# *Earth Art, Consciousness and The Thing Itself*

The constellations of Earth art and consciousness research are related. How, though? **Tracey Warr** maps the terrain.

photo James Cohon Gaily

Robert Smithson: 'Spiral Jetty', Utah 1970

> 'The ultimate passion of the Western mind over two thousand five hundred years has been to understand the ground of its own being.' Max Velmans, *Understanding Consciousness*

Debates on the philosophy and science of consciousness are currently being fuelled by research in sleep, artificial intelligence, quantum theory, phenomenology and other areas of neuroscience, cognitive science, psychology and the biosciences. Whilst our subjective experience confirms the existence of consciousness (our own at least), and intuitively we know that it is central to human life, science is currently unable to explain what it is, how it works and what its functions are. Can some of the practice of Earth and body artists over the last 50 years contribute to our understanding of consciousness?

There is a tangle of muddled terms and theories surrounding the word 'consciousness.' The words mind, soul, knowledge, self-knowledge, self, are all often used interchangeably with the term consciousness. None of these words accurately or comprehensively coincide with the notion of consciousness that is explored here. 'Being' is the word that comes closest to a definition of consciousness I want to consider.

One common definition of consciousness is to make a distinction between being conscious or wakeful, and unconscious. But this leaves out a whole range of experiences which we are conscious of. We have visual and auditory experiences in dreams for instance. So a better definition here, and one used by Velmans,[1] is that consciousness is what we are conscious of – so then this includes thoughts, feelings, images, dreams, body sensations and sensory experiences.[2] Unfortunately this second definition excludes preconscious and unconscious brain and body activities. It excludes autonomic bodily functions – heart beat, blood flow, vasomotor activity, pupil dilation – the neural, biochemical and bioelectrical activities carried out by our bodies of which we are unaware and to which we have no conscious access. Our bodies are twitching with electrical and chemical reactions, crawling with invisible quantum life, and animated by the motivations of genes, cells, DNA, hormones and enzymes.

London Fieldworks: 'Polaria', Dungeness 2000
photo Anthony Oliver

In addition Velmans' definition also excludes all our preconscious activity such as dreamless sleep, knowing without knowing, experience that is 'below language'. There is plenty of experience that we do not consciously remember or voice – that may hover on the edge of what is consciously known. This may be experience retained in the body, in emotion, in the soma. There are whole swathes of our experiences existing at a non linguistic and non symbolic level.

Much of the human mind is unconscious, including information processing and long term memory. There is clinical evidence that we have the ability to make discriminations below the threshold of conscious awareness. Velmans points out that preconscious semantic processing is required for many skills that we think of as conscious, such as reading, thinking and speech. Consciousness – in his definition – arrives too late to influence input analysis in reading, overt speech and covert thought. Preconscious activity may influence actions, enter into the creation of our expectations, affect our judgements and create emotional reactions to events, i.e. what we mean when we talk about gut-reactions, instinct and intuition. Isn't all that part of what we think of as consciousness?

Velmans works with a definition of phenomenal consciousness – he defines it in terms of the presence or absence of phenomenal content.[3] By contrast David Chalmers has argued for the inclusion of some elements of the preconscious and unconscious,[4] whilst Jonathan Shear and Ron Jevning[5] have discussed states of pure consciousness achieved through Eastern meditation techniques that they describe as wakefully devoid of phenomenal content – in effect the opposite of Velmans' definition.

There are several basic theoretical positions which frequently underlie arguments in both the philosophy and science of consciousness. Most Western thought is premised on versions of dualism, idealism or materialism. Dualism splits the universe into two fundamentally different substances – mental and physical. In this definition consciousness is an entity, a wholly different substance from the physical. It remains essentially mysterious and unknowable. The so-called 'hard problem' in consciousness studies is that if consciousness is fundamentally different from physical energies and events what is the relationship between the two? How can wishes or desires affect the behaviour of neurons? How could electrochemistry give rise to subjective experiences?

Next, Idealism sees the world as largely dependent on the operations of our minds. The most extreme version of this is Berkeley's hypothesis that the existence of the material world depends on its being perceived. In the absence of human perceivers, it is perceived by God. Materialist reductionism claims consciousness to be nothing more than a brain state or function. It assumes that through neurological research consciousness can be located within the brain. As Velmans points out no discovery that reduces consciousness to brain, however, has yet been made.

