

Learning from Land Arts: Deep and Immediate Temporal Crossings

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The recent documentary *Through the Repellent Fence: A Land Art Film* (Dir. Sam Wainwright Douglas, 2017) quotes the Land Arts of the American West program director saying “the most important work they [the participants] are going to make, is work that is ten years out. Its how this experience, and the work they make, shifts and alters their perception of the world. And, their relationship to shaping the world.” It is a provocation crossing deep and immediate time. This paper will select a group of former Land Arts program participants, architects, artists and writers, to examine the impact and trajectory of the experience on the formation of their identity and work as shapers of worlds.

Land Arts of the American West is a “semester abroad in our own backyard” attracting architects, artists, and writers since 2000 to investigate the intersection of human construction and the evolving nature of the planet. Land art, or earthworks, index the complex array of human activity shaping our worlds—in petroglyphs, roads, dwellings, monuments and traces of those actions—to show us who we are. Its itinerary crosses six-thousand miles overland to experience major land art monuments—Double Negative, Spiral Jetty, Sun Tunnels, The Lightning Field—while also visiting sites to expand an understanding of what land art might be. Participants camp for two months witnessing pre-contact archeology at sites such as Chaco Canyon and infrastructure at Hoover Dam, as well as military-industrial operations in the Great Salt Lake Desert and scientific exploration at the Very Large Array. They experience remote sites like the north rim of the Grand Canyon and Gila Wilderness in addition to occupied zones such as Wendover, Utah and

Marfa, Texas. As they travel they make their own work in the landscapes they inhabit to calibrate the expanding range of their examinations. Past participants from North America, Australia, Chile and Spain have included art, architecture, art history and creative writing graduate and advanced undergraduate students from a wide range of institutions. The program includes enrollment in the Land Arts studio and seminar with two months of field work from late August through October followed by the return to a studio on campus for the remainder of the fall term. Work produced is exhibited publicly the following Spring to share the production with wider audiences.

This paper will assess sustaining impacts of Land Arts participation by revealing fundamental sensibilities that permeate individual and collective responses to shaping worlds across proximate and remote time.



Figure 1: Celeste Martinez being interviewed by Sam Wainwright Douglas during filming at Double Negative, Mormon Mesa, Nevada, .4 Sep 2011. Photograph by Chris Taylor.



Figure 2: Jana La Brasca speaking about her master's thesis research on Bruce Conner's film *Crossroads, Marfa, Texas*, 2017. Photograph by Jana La Brasca.

INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of this paper is to sample alumni from Land Arts of the American West at Texas Tech University¹ to examine the sustaining impacts of their experience with the program. Following a temporal provocation captured in the recent documentary film by Sam Wainwright Douglas: "for me, the most important work they are going to make is work that ten years out. It's how this experience, and the work they make, shifts and alters their perception of the world. And, their relationship to shaping the world."² The impetus of this paper is to interview Land Arts alumni and learn what they carry forward, across time, from their experience.

Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things.³

JANA LA BRASCA

Originally from Southern California Jana studied art history at the University of California at Berkeley, before arriving in Marfa for an internship with the Chinati and then Judd Foundations. Her interest in the Land Arts program emerged when she helped lead a group tour and was drawn into the dialog and sensibility of the program participants. Beyond the dust and road wear, she was curious about the modes of operation and spheres of interaction that develop through Land Arts field experience.

As an art historian Jana's work took different forms from the architects and artists who generally construct objects, images, and situations. Central to Jana's work was observation, and description. Honing her craft of looking (or listening) and writing about what she reveals through the process. This led her to produce a research paper that began with her observations of landscapes, journeys and what she found out there—from light to laundromats—and linked them with historic accounts of past explorers who traversed similar if not the same terrain. While this paper was central to the body of

work Jana produced, and she made a point to say “it has influenced everything I have written since,”⁴ it was not the primary take away of her experience. In our interview, she discussed the importance of “throwing oneself into data collection mode,” into a very broad way of looking. And to, “always take notes” to be open to the possibility of turning around to see that, what you are “creating is interesting enough to mine for the next idea.”

“The only way to get acquainted with your work is to go through it,” she said. “That shaped the way I’ve thought about the world and what I’m supposed to make.” And, Jana’s work was not only text based. There were visual interventions pursued, and not surprisingly they were about looking.

