

Stimulating Traditional Concepts Of 'Land Art' in India: Influence of Subodh Kerkar contemporary Art

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Abstract

In the quest for new techniques, inspirations and concepts artists around the world never cease from experimenting with new mediums. Sometimes these experiments are an outcome of retaliation against some of the prevalent art practices of the times. In the late 1960's some artists in North America and Europe, mostly Americans but also British, created monumental art away from civilization to challenge the commercialization of art. These artists retaliated against painting and sculpture as art forms and brought art outside the boundaries of museums and galleries. Using the earth as their canvas artists like Robert Smithson, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, James Turrell and others created art by incorporating natural landscapes as part of their work. Although this movement in art faded away in the following decade some artists even today are creating art which is heavily influenced and associated with this genre of art. In India an artist like Subodh Kerkar has created many site-specific installations which are of this genre. The aim of this paper is to study the practice of this art form in India and to examine to what extent it shows a continuation or a deviation from the approach in the West. For this the focus will be on the artist Subodh Kerkar a prominent practitioner in this genre.

1 Introduction

'Land Art', also known as 'Earth Works', developed as a movement during the late 1960's to early 1970's as an international revolt by artists against painting and sculpture and the anti-formalist trend of that time. The movement began in October 1968 with a group exhibition titled 'Earth Works' at Dawn Galley, New York. The term 'Land Art' was coined by artist Robert Smithson. Land Art was inspired by conceptual art and it also shows the influence of modern movements like Cubism, De Stijl and Minimalism. Land Art was also seen as environmental art as the materials used in this art were essentially environment friendly and usually local in nature. These works were initially installed in remote areas away from habitation and were usually seen by very few people, sometimes by the artists alone. Due to this aspect of this genre these works have been extensively photographed and videographed for documentation of the art work. The artist Gordon Matta-Clark with his work 'Garbage Wall' of 1970 defied this rule and brought this art in to the urban environment and today a lot of artists are following his footsteps. Land art is considered to be a form of pure art as this art is created without considering its commercial aspect in mind. On the other hand as most of these art works are temporary and perish within hours it takes a lot of courage on the part of the artist to create

works which exist for a short span of time. Land Artists also use the surroundings in their art, making their installation a part of the landscape. Although as a movement this form of art has diminished but there are many contemporary artists practicing Land Art in the world as well as in India.

2 Objectives of the Study

- I. To study the practice of Land art form in India and to examine to what extent it shows a continuation or a deviation from the approach in the West.
- II. To focus on the Subodh Kerkar creating art which is heavily influenced and associated with this genre of art?
- III. To show the importance of contemporary artists practicing Land Art in the world as well as in India.

3 'Land Art' in India: Influence of Subodh Kerkar Creating Art

In fact, India has been a muse for land artists like Alex Boucher, a French artist and archaeologist and has also inspired many artists of international acclaim. One of the most prominent contemporary artists of this genre Andrew Rogers was inspired to create artworks on Indian soil as well. In 2007 Rogers created two installations under the world wide project called 'Rhythm of Life' with sand stones in Rajasthan near a 400-year-old fortress and a 1,200-year-old temple. One of these on a hill top is created as steps corresponding with the fort next to it and the other is a stone wall built on a steep slope. An interesting art work created by the environmentalist and architect Biju Bhaskar titled 'Giri Vannakam' was built in March 2010 at Thiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu. It consists of a thatched shelter and a conical structure built with stones surrounded by a nest shaped structure made of twigs and branches. The title of this work literally means bow to a mountain. This work was built by the combined effort of Bhaskar and his artist friends and is an encouraging example of initiation towards Land Art by the artists in India.

Subodh Kerkar from Goa is an avid practitioner of 'Land Art' in India. He is a trained medical practitioner who found his true calling in art. He left his medical practice to devote his life to his true calling and started working as a water colourist. Although he was earning quite well from his paintings but eventually he started finding it monotonous and felt the need to venture into a new sphere. The break came when one day he accidentally created his first Land art installation with disc shaped lamps installed in craters dug on the beach and lit them up. He says that the effect stunned him and he later on developed his first Land Art creation on the concept calling it 'The Tenth Planet' in 2004. His journey towards new horizons began that day and he is still travelling on the road as an enthusiastic explorer. He is an artist who has done substantial work in this field and continues to do so. He has made a place for himself in the international art scene with his works and is seen as a torch bearer of this genre in India. His inspiration comes from the sea as he lives and works near it. Kerkar studies the tides when he uses the sea in his works, which is very often, and his science background comes handy in this respect. His understanding of physics helps him to create works which are a fusion of art and science. His works along with being environmentally friendly are also inspirational as they usually spread awareness regarding issues that the artist feels strongly about. He uses seashells, sand, water, trees, palm leaves and many other locally available materials for his installations. His works like that of most of the Land Art artists are outdoor installations in nature and made of natural materials.

