

INSTALLING ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP:  
INSTALLATION ARTWORKS AND THE CAPACITY TO CONVEY  
NATURE EXPERIENCE

by

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## ABSTRACT

With the Scientific Revolution, the scientific method excluded the intrinsic tie between humans and nature. Our understanding of the natural world becomes increasingly limited as over-controlled experiments continue to disregard the naturally occurring variables and interdependent relationships that make up the environment. Recognizing the interconnectedness of natural processes allows us to build empathy toward the environment as we become conscious of the role we play; humans are not separate from nature. At our pace of ecological destruction, we must step out of the labs and into the natural world to understand its intrinsic value. Due to environmental injustice and poor communication, marginalized communities have decreasing access to green spaces and ecological information. Art installations non-conventionally provide access to nature knowledge and experiences that focus explicitly on the interconnectedness of universal processes and our place as humans. Three case studies of installation art will show how the artists intended a unique space for visitors to explore nature first-hand. Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* provides conceptual accessibility for visitors to explore the ideas of geologic scale, time, and the place of a human-made structure. Shigeo Kubota's *Three Mountains* was a multi-sensory experience built as a museum installation that allowed visitors to experience driving through the Navajo landscape. Adrián Villar Rojas's *The Theatre of Disappearance* explores the proximity between humans and the thousands of millions of years of geological strata that shape our environments. These artworks successfully create conceptually and physically accessible nature experiences.

## **Installing Environmental Stewardship: Installation Artworks and the Capacity to Convey Nature Experience**

The human being is the greatest and most precise scientific instrument that can exist. And precisely this is the greatest disservice of modern science: that it has divorced the experiment from the human being, and wants to know nature only through that which is shown by instruments—indeed, wants to limit and demonstrate nature's capacities in that way.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Nature theorist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe rejected the increasingly mechanized and conventional scientific methods born out of the Scientific Revolution that excluded the intrinsic tie between humans and nature. When analyzing natural phenomena in isolation from variables and processes that are present in nature, our understanding of them and how they relate to different events is limited. For a holistic perception, we must subject ourselves to natural processes and observe them firsthand. Goethe's experiential science requires the observer to contextualize their relation to the natural phenomena, "but also more general, universal patterns and relationships."<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the interconnectedness of natural processes allows us to build empathy toward the environment as we become conscious of the role we play; humans are not separate from nature.

With the growing urgency to reverse environmental destruction, accessibility to nature experiences becomes a defining factor in who knows to fight for the Earth and who does not. Unfortunately, green spaces are becoming increasingly limited and often nonexistent in many areas; greater access to nature is associated with higher incomes and

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation used as an epigraph is from David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, *Goethe's Way of Science: A Phenomenology of Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 37-38.

education levels, as well as being white.<sup>2</sup> Experiences and information about nature are not only physically inaccessible but become conceptually inaccessible as technology continues to influence earth sciences to move indoors, behind institutional walls, and into reports that contain language only understood amongst educated professionals in the field.<sup>3</sup> Even if everyone easily understood these reports, the information likely provides limited context for the reader to understand the broader implications and interrelations of the natural phenomena. Instead of mediating nature processes through technical writing, art installation mediates nature in a way that empathetically connects the viewer to the power and grandeur of the natural world. To ensure environmental stewardship for our Earth and the future, all people must have the opportunity to observe, participate with, and understand natural phenomena and earth processes, and art installations can open these opportunities.

The Goethean method advocates art as a means to share the sensorial information gathered by artists during their nature experiences.<sup>4</sup> Nature's "free space, expansive variety, and multisensory appeal" aligns closely with the characteristics and capacities of installation art, in particular.<sup>5</sup> Installation art features the interdependence of many parts that represent a complete experience; it is often characterized by the viewer's necessity to

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Florida, "The Inequality of America's Parks and Green Space," Citylab, March 19, 2019, <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2019/03/inequality-parks-and-green-space-income-race-research/585166/>.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Richard C. Somerville and Susan Joy Hassol write about climate change as a subject that, due to poor communication of information from scientists to the general public, has been denied, discredited, and has conjured general skepticism about the credibility of the scientists, their claims, and the evidence. See their article, "Communicating the Science of Climate Change," *Physics Today* 64, no.10 (October 2011): 48-53, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1063/PT.3.1296>.