In discontinuity theory, consciousness somehow and for some reason evolved. In continuity theory consciousness was already there from the beginning and its origin is neither more nor less mysterious than the emergence of matter and energy.[6]

Science is the metaphysics of the late 20th and 21st century, whereas the function of art in Western society is far from clear. There is not room here for any involved discussion of either aesthetics, or of what exactly art is. But briefly, how does the Western, modern concept of art relate to non-Western and archaic artefacts? Objects, sites and activities that we might think of as art, were sacred, religious objects, places or processes for their communities of makers. Suffice to say here that the Western modern notion of art as an autonomous object, a thing of beauty, a work of genius, a work of skill and craft, has been in dispute for as long as it has been in evidence.

In the first half of the 20th century Dada and Surrealist artists and many others since, and writers including Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille and André Breton were all proposing alternative notions of art that emphasised its corporeal aspects. The discourse of art in mainstream art history, theory and museums is only a small proportion of the story. In his 1983 essay 'Art in the Dark', Thomas McEvilley proposed that 'the art context is a neutral and open context which has no proper and essential contents of its own.' Discussing '70s body art he described this as an art form that 'flowed into the darkness beyond its traditional boundaries and explored areas that were previously as unmapped and mysterious as the other side of the moon.' Suzi Gablik has suggested that art could be a communal expression of the sacred.

In the late '60s and early '70s Land Art was a practice, along with Body Art, Process Art and Conceptual Art which issued from a need to escape from an art world, art market and practice predicated on objects and museum display. Lucy Lippard and John Chandler discussed this trend for dematerialised art.[7] Land Art emphasised the contingency between art and world through its site specificity, its remote locations and the impossibility of displaying it in a museum. Earth Art is about limits – the limits of the optical, the limits of language and the limits of form.

Earth art – from ancient to contemporary – seeks ways to relate the human to the cosmic scale. Sometimes these art works are monumental – Stonehenge, Giza or the American Land Art works by Michael Heizer, Walter de Maria, James Turrell or Charles Ross.[8] But Earth art works are also ephemeral – the body prints of Ana Mendieta, the lines drawn in snow by Dennis Oppenheim, the buried poems of Nancy Holt, the walking works of Richard Long or Marina Abramovic, the temporary definitions of spaces and places by Christo or the performative works in the landscape of Susan Hiller, Bethan Huws, Dominique Mazeaud, Aviva Rahmani, Shelley Sacks or Bruce Gilchrist.

Since the cave dwellers, humans have encompassed inner and outer space with structures and marks on the surface of the Earth. American Land Art drew on the precedents of ancient Earth and stone sites such as the Egyptian pyramids, the Mayan temple complexes, the Nazca Geoglyphs, the Great Serpent in Ohio and neolithic rock carvings. The Land artists made naked eye observatories and structures creating perspectives on the land, the horizon and forces of nature. These sites attempt to comprehend the immensity of the solar system. Turrell has discussed the influences on his work from neolithic sites including Maes Howe in Scotland and Newgrange in Ireland.[9] Earth Art is about the ordering of human psychic existence across the surface of the Earth under the sky. Earth art sites mediate between the human and the vastnesses of cosmological and geological space and time. The aerial view is important to many of the American Earth artists and especially to Turrell, whose experiences of flying are highly significant to his work, 'the aerial view reveals the vitality of the Earth and the passing and reemerging of cultures. Geology reinforces that view with the movement of continental plates, with subduction and volcanic reemergence… . Volcanoes and islands have a terrestial thingness to them… . For my project I wanted an area of exposed geology where you could feel geologic time.'[10]

According to Robert Smithson 'The city gives the illusion that the Earth does not exist'. The American Land Artists moved out into the vast open spaces of the Western deserts of Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and Utah, where it was impossible to deny the existence of nature. Deserts, like the sea, the sky and outer space are spaces that challenge the limits of the optical. They offer both a visual plenitude – boundless horizons and the no-space of sensory deprivation. Turrell's *Roden Crater* and Ross's *Star Axis*, like many of the ancient sites, bring the space of the sky down into the human space and scale. They are a form of remote viewing of cosmic space and time. Ross remarks on *Star Axis*, 'I'm not trying to direct… metaphysics, just trying to point out that we're directly plugged into it.'