Even as Land Art is meant to challenge the concept of permanence and collectability yet there are works that have survived for more than sixty years and still exist. One such example is the famous

‘Spiral Jetty’ by Robert Smithson at Great Salt Lake, Utah, U.S. This work was made in 1970 and survives till date. His ‘Spiral Jetty’ has become a landmark and is composed of an arrangement of rock, earth and crystals which protrudes into the Great Salt Lake. It is 1500 feet long and as per its name is spiral in shape.



Figure 1: ‘The Spiral Jetty’ 1970, Robert Smithson

Likewise Subodh Kerkar’s ‘The Earth Bowl’ installation at Vagator beach, Goa is one such work which has a permanency to it. This installation made with the budget of about 2.5 Cores INR is symbol of universal brotherhood and also promotes tourism. Subodh has carved a perfect bowl in a rock, which extends like a ramp into the sea and gets filled with big waves splashing the rock. When the water recedes the bowl gets isolated from the sea and yet stays connected as the water that it holds as a part of the sea is left behind in it. The sea unites the whole world hence symbolising ‘Worldly brotherhood.’ Along with this many of his temporary installations have been recreated in metal and permanently installed on sites in countries like Australia and Dubai.



Figure 2: ‘The Earth Bowl’ 2011, Subodh Kerkar

Kerker in the year 2008 was invited to Portugal to participate in a Land Art exhibition in which he planted rice which he had brought from back home. He created a route with it around the trees in an old garden called 'The Garden of Necessities' where this exhibition was held. His aim was to symbolically recreate the route that Vasco de Gama took to reach India. As the rice sprouted his art started to take shape thus becoming alive.



Figure 3: 'Rice goes for a walk' 2008, Subodh Kerker

This is one feature of Land Art which separates it from other forms of art as these art works are almost alive and with time their visual effect as well as meaning changes, giving a new meaning to the art works at different stages of their growth and decay and destruction. Subodh has also done an installation by growing Gulmohar trees in a line and when they bloom in striking red colour they stand out as a streak amongst the green of other trees. Such works can also be seen as an intervention of humans in nature and yet being a part of it.

4 'Land Art' Importance & Survival

Land art has many times been used by artists as a mode of spreading awareness regarding social, political or environmental issues. Subodh Kerker too has made works which touch similar issues.



Figure 4: 2010 'UNFOLDING OF A DREAM'

Once he hung colourful Girkali sarees from the coconut trees to highlight the issue of providing sanitation facilities to the multitude of immigrant women labourers who come every year for harvesting from neighbouring states. 'Unfolding of a Dream' his long line of colourful prayer flags descend from a hill forming a spiral on the beach. This is his way of showing support to the Tibetan cause. This almost 4 kilometre long work, using six hundred flags was created in 2011 at Vagator beach in Goa. There are various other works of Subodh that display the activist in him and this aspect of his work aptly captures the original spirit of Land art. Land artists have repeatedly explored performance based art, which is captured in videos and photographs. It is essential for Land Art artists to indulge in this documentation due to the perishable nature of their works but it also comes handy in showing their work to people and preserving its record. It is especially beneficial when the art works are performance based. Many artists around the world have included performance in their Land Art and in this regard too Subodh Kerkar is no different. In 2009 he created a performance based work titled 'Of Donkeys, Demons and Diabolical Death.' This work was based on the 26th November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack in which many citizens lost their lives at the hands of young misguided and brainwashed men.



Figure 5: 2009 Of Donkeys, Demons and Diabolical Death

Kerker believes that such men as the terrorist are like donkeys who indulge in crimes of such inhumanity, that their brains are manipulated and are used by others to accomplish their vicious motives. For this work he hired actors who performed on the beach with dinghy boat flags and red coloured pigment which was diluted in the water. This kind of art is generally done to promote a message and Land Art is known for its activist nature.

Kerker in his art along with creativity also combines history which adds an additional layer to his work. His works in Dubai and Portugal are laced with history where he reinstates the memory of old trade partnership of the countries in the past. Likewise in his work 'The presence of the absence' he had cut out a silhouette of the 'Dancing Girl' from Mohenjo-Daro. This was cut out of a metal plate mounted on a railway track. This work installed in 2010 at Shimla underscores his theme of Partition. He opines that the Partition resulted in a peculiar situation in which the cultural centres of the Hindus went to Pakistan while their cultural centres came to India.