<sup>4</sup> Catriona MacLeod, *Goethe Yearbook 18*, ed Purdy Daniel (Rochester, NY; Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), 142.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Strauch-Nelson, "Reuniting Art and Nature in the Life of the Child," *Art Education* 65, no. 3 (May 2012): 33-38.

closely observe the installation in its specific context. Installations realize Goethe's idea that humans are the prime scientific instruments, as "the audiovisual experience supplemented kinesthetically can be a kind of learning not with the mind alone, but with the body itself."<sup>6</sup> A close examination of three very different installation artworks, two from the late 1970s and one contemporary, will show how art installations can act as nonconventional nature experiences. Because installations are immersive and require in-situ observation over time, their complexity proves a fitting way to represent natural processes. Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977) contrasts the scale of human intervention with the scale of the natural landscape in which it exists as hundreds of giant spikes filling a New Mexico plain. In contrast, with *Three Mountains* (1976–1979) Shigeko Kubota built multisensory and digital components into three mountain-like structures so that others could explore her nature experience in a museum. Unlike the other two artworks, Adrián Villar Rojas's *The Theatre of Disappearance* (2017-2018) at The Geffen Contemporary at Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) in Los Angeles overtly deals with the Anthropocene and its implications as the installation confronts viewers with the thousands of millions of years of geological strata that shape our environments, through a warehouse environment built out of both natural and man-made materials. These works represent the artists' careful observation, understanding, and translation of natural processes into art installations. By finding innovative ways to convey their firsthand nature experiences to others, De Maria, Kubota, and Rojas encourage the viewer to think about the intrinsic value of nature, our role as a part of it,

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Morse, "Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image, and the Space-in-between," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture, in association with the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), 153-167.

and the interdependency of all nature processes. The more we identify as an inseparable part of nature, the clearer we see the need to protect it.

For anyone who wants to strengthen people's empathy with nature through art, it is important to understand the phenomenology of how these artist-mediated experiences lead the viewer to a conclusion about nature that promotes environmental stewardship, and toward this end, a consideration of the hermeneutic circle is helpful. The hermeneutic circle is a theoretical model that proposes that the viewer must understand the individual parts of an artwork to reach an understanding of the whole, yet, the person must understand the whole to make sense of the parts that make it up, so that it is necessary to continuously shift awareness between parts and the whole and adjust perceptions of both. Goethe identified the hermeneutic circle as an effective framework to describe how we eventually grasp the deeper meanings of an artwork in terms of its cultural and historical context; these ideas cannot be understood like an object would be, but rather as an ever-changing experience.<sup>7</sup> The installation can simultaneously do two seemingly contradictory things in regard to parts, whole, and understanding: it can help us to understand the parts, their relationship to each other and to us and to the whole, and yet at the same time, it can allow us to be impacted by the incomprehensible power and value of the whole. Using the idea of the hermeneutic circle will help identify the multi-sensory and kinesthetic parts of the artwork that the artists employed that allow them to successfully convey a nature experience and the value of the natural world. I will use the artists' writings to clarify and prove that the artists emphasized certain multi-sensory and

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<sup>7</sup> While Goethe did not conceive the hermeneutic circle, his continued interest in it helped broaden the theoretical concept's application from understanding literary text to understanding other subjects like science, the natural world, and art. Seamon and Zajonc, *Goethe's Way of Science*, 280-281.

kinesthetic aspects of the artworks with the intention to present the viewer with a nature experience. In combination with hermeneutics, I will engage ecocriticism, a relatively new framework concerned with interpreting culture in terms of how it might promote “environmental interconnectedness, sustainability, and justice.”<sup>8</sup> Ecocriticism allows me to analyze the ways in which attitudes toward the natural world play out in the installation artworks of Walter De Maria, Shigeo Kubota, and Adrián Villar Rojas and how they affect the perception of the viewer. Once again, I will use the artists’ writings as well as published information regarding the artists and their works to understand the tactics used by the artists and the installations to lure a broader audience, and reach people that are apathetic toward the natural world.

In this paper, I will analyze the ways these environmental installations convey experiences of and attitudes toward nature that excite visitors and inspire them to learn more about that natural world. The conclusions I draw from the three artworks prove installation art to be an effective method for introducing or reacquainting people with nature as well as strengthening their understanding of natural processes and patterns on a grand scale. That makes installation art an important tool of the environmental movement, because when humans begin acting as scientific tools grounded in the power of embodied empirical observation, they become unable to ignore the glaring signs of ecological destruction. By creating nonconventional environments in which visitors can experience and observe nature, artists are providing access to populations who otherwise

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<sup>8</sup> Alan C Braddock, "Ecocritical Art History," *American Art* 23, no. 2 (2009): 24-28, <https://doi.org/10.1086/605707>.

might not have access; these populations are exposed to the importance of joining and supporting the communities that fight for environmental justice.

### ***The Lightning Field (1977)***

*The Lightning Field* (1977) is a site-specific work located in Quemado, New Mexico southwest of Albuquerque, close to the Arizona border. The Dia Foundation commissioned this and many other installations by Walter De Maria; their mission is to realize artworks that would have been impossible for the artist to achieve alone due to scale and cost.<sup>9</sup> De Maria, in his writings, published media, and construction of the work, emphasized the artwork's allure, site-specificity, and scale to establish *The Lightning Field* as an impactful mediated experience. In this section, I will discuss how the artist created an appeal around this artwork based on drama, in order to convey the importance of all nature phenomena, not just the extreme weather events like lightning, and as a way of reaching new populations. I will discuss how De Maria used scale to confront the viewer with humans' limited ability to conceptualize the scale of the Earth, leaving the viewer with the idea that nature will always be too expansive for us to comprehend. Lastly, De Maria played on the site-specificity of *The Lightning Field* to portray the site as uniquely valuable even if people can visit the same type of landscape across all of southwest United States. *The Lightning Field* is an exceptional example of how an artist can represent nature through art installation to provide a mediated nature experience. This mediation allows viewers to easily reach conclusions concerning humans' place in the world, our attitude toward nature, and how both affect the well-being of the Earth.

