

Environmental Art:

Exploration of Spiral Jetty, artist Robert Smithson, and the birds and habitat of Great Salt Lake

LESSON OVERVIEW/OBJECTIVES

Students will learn about environmental art by focusing on Spiral Jetty at Great Salt Lake, Utah. To contextualize Spiral Jetty, students will learn about the Jetty's creator, Robert Smithson, as well as the birds and habitat of Great Salt Lake. Using a variety of media, students will render both their version of Spiral Jetty and one of the birds that that migrate through and/or nest at Great Salt Lake.

KEY IDEAS THAT CONNECT TO VISUAL ARTS CORE CURRICULUM:

Based on Utah State Visual Arts Core Curriculum Requirements (3rd Grade)

Standard 1 (Making): The student will explore and refine the application of media, techniques, and artistic processes.

Objective 1: Explore a variety of art materials while learning new techniques and processes.

- b. Use simplified forms, such as cones, spheres, and cubes, to begin drawing more complex forms.
- d. Make one color dominant in a painting.
- e. Create the appearance of depth by drawing distant objects smaller and with less detail than objects in the foreground.

Objective 3: Handle art materials in a safe and responsible manner.

- a. Ventilate the room to avoid inhaling fumes from art materials.
- b. Dispose and/or recycle waste art materials properly.
- c. Clean and put back to order art making areas after projects.
- d. Respect other students' artworks as well as one's own.

Standard 2 (Perceiving): The student will analyze, reflect on, and apply the structures of art.

Objective 1: Analyze and reflect on works of art by their elements and principles

- a. Determine how artists create dominance in their work; e.g., size, repetition, and contrast.
- b. Examine significant works of art and point out how the artists have created an illusion or feeling of depth.

Objective 2: Create works of art using the elements and principles.

- a. Identify dominant elements.
- c. Discover how an artist has thoughtfully used all of the space within an artwork.
- e. Create a work of art that uses contrast to create a focal point. Use that to convey the most important idea or part of the work.

Standard 3 (Expressing): The student will choose and evaluate artistic subject matter, themes, symbols, ideas, meanings, and purposes.

Objective 1: Explore possible content and purposes in significant works of art

- a. Explain possible meanings or interpretations of some significant works of art.



Environmental Art:

Exploration of the Spiral Jetty and the birds and habitat of Great Salt Lake

Objective 2: Discuss, evaluate, and choose symbols, ideas, subject matter, meanings, and purposes for their own artworks.

- a. Group significant works of art according to theme or subject matter
- b. Judge which works of art most clearly communicate through the use of symbols.
- c. Create symbols in art that express individual or group interests.
- d. Create a work of art that uses a similar subject matter, symbol, idea, and/or meaning found in a significant work of art.

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES:

Students will:

- Understand what Environmental Art/Eco Art/Land Art is and its possible applications
- Understand what comprises Environmental Art
- Experience layered learning by through information about the Great Salt Lake, birds and habitats, the Spiral Jetty and its creator Robert Smithson
- Develop art from nature or based on nature

FOR THE TEACHER

Introduce the concept of environmental art to the students by showing a number of examples (provided). Introduce Great Salt Lake, the birds and habitat and the Spiral Jetty. Information is below. Images to support the lesson are provided at the end of this lesson.

History and Statistics of Great Salt Lake

Great Salt Lake supports a rich and dynamic biological system of regional, national, and global importance. Situated in the Great Basin in the western United States, the lake covers an average area of about 1500 square miles, making it larger than Rhode Island. It is about 75 miles long and 30 miles wide but is very shallow. The depth varies with the fluctuation in the lake level, but the average is about 15 feet, with an average maximum of 30 to 33 feet.

After the Lake Bonneville flood 14,500 years ago, the Great Basin gradually became warmer and drier. Lake Bonneville began to shrink due to increased evaporation. Today's Great Salt Lake is a large remnant of Lake Bonneville and occupies the lowest depression in the Great Basin. This location has allowed for the deposition of about 12,000 feet of sediment from the lake's various tributaries. The large amount of accumulated sediment is due to the fact that Great Salt Lake is a terminal lake, meaning it has no outlet. Thus, all of the materials from rivers and other sources come in to the lake, but there is no escape for them.

The first accounting we have of the lake comes from the Spanish missionary explorers Dominguez and Escalante, who learned of the lake from the Native Americans in 1776, but they never actually saw it. Jim Bridger was the first European American person known to have visited the lake in 1825. Other fur trappers or traders, such as Etienne Provost, may have beaten Bridger to its salty shores, but there is no evidence of this. The first scientific examination of the lake occurred in 1843 by John C. Fremont.

Why is Great Salt Lake so salty?