When Land Arts returns from the field participants map out the projects they are developing for completion and exhibition. After Jana presented during a group critique she was asked about *Inge*, an alter personae she had been developing of a German researcher looking for ‘Tubes of the American West.’ After some discussion, a public lecture by *Inge* became a project.⁵ While this was great fun, it was also another way for Jana to hone her voice. For her to bring humor into the sensibility and precision of her research.

The primary and lasting impact of Jana’s experience in Land Arts was “becoming aware of the nuclear history of the southwest.” It was “impactful” and went on to inform her master’s thesis⁶ and continues to mark the direction of her upcoming PhD work. Her thesis focused on Bruce Conner’s film *Crossroads*⁷ and the curious response to a film made of declassified military footage of the first underwater atomic bomb test, in 1946, as a work of art. Jana asks, “why is it that people in the 70s saw the explosion and wrote about it as land art, as a work of sculpture?” And, she said that while the “extremely violent and threatening way it was digested through aesthetics has to do with land art, it probably has to do with much broader, and weirder, things.”

Most important from my perspective is Jana’s remark that her experience with Land Arts allowed her “to create a road map that I continue to use in the work I’ve made since.” Reflecting on her decision to participate in the program she was struck by this “being what school could be like and realizing that this was the kind of school I wanted to attend.” She thought of herself as a creative and curious person yet without clear strategies for “how to discipline those aspects” of herself “outside of being a straight A student at Berkeley.” Land Arts allowed her “to figure out how to be my intellectual and creative self at the same time. The person I’m supposed to be and the person I know I am. It’s both vague and overwhelmingly important.”

JARROD BECK

Jarrold Beck, a participant from eleven years ago, who studied architecture at Tulane University and printmaking at the University of Texas at Austin. He talks about print, something he remains deeply connected with, as a way for him to enter an art world.



Figure 3: Jarrold Beck leading a workshop at Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas, Venezuela, 2013. Photograph by Meredith Kohut.

He participated in Land Arts 2006 producing a body of work that expanded forcefully from print to space.

When we sat down to talk in his Brooklyn studio he jumped in to say the “moment of having to think about what I was going to take with me to Land Arts was the beginning. Just like architecture school structured the research side of what I’m interested in, and what I’m still doing today.”⁸

“I’m still building by thesis⁹ in a way. It was Land Arts that made me see—made me fall into a structure—and figure out a way of working outside a typical studio environment.”

“It makes so much more sense to me through my education as an architect. Having to get somewhere, approach a site, establish a program, and move really fast.”

He went on to say “that’s why I’ve been so successful with residencies. I can go in and make myself create a space, make work, be enriched by the conversation around me, without becoming distracted or unfocused. Then I can move on.”

“Sometimes it’s hard” he continued “because I do go through studios like underwear.”

Considering the direct lineage from his Land Arts experience, Jarrod talked about how he uses residences to do research and development work for major projects.¹⁰ For his project, *The Moon*, he used his time at the MacDowell Colony to develop the necessary paper pulp technologies and shifts in scale.

Commenting on an aspect of the program that left a deep impression Jarrod said: “if you have to put parenthesis around anything I’ve done before I was thirty—that is still influencing me now—it’s the experience of living and working with the *no trace ethic* in Land Arts.” A decade later Jarrod is in the business of making things for the world. Of making traces. In the field the *no trace ethic* is productive and necessary for living and working in the wilderness. Later it becomes a sense of obligation and knowing what we are responsible for, and carrying that responsibility forward. Jarrod spoke about the importance of being ready, willing and able to make a mess to generate work. Yet, also knowing that he must deal with that mess. He can’t just walk away and expect someone to come in after him to clean up. Jarrod also acknowledges that he uses “a bit of exhaustion” in his practice. Particularly when teaching, “to get people to focus and put the phones down.”

In a workshop he led in Venezuela,¹¹ he activated students through a procession of found materials to demonstrate relationships they found in the architecture and its archive of the collaboration between architect Carlos Raul Villanueva and artist Alexander Calder to create the Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas.¹² Students manifested drawings with material.

With *The Moon*, which was made of compressed paper pulp, Jarrod brought in his practice of writing. Which, he says is persistent even when not exhibited. From his sketchbook narrative, which became a book¹³ supporting the project, he realized “*The Moon* had to be peeled.” So, he engaged a group of dancers who, had to go to *The Moon*, and peel it apart.