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<sup>9</sup> Dia Art Foundation, "About Dia," accessed March 10, 2020, <https://diaart.org/about/about-dia>.



Although the artwork's title leads us to believe that the subject of the work is the phenomenon of lightning, the work has little to do with lightning. De Maria even wrote, in his notes on *The Lightning Field*, that lightning is a non-essential aspect of the installation as it is only present “three per thirty days during the lightning season.”<sup>10</sup> De Maria used lightning as an allure to get people interested in visiting *The Lightning Field*, as witnessing a lightning storm is a rare occurrence. The shocking idea of being isolated and up close as lightning strikes 400 giant stainless steel poles arranged in a grid across a plain was bound to catch people's attention. Yet, De Maria continued to exacerbate the hype around *The Lightning Field* by controlling the narrative of the work, including by publishing carefully photographed images of *The Lightning Field* by John Cliett. Walter De Maria aimed at controlling the narrative to the point that visitors are prohibited from taking any pictures while at *The Lightning Field*. Cliett's photographs purposefully misrepresent the subject of the artwork as lightning. Photographed at a low angle (figure 1), the poles, a symbol of lightning, look as if they are soaring high into the air, hyperbolized in size compared to the mountain range in the distance. Cliett chose to crop the photo (figure 2) to center the array of poles as the focal point; the landscape seems to end with the boundaries of the installation. These pictures foreground De Maria's artistic intervention on the landscape as well as the presence of lightning as the focal point of this installation.

The viewer's understanding of John Cliett's photos as representational of the installation evolves once confronted with *The Lightning Field* in its remote location. The

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<sup>10</sup> Walter De Maria, “*The Lightning Field*: Some Facts, Notes, Data, Information, Statistics, and Statements,” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 633.

hype created around the idea of a lightning storm fades as the visitor quickly realizes that the phenomena present in the artwork are far more subtle than the event of lightning highlighted in the photographs. Wind, rain, and the rising and falling of the sun are natural processes that appear before the viewer has the possibility of witnessing lightning. However, even if the viewer's mediated nature experience does not consist of the dramatic phenomenon that intrigued the viewer to visit in the first place, the viewer does not write off the experience as unimportant. Instead, the viewer's disappointment about the absence of lightning may urge them to reevaluate why De Maria used lightning as the main allure of this experience. Regardless of if lightning is present or not, one should not value nature based on a phenomenon of spectacle but instead value and appreciate all processes present in the natural world. Watching wind sweep dust across the plain is just as intrinsically valuable and beautiful as witnessing a lightning storm. Walter De Maria uses hype and allure to draw attention to how we value specific natural processes more than others based on spectacle. The hype surrounding *The Lightning Field* is also useful when attracting visitors who would usually not be interested in spending time isolated in nature unless there was something grand to see.

While the steel poles, both symbolizing and attracting lightning, are clearly visible in the photographs Walter De Maria and the Dia Foundation published to create hype around the installation, when physically at *The Lightning Field*, seventy to ninety percent of the poles disappear midday "due to the high angle of the sun."<sup>11</sup> By stating this fact in his writing, Walter De Maria identifies the limits of artistic intervention on nature. In this case, the power of the sun and its interrelated natural processes make De Maria's

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 632.

installation almost invisible for a large portion of a sunny day. In his essay “On the Importance of Natural Disasters” (1960), De Maria states that “art [cannot] stand up to nature.”<sup>12</sup> I would argue that Walter De Maria enjoyed knowing that visitors would show up to see the perfectly placed grid of giant spears, and instead find themselves confronting a landscape that overwhelmed and partially wiped out the view of any artistic intervention. This artwork ultimately exemplifies the power of nature.

The disappearing poles not only signify the overall power of nature and its processes, they also reveal our limitations when conceptualizing the scale of vast expanses. When visible, the poles, in a sixteen by twenty-five pole rectangular grid, provide the viewer with a sort of system to conceptualize the scale of the artwork. The clear steel boundaries built up from the landscape make it easier for the viewer to understand not only their position within the field but also the position of the area within the desert landscape. When the poles disappear midday, the viewer’s perception of the scale of the artwork evolves as mathematical structure is replaced by the seemingly-chaotic dispersal of those poles that are still visible. We use systems out of necessity to make sense of the natural world. When nature overpowers these systems or makes them unusable, our sense of scale diminishes, and our limitations in understanding the vast range and reach of nature become clear.

