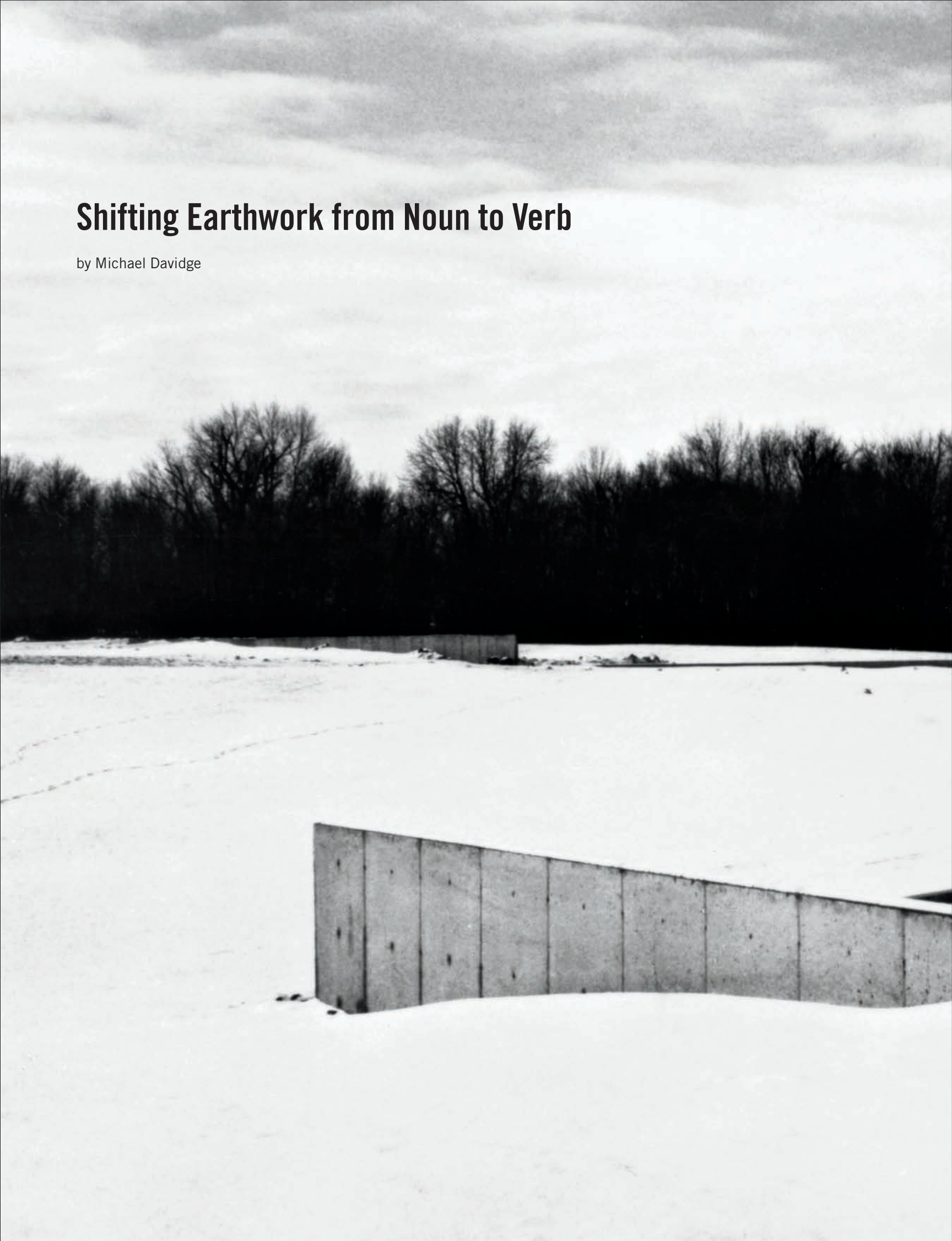


Shifting Earthwork from Noun to Verb

by Michael Davidge





Richard Serra, *Shift*, 1970–72, concrete, six sections, installed: King City, Ontario, Canada; each section varies between $1.524 \times 27.4 \times .203$ metres and $1.524 \times 73.1 \times .203$ metres. Collection of Great Gulf Homes, Toronto. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni, © Maya Gorgoni. Artwork: © Estate of Richard Serra /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/CARCC Ottawa 2026. Courtesy Artists Rights Society, New York, and the Estate of Gianfranco Gorgoni, New York.

