

# In Land: Writings Around Land Art and Its Legacies

Ben Tufnell . Zero Books . 2019

Reviewed by **Lisa Le Feuvre**

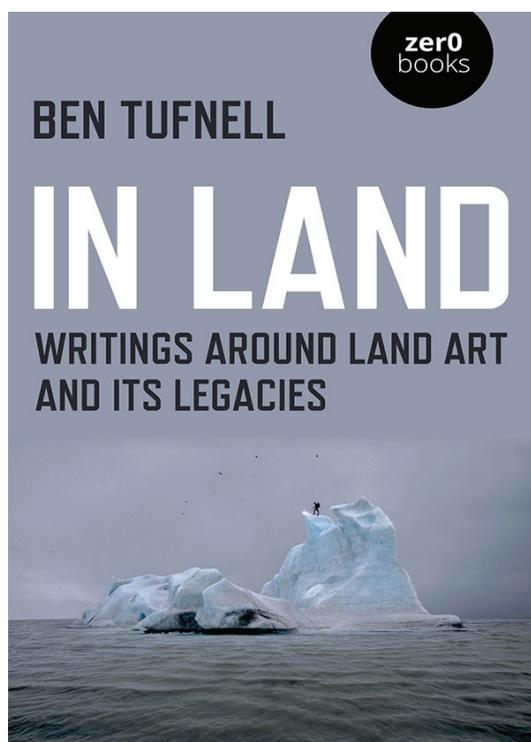
Landscape is first made by geological history, and second by human history. In the late 1960s a number of artists across the globe started to create sculptural situations in the landscape, far from urban hubs of art making, directly addressing these processes. For millennia human beings had marked the surface of the planet in extraordinary ways, but this was something different. These actions grew out of the contemporaneous expanding highway networks, developed from climate-change consciousness that was spurred by post-industrialization, and riffed off humankind's launch off the limits of the known world to the moon – an event that pushed bird's eye views of our planet into mass consciousness. These artists' excursions and incursions were fed back to the museum through photography, film, objects, texts, and conversation: as the critic Dore Ashton noted at the time, this was artwork made to be seen.

'Land art' was the moniker that came to describe such activities. One of the first public uses of the term was made by Gerry Schum and Ursula Wevers in a landmark exhibition they created to be experienced on German mainstream television. In 1969, the 'Television Gallery' broadcast European and North American artists addressing the landscape. Their approach was not to present landscape, nor to show an ideal rural beauty. It was to get literally down and dirty with the matter of the land. Holes were dug, rocks were moved, earth was displaced. Schum and Wevers chose to title their wordless thirty-eight-minute program 'Land Art', having rejected their initial title 'Landscape Art.' This would become the descriptive term for some of the most radical art that would follow, as well as a means to address the long history of earthworks. Evoking and landscape and displacing a place, Land art intensifies what we think we might know about the places we inhabit.

Ben Tufnell is both an expert on and enthusiast of Land art. This collection of short monographic essays written between 2002 and 2017 gathers his musings on actions of artists who could be considered Land artists. Like so many art historical terms, Land art is a description that artists equally adopt and rail against. Tufnell is interested in circling around Land art, not in defining it. He opens up what Land art might be, rather than tying it to a dogma. His method is to follow the artists whose names (willingly and otherwise) are regarded as part of the coordinates of Land art. He looks to those fundamental to the development of this art historical genre, such as Nancy Holt, Richard Long, and Ana Mendieta, as well as to artists who would refute inclusion, such as Roger Ackling and Katie Paterson. For Tufnell, Land art is an attitude and method, not a monumental gesture.

Tracing networks of ideas across time and geography, an autobiographical line weaves through Tufnell's texts. We learn Tufnell was a curator at Tate, that he was an only child who reveled in discovering the landscape, and that he has an inquiring mind, open to testing assumptions. In this collection he pays particular attention to the ways artists, museums, and exhibition-makers have understood artists' Land art in Britain. Hamish Fulton was the artist who revealed to Tufnell how artists' interrogation of landscape and place can enable alternative ways to understand how we might find our place on this planet. In an interview in this volume, Fulton makes a careful reminder that attitudes to landscape and environment are always in flux. As assumptions wax and wane, we often find it unimaginable that previous humans actions on landscape could ever have been acceptable. Land art is concerned with perception and sensation: perception is akin to geography, to reading space through coordinates; sensation is akin to landscape, to revealing ideas through inhabitation.

An artist Tufnell describes as haunting his writings is Robert Smithson, whose ideas indeed spiral through these texts. Smithson clearly articulated in a 1969 interview that to look to remote sites and to the surface of our planet was to make 'the landscape as coextensive with the gallery. He continued: I don't think we are dealing with a back to nature movement. For me the world is a museum. [...] I'm totally concerned with making art and this is mainly an act of viewing, a mental activity that zeros in on discrete sites.' To write around rather than on is to create a discussion, not to set a prescription. It is also to create a climate of ideas - climate as the philosopher Bruno La Tour understands it: the broad sense of the relations between human beings and the material conditions of their lives. The environment is us and we are it: the composition of the air we breathe, and the land gravity pulls us to has been formed by human beings, it is not independent of us. Land art in its long and short histories re-mapped and stretched the limits of what art might be. Art does not create the future, rather it vibrates with what is already tingling in the nerve endings. In this collection, Tufnell invites the reader to accompany him on this journey, with perception and sensation the roadmap.



**Lisa Le Feuvre** is a curator, writer, editor and public speaker. In November 2017 she was appointed as the inaugural Executive Director of the Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson Foundation.

Focusing on art as a powerful force to retune perceptions, Lisa Le Feuvre has a track record of world-class programming and effective leadership.