De Maria highlights the artwork’s site-specificity as another way of building up the viewer’s perceived value of this experience before they visit. The viewer assumes, based on the time and effort that a visit to *The Lightning Field* requires, that it will be a

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<sup>12</sup> Walter De Maria, “On the Importance of Natural Disasters,” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 630.

highly valuable experience. The Dia Foundation only permits visitation through written correspondence, beginning four months before the start of visiting season, which is May to September. Visitors must arrive at the Dia Foundation Office in Quemado, a town inaccessible by public transportation, no later than two in the afternoon on the day of their visit; each visitor is allowed a little less than twenty-four hours at the field. From the office, a Dia Foundation employee drives a maximum of six visitors forty-five minutes further into the desert. *The Lightning Field* is physically remote, and visitors never receive the address; this secrecy also adds to the allure of the installation as a private oasis in the New Mexico desert. The visitor may expect this place to be a landscape that stands out from the typical southwest landscape. Yet, even though De Maria spent five years scouting land until selecting this specific site, the landscape in Quemado is not that different from other areas of the southwest he explored in Texas, Utah, and Arizona.<sup>13</sup> Since the visitor must put so much time and effort into visiting the site, though, they come to it with the mindset that it is unique and worthwhile. Once there, they discover that it is special and worthwhile, not because it is somehow unique in all the southwest, but because all intense experiences of nature are special and valuable.

*The Lightning Field* provides visitors ample conceptual opportunity to grapple with broad ideas concerning the value of the natural world, yet it is physically inaccessible for most people; the artwork is remote and exclusive due to the limited number of people who can view the artwork and high travel costs. While the point of this paper is to explore mediated nature experiences that are both conceptually and physically accessible, and *The Lightning Field* clearly does not have a high degree of physical

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<sup>13</sup> De Maria, “*The Lightning Field*,” 631.

accessibility, it remains a model of the kind of components that make for a successfully mediated nature experience, components that artists can apply to a museum setting. Museum exhibitions can easily apply the concept of an allure that entices people to experience nature through art installation, which is evident in the section on Adrián Villar Rojas *Theatre of Disappearance*. Like in *The Lightning Field*, contradictory perceptions of scale could be used in a museum installation to convey humans' limitations in understanding the reach of nature and our tendency to create systems to conceptualize it. An exhibition's emphasis on site-specificity encourages viewers to consider the value of the site and compare and contrast it with landscapes and experiences from their life; the more associations we make between our daily lives and our nature experiences, the more involved we become with nature. As our associations grow, nature becomes more of a routine part of our daily lives, and our empathy and will to protect it grows.

### ***Three Mountains (1976-79)***

Shigeko Kubota's video installation *Three Mountains (1976-79)* was a prime example of a supplemental nature experience, which the artist created to convey her own experience of a mountainscape she drove through on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. Kubota, in her installation, focused on the viewer's kinesthetic experience by carefully situating the parts in relation to each other and the viewer to convey the most fitting representation of her nature experience in the Navajo landscape. The viewer's embodied position, intended and choreographed by Kubota, possibly made it clear to the viewer that Kubota is the subject of and intrinsically tied to the specific nature experience conveyed by *Three Mountains*. She also utilized the multi-sensory elements of analog video to

represent the sensorial aspects of her road-trip experience, specifically sight and sound. Kubota used technology, in this installation, to convey her nature experience not only more accurately but also, to simultaneously express the limitations of a technologically-mediated nature experience. In this section, I will cover how the kinesthetic and technological qualities of Kubota's *Three Mountains* successfully conveyed Kubota's experience as well as called attention to the limitations of an artist's mediation of the primary source, that is, the natural world. Ultimately, *Three Mountains* emphasized the individual's relationship with nature and urged the viewers to put effort into observing, interpreting, and mediating their own experiences, first-hand. *Three Mountains* enticed individuals as they likely witnessed and contrasted Kubota's intimate understanding of the nature experience with their own mediated experience of *Three Mountains*.

Kubota emphasized the kinesthetic situation of the viewer in relation to each part of the artwork to effectively translate her nature experience for others to perceive and enjoy while still having established the individualization of her encounter with the natural world. Blaring, muffled white noise streamed out of a pyramid structure (figure 3), bombarding the viewer upon initial entry into the installation's space. The viewer had to walk past the speaker to continue exploring the artwork as screens built into the sloping structures behind the speaker structure invited the viewer to stand in front of them and peer inside. The noise, which had initially affected the viewer from the front, then impacted the viewer from the back. The viewer's audial experience was like the audial aspect of Kubota's original nature experience driving through the Navajo landscape. The viewer's initial encounter with the sound was a slap in the face, similar to the sound as Kubota began to roll-down a window in a car moving at high speeds. All that sound

forcing itself into that crack in the car affects the passenger abruptly and all at once. After walking past the speaker, the viewer, then with their back to the speaker, had the audial sensation that Kubota experienced as she continued to roll down her window completely, which created an air vacuum and trapped the sound in the back of the car. Unable to recreate the intense pressure needed to create this sound, Kubota directed her focus to the viewer's kinesthetic relationship with the speaker to convey the sensorial aspects of her encounter more accurately.