The Earth is almost thoroughly polluted. The little viable soil that is left, sand from Africa, is shipped internationally to sustain a vast system of “earthworks,” where it is treated with additives to create an artificial mix that can generate plant life. The produce still needs to be detoxified before it is safe to consume. All of the labour is done by robots or the involuntary servitude of prisoners. Such is the dystopian vision depicted by Brian W Aldiss in the novel *Earthworks*, 1965, that the artist Robert Smithson famously picked up at a bus station on his way to visit his hometown and recounted in “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” 1967. This wasn’t Smithson’s only understanding of the term “Earthwork.” As writings like his essay “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,” published in *Artforum*, 1973, show, he was well aware of historical precedents such as ancient burial mounds. Aldiss’s vision, however, was certainly more in keeping with Smithson’s sensibility as he critically surveyed the suburban sprawl of Passaic as though he were an alien visiting from another planet.

One of the so-called monuments in the industrialized wastelands of Passaic that Smithson identifies is a sandbox, which he views as an open grave. Through it he conducts a thought experiment: “Picture in your mind’s eye the sandbox divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other.” If a child ran clockwise 100 times through the sand, it would become irretrievably mixed, but running counter-clockwise through it would not restore it to its original state. This experiment could almost be taken as a proposal for an “earthwork” as it was understood as a genre of contemporary art towards the end of the 1960s, and Smithson was one of its foremost theoreticians and practitioners. Although there was no unified explanation for earth art or land art at the time, many of the works are linked to the experimentations of conceptual art, where an idea took precedence over form and challenged the limits of the commodity-based art world, often by taking place outside the confines of the gallery. Smithson’s work, informed by the theory of entropy, presents the bleakest vision, pulverizing human aspirations in the vast expanse of time.

The recent exhibition “Earthwork” at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto in 2025 offers, in contrast to Smithson’s, a reparative outlook, and critically reimagines the concept of “earthwork” from an Indigenous perspective. Curated by Mikinaak (“Mik”) Migwans, a member of Wiikwemikoong Unceded Territory and curator of Indigenous Art at the museum, it provides an opportunity to reassess the art historical legacy of



earthworks and to look at them from a decolonial perspective. However, the main concern is rather to connect with a different legacy, one that is rooted in Indigenous stewardship of the land and shifts the meaning of the term “earthwork” from a noun to a verb. Containing artworks, installations and resource materials that represent a range of practices from across Canada, the exhibition shows that earthwork is an act of caring for land that builds resiliency for the future, spanning from the ancestral maintenance of burial grounds and territories to activities that are ongoing in the present.

At the entrance to the exhibition, a work by the BUSH Gallery collective announced the underlying philosophy in capital letters spelled out with fireweed leaves: “PLANTS AS MONUMENTS.” The three roughly shaped canvases that bear these words are actually photograms, created on the sidewalls of a teepee set up as part of a “rez-idency”

1. Richard Serra, *Shift*, 1970–72. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni, © Maya Gorgoni. Artwork: © Estate of Richard Serra/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ CARCC Ottawa 2026. Courtesy Artists Rights Society, New York, and the Estate of Gianfranco Gorgoni, New York.

2. Installation view, “Earthwork,” 2025, Art Museum, University of Toronto. Photo: LF Documentation. Courtesy the artists and the Art Museum, University of Toronto.

