces do not withhold a 'referential speech', like the Gothic, or the Renaissance artists, or even Mexican muralists. They are raised from a different starting point, where real time and space replace referral or transposed time. They are supports of an event that changes and evolves.

They are 'realities' and 'autonomous situations'. 'Realities', because the events develop in time and space, and 'autonomous' because they don't depend on anecdotal content that the viewer is accustomed to seeing in art. They are pieces through which it is possible to establish a different knowledge relation. The audience discovers their capacity to create or destroy color through their own perceptive ways. They discover 'color in the making', surging and disappearing before their own eyes.

**Carlos Cruz-Diez**  
**Art in Architecture, 1996**

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I knew that the actual space of a room could be broken down and played with by planting illusions of real light (electric light) at crucial junctures in the room's composition. For example, if you press an eight-foot fluorescent lamp into the vertical climb of a corner, you can destroy that corner by glare and doubled shadow. A piece of wall can be visually disentangled from the whole into a separate triangle by plunging a diagonal of light from edge to edge on the wall; that is, side to floor, for instance. What has art been for me? In the past, I have known it (basically) as a sequence of implicit decisions to combine traditions of painting and sculpture in architecture with acts of electric light defining space.

**Dan Flavin**  
**Three Installations in Fluorescent Light, 1974**

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I don't particularly want to pursue the analogy between the gallery and the mudflats. I think the only important limitations on art are the ones imposed or accepted by the artist himself ... I work outside because it's the only place where I can displace mass. I like the scale – that's certainly one difference between working in a gallery and working outdoors. I'm not trying to compete in size with any natural phenomena, because it's technically impossible ...

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said,

is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect.

**Michael Heizer**  
**Avalanche, Autumn 1970**

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My land is in a large, flat valley with very little vegetation – it's land worn down by Lake Bonneville, an ancient lake that gradually receded over thousands of years ... The feeling of timelessness is overwhelming.

'Time' is not just a mental concept or a mathematical abstraction in the desert. The rocks in the distance are ageless; they have been deposited in layers over hundreds of thousands of years. 'Time' takes on a physical presence. About 30 miles south of *Sun Tunnels* are the Bonneville Salt Flats, one of the few areas in the world where you can actually see the curvature of the earth. Being part of that kind of landscape, and walking on earth that has surely never been walked on before, evokes a sense of being on this planet, rotating in space, in universal time.

I wanted to bring the vast space of the desert back to human scale. I had no desire to make a megalithic monument. The panoramic view of the landscape is too overwhelming to take in without visual reference points ... Through the tunnels, parts of the landscape are framed and come into focus ... [They] extend the viewer visually into the landscape, opening up the perceived space. But once inside the tunnels, the work encloses – surrounds – and there is a framing of the landscape through the ends of the tunnels and through the holes ...

The idea for *Sun Tunnels* became clear to me while I was in the desert watching the sun rising and setting, keeping the time of Earth. *Sun Tunnels* can exist only in that particular place – the work evolved out of its site.

**Nancy Holt**  
**Artforum, April 1977**

---

It takes a great deal of time and thought to install work carefully. This should not always be thrown away. Most art is fragile and some should be placed and never moved again. Some work is too large, complex and expensive to move. Somewhere, a portion of contemporary art has to exist as an example of what the art and its context were meant to be. Somewhere, just as the platinum-iridium metre guarantees the tape measure, a strict measure must exist for the art of this time and place. Otherwise, art is only show and monkey business.

**Donald Judd, from 'Statement for the Chinati Foundation', 1986**

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Empty space has no visual dimension or significance. Scale and meaning appear, instead, only when an object or a line is introduced ... The size and shape of each element is entirely relative to all other elements and the given space.

**Isamu Noguchi**  
**A Sculptor's World, 1968**

---

I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum. I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero ...

I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and

spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself.

I am for the art that grows in a pot, that comes down out of the skies at night, like lightning, that hides in the clouds and growls. I am for art that is flipped on and off like a switch ...

I am for the art of scratchings in the asphalt, daubing at the walls. I am for the art of bending down and kicking metal and breaking glass, and pulling at things to make them fall down ...

**Claes Oldenburg**  
**'I Am for an Art...', December, 1961**

---

To me a piece of sculpture inside a room is a disruption of interior space. It's a protrusion, an unnecessary addition to what could be a sufficient space in itself. My transition to earth materials took place ... when I cut a wedge from the side of a mountain. I was more concerned with the negative process of excavating that shape from the mountainside than with making an earthwork as such. It was just a coincidence that I did this with earth.

