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A Wild <sup>R</sup>Ride  
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Undermining: A Wild Ride through Land Use, Politics and Art in the Changing West

Lucy R. Lippard, The New Press, 2014, 208 pp.

Undermining: A Wild Ride through Land Use, Politics and Art in the Changing West continues cultural critic Lucy R.

Lippard's investigations into the relationships between place, activism, and contemporary art. Her career reflects major shifts in the latter field over the last fifty years: Lippard is well known for bringing key Conceptual Art processes and artists to light in the 1960s, and for path-breaking forms of radical fragmentation in art, for example in her fundamental Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (1973). This catalogue publication followed a series of exhibitions (the "Numbers Shows"), which first took place in Seattle, Vancouver, and Buenos Aires with different titles and artists each time, including figures such as Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and N.E. Thing Co. In Six Years, she presents a chronological list juxtaposing artworks, quotes, and biographies, in a compendium that echoes the salient characteristics of Conceptual Art, both through its balanced mingling of documentary forms, and through Lippard's eschewing of authorial marks in favour of archival chronology. Undermining's own idiosyncratic style follows from this fragmentation, presenting a sequence of cultural histories, politics, and forms of land use throughout the western United States through quasi-free associations and brief case studies. Such examples placed side by side evoke the aesthetic of collage, a process that Lippard has repeatedly claimed to be her "baseline."<sup>1</sup> This aesthetic is more literally expressed in the design of Undermining, with one to three colour images running above the body of the text on each page, and image and text given equal spacing. The sequence of images runs independently of the body of the text (not as illustrations or objects of critique), further levelling the forms of content, while opening a multiplicity of possible relations among the contents/works/texts in a "parallel visual/verbal narrative."<sup>2</sup> Lippard has also written extensively about place and geography, in a way that echoes her biography, having grown up in different parts of the eastern U.S., studied and worked in New York City, and lived in New Mexico over the past two decades. She has previously addressed much of the subject matter concerning art and the American West of

<sup>1</sup> See Lippard's keynote presentation at the 2013 Creative Time Summit, "Location/Dislocation," [creativetime.org/summit/2013/10/26/lucy-lippard](http://creativetime.org/summit/2013/10/26/lucy-lippard).

<sup>2</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, Undermining: A Wild Ride through Land Use, Politics and Art in the Changing West, (New York: The New Press, 2014), 5.

**Undermining**, in books such as **Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory** (1983) and the catalogue for her exhibition **Weather Report: Art and Climate Change** (2007), which I will later discuss, tangentially, to reflect on her associative method and flesh out the histories and research projects coursing through her most recent book.

**Undermining** begins in Lippard's home in Galisteo, New Mexico, a village of some 250 inhabitants. Galisteo figures as a vantage point for considering global questions, with the commercial enterprises of nearby mining sites, for instance, facilitating an inquiry into the natural resources and localized labour practices that undergird globalization. Central to Lippard's research project for the book is a literal and metaphorical investigation of the term "undermining," encompassing archaeology, forms of resistance to natural resource extraction, and an evaluation of its relationship with urban consumption. From the stepping stone of Galisteo, Lippard's "wild ride" takes us to disparate lands of the American West, to examine regional structures such as the Keystone natural gas pipeline (running from the Albertan tar sands to the Texan Gulf Coast via private lands in the Midwest), extensive fracking in New Mexico, overpriced "revival" vernacular adobe houses in New Mexico, and nuclear waste sites. Lippard thus uses overlooked examples from resource extraction—gravel mining in particular—as a way to frame relations between local and global, rural and urban, which she spatializes in terms of a vertical dialectic, leading her to claim that "gravel mines are metaphorically cities turned upside down,"<sup>3</sup> suggesting that skyscrapers leave their inverted image in outlandish scars in New Mexico's sparsely populated landscapes. Her vertical axis also serves to evoke relations of power between major mining corporations and their permanent influence on remote layers of Western landscapes.

Lippard shifts to horizontal metaphors in contextualizing the mythologies of colonialism, westward expansion, and Manifest Destiny specific to the New West. This horizontality is also evoked by the grid in mapping, city streets, highways, and the electrical power supply of urban sprawl, which Lippard symbolically associates with capitalism, and personally shuns by choosing to live "off the grid" on solar power. She also foregrounds clashes between indigenous groups and mining

3 Ibid., 11.

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corporations in the southwestern U.S., illustrating the strains and contradictions between overpopulated and resource-wasteful areas such as the Phoenix Valley, and contested indigenous areas such as the Zuni Salt Lake, in a region that chases dwindling water and other natural resources while pursuing reckless urban expansion.

