Biography

In essence, my art serves as a conduit for the earth's spirit, a means of transmitting its energy and vitality to those who encounter it. By tapping into the ancient wisdom of our ancestors and honoring the sacredness of the natural world, I hope to inspire others to join me in the vital task of healing the earth and preserving its precious ecosystems for future generations.

— Alan Sonfist [1]

Alan Sonfist occupies a foundational yet deliberately understated position in the history of postwar American art. Neither aligned with the heroic rhetoric of Land Art nor with the detached formalism of institutional sculpture, his practice unfolds at the intersection of ecology, urban history, and collective responsibility. For more than five decades, Sonfist has advanced a body of work grounded not in intervention but in restoration, an art predicated on continuity, patience, and the ethical implications of time.

Born in 1946 in the Bronx, Sonfist's sensibility was shaped by an unusually intimate exposure to nature within the dense fabric of New York City. As a child, he spent countless hours in an old-growth hemlock forest near his home, a rare and fragile remnant of a pre-urban ecosystem. He later recalled that his mother placed him in the hollow of a tree before he could walk, an anecdote that has become emblematic of his lifelong identification with the natural world.



Fig. 1 Alan Sonfist, *Element Selection,* 1969 © Alan Sonfist

[1] Alan Sonfist, interview by Lorenzo Beatrix, in *Voices of the Underground: An Odyssey Across Earth and Sound* (Zurich: Jungle Books, 2025).

That formative environment was gradually compromised. Fire, neglect, refuse, and later well-intentioned but superficial "improvements" transformed much of the forest into something sanitized and ornamental. For Sonfist, this process revealed a broader cultural failure: the inability of urban society to recognize ecological presence except as amenity or decoration. The loss far from producing nostalgia, brought clarity, teaching him that nature, when severed from its temporal depth, becomes vulnerable not only to destruction but to misrepresentation.

By the late-1960s, as many of his contemporaries were engaging the landscape through acts of displacement and scale, Sonfist articulated a markedly different position. "I do not want my work to alter the landscape," he stated, "but to return it." This principle would become the intellectual, scientific and moral axis of his practice. Rather than imposing form upon the land, Sonfist committed himself to the study of indigenous flora, ecological succession, and the specific environmental histories of sites, particularly those embedded within cities.



Fig. 2 Alan Sonfist, *Time Landscape* under construction, 1965 © Alan Sonfist

Out of this research emerged the concept of *Time Landscape*, one of the earliest and most sustained articulations of ecological art. Each *Time Landscape* consists of a carefully researched replanting of native vegetation corresponding to a precise historical moment in a site's ecological past. The result is a living sculpture, one that functions simultaneously as artwork, archive, and ecological refuge. Time, rather than mass or gesture, is its primary material.

The first and most emblematic realization of this concept (*Time Landscape*) took place in New York City. Drawing directly on the lessons of his childhood forest, Sonfist envisioned an urban site where residents could encounter an ancient ecosystem as a close presence. The realization of this project required thirteen years of sustained negotiation, with botanists, environmental scientists, city officials, urban planners, and local communities. The process itself became inseparable from the work, exposing the complex administrative and social structures that govern even the smallest fragments of urban land.

Eventually, Sonfist secured a modest rectangular plot, measuring eight by twelve meters, in Lower Manhattan. Within this constrained geometry, he established a protected enclave of indigenous plant species, insulated from the cycles of redevelopment and aesthetic fashion. The work stands more as a commitment than a monument, favouring preservation over display, duration over spectacle.



Fig. 3 Alan Sonfist, *Time Landscape*, 1965 © Alan Sonfist

Over subsequent decades, Sonfist has realized related projects internationally, adapting his methodology to diverse ecological and cultural contexts while maintaining a consistent philosophical core. His work resists the logic of immediacy, demanding care, stewardship, and an acceptance of natural change that goes beyond artistic control.

Alan Sonfist's contribution to contemporary art lies in his refusal to separate aesthetic inquiry from ecological accountability. His landscapes recede into function and continuity. In an era increasingly defined by acceleration and consumption, his work insists, quietly but unequivocally, that art can operate on the scale of natural time, and that the most radical gesture may be one of restraint, restoration, and listening.



Fig. 4 Alan Sonfist, *Leaves Frozen in time,* 1974 © Alan Sonfist