Runoff from the Wasatch Range to the east brings fresh water into the lake. About 66% of the water entering the lake each year comes from three rivers- the Bear, the Weber/Ogden, and the Jordan. Another 31% comes directly from precipitation in the form of rain or snow, while ground water and springs under the lake provide the final 3%.



Environmental Art:

Exploration of Spiral Jetty and the birds and habitat of Great Salt Lake

The water flowing into the lake from the mountains carries dissolved mineral salts that have been removed from rocks and soils along the way. After the water enters the lake, there is only one way out - evaporation. As the water evaporates, it leaves behind the salts it brought into the lake, thus increasing the salinity of the lake water. It is estimated that more than 2 million tons of salts are added to the lake each year. As a result, Great Salt Lake is one of the saltiest bodies of water in the world, with only the Dead Sea, on the border between Jordan and Israel, having a higher salinity. Depending on the lake level, the salinity of the lake in historic times has ranged from about 27% (7.7 times as salty as ocean water) to about 5% (1.4 times as salty).

The north and south arms of Great Salt Lake are separated by a 13-mile long rock-fill causeway, which was built in 1957. The south arm of the lake receives flow from all three main tributaries in contrast to no major inflow of fresh water to the northern arm, which, as a result, has a significantly higher salinity. A 300-foot breach was made in the causeway in 1984 to control flooding, which also increased water circulation between the two parts of the lake.

Wildlife — The Ecological Web

Although Great Salt Lake is often referred to as Utah's "Dead Sea" and is thought of as a barren, desolate wasteland, nothing could be farther from the truth. The lake and its surroundings host a complex web of unique and fascinating life forms.

The lake, marshes and salt flats contain a wide variety of species ranging from the simple brine shrimp to the great blue heron. Marshes are found where freshwater streams enter the lake and are host to a complex community of microscopic organisms, bulrush, spikerush, insects, and a variety of birds. The salt flats occur in low areas known as playas where water collects and then evaporates, leaving behind large deposits of salt. Tiger beetles are one of the few animals that are adapted to live in this environment.

The breadth and abundance of bird life at Great Salt Lake have earned its designation as a "Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve." Birds of regional, national, and international significance are drawn to its 15,000 square miles of water environment, remote islands and shoreline, and 400,000 acres of wetlands. Five million birds representing 257 species rely on the lake for resident feeding and sanctuary, breeding, or migratory stopover. The ecology of life at Great Salt Lake is an incredible example of the rich web of relationships between land and water, food, and survival.

Notable birds of the Great Salt Lake

- American Avocet
- Long Billed Curlew
- Snowy Plover
- White Faced Ibis
- Franklin's Gull
- Snowy Egret
- Sand Hill Crane
- Bald Eagle
- Wilson's Phalarope



Environmental Art:

Exploration of Spiral Jetty and the birds and habitat of Great Salt Lake

Environmental Art, Spiral Jetty, Robert Smithson

Beginning in the 1960s, a number of American artists, including Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt, and Robert Smithson, chose to depart from the confines of gallery and museum spaces to create artworks directly in the landscape. Drawn to desolate and remote locations, from abandoned industrial sites to uncultivated deserts and mountains, these artists created often colossal sculptural interventions in nature, inaugurating the movement of Land art.

One of the most remarkable examples is Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, located at Rozel Point peninsula on the northeastern shore of Great Salt Lake. With the assistance of a team operating dump trucks, a tractor, and a front loader, Smithson created the sculpture in three weeks in April 1970. Over six thousand tons of black basalt rocks and earth were formed into a coil 1,500 feet long and 15 feet wide that winds counterclockwise off the shore into the water. In 1999, through the generosity of the artist Nancy Holt, Smithson's widow, and the Estate of Robert Smithson, the artwork was donated to Dia Art Foundation.

Before creating Spiral Jetty, Smithson had established a remarkably diverse artistic practice. He began his career as a painter but in the mid-1960s started to experiment in different media, including sculpture, writing, drawing, film, and eventually, earthworks. Deeply informed by his interest in geology, crystallography, and science in its popularized forms (such as science fiction literature and cinema, encyclopedic collections, even natural history museums), Smithson's practice focused on processes of accumulation and displacement in order to reveal the contradictions in our visible world. In the late 1960s, his work increasingly revolved around the relationship between art and place. Smithson's *Leaning Mirror* (1969), for instance, is a seminal indoor earthwork that consists of two six-foot-square mirrors embedded at a precise angle in a mound of reddish sand from an outdoor site. In other instances, Smithson worked directly in the peripheral spaces that inspired him. Sometimes the results were fleeting documentations, as with the illustrated travel-essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967); other times permanent, large-scale sculptural interventions, as in the case of Spiral Jetty. "I like landscapes that suggest prehistory," said Smithson. The artist chose to create Spiral Jetty in Great Salt Lake due in part to the lake's unusual physical qualities, including the reddish coloration of the water caused by microbes, as well as how salt deposits crystallized on the black basalt rocks, formed from molten lava of nearby extinct volcanoes, that were scattered along the peninsula.