The large-scale land-art sculptures of the late 1960s known as earthworks—such as Sun Tunnels by Nancy Holt—dotted around rural parts of the Southwest are iconically associated with their sites, but largely appreciated “from a distance” by the art world through photographs, and thus abstracted from their places. Lippard previously explored this genre in-depth in Overlay, which focused on the multiple formal and thematic correspondences between contemporary land art and such prehistoric art practices as ritual burial sites, cairns, and large-scale chalk drawings on land. In Undermining, however, Lippard describes contemporary artworks in a more cursory and critical way—as distanced from an elemental or romanticized appreciation that the works might gain in association with their prehistoric counterparts—from a perspective entrenched in economic and colonial considerations. Lippard highlights how the celebrated earthworks have prompted their own forms of market ritual and micro-tourist economies, with overnight stays at Walter De Maria’s Lightning Field, for instance, booked months in advance. Echoing pioneer mythologies of the New West, she reminds us that for the well-known earthworks, “all of the artists are white; all but one are men (sporting cowboy boots and ten-gallon hats).”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, factors of the sites external to the works, such as their weather and natural splendour, have played their part in a popular appreciation of the earthworks (as two images of Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson, with sunsets, aptly represent). The resulting circulation of their documentation has thus contributed to folding the natural environment into the value of the works. Other vital aspects reflecting the specificities of places are sidelined by artists, however, contributing to the earthworks’ character as site- more than place-specific. The attraction of “sites” and their natural characteristics, as opposed to wider regions (or “places”) that might entail social and political considerations, coincides with the artists’ demographic and urban vantage points, leading Lippard to claim that “much land art is pseudo rural art made from a metropolitan headquarters,” and thus a kind of colonization in

4 Ibid., 81.

itself.<sup>5</sup> Lippard's critique of these earthworks forms one of the more salient critical turns of the book, questioning the role they have come to play as cultural markers in rural areas of the West, and inserting them into her sequence in order to prismatically reflect relations between romanticized documents, tourism, and the particularities of place.

The artistic practices outlined at the end of Undermining propose a more inconspicuous authorial position, as well as a more engaged involvement with, and sensitivity to, the damaging impact of civilization on the natural world. Instead of lifting rock by the tonne, contemporary artists behind these often anonymous practices speculate on matter, broaching why natural forms should, or could be, in a site. In opposition to the grandeur of 1960s earthworks, Lippard suggests in Undermining that “a vernacular land art might include commemoration that looks to the smaller scale, land-based notions of nature, remembering small farms and common lands, the disappearing histories of places and ecosystems.”<sup>6</sup> For instance, Flash Flood (2010), photographically documented in Undermining, is a performance organized through the environmental group 350.org in New Mexico, where more than 1,000 people marched holding up blue placards, fabrics, and tarps, evoking the endangered nature of the Santa Fe River on their route. Lippard highlights such projects that are collaborative, anonymous, and target climate change through activist processes. The forms of this genre extend and renew Lippard's interest in both the dematerialization of art and strategies of resistance against institutional structures, with works using diffuse suggestions and ephemeral evocations, rather than a permanent displacement of natural materials, to provoke a radical production and understanding of space.

Landscape photography is another genre that Lippard critically foregrounds in Undermining, but one that appears double-edged in terms of its activist agency. The documentation of pristine landscapes affected by human intervention may be used in favour of westward expansion and tourism, and Lippard argues that much activist landscape photography is thus dependent on legends or descriptions to direct a reading of the issues at hand. This is exemplified by photographs from the Centre for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), a Los Angeles-based organization formed by Matthew Coolidge and Sarah Simons, dedicated to investigating land use and geography—and that,

5 Ibid., 88.

6 Ibid., 90.

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despite its currency in contemporary art exhibitions, does not overtly consider its work as art. In Weather Report, the catalogue for an exhibition on climate change that Lippard curated in 2007, she writes about photographs by CLUI documenting the effects of climate change on a barrier island that protects US land along the Gulf Coast. Taken in the clinical and disembodied style typical of CLUI's work, the photos document houses elevated on stilts in preparation for flooding, thus presenting a "deadpan approach to dramatic issues" that reflect "the public indifference to such obvious threats."<sup>7</sup> CLUI's photography furthermore provides a kind of artistic counterpart to the project of Undermining, presenting sequences of photographs of land use and infrastructure, while raising questions about the relations between geography, photographic documentation, and natural environments.

Lippard's quasi-free associations, which characterize the style of the book, stem largely from the writer's personal experiences. As such, they are idiosyncratic rather than systematic, eschewing clear methodology or binding theories that might help the reader contextualize her examples, either in terms of the human impact on natural environments (e.g. the Anthropocene) or the influence of market forces in altering the built environment (e.g. gentrification). Lippard touches on a broad range of economic, artistic, and political issues throughout Undermining, but only briefly. However, as she outlines in the first pages, "the book is less about the subjects covered than about the connections between them."<sup>8</sup> It is no doubt easy for the reader to feel frustrated by the encyclopedic range of ideas, or the rapid pace of their deployment, and want to "get off the ride" to delve more deeply into any single place. This frenetic rhythm forms part of the aesthetic complement to Lippard's research project, prompting causal relations, speculations, and links within her subject matter. These relations extend and spatialize the literary form of the fragment, harking back to Lippard's evocation of Conceptual Art in Six Years, but also to feminist as well as early Romantic literary and critical traditions that challenge discourses of totalization. The productive use of the fragmentary in Undermining, which invites loose associations, while making glaringly apparent the paradoxical impossibility of, and necessity for, a binding system, highlights the central tension in the modern philosophical genre of the fragment. Lippard

<sup>7</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, Weather Report: Art and Climate Change (Boulder: Boulder Museum of Art, 2007), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Lippard, Undermining, 5.

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echoes these disparate critical frameworks to propel new ways of writing about art, and allowing the very lack of systems to be productive and artistic in a critical context.<sup>9</sup> It is along these lines that Undermining takes on the character of an exhibition, one reflecting the open-endedness of artworks about place, as well as the political, geographical, and economic issues woven into them.

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<sup>9</sup> See the excellent historical and philosophical account of the fragment in Conceptual Art and early German Romanticism by Peter Osborne in Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art (London: Verso, 2013).