Performance operates in Jarrod’s work in multiple ways. First, through traditional focus, like looking for or at a group of dancers and performers. And, second, to create situations for people to spend time with his work so they can begin to pay attention to other things. Time is a material in his work.

Perhaps this comes from his assessment that “Land Arts is insane.” Being so fast and something that you are literally in. Recalling the importance of managing the balance of a group he said: “I became a total asshole and shut down, not speaking to people for two days. While I feel horrible about it, that was my moment to work through.” “There is power in letting go of all the other stuff to focus on how the group with get through the experience.” He went on to say “there are parts of grad school I don’t remember and there is a lot of Land Arts that remains vivid. It was really. . . The way I want to live.”

Jarrod has “decided to move through the world with material.” One of the ways he “moves forward as an artist is to look for ways to

work with materials and identify institutions willing to bring in someone to experiment who doesn’t really know the material very well.”

For him Land Arts “was all about lines in the desert and learning to see everything else around the lines—from context to all that goes into the production of the lines.” He is still making these lines. As an architect, he “believes that things grow out of lines and that lines are instructions for space.” He is “just trying to find the lines and ways to make them with space and meaning.”

Ten years out, he has found a place for plaster in his work, in a five-acre drawing on a plot of land in West Texas, where he is amassing thousands of pounds of plaster. This drawing comes from examining erosion and geologic forces within very compressed topography. He’s “rolling Mylar forms to cast lines and cones—long lines—in the land. Placing them where there is erosion to create a drawing in the desert.” He talks about finding the time of this material and a space to allow the drawing to evolve.

CELESTE MARTINEZ

Our final case study is Celeste Martinez, an architect from Midland, Texas who completed her undergraduate education at Texas Tech University where she remained to participate in the Land Arts program to help identify her trajectory for graduate school. In the end, she chose to attend the Rhode Island School of Design where she graduated in 2016.

Celeste was attracted to Land Arts because, while she was from the southwest she was keen to explore her home turf in new ways. She was also very “interested in the proposition of learning through making.”

In our conversation¹⁴ she spoke about the experience “opening my eyes to new forms work could take”—that other possible paths existed—and being drawn to becoming “influenced by a wider range” of agents—people, places, works—than are typically available during her undergraduate work in architecture. Part of the decision to attend RISD was founded in “a desire for a school where art, architecture, and design were more closely and structurally linked.”

Her master’s thesis¹⁵ took advantage of stop motion animation techniques she first deployed during Land Arts. There she recorded and presented the artifacts—mostly clothes—she brought with her into the field. Her thesis told the story of a pair of lovers traveling the borderlands from El Paso ~ Juarez to San Diego ~ Tijuana. While she was keen to further examine the no-man’s-land of the border, she also realized “the importance of using humor in the work.” Ultimately, she saw the thesis as a “curated experience.” A narrative. This openness to form and process she attributes to beginning during her Land Arts experience. She is continuing the work with a RISD grant that will help her get out there, to the borderlands near Juarez, and work with a school helping kids in Palomas, Mexico and Columbus, New Mexico.

The inter-connections of her curiosity have led her to practice¹⁶ with a group specializing in education. In “making architecture from



Figure 4: Celeste Martinez working in the Gila Wilderness, New Mexico, .14 Oct 2011. Photograph by Chris Taylor.

pedagogy.” Part of the appeal for her working with this group is their openness and interest in engaging other disciplines—they have in-house educators on staff.

This has also led her to consider the politics of the service the firm provides and question “why this level of commitment is not a baseline available to all.” She connects her interest in the politics of making things visible, “to giving people voice,” as an extension of the trajectory from her work in Land Arts.