The fractured rocky landscape and fluctuating water levels of Great Salt Lake also appealed to the artist's long-standing preoccupation with entropy. Smithson's distinct definition of entropy, drawn from popular science and science fiction alike, fixated on the chance operations of nature that lead to a state of transformation. Created at a time when water levels were particularly low, the artwork was submerged from 1972 onward, and was only known through documentation. However, regional droughts thirty years later caused the lake to recede such that by 2002, a salt-encrusted Spiral Jetty reappeared for the first prolonged period in its history. Smithson often asserted that by responding to the landscape, rather than imposing itself upon it, Spiral Jetty is a site to actively walk on rather than a sculpture to behold. The act of traversing the artwork was enacted in Smithson's 1970 film of the same title, which was made in the months following the completion of the sculpture. Alongside aerial footage of Spiral Jetty is a poetic sequence of the artist running along the spiral to rest at its innermost coil. In an interview from 1971, Smithson explained how the visitor's experience of space shifts as one walks through the work: a "constriction or concentration exists within the inner coils . . . whereas on the outer edge you're kind of thrown out, you're aware of the horizons and how they echo through the Jetty."

Immediately following its completion, Spiral Jetty was deemed a momentous achievement in specialized art magazines, the popular press, as well as among Smithson's peers, and more than forty years later, it continues to be recognized as an iconic artwork. Disappearing and reemerging, bound to site and circulated in documentation, the work exists in a state of permanent flux. "One apprehends what is around one's eyes and ears," wrote Smithson, "no matter how unstable or fugitive."



Environmental Art:

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SUPPLIES

- Thick cardstock/poster board paper or a strong background material such as foam core
- Drawing Paper for students to sketch their birds
- Cardstock to draw and make birds
- White Glue
- Colored Sand and/or colored paper to make the Spiral Jetty
- Toothpicks
- Model Magic
- Pencils, crayons, colored pencils, markers, watercolor paints, and brushes

VOCABULARY

Environmental Art - In a general sense, it is art that helps improve our relationship with the natural world. There is no definition set in stone. Much environmental art is ephemeral (made to disappear or transform), designed for a particular place (and can't be moved) or involves collaborations between artists and others, such as scientists, educators or community groups (distributed ownership).

Setting - Is the time and place where a subject is located or a story happens.

Subject - Is who or what the artwork is about. It can be a story, an idea, a person, an emotion, or a feeling.

Symbol - Is an object or thing that has meaning more than the thing itself. A dog might represent fidelity in addition to being a pet; it is a visual sign for an idea or concept.

Foreground - Is the part of the picture that seems closest to the viewer.

Background - Is the part of the picture that seems farthest from the viewer.

Elements of art - Are color, line, shape, form, space, value, and texture. Artists use these tools to create all visual art—representational, abstract, and non-representational.

Seascape - A painting, photograph, or other visual image that depicts a body of water or other marine subject; seascapes are similar to landscapes, but their dominant focus is water rather than land.

Landscape - A painting, photograph, or other visual image that depicts an expanse of land; it is typically wider than it is tall.



Environmental Art:

Exploration of Spiral Jetty and the birds and habitat of Great Salt Lake

INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN

Quick Writing and/or discussion

Before beginning the lesson, give students a few minutes to respond to one of the following prompts:

- When they hear the words Environmental Art, what comes to mind? What do they think it means?
- Describe an image that might be considered Environmental Art.

Introduction

Introduce this lesson by asking students to describe some ideas of environmental art. What constitutes environmental art and why? Have they ever seen any environmental art and if so, where? Ask students to think about why environmental art is important. Tell students that they are going to learn about the Great Salt Lake, the Spiral Jetty and the birds that migrate through the GSL. From the information they learn, they will create their version of the Spiral Jetty as well as make one of the birds that migrate through the GSL.

Observe: Look and Discuss

Show students pictures of the Spiral Jetty and the Great Salt Lake (GSL). Approach this lesson in a layered fashion. First, talk about the lake, history, geography, significance etc. Secondly, introduce the Spiral Jetty and its creator Robert Smithson. Connect the art to the lake to give it context and meaning. Thirdly, talk about the birds that migrate through the Great Salt Lake. The GSL is one of the key stops for migrating birds in the western hemisphere.

Create:

Give students cardstock paper. Talk about what a background is. With their supplies, have them represent the Great Salt Lake as the background. Talk about foreground, so that their Jetty is large and dominant on the paper. With either sand or colored paper, have the students create their own version of the Spiral Jetty. If you use sand, draw the Spiral Jetty with white glue and pour colored sand on the glue. Pour off any extra. If you use colored paper, have students draw and cut out their Jetty and paste it onto the Great Salt Lake background.

