

# LAND/ART Takes Center Stage in New Mexico

by Suzanne Sbarge

In 2009 the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance will partner with the LAND/ART project to raise awareness about New Mexico's grasslands. A group of New Mexico organizations is coming together to explore land, art, and community through exhibitions, site-specific artworks, a speakers series, and a culminating book.

New Mexico's land and culture's loom large in the art world, and the influences of the modernist era, such as Georgia O'Keeffe, the Taos School, and Fritz Scholder, still define much of the state's reputation. Contemporary artists, however, continue to take new approaches to engaging with the land, departing from traditional views of landscape as scenery. The Land Art movement emerged in the 1970s when some adventurous artists left the New York gallery scene to make art in the open landscapes of the West. Today, Land Art encompasses the built, virtual, and natural environments. The large-scale collaborative LAND/ART project explores the evolution of this vast international art genre, with a focus on its particular relevance to New Mexico.

Historically, New Mexico has been a place where the intersection of nature and culture is at issue. In the 1960s and '70s, the American Southwest was the location of the first generation of Land Art or Earthworks, including such major projects as Walter De Maria's *The Lightning*

*Field* and Charles Ross' *Star Axis* in New Mexico, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* in Utah, and James Turrell's *Roden Crater* in Arizona. Since then, the Land Art genre has been subsumed under the more general term "environmental art," which is a highly diverse and vital feature of contemporary art around the world.

More recent Land Art projects reflect the influence of evolving trends in feminism, postmodernism, technology, environmentalism, and pop culture. Land Art has expanded from "bad boys with big bulldozers" to a much broader contextual approach of examining our past, present, and future relationship with the environment—be it urban, wild, contrived, imaginary, ephemeral, ancient, degraded, restored, cyber, private, or public. This new genre recognizes that what we now think of as the "environment" has broadened to include the global community, the microscopic world, and cyberspace, as well as wilderness, the urban environment, and suburban sprawl. It includes ecological activism, reclamation and remediation projects, and ephemeral site-specific performances, among many other approaches, all of which have in common artists who respond to features of our natural environment.

The work of photographer Michael P. Berman, esteemed in the contemporary art world, and a longtime member of

the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, is active in several environmental organizations. His current series, "Grasslands," is about the endangered Chihuahuan Desert grasslands in New Mexico, Texas, and the northern border of Mexico, where he has wandered into the desert without a compass to—in his words—"live deliberately." He believes that how you see the land comes down to what you value. "I believe art has a greater potential for meaning when it serves some purpose. People have started to recognize these lands as significant and this is something

art can help along. If anything, my work is to generate small symbols that reveal the greater complexity of things."

Stay tuned for NMWA events in conjunction with LAND/ART in 2009. Other organizations involved in LAND/ART include the City of Albuquerque's Open Space and Public Art Program, the Harwood Art Center, the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum, SITE Santa Fe, and the UNM Art Museum, among others. LAND/ART is coordinated by 516 ARTS. For more information, please visit [www.landartnm.org](http://www.landartnm.org).

