A Brief Discussion on Sustainability Art
Concepts of art and sustainable development

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The word 'sustainability' is no longer an unfamiliar term as we enter the year of 2020. The term is originated in the 1970s and was commonly seen in research studies on ecology, economics and environmental studies. On the other hand, the concept and models of "sustainable development" was internationally academically published for the first time in World Commission on Environment and Development's (WCED) *Our Common Future*, a report commonly referred as *Brundtland Report*. In the report, sustainable development was defined as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need'. The report has also raised that the three aspects in economic development, general public consensus and environmental protection shall need to be compromised in order to achieve balance and sustainable development in each aspect.

And when did sustainability art emerge? If we were to determine solely through the use of materials, it might have already existed prior to Stone Age. Taking a cave drawing that depicts prehistoric hunting scene found on Indonesia's Sulawesi Island as example (image 1), ancient human generally utilize different natural minerals as their main medium for drawing, which is comparable to green materials of modern human. However, from the point of view of creative incentive, men at that time were simply documenting everyday lives with imageries using available materials, which coincidentally created artworks that match the definition of sustainability art today. According to London art historian, curator and critic, Maja Fowkes and Ruben Fowkes' published article in 2006, *The Principles of Sustainability in Contemporary Art*, the origin of sustainability art can be traced back to conceptual art in late-1960s to early-1970s. The art form's main concern is about dematerialization and questioning of the art system, in which the conceptual idea outweighs traditional aesthetics. At that time conceptual art was branched into Land art and its emergence was an attempt to bring art beyond the museum and into the natural environment, in order to criticize the commercialization and artificiality of other artworks. Land art was commonly created by natural elements but cement and metal were also sometimes used. There was a strong emphasis of the connection between artwork and its surrounding environment, temporality and adaption to changes of the environment, hence the artworks created usually remain as photographs or video. A classic example is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (image 2) created

with basalt rocks, salt crystals, mud and water at the Great Salt Lake at Utah in 1970s. Another example is Michael Heizer's series of *Circular Surface Planar Displacement Drawing* created by the motorcycle traces at Jean Dry Lake at Nevada in around 1970s (image 3).

The characteristics of sustainability art can be said to be found in the fundamental elements of Land art, especially in terms of the choice of using environmentally friendly materials. In comparison with Land art, the contexts of sustainability art are even broader. Other than raising concerns on repairing disturbed ecosystems and recycling resources, sustainability art also suggests human to evaluate on the excessive or lack of choices in everyday lives, in order to abandon an egocentric lifestyle for building an inclusive living system with other non-human species.

If resources in the world were sufficient, non-exhaustible and the use of them shall not impact the ecosystem, it would have been unlikely for the concept of sustainable development to have emerged and expanded to the area of art. During 1940s to 1960s, countries globally were rapidly urbanized and mechanized. A large amount of natural resources was consumed to support this change which also led to the consequences of severe environmental pollution, especially through oil-mining. Until 1973 to 1974, the world was facing the first oil crisis that rose due to natural and human factors. It was also the period of Cold War in which countries were in state of competition against each other on economy, technology and armaments. The public began to realize that the exhaustion of non-exhaustible natural resources shall cause chain effects of losing balance in social, political, economical and transportation aspects. The situation hence explains that the emergence of the term "sustainable development" in 1970s was not occasional but out of actual needs.

Sustainability artists attempt to raise the public's attention in conservation of Earth through their artworks. Environmentally friendly concept is among all topics the most common one and is the essence of many creations. With the interest in relieving the burden of Earth in mind, it is suggested that the whole creative process including the use of materials, logistic tools and installation method shall comply to the rules of carbon reduction, waste reduction and resources recycling. Other than natural conservation, sustainable artworks may also cover various areas of discussions such as ecological studies, education, medicine, social justice, ethical decisions and humanities development. Any scope of areas that may face chances of

imbalance are worthy of discussion and show of concern, as well as becoming creative topics that are meaningful and reflective.