Using paper and toothpicks, have the students create one of the migrating birds of the GSL. Show them how to fold wings and attach to the body. You can use toothpicks for legs. You can use Model Magic to stand the birds up or affix the bird to the Jetty in a 2D fashion.

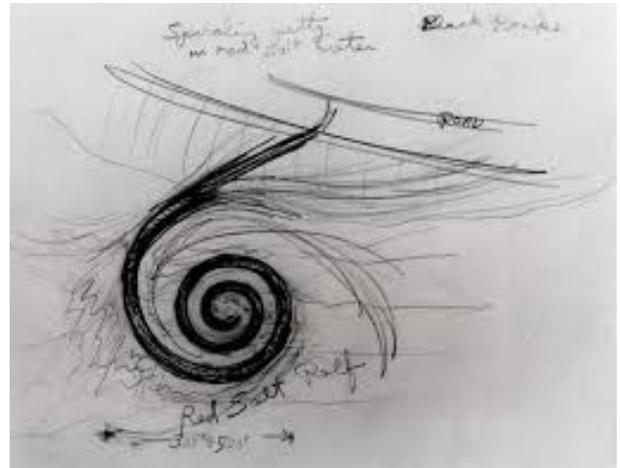
Reflect

When students have finished, give them a few minutes to look at each other's images. Talk about what kind of environmental art they created. You can give students time to describe the birds they chose. Highlight the whole scene that they created and talk about why creating the whole scene gives their environmental art context and meaning.

Environmental Art:

Exploration of Spiral Jetty and the birds and habitat of Great Salt Lake

Robert Smithson and Spiral Jetty



Environmental Art:

Exploration of Spiral Jetty and the birds and habitat of Great Salt Lake

Sample Bird Representation of those at the Great Salt Lake



American Avocet



Long Billed Curlew



Snowy Plover



White Faced Ibis



Franklin's Gull

Environmental Art:

Exploration of Spiral Jetty and the birds and habitat of Great Salt Lake



Sand Hill Crane



Snowy Egret



Bald Eagle

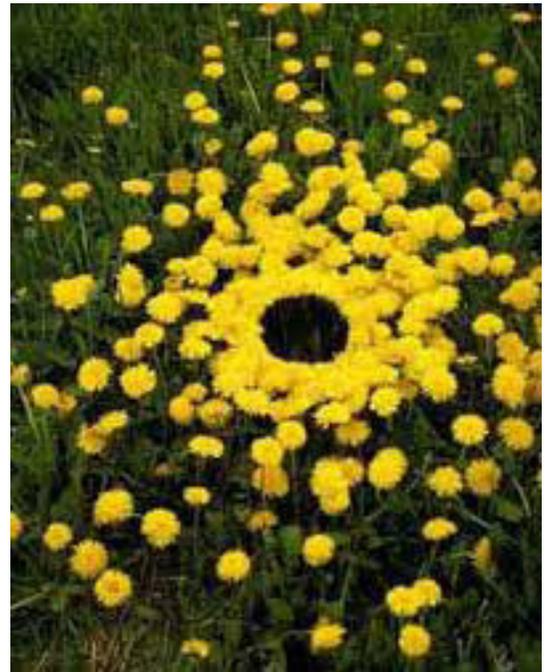


Wilson's Phalarope

Environmental Art:

Exploration of Spiral Jetty and the birds and habitat of Great Salt Lake

Andy Goldsworthy Art Samples





Environmental Art:

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LESSON EXTENSIONS

Visual Arts and Writing

- Ask students to pick a place at Great Salt Lake to create their own land art. Have them draw their idea and write about it describing what it would be made of, how it integrates into the site and describe its significance.
- Have students look at other environmental artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and make a piece of art from natural materials.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

http://umfa.utah.edu/land_art_landing

<http://www.diaart.org/sites/main/spiraljetty>

http://www.westminstercollege.edu/great_salt_lake_institute/

<http://nhmu.utah.edu/museum/exhibits/great-salt-lake>

<http://www.d.umn.edu/tma/MungerSite/Intro.html>

<http://www.edelmangallery.com/misrach.htm>

http://www.americansouthwest.net/utah/salt_lake_desert

<http://umfa.utah.edu/http://www.fogsl.org>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufdkQ2jG1vQ>

Robert Smithson, "Conversation in Salt Lake City (1972)," in *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 298.

Kenneth Baker, "Talking with Robert Smithson," in *Robert Smithson: Spiral Jetty*, ed. Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press; New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2005), p. 158.

Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in *Robert Smithson: Spiral Jetty*, p. 9.

12 Amazingly Creative Examples of Environmental Art - <http://www.mymodernmet.com>

<http://www.treehugger.com>

Google - Andy Goldsworthy for text and images