

ART&GREEN 2

NEW LAND ART

by Claudia Zanfi



Roman Ondak, "Loop"
Venice Biennial 2009 (photo Claudia Zanfi)

Around the end of the '60s and the start of the '70s, the Land Art phenomenon started to emerge from the conceptual themes, which in Italy were taking a turn towards *Arte Povera*. Traditional exhibition spaces began to be put in doubt, while the territory itself was taken as both medium and subject of the work. For the first time, an attempt was made to act on nature without any will to represent it. Through Land Art, artists came out of the traditional gallery and museum spaces and intervened directly on the natural landscape. The great open spaces of the USA and the wealth of uninhabited and unspoilt environments afforded the ideal environment in which artists could physically develop their aesthetics and ideas. The deserts, lakes, valleys and plains thus became the natural workshops for the artists of this movement. The shape most often adopted, the spiral, is in fact an open form, which in terms of '*Gestalt*' cannot be understood without embracing the very concept of nature and infinity.

Land Art originally developed as a largely British experience, although many American artists also adhered to the movement. One of the main precursors was the Englishman Richard Long, who began to design works which foresaw interventions on landscape (installations, digs, sowings) or even *across* the landscape (his 'long walks', pathways and itineraries). In the '70s, the most famous and monumental works were created, such as 'Spiral Jetty', an enormous spiral structure by Robert Smithson, built into the Salt Lake of Utah, and 'Double Negative' by Michael Heizer, a land cut and fill created in the Nevada desert. Land Art then enjoyed great development and success also in Europe, where Christo may be considered the artist most representative of the new school, wrapping up large buildings and even whole islands with kilometres of white or coloured plastic sheeting. In 1976 Richard Long, at the Venice Biennale, presented his 'Sculpture in

Stone', a composition of stones placed geometrically on the floor of the pavilion, crossing a number of rooms to lead out of the closed space, continuing outside. And this kind of ode to nature, of dialogue between the inside and out in a harmonious research into that which surrounds us, was found once more in forms of New Land Art, like in the work by Roman Ondak 'Loop'. Created for the 2009 Venice Biennale, the work is a gravel path which leads into and crosses the entire Romania Pavilion, with evergreen hedges and bushes running all along the sides. On closer inspection, it is simply a faithful reproduction of the paths that may be followed outside in the Gardens to reach the various national pavilions. Ondak makes a thoroughly successful attempt to create a line of continuity between what we see and experience on the outside of the pavilion and on the inside. His is a game of table-turning and estrangement which places nature centre stage in this intriguing work.



Arte Sella, 2011
(ph Claudia Zecchi)



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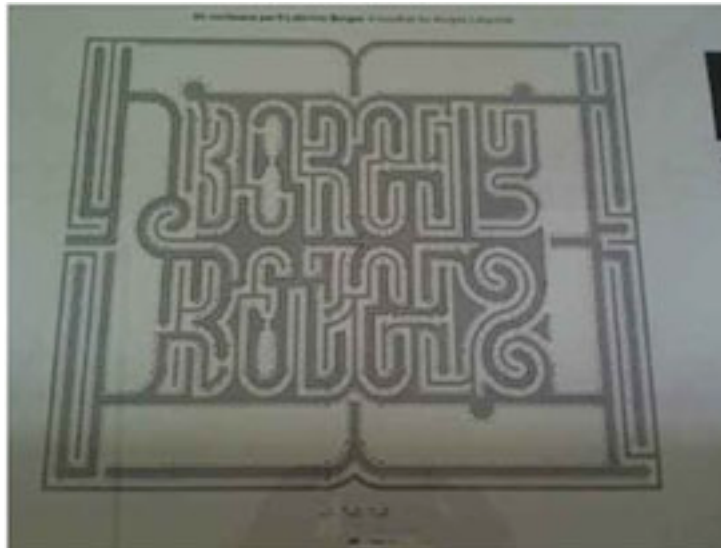
Giuliano Mauri, "Carosello Ugnoli",
Val Trompia 2010 (ph Claudia Zecchi)

