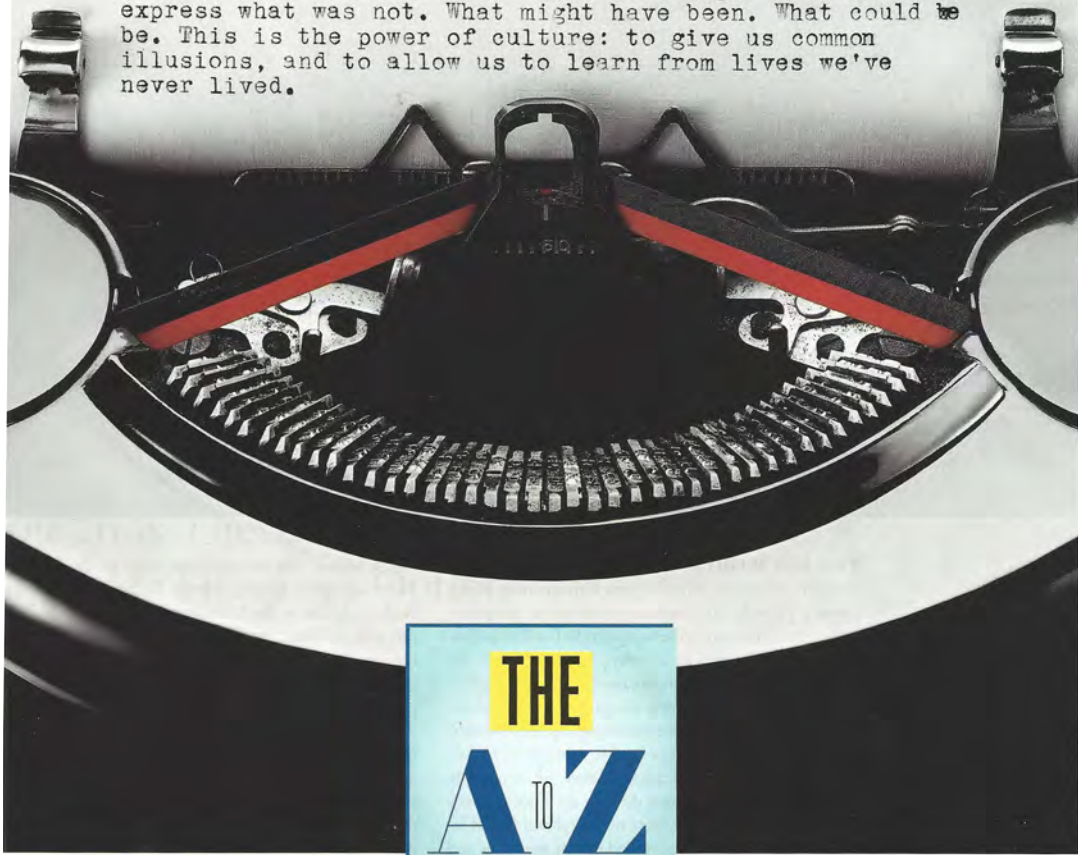




# Culture Index

A COMPENDIUM OF WHAT'S IN PLAY NOW • EDITED BY JULIAN SANCTON

We tend to think of culture as a form of leisure. Of relaxation. We listen to music on our way to work, surf the Web on our lunch breaks, watch TV when we get home, see movies on the weekend, and read on vacation. But as anthropologists will tell you, culture is not a luxury--it's a necessity. In his recent international best seller, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari ~~xxxx~~ argues that what sets modern humans apart from other animals is not language but fiction. Where Neanderthals could express what was, he says, Homo sapiens could express what was not. What might have been. What could be. This is the power of culture: to give us common illusions, and to allow us to learn from lives we've never lived.





**P**

**PUBLIC ART**

*Seven Magic Mountains*, Ugo Rondinone's towering fluorescent cairns in the Nevada desert, stands on sacred artistic ground.

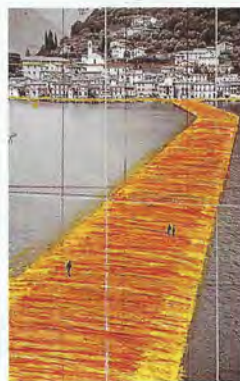
**THE FIRST TIME** the Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone saw Jean Dry Lake, a bed of cracked earth 30 miles south of Las Vegas on I-15, he was "struck by the vastness of nature and the silence it produces. You get the notion there's no life. The desert dwarfs everything."

Bracketed by the twin artifices of Los Angeles and Sin City, bombed by Cold War paranoia, and bisected by asphalt, the area looks every bit a cultural wasteland. It isn't. Jean Dry Lake birthed the late-'60s Land Art movement, in which the likes of Jean Tinguely and Michael Heizer rebelled against the perceived commercialization of Pop Art and New York's concrete jungle by making art in—and of—the Nevada desert. (Heizer is still working on his 40-year magnum opus, *City*, some 200 miles to the north.)

Now Jean Dry Lake is home to Land Art's revival, with Rondinone's *Seven Magic Mountains* at the fore. Rondinone has erected towering rainbow cairns of locally sourced but artificially shaped boulders painted in fluorescent colors, transfiguring Jean Dry Lake into an ersatz version of itself, as all things near Vegas must be. Poised, Rondinone says, "between the natural and the artificial," his Day-Glo Stonehenge extends Land Art's synergy of landscape and artist to reflect man's intrusion on the environment in the age of climate change. "Even what looks natural is altered," says Doreen Remen, co-founder of New York's Art Production Fund, which commissioned the two-year installation with the Nevada Museum of Art. "Where Land Art of the past was built into, and rose out of, the landscape, *Mountains* speaks to the mediated state of our current interaction with nature." *Opens May 11.* —G.F.



*Plus*  
**BEST OF THE REST**



**LAKE ISEO, ITALY**

Timed to coincide with the end of Art Basel, Christo's *Floating Piers* will snake two miles of shimmering, marigold-colored, nylon-draped docks across the surface of Northern Italy's Lake Iseo and through the narrow pedestrian streets of Sulzano and Peschiera Maraglio. It's the artist's first project since the death of his wife and artistic partner, Jeanne-Claude. At 81, he may not live to see another of his notoriously complicated projects completed. But for two weeks in June, on a buoyant yellow scrim, Christo will walk on water. *June 18 through July 3.*





### **BROOKLYN, NEW YORK**

Duke Riley's *Fly by Night* is an ornithophobe's nightmare: Three nights a week this spring, at the call of a whistle, thousands of pigeons will leave a converted ship in the Brooklyn Navy Yard and, clad with LED leg bands, execute a graceful choreography of white wing tips and yellow lights as the sun sets over the East River. The project, a partnership with public-arts organization Creative Time, is an ode to the deep New York roots of pigeon fancying, which saw a dense network of rooftop coops stretch across the five boroughs until the 1960s. *May 6 through mid-June.*



### **MARFA, TEXAS**

Throughout his career, Robert Irwin has methodically sloughed off visual art's traditional components—image, line, and object—until he's essentially left with an empty room. The light-and-space artist has spent 16 years harmonizing the play of sun and shadow in one particular room, a crumbling former hospital in Marfa, Texas. The Chinati Foundation's Robert Irwin Project, a series of graduated windows illuminating the space in gray scale and extending the principles of Land Art beyond the merely tangible, finally opens on July 23. —*G.F.*