Other Land Art works bring the visitor into confrontation with the immense scale of the cosmos and the awesome forces of nature. De Maria's *Lightning Field* in New Mexico consists of 400 stainless steel lightning poles set out in a precise grid one mile by one kilometre. Heizer's *Double Negative* replicates the phenomenal scale of construction at ancient Egyptian sites, dwarfing the human visitor. His *Effigy Tumuli* combines references to both the zoomorphic forms of the Nazca Geoglyphs and neolithic passage tombs. Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, *The Missoula Ranch Locators* and *Hole in Dunes* create perspectives on desert, sky and ocean.

In 1993 Pierre Comte made a temporary land art work in France designed to be seen from outer space. It was photographed by an orbiting satellite. ('The ARSAT Saga', 1993) Images of Earth from space in the '60s and our increasing visual access to outer space through the Hubble telescope and other long range imaging gave us a new perspective on ourselves, or

perhaps just renewed an old one. We are beginning to reconceive of ourselves as part of nature rather than its opposite. We begin to see the brief incandescence of our individual presence and consciousness within a vast continuum of cosmic space and geological time. Earth art works allow us to imagine our place in the cosmos, to comprehend a scale way beyond our physical limitations. So Earth art sites are kinds of instruments, but not necessarily the literal astronomical instruments or calendars they have been described as.

The brain can be studied objectively using imaging techniques: EEG, PET scans or MRI. Whilst the brain is the aspect of our bodies that seems most closely involved with consciousness it is not the same thing. The only evidence about what conscious experiences are like comes from first person, subjective, sources. Attempts to make a scientific study of this first person phenomena in the past have included the introspective methods of Wundt, Kulpe and Titchener and the study of responses and stimuli in behaviourism. The drawback of both methods however has been their reliance on linguistic reporting. The phenomenology of experience cannot always be unambiguously and exhaustively described in words. Even though science uses protocols and methodologies generally established and agreed to be 'objective', the scientific observer is still a subjective observer. There is no real basis for assuming that it is possible to designate one human being a subjective subject and another an objective observer. Interpretations and descriptions are theory laden – driven by the questions one is inclined to ask and the answers one is inclined to find. Science has developed standardised procedures and methods of objectifying observations. But the interpretation of observations and results are always subjective.

So is there no sure knowledge? Phenomena experienced subjectively and individually may be verified through intersubjective agreement about what has happened. There are shared consensus realities created by communities of knowers. As Velmans points out, science itself is a form of communal knowledge with transcultural procedures.

How is the phenomenal world related to the very different world described by physics? There are features of the world that exist independent of any observers, such as force, mass, gravitational attraction, photosynthesis or electrical charge. Kant coined the term 'the thing itself' or 'ding an sich' to refer to the 'real' world beyond the filtering distortions of our sensory and perceptual systems. According to Kant the thing itself is unknowable, it is a transcendental reality that lies behind everything. Our sensory systems provide us with dimensions of experience which model the energies surrounding our bodies. These experiences represent, rather than accurately report, what is going on in the world. The act of perceiving the world is itself creative.

Sensory systems are committed to specific modalities of experience. Beyond the sensitivity of human eyes are radio waves, radar waves, microwaves, infrared, ultra-violet, x-rays and gamma rays. Compared with many other species on the planet this is a very limited sensory system. The physical reality perceived by humans is only one of many possible perceived realities. Studies of sensory impaired people show that there is considerable variation in the phenomenal worlds that can potentially be experienced by humans.