CONCLUSION

Celeste brings us back to Sam’s film, as a work of land art in its own right, and as a lesson of temporal crossings. While the Land Arts program is only part of the film’s final cut,¹⁷ which focuses on the border crossing “Repellent Fence” created by the indigenous collective Postcommodity,¹⁸ it is important to note how the sensibility of Sam’s film developed over years of shooting with the Land Arts program in the field. Sam sees and presents land art by evidencing the primary of time, as a material, in what we can learn from Land Arts as a secession of deep and immediate temporal crossings. Crossings

that extend out from working methods of individuals¹⁹ to establish active and vibrant networks, more expansive than discrete works, for critically examining and shaping the worlds we inhabit.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For additional information about the Land Arts program see landarts.org; Taylor, Chris and Bill Gilbert. *Land Arts of the American West*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009; Taylor, Chris, Rodrigo Perez de Arce, Pilar Cereceda, William L. Fox, Gonzalo Pedraza, Andres Rivera, and Flora Vilches. *Incubo: Atacama Lab*. Santiago, Chile: Incubo, 2008; and Kennedy, Randy. "The American West as Classroom, Art and Metaphor." *New York Times* (4 May 2011) p. C1 and C9. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/04/arts/design/land-arts-of-the-american-west-a-texas-tech-program.html>.
- 2 Chris Taylor in *Through the Repellent Fence: a land art film*. Directed by Sam Wainwright Douglas, 2017.
- 3 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977, p. 3.
- 4 Interview with Jana La Brasca was conducted by author via telephone between Marfa, Texas and Muley Point, Utah on 10 September 2017. All quotations in this section are from Jana La Brasca unless noted otherwise.
- 5 Documentation of the lecture/performance can be found at <http://cargocollective.com/dripdry/Tubes-of-the-American-West>.
- 6 La Brasca, Jana. "The world in miniature" : *Testing Bruce Conner's CROSSROADS*. Austin: University of Texas, 2016. <http://catalog.lib.utexas.edu/record=b9199670~S29>
- 7 *Crossroads*. Directed by Bruce Conner, 1976, 37 minutes. 35mm film transferred to video, with sound by Terrance Riley and Patrick Gleeson.
- 8 Interview with Jarrod Beck was conducted by author in person at his studio in Brooklyn, New York on 29 July 2017. All quotations in this section are from Jarrod Beck unless noted otherwise.
- 9 Beck, Jarrod Charles. *Perceptual and Territorial Acquisition*. Austin: University of Texas, 2007. <http://catalog.lib.utexas.edu/record=b6926494~S29>
- 10 Major residences have included: MacDowell, Yaddo, Kanoria Art Center in Ahmedabad, India (2017), UrbanGlass (2016), Sculpture Space (2015), Smack Mellon, Rauschenberg Foundation, Bemis (2013), and McDowell, Vermont Studio Center, Socrates Sculpture Park (2012). Complete listing can be found online at <http://jarrodcharlesbeck.com/Statement.html>.
- 11 Beck, Jarrod, Guillermo Barrios, Miguel Bracell, Rody Douzoglou, Evan Garva, Stefan Gzyl, María Esabel Peña, Meredith Kohut, and Natasha Tiniacos. *Balance: Jarrod Beck*. Caracas, Venezuela: Ediciones FAU, 2016.
- 12 The university was listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/986> accessed 13 November 2017.
- 13 Beck, Jarrod. *The Moon*. Brooklyn: Smack Mellon, 2017.
- 14 Interview with Celeste Martinez was conducted by author via video chat between Providence, Rhode Island and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on 23 July 2017. All quotations in this section are from Celeste Martinez unless noted otherwise.
- 15 Martinez, Celeste. *The Orientation of the Outlier*. Providence: Rhode Island School of Design, 2016. <http://librarycat.risd.edu/record=b1492667~S4>
- 16 Celeste works with Fielding Nair International. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/celeste-martinez-6140272b/> accessed 13 November 2017.
- 17 The documentary film premiered at the Museum of Modern Art in New York on 18 February 2017 and will receive wide distribution in the coming year.
- 18 For more information about Postcommodity see <http://postcommodity.com>.
- 19 Land Arts of the American West at Texas Tech University since 2008 have consisted of participants from North America, Australia, Chile and Spain in art, architecture, art history, medical anthropology and creative writing at graduate and advanced undergraduate levels from Texas Tech as well as from the Universities of Texas at Austin, Iowa (Writers Workshop), Pennsylvania, South Florida, California at Berkeley and Riverside, New York University, Rhode Island School of Design, Goldsmiths, Cranbrook, Whitman, Bard and Yale.





Figure 5: Land Arts camp at Double Negative, Mormon Mesa, Nevada, 22 September 2017. Photograph by Chris Taylor.