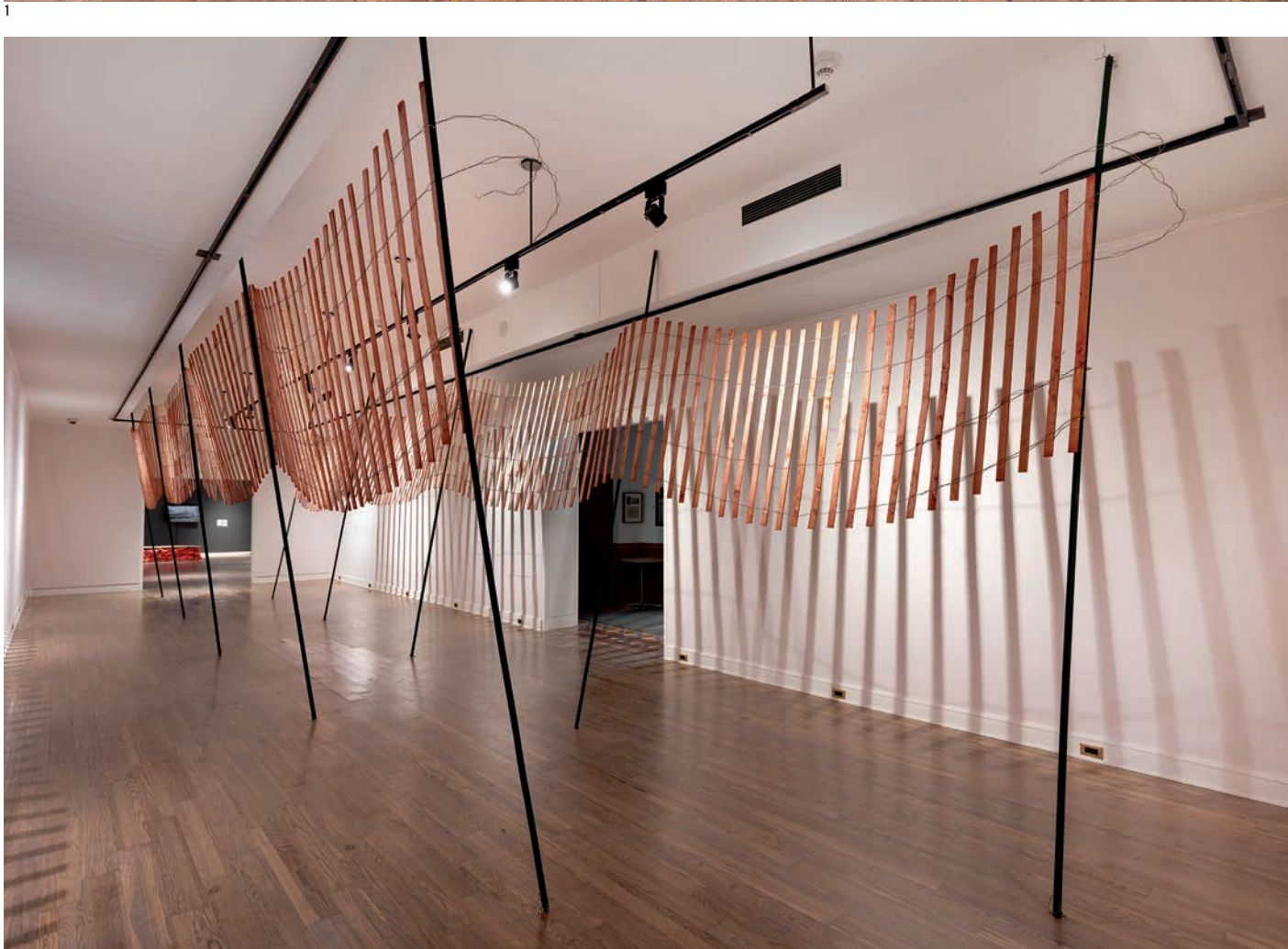
3. Michael Belmore, *drift*, 2025, steel, wood. Photo: Micah Donovan. Courtesy the artist and the Art Museum, University of Toronto.



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on Secwépemc territory. The collective, including Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, Peter Morin and Tania Willard, created the work, like earlier land artists, outside the walls of the gallery, but as their manifesto (also on display) indicates, it is pointedly being done on "Indigenous Lands." The engagement guide for the exhibition indicates that the phrase is a quote from the Tuscarora artist and art scholar Jolene Rickard, taken from a conversation with Tania Willard that was part of a keynote address at the University of British Columbia's Indigenous Art Intensive in 2021. From Rickard's perspective, the phrase not only signifies the ecological approach that Indigenous peoples take in the use of wild plants for food, medicines and crafts but also testifies to their survival from the beginning of time. Rickard feels a responsibility to share the knowledge, rooted in the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee, that advises that everything should be undertaken with a view towards sustainability for a span of seven generations. "My people are in it for the long haul," she said, referring to their surviving thousands of years and outlasting various political structures through the transmission of knowledge that has brought them to where they are today.

Rickard's description of this transmission of ancestral knowledge through contemporary practice recalls the art historical text by George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (published by Yale University Press, 1962), that was a cornerstone in Robert Smithson's thought. In Kubler's analogy of a cultural practice from the past being received in the present like the light from a distant star, Smithson envisioned the extinguishment of civilizations over great spans of time registered in geological rather than biological forms. Rickard, on the other hand, clearly has survival in mind.