*Three Mountains* continued to engage with the viewer's position to convey Kubota's original embodied experience within the constraints of a museum setting. As the physical position of the viewer changed, the focus shifted from the viewer's kinesthetic experience of the audial, to the viewer's relation to the visual components of this installation. Once the viewer stepped up to the structures in the back of the space (figure 3), they saw five monitors running video on four different channels, which showed rapidly moving mountains ranges that flurried across the screen, emerging from and falling into the corner of their mountain-shaped containers. While the viewer was not moving past mountains in a car at sixty miles per hour, what the viewer and Kubota did share in common was a fixed gaze. By locking these videos into mountain structures, Kubota situated the viewer to experience the view of the actual mountains similarly to how she did when she looked at it out of a car window, with a fixed gaze on a changing scene. She also portrayed the car window's effect of essentially framing what she was visually experienced by presenting the monitors as windows that the viewer looked through to see mountain ranges whizzing past.

Kubota used the kinesthetic engagement of the viewers to assert them as accurate interpreters of the nature experience. Yet, the viewer may have been unaware that they were interpreting someone else's nature experience; the kinesthetic engagement would have encouraged them to feel like the sole subject of the experience. Kubota eventually inserted herself as the subject of the installation as the video of a mountain range whizzing past switched to a peaceful scene that pictured Kubota faintly above the mountainscape (figure 4). Kubota's appearance in the video is likely due to the reflection her Sony Portapak captured as she videotaped through the car's glass window. Her face, overlaid with the sky and mountain peaks, became a part of the viewer's experience of looking through the monitors-as-windows to see the mountain range passing by. Kubota acted as her own watermark, and established that the nature experience represented by *Three Mountains* was her own. The sudden change in the installation narrative likely created a feeling of exclusion in the viewer. Kubota's presence made it explicitly clear to the viewer that *Three Mountains* was a mediated experience. Kubota did this to stress the importance of experiencing nature intimately and first-hand. As the viewer understood that *Three Mountains* was based off of a direct experience, the limitations of the artist in conveying a nature experience would have become apparent. The viewer then could think about how the artist had to simplify and fabricate the experience so that many people could share it in a museum setting; Kubota had to leave so many parts of her encounter out. With this realization, the viewer could understand that Kubota's primary experience depicted in *Three Mountains* was far more complete and meaningful. This would have encouraged the viewer to go out and experience nature to discover the minutia that goes into intimately experiencing the natural world.



It is essential to recognize *Three Mountain's* technological components as the key tools Kubota used to exemplify nature's expansiveness in contrast with the innate limitations of an artist to convey a nature experience with the same expansiveness. Kubota utilized the audial and visual qualities of analog video to limit her artistic intervention in rendering the landscape. The artist employed the indexical qualities of video to capture traces of nature that read as closer to Kubota's direct experience than a painting or sculpture would. The audial and visual capacities of analog video allowed *Three Mountains* to convey fairly accurately the multi-sensory aspects of Kubota's first-hand experience. While *Three Mountain's* technological components give the idea that the recorded experience is close to the real, they simultaneously magnified the overall limitations of a nature experience mediated by technology. The video represented the ridgeline of the mountains clearly, yet the grain of the analog video made it obvious that it was a recorded and technologically mediated mountain landscape; Kubota used the poor quality of the videos produced by the Sony Portapak to suggest that the viewer should not only look at nature through a monitor screen. The four channels played on loop during *Three Mountain's* three-year exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York beginning in 1976. While Kubota extended the viewer's opportunity to experience nature where time does not matter, by using mirrors and video distortions to "distend time and space" for the viewer, there eventually came the point where no new information presented itself to the viewer.<sup>14</sup> If engaged for long enough, the viewer would begin to recognize the patterns and queue of videos as they looped back to the beginning. Just as the viewer could begin to understand that our measurement of time

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

cannot apply in nature, they simultaneously could realize that their mediated experience of *Three Mountains* has significant limitations in regard to how much of an original nature experience it could convey. *Three Mountains* was a microcosm, a sliver, of Kubota's experience.

Kubota used the changing position of the viewer within the installation and multi-sensory aspects of analog video to convey with some accuracy her impactful nature experience of driving through the mountains in Arizona. But, both the technology and position of the viewer eventually contributed to the viewer's feeling of exclusion from the experience as it became clear that it was a mediated version of what the artist had experienced directly. Kubota looped her videos to emphasize the viewer's limited scope of experience. She also used the viewer's situation, standing in front of the monitors, to interject herself as the subject of the experience. While the sensorial and kinesthetic aspects of this installation help convey a nature experience, they also likely allowed the viewer to understand the reality of the installation's limitations. The limitations of this art installation do not contradict its capacity to convey a nature experience; rather, it is a sterling example of an installation that promoted environmental stewardship. The installation created an enticing and chaotic experience of the natural world and simultaneously aided the viewer in understanding that direct experience with nature is far less limited than any mediated one, encouraging the viewer to seek their own direct experience.