Many of our experiences are outside language and resist interpretation, experiences perhaps of the numinous, the sublime or the thing itself. For Susan Hiller art ideas are existing below a verbal recognition level and artists grab on to them. One way that these experiences are articulated is by bringing the body back into use as a communicative medium. Speech has been over-emphasised as the privileged means of human communication, and the body neglected. It is time to rectify this neglect and to become aware of the body as the physical channel of meaning.[11] Another way that we articulate experiences below language is through intersubjectivity – where experiences and knowledge may not be verbalised but are shared by a group and acknowledged in that way – these might include ritual, raves, mysticism, religious beliefs.
What unifies the consciousness of a particular being? What constitutes being? The dictionary defines 'being' as existence and essence – so it is clear that it is distinct from the other terms we've discussed – mind, soul, knowledge, self but it seems similar to the contemporary meaning of the word consciousness. The term 'self' is problematised in cultural theory by issues of identity construction and the social projection of persona. Nevertheless there remains an overwhelming subjective sense of a continuous and coherent being. This 'I' is experienced as being identical through time and forming a coherent whole, a base from which perspective, as well as perception, is gained. Thomas Nagel defines consciousness as 'what it is like to be something.' Drawing on his sleep research, neurophysiologist Stuart Dimond discusses consciousness as 'the running span of subjective experience.' The word 'being' implies existence and therefore raises the issue of non-existence. It implies the self existing within a span of time, it implies mortality.

Efforts by anthropologists to record and understand the extralinguistic and ritual import of the body in non-Western cultures, have been very important to body artists and land artists. They use the body itself as a technology to explore consciousness. A fascination with and appropriation of archaic and non-Western





Charles Ross: 'Star Axis'. Looking North, 1½ hour time lapse
photo Edward Ranney

'The Great Serpent', Ohio, 10th c. AD

spiritual structures, sites and rituals in recent Western culture addresses a hunger for the spiritual or metaphysical in secular times pointed out by both Lucy Lippard and Suzi Gablik.[12] The body is central in Earth art. John Dixon describes the basic shapes of early Earth art as the avenue, the spiral, the labyrinth and the mandala. Many of the ancient sites – such as Nazca, Giza and many neolithic sites, bear evidence of processional use. They were points of interaction rather than static monuments. The crucial act in relation to any earthwork is not primarily detached contemplation of an object of aesthetic significance. It is, rather, placement of ourselves in a dimension of our being.[13] Land Art works such as Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* or Robert Morris's *Observatory* in Flevoland, Holland, relate to ritual – the ritual journey of the pilgrimage and rituals of the calendar – solstices and equinoxes. For Smithson Land Art was ephemeral – just as body art was – but on a much longer time scale – through erosion and entropy his works eventually return to nature. *Spiral Jetty* has been submerged by the waters of the Great Salt Lake. His *Broken Circle* and *Spiral Hill* in Emmen, Holland is also now partly submerged and its form is overgrown and blurring. Smithson's film *The Spiral Jetty* makes explicit his sense of cosmic and geological time. In the film Smithson runs around and around the Spiral Jetty. His writings emphasise a bodily experience of land, sky, water and sun.

More recent Earth art projects by Bruce Gilchrist and Jo Joelson, Syzygy, Knowhere and Polaria, use the body in the environment, rather than the intellect, as a means of knowing. The body is, for them, a mobile laboratory – equipped with sensors, data recorders and processors.[14] Earth art works are sites for intersubjective, non linguistic, shared experience of cosmic space and time – life, death and consciousness. They are sites for encounters with the thing itself.

Turrell addresses a meditative contemplation of nature with his skyspaces: 'I am dealing with no object. Perception is the object… . I am dealing with no image, because I want to avoid associative, symbolic thought'. Vastness or the full void, to borrow a phrase from Brazilian artist, Lygia Clark, challenges meaning. 'People are afraid', Turrell says 'to dissolve themselves into any sort of human cosmic consciousness.' Turrell's installations along with the paintings of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Caspar David Friedrich, Kasimir Malevich, Ad Reinhardt, Anselm Kieffer and Turner address luminous voids. Are we contemplating the sublime? And can such experiences be culture-independent?[15]

Several writers have described some kind of position outside binary thinking, a state disruptive of unity, closure and form. In *Purity and Danger,* Douglas discussed pollution taboos concerning the unassimilable waste that is outside the constitution of things that are defined.[16] Bataille's 'informe' has no definition but is performative, like an obscene word. It performs the operation of creating taxonomic disorder and a perpetual maintenance of potentials. Like Bataille, Smithson was concerned with a vision of the inevitable decrepitude of all form. Separate 'things', 'forms', 'objects', 'shapes' etc., with beginnings and endings are mere convenient fictions: there is only an uncertain disintegrating order that transcends the limits of rational separations. The fictions erected in the eroding time stream are apt to be swamped at any moment.[17] Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* is a 6, 000 ton coil of basalt and limestone projecting a quarter of a mile into the Great Salt Lake in Utah. The spiral is a magnification of the salt crystal's screw-like growth, of the cosmos, and an image of the dizzying dissolution of matter. Smithson collaborated with entropy. For him, 'fragments of a timeless geology laugh without mirth at the time-filled hopes of ecology'.