Mikinaak Migwans has taken an expansive approach to the curation of the exhibition, combining works of art by contemporary Indigenous artists with installations documenting traditional practices, as well as research, activism and advocacy that provide concrete examples of how earthwork is a verb and not an object. Just past the location of *Plants as [are] Monuments*, 2021, in the gallery, a large photo mural and two videos by Art Hunter, a Knowledge Keeper from Rainy River First Nations, document the maintenance of the ecology of the sacred site at Kay-Nah-Chi-Wah-Nung, through controlled burns. Photographs by Hunter also show the regrowth of medicinal plants following the cultivation of the site by fire. As you go deeper into the exhibition, there is another photo mural and video attributed to the land defenders at 1492 Land Back Lane, evoking the blockade in Caledonia in 2020 that protested the incursion of



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development on Indigenous land circumscribed by the Haldimand Proclamation of 1784. Since the definition of earthwork as a barrier predates its use in contemporary art by centuries, it is fitting that the exhibition should link stewardship that minimizes its detrimental impact on the land to the actual defence of the land. This philosophy is also brought out in the exhibition design, with benches and tables made out of sandbags and unfinished plywood, calling attention to their temporary nature but also their deployment as barricades, if necessary. A large reading room provided visitors with numerous resources to deepen their knowledge of the Haldimand Land Tract and the significance of burial mounds, as well as to understand the vital link between blockade and stewardship.

Overall, the exhibition's concern isn't with situating itself within the land art movements of the '60s and '70s; rather, it provides an alternative context for the earthworks on display. One of the

1. BUSH Gallery (Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, Peter Morin, Tania Willard) + kids, family, the land and dogs, *Plants as [are] Monuments*, 2021, light-sensitive emulsion on teepee canvas. Photo: LF Documentation. Courtesy the artists and the Art Museum, University of Toronto.

2. Michael Belmore, *Turbulent Air / Turbulent Water*, 2025, steel, wood. Photo: LF Documentation. Courtesy the artist and the Art Museum, University of Toronto.

3-4. Lisa Myers, *Plant Signals*, 2025, audio installation with plant pressings, notes on paper, documentation of plant life on the site of Richard Serra's *Shift*. Photo: LF Documentation. Courtesy the artist and the Art Museum, University of Toronto.



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few instances when the relationship was explicitly addressed was in a keynote lecture by the visiting art historian Aaron Katzeman, whose research examines the land art movement through the question of labour. Katzeman described the now-prevalent land-based critique of the earthworks of the '60s and '70, arguing that they were oblivious to the issue of land rights and basically perpetuated

colonialism by aesthetic means. His analysis gets to the heart of how land artists remained colonialist even if they were anticapitalist and anti-imperialist in their sentiments. Commenting on the exhibition at the Art Museum, he did note that its strategies echoed earlier land art exhibitions, such as "Earth Art" at Cornell University in 1969, which included work that was installed outside of the museum and

1. Edward Poitras, *Offensive/Defensive*, 1988, two silver prints, pastel, 113 × 159.40 centimetres. From SK Arts Permanent Collection. Photo: LF Documentation. Courtesy the artist and the Art Museum, University of Toronto.

which responded to local contexts. “Earthwork,” however, shows that it is possible to make artwork that not only revitalizes environmental Indigenous practices that care for the land but also furthers the methods of decolonization.

There are works in the exhibition that do readily evoke the land art tradition, and it is revealing to make comparisons. For example, Anishinaabe artist Michael Belmore had two works on display: one inside the museum, *Turbulent Air / Turbulent Water*, 2025; and one that was installed outside on the campus grounds, *drift*, 2025. Both works were made with snow fencing, raised to resemble a banner and sandblasted with a pattern that was reminiscent of wampum, conveying a message in binary code. Belmore is quoted in the engagement guide as saying, “I consider my practice as being a kind of collaboration between human and materials, between human lifetime and geological time, or deep time.” Invoking the same spans of time as Smithson but with a view towards persistence, Belmore deploys snow or sand fencing as symbolic of a method of negotiation and resistance that is achieved over a long duration.

Edward Poitras’s *Offensive/Defensive*, 1988, in “Earthwork” is formally similar to Jan Dibbets’s *A Trace in the Wood in the Form of an Angle of 30° – Crossing the Path*, 1969, in “Earth Art.” Both feature cuts in the earth that create a visually arresting pattern documented with photography. Consisting of two long lines created by overturning the soil in a wooded area a few miles from Cornell, Dibbets’s work is more plainly about perspective and the imposition of geometry on a natural landscape. The two cuts in Poitras’s work, set off diagonally from each other in a diptych, occurred about 200 kilometres away from each other. The artist exchanged a rectangular strip of sod from his home on the George Gordon First Nation with one from the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. The work indicates Poitras’s role in communicating between two worlds, but it contains a deeper layer. A Métis/Saulteaux artist based in Saskatchewan, Poitras cast the two words of the title of his piece in lead and buried one of them beneath the sod at both locations, evoking guerrilla strategies of resistance during the North-West Resistance of 1885.