### ***The Theatre of Disappearance (2017-2018)***

In contrast with De Maria's *The Lightning Field* and Kubota's *Three Mountains*, Adrián Villar Rojas's contemporary artwork *The Theatre of Disappearance* dealt more directly with the consequences of rejecting a relationship with the natural world. The installation took up the Geffen Contemporary warehouse space at MOCA in Los Angeles, California, from 2017 to 2018. The warehouse was stripped down to its shell so that Villar Rojas and his team of artists could reconstruct the interior with materials that looked natural yet, upon closer observation, were infused with human-made objects. Villar Rojas made the installation very dim so that the viewer's eyes would need to adjust upon entering the warehouse. The dim lighting let the blue walls and lit-up vitrines be the sources of light and color. The installation's tall, deep-sea blue walls likely caused an immediate overwhelming and immersive embodied experience for the viewer as they felt enveloped in the blue color that surrounded them; there may have been a sense of being on the ocean floor. After the visitor's eyes adjusted, they would have seen that the ground of the installation was not a normal cement floor of a warehouse. Rather, Adrián Villar Rojas poured a new floor of "100 dump trucks worth of earth... mixed with an adhesive to make it like an asphalt-like surface" mixed with old tennis shoes, orange peels, and other materials made and used by humans.<sup>15</sup> On this ground, the artist placed skinny layered columns that look like core samples taken from the Earth. The artist also placed dozens of large boulders, and dozens of variously shaped refrigerated display cases with still-lives comprised of both natural and manufactured objects intertwined, all seemingly randomly arrayed in a large, dark, rather desolate-looking space.

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<sup>15</sup> Splash TV, "DTLA Talks: The MOCA Los Angeles with Adrián Villar Rojas," filmed November 22, 2017, Los Angeles, California. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrWuXGQP6oE&feature=youtu.be>.

In this section, I will discuss how the artist designed the space to mimic the un-built, free-form quality of nature and, in doing so, exposed the viewer to an organic, seemingly unplanned experience with elements from the natural world. The free-form flow of the installation provided an exploration opportunity for the viewer similar to how one would explore the natural world, with freedom and spontaneity. Yet, the schematized version of the natural world Villar Rojas presented to the viewer was far from any experience one would actually encounter in nature. Villar Rojas included mass-produced products and materials of consumerism into every aspect of this installation to present the exhaustive relationship between humans and the Earth. This tactic of exposing the effects of our alienation (i.e., loss or lack of sympathy) from nature made *The Theatre of Disappearance* an example of "participatory art [that aimed] to restore and realize a communal, collective space of shared social engagement... through a nihilist redoubling of alienation, which negates the world's injustice and illogicality on its own terms."<sup>16</sup> The artist exaggeratedly mimicked the parasitic relationship between humans and nature by interrupting each element of the natural world present in the installation with traces of human consumerism. *The Theatre of Disappearance* provoked a heightened critical awareness in the viewer about the reality that humans' relationship with the Earth is incredibly parasitic and that nature is not inexhaustive; one day, there will be nothing left for us to take from the Earth.

The exhibition had multiple entrances and a seemingly-random floor plan. The participant, then, must have felt free to wander as they pleased through it. The tall blue

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<sup>16</sup> Claire Bishop, "Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?" in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. by Nato Thompson (New York, Cambridge: Creative Time Books/MIT Press, 2012), 36.

walls did not create rooms but instead weirdly shaped areas and rows of tight corridors that often led nowhere (figure 5). Like in nature, viewers were likely intrigued by the variety presented by the installation, such as the dozens of different vitrines that contained carefully manicured assemblages of elements from the natural world and waste created by human consumerism. This variety and the freedom to explore it according to viewers' own intuition rather than following a pre-established flow mimicked the natural world and how people might explore it. We can compare the immersive quality of the tall blue walls with the immersive quality of a blue sky on a clear day or the deep blue sea that contains a natural world difficult for us to fathom. The small spaces and dead-ends created by the random placement of the walls also mimicked nature in two ways. One is that, to the best of our knowledge, there is no order in the creation of the natural world. Just like in this installation, the natural world is random and creates irregular spaces. Secondly, just like in nature, a viewer must carefully observe and explore these spaces to reach conclusions about how they relate to other elements of the natural world. In nature, a person would not know about a cave if they stopped exploring before they happened upon it. In this installation, viewers could not know if they were walking down a hallway to nowhere or to a new, exciting element of the installation without continuing their exploration. Viewers likely had an individualized and free-form experience of elements in the installation that urged them to embrace uncertainty as the key to understanding it.