**Dennis Oppenheim**  
**Avalanche, Autumn 1970**

---

Imagine the New York Stock Exchange in a French cathedral. Imagine the brokers all rigged out like Indian chieftains, with head feathers or with Mexican sombreros. The architecture of Manhattan is the first step. Painting and sculpture must certainly follow as inevitable second steps ... The highest, the most logical, the purest and strongest form of painting is the mural. In this form alone, it is one with the other art – with all the others ... It is, too, the most disinterested form, for it cannot be made a matter of private gain; it cannot be hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few. It is for the people. It is for ALL.'

**José Clemente Orozco**  
**As quoted in Orozco, 1980**

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I very often travel to a particular area; that's the primary phase. I begin in a very primitive way by going from one point to another. I started taking trips to specific sites in 1965: certain sites would appeal to me more – sites that had been in some way disrupted or pulverized. I was really looking for a denaturalization rather than built-up scenic beauty. And when you take a trip you need a lot of precise data, so often I would use quadrangle maps; the mapping followed the travelling.

The first non-site that I did was at the Pine Barrens in southern New Jersey. This place was in a state of equilibrium, it had a kind of tranquillity and it was discontinuous from the surrounding area because of its stunted pine trees. There was a hexagon airfield there which lent itself very well to the application of certain crystalline structures which had preoccupied me in my earlier work. A crystal can be mapped out, and in fact I think it was crystallography which led me to map-making. Initially I went to the Pine Barrens to set up a system of outdoor pavements but in the process I became interested in the abstract aspects of mapping. At the same time I was working with maps and aerial photography for an architectural company. I had great access to them. So I decided to use the Pine Barrens site as a piece of paper and draw a crystalline structure over the landmass rather than on a 20 x 30 sheet of paper. In this way I was applying my



conceptual thinking directly to the disruption of the site over an area of several miles. So you might say my non-site was a three-dimensional map of the site.

**Robert Smithson**

***Avalanche, Autumn 1970***

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*Star Axis*: capturing star geometry in human scale, experiencing star alignments in physical form, entering the Earth to reach the stars. You don't have to know the technical details. The artwork places you inside the star alignments.

When I searched for the land, I was looking for a certain quality I couldn't define. Couldn't put my finger on it. Then when I found the site, I knew immediately. It's a place where you feel like you are standing at the boundary of Earth and Sky. Here your feet are planted on the Earth and your head is in the space of the stars with the horizon at your midsection.

**Charles Ross, 2013**

---

I went on with my mural in the National Palace, and by the time I completed the arches, I judged it the finest thing I had ever done. I am still proud of this stairway mural ... The murals before it had all set isolated figures and groups of figures against large and quiet backgrounds. In this mural, I borrowed the architectonic movement of the stairway itself and related it to the dynamic upward ascent of the Revolution. Each personage in the mural was dialectically connected with his neighbors, in accordance with his role in history. Nothing was solitary; nothing was irrelevant. My National Palace mural is the only plastic poem I know of which embodies the whole history of a people in its composition.

[...] I gave myself the task of integrating the movement of the figures with the rhythm of the architecture, with the movement of history in time and space, and with the movement of the landscape ascending from the valleys to the mountains. I was very happy with the outcome.

**Diego Rivera**

***My Art, My Life: An Autobiography, 1960***

---

In most of my work the site is part and parcel of the content. It takes the focus off the object and makes the viewer the subject ... I wanted to get away from the imagistic value of an object in an empty space and instead put the focus on the experience of the entirety of the context.

I don't think public sculpture is going to change the world, but I do think it might be a catalyst for thought. To see is to think and to think is to see. If you can change someone's way of seeing, you might change their way of thinking. That will be impossible if works don't exist in public spaces.

**Richard Serra**

**from 'A Conversation about Work with Richard Serra' in *Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years*, 2007**

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The scale of the *Spiral Jetty* tends to fluctuate depending on where the viewer happens to be. Size determines an object, but scale determines art. A crack in the wall if viewed in terms of scale, not size, could be called the Grand Canyon. A room could be made to take on the immensity of the solar system. Scale depends on one's capacity to be conscious of the actualities of perception. When one refuses to release scale from size, one is left

with an object or language that appears to be certain. For me scale operates by uncertainty. To be in the scale of the *Spiral Jetty* is to be out of it. On eye level, the tail leads one into an undifferentiated state of matter. One's downward gaze pitches from side to side, picking out random depositions of salt crystals on the inner and outer edges, while the entire mass echoes the irregular horizons. And each cubic salt crystal echoes the *Spiral Jetty* in terms of the crystal's molecular lattice. Growth in a crystal advances around a dislocation point, in the manner of a screw. The *Spiral Jetty* could be considered one layer within the spiralling crystal lattice, magnified trillions of times.