Lisa Myers’s *Plant Signals*, 2025, engaged directly with a nearby work of land art dating from the early 1970s, Richard Serra’s *Shift*, 1972, which was constructed on an art collector’s family property situated about 30 kilometres north of Toronto. *Shift* consists of six low concrete walls that zigzag across an uneven potato field. The walls seem to rise from the ground, but it is more accurate to say they sink into it, as they are level and reveal the unevenness of the terrain. In fact, the trajectory of the walls



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2. Installation view, “Earthwork,” 2025, Art Museum, University of Toronto. Photo: LF Documentation. Courtesy the artists and the Art Museum, University of Toronto.

3. Installation view, “Earth Art,” 1969, Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Artwork: Robert Smithson, *Cayuga Salt Mine Project*, 1969. Photo: Pat Crowe. © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/CARCC Ottawa 2026. Courtesy the Johnson Museum, New York.

4. Robert Smithson, *Mirror Displacement for Cayuga Salt Mine Project* (detail), 1969, Cayuga Salt Mine, Cayuga, New York. Created for the 1969 exhibition “Earth Art” at Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Photo: William C Lipke. © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/CARCC Ottawa 2026. Courtesy the Holt/Smithson Foundation, Santa Fe.

is said to designate the path that two individuals would need to traverse in order to stay in view as they walked towards each other. Myers's multi-dimensional work constructs a narrative that is set 100 years in the future, comprised of recordings and field notes investigating mysterious signals emanating from the site of the sculpture. There is an augmented reality image of one section of it, activated by a QR code, that floats in mid-air like the mysterious black monolith from 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Observations from the field notes suggest that the rumblings and signals being perceived are the sounds of the sculpture being uprooted in correlation to the deepening of the roots of the thriving flora around it.

Finally, one of the works opens up a consideration of the very land on which the "Earth Art" exhibition took place. A video and a selection of photographs from a body of work entitled *Onákdó:t*, 2019, by Alex Jacobs-Blum, traverse the traditional territory of the Cayuga Nation, which includes Ithaca, New York, where Cornell University is located. A band member of Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, Jacobs-Blum has documented her travels between the Six Nations and the Cayuga Nation as an act of reclamation and healing. Some of her photos include historical markers that commemorate the Sullivan Campaign of 1779, following the War of Independence, with no consideration for the peoples of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy whose lands were dispossessed by it. In the video, a hand (presumably the artist's) can be seen piecing together cracked earth as in a dried-up riverbed, trying to make it whole again.

Conversely, the work that Robert Smithson created for "Earth Art" fragmented the area into myriad reflections. In *Cayuga Salt Mine Project*, 1969, Smithson set up what he called a dialectical relationship between a site and a nonsite in a nascent form of institutional critique. At the site, he placed mirrors in a salt mine in the vicinity of Cornell and photographed them, and in the museum he displayed the photographs along with an installation of mirrors in piles of salt taken from the mine (the nonsite). The mirrored relationship of two economies of extraction can be seen reflected in the relationship that the installation obliquely established between the Cayuga Rock Salt Company, the source of the salt in his installation, and the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, where it was installed on the Cornell campus. The homophony between nonsite and non-sight is deliberate and indicates an act of consciousness raising no matter how abstruse. Smithson was not an environmentalist, but he did recognize the devastation wrought by mining companies. Environmentalists have increasingly advocated for placing restrictions

on salt mining in the area, as it poses a threat to Cayuga Lake, the safety of drinking water and the well-being of wildlife. Another dimension is added to the piece when you consider that, beyond being situated on Gayogohó:nq' (Cayuga) territory, Cornell was a beneficiary of the Morrill Act of 1862, which granted land expropriated from Indigenous peoples across the US to aid financially in the establishment of universities and colleges.

When the Herbert F Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell revisited "Earth Art" in 2014 with the exhibition "beyond earth art: contemporary artists and the environment," it raised the alarm about the environmental crisis that had only worsened in the intervening years. Surprisingly, it did not foreground Indigenous issues in any significant way. That would be redressed by a later exhibition, "Art and Environmental Struggle," in 2021, featuring contemporary Indigenous artists such as Raymond Boisjoly and Meryl McMaster. Jolene Rickard, who is a faculty member at Cornell, has worked to centre Indigenous rights in the area and at the university, where she initiated the land acknowledgement that was officially adopted by the institution in 2021. Returning to 1969, there is one particularly prescient aspect of "Earth Art" to underscore: museum director Thomas W Leavitt noted in the catalogue that in exhibitions such as that one, the institution's role becomes "perhaps the support of research or the support of interesting activity whatever may be given—rather than the acquisition of something for the home or museums." In exhibitions such as "Earthwork," support for the research and activities it surveys is crucial if we want to avoid making the worst of our dystopian visions a reality. ■

Michael Davidge is an artist, writer and independent curator who lives in Ottawa.