Although the viewer could explore this installation as if it were nature, what the installation presented the viewer to examine was drastically different from the natural world. Adrián Villar Rojas juxtaposed the aesthetically pleasing curation of the vitrines with the reality of what their contents represent. These refrigerated vitrines contained

still-lifes made up of slowly decaying plant and animal matter like leaves, fruit, coral, and a swordfish intertwined with human-made products like tennis shoes and a loaf of bread (figure 6). The viewer likely could not help but be intrigued by the strangely and carefully curated snippets of the organic world mixed with the inorganic world. The presentation created a contrast between how much a viewer might like to look at the contents and how horrified they were by them, similar to Dutch still-life paintings, which are beautiful scenes of decay. While these vitrines may have aesthetically pleased the viewer, human-made items present in the vitrines as a trace of the Anthropocene ultimately made it clear that though our materials can be resilient to decay, we as humans are not. This installation acted as a functioning memento mori or reminder of death that we, as a part of nature, will decay with it.

The distinction between our fate as humans, to die and decay, and that of the waste we have created, to last for ages, is crucial. Villar Rojas emphasized the irreversibility of the damage we have done on the Earth. The viewer likely confronted the footprint that we as humans are making that will impact the Earth's future even after our species is extinct and decayed. Also, the artist created dissonance by using refrigeration to slow the inevitable decay of organic material. Although it slows down the decaying process, decay is still unavoidable. So, while we can do our best in mitigating environmental issues that are consequences of the Anthropocene, there will eventually come the point where our destruction catches up to us. The content of the vitrines in *The Theatre of Disappearance* represented our fleeting existence on Earth and urged the viewer to see it as our own fault as humans.

The curated nature scenes in each vitrine allowed the artist to express our damaging tendency to value and put on display some parts of the natural world more than others. Often humans explore the natural world simply because it is a good photo opportunity to be shared on social media with the pretension of caring for the Earth. The refrigeration aspect of the vitrine acted as a symbol for how we try to maintain and preserve the image of nature for our own benefit, not in the interest of the health of the natural world. This idea becomes apparent as the organic elements of the still-lives presented in an inorganic container satisfy the artist's needs in the installation moreover, though, satisfied the viewers, aesthetically.

The sedimentary columns that Adrián Villar Rojas presented throughout the installation were made up of various layers of compacted rock, dirt, cast concrete, and synthetic resins and looked as if they were excised straight from the Earth below it (figure 7). They might have first looked like a real core sample of geologic rock strata that the artist made into perfectly rectangular and smooth monoliths. However, upon closer examination, viewers likely saw them as obviously manufactured out of various natural and unnatural elements. The artist created dissonance by presenting organic material that represented geologic strata in an unnatural, highly manicured, and planned way. This dissonance likely conveyed two ideas to viewers regarding their role in the destruction of nature. First, Villar Rojas made it clear that humans must schematize and simplify elements of the natural world to grasp the natural processes behind them. The artist focused on the essentials by using a simplified form to show the layers as clearly as possible without the possible distraction of a column's varying shape. Yet, the ultimate goal seemed to be to convey the idea of millions of years of geologic strata that make up

the Earth below our feet. Second, the viewer likely understood the long-lasting impacts of non-biodegradable materials through examining the vitrines which potentially proved useful for when they encountered the columns. As human-made items appear excessively in the monoliths, the vitrines aided the viewer in thinking about the traces that the Anthropocene will undoubtedly leave in geologic strata in the future.

Villar Rojas represented a schematized version of the natural world to be explored as nature might. Villar Rojas was able to create an experience that gave viewers freedom and variety that, at the same time, confronted them with the realities of what it is like to explore nature in the twenty-first century. He used human-made materials to disrupt the scenes of the natural world, to convey that there is little nature left for us to explore that is not significantly impacted by humans. He integrated traces of humans' material world into organic still-lives to act as a reminder of our mortality and our influence on the livelihood of our own species. *The Theatre of Disappearance* also juxtaposed the idea of saving nature because it is our livelihood with the idea of preserving nature, so it can aesthetically benefit our own self-image. Lastly, the structure of the geologic strata presented by the installation was an example of how our cookie-cutter understanding of nature as an inexhaustible resource is based on our limited and often incorrect perceptions of how the world works. "If social agencies have failed" us in understanding the consequences of our actions against the Earth, "then art is obliged to step in" and try to convey these truths through whatever means possible, including presenting humans as apathetic destroyers of the Earth.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 38.



## Conclusion

De Maria, Kubota, and Adrián Villar Rojas hyperbolize their limitations to overtly express their individual attitudes toward nature as well as their messages concerning how, as humans, we should be interacting with nature. Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* confronts the viewer with humans' limited ability to conceptualize the scale of the Earth by contrasting the scale of De Maria's artistic intervention of 400 spikes on a desert plain with the scale of the New Mexico landscape. *The Lightning Field* provides ample conceptual opportunity to grapple with the broad ideas concerning the value of the natural world as the system that determines how everything happens and exists with a range and reach too expansive for humans to comprehend. Yet, the limited physical accessibility of *The Lightning Field* makes it only a model of a successfully mediated and conveyed nature experience rather than an explicit example of an accessible nature experience through installation art. *The Lightning Field's* allure, site-specificity, and illusionary scale are all crucial elements of successfully mediating a nature experience that artists, educators, and curators can apply to the museum setting. To pivot and focus in on how installations function to convey nature experiences in a museum setting, I discussed how the video sculpture *Three Mountains* utilized the multi-sensory components of analog video, within sculptural structures, to mimic the artist's first-hand experience. Simultaneously, Shigeko Kubota's predetermined positioning of the viewer's embodied encounter with the artwork highlighted the limitations of a mediated nature experience and Kubota's intimate relationship with nature to urge the viewer to have an individualized, first-hand experience with nature. In contrast, Adrián Villar Rojas's *The*

