

A profusion of terms

By Sami Bower, executive director of greenmuseum.com

Many artists and critics use the words “environmental art,” “eco-art” and even “land art” interchangeably or at times use the same term to mean different things. At greenmuseum.org, we use “environmental art” as an umbrella term to encompass “eco-art,” “ecological art,” “ecoventions,” “land art,” “Earth art,” “Earthworks,” “art in nature” and even a few other less-common terms.

“Environmental art” is an older term that is useful but might best be thought of as a starting point for the further exploration of ideas and, given plenty of sun, fertile soil and water, should be expected to transcend its

There is also the term “art in nature,” which is used more often in Europe, and refers more to creating beautiful forms (usually outdoors) with natural materials found on-site such as flower petals, mud, twigs and icicles. Content-wise, contemporary “art in nature” seems to find more inspiration in a type of Romantic Minimalism, reveling in the abstract beauty and decorative potential of ephemeral natural forms. As such, it usually lacks overt feminist, ecological or political content. What “messages” these works have are much more subtle. Many projects take the form of site-specific performances or installations carefully documented in often stunning photographs which are then sold in galleries or in elegant coffee-table books.

Many of these same artists also describe their work as “land art,” which is an older term from the '60s and '70s that has survived in common usage and suggests art made outdoors on the land. Early innovators created simple lines and geometric forms on the earth by walking back and forth and considered it “land art.”

“Crop art” could be considered a variation of “land art” and typically refers to large images made in agricultural fields visible from the air. Some aerial projects involve large numbers of volunteers and a wide range of objects arranged to form an image or convey a message.

“Earthworks” and “Earth art” are also considered as specific forms of “land art” where the idea is to shape the land in aesthetic ways. Many earthworks have involved bringing soil indoors, carving large shapes into the earth



“Like a Rock From a Tree?” by Steven Siegel. To view more of Siegel's work, visit www.stevensiegel.net.

in remote places and the creation of monumental cement constructions in the desert that essentially use the earth itself as stage, material and canvas for conceptual art ideas.

Painting and photography addressing environmental issues are also an important part of this movement. “Social sculpture,” “slow food,” “new media art,” “bio-art” and “recycled art” all fit in here, too.

How much the many forms of “environmental art” ends up benefiting the Earth is a matter of further discussion and analysis. If our goal is to create a sustainable human population on the Earth, then I think we are just seeing the very beginnings of where this work is headed. Most art that claims to be “environmental” or “ecological” isn't really helping the worms and watersheds at all. Until we begin to consider art for non-humans seriously as a means of healing our relationship with the natural world, then we will just be scratching the surface of what's possible.

Rotations: Moore Estates by Matthew Moore sits on 35 acres of soon-to-be developed farmland. Moore planted sorghum to indicate homes and wheat for the roads. Visit www.urbanplough.com for more information.



“Fields of Salt” by Linda Gass. To view more work by Gass, visit www.lindagass.com. Photo by Don Tuttle.

roots. The urge is sometimes just to make up a different term, such as “green art” or “sustainable art” or “Post-Carbon Art” and hope that solves the need for freshness. “Restoration art,” another term that appears occasionally, refers to art that “restores” polluted or damaged ecosystems and landscapes. This would be considered a form of “eco-art.”

Then, there is ecovention. Coined in 1999, the term “ecovention” (ecology plus invention) describes an artist-initiated project that employs an inventive strategy to physically transform a local ecology. As an exhibition-based concept, ecovention is steadily becoming more familiar.

And we're not done.