The embodied consciousness is an enormously temporary and precarious cohesion.[18] The material body – along with all matter – is in an inexhorable state of mutability and is constantly confronted with its own impending caesura. Being is a form briefly carved out of the informe. In Western cultures death is taboo, is denied. We are all traumatised by the human condition which is to live conscious of death.[19] The body's vulnerability, isolation and mortality are the motivations for the constructs of civilisation. The body's visceral, somatic, pulsional, mortal character is reflected in the things we make.[20] There is copious evidence that human beings since neolithic times have believed that they are more than material bodies. Traditions of respect for the dead, belief in versions of an afterlife, ancient earthworks that seem to be dealing with death as much as they are dealing with the sun, moon and stars are everywhere eloquent of this persisting human belief.

It is possible to say that the thing itself is still a category that exists prior to, and outside of, culture. We may, if we like, by our reasonings unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the real world.[21] The world as we perceive it would cease to be if there were no humans but the world of physics would still exist – the thing itself. So what does consciousness do? Is it to do with the creation of the experience of being – the subjective sense of a coherent self through time, through a life span that makes survival and reproduction worthwhile? Consciousness is the creator of subjective realities. Consciousness gives meaning to existence. With it we participate in a process whereby the universe observes itself – as we are an integral part of the conscious universe. Human consciousness is embedded in and supported by the greater universe.

Art is a metaphor for our perception of the thing itself with our embodied consciousnesses, the world we feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting portions of the given stuff. As William James wrote, 'my world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them.'

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**Notes**

[1] Max Velmans, *Understanding Consciousness*, Routledge, 2000.
[2] see Velmans for a more detailed discussion of definitions and theories of consciousness.
[3] see Libet in *The Volitional Brain*, Imprint Academic, 1999.
[4] David Chalmers *The Conscious Mind*, Oxford University Press, 1996.
[5] Jonathan Shear and Ron Jevning in Varela & Shear eds., *The View from Within*, Imprint Academic, 1999.
[6] see Chalmers, 'Webliography of Consciousness Papers', for further discussion of these issues, www.consciousness.arizona.edu.
[7] in their essay 'The Dematerialisation of Art', 1968 and Lippard recorded many of these art projects in her book *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object*, Studio Vista, 1973.
[8] see Gilles Tiberghien, *Land Art*, Art Data, 1995 and Jeffrey Kastner, *Land and Environmental Art*, Phaidon, 1998.
[9] see www.rodencrater.org
[10] Air Mass, South Bank Centre, 1992.
[11] Mary Douglas, 'Do dogs laugh?', 1971.
[12] see Lippard's *Overlay*, Pantheon, 1983 and Gablik's *The Reenchantment of Art*, 1991.
[13] 'Towards an Aesthetic of Early Earth Art', 1982.
[14] see www.londonfieldworks.com
[15] for instance consider the following 'The mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it' (Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1756). For Kant's experiences of the sublime, 'by their tremendous force dwarf our power of resistance into insignificance' but they also 'call out unwonted strength of soul and reveal in us a power… which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent omnipotence of nature'.
[16] Mary Douglas *Purity and Danger*, Routledge, 1966.
[17] The Writings of Robert Smithson, 1979.
[18] Manuel Delanda has starkly described us as 'temporary coagulations of recycling matter… . The flow of flesh (biomass) through the food chains constitutes the main form of energy circulation in organic strata' ('Nonorganic Life', 1992).
[19] 'The archaic and Oriental cultures succeeded in conferring positive values on anxiety, death, self-abasement and upon chaos.' (Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, 1960) And see Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, The Free Press, 1973.
[20] see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, Oxford University Press, 1985.
[21] William James, 1890.