*Theatre of Disappearance* presented an environmental experience that was far more overt about the necessity of caring for the environment; it was call to action to acknowledge and change our parasitic relationship with the Earth. Villar Rojas utilized a free-form exhibition layout to create an opportunity for an embodied exploration of themes of the natural world, like its expansive variety. However, he inserted mass-produced human-made objects into every part of the exhibition: the walls, the building's columns, the floor, and the refrigerated still lifes. Viewers, though presented with the freedom to explore the space as a microcosm of how one explores nature, quickly had to confront the reality of the Anthropocene, that there may be no nature untouched by humans left to explore.

It makes sense that an artist in 2017 would have a more blatant and discomforting response to humans' attitudes toward the natural world compared to artists Walter De Maria and Shigeko Kubota, who worked in the 1970s. This shift is necessary to respond to our devolution in values over time as a society—modernity ignited our obsession with economic advancement so intensely that it has conditioned us to see any consequences of it as worthy collateral damage. The three installations by De Maria, Kubota, and Villar Rojas all acquaint or reacquaint the viewer with the basic elements that make up nature's ultimate importance and value. These installations function to decondition our understanding of nature as merely a part of life that can be compartmentalized, to reveal it as the overarching system of processes that determine all of life as we know it.

As we continue to destroy the Earth's environments at an ever-more-rapid pace, it becomes increasingly urgent that the consequences of our destruction are conveyed to the public by whatever means strikes a chord of understanding in the viewer. It is essential to look across disciplines to find solutions for people who either lack access to green space

and nature experience or those who are apathetic toward nature. Connecting with and understanding nature is a holistic journey, so the dissemination of important themes and information regarding the natural world should be presented across disciplines.

Installation art proves to be a compelling way to communicate the ineffable qualities and intrinsic value of the natural world in a way that is impossible for the traditional scientific method. Participatory installation art reveals truths about one's experience with nature that continue to evolve as long as the viewer stays engaged. This evolution in our understanding and attitude toward nature is what sparks or gives voice to our intuitive connection with nature, which informs the action we take in protecting the Earth. Art installations provide the viewer with the opportunity to embody Goethe's ideal scientific instrument.

## Epilogue

I had the privilege of working with Art Critic, Neil Fauerso as the second-reader of this thesis. He presented an organization and schematization of the artworks as archetypes on the spectrum of mediated experiences, each having their unique impacts on the viewer in the messages it relays about nature. In his comments on my examination of Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field*, Shigeko Kubota's *Three Mountains*, and Adrián Villar Rojas' *The Theatre of Disappearance*, he wrote:

The commonality between all three pieces is their use of some form of control or limitation in the mediated experience. For *The Lightning Field* it is the remoteness, the limit of people who can go at one time, the fact that it is in a place you can't find yourself. For *Three Mountains*, the limitations and control is the reproduction of nature through media. For *Theatre of Disappearance*, the limit/control is the curation of physical nature (rocks etc) in a gallery space. I think these can be broadly thought of then as: "Destination" (*Lightning Fields*), "Simulacra" (*Three Mountains*), "Diorama" (*Theatre of Disappearance*) and these three classifications can broadly form a spectrum of mediated experience, each allowing the human instrument to receive information/wisdom regarding nature in ways that the encounter with nature purely does not because it is so elemental.

There is use in investigating all the unconventional yet effective ways that installation can convey ineffable information about the natural world; the spectrum can be utilized to reach certain populations specifically.



Figure 1. Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field*, 1977. © Estate of Walter De Maria.  
Photo: John Cliett.



Figure 2. Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field*, 1977. © Estate of Walter De Maria.  
Photo: John Cliett.





Figure 3. Shigeko Kubota, *Three Mountains*, 1976-1979. © Shigeko Kubota Video Art Foundation.



Figure 4. Shigeko Kubota, *Three Mountains*, 1976-1979, Video Stills. © Shigeko Kubota Video Art Foundation.



Figure 5. Adrián Villar Rojas, *The Theater of Disappearance*, 2017-2018. Photo: Studio Michel Zabé



Figure 6. Adrián Villar Rojas, *The Theater of Disappearance*, 2017-2018. Photo: Studio Michel Zabé





Figure 7. Adrián Villar Rojas, *The Theater of Disappearance*, 2017-2018. Photo: Studio Michel Zabé

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