**Robert Smithson**

***The Collected Writings, 1996***

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What I wanted was to show that space is more important than any element or object. Contrary to what we have always believed, space is not something that is filled with objects: objects are in fact filled with space. Space flows: nothing limits it. I'm interested in showing people who are interested in space as a quality or a universal density that in fact it is space which is in control, it defines and sets its own conditions.

**Jesús Rafael Soto in conversation with**

**Hans Ulrich Obrist in *Jesús Rafael Soto: Visione in Movimento*, 2006**

---

My works don't illustrate scientific principles, but I want them to express a certain consciousness, a certain knowing. My spaces must be sensitive to events outside themselves. They must bring external events into themselves. I think of my works as being important in terms of what they have to do with us and our relationship to the universe, but not necessarily in scientific terms. I'm concerned with what my spaces direct their seeing to, and hence what they direct our seeing to. At the same time, I'm interested in the expression of time. Because, even though you may have expressions of our particular historical moment in, say, the art of Andy Warhol, there are also expressions that go through time, beyond time, and have a sense of themselves that transcends any specific period. That's the part of art I'm interested in. That said, however, I do want to be involved with the here and now. I want my art to function in contemporary terms.

**James Turrell in conversation with Craig Adcock, in *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space*, 1990**

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Carlos Cruz-Diez: 'Art in Architecture', 1996, text supplied courtesy of the artist; Dan Flavin: *Dan Flavin: Three Installations in Fluorescent Light*, Wallraf-Richartz-Museums in der Kunsthalle Köln, 1973-4; Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim and Robert Smithson: 'Interview with *Avalanche*', *Avalanche*, New York, Autumn 1970, reprinted in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt, New York University Press, 1979; Nancy Holt: 'Sun Tunnels', *Artforum* 15, no. 1, April 1977; Donald Judd: 'Statement for the Chinati Foundation', 1986, in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1975-1986*, Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1987; Isamu Noguchi: *Isamu Noguchi: A Sculptor's World*, Harper & Row, 1968; Claes Oldenburg: 'I am for an Art...', *The Store*, New York, December 1961, reprinted in *Oldenburg*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1970; José Clemente Orozco: *Orozco*, Council of the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1980; Charles Ross: text supplied courtesy of the artist; Diego Rivera: *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography* (with Gladys March), Citadel Press, 1960, reprinted by Dover Publications, 1991; Richard Serra: 'A Conversation about Work with Richard Serra' by Kynaston McShine, in *Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years*, eds McShine and Cooke, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2007; Robert Smithson: 'Robert Smithson in conversation with Gianni Pettenna in Salt Lake City (1972)', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, University of California Press, 1996; Jesús Rafael Soto: Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist in *Jesús Rafael Soto: Visione in Movimento*, Silvana, 2006; James Turrell: Artist in conversation with Craig Adcock, in *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space*, Craig Adcock, University of California Press, 1990.



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Canada



# SGang Gwaay Llnagaay

## Haida Culture

Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, Queen Charlotte Islands, BC, Canada

The totem poles at SGang Gwaay Llnagaay – often referred to as Ninstints or Nan Sdins – form a part of the nineteenth-century Haida village on a small island off the west coast of Haida Gwaii (or the Queen Charlotte Islands). The thirty-two carvings comprise the largest collection of Haida totem poles still found at their original location.

Haida people had occupied the village for thousands of years, at times with populations of about 300 inhabitants. However, the village was abandoned around the end of the nineteenth century. The site has been damaged by weather and, while the totem poles have withstood the elements to a greater degree, only the ruins of ten longhouses remain. However, the crucial significance of this site as an example of Haida culture and society can be noted by its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1981.

The SGang Gwaay Llnagaay poles are both memorial and mortuary totems. Memorial poles, usually located in front of the family dwelling, mark the homes of important members of the community. Leading families or chiefs would compete among each other to erect the tallest and most impressive totem poles as an indication of their respective wealth and power. Haida people created this form of memorial monument in the late pre-contact period, and the practice spread across the northwest coast quickly. The aesthetic of the carvings is characteristic of the northwest coast formline style, the most iconic and popular First Nations arts tradition from early contact through to the present. The totem poles represent individual family crests and the carved imagery is comprised of many different aspects of Haida life, including animals, vegetation, spiritual figures, human figures and objects of material culture.

Mortuary poles commemorate the passing of significant members of the SGang Gwaay Llnagaay community by interring their remains inside the poles. Although the village is long abandoned, the Haida consider this site to be a sacred place, and so visitors are asked to stick to the paths and respect the spiritual presence.



1. SGang Gwaay Llnagaay  
Haida Culture, evidence of occupation  
c.200 BC – AD c.1880s
2. Memorial Totem Poles
3. Detail of carvings showing anthropo-  
zoomorphic features