“Would installations make the same impact if they were on small scale?” It is an interesting query posed by Prof. B. N. Goswamy to the practitioners of Land Art. Such questions reflect the promise of growth as well as scope for experiment by the artists in this field. Not that artists have not tried to make Land Art small enough to be displayed in a museum, in fact Jacek Tylicki in 1973 had created works by leaving a museum paperboard or sheets of paper on the bank of a river, in a forest and exposed to the wind for days, forcing nature to create art. Some of them merely 473 x 354 mm large and are now part of a museum collection. So it appears that it is not the monumental size that sets this art apart from other types of art but the essence of it that places it apart. Subodh Kerkar has not created any such small scale work but he recreates works in fibreglass and other materials which are either a part of or inspired by his Land Art works. Some of the examples of this can be seen in his fibreglass water drops with taps attached to them which are inspired by his 2007 work ‘Water 2’ in which he had planted glasses filled with water on a beach.

To execute Land Art huge amount of finances and man power is required. As heavy machinery and technicians are required to create these installations that could cover miles and are not feasible for a single hand to accomplish. After these works are created as they are viewed by very few people their documentation by video and photographs again requires heavy financing as these pictures are usually taken from the air. Requirement of such kind of financing limits the number of artists who undertake these kinds of projects. Not only is the money required for this type of art very high but there is not much saleability involved as well because essentially due to their immobility and perishable nature these kinds of works are not buyable. Kerkar for that matter sometimes creates sculptures which are part of his work, giving his Land Art a permanency. With this he not only succeeds in bringing a part of Land Art back to the galleries and museums but also creates a commercial value for his work. Many of his works have been re-created in more permanent materials like bronzes and fibreglass for this purpose. This is a way for artists to earn while doing land art which traditionally was difficult. Although commercialization of this otherwise pure art is completely different from its original concept of revolt against art in galleries and museums but for its survival I believe it is necessary.

4 Another facet of ‘Land Art’ in India

Sand Art of Orissa, in India, has been practiced since the fourteenth century AD especially in Puri. Previously it was essentially a religious art and it is believed to have been practiced as part of an initial training for stone sculpting in temples, as sand is a softer and an inexpensive medium. It was used by sculptors under training to polish their skills. This perishable art was practiced on the beach and this practice has continued even today, although the themes have changed and are more secular in nature, sometimes even propagating some social message. This art has a lot in common with Land Art and it can easily fall into this genre. If we look at the location where it is made or the material or even the perishability of this art form they all match that of Land art but still there is one aspect in which sand art does not fit and that is not including the natural landscape in the individual art works. Artists of sand art create works which are complete in themselves and usually do not merge into their surroundings. They are like sculptures made up of sand rather than a shape created or installed in the pre-existing landscape and the element of minimalism is also missing from it. Sudarsan Pattnaik a well-known Sand artist from India has brought India to an international level with their works in the contemporary times.

Besides Subodh Kerkar there have been a few artists who have created land art in India but the number is quite few and most of them are non-Indians, but it is still noteworthy to see various organizations and the government encouraging this genre of art in India. Kerkar’s ‘Prithvi Kund’ was sponsored by the state government of Goa. Very few artists themselves venture into Land Art but if

financial and practical support is given they will surely explore this genre. This form of art needs encouragement in our country and this could be extended by the government, by museums or private organizations working for art. On his visit to Chandigarh Subodh Kerkar had made a case regarding the potential of 'Land Art' in Chandigarh but due to administration rules artists are unable to venture into this form of art. The open spaces, gardens and its nearness to the Shivalik hills make Chandigarh an ideal place for the execution of this art. All one needs to do is to observe and explore one's surroundings to see and feel art all around. In fact the grandeur of the Himalayas deserves attention from land artists.

5 Conclusion

The practitioners of Land art in India generally remain true to the original concept of Land Art but on individual levels they have made slight deviations in their works. Subodh Kerkar has installed permanent sculptures, like moon cast in metal and sculptures inspired by chillies, as part of his work which could easily pass as an extension of this genre. Besides this there are three aspects of land Art in contemporary India which clearly emerge from the above discourse, the first one is about India's contribution in encouraging this form of art. Although geographically India has an excellent scope for the development of Land Art but still very few artists here are taking to it in an enthusiastic manner and even the government is not doing much in this regard. Privately in its own capacity India is doing its bit to promote this genre but yet a lot is required for Land Art to flourish in the country. The practicing Land artists like Subodh Kerkar are doing substantial work in this field and also bending the rules a little according to requirements. Kerkar is also bringing in commercialization and social activism associated with Land Art in his work. Last of all a new age Sand Art, with its awareness themes is closely following the footsteps of land art. Most of its features overlap with that of Land Art and it would not be wrong to include Sand Art as a tributary of Land Art. Land artists in India are maintaining the essence of India in this genre; this can be seen not only in Kerkar's art but in Sand Art of Orissa as well. The themes, concerns and inspiration are Indian but with an international appeal.

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