Dedicating this initial analysis of the new forms of Land Art above all to the works visible and created in Italy, we need to move into the wide open spaces, green expanses and woodlands, such as our mountain areas. Since 1986 the Dolomites have been home to the 'Arte Sella' project, which unfolds along a forest path on the southern side of Mount Armentera, in the Sella Valley (Borgo Valsugana, in the province of Trento). We find ourselves in the midst of an itinerary in which the visitor may admire the works and at the same time enjoy all the particular elements of the environment, such as the variety of the wood itself, the presence of characteristic stones and monumental trees. The interventions are carried out by artists from right across the world, like Matilde Grau, Giuliano Mauri, Patrick Dougherty, Anni Rapinoja, Maria Dompè, Dimitri Xenakis, Francois Lelong, to name but a few, who spend the entire summer here in order to bring their artwork to life. The artistic project sets out to be not only an art exhibition in its own right, but also and above all a creative process: each artist's intervention is expressed in harmony with nature, drawing inspiration and stimulus from it. The works are largely created using materials from the place and of an organic nature: stones, leaves, branches or tree trunks. At the end of the event, the works are left in the wood and are reintegrated into its natural life cycle. It should be noted that in this new form of naturalist art, the

artist is no longer the absolute protagonist, unlike the '70s experience of Land Art, which instead was characterised by a definite 'marking' of the territory.

The key to these works lies in their being able to create not only an outstanding element in contemporary art, but rather a community of people made up of artists, visitors and project operators, in the belief that the Earth should not be subjected to Man, and that Nature, Beauty and Culture are values to follow, seek out and enjoy together in a form of harmonious and sustainable development of the territory. A solitary artist who has long worked towards this goal throughout his career – both artistic and human – is Giuliano Mauri, from Lodi (Milano), who owes his notoriety to his countless poetic environmental interventions. Using branches and tree trunks, willow in particular, the artist constructs fantastical buildings, cathedrals, bridges, roundabouts, spiralling stairways, islands and skies, often defined as 'plant architecture'.

Mauri considers himself a 'carpenter of nature'; in actual fact, his art has gone beyond the historical dichotomy between aesthetics and nature, and his installations, created exclusively using natural materials recycled from tree pruning, appear to be in perfect harmony with the environment. Among his most famous works we might cite the evocative '*Cattedrale Vegetale*' ('Green Cathedral'), created in various woodland sites including Val di Sella (Province of Trento) and Val Trompia (Province of Brescia) and the '*Voliera per umani*' ('Aviary for Humans') to be found in Monza Park. The work is of notable size (25 mt in diameter and 12 mt high), and is made up of interweaving strips of wood. The aviary spans out from a central pillar, and visitors may walk around the circumference via a spiralling walkway. The branches used are all from pruning work carried out on the woodland and thus it is the entire park itself – with its beeches, elms and chestnuts – that contributes to this Land Art installation. In this way, Mauri brings back to life the wood of these trees even after their biological death. And although the installation is designed to last, it too will meet its end when time and the elements wear down its binding and cause the structure to collapse, in keeping with the passing of the seasons.





“Borges’ Labyrinth”, Fondazione Cini – Isola di San Giorgio, Venice 2011 (photo Claudia Zanfi)

“I dream obsessively of a small, clean labyrinth, at the centre of which there lies an amphora which I can almost touch with my hands, which I have seen with my own eyes, but the paths around it are so winding, so confused that only this becomes clear: I would be dead before I reached it” (Labyrinthes, by J.L.Borges). Even the construction of ‘labyrinths’, ancient method of laying down plant mazes on a territory (very much in use in the English gardens of the 18th century), may be considered a form of Land Art. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the death of the acclaimed Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges (14th June 1986 – 14th June 2011), the *Fondazione Cini* opened the ‘*Labirinto Borges*’ on the Island of St. George in Venice: a reconstruction of the maze-garden that the English landscape artist Randall Coate designed in his honour. This maze has a familiar feel to it if we read the works of Borges, although it is quite easy to get lost in his fantastic imagery. The Labyrinth may be found in the space behind the *Chiostro del Palladio* and the *Chiostro dei Cipressi*, thus constituting a sort of ‘third cloister’, roughly the same size as the other two. This plant work is created with the use of around 3,200 box trees, lining almost three kilometres of pathway. The box trees are cut at the height of around one metre from the ground in order to allow for a view of the whole. Seen from above, the work features the design of an open book, covered with symbols dear to the poet (a stick, an hourglass, a tiger and a question mark). Then there is the use of symmetry: the box trees spell out the name ‘Borges’ in two opposite directions. The aim of the project is to create a garden in memory of the writer, creating a space full of spiritual meanings and in harmony with nature. The ultimate aim, of course, is to find the way out, but we might just prefer to lose ourselves in the ‘*Labirinto Borges*’!

We shall end this first chapter with a sentence uttered by Beuys in 1984 during a conference on the theme of the ‘Defence of Nature’: “We plant trees and trees plant us, for we belong to each other and we must exist together.” In this sense, today, the message of Land Art is extremely contemporary; it is up to us to grasp it and modify that indifference towards the transformation of the territory, which in many parts of the world continues to take place without the slightest regulation.