Image 1. Latest research in 2019 pointed out that the cave drawing that depicts prehistoric hunting scene found on Indonesia's Sulawesi Island may be the most ancient figural art, which could be created 44,000 years ago. (Image from news.griffith.edu.au)

Image 2. Robert Smithson created the *Spiral Jetty* at the Great Salt Lake at Utah with basalt rocks, salt crystals, mud and water in 1970. (New York Times, photograph by Ruddy Roye)
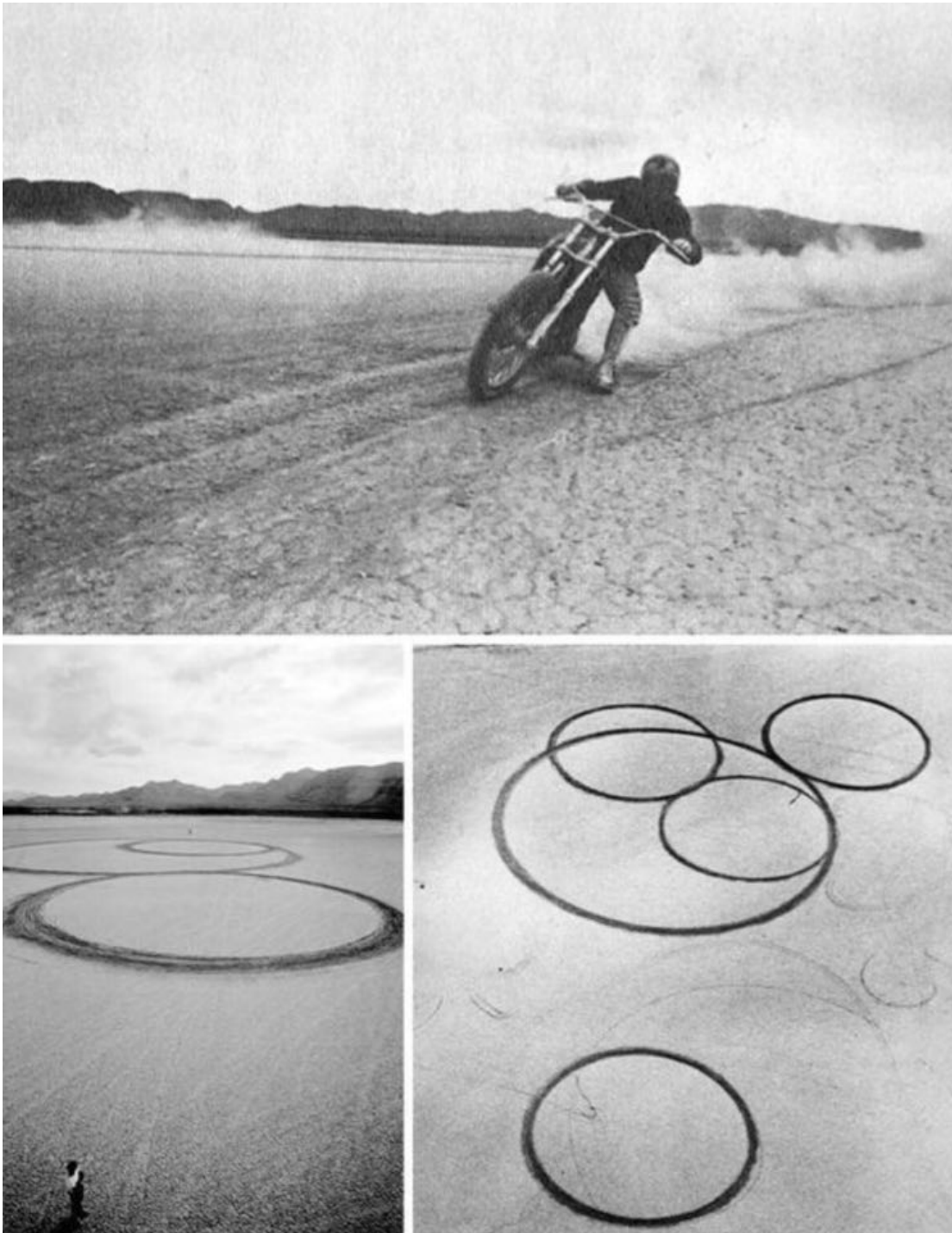
Image 3. Michael Heizer's created a series of work called *Circular Surface Planar Displacement Drawing* using motorcycle traces at Jean Dry Lake at Nevada in around 1970s. (Photograph by Gianfranco Gorgon)