



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Wasteland Aesthetics: Art and the Postindustrial Landscape, 1962–72

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Several vanguard artists in the United States turned from the interior architectures of the studio and gallery toward material landscapes during the 1960s and early 1970s, engaging outdoor spaces as a critical medium and testing ground. Specifically, many were attracted to “wastelands,” those landscapes that were actually or perceived to be ruined or contaminated. Although art historians have often collapsed landscape-based art from this period into the categories of “land art” or “environmental art,” this dissertation foregrounds the actual sites where such projects were staged and proposes that art in wasteland spaces represents a distinct branch of aesthetic practice. It maps, therefore, a genealogy separate from that for artists working with different kinds of landscapes and draws together performance artists, post-minimalists, conceptual photographers, ecological artists, and others in order to examine new ways that artists came to know and work with the land at this time. It contextualizes these artworks in relation to a precise socio-historical moment, namely the shift from industrial to postindustrial economies in the West, as well as longstanding landscape aesthetic traditions (e.g. the *picturesque*, the American technological sublime). This dissertation argues that the emergence of the postindustrial was evident in the production of new landscapes, new conceptions of landscape, and new crises of relation with land, to which artists shared an aesthetic response. It therefore complicates understandings of both postwar art and space via an exploration of the interplay between critical aesthetic imperatives and the landscapes in which they have been tested. It simultaneously traces the radical transformation of the American landscape, literally and metaphorically, in the same era: as technological testing ground, modern ruin, and repository of contamination.