

Martin Gayford. Apollo Magazine. December 2006

## Our age of pilgrimage

As a new book reveals, we travel the globe in pursuit of artists who reject conventional galleries – but can this be sustained?



1 A tourist confronts one of the 51 black stainless-steel figures of *Inside Australia*, installed by Antony Gormley in 2002-2003 on the dry salt bed of Lake Ballard, near Menzies, in a remote corner of Western Australia. Photo: © courtesy the artist and Jay Jopling/White Cube



2 The *Lightning Field* by Walter de Maria (b. 1935), 1977. This work consists of 400 stainless-steel poles erected in a grid near Quemado, in remote desert in south-western New Mexico. The poles are needle-tipped to attract the summer storms that are common here. Photo: John Cliett © Dia Art Foundation



3 A sculpture by Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2005) in his garden at *Little Sparta*, Dunsyre, Lanarkshire, Scotland. Photo: © Andrew Lawson

The photographs illustrating this article are from *Destination Art* by Amy Dempsey, published by Thames & Hudson

In April, Chaucer famously noted, with its sweet showers and gentle winds, 'Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages'. But the urge to embark on spiritually improving journeys is not limited to one month of the year, nor to religious destinations. We are living in the age of the art pilgrimage.

Its origin may perhaps be traced to August 1949, when the painter Barnett Newman visited the Native American burial mounds of Ohio, and was overwhelmed by their simplicity and mystery. In retrospect, what happened then may be seen as one of the crucial encounters of modern art history, up there with Picasso's discovery of tribal art in the Trocadero Museum, Paris, in 1907. What Newman found there was a kind of art that was simple, self-sufficient, and – as he put it – sublime. It could not be shown in a museum; this was 'something that must be experienced there on the spot'.

Here was art that required a kind of pilgrimage, not a commodity that could be arranged – like a series of scientific specimens – in the neat taxonomy of a gallery. In the half-century since Newman's momentous journey, in a development perhaps insufficiently noted by art historians, artists have increasingly escaped those institutional walls, and sometimes created works in places yet more remote than the plains of Ohio.

This is the theme of *Destination Art* by Amy Dempsey (Thames & Hudson), a book that in a modest way could change your life. It is hard to turn many of its pages – which are arranged as a gazetteer – without being tempted to book a trip or two. How about a visit to the desert of southwest New Mexico to see Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977), for example? This – a rectangular grid of 400 stainless-steel poles arranged on a plain ringed by distant mountains – is an inaccessible masterwork of minimalist land art (Fig. 2). Or, somewhat easier of access, why not a visit to Milly-la-Forêt, near Fontainebleau, where the sculptor Jean Tinguely and friends constructed *Le Cyclop*, a gigantic monocular head, set among trees, into which you can climb.

Dempsey's book is full of such intriguing possibilities for the globe-trotting aesthete. But it is more than a modern-art travel guide; in sum its entries chronicle that exodus from the confines of the gallery, whether a white cube or not. And many of those involved were the heirs of Barnett Newman – minimalists, land artists and allied unclassifiable figures such as Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, James Turrell, Nancy Holt and Richard Serra. Works by all of these are included by Dempsey, together with various sculpture parks and European modernist monuments, such as the Matisse Chapel at Vence, and Brancusi's *Endless Column* at Târgu-Jiu. (There is also, less relevantly, a sprinkling of modernist architectural masterpieces.)

Newman himself did not create work beyond a museum context, but his paintings and sculptures became increasingly large and hence greedy for space. The more grandly simple art is – in the manner of those Ohio mounds – the more it requires spacious isolation. Hence it is no accident that the artists who followed Newman, notably Judd, grew impatient with the display of their work in conventional one-of-each museum collections. Judd famously took over an entire Texan town, Marfa, together with a disused army base and a substantial acreage of Texas (naturally a destination included here). He transformed this private empire into a series of installations of work by himself and a few friends, including Flavin and John Chamberlain. This was how art should be seen, he believed: in depth, and in a place where the visitor could concentrate on it.

The journey is part of what James Turrell calls the 'price of admission'. Turrell himself has been at work on *Roden Crater*, an extinct volcano in the Arizona Desert, which he has been transforming into a sort of art-work-cum-observatory since the 1970s. When I questioned him on this topic a few years ago, he expressed his doubts about museums: 'You have to go a long way to see Roden Crater. If you do that, you see it properly. You stay there, and do it. Passing by things in museums is kind of a tough way to see art. That's a bit like reading the books by their covers.' Among Turrell's inspirations is Simon Rodia, the Italian immigrant labourer who created the *Watts Towers*, Los Angeles (1921-54), a piece of 'outsider art' that now looks more prophetic than eccentric, a model for a certain kind of artist. 'As a child', Turrell told me, 'I found it exhilarating Rodia had made this, it had no apparent use, and when he finished it he just went off to Mexico. I thought that was wonderful. I admired that kind of thinking, and – nowadays – that of Andy Goldsworthy. These acts are mildly heroic.'

The sculptor Antony Gormley – whose work, figurative and of human scale, is superficially very different from Turrell's – has remarkably successfully created works outside the gallery that are genuinely popular with a wide public, although some, such as the gaunt figures *Inside Australia* at Lake Ballard, 800 kilometres northeast of Perth, are inaccessible to most (Fig. 1). Gormley also has misgivings about museums, although he is more worried about the audience they reach than the kind of attention-span they encourage. The modern art gallery, he told me, 'is a sort of prison for art. Not everybody goes there. I think that utopian, modernist idea of an art that was available to everyone – irrespective of language, gender, creed and so on – failed because all the art disappeared into the museum.'

His installation *Another Place* currently on Crosby Beach, Merseyside, has also proved extremely well-liked, though at the time of writing it is under threat of removal on health and safety grounds. Once art leaves the gallery, of course, there is a greater danger of people tripping over or colliding with it (it is interesting to note that the *Watts Towers* were almost demolished as 'an unauthorised public hazard').

Nonetheless, isolated art is increasing all the time, some of it in the lonely places of the earth, some of it just alone – such as Anish Kapoor's enveloping red dome, *At the Edge of the World*, housed in a disused brewery on the outskirts of Antwerp. So art tourism is likely to increase too, until green taxes and green guilt make it prohibitive. There is an irony in the fact that much of this work is ecological in spirit, but impossible to inspect without pumping large quantities of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere.