Robert Smithson: Writings, Sculptures, Earthworks

Timothy Daniel Martin
Goldsmiths College
University of London

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies in Goldsmiths College, University of London. Trinity term 1999.

ABSTRACT

Author: Timothy Daniel Martin
Title: Robert Smithson: Writings, Sculptures, Earthworks
Degree: Ph. D.

The thesis examines the writings, sculptures and earthworks of the American artist Robert Smithson (1938 – 1973). Its aim is to reconstruct and analyse the major theoretical concerns that informed his practice. Various critical and theoretical aspects of his writings are examined in order to show how each was developed in relation to his reading. After demonstrating the relations between his library and his critical concerns, it then analyses the ways in which these concerns informed his artistic practice. These reconstructions and analyses also build up a broader picture of the ways in which Smithson's work changed in its underlying concerns over the course of his career.

The thesis traces Smithson's concerns over six different areas of intellectual enquiry. The first chapter is concerned with religion, and focuses on his early work of the period 1959-63. This includes a detailed reconstruction of the influence of Catholicism and the English Imagist movement on his conception of art and art history. The second chapter traces his sources and arguments as an art critic, specifically his use of Mannerism as an interpretative critical paradigm for Minimalism. It also examines his rejection of formalist criticism, showing how his differences with the critic Michael Fried were pursued using a form of deconstruction different from the methods of Jacques Derrida. The third chapter addresses his concern with philosophy, particularly his use of the dialectics of materialism / idealism and mind / matter. It then examines his understanding of phenomenology to show how his conception of the 'Site / Non-site' provided an alternative philosophical basis to that of Conceptual art.

The fourth chapter concerns linguistics, showing how Smithson utilised the work of Wittgenstein, Carnap and communications theory in developing his own physicalist theory of language. It discusses how he adapted these analytic theories of language to suit his materialist and phenomenological concerns. The fifth area of concern to be traced is that of psychoanalysis. In order to analyse Smithson's psychoanalytic understanding of vision, an early sculpture is interpreted in terms of Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and the *objet (petit) a.* After discussing Smithson's reading in psychoanalytic theory, it is shown how this theory was played out in his conception of the earthwork sculpture *Spiral Jetty.* The sixth and final chapter traces his preoccupation with making a socially engaged earthwork art. An examination of his general political views leads to a discussion of how Smithson developed a politically oriented conception of earthwork art that drew extensively on his

understanding of psychoanalysis and structuralist anthropology. It is shown how he tried to develop a general theory for the arts in which they acted to mediate in social conflicts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT 2

Table of Contents 4

List of Plates 9

Acknowledgements 11

Introduction 12

The Early Writings 1959-1963 17

I. Introduction 17

II. Primary and Secondary sources for Robert Smithson's Early Work 19

A. Cummings Interview 19

B. Robert Hobbs 20

C. Eugenie Tsai 21

III. The Early writings: Poems, Letters and "The Iconography of Desolation" 22

A. Poems 22

B. Letters to George Lester, 1960-63 23

IV. "The Iconography of Desolation" 27

A. Anti-Modernism 27

1. Form and Content 29

2. Positivism and Progress 31

B. Back to the 1940's? 34

C. The Iconographic: "Flaming Rhapsodies to a Crippled God" 36

1. Anglo-American Imagism 38

2. Iconography as History, T.E. Hulme 39

3. Iconographic "Matter": Imagism and Dualism 42

4. Iconographic Time and Space 45

5. Time and Western Man 47

6. Iconography as Religion 49

D. Savage Splendour: Revelation, Excess and Entropy 51

The Naked Lunch 51

V. "The Desolation" and After: 1962-63 ... 56

Art Criticism: Abstract Mannerism and Deconstruction ... 58

I. Introduction ... 58

II. The Mannerist End of Abstract Expressionism ... 59

A. A Cyclical Model of Mannerism ... 60

B. Critical Mannerism ... 61

C. The Transition from 'Flatness' to 'Literalness' ... 62

D. ...and 'depth' to 'opticality' ... 63

III. A New "Abstract" Mannerism? ... 64

A. Art History: Hauser & Sypher on Mannerism ... 64

Wylie Sypher ... 67

B. A Psychology of Abstraction: Abstraction and Empathy ... 68

C. "Entropy and the New Monuments" ... 70

1. Entropy ... 73

2. Mannerist Cinema ... 74

3. Peter Hutchinson ... 77

4. Brian O'Doherty ... 78

D. Michelangelo and Greenberg ... 79

IV. Deconstruction and the Mannerist Frame ... 81

A. Fried on The Frame ... 82

B. Smithson on Fried ... 84

1. Mannerism and the Frame ... 85

2. Time ... 87

3. The 'Infinite Abyss' of the Mind ... 88

C. The Frame in Smithson's Site / Non-site ... 89

D. Deconstruction and Mannerist Art Criticism ... 92

Philosophy: Writings and Non-sites ... 96

I. Introduction ... 96

II. Materialism or Idealism? ... 98

A. Smithson as Materialist Philosopher: Reconsidering Art Criticism ... 100

B. Materialism and Science ... 103

C. Smithson as Dualist: ... 106

III. The Mind / Matter Problem ... 106

1. "Donald Judd" 107
2. Spiral Jetty 108
3. Sculpture Between Mind and Matter 109
4. Ideals 112

IV. Phenomenology 114
A. Husserl 116
1. The Three Reductions 116
2. Smithson on Judd 119
3. Site / Non-Site 121
a) Site Visit: Empirical and Phenomenological 121
b) Further Reductions of Mind and Matter 122
c) Yet Further Reductions: The Surd 124
d) The Formation of the Non-site 127
e) Three Variations on the Non-site 130

V. Conclusion 135

Theories of Language 137

I. Language, Logic and Negation 137
A. Wittgenstein: Propositions and Pictures 139
1. General Negation 140
2. The Picture Theory 142

II. Material Signs 144
A. Colin Cherry: On Human Communication 146
B. Symbols Signals and Noise 146
C. Carnap's Logical Syntax 148
A Syntax Experiment 149

III. Language = Mind + Matter? 151
A. Formalism as Neo-Idealism 151
B. Conceptual Art as Neo-idealism. 154

IV. The Social Psychology of Language 156
A. Semantic Cities 157
B. Tony Smith 159
C. "Ultramoderne" 160

V. Non-sites and Phenomenological Linguistics 163

VI. Conclusion 167

Psychoanalysis: Modelling the Drives 169

I. A Psychoanalytic Subject 169

II. Enantiomorphic Chambers 172

A. The First Axis: The Transcendental Ego 175

B. The Second Axis: The Split Subject and the Gaze 180

C. The Third Axis: Prison Chambers 183

D. A Graph of Visual Desire 184

III. A Materialist Psychoanalysis: From Entropy to Ehrenzweig 187

A. The Three Stages 189

B. Tony Smith and Michael Fried 190

C. Robert Morris 192

IV. Pleasure and Fantasy in *Spiral Jetty* 194

A. The "Hidden Order" of *Spiral Jetty* 194

B. The Freudian Drives and their Objects 196

C. A Lacanian Analysis of *Spiral Jetty* 197

D. Dead Projectors 198

E. The other and the Other 199

The Politics of Place 203

I. Introduction 203

II. "The Rat of Politics and the Cheese of Art" 205

A. The Museum 206

III. An Engaged Earthwork Art 208

A. Man in the Landscape 208

Broken Circle / Spiral Hill 210

B. Purity and Danger 213

1. Mediation 214

a) Ecologists 215

b) Industrialists 216

2. Bingham 217

IV. The Engaged Artist 218

A. Alienation 219

B. Hysteria and the Totem 220

Articles, Manuscripts, Interviews and Letters by Robert Smithson 224

General Bibliography 230

LIST OF PLATES

PLATE	ARTIST	TITLE	DATE	DIMENSIONS	COLLECTION OF
Plate 1	Robert Smithson	*Blind Angel*	1961	112 x 135 cm	George Lester Estate
Plate 2	Robert Smithson	*Device for Removing the Death Rattle from Typewriters*	1961	90 x 70 cm	George Lester Estate
Plate 3	Robert Smithson	*Enantiomorphic Chambers*	1965	24" x 84" x 31"	whereabouts unknown
Plate 4	Donald Judd	*Untitled*	1965	20" x 48.25" x 34"	Centre Pompidou, Paris
Plate 5	Robert Smithson	*Plunge*	1966	10 units, total length 520 cm	Denver Art Museum
Plate 6	Robert Smithson	*Gyrostasis*	1968	182 x 137 x 99 cm	Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Plate 7	Frank Stella	*Hollis Frampton*	1963	7' x 7'	Leo Castelli Gallery, NYC
Plate 8	Frank Stella	*Honduras Lottery Company*	1963	7' 1" x 7' 1"	Leo Castelli Gallery, NYC
Plate 9	Robert Smithson	*Non-site, Franklin N. J.*	1968	42 x 209 x 24; 102 x 76 cm	Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
Plate 10	Robert Smithson	*Non-site, Mono Lake*	1968	8" x 40" x 40"; 40" x 40"	La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California
Plate 11	Robert Smithson	*"Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space"*	1966	12" x 9"	*Arts Magazine*
Plate 12	Robert Smithson	*Double Non-site, California and Nevada*	1968	12" x 71" x 71"; 71" x 71"	Private Collection
Plate 13	Robert Smithson	*Hypothetical Continent (Cathaysia) in Stone*	1969	unknown	Robert Smithson Estate
Plate 14	Robert Smithson	*Hypothetical Continent (Map of Broken Glass, Atlantis)*	1969	20' x 16'	Robert Smithson Estate
Plate 15	Robert Smithson	*Map of Broken Glass (Atlantis)*	1969	42.5 x 35.5 cm	Robert Smithson Estate
Plate 16	Robert Smithson	*A Heap of Language*	1966	16 x 56 cm	Museum Overholland, Nieuwersluis, Holland
Plate 17	Robert Smithson	*Drawing Y*	1965	11.25" x 13.5"	Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.C.
Plate 18	Robert Smithson	*Enantiomorphic Chambers,* reconstruction, photo 1	1999	24" x 84" x 31"	Robert Smithson Estate
Plate 19	Robert Smithson	*Enantiomorphic Chambers,* reconstruction, photo 2	1999	24" x 84" x 31"	Robert Smithson Estate
Plate 20	Robert Smithson	*Enantiomorphic Chambers,* reconstruction, photo 3	1999	24" x 84" x 31"	Robert Smithson Estate
Plate 21	Robert Smithson	*Enantiomorphic Chambers,* reconstruction, photo 4	1999	24" x 84" x 31"	Robert Smithson Estate
Plate 22	Ad Reinhardt	*How to Look at Modern Art in America (detail)*	1946		*PM Magazine*

	ARTIST	TITLE	DATE	DIMENSIONS	COLLECTION OF
Plate 23	Robert Smithson	*Pointless Vanishing Points*	1968	102 x 102 x 244 cm	Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
Plate 24	Robert Smithson	*Enantiomorphic Chambers,* reconstruction, photo 5	1999	24" x 84" x 31"	Robert Smithson Estate
Plate 25	Robert Smithson	*Enantiomorphic Chambers,* reconstruction, photo 6	1999	24" x 84" x 31"	Robert Smithson Estate
Plate 26	Robert Smithson	*Afterthought Enantiomorphic Chambers*	1965	28 x 22 cm	Robert Smithson Estate
Plate 27	Robert Smithson	*Spiral Jetty*	1970	1500' long x 15' wide	Salt Lake, Utah
Plate 28	Robert Smithson	*Spiral Jetty with Sun*	1970	12" x 9"	Robert Smithson Estate
Plate 29	Robert Smithson	*Broken Circle - Spiral Hill*	1971	canal 140' D; Hill 75' base	Emmen, Holland
Plate 30	Robert Smithson	*Bingham Copper Mining Pit – Utah Reclamation Project*	1973	50.8 x 77.5 cm	Elmer Johnson Estate

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those who assisted in the completion of this thesis. Above all, this thanks and gratitude goes to Professor Alex Potts for his guidance, patience and good humour. His example as a teacher, supervisor and writer has been most admirable. My thanks also extend to the faculty of Goldsmiths College and Reading University for their support and encouragement.

This thesis would have been much less rich without the help and trust of Nancy Holt. Her many conversations, her generosity in providing documents, and her support in the reconstruction of *Enantiomorphic Chambers* have helped to bring Smithson's life and work into focus. I would also like to thank John Weber and the staff of his gallery for all their assistance in research.

For their intellectual support and encouragement, I would like to thank some of my fellow post-graduates, particularly Michael Ben Naftali for her patient reading of early drafts; Phil Dravers, for his many ideas on Lacanian psychoanalysis; and Alex Coles for his support and encouragement in the preparation of a chapter for publication.

For support and financial assistance in the reconstruction of *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, I would like to thank Mr. Per Boym of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo, and the collector Joseph Berland for supplying an accurate copy of a crucial drawing in his collection. For financial assistance and encouragement I would also like to thank Richard and John Martin, Dian and Frank Benson, and Reg Milne.

None of this research would have been completed without the patience and help of the library staff of the Bodlean Library, Reading University Library, Goldsmiths Library, the National Art Library, and The Archives of American Art.

Most of all, however, I wish to extend my thanks to Lynn and George for their patience, support and curiosity. It could not have been done without them.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a critical reconstruction and analysis of the writings, sculptures and earthworks of Robert Smithson (1938-1973). It offers a systematic account of the development and underlying structure of his ideas as they impact on his artistic practice, based on a detailed examination of archival evidence. In analysing this evidence I encountered a number of difficult tasks, some of which came as unexpected, some of which did not. I would therefore like to address these challenges and my methodological responses to them by way of an introduction.

One of the first expected challenges for this thesis was to find a way to recount the work of a writer and artist who did not himself give much credence to notions of subjective unity and presence. This state of affairs could have serious implications for a biographical account of Smithson. I have sought to address this by not considering Smithson the man, but rather Smithson the thinker, the reader, the writer and the artist. Taken in this way, Smithson's observations on the inconsistencies and self-contradictions of knowledge, and his reflections on the subjectlessness of human character, are neither swept away into a corner nor accepted at face value, but are left in place under critical scrutiny.

Smithson's own questioning of knowledge and subjectivity has regularly led to his assimilation into the project of postmodernism. Some of the secondary literature depicts him as a main player in the art world for introducing the dissolution of boundaries between media, for declaring the constructedness of subjectivity and knowledge, and for diminishing reliance on concepts of unity, intentionality and referentiality. Certainly my own work has benefited from such analysis. While I do not generally doubt the validity of such assimilations, and am broadly sympathetic to the uses his work has been put, I remain of the opinion that this approach sometimes has the consequence of obscuring what Smithson was doing as much as illuminating it. In this respect I have sought to make fewer assumptions about his postmodernist intentions than is regularly the case in the secondary literature.

Given that I see a high degree of unity in his work I can not avail myself of the more traditional postmodern strategy of arguing for the lack of unity in subjectivity, using Smithson's comments as a sympathetic corroboration. In adding to the secondary literature on Smithson I have therefore found myself in a somewhat amusing situation. I was left with a choice between putting Smithson to use in the service of my own critical goals, or in repressing these in favour of putting Smithson at the front of the stage. Both choices were necessarily limiting. I generally start by choosing the later, but given the ways in which he sought to nuance ideas of intention and subjectivity—ideas which extend to all authorial productions-- it is not a straightforward choice. At times I assume a unity and directedness in his project, and at others I observe his conflictedness, his silences, and the ways in which he was a

product of his library and the discourses at work in the art world in which he lived. One method of signalling the constructedness of Smithson as a subject and thinker was to start with some of the more traditional assumptions about subject unity, and then to proceed apace towards those aspects of his work where theories of intentionality are less satisfactory. I would maintain that Smithson's intellectual life does benefit from such scrutiny and reconstruction on the assumption that he was a reasonably attentive reader, and that he had goals, ranges and persistent traits. In this sense I hope to have offered something beneficial to those who have read and enjoyed Smithson and felt that there was a consistent logic at work, but were unable to immediately identify it. Certainly this is the same set of conditions that originally piqued my curiosity, and eventually led to this thesis.

While this thesis does not reconstruct the man behind the signature, it does make use of certain categories, some of which Smithson vigorously tried to dispense with. Disliking the word "sculpture", arguing against the categorisation and separation of knowledge under subject headings, Smithson clearly poses a challenge to many of the standard critical methods and vocabulary of his day and mine. For the purposes of making a critical study of Smithson I have reinvested some of these terms and categories with analytic tasks. To justify this contradiction it would be possible to argue that these words and categories have persisted despite Smithson's efforts, or that these categories do an important job whatever their epistemologically uncertain status. I would defer from arguing so. Instead I would observe that, like Smithson, I have used them, questioned them and thereby enriched them, and then carried on using them. While I distinguish between writing, sculptures and earthworks by using some categories which he rejected, I feel this is ultimately less interesting a problem than the ways in which I have argued for a unity of thought across all the media used in his work.

Essays, poems, unfinished draft articles, pencilled thoughts, sculptures, drawings of many sorts, photographs, cinema films, lectures and earthworks are all represented here as stemming from a consistent and unified series of intellectual concerns. My ambition was to employ those methods which clearly highlighted Smithson's intellectual concerns, in the belief that they were the most important unifying factor amongst the variety of work which he produced. This has allowed work in all media to be assessed against a single set of criteria. In order to build up a picture of Smithson's intellectual concerns I made the critical choice to closely examine his library as the primary factor in his intellectual development. Certainly it could have been otherwise, for example, seeing his concerns in relation to other external factors such as other artist's work or the political and social events of the 1960's and 1970's. As well, more unconscious internal factors could have been brought into play. If I have chosen to limit the number of factors, it was in order that they be treated clearly and thoroughly.

It is my claim that Smithson's work, whatever the medium, sprang from the rich intellectual life which he maintained, and that the primary source for him in this was his library and his discussions

with other artists, critics and intellectuals. While the conversations are almost entirely lost to posterity, the library list is not. Given that I use an empirical method to get my analysis going, I necessarily turn first to the evidence which has survived. Thus, that which was temporally fleeting and unrecorded does not feature greatly in this thesis, hence my emphasis on a close reading of Smithson's writings. If I have tried to make a number of claims about Smithson, these are claims which I wished to substantiate with clear evidence, and wherever possible, with primary evidence.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges posed by his writings is their quality of what he called "dedifferentiation". They make isomorphic comparisons of similarity across very broad fields of reference. I have known this to be a problem of such magnitude that it has put some critics off the task of writing about Smithson. I have dealt with this situation by turning first to an empirical method, by making good use of the list of Smithson's library drawn up at the time of his death. This included sorting the list into chronological order by publication date in order to roughly chart the progress of his reading. At the same time I began to separate out some of the concerns which he collected in his essays in order to examine them individually and then as they changed over time. The main categories that I identified were art criticism, philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis and socially engaged art. The picture of the repetitions and variations of these concerns that emerged from this analysis was then set alongside the chronological reading list. This led to comparisons between the content of the books and the writings, and finally to a fuller picture of his intellectual life. Granted, this deductive and comparative method almost inevitably produces the effect which I intend, namely the appearance in Smithson of a thought process. As such I have wagered that the picture that emerges from this is not so unlike that perchance illusory thing called a person's intellectual life.

I claim in this thesis, then, that there was something called Smithson's thought, that it was coherent, that it developed and changed, and that it is at least partially open to scrutiny through an examination of the existing evidence. However, if empiricist approaches took me thus far, I was not yet satisfied, and for this reason I also availed myself of more theoretical methods. That I have done so is not entirely irreconcilable even if empiricist and theoretical approaches start from different assumptions and pursue different aims. In cutting twice, however, it was my hope that I would be able to substantiate a second claim about Smithson. This claim is that his project was partly based on an understanding of the structural nature of human desire. In trying to define this I was fist struck by the fact that the intellectual coherence of his work counted as little compared to the performative impact he created for his audience as they read him or look at his sculptures and earthworks. The evidence seemed to suggest that Smithson understood something about human desire and how to answer to it through art. My feeling for this arose first in researching the early Minimalist sculpture *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, which seems so clearly to address questions about the structural functioning of visual desire. If his understanding of what was wanted, and why it was wanted, was

substantial even at this time, it still remained quite difficult to quantify. Though I could identify many of his later sources, this did not account for the work he did in advance of his detailed readings in psychoanalytic literature. Because this understanding is, in my opinion, the single greatest reason why his work continues to receive enthusiastic support, I was not content to pass over it without developing it at some length. My second claim, then, was best substantiated by stepping outside Smithson's terms of reference. Added to this I also reconstructed a full scale model of *Enantiomorphic Chambers* in order to compare its functioning to his written and photo-collage commentary.

The basis of my analysis of Smithson's thinking on desire takes up two Lacanian concepts. I argue first that Smithson understood the basic points made in Lacan's description of the mirror stage, in which subjectivity is formed in relation to an imagined 'other', with all its consequences for internal alienation. I then argue that he understood this 'other' to be a part object, in many cases a gaze, which played a central role in activating the functioning of desire. Had this been the extent of it I would have been content to analyse this in Kleinian terms. I turned to Lacan, however, for several reasons. Firstly was the similarly phenomenological and structuralist basis on which each arrived at a description of their insights. Secondly was the way in which Smithson sometimes described the part object as something wholly abstract. Thus the Lacanian notion of the *objet a* was better placed to draw out the spatial, structural and abstract qualities of Smithson's thinking.

My method in the latter part of this thesis is not strictly Lacanian. I have used the logic of Lacan because it is the most suitable to particular aspects of the logic of Smithson. I also hope that this shift in methods helps balance those sections of the thesis in which I closely follow and reconstruct Smithson's core interests. Reconstruction, when taken too far, can become overly sympathetic and uncritical of its object. I have sought to avoid this, and it can easily creep in over the course of five years of research, by introducing concepts such as the *objet a* and by coining the term "entropic ego" to describe Smithson's conception of *Spiral Jetty*. While providing needed distance this does complicate the critical lexicon, and where I have not always clearly signalled these shifts, I trust somewhat in my reader in identifying them. In the last chapter, in which I trace the shift in Smithson's position in the very final years of his life, I found a Lacanian model for understanding his take on the psychic to be less appropriate. At this time Smithson's outlook converges more closely, if anything, with Kleinian models. For this reason I have not regarded Lacanian theory to be necessary to an understanding of the late work.

I feel that Smithson made a contribution to this area in a way he did not to others such as philosophy and linguistics. He was a talented user of philosophy, but rather crude if read as a philosopher. Thus my analysis is primarily descriptive up to the point that he brings philosophical ideas to bear on his sculptural practice. This is not the case with psychoanalysis, where his contribution has remained

largely unstudied, but is far more substantial. Smithson worked with Freud, Ehrenzweig, Mary Douglas and others in an inventive and productive way. I am of the view that this subsequently enriched his earthworks such as *Spiral Jetty*. Ending as I do with his late work, the latter half of this thesis takes up this challenging search for the psychoanalytic Smithson. I have pictured him here as an artist and writer deeply involved in contemplating the nature of desire, including its material conditions and the instincts and drives involved. I then conclude by piecing together a picture of his final work in order to show how he put his unique psychoanalytic insights and theories to work in the service of a perceived social purpose. While this is not the only possible analysis of his late work, it is a brief description of the most important and salient points about his conception of a socially engaged art.

It remains to say in conclusion that any critical reconstruction which purports to accurately recount the development of a person's intellectual life is bound to bear certain limitations and contradictions. I nevertheless hope that this study will add to an understanding of Smithson's work in ways not yet achieved in the secondary literature. The ambitiousness and scope of his intellectual life remains an admirable one, and well worth setting out both for a greater appreciation of the art of the period and for the future benefit of the arts.

There are, at present, two editions of Smithson's writings. The first edition, edited by Nancy Holt, appeared in 1979. A more detailed and comprehensive second edition, edited by Jack Flam, appeared in 1996. In order to make references to the writings more straightforward, all the footnotes in this text refer to the second edition, which is noted throughout as S2.

Chapter I

THE EARLY WRITINGS 1959-1963

I. Introduction

As an artist, Robert Smithson developed rather early, having his first professional one-man show in 1961. This initial phase of early work spans a period from the age of 17 in 1955 and concludes around the age of 25 in 1963. Given that he died in 1973 at the age of 35, this early period constitutes nearly half of his artistic life. For this reason, the period warrants attention in any examination of his work. When counting by writings rather than by years, however, the picture is very different. The vast majority of his writings took place after 1963. The early period has left written traces only in one full essay, titled "The Iconography of Desolation", a series of short poems, and his private correspondence with his gallerist George Lester, and his wife Nancy Holt. To make sense of Smithson's intellectual development at this time, this slim evidence necessitates some rather close reading of the few existing documents. The task of unravelling his views and thoughts on art, religion and modernism is made somewhat the more difficult by the dense style of his prose. In conjunction with his library list, though, it has been possible to trace some of the sources used in his essay, and to make sense of how he used his sources in developing his own views. This allows some conclusion to be made about the sorts of problems Smithson set himself as he embarked upon his 'mature' writings on art, philosophy, linguistics and psychoanalysis.

The early work of Robert Smithson remained out of the public domain for many years after his death. With the assistance of the Smithson Estate, including his wife Nancy Holt and his gallerist John Weber, early paintings, drawings and writings were slowly exhibited and published. In 1985, the Diane Brown Gallery exhibited forty paintings and collages, and in 1986, the International with

Monument gallery exhibited ten collages and drawings. Additional documentation and information on the early period also became available in 1986, when Nancy Holt gave a collection of Smithson's papers to the Smithsonian Institute's Archives of American Art, thus opening the period to greater scrutiny. In 1991, Eugenie Tsai published the majority of Smithson's early writings, along with a selection of drawings, paintings and photographs.[1] The University of Columbia also sponsored an exhibition of paintings in 1994 organised by Tsai. In the 1995 retrospective exhibition *El Paisaje Entrópico,* the early work was included alongside the rest of his mature work for the first time. This has been repeated in the 1999 exhibition *Robert Smithson: Retrospective Works, 1955-1973* organised by the Museet fur Samtidskunst, Oslo.

Smithson enjoyed, in his youth, a fairly successful career as an artist. The work from the period of 1959-63, however, has often come as a surprise to those who are familiar only with his 'mature' period. The paintings and drawings are far more figurative and expressionistic in style than later work, and often display an overt religious content. Smithson himself seems to have been somewhat ambivalent about his early work, maintaining that he did not achieve artistic maturity until about 1964. He destroyed much early work, and in 1973 he also attempted to exchange early drawings in a private collection for more recent work, presumably to keep the early work away from the public eye. His low estimation of this work may have been due solely to a perceived naiveté in its form, or to a content which retrospectively seemed to be misplaced. In an interview, however, Smithson gives two contradictory impressions of his early work. One simply negates it as a groping; the other accepts it as a necessary phase in his development. Smithson, in both cases, recognised the importance of his early interests in the sciences *and* his study of a variety of religions and theologies. In the secondary literature, however, little has been said about the nature of the theological issues that compelled him at this time. I find this omission to lessen the understanding of the early and mature work, because it ignores the remarkable cosmological and cosmogonic worldview that Smithson developed around 1961. It would seem valuable for an understanding of the early paintings and drawings to undertake an examination of the various religious traditions and theologies which interested Smithson. These traditions and theologies were, to the exclusion of almost everything else, of extreme concern to him--to the point of crisis--in 1961. This chapter, therefore, concentrates on making some sense of Smithson's study and use of religious themes, with particular attention to his interests in Catholicism. It might be remembered that Smithson was both married and buried with Catholic ceremonies.

The early period has been the subject of writings by Robert Hobbs, Eugenie Tsai, and Paul Wood. There are also several primary sources in the form of a 1972 interview with Paul Cummings and taped conversations from 1970 with Dennis Wheeler. Overall, the secondary literature on early Smithson

---

[1]Eugenie Tsai, Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings, University of Columbia Press, New York, 1991.

concentrates on the drawings and paintings. These considerations have proved fruitful, especially in indicating formal and thematic breaks and continuities in the paintings and drawings. There is little, however, about Smithson's early writings, in part because few of them have survived, and many have been difficult to consult. The Smithson Archives contain one text (provisionally dated by Holt at 1961) "The Iconography of Desolation", two letters to Nancy Holt written from Rome in 1961, and a collection of twenty-two poems. The private collection of George Lester, who was Smithson's art dealer during this period, also contains 19 letters to Lester from the period December 4, 1960 to February 22, 1963. These letters have not been generally accessible.

The main purpose of this chapter is to examine the letters and the text "The Iconography of Desolation".[2] Of major concern will be a clarification of the aesthetic debate he undertook with the art criticism of Clement Greenberg, and his own aesthetic based primarily on theology and cosmology, which he called an "Iconographic esthetic". This chapter will seek to clarify his various interests by closely reading the primary texts.

II. Primary and Secondary sources for Robert Smithson's Early Work

In giving a brief review of some of the existing literature on the early work, it is interesting to note that the interests Smithson had in Catholic theological problems is given little attention. This would seem somewhat unfortunate, in that Smithson found these problems highly compelling. In some respects, it might even be claimed that these problems formed much of his initial programme for making art. As will be discussed, they also had a considerable influence on his writings. While both Smithson and Hobbs may have sought to downplay these interests-- for whatever their reasons-- it is still possible to reconstruct a picture of his early intellectual and literary pursuits.

A. Cummings Interview

In the 1972 interview conducted for the Smithsonian Institute's Archives of American Art, Smithson outlined an autobiography that included his early work, largely for the purpose of contrasting it with his self-proclaimed mature period. Cummings succeeds in drawing Smithson into a discussion of his interests and life, rather than his work. For this reason, the interview is the most comprehensive source of information for the early period. Cummings asks Smithson about the early period several times over several days, in order to get a full answer. Consequently, Smithson did explain many of his

---

[2]Robert Smithson, "The Iconography of Desolation", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frames 0977, and Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, Jack Flam, (Ed.), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p.320. This is the second edition of Smithson's writings. All quotes from Smithson, unless otherwise specified, are to the second edition. For ease of reference it is hereafter noted as S2 in the footnotes.

early interests-- discussing in turn school experiences, friends, travels and literary interests. This explanation, however, is rather fragmented.

Smithson also observes several continuities through this period of change, such as an appreciation for "a primordial or archetypal gut situation" which he linked to psychoanalysis. Smithson also remarked that there was a continuous interest in the paintings of Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt, and consistent themes such as entropy, throughout his life. He repeatedly discusses his interest in theology, and Imagist writers such as T. E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.

B. Robert Hobbs

The critic Robert Hobbs, in examining the whole of Smithson's oeuvre, tends to reiterate Smithson's picture of a sudden closure to the early period.[3] Hobbs indicates that Smithson was first involved with Abstract Expressionism as a search for genuine felt experience. For this reason, Smithson preferred Abstract Expressionist work from the 1940's because of its greater forcefulness. In 1960, therefore, Smithson was seeking to reinvigorate the movement through subjects that were especially agonised or antinomous. Thereafter, Hobbs describes the abandoning of Expressionism, both abstract and figurative, because it was "too forced" and "too confessional". Smithson then entered a period of seclusion only to reappear in 1964 as a Minimalist with a different set of concerns over "form and subject matter". Hobb's comments about this period are rather categorical, for example: "But having suffered an intense religious crisis in the early sixties which left him uninterested in orthodoxies, he *never* again concerned himself with such iconography." and "Smithson was *not* attempting to create a Sublime art."[4]

The downplaying of Smithson's Catholicism has also contributed to an underestimation or misconstrual of the role of a specifically religious discourse in Smithson's worldview. It has also left open the question of what writings these early beliefs were based upon. Smithson's library contained books by Sts. Augustine, John of the Cross, Thomas Aquinas, Francis, and Jerome, a collection of Early Christian writings, and several books on dualist and Gnostic theology. Also included are numerous books on Christian mystics, books on the sin of sodomy and sloth (Acedia), science and religion, and several histories of the Catholic Church. There are also a number of books dealing with

---

[3]Hobbs, Robert, "Introduction", Robert Smithson: Sculpture, Cornell University Press, University of Cornell Press, Ithica, NY, 1981. While Hobbs knew Smithson, he did not meet him until the late 1960's. Consequently, Hobbs may have had a limited impression of the work of the early period.

[4]Hobbs, Op. Cit., p. 140. Italics added by the author.

Hebrew theology, the history of anti-Semitism, several books on Zen, black magic, Native American religion, and Greek mythology. [5] The publication dates of all these books are before 1962.

The evidence of the library list generally supports Hobb's statements. Smithson does not, after 1964, continue to purchase books on the topic of religion. I would, however, question the categorical finality of Hobb's comments. Smithson kept an interest in religion for the duration of his life, to the degree that he remained intent on removing its ill-effects from his art. Interestingly enough, this did not prevent friends and colleagues ascribing a religious content to work made during his mature period.[6]

C. Eugenie Tsai

Tsai recounts, in Robert Smithson Unearthed, his early involvement in the New York art world, beginning before he had completed high school in nearby New Jersey.[7] In the period from 1956 (aged 18 years) to 1959, he associated with many groups of artists including those at the Cedar Street Tavern. During this time, drawings were contributed to a poetry publication organised by a friend Richard Brilliant. This friendship was also important because it allowed Smithson the opportunity to be involved in events, discussions and lectures at Columbia University. While his drawings from the Art Student's League display an ongoing interest in graphic illustration, his association with Brilliant probably stimulated his interest in poetry and the work of the illustrator-poet William Blake. Tsai also traces Smithson's interest in the epic poetry of Dante's Divine Comedy. During this period, his interest in literature and painting is seen to eclipse his boyhood ambitions in the natural sciences.

Tsai, in particular, recounts the effect of religious philosophy in this early work, citing Eliot, Dante and Blake as primary artistic sources, and Smithson's mother and aunt as personal childhood influences. She sees Catholicism as inducing Smithson's retreat from abstraction towards figuration and religious iconography. Thereafter, science and science fiction are paralleled with theology until the beginning of his self-proclaimed mature period. Regarding "The Iconography of Desolation", Tsai refers to an "evocative incantatory style" in the text which might be more expected in his poetry than his prose. She sees a hallucinatory quality typical of Burroughs combined with and an intense, but waning, interest in Catholicism. Although Tsai makes substantial claims for the influence of Catholicism and the poetry of Dante on Smithson, she does not explore in detail the religious

---

[5] A partial and error strewn list has been published in the French edition catalogue of the exhibition *Le Paysage Entropique: 1960/1973*, Editions Musées de Marseilles, France, 1994. I have used a copy of Tatransky's original list, an undated four page addenda, an undated one page addenda, and an "Additions to Catalogue of Robert Smithson' Library", dated Nov. 17, 1994. All lists were provided by the Estate.

[6] Carl Andre, "Robert Smithson: He Always Reminded Us of the Questions We Ought to have Asked Ourselves", Arts Magazine, May 1978.

[7] Tsai, Unearthed, pp. 6-9.

concerns important to Smithson at the time. In this respect, I hope to add to what she has already achieved by further clarifying Smithson's sources and themes.

III. The Early writings: Poems, Letters and "The Iconography of Desolation"

A. Poems

Tsai suggests, probably correctly, that the collection of twenty-two poems in the archives were written between 1959 and 1961. Some correspond with his paintings, in that they share the same themes and titles.[8] This correspondence might reflect an interest in relating a text and an image for which William Blake and the illustration of Mallarmé by Manet served as examples. In Blake's work, poems and paintings are complementary to each other by appearing on the same page, while each remains autonomous. However, there is no evidence to my knowledge that Smithson's poems and paintings were ever displayed together, for example, at his exhibitions with George Lester. There is, then, no obvious formal precursor from this period for the careful arrangements of images and art criticism which so marked his later magazine articles. "The Iconography of Desolation" is an unillustrated piece of art criticism. During this period, it is the love letters to Nancy Holt which are the best examples of the combination of text and image on a single page.

The first archival record of Smithson's writings is his poetry. In two of the most important, "From the Walls of Dis" and "To the Flayed Angels", Smithson's interests in Catholicism are quite dominant. They suggested a highly corporeal form of suffering, where human and inanimate matter is steeped in a 'divine agony of the flesh'. The Christian Incarnation and Resurrection were depicted as the only moment of release from a ubiquitous and coeternal torture. In a reference to Dante's *Inferno*, for example, Hell was not a discrete order, but spilt over into living beings and inanimate matter alike. The whole material world was subject to a "Divine Agony", which was the result of a dualism between deistic "Action" and human "Passion". In that they are written by hand, he also devised a somewhat clumsy expressionist font style when writing them out.[9]

---

[8] The poem "From the City" includes the line: "We shall fly to Rome.", therefore suggesting a date before July 1961.

[9] An example can be found in "From the Temptations, S2, p. 315.

B. Letters to George Lester, 1960-63

There are nineteen letters to George Lester, nine of which are dated. The first appears to be from late 1960 and the last from February 1963. The bulk of these letters concern arrangements for his exhibition with Lester's gallery in Rome, which took place in the summer of 1961. The exhibition included both abstract and figurative works. In the months leading up to the exhibition Smithson wrote almost weekly in order to discuss details and to explain the paintings. In effect, these letters allow a full but brief picture of Smithson's artistic views as he presented them to his gallerist. The most remarkable aspect of these letters is the intensely religious tone in the description and justification of the work. The strength of these sentiments seems to have alarmed Lester and led to an exchange of aesthetic views. One disagreement arose over a poetic "Incantation" poem, which Smithson had written for the catalogue. Lester wished to delete it, perhaps because it was rather excessive, while Smithson responded that it was "perfectly compatible with the stark style of the paintings."[10]

Lester's letters to Smithson have been lost, but it can be surmised that he was not always impressed with Smithson's figurative paintings, or his views on painting. Lester seems to have encouraged him to set aside religious interests in favour of a more formalist approach to painting. In an undated letter from mid-May 1961, Smithson responded to this encouragement by explaining his own views:

> *Dear George,*
> *Believe me, I have take what you said to heart. It was not my intention to make you angry.*
> *First let me say that art is not merely making a picture, according to the prevailing mode, of "discipline", "self control", "technique" and "composition". The show that I sent you was born out of an inner crisis that has its roots in the Pre-Renaissance. The broken icons of Byzantium inspired me more than all the insipid equine figures of the Florentines. The "faithful" have worshipped these playboys of Galilee for the last four hundred years. Modern Isms are the result of the failure of the "humanism of the Renaissance".*[11]

These comments show a very high level of interest in a figurative expressionism based upon gothic and Byzantine art, such as his *Blind Angel* (1961) **[Plate 1]**. In an undated letter of several weeks later, the debate between a religious and a formalist art was still in full swing:

> *This may sound strange to you George, but my* Christ *is "Sloppy" as you say in your last letter, sloppy in his appearance but not in his execution. Each stroke of paint contains grace. Granted, not the "discipline" of Giotto, but the "discipline" of those*

---

[10] Letter to George Lester, No. 5, May 1, 1961. .All references here are to letters in the private collection of the George Lester Estate, and are listed and numbered in the bibliography. Copies of these letters were given to me by Nancy Holt in March 1996.

[11] Letter to George Lester, No. 12, Undated (May 1961).

> *martyrs hacked and sliced in the Circus of Diocletian. Not Aesthetic discipline but Ascetic discipline.*

It may have seemed to Lester that he had taken on a new and energetic proponent of Abstract Expressionism, but had ended up with a religious, figurative painter. For Smithson, piety, religious grace, sincerity and self-denial are more highly prized than formal self-reflexivity.

He also related that he was considering both a commission for a church fresco and a book of drawings and religious incantations for a Catholic publisher in New York. Smithson sought to convince Lester that the New York art world could and would turn to a religious art if he demonstrated and lead in that direction. He appears confident of his many personal connections and convinced of broad support. "I have just made a very important contact with a publisher of religious writing and art. Don't be afraid of the word 'religion'. The most sophisticated people in Manhattan are very much concerned with it."[12]

The religious intensity of Smithson's letters hit a peak in May 1961, just at the time his maternal aunt, Julia Duke, died. Julia Duke had lived in the family household, and according to Smithson, she "was like a second mother to me." Nancy Holt and Carl Andre have recalled that this aunt had been fascinated by eastern European Catholic dualist theology, such as the Bogomils and Cathars. Judging by the letters, she was largely responsible for passing these interests on to her nephew. Indeed, while Smithson read widely in such theology, it should be understood that his passion for such issues stemmed directly from his family. In the letter announcing her death to Lester, Smithson's expressive theological views were never more forcefully put:

> *A crisis born out of an inner pain; a pain that has overwhelmed my entire nervous system. When I painted 'Purgatory' and 'The Walls of Dis', I painted in a thick despairing way. From that despair emerged the absolute ikons of Life and Death. Ikons infused with the feelings of the Aztec human sacrifices; the visions of the Spanish mystics; and the martyrdoms of the Early Church. Against backgrounds of dead-space and no-time, I painted ikons bleeding from every stroke, without mechanical distortions, unlike the dispassionate distortions of Cubism, each stroke becomes a raw nerve. My "Man of Sorrows" is paralysed in a Divine agony, unable to explode into some cheap Ism. This creates an almost unbearable tension. I am a Modern artist dying of Modernism.*[13]

Whatever Lester's response to this letter, Smithson's next letter is a brief note promising that he will bring to Rome 20 of his abstract canvases. It can be surmised that Lester wanted to be able to hang a show that was less overtly religious.

---

[12] Letter to George Lester, no. 7, May 17, 1961.

Shortly after this note, Smithson went to Rome for his exhibition, and thus temporarily ended the need for their correspondence. What these letters reveal is a vigorous debate in which Smithson puts forward an art based upon extreme emotional and religious states of mind. Many of these letters contain various fantasies of slow and painful death, or hints of abjection. At times he seems pious, and even condemning. At other times Smithson mocks at consumer culture in a religious language There is no sign at this time that he was able to submit his emotional condition to an analysis other than that provided by Catholicism. He seems not to be reflecting on the causes of his anxiety over death.

There are also two letters from this period to Nancy Holt, written from Rome during his exhibition at the George Lester Gallery in the summer of 1961. The opening lines of one of these letters are as follows:

> *"...here is a little more lunacy to add to your collection. From the Keeper of Derangement himself; now vacationing in the Eternal City. In order to walk in the path of the Vandals and the Saints; and to concoct flaming rhapsodies for a crippled God. The Nero from New Jersey watches the fire on the tip of a Lucky Strike. Things are simply too, too modern."*[14]

In the two available letters from this period Smithson appears to have been moved by his experiences of Roman churches

> *"The dark Roman churches appeal to me because much of the art can not be defiled by vulgar liberal eyes. The paintings and mosaics shrouded in deep shadow bring on a Peace of the unknown. The drapes and rich ornamentation covered with soot, crawling around the pillars, remind me of the Serpent in the Lost Eden. Each church is a jungle and a desert smothered with cherubs and relics; offering up prayers to the mystery of the Virgin. The glow from the 17th century candles on the faces of the saints hidden in secret shrines evoke the invisible worlds of dreams within dreams."*[15]

He also found himself bothered by the casualness displayed by tourists when visiting churches and the exhibition of his paintings. In particular, he loathed the tourist for possessing an indecent and irreverent stare. While he regretted the tourist's lack of reverence, he found himself to be in a state of "luxurious emptiness", seeing both the past and the future as a chain of inevitable tragedies. The culmination of this sequence of historical tragedies was to be, so he mused, the final doom of atomic war. On some pages drawings of rather Byzantine putti and angels appear in the margins. Some of these figures, which were probably added later, do seem to be related to the text by which they appear.

---

[13] Letter to George Lester, dated May 1, 1961.

[14] Letter to Nancy Holt, dated August 1, 1961, Smithson Archives, roll 3832.

[15] Letter to Nancy Holt, dated (July) 24, (1961). Smithson Archives, roll 3832.

While in Rome, he painted four canvases, including *Device for Removing the Death Rattle from Typewriters* **[Plate 2]**. In that these paintings avoid overt religious imagery and begin to introduce a higher note of irony, it might fairly be assumed that Smithson's visit to Italy caused a decline in the intensity of his religious interests. While the trip provided ample opportunities to see many different styles of religious art, the end result was to diminish his interest in Catholicism. It is difficult to determine from the written evidence what may have caused this change. It may have been that Lester persisted in encouraging Smithson to be more concerned with formal issues. The title of this painting could suggest an attempt to remove a preoccupation with death from his work, or to re-orient his concerns over death such that they would be less traumatic. Smithson did have reason to be concerned with death. His 'second mother' had just died, and in his own considerations of his reason for existence, he must have been aware that the death of his brother, one year before his own birth, had been the cause of his own existence.

After returning to New York, Smithson's correspondence decreases in its frequency, and in its religious intensity. By September 22nd, he is writing in a style very close to that of "The Iconography of Desolation"—a mixture of religion and farce. This letter comments on popular culture with an irony that begins to collapse and mock the very language of religious condemnation. The stylistic control of his prose in this letter is slightly more complex. He begins to turn religious language upon itself.

He reports too that death now plays a more minor role: "The mortified frontal figures have developed into figure proportions that contain gestures of movement, but 'movement' that is free from action. Or should I say figures that don't 'suffer' from action." God too plays a more minor role. Although he still seeks "the lovely terror beneath beauty", the source of terror and suffering is no longer in god, but in nature. He is no longer seen by the burning eyes of the Son, but by the eye of the Sun: "The eye of nature is the black hole posing as the Sun. Which means in English "O" = Zero." The remarks in this letter are very close to the language and imagery found in "The Iconography of Desolation".[16]

Although Smithson's correspondence shifts at this point from weekly to biannually, it is possible to continue tracing his writing through into the autumn of 1961. This is the period in which he most probably wrote his first concerted essay.

---

[16] Letter to George Lester, No. 15, September 22, 1961

IV. "The Iconography of Desolation"

The most substantial literary text from the early period is "The Iconography of Desolation".[17] This text is important because, of all the limited number of early writings, it is the sole precursor to his later published prose writings. On stylistic grounds, I would suggest that it was written in the autumn of 1961, shortly after his return from Rome.

This essay is in some respects a condensation of the debate that passed between Lester and Smithson. Modernism is attacked, and in its place he proposes a religious or "Iconographic" aesthetic. The text is divided into two parts. The first part amounts to a rebuttal and rejection of modernism and Clement Greenberg, although Greenberg is not mentioned by name. Alternating with his rebuttal, Smithson defines his own Iconographic aesthetic. The essay then shifts without pause into a partial enactment of his own aesthetic. This leads him by way of a conclusion to a point of self-professed impasse. The first line of the essay makes it clear that it deals with a state of impasse.

> *Any effort to regain iconography from the total tangle of Sacred and Profane must create wrath that propels the suppliant artist down the rabbit hole into Desolation, where All is spilled and spoiled below belief.*

As Smithson continued, he established two distinct aesthetic camps. The first "Profane" camp was associated with Greenbergian formalism, modernism and Puritan religion, and was therefore located in multiple points in the history of art. Most broadly, it covered a time period of 1700-1961 so as to include Enlightenment philosophy. At other times, the profane seems only to have referred to post World War II American art. In clear opposition to the "Profane" "Modern" camp was the distinctly "Sacred" European tradition of religious art that predated the Enlightenment. The referential range of this camp starts with Etruscan and Archaic Greek art but is primarily based upon Byzantine, Early Renaissance and Baroque art and religious texts. This camp was most usually referred to as "Iconographic", in reference to Byzantine icon painting. As Tsai says of this text, the battle between these camps rages as a conflict that destroys the landscape and produces the 'desolation' mentioned in the title.[18]

A. Anti-Modernism

The "Iconographic" aesthetic that Smithson proposed was based largely on his reading of English Imagism and Christian theology. A detailed examination of this Iconographic aesthetic is presented in the next section. First, however I would like to propose that this text can provide a picture of

---

17 "The Iconography of Desolation", S2, p. 320. Also, Tsai, Unearthed, pg. 61.

18 Tsai, Unearthed, pg. 21.

Smithson's early criticisms of modernism. This is a valuable picture given his mature criticisms of modernism and the regularity with which he is summoned as a progenitor of Postmodernism. In this view, the essay is more important for how it rejects modernism than how it explains the Iconographic.

Smithson's definition of modernism was based primarily on the art criticism of Clement Greenberg, but extended to include Italian Futurism, Marcel Duchamp and Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1961, Greenberg, in addition to writing regularly for popular magazines and cultural journals such as The Nation and Partisan Review, had also just published his seminal collection of essays entitled Art and Culture, of which Smithson owned a copy. Like many other American artists and critics of the early 1960's, Smithson must have been quite familiar and even surrounded with Greenberg's conception of painting and sculpture. Smithson's knowledge of Greenberg's writings, however, needs to be qualified, as it probably was not comprehensive. On the whole, and confirmed by the evidence of his library, it can be generally assumed that Smithson was responding to Greenberg's Art and Culture, and any generally available magazine articles published in the period between 1960-62.

In understanding the primary object of Smithson's attack, it is relevant to bear in mind that Greenberg's career as a critic spanned many decades, and some of his positions and ideas changed over time. Surveys of his writings tend to observe that Greenberg underwent a "sea change" in the early 1950's. Earlier writings have been described as an "Eliotian Trotskyism".[19]. A second phase of his career and writings was largely influenced by Cold War politics, becoming, in some respects, an optimistic defence of Post-war consumer wealth and American international cultural policy.[20] For this second phase, John O'Brian has coined the term "Kantian Anti-Communism". Greenberg's own retrospective explanation for this shift addresses logical positivism as much as Kantian philosophy: "I talked about positivism, and wrote about it, and I thought this is what Modernism since Manet came down to."[21] Greenberg's Kantian and positivist paradigms for art, I suggest. were implicitly understood by Smithson, and were the main basis of his disagreements. Smithson's dispute with modernism, therefore, is best seen as directed at the Greenberg of the late 1950's and early 1960's, when Greenberg was least sympathetic to either pessimistic or moral sentiments in art.

Throughout his mature life, Smithson presented himself as a polemical adversary to Greenberg and, for that matter, Harold Rosenberg, Michael Fried and Barbara Reise. "The Iconography of Desolation" was but the first of many ripostes and counter arguments, most of which were never

---

[19] T. J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art", Pollock and After: The Critical Debate, Paul Chapman Publishers, London, 1985, p. 50.

[20] John O'Brian, Introduction, Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Vol. 3, p. xxvi.

[21] Linda Saunders (Ed.)"Clement Greenberg with Peter Fuller", Modern Painters, Vol. 4, No. 4, Winter 1991, pp. 19-20.

published. In the course of framing his first aesthetic debate, Smithson explicitly criticised modernism and Greenberg on two major counts. They can be summarised as such:

1. Modernism ignored content in favour of form, thereby excluding revelation as a legitimate artistic concern.
2. Greenberg's conception of modernism was motivated by a tacit morality located in his espousal of positivism and empiricism.

1. Form and Content

Smithson's first criticism of modernism dealt with its exclusion of content. This objection responded to Greenberg's 'ban' on literary content in painting, typical of which would be his remark about Paul Klee's paintings, "...the virtues by which his art stands or falls have little to do with his denoted or explicit literary content."[22] Greenberg's critical devaluation of the literary and the narrative in painting derived from his desire to separate the textual and visual arts in order that they might each achieve their greatest formal purity, unity and competency. Greenberg observed, for example, that the visual arts risked impurity by including narrative, as was the case in history painting and illustration.

Smithson, like many of his contemporaries, could not sanction this divide. For example, Leo Steinberg objects to Greenberg exclusion of content by observing that "the eye is a part of the mind" and that art was integrally linked to human thought. [23] Smithson argued that content was something given in advance, in a moment of "grace" and "revelation", thus perhaps emulating some of the statements made by Gottlieb, Rothko and Newman in the 1940's.[24]

Greenberg, on the other hand, advocated the primacy of form over content, wherein the painter introduces only the content that the form can bear. In Art and Culture, for example, artists were reminded not to have predetermined ideas. This anti-expressionism, needless to say, included religious revelations. This insistence on the separation of narrative from painting, and the strict emphasis on the aesthetic and determinate judgement of form alone, greatly irritated Smithson.

In introducing his conception of an "Iconographic" art, an expressionist and religious art of revelation, Smithson clearly felt himself to be at odds with Greenberg. Greenberg championed a modernism that was autonomous from the domination of metaphysical assumptions of (Christian)

---

[22]Clement Greenberg, "Art Chronicle On Paul Klee", June 1941, Collected Essays and Criticisms, Vol. I, p.71.

[23]Leo Steinberg, Other Criteria, "The Eye is a Part of the Mind", O.U.P., London, 1975, p. 289. This article was originally published in 1953 and reprinted in 1958 and 1961.

faith. Like Kant, he sought to pry apart concepts of moral or political truth from beauty such that they could at best be considered analogous to each other. [25] Greenberg's goal was to avoid the use of art as a ventriloquist's dummy to be animated by a notion of moral truth. This Kantian separation was appropriated by Greenberg and by 1950 was programmatically instituted in his writings and lectures.[26]

Some examples from early Greenberg essays might help to clarify the debate as it existed in New York starting in the 1940's. In his "Review of the Exhibition 'A Problem for Critics'"[27], Greenberg assessed the 'New Metamorphosism' devised by the gallerist Putzel. The art works in this exhibition were not unlike Smithson's favourite paintings by Pollock or his own conception of the 'Iconographic', in that they possessed elements of representation, spatial depth and figuration of a poetic and imaginative kind. Greenberg welcomed this work as a relief from the aridity of pure abstraction, but quickly returned to his Kantian appreciation of painterly disinterestedness, which he called "high impassiveness". Seeing in the work a Surrealist inspired 'biomorphism', he worried about this "quasi-literary" turn as being "too obvious in emotion". The painters were criticised for possessing ideas in advance, which may make a sensation for the day but soon begin to look woefully faded. Instead, artists should be free of preconceived subject matter, finding it in the form of painting itself. Kuspit summarises Greenberg's rejection of expressionistic or religious content as such:

> *The artist who refuses to sacrifice natural feeling and natural content {the latter is usually a vehicle for the former} is generally expressionist, often arty, and sometimes has an "ill-digested" sense of what art is about, viz., unity.*[28]

Direct expression, therefore, was seen to be precluded by the need for formal unity. Expression, for Greenberg, occurred only in the dialectical tension between formal elements. For Smithson, content arose from a communication between the artist and a noumenal or divine realm, and therefore precluded form. Smithson argued that revelation, being the original moment of art, could be realised in either text or painting. No particular form stood out as being superior in the manifestation of revelation.

Greenberg's early writings, however, do treat the issue of content more sympathetically. In the 1940's he modulated his formalist criteria, showing a dialectical appreciation for the role of T. S. Eliot's

---

[24] For example, the "Statement" made by Gottlieb, Rothko and Newman, 1943, and Rothko's "The Romantics Were Prompted...", 1947, Art In Theory, Harrison and Wood, (Eds.), Blackwells, Oxford, 1992, pp. 561-565.

[25] The use of Kantian aesthetics was observed by Greenberg himself, and has also been analysed by authors such as Y.A. Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll Around Clara Clara"; October: the First Decade, Michelson, Krauss, Crimp & Copjec, (Eds.), MIT Press, Cambridge, 1987; Karsten Harries, "Building and the Terror of Time", Perspecta, MIT Press, Cambridge, No. 19, 1982; Francis Colpitt, Minimal Art, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1994, p.42.

[26] Greenberg's 1950 lectures at Black Mountain College epitomise the influence of Kant's philosophy.

[27] Greenberg, Collected Essays, 1945, vol. II, p.28.

sense of morality and Trotsky's conception of politics. In 1946, he might even have sympathised with Smithson's aspirations, as they were to appear in 1961. Greenberg observed, for example, that "literature, like all other contemporary art, is on the hunt for a set of ecumenical beliefs more substantial than those which society or religion now supply it....The hunt as well as the purity is...historically compelled."[29] This did not, however, warrant the wholesale capitulation of art to religion. Even the early Greenberg expressed considerable disdain for art which was "mythological", "aberrated" and "deranged".[30] These artists were characterised as being the historical product of an excess of romantic and transcendent subjectivity set into motion by the extreme conditions of an alienating Industrialism. It was better to be "sceptical" and "matter-of-fact", and to value "detachment and irony". The expressionist was deluded in thinking that intensity of experience and feeling could alone provide the basis of good art.

Considering the paintings that Smithson exhibited in Rome in 1961, it seems he generally accepted the viability of an expressionist art of revelation, and in letters of the same period, he encouraged viewers to bring moral and reflective judgements to bear on his paintings. Because these judgements were based on a Christian metaphysics, as Smithson indicated, his rejection of formalism still left him with a need to defend the grounds of his self-awareness and judgement on something other than Greenberg's essentially (Kantian) cognitive self-definition.

For Smithson the certainties of judgement arose from a knowledge gained through a revelation of the cosmic order. This revelatory knowledge appeared to him, so he seems to claim, after passing into a reduced state of consciousness, typical of which is the imagery of passing down the rabbit hole. Consciousness moved downward into an objectal material status. At this point of entropic reduction in consciousness, a second order of consciousness became visible. This second order resulted in a revelation of the duality of consciousness as both extensive and non-extensive, material and immaterial. It produced a vision of the world as split and tumbling towards death. This content was felt to be so imperative that it precluded formalist concerns.

2. Positivism and Progress

Smithson's conception of revelation was based, then, on an experience of entropy in consciousness. The value of this downward movement can be seen as the basis of his objections to Greenberg's values of positivism and belief in progress. Greenberg's insistence on an evolutionary model for art history

---

[28]Donald Kuspit, Clement Greenberg: Art Critic, University of Wisconsin Press, London, 1978, p. 32.

[29]Greenberg, Collected Essays, "Frontiers of Criticism: Review of 'Les Sandales d' Empédocle: Essai sur les limites de la littérature' by Claude-Edmonde Magny", Vol II, p.71.

[30]Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture", Collected Essays, Vol. II, p.165.

received considerable contempt. As Smithson viewed it, "...a dead god speaks out of the soul through the depths of disease playing wounded tricks on Improvement." Greenberg's account of the historical "triumph" of American painting is problematic to Smithson because this triumph was presented as an improvement, a progress in art. Greenberg was seen to be insisting that abstraction was historically inevitable in America, given the formal history of twentieth century art.

Rather than a refined knowledge of the formal history of modernism since Manet, Smithson required of his spectators a thorough knowledge and appreciation of pre-Renaissance art and religion. Both his letters and his essay maintain that moral contemplation was the best foundation for developing aesthetic appreciation and judgement. Smithson's Iconographic art was attractive for its moral sensibilities and was best appreciated by the pious. In one instance he writes,

> *All dimensions must be exorcised by a visual mortification of the eyes before iconographic vision can be experienced. The Fourth Dimension is simply the ruins of the Third Dimension. Until these ruins are viewed with detachment, the artist will wander.*[31]

Smithson was aware just how much this ran against the grain of Greenberg's formalism. His response was to observe that Greenberg too utilised a veiled morality based on his positivist belief that theology and philosophical speculation are earlier imperfect modes of knowledge and that genuine knowledge is based on scientific observation of natural phenomena. Smithson was of the view that Greenberg's claims for positivism appeared to arise from an empirical deduction, but in fact arose from a moral or ethical system of values. Donald Kuspit, echoed this observation eighteen years later: "By combining the short and long views of art--intuitive response and the reflective understanding afforded by historical perspective--Greenberg means to give his criticism sublime credibility."[32]

Greenberg's admiration of empirical criticism was explicit, appearing in his admiration of English critics such as T. S. Eliot and Kenneth Clark[33]. The implication Smithson saw in Greenberg's art criticism was that the empirical process itself was moral because it eventually led to a pure, unified and complete knowledge of painting, much as science would do for nature.

Smithson also extends his argument over the veiled morality of empirical aesthetics to include the treatment of science as moral. Referring to "Einsteinian art lovers", he comments:

---

[31] "The Iconography of Desolation:, S2, p. 321.

[32] Donald Kuspit, Clement Greenberg: Art Critic, p. 6.

[33] Clement Greenberg, "The Seeing Eye: Review of 'Landscape Painting' by Kenneth Clark and 'Landscape, Portrait, Still-Life' by Max Friedlander". (The Nation, 22 April, 1950), Collected Essays, Vol. 3, p. 26.

> *Before we are inundated with the mundane mania for the neo found-object chock full of "banal" mystery, let us approach the God of the "culture-hero" Dr. Einstein. Is his God Yahweh in the Pillar of Fire which is not the Atomic Bomb? "The non-mathematician," says Dr. Einstein, "is seized by a mysterious shuddering when he hears of four-dimensional things, by a feeling not unlike that awakened by thoughts of the occult. And yet there is no more commonplace statement that the world in which we live is a four-dimensional space-time continuum." But, the* world *in which we do* not *live is free from the existence of sense and dimension. The invisible world is just as actual as the space-time continuum, just as death is as sure as life. If icons are seen as* sense-objects, *they are dead to the world. A spirit that is revealed through incarnate grace cannot be* measured *by human beings.*[34]

Given that Greenberg made no particular reference to Einstein in his writings, this criticism may have been directed towards modernism in general, or Leo Steinberg in particular.

> *It has been suggested that the very conceptions of twentieth century science are finding expression in modern abstract art. The scientist's sense of pervasive physical activity in space, his intuition of immaterial functions, his awareness of the constant mutability of forms, of their indefinable location, their mutual interpenetration, their renewal and decay-all these have found a visual echo in contemporary art; not because painters illustrate scientific concepts, but because an awareness of nature in its latest undisguise seems to be held in common by science and art.*[35]

Smithson was not the first, by 1961, to question the formalist theories of Greenberg. Indeed, some aspects of Smithson's criticism of Greenberg were not new when seen against the background of the objections and opinions of New York School painters of the 1940's and 1950's. To this end some comparisons are possible between Smithson and the early phase of Abstract Expressionism.

One such comparison can be found in a 1943 "Statement" produced by Gottlieb, Rothko and Newman.[36] This text emphasised a spiritual kinship with archaic and primitive artists. They saw dramatic subject matter such as monsters and gods to be crucial in the revelation of timeless truths. Likewise, Rothko's brief text of 1947, "The Romantics Were Prompted" bears similarities to Smithson's criticisms of Greenberg's art theories.[37] Rothko insisted that artists needed to be free from social conventions and money in order to experience a transcendent state. The artist, in Rothko's view, produced miracles, making of his picture a revelation and unexpected resolution of an eternal need. In this way, painting could share this drama with the artist and the viewer, thus ending social isolation.

---

[34] "The Iconography of Desolation", S2, p. 321-2.

[35] Leo Steinberg, "The Eye is a Part of the Mind", Other Criteria. This article was published in Partisan Review, March-April 1953; revised and reprinted in Susanne Langer, ed., Reflections on Art, 1958 and 1961.

[36] Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, "Statement", The New York Times, 13 June, 1943. Reprinted in Art In Theory, Harrison and Wood, (Eds.), Blackwells, Oxford, 1992, pp. 561-563.

B. Back to the 1940's?

In 1961 when Smithson returned From Rome, there clearly was an atmosphere of disaffection with the dominance of Greenberg, and a concerted attempt to make the situation move on. Harold Rosenberg described this period in such terms: "As the outcries of farewell to the old new art reached their shrillest pitch, numerous candidates for the succession were watched with the fascination of a tight-rope act."[38] Smithson may very well have attempted to move on by moving back to a set of beliefs that were predominant in New York just prior to Greenberg's arrival.

In the early 1940's, the works of many Abstract Expressionist painters were quite figurative, prompting Greenberg at first to declare them a type of Symbolism. As the imagery became flatter and possessing of fewer internal incidents, the symbolism was less and less discussed in the criticism of the fifties. As Lawrence Alloway saw it in 1973, "The problem to consider is whether the reductive mode, initiated in New York 1947-50, necessarily acts to exclude meanings or whether the declared concerns of the early forties may not persist in condensed and elliptical forms."[39] As Smithson shifted between abstraction and figuration at this time, it would seem that he was trying to return to the period in American painting prior to the rise of Greenberg.

As was the case for Smithson in 1961, then, the reciprocal problem of form and content was also of particular concern to Abstract Expressionist painters of the 1940's, but for the majority, it included a conscious rejection of European legend and myth. Like the American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, these artists referred to primal energies rather than mature, if foreign, myths and ideologies. The case of Barnett Newman was particularly interesting in its frank rejection of specifically European content in favour of primitive art which he associated with America. This somewhat anti-European tendency in Abstract Expressionism has been described as an, "American-style naturalistic ideology in which what has value and counts most is the authentic, the immediate, the spontaneous, the inspired and the impulsive."[40]

Rather than resuscitate a series of historically dead or culturally alien myths, this group of painters sought to create their own myths, finding primitive art a greater aid in approaching such new counterparts. Some of the restriction of interest may have come from the conscious attempt to surpass or equal the European heritage of modernism. If there is a point in which the New York School

---

[37]Mark Rothko, "The Romantics Were Prompted...", 1947, Art In Theory, Harrison and Wood, (Eds.), Blackwells, Oxford, 1992, p. 563-564.

[38]Harold Rosenberg, "Past and Possibility", The Anxious Object, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966, p. 27.

[39]Lawrence Alloway, "Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism", Artforum, November 1973.

[40]Compagnon, Antoine, The Five Paradoxes of Modernity, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, p. 91.

sought to re-engage a European discourse, it was in the subjecting of these often animistic and tragic primal energies to the recuperative and interpretative processes of Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis. Greenberg, needless to say, was resistant to both mythological and psychoanalytic readings as a method of critical interpretation.[41]

Smithson's essay cited Pollock's interest in Surrealism, Hopi and Navaho Indian sand painting as more than just an interest in form and technique; it was primarily an interest in the ritual and religious aspects of animist painting practice. Smithson's defence of religion or morality in the act of painting has considerable precedent throughout much of Abstract Expressionism. It also seems that he was trying to revive this precedent.

In the anthropology books he may have bought at this time, animism was defined as viewing nature and its spiritual forces as greater, as far more important, and as preceding human spiritual existence. [42] Smithson suggested that animist religion provided little space for Greenberg's Kantian sovereign individual who brings objects into presence by representing them. Smithson's references to Navaho religion suggest he may have been reading anthropological explanations of their views. The Navaho viewed the world, rather than the subject, as immanent, and required an undertaking on the part of men to communicate with supernatural beings, to surrender autonomy in exchange for practical help or gifts, and was quite indifferent about metaphysics or the dilemmas of moral life. This position conflicted with Kantian idealism's primary privileging of the subject. Neither a critique of reason nor a 'self-definition with a vengeance' could operate in an animist art practice because it did not make clear distinctions for a conception of a subject, a subject much disputed now and in later writings by Smithson.

With the inclusion of animist and totemic religions, Smithson reiterated objections to Greenberg's theories of art made standard by the writings of New York School painters. In some respects Smithson's anti-modernism can sound quite like the views of many Abstract Expressionist painters before the arrival of Greenberg.

This, however, is not the limit of Smithson's objections. What differentiated him from the interests of most Abstract Expressionist painters in the 1940's was his interest in carrying his arguments over to the ground of European pre-modern history. Such Catholic histories were neglected or discredited by the majority of New York School painters, and virtually ignored in Greenberg's account of art. He will

---

[41] For example, Greenberg mentions Freud once and Jung not at all between 1950-56.

[42] For example, Smithson owned Mercea Eliade's Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1959; and Myths Dreams and Mysteries, Harper Torchbooks New York, 1957.

use this history to further undermine Greenberg, while at the same time substantiating and clarifying his conception of the Iconographic.

C. The Iconographic: "Flaming Rhapsodies to a Crippled God"

The Cummings interview of 1972 invited Smithson to recollect his early work and the influences upon it. Perhaps in specific relation to "The Iconography of Desolation" Smithson remarked that he was seeking to understand the roots of Western civilisation and the historical relation between art and religion. He remarked further that "I got to understand...the mainspring of what European art was rooted in prior to the growth of Modernism...I could understand Modernism and I could make my own moves." Elsewhere in the interview he makes it plain that his initial attempts to make sense of pre-Modern history drew heavily on Imagist writings.[43]

In addition to pre-historic animism, then, Smithson wanted to bring to bear an alternative European history, especially Early Christian, Byzantine, Renaissance and Baroque, into his dispute with Greenberg and in his definition of an alternative. This Iconographic aesthetic, which is to say the "Sacred" camp opposed to Greenbergian modernism, was characterised in the first part of this text as religious, mystical, and based on revelations which were evident equally in the literary and visual arts. It also included the conception of art as an act of worship and a passage towards grace. The Iconographic, however, was subject to repeated death or loss of force, and therefore required constant and violent rebirth. In describing this alternative aesthetic, Smithson was familiar with a variety of religious beliefs and mythologies, being preoccupied at the time with what he called "A kind of savage splendor".

Smithson provided a brief history of the Iconographic aesthetic. The majority of this lineage consisted of mystic and Gnostic members of the Christian tradition. Chronologically, it began with the ancient Greek myth of Philomela mentioned in T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* and Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. She was raped by her sister's husband, a barbarous king, and in her grief was transformed into a nightingale and muse of tragedy. Christian mystics and writers included St. Anthony, St. Jerome (341-420) the ascetic of the Chalcis desert who wrote the Vulgate Bible, St. Anthony of Egypt (251-356) whose ascetic penitence in the desert was a prelude to his work with those who suffered from chronic hallucinations due to ergot infested rye grain. The most recent was St. Mary Magdelene of Pazzi (1566-1607), an ascetic who recorded her visions and revelations. Smithson may have collected information about some of these saints during his travels in Italy.[44]

---

[43] "Interview with Paul Cummings ", S2, p. 320 & 282.
[44] "The Iconography of Desolation", S2, p. 324.

In addition to his readings about these saints, Smithson took an active interest in the Anglo-American literary tradition of Imagist poetry, history and aesthetics. The poetry of Pound and T. S. Eliot, the writings of T. E. Hulme and the novels of Wyndham Lewis are repeatedly cited in the Cummings interview as the primary sources for his conception of art and history at this time.[45] These writers were a topic of conversation for Smithson as early as 1958 during Richard Brilliant's undergraduate years at Columbia. By 1960 and 1961, however, the work of Eliot, Hulme and Lewis, despite their seeming conservatism, proved seminal in Smithson's "discovering the history of Western art in terms of the Renaissance and what preceded it, especially the Byzantine."[46] Smithson also had a direct link with the Imagist poet William Carlos Williams.[47]

Smithson turned to the writings of the Imagists, "that whole pre-war circle of Modernism", in part as "a matter of just taking all these pieces of fairly recent civilisations and piecing them together, mainly beginning with primitive Christianity and then going up through the Renaissance."[48] The conception of history that Smithson gained from these writers is evident in "The Iconography of Desolation", and bears on his treatment of history at many points in his later writings and interviews. Craig Owens has observed that Smithson saw history as an 'allegorical ruin', and thereby instigated a shift from Modernism to Post Modernism[49]. In what follows, I wish to pursue a slightly different line of inquiry, by examining the sources of Smithson's conception of art and history in respect of its debt to Anglo-American Imagism.

45."Interview with Paul Cummings", S2, p. 282.

46 "Interview with Paul Cummings", S2, p. 282. It is T. S. Eliot's aesthetic conservativism rather than Lewis' or Pound's political conservatism which, in future, bothers Smithson. See his unpublished essay "Abstract Mannerism", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frame 0254: "Ever since Clement Greenberg took over T. S. Eliot's role as the formalist culture-hero..." In "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape" (1973), Smithson indicated that these writers represented an "antidemocratic intelligentsia", citing William Empson's introduction to John Harrison's The Reactionaries. A Study of Anti-Democratic Intelligentsia, Victor Gollancz, London, 1967.

47 Dr. Williams was Robert Smithson's childhood pediatrician, and wrote poems about Patterson New Jersey and the local landscape, including the abandoned quarries which Smithson enjoyed visiting in his youth. Williams was regarded as a late member of the Imagist movement.

48 "Interview with Paul Cummings", S2, p. 286.

49 Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a theory of Postmodernism", Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, Brian Wallis, (Ed.), Godine Press, Boston, 1984. Owens examines Smithson's treatment of language and history as allegory. Although his description of Smithson's use of language does not apply to the "Iconography of Desolation", it does apply in terms of the use of fragmentation, multiple voices and disjunctive accumulation. In relation to the use of history as allegory, Owens observes traits which are also apparent in this early text such as the emphasis on ruin and decay in history, the desire for a dissolution of boundaries between the arts, the sense of abjection in the face of allegory as aesthetic error, and the overall way in which Smithson cuts across temporal and spatial axes. Owens seeks to make the point that deconstruction, like Smithson's work, examines structure over time, and that this is a specifically allegorical rather than symbolic impulse.

1. Anglo-American Imagism

Critical assessments of Imagism and Vorticism vary, but there are a number of regularly observed traits which relate to the writings of Smithson.[50] The first of these traits was the close ties it maintained between American and European culture. Graham Hough has described Imagism as the most promising literary revolution of its time, and yet it was undertaken by Americans, such as Eliot and Pound, in England. Imagism, despite its passionate interest in American culture, was also European. Smithson, in 1960-61, was primarily interested in European history including those American writers who valued it and dealt directly with it. A second trait of Imagism to relate to Smithson's writings was its encouragement of aesthetic debate as a central activity for writers and artists alike. Eliot, Pound, Hulme and Lewis all wrote lengthy aesthetic theories, considering such issues as the role of history and tradition in art and the philosophy of a new modern art. Perhaps more than the Cubists and Futurists of the same era, English modernism saw critical debate as central to artistic creation. Smithson demonstrated this tendency too, in making the first part of "The Iconography of Desolation" an aesthetic debate, and the second part an enactment or performance. Like Lewis, Smithson combined visual and textual arts throughout his life.

If Smithson took encouragement from the Imagists to maintain an artistic and critical practice, a third affinity may be observed between Imagism and Smithson's writing, in the treatment of narrative and images. Pound's Cantos and Eliot's "The Waste Land" employed a device of sequenced images that have a limited narrative logic. According to their theories, tension was created, instead, by presenting a play of contrasting images. This literary practice was perhaps best described in T. S. Eliot's introduction to St.-John Perse's poem *Anabase*.

> *"Any obscurity of the poem...is due to the suppression of 'links in the chain', of explanatory and connecting matter, and not to incoherence, or to the love of the cryptogram. The justification of such abbreviation of method is that the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression of barbaric civilization."*[51]

It was this sort of sequencing of images that Tsai has remarked on in her description of "The Iconography of Desolation". It is Smithson's appreciation of the 'suppression of links' which necessitates an allegorical reading, a guess work along a metonymic and metaphoric axes. While Craig Owens has described this as essential to an appreciation of the writings, there is a lot less guess work involved reading his text when it is compared to Imagists writings on history and religion.

---

[50] Greenberg reviewed the writings of T. S. Eliot in "The Plight of Our Culture", 1953, and Wyndham Lewis in "Polemic Against Modern Art: Review of 'The Demon of Progress in the Arts' by Wyndham Lewis", 1955, The Collected Essays. Both reviews are highly critical.

[51] Graham Hough, Image and Experience: Reflections on a Literary Revolution, Duckworth, London , 1960, p. 18.

Looking at his sources allows several links to fall into place that might help explain the complex root of Smithson's 'allegorical impulse'.

2. Iconography as History, T.E. Hulme

The secondary literature on Smithson's early work has, in some respects, neglected a crucial link to the writings of the Imagists, especially T. E. Hulme. Smithson's 'Iconographic' art is derived, in substantial part, from Hulme's understanding of cultural history, and from his cosmological description of the universe. Both Speculations and Further Speculations were in Smithson's library at the time of his death. The influence of these two books was not limited to the early period, in that the essay that owed most to Hulme was the unpublished and undated "Refutation of Historical Humanism".[52]

Hulme's main publication, Speculations, is a compilation of essays that include a sustained attack on humanism, and an historical analysis based upon a dialectic of Classicism versus Romanticism. It also includes a commentary on the philosophy of Henri Bergson and Georges Sorel. [53] Sir Herbert Read, who posthumously compiled and edited the book, remarked that the final chapter called "Cinders" was to be Hulme's most important work, a personal philosophy in allegorical form. "Its final object [was] the destruction of the idea of unity, or that anything can be described in words."[54]

Critical consideration of Hulme's work is quite limited in quantity. While some have considered them an admirable and poetic treatment of history and culture, others have regarded them as "a depressed cosmic Toryism", "an abyss of nonsense", and an eccentric and highly selective view of history and Catholicism.[55] Hulme, none the less, played a major role in the early years of Imagism mostly through lectures and cafe discussions, rather than through publishing. Ezra Pound, in particular, credited Hulme's influence as seminal for the formation of Imagism, suggesting he was its first practitioner in terms of style and attitude. According to the Cummings interview, Smithson was reading Hulme's Speculations shortly before departing for Rome.

In relation to Smithson's "Iconography of Desolation", Hulme's influence can be noted almost from the outset. At the beginning of the text, for example, Iconography is described as ambushed by a secular humanism and then snared by a "declassic-deromantic" objectivity. This part of the text

---

[52] "Refutation of Historical Humanism", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frames 0828-30. I can only hazard a guess of 1966 as the date of this text.

[53] T.E. Hulme, Speculations, Herbert Read, (Ed.), Routledge & Keegan Paul, London, 1960. First published in 1924.

[54] Herbert Read, Introduction, Speculations, by T. E. Hulme, Routledge & Keegan Paul, London, 1960, p. xiv.

[55] Graham Hough, Image and Experience, p.32-36.

considers two of Hulme's favourite objects of criticism: humanism and romanticism. The significance of Smithson's repeated criticism of Greenberg as a Protestant-Humanist-Romantic lies in Hulme's attempt to discredit these concepts on religious, historical and political grounds.[56]

Hulme criticised humanism for its pretence of making philosophy seem like objective science whilst simultaneously producing a pale substitute for religion. Humanism was also criticised for falsely insisting that reality was different from appearance. Humanist idealism derived from the desire to remould reality nearer to one's satisfaction. When seen in the light of a doctrine of Original Sin, Hulme found humanism to be fatally unaware of human limitations. Hulme claimed a religious knowledge, a "special region of knowledge, marked out from all other spheres of knowledge, and absolutely and entirely misunderstood by the moderns."[57] Humanism misappropriated this knowledge, but in so doing achieved a subjectivity in truth which went unobserved. Consequently, humanism tries unsuccessfully to establish a human perfection which, for Hulme, belonged exclusively to the 'divine'.

In criticising humanism, Hulme produced a history of the Renaissance, pointing out salient figures in its formation. Some examples were Machiavelli, who posited that human nature was solely a natural power; and Lorenzo Valla, who asserted that pleasure was the highest good. Humanism at this time made the general assertion that man's character and personality were important, perfectible and reducible to a psychology. These assumptions were fallacious for Hulme, who preferred the pre-Renaissance belief that "Man is in no sense perfect, but a wretched creature, who can yet apprehend perfection." Hulme did not argue that the Renaissance did not bring improvements, but that it based these on a false premise that had left European culture deluded, depressed and in need of radical change. Hulme urged his readers to make a 'conversion' to his position after which "the world takes on an entirely different aspect". Hulme sought, through the rejection of humanism, a renewal of pre-enlightenment cultural traditions that would return modernism to a proper course.

Hulme's explanation of European history, then, observed a major shift at the time of the Renaissance, when humanism replaced the precepts and "facts" of religion. "For the Middle Ages these 'facts' were the belief in the subordination of man to certain absolute values, the radical imperfection of man, and the doctrine of Original Sin...These beliefs were the centre of their whole civilisation."[58] Hulme also provided Smithson with a link between the Christian and Greco-Roman Classical traditions by contrasting them with Romanticism. Christianity and Classicism shared a concept of man as limited and fixed. Man, according to Hulme's description, was correctly described by certain classical authors

---

[56]At no point does Smithson refer to Greenberg as Jewish or Marxist, although he must have known this.
[57]Hulme, Speculations, p 23.
[58]Hulme, Speculations, p. 51.

as being absolutely constant and in need of the discipline of tradition and order. Likewise. Christianity viewed man as immune to perfection due to Original Sin.

For Hulme, a Christian-Classicism extended until the end of the Baroque period, when it crumbled under the weight of such projects as Versailles and the allegories of Louis XIV. Hulme continued his history beyond the Baroque period by contrasting the Classical with the Romantic. Based on the philosophy of Rousseau and the French Revolution, Romanticism erroneously claimed that man was infinite. For Rousseau it was irrational laws which caused human suffering, and with this justification the French Revolution dispensed with tradition, including the concept of man as fundamentally limited. In this history, Romanticism taught a false belief in the essential goodness of man, and made promises and political policies that were impossible to realise. The consequence of this erroneous view of man was depressing in its outcome. Hulme's political interests are thus clearly and explicitly implicated in his aesthetic observations. For a time, Smithson may have extracted from Hulme more than the aesthetic dimension of his analysis of history.[59]

Smithson used Hulme's history to criticise Greenbergian formalism for stripping from the art of Pollock either a Classical or Romantic reading. Indeed, Greenberg was worse than the Romantics. "Social humanist" art criticism ignored all non-empirical knowledge and regarded man and art as unlimited in the face of formal invention. It was complacent in its suppositions, and self-satisfied in its belief in the apparent objectivity of its conclusions. Furthermore, formalism played semantic tricks on Iconographic abstract painting through its creation of the category of 'non-objective' painting. Smithson vented his fury over the manner in which revelation in abstract painting was categorised not as subjectively plausible, but as objectively false. This categorisation was a sly piece of humanist distortion. The term 'non-objective' seemed to apply only to a lack of figuration in the abstract paintings of the New York School while it was later taken to mean that the content was subjective and could be ignored.

Smithson observed that these semantic games did not succeed in extinguishing Iconographic art. Smithson, like Hulme, valued the attitude of pre-Renaissance "Iconographic" revelation. Judging by his letters to Lester, Smithson believed for a time that it was going to return. Whereas the Imagists did attempt a return to a pre-Enlightenment aesthetic, Smithson seems to have developed doubts shortly after his returned from Rome. These doubts, however, did not prevent his appreciation of Hulme's metaphysical speculations on the nature of the material universe.

---

59 Smithson disavowed the political conservatism of the Imagists in his article on Fredrick Law Olmsted. See footnote 28.

3. Iconographic "Matter": Imagism and Dualism

Early on in "The Iconography of Desolation", Smithson made a vivid and informative comparison between Pollock and the French painter Georges Rouault as interpreted by the novelist and critic Leon Bloy[60]. He did this in part to compare Hulme's "Classical versus Romantic" dialectic with Bloy's "Romantic Dualism" of "Good versus Evil". The purpose of this comparison was to raise the issue of the metaphysics of artistic materials. In Smithson's text, this comparison appears as a sudden shift from issues of history to those of cosmology. While the shift may seem to be a digression, it closely follows the form of Hulme's writings as they shift between history and cosmology. Hulme's conception of human history was one of human limits and these limits were due to the cosmological structure of the universe as strictly delimited into material, biological and spiritual "zones". In was in keeping with Hulme that Smithson raised the issue of physical matter and substance in art. Smithson's deliberations take in a wider variety of dualist theologies than Hulme. He was interested not only in early modernism in England and France, but also remarked: "I was fascinated also with Gnostic heresies, Manicheism, and the dualistic heresies of the East..."[61] This rich mix of interests can be traced in his treatment of the paintings of Jackson Pollock.

In his essay Smithson contrasts Jackson Pollock with a group which consisted of Georges Rouault, Leon Bloy, the Manicheans, the Cathars, and "Romantic Dualism". This group held the view that matter was inherently evil. For example, the Cathars, (who were a 13th century heretical religious group in southern France) taught that "Matter was inherently evil, the creation of the devil; the work of god was the universe of souls, and the path to salvation was their release from sinful flesh."[62] Smithson saw this Cathar morality in Bloy and Rouault, who praised the soul as it suffered the depravations and corruption of the flesh. [63] As in the paintings of Rouault, it was the holy outcast, such as prostitutes and Jews, whose profound suffering became the instrument of (national) redemption. Smithson represented Rouault, then, as a dualist who held that the materiality of painting was evil.

In considering Smithson's conceptions of matter, his aunt, Julia Duke may also have offered some suggestive theological observations. She was, by some reports, a follower of an eastern European Catholic religious sect. Her beliefs may have been partially derived from the tradition of the Bogomils, who were suppressed by the Catholic Church for their heretical dualist theology. In this dualist

---

[60] Smithson owned a copy of Rayner Heppenstall, Leon Bloy, Yale University Press, [New Haven]. 1954.

[61] "Interview with Paul Cummings", S2, p. 286.

[62] J. McManners, (Ed.), Oxford History of Christianity, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, p.212.

[63] Richard Griffiths, The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French literature 1870/1914, Constable, London 1966, p.217.

tradition. matter is not necessarily evil. Mercia Eliade, who was later widely read by Smithson, has summarised these views:

> *"All Nature sighs, awaiting the Resurrection" is a central motif not only in Easter liturgy but also in the religious folklore of Eastern Christianity...For this whole section of Christendom "Nature is not the World of sin but the work of God." Incarnation helps to re-establish nature in its original glory.*[64]

With such a set of religious beliefs, the artist can sanctify nature, and momentarily renew a sacred time of origin. Although Smithson certainly indicated a preference for this conception, it was highly contingent, based upon the limits of a "crippled God".

The comparison with Pollock makes it evident that Smithson did not admire the view that the material world was a corrupt place. To the contrary of Rouault and Bloy, Smithson argued that matter could be sanctified, made into "sacramental substance". Pollock was seen to have performed a transubstantiation or sanctification of materials. Smithson also saw this practice in Navaho sand painting rituals in 1959 on a trip to Arizona and New Mexico. Smithson's case was that Pollock sanctified matter in order to allow it to give rise to revelation. While matter was not divine; neither was it evil.

If differing Catholic dualisms were accepted and rejected by Smithson, Hulme's observations on form and matter provided a further cosmology that also appealed to him, and found its way into his essay. The first line of Hulme's chapter "Cinders" provides a summary: "There is a difficulty in finding a comprehensive scheme of the cosmos, because there is none. The cosmos is only 'organised' in parts; the rest is cinders."[65] Hulme metaphysical map distinguished three distinct and unrelated categories in the universe:

1. The inert inorganic world which is known through the physical sciences.
2. The organic and vital world as known through biology, history, psychology and the philosophy of Vitalism propounded by H. Bergson.
3. The domain of the moral and religious, i.e. The Divine.

Hulme explained that these three domains constituted all the universe and were completely separate and unrelated to each other. For Hulme, however, material and divine zones shared a certain similarity. They both had a perfection and rigidity, a monumental stability and permanence, which vital elements could never possess. The inert and the Divine were "extreme zones which partake of

---

[64] Mercea Eliade, Myth and Reality, p. 172.
[65] This is the first line of "Cinders".

the perfection of geometrical figures, while the middle zone was covered with some confused muddy substance." Both zones also possessed unstructured "cinders". Hulme argued, as well, for the reversal of anthropomorphism, in that Man needed comparison with the divine and the material zones rather than projection on to them. It is also noteworthy that Hulme excludes from his list a zone of "hell". Instead, each zone has its owns limits, terrors, and for Smithson, agonies.[66]

For Smithson, matter was neither the product of evil, nor entirely dissimilar to the zone of heaven. There was a correlation of *structure* between the two zones, even if they were not seen to intermingle. In these terms the structure of Pollock's paintings, the webs and skeins of matter were a revelation. Through the material qualities of inert paint, Pollock had hinted at a biological flux, but more importantly, a divine space of unstructured "cinders". Pollock's treatment of paint-as-matter was exemplary because it respected the sanctity of matter and did not project onto it just a humanist or vitalist content. Instead, Pollock used matter as a correlative to the divine zone. The seeming "chaos" in the paintings was not indicative of biological or human disorder, but of a lack of order in matter and cosmos.[67]

Smithson's position on the issue of matter was important to him, and required constant clarification and reconsideration in his early writings. It was to remain a key issue in his later writings, and a key issue in American aesthetic theory throughout the 1960's. While this will be discussed further, another related issue can also be seen to arise in the early writings, namely anthropomorphism. Smithson suggested in the Cummings interview that he may have derived from Hulme some of his criticism of anthropomorphism. Hulme observed that "humanism in all its forms of pantheism, rationalism and idealism really constitutes a complete anthropomorphisation of the world, and leads naturally to art which is founded on the pleasure to be derived from vital forms."[68]

Anthropomorphism related to the question of matter, because art was in a position to project human meaning onto inert materials. In the case of romanticism and humanism, the projection led the artist to consider matter as a convenient medium of self-expression. Smithson applied this observation to formalist theories of art with the conclusion that it operated on a Romantically fallacious logic. The logic might be summarised as such, 'Man is perfectible, therefore nature is perfectible in the hands of perfected Man. Painting's history should be the result of a growing perfection of matter by man.' Smithson wanted to avoid ascribing to matter the qualities which humanism ascribed to man. If anything, Smithson prefered to reverse the direction of anthropomorphic comparison. Man was like matter, more than matter was like man. The result was a view in which man temporarily avoided, but

---

[66] Hulme, Speculations, p. 5.
[67] "The Iconography of Desolation", S2, 321.
[68] Hulme, Speculations, p. 54.

ultimately succumbed to a strictly differentiated universe linked by similarities of structure. Man was headed for a state of rigidity, into a state wherein non-spatial and non-temporal divine structures fixed man into inert matter.

In defining his Iconographic conception of matter, it seems there was a considerable underpinning of Hulme's cosmology and history. I don't wish, however, to over-estimate the influence of Hulme in Smithson's thoughts on matter. Theological considerations drawn from his family background also played a role. What Smithson took from both was a sense of the history of man, and the task of the artist, in which matter, space and time were integrally intertwined. Having given some impression of his views on matter, I would now like to trace through some of the sources for his conception of time and space.

4. Iconographic Time and Space

Catholic theology, religious dualsim, and the Anglo-American Imagists all address questions about matter as an issue relevant to art. Questions of space and time were also addressed by these sources as they appear in "The Iconography of Desolation". Time in particular was a persistent issue for Smithson, with over a dozen books on the topic in his library at the time of his death. As has already been mentioned, Smithson repeatedly attacked Einstein's conception of a fourth dimension, in preference for seeing 'in between the dimensions'. He posited that there was a "world" which was free of time and space. Likewise, he quoted an Early Christian text that stated that any god who could be measured in time and space was a man-made god. For Smithson, "Revelation has no dimensions." and "The early Christian Fathers never Fixated on dimensions in their theology." In terms of painting he states: "A spirit that is revealed through incarnate grace cannot be *measured* by human beings."

These claims were generally meant to claim that cognitive judgement, empiricism and rationality were unable to apprehend what lay outside the confines of time and space. As such Smithson might be favourably compared with Kant, who claimed that a noumenal realm existed but was inaccessible to knowledge. Smithson was claiming that there were forms of knowledge, such as revelation, which could provide such knowledge, if only temporarily. What the Iconographic aesthetic promised, in its conception of time and space, was a means to 'exorcise' dimensional awareness through a mortification of sense perception. Iconographic perception required a stopping-up of the senses in order to perceive a non-temporal domain. Revelation led to a perception of two types of time. One was a cosmogonic sacred time of fixed eternal truths, the other was a cosmologic profane time of history and "ruination".

The dualism of the "Sacred and Profane", which is mentioned in the opening of this text, can be found in many of the Gnostic and heretical theologies that Smithson studied. They contrasted a sacred time of primordial creation with an historical profane time which is marked by decay, loss of plenitude and significance[69]. Sacred time can periodically be revived through rituals, giving great status to the magician or priest, who temporarily reverses the decline of created matter. There are many variations on this dualism. Smithson's reference to a "crippled God"[70], for example, seemed to refer to a god which must deal with a coeternal decay or entropy. Such a dualism not only posits a duality of causal principles in the world, but that these principles existed before historical time (this makes of all such dualisms, by definition, a cosmogony or theory of origins).

In addition, Smithson located and criticised what he considered to be the paradigm of modernism's conception of time. This particularly included the philosophy of time found in the writings of Henri Bergson, as filtered through his reading of T. E. Hulme and Wyndham Lewis. His references to Bergson, for example, are intermixed and compared with then current views on Abstract Expressionism, particularly evident in the criticism of Harold Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters":

> *... "moment" means the actual minutes taken up with spotting the canvas or the entire duration of a lucid drama conducted in sign language. The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.*[71]

A fascination with the moment of the creative act is attributable to Rosenberg's defence of Pollock, and is criticised by Smithson as generally Bergsonian, the key word being 'duration'.

Treatment of Bergson in the writings of the Imagists varies widely. Indeed, every major member of the Imagist movement had something to say about Bergson's philosophy, as likewise did Whitehead, Proust, Joyce, Stravinsky, etc. (most of the modernist canon). This popularity may have come from his defence of a philosophy of process, which refuted a mechanistic and static conception of the universe, in favour of one of change and evolution. Hulme spent considerable textual space in analysing and explaining the philosophy of Bergson, usually to approving ends, although this stance changed later in his life to one of disapproval[72].

---

[69] Mircea Eliade, "Prolegomenon to Religious Dualism: Dyads and Polarities", The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1969.

[70] Letter to Nancy Holt, August 1, 1961. Smithson Archives, roll 3832.

[71] Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters", The Tradition of the New, De Capo Press, N.Y., 1994, p. 28. Originally published in Art News, Dec. 1952, and republished in book form in 1960.

[72] I have not here considered the possible significance of Hulme's rejection of Bergson for Smithson, because Smithson's copy of Further Speculations was not published until 1962.

Hulme explained Bergson as proposing two types of knowledge. The first applied to 'extensive manifolds'. This knowledge was rational and mechanical, and quite sufficient to explain the physical and largely predetermined world of matter, such as astronomy. The second form of knowledge, however, arose from intuition, and was capable of understanding organic life, addressing itself towards 'intensive manifolds'. Intuition, unlike analysis, did not depend on a spatial unfolding in order to draw conclusions. As Hulme quotes Bergson, "But...the insurmountable difficulties presented by certain philosophic problems arise from the fact that we separate out in space, phenomena which do not occupy space."[73] Intuition was the complex sense of many and various forces, a moment of free will when the subject was able to escape the predetermined mechanistic world of time. Duration, or 'La Durée' occurred in a moment of creativity and invention which altered the course of otherwise predictable events Smithson may have appreciated at least in part Bergson's views on time and subject identity. As Antliff has summarised these views: "Bergson ...defines this inner self as existing in heterogeneous time, which cannot be represented with 'quantitative' signs. And for Bergson it is artists who transcend social conventions and obtain a direct cognition of their durational being."[74]

Hulme latter rejected Bergson's conception of duration and artistic freedom, finding it excessively humanistic and empathetic. By 1962, Smithson was reading Further Speculations, which presented a new non-empathetic theory of abstract art based on Worringer's Abstraction and Empathy. The importance of Worringer's psychology of art will be discussed in chapter 2. The rejection of Bergson, however, was already evident in "The Iconography of Desolation", probably due to his reading of Wyndham Lewis.

5. Time and Western Man

Perhaps the literary work by Lewis most relevant to the issues of time and space is Time and Western Man.[75] Smithson repeats Lewis' view that Bergson foolishly avoided the struggle which resulted in Man's greatest achievements. In depicting matter as virtually alive and restless, he broke down the concrete world into nothing but a dynamic flux. The quasi-mystical 'Durée' was, for Lewis, nothing more than a usurpation of space by time. At a more political and social level. Lewis criticised Bergson in Time and Western Man for the valourization of inner phenomenological and existential experience. As Frederic Jameson has observed, "Bergson's philosophical distinction between the two forms of time will presumably allow his readers to identify the more authentic zone of temporal experience for the purposes of reorganising their individual lives around their deepening perception of it. While for

---

[73] Hulme, Speculations, p. 178.

[74] Mark Antliff, Inventing Bergson, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993, p. 45.

[75] Smithson's copy was published in 1957.

Lewis, far more resolutely social, the valorized concept will itself generate a fatal temporalization of social life in general."[76]

Smithson probably borrowed from Lewis' views on Bergson, for example, in his criticism of Duchamp. According to Smithson, Duchamp's interests in Bergson had the result that "Duration cut him off from revelation, thus confining grace to the chessboard"[77] Furthermore, Bergsonianism was seen as having destructive effects on Iconographic revelation because, "...revelation is eclipsed by the decaying force of duration.." The attack on Bergson finally becomes quite severe, even if it is only partially the target in the line: "The Fourth Dimension is Yahweh's wrath upon a cursed humanity". For Smithson, Bergson, participated in the reduction of the Divine to a temporal experience which enhanced the subject's sense of identity. This was a Romantic ideology centred on an individualistic and falsely idealised conception of the subject. In Smithson's experience, sacred time left the subject quite annihilated, in the sense that it had no spatial or temporal bearings by which to ground itself. This view might be regarded as anti-phenomenological, in that he focuses exclusively on events that do not have an origin in perception. But then, Smithson never really does directly describe an experience of revelation.

Smithson's interest in Lewis, however, may not have been restricted just to the satirization of concepts of time in Western philosophy and literature. There are some remarkable stylistic and structural similarities as well. The first of these concerns what Jameson has called Lewis' quality of "theological science fiction".

In his theological science fictions, Lewis also proposed the existence of a single universal force. Jameson describes this force as a "diabolical term" that encounters no opposition. This force lies behind what he called the "Demon of Progress". Lewis, and Smithson as well, argued that Bergson over-emphasised biological evolution as a process of improvement.[78] By comparison with Bergson and Lewis, Smithson can be seen, at this time, to formulate a conception of a cosmogonic entropy, a perennial and originary "demon" which was a lack of force. Taken in its subtlety, this was a type of non-evolutionary claim rather than an anti-evolutionary claim. This might be described as an hydraulics of the universe that depended on a void, rather than Bergson's positive or Lewis' negative force. In this scheme the divine, the "crippled God" of his revelation, was a-temporal, but also experienced time as a loss of force that caused a decline into inorganic matter. Man, as it were, was caught in this non-force. There is, perhaps, even a hint of Existentialism in this.

---

[76] Fredric Jameson, Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1979, p.135.

[77] "The Iconography of Desolation", S2, p. 322.

[78] Smithson owned a copy of Bergson's Creative Evolution, published in 1913.

For Smithson, the logic of his scheme was itself diabolical. Firstly, only non-temporal revelation demonstrated temporality's nature as a lack. Smithson tried to give this difficult logic more body by observing its effects on his desire. He found that the temporal effects of revelation had the odd effect of finishing before they had started. It would seem that when revelation happened, *nothing* happened. Only after revelation, had revelation happened, if it happened at all. In a post-revelatory state his desires seem to him to have ended as something less, without having begun as something more. In 1972, his conclusion was that he never did believe in or experience a redemption through revelation, "I never really could believe in any kind of redemptive situation."[79]

In criticising Bergson's Durée, Smithson also regularly made a link with Harold Rosenberg's attention to the temporal act of expressionist painting. Smithson claimed that there was little to gain in focusing on the duration of the act of painting. Rosenberg's conception of "action painting" was irrelevant when compared to the time referred to by the art or the non-temporal experiences of the artist. This was a view that did not change much in Smithson's later writing. For example, he remained critical of art that emphasised the duration of the creative process, including the Happenings of Alan Kaprow and the process art of Eva Hesse.

Smithson was later to develop an interest in geology and palaeontology as a way of referencing a cosmological time frame. This was meant to show up as trivial the Modernist and Bergsonian conceptions of an intense and momentary personal experience in the present. He also carried into his later work a particular sense of the logic of time. In "Spiral Jetty", for example, he used his ruminations on time to suggest a psychical entropy, which he would then describe. In his *Afterthought Enantiomorphic Chambers* **[Plate 26]**, Smithson also attempted to describe a reverse-temporal quality to visual desire.

6. Iconography as Religion

Smithson developed a highly personal range of religious and metaphysical speculations in his essay. Some sketch of a religious set of beliefs does seem to fit together, making it possible to describe something of its range. Firstly, Smithson's 'religion' held that quantification and measurements of the physical and perceptual world were rendered highly relative in comparison to a supersensible, atemporal and non-spatial divine. In seeking to transcend matter, space and historical time, Smithson evoked an Absolute Real. As this "Real" included everything, including nothing, Smithson saw no reason to refer to this Absolute as a positive term. It was as easily and accurately described as "The

---

79 "Interview with Paul Cummings", S2, p. 286.

Void" or a "Non-site" in "non-time". The divine was of a split or dual construction, containing a god and a void.

One of the two elements in the absolute universe is a "crippled God", who is limited in operation, much in keeping with sacred / profane dualisms. In historical time, profanation increases as organic and inorganic matter drifts away from the sacred, thus demonstrating the profane to be a type of entropy. The void, as manifested in entropy was a co-eternal partner to god. In this case the Divine and matter alike are on a constant, but never complete, downhill slide into energylessness and undifferentiation.

Much as Craig Owens has observed, Smithson's 'religion' is structured like an allegory on two temporal axes.[80]. One is synchronic, or for all time, the other is diachronic, or in time. God and the void exist cosmogonically from the origin of time as eternal players in a never-ending dialectic. However, in time, Smithson elicits a notion of a sacred and profane, in which an historical time entropically diminishes matter's original link to the sacred. Entropy might also be seen as the final cause of profane historical time. The synchronic structure of Smithson's allegory is based on Hulme's three horizontal zones, each one cloven in half vertically into a sacred and an entropic profane. For a time, starting in the spring of 1961 and ending in the winter, he accepted this role of "concocting flaming rhapsodies to a crippled God".

However, entropy was treated as the concept *par excellence* which defeated logic and abstract conceptualisation. Although it could be forwarded as a rebuttal to modernism's humanism, vitalism and positivism; he also demonstrated that this could not be achieved without relapsing into the error it denounced. In other words, a theology of entropy could not be posited as an "improvement" on modernism, or as more "truthful", without foundering upon its own logic. Smithson seems truly to revel in this seemingly irresolvable contradiction by compounding it; he applies entropy not only to political processes in society and physical processes in nature but also to the mental and conceptual faculties of the mind. This sequence of questions, as it arose in his shifting dualist beliefs clearly contributed to his later interest in the mind / matter problem (as discussed in chapter 3).

By late 1961, Smithson had started to set himself a conundrum around entropy. The kernel of the problem lay in his descriptions of the break down in his understanding as it tried to conceive of entropy. Thus, if all mental understanding of entropy is prone to break down, then proof of his claim for entropy lay in the entropic destruction of the mind of the claimant. When posited in these terms, entropy raised the question of who it is that paces out entropic decline unto final doom and yet comes

back again to describe the experience. This conundrum was partly the product of his involvement with the rhetoric of limits and decline as he encountered it in Imagist literature and Catholic theology. If he assembled his reading into an impasse, it was nevertheless a highly productive impasse that led to future interests in anthropology, philosophy, linguistics and psychoanalysis. The logic of entropy was especially rich in its consequences for his conception of subjectivity.

If Smithson reached an impasse in his considerations of the place of entropy in art, history and cosmology, he nevertheless shifts his essay towards a literary enactment of it. His impasse rather had the result of giving him a burst of literary energy. As his essay moves toward its entropic conclusion, he shifts into an effusive garrulous style that reflects his attempts to fragment and synthesise his reading and his interests. This burst of imagery and savage splendour provided a basis on which to demonstrate a mental and literary entropy.

D. Savage Splendour: Revelation, Excess and Entropy

The second part of "The Iconography of Desolation" did not undertake an aesthetic or theological debate. It sought to perform or enact an Iconographic revelation under the terms and conditions defined in the first part of the essay. Having already presented two historical forces-- a Classical-Byzantine-rational aesthetic derived from English Imagism, and a humanist-Romantic-American modernist aesthetic epitomised by Greenberg-- Smithson used the final part of his essay to perform their mutual demise. This clash produced a pageant of excesses, violence, monstrosities, a rapid sequence of condensed images of pleasure and agony.

In the second half of the text, Smithson set aside his sources and put them to work under an experiment with the literary style of Willaim Burroughs. It reflected a growing theory of entropy as applied to language-- a breakdown of religious and metaphysical beliefs into linguistic "fictions".

The Naked Lunch

One of the sources of Smithson's increasingly ironic religious position is William Burroughs (b.1914), guru of the Beat poets. His novel Naked Lunch, is mentioned in particular to Cummings as another literary influence at this time, an interest most apparent in the second part of "The Iconography of Desolation". Burroughs' literary style uses rapid cuts and jumps in the structure of his travel narratives, and often indicates these cuts with the voice of a meta-narrator in the manner of a film

---

[80] I employ here, just as Owens did, Joel Fineman's analysis of the structure of allegory in "The Structure of Allegorical Desire", October: The First Decade, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 376.

director. A further literary technique employed by Burroughs was developed with his French mentor the surrealist author Brion Gysin, using methods they called 'the cut up' and 'the fold in'. These methods, which include the random insertion and deletion of words, were employed in the novel Naked Lunch to distort the narrative. Another method used by these authors involved the erasure of key words in the text which were then replaced with randomly chosen words, creating a quality of dream-like transference. It is difficult to estimate the influence of these literary techniques on Smithson's text. The draft version of this text shows little evidence of these techniques, with its hand-written corrections and edits on a typed manuscript. Cummings asks whether Smithson was consciously using Burrough's technique in his prose and collages, but his answer was somewhat inconclusive, a "Yes-well not exactly".[81]

What may have been of some influence, however, is Burroughs' stance and strategy toward concepts found in religion, finding they could be used to produce a literary excess, risk and adventure. As an example of a risking of the sacred in the pursuit of a new aesthetic, Naked Lunch must have seemed highly instructive for Smithson. Perhaps the "Prophet's Hour", a mock radio broadcast, may have been of interest because it relates a similar sequence of religious prophets and saints as a piece of bracketed theatre in the tone of vulgar American advertisement:

> *"The one and only legit Son of Man will cure a young boy's clap with one hand - by contact alone, folks - create marijuana with the other, whilst walking on water and squirting wine out of his ass... Now keep your distance folks, you is subject to be irradiated by the sheer charge of this character."*[82]

Smithson began the second part of his text with a similar parade of religious and historical excess by opening the doors to his "Museum of Derangements". In the Cummings interview he called this "a grotesque massive accumulation of all kinds of rejective [defunct] rituals..."[83]

A number of similar framing devices appear in the later part of this text. One of them was the device of the "iconoscope", which allowed the reader to reposition revelatory images such that they were enactments of a symbolic projection.[84] As in Burroughs, a theatre or cinema studio is also evoked as a frame for the revelations. The use of the theatre, which allows for the distortion of reality, however, immediately brackets and limits any revelation as solely a matter of art rather than of actual

---

[81] "Interview with Paul Cummings", S2, p. 289. The draft is in the Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frame 0988.

[82] William Burroughs, Naked Lunch, Grove Press, New York, 1966, p. 96. The copy in Smithson's library was published in 1966, suggesting that he may have replaced a lost or lent copy of 1961.

[83] "Interview with Paul Cummings, S2, p. 287.

[84] "The Iconography of Desolation", S2, p. 324. An iconoscope is a double barrelled telestereoscope which can be adjusted to suit two functions. It can be used to view flat images to create the effect of depth rather like relief sculpture by suppressing the awareness of flatness in the image under inspection. Alternately, the iconoscope can be used to make three-dimensional space seem flat, like a photograph, by suppressing the awareness of depth.

experienced visions of the real. In this sense the second part of the text reveals an ironic distancing of revelation, a sense of a self conscious manipulation of a literary and symbolic code, which may be one source of his growing disaffection with the mystical.

Thus opening his museum of aberrations by projecting them onto a surface with his iconoscope, he tours a hellish series of authoritative deities, absolute gods both pathetic and perverse, superhuman intellegences, a panoply and parody of dead gods and authorities from ancient Etruscan myths right up to Modernism. Following this parade, which includes Nazis and "females dripping in poly-unsaturates", Smithson presents several set piece subversions of the 'high' by the 'low' which are termed "iconomatic snapshots", including the boatman of the river Styx leading souls over a pool of whipped cream to an other-world supermarket, and a False Prophet displaying his stigmata on a mound of confectionery.[85] This part of the essay, like his later *Hotel Palenque*, was also a type of comic art history lecture.

In between his references to a theatrical frame, the revelations have the character of dense metaphor and metonymy. They are a sequence of images based on condensations and broad displacements. As discussed above, they resemble the Imagist method of suppressing "links in the chain" toward "one intense impression of barbaric civilisation" described by T. S. Eliot. A quote from near the end of the text gives some impression of its imagery and effect:

> *Behold, on the wide screen Mother Nature turning herself inside out, exposing growing grey agony. Cameras! Action! Darkness! Bullets rip through Mother Nature at supersonic speed, taking big hunks of grey-stuff with them. Print it. The landscape grows smaller, sucking itself in... deeper and deeper where the ridiculous artist paints nature's dirty secret under the "dim religious light" in a Manhattan loft. In such an atmosphere the artist might cry out with St. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi, "Oh, nothingness! How little art thou known!" Our gaze becomes full of cyclotrons and accelerates into a lead wall. "We want honest art criticism!" demand the* <u>*art lovers*</u>*. Alas, the extinguishment of the major spotlights is taking place. Before the Grand Wipe Out, Grandma Moses appears in the Burning Bush of Life Magazine...Anything for the sleep of spiritual suicide? Yes, by Death myriads of vacant dreams with dematerialised souls plotting the destruction of the Millennium. Hamburger Heaven prepares for sport on the Jelly-tart, according to blitzed theology.*[86]

Some of "The Iconography of Desolation", was a sincere search for an appropriately sacred way of looking and reading, painting and writing. In the later part of this text, Smithson was busily assembling a complex torrent of history and thought which acted to disintegrate the certainty of the Iconographic aesthetic. As the mystical-rationalism of the Byzantine pushes to the excess and vision

---

[85] "The Iconography of Desolation", <u>S2</u>, p. 324-5.
[86] "The Iconography of Desolation", <u>S2</u>, p. 326.

of Baroque art, Smithson was able to make a link with Burroughs' prose, and by virtue of this link bracket-off his Iconographic work as fantasies rather than visions.

In comparison, both Smithson and Burrough appreciated the power of language to evoke excess, a void and nonsense. Whereas Smithson went on to use linguistic philosophy and psychoanalysis to describe the role of language, Burroughs' sentiments were more behaviouristic and mechanistic: "Those who have heard voices from the non-dominant brain hemisphere remark on the absolute authority of the voice. The fact that no evidence is adduced and that the voice may be talking utter nonsense is irrelevant. The truth *is* nonsense."[87] A final and important difference to observe, however, is that Burroughs emphasised drug induced hallucination rather than religious vision. Although there is no definitive evidence on the matter, Smithson's friends do not generally attribute his visionary interests or tastes for profuse excess to drug use.[88]

Burroughs' writings, in their emphasis on highly artificial stylisation and on excessive fantasy, perhaps helped Smithson to bracket off his sense of extreme horror at his visions of a cosmically faulted universe. If these visions were a type of hysterical formation, then Burroughs' text many have served to contain the urge for revelation by bracketing these desires as fantasies rather than as encounters with the "real". To put it in psychoanalytic terms, Burroughs' novel provided Smithson a means to mediate the excessive ecstasy of revelation by framing it as a theatrical display of excess. Burroughs, in effect, accelerated Smithson's acceptance of alienation towards language. The concept of an alienation from language and imagery was already familiar to Smithson from his reading of Bergson. In Bergson, self-representation fails to mirror our experiences of time because representation is spatial. Words are spatial and impersonal social conventions that fail to externalise inner experience.[89] Smithson's text ends on a note of entropy and alienation from language and painting, in which the desolate artist is consigned to paint and endless sequence of zeros. But why does Smithson conclude on this note, what is its value to him?

Smithson might be seen, in this early stage of his work, to be attempting to write and paint beyond the limits of his imagination. In so doing, he encountered an enormous burden: the incarnation an icon of god. Unlike his letters to George Lester, Smithson's closure of his text reveals a growing disbelief in the powers of language and painting to represent god. "The icon is sinking into a big vat of grey paint, and there is nothing to do but watch it sink like the watchman watches the night."[90] What dawns on

---

[87] William S. Burroughs, Ghost of a Chance, Serpent's Tail Press, London, 1995.

[88] Nancy Holt is particularly anxious to down play Smithson's drug use. There is evidence that he experimented with Peyote (four times?), used "Speed" in the cinema, and was fond of drinking quite large quantities of lager slowly through the course of an evening.

[89] Mark Antliff, Bergson, p. 45.

[90] "The Iconography of Desolation", S2, p. 327.

Smithson is the realisation that language contains its own "entropy". By this he means that language always carries a falsity and a cancellation of meaning. Language itself is split.

Smithson's metaphysics clearly had a basis in his readings of Catholic literature, and the influence of his maternal aunt Julia Duke. Smithson's poetry from early 1961 was especially rich in references to Catholic theology, mysticism, dualism, and the sufferance of the flesh as a consequence of the murder of Christ. Punishment wells up out of hell, in these poems, to engulf the body and the material world. This rising slime, and its redemption through incantation, attaches itself to language as well, and Smithson quoted T. S. Eliot to this effect in a letter to George Lester:

> *Out of the slimy mud of words, out of the*
> *Sleet and hail of verbal imprecisions.*
> *Approximate thoughts and feelings, words*
> *That have taken the place of thoughts*
> *And feelings,*
> *There spring the perfect order of speech*
> *And the beauty of incantation.*[91]

In May of 1961, Smithson was hoping to achieve the beauty of incantation, and to restore language to its ability to reveal truth. Yet even as "The Iconography of Desolation" opened, it doubted the possibility of his task. By September language and painting were repeated attempts to establish this truth, but never to any satisfaction. This had the result that religion itself was drawn into question, and with it a certain part of the author's self-identity. This breakdown in religious faith arose as a consequence of a dawning realisation that language itself was a mechanism of displacements and negations. Truth, in these terms, was always a falsification, because it was constructed on the negations of language, or in painting, on a persistent blind spot in vision

The "Iconography of Desolation" provides a detailed record of Smithson's concerns in 1961. The writing of this text also marks the beginning of a process of writing that remained with him. Encouraged by his readings of Imagist writings, Smithson developed a high regard for aesthetic debate as crucial to any artistic endeavour. Imagist writings were further valuable in encouraging Smithson to pay close attention to internal phenomena. He also formed the habit, at this time, of copious reading and writing. As his reading interests widened, the Imagist aesthetic of "suppressing links in the chain" continued to be an important stylistic device.

---

[91] Letter to George Lester, No. 8, circa early May 1961.

V. "The Desolation" and After: 1962-63

If "The Iconography of Desolation" marks the beginning of the end of his religious phase, perhaps the undated letter of late 1962 most marks its end. Approximately one year after writing his essay, he wrote to Lester to tell him that he agreed with him. Smithson now regarded his religious paintings to be "a terrible error". His explanation of his change of heart is not clearly explained. It included a somewhat cryptic reference to Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible*, and to "a paradox of wrong belief in a right minded world." Judging by the letters, at the end of this religious period, Smithson was left with a clear understanding of a wide variety of theological debates, an unexplained but considerable appreciation of a film, and a conviction in what he latter called "clear headed illogic rather than muddle headed logic".

After this change, Smithson letters were far less frequent, and the discussion of religion much more restrained. Sometime in 1962 Lester offered Smithson a contract. In response, Smithson avoided discussion of the offer, preferring instead to relate his growing interest in the politics and mechanisms of the art world. In one of his last letters, of February 2, 1963, there is no mention of religion at all. Instead, he writes, "I've discovered a great deal about the economics and the politics in the art world, so that when you are in N.Y. I will have much to tell you about art-cartels, political blocks, the international art market, power plays and other avant-garde tactics. It takes much personal observation to understand such things."[92]

The records of Smithson's reading in 1962 and 1963 also show a substantial change in his reading interests. There is a complete halt to his acquisition of Catholic religious literature. Instead, he started to read anthropology, fiction, science, maths, more art history, philosophy, and in short, rapidly began to expand his intellectual interests and horizons without entering into a formal education. Both Nancy Holt and Craig Owens have indicated this change in reading habits had a recuperative effect, providing not only a variety of points of view, but also a defence against the powerful effects of religion on his earlier painting, writing and thought. Certainly, by the last letter of 22 February 1962 Smithson no longer sends Lester drawings of religious agonies, but sends a photograph of himself and Nancy Holt, who he had recently married. "Enclosed is a bit of demi-POP-photomatic art (Nancy and myself) 42nd St, style. Note my silver skull ring with ruby eyes."

Where does "The Iconography of Desolation" fit in Smithson's course as a writer? This essay traces a period in his thinking that moves away from religious and theological concerns. However, there is more than this at stake for him, because certain concerns are present in this essay which remain in his later work. Judging by his early Minimalists sculptures, he remained very sensitive to the

---

[92]Letter to George Lester, No. 19, Feb. 22, 1963.

psychological features of religious visual cultures. Having had his own experiences with the psychical machinations of painting iconographic art he remained acutely aware of the structural nature of visual desire. Though drawing conclusions about this is rather complex, two further motifs between early and later work stand out: entropy and dialectics. While something has already been said above about the shifting theology of entropy, little has been said about the shifting formulation of dialectics.

Smithson remained fascinated by a dialectical approach and involved it when conceptualising many of his various activities. It was his chief form of analysis, and an enduring mark of his writings. In 1961, in his letters and essays, Smithson can be seen at that moment when theological dualism gives way to philosophical dialectics. More than this is evident, though. The ending of his essay is a difficult and painful one, and for all its irony there is a real note of desolation in his essay. It is a 'passing into', a transition into accepting the world and the subject as split. He brings his discourse to this point of desolation right from the first line, and provides the answer to his condition too. Smithson the dualist announces the problem: the universe is split beyond all hope of redemption. In some respects this general cosmological structure is present in all his work, right through his mature career, and lends it a unity with the early work. With the end of his overtly religious phase, he moved in the direction of postulating this split or dualism in the subject, in language, and in the very stuff that constitutes the materials of the world. In this sense Smithson started and ended as an artist and writer who was fascinated by an ontological dualism. One consequence of this was his growing interest in and use of philosophical dialectics. This new interest allowed him to make a number of philosophical considerations about art, and in the mean time to take Greenberg and Michael Fried to task using a familiar and rigorous philosophical method. It is to the arena of art criticism that I would now turn.

Chapter II

ART CRITICISM: ABSTRACT MANNERISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

I. Introduction

Robert Smithson's career as an art critic spanned the period between 1966 and 1973. During this time he sustained a fairly prolific production of texts, including 30 published articles and another 30 unpublished texts. Much of this writing, however, is not about his own work. For example, his first major article mad an analysis of the concerns of a group of artists, later to be called Minimalists, at a time when critics were at a loss to define the group. In making sense of Smithson's art criticism in articles such as "Entropy and the New Monuments", this chapter starts by identifying his major critical theory of mannerism. It then seeks to place his theory of mannerism in a context, by tracing its relation to existing art critical debate. In that his writings on art immediately conflicted with the then dominant theories of formalist critics, one function of this chapter is to identify his claims and the sources on which his alternative theory drew. Subsequent to this, the chapter examines Smithson's disagreements with the critic Michael Fried. The purpose of this examination is to answer the question: how did Smithson's art criticism trigger a type of 'mannerist' deconstruction of modernism?

One of the more interesting and important of Robert Smithson's proposals as an art critic, was his view that Minimal art was an "Abstract Mannerism". So he argued from the start, that if there was an historical precedent for Robert Morris and Donald Judd, it was Parmagianino and Pontormo, not Pollock and Poons. His conception of Abstract Mannerism, however, was more complicated than just that of an historical comparison. It served in many ways to disrupt and nullify the predominant system of values which operated in contemporary art criticism, especially that of Greenberg, Rosenberg, and Fried.

In getting to an understanding of why Smithson, in his critical activity of defining Minimalism, made such general reference to Mannerist art, it is necessary to start with the contemporary debate, both in art criticism and in art history. In assembling this puzzle, then, I would first like to sketch out Greenberg's use of the term "Mannerism" in his explanation of the demise of Abstract Expressionism. Following this I would like to show how Smithson developed an alternative conception of historical Mannerism based on his readings in art history. These readings included important new research by Arnold Hauser, Jacques Bousquet and Wylie Sypher. Smithson added to his historical knowledge a new psychological definition of Abstraction with the aid of Willhelm Worringer. With this context in place it will then be possible to consider his first major published article ""Entropy and the New Monuments" ", and his further elaboration of Abstract Mannerism. Finally, this chapter will make an account of the arguments Smithson levied against Michael Fried over the structural role of the frame in art.

II. The Mannerist End of Abstract Expressionism

The first mention of mannerism relevant to Smithson's use of the term occurred in 1962 in the art criticism of Clement Greenberg. This term was new to his critical vocabulary, and arose in the course of explaining the decline of Abstract Expressionism. Greenberg, of course, had been the primary exponent of this movement over the previous twenty years. In 1960, there was no need for this term. Abstract Expressionism, after a lengthy period of critical neglect, was now well received, a "triumph" both in America and in Europe. Greenberg was in a strong position at this point, and entered into a number of debates and disputes with other critics in order to ensure the perpetuation of a formalist interpretation of this work. In 1962, however, his task had changed. He now had to explain why Abstract Expressionism, even as it triumphed, was no longer America's leading visual art. It was in the explanation of the decline of Abstract Expressionism that he first used the term mannerism. This was meant to serve a double effect, in that he sought to simultaneously explain both the demise of Abstract Expressionism, and the rise of a new group of painters, which he promoted under the name of Post Painterly Abstraction. This new group consisted of Jules Olitski, Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, Barnett Newman and Frank Stella.

Greenberg's explanation of the occasional effects of mannerism in the history of painting was a fairly straightforward one. Firstly, it appeared usually at the end of a formal cycle in the history of art. Secondly, it was a decline caused by the exhaustion of formal possibilities. Clearly, Greenberg's use of the term mannerism was meant to be pejorative, and was first levelled in 1962 at artists who he felt had failed to seek a formalist advance in painting.

A. A Cyclical Model of Mannerism

In 1962, several definitions of the term mannerism already existed in the discipline of art history. Greenberg was aware, for example, of Walter Friedlaender's Mannerism and anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting of 1914, which described it as an anti-classicism that developed into an academic style and then was rejected. This, however was not the primary source for Greenberg's understanding of its formal dynamic. For this he turned to descriptions in Heinrich Wölfflin's Principles of Art History. In turning to Wölfflin, who was in many respects the first practitioner of an art historical formalism, he was seeking primarily to rationalise the transition from Abstract Expressionism to Post Painterly Abstraction. He argued a case, much like Wölfflin, that the history of painting was marked by dialectical shifts between two fundamental formal properties of pictures. They were the "painterliness" of Abstract Expressionism and the "linearity" of Post-Painterly Abstraction. Greenberg, following Wölfflin, explained the cause of historical transitions between the linear to the painterly as arising from an over-familiarity and exhaustion of one or the other family of forms. Mannerists remained overly attached to exhausted formal means, and thrived in conditions of low-risk and academic rigidity. This contributed to a stagnation in the historical project of formalist progress.

Wölfflin developed his ideas based on a study of Italian art from the High Renaissance to the Baroque period, and although he never used the term "Mannerism", it was the current term for this era in the early 1960's.[93] By 1964, Greenberg's use of Wölfflin's theory was quite fundamental to his explanation of contemporary changes in painting. He criticised later Abstract Expressionism as a "mannered, imitative, uninspired and repetitious art...which has degenerated into a blatant formula." For him, mannerism was to be particularly found in the "10th Street galleries...[where] a thousand artists could be seen mauling the same viscosities of paint in the same ranges of colour." In his view, New York had recently attracted numerous second-generation and second-rate imitators of the DeKooning gesture who worked along side the even more inane practitioners of 'action painting'. Both had made a mockery of sincere self expression by endless imitation. The only way forward, in Greenberg's opinion, was Post Painterly Abstraction and Anthony Caro's practice of painted sculpture. Both required a highly restrained, emotionally taut linear abstraction.[94] He was, of course, very careful to explain that Post Painterly Abstraction was the next new stage of painting, and not a

---

[93]There are a number of differences between Wölfflin and Greenberg, some of which were not observed at the time. For example, Wölfflin largely delineated a transition from High Renaissance linearity to Baroque painterlinesss. Greenberg, on the other hand, observed the same formal transition, in the reverse direction. Neither did Wölfflin see, as Greenberg did, an easy circularity between these two formal characteristics. Wölfflin did give a brief account of the exhaustion of Baroque painterlinesss and the rise of Neo-classical linearity, but did not credit this to an over-familiarity with the form. He credited instead the historical and social effects of the Enlightenment, of rationality and a "new objectivity" which reinvigorated linearity with new meanings.

[94]Clement Greenberg, "The 'Crisis' of Abstract Art", 1964, and "Post-Painterly Abstraction", 1964, The Collected Essays, Vol. 4, pp.176 & 192.

mannerist phase in the decline of Abstract Expressionism.[95] In that this model of linear and painterly alternations allowed for two regular periods of mannerist exhaustion, it is not surprising that, by 1967, Greenberg was claiming that Minimalism was a mannerism of Post Painterly Abstraction linearity.

B. Critical Mannerism

Greenberg proposed a cyclical return of mannerism throughout the course of art history that occurred when artists forgot the value of progress in the arts. In this respect, Greenberg brought to bear on the term mannerism more than an analysis of form, but a rather complex set of philosophical values, based largely on positivism, materialism, and Kantian idealist notions. This more complex set of value relations, in which mannerism again featured as a negative term, was called upon particularly at a point when he was seeking justification of his own changes as a critic. Critics too could succumb to mannerist tendencies.

Greenberg referred to mannerism a second time in working out a theory for the development of formalist art criticism. If critics were not to become mannerists, then they too had to pursue an advance in critical dialectics. The mid 1960's, therefore, saw Greenberg drop his well-established dialectic of flatness and depth based on his conclusion that its logic had reached a completion. With the advent of linear rather than biomorphic forms, the thickly built and wholly-flat surfaces of Dubuffet, and an almost total flatness in recent American painting, Greenberg was of the opinion that a new dialectic structure had developed. This change required the critical identification of a new operative dialectic, which he described as one of "literalness" versus "opticality".

In introducing this new dialectic, Greenberg again cited as a 'mannerist 'shortcoming those critics and artists who failed to recognise this new advance. For example, such modern mannerists as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns were incapable of advancing the formal development of painting because they borrowed their imagery. As they had never won a style of their own, they were forever lacking a "home" for representation[96]. Minimalists such as Judd, Morris and Andre were also criticised for being mannerists, because of their tendencies to over-emphasise and over-conceptualise certain formal characteristics such as space. This failure reduced Minimalist sculptors to the production of "tokens" for high art. As feats of nothing other than "ideation", they failed to embody or

---

[95]Clement Greenberg, "Review of Andrea Del Sarto by S.J. Freedberg", 1964. The Collected Essays, Vol. 4, p. 197. Freedberg was a professor at Harvard, and taught Fried, Reiss and Krauss. His work on the formalist development of Del Sarto demonstrated a more complex set of formal relations in this period than proposed by Wölfflin. Freedberg's view was felt to be more subtle than Wölfflin's (especially given that Renaissance und Baroque, though written first, was not translated into English at this time) and may have been influential in Greenberg's modification of his history of Ab. Ex. and Post Painterly Abstraction in his creation of a transitional category for Rothko, etc. For a further account of this, see Barbara Reise, "Greenberg and the Group: A Retrospective View, Part I", Studio International, May 1968.

[96]Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism", 1962, Collected Essays, Vol. 4, p.124.

stand for human experience. Minimalism left nothing to be felt or discovered.[97] Worst of all was their insincerity, in that the Minimalist were smart enough to figure out that a major shift in style had taken place, but made the change out of calculation rather commitment.

The Minimalists were bound to respond to this. To account for Smithson's responses, however, it would first be necessary to give a more complete outline of Greenberg's and Fried's critical positions, with particular attention to their theorisation of sculpture.

C. The Transition from 'Flatness' to 'Literalness'...

For Greenberg, Post Painterly Abstraction avoided mannerist tendencies because it had evolved a new formal dialectic to take painting into the future. First, it had found a new "literalness" out of the final ascendancy of Abstract Expressionist "flatness". Where flatness had been an idea, a conceptualisation of the picture plane, literalness functioned to indicate the actual tactile surface of the work, almost as if it were a piece of sculpture. This category of literalness, much as flatness, though, still communicated much the same values of empiricism, positivism and materialism. As an example of literalness, Greenberg cited the work of Morris Louis, whose canvases were stained such that colour became one with the canvas, rather than a surface coat.[98] This reduction to a literal surface, however, was seen to benefit sculpture more than painting. In recognising that literalness drew attention to a painting as if it were a sculptural object, Greenberg sought a dialectic that was as promising for sculpture as for painting.[99]

By 1962, then, Greenberg claimed that the logic of flatness was running out of new alternatives in painting[100]. Literalness was now best found in abstract sculpture, and with this, he quite remarkably lowered his usual insistence on medium purity. Sculpture was theoretically more promising in terms of literalness because it more fully asserted itself as material fact, and produced a greater force to counterbalance the optical experiences of sculptural illusion. For Greenberg, it was Anthony Caro who had fulfilled Pollock's triumph, in that both artists had succeeded in asserting literalness while also ensuring that it was ultimately conquered by the spectator's purely optical experience.

---

[97] Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture", 1967, Collected Essays, Vol. 4, p.255.

[98] Clement Greenberg, "Introduction to an Exhibition of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski, 1963, Collected Essays, Vol. 4, p. 150.

[99] In so doing, Greenberg echoed a formal paradigm that can be traced back to Winckelmann. See Alex Potts, Flesh and the Ideal, Yale University Press, New Haven, p.71.

[100] Clement Greenberg, "The New Sculpture", Art and Culture, Thames and Hudson, London, 1973, p. 139.

D. ...and 'depth' to 'opticality'

Opticality emerged, for Greenberg, primarily as a way of looking at the sculpture of Anthony Caro, where "eyesight has more freedom of movement and invention" in three dimensions. Such opticality was described as rendering substance incorporeal, weightless, and 'like a mirage'. This 'sheer visibility' defeated the literalness which had so come to dominate in painting.[101] In introducing opticality, Greenberg was seen, by other critics including Smithson, to assert values usually associated with philosophical idealism. He seemed to be proposing a description of the spectator in terms of inner experience such as thought, mind and judgement, none of which could be verified. For some, the idealism inherent in opticality conflicted too heavily with Greenberg's materialism. For others, it promised a refinement in taste and aesthetic judgement, and promised a possibility for its immanent perfection.

Opticality was also extensively theorised by Michael Fried, but for many, it remained an ambiguous term that was often fruitfully misread. It can be generally understood from Fried that post painterly opticality rendered the literal matter of a painting incorporeal, and this created the corresponding illusion of a similarly disembodied spectator. It was from within this disembodied state of optical 'presentness' that a spectator could experience a new appreciation of illusion in painting, and bring about a remarkably unfettered and unmediated communication of feelings. For some, such as Rosalind Krauss, opticality was philosophically too idealist, because it sought "an instantaneous but forever complete experience of knowing, within which the object and the subject can be utterly transparent to one another."[102] More recently Fried has claimed that opticality was primarily a phenomenological practice. Nevertheless, during the time in question, it was often regarded as positing a metaphysics of 'being', made clear in his remark that "We are literalists most or all of our lives, presence is grace."[103]

As is well known, Fried was generally partial to Greenberg's formalism, but varied in several important respects. For example, he avoided Greenberg's cyclical model of painterly versus linear forms by asserting that there were no single or absolute categories in painting. Each age simply had its particular concerns, and in the case of Post Painterly Abstraction it was a concern for the "medium of shape" in conjunction with the dialectic of literalness and opticality.[104] Fried put a case that "depicted shape" was to be balanced with the "literal shape" of the canvas support. What was important, especially in the works of Barnet Newman and Frank Stella, was the way they addressed

---

[101] Clement Greenberg, "Contemporary Sculpture: Anthony Caro" Arts Yearbook 8, 1965; and Studio International, September 1967. In addition see also "The New Sculpture", Art and Culture, p. 139.

[102] Rosalind Krauss, "Using Language to Do Business as Usual", Visual Theory, Norman Bryson (Ed.), Polity Press, Oxford, 1992, p.88.

[103] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", Artforum, Summer, 1967.

[104] Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings", Artforum, November 1966.

the frame as an integral part of the picture.[105] The consideration given to the frame also contributed to the ascendancy of linear over organic, painterly ones.

III. A New "Abstract" Mannerism?

In American art criticism, the first sign of an alternative to Greenberg's pejorative use of the term mannerism appeared in Richard Wollheim's article "Minimal Art" of 1965. In many respects this eponymous article was premature to the movement of the same name, dealing mostly with Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg and Ad Reinhardt. He observed a specifically mannerist tendency in this work, especially in Reinhardt, because it employed a process of simplification and distortion in which an earlier image was removed or erased. This defence of these artists, which were so maligned by Greenberg, was based on a conception of art as the product of mental effort, of complexity followed by simplification, of erasure and rewriting, wherein physical effort could be "minimal". Wollheim's article has som affinities with ideas raised in the new research on Mannerism. It is interesting that, in the same magazine issue as "Minimal Art", Jacques Bousquet's book Mannerism received a review. Indeed, art magazines from the first half of the 1960's generally gave a broad coverage of art, such that a consideration of a contemporary mannerism could be followed by a consideration of historical Mannerism. Such coincidence in the consideration of contemporary and historical Mannerism, as in the case between Wollheim and Bousquet, were not unique. They were made more likely during the 1960's due to a marked rise in art historical publications on Mannerism. George Kubler accounted for this rise by explaining that mannerism was the last of the historical epochs to be studied by art history. This necessitated a re-assessment of the discipline's aims that made critical differences all the more acute.[106] What is clear about the context of Smithson's use of a critical mannerism is that, just as Greenberg started to use it as a pejorative term, art historians were assessing it, largely for the first time, in much more admiring and attentive terms.

A. Art History: Hauser & Sypher on Mannerism

In 1966, one year after Wollheim's article, Smithson made his first attempt at defining Minimal art as an historical recurrence of mannerism. This article was given the title of ""Entropy and the New Monuments" ", and published in Artforum. In building up an alternative to Greenberg's description of mannerism, Smithson drew on about fifteen different texts, the most important of which were, Jacques Bousquet's Mannerism, Wylie Sypher's Four Stages of Renaissance Style, of 1955, and Arnold

---

[105]Fried also criticised Greenberg for failing to see the personal and historical conditions whereby formalism had gained ascendancy. He argued, as did Stanley Cavell, that formalist pronouncements were not to be taken as objective purifications of art, but simply as a new set of conventions.

[106] George Kubler, The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 1962.

Hauser's Mannerism. The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art of 1965. What made the last two of these books valuable him was that they traced the history of mannerist sensibilities right into the twentieth century. In so doing, they provided an alternative to the formalist history of modernism. Hauser, however, received considerable critical disapproval on this account in a long review run by Artforum.[107] This rather scathing critique, it is interesting to note, appeared in the same issue as Smithson's "Entropy and the New Monuments", and may have contributed to an editorial decision to omit Hauser's book from Smithson's footnotes[108].

This coincidence aside, Hauser's book was valuable to Smithson's aesthetic theory for a number of reasons. It was a broad study of an intellectual sensibility, emphasising recent and historical Mannerism as anti-humanist, dialectical, cosmological, alienated, and based on a structure of thought and an aesthetic approach which was applicable to both language and the visual arts. For example, he points out, "The development of Mannerism marked one of the deepest breaks in the history of art, and its rediscovery implies a similar break in our own day. Indeed, the crisis that led to our acceptance of it was deeper than the crisis of the Renaissance which gave it birth." He further observes,"...there are many parallels between the age of mannerism and our own." He also describes a conceptual practice in which dialectics served to produce an uncertain mannerist knowledge. "The strongest link between Mannerism and the artistic outlook of the present day is this dualism, the sense of having one foot in each of two worlds, in one of immediate experience, which is naturalistically representable, and at the same time in another, which is visionary, and therefore capable at most of being hinted at by sensual means." [109]

Hauser claimed that Mannerism arose because of an inadequacy in Renaissance humanism: "The crisis of the Renaissance was the crisis of humanism as epitomised by Erasmus ' stoicism, followed by the anti-humanism of the Reformation, Machiavelli and Mannerism." He also explained that Mannerists gained a critical distance from humanism and Catholicism alike by putting central terms into dialectical relations. Hauser describes Mannerist anti-humanism as arising from the submission of humanist terms to dialectical analysis. In addition to Friedlaender's anti-classicism he added the dialectical tensions between naturalism and formalism, the rational and the irrational, the sensual and the spiritual, the traditional and the innovative and revolt against conformism. There was, then, a "dialectical principle that underlies the whole of the mannerist outlook", wherein "Every attitude is associated with its opposite." For these reasons Hauser implores the reader to avoid over-simplification in order to comprehend the actual complexity of the Mannerist mind, pointing out that

---

[107] Helmut Wohl, "Review of Mannerism by Arnold Hauser", Artforum, June 1966.

[108] The five footnotes for "Entropy and the New Monuments" were probably edited out by Phil Leider. They include citations of Hauser and Sypher. See Smithson Archives Roll 3834, frame 1140.

[109] Arnold Hauser, Mannerism. The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art, Knopf, New York, 1965, pp. 3, 4 & 371.

the penchant for the paradoxical was not just a witty play of words, but a real reflection of Mannerist thought. Hauser observes that "A mannerist work of art is always a piece of bravura, a triumphant conjuring trick."

The Mannerist's dialectical method was also seen to be at work in 16th century Catholicism. Mannerist theology would have already been familiar to Smithson, and Hauser observes it for its examples of a type of clear-headed illogic. Firstly is the theology of predestination, in which an individual is not chosen on merit for salvation. Hauser remarks that such theories of a deistic irrationality arose because the Mannerists, "indulged the paradoxical; they despaired of reason, yet reasoned on, they slipped between being truly mental to truly physical." He concludes that the unity of Mannerism was its overriding intellectual spiritualism that was cosmological without necessarily being religious.

Smithson may also have appreciated Hauser's attention to the structures used in Mannerist cosmological thought. From Hauser he would learn that, "To the men of the Renaissance every aspect of life and thought-- theology, philosophy, astronomy as well as economics and politics-- seemed to be dominated by a system of concentric circles revolving around a fixed and motionless centre." The universe was thought of as being organised on the same hierarchical pattern as feudal society, in which a pyramid was centred on the emperor just as the universe was centred on God: "Even the central perspective of Renaissance painting was merely one more instance of the same orientation toward a single focal point."[110] Hauser might be seen, just as much as Borges, to have encouraged Smithson's analyses of optics and perspective as 'proofs' in a game of metaphysical speculation. For example, he described one of his sculptures of this period, *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1965) **[Plate 3]**, in terms of its complex stereoscopic geometry, and its ability to conjure an 'evil eye', or as Smithson put it, an imprisonment by "two alien eyes".[111] This sculpture suggested a fundamental structural splitting in subject and nature alike, as will be discussed in chapter five.

In defining the socio-economic conditions of Mannerism, Hauser also sought to locate the advent of modern alienation: "Mannerism is not so much a symptom and product of alienation...as an expression of the unrest, anxiety and bewilderment generated by the process of alienation of the individual from society and the reification of the whole cultural process." Furthermore, he observes, "the sense of estrangement and loss of self, the doubt about the reality and identity of the self, are among the principle themes of the literature of the age." Hauser concluded by providing a psychological description of Mannerist alienation, finding it largely a product of narcissism.

---

110 Hauser, Mannerism, p.44.

111 "Pointless Vanishing Points, S2, p. 359.

Of final interest to Smithson would have been Hauser's efforts to indicate a Mannerist relation to language. He remarks that, "The determining factor for the attitude to language and its handling in the age of Mannerism must have been the sense of the autonomous existence led by words and phrases and their compliance with a creativity of their own; the feeling that it was language that thought and wrote for the poet."[112] An alienated relation to language is also traced into the twentieth century to the work of Mallarmé and the Symbolists. This consideration of language as autonomous and independent from the subject may have provided further insight and impetus to Smithson's interests in linguistics and communications theory.

If I have given such a long account of this book, it is to emphasise it as a potential model for Smithson's descriptions of contemporary Minimalist art. Hauser's broad description and psychology of Mannerism may have prompted Smithson to formulate his own theories on modern mannerism. Like Hauser, his group included artists and writers, for example, Jorges Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabakov, George Kubler, Alain Robbe-Grillet, the science fiction of J. G. Ballard, as well as the films of Alfred Hitchcock and Roger Corman. Hauser, in effect, provided a genealogy for Smithson's aesthetic group. In addition to this historical legitimisation, Smithson's study of Mannerism allowed an informed redress of Greenberg's pejorative use of the term. In that Greenberg had depended on this term as a negative value in his own theories, Smithson's positive account of mannerism acted to destabilise contemporary art criticism, much as it did in the discipline of art history.[113]

Wylie Sypher

Smithson's readings on Mannerism also included Wylie Sypher's Four Stages in Renaissance Style, which discusses Mannerism as a third stage between High Renaissance and Baroque in a combination of formalist and psychoanalytic terms. Formally, Mannerism is qualified as treating themes from unexpected points of view and eccentric angles, using sour colour, nervous line, oblique space and asymmetrical designs. Rather than being an art of natural expression, "Mannerism is nothing if not intellectual", which "came to mean a kind of facile learning, an abused ingenuity, a witty affectation...". Like Hauser, Sypher also makes a number of psychoanalytic observations about the gratification sought by Mannerist artists and authors, including their pleasure in a multiplicity of psychological states without any centring of attention, and their tendency to excess within rigid boundaries. He concludes by noting that the Mannerist usually tells the truth in a key pitched so high as to be an hysterical ecstasy, or so quietly as to be a mumble.[114]

---

[112] Hauser, Mannerism, p.112 and 286.

[113] I refer to John Shearman's attack on Hauser in the introduction to Mannerism, Penguin, 1967; and to Leo Steinberg's rebuttal in defence of Hauser in "Objectivity and the Shrinking Self", Other Criteria, 1967, pp. 309-310.; and finally to George Kubler's observation in The Shape of Time Remarks on the History of Things, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 1962.

[114] Wylie Sypher, Four Stages of Renaisance Style, Doubleday, New York, 1955, pp. 108, 109 & 139.

Smithson seems to have paid close attention to Sypher's vivid psychoanalytic descriptions of the Mannerist aesthetic. Parmagianino, for example, "presents us with a 'frozen' type of figure, people who assume striking posses without in the least seeming to feel them, since an artful formality obscures or conceals their nature...At times Hamlet seems to be this kind of hysteric detached Mannerist figure." Sypher finds it possible not only to psychoanalytically describe the functioning of desire in a Mannerist work of art, but also to show that the Mannerists themselves had highly developed conceptions of their own subjectivity and self-alienation. "Thus Mannerist composition employs a kind of parapsychology, an adjustment by disrelationship."[115]

Sypher's book, and Hauser's as well, served to reinforce Smithson's interest in an "esthetic" based on an illogical dialectical thought. "... Mannerism is a moment of dualism-a *spannung*, a strain not decisively resolved. That is why mannerist psychology and art are dramatic; because the dramatic act can accommodate possibilities as logic cannot."[116] Such comments as these may have proved stimulating to Smithson because they explained the Mannerist as epistemologically complete only in parts. In the sixteenth century, neither the subject nor the dialectic need reach an Hegelian synthesis, but could remain in place as each in the pairing were worn down, or sustained *ab absurdum* in a cosmology of "Quasi-Infinities".

It was a later book by Sypher, however, which proved the more quotable for Smithson, especially the remark that "entropy is evolution in reverse".[117] Sypher's book The Loss of Self in Modern Art and Literature provided Smithson a more thorough psychoanalytic commentary on self-alienation, and a more vivid picture of the dialectics of unconscious impulses.

B. A Psychology of Abstraction: Abstraction and Empathy

In describing Smithson's conception of a mannerist Minimalism, it would only be a partial view to consider just his reading on historical Mannerism. What is missing is his use of an almost ahistorical account of abstract art that would allow comparisons between Minimalism and pre-historic art abstract art. Therefore, before turning to consider Smithson's "Entropy and the New Monuments" I would like to introduce a further text which featured largely in its arguments. This is Worringer's Abstraction and Empathy, of 1908, which had been so highly recommended to Smithson in his reading of T.E. Hulme's Further Speculations. Its particular value to Smithson was that it provided a

---

[115] Sypher, Four Stages, pp. 145-6.

[116] Sypher, Four Stages, p. 162.

[117] Wylie Sypher, The Loss of Self in Modern Literature and Art, Vintage Press, New York, 1962.

general psychological account of abstract art from the most pre-historic to the most recent. Worringer discerned, in effect, two fundamental psychological impulses in art: "Naturalism and Abstraction".

The first of these impulses is a modern volition for vitality and the organic. This impulse often, though not necessarily, leads to an art that imitates the natural world, such as is found in Classical and Renaissance art. This is an "empathetic" art because it arises from a feeling about the world, notable for a happy, pantheistic relationship of confidence between artist and the phenomena of the external world. The external world is imitated because the artist feels confident in and gratified by it. Aesthetic enjoyment of this sort is considered an objectified self-enjoyment, because empathetic art gratifies a desire, an inner need for 'self-activation', 'self-affirmation' and freedom. The naturalism of Renaissance art, for example, depicted deep space because the artist felt confident and pleased in his experiences of the world.

Diametrically opposed to the impulse of empathy, Worringer poses an impulse for abstraction. Abstract Egyptian art, for example, developed out of an inner unrest inspired by the phenomena of the outside world. There is, in abstract art, an underlying psychic dread of space caused by a feeling of confusion and anxiety about the constant flux and indeterminacy of the phenomenal world. The sense of fear in abstract art can come either before cognition, as in primitive art, or above cognition, as in Oriental art. Abstract art gratifies, then, by providing a point of tranquillity -- not vitality -- and a refuge from the variability of appearances. Worringer attributes the predominance of abstract art in primitive cultures to their anxiety about the external world, and a feeling of helplessness caused by a failure to find a spiritual cognition of it.

> *...purely geometrical regularity was bound to offer the greatest possibility of happiness to the man disquieted by the obscurity and entanglement of phenomena. For here the last trace of connection with and dependence on, life has been effaced, here the highest absolute form, the purest abstraction has been achieved; here is law, here is necessity, while everywhere else the caprice of the organic prevails.*[118]

Worringer's explanation of abstract art includes a consideration of the causes behind the sudden contemporary revival of Abstraction (i.e. Post-Impressionism and German Expressionism, especially Emile Nolde and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner). Firstly, he explains that neither empathy nor abstraction are conscious interests. These impulses are chosen instinctively, rather than by calculation and consideration. Contemporary abstraction did, however, contain an element of conscious thought. It was based on the belief that rational cognition, as largely initiated by Kant's consideration of the "Thing", had led to a distinct failure in empathetic naturalism. Cognition was exhausted in its attempts to know the "Thing", thus causing a return of the primitive fascination with the "Thing-in-

itself". Though this may not be an accurate appraisal of Kant, it was nevertheless the explanation given by Worringer.[119]

Worringer concludes his dualism of aesthetic impulses on a synthetic psychological principle. Having traced the role of the ego in the aesthetics of empathy and abstraction, he proposes that both are founded on a single impulse for "self-alienation". For example, in empathetically projecting the self into imitative art works:

> *We feel, as it were, our individuality flow into fixed boundaries, in contrast to the boundless differentiation of the individual consciousness. In this self-objectivation lies a self-alienation... This affirmation of our individual need for activity represents, simultaneously, a curtailment of its illimitable potentialities, a negation of its ununifiable differentiations. "In empathy, therefore, I am not the real I, but am inwardly liberated from the latter, i.e. I am liberated from everything which I am apart from contemplation of the form... "(Lipps)...In this sense, therefore, it cannot appear over-bold to attribute all aesthetic enjoyment--and perhaps every aspect of the human sensation of happiness--to the impulse of self-alienation as its most profound and ultimate essence.*[120]

Compared to empathetic art, which seeks alienation from "individual being", the self-alienation in abstract art is even greater and more consistent. It reflects "an urge to seek deliverance from the fortuitousness of humanity as a whole." This includes alienation from one's own subjectivity as well as from the external world. Worringer provides, then, a model for the functioning of unconscious instincts in the creation of art. Whether the artwork was empathetic or abstract, its aesthetic effects were not based upon self-affirmation, but on self-alienation. With this description of the aesthetic subject as self-alienated, as split, it would now seem possible to enter into a description of the major features of Smithson's "Entropy and the New Monuments".

C. "Entropy and the New Monuments"

In some respects this article was a sprawling, loosely argued text which ranged widely in its consideration of contemporary sculpture. It did not, in the manner of Wollhiem, attempt a rigorous analysis. It presented instead a shifting set of categories held together by a string of themes which moved from Hauser's Mannerism, to Worringer's abstraction, to Freud's death-wish, and to a general consideration of an entropic drive in man and nature. In so doing, Smithson proposed a largely materialist psychological explanation of the impulses at hand in a new generation of abstract artists.

---

[118] Willhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style, Routledge, KeeganPaul, London, 1963, p. 20. Smithson referred to two editions, one of 1953, the other of 1967.

[119] Willhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy, p. 18.

[120] Willhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy, p. 24.

In commencing his article, Smithson offered a consideration of time at the cosmic level, invoking an image of the whole universe slowing, cooling, hardening and crystallising as it succumbed to entropy. Likewise, the sculptures of the Minimalists (Judd, Morris, Flavin, Tony Smith) and the Park Place Gallery (Mark DiSuvero and Paul Thek) were compelling because they revealed an entropy, a lethargy induced by shifting from an historical to a more monumental geological time frame. For example, these sculptures suggested "monumental artifices of ideas and a vast immobility", which were "devoid of any classical ideals", and revealed a truth in false communications.[121]

Smithson set up a rather difficult set of reversals in this article. Much of it involved turning the metaphysical value system of formalism upside-down. This gave the appearance, to some, that Smithson was criticising Minimalism for being "vapid", "empty", "hyper-prosaic", and for elevating lethargy "to the most glorious magnitude".[122] Clearly, though, these were not meant as criticisms, and were, in effect, wide ranging attempts to question the value system of formalist aesthetics. The general strategy which Smithson pursued was to locate in contemporary art criticism those dialectical pairings which had been given value relations, and then reverse them with as much rhetorical force as he could muster in the fairly brief space allotted to the genre of the magazine article.

Of all his Minimalist colleagues, Smithson regarded the work of Robert Morris as the most mannerist.[123] There seem to have been a number of reasons for this. Firstly, Morris was interested in reviving certain strategies found in the work of Marcel Duchamp. But, Morris did not assimilate these strategies to suit a more contemporary situation. As Hal Foster has likewise commented on the Duchamp revival at this time, the repetition of such Dada techniques failed to transform them. By recovering Dada in a literal and historicist manner, it turned what had been a socio-political critique into an academic style. [124] For Smithson and Foster, artists such Morris repeated rather than recollected Dada. But, where Foster criticised, Smithson praised.

Unlike Foster's critique, though, "Entropy and the New Monuments" praised Morris' lack of originality. This extended both to his academic repetition of Dada and to the copying of work by contemporary colleagues. As Smithson observed, "Many of Morris' wall structures are direct homages to Duchamp; they deploy facsimiles of ready-mades within high Manneristic frames of reference...If anything they are uncreative in the manner of the 16th-century alchemist-philosopher-artist...[Morris and Duchamp are] artificers of the uncreative or decreators of the Real." What was interesting about Morris' work was the entropic collapse of the creative artistic subject as normally valued by

---

121 "Entropy and the New Monuments", S2, p. 14.

122 Conversation with Peter Hutchinson, on 2. 4. 96.

123 Conversation with Nancy Holt.

contemporary art criticism. Morris, for one, did not reject Smithson's use of the term 'Mannerist' to describe his work, though he never used it himself.[125]

Smithson also saw mannerism at work in architecture. The "Manneristic modernity of Phillip Johnson", such as his Union Carbide building, was irresistibly "grand and empty", its "sleek walls and high ceilings give the place an uncanny tomb-like atmosphere." This building possessed all the fundamental elements of a Modern mannerism, especially when used as a Science fiction film set. It exuded a sense of crystalline entropy, of vast changes of scale and time, which left little ground for the more traditional and humanist conception of artistic sincerity and a vital, unified subjectivity.[126]

Smithson's article concluded by describing Minimalism as a mannerism in its tendency to dislocate meaning. This dislocation has resulted from a questioning of the role of representation both in the arts and in the physical sciences. In one example, Smithson described Judd's sculptures **[Plate 4]** for their use of mathematics and geometry, but as separated from their original meaning. Such use of a "Synthetic maths" was, for Smithson, a mannerism of science, and was seen to produce "new states of mind". He explained the virtues of dislocating meaning by referring to a speculation put forward by Charles Sanders Peirce, in which he imagined the possibility of graphically representing the structures of human thought. Smithson turns this into a justification of Minimalism. Its "new maths" was an attempt to give visual representation to the non-visual structures of meaning.[127] This conclusion, however, rather contradicted his main thesis that abstraction was not a form of naturalistic imitation. The crystalline geometry born out by Minimalist representations of thought structures led Smithson to speculate on the reasons for this similarity. If thought used 'dead' structures, then mental abstraction was not part of the subject, but a natural and automatic effect of matter.

In this first attempt to define the aesthetic of Minimalism, Smithson drew heavily on his readings on Mannerist art. He emphasised, for example, the indeterminate role of the artist's subjective presence in the making of art. The subject was not, as in formalist and humanist criticism, unified internally and alienated externally. Instead, the subject was seen as beneficially alienated and divided at all discernible levels. The idea on which he drew often included conceptions of the subject given in art historical studies of Mannerism. This amounted to a picture of the 'decreative' subject caught or frozen by contrary psychological impulses, all of which superseded rational thought. To these ends, a

---

[124] Hal Foster, Return of the Real, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 21. Foster's comments are particularly directed at Alan Kaprow.

[125] "Entropy and the New Monuments", S2, p. 19. For example, he did not invoke this rationale in defence of accusations that he borrowed the use of felt from Joseph Beuys.

[126] "Entropy and the New Monuments", S2, p. 12. These comments precede the Mannerist debate as it occurred in differentiating Modernist from Postmodernist architecture. See C. Ray Smith, Supermannerism: New Attitudes in Post Modern Architecture, Dutton, New York, 1977.

[127] "Entropy and the New Monuments", S2, p. 22.

substantial part of "Entropy and the New Monuments" was given to the task of heightening the sense of dialectical paradox inherent in the humanist and formalist espousal of an aesthetic experience of self-presence. To name but a few of these dialectical paradoxes, he confounded the value given to the serious over the humorous, evolution over decline, original over copy, true over false, and sincerity over self-alienation.

Looking forward to subsequent writings by Smithson, this initial reversal of value systems developed into a plea for the recognition of binary dialectics, but with the important proviso that there should be no values associated with either of them. His first magazine article was an opening gambit of rhetorical reversals that then settled into a consideration of why thought and language depended on split structures. What he wanted to attend to was the way in which formalist critical values had produced implicit negative terms which, upon examination, were essential to their effective operation. Not only were such 'negative' terms equally valid; they were necessary to the logic of any value system.

If Smithson's argument bears some resemblance to deconstruction at this point, he went on to argue a less deconstructivist point. Not only were all language systems formed around dialectical pairings, nature too was gripped in a dialectical process at a fundamental originary level. The dialectics of nature dictated the dialectical structure of language. Rather than become involved in a process of dialectical action and reaction, he felt that mental lethargy allowed him to perceive more clearly the "desolate and exquisite surface-structures" of thought.[128] He sometimes equated this value-free perception of structure with the observational procedures of phenomenological philosophy. While this deserves further consideration, what is important for the moment is the mannerist claim that nature was based upon dialectical oppositions, and that it expressed no moral preferences that valued one element of a pair over the other. What might still need accounting for, in Smithson's mannerist dialectics, was the role of the law of entropy.

1. Entropy

Smithson's conception of mannerist dialectical paradox made important reference to the law of entropy in regulating the interaction of diametrically opposed terms. Smithson was indicating what might be regarded as a meta-dialectical rule of entropy / progress. The law of the law of dialectics, then, was that contrary elements counter-acted each other to the point of mutual exhaustion. There was no Greenbergian triumph, nor any Hegelian synthesis. Much as in Smithson's sculptures of this time, such as *Plunge* (1966) **[Plate 5]**, *Leaning Strata* (1968), and *Gyrostasis* (1968) **[Plate 6]**,

---

[128] "Entropy and the New Monuments", S2, p.14.

diametrically opposed forces simply repeat themselves with the variation limited to their mutual diminution. This is the law of difference and decline that he posed against the law of unity and progress.[129] If such sculptures demonstrated entropy as the inevitable consequence of the law of dialectics, it leaves as an open question whether Smithson's writings were meant to be similar instances or performances of the doctrines that they asserted.

One question that might be asked in advance of this, is whether Smithson's treatment of entropy was extended to an explanation of the 'psychic impulses' of Minimalist mannerism. In one respect entropy did serve as a unifying principle among an otherwise heterogeneous aesthetic. This included observing a string of resemblances, starting with mannerism and moving on to impulses for abstraction, then on to the death wish or Thanatos, and finally ending in physical, often geological entropy.[130] Smithson suggests that if dialectics led to a collapse it was because there was something in the subject which desired collapse. This was a point well made by one of Smithson's favourite books of the time, Wylie Sypher's Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art:

> *Under the guise of the death-wish Freud gave psychoanalysis its own version of the theory of entropy. If, he says, the tendency of instinct is towards repeating or restating an earlier condition, then the desire to return to the inorganic is irresistible, and our instinct is to obliterate the disturbance we call consciousness. "The organism is resolved to die in its own way." and the path of our life is simply our own way of choosing our progress towards death. The ultimate pleasure is an untroubled security of not-being; therefor the drag towards inertia is constantly behind that self-assertion we call living. "The inanimate was there before the animate" - a wisdom graven ineffaceably, though illegibly, within the unconscious self.*[131]

While a fully psychoanalytic model of an entropic death drive in mannerism was not explicitly developed to any great extent in ""Entropy and the New Monuments" ", this changed with Smithson's reading of Ehrenzweig's Hidden Order of Art in the summer of 1968. In the meantime, the psychological aspects of his art criticism and theoretical writings on mannerism were based primarily on Worringer. An example of this can be found in his treatment of film theory.

2. Mannerist Cinema

Sometime in the later part of 1967, Smithson began extending his conception of mannerist aesthetics beyond the fine arts. Of particular note was his extension of a critical dialectic of "Naturalism" and

---

[129] Erwin Hiebert, "The Uses and Abuses of Thermodynamics in Religion", *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 95, no. 4, Fall 1966, p. 1046. Smithson owned one other issue of Daedalus, on the topic of J. L. Borges.

[130] Rudolf Arnheim, Entropy and Art: An Essay on Order and Disorder, Univ. of California Press, Berkely, 1971, p. 44, provides a history of entropy in psychoanalytic theory. It also mentions Smithson's treatment of entropy.

"Mannerism" to twentieth century cinema.[132] In his most extensive essay on film, "From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema", he started by presenting a brief history of Naturalism and Mannerism as applied to painting, playing Rembrandt against Parmigianino. He cast the former in the category of Naturalism because Rembrandt's self-portraits indulged in putting on an act by dressing in different costumes, but in an honest, natural and expressive way. The self-portraits of Parmigianino, on the other hand, were cast in the model of Worringer's abstraction. These pictures had much less character and affable personality, they were gripped by a terror and were the product of an abstract idea. The world of this idea was airless, frozen, and depicted a stylised alienation from the self. The mannerist "is one that rejects Renaissance naturalism and the image of the self sufficient man acting in a rational environment. One could almost say the environment is lost under a network of tiny surfaces, that reflect nothing but ungraspable meanings." This was seen to be aided by the mannerist use of allegory as "an aesthetic error" which produced terror and humour as a simultaneous contradiction.[133] Mannerist portraits, in effect, simulated the language of the self in order to show that the self was nothing but a representation, nothing but an illusion. In comparing the faces in a Rembrandt *Self-portrait* and a Parmigianino *Virgin*, he observed:

> *This laughter of Rembrandt's is warm and friendly, its expressive character leads directly to the artist's inner sense of individualism. Not so, when it comes to Parmigianino's virgin face; nowhere is good nature or "character" suggested in his conception. This is a picture not a painting, because it derives from the mind and not sensations. It is an infernal abstraction and not a "real" person. Consider the Virgin's eyes--she has none, but there is a gaze, a terrible snake-like glance that seems to turn her child to ice.*[134]

Following his discussion of painting, Smithson then turned to mannerist film-makers, which included Andy Warhol, Alfred Hitchcock, Roger Corman, and the genre of "grade-B" science fiction films. In general, these films spared no artifice in communicating a sense of the world as alien, as something interminably distant to the humanist's power of representation, and possessed of a strange unconscious agency that he described as "primal evil". In considering Eisenstein's *Ivan*, Smithson indicated two acting methods, describing the Stanislavky method as empathetic, expressive and naturalistic, and the Meyerhold - Brecht method as abstract, and mannered. In *Ivan*, "The actors are not encouraged to

---

[131] Sypher, Loss of the Self, p. 154. Sypher's book was quoted in "Entropy and the New Monuments", and cited in the footnotes to the draft "The New Monuments and Entropy", Smithson Archives, roll 3934, frame 1140. Sypher also discusses Ehrenzweig and may have acted as an introduction.

[132] Fullest consideration of Mannerist cinema is to be found in the unpublished article "From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema", S2, p. 349. What appears to be an earlier draft can be found in "Fiction and Language in Art", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frames 0429-0448. The majority of his analysis was published in "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", Art International, March 1968. S2, p. 88.

[133] "From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema", S2, p. 350. Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse", Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, Godine Press, Boston, 1984, p. 203.

[134] "From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman, or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema", S2, p. 352.

have *deep and profound feelings*, but rather they are *built* into the setting of the film. Each emotion is constructed rather than directed. Ivan is a set of manners, or a collection of devices."

Hitchcock's films were mannerist because their cinematic reality was intentionally made to look like a low-budget film set full of false horrors, flimsy special effects, and absurd reversals. "Hitchcock's humour informs every terrible situation he takes his "bad" actors through. His settings are a vast simulacra built by an evil demiurge, and peopled with frozen automatons." Creating the quality of language-as-illusion required, for Smithson, a mannered style of acting, rather blatant visual effects and a certain absurdity of narrative. Corman's films were repeatedly applauded for their self-consciously bad acting. In the more condensed published version of his views on these films, Smithson concluded,

> *A parodic pattern is established by the conventionalised structure or plot-line. The actors as "characters" are not developed but buried under countless disguises. This is especially true of* The Secret Invasion, *where nobody seems to be anybody. Corman uses actors as though they were "angels" or "monsters" in a cosmic dissimulation... [his] sense of dissimulation shows us the peripheral shell of appearances in terms of an invisible set of rules, rather than by any "natural" or "realistic" inner motivation--his actors reflect the empty center.*[135]

In the New York art world Smithson saw a similar aesthetic dialectic at work. In defining this he compared several books of contemporary photographs of artists and critics with the films of Andy Warhol.

> *[In the photographs] the artist or critic poses or fakes being unaffected, he imitates everyday, mundane, natural events--such as playing baseball, on-the-job painting, or drinking beer. Andy Warhol takes this* artificial normality *to "marvelous" extremes by having "queens" act like "plain-janes." Thus the phony naturalism of we're-just-ordinary-guys-doing-our-thing becomes brilliant manneristic travesty under Warhol's direction.*[136]

Mannerist cinema conveyed an aesthetic based on a psychology of self-alienation, and much like Worringer's abstract art, this arose from a sense of terror and dread caused by a sense of corruption in society and nature. It also responded to language and representation with an abstracted humour and distance. Mannerist art was only "pseudo, sick, perverse, false phoney and decadent" to the naturalists or empathists. Smithson's strategy was to set out an aesthetic dichotomy based on "Mannerism" and "Naturalism". This aesthetic dialectic differentiated between ideas and self-expression, abstraction and direct sensation, pictures and paintings, rustic charm and celestial terror, peripheral and central, and an alienated subject from a confident expressive subject. Smithson also applied this dialectic to the criticism of Greenberg. Before considering this, however, I would like give some indication of the

---

[135] "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", S2, p. 90.

reaction among other artists and critics to Smithson's conception of Minimalism as an abstract mannerism.

3. Peter Hutchinson

As is now clear, Smithson's interests in Mannerism were not unique at the time. The recent rise in publications and research in the 1960's meant that Minimalism and Mannerism were never far apart in any large-circulation art magazine, in that they reported on exhibitions of both contemporary and historical art. Smithson, however, was the first of his contemporaries to make an explicit and extended comparison. LeWitt endorsed the article in which this critical theory was introduced, and as such must have endorsed the theory. Judd rejected it, while Morris remained silent. This comparison was taken up by other artists, including Peter Hutchinson in his "Mannerism in the Abstract" which appeared in Art and Artists (London) in September 1966.[137]. Hutchinson was not as academically inclined as Smithson, in that he undertook little or no direct research when writing this article.[138] His definition of mannerism was based largely on Sypher's Four Stages of Renaissance Style and on discussions with Smithson.

> *My article "Mannerism in the Abstract" arose from discussions with Bob. Although we did brain storm together a lot, the germ of the idea was probably his. Although some people might have interpreted this piece as an attack on Minimalism, it really wasn't.*[139]

For Hutchinson, Minimalism was, in some respects, a plagiarism and referential cliché of Post-Painterly Abstraction. It was nevertheless a radical departure from purist abstraction, which it sought to corrupt from within. Neo-mannerism questioned Greenbergian Purism, but was not primarily defensive. Sculptors included in the discussion were Smithson and Dan Flavin, along with Leo Valledor, Chuck Hinman, Chuck Ginnever[140], Peter Forakis, and Robert Grosvenor. Painters included Ad Reinhardt, Larry Poons and Irwing Fleminger. This list would suggest a primary association with the Park Place Gallery and is much the same as the one presented by Smithson in ""Entropy and the New Monuments" ". Hutchinson emphasised that neo-mannerist art could reverse values any number of times. "There is no end to the Mannerist love of reversal, double meaning and spoof." That Hutchinson may have 'copied' ideas from Smithson seems not to have been a problem,

---

136 "From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema", S2, p. .349.

137 This article was subsequently republished in Gregory Battcock (Ed.), Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology, Dutton Signet, New York, 1968, p. 187.

138 Conversation with the author, 2.4. 96.

139 Letter to the author, dated 22. 2. 96. Further mention of Smithson can be found in Dorthy Seckler. "Arty May Die But the Ideal Will Not", The Narrative Art of Peter Hutchinson: A Retrospective, Provincetown Arts Press, Provincetown, 1994, p.47.

140 For a review of the work of Chuck Ginnever see Lawrence Alloway, "Space as a continuum...", Artforum. Sept. 1967. No mention is made of the mannerist debate.

either theoretically or practically. Yet, this article was neither commissioned nor seen in advance by Smithson.

4. Brian O'Doherty

Turning to the next page of the September issue of Art and Artists, the critic Brian O'Doherty published a response and assessment of the mannerist position in his article "Minus Plato".[141] O'Doherty remarked on Hutchinson's article (which he had commissioned), by pointing out that mannerism was also an unfortunate form of academicism. O'Doherty referred to what Friedlaender called the 'second-stage' Mannerists, who were minor artists, academics of an anti-academic style. In effect he agreed with Greenberg that the Minimalists were the academics mannerists of abstract art. He nevertheless recognised that academicism provided a necessary strength that allowed this art to survive in the highly competitive New York art market.

The work was intellectually rigorous, cancelled clichés of avant-gardism and side-stepped the expected dialectic "It is through these exact cancellations that the objects are brought into their state of marvellous paralysis, that has reduced some criticism to phenomenology." He further pointed out that "...these cancellations attack liberal humanism and psychology...and the idea of history." O'Doherty argued that the models on which this art was based were arbitrary. These were used but not believed in, they were simply the artist's conceptual landscape. The result was an eclectic invention that Hutchinson rightly identified as a mannerism.[142]

In so doing O'Doherty essentially reinforced the impression that Minimalism was a mannerist academy set up in contradistinction to Greenberg, Michael Fried and the painters of the Post-Painterly Abstraction group. Perhaps mostly in reference to Smithson, O'Doherty identified the Minimalists as "scholar artists" who made an art which "invests itself in multiplying paradoxes, and this excess of paradox leads to stasis. This stasis is the most interesting thing about current academic structures."[143] Certainly the 'rules of the academy', such as the lack of emphasis on individual artistic personality, and the upsetting of conceptions of time, are all regarded by O'Doherty as effective strategies to prolong critical attention on the Minimalist group. It would seem the British art press responded to Smithson's mannerist aesthetics in a way the American art press did not.

---

[141] Brian O'Doherty, "Minus Plato", Art and Artists, September, 1966, and republished in Battcock (Ed.), Minimal Art, p. 251. Compared to Hutchinson, Smithson had a more distant relationship to O'Doherty, who was then New York editor of Art and Artists. His engagement calendar does record, however, four meetings in 1966 as well as their attendance on June 17th at a Yale University panel, where O'Doherty facilitated Smithson's introduction to the architects of Tippets-Abett-McCarthy-Stratton.

[142] O'Doherty, "Minus Plato", Minimal Art, p. 253.

[143] O'Doherty, "Minus Plato", Minimal Art, p. 254.

D. Michelangelo and Greenberg

For Smithson the aesthetics of mannerism were useful for understanding contemporary sculpture and cinema. They also ran quite counter, in his mind, to the aesthetic philosophy of Greenberg and Fried. It would seem appropriate, therefore, to consider two particular examples where mannerist aesthetics were levelled against formalist aesthetics. The first is found in Smithson's consideration of the sculpture of Michelangelo. In this essay Smithson moved backward in time, taking his criticism of formalism onto the turf of art history.[144] In the second example he moved forward to the new champion of Post Painterly Abstraction, Michael Fried.

In the first example, the unpublished "What Spoils Michelangelo's Sculpture" opens with a quote from Greenberg, which came in the course of a history of sculpture from ancient Greek to Picasso.

> *However, what really spoils Michelangelo's sculpture is not so much its naturalism as, on the contrary, its unnaturalistic exaggerations and distortions, which place themselves more in the context of pictorial illusion than in that of sculptural self-evidence.* [145]

In this article, Smithson primarily employed Worringer's psychological theories of art as discussed above. Greenberg was seen as a critic of empathetic disposition, while Michelangelo was, as a sculptor and painter, an artist of abstract disposition. It is interesting to note, however, that in 1973 Smithson remarked to the effect that he did not fully understand Worringer when writing articles such as this.[146] The misreading seems largely to have arisen over Worringer's connection of the abstract impulse with 'realism', and the empathetic impulse with 'naturalism'. Smithson's terminology conflated this distinction. While this created a certain confusion in Smithson's text, he nevertheless did recoup a clarity by adding Worringer's comparison of the different religious motivations behind empathetic and abstract impulses in art.

Smithson selected the Greenberg quote given above in order to make the point that the critic's preferences in sculpture were for naturalism, and a 'sculptural self-evidence' equivalent to literalness. Greenberg wanted to walk around a sculpture situated in non-illusory or literal space, while submitting this event to the subjective experience of optical sense impressions. Michelangelo's sculpture was criticised because he did not employ a literal space, but one that was already illusory,

---

[144] Smithson prepared a diagram for the lay-out of this text, indicating that he considered it to be of a publishable standard. While Smithson's writings in defence of the Minimalist's love of paradox could justifiably perform a certain amount of this paradox, his attacks on Greenberg may have, in the opinion of his editors, required a greater analytic rigour. The text may also have been rejected because Greenberg's article was no longer current.

[145] Clement Greenberg, "Modern Sculpture: Its Pictorial Past", Art and Culture, Thames and Hudson, London, 1973, p. 158.

[146] The remark is made in "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape", S2, p. 162.

already a 'pictorial illusion'. This was criticised by Greenberg because it denied to the spectator the task of reducing the sculpture to optical experience.

For Smithson Greenberg seemed to be asking only for a naturalist and empathetic approach to sculpture. Greenberg's history of sculpture had no appreciation for an impulse to abstraction. One of Smithson's motives may have been to make a reading of this impulse in Michelangelo's sculpture in order to demonstrate the limits of a formalist history of art. Turning to Worringer, Smithson observed that abstract sculpture dreaded the naturalist space and time of Greenbergian literalness. The whole point of abstraction was to take the object out of the flux and uncertainty of time and space, out of the bewildering and disquieting mutations of the outer phenomenal world. Smithson therefore concentrated on Michelangelo's invention of an abstract cosmological system that was not spatial or temporal. His sculptures sprang from a mental world and were therefore spatially compressed and distorted. For evidence of this claim, Smithson cited Panofsky on Michelangelo's "volumetric system of almost Egyptian rigidity", and Worringer's comment on "the invisible pressure of [Michelangelo's] cubic compactness." Smithson's point was that sculpture could reduce space without requiring "pictorial illusion" if it arose from an 'abyssal mental space'.[147] Worringer's descriptions of the 'abstract impulse' are clearly evident in Smithson's descriptions of Michelangelo. The dread of space, the torpor, decline, suffering and exhaustion of vital powers was ever present in all of Michelangelo's latter Mannerist works. As he described it, figures freeze into columns, vital energies drain away, and a grotesque, sagging city of muscles trap the mind as the whole body becomes infected with entropic forces.[148] This abstract and absolute universe was, for Smithson, a more abstract art than the superficially abstract naturalism supported by Greenberg.

Through this essay on Michelangelo Smithson made the claim that Greenberg's criticism, and much contemporary abstract art as well, arose from a realist (Worringer would say 'naturalist') gratification in space. Whether it was the pleasure of flatness turning into depth, or literalness into opticality, both gratified the naturalist impulse for the anthropomorphic projection of a vital inner self into external organic forms and deep space. Post-Painterly Abstraction was, therefore, an "uncorrupted" art, because it remained unaware of the gratification of internal mental abstraction. In effect, it was naively unaware of the "malevolent demiurge", or the self-alienation inherent in all impulses for abstraction. As he put it, "Mindless abstraction is not abstraction, it is merely realistic naturalism without any figures." Greenberg defended a vitalistic art, then, that recoiled from Michelangelo's sculpture because it dealt with such 'unnatural' ideas. It was Greenberg's faith in naturalism that allowed him to confidently declare Michelangelo's cosmological speculations and exaggerations to be

---

[147] "What Really Spoils Michelangelo's Sculpture", S2, p. 346.

[148] Smithson quotes Wolfgang Kayser, The Grotesque in Art and Literature, McGraw Hill, New York, 1963.

inappropriate to the medium of sculpture. Greenberg was, in Smithson's view, quite unable to enjoy the types of gratification found in abstract art.[149]

It only remained to Smithson to add what Worringer had so doubted about the impulse for abstraction: that it stemmed from a "morphological law of inorganic nature [which] still echoes like a dim memory in our human organism." Smithson did claim that Michelangelo had abandoned the idealisation of the human figure in favour of a consistent downward 'ideal' wherein all nature was corrupted, and that this negative cosmology arose from Michelangelo's awareness of an "abstract infinite sphere.[150]

Smithson was serious enough about the publication of his Michelangelo article to design the layout of the pages. Like his other writings on mannerism it proposed that nature, the subject and language were a structured peripheral shell of appearances, devices and dissimulations. Like certain Mannerist paintings, he proposed a model of art in which the frame encompasses an empty centre. Along side these proposals, Smithson set out to show how contemporary artists and critics were busily manufacturing a very different fiction of the frame—one which proposed grace and plenitude where Smithson proposed a void. Though primarily a structuralist, his disputes over the frame in art amounted, in some respects, to a deconstruction. As this has been much discussed in recent years, I would now like to turn to the question of whether mannerism triggered a type of critical desconstruction of contemporary modernist discourses on the frame.

IV. Deconstruction and the Mannerist Frame

Starting with his first major piece of art criticism, Smithson put forward a critical interpretation in which Minimalism was seen to be a type of "Abstract Mannerism". As has been seen, contemporary art historical research into Mannerism provided Smithson with a developed alternative aesthetic rational, with the added bonus that it undermined the credibility of Greenberg's explanation of the demise of Abstract Expressionism. Mannerist aesthetics also offered many criticisms and reversals of the system of values--positivism, disinterested aesthetic judgement, humanist conceptions of sincere self-expression-- which Smithson felt were operating explicitly and implicitly in Greenberg's writings. As has also been seen, this interpretation of Minimalism as an abstract Mannerism was augmented by a psychological and psychoanalytic theory of 'non-empathetic abstraction' based largely on Worringer and Sypher.

---

149 "What Really Spoils Michelangelo's Sculpture", S2, p. 348.

Smithson's aesthetic theory, which I am here placing under the umbrella term of mannerism, has been the subject of a number of recent academic articles. In these articles mannerism, however, has largely been understood and absorbed into the project of Post-modern deconstruction, particularly as found in Craig Owens' "Earthwords", Duro's The Rhetoric of the Frame, and Shapiro's Earthwards.[151] I would like, therefore, to reassess the particularities of Smithson's mannerist aesthetics, in comparison with Derrida's deconstruction.

Gary Shapiro has considered Smithson as a practitioner of deconstruction through a reading of Derrida's concept of 'signature'. [152] In taking up the comparison between Smithson and Derrida, I have preferred to address the question through Derrida's concept of the frame. Perhaps there is little difference in that Jonathan Culler, for example, has discussed the notable similarities between Derrida's treatment of the frame and the signature. [153] Smithson and Derrida, however, both gave far more consideration to the frame than to the signature, thus allowing a greater use of textual evidence in a comparison. Derrida's book, The Truth in Painting, however, was not written until 1978 and not published in English until 1987. In this respect Derrida was not a part of the rich discussions on the frame which took place in the art press in the late 1960's.

The debate over the frame, which arose between Smithson and Fried, began with Smithson's response to Michael Fried's seminal article "Art and Objecthood". While this highly contentious article declared 'war' on Minimalist "theatricality", Smithson's response was to focus on the treatment of the frame in Minimalism and in Post-Painterly Abstraction as it related to Mannerist art. This proved a fruitful ground on which to reply to Fried because, "...in the writings of Michael Fried, it is clear that the frame was loaded with far more valencies than could be admitted into unitary, homogenizing assumptions of critical formalism."[154]

A. Fried on The Frame

Fried's theorisation of the frame began in earnest in 1966 when he made a case for what he called the "medium of shape". In identifying this new medium, he worked closely with Greenberg's dialectic of literalness and opticality in order to suggest that the frame marked the dividing point of the dialectic. The frame was the fulcrum point between literalness and opticality. In this theory, the literal framing

---

150 "What Really Spoils Michelangelo's Sculpture", S2, p. 346.

151 Jacques Derrida, "Parergon", The Truth in Painting, University. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, pp 57-82.

152 Gary Shapiro, Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art After Babel, University of California Press, Berkely, 1995, pp. 191-233.

153 Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism, Routledge & Keegan Paul, London, 1983, p. 193.

154 John Welchman, "In and Around the 'Second Frame'", The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork, Paul Duro, Ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 203-222.

support of a Post Painterly Abstraction painting was seen to pre-exist any internal composition. Whatever was placed onto the canvas, therefore, was deemed a "deductive structure", meaning that it was deduced from the frame. A typical example would be a Stella Purple Painting such as *Hollis Frampton* [**Plate 7**] from 1963.[155] At the time, his colleague Rosalind Krauss provided a concise summary of this theory:

> *... this departure from traditional modes of composition is also true of the work of Kenneth Noland* [as] *has been demonstrated by Michael Fried in his various essays on that painter. In Noland's case composition is discarded for what Mr. Fried has called "deductive structure": the derivation of boundaries within the pictorial field from the one absolute boundary given by the physical fact of the picture itself-- its framing edge. The importance of Noland's decision to let the shape of the support serve as the major determinant of the divisions within the painting rests in part on its avoidance of an explicit affirmation of the flatness of the canvas, which would dilute the experience of the color by rendering it tactile... rather than a sheerly visual or optical medium.*[156]

Internal compositional shape, for Fried, was given to posses a lack that was only put right by considering the frame first. In this operation, the frame provided a clear and absolute knowledge because its existence was literal, while it did so without forcing attention on the literalness of the pictorial surface. This surface was therefore left free to produce sensations of a uniquely optical space. Preliminary attention to the literalness of the frame then allowed attention to the internal composition as completely non-literal, completely "optical". By first attending to the frame, such paintings were, for Fried, asserting the proper place for literalness. Literalness may have come first, but only such that it was then overcome. Bracketing out literalness allowed form to be deduced, just as bracketing out the body allowed 'grace' or 'being' to be deduced. This literal world, being matter rather than form, was suited to determinate judgements, and by this Fried generally indicated either a Marxist socio-historical definition of literalness, or simply that it included the spectator's physical presence. The literal world was the world of matter not form, of the spectator's body not art.

As Fried's theory went, the inside of the frame was a purely optical arena, producing an illusion of a wholly incorporeal space that only the eye could enter. This theorisation of "opticality" was meant to make clear reference to the practice of a phenomenological bracketing, as Fried later claimed. The inside of the painting was supposed to be a metaphor for, or description of, internal perceptual experience-- it represented an internal mental space and time, by excluding a literal space and time. However, this was not particularly clear. The opticality contained by the frame was generally understood to mean that painting implied "a lack of direct involvement in experience, and an absorption in indirect distanced preoccupations."[157] To Fried's colleague Rosalind Krauss, this purely

---

[155] Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings", Artforum, Nov. 1966, pp. 18-27.

[156] Rosalind Krauss, "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd", Artforum, May 1966.

[157] Thomas McEvilley, Art and Discontent, Documentext, New York, 1993, p.72.

optical space was a metaphor for the space of an inner being, an inward glance that provided a brief but complete experience of self-knowledge.[158] For Jon Thompson, in London, literalness and opticality were understood to be a deployment of an expressly Kantian dialectic between an external 'phenomenal' world and an inner 'noumenal' one.[159] Opticality, then, was generally understood to refer either to a metaphysics of presence, or to a highly idealist phenomenology, or both. Smithson's understanding of Fried was no different. These 'misinterpretations' were, perhaps, not unfounded given Fried's other claims, typical of which is one from "Art and Objecthood":

It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness; as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.[160]

What this quote indicated to Smithson was a latent metaphysics of the art object and a conception of the subject's inner experience in positivist and transcendental terms. This experience of self-knowledge was described as instantaneous upon seeing the painting. For this reason Fried vigorously rejected the literalness and theatrical temporality of Minimalist sculptures. They were conceived for viewing in "natural" time that, like the theatre, allowed the spectator's material body to intrude. Fried was not pleased by such violations of the purity of the medium of sculpture.

B. Smithson on Fried

Perhaps because Smithson was often regarded as a philosophical spokesman for Minimalism, he was given the first chance to reply to Fried's "Art and Objecthood". Artforum, having published Fried in the summer 1966 issue, ran Smithson's "Letter to the Editor" the following October. This was a rather scathing and sometimes personal attack on Fried, perhaps justifiable in light of Fried's tone of aggression. The "Letter" was not the end of Smithson's reply, in that he continued it in subsequent articles, including "A Sedimentation of the Mind", of September 1968, and a number of unpublished articles, notebook entries, and symposia. The "Letter" wasted no time in satirising Fried:

Sirs,
France has given us the anti-novel, now Michael Fried has given us the anti-theater. A production could be developed on a monstrous scale with the Seven Deadly Isms, verbose diatribes, scandalous refutations, a vindication of Stanley Cavell, shrill but brilliant

---

158 Rosalind Krauss, "Using Language to do Business as Usual", Visual Theory, Ed. Norman Bryson, Michale Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, Polity Press, 1991, p.79.

159 Jon Thompson, "New Times, New Thoughts, New Sculpture", Gravity and Grace, South Bank Centre, London, p.22.

160 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", Artforum, Summer 1967.

disputes on "shapehood" vs. "Objecthood", dark curses, infamous claims, etc. The stage should subdivide into millions of stages.

In this satire Smithson sought to demonstrate the theatrical pitch of Fried's text. For Smithson it was important that attention be drawn to the ways in which Fried participated in the very thing he criticised, but with out being aware of his participation. Fried's text was a theatrical performance, yet he seemed unaware of it *as* performance. "What Fried fears most is the consciousness of what he is doing-- namely being theatrical. He dreads 'distance' because that would force him to become aware of the role he is playing."[161]

1. Mannerism and the Frame

Further to this satire he then started upon a more historical set of criticisms:

In a manner worthy of the most fanatical Puritan, he provides the art world with a long-overdue spectacle--a kind of ready-made parody of the war between Renaissance classicism (modernity) versus Manneristic anti-classicism (theatre). Fried, without knowing it, has brought into being a schism complete with all the "mimic fury" (Thomas Carew) of a fictive inquisition. He becomes, I want to say, in effect the first truly manneristic critic of "modernity". Fried has set the stage for manneristic modernism, *although he is trying hard not to fall from the "grip" of grace.* [162]

Smithson's primary criticism was made by comparing Fried's theory of the "medium of shape" with the Mannerist treatment of the frame. He can be seen to muster his arguments in his notebook (notebook III), where he commented:

Abstract art developed a new quality when Abstract Expressionism went into its alleged decline. Strangely enough this idea has its parallels in historical Mannerism... (Bousquet) 'By a typically Mannerist paradox the frame became the picture. In France the feigned frame enjoyed great vogue... Space begins to loose its homogeneity and is sometimes entirely abolished.'[163]

In a typed draft he added:

...it was Greenberg, who in his flight from hard-core Cubism to soft-core Cubism, i.e. from Picasso to Morris Louis, stumbled on that great Mannerism, ultra-consciousness of the "framing edge"...Greenberg tells us in his essay "American Type" Painting, *"What is destroyed is the Cubist, and immemorial, notion and feeling of the picture edge as a*

---

[161] "Letter to the Editor, S2, p. 66. Originally published in Artforum, October 1967.

[162] "Letter to the Editor", S2, p. 66.

[163] Robert Smithson, "Conscious and Unconscious Art", Smithson Archives roll 3834, frames 0070-0083. The quotes are taken from Jacques Bousquet, Mannerism, 1965.

> *confine, with Barnett Newman, the picture edge is repeated inside, and makes the picture, instead of being echoed." History repeats itself, but in the Abstract.*[164]

In effect, Smithson argued that Newman, Greenberg and Fried had become mannerists in their awareness of the frame, but had failed to see how this consciousness might parody or defeat the whole system of exclusions and purifications on which formalist logic was predicated.

> *In the work of Frank Stella and Barnett Newman the "framing support" is both hinted at and parodied. Clement Greenberg recognized an element of "parody", perhaps unconscious, in Barnett Newman's "field" paintings, which called attention to the frame. This element became less of a parody, and more a conscious fact, in Frank Stella's "shaped canvases". Judd's symmetric, free-standing structure eliminated all doubts about the importance of the framework by asserting its formal presence beyond any reference to "flat" painting. All surfaces vanish in this important work, but return later in his fabricated works with startling new implications.*[165]

In this quote, Smithson condensed a complex reasoning that ends with the work of Judd, an artist about whom he had already written a type of phenomenological description. While not wishing to pre-empt the discussion of Smithson's article on Judd in chapter 3, suffice it to say that Fried found 'being' and 'grace' in the opticality he experienced within the frame of a painting. Smithson's retort to this was partly drawn from phenomenology. Smithson argued that a careful study of sense perceptions showed that the frame did not produce a sense of 'being' within a painting. From a phenomenological perspective, there were no literal or art objects, only perceptions as objects. Perceptions were the only 'real' objects. Thus, qualities, intensities and inner forms of an art object had no real 'being'. According to the phenomenological bracketing, "...nothing corresponding to *being* is to be found among the [perceptual] *objects*. It follows that *being* is not perceptible, inasmuch as the objects exhaust the extension of possible perceptions."[166]

While Smithson's argument was vehemently anti-metaphysical, it was also intentionally inconclusive. He granted that there were frames in art, but that these frames proliferated beyond comprehension. There was the frame between literal space and the internal optical space of a painting. There was a frame between spectator and external world. There was a frame between sense perception and the sense-making mind. There was a frame between the mind and its pre-cultural and pre-historic stratums of lived experience. His point was that the frame kept receding from 'the grip of grace' right into an infinite sphere. In the terms of Smithson's logic, the frame was just as much a problem of time as it was of location.

---

164 "Abstract Mannerism", S2, p. 339.

165 "Donald Judd", S2, p. 5.

2. Time

Smithson's "Letter to the Editor" added the observation that Fried was a "naturalist" who attacked natural time. Smithson's case bears some similarity to that of Louis Martin's analysis of Frank Stella. In "The Frame of Representation", Martin observes that Stella's paintings, such as *Gran Cairo*, or *Honduras Lottery Company* (1963) **[Plate 8]**, are made of a repeated series of frames in frames. This results in an optical duality, in that the painting recedes and protrudes in alternation. The result is an unpredetermined alternation between the two readings, causing a "rhythmic time...in which the subject is both a product completely determined by the mechanism of representation and a chance producer of this mechanism." [167] Contrary to Fried's claims for instantanaity, these paintings could not be grasped in a "single infinitely brief instant". For Martin, the painting repeats the frame, thus allowing the picture, which isn't ever a picture, to establish two temporal modes *within* the frame, which isn't ever a frame. Fried also saw two temporal modes, one internal and instantaneous, one external and durational. The difference was that, for Fried, the frame should *exclude* all but one type of temporal experience.

Smithson unravels Fried's dialectic of time. To Fried's tidy opposition, he observed an infinite number of temporal frames. For example, the context of human history was, for Smithson, a rather minor context when compared to the larger, monstrously unframable, passage of geological time. Fried wanted to establish a social and historical time outside the frame and an instantaneous temporality of inner experience inside the frame. Inner being deduced itself, created itself, from a set of external historical conditions. Smithson retorted that the subject was also part of a much larger, possibly endless temporality suggested in the study of geology. As he put it, "...eternity brings about the dissolution of belief in temporal histories, empires, revolutions, and counter-revolutions--all becomes ephemeral and in a sense unreal...Eternal time is the result of scepticism, not belief." For Smithson a temporal consciousness of endlessness made it far more difficult to locate "literal time", than Fried admitted. Indeed, as Smithson argued, the better dialectical opposite of instantaneousness was endlessness. As soon as Minimalist sculptures started to infer an atemporal endlessness, Fried's dialectic of literal / instantaneous time was disrupted, or so Smithson observed:

> *This atemporal world threatens Fried's present state of temporal grace-- his "presentness". The terrors of infinity are taking over the mind of Michael Fried. Corrupt appearances of endlessness worse than any known Evil. A radical skepticism, known only to the dreadful "literalists" is making inroads into intimate "shapehood". Non-durational labyrinths of time are infecting his brain with eternity. Fried, the Marxist saint, shall not be tempted into*

---

[166] Marvin Farber, The Foundations of Phenomenology: Edmund Husserl and the Quest for a Rigorous Science of Philosophy, State University of New York, New York, 1943, p. 452.

[167] Louis Martin, "The Frame of Representation", The Rhetoric of the Frame, p.95.

> *this awful sensibility, instead he will cling for dear life to the "surfaces" of Jules Olitski's* Bunga.[168]

A deconstructive critic would have been content to indicate the contradictions internal to Fried's theory. Smithson goes further than this by suggesting his own theory of time, his own ontology. Smithson concluded by observing that Fried's theory was a product of his own anxieties. He encouraged Fried to confront his anxieties by looking at his external image in a set of parallel infinitely-reflecting mirrors. Fried feared a consciousness of time, feared endlessness, because it upset his definitions of the external and literal, and by implication his conception of internal 'optical' grace and self-intimacy. Like deconstructive criticism, Smithson did identify a series of language traps in Fried's theory of the frame. Like Derrida, Smithson identifies Fried's dialectic and shows it to be constructed and arbitrary. He indicated that the vocabulary of temporal and spatial experience, despite its seeming clarity, could serve to repress aspects of experience that was unwanted or uncomfortable for the ego. In this respect, Smithson does more than just deconstruct. He proposes alternatives, and he psychoanalyses the author.

Smithson took the opportunity to continue his argument in his article "A Sedimentation of the Mind", which was in draft stage some six months later, and published in September of 1968. This article, however, goes somewhat beyond the bounds of deconstruction by laying its psychoanalytic cards on the table.

3. The 'Infinite Abyss' of the Mind

Smithson continued his disagreement with Fried in his article "A Sedimentation of the Mind". Here he started with a rehearsal of the points made in his original "Letter", making the claim that any particular frame can be seen to be contained by yet another frame, and yet another again. Not only was it relative where one set the frame, but the limits could be seen to expand and contract endlessly. Having brought the placement of the frame into question, in a manner not unlike a paradox by Xeno, Smithson continued by offering a psychological explanation for the weakness of Fried's theory. He did this by introducing something that he regarded to be frightfully unframable, namely an "infinite abyss". In choosing his term, Smithson was careful to first reference Fried's use of the phrase, largely in order to redouble the effects of his criticism:

> *Fried claims that he rejects the "infinite", but this is Fried writing in* Artforum, *February 1967 on Morris Louis: "The dazzling blankness of the untouched canvas at once repulses and engulfs the eye, like an infinite abyss, the abyss that opens up behind the least mark that we make on a flat surface, or would open up if innumerable conventions both of art*

---

[168] "Letter to the Editor", S2, p. 66.

> *and practical life did not restrict the consequences of our act within narrow bounds." The "innumerable conventions" do not exist for certain artists who* do *exist within a physical "abyss." Most critics cannot endure the suspension of* boundaries *between what Ehrenzweig calls the "self and the non-self."* [169]

Smithson was doing more than just presenting Fried's theory as the product of social conventions and historically contingent meanings. He was arguing for a materialist psychology in which entropy dialectics and the void all have physical causes. Smithson proposed that, had Fried been less fearful, he would have been able to accept the importance of an inner experience of the self as unframable in the manner of a "physical abyss". The subject was not a discrete form, but ebbed away over the horizon into an inert materiality. Smithson envisages a process of framing and unframing as a distinctly physical process, in a way that Derrida does not. Smithson's point was that a frame established a dialectic between inside and outside. Yet, the further inside-- meaning the interior of the self-- one went, the closer one approached an outside. The inside was a "physical abyss" that rendered dialectics void, because the inside was completely "undifferentiated". This interior condition was indistinguishable from the outside. It was inert, material, and non-dialectical because it allowed no differentiations to arise. While this was a cause of some amusement to the mannerist, Fried was 'diagnosed' as suffering from terror. How, though, was Smithson to use this in making sculpture? How did his practice reflect his theory of the frame?

C. The Frame in Smithson's Site / Non-site

Derrida and Kant, Smithson and Fried all recognised the necessity of frames and limits in art. In his sculptures and writings, however, Smithson treated the frame as something permanently unstable, problematic, and formally complex. For example, he often remarked upon the differences in framing in media such as film, photography, and cartography, as well as painting and sculpture. Unlike Derrida and Fried, however, it is possible to enquire into Smithson's use of the frame in making works of art. One such opportunity arises in the series of sculptures called "Site / Non-sites".

For example, in *Franklin New Jersey Non-site*, (1968) **[Plate 9]**, a quadrangle frame was repeated at five different scales, and applied to a map, an aerial photograph, and a set of wooden bins containing geological samples taken from the Site. On the photograph the repeated frames suggest an optical perspective point, on the map a cartographic survey point or subject position, and in the bins a material and spatial diminution and expansion within the spectator's space. While the repetitive frame tends to disrupt, destabilise or cause a conflicted reading of each item-- photo, map and sample-- the overall effect is to give the Non-site a formal unity.

---

169 "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", S2, p. 102.

Smithson offered an interpretation of the framing containers that he used in his own works of sculpture.

> *The bins or containers of my* Non-Sites *gather* in *the fragments that are experienced in the physical abyss of raw matter. The tools of technology become a part of the earth's geology as they sink back into their original state... One might say a "de-architecturing" takes place before the artist sets his limits outside the studio or room.*[170]

In the *Franklin Non-site*, the work (ergon) was expended only on the form of the frame (parergon). The interior was left as unformed matter, or as an acquired map or photograph. What lies inside the frame shows no sign of artistic intervention. The 'art' lies only within the actual frame. While the frame is always the same, each frame suggests a different type of subjectivity at work. The bins suggest the artist's body, the photo suggests the artist's sense perceptions, and the map suggests the artist's mental abstraction. By collapsing the subject onto the frame of a Non-site, particularly in the metal or wooden bins, the result is that a shift either inward *or* outward was a shift into unformed matter. Just as in nature, the illusion of a meaning-giving mind arose only by virtue of a seemingly "accidental" frame.[171]

The subsequent *Mono Lake Non-Site*, (1968) **[Plate 10]**, made this point with greater rigour, by using a hollow metal frame which lay on the floor. Material from the site was used to fill the thickness of this frame, thus drawing what had previously been framed into the frame itself. The consequence was to leave visible on the inside of the frame the same floor surface that existed outside the frame. Reading from the outside to the inside, this work renders a sequence: unformed (external); formed, unformed, formed (frame); unformed (interior). This sequence, which draws attention to the internal / external logic of the frame, allowed the frame to demonstrate its thickness, a thickness that contained the frame's indeterminacy, its accidental-ness, its uncertain reversible status as neither matter nor form. Or at least this is to interpret the Mono Lake Non-Site through Derrida's consideration of the thickness of the frame.

> *Paregra have a thickness, a surface which separates them not only (as Kant would have it) from the integral inside, from the body proper of the ergon, but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting is hung. The parergon stands out both from the ergon (the work) and from the milieu, it stands out first of all like a figure on a ground... But the parergonal frame stands out against two grounds, but with respect to each of those two grounds, it merges into the other... There is always a form on a ground, but the parergon is a form which has as its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest*

---

170 "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", S2, p. 104.

171 Smithson may have been responding to Roland Barthes conception of Structuralism in Roland Barthes, "The Structuralist Activity", Partisan Review, Winter 1967, p. 82.

> *energy. The frame is in no case a background in the way that the milieu or the work can be, but neither is its thickness as margin a figure.*[172]

Derrida indicates that the Kantian frame is meant to hover between form and matter, and without drawing undue attention to itself or seducing the spectator, provide a conceptual schema that no one can resist. Yet, the frame acted, in Kant's *Critique*, as "a violent superimposition which falls aggressively upon the thing" in a way that is highly indeterminate. Derrida's deconstruction leads him to ask: "is this superimposition the contingency of a case, the fall of an accident or a necessity which remains to be examined?...And what if the *remainder* could never, in its structure as remainder, be determined 'properly'."[173] Derrida here argues the inconsistency of the frame. Put into Friedian terms, Derrida observes that the frame is nothing in relation to the literal, because it merges into the work. In relation to the optical form of the work, the frame is nothing because it merges into the literal.

To an extent, the *Mono Lake Non-site* would seem to be a deconstruction of the frame. Like Derrida, Smithson emphasised the infinite deferral involved in framing a site. He described the *Non-site* as 'a determinable but uncertain remainder of an indeterminable but certain Site'. Subject and Site are elided against an inescapable "horizon line" or an "abyss". And this horizon-like remainder cannot be avoided or arraigned because it is the subject's own negation of presence-- an absence so expansive that it finally reverses:

> *I seems that no matter how far out you go, you are always thrown back on your point of origin... You are confronted with an extending horizon; it can extend onward and onward, but then you suddenly find the horizon is closing in all around you... In other words, there is no escape from limits.*[174]

Beside his descriptions of the mannerist subject frozen in the frame, might be added:

> *Oblivion to me is a state when you're not conscious of the time or space you are in, You're oblivious to its limitations. Places without meaning, a kind of absent or pointless vanishing point.*
>
> *There is no order outside the order of the material.*
>
> *I don't think you can escape the primacy of the rectangle...*
>
> *Every single perception is essentially determinate...I'm not interested in the problems of form and anti-form, but in limits and how these limits destroy themselves and disappear.*[175]

If Smithson described the elision of the frame against the indeterminate certainty of a Site, there was also a determinate uncertainty of the subject. The only evidence or truth of the subject lay in the work

---

[172] Derrida, "Parergon", The Truth in Painting, pp.60-61.

[173] Derrida, "Parergon", The Truth in Painting, p. 67.

[174] "Interview with P. A. Norvell", S2, p. 192.

of bracketing or framing that serves to separate a material linguistic proposition (a Non-site) from the material world (a Site). [176] The *Mono Lake Non-site* is all frame. Like a blank map, its empty centre encompasses either nothing, or everything. This emphasis on the materiality of the subject distinguishes Smithson from Derrida. For Smithson the deconstruction of the frame reveals a world of substances, including a cosmology of the origin and end of substance. Derrida, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the historically contingent dialectics of a discourse.

D. Deconstruction and Mannerist Art Criticism

Both Smithson and Derrida illustrated their theories of the frame with Mannerist art. Both observed that any philosophical theorisation of the frame required a further frame, and that this condition inevitably raised the spectre of the abyss, *l'abîme* of an infinite series of frames within frames. Where Derrida illustrates this with an engraving of Versailles' *enfilade* doorways, Smithson used images of Minimalist serial structures. Both provided examples for their argument through copious illustrations taken from Mannerist art, including Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel.

Smithson observed that the frame in painting was an artifice, and part of his art critical objective was to show how theories of the frame were constructed, temporary and contingent on historical context. To this he added the psychological context of the critic. He stated this clearly when he said,

> *For too long artists have taken the canvas and stretchers as given, the limits...I'm doing it to expose the fact that it is a system, therefore taking away the vaulted mystery that is supposed to reside in it. The artifice is plainly an artifice. I want to de-mythify things.* [177]

Deconstruction left Smithson with a sense of the undecidability of the frame:

> *All legitimate art deals with limits. Fraudulent art feels that it has no limits. The trick is to locate those elusive limits. You are always running against those limits, but somehow they never show themselves.* [178]

Derrida's remarks on the Kantian frame bear a resemblance to Smithson's argument. The quote below is taken from that point in Derrida's argument where he considers the way in which Kant's discourse on aesthetic judgement is framed by his discourse on determinate judgement:

---

[175] "Interview with P. A. Norvell", S2, pp. 190-91.

[176] Smithson made use of G.E.M. Anscombe, An Introduction to Wittgenstein's "Tractatus", Hutchinson University Library, London, 1959. What was indicated in this non-site was also explained in terms of Wittgenstein's writings on negation. In these terms, all propositions share with the world certain of its "logical forms" such as matter, space and time. Whether or not the proposition (Non-site) is true, it still speaks of this logical form, and does so on its own account.

[177] "Interview with Anthony Robbins: Smithson's Non-site Sights", February 1969, S2, p. 175.

[178] "Interview with P. A. Norvell", S2, p. 194.

> *...it is this analytic of judgement itself which, in its frame, allows us to define the requirement of formality, the oppositions of the formal and the material, of the pure and the impure, of the proper and the improper, of the inside and the outside. It is the analytic which* determines *the frame as* parergon, *which both constitutes it and locates it in an abyss, makes it both hold...and collapse...A frame is essentially constructed and therefore fragile: such would be the essence or truth of the frame. If it had any. But this "truth" can no longer be a "truth", it no more defines the transcendentality than it does the accidentality of the frame, merely its* parergonality.
>
> *Philosophy wants to arraign it* [the frame] *and can't manage. But what has produced and manipulated the frame puts everything to work in order to efface the frame effect, most often by naturalising it to infinity... Deconstruction must neither reframe nor dream of the pure and simple absence of the frame.*[179]

Like Derrida, Smithson also recognised the active role played by absences, voids, gaps and frames. For Derrida, undecidability in language was due to syntax, to the spacing demanded by language's physical status.[180] He observes that the blank space of absence is not passive, but active, causing a "fold" or "hymen" in the text. Meaning can be dissolved in these spaces and syntactical shifts. The spaces are a void into which one meaning falls and another arises.

Smithson's deconstruction of language used imagery that differs substantially from the standards of post structuralism as it was practised in the 1980's. Derrida uses the image of language as fluid, as something capable of excess meaning and of a "freeplay", something ever ready to start again. Smithson used an almost reverse image. Language was something that tended to crystallise, thicken, and solidify. In his case words don't threaten an instability, but threaten constantly to loose all meaning and return to the state of a material deposit. In this respect, both were understood to be proposing a negative theology.[181]

In asking how mannerist art criticism framed Mannerist Abstraction, one example can be found in Smithson's article "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space" **[Plate 11]**, which discusses works by Reinhardt, Volmer, Giacometti and Eva Hesse. First, is the noticeable use of graphic arrangement. On each page the main body of the text lies within a central frame. A second frame is made of supplemental footnotes, yet this supplement does not just add to the text. The text is about the footnotes. The main text struggles with the footnotes, tries to explain them. When this relation reverses, once the footnotes start to explain the text, they proliferate into footnoted footnotes. This

---

179 Jacques Derrida, The Truth in Painting, p.73. Note that Bennington and McLeod's translation has been changed. I have translated Derrida's "l'abîme" as "abyss" rather than "ruin".

180 Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session", Dissemination, U. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982.

181 Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Eds.), Derrida and Negative Theology, SUNY Press, New York, 1992. Carl Andre and Virginia Dwan have made similar observations.

article has provided good ground on which to argue for Smithson's deconstruction, in that the central text flounders in its consideration of the works of art lying in the "ultramundane margin".[182]

By comparison, in Derrida's "Dissemination", unintegrated fragments are assembled from Phillipe Sollers, Pascal, Marx and Wittgenstein, thus emphasising fracture, grafting, and citation effects which avoid an authorial subject.[183] In addressing the constructed materiality of language, both authors discuss it, and mount it, by causing the reader to engage visually and tangibly with the physical syntax of their writings.

In writing about the frame, both Derrida and Smithson do so in a dazzling, dizzying textual style, using numerous graphic techniques in laying-out a text for publication. Smithson, however, saw textual properties in a much wider range of objects and sites. Because Smithson was of the view that language always took a material form based on structures that were readily available in the physical world, his range of reference was quite broad. Derrida reads texts in order to locate shifts, breaks, quirks and self-contradictions. He does not attempt, however, to read skylines, geological sedimentations, or to lavish attention on the material properties of an art magazine, as Smithson did. In making these readings, Smithson was much closer to the structuralism of Roland Barthes than the deconstruction of Derrida.

De-structuring was only a part of what Smithson did. He had a 'monumental' practice which served as a background to his writings, thus enabling him to write for those who wished to deconstruct systems of authority while also claiming a certain authority and mastery through artistic practice. He engaged the gap and fold of language without being shy of realising major projects outside of the academy. If Derrida's was strictly a textual practice, Smithson engaged a Site. Smithson's admiration for Frederick Law Olmsted is quite indicative of the range of his urge to construct:

> *In comparison to Thoreau's mental contrasts ("Walden Pond became a small ocean"), Olmsted's physical contrasts brought a Jeffersonian rural reality into the metropolis. Olmsted made ponds, he didn't just conceptualize about them.*[184]

There is also a strain in Smithson's texts that credits the role of anxiety. As he described his earthworks to Wheeler, the anxiety and fear felt in his writings led to a great admiration for ritual cultures which made sacrifices. De-structuring, it seems, led to an encounter with the drives, to 'death *and* sensuality' as he found likewise of Bataille.[185] De-structuring was only part of an overall activity

---

[182] Shapiro, Earthwards, p. 166.

[183] Jacques Derrida, "Dissemination", Dissemination, U. of Chicago Press, 1982.

[184] "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape", S2, p. 159.

[185] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 230.

in which the earthworks were regarded as structured monumental ceremonial sites conjuring a pre-historical, pre-rational 'dead' subject.

What Smithson's deconstructivist tendencies recovered was a greater awareness of the subject's unconscious drives operating in a text. These drives were, in some respect, subjectless mental events emanating from the universal traits of matter. Once seen in these terms, Smithson answer to the question, 'what comes after deconstruction?' was a particular type of return to the frame. Writing and sculpture were the product of giving play to a subjectless drive, an entropic 'death' drive. The resulting work, therefore, was ceremonial, monumental, and almost devoid of egoic subjectivity.

A final and substantial difference arises between Smithson and Derrida regarding deconstruction. Smithson turns his observations about language to psychoanalytic ends. The dialectical nature of language and the value systems that arise from them were a concern to both Smithson and Derrida. However, Smithson conceptualises the production of linguistic dialectics as the work of the ego. Certain ego states had an excessive need for clear visualisation, and did not like ambiguity, multi-evocative or open-ended structure. As has been discussed, Smithson also identified an unconscious undifferentiated, solidified, "alien" unconscious state that was capable of knowing and being without using a system of differences. Between the processes of "differentiation" and "de-differentiation", Smithson suggested that cultural frames were made and destroyed. This introduction of a psychoanalytic frame is not reflected upon by Smithson. He simply introduces it without explaining how it acts as a methodological frame. Thus, Smithson's tendency was not primarily that of deconstruction, but to be a structuralist, and one who easily jumped from structural model to structural model. He used dialectics, setting terms into opposition, and this sometimes had the power to create a type of deconstruction. In the broader picture, however, he used this process to try to improve, adjust and modify his primarily structuralist theories.

For all their parallels, Smithson's terms of reference were rather different from those of deconstruction. In order to get a sense of the philosophy that he brought to bear in his work, I would now like to retrace some of the types of philosophical problems and issues that concerned him. Ultimately, the point of identifying these issues will be to apply them in an interpretation of his sculpture.

Chapter III

PHILOSOPHY: WRITINGS AND NON-SITES

I. Introduction

Among the thirteen interviews and dialogues recorded in his lifetime, Smithson was repeatedly invited to define his philosophical views. On most of these occasions, he provided concise and helpful remarks. Usually, however, his remarks were followed with an important proviso: his interests in philosophy were secondary to his interests in making art. In his own view, though he read philosophy and used it in the making of his writings and sculptures, he was not interested in producing it. Smithson quite comfortably reduced philosophy to suit his set of concerns. He easily mapped one philosophy over another, selecting from each as and when he saw their coincidence with his own concerns. The task of this chapter is, therefore, to describe his philosophical concerns, and then to interpret how he applied them to the making of art. It does not treat Smithson as a philosopher, for in this respect his writings would seem rather crude. His writings were intended to be a "mannerist" pageant of dualisms and dialectics taken from his readings in philosophy. The most common of these dialectics, such as idealism / materialism, and mind / matter, were stimulating and interesting because their irresolution proved valuable to him as a sculptor. It was this balanced irresolution which Smithson regarded as the creative aspect of his philosophical views. As he put it, (in reference to his use of a scattering / containment dialectic), "It's the tension between those two things that essentially manifests itself in fascinating art... It's not a matter of being satisfied."[186]

---

[186] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, 1970, p. 199.

Before giving a summary of Smithson's views on philosophy, a second point might also be made. Smithson often went out of is way to disabuse the aspiration of finding a systematic analysis of any sort either through philosophy or art. In this sense, "truth" was unavailable to language. Another way to summarise this would be to paraphrase A. J. Ayer, an author who was important in Smithson's philosophical readings, by saying the 'he seemed to wish to convey the opinion that critical talk about the physical world was inherently bound to fail.' He was of the opinion that the concepts, abstractions, and rational systems of systematic philosophy could even prove dangerous. As he put it, "Everyone who invents a system and then swears by it, that system will eventually turn on the person and wipe him out."[187]

It might be concluded that Smithson had no serious wish to put forward a systematic philosophy. He wanted, instead, to take an aesthetic pleasure out of the breakdown of philosophy. Any cursory inspection of Smithson's published writings, such as his better-known articles "A Sedimentation of the Mind" and "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site", produce examples of Smithson's literary use of philosophy. It was this rather poetic use that led his strongest critics to deny any valuable or clear sense to his writings. For these critics, the writings were impossibly vague and shifting, which did not justify the dogmatic style of his philosophical claims.[188]

Rather than take the view that Smithson was anti-philosophical, I would propose the view that he was trying to give a fairly organised phenomenological and psychoanalytic account of those conditions and desires which come into play so as to obstruct and wreck systematic philosophical thought. This chapter will conclude, therefore, with a consideration of his interests in a psychological phenomenology. The following chapter continues with a consideration of Smithson's use of linguistic philosophy.

If Smithson can be faulted for giving a disorganised account of the forces of mental disorganisation, there is nevertheless a rigorous ground on which to assess his philosophical undertakings. Methodologically, I start off with the results of an empirical analysis. This involved setting out his philosophical comments in chronological order, and then tracing his comments back to his readings in philosophy. This method has the motive of trying to restore to his work some of the discursive matrix from which it was assembled. If my own observation is that there *is* a type of system and consistency in his writings, it is partly based upon taking his library list into the consideration. By locating Smithson in his library, it is quite possible to see some of his claims in systematic relation to his reading. By looking at what he read and wrote about philosophy an intellectual context begins to

---

[187] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, 1970, p. 210.

[188] Nicholas Callas, and Brian O'Doherty put this view. For O'Doherty, Smithson used his philosophical arguments as a weapon in maintaining his power within the art world. See "Minus Plato", Minimal Art, p. 254.

appear. This method is intended to provide a primarily descriptive analysis of his interests in philosophy. I would then like to turn to more interpretative methods in order to show how the context of his philosophical interests provides a basis for an interpretation of his sculpture, and in particular his Site / Non-site sculptures.

There are, for the sake of system and brevity, three philosophical concerns that are treated in this chapter. The first concern to appear was that of materialism and idealism. This was applied, in part, when challenging contemporary art critics. Further to this first dialectic, Smithson also became interested in the mind / matter problem. Thirdly, in 1969, Smithson can be seen to be engaged in phenomenological and psychoanalytic theories that provided him a way to conceptualise and reflect upon the mind.

II. Materialism or Idealism?

In chapter one it was observed that Smithson gained some considerable knowledge of, and skill in using a dualism of matter / soul as found in Catholic theology. This interest ceased, however, by 1962. After this point in time, Smithson turned particularly to the study of philosophy, anthropology and literary criticism. This change in reading habits has been substantiated by Nancy Holt and is born out by an examination of his library. Judging by dates of publication, the early books on his "Philosophy" shelf were his general introductions to the subject. The most important of these, A. C. Ewing's The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy, was a thematic consideration of major philosophical questions, rather than a chronological history of major philosophers.[189] This question-oriented book would have suited him, allowing him to refine his concerns quickly in relation to major philosophical issues. Although there can be no absolute certainty about when he acquired this book, it nevertheless coincides well with the tempering of his early penchant for theistic cosmology. With the end of his religious phase, Ewing's introduction would have provided him with a clear explanation of materialism, and a criticism of idealism and religion. Partly because it had greatly concerned Ewing, it also provided a stirring introduction to the mind / matter problem. Ewing, who was a professor of philosophy at Cambridge, had a strong position on this problem, and had written his primer in part to place his conception of "Dualistic Interactionism" against the monistic materialism of Wittgenstein, Ryle, Russell and Ayer.[190] Ewing, then, was a dualist seeking to dispute a prevailing materialism.

---

[189] A. C Ewing, The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy, Collier. No publication date is given in the library list. My reference is to the edition by Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1951.

[190] Edwards and Pap, A Modern Introduction to Philosophy, Third Edition, The Free Press, New York, 1973, p. 271.

In identifying Smithson's treatment of materialism and idealism it is interesting to note how he became familiar with these philosophical arguments. If Ewing, along with another primer by Isaiah Berlin, provided Smithson with a general introduction to philosophy, then he would have understood these arguments partly in their terms. Both of these authors were dualists concerned to rescue at least some aspects of idealist metaphysics from the attacks of materialist philosophy. Smithson found in his readings of Ewing and Berlin the basic dilemma between materialism and idealism. Idealism held that ultimate reality possesses one sole attribute, namely the mind or consciousness. Materialism held the view that the sole attribute was matter.

Idealism, then, claims that objects of knowledge are wholly dependent upon the activity of a mind (in Christian terms soul or spirit) which is non-extensive (Descartes), and that in the last analysis, the only thing one can verify with any certainty is the existence of one's own consciousness (Berkeley). External objects of perception, then, arose from ideas rather than substances. Materialism, on the other hand, claims that there is no incorporeal mind (Hobbes and Hume) and that consciousness is wholly due to material events. Material brain events alone sufficed to cause mental events. Smithson would also have found in his primers an extensive explanation of dualism, the belief that both mind and matter are significant, as it occurred in Pascal, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Freud.[191]

Beyond these primers, Smithson's library also included detailed considerations of the mind / matter problem, including John Wisdom's Problems of Mind and Matter, and James Cornman's Metaphysics, Reference and Language. Added to these were his further reading in Analytic Philosophy such as A. J. Ayer and Wittgenstein, Carnap's logical behaviourism, and the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger.

If it is possible to trace his readings on materialism and idealism, it is also possible to identify certain points in his writings where he takes up a position on the problem. Overall, Smithson made ample comments to the effect that he was a dualist. The different nuances in his position were made clear when disputing with other critics. This may have been partly responsible for certain inconsistencies, in that he often levied monist materialist arguments against the idealisms he saw operating in art criticism, science and politics. The favouring of materialism particularly stands out in some of the quotes given below.

> *Well, I think it [my writing] relates probably to a kind of physicalist or materialist view of the world, which of course leads one into a kind of Marxist view.* [192]

---

[191] These arguments were available to Smithson in Isaiah Berlin (Ed.) The Age of Enlightenment: Locke, Berekely, Voltaire, Hume, Reid, Condillac, Hamann, LaMettrie and G.C. Lichtenberg, Mentor, New York, 1956.

[192] "Interview with Paul Cummings", S2, p. 284.

The Brain itself resembles an eroded rock from which ideas and ideals leak. [193]

His claims to be a materialist, however, did not bar him from also claiming that he was a dualist, that he was concerned with the paradoxes produced by either side of the debate. Some examples of this might include:

Well, I developed a dialectic between the mind - matter aspects of nature. [194]

That is what my work is about---the interaction between mind and matter... a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter. [195]

With these conflicting claims in mind, I would like to proceed by first examining Smithson's use of materialist philosophy in relation to art criticism and science, and then move on to consider Smithson as a dualist who alternated between metaphysics and materialist physicalism.

A. Smithson as Materialist Philosopher: Reconsidering Art Criticism

In examining Smithson as a materialist philosopher, perhaps the first question to ask is whether Smithson effected or tried to effect a wholesale transference of the mental to the physical. There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that this was quite often his intention. One of the most prominent qualities of Smithson's materialism was made particularly plain when he took as his task the critique of Greenbergian formalism. For example, articles such as "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site and "A Sedimentation of the Mind" set out to dispute the idealisms in Greenberg's theory of art, and the idealistic humanism in Rosenberg's accounts of Abstract Expressionism.[196] As Annette Michelson has observed, Smithson seemed to arrive fully-fledged into this debate on the philosophy of art criticism at an historical moment when the debate itself was becoming a major issue.[197]

One of the goals of his writing up to 1968, then, was to submit to scrutiny some of the terms and concepts of formalism as devised by Greenberg, with a view to exposing their inherent idealism. As

---

[193] "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", S2, p. 196.

[194] "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenhiemer and Smithson", S2, p. 250.

[195] "Interview with Patsy Norvell", S2, p. 193.

[196] This is probably too simple. While Greenberg, Fried, Rosenberg, Lippard and B. Reise were all discussed by name, many of his comments are aimed at unspecified targets.

[197] Anette Michelson, "10 x 10: Concrete Reasonableness", Artforum, January 1967. Some evidence of the reconsideration of the philosophy of art criticism can be seen when Artforum initiated a section titled "Problems of Criticism" starting in September 1967. Various critics were invited to contribute, including Robert Goldwater and Clement Greenberg.

has been discussed in the chapter on mannerism, one major concern was to refute idealist conceptions of the "self", which Smithson saw as an *a priori* in much art criticism. For example:

> *The empathetic projection of the "self" into an art-object has determined almost all esthetics of the last fifty years or so.*[198]

> *The notion that artists have "deep feelings" and "pure souls" is simply a way to keep the artist in his mythic state of isolation. The first-person role that the artist is forced into by the humanist is just another way to confuse "art" and "life".*[199]

As he understood it, Greenberg was pretending to be a materialist and Marxist while actually being a humanistic idealist. His materialism was subsumed because he claimed a superior value to immaterial inner experience. This criticism shows Smithson to be an attentive reader of Greenberg, one who could appreciate the truth in Greenberg's own claim that he was not a formalist. Greenberg, in the early 1960's, had repeatedly refuted the criticism that he was a formalist by emphasising that a painting, no matter how successful in formal terms, was a failure if it did not convey feeling. Smithson did not criticise Greenberg for being a materialist formalist, but for presenting a materialist / idealist dualism in which form ultimately served the function of expressing mind. In the light of Smithson's interests it would seem accurate to say that Greenberg posited the existence of mind without ever investigating or questioning it.

Against the reigning views of Greenberg and Rosenberg, Smithson was trying to deny the ground on which their dualisms found synthesis. He saw in their writing a Bergsonian mythology of the creative will, which gave meaningful form to otherwise insignificant matter. Smithson generally de-mystified and deconstructed this humanist conception of an inner self. This was replaced, in part at least, with a more radical materialist and behaviourist account of human action. It was in this sense that Smithson appeared to be a dramatic anti-idealist, and in this respect, the inheritor of the mantle of Ad Reinhardt.

Smithson also observed that Greenberg's idealism gave his theories the appearance of a rational set of beliefs. One such regrettable result of Greenberg's rationalism was its insistence on formal distinctions between he arts. Regrettable, that is, because the resulting categories operated with the force of a "cultural confinement".[200] Another regrettable consequence of his idealism was that it

---

[198] "The Pathetic Fallacy in Esthetics", S2, p. 338.

[199] "A Refutation of Historical Humanism", S2, p. 336.

[200] A considerable literature exists addressing the ideological and political ramifications of Greenberg's various activities, particularly by David and Cecile Shapiro, and Serge Guilbaut.

tended "to isolate the art object into a metaphysical void, independent from external relationships such as land, labour and class."[201]

Greenberg was understood by Smithson to have proposed strict distinctions between the arts because of a belief in a "pure cosmic order", thus hiding the fictive aspects of his accounts of art history. Smithson commented: "The status of fiction has vanished into the myth of fact....Rationalism confines fiction to literary categories in order to protect its own interests or systems of knowledge." Furthermore, such rationalist "History breaks down into fabulous lies."[202]

In a way, Smithson did agree with Greenberg. There was a "cosmic order" in a sense. But it was not necessarily a rational order. Nature produced all sorts of oddities and strange creatures, as evidenced in fossil records. Quoting the writer Charles Knight, he observed a fossil record of a swamp full of "'stupid smooth-skinned monsters some six feet long, with wide tooth-filled jaws and an enormous gape which enabled them to swallow their food at a single gulp.'" Rather than insist that art must be rational, Smithson offered another task for the art critic. This task was materialistic, scientific and geological, or at least to a degree. Smithson's temporal frame for art and art criticism involved sensing "an enormous amorphous struggle between the stable and the unstable; a fusion of action and inertia, symbolising a kind of cartoon vision of the cosmos." For Smithson, an art criticism based upon such "teratoid" marvels and oddities was just as logical and realistic as one based on the humanist conception of a 'naturally' rational order in nature. Reprinting Ad Reinhardt's *Portrait of the Artist as a Jung Mandela*, he indicated that art was both monster and marvel, "half way between the real and the symbolic."[203] Smithson was not so interested, then, in the artist's mind as it grasped a spirit of history. Rather, he considered those ways in which matter caused or resembled the mind. Despite his regret that formalism isolated art from its socio-historical context, Smithson was not particularly interested in such contexts. In effect, then, Smithson and Greenberg were both dualists, with major differences over their theory of mind.

In disabusing humanist and idealist art criticism Smithson offered two options, both of which were sustained in the better of his articles. The first option was wholly materialist and anti-metaphysical. In these overt attempts fully to transfer to the physical all vestiges of mind or soul, Smithson can be understood as radically anti-metaphysical and thus a part of 20th century Anglo-American philosophy in the tradition of Russell, Ayer and Goodman. If Smithson's materialism was quite unique, he nevertheless made remarks such as: "The mind is a rock from which ideas and ideals leak." This was

---

201 "Art and Dialectics", S2, p. 370.

202 "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", S2, p. 84 & 88.

203 "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", S2, p. 83 and 89.

the monist rather than the dualist Smithson, who could claim, in quite unreserved terms, that he was a materialist.

B. Materialism and Science

Many of Smithson's writings on art had the effect of introducing basic materialist arguments from philosophy, including the philosophy of science. For example, his interest in the artists of the Park Place Gallery was due largely to his interest in their use and misuse of Einstein's theory of relativity. This was but one indication of his considerable interests in the physical sciences and the philosophy concerned with its practices. The most obvious and repeated evidence of this can be found in his interest in entropy as it relates to the third law of thermodynamics. He also made extensive studies in crystallography, geology and palaeontology. To a lesser degree, he studied chemistry, astronomy and physics. These interests were ongoing, visible as much in his boyhood photographs of fossil hunting, as in his last purchases for his library. Generally, though, his interest in the philosophy of science was as much an interest in what was not known as in what was. His knowledge of Bergson, as has been seen, would have encouraged from the start Smithson's focus on the limits of scientific knowledge.

Through the study of the philosophy of science, Smithson developed a scepticism about the epistemological foundations of science. Probably the most concise statement of his view indicated that the natural environment was a situation without explanation. He felt he shared this "esthetic view" with Borges, Barthes, Ballard and Tony Smith:

> *For them, the environment is coded into exact units of order, as well as being prior to all rational theory; hence it is prior to all explanatory naturalism, to physical science, psychology, and also to metaphysics.*[204]

As further evidence of his position, he repeatedly cited the limits of mathematics to explain the existence of prime numbers and "prime forms".[205] Primes, as he read about them in George Kubler's The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things, were described as a nonsensical material language, a babble of material utterances and a lacunary counting which did not reduce to a rational meaning.[206]

Given these particular views of mathematics and science, Smithson was not in agreement with many contemporary artists who utilised engineering and technology in the creation of sculpture. While he

---

[204] "The Artist as Site-Seer; or, A Dintorpic Essay", S2, p. 340.

[205] Smithson drew upon George Kubler's The Shape of Time Remarks on the History of Things, Yale Univ. Press, 1962. Kubler presented an anthropological conception of human tool making as a search for certain irreducible prime forms.

did list the chemical contents of his paints, and remarked on other Minimalist's interests in new materials, he repeatedly discredited any faith in the positive powers of technology. The clearest example of this can be seen in his correspondence with the artist Gyorgy Kepes, who was a Bauhaus-trained professor at M.I.T.'s Centre for Advanced Visual Studies. Writing to him after receiving an invitation to exhibit in a show organised on the theme of art and technology, he replied:

> *To celebrate the power of technology through art strikes me as a sad parody of NASA... The rationalism and logic of the engineer is too self-assured. Art aping science turns into a cultural malaise...All the 'fancy junk' of science cannot hide the void. I am sick if 'lighting candles', I want to know what the 'darkness' is...If technology is to have any chance at all it must become more self-critical.*[207]

In this letter, Smithson criticised the idealist manipulation of science and technology for its attempts to perfect or improve upon the natural world. As he would later observe, these manipulations led just as easily to mass pollution and alienation from nature. It was a humanist myth that science could build a better world. In his view, science was far too often drawn into social ideologies, often due to a mistaken anthropomorphic projection of human characteristics onto the material world. For example, Smithson remarked that science and medicine had already morally interpreted natural phenomena when using words such as 'disease' and 'mutation'. In this way metaphysical values were added to empirical observations. Idealism, in effect, rendered science dysfunctional by introducing a system of values.

In some respects, like the writers of certain books on is shelf, he could be seen to be responding to reigning social uncertainties about the value of science and technology, including the application of high technology to the Viet Nam war. Another uncertainty included anxiety over atomic physics and the atomic bomb.[208] While such agents of instant annihilation did not figure regularly in his writings, there were still problems with technological optimism evident in his repetition of the sentiment that 'the future tends to be pre-historic', or that 'progress is entropy in reverse'.

One cause of his scepticism over technological progress arose from Smithson's interest in the philosophic problem of scientific induction. This problem arose in philosophy because there was no guarantee in science that the future future would be different or the same as past futures. Science could not predict the future based on past observation. This questioning of scientific induction was common to the philosophical literature that he read, including A. J. Ayer, Ewing and Russell. The

---

[206] "The Artist as Site-Seer; or, A Dintorpic Essay", S2, p. 340.

[207] "Letter to Gyorgy Kepes", July 3, 1969, S2 , p. 369.

[208] Louise B. Young, The Mystery of Matter, American Foundation for Continuing Education, 1965. This book from Smithson's library was a compendium of short scientific and philosophical articles intended to address anxiety about the physics of the atomic bomb. Its stated aim was to provide an accessible reference such that American citizens could undertake "informed democratic

lack of future guarantee in inductive proofs was put to use by Smithson to make points about the lack of certainty in science. On this basis, for example, he expressed his admiration for Pascal over Descartes. While the former stressed the statistical, the latter stressed the determined. Smithson argued that certainty was a myth, a false scientism bolstered by a false philosophism. Because the law of induction was not provable, Smithson argued that a permanent uncertainty made statistics the only reasonable alternative.

A further example of Smithson's considerations of science may also be traced back to the philosophy of science in his library.[209] This question concerned the problem of empirical evidence in science.[210] In his view, empiricism depended on repeatable evidence from sense data, yet it was not so easy to prove that sense data was accurate or dependable, or that there was a mind that could verify such data. This philosophical argument had numerous sources, including Ewing, but also the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. What particularly held Smithson's interest was a characterisation of science as a situation in which the mind that makes empirical observations itself defies empirical observation. He found it highly perplexing that powers of perception and empirical observation should exist in brain-matter, or that brain-matter possessed a capacity to experience sense data and memory. Some of his comments on the Site / Non-site works addressed this question.

> *Here [in the Non-site] you are confronted with both a mental and a physical manifestation that purports not to be there, so that it's an effacement through the physical properties of both mind and matter.*[211]

In this comment, he suggests that empirical observation of a sculpture cannot really take place because the subjectivity of the observer is never stable or clear. If mind is finally matter then how is it that matter can observe matter? One of the typical responses to this question, and one that Robert Morris particularly admired, was Donald Davidson's conclusion that certain materials or combinations of materials had mental properties.[212] This was not, however, to be Smithson's solution to the problems of monist materialism. He preferred the position of the dualist.

---

choices and debate regarding government nuclear policy." This wide-ranging book contained a majority of the information required for his many of his articles.

[209] The chapter of Ewing's book which was most reprinted addressed just this problem. See: "The 'A Priori' and the Empirical", The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy, and Edwards and Pap, Philosophy, p. 730.

[210] This issue is raised in Michael Fitzgerald, "Certain Vagaries: Robert Smithson, Science and Surrealism", Arts Magazine, May 1983.

[211] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 204.

[212] Tim Martin and Penelope Curtis, Robert Morris: Recent Felt Pieces and Drawings 1996-1997, Henry Moore Institute exhibition guide, Leeds, 1997, p. 5.

C. Smithson as Dualist:

Some of the most pointed remarks which Smithson made on the materialist idealist debate came in the 1968 article "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" under the section "Inverse Meanings - The Paradoxes of Critical Understanding". Here the materialism of Carl Andre and Robbe-Grillet was presented in the light of the criticism of Lucy Lippard and Peter Brook. Smithson surprisingly sided with the critics in finding that overt materialism quickly turns into romantic idealism, and both into fictions.

> *Romanticism and materialism if viewed with two-dimensional clarity have a transparence and directness about them that is highly fictive. Says Brook, "If Robbe-Grillet has sought to destroy the 'romantic heart of things', there is a sense in which he is constantly fascinated by the romanticism of surfaces." The same is true of "materialism" when it becomes the esthetic motive of the artist. The reality of materialism is no more real than that of romanticism. In a sense, it becomes evident that today's materialism and romanticism share similar "surfaces." The romanticism of the 1960's is a concern for the surfaces of materialism.*[213]

What Smithson indicated in this quote was the problem of being a monist of either a materialist or idealist sort. In this quote Smithson is very close to Ewing's observations that, in fully blown idealism, physical reality was regarded as a fiction, while in fully blown materialism the mind was regarded as a metaphysical fiction. Being a dualist allowed him to establish a two-way dilemma between materialism and idealism. T. E. Hulme's comment may also have been influential: "Realise that to take *one* or the *other* as absolute is to perpetrate the same old counter falllacy; both are mixed up in a cindery way and we extract them as counters."[214] It was his authorial privilege and his pleasure to locate himself in the structural gap between the two poles of this dialectic in order to perform its paradoxes. The simultaneous indeterminacy of both matter and the conscious mind was most vividly played out in his consideration of the mind / matter problem. It is to his treatment of this problem that I would now turn.

III. The Mind / Matter Problem

Of all of Smithson's interests in dialectical philosophy, it was the mind / matter problem that was most mentioned. Between 1965 and 1970, Smithson used this dialectic in a wide range of forms. Smithson's reading on this problem introduced him to a variety of dualist (as opposed to monist)

---

[213] In this article Smithson champions the aesthetics of paradox. Morris makes "sham mistakes", LeWitt "enervates concepts of paradox and self destroying logic", Reinhardt produces "an unfathomable ground of farce where negative knowledge enshrouds itself in the remote regions of that intricate language -- the joke." Peter Hutchinson's language "mocks its own meaning so that nothing is left but a gratuitous syntactical device", and Dan Graham isolates "segments of unreliable information into compact masses of fugitive meaning."

[214] Hulme, Speculations, p. .236.

opinions. Dualist philosophers, such as Kant proposed that mind and matter were absolutely divided. Hegel proposed a dialectic between the two which would one day lead to a fusion or synthesis. Taken together, mind and matter were the very definition of the Absolute.

Smithson's dualism, however, drew on somewhat more recent literature on the subject. On one side were the materialists already mentioned. Added to this, were behaviourist claims that purely mental events were impossible to verify or locate and were therefor of no scientific interest. On the other side, Ewing and Wisdom argued that there still had to be a mind to experience brain events.[215] Descartes and Husserl were also added on the side of mind, especially for the claim that only internal phenomena of consciousness were certain and verifiable.

Smithson made of these various arguments a series of speculations. Firstly, he took from his library a series of different arguments about the causal links between mind and matter. Secondly, he also produced various speculations and observations about the resemblances between them. While maintaining on one hand that the mind was material, "a thing in a state of arrested disruption", on the other he maintained that material objects were mental problems, "products of thought rather than a physical reality."[216]

If Smithson concluded, in dualist fashion, that both matter and mind existed, then the first question to address is this: how did he take a position on, or speculate about, causal links between them?. In answering this question I would like to look at his writings on the work of Donald Judd and his own Sprial Jetty.

1. "Donald Judd"

For this early article, Smithson emphasised that there seemed to be no internal aesthetic decision making, no sign or trace of a conscious mind in Judd's sculpture. In a reversal that rather astonished Judd, Smithson praised him for his lack of thought processes, his lethargic and entropic attitude, because it seemed to be devoid of an inner being or self. This mind, if it was a mind, was directed toward external matter, it was conscious of a "mass", "bulk", or "'Primary Matter'" without energy or time. This was not a formalist undertaking either, in that Judd did not question how to turn matter into self-expressive artistic form, but, "brought into question the very *form* of matter."

---

[215] Sources from his library included John Wisdom, Problems of Mind and Matter, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 1963; James W. Cornman, Metaphysics, Language Reference, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 1966; and of course Ewing's The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy.

[216] "Interview with Patsy Norvell", S2, p. 192.

Smithson's accounts of Judd's practice starts off on a rather behaviourist note. Judd was seen to respond to external stimuli without the intervention of a conscious volition. He mindlessly responded to the inspection of crystals by recreating them as sculptures. To this end, Smithson offered the suggestion that Judd had a "crystalline mind". His "sensibility encompasses geology and mineralogy.", and "his writing style has much in common with the terse factual descriptions one finds in his collection of geology books."[217] Smithson suggested here the basic argument that matter caused mind. He added that the most basic structures of inert matter caused the most basic aspects of mind. Judd's mind adhered to or instinctually obeyed the laws of form that were found in matter. Smithson traced the structures of matter as they were isomorphically projected first in the mind and then in the sculpture. He suggested that if the mind obeyed the same laws of structure that occur in matter, then the mind also obeyed the laws of entropy and structurlessness that occur in a matter. The article on Judd was a description and speculation on the ways in which matter gives rise to mental events. However, being a bi-directional mind / matter dualist, he also traced the dialectic in the opposite direction some years later when writing about his own work.

2. Spiral Jetty

Smithson gave repeated consideration to certain irreducible prime forms such as crystals and spirals, and forces of formlessness such as entropy. He found them evident in matter at microcosmic and macrocosmic scales, and in mental events. On one occasion, Smithson produced an account of his own mental processes as they slipped backward toward the material that caused his mind. In this example Smithson suggested the possibility that the mind could perceive its own materiality:

> *Chemically speaking, our blood is analogous in composition to the primordial seas. Following the spiral steps we return to our origins, back to some pulpy protoplasm, a floating eye adrift in an antediluvian ocean. On the slopes of Rozel Point I closed my eyes, and the sun burned crimson through the black lids. I opened them and the Great Salt Lake was bleeding scarlet streaks. My sight was saturated by the color of red algae circulating in the heart of the lake, pumping into ruby currents... Perception was heaving, the stomach turning, I was on a geologic fault that groaned within me... [] ... I was slipping out of myself again, dissolving into a unicellular beginning, trying to locate the nucleus at the end of the spiral. All that blood stirring makes one aware of protoplasmic solutions, the essential matter between the formed and unformed, masses of cells consisting largely of water, proteins, lipoids, carbohydrates, and inorganic salts...* [218]

This quote is a rich evocation of the mind's return to the biological origins of ocular perception. It also ponders the ways in which the mind has the same constituent parts as a presumably non-conscious geological site. In situating himself in a position where mind and matter seemed to lose

---

[217] "Entropy and the New Monuments", S2, p. 20.

[218] "Spiral Jetty", S2, p. 148.

their distinctive qualities, and in tracing the mental properties of matter and the material properties of mind, Smithson enlivened this debate by applying it to sculpture.

As suggestive as his remarks were, Smithson nevertheless backed away from directly defending the materialist 'doctrine of production'. He never flatly claimed that matter caused or produced mind. Should he have wanted to make such claims he probably would have made far more of his study of the brain. He found it far more stirring to address himself to the gap within this dialectic and to explore the ways in which mind and matter take on a resemblance of each other in a work of art. As he put it, "I'm interested in zeroing in on those aspects of mental experience that somehow coincide with the physical world."[219]

3. Sculpture Between Mind and Matter

For Smithson, Donald Judd was not the first artist to make work based upon the inert properties of his mind. He was simply the first artist to be conscious of do so. Other artists and critics also made art dependent upon the structure of their mind. Smithson could be rather amusing in asking how such material brain events resembled mental events. For example, he observed that the mind of Michael Fried resembled the paintings he defended. The pools of paint used by Jules Olitski and Morris Louis were appreciated because this critic had a "damp mind". He thus evoked the ancient materialist belief of Lucretius, in which human emotions and thoughts were the products of "humours" rather than a noumenal mind.

A further example can be found in "Entropy and the New Monuments" where comparisons of resemblance are made, even if they are not entirely serious. For example:

> *We must not think of Laughter as a laughing matter, but rather as the 'mater-of-laughs... Solid-state hilarity, as manifest through the 'ha-ha crystal' concept appears in a patently anthropomorphic way in Alice in Wonderland... Giddiness of this sort is reflected in Meyer's plastic contraptions... A fit of silliness becomes a rhomboid, a happy outburst becomes a cube, and so forth.*[220]

In this quote Smithson makes an amused case for the material structure of subjectivity. He proposes that if the mind is material, then such things as laughter, pleasure and aesthetic pleasure must all resemble inorganic material structures. Responses of pleasure and pain have a material origin, and can be expressed for their structural and material basis.

---

219 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 208.

220 "Entropy and the New Monuments", S2, p. 21-22.

His sculpture *Enantiomorphic Chambers* of 1965, and its connected documents and writings, indicate Smithson's fascination with one of the most simple of structural rules. Enantiomorphic structure, which is the quality of mirroring on an axis, could be seen in organic and inorganic objects alike. For example, humans have a mirror opposite left and right side of the body, including the ocular system, just as crystals do. Additionally, eyes contain inorganic crystalline lenses. Consequently, perception seemed to arise from a multiplication of different enantiomorphic structures. He was struck by the argument that visual perception could be an entirely material event, using everything from the most simple of inorganic materials and structures up to the most complex biological ones. Yet, this still begged the question of 'who' made sense of these perceptions. This amounted to a "simulacral riddle" according to Krauss, which had, perplexingly, no place in space at all.[221]

Finally, in his "Dintorpic Essay" of 1967, the computer provided some of the most vivid of Smithson's images for the paradox of the materiality of the human brain as it related to funerary art. Although still in its technological infancy, computers were often compared to the brain in both the scientific and science fiction literature of his day. To quote one of his favoured books on the question of machine intelligence, "Again some people experience a feeling of intense irritation when such questions are raised. 'A man is a living thing' we are told, 'but, a machine is dead matter.' Perhaps again, this suggests a wrong emphasis; it may well be, not that people have too great a respect for living matter, but rather that many people have too ready a contempt for 'mere' dead matter--a stuff devoid of mystery."[222]

Smithson's consideration of the computer was given in a rather complex train of thought that mixed contemporary cybernetics with Freud's rather contradictory conception of the death wish in Beyond the Pleasure Principle.[223] Added to this was Willhelm Worringer's theory of the function of abstraction in Egyptian art.[224] For Smithson, such machines were modern versions of ancient tombs. They were "electric mummies" whose circuit boards bore a strange resemblance to the patterns in Egyptian funerary art. These living-dead logic machines posed an interesting dilemma because it was possible to directly see the materials and structures that made up its mental powers.

> *There seem to be parallels between cybernation and the world of the Pyramid. The logic behind "thinking machines" with their "artificial nervous systems" has a rigid complexity, that on an esthetic level resembles the tombic burial structures of ancient Egypt. The*

---

221 Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, Formless: A User's Guide, Zone Books, Boston, 1997, p. 76.

222 Colin Cherry, On Human Communication, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1957, p.56.

223 As have other authors, Leo Bersani, The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, argues the point that Freud's conception of the death wish was itself highly contradictory.

224 Smithson credits this idea to Willhelm Worringer's Abstraction and Empathy, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1953. On page 5, Worringer identifies in particular "an aesthetics which proceeds not from man's urge to empathy, but his urge to abstraction.[which] finds its beauty in the life-denying inorganic, in the crystalline, or in general terms, in all abstract law and necessity."

> *hieroglyphics of the Book of the Dead are similar to the circuit symbols of computer memory banks or "coded channels". Perhaps one could call a computing machine an-- "electric mummy"... All the content is removed from the "memory" of an automaton, and transformed into a "shape" or "object". The mummy like the automaton has vacant memories, that remember voids of meaning.*[225]

The question of the computer held various contradictions for Smithson, and indeed the "Dintorpic Essay" is one of his most aggressively associative and philosophical texts when it came to pinpointing a definition of mind. One of the paradoxes of resemblance lay in the observation that the design of the computer's dead brain was visibly similar to designs from death-oriented cultures.

Smithson's consideration of the computer and the mummy as a living-dead mind went in two directions, producing a rotund image of "ascending and descending states of lucidity". Smithson pictured an Egyptian tomb consisting of a mummy that has been slowly desiccating to ever-greater states of inorganic crystalline matter. The surrounding hieroglyphics served two functions: they recorded memories by turning them into strings of abstract shapes, and they registered a wish or desire-- in this case the death-wish that so dominated this culture. An Egyptian burial chamber was seen to contain all the elements of a computer. The mummy was equivalent to a processor chip, while the inscriptions served as memory banks. At a microscopic level, it was imagined that the mummified brain might retain the material organisation of the living brain. Smithson seems to fantasise a situation in which it would be possible to switch on the burial chamber, like a machine, and to download the hieroglyphics back into the mummified brain. In this fantasy, the loading of the hieroglyphic memory into the mummy induced it to sing a poetic lament. This song expressed a sad and highly uncanny sentiment: The dead wish to be dead. The appearance of such desire was terrifying, in that it arose from the inert subjectless domain of matter.[226]

Smithson's fantasy that a computer might develop its own consciousness and wishes was a common contemporary fantasy in science fiction literature, a typical example being HAL in the Stanley Kubrick film *2001*. In that the computer possessed a subjectivity which was neither dead nor alive, it raised the question of the source of its wishes. For Smithson these wishes were lodged in art, in tomb sculptures. Art was a sort of dead linguistic memory which records desire and awaits a processor or spectator who can download it and 'sing' it again. Perhaps it was at this time that he read Lacan's comments on this:

---

225 "The Artist as Site-Seer: or, A Dintorpic Essay", S2, p. 342.

226 "The Artist as Site-Seer: or, A Dintorpic Essay", S2, p. 342. Krauss, Formless, pp. 74-78. Krauss would seem justified in her comparison of Smithson with Roger Caillois's discussion of the headless preying mantis, who carries on simulating living activities even after it is dead. Among the functions this dead insect performs, such as eating and copulating, is the defensive function of playing dead.

> *There is no other way of conceiving the indestructibility of unconscious desire -- in the absence of a need which, when forbidden satisfaction, does not sicken and die, even if it means the destruction of the organism itself. It is in a memory, comparable to what is called by that name in our modern thinking-machines (which are in turn based on an electronic realization of the composition of signification), it is in this sort of memory that is found the chain that* insists *on reproducing itself in the transference, which is the chain of dead desire.*[227]

Smithson's writings generally lead to the claim, then, that mind and matter were both "coded into exact units of order". In this respect, they were both shared certain forms and 'ideals'. But, what were these 'ideals' and did they constitute an idealism?

4. Ideals

The normal course of most dualist philosophy is to note the extreme difference between mind and matter. They emphasise two absolutely different realities that share no fundamental attributes. Yet, throughout his mature writings, Smithson sought to span their differences without succumbing to idealism. Some art historians, however, such as Gary Shapiro and Rolf-Dieter Herrmann, understand Smithson to have implicitly proposed the idea of "Being" in the sense given by Heidegger.[228] According to this view, Smithson was a dualist and therefore had to hold to some set of beliefs regarding a non-extensive mind. His interest in maintaining the irresolution of the mind / matter problem necessarily required a cogent argument for the existence of a mind or being that inevitably marked his philosophy as idealist.

Added to the view that Smithson was in some part an idealist are those comments by colleagues who understood him to be a panpsychicist or hylozoist philosopher. For example, Richard Serra has observed that "Smithson's interest in entropy was an attempt to articulate a universal consciousness, whereas my concerns were literal and pragmatic."[229] This comment indicates that Smithson believed that the entire material universe was part of a single consciousness. This is a panpsychical view which proposes that "even in the very lowest organisms, along with every motion of matter, whether organic or inorganic, there is something or other, inconceivably simple to us, which is of the same nature with our own consciousness, although not of the same complexity."[230]

---

[227] Jacques Lacan, " The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious", Ecrits, Routledge, London, 1977, p. 167. This article was in Smithson's library in the 1966 issue of Yale French Studies.

[228] Gary Shapiro, Earthwards, p. 127. Rolf-Dieter Herrmann, who was a student of Heidegger, makes much the same point about Smithson in "In Search of a Cosmological Dimension: Robert Smithson's Dallas-Fort Worth Airport Project", Arts Magazine, May 1978, p. 113.

[229] Richard Serra: Writings Interviews, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 114.

[230] W. K. Clifford, "Body and Mind" in Edwards and Pap, Philosophy, p. 181. Clifford has been cited here for his concision, and was not one of Smithson's sources.

Carl Andre has observed a hylozoic quality: "I am sure his writings and polemics are formulae and incantations efficient in the raising of demonic forces and his great works are less signs to us than messages for the earth carved in her bosom."[231] In this view, Smithson believed that all matter had mental properties. This, view observed in Smithson some element of idealism. One of the best uses of this examination of Smithson's treatment of the mind / matter problem might be to determine the particular quality of his metaphysics and idealism by building on the views of Shapiro, Krauss, Serra and Andre.

Perhaps the most helpful comment Smithson made on this issue came in response to being called "metaphysical":

> *Perhaps, a better word than "metaphysical" to describe my art would be "infraphysical", infra meaning "below" rather than "beyond". By infra I mean an order that is not visible to the natural eye, but rather an order that remains hidden until it is made physical by the artist. This involves degrees of consciousness that go from the organic natural state to the crystalline artifice. The natural world is ruled by the temporal (dynamic history), whereas the crystalline world is ruled by the a-temporal (non-dynamic time).*[232]

In this comment Smithson speaks of a 'hidden order' that suggests Leibniz's panpsychicism, or Platonic idealist notions of form. Did Smithson consider that there was a set of monads or logical forms that caused matter and mind? To answer to this in the affirmative, it would be necessary to ignore comments such as:

> *George Kubler, like Ad Reinhardt, seems concerned with "weak signals" from "the void". Beginnings and endings are projected into the present as hazy planes of "actuality". In* The Shape of Time, *Kubler says, "Actuality is... the interchronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events."* [233]

Smithson did not, then, hold to Panpsychicism. Rather than proposing a set of 'ideas', which constituted the world (as in Leibniz's "monads" or Plato's Ideal forms), Smithson envisaged prime forms which were inert, energy-less, and most importantly, extra-rational. In addition, he stressed absence, voids and gaps as crucial constituents in mind and matter He repeated this to Alan Kaprow: "It seems that your position is one that is concerned with what's happening. I'm interested for the most part in what's not happening, that area between events which could be called the gap. This gap exists in the blank and void regions or settings that we never look at."[234] If he was referring to an Absolute,

---

[231] Carl Andre, "Robert Smithson: He Always Reminded Us of the Questions We Ought to have Asked Ourselves", Arts Magazine, May 1978.

[232] Draft of a letter to Martin Friedman, Smithson Archives, Roll 3834, frame 0049. This draft appears in Nontebook II, and may date from mid-1969.

[233] "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space", S2, p. 34.

[234] "What is a Museum?", S2, p. 44.

in the manner of Kant or Hegel, it was "an *Absolute* that suggests nothing, recalls nothing, and signifies nothing."[235]

In this sense, Krauss's emphasis on formlessness would seem appropriate, even if it downplays Smithson's interests in universal or ideal form. Shapiro too aptly locates Smithson's interest in the void or gap. He credits this to his interest in Heidegger's "primordial condition", which was predicated on presence against the background of Nothingness. Some element of this certainly rings true, yet may be too narrow to be fully reliable.

The problem up to this point in really locating Smithson's idealism is that no mention has been made of his use of phenomenological philosophy. By way of this philosophy he did find a way to reconcile his interests in universal forms, in 'zeroing in on the coincidences between mind and matter', without producing a metaphysics. He seems to have done this largely through his readings of the phenomenology of Husserl.

IV. Phenomenology

It might be claimed, in advance, that Phenomenology did not provide Smithson with a solution to the dilemma of mind and matter. It merely helped him to refine one side of it, namely the side of the mind. If Smithson was, as he claimed, a dualist, then he turned to phenomenology in search of a specifically non-humanist, non-idealist and non-materialist method for observing the mind. As one critic put it, this philosophy offered "a new way of describing human experience in the world that did not fall prey to the impasses of either rationalism or empiricism-- the problem of mind and body, solipsism and scepticism."[236]

In criticising materialist models of the mind, such as behaviourism, he gave some hint of his own interest in making a more detailed study of lived mental experience.

> *The consciousness of most people is on a particular kind of level where they never really get beyond mechanism and electronics, and it sort of stays on that level and they can't really conceive of a universe in terms of their own experience.*[237]

---

[235] "Ultramoderne", S2, p. 65.

[236] Galen Johnson, "Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of Painting", The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader, Northwest University Press, Evanston, 1993, p. 8.

[237] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", Smithson Archives, roll 3833 frame 1133.; S2, p.211.

In this remark, Smithson seems to have made use of a basic distinction made by Husserl between the "natural attitude" and the attitude phenomenological psychology. This distinction has been described as such:

> *...natural man cannot seriously ask himself the question of how he can get outside his "island of consciousness" and how what manifests itself in his consciousness can acquire objective significance. For when I apperceive myself as natural man, I have already apperceived the spatio-temporal world and conceived of myself as in space where I already have a world-outside-me. Transcendental questions can be asked only within the phenomenological attitude, which is opened up by the phenomenological reduction.*[238]

In turning to a study of phenomenal experience, Smithson was quite typical of other artists in the 1960's, such as Carl Andre and Robert Morris, and critics such as Michael Fried.

Based on an examination of the publication dates of the eight relevant books in his library, it would seem that Smithson acquired a general reader, Quentin Lauer's Phenomenology: Its Genesis and Prospect in 1965. He acquired a second introductory text, Marvin Farber's The Aims of Phenomenology in 1966, and then proceeded to read Husserl's Ideas and The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness in the period 1966-69. He read Heidegger more extensively in 1969-1972, particularly An Introduction to Metaphysics and Discourse on Thinking. The library list shows no evidence of a first-hand familiarity with Merleau-Ponty, although Lauer's text provided a summary and appraisal, and his copy of Yale French Studies contained an article on Merleau-Ponty's linguistics. The list shows that the bulk of his reading concerned the work of Husserl.

One of the difficulties in determining Smithson's interests in and use of phenomenological philosophy is that he rarely mentioned it by name. Some obvious mentions occurred in 1967 in "Ultramoderne", and in 1968, in a set of lecture notes for a symposium at Yale University. In leading up to the conclusion of this lecture he noted:

> *26. There is at present a new esthetic emerging that does not have its origin in history or in the self-centered notions.*
> *27. This esthetic is non-critical, in that it avoids categorical imperatives such as "painting" and "sculpture." It tends more toward an abstract phenomenology.*
> *28. Phenomenology would view art as unknowable, and avoid formal explanations. (anti-rational, anti- existential, and anti-psychoanalysis.)*[239]

Other comments might also be taken to have stemmed from his considerations of Phenomenology:

---

[238] Joseph Kockelmans, Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretation, Doubleday, New York, 1967, p. 184.
[239] "An Outline for Yale Symposium: Against Absolute Categories", S2, p. 360.

> *An interesting thing to start with would be the whole notion of the object, which I consider to be a mental problem rather than a physical reality. An object to me is the product of a thought...My view of art springs from a dialectical position that deals with whether something exists or doesn't exist.*[240]

> *Objects are phantoms of the mind, as false as angels.*[241]

> *Phenomenology: Reality is enigmatic - inexplicable - baffling...*[242]

Explaining the importance of phenomenology to Smithson's work, especially his Site / Non-site works, is best done in the light of a short summary of Husserl's philosophy. The summary below is given in terms that make comparison to Smithson more ready, and in no way pretends to be complete.

A. Husserl

Based on these quotes, then, what might have been appealing to Smithson in Husserl's phenomenology? First may have been Husserl's search for the formal structure of the "life world", and his belief that the objective world and human thought shared the same structures. He found it very difficult to locate these structures, yet regarded seeing and vision as fundamental to the search. Husserl also pursued the goal of making a rigorous philosophical description of consciousness. Perhaps of greatest use to Smithson was Husserl's system of reductions, the *epoché* or bracketing, which are meant to enhance the observation and description of consciousness. Husserl developed from this a picture of the mind as composed of three different ego states, to which Smithson added one more.

1. The Three Reductions

Reaching some conclusion about the mind was, for Smithson, a somewhat hopeless task because it used the mind to inspect the mind. He did develop, however, an interest in a number of disciplines meant to undertake just such an inspection. One of these was based upon Husserl's conception of three different types of ego, each of which was capable of a reductive function, and each of which possessed a unique temporal and spatial awareness. [243] Husserl's was not a standard dualism, however, in that it avoided the Cartesian division of external object and internal subject. It did this by designating two types of objects: real and ideal. Real objects were distinguishable by their temporal and spatial existence. Thus, a chair is a 'transcendental' real object, because it exists in time and space, and a memory of a chair is an 'immanent' real one, because it exists in time but not in space. Thirdly, ideal

---

240 "Interview with Patsy Norvell", S2, p. 192.

241 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 212.

242 "The Artist as Site-Seer, or, a Dintorpic Essay", S2, p. 343.

243 Suzanne Cunningham, Language and the Phenomenological Reductions of Edmund Husserl, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hauge, 1976, p 6.

objects are non-temporal and non-spatial, and include the laws of logic and geometry. Husserl does not make a distinction between subject / object or idea / reality, or mind / matter, but between temporal / non-temporal and spatial / non-spatial objects. Many of Smithson's descriptions of a-temporal and a-spatial objects were based on this phenomenological framework. So too did Smithson absorb an understanding of the three types of reduction or bracketing that led to the observation of these objects at three different levels of the ego.

Firstly, was the phenomenological reduction. This reduction removed the spatial limitations and existential circumstances of the external object. The phenomenological *epoché* or bracketing removes historical and cultural meanings, to focus exclusively on the acts and objects of sense perception. By this reduction, Husserl, like Descartes, sought to build upon only what was self-evidently given to perception. While external reality could not be proved, the existence of consciousness could. The phenomenological reduction was thus intended to make a rigorous description of consciousness. It was a search for the basis of the mental conceptual world in its relation to lived perceptual experience. This reduction did not lead to a careful empirical study of external transcendental real objects, but a careful description of the phenomena of sense data, immanently real objects and experienced sensations.

Secondly, though logically prior, the phenomenological reduction exposes a transcendental ego. This ego is a logical necessity, in that consciousness self-evidently interprets experience and sense-data. If perception can be taken as an object, then there must be a subject aspect to consciousness. Husserl reframed Descartes' certainties about the subject: consciousness is a pole, with the objects and acts of perceptual consciousness at one end, and a meaning-giving transcendental ego at the other. As Lauer explained, Descartes separated subject and object like Humpty Dumpty, whereas Husserl refused to separate them, each being meaningless without the other.[244]

Finally, Husserl determined a third level to the ego. Through the "eidetic reduction" the subject / object pole of consciousness was observed in order to determine its absolutely essential elements. This ego is highly reduced, not a *de facto* ego. It is without temporal or spatial qualities too, just as are the universal elements that are its conditions. Through the eidetic reduction, Husserl finds evidence that consciousness distinguishes between specific and general objects. Meaning is made by classifying, typifying and generalising. Thinking and meaning-making identify universals, and without them it is not possible to know anything. As Derrida has observed, Husserl was struck by the ideal geometrical universals which his eidetic reduction described:

---

[244]Quentin Lauer, Phenomenology, p. 9.

> *The mathematical object seems to be the privileged example and most permanent thread guiding Husserl's reflection. This is because the mathematical object is ideal. Its being is thoroughly transparent and exhausted by its phenomenality. Absolutely objective... it nevertheless is only what it appears to be. Therefore, it is always already reduced to its phenomenal sense, and its being is, from the outset, to be an object for a pure consciousness.*[245]

In this reduction, Husserl also noticed the activity of modes of imagination on consciousness, and indeed the eidetic ego comes into play in fantasy:

> *Husserl tells us, by merely imagining ourselves as perceiving, cutting all ties with actuality and moving by fantasy into the realm of pure possibility, one arrives at perception, of 'the universal type', the 'pure eidos'.*[246]

It was probably from Husserl, then, that Smithson developed his critical method of observing his own fantasy. Some of its elements were based on universals, on pure geometrical "crystalline" laws. Other elements of his fantasy were based on the contingencies of the site in which he found himself. There was a whole range of abstractions from the most individual to the most universal. The Ideal objects that appeared in the eidetic reduction were not constant or perpetual. They only exist for a particular ego, at a particular time.

Where Smithson began to differ from Husserl, was in his identification of entropy as a universal. Indeed, in a twist on Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction, Smithson seems to have experienced the reductions as a type of entropy. Mental entropy could lead to serious self-observation. Husserl's description of an ego that was non-temporal and non-spatial, that could perceive timeless and spaceless "objects", and whose appearance was due to an entropic reduction, seems to have had a great appeal to Smithson. But, while Husserl's eidetic ego worked laws of logic, geometry and mathematics, Smithson seemed compelled as well, to address an ego that was even more reduced than anything proposed by Husserl, and as such is fundamentally at odds with the whole tenor of Husserl's project. This was an ego, so forcefully present in some of his descriptions of sculpture, that was below logic and ideal objects. This fourth ego was variously described as a 'void', an abyss of unstructured matter, a 'geologic chaos', and a psychic state of complete "Undifferentiation."[247] This ego was detected in the holes and gaps in perception and consciousness.

---

[245] Jacques Derrida, Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1983, p. 27.

[246] Suzanne Cunningham, Language, p. 10.

[247] Could Smithson owe a debt to J. P. Sartre in his notion of the ego as void? This was the view of Tony Mussman in "Literalness and the Infinite", Minimal Art, Gregory Battcock, (Ed.), p. 248.

How, though, did Smithson apply his Husserlain phenomenology to art criticism and to sculptures? One example can be found in the now-familiar essays on Donald Judd. A further example can be found in the theory and practice of the Site / Non-sites.

2. Smithson on Judd

In the draft "Untitled", in "Donald Judd", and in "Entropy and the New Monuments", Smithson made some early attempts to described Donald Judd's sculptures **[Plate 4]** as special objects made for phenomenal reduction. In order to do this he started with a few empirical observations of the works, noting their materials, their paints and plastics. He then turned to a description of his perceptual experience. "At the threshold of awareness a new mental process intrudes, and overwhelms any previous comprehension." Smithson called this a looking with 'eyes which can follow a double path.' This meant having an eye on the object and an eye on the phenomena of perceptual experience. These sculptures were described in terms of Husserl's real objects. They were vaguely utilitarian everyday objects, which also provided a rich parade of perceptual objects and experiences.

In this sense, Smithson found such sculptures to verge on transparency. They were inside and outside, external object and internal perception:

> *An uncanny materiality inherent in the surface engulfs the basic structure... What is outside vanishes to meet the inside, while what is inside vanishes to meet the outside. The concept of 'anti-mattter' overruns, and fills everything, making these very definite works verge on the notion of disappearance. The important phenomenon is always the basic lack of substance at the core of the "facts."*[248]

A second observation about perception was fairly consistent with Merleau-Ponty's Cezanne's Doubt, or The Phenomenology of Perception. The consistency arises in the description of perception as incomplete and full of gaps. Merleau-Ponty stresses the confused jumbled nature of perception, and its role in instigating a visual fascination. Gaps are structurally present in order to ensure that unseen parts of the sculpture induce further perception. The gaps are the conduit of visual demand and desire. In order to see this aspect of perception it was preferable to have at hand an object that tended to empty out the visual field, to recede to the horizon or to a vanishing point. Accordingly, Smithson observed in Judd's sculptures that,

> *Sequences of lost ideas emanate from discrete sources-- a string of incompletely understood phenomena, lacking the common thermal, mechanical, electrical, magnetic, and chemical factors. From form to form nothing is seen. Zero-sight on the horizon-line is repeated over and over almost exactly. Successive negatives and positives follow the*

---

[248] "Donald Judd", S2, p. 6.

> *entropy... Indifference to realism and idealism is evident in this "Phenomenology of Perception".*[249]

Smithson reiterated this point by describing perception of a Judd sculpture as "a parade of multiple aspects and confused relations", where "the eye's rapture is thrown off by chance distractions." This phenomenological reportage of perceptual experience, brought about by a reduction of attention to the acts of pure visual consciousness, had the virtue of providing a clear basis on which to describe even unclear or incomplete perceptual phenomena.

To the description of perception as jumbled, he added an observation of its entropic slide into boredom: "The eyes grow weary, heavy upon the mind, and bring to one's consciousness a valid disappointment... One sees a group of distances made of false solids that seem innocuous and dull."[250]

He seems to have understood, from his readings in phenomenology, that perception was structurally incomplete, and that this incompletion was fundamental to the functioning of a type of consciousness and desire. Empty objects such as a Judd's sculpture, as they recede from perception and remain incomplete and hidden, call or bid for further perception. As Farber put it, "Perception wants more than it can grasp *qua* perception."[251]

Although Smithson may have paraphrased a description of Merleau-Ponty in describing Judd, there remains a distinct difference. For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness does not find clarification through a singular study of its subjective constitution. Consciousness can only be clarified in synthesis with a dynamic, temporal and vital world. Smithson, however, saw consciousness clarified by its lapsing into incoherence and nullity. Compared to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Smithson's description of entropy as a universal of perception leads him to slide off the scales of Husserl's transcendental subjectivity. In effect, he was far more reductive in rendering the subject frozen, regressed and exhausted. The reduction ends up on an imagined universal of perception, as "the inorganic matrix of the mind, [where] blindness takes place." This early use of phenomenology was more reductive than Husserl, and less socio-historical than Merleau-Ponty.

---

249 "Untitled", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frame 697. This text is not in S2. In this passage Smithson is paraphrasing a description of Merleau-Ponty by Quentin Lauer, Phenomenology: Genesis and Prospect, p. 183. "Merlueau-Ponty is not concerned with promoting either realism or idealism; rather he is indifferent to both."

250 "Untitled", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frame 697.

251 Marvin Farber, The Aims of Phenomenology: The Motives, Methods and Impact of Husserl's Thought, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1966, p. 113.

3. Site / Non-Site

In the period 1967-72, Smithson repeatedly turned to phenomenology in developing his practice of Non-site sculptures. These sculptures generally involved making a trip to a "Site". Smithson would then walk around the site, looking at maps, taking photographs, making observations and collecting geological samples. Upon returning to New York, he would then assemble his photographs, maps and site samples using frames, bins and sometimes mirrors. Usually, these Non-sites were shown in a gallery or museum, although they were occasionally photographed in their original site. The location of sites varied, including New Jersey and the American deserts.

His written accounts of these visits often contain a combination of external observations and internal observations of phenomenal experience. For example, he regularly distinguished between sense data, perception, and concepts, when describing the selection of a Site for a Site / Non-site work.

> *The investigation of a specific site is a matter of extracting concepts out of existing sense-data through direct perceptions. Perception is prior to conception, when it comes to site selection or definition. One does not impose, but rather exposes the site-- be it interior or exterior.*[252]

There is substantial, if not complete, reason for understanding the Non-sites in terms of phenomenology. Unfortunately, the evidence for this is scattered among many texts, including the first footnote of "Spiral Jetty", his unpublished "A Provisional Theory of Non-sites", the "Interview with P. A. Norvell", and the "Wheeler Tapes". Placing these comments together serves to clarify his use of phenomenological philosophy as well as clarifying the logic and generic theory of the Non-Sites.. It can also account for the subsequent variations on this generic logic as it led on to his *Hypothetical Continents* and to earthworks. Given these texts, then, what was the general practice or method used in making Non-sites?

a) Site Visit: Empirical and Phenomenological

A general account of the Site / Non-Site works would commence with Smithson setting off from the centre of New York for a peripheral Site. His readings of geological history, his study of fossils, minerals, and the *mise-en scenè* of the natural history museum often guided him in his search. He also owned a large number of maps and guidebooks. In looking at potential Sites, he tended to bracket out all but the visual and perceptual.[253] He sought the Site "in terms of esthetic boundaries rather than

---

[252] "A Thing is a Hole in a Thing it is Not", S2, p. 96.

[253] There is an exception to this in *Line of Wreckage, Bayonne, N. J.* Smithson considered Bayonne to be an Egyptian madhouse where everyone "knuckles under". See "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 205.

political or economic boundaries".[254] With his geological guidebooks in hand, he sought sites that were already reduced, already transparent and phenomenally exhausted, their visibility limited:

> *When I get to a site that strikes the kind of timeless chord, I use it. The site selection is by chance. There is no willful choice. A site at zero degree, where the material strikes the mind, where absences become apparent, appeals to me, where the disintegrating of time and space seems very apparent... the ego vanishes for a while.*[255]

Once on a Site, Smithson then concentrated, rather in the manner of the "natural attitude", by gathering "information" and empirical evidence of its geological history. Depending upon the site, this included volcanoes, lakes, and sedimentary beds.

In parallel with this, he also concentrated on his perceptions of the site, thereby causing the natural ego to diminish. This concentration on perception was called a "perceptual calculus".[256] This double effort during a site visit was explained quite straightforwardly in terms of the mind / matter dilemma. He was splitting his consciousness between the material reality of the Site, and the mental events of perception. His method was to place empirical observations of external objects in parallel with phenomenological observation of inner perceptual objects. "It's a matter of wrestling with these material properties and at the same time with the mental experiences...a matter of setting up correspondences..."[257]

b) Further Reductions of Mind and Matter

According to Smithson's descriptions, having undertaken a set of parallel observations, there then occurred a further set of reductions of the material site and the conscious mind. This allowed him to observe or 'set up correspondences' between the two. The reduction of the site led to intuitions of its logical forms, its rules and laws. These general rules were taken from his study of the characteristics of geology, such as fluvial deposition, saline crystallisation, and volcanic heating. He considered the speed of cracks, and listed the major processes of rock and mineral disintegration: "Oxidation, Hydration, Carbonatization, and solution." Occasionally, human activity also registered, for example, the engineering history of an abandoned airport (Pine Barrens) and a Steel Mill (Essen, Germany), and the social structure of a town (Bayonne, N.J.). He focused on the materials and general processes at work on a site. The extent of these materials and processes marked the limit of the site. "I'm scanning the physical material before I start to set up the plan...I'm looking for a homogenous

---

[254] "A Provisional Theory of Non-sites", S2, p. 364.

[255] "Interview with Patsy Norvell", S2, p. 194.

[256] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 222.

[257] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 215.

material that, in a sense, covers the vicinity of the site, and the site is bounded after I find the material."[258]

In parallel with the reduction of the site to its geological conditions and structures. perception also underwent a reduction. This was in a way comparable to Husserl's eidetic reduction. In this reduction. he sought to observe the fundamental conditions and structures of the transcendental ego, the means by which it gathered and synthesised perceptions into meanings. He described a variety of necessary and active mental structures that were used by his consciousness. For example, the transcendental ego was seen to use a range of temporal and spatial mappings, which included grids, axial geometry, mirrorings, and dialectics. These pre-reflective structures and logic-forms enabled the ego to gather perception into coherence.

Smithson drew a number of conclusions from this practice. Firstly, he noted how consciousness was a cartographer of hypotheses, a maker of propositions about something, regardless of whether its propositions were true or false. "Most of our abstractions are hypothetical, our mapping is hypothetical."[259] It used ideal objects to map real objects. Bearing in mind Husserl's definition that real object include both external sites and internal perceptual acts, (because both are temporal), Smithson concludes that sites and perceptual experience alike are mapped by the same structures. The question remains, though, where these ideal objects come from. Do they arise from within mental experience, or does the mind borrow them from the site?

Perhaps the most important quality of consciousness that Smithson's reduction uncovers is a condition of consciousness as a 'gatherer' through its capacity for abstraction, for its recognition of *types* of things. This gathering, and its treatment of real objects as both internal and external to the subject, allowed a porosity between subject and site. For these reasons, Smithson found that a site could contribute greatly to effecting the gathering acts of typification and abstraction made by consciousness. Like Husserl, Smithson proposed an interface between reality and consciousness, in which reality impinges directly upon it.[260]In this respect the mind was, for Smithson, inescapably part of the life-world. It was constantly immersed in reality, and constantly borrowing conditions and structures from the external world in making its own abstractions and meanings. As he may have read in his library,

---

258 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 217.

259 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 203.

260 Jaakko Hintikka, "The Phenomenological Dimension", The Cambridge Companion to Husserl, Smith and Smiths (Eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 83.

> *If there are any worlds, any real physical things whatever, then the empirical motivations constituting them must be able to extend into my experience and into that of each Ego.*[261]

The effects of a site on the mind became visible through the highly reduced level of the eidetic reduction. What was seen during this reduction then became one basis for the making of a non-site.

Smithson reached one further conclusion about the exchange between mind and matter, and its description in the non-site. He pondered the role language played in making his observations and reports. He found that, as the edetic objects were imagined and described, language introduced an inevitable element of "fiction" into his accounts. Language described ideals by using highly organised spatial systems (syntactics). From a point of view afforded by the eidetic reduction, Smithson argued that consciousness gathered perception into meaning by virtue of a set of systems. It then represented these systems through a set of ordered material signifiers. Consciousness was a maker of "fictions", a temporary, shifting set of gathered concepts. What lent "integrity" to his own writings was his awareness of all language as a temporary structuring, a tentative model which could only fairly be regarded as a fiction.

Smithson added a supplement to Husserl's scheme of reductions. He proposed the existence of "surd" objects below Husserl's real and ideal objects, and an entropic ego below the transcendental ego. At this level even visual observation condenses to a state that can only be accessed through imagination, fantasy and language—which of course is quite unlike anything proposed by Husserl.

c) Yet Further Reductions: The Surd

While the above reduction of empirical site and eidetic consciousness revealed a transference of universals and ideal objects from site to mind, this was due to consciousness' directedness, its gathering, its map-making and proposition making. An essential condition of consciousness was that it was always directed at and gathering something. But, it did not necessarily always find something:

> *...so the Site is evading you all the while its directing you to it... The containment is an abstraction, but the containment doesn't really find anything. There is no object to go toward... You're on your own. You're groping out there. There is no way to find what's out there. Yet you're directed out there.*[262]

Although perception was directed, the mind could encounter nothing, or an absence or a void. Following Husserl, Smithson proposed the existence of what might be deemed an 'entropic ego'. I

---

[261] Husserl, Ideas, I, § 48)

[262] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 218.

would coin this term in order to explain how Smithson worked with Husserl's analysis but added to it a level that was more scattered and uncentered than anything proposed by Husserl. Smithson may have been drawing in theories from psychoanalysis, such as that of 'undifferentiation' in making his observations, and in so doing blurring distinctions between phenomenological and psychoanalytic definitions of the ego. While Smithson never used this term I feel it catches that ambiguity of reference between philosophical and psychoanalytic usages on which his writings played at this time.

Smithson makes the claim that if the transcendental ego can be seen to gather meanings by virtue of ideal objects (maps, grids, syntax and dialectic), then as a logical necessity, there must be an aspect of consciousness, an entropic ego, which scatters itself into the world. With Wheeler he used the term "scattering". On other occasions, he used less intentional and active terms such as "de-structuration", "de-architecturisation", and "low-level perception". If the entropic ego possessed a scattering perception, a type of eidetic reduction revealed that it did so using a particular sort of object. He called this a "surd" object. And just as ideal objects from a site could extend to the mind, so too could surd objects on a site extend into experience.

This final reduction, then, made it possible to describe what he called, after Samuel Beckett, "surd" objects: broken abstractions, "mental wreckages", which were added as a third category to Husserl's Real and ideal objects. He described entropic perception and the surd for Dennis Wheeler. He used as his example the *Double Non-site, California and Nevada* (1968) which is composed of volcanic obsidian and pumice stone from two dormant volcanoes **[Plate 12]**. The sites and the abstract structure he has given to the sites, contain a volcanic surd:

> Wheeler: *What do you think of the low level perception?*
>
> Smithson: *It's spreading around, its running out all around the site. There's no focus, no fixed focus, although this three-dimensional map, the non-site, indicates that something is out there... You're incapable of seeing that your senses are tending to break down into other sense responses. In other words, there's a contingency within the containment so that you have essentially a gathering taking place out of the scattering...*

He continued his description of a scattering low level perception, noting the curious temporal functioning of the entropic ego:

> *...And I'm not doing the scattering, the scattering has already been scattered... It's that loss of focus that interests me, you know, the perception always evading... The thing that holds it together is the idea of the volcano. So you might say that this volcano is taking place within my mental experience... the unpredictability of a kind of mental volcano.*

This remark would seem to be one of Smithson's most vivid descriptions of the entropic ego. The surd object of the volcano became the surd mental object. This object was a scatterer, and like the

scattering lava flow of the site, consciousness energetically and randomly spread around, conforming to the contours of the land, then cooled, lost energy, and crystallised.[263] Describing this entropic ego's functioning was made possible, he observed, by virtue of a quick return to the eidos, the vividly mapped idea-image of a volcano. By quickly jumping to the eidetic level he is able to observe that the scattered entropic ego was *already* scattered. This entropic ego seemed to pre-exist all other levels of the ego.

As has been seen, some of Husserl's and Smithson's ideal mental objects could be taken from a site, while others existed in the mind. The same condition held for Surd objects. The Surd objects that existed in this lowest level of consciousness were quite minimal, though their multiple spatial and temporal qualities made it possible to connect spatially and temporally distant sites. The entropic ego had only two basic and highly evasive elements: multiple points, and a horizon. In the example he gave, multiple "points" were isomorphs of the lumps of dense hard obsidian spread out in the soft volcanic pumices of his sites. Points were described as abstractions that expand and contract in time and space. From the viewpoint of logic, they were 'impossible objects' that "jeopardised map making".

> *The dot evades our capacity to find its center. Where is the central point, axis, pole, dominant interest, fixed position, absolute structure, or decided goal? The mind is always being hurled towards the outer edge into intractable trajectories that lead to vertigo.*[264]

He also described the collection of such points for the making of a non-site.

> *The points of pick-up, or the points of collection, tend to be scattered throughout the site, yet there is no possible way of defining those points. So if you go to the sites, there's no evidence other than the site, you're sort of thrown off the non-site. This is the coming together of those particular points. And those points tend to cover the landmasses so that, in a sense, all this terrain will be homogenized. Taking this rather unbounded area and then transferring it into a boundary situation so that the points tend to obliterate the land expanses in the nonsites. There's a kind of balance between the containment and the aspect of scattering.*[265]

An horizon was also generally given to be present in the entropic ego, and in the site. It was similarly "impossible":

> *... a horizon is an impossible thing to locate. Even though it is right there in front of you, it is constantly evading your grasp. It is only a mirage that can't be fixed, arrested or stopped, or transferred into an abstract condition.*[266]

---

263 Smithson's *Glue Pour*, (1970) and *Asphalt Rundown*, (1969) might be seen in a similar light.

264 "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", S2, p. 94.

265 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 218.

As spatiality and temporality was not stable in this ego, points existed without stable relations. He called these variously " surd areas", "irrational areas", and "regions where logic is suspended", set against an horizon, an abyss, a negation. It made a wreck of the precision of abstraction and its Ideal objects. "It's a kind of bringing chaos and order into very close quarters. It's a very precarious kind of range to operate in; it's fraught with all kinds of disasters, but there, disasters are sort of frozen..."[267]

Finally, Smithson was of the view that the Surd object was something that had a remarkable ability to demand satisfaction. He pointed to the satisfactions of Mayan religious ceremonies where matter was sacrificed, and to Georges Bataille's Death and Sensuality.[268] Both were involved in an entropic ego, which experienced disjunction and Surd objects as a liberation.

Smithson did not want his scheme of reductions of the subject to be understood as an idealist philosophy in the manner of Conceptual art. By adding the entropic ego and the Surd object to Husserl's (ambiguously idealistic) scheme, he felt he was investigating and describing the physical limitations of the subject, and the immersion of his thinking process in the fabric of the material world. The experiences that Smithson described on the site clearly owed a great deal to phenomenological philosophy. But, by what order of thinking did the non-site sculpture come to be?

d) The Formation of the Non-site

Up to this point in my general chronology of the site / non-site, Husserl has proved very helpful. An encounter with a site could be studied through a sequence of reductions. But, it is not immediately evident how the non-site fits in this model of parallel material and mental reductions. What, if anything, do non-sites represent?

Dennis Wheeler asked Smithson about the relation of the non-site to the perceptual experiences of the site. His response indicated that the sites induced eidetic and entropic ego experiences that were then "contained", "translated" or "transformed" into physical non-sites.

> *When you investigate tangible, physical fact this will set up a mental experience which is like the mirror. And how I perceive this is metamorphosed through my mental state, and then I translate that mental state into a physical state... I'm not just presenting materials, there's a kind of transformation that takes place.*[269]

---

266 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 239.

267 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", Smithson Archives, roll 3833 , frame 1135.

268 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 230.

269 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 209.

Wheeler then asked Smithson whether this was a linguistic transformation in the manner of Chomsky. He got no reply.[270] If the non-sites are a language, what kind of language are they? In an essay on the theory of Non-sites Smithson observed:

> *To understand this language of sites is to appreciate the metaphor between syntactical construct and the complex of ideas, letting the former function as a three dimensional picture which doesn't look like a picture.*[271]

The elements of a *Non-site* consisted of shaped maps, serial photographs and framing containers of materials taken from a site. For example, one map was given an octagonal outer edge. In another, holes were cut in the maps. Maps were made into frames, geometrical forms were drawn on maps, maps were folded, and in another instance, two maps were conjoined. These manipulations might be understood as "picture" descriptions of the universals and Ideal objects at work in his own mental mapping of the site. The photographs might be understood as records of phenomenological experience, of sense-data. The metal bins describe part of the process of the scattering and containment of consciousness.[272]

Ann Reynolds has compared the Non-sites to the recreated habitats and mineral display cabinets in the Natural History museum in New York. [273] In this view, "Smithson was engaging two places, one inside and the other outside the exhibition space." Reynolds' linguistic model interprets the distance between a Non-site and a Site as a "metonymic" distance between a signifier and a referent. Their unusual way of signifying a site through non-unified aesthetic appearance "twisted one's visual pleasure with an inescapable irony that succeeds in short-circuiting the uncontrollable assumptions one has about what and how nature should be viewed." This was largely because the abstraction of the site had not been hidden and naturalised. The non-site, in this case, is seen as a metonym or symbolic equivalent to the site. By placing the non-site in the museum, Reynolds sees Smithson making a critique of the social norms for representing "the outside". Added to this was the irony that some of the original sites in industrial areas had disappeared. "Smithson's non-site thus presents a fragile system, soon to be nothing more than an image without a referent." For Reynolds, non-sites refer to sites that have a social and political significance, as Essen in the Ruhr Valley, and Bayonne N. J., and use the museum to preserve a record of the social fragility and economic transience of such sites.

---

[270] This question was edited out in S2. What it indicates, perhaps, is that Smithson had difficulty giving a phenomenological account alongside a linguistic account of the Site / Non-site works.

[271] "A Provisional Theory of Non-sites", S2, p. 364.

[272] To say that the photographs are just records of phenomenal experience is to greatly simplify his writings on photography. This will be addressed again in chapter five.

[273] Ann Reynolds, "Reproducing Nature: The Museum of Natural History As Nonsite", October, No. 45, 1988, p.115.

Seeing the non-sites through his interests in phenomenological philosophy, however, tends to add another dimension to Reynolds' explanation. The non-sites do not just relate the inside and outside of a museum, or critique social norms for misrepresenting an external reality. They describe the subject's perceptual experiences while on the site. They were records of phenomenal experience gathered elsewhere, in a detailed study of the interaction between site and consciousness.[274] His "Provisional Theory of Non-sites", for example, neither mentions the role of the non-site in the museum nor the social aspects of a site. It only suggests that a site might be revisited after seeing a non-site.[275]

As Reynolds quotes Smithson, "How we *see* things and places is not a secondary concern, but primary."[276] It would seem that Smithson's understanding of "*how* we see" was first and foremost a matter of phenomenological investigation. A social theory of *what* we see and mean was to be built upon an understanding of how consciousness constituted and scattered meaning. The process began with a phenomenological bracketing that excluded all social, existential and metaphysical meanings. Attention was solely addressed to a description of the pure acts and objects of consciousness, even if it turned up evidence of a subjectless, entropic ego and its surd objects.

For Smithson the problem of the non-site was in part the problem of language itself. If he was sceptical about the non-sites, it was because they failed adequately to distinguish the socially determined aspects of his sculptural language. His written descriptions similarly included fantasy, imagination and social codes, and was therefor not a purely descriptive act. Indeed, if the methods of reduction in phenomenology were increasingly dependent on imagination, could such a method imagine the objects by which imagination took place? Good descriptions of phenomenological experience were not easy to make, then, and this was compounded by the role of language and culture. Perhaps culture was a type of site too, whose logical forms could similarly permeate the mind. I would next like to trace some of Smithson's response to this problem. In so doing I would like to postpone consideration of one important concern with Non-sites as language. This consideration of language as "coded matter" is better addressed in the next chapter after a consideration of his knowledge of linguistics.

---

[274] Smithson's dislike of Impressionism, and interest in Cezanne is quite informative. Impressionism failed to account for the effects of a Site's logical forms on the perception of the Site. It was only a description of sense-data, and lacked any further reflection on the structures of consciousness in interaction with a *plien-air* site. Perhaps Merleau-Ponty contributed to Smithson's appreciation of "Cezanne's Doubt".

[275] I tried this in the course of reconstructing the Non-site *Chalk Mirror Displacement* for the Smithson retrospective in Oslo, April 1999. The quarry is now a home to a housing estate. The reconstruction, for the Art Institute of Chicago, utilised chalk from a nearby quarry.

[276] Reynolds, "Reproducing Nature: The Museum of Natural History As Nonsite", p. 127. She quotes Smithson's "Proposal, S2, p. 380.

In sticking to the chronology of his work, I would now like to trace the logic by which Smithson brought the non-site back into the social, back into external reality, and temporarily back into the museum.

e) Three Variations on the Non-site

Out of the general logic of the site / non-site Smithson devised certain further variations suggested by the phenomenological framework of his method. Some of these variations resulted in only a single work. One of them, however, led on to numerous works called *Hypothetical Continents*, and finally on to earthworks. These variations increasingly returned the non-site to external reality, including social reality, but bypassed the museum. While this in itself may be interpreted as a political act, what was the logic of this return?

In the basic non-site the main purpose was to describe the ways in which a site 'caused' or corresponded to consciousness. He found that the logical forms of a site managed to effect a part of perception. For example, the 'gathering' of the logical forms of a site came to effect the 'gathering' objects which the mind used to make sense of perception. Likewise, the scattering entropic forces in play on a site effected the mode of the scattering of perception. The emphasis was consistently on the ways in which a site contributed to mind. Clearly, though, the mind had its own objects and surds, and Smithson wanted to know more about them. He stretched his non-site formula to do so.

In a variation of the general logic Smithson made a one-off non-site with no reference to a site, which he called *Non-site, Site Uncertain* (1969). This sculpture used a bag of coal which he purchased in New York. Non-site containers were fabricated in the shape of brackets, L-shaped bins, half frames, each one smaller than the next. In excluding a site visit, this variation allowed greater concentration on the mental acts of fantasy, imagination and memory. In this instance, the mind was on its own, able to focus only on immanently real objects, on culturally acquired knowledge, and a small sample of the material from the site. Without a site to visit, Smithson restricted himself to the mental memories of his geology textbooks such as his Handbook of Rocks and Minerals, to the paintings of Charles R. Knight, and to the *mise en scène* of the natural history museum. The emphasis on the mental was compounded by choosing material from a site that did not exist in accessible space, because it lay deep underground in the coal beds of central Ohio. Neither did it exist in time, because the flora and fauna that composed the coal were millions of years old. His coal bag contained pieces of material memory from a site that no longer in time or space.

> *But, the idea is now that the sites are beginning to completely evade me, and sink back down into geologic time... The existent sites, the sites that are on the surface, are always*

> *tending to drift down... [this]... leads down to a point that doesn't exist, indicates the direction of the experience.*[277]

By using a site which had to be imagined, he was hoping to be able to better observe relations between imagination and language. He does not, for example, replace a description of a site visit with a description of his social and economic exchanges in purchasing the coal. He works only with his memories, and an index of a site that was unavailable in time and space. In a similar instance he visited a salt mine in New York State so that he could, as it were, traverse time and space by travelling (with mirrors in hand) down to the bottom of the mine.

In the *Non-site, Site Uncertain* the bag of coal was a memory trace of a site. His fantasy imagining of the site was also an object which could be examined for its structure, and inspected for its correspondence with a set of Carboniferous period essences and universals. For Smithson the bag of coal provided some information. But beyond a certain point the object was incomplete: there was no site, nor was it accessible in time or space. This object became fascinating, inexplicable, and in so doing induces hypotheses, fantasies and imagined sites. Hypotheses arise, then, out of the incompletness of his perception and of the object. If Smithson latches on to this phenomenological conclusion, then he proceeded a step further in trying to make sense of the mental objects which underlie fantasy and imagination. But in trying to observe these mental objects, they become as fleeting and incomplete as the coal:

> *You're presented with a certain amount of material and then what's generated is not something that is explainable. You're into an inexplicable area of investigation. All the investigation tends to be inexplicable. You're not presented with any kind of obvious object. The object is always defeating itself in terms of its objectivity. In that cancelling aspect you get into the lower level, subterranean consciousness, or in this case a submergence.*[278]

It would seem that the deeper and more temporally distant the physical objects the more they are coincident with the lower levels of the mind. The objects which produce visual fantasy, imagination and hypotheses are condensed in time and space beyond the limits of visuality. Or so it might seem, as Smithson has a rather astounding answer to this problem of the non-extensive aspects of the mind. According to him, these ideal objects are suddenly "invaded". Mental objects don't exist anywhere, he remarks, "But then suddenly the existence of the non-existent thing is invaded with raw material which in a sense solidifies the hypothetical. So it's taking a kind of nonexistent thing and making it existent."[279]

---

[277] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 223.

[278] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 220.

The moment in which the mental is invaded by the material is the moment when the non-site, or any type of language, takes form. This is the moment when ideal objects suddenly become radically real and material as a linguistic substance. What is important to Smithson in this moment is to observe the materiality of language. He was not concerned with the fullness of the non-sites' truth value about the site. This was irrelevant. What was important was to see that the mind had the capacity to materialise its objects through language, and that this language, as a physical object, was just as baffling as the piece of coal. The non-site, when considered for its linguistic materiality, opened up a whole linguistic world of possibilities. This site of language was partly cultural in its formation, partly organic, and partly inert, fissured and incomplete.

Having proceeded with the logic of the non-sites, Smithson reached a conclusion that terminated the need to continue with them. Their phenomenological method led Smithson back to the world, and in response he made a trip to Mexico, where he wrote about architecture as a type of encoded linguistic space. He also went to the Cayuga salt mines in northern New York, to descend two miles under the ground looking for low levels of space and a backward journey in time. Both of these trips were predicated on the logic of the non-site. This logic of the non-site furthered one more step in a third variation, which were collectively called *Hypothetical Continents.*

A third variation on the site / non-site theory produced numerous works, generally designated as *Hypothetical continents.* In this variation, matter did not cause mind, but rather the reverse. Mind caused a linguistic world which became so large that it became the world. Smithson spoke of these Non-sites as a type of time travel to experience the memory traces of a site. The site was no longer "Uncertain", but conceptual and imagined continents. For these works he consulted the emerging geological theory of continental drift along side cultural myths of lost continents such as Atlantis.[280]

Further examples of his third variation were the *Hypothetical Continent (Lemuria) in Shells* (1969), *Hypothetical Continent (Map of Broken Glass, Atlantis)* (1969); and the *Hypothetical Continent (Cathaysia) in Stone,* (1969). Two of these works were sited maps of the lost continents hypothesised by geologists. The Cathaysia map **[Plate 13]** was made of glacial boulders that sink into soft ground, while Lemuria was made in eroding shells on a sandy beach. Using Carboniferous period limestone, he constructed a map of this period showing the lost continent of Gondwanaland. The Hypothetical maps of Atlantis included several maps on paper as well as a larger mapping made from several tons of fragmented glass. While Cathaysia, Gondwanaland and Lemuria were hypothesised by geologists, Atlantis was an historical fantasy of a lost continent, and as such was a site of cultural fantasy.

---

[279] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 220.

In explaining this to Wheeler, he chose among his options the most fictional and least empirical of the hypothetical continents. Of all the *Hypothetical Continents*, Atlantis was the most difficult and complicated because it was wholly imaginary, even though recent geological theory confirmed the existence of lost continents. In his account of the *Hypothetical Continent (Map of Broken Glass, Atlantis)* **[Plate 14]**, he first read from a dictionary entry for the word "Shoring" in order to define a universal that was at work in the act of mapping. The suggestive ambiguity of his remarks hinged on whether he was describing a pre-historical site, the structure of a mental conceptualisation and imagination, or the heap of broken transparent glass installed on the urban beach at Loveladies Island, New Jersey.

> Wheeler: *With the Island, that shoring makes great sense, because it happens every where at once. It happens in the collapse, and the formation that the glass takes on...And the shore of the island [Loveladies] itself is going on.*
>
> Smithson: *The support is liquid, also; [through] the weight action on the shore, it tends to get shoreless...*
>
> Wheeler: *...There are references to another time in a very peculiar way, that's making geological time available in material in a very peculiar sense...there's geologic time because the center of the earth is available at some level or another below the surface.*
>
> Smithson: *And also there's the fact that it's a depositional kind of crystalline thing where the facets are uncertain. It's... an idealization of the facets.*[281]

In his explanation, Smithson described for Wheeler a process of reduction, such that *Hypothetical Continent (Map of Broken Glass, Atlantis)* was an "idealization", a reduction to the universal conditions at work in the imagining of the site. He was mapping his mental idea of the site, as if his idea was a collection of shored facets:

> *Wheeler: What do you mean by facets?*
>
> *Smithson: Well, the plates...get back to that metaphor of Oz...through the force of the twister you're propelled to this central City of Oz...which is essentially a crystalline buildup... Oz, like Atlantis is this difficult place... a vanishing point.*[282]

The *Atlantis* is a map of the mental objects that constitute imagination. But these objects must be imagined, thus causing an eventual collapse of his logic. To this end he interprets the film *The Wizard of Oz* as a trip not only to a fantasyland of wish fulfilment. The Emerald City and the cyclone that

---

[280] These included: James Dana, The Geological Story Briefly Told, New York, 1895; Camp, L. Sprague De, Lost Continents: The Atlantis Theme in History, Science, and Literature, Dover, 1970; Willy Ley, Another Look at Atlantis, Ace Books, 1969; James Mavor, Voyage to Atlantis, Putnam, 1969.

[281] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 226.

[282] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 226.

transports her are themselves the very structures and objects through which fantasy takes place. In the interaction between twister and city, "the energy gets so intense that it breaks into imaginative or fairy-tale results. Like the ultimate reality, it's like going from the black-and-white film in the picture to Technicolor..."

> Wheeler: *It seems like a preposterous possibility too.*
>
> Smithson: *It's the difficulty of dealing with the hidden aspect of nature. The phenomenon of nature destroys itself through itself...it's always an evasive kind of situation.*[283]

For Smithson, The *Map of Broken Glass (Atlantis)* **[Plate 15]** was a map of the mythological island of Atlantis. But crucially, it was also a map of the conditions and properties of myth-making, hypothesis-making, and finally, language making. Smithson found something uncertain and shifting, something unstable in both myth and continent, as a shared structural property. In returning one to the world it is as if language arrives too late to explain experience, too late to grasp what has already passed. It is also caught in time in the sense that, just like the objects it describes, language is bound in time and destined to break down.

Perhaps, in all the convoluted logic of this work, what is most important is the resulting non-site. The making of a paper map non-site led to the making of ever-larger and more physical maps, and as the map becomes a site, at this point, the whole phenomenological reduction begins to reverse. Non-sites, mental though they were, become sites, as the scale and materiality of the map is increased and expanded. As Smithson explained,

> *Well, the* Map of Broken Glass *points to the* Island of Broken Glass, *and the map, of course is less threatening than the existence of an actual landmass. The drive to discover that particular lost continent is fraught with all kinds of perplexity and vexation. There's a kind of grinding aspect of it, an almost painful recognition... Well, the map is transferred from paper and ink into material. And... as signifiers the map and the material maps offer the same amount of awareness, except that the physicality increases, in terms of the weight or the mass of the thing increases, the focus gets more intense, pinpointing the shape... burns the brain out.*[284]

In keeping with this shift towards the material realisation of his maps, a number of related jokes were also made in "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", about maps so large they become reality, and lead to the loss of distinction between language and the world.

---

283 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 227.

284 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 228.

> *In Chapter II* [of Lewis Carol's Sylvie], *a German Professor tells how his country's cartographers experimented with larger and larger maps until they finally made one with a scale of a mile to a mile... The Professor said, "It has never been spread out, yet. The farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country and shut out the sunlight! So now we use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well."*[285]

The *Hypothetical Continents* were a type of description of mental events. They record the types of objects and processes involved in acts of imagination and fantasy. But in realising these sculptural descriptions he was increasingly inclined to build his work out on a site. This allowed him to take into consideration the types of geological processes at work on the site. He builds his islands on an island, he makes his maps of sinking continents on soft sinking ground, and he constructs his maps of lost places out of the geological traces of those places. Not only does his sculptural language move increasingly out into the world, because as it expands in scale, his language increasingly becomes a world. He found that the more he mapped his fantasy of a lost continent the more this map became a continent. Language and the world were both the same, in the respect that both were composed of "coded matter".

V. Conclusion

In the light of this, it must appear doubtful that Smithson aimed to establish the thesis that the mind was only reducible to descriptions of its material behaviour. It also appears doubtful that Smithson aimed to establish the idealist thesis that only pure mind could be verified and provide certainty. His phenomenological study of conscious experience did not deal with "Essences" in the sense of objects with a permanent ascribable "Being". His universals were empirically real, mental conditions, which were broken down by empirically real mental scattering and entropy. Both Smithson and Husserl claimed that universals and abstractions were devoid of metaphysical mystery. Husserl's reduction, as Farber points out, is not to be taken with any metaphysical presuppositions, either idealist or materialist. Though Smithson may have claimed this, he did not generally act on it. There was something in Smithson's thinking that put a metaphysical spin into his consideration of the universal of entropy.

Like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Smithson returned from a bracketed state to external material fact, and to socio-political reality. Consciousness was always gathering an object, always immersed in the world. The non-sites traced the reduction to mind, and the *Hypothetical Continents* then traced a return back to matter and external reality.

---

[285] "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", S2, p. 93.

What was unique in the third stage of his phenomenological logic was Smithson's consideration of the role of language and cultural knowledge in mental events. In this sense he exceeds Husserl's concerns, and approaches those of Merleau-Ponty. In his day, his concern with language was not unique, as theories of language were increasingly used in art practice and art criticism. Before returning in the next chapter to Smithson's phenomenological concerns over language, I would like to trace Smithson's interests in linguistics and the context from which they arose.

Chapter IV

THEORIES OF LANGUAGE

I. Language, Logic and Negation

Between 1964 and 1973, Robert Smithson developed a number of theories about language. These theories were subsequently of great interest to critics who examined Smithson's work largely from a postmodernist vantage point. Despite this interest, little has been said about the sources on which Smithson drew, and how his theories were in part a response to a larger set of historical conditions within the American art world. The purpose of this chapter is to continue the previous chapter's work in tracing Smithson's treatment of philosophy, by looking at the types of linguistic philosophy that he studied. This is then applied to an understanding of how he responded to developments in the art world, and how he applied his theories to his work as a sculptor. I would add that, due largely to my own predilections, I concentrate here far more on his fascination with the spatial aspects of language than the temporal. The clarity of my description and analysis is thus bought somewhat at the expense of framing out his comments on temporally perennial and chronologically retroactive qualities of language.

Smithson developed his interests in linguistics at a time when the field was rapidly expanding and of growing popular interest. This popularity was due to a number of factors. In 1967, for example, Marshal McLuhan's made the much publicised claim that 'the medium was the message', and that technology was an extension of the human nervous system that altered patterns of perception to create new environments, senses and feelings. Another factor was the advent of machine languages for computers, and the many causes for speculation that arose over artificial intelligence. This period was quite interested in that branch of linguistics called syntactics, and as such Smithson was engaged in a

widely held contemporary concern. In their context, then, Smithson's interests in linguistics was an interest in the most active area of twentieth century philosophy, and he was one of the first American artists to make a concerted study of this body of knowledge.

In a sense, Smithson's recommendation that artists study language was nothing new. An older generation of critics such as Greenberg, for example, had made many observations about medium specificity in art and literature, which were confirmed by linguistics. Among this generation there was a general optimism about the benefits of linguistic studies. Though Smithson did not share this optimism, his library still included a few examples, such as the popular writings of Susan Langer and Ernst Cassirer. These writers were part of an older generation of cultural theorists who operated within a Kantian and humanist tradition. Langer's remarks, from as early as 1942, indicated the widespread interest in, and hopes for, a philosophical linguistics. As she put it,

> *In the fundamental notion of symbolization...we have the key note of all humanistic problems...If it is indeed a generative idea it will beget tangible methods of its own, to free the deadlocked paradoxes of mind and body...and will overcome the checkmated arguments of an earlier age by discarding their very idiom and shaping their equivalents in more significant phrase. The philosophical study of symbols...holds the seed of a new intellectual harvest...* [286]

Like the older generation of critics, Smithson insisted on the importance and benefits of such studies, but he did not underestimate the resistance and fear that such recommendations would encounter.

> *The fear of language is great because nobody knows what it is. The illusion produced by language causes the artist much delight and dread. The word, to an artist, is an agent for disaster.*[287]

Smithson, and other of the Minimalist artists, shared an interest in linguistics, and its study underwent a rapid increase in the visual arts at this time. Sol LeWitt, for example, organised a language exhibition with Smithson in 1966. Carl Andre wrote poetry, Judd continued to write statements, and finally Robert Morris, Joseph Kosuth and Art and Language started to make art which largely blurred the borders between the visual and the textual. The late 1960's also saw a number of prominent critics turn to linguistics, including Fried's interests in Wittgenstein, and Krauss's interests in semiotics.

Of the three fields of linguistics, syntactics, semantics and pragmatics, Smithson preferred the first and second over the third. This is to say that the interests of the communications and computer

---

[286] Susan Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1942, p.25.

[287] Draft for "Language to be Looked at and / or Things to be Read", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frame 0166.

engineers were more important to him than the social interests expressed among many other subsequent artists and critics. He was interested, like so many others in his day, in the ways in which language functioned through its spatial and material properties. His interest in linguistics probably arose from his reading of philosophy. His general introduction to philosophy, A. C. Ewing's Fundamentals of Philosophy, for example, observed that a solution to the ancient paradox of the mind matter problem might best lie in an analysis of its language. Perhaps it was this generally expressed view that led to his fairly extensive reading of pre-war Anglo-American theory, including Analytic philosophy, the Vienna Circle, Wittgenstein's reduction of language to "propositions" and Rudolf Carnap's reductions of language syntax to mathematical expressions. To these, he added contemporary scientific studies in information theory and communications engineering. He also read and applied Structuralist linguistic theory as found in the writings of Roland Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss. He certainly owned and may have read an article about phenomenological theories of language, and Lacan's essay, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious". A final indication of his interest in language was his enthusiastic recommendation of Martin Gardner's Annotated Alice as a demonstration of language and its workings.[288] In order to further understand Smithson's views, this chapter will look more closely at his library sources in order to amplify some of the questions and issues which his writings addressed.

A. Wittgenstein: Propositions and Pictures

Smithson started his reading on linguistics on the dualist assumption that language was part matter and part mind. In starting with Wittgenstein, he found a helpful conceptual framework through which language could be studied, partly because Wittgenstein provided an image of language as something independent from mind and world. In his theory of "general negation", Wittgenstein provided Smithson a way to consider language as a world. This theory started with a consideration of the verifiability of linguistic propositions.

Early Wittgenstein was of the opinion that language could be logical and verifiable, and argued in favour of a purely linguistico-logical truth inherent only *within* language. Many of these theories were highly radical, making monumental claims about the spurious logic of all metaphysical philosophy. The implications of Vienna School theories (Wittgenstein, Ayer, Carnap, et. al.) were particularly topical in American art criticism at this time[289].

---

[288] Interview with Mel Ramsden and Michael Baldwin, Banbury, 21.2.96.

[289] Much discussed at the time by Stanley Cavell, Michael Fried and latter by Joseph Kosuth, Wittgenstein's writings were seen to oppose the rather Empiricist claims of formalism by arguing that the relation of a medium to a mind expression is only reducible to propositions which cannot be fully substantiated. Propositions, whether true or false, are still just language propositions. These propositions may make sense, especially when submitted to introspection and the rules of logic, but there is no guarantee that language propositions actually refer to anything in the real world or to an absolute nature of a medium. Smithson may have been

If the foremost among these theorists was Wittgenstein, then Smithson was quite typical of the intelligentsia of his day in first encountering linguistics amongst his writings. For Smithson the questioning of language ran parallel in time with his interests in materialist philosophy, and the two are closely linked. Given Wittgenstein's general distrust of idealism, he made sympathetic reading. Among Wittgenstein's early philosophy of language, Smithson was primarily interested in the paradoxical logic of general negation and the picture theory. This arose in his reading of excerpts of Wittgenstein's Tractatus, and two further academic commentaries.[290]

1. General Negation

Smithson read, in his introductory text on Wittgenstein's Tractatus, that logical truth in a proposition was a very difficult thing to establish.[291] The most verifiable of propositions were tautologies (i.e., Frank Stella's 'what you see is what you see.') in which all truth-propositions were mutually consistent. Beyond such circuitous propositions (indeed Smithson regarded them as "trite"), he read of Wittgenstein's logic of general negation. This was an attempt to establish a ground against which propositions could be judged to be true or false. Importantly, this logic avoided the conventional view that truth in language was grounded in the world of factual existence. In the conventional view, for a proposition to be true, the fact of which it spoke must exist. Wittgenstein, however, described an alternative ground. Truth could be established against the absence of all factual existence.

To Smithson, Wittgenstein separated the world from language by asking whether a statement could be true if nothing existed. His answer was 'yes', because logic (rather than empirical fact) dictated that there were true propositions in such cases. He reasoned that all elementary propositions would have to be regarded as false in the face of the non-existence of any factual situation. But, in the case of the non-existence of any fact, negated elementary propositions can be true. (In traditional logic, 'not p' is the one and only proposition that is true when 'p' is false and false when 'p' is true.) If nothing exists,

---

made aware of these arguments by way of reading Cornman, who examined Wittgenstein's claim that within any given language nothing can be said about the structure of that language. There may be another language (metalanguage) capable of dealing with the structure of the first language, but having itself a new structure -- thereby creating a hierarchy without limits.

For some contemporary critics, such as Michael Fried, Wittgenstein's arguments were effective in qualifying Greenberg's claim that formalism was a type of permanent meta-language for painting and sculpture capable of identifying the essential truths of the medium. Fried tended to use Wittgenstein's observation that language and pictures were subject to a whole variety of rules. He did not claim, therefore, that the medium of shape was an essential given in painting, but simply a concern that dominated at one historical moment.

[290] Smithson's library contained: Norman Malcolm, Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir, O.U.P., Oxford. 1962; Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein: Selected Texts, George Pitcher, Ed., Anchor Press, 1966; Ludwig Wittgenstein, Notebooks: 1914-1916, Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Harper Press, Date unknown; and G. E. M. Anscombe, An Introduction to Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus', Hutchinson University Library, London, 1959. James Cornman's Metaphysics, Reference, Language also discusses Wittgenstein's picture theory.

[291] G.E.M. Anscombe, An Introduction to Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus', Hutchinson University Library, London, 1959, pp. 33-34.

then a statement to that effect is true. Language is most true, then, not when it speaks of an empirical fact but when it speaks of negation, absence and void.

For Smithson, Wittgenstein also separated language from the empirical world. He did this by putting "all necessity in the realm of logical possibilities (and there are no other kinds of possibilities *and these are the same for world, thought, and language*), while the realm of facts consists of whichever of these possibilities *happen* to have come into existence by sheer contingency."[292] In this linguistic world there is no necessary relation to the world. Language makes its own world through propositions, each of which has two poles. If one wishes to survey the whole of the world of logical possibilities, then, it would be necessary to survey 'p' *and* 'not p'.

By 1965 Smithson was absorbing and considering Wittgenstein's theory of general negation. On this basis, Smithson claimed that Robert Morris' double ""mistakes"" allowed a logical truth about language to emerge. (There is also a noticeable reference to Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of a private language.):

> *Robert Morris enjoys putting sham "mistakes" into his language systems. His dummy* File, *for example, contains a special category called "mistakes". At times, the artist admits it is difficult to tell a real mistake from a false mistake...* [293]

Smithson continued,

> *...Sol LeWitt is very much aware of the traps and pitfalls of language, and as a result is also concerned with ennervating "concepts" of paradox. Everything that LeWitt thinks, writes, or has made is inconsistent and contradictory... His concepts are prisons devoid of reason. The information on his announcement for his show... is an indication of a self-destroying logic... It's like getting words caught in your eyes.*[294]

Smithson and LeWitt were both widely aware of Wittgenstein, and Smithson's comments are sensitive to the issue of negation. LeWitt was interested in the ways in which structure could be logical and systematic without being rational.[295] Smithson argued that LeWitt's investigation of the paradox of the 'not p', the negated proposition, led to such a proliferation of possibilities that it became an exercise in self-destroying logic. Yet, this exercise nevertheless produced a world of linguistic possibilities. Smithson made LeWitt's views characteristically his own, however, in extending the observation that the materials of language constituted a physical world as well as a logical world. Once he could separate these two worlds he could compare them for their similarities and differences.

---

[292] H. L. Finch, Wittgenstein, Element Press, Shaftsbury, Dorset, 1995, p. 155.

[293] "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", S2, p. 80.

[294] "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", S2, p. 80.

LeWitt's exhibition announcement was a valid proposition about the world because, as the logical possibilities accumulated, the materiality of language also became increasingly self-evident

The theory of general negation seems to have helped Smithson in viewing the world of facts and "Sites" from the world of language, and to see parallels in their logic and structure. To this was added his strong sense for materialism and the material properties of language. Language and the world shared certain logical forms and certain material forms. As will be discussed, Smithson's Non-Site maps increasingly turned into earthworks, and in so doing ensured that linguistic material began to *be* the world. Perhaps due to his interest in mapping he also took note of how Wittgenstein conceived the relation between visual propositions and the world.

2. The Picture Theory

Perhaps it is not surprising to see Smithson, who was so fond of the logic problems of Martin Gardner and Jorge Luis Borges, taking an interest Wittgenstein's early theory that propositions have a feature that is very comparable to a feature of pictures. This was a usefully theory because it provided a model of the parallels between pictures, language and world. He took the opportunity to apply it in the course of his comments on Yve Klein's then-recent works, which included monochrome IKB paintings and spheres.

> *A sense of the Earth as a map undergoing disruption leads the artist to the realization that nothing is certain or formal. Language itself becomes mountains of symbolic debris. Klein's IKB globes betray a sense of futility-- a collapsed logic. G.E.M. Anscombe writing on "Negation" in* An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus *says, " But it is clear then an all-white or all-black globe is not a map." It is also clear that Klein's all blue globe is not a map; rather it is an anti-map; a negation of "creation" and the "creator" that is supposed to be in the artist's "self".*[296]

According to Wittgenstein's theory, all meaning is a function of isomorphic corrolation. Pictorial and linguistic propositions make these corrolations thorugh syntactical means, by virtue of their spatial and material qualities. For example, a picture becomes a proposition about the world the moment that it correlates its elements with actual things. A picture is an isomorph of the world to the extent that it shares with it one or more of its logical forms. A picture can be a proposition about anything whose form it shares. For example, it can be a proposition about the spatial conditions of objects, because pictures can share logical forms, such as space, with the world. This would have helped Smithson in conceiving of a common quality to both his writing and his sculpture, as both are isomorphic propositions about the world.

---

[295] Francis Colpitt, Minimal Art, p. 58.

In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein set out to prove the correspondences of logical form between language and the world by providing the picture theory with a mental experiment on a globe. First, he considered an island marked out on a sphere. This was a 'picture proposition', and if the proposition is true he paints the island white and the ocean black. If the proposition is false, then the island is black and the ocean is white. Thereafter, however, he considered the globe under the circumstances that *either* one proposition *or* the other is true. The first instance (Either 'p' is true or 'not p' is true) results in an all-white globe. The second instance (Either 'p' is false or 'not p' is false) results in an all-black globe. The instances of either/or propositions indicate, for Wittgenstein, that such monochrome globes are not maps; they do not show a logical connection because the relation between island and ocean becomes non-significant. Though either / or propositions led to logical nonsense, monochrome globes were still a representation of the whole world of logical possibilities. Thereby, Wittgenstein concluded that what was represented by a monochrome globe was not something that a subject expressed by means of signs, but something which "speaks out on its own account".[297]

It was probably from the picture theory that Smithson and Carl Andre drew their remark that, "A Thing is Hole in a Thing it is Not". Yet in the remarks quoted above, he clearly understood that this theory had something to say about the relation between language and mind. Wittgenstein provided Smithson a way to conceptualise the role of the subject in language, without making recourse to an idealist linguistics. What registered in his reading of Klein's globes was that the world of language rather lacked a place for the humanist subject. The transcendental subject's existence was an absurd 'fact' in a world of crystalline formal logic. Language belonged, as it were to others, who spoke through it more than the subject. Smithson diverges from Wittgenstein, however, in his conclusions over the nature of this 'other'. Wittgenstein indicated that the force of social convention in language begins to speak for itself. For Smithson, the sense of an Other in language lay in its materiality. If language shared logical forms with the world, it also shared a materiality that seemed to speak on its own account. If a monochrome globe was linguistically significant, then so too was the earth.

For his own reasons Smithson remained active in pointing out the isomorphic relations of form which existed between language and the world. "Hidden Trails in Art", an unpublished text from circa 1969, developed the picture theory of language by examining the ways in which an art magazine was an isomorphic map of the world, and a world unto itself. In his image the subject was given a metaphorical place as a temporary, passing traveller:

---

296 "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", S2, p. 110.

297 This is a paraphrasing of G.E.M. Anscombe's Introduction to Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus', which Smithson quotes in "A Sedimentation of the Mind".

> *If you read this square magazine long enough, you will soon find a circularity that spreads into a map devoid of destinations, but with land masses of print (called criticism) and little oceans with right angles (called photographs). Its binding is an axis, and its covers paper hemispheres. Turn to any page between these hemispheres and you, like Gulliver or Ulysses, will be transported into a world of traps and marvels. The axis splits into a chasm in your hands, thus you begin your travels by being immediately lost. In this magazine is a series of pages that open into double terrains... Writing drifts into stratas, and becomes a buried language...*
>
> *...Columns of type sink into the whiteness of the paper. Arctic zones surround isolated clumps of meaning. The edge of any paragraph is menaced by the margins of another ice age. Snow white spaces cut glaciers into layers of words. Here maps have no direction because they are scattered from cover to cover. Maps within maps are seen where no maps are supposed to be.*[298]

In this passage, Smithson represented the art magazine (probably Artforum) as a globe or map whose propositions shared with the world certain of its logical forms. Without examining the content of the texts or photographs, he observed the ways in which the logical space of the magazine mirrors the geo-logical space of the world. In addition, it is important to note that Smithson also adds something of his own sensibility for the temporal, as opposed to spatial, forms which pictures and language share with the world. Thus he observes that language and pictures may share forms with the world, but that this world need no longer exist. As well, there is something in the spatial and material aspects of language that is subject to temporal forms in the world, such as erosian and decay.

In his early treatment of linguistics Smithson oscillated between two propositions: language is like a world and, the world is like a language. Smithson used the work of Wittgenstein to establish a ground and framework for the first proposition. In order to establish the proposition in the most material terms that were possible, he consulted a further range of books on the material functioning of language.

II. Material Signs

Some of Smithson's most memorable passages concern the parallels between matter, language and mind. The project of theorising each of these ran quite parallel in time. In terms of the relation between matter and language he had much to say about how the earth was like a language:

> *The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures.*[299]

---

[298] "Hidden Trails in Art", S2, p. 366.

A short poem of 1967 emphasised the materiality of language:

The Word is the Thing
The Thing is the Word
The Word is a Thing
The Thing is a Word. [300]

Smithsonmade it plain that he was quite consciously pursuing a materialist linguistics:

I was interested in language as a material entity...[which] relates probably to a kind of Physicalist or Materialist view of the world.[301]

To complete the chain of relations between matter – language – mind, he observed that the mind was like the geology of the world:

One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought... Slump debris slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain.[302]

In general Smithson argued that matter, language and mind were all isomorphs of eachother. Smithson's first published article already contained signs of this range of interests. In "Entropy and the New Monuments", he compared A. J. Ayer's comments on falsity with lessons gleaned from his readings on communications engineering:

Recently, there has been an attempt to formulate an analogue between "communication theory" and the ideas of physics in terms of entropy. As A. J. Ayer has pointed out, not only do we communicate what is true, but also what is false. Often the false has a greater "reality" than the true. Therefore, it seems that all information, and that includes anything that is visible, has its entropic side. Falseness as an ultimate, is inextricably part of entropy, and this falseness is devoid of moral implications.[303]

In conjunction with reading Wittgenstein and Ayer, Smithson was also reading a number of books on the physics of language. The most important of these were Colin Cherry's On Human Communication, and J. R. Pierce's (N.B. not Charles Sanders Peirce) Symbols, Signals and Noise. The former provided him with a detailed account of Anglo-American linguistics including the Vienna Circle, while both discussed the reigning views on the reduction of language to mathematics and

---

299 "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", S2, p. 107.

300 Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frame 0166. The poem seems to have been a part of his press release "Language To Be Looked At And / Or Things To Be Read" of June 1967.

301 "Interview with Paul Cummings", S2, p. 294.

302 "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", S2, p. 100.

303 "Entropy and the New Monuments", S2, p. 17.

physics. The relative obscurity of these texts and Smithson's dependence upon them would warrant a brief summary.

A. Colin Cherry: On Human Communication

Cherry's presentation of language was an extension of materialist and behaviourist philosophy, as well as being informed by the work of Roman Jakobson.[304] He made the point, by reference to Jackobson, that both meanings and signals depended on binary distinctions. 'Hot' and 'Cold' are not just binary concepts, they use binary groupings of phonemes such as vocal / non-vocal and consonantal / non-consonantal. Furthermore, these binaries followed Zipf's law: 'language acted so as to follow the principle of least effort.' Language tended toward structural simplification, and was meant to make life more simple by allowing the formation of plans and predictions. Cherry also introduced Smithson to the work of Rudolph Carnap and the study of syntax. This introduction probably led to his acquisition of Carnap's The Logical Syntax of Language, the importance of which will be discussed further below.

Cherry provided Smithson with a number of important materialist and scientific analyses of language. It treated language as 'the discriminatory response of an organism to a stimulus', and emphasised the materiality of this process. Words were physical entities, physical signals. Providing numerous illustrations and diagrams, this book closely defined and analysed the physical properties of signals. The operational frequencies of the sense organs, the particular spectra of light and sound waves that stimulate the human body, were all described as essential physical attributes of communication. He also described the minimal requirements of a signal, and the minimal rules of communication. For example, the most basic signal must do more than produce periodic repetition for communication to function. Therefore, temporal variation was introduced to produce a variety of signals. In order to distinguish language from matter, Smithson found that he could, like the communications engineer, statistically measure the probability of novel signal combinations by measuring the variety of spaces between signal units. According to Cherry the complexity of the message, its information content, could be measured in terms of the statistical rarity of its signs. [305]

B. Symbols Signals and Noise

In accounting for Smithson's quote given above, it would be helpful to examine one of the sources of his comment. When he mentioned a recent "attempt to formulate an analogue between

---

[304] Colin Cherry, On Human Communication, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, 1957.

[305] Cherry, On Human Communication, p. 14.

'communication theory' and the ideas of physics in terms of entropy", he must have been referring to Pierce's Symbols, Signals and Noise.[306] In this book, Smithson would have read of the proposition, largely attributed to A. J. Ayer, that communication theory is a mathematical theory. Pierce asked, in effect, whether physics could define language, and in so doing, offered a detailed comparison between the theory of entropy in thermodynamics and its equivalent in statistical mathematics and communication theory. In thermodynamics, it is energy and complexity of structure which is lost. In communication theory is it knowledge that is lost:

> *Entropy is taken as the measure of the amount of information conveyed by a message from a source. The more we know about what message the source will produce, the less uncertainty, the less entropy, and the less information.*[307]

Following on from Cherry's point that high statistical rarity indicated a high informational content, Pierce added that the complexity of a message also increased informational entropy. In purely mathematical terms, then, the transmission of a message or a thought encountered resistance, interference and entropy. The only way to avoid such entropy was to communicate less information, and this in turn degraded the communication of thought.

Pierce also made much of the ways in which physical entropy came into play during the transmission of a message. In an extension of Zipf's law, Pierce considered 'noise', entropy, and interference between symbols. These were often caused by the physical resistance of transmission, or by exceeding the maximum speed of transmission. What must have struck Smithson as most remarkable in this explanation of entropy in language was the fact that efficient communication could best be guaranteed by virtue of the existence of at least one blank channel at all times. This blank channel or void transmission capacity largely reduced the statistical occurrence of entropy in communication, but without transmitting anything. If Wittgenstein proposed that language could be verified against the ground of general negation, then Pierce contributed the idea that modulations in the pauses or voids between signals played a crucial role in communicational entropy. Mathematically and physically, these pauses could, in effect, limit and alter information to the point that they produce the illusion of a subjective volition. Pauses seemed to tell lies.

In his remark in "Entropy and the New Monuments", Smithson appears to be trying to bring into correspondence a physical and a statistical communications theory of entropy with a social theory of how propositions are verified. In mentioning A. J. Ayer's point that language was an imperfect code of communication, he did so for rather different reasons. For Ayer, verification of a proposition was finally not just logical but also social. One such example was that, for social reasons, a person may

---

[306] J. R. Pierce, Symbols Signals and Noise, Hutchinson, London, 1962.

wish to lie. That a communication may be a lie did not, however, prove the existence of a private interior subjectivity for Smithson. Language had statistical and material properties which could produce many of the illusions of subject presence, without requiring the presence of thought, volition or subjectivity. Language could even, of itself, lie and set limits.

Given this view of the syntactical functioning of language, Smithson could at times dismiss social and moral theories of language. Intersubjective language events were entirely made of "coded matter". For example, in response to Ayer's view that social norms determined truth, he indicated that persistent lying could lead to social conditions of such complexity that they collapsed, and in so doing left subjectivity and moral responsibility unverifiable.[308] His primary interest was in the material states and properties of messages- increasing or decreasing the number of channels, changing the efficiency of encryption, measuring the statistical occurrence of signs, and pondering the functions of linguistic absences, pauses and voids.

The physicality of language became a regular and continued theme in Smithson's writings, and received elaboration through a number of essays, remarks, and experiments. Smithson made the assertion that the logic and materiality of language out-weighed the presence of an uttering subject, or a thinking mind. But, could the presence of a subject in language be wholly or partly determined? For Smithson, the answer was 'No'. Yet, as will be seen, the writing subject did nevertheless have a statistical *disappearance* that could be measured. To do so he turned to the work of Rudolph Carnap.

C. Carnap's Logical Syntax

In pursuing his interests in the physicality of language, Smithson became interested in Carnap's studies of syntax. Cherry sketched out for Smithson the basic premise: "Carnap has defined as logical syntax all the purely formal aspects of the syntax of language i.e. anything concerning signs and their orderings, but having no reference to designata, real or imagined."[309] Carnap promoted the cause of a scientific philosophy that would dispense with "mushy metaphysics" and replace it with an analysis of the linguistic frameworks used to conceptualise the world. As Carnap described it, "Under the influence of Wittgenstein I came to hold the view that many theses of traditional metaphysics are not only useless, but even devoid of cognitive content, entirely unverifiable."[310] Through the 1940's and 50's Carnap attracted many of the best philosophical minds in America to the project of building a

---

[307] Pierce, Symbols Signals and Noise, p. 23.

[308] In his interview with Alison Sky, "Entropy Made Visible", S2, p. 302, Smithson connects Watergate with communications entropy.

[309] Cherry, On Human Communication, p.223.

systematic study of language, in which metaphysical "philosophy is to be replaced by the logic of science...and the logic of science is nothing other than the logical syntax of the language of science."[311]

Philosophically, Carnap was a materialist, and linguistic physicalist, in that he emphasised that any statement, whether true or false, could be described in terms of its syntax, its spatial - logical arrangement of signs. This involved an analysis of the relation between the formal logic of language and its spatial construction, rather than with its social construction. For Smithson, Carnap succeeded in examining language "effaced" of human use and the vagueness of meaning. This meant translating every item of significant discourse into a language which, in addition to its logical apparatus, contained only references to sense data.[312] Smithson incorporated these views in his call for an examination of language stripped of its historical and social meaning. Following Carnap he reduces language to different types of presence and absence. These spacings seemed arbitrary not because the social rules were unknown, but because the meaning-making subject was bracketed out.

> *As one becomes aware of discrete usages, the syntax of esthetic communications discloses the relevant features of both 'building' and 'language' Both are the raw materials of communication and are based on* chance – *not historical preconceptions. Linguistic sense-data, not rational categories, are what we are investigating.*[313]

Smithson had a particular reading of Carnap's theory, in the sense that he understood it to reduce language to a physical world or coded presences and absences that greatly resembled the world, but left the speaking subject undisclosed. The real stimulus it provided to his theories was in dramatising the disappearance of the speaking subject. He made this into a small written experiment.

A Syntax Experiment

Among Cherry's discussion of Carnap's claims for the reduction of meaning to a logical syntax of propositions, Smithson found a description of an experiment which made a measure of "semantic information content based upon Carnap's logical probabilities". This experiment replaced questions of meaning with an examination of structural and distributional procedures.[314] As early as 1966,

---

310 Rudolph Carnap, "Philosophical Problems", The Philosophy of Rudolph Carnap, P. A. Schilpp, (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, 1963, p. 45.

311 Rudolph Carnap, The Logical Syntax of Language, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., London, 1937, p.xiii. Smithson's copy was the 1959 edition.

312 A. J. Ayer, Philosophy in the Twentieth Century, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1982, p.245.

313 "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site", S2, p. 59.

314 Cherry, On Human Communication., p.236.

Smithson converted this into a work of art, titled a"Proposal for the Detection of Approximate Period Quantity":[315]

Procedure
1. *Select a bookcase full of books.*
2. *Measure the limits of the bookcase (height and width)*
3. *Count the books.*
4. *Take the first book and count the number of periods on the first full page of type.*
5. *Multiply that number by all the pages in the book.*
6. *Record the title and the approximate number of periods in each book.*

Form for Recording Data
1. *Name of period detector.*
2. *Size of bookcase (height and width).*
3. *Total number of books in case*
4. *List of all the book titles with the approximate total number of periods in each book.*
5. *Total of all the periods in the entire bookcase.*

Those who undertook the experiment were asked to send their results, with optional photographs of the library, to Smithson for compilation into a book.[316]

The participant in this experiment was asked to take the language that he or she "owns", one's personal library, and count only the number of occurrences of a particular syntactic unit, the full stop. Smithson catches something of the ambivalence of Carnap, in that the results of his experiment are empirical, yet the implications are phenomenological.[317] This experiment emphasised both the material and the mental in language, as seen *only* in its spatio-syntactical structure. The participant counts the number of times a subject-- a reader or an author-- stops. This amounted to counting the absence of cognitive content and authorial presence by counting a material and syntactical element. His language experiment produced a crude but pure tabulation of the statistical occurrence and disappearance of the subject. If the statistical disappearance of the subject could be measured as it occurred in language, then Smithson took this logical form to be a highly significant. The logical form of absence in language was something that it shared with the world at the level of its physical composition. It also implied that there was a similar logic of gaps in the mind.

Smithson's study of language was most compelling when it began to blur the distinction between mind and matter. If Smithson established that language acted as a material isomorph of the world,

---

[315] "Proposal for the Detection of Approximate Period Quantity", S2, p.334. The original document in the Smithson Archives is undated.

[316] The author has noted the extensive photographs of Sol Lewitt's library in the exhibition *Sol Lewitt-- Structures*, M.O. M. A., Oxford, Jan. March, 1993. These would have been appropriate for inclusion in Smithson's proposed book.

[317] Rudolph Carnap, "Philosophical Problems", p. 50. Carnap saw no difference between physicalism and phenomenalism. He chose the former because materialism seemed more politically progressive at the time. Both materialism and idealism were "psuedo--theses". What was important was their choice of language.

and that there were parallel logical forms in language and the world, just what could be said about the place or role of thought and mind in language? His answer to this is best considered in the light of his attacks on contemporary idealist philosophies of language.

III. Language = Mind + Matter?

One debate common to Smithson's library was the question whether thought caused language as in linguistic 'mentalism', or whether thought occurred in language, as in Wittgenstein, phenomenology and Greenbergian formalism. In relation to mannerism, Smithson had already put forward the view that language caused thought. Addressing this question allowed Smithson to develop his theory of language along side his interests in the mind / matter dilemma. It also enabled him to clearly distinguish his own theories from Greenberg's formalism, and from Conceptual art.

A. Formalism as Neo-Idealism

Mentalism is largely an idealist theory of language, because it puts mind before matter. It suggests, much as in the dualism of Descartes, that there is a disembodied, non-extensive and pre-linguistic consciousness which finds adequate material words to send a message which must then be decoded by a listener back into thought. As Leonard Bloomfield has put it, "[mentalism] supposes that the variability of human [linguistic] conduct is due to the interference of some non-physical factor, a 'spirit', 'will' or 'mind' (Greek psyche hence psychology) that is present in every human being."[318] This theory was often advanced by nineteenth-century Romanticism, but was latter challenged by the "New Grammarians", and the Vienna School, who tried to put the study of language on a par with the sciences.

In America in the 1950's, Greenberg developed a particular objection to idealist mentalism. He pointed out, much as Hegel did, that meanings were always determined, at least in part, by their specific medium.[319] Each art, be it painting, sculpture, literature or music takes some of its meaning from the way each medium engages the mind. Where the mentalist can retort 'think before you speak!', the formalist replies 'But, I don't know what I think until I hear what I say!' In Greenberg's formalist view of the plastic arts, as in his contemporaries' view of writing in the field of literary

---

[318] Leonard Bloomfield, Language, Henderson and Spalding, London, 1935, p. 32.

[319] Michael Podro's remarks on Hegel's aesthetic theory are quite pertinent here. The various forms of reflexivness are ways in which matter is re-used by the Mind or Spirit to give it meaning for Spirit. Art is not mere cladding for thought.See The Critical Historians of Art , Yale University Press, New Haven, 1982. p.26.

criticism, a medium is the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for mental activity.[320] All content was seen as inseparably fused with its medium. The mind re-used matter to give it meaning.

For Smithson the formalist objection to mentalism, though it did not put mind first, was ultimately idealist in its view of language and the visual arts. Greenberg suggests, much as does Hegel, the art critic Hippolyte Taine, and Saussure, that images (signs), unite an 'idea' or 'concept' with a physical medium (sound image).[321] For Smithson this still amounted to the unverifiable claim that art provided a more or less adequate representation of mind.

Formalism also claimed that empirical processes could perfect and improve language to make it more effective. In this sense Greenberg claimed that forms could be judged for a sort of perfection based on their functional effectiveness in communicating feeling. In response to this view, Smithson first observed that linguistic form was too transient to be perfected. This criticism of Greenberg arose from Wittgenstein's later Philosophical Investigations, which provided many arguments against the use of language as a rigorously logical instrument:

> *Critics...have tried to turn art into a matter of reasoned discourse, and occasionally, when their 'truth' breaks down, they resort to a poetic quote. Wittgenstein has shown us what can happen when language is 'idealised' and that it is hopeless to try and fit language into some absolute logic, whereby everything objective can be tested. We have to fabricate our rules as we go along the avalanches of language and over the terraces of criticism."*[322]

He also argued that formalism, as it led to greater functionality, rather assumed that functionality was pleasurable for the subject. For Smithson language was useful, but the underlying subject remained anonymous, quite unfulfilled by the perfection of utility. To say that language was useful was to beg the question 'useful to whom?'

> *Andre Martinet writes, "Buildings are meant to serve as protection... " – the same is true of artists' writings. Each syntax is a "lightly constructed shell" or a set of linguistic surfaces that surround the artists' unknown motives. The reading of both buildings and grammars enables the artist to avoid out of date appeals to "function" or "utilitarianism".*[323]

Particularly in 1967, Smithson and Greenberg traded criticisms based upon the issues of materialism and idealism in relation to language and artistic practice. Smithson found that Greenberg may have

---

[320] The comparison to literary theory which I have in mind here is T.S. Eliot's concept of a "disassociation of sensibilities" which was responsible for a radical separation of thought from feeling and the call for an "objective correlative", namely the artistic task of finding a vehicle or medium to express an emotion. Greenberg depended greatly on Eliot for these ideas.

[321] For a discussion of this in relation to Taine and Saussere, see Donald Preziosi, Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989, p.106-110. The brackets indicate Saussure's description of language.

[322] "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", S2, p. 107.

[323] "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", S2, p. 82.

claimed to be a materialist, yet in the end was as dependent on humanist and idealist conceptions of language and art as his old rival Harold Rosenberg. If Rosenberg emphasised the romantic expressive "Action Painter" who gave a sincere record in inner events, then Greenberg kept the model but reoriented the emphasis to the mastery of the medium and the curtailment of expression to suit the medium.

Greenberg's response to this criticism was to accuse Minimalist sculptors of being idealists, because they indulged in 'Ideation in advance' of finding formal means.[324] The writings and theories of the Minimalists were a form of overly-calculated mental activity that did not help to make a successful work of art capable of conveying sincere feeling. The Minimalists' motivating social idea was to get as "far-out" a non-art look as possible. They calculated this in advance in order to produce a social reception of their work. They did not, however, struggle to find a unity of mind and matter, feeling and form. Though he returns Smithson's criticism by calling the Minimalists idealists, the real force of the criticism concerns the calculation of social responses. This criticism was effective, perhaps, because it indicated Smithson's apparent lack of interest in the social aspects of language.

Smithson responded, therefore, on social grounds by claiming that Greenberg's own interest in the medium specificity of the various plastic arts was based not on materialism, but on an idealist sentimentality about successful labour, which he regarded as little more than the "Pathetic Fallacy" disguised in formalist terminology.[325]. One reason this exchange is interesting is because Smithson did not deny that he had social intentions in making his work, and that this included a social theory of language. However, his exchange with Greenberg exposed a weakness in Smithson's presentation of linguistic theory. By so insisting on the material aspects of communication he had difficulty at this time in establishing his views on the social aspects of language.

If Smithson's materialist linguistics was not to lead to a behaviourist social psychology, Greenberg's criticisms meant that he would need to say more about the mental and social aspects of language. By 1969, this led to his reading of phenomenological linguistics and psychoanalysis in a way that moved his theories forward. Much to his disappointment, however, many newer artists, while paying greater attention to language, were moving backwards toward an idealism that was even more pervasive than Greenberg's formalism. This situation meant that he could continue, rather easily, in making materialist criticisms of the linguistic idealism inherent in Conceptual art.

---

[324]Clement Greenberg, "The Recentness of Sculpture", Collected Essays, Vol. 4, p.250.

B. Conceptual Art as Neo-idealism.

Many of Smithson's latter comments about language were made in the context of the rise of Conceptual Art. Smithson's move into Earthwork art, rather than into the "dematerialisation" of Conceptual Art was due largely to his views on language. In the early 1970's Lucy Lippard described the logic behind this dematerialisation:

> *During the 1960's, the anti-intellectual, emotional/intuitive process of art making characteristic of the last two decades have begun to give way to an ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively. As more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. The studio is again becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete.*[326]

In response to this trend, Smithson offered the following critique in 1970:

> *I'm concerned with the physical properties of both language and material, and I don't think that they are discrete...when the critic is on the ball, he understands that language is not a secondary instrument that is going to disappear and leave the work there. Language grows like a barrier reef, it has its own physical process... and there is no escape from that, and to try and escape from that leads you into a kind of neo-Platonic, neo-idealism, which is like Kosuth's 'idea is idea', which is kind of trite.* [327]

He continued:

> *...the only artists I respect are the ones who admit that there is a physical aspect. There is another type of thing [from Conceptual Art] where you can go over into the material...You don't need systems, you don't need art ideas, you don't need any of these things, because ultimately it's the material, and that material is language, steel, whatever...and I'm interested in somebody doing something with that...So It's a matter of wrestling with those material properties...It's like setting up correspondences where you seemingly have something that's very material but at the same time it somehow is absorbed into abstraction. So that first you see it, then you don't. It's a kind of camera obscura.* [328]

Smithson repeatedly criticised Conceptual art for its idealist assumption that thought and language were non-substantial:

---

[325] "The Pathetic Fallacy in Esthetics", S2, p. 337. John Ruskin describes the "pathetic fallacy" as the error of projecting on to external things attributes of the perceiving mind under the influence of emotion. (Modern Painters, vol. 3.). Similar arguments are made by Robbe-Grillet.

[326] Lucy Lippard, "The Dematerialization of Art", Changing: Essays in Art Criticism, Dutton, New York, p.255. Originally published in Art International, Vol. XII, February, 1968.

[327] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler ", Smithson Archives, roll 3833, frames 1123-1127; S2, p. 208-9.

[328] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 215.

> *[Conceptual Art has become a sort of] neo-idealism, kind of an escape from physicality...I'm concerned with the physical properties of both language and material, and I don't think that they are discrete. They are both physical entities, but they have different properties, and within these properties you have these mental experiences, and its not simply empirical facts. There are lots of things, there are lots of designations that are rather explicit, but these explicit designations tend to efface themselves and that's what gives you the abstraction, like a Nonsite/ Site situation there is no evasion from physical limits...* [329]

Smithson found that Kosuth's criticism of "Mirror Travels in the Yucatan" was in danger of "missing the mental experience of the article in relation to the physical activity that went on".[330] Conceptual art dealt with simple definitions of words, and an overly rigid conception of definite descriptions and names, without being aware that the consequence was a patently idealist art. The mistake of Conceptual art was best born out in his parody of the language triangle of Ogden & Richards.

Just what Smithson meant by idealism in semiotic theory might best be described by one of the "language triangles" that he encountered in his reading of Ogden and Richards' The Meaning of Meaning.[331] A second triadic model from Charles S. Peirce was also explained in Smithson's library, and both are given in Diagrams 1 and 2.

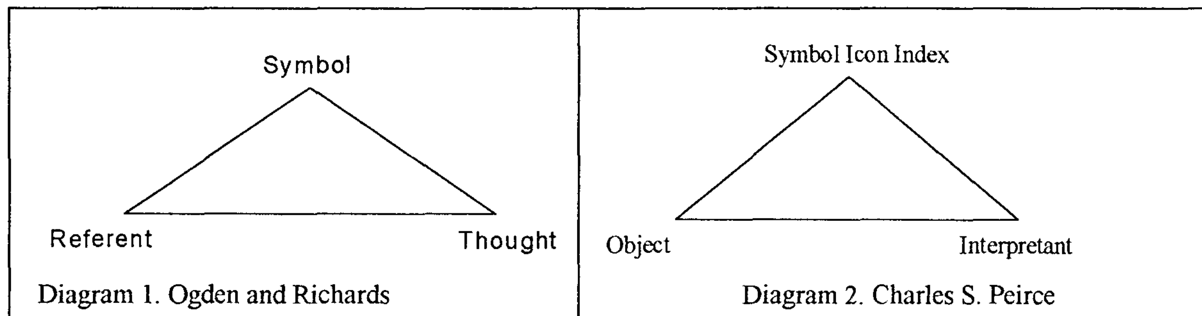


Diagram 1. Ogden and Richards

Diagram 2. Charles S. Peirce

These two triadic models can be described as differentiating between Semantics and Pragmatics. Ogden and Richards' semantic model describes the relation of signs to the objects (designata) which they denote. This model has the potential to become idealist if the corner labelled "thought" is taken to stem from a non-corporeal mind, as Smithson claimed of Conceptual art. It can also be a materialist model if 'thought' refers to electro-chemical brain events. In the text and footnotes of "Dintorpic Essay" Smithson parodied the idealist interpretation of this model with the help of Alexander Graham Bell. Bell was a great hero in the literature of communications engineering because of his invention of the telephone. In reducing the voice to electric impulses, he had made thought into something

---

329 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 208.

330 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", Smithson Archives, roll 3833, frame 1104.

331 Ogden, C. K. & Richards, I. A.. The Meaning of Meaning, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 8th edition, 1960. (first edition, 1923).

tangible. To remind the Conceptual artist of the materiality of language and thought, he suggests that Ogden & Richards' triangular model be fabricated into tetrahedral lattices, in the manner of Bell's experimental kites, and let fly. Its fabrication was a reminder of the physicality of thought and language, even if they sometimes appeared to be lighter than air.[332]

The rise of Conceptual art, then, did more than prompt Smithson in the direction of Land art. It allowed him an environment in which he could quite easily play the linguistic materialist against a growing group of linguistic idealists. What was not so easy, however, was escaping the pressure to provide a theory that took into account the social aspects of language. Was Greenberg correct in asserting that the Minimalists and Smithson had a social theory of language?

IV. The Social Psychology of Language

In diagram two, Smithson was introduced to a second model, from Peirce, which gave rise to linguistic Pragmatics. It indicates that linguistic meaning involves interpretation, and is therefore a matter of social conventions. This model has proved valuable to more recent art historical methodology, partly because the term labelled 'symbol' can include an 'icon' (visual imagery), or an 'index' (a footprint, or photograph). Peirce thereby laid the claim that the interpretation of iconic imagery required knowledge of a set of social conventions. [333] If Peircian semiotics has recently proved useful in critiquing the social and institutional use of language, then it might also be observed that many of Smithson's most insightful postmodern critics have also come from this linguistic tradition. In this respect, his drawing *A Heap of Language* (1966) **[Plate 16]** is quite notable. As an example of Smithson's language triangle, it makes no reference to acts of social interpretation.

In the minds of many of Smithson's contemporaries, however, a social psychology of language was a very desirable thing. The socio-political situation in America in the late 1960's was one in which artists increasingly felt compelled to address issues of social concern. This included, among others , the Vietnam war and civil rights. There was considerable hope that art might be used to effect social critique and social change. Norms and values could be questioned using linguistics, and art could be used to communicate alternatives. Indeed, there was in the avant-garde of the time a commitment to improve culture and society.

---

332 "The Artist as Site-Seer; Or, A Dintorpic Essay", S2, p.342, and footnotes 46 and 51. N.B. The date of this text is probably mid-1967. cf. footnote 44.

333 Richard Wollheim, Painting as an Art, Thames and Hudson, London, 1987, argues a case that Icons, which is to say visual signs and paintings are identifiable through a natural link. He calls as evidence the fact that pre-linguistic children can quite fully identify with pictures, while they cannot with text. Wollhiem agrees with Gombrich's view that visual signs or icons function along Empirical rules and therefore cause understanding for purely psychological reasons. Similarly, C. S. Peirce regarded Icons as functioning

If Smithson ranged primarily within the concerns of the first linguistic triangle, when shifting to the second model he had a number of predispositions regarding the 'interpretant' of a communication. This abstract 'other' was assumed to be, for Wittgenstein, Ayer and Peirce, a social other. Smithson's sense of 'other' was more a post-theological conclusion, made when rejecting his own early religious art. In rejecting theology he was still left with the observation that the mind imagines an 'other' to be watching or speaking. While there were other people, Smithson was quite aware of the ways in which an artist imagined an other which was really just a piece of the self or ego. He combined this personal psychological observation—that some types of desire work by way of imaging an 'other'-- with other psychological theories. As well, his authors of choice were not especially known for their interest in social psychology. He referred to Worringer, who argued that abstract art was based upon an impulse to withdraw from the social world. Similarly his initial use of phenomenological psychology encouraged him to bracket out social meaning. If Smithson took little interest in social linguistics or pragmatics, it was partly because he was of the view that other people, as well as himself were drawn into language by virtue of being in the world of matter. He was interested in what caused language and signification in the first place, rather than its intersubjective use in social situations. Thus, his linguistics could extended to the unusual task of reading the rocks, and this often pushed social readings into second place.

If some effort has been expended in the description of Smithson's interest in linguistics, it is my interpretation that his interests in linguistics started to go in two directions. While he remained interested in the ontology and metaphysics of syntax, he increasingly took interest in a social linguistics and psychology. I would like to look at this later development next. More will also be said in the last chapter when considering Smithson's land reclamation projects and his role as a social mediator. In between, I would like to draw some conclusions about how Smithson understood the relation between thought and language. This entails a look at his use of phenomenological linguistics, and in the next chapter, his use of psychoanalysis.

A. Semantic Cities

One of the more memorable of Smithson's linguistic fascinations concerned the scale and weight of human language. Architecture in particular proved of enduring interest, in part because it was a human language that directly manipulated the world, and in part because its logical forms were most like those of the world. There was also a more social element to these analyses. Rather than looking to

---

through direct resemblance. More than social convention or habit. By comparison, Krauss, Saussure and Nelson Goodman all share the belief that the reading of Icons depends on familiarity with social conventions.

Anglo-American linguistics, however, Smithson turned largely to the tradition of French structuralist linguistics and anthropology. This change in sources eventually heralded a greater interest in the social aspects of language.

In the course of his writings, Smithson made a number of readings of architecture, examples being "The Domain of the Cave Bear" (1966), "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic" (1967), "Ultramoderne" (1967) and *Hotel Palenque* (1968).[334] When writing about architecture and urban centres, however, he turned less to phenomenology or Vienna School linguistics, than to the writings of Roland Barthes and Levi-Strauss, who provided semiological theories that were more engaged with the social rules by which objects took on a signifying function.[335] Structuralist interpretations fascinated him for their claims that all human activity was structured like a language and possessed semantic meaning.

Of preliminary importance to him was Barthes conception of the "simulacrum". Reading in Partisan Review he found that

> *The goal of the structuralist activity... is to reconstruct an 'object' in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning... of this object. Structure is therefore actually a 'simulacrum' of the object, but a directed 'interested' simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible, or... unintelligible in the natural object."*[336]

Other Minimalist artists, such as Tony Smith, shared similar interests, and Smithson wrote about these in relation to Barthes on three occasions.[337] In June 1967, several months after reading Barthes' theorisation of Structuralist practice, Smithson wrote,

> *By extracting from the site certain associations that have remained invisible within the old framework of rational language, by dealing directly with the appearance of what Roland Barthes calls "the simulacrum of the object", the aim is to reconstruct a new type of "building" into a whole that engenders new meanings. From the linguistic point of view, one establishes rules of structure based on a change in the semantics of building. Tony*

---

334 An interpretation of Smithson's *Hotel Palenque* can be found in my essay "De-architecturisation and the Architectural Unconscious: A Tour of Robert Smithson's Chambers and Hotels", The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity, Backless Books, London, 1998.

335 As far as can be determined, Smithson read Barthes' On Racine, Hill and Wang, 1964; "The Structuralist Activity", and "The Diseases of Costume" Partisan Review, Jan., 1967; Writing Degree Zero, Hill and Wang, March 1968; and Elements of Semiology, Hill and Wang, 1968. He discussed and misquoted Mythologies in 1967, though there was no published translation until 1972. He also owned a copy of Yale French Studies, October, 1966. The topic of the issue was Structuralism, and featured articles in translation by Levi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan, as well as articles on the tradition of Anglo-American structuralism, Merleau-Ponty, anthropology, art and literature. He also had, in Partisan Review, Leo Bersani, "From Bachelard to Barthes", Spring 67; Peter Caws, "What is Structuralism", Winter 1968. David Paul Funt, "The Structuralist Debate", Hudson Review, Winter 1969-70 gives concise accounts of Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan and Althusser. Lastly, in order of publication was Gertrude Stein, The Structuralist Controversy, John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1972.

336 Roland Barthes, "The Structuralist Activity", Partisan Review, winter 1967, p. 82.

337 "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site", S2, p. 58; "A Thing is a Hole in a Thing it is Not", S2, p. 96; and "Dintorpic Essay", S2, p. 343.

> *Smith seems conscious of this "simulacrum" when he speaks of an "abandoned airstrip" as an "artificial landscape."*[338]

His reading of Barthes, and Levi-Strauss led him to the view that the arrangement into structure of individual architectural elements or units produced semantic meaning. Building was a simulacrum created by such 'secondary signification'; it was an artifice, a social and semiotic construct. Smith's interest in architecture similarly made a reading the syntax of an architectural structure. Tony Smith, it was claimed, could analyse the structural attributes of architectural semantics, in this case an abandoned German World War II airport.[339] Interestingly, neither Smith nor Smithson were concerned to analyse the buildings in question for a specifically fascist social meaning. If, at this point, he was not inclined to analyse architectural form for its relation to political content, then how did he use structuralist methodology?

B. Tony Smith

Having compared Tony Smith and Roland Barthes, Smithson made the following suggestion:

> *Tony Smith writes about "a dark pavement " that is "punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights." (Artforum, December 1966) The key word is "punctuated." In a sense, the "dark pavement" could be considered a "vast sentence," and the things perceived along it, "punctuation marks." "... tower... " = the exclamation mark (!). "... stacks... " = the dash (-). "...fumes... " = the question mark (?). "...colored lights... " = the colon (:). Of course, I form these equations on the basis of sense-data and not rational-data. Punctuation refers to interruptions in "printed matter." It is used to emphasise and clarify the meaning of specific segments of usage. Sentences like "skylines" are made of separate "things" that constitute a whole syntax. Tony Smith also refers to his art as "interruptions" in a "space grid".*[340]

Some of Smithson's interpretation of Smith bears the mark of structuralism. In this quote, for example, buildings stand in signifying relation to each other because they posses a syntactic structure in the distribution of mass and space experienced over time. He incorporated the structuralist point that meaning arises from "every manifestation of social and mental activity which can be discerned among the population", and that these meanings arise by virtue of the structural relation of individual objects, words and myths.[341] His concern was to identify the syntactic elements whereby architecture and urban space became meaningful. He was not quick to turn his understanding of architectural

---

338 "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site", S2, p. 58.

339 Smithson refers to Samuel Wagstaff and Tony Smith, "Talking with Tony Smith", Artforum, December 1966. Critics have noted Smith's silence over the fact that the airstrip and parade ground mentioned in the article were specifically fascist. Smithson does not mention it either. Smiths' reading would seem to me to be implicitly anti-fascist, in that it invites an analysis of the structure of fascist architecture.

340 "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site", S2, p. 59.

341 Claude Levi-Strauss, "Overture to Le Cru et le Cuit", Yale French Studies, October 1966, p.45.

semantics to an understanding of the social, political or economic meanings of skylines. There are no ghettos or palaces. He used structuralism here, however crudely, to support the claim that the urban landscape was legible, and by association, so too was the natural landscape.

Smithson rather struggles in his initial writings to incorporate structuralism. Perhaps it is no surprise given that, at the time Smithson wrote on Tony Smith, there was no major structuralist analysis of language, such as Barthes Elements of Semiology, or Writing Degree Zero, in English translation. Thus, with his rather sketchy knowledge of Barthes, but with a more thorough knowledge of Levi-Strauss, Smithson embarked on his own structuralist readings of architecture. I would like to consider one such example.

C. "Ultramoderne"

Shortly after making his comments on Tony Smith, Smithson was at work on an article on 1930's New York architecture. "Ultramoderne", however, identified several semantic and syntactic structures at work in architecture in a way not evident in his comments on Tony Smith. As in structuralist analysis, Smithson chose a group of buildings including the Empire State building, Radio City music hall, and the Bell building.[342] Similarly, he observed that these buildings utilised a "paradigmatic infrastructure". Had he been following Barthes, Smithson might have established a matrix of meaning for these buildings by comparing them to the contemporary International style. Instead, he turned to Levi-Strauss to establish a matrix of meaning that drew on ancient and prehistoric architecture. Calling on Mayan, Aztec and Egyptian architecture, these buildings were seen to be a renewal of ancient social drives, "something immortal, yet corrupt" that projected the subject "into ascending and descending states of lucidity".

This identification of meaning making structures was not an exercise in formalism. In a formalist treatment of architecture, units such as doors, windows or walls temporarily lose their meaning so that the functionality of the architectural unit can be studied and purified. Once purified the unit can be recuperated in a manner that enhances the subject's sense of meaning. Smithson sought to avoid this by making a more semiotic reading of architecture, by taking up and applying his reading of Levi-Strauss' descriptions of structuralist methodology and Roland Barthes' descriptions of Racine's theatrical architecture.[343] This satisfied his call for "an esthetic method that brings together

---

[342] This article was commissioned as part of a special edition on 1930's art and culture.

[343] Claude Levi-Strauss, "Overture", p. 41.

anthropology and linguistics in terms of 'building.' This would put an end to 'art history' as the sole criterion."[344]

In Smithson's analysis Ultramoderne buildings made dialectical distinctions and maintained strict differences-- floor to ceiling, wall to window, interior to exterior. The difference between interior and exterior was emphasised using heavy masonry and mirrors.

> *The overuse of the mirror turned buildings, no matter how solid and immobile, into emblems of nothingness. Building exteriors were massive and windows were often surrounded by tomb-like moldings and casements, but the interior mirrors multiplied and divided 'reality' into perplexing, impenetrable, uninhabited regions. The walls outdoors were ultra physical, while the walls indoors were ungraspable and vain.*[345]

While interior and exterior existed in dialectical relation to each other, the result was not the perfection of utility. Though there was a type of gratification in these buildings, these dialectical distinctions did not improve the subject or provide the pleasure of functionality. Residents of these buildings lived in "interiors of gloss and glass. in luminous skyscrapers, in rooms of rarefied atmospheres and airless delights." He traces these Ultramoderne pleasures to ancient ceremonial architecture where sacrifices ensured survival. This primal pleasure created architectural forms which repeated and duplicated *ad infinitum* in a formal enactment of continuity and survival.

Likened to Kubler's prime numbers, the various units were enigmatic, irreducible and inexplicable, and the building "a vast *topos* teaming with replicas" of units. For example, dialectical relations between the mirror, which contains "everything", and the window, which contains "nothing", led to a static structure that proliferated without producing discursive meaning. Repetition pleased because it represented an unconscious drive for continuity and survival. Structural repetition caused a "A tripartite infrastructure that extends forever into the future through the past." Architectural designs that use spatial and temporal repetition please because they promulgate a primordial life drive. Therefore it is not the functional perfection of a unit that pleases, but its constant return after its sacrifice. [346]

Smithson suggested that the "Ultramoderne" architecture presented a closed theology, a negative idealism, which did not provide a home for the transcendental ego. It did succeed, though, in providing a truly epic and monumental experience of time and space. Smithson used structuralist methods to show how the distortions to the matrix of meaning which these buildings achieved were due to fantasy, and to deeply imbedded historical drives which had reappeared after a long absence.

---

[344] "A Thing is a Hole in a Thing it is Not", S2, p. 96.

[345] "Ultramoderne", S2, p. 64.

These structures, which seek more to reproduce themselves that to 'mean' anything, fill these buildings with a sense of alien primordial instincts. Smithson never tired of such analysis of architecture, and continued to make such observations, for example in "Art Through the Camera's Eye", 1971.[347]

In turning to anthropology and ancient history in "Ultramoderne", Smithson began to produce a social aspect to his theories. By the summer of 1968 he was to make a much greater move in this direction. In terms of reading architecture, this occurred in his considerations of the museum. "The Establishment", of June 1968, was Smithson's most frontal attack on contemporary social myths and their effects on the architecture of the museum. He started by questioning the existence of a social Establishment, quite in keeping with the structuralist theme of the death of authorial presence. Barthes' Partisan Review article called for the critic who instead listens...

> *...for the natural in culture, and constantly perceives in it not so much stable, finite, 'true' meanings as the shudder of an enormous machine which is humanity tirelessly undertaking to create meaning, without which it would no longer be human.*[348]

Following Barthes, Smithson observed that the objects in a museum are the products of a machine which tirelessly creates meaning. There was, however, no organised social entity which ran this museum. The important social forces at work were mass fantasies and instinctual states of mind.

> *The notion of an establishment seems to be a social fairytale, a deadly utopia or invisible system that inspires an almost mythical sense of dread-- it's a bad dream that has somehow consumed the world. I shall postulate The Establishment as a state of mind-- a deranged mind that appears to be a mental City of Death.*[349]

While in "Ultramoderne" Smithson seems to have admired the return of a primordial architectural language of sacrifice and renewal, he regrets that the museum, as a social institution, does not recognise its primordial social role. In a tone reminiscent of "The Iconography of Desolation", Smithson rattles off his description of the interior organisation of museum architecture. For his relics he provided a "Hall of Destruction", a "Room of Great Artists", and a "Hall of Lost Establishments and Vanished Civilisations". In identifying "the natural in culture" he concluded that the major social function of the museum was to provide the spectacle of the instinct for destruction. The more the museum produced social meaning, the more it served as a carrier of the instinctual drives.

---

346 "Ultramoderne", S2, p. 65.

347 "Art Through the Camera's Eye", S2, p. 371.

348 Barthes, "The Structuralist Activity", p. 87.

349 "The Establishment", S2, p. 97.

In this article, as structuralism moved toward psychoanalysis, Smithson echoed Freud in finding in the Establishment museum "a cracking wall" on which is written "a list of 'ideals' that killed millions." At this time he also commented that the Vietnam War was a similar type of display, in that it was a form of ritual social sacrifice played out every day on the spectacle of television. The museum was the most complex of all collections of linguistic matter, and in his examination and classification Smithson suggested that certain physical and instinctual process are the single largest factors in determining social meanings.

If it was possible to read in architecture a social meaning, this meaning was but a myth, under which Smithson detected a set of drives and instincts that derived from inert inorganic forces. There was a sort of "primordial language" as Smithson called it, and one which was highly compelling. This language was the nexus of his proposition that language was a sort of world, and that the world was a sort of language. This move into a more social theory of language took place alongside new interests in the relation between language and mind. His social psychology was tied to a more detailed psychology of language. For this he turned to his interests in phenomenology with an additional set of questions.

V. Non-sites and Phenomenological Linguistics

In the course of chapter three, a detailed account was given of the ways in which Smithson used phenomenology as a part of this site / non-site practice. Phenomenology was seen to influence the developmental logic of a sequence of sculptures that concluded with the *Hypothetical Continents.* At that time, however, little comment was made on the philosophy of language that such descriptions implied. I would now propose that Smithson conceptualised the non-sites using a phenomenological linguistic theory. In turning to the question of his knowledge of phenomenological linguistics, I would indicate the presence in his library of an academic article by Phillip E. Lewis, "Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of Language".[350] This article provides a suggestive clue to understanding Smithson's transition from the *Hypothetical Continents* to earthwork art. It did so by providing a framework on which to establish a psychology of mind and language.

Lewis' article explains that Merleau-Ponty sought to avoid materialist and idealist models of language, both of which treated language as an external companion to thought. Much like Greenberg, he suggested that language and art were fully conceived only at that moment when it received

---

[350] Phillip E. Lewis, "Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of Language", Yale French Studies, October 1966, p.19.

formulation. Thought was appropriated and possessed through language; designation does not follow recognition, it *is* recognition. Lewis' metaphors for this were strikingly similar to Smithson's:

> *"... languages may be considered as the deposition and sedimentation of the expressive acts which translate intended meaning into acquired meaning."*[351]

Merleau-Ponty recouped an intentional subject in language, but it was a curiously temporal subject, which became evident only in retrospect. Language was a process which materialised the subject retroactively. By the time the materialisation ceased, the subject was gone, leaving only a trace in the coding of matter.

Lewis also explained that, to move from a phenomenology to a linguistic phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty used the metaphor of "the gesture". The meaning of a gesture "intermingles with the structure of the world that the gesture outlines." Language was thereby a gesture that simultaneously outlined its meaning and its world. As in Wittgenstein, there was a direct intersection between meaning, language, and the world.

As Lewis explains, Merleau-Ponty was not interested in the "secondary meaning" of conventional operations of language, but in a primordial language, a "singing the world", that was a direct gesture of psychical meaning. This "primary" meaning occurs before the advent of accumulated cultural meanings. This did not lead, however, to a direct language of emotions, but to a gesture in the world that physically integrated man and world through a patterning power.

Seen in these terms, during phenomenological experience of a site, the subject had an attitude, a gearing into the world. To a phenomenological linguistics the non-site, as a type of descriptive language, is founded on the same attitude. As the instrument of a subject, inconceivable except as incarnate in the world, the non-site linguistically presents, or rather *is* the positioning of the subject in the world. As a language of primordial consciousness, the Non-site is a material patterning that integrates the subject in the world. The non-sites were a place the mind could inhabit despite the gaps in subjective presence. They temporarily contained any fragmentation.

In terms of the phenomenological linguistics described by Lewis, the non-site was a compelling form of language because of its ability to constitute a whole new world. This new world is not so much the world of social and cultural meaning, but a syntactical world that exists someplace other than just in the natural physical world. What really made the non-site a world, however, was that its syntactical-

---

351 Phillip E. Lewis, "Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of Language", p.32.

spatial structure was a place that the subject *and the subject's lack of being*, could inhabit. The non-site created a place in which the subject got lost in the gaps:

> *Yeah... there is a one-to one relation, but at the same time that one-to-one equation tends to evade connection, so that there's a suspension. Although there's a correspondence, the equalizer is always... subverted or lost, so it's a matter of losing your way rather than finding your way.*[352]

When asked about the enlargement and increasing physicality of the non-site maps as they became *Hypothetical Continents*, Smithson answered by observing that no new phenomenological data or new logical forms came to light as a consequence. Making the scale larger allowed more gaps and fragments, and these gaps were an improvement to his language because they better accommodated non-being.

> *... as the weight, or mass of the thing increases, the focus gets more intense, pinpointing the shape... burns the brain out... The intensity of the focus shatters any kind of answer... The ineffable aspect of it just breaks down into all these fragments, and yet they are there. Its like a handful of dust or anything. Like Eliot said, "I'll show you fear in a handful of dust."... [but,]..The need to localize that-- it's dilemma-filled. Because the eternalizing aspect is permeated with a kind of terrible mortality... If you really could live forever, what a horrible thing that would be... so bored... you would forget all speech.*

The physical expansion of the signifier and its gaps was meant to make a language that was a type of world for the subject. With the *Non-site, Site Uncertain*, however, site and subject begin to lack being. To fully accommodate this lack of being, it was necessary to greatly enlarge the scale of the language. The rendering of a "Hypothetical Continent" made imagination and memory increase into becoming a world. The language grew more physical, more in the world, and more like a world.

The challenge Smithson set himself in the *Hypothetical Continents* was that of finding a sculptural language that shared the greatest possible number of forms with the world. This new language should be as much like the world as possible. For this reason, the centre of the *Island of Broken Glass (Atlantis)* consisted of ever-larger gaps and fragments, while the shoring of the glass island was eroded by the tides of Loveladies Island.

Merleau-Ponty suggested that language was a world because its gaps embodied a similar lack in the subject. Smithson used this in the arena of sculpture to create larger and larger maps, to the point that it became difficult to tell whether they were an act of mental memory and fantasy, or a case of matter remembering itself on its own account. The method allowed him to suggest an ontology in the

---

352 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 218.

presence of an 'Other' in matter itself, but in a manner quite different from his early theologically oriented writings

In making the move from *Hypothetical Continents* to the earthwork *Spiral Jetty*, though, Smithson, more than Merleau-Ponty, proposed the existence of a set of drives in the gaps of primordial language. Mind and matter met at an intersection that produced a material, subjectless 'instinct' at work within the artist, in sculpture, and in matter. As will be discussed in the next chapter, in earthworks such as the *Spiral Jetty*, the gaps were so large that it was possible to see in them a type of presence. Smithson was more interested in the post-theological question of who or what spoke through the gaps in language and the world. This led him to incorporate a psychoanalytic theory into his understanding of language and to his analysis of the functioning of perception.

In this respect it is interesting to speculate whether he read in his copy of Yale French Studies Jacques Lacan's "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious". Though Smithson may not have absorbed Lacan's detailed analysis of the functioning of metaphor and metonymy, if he read as far as the second page, he would have encountered Lacan's reformulation of the Freudian drives.

> *...what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language. Thus from the outset I have alerted informed minds to the extent to which the notion that the unconscious is merely the seat of the instincts will have to be rethought.*
> *But how are we to take this 'letter' here? Quite simply, literally.*
> *By 'letter' I designate that material support that concrete discourse borrows from language.*[353]

Perhaps with Lacan in hand he was able to theorise language as "a chain of dead desire" on which the subject constructed temporary stability.

What is it then that speaks on its own account in language. Smithson's closest answer to this came from a linguistics that worked through phenomenology to conclude psychoanalytically. A chain of dead desire unconscious drives, which were based upon entropy in inert matter. This was a topology of the drives, a world of positions and destructions, gatherings and scatterings, which were more attached to the subject than was his transcendental ego. In this sense, it was not the subject that linked his inner world and his outer world by means of a gesture. Language was possible as a signifier of mind because the world too was a representation, a sedimentation of intended meanings issuing from the functioning of inert drives.

---

[353] Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious", p. 147.

VI. Conclusion

Smithson's interests in linguistics arose in a context that included the growing belief that the study of the signified should give way to a study of the signifier. This context included the philosophical work of Wittgenstein, A. J. Ayer, Rudolph Carnap, and communications engineering. It soon incorporated Structuralism through Roland Barthes' and Claude Levi-Strauss. In art and literary criticism it included Arnold Hauser's book on The Crisis of the Renaissance, the novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet's, Nature Humanism Tragedy, and Wylie Sypher's Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art.[354]

In encountering the Vienna circle and early Wittgenstein, Smithson found a basis on which to consider language as a world in itself, completely separate from the subject and the world. Vienna Circle linguistics, in Smithson's hands, showed how language produced all the effects of truth in man without involving the presence of a mind. It also allowed him to make an account of the role of negation and absence as structurally significant aspects of language.

With Cherry and Pierce, Smithson developed an appreciation for the physicality of communication and its material functioning. The physical and statistical analysis of messages suggested, for Smithson, that there were logical and material forces at work in language. He used these theories to bolster his claim that language was like the world, by virtue of the fact that the world was like a language. Language and inert matter were both haunted by coding and fragmenting drives that made themselves manifest without conscious volition.

The structuralism of Barthes and Levi-Strauss perhaps allowed Smithson to go further than the Vienna Circle or engineering science in positing a pre-conscious and unconscious functioning of the signifier. Its careful study of the material structures of language suggested the presence of meaning that escaped the conscious subject. Anthropological structuralism also provided Smithson with a means to make an analysis of the social functioning of language.

By 1969, phenomenological theories of language provided a psychological account of a primordial language. Because it was a material patterned relationship, Merleau-Ponty's primordial language integrated mind and matter. All three made use of a set of logical forms which included gaps, voids and mirrorings. This was an important form in subjectivity because it caused psychological conditions in which instincts, desires, and finally subjectivity arise.

> *Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. This discomforting language of fragmentation offers no easy gestalt solution; the certainties of didactic discourse are*

---

[354] All of these texts were in Smithson's library.

> *hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle. Poetry being forever lost must submit to its own vacuity; it is somehow a product of exhaustion rather than creation. Poetry is always a dying language but never a dead language.*[355]

Some time has passed since Craig Owen first observed that Smithson's greatest contributions to post-modern culture was that he brought language and the fine arts together. "If...Smithson's writings testify to anything in our present culture, it is to the eruption of language into the field of the visual arts, and the subsequent decentering of that field."[356] Twenty years later, this claim seems as valid as ever. If, in the twentieth-century the most important philosophy was linguistic philosophy, then Smithson was important as one of the first American artists to take it into account. It might now be added that his understanding of linguistics was quite specific to his reading, and that his theories were developed partly in response to his historic context.

Smithson's study of linguistics led him to a series of projects in the last three years of his life that had as their focus the question, 'who is speaking?', or in visual terms, 'who is watching?' from out of the gap in language and the world. This question had theological origins in his work, but it became a two tiered inquiry that had implications for sculpture as a social language and as a language of the unconscious instincts. The last two chapters of this thesis will examine each of these aspects of language, starting with the psychoanalytic, and concluding with the social.

---

355 "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", S2, p. 107.

356 Craig Owens, "Earthwords", October, No. 10, Fall 1979, p. 122.

CHAPTER V

PSYCHOANALYSIS: MODELLING THE DRIVES

I. A Psychoanalytic Subject

Throughout chapter three, Smithson was found to be compelled by the duality of matter and mind. As a result of this, he increasingly argued against idealist views of the mind in favour of materialist views. While he read a broad range of historical philosophy on this issue, he also read contemporary phenomenological psychology with a view to establishing a greater understanding of the relation between mental phenomena and the external world. Phenomenology was a way to make empirical observations of mental events, and as such it coincided with and encouraged his study of psychoanalysis. As has already been mentioned Smithson quite blurred the distictions between a phenomenological and a psychoanlytic definition of the ego.

As a basis on which to construct a model of subjectivity and mind, phenomenology and psychoanalysis proved invaluable contemporary fields of study. If his interest was in "a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter", then these studies contributed to the way in which he conceived of this mental phenomenon. Husserl's phenomenology allowed him to make a description of the most material and "entropic" levels of the ego, while Merleau-Ponty provided him with a model for the a subject whose perception was marked by holes and gaps. Psychoanalysis was important for its ability to suggest what lay in these gaps by providing a theory of the unconscious. It provided a connection between a physical and perceptual structure of gaps and a theory of human desire and pleasure

In chapter four, Smithson was seen to take up a study of linguistics, in part to breach, in part to enter the "gap between mind and matter." Informed by engineering sciences, Wittgenstein, syntactics, and

phenomenology, these studies often emphasised the role of the linguistic gap, the logical negation, and the syntactic halt. Matter itself had linguistic properties, and could store information and process machine language. This led Smithson to question the functioning of an unconscious in language, and the existence of a primordial language that elided the subject, yet made language possible.

In this chapter, I would like to highlight the presence of Smithson's interests in psychoanalysis. To this end I present two of his works for their quality as a meditation on the nature of desire and drives. The first of these is his *Enantiomorphic Chambers* of 1965. This sculpture is an important early Minimalist workin which he proposed that visual desire in the subject was predicated on a series of gaps in which the subject imagined or fantasised the existence of an object. With this post-theological conclusion about the structural nature of vision, he no longer sought to see or represent god. By 1966 it was sex, not religion, that was of issue to his study of the visual field.

Following this I examine Smithson's use of Anton Ehrenzweig in his art criticism and in his commentary on his own work. This leads to a consideration of *Spiral Jetty* as an encounter with unconscious drives as defined by Freud and Ehrenzweig. As this reading leaves parts of his article and film unexplained, a further interpretation is made, using Lacan's theory of the scopic drive in The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis.[357] For Smithson, viewing *Spiral Jetty* and its accompanying text, film and photographs, draws one into a scenario which engages and stimulates one's awareness of the imbrication of human activity in the physical world. Smithson was indicating how human interactions with the physical world are driven by material processes and forces which are not within the subject, but exist externally in the world. As such these drives are not the part of an internal imagined other, but of a wholly other Other, an irreducible alterity that functions in the world, or in Lacan's notation, in the "Real".

Before examining these sculptures and their psychoanalytic theorisation, it would be informative to look at the sources Smithson had in his library, and the regularity of their occurrence in his writings. In the "Cummings Interview" Smithson suggested that his interests in psychoanalysis were ongoing but noticeably increased in 1967. At this time he made several return forays into his library to reread Freudian theory, the first reading having taken place when he was aged seventeen. His library contained Moses and Monotheism, Totem and Taboo, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, and Civilisation and Its Discontents. Similarly, it contained Wylie Sypher's Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art, which proved influential in providing an analogy between entropy and Freud's conception of the death-wish. He had already read Jung's Man and his Symbols, Modern Man in Search of a Soul, Psychological Reflections, Psyche and Symbol, Psychology and Alchemy, Symbols of Transformation,

---

[357] Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis, Penguin Books, London, 1994.

and J. W. Perry's highly Jungian study of schizophrenic art, The Self in Psychotic Process. Unfortunately, the publication dates of all the above listed texts are 1964 or earlier, making it difficult to trace the order of their acquisition. As Michael Leja has observed, however, the American art world generally favoured Jung in the 1940's and 50's and Freud in the 1960's.[358] The evidence of Smithson's library list generally supports this, leading to the conclusion that his interests in Jung were greatest during his association with Abstract Expressionism in the late 1950's. What the library list demonstrates is that Smithson was aware of theories of the unconscious as a set of drives (Freud) and as a process of symbolisation (Jung).

As Smithson had a subscription to Partisan Review, he also had access to articles that used psychoanalytic theory in the analysis of literature. What was then importantly added to this reading list in 1967, was Anton Ehrenzweig's The Hidden Order of Art.[359] As has already been discussed, Smithson made regular use of Ehrenzweig's psychoanalytic theory in part because it made desire more material, and described its functioning in terms similar to descriptions of matter. Following this in 1968, he acquired the existentialist psychoanalysis of Ludwig Binswanger's Being-in-the-World, and Gaston Bachelard's more literary Psychoanalysis of Fire.

In an earlier chapter, Smithson was seen to suggest that Michael Fried should have learned to appreciate the important role of unconscious dedifferentiation in making art. Similarly, we have also encountered Smithson's Minimalist mannerists, whom he saw as de-subjectified and frozen by their self-conscious awareness of being watched, a characterisation based on Hauser's and Sypher's psychological studies of historical Mannerism. Smithson's descriptions of phenomenological experience have also been seen to involve psychological and psychoanalytic theorisation. In order to get some impression of Smithson's understanding of the psychoanalytic structure of the visual field, I would like to start at the beginning of Smithson's Minimalist phase in order to sketch out the beginnings of his use and practice of psychoanalysis.

---

[358] Michael Leja, "Jackson Pollock and the Unconscious", Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940's, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993, p. 121.

[359] Ehrenzweig died just before publication of his book in 1967. He was a Lecturer in Art Education at Goldsmiths' College, London, having emigrated from Vienna in the 1930's, where he had studied psychoanalysis and law. His workshops and lectures for art teachers had an enduring influence at Goldsmiths and in Britain, partly through such teachers as Jon Thompson. Due to the timing of his death he has remained something of a 'one-hit wonder'.

II. Enantiomorphic Chambers[360]

Imagine for a moment the exhibition room of a small New York college, circa 1966. In the room is the first major showing of the artists who will soon be grouped under the name of "Minimalism". On the right is Donald Judd's conception of the "Specific Object". Straight-ahead is a Sol LeWitt, on the left wall is Robert Smithson's *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, while a Dan Flavin florescent tube lights a corner, and a Carl Andre takes the floor.

One story surrounding Smithson's sculpture was that it was a critical response to Frank Stella's comment "What you see is what you see".[361] This tautology irritated Smithson, seeming perhaps to be the type of self-fulfilling proposition that Greenberg so admired in his exhortations to painterly 'matter-of-factness', empiricism and restrained emotion. If Smithson's first contribution as a Minimalist was a retort to Stella, it did so by posing a stream of questions. How does the geometry of sight become invested with desire? How do unconscious drives make demands of the eye? How does the unconscious get visual satisfaction? And why can one see only in a "blind" manner what one desires? In finally finding his answers, Smithson made considerable headway in indicating the structural functioning of a scopic drive, and in theorising how this drive might be satisfied by sculpture in a moment of "de-personalising" pleasure.

More than other sculpture in this early Minimalist exhibition, Smithson's *Enantiomorphic Chambers* needs to be understood as an attempt to take the Cartesian space and geometry with which Minimalist sculpture dealt, and turn it to the study of the functioning of desire in vision. While Smithson was not the only Minimalist to address the illogic of geometry and the subtleties of perception, what might be regarded as unique is that his sculpture was meant to look back at the spectator as if it possessed its own capacity to see. If this is the claim he made in his writings, it would seem unfortunate that this sculpture disappeared immediately after its first showing.

This disappearance has proven a loss to a fuller understanding of Minimalism and Smithson, the more so because the *Chambers* continued to play an important role in Smithson's thinking about sculpture and the nature of visual experience. The final and most comprehensive theoretical explanation for this sculpture was "Pointless Vanishing Points", which was not written until 1967, by which time there was little point in publishing it. There was some delay in his explanation of this work as a demonstration of an aspect of vision that was not accounted for either by Descartes or phenomenology. The aspect of vision that Smithson sought to emphasise was the experience of being

---

[360] The section of the chapter on *Enantiomorphic Chambers* was originally published in Robert Smithson Retrospective: 1955-1973, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo Norway, 1999, p. 60. The plates for this text were made during this exhibition with the kind appearance of a member of the security staff.

[361] Conversation with the author, October 1998.

seen.[362] How clear this was at the time of its first exhibition, however, remains uncertain as this was a work that caused Smithson many an "afterthought".

Enantiomorphic Chambers was shown but once in 1966 in *Art in Process: The Visual Development of a Structure* at the Finch College Museum of Art. This sculpture provided him with his first critical success, while also "shamelessly" situating him as a founder member of Minimalism. Despite its loss, photographs, drawings, texts, and other items remain, thus making possible its replication.[363] This reconstruction allows an opportunity to further understand an important Minimalist sculpture.[364]

It might be thought that this sculpture reflected Smithson's growing interest in what phenomenology had to say about visual experience. Contemporary with this work is his first published writing, in the form of a catalogue essay on Donald Judd. In this essay, what Smithson valued in Judd was what he also valued in Merleau-Ponty. This admiration extended even to the point of using a description of Merleau-Ponty written by Quentin Laurer to describe Judd.[365] In these sculptures, as in Merleau-Ponty's writing, vision was experienced as a labyrinth of many visual spaces, an intertwining of multiple perceptions which intersected and separated with great complexity. This was a phenomenological meditation on the "Visible and the Invisible", on objects in embodied vision as they recede and become invisible.[366] Judd's sculptures, therefore, never provided visual certainty despite their clear geometry, but suggested instead an absence and a reversible visual limit.

Looking at the manuscript draft of this essay, which is quite different from the final version, I would like to pick out from its torrent of descriptions those comments that refer to the presence of an 'all-seeing' quality in the phenomenal experience of vision. He described the appearance of a gaze emanating from Judd's sculpture, in such a way that, as he looked at it, it looked back:

The eyes follow a double path into areas that can only be visualized in terms of inverse order... It will be impossible to give any idea of such a mask, for it reveals no obvious features... No space is "seized"... The mobile eye looks from a fixed point, and sees an oblique set

---

362 This was important to Merleau-Ponty too in works such as The Visible and Invisible.

363 "Interpolation of the *Enantiomorphic Chambers*" appeared in the Finch College exhibition catalogue, Art in Process, 1966, S2, p.39. Drawings include *Afterthought 'Enantiomorphic Chambers'*, *Drawing Y* and *Drawing Z* (Collection of M.O.M.A., N.Y.) Most important to the reconstruction was the *Berland Drawing* (collection of Joseph Berland, N.Y.C.). There are several stories relating to the disappearance of the sculpture. One is of its purchase by the collectors Mr. and Mrs. Lipman. John Weber relates that the work was offered to a charity auction, after which all trace was lost.

364 Reconstruction of this sculpture was undertaken by the author at the request of the Smithson Estate, and was funded and exhibited by the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo, Norway, in the exhibition *Robert Smithson Retrospective: 1955-1973*, 1999.

365 As far as can be determined, Smithson was familiar with Merleau-Ponty through at least three secondary sources, including Quentin Lauer, Phenomenology, It's Genesis and Prospect, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1965.

366 Merleau-Ponty's Visible and Invisible was published in France in 1964. Its first English translation was in 1968.

of conditions, that offer no precise location...The mind reconstructs "a sight" that "looks" at another sight, while diminishing any spatial idea. [367]

In this passage, he seems to raise more than just the issue of the imprecision of vision. This imprecision caused, or allowed, a mental reconstruction, an act of imagining, the result of which was the sighting of another gaze, whose location was not in his field of vision. I would propose that the sculpture *Enantiomorphic Chambers* was the object of an extended attempt to locate and theorise this gaze. In this sense, Smithson's contribution to this exhibition was more than a phenomenological investigation of the visual field, but a psychoanalytic investigation of the scopic drive. This started with Smithson's attempts to disqualify a purely geometrical relation between object, perception and subject. He then sought, with some belated success, to delineate the geometry by which the subject took visual pleasure in being seen. In the mirror-tricks created by this sculpture, he sought out what the subject desired to see / be seen by. His delineation, however, is rather fragmented across media and time, and in order to clarify and integrate his writings, interviews, diagrams and drawings, I would like to make some recourse to Lacan's theory of "the gaze" both in the "mirror stage" and as an abstract *Objet a*.[368] Lacan is of particular value to this analysis, because he shared with Smithson an interest in the phenomenology of vision, and likewise used this to build a psychoanalytic theory of visual desire.

In turning to the sculpture, the existing photographs show left and right-hand units made of painted steel and mirrors. When seen head-on, Smithson wished the work to be camouflaged as a flat green painting with a blue frame. At odds with this flatness, two mirrors stood forward and at right angles to the painted surface, one in each chamber, such that they reflected each other. Whether the mirrors were parallel or slightly oblique, or adjustable between both, remains uncertain.[369] The two units were hung on the wall such that the spectator could approach and stand between the mirrors. Smithson described it in these terms:

In this work, the vanishing point is split, or the center of convergence is excluded, and the two chambers face each other at oblique angles, which in turn causes a set of three reflections in each of the two obliquely placed mirrors.[370]

Of immediate note in the work is the presence of mirrors set to avoid the spectator's self-reflection as encountered in a front-facing mirror. Given that Smithson's texts of this time were quite critical of the "humanist self" or unified ego, it would seem that the mirrors were set to thwart the appearance of

---

367 "Untitled", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frame 687.

368 Lacan, The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis, chapters 6-9.

369 Nancy Holt and Peter Hutchinson recall them being parallel. The oblique arrangement described above differs from the parallel by about 2 radial degrees. It would have been easy to adjust it to either.

370 "Pointless Vanishing Points", S2, 358.

egoic self-unity. This may have been due to the tendency of a head-on mirror to provide the spectator with a gestalt self image. For example, Lacan indicates that the formation of the ego during the infant "mirror stage" arose from identification with one's own mirror image. Unlike the infant's experience of its body as fragmented and uncoordinated, this image appears as pleasingly unified.[371] To this end, the sculpture was a camouflaged lure, a trap to catch the gestalt-seeking visual ego, and replace it with a different model in which the subject remained distinctly 'split'. As Lacan indicates, the mirror experience is also alienating and splitting, in that the pleasant image of self-unity lies *outside* the body, in the mirror. Thus, a splitting and an alienation arises in the scopic field, followed by a desire to fill this gap.

Smithson wrote out this split in a drawing for the sculpture. At the bottom of *Drawing Y*, **[Plate 17]** Smithson diagrammed a "code of reflections" such that the ego, the word "ME", has been multiplied into three, then split into two letters, and finally connected across three axes.[372] A similar diagram was given in the catalogue, the combined result being given in Diagram 3.

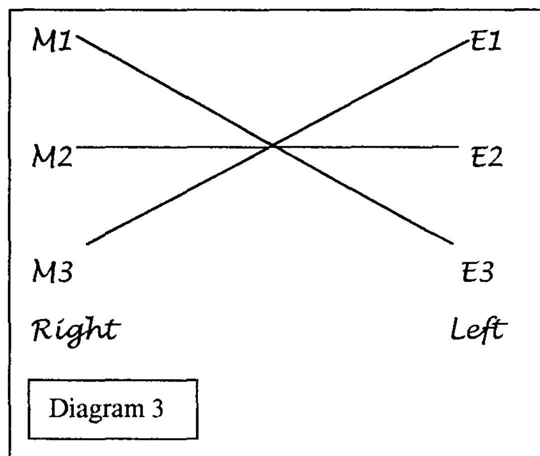


Diagram 3

It would seem from the plan given in *Drawing Y*, that the axial positions marked 1 through 3 in the diagram corresponded to three different viewing angles, providing that the spectator stood in the centre between the two halves of the sculpture, as in diagram 5. Each of these three viewing axes produced a different optical effect and each will be discussed below. While the first emphasises a split, the second evokes a gaze, and the third allows the spectator to take up the position of the gaze.

A. The First Axis: The Transcendental Ego

At the top of "Mirror Travels in the Yucatan", 1968, Smithson placed a quote from Claude Levi-Strauss:

The characteristic of the savage mind is its timelessness: its object is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and diachronic totality, and the knowledge which it draws therefrom is like that

[371] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I", Ecrits, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 1.

[372] This drawing is reproduced in Robert Hobbs, Robert Smithson: A Retrospective View, Cornell University Press, Ithica, NY, 1982, p. 57.

afforded of a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls, which reflect each other (as well as objects in the intervening space) although without being strictly parallel.[373]

Three years before this article, Smithson set out to produce this mirror effect in the first axis (M2 - E2 axis) of this sculpture. To do so, the spectator stood between the mirrors and faced one or the other [**Plate 18**]. In their oblique setting, the mirrors then produced the first three reflections of an infinite regression. Restricting the regression to three reflections meant that the spectator could accurately remark "I see myself seeing myself", in that there was one's face, then beyond that and somewhat smaller, the back of one's head. Beyond this, and smaller still, was the face again. This position provided a visual situation in which the spectator was caught looking at himself looking at himself [**Plate 19**]. On 'face' value this model seemed to be a credible model of self-apprehension, of Stella-esque self clarity. In Smithson's view, what this subject has forgotten, however, is the pleasure of making this observation for an Other, a someone who watches the performance of self-reflexivity and is satisfied by the show.

Smithson restricted the first axis (M2 – E2 axis) to three reflections because it visually produced three subject positions as a logical parallel to the three subjects present in the "I see myself seeing myself". It was this sequence of reflections that allowed the subject to apprehend himself as a thinking being. This visual model of self-apprehension proved, for Smithson, to be the basis of a good deal of western philosophy, particularly the rationalism of Descartes.[374] While it used the visual image of the unified body, this image appears three times, thus making manifest the type of splitting necessary to any Cartesian self-reflection, for example, 'I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am.' For Smithson, the oddity of this model of classical philosophical self-reflection was that the subject must appear in triplicate in order to perceive itself as a unity.

For his example, he described the perspectival systems employed in the surveying of land and the making of maps, as expressly Cartesian. In this system, a sovereign subject stands as a geometral point, which is described as non-extensive.[375] If the subject is a non-extensive logical necessity, the subject's perceptions of its object occur as a screen of visual perception, a surface in the path of the intersecting rays, as in Diagram 4. These perceptions 'belong' to the subject, or so it may seem. For Smithson they might also belong to an unconscious.

---

[373] "Mirror Travels in the Yucatan", S2, p. 119.

[374] This may also have applied to Clement Greenberg's notion of self-reflexivity.

[375] In "Pointless Vanishing Points" Smithson conflates one-point perspective and Cartesian space in the various survey techniques used in measuring and mapping land. Martin Jay discusses this as the scopic structure of the "Ancien Régime", in Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century Thought, U. of California Press, Berkeley, 1993.

This Cartesian subject can "seize" space, because he is sure in the knowledge that his perceptions are

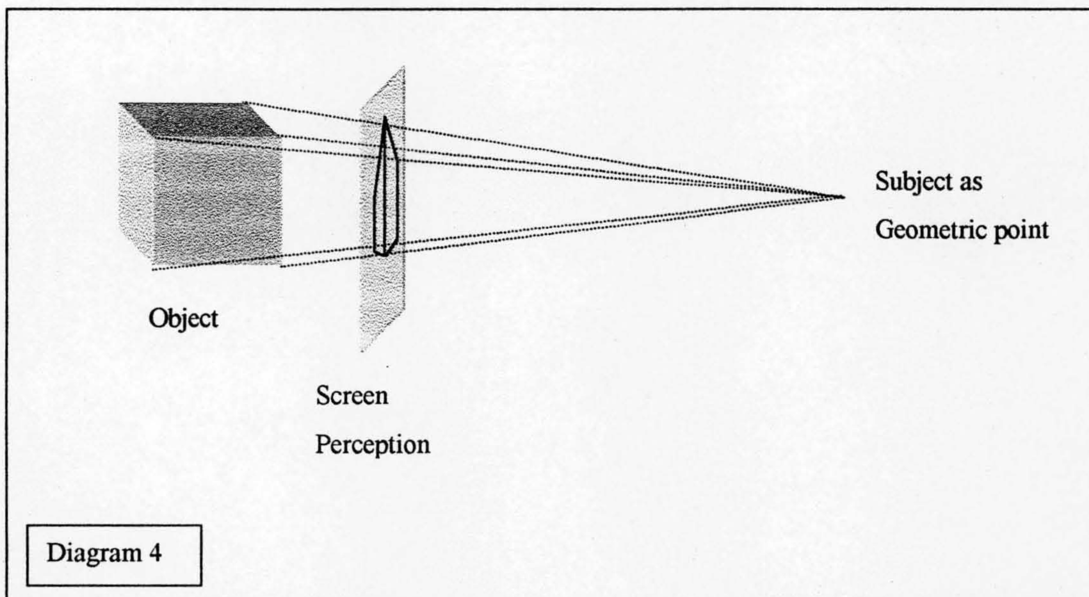


Diagram 4

his own. The subject in the *Chambers* can confidently report from this mirror axis that he sees himself seeing himself because there is an absolute confidence that the image of the back of the subject's head is still his own property, and a trustworthy illusion. In this sense, Smithson's understanding of the Cartesian subject is that it grasps itself as a logical certainty by trusting in the pure possession of its perceptions. There is in this, however, an element of idealism, a presumption that one's representations of oneself belong only to one's self. This was the idealist presumption that Smithson felt Michael Fried made in "Art and Objecthood", and in order to debunk its idealism he recommended putting Fried on an infinite series of stages.[376]. Smithson thus uncovered in Fried's attack on theatricality a theatrical eye for whom he had written in an act of giving satisfaction.

In providing an opportunity to walk into a visually self-reflexive field, the desired effect on the spectator seems to have been to show that this Cartesian field *failed* to produce the masterful, irreducible, unified ego-subject so prized by idealist philosophy, including the writings of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. As Lacan observed in his theory of the mirror stage, seeing oneself is not comfortably done.[377] While the mirror may provide a unified self-image, this act of identification takes place with an image that is outside the body. Standing in the *Chambers*, one does indeed see the back of one's head, and this suggests the presence, somewhere in the sculpture, of another eye, it suggests being seen rather than seeing, and as such addresses not the *cogito* but the *desiderio* of vision. In this sense Smithson's sculpture realises the appearance of a Kleinain part-object, a gaze which is separated off but remains reflexive and interchangable with the ego. What seems crucial to

376 "Letter to the Editor", S2, p. 66.

the understanding of the function of desire in vision is the presence of an external eye. Lurking 'behind' Cartesian self-possessed certainties, lay the structural functioning of a very different aspect of human scopic desire. Smithson's scepticism differs from Descartes', in that one's visual experience was not assumed to arise from a unified subject with unified biological needs. Desire in Enantiomorphic Chambers was seen to arise from an internal splitting of the subject. Even if satisfaction was garnered from the part-object the subject was still in thrall to something which could not be seen. In my view, the non visisble nature of the object in the *Chambers* lends itself to an analysis consistent more with Lacan than Klein. This is because the part object was understood by Smithson as in the specular field as a gap, or a void, and as something that was best understood as existing only at the level of a structure.

In criticising the presumptions of the classical philosophical model of geometral vision, it may very well be that for some of Smithson's friends there was a second setting to the M2 - E2 position [**Plate 20**]. In this slight modification, the mirrors would have been absolutely parallel, such that the regress of self-images was infinitely. In that he regularly wrote about Zeno's and Borges' paradoxes of infinite regress, and about the effects of entropy in repetition, it would seem likely that this parallel setting was of considerable further interest. I would suggest that this slight adjustment of the mirror was meant to further 'call the ruse' of the Cartesian ego and its misrecognition of itself through the practice of self-reflection. In that it created an ever-extending sequence in which a subject pursues itself *ad infinitum*, the M2 - E2 axis in its second setting possessed an ability to infinitely defer the discovery of a point of view or vanishing point. Anxiety may arise because the whole visual field becomes a labyrinth of unstable reflections. Contrary to Stella, what you see isn't what you see in the *Chambers* because the subject is indefinitely displaced or elided to a vanishing point that can never be seen. What I wish to show is how *Enantiomorphic Chambers* constitutes Smithson's attempt to locate a gaze which is curiously internal but imagined to be external, not as he put it by seizing space, but by seizing the subject in its split. The infinite vanishing point of the mirrors is something thal literally cannot be seen or photographed, and cannot be incorporated into a narcissistic sense of wholeness.

In splitting the visual field Smithson produced a certain amount of anxiety. He speaks of the vanishing point of the infinitely deep mirrors as a type of gazing eye, but one which cannot be seen, no matter how much one moves side to side because it always gets blocked. It always lies behind the eye of the spectator as seen in the first mirror reflection, and can only be 'seen' as an inferred invisible logical necessity. Smithson was not alone in using this demonstration of infinite regress to criticise idealist models of subjectivity. He was most likely to have encountered a similar argument in his reading of A.J. Ayer and Wittgenstein, as well as in the literature and imagery of science fiction.

---

[377] Lacan, "The Mirror Stage", p. 1.

In infinitely splitting the subject, Smithson was in pursuit of an alternative conception of the subject and vision. His aim was to get around what he regarded to be a "monocular" metaphysical view of subject identity. By way of an alternative model of visual splitting in the subject, he became interested in researching the history of vision and particularly binocular sight as further evidence of a split in its structure. He regarded this to be a study in embodied "physiological" vision, from which he found that the biological design of human eyes utilised a mirroring. Stereoscopic vision was mirror-split, because human eyes are 'enantiomorphic', meaning that, along the median plane, one side of the human head is a mirror image of the other. [378]

For Smithson the study of binocular optics proved important in formulating his concept of a visually split subject, and to this end, he recounted a brief history of vision as presented in the text "Pointless Vanishing Points". It started with the ancient Greek Hipparchus, who supposed that rays were emitted from the eyes in a propelled or compelled vision. This was followed by the later Greek discovery that the eyes receive rays of light. Moving on to the Renaissance, he traced a development from monocular one-point perspective, to Paulo Uccello's two-way perspective, then to nineteenth-century stereoscopic photography, in order to show how perception was increasingly recognised as structurally split in two.[379]

In this history, Smithson tried to unjumble two distinct models of vision. One was the spatial and geometral system of perspective that posited the subject as a unified, non-extensive, causal point. The other models, of Hipparcus, Uccello and stereoscopy, posited a split in vision. In Hipparcus's model the eyes both emitted and received occular rays, Uccello split vision by imagining himself standing outside the perspective picture looking in, an from within the painting's vanishing point in order to look outward. Stereoscopic mechanisms also recognised the structural splitting of vision by utilising three dimensional effects cuased by the existence of two eyes. For Smithson, all three of these models emphasised the splitting, separating power of vision. They also suggested an aspect of visual experience that was not about grasping space, but about feelings of being grasped by eyes imagined to be other than one's own. One of his points about models of vision in which there is a split and a gap was that they porposed the logical possibility not only of seeing, but of being seen, of entering an othered or 'de-personalised' field of vision that strips away subjectivity.

Smithson explained some of this to Dennis Wheeler in these terms:

---

[378]Smithson differs from Lacan in his emphasis on the two-eyed structure of vision, as based on the stereo optics of Wheatstone. Lacan's biological basis was Roger Caillois' study Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia.

[379] "Pointless Vanishing Points", S2, p. 359.

[Enantiomorphic Chambers] That's really about the eyes, and a kind of external abstraction of the eyes. Its like you're entering the field of vision. It's like a set of eyes outside my personal set, so it's a kind of depersonalization... Like... artificial eyes, that in a sense establish a certain kind of point of departure not so much towards the idealistic notion of perception, but all the different breakdowns within perception.[380]

In the catalogue essay, Smithson added the rather biblical comment that "To see one's own sight means visual blindness." Smithson indicated in this sculpture a structure in which a visually split subject was positioned in relation to an imagined gaze whose presence was clearly felt, but whose location remained elusive. Putting it another way, Smithson observed that "visual blindness" allows the subject to see that the having of eyes is to take for granted that one is visible to other eyes, and that there is substantial satisfaction to be had in this.[381] In turning to the second axis, Smithson began to lure his visually split subject into an encounter with a 'de-personalised' gaze that was imagined to be external, yet clearly arose to satisfy internal desire.

B. The Second Axis: The Split Subject and the Gaze

A complete splitting of the spectator's visual field was accomplished in this sculpture on its second axis (M1-E3 axis), by providing each eye with a different space to look into. Combining these different spaces in the mind produced a stereometric optical illusion. This illusion took place when a two-eyed spectator looked into one of the chambers, while standing near the forward-most vertical edge of the work. In this situation, one eye registered an angled rear surface, while the other registered the inner corner of the chamber as reflected in the mirror. This can be seen in Diagram 5 and **[Plate 21]**.

In this position, the various odd angles and shapes of the chambers are designed to ensure that the blue frame around the work remains in the same place in both images, while the green surfaces appear at the same distance but at different angles. The closer one stands to the forward edge of the sculpture, the more satisfying is the illusion. Thus, Smithson rather comically encouraged his spectators to push their face right up against the Greenbergian picture plane in search of hidden depths. The phenomenon of such doubling in the vision of the spectator provokes an unexpected "either/or" choice between the conflicting images. At first, this is a rather anxious uncomfortable experience. After some effort, however, the two images coalesce, causing the illusion of a unified but non-existent space, a prism shaped area that certainly can be perceived but cannot be entered, grasped or seized. In addition to an infinite and invisible vanishing point on the first axis, this sculpture also

---

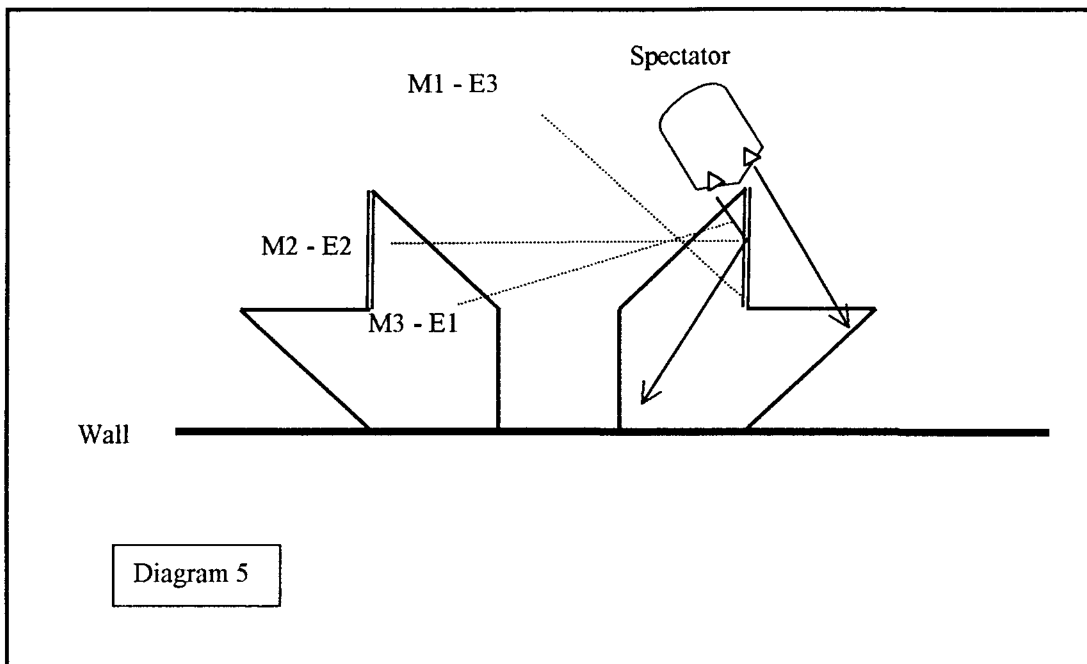
380 "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frame, 1124.

381 This much he understood from his own experiences with religion in 1961. During this time, the eye of Christ was a repeatedly painted image, in both figurative and abstract styles.

possessed another axis, a wholly imagined or abstract space from which emerged a fantasy of being captured by an imperceptible pair of "alien eyes". He comments,

...one would end up with something that would resemble a reversed *stereoscopic viewer. One would be physiologically transported behind the 'fused image' of the* picture plane, *to where the vision diverges...It is as though one were being imprisoned by the actual structure of two alien eyes. It is an illusion without an illusion.*[382]

With this optical illusion, the spectator experiences a split in visual unity, then a reunification which



reveals an uncanny, impossible, illusory space. In my own lecture demonstrations of this effect, more often than not, the spectator experiences a release of anxiety leading to a pleasurable surprise.

It seems to have taken two years for Smithson to produce a text capable of theorising a general structure to the scopic drive. If phenomenology located a gap in the visual field, psychoanalytic texts led him to suggest that this gap was filled with pleasure and anxiety whenever a gaze appeared in the gap. Smithson saw it advisable to see this void space because of the anxiety and pleasure that arose out of it. The prism shaped space that emerges here is likened to the purely abstract space from which the part-object emerged. Here one can only see the space, not the object, which remains forever invisible to everything except the imagination. Lacan was of the view that, for desire to get going in

---

[382] "Pointless Vanishing Points", S2, p. 359.

the split subject, a second term arises which he calls the *object a*, or object-cause of desire.[383] Smithson, like Lacan, likened this cause of desire to a vanishing point, a void, a horizon line, and to a pair of "alien eyes".

It would seem from what has been established already, that the subject, in splitting, gives rise to a structure in which desire appears. It remains, however, to indicate what this split subject requires, by way of an object, to fill this lack and render satisfaction. This object, should it be found in a work of art, caused desire in a spectator. For Lacan, this object, it is important to note, exists not so much as a material object, but as the object-cause or *object a* of desire. How can a sculpture come to be a little piece of the other, a little filling in the scopic void of a split subject?

As an art critic, Smithson observed how a particular art object might cause desire because of what he called the "X factor", a factor which the subject cannot define, yet nevertheless seeks. In his article "The X factor and the New Art", he listed eleven artists and eight critics in terms of their object:

"For Ad Reinhardt it is "the end", for Don Judd it is "the specific", for Leo Valedor it is "the zig-zag", for Sol Lewitt it is "the redundant", for Dan Flavin it is "the fact", for Carl Andre is the "the anaxial", for Wil Insley is is "the basic" for Peter Hutchinson it is "the empty", for Frank Stella it is "the solution" and for Robert Morris it is "the uninflected".[384]

The variety of these objects, and their classificationunder a single abstract terms gives some imprssion of the way in which Smithson viewed the object as holding a place in a structure. Thus what was important was identifying the structure as much as the specific part-object which got an artist's desire going. Among the Minimalist artists he found a similarly non-specular, abstract object in their sculpture:

When we run our eyes over a LeWitt or a Judd, the redundant order of their art breaks open our sight into lapses or gaps. Our vision is shifted ... The question is not so much what we see, but what we don't see... The more the eye looks the less it sees, until total "blindness" envelops one's perception. It becomes more of a challenge to think about sight, instead of merely looking.[385]

What Smithson proposed in general for sculpture was that it had the power of suggesting an abstract object that had no specular image in the visual field. In the *Chambers*, this abstracted object was a

---

383 This is a simplification of Lacan's theory. In fact, the split brings on three factors, \$, *object a*, and the A. As I am particularly concerned with the scopic register of imagination and the relation \$◊a, rather than the big Other (A) Symbolic, consideration of the chain of signifiers $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$ has been omitted. Bruce Fink, The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 83, defines the *object a* as, "that which interrupts the smooth functioning of law and the automatic unfolding of the signifying chain...and a last reminder or remainder of the hypothetical mother-child unity to which the subject clings in fantasy to achieve a sense of wholeness, as the Other's desire, as the jouissance object, as that 'part' of the mOther the child takes with it in separation, and as the foreign, fateful cause of the subject's existence that he or she must subjectify in analysis."

384 "The X Factor in the New Art", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frame 0950. This article is sadly not in the second edition.

385 "The X factor in the New Art", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frame 0950.

gaze. Like Reinhardt's cartoon painting [**Plate 22**][386], and Lacan's analysis of the anamorphic blot in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*[387], Smithson's *Enantiomorphic Chambers* possessed what he called "alien eyes". What the subject wants to see, what gets fantasy and desire going, is the fantasy of a desirous gaze outside of one's own. This meant not just seeing the sculpture, but being seen by it in return. Additionally, this gaze does not have to physically exist. As in the sculpture *Pointless Vanishing Point*, 1969 [**Plate 23**], there is no vanishing point. The alien need only be imagined for it to function, as it is "an illusion without an illusion". If this gaze was a logical necessity to his own visual desire, was it seen to be the result of unconscious drives? Was the gaze of the alien conceived of as a sign of the functioning of an unconscious? In the text "Pointless Vanishing Points" there is no such theorisation of the unconscious. Yet, when entered on its third axis, the *Chambers* provided an opportunity to step behind the picture plane and to be the gaze for another spectator.

C. The Third Axis: Prison Chambers

In the psychoanalytic writings that Smithson had read up to 1966, he seems not to have encountered a detailed analysis of a specifically scopic drive. In trying to formulate his own, Smithson proposed that it was the subject's role to get inserted in a function whose exercise visually grasps the subject, wherein the function was a de-personalising gaze, which Lacan refers to as implicated in the unconscious.[388] The *Chambers* provided a chance to play the gaze, a chance Smithson himself took in a series of photographs taken for Harper's Bazar magazine. The starting point of this position can be seen in [**Plate 24**].

The third axis (M3 - E1 axis) took place when a two-eyed spectator stood with his or her back to the wall, a chamber on either side. The spectator can now see into the mirrors without finding a self-reflection. The feeling is one of standing in the split between two giant oddly aligned eyes. What is seen in each mirror is an image of one side of the room within an image of the other side of the room, thus allowing the spectator to see in two directions at once. On either mirror, there appears a full visual field, while the sculpture acts to hide the spectator. Standing in the chamber looking out, the spectator has an all-seeing panoptic vision, and can see other people in the room while remaining relatively hidden. The spectator becomes an 'invisible' party, he or she has stepped "behind the 'fused' image' of the picture plane", but can still see other spectators [**Plate 25**]. According to the quote

---

[386] Reinhardt's drawing, *How to Look at Modern Art in America* of 1946, presented a cartoon posted onto the 'tree' of American art. In this cartoon a self-possessed spectator points to an abstract painting and remarks: "Ha Ha, What does that represent?" Much to his surprise, however, the spectator is jolted by the painting, which comes to life, glares back and retorts "What do you represent?" This comparison was brought to my attention by Michael Corris of Oxford-Brooks University.

[387] Lacan, "Anamorphosis", The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis, p. 79.

[388] Lacan, "Anamorphosis", The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis, p.106.

above, looking down this axis was the spectator's own tantalising chance to be the gazing eyes of this "alien".

From this last position the spectator has been drawn right into the sculpture to look outwards, thus taking up the position of an imagined pair of eyes. This alone offers a type of pleasure and power. While this may account for his explanation that the spectator was 'transported behind the picture plane', can the spectator identify with this alien and enjoy its pleasures? Perhaps he or she can, by laying in wait for another spectator to enter the field of captivation created by the chambers. In retrospect, Smithson found this position to release an erotic charge. A noticeable excitement arose at the thought of being the gaze that cannot be seen.

When the play of this game of capture, whether real or imagined, ended, the time came for the spectator to walk away from the work. Having taken the chance to be the gaze, and to recuperate a pleasure after the traumas of the first and second axis, the spectator then saw *Enantiomorphic Chambers* from a distance. Hanging on the wall like a pair of glinting, crystalline, green eyes gazing back, the spectator encountered his or her own desire gazing back from the object due in large part because the spectator remembers but does not see his or her own body in the position of the gaze. At this moment, the subject is captured, or at least presented with a structural demonstration of visual desire of his or her own making.

Shortly after completing the sculpture, Smithson produced thephotocollage *Afterthought 'Enantiomorphic Chambers'* **[Plate 26]** in order pin down the eroticism of the sculpture. In recreating the third axis, he placed a photograph of a chamber either side of an anonymous faceless and libidinous figure, with head down and back turned. Decapitated and phallus-like, this presumably male figure is engaged in the course of desire by perhaps better know means. He enjoys an auto-erotic stimulation or "(Pocket - polo)" as he wrote in the text at the bottom. While the spatial relation between figure and sculpture is ambiguous, ink lines connect the two chambers to form a visual intersection over the torso. Somewhere in this intersection, a gaze was present, and it was productive of an erotic pleasure, even if no sexual partner is present. No one has been seduced, he has not stretched out in bed, but pinned a de-personalised subject on a grid.

D. A Graph of Visual Desire

One way to interpret the *Afterthought* would be to see it as a schematic of the relation noted by Lacan between the split subject ($) and the gaze (*object a*). On the first axis, the subject experienced an anxious splitting that led to a fantasy of a gaze. In the second axis this gaze was located as non-

specular and so awkwardly non-spatial as to be beyond physical entry. Only by imagination and abstraction could the space be entered. In the third axis, this gaze was taken up in a recuperation of pleasure and an intensity of being.[389] This situation, for Lacan, was a singular and permanent relation that could be beneficially reduced to its most abstract status in the form of a mathematics. For Lacan this relation was noted in the matheme $ ◊ *a*, which might be written as 'the split subject in relation to the object-cause of desire'. Smithson provided his own abstract notation in a grid at the top of *Afterthought: Enantiomorphic Chambers*, which is reproduced in diagram 6.

Reading this graph requires some deduction, as Smithson provided no guide. What it may have provided was a model of a vertical synchronic, and a horizontal diachronic functioning in visual desire, a temporal model that Smithson admired in Levi-Strauss's descriptions of the "La Pensée Sauvage". If this is the case, then, from the left and from the right Smithson wrote a sequence of numbers running from 1 through to 8. This lower numerical sequence is based upon a law of diachronic succession that dictates the chain's temporal procession. The sequences 1-8 proceeds towards the centre of the graph from both sides. Being split, it starts from the left and from the right, to move towards the center in search of its object. In the middle of this lower chain an interuption arises, in the form of a digital sequence running 0 1 0 1. During the period of sexual excitement, when the part-object or *objet a* comes to mind the 1 – 8 sequence is displaced vertically into an upper register, thus making the two sequences synchronic. The digital sequence, for all its power of

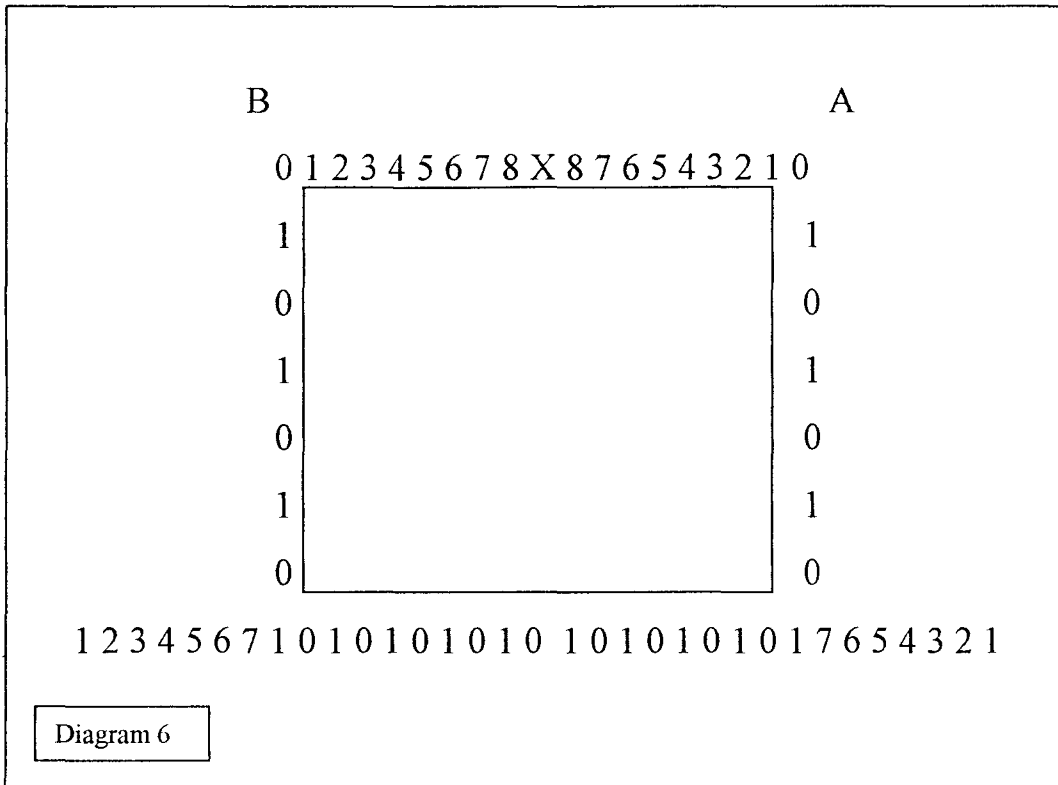


Diagram 6

Looking down the drawing, the photo collage has at its centre an anonymous aroused male figure, caught in the gaze of the *Chambers*. In the text he comments that he is not meeting the gaze or "stopping sight" with "brutal opposition", but turning his back and lowering his head in an act of "destitution". It would seem that the subject is elided, decapitated, de-subjectified by the fantasy of a gaze. The result, however is the release of an erotic charge that requires no partner. The sculpture as gaze can kick the scopic drive into play. There is no need for another person to enter this solipsistic cycle of desire because the object which sets it in motion is entirely imagined and abstract. Thus the sculpture places his own sexuality in the frame and does so largely to demonstrate the minimal conditions of male scopic pleasure.

Perhaps Smithson 'plays' the sculptor's version of the 'nurd', who gets a little too much pleasure from the object. It's the male who fails to relate to the people, by getting his kicks from the object.
If this was part of the game of the erotics of vision, it was neither 42nd Street pornographic peep show, nor narcissistic ego game. The sculpture induced a splitting of the subject, a captivation by an alien gaze, and a rather charictaristic male fantasy. In this sculpture, the gaze has no personality or subjectivity, and neither does the artist, though this does not stop unconscious material-instinctual satisfaction from taking place.

Why make sculpture? Why was Smithson first a sculptor and secondly a writer? Because one can make what satisfies one's eye. With two mirrors one can create the feeling of being seen. The work of art produces its own stimulus, its own ability to satisfy without narcissus. Unlike the pornographer, it is left to the spectator to do the imagining. While one critic has considered Smithson's interest in this to be a perversion, to Smithson it would seem to be a typical structure in male scopic pleasure that is inescapable.[390] Scopic satisfactions are simply partial satisfactions, and for the male scopic drive to work its minimal requirement is the object that possesses the gaze.[391] Compared to the sculpture on the opposing wall in the original exhibition, this was a very 'specific object' indeed, though not the type that Judd wished to represent.

This encounter with *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, in its location of a gaze to complement the subject, broke new ground for Smithson. It indicates that his initial contribution to the Minimalist movement was a 'specific object' that gave the spectator a sense of the functioning of an object of desire in vision. As difficult a puzzle as it was for him, and for subsequent critical interpretation, it established a basis for understanding libidinal vision as something indelibly structured by a split, void or lack in the ego. This split allowed a logical fantasy object to arise, namely a gaze and the possibility of being seen. This *object a*, or gaze, was part of the unconscious de-subjectifying satisfaction of the scopic drive.

Given his protracted and persistent interest in the effects of this sculpture, it is little surprise to see Smithson go on to investigate theories of the drives in the available literature. One of the most important advances which he sought at this time was a greater understanding of the relation between entropy and unconscious drives. He found much in Freud's theory of the death drive, but perhaps more in Anton Ehrenzweig's psychoanalytic theory of "dedifferentiation" in art.[392] By 1967, Smithson integrated these theories in his Site / Non-site sculptures, his mirror displacements, and his earthworks. It appeared first, however, in his art criticism, and in order to get some sense of his theory individual notion of an "entropic" unconscious drive, I would turn for an example to his use of Ehrenzweig in his defence of Tony Smith and in his discussions with Robert Morris.

III. A Materialist Psychoanalysis: From Entropy to Ehrenzweig

The materialist-behaviourist view of human character often served Smithson as an important criterion in making philosophical judgements against idealism. Nevertheless, behaviourism was not satisfactory

---

[390] Stuart Morgan, "'An art against itself': Functions of Drawing in Robert Smithson's Work", Arts Magazine, May 1978, p. 125.

[391] Serge André, "Otherness of the Body", The Lacanian Theory of Discourse, New York University Press, New York, p. 90.

[392] He also would have found much in Merleau-Ponty's theorisation of the gaze in The Phenomenology of Perception. Lacan drew heavily on this as a source for his own theories, but it is much more difficult to find evidence that Smithson read this. He seems only to have read about it.

to Smithson, in that it could do little to account for the problem of a subject who made sense of perception, sought pleasure, or valued art and freedom. Smithson was interested in pushing the question of the relation between matter and mind in relation to the question of consciousness, and although he was attracted to the claims of materialism, he did not necessarily want to accept the consequences of behaviourism. By 1968 his reading of psychoanalytic literature was increasingly present in his criticism and in his theorisation of art. By this time Smithson generally accepted a psychoanalytic solution to the mind / matter problem. While Smithson stuck to a dialectical dualism, he worked on the assumption that the unconscious was a third term, a median zone between body (matter) and consciousness (mind). The unconscious and its drives were the medium by which the body communicated its instincts to the conscious mind.[393] In addition to works by Freud and Jung, Smithson read several further books giving detailed analysis of the drives.[394] The most important of these for his art criticism was Anton Ehrenzweig's Hidden Order of Art.[395]

What Ehrenzweig's book provided Smithson was a detailed psychoanalytic explanation of creative processes given in materialist terms. The quote below, for example, provided Smithson an image of the psychic drives in biological and material terms, including those of entropy, as well as offering a parallel between the dialectics of differentiation / dedifferentiation and Eros / Thanatos.

...I followed the physicist, Schroedinger, in assuming that life (Eros) tends towards ever enriching internal differentiation through eating (internalization, retention), while death (Thanatos) tends towards entropy, a leveling down of the difference between inside and outside and a diminution of internal tension through externalization (excreting, expelling). Freud, too, identified the death instinct with the nirvana principle of entropy, a complete running down of tension within the psychic organism... [I would now] reformulate the opposition between the two instincts in terms of an optimal threshold for further increases in differentiation...Both instincts are needed.[396]

More than in Freud and Jung, Smithson found in Ehrenzweig's book an analysis of contemporary 1960's art. He gives consideration to Pollock, Rothko and Picasso, his friends Eduardo Paolozzi and Bridget Riley, and his experiences teaching students at Goldsmiths College, London. By 1968, Smithson was widely incorporating Ehrenzweig's conceptions of artistic practice art, particularly for its conception of a stage of "dedifferentiation" as amental isomorph of material entropy.

---

[393] Sigmund Freud, Collected Papers, Hogarth Press, London, Vol. 5, 1964. p. 64. Freud defines a drive as "both the mental representative of the stimuli emanating from within the organism and penetrating to the mind, and at the same time a measure of the demand made upon the energy of the later in consequence of its connection with the body."

[394] He read the Freudian Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Conn., 1959. Also, the Jungian John Weir Perry, The Self in Psychotic Process: Its Symbolisation in Schizophrenia, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1953.

[395] Anton Ehrenzweig, The Hidden Order of Art, Weidenfeld Press, London, 1993. First published in 1967.

A. The Three Stages

Ehrenzweig put forward an explanation of painting and sculpture based upon three stages. The first and last of these stages, respectively "differentiation" and "re-introjection", were based largely on the work of Melanie Klein and to a lesser degree, D. W. Winicott. In brief, when the first of these three stages of creativity commences, the artist is in a "differentiated" ego state. This state often displays an excessive need for clear visualisation; it seeks logic and clarity, and objects to ambiguity or open-ended multi-evocative structure. This state also persecutes, through the super ego, by showing disgust and an aggressive parental authority. Its aggression toward fantasy leads to fragmentation and repression of these fragments into the unconscious. For this reason it is also referred to as the "paranoid-schizoid" phase.

In the first stage of creativity, the artist unconsciously projects repressed fragments of the self into a new work of art. It is a paranoid-schizoid stage because it alternates between schizoid projection of repressed fragments, and paranoid persecutions and anxiety that punish the artist for such schizoid projection. One example of a manifestation of paranoid aggression and persecution of schizoid scattering is anal disgust, it which the art work is dismissed as a mess, 'a load of crap.'

The second phase, called "dedifferentiation" is also a two-part process. What it produces is a structure that suits both the exigencies of irrational id fantasy, and the needs of a rationally organised objective task. Dedifferentiation is partly a repression, in that it makes repressed material inaccessible to conscious experience by fragmenting it. It therefore causes a rich unconscious fantasy life. In non-psychotic individuals, the unconscious is like a 'womb' for receiving dedifferentiated and repressed images, toward eventual re-introjection. Dedifferentiation initiates what Ehrenzweig called unconscious scanning in which the fragments are assessed for their undifferentiated substructure.

Smithson described dedifferentiation in these terms:

Dedifferentiation... is not like differentiation in terms of pure concept or ideal postulates or tautologies, or anything like that. Dedifferentiation is when you have these sort of overlapping things, when the dialectic gets a little... unusual, let's say.[397]

There is a dialectical situation, and a striving for the satisfaction of a gestalt unity. This then breaks down in favor of the Alogon and dedifferentiation, scattering rather than containment. It's not about being satisfied.[398]

---

[396]Ehrenzweig, The Hidden Order, p. 219-220.

[397] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 207.

[398] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 199.

It was this theory of dedifferentiation that Smithson was able to ally to his theory of entropy: "'de-differentiation' [was] Anton Ehrenzweig's word for entropy."[399] Ehrenzweig also suggests that dedifferentiation can become self-destructive in conjunction with the death wish.

If dedifferentiation is partly a repression, rather paradoxically it leads to a state of non-containment. At the extreme end of this process, dedifferentiation breaks down all differences to the point of "undifferentiation" which is experienced as an oceanic unity. As time and space are dissolved in undifferentiation, so too is the working of reason, which depends on these modes for thought. This state allows a safe containment and unification of projected fragments, an envelopment by one-ness, which Smithson called "primary envelopment". While the manic refuses to give up undifferentiation, the schizophrenic fears it as if it were death.

When in a state of undifferentiation it is possible to hold mutually exclusive structures in a single focus and to contemplate more than one system at a time under a single comprehension. By fluctuating between undifferentiation and dedifferentiation, the artist contributes to the building of works of art in that repressed and fragmented imagery is eventually introjected back into the ego.

In Ehrenzweig's third stage of "Re-introjection", repressed fragments that have been given unconscious unity are now made available to the ego and put into the artwork. This third 'depressive' stage requires a detachment from manic feelings of unity, and leads to a sad but mature acceptance of death, otherness and heterogeneity. Re-introjection accepts the limits of art. It also brings renewed powers of abstraction and problem solving. This stage is more integrated, contained, and able to make intersubjective reparations because it retains some of the marks of oceanic imagery and manic contentment. The value of introjected art is that it retains some memory trace of the unconscious substructure at work within it.

Smithson's reading of Ehrenzweig seems to have had considerable effects on his theorisation of art and his understanding of artistic practice. The first real use of Ehrenzweig appeared in a defence of the artist Tony Smith from criticisms made by Michael Fried. I would like to briefly turn to this dispute in order to examine its psychoanalytic argument.

B. Tony Smith and Michael Fried

In 1966, Smith published an interview describing a drive on an unfinished highway.[400] In 1967, Fried's "Art and Objecthood" used Smith's experiences on the turnpike as an example of an anti-

---

399 "A Sedimentation of the Mind", S2, p. 110.

modernist literalism that was more related to theatre than to painting and sculpture. Fried argued that, whereas Modern art made the spectator aware of his or her subjectivity through looking at an art object, Smith had replaced the art object with a temporal experience. Fried objected to the endlessness and objectlessness of Smith's experience, claiming it to be outside the category of the fine arts, and therefore a "theatrical" anti-art.[401]

In "A Sedimentation of the Mind", Smithson weighed into this dispute by first indicating that Smith was *not* claiming his trip to be a work of art.

> *He is talking about a sensation, not the finished work of art; this doesn't imply that he is anti-art. Smith is describing the state of his mind in the "primary process" of making contact with matter. This process is called by Anton Ehrenzweig "dedifferentiation" and it involves a suspended question regarding "limitlessness" (Freud's notion of the "oceanic") that goes back to* Civilization and Its Discontents. *Michael Fried's shock at Smiths' experiences shows that the critic's sense of limit cannot risk the rhythm of dedifferentiation that swings between "oceanic" fragmentation and strong determinants.*[402]

Fried's comments were subjected to a psychoanalysis with the result that he is made to look like an aggressive, super-egoic persecutor, afraid of the suspension of boundaries between self and non-self. Smithson agreed with Fried that dedifferentiated states, such as Smith's car ride, were not art because they suspended limits. What he hoped for, though, was that Fried would have a greater respect for the 'primary process' as it led up to re-introjection and the creation of art. In his view, however, Fried was the classic over-differentiated paranoiac, and therefore too fearful of dedifferentiation and all too prone to persecute those who displayed such tolerances.[403] Smithson then rounded off his defence by reasserting that dedifferentiation was a natural material phenomenon, likened to the rusting of machines or the decomposition of an organic body.

> *All differentiated technology becomes meaningless to the artist who knows this state... The rational critic of art cannot risk this abandonment into "oceanic" undifferentiation, he can only deal with the limits that come after this plunge into such a world of non-containment.*[404]

For Smithson, the artwork stemmed from an awareness of his subjectivity as a real thing, immersed in the world. Human interactions with the world were material processes, including unconscious drives and instincts which were not subject to conscious control. There was no art without an experience of entropic dedifferentiation, because in the first place, art was a matter of satisfying material drives.

---

400 Samuel Wagstaff and Tony Smith, "Talking with Tony Smith", Artforum, December 1966.

401 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", Art in Theory, 1900-1990, Blackwell, London, 1992, p.828.

402 "A Sedimentation of the Mind", S2, p. 103.

403 Smithson describes Fried as an "obsessed", but credible adversary in the "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", Smithson Archives, roll 3834, frame 1127.

404 "A Sedimentation of the Mind", S2, p. 102.

Entropy was a crucial and unavoidable material / mental phenomenon in creativity and in the eventual erosion of the resulting artwork.

By insisting on the entropic nature of dedifferentiation, Smithson gave Ehrenzweig's theory of the unconscious a retroactive power. Temporally, Smithson's theory was at times a palaeontology which looked backward. In the instance of the *Hypothetical Continents,* dedifferentiation was almost a form of Platonic anamnesis in which the past is physically encrypted in matter.[405] In Smithson's more materialist manner the brain, in a state of undifferentiation, was likened to matter with memory, a computer with a hard disk, and an Egyptian tomb with hieroglyphs.[406]

C. Robert Morris

The high value placed on psychoanalytic theories was often evident when Smithson responded to questions from artists. An example can be noted in an interview in 1971 with Gregoire Müller.[407] In response to a question about the ambiguity and difficulty of photographing Land Art he remarked, "...there are three different kinds of scale that one can apprehend, and they are constantly trading places with each other. The area that you seem to be interested in is the dedifferentiated area – between differentiation and undifferentiated.".[408]

According to the Wheeler Tapes, Smithson discussed these issues with his colleague Robert Morris, along with their shared interest in the mind / matter problem. While Morris went in the direction of the materialism of Nelson Goodman and Donald Davidson, Smithson remained shy of these resolutions to the problem.[409] Morris held to a non-reductive materialism that allowed for anomalous material events, such as mind. Morris also favoured the argument of Davidson, that the psychological realm possessed a certain holistic structure by virtue of the brain's material basis. The suggestion of a totalising structure led Morris to his interests in Gestalt psychology and the theory that there was a fundamental striving in the human mind towards the stable, compact and simple organisation of visual material into a gestalt or unity. When viewing his Minimalist sculptures, Morris argued for a gestalt perception that faded at its edges. As Rosalind Krauss has indicated, he pursued a

---

[405] Smithson read of anamnesis in Eliade, Mercia, Myths Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities, Harvill Press, London, 1960. Harper Torchbooks, 1957.

[406] "A Dintorpic Essay", S2, p. 340.

[407] Gregoire Müller was an installation artist, painter, and an editor of Arts Magazine.

[408] "Interview with Gregoire Müller", S2, p. 254.

[409] Regarding Robert Morris' treatment of the Mind / Matter problem see Rosalind Krauss, Robert Morris: The Mind / Body Problem, Guggenhiem Museum Publications, New York, 1994. See also Morris' comments on anomalous monism in an interview with Tim Martin and Penelope Curtis, Robert Morris: Recent Felt Pieces and Drawings 1996-1997, Henry Moore Institute exhibition guide, Leeds, 1997.

phenomenological study of the edges of the "perceptual field" as well as the gestalt perception of objects.[410]

In the Wheeler tapes, Smithson claimed to have dissuaded Morris from linking phenomenological practice to a Gestalt psychology of visual perception.[411] To this end he lent Morris a copy of Ehrenzweig, and with it the argument that gestalt visual unity was only a part of the creative process. Smithson's persistent fascination with physical entropy was combined with a theory of the unconscious drives, to produce an acute awareness of the importance of dedifferentiated vision. By stressing the role of entropy in the making of art, he sought to counteract the theory that art was only the result of differentiated Gestalt visual functions. The 'primary process' of unconscious dedifferentiated vision allowed the re-introjection of subliminal imagery and unconscious thought into art. For Smithson, Gestalt ego psychology appreciated none of this complex interaction between the ego and the unconscious, nor the permanent split in the subject caused during the formation of the unconscious as an interface between mind and matter. A clearer understanding of a splitting dedifferentiating unconscious functions was necessary both to good art and to good art criticism.

In conclusion, psychoanalytic theories of the drives and the unconscious were directly incorporated into Smithson's writings and his practice. Furthermore, these drives were conceived of in wholly material terms. Desire was a material phenomenon with a specific structure that could be analysed and modelled. His descriptions were based on theories of a subjectless drive, which he found in the writings of Freud, and in the more current writings of Ehrenzwieg. To these theories he added his own particular emphasis on the material and instinctual basis of the drives.

Smithson turned to materialist psychoanalysis in search of an answer to his questions about the relation between mind and matter. Upon working through these theories he was, for the most part satisfied with the answer. In this sense Freud and Ehrenzwieg provided answers of a sort to a set of questions which he undoubtedly found highly compelling. Perhaps this is why, after 1969 Smithson's concern with the mind and matter begins to diminish. Having found satisfaction I would contend that he turned his new psychoanalytic-materialist solutions to create one of his most important works, *Spiral Jetty*. Here, his conception of human drives could be realised and performed. Therefore, I would now like to consider this earthwork for the ways in which he applied his theoretical breakthrough.

---

410 Rosalind Krauss, Richard Serra / Sculpture, Thames and Hudson, London, 1986, p. 28.

411 Morris quoted Ehrenzweig in "Notes on Sculpture part 4: Beyond Objects", Artforum, April, 1969. Morris had no lasting interest in Ehrenzweig, (Unedited transcript for Henry Moore Institute interview, 29.4. 97.

IV. Pleasure and Fantasy in *Spiral Jetty*

When combined with Freud, Smithson's reading of Ehrenzweig led to a quite full-blown theorisation of entropy as a drive (Triebe). The result was to prove important both to his conceptualisation of his earthworks, and to his views as an art critic and social commentator. While this more social and political aspect will be addressed in the final chapter, I would like to take this opportunity to examine how he applied materialist psychoanalysis to his work. The making of *Spiral Jetty* was an exercise in modelling human drives as the interface between mind and matter. It did so by drawing the spectator into an environment in which the structures of unconscious material drives could be directly experienced over time. The *Spiral Jetty* provided an opportunity to model the drives using his own theory. In order to see the *Jetty* in the terms of this model it would be helpful first to read it in terms of Ehrenzweig and Freud.

A. The "Hidden Order" of *Spiral Jetty*

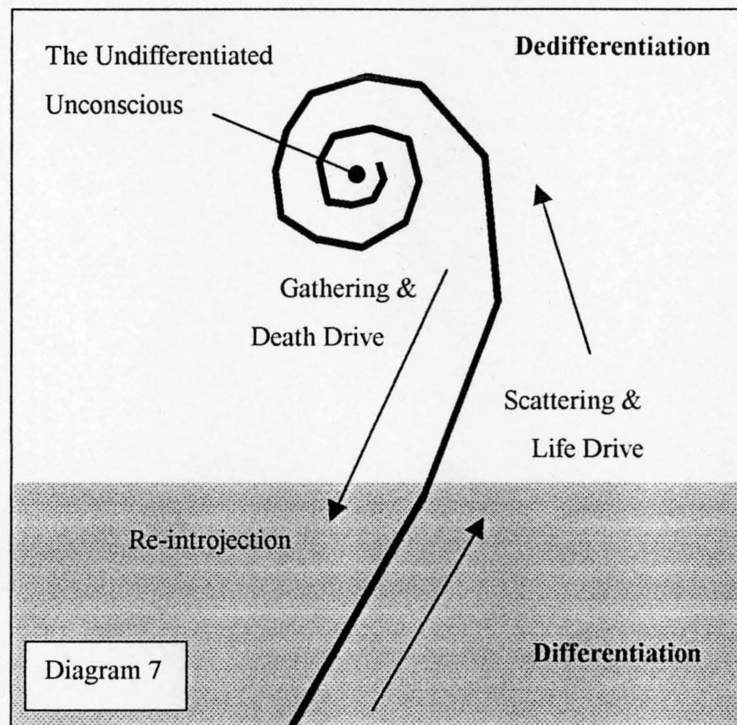
Much of what interested Smithson in his favourite chapter of the Hidden Order of Art was Ehrenzweig's demonstration of scattering / containment drives in combination with death / life drives. In terms of Ehrenzweig and Freud, Smithson's conception of *Spiral Jetty* might be illustrated as in diagram 7.

In the diagram, the *Jetty* extends from the shore in a primary vitalistic act of scattering and expulsion. This is an aggressive act caused by the super ego. To this end, the noise and violence of the construction of the *Jetty* was carefully emphasised in the film. Under this attack, the ego starts to dedifferentiate, thus dissipating the aggressive energy of expulsion through entropy. To this end Smithson's film then concentrated on helicopter shots which tracked him as he ran out onto the *Jetty*. Once he has reached the end of the spiral, he has entered a state of undifferentiation.

> *On eye level, the tail leads one into an undifferentiated state of matter...Ambiguities are admitted rather than rejected, contradictions are increased rather than decreased -- the* alogos *undermines the* logos.[412]

---

[412] "Spiral Jetty", S2, p. 147.



At the end of the *Jetty*, in a reversal of life and death drives, the manic state of undifferentiation begins to feel deathly and entropic, and leads to a return along the jetty in a rebirth and reintegration. While Eros also drives the process of re-introjection and gathering, it is now mixed with mourning and an acceptance of fragmentation and death. For Ehrenzweig, the rhythm between the drives was seen as crucial to the vitality and integration necessary to creative acts such as art. As he remarked:

> *Life can only prosper by a balance between differentiation and dedifferentiation. Both instincts [Treibe] are needed. The power of the organism to contain the tension caused by rising internal differentiation without resorting to splitting and expulsion is a measure of its vitality.*[413]

On this basis, Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* is a model of the drives that resisted idealistic attempts to valorise vitality and Eros over entropy and Thanatos. Read alongside Ehrenzweig, *Spiral Jetty* may be regarded as trace of the many drives that come into play in the creative process itself. Given that this theory proposes that one drive lead to another, from Eros to Thanatos to Eros, the spiral serves as an appropriate model. In addition to Ehrenzweig Smithson also utilised Freud's theories of the drives. How, though might the *Jetty* be regarded as a model of these theories?

---

[413] Ehrenzweig, The Hidden Order, p. 220.

B. The Freudian Drives and their Objects

The Freudian theory that entered Smithson's writing dealt particularly with the repetitive functioning of the drives. This has already been encountered in his matheme for the scopic drive, 0101010. There is much to recommend *Spiral Jetty* as a model of the Freudian drives. In a recent paper, Margaret Iverson has discussed Smithson's representation of the repetition of the drives in the film, *Spiral Jetty*.[414] She has particularly drawn attention to a slow repetition in the scenes in which a helicopter-mounted camera pursues him as he runs and stumbles down the length of the *Jetty*, buffeting him in a strong constant wind. Iverson has read this as a performance of the death drive. Upon reaching the end of the *Jetty*, Smithson returns more slowly as the camera recedes to hover at a distance.

The film of *Spiral Jetty* abounds in repetitions particularly in its editing of images and sounds. For example, the sound track contains recordings of mechanical respirators, metronomic clicking, and Smithson's twenty repetitions of the 'poem' "Mud, salt, crystals, rocks, water". Visually, one passage alternates shots of tranquil lapping water with shots of animal-like bellowing from earth moving machines at ten second intervals. Forward movement down a road was recorded in alternating shots looking forward and then backward.[415] As Iverson has observed, many helicopter shots move inward and outward over the earthwork.

There is more than just repetition in the film *Spiral Jetty* to indicate that Smithson sought to replicate the structure of the Freudian drives. His reading of Freud may have also encouraged theorisation of an object around which *Spiral Jetty* revolves, in this case combining his thinking on the role of the object in desire with a theory of the drives. For example the spiral has a central point which is never ultimately reached by the path itself, yet it still determines the *Jetty's* shape. As Freud observed in Instincts and Their Vicissitudes, the object of the drives does not satisfy. The object is an aim of the drive without being a goal.

> *The object of an instinct [*Trieb*] is the thing in regard to which or through which the instinct is able to achieve its aim. It is what is most variable about an instinct and is not originally connected with it, but becomes assigned to it only in consequence of being peculiarly fitted to make satisfaction possible. The object is not necessarily something extraneous: it may equally well be a part of the subject's own body. It may be changed any number of times in the course of the vicissitudes which the instinct undergoes during its existence; and highly important parts are played by this displacement of instinct.*[416]

---

[414] Margaret Iverson, "Et in Utah Ego", Death Drive: Contemporary Art and Psychoanalysis, Tate Gallery conference, London, June 26, 1998.

[415] This was the only sequence that Smithson himself shot.

[416] Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes", The Freud Reader, Peter Gay, (Ed.), Vintage Press, London, p. 567.

Spiral Jetty was more than a picturesque reverie on the futility of transitory human pleasures. It aimed to be a rigorous model for unconscious drives that repeat because they miss their encounter with their object and end up right where they started.

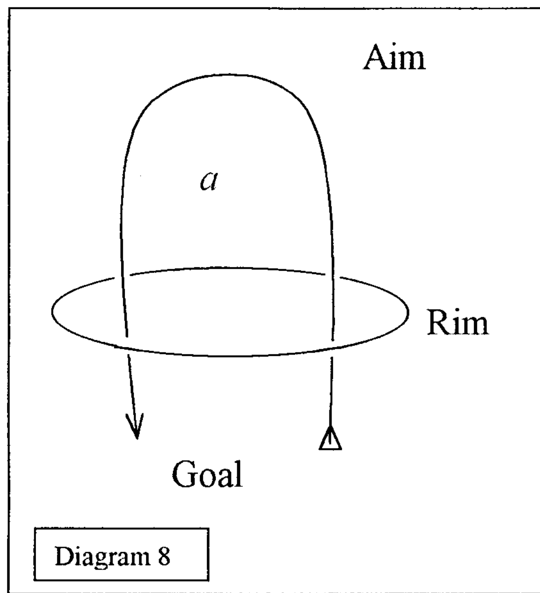


Diagram 8

If Smithson had good reason to conceive of the drives in terms of a spiral it was because of the sources he drew upon. The intellectual milieu that he inhabited provided descriptions of the drives in rather particular terms. From a more recent historical perspective, however, Lacan's theory also confirms this model, so much so that it is interesting to see how this theory can be used to interpret *Spiral Jetty*. One such source is Lacan's diagram of the Freudian drives, as shown in Diagram 8, in which they circulate around the object as an aim, but hold, nevertheless, a self-reflexive goal.[417] If Lacanian theory is able to clarify Smithson's use of an abstract *object a*, or alien gaze, in a way that Freud and Ehrenzweig do not, this may be due to Lacan's substantial use of similar sources. Not only was much of Lacan's theory of the *object a* developed in the 1960's, it also drew on Merleau-Ponty, materialism, and the part-object theory of Melanie Klien. Using Lacan as a basis of interpretation allows a different psychoanalytic view from Smithson's, while remaining sympathetic in its sources, and more current to contemporary critical concerns of the 1990's.

C. A Lacanian Analysis of *Spiral Jetty*

For Freud and Lacan, unconscious drives were distinctly theorised as partial drives. Oral, anal, genital, scopic, and aural drives all functioned as a repetition around an object. For example, the scopic drive takes the gaze as its object. Just what or who the *object a* happens to be found in, does not matter, as 'it is not the bird that counts, but the scoring of a hit' that satisfies the drive.'[418] If *Enantiomorphic Chambers* showed an intuitive understanding of the object-gaze that caused visual desire, then was this was carried over into the *Jetty*?

---

[417] Lacan, Four Fundamentals, p. 178.
[418] Lacan, Four Fundamentals, p. 179.

In "Spiral Jetty" there are a number of objects that seem to have caused Smithson desire, the most important of which was the sun [**Plate 28**]. His description is both very precise in terms of geography, and highly descriptive of the encounter.

> *Driving west on Highway 83 late in the afternoon, we passed through Corinne, then went on to Promontory. Just beyond the Golden Spike Monument,... we went down a dirt road in a wide valley. As we traveled, the valley spread into an uncanny immensity unlike the other landscapes we had seen. The roads on the map became a net of dashes, while in the far distance the Salt Lake existed as an interrupted silver band. Hills took on the appearance of melting solids, and glowed under amber light. We followed roads that glided away into dead ends. Sandy slopes turned into viscous masses of perception. Slowly, we drew near to the lake, which resembled an impassive faint violet sheet held captive in a stoney matrix, upon which the sun poured down its crushing light.*[419]

In this quote Smithson was careful to provide all the necessary cartographic clues to see that he had put himself on the eastern side of the lake travelling westward in the late afternoon. This set of conditions meant that he knowingly headed directly westward into the sun, and upon arriving at the lake, saw its reflection in the water. This cartographic knowledge ensured an encounter with the sun as a gaze. Before giving his description of this traumatic encounter, I would like to clarify this use of the sun as an *object a* by giving an account of his earlier use of it in his writings on photography.

D. Dead Projectors

A psychoanalytic theorisation of an object in *Spiral Jetty* might be understood by arriving from a different direction toward the same point, namely in terms of observations made by Craig Owens in relation to Smithson's photography.[420] According to Owens, Smithson did not consider his photographs to be indexes of reality. This was because reality was "projected" by the eye of the sun. When photographing his "Tour of the Monuments of Passaic", the result was not an index of reality, as C. S. Peirce might maintain, but an index of a representation, a photograph of a photograph. As Owens observes, "If reality itself appears to be already constituted as an image, then the hierarchy of object and representation -- the first being the source of the authority and prestige of the second -- is collapsed. The representation can no longer be grounded, as Husserl wanted, in presence. For Smithson, the real assumes the contingency traditionally ascribed to the copy; the landscape appeared to him not as Nature, but as, 'a particular kind of heliotypy.'"[421] Reality was a sun-print, or heliotype, made by emissions from the sun. This is how Smithson described his arrival in Passaic New Jersey:

---

419 "Spiral Jetty", S2, p. 145.

420 Craig Owens, "Photography en Abyme ", October, vol. 5, 1978; and Gilles Tiberghien, Land Art, Art Data, London, 1995, p. 241.

> *Noon-day sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an overexposed* picture. *Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of "stills" through my Instamatic and into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph... and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank.*[422]

What is noteworthy about this approach to photography is the description of a sun that projects, and in so doing shows him the world. Smithson does not look at the world, it is shown to him by a projector as a picture on a screen. In Utah it was by looking out over water, and seeing the sun's reflection that he encountered this similar sense that the sun was a sort of projector and a gaze. The sun did more that show the world, it made it visible through the gaze.

E. The other and the Other

The sun, in *Spiral Jetty* plays an important role. It begins with the experiences he described upon encountering the site. The article in particular presents a rhythm between anxiety and the pleasure of mastery in relation to the sun. It is the mention of mastery and failure of mastery, though that gives an indication that this other of the sun is not a projection of the subject, but something quite different. Smithson does not identify with the sun, he does not assimilate it, as was the case of the gaze in the *Chambers*. He speaks of it as a cause of anxiety, as something he tries to control and survive, and only succeeds in incorporating momentarily and partially. It is more of an external point under which he is constituted as a representation. In Lacanian terms this is not so much the little other, which can easily be incorporated, but an irreducible big Other and ultimately of an encounter with the "Real" – that part of the world which lies wholly outside the powers of imagination or symbolisation.

The anxiety in the article first arises in its record of a traumatic encounter on the shore of Salt Lake, which took place while standing with the sun reflecting off the water into his face.

> *As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of Site and Non-site whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other... No sense wondering about classifications and categories, there were none.* [423]

---

421 Owens, "Photography en Abyme", p. 44.

422 "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey", S2, p. 70.

423 "Spiral Jetty", S2, p. 146.

This quote evokes the proximity of a trauma, in that it renders him immobile, transfixed, and decapitated. He encounters in the site something so "Real" that it lies completely beyond imagination or symbolisation. It is beyond words and categories. Within this real of the site the sun rampaged like a dangerous devouring that constantly threatened to engulf him. According to his own record, this experience of anxiety in the face of the Real was formative in the conception of *Spiral Jetty*, in that it leads immediately to a fantasy about the sun.

> *The shore of the lake became the edge of the sun, a boiling curve, an explosion rising into a fiery prominence. Matter collapsing into the lake mirrored in the shape of a spiral.*[424]

Standing on the shore looking at the lake, he imagined the land to be the sun, with a violent expulsion from the sun - land as if it were a solar flare - spiralling jetty of rocks. [425] In this encounter, the sun showed him the Jetty, and he built it, and was careful to have it photographed it in a very particular way that placed it in the centre of the spiral [**Plate 27**].

I would suggest that this image of sun and solar flare can be read as an image of a violent expulsion of the drives, but drives that are not internal. The come from an external other. Based on his reading of Ehrenzweig, he may very well have conceived of it in these terms. What it evokes is a sense of a violent drive, a pleasure and satisfaction taking place somewhere inside the sun. This Other not only enjoys copiously, it wilts the subject, turns him or her into a representation, and brings with it pleasure and death. He emphasised this last point in the film by his reading of a description of sunstroke from a medical dictionary. Being caught in the drives of the Other was a dangerous affair that threatened to engulf the subject. Thus he encounters a double dose of anxiety, both from the Real and from the Other. There was no mastery of this, only a sweaty tense anxiety and swimming vertigo.

> *The helicopter maneuvered the sun's reflection through the Spiral Jetty until it reached the center. The water functioned as a vast thermal mirror....A withering light swallowed the rocky particles of the spiral, as the helicopter gained altitude. All existence seemed tentative and stagnant. The sound of the helicopter became a primal groan echoing into tenuous aerial views. Was I but a shadow in a plastic bubble hovering in a place outside mind and body?* Et in Utah Ego. *I was slipping out of myself again... trying to locate the nucleus at the end of the spiral.*[426]

This encounter with the sun lead to the construction of a cyclonic trace. on which the subject was hauled out toward and around is image in the water. In its completed state, *Spiral Jetty* is a colossal material hauling-out. *Spiral Jetty* appears as a permanent, frozen image of a repetitive extra-human

---

424 "Spiral Jetty", S2, p. 146.

425 Smithson may have been referring to his copy of Georges Bataille, Death and Sensuality, n.p., n.p., 1969.

hauling drive. He therefore finished it by covering the builder's tracks, by ripping up the machine compaction and hiding its method of construction to enhanced its quality as a monumental impersonal drive.

When Smithson tried to determine the source of this gaze, as he did in *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, he found a different reversal of vision. He imagined not so much the infinite regression of the gaze, as in *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, but an experience of a reversion to the early stages of ocular evolution, "back to some pulpy protoplasm, a floating eye adrift in an antediluvian ocean."[427]. He encounters here a primordial showing-seeing drive as it exists in the world.[428]

Smithson finds little items of reassurance in this anxiety, for example his delight that the spool of his film "Spiral Jetty" should share the same material structure as the *Jetty*, a spiral with a hole for a centre. This odd fact seemed to guarantee success by mastering a piece of the Other in the form of an *object a*. With all this anxiety in mind, it is possible to appreciate in the *Jetty* as an attempt to represent this Other of the sun as something that is itself incomplete. If the Jetty was conceived as a fantasy of a solar flare, it was as a mark of the sun's desires. This flaring, spiralling drive circulates around an object, and in so doing belies the fact of its incompletion, its alienation.

If I would persist any further with this analysis it would be to observe what is most eloquent, and simultaneously most wilting of the subject, and most extraordinary as a meditation on the Other in this work. It is his photograph of the sun in the centre of the spiral. This is a highly condensed image in which Smithson perhaps answers to the question what is the other of the Other? This is a question that he answers very differently from Lacan, but consistently with his rather metaphysical materialism. The other of the Other in Lacan does not exist, as per his famous dictum, "There is no Other of the Other". It is simply the pleasure of the Other that grounds its alterity. In that most beautiful of pictures for Smithson, with the sun shining out of the spiral a drive, he captures an image of a drive that exists in the Real without need of an Other because it is manifest throughout all states of matter. Thus he works through the anxiety of the Other by displacing the ground of its alterity. Where, though does he put it, when not shifting towards cosmological conclusions? Though it is an image of an external drive that circulates around itself, the answer eludes me here. It seems to be simply in the land, in the Real, and therefore beyond signification.

---

426 "Spiral Jetty", S2, p. 149.

427 "Spiral Jetty", S2, p. 148.

428 Merleau-Ponty also makes a similar suggestion in The Visible and Invisible. However, this quote seems to be based on Paul Shepard, Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature, 1st edition, Knopf Press, New York, 1967, p. 4, which contains a chapter on the evolution of the eye.

In a fundamentally psychoanalytic insight, Smithson locates the sun as a representative of an encounter with an external Other located in an unspeakable unclassifiable Real. The Other traumatised by overwhelming the subject Though he tries to incorporate it through a fantasy of a solar flare, this leads him back into the drives of the Other to be its pleasure, to do its work of building the jetty. This leads to a meditation on the ground of alterity that makes the Other other. While this grounding is difficult to discern, the consequences for his art are fairly clear. *Spiral Jetty* leaves him in a position to make a more socially engaged art because of its mediation on the drives of the Other.

Returning to New York from Utah, and from his encounter with the Other in the Real, Smithson began to appreciate the possibilities of an earthwork art that could address not only his own drives, but those in society at large. This was not just the necessity of historical precedent in art, but the necessity of mediating in the anxiety between "man and land", or in Lacanian terms, the subject in the Real. Back in New York he commented:

> *I'm interested in that area of terror between man and land. The primitives have that idea of totem and taboo -- like site and non-site. It's how much you are aware of the situation. The totem indicates the taboo area...A lot of working outdoors is just escapism...The tendency to go out is a peripheral concern, and peripheral concerns are romantic--going out into the infinite. If you bring that back it is more of a classical thing...I am working in the tension of both these areas. Like the Spiral Jetty in Utah, on an unstable salt reef.*[429]

Spiral Jetty played out an almost cosmological psychodrama. This can already be seen in the case of the spectator of the *Spiral Jetty*, where the artist functions in the role of mediator by setting up an arena in which the viewer becomes more aware of his or her subjectivity as immersed in the physical world of inert forces, biological instincts, and unconscious drives. *Spiral Jetty* also gave him a new sense of the social order of art and the social role of the artist. It began to appear that earthwork land reclamations could help analyse social conflict in terms of subjectless social instincts and drives. This new social order for art and artist is the subject of the final chapter.

---

429 "Interview with Paul Toner", S2, p. 238.

Chapter VI

THE POLITICS OF PLACE

I. Introduction

During the last two and a half years of his career, Smithson's priorities changed quite substantially. He generally read less, wrote less, and modified his philosophical, political and psychoanalytical positions, sometimes quite dramatically. In the late period he was less concerned with reduction, with the minimal, with isomorphic or 'dedifferentiated' styles of writing, less concerned with arguing against Greenberg, and less oriented towards making sculpture for exhibition in galleries and museums. In his last phase, Smithson was more concerned with the social aspects of art, and specifically with the question of how to make an engaged earthwork art that contributed to the transformation of human behaviour. This shift from the reductive to the recuperative marks something of a return to concerns found in his early work, yet with two substantial differences. He was suspicious of the functioning of fantasies, especially of an ideal or God, but also of that Christian notion of the Other, namely the good neighbour as a model of ideal conflict-free social behaviour. He was also convinced that artists should avoid solely hysterical reactions in making socially engaged art because such reactions were ultimately unfruitful either for art or for society.

Smithson's late period is interesting, in part, because it turns so sharply into an engaged social practice. At this time he constructed a discourse through writings, letters and interviews, in which he stressed the need for the non-hysterical artist to work with social feelings of terror and alienation from the land, as if these feelings arose from a social unconscious. His earlier fascination with entropy and the death drive was transformed into a project which sought to detect its functioning in society, and to manipulate language and sites so as to disarm and redirect certain social activities which he felt to be

motivated by these unconscious drives. Due to his untimely accidental death in a plane crash in July 1973, however, it is necessary to speculate somewhat in order to get a picture of his thinking on engaged art.

My objective here is to examine how Smithson sought to make a linguistic object that could transform the social, using his knowledge of the philosophical, linguistic and psychoanalytic material which I have already introduced in earlier chapters. Given the abruptly incomplete nature of the late work, what I feel is needed is a more comprehensive picture of his proposals for an art that could change or add to language in a way that it improved social conditions. In emphasising this aspect of his late work I am drawing attention to what is potentially an idealist political belief. Although there is no guarantee that a socially transformative art is possible, I nevertheless feel such a line of inquiry to be a benefit to a variety of discourses and arts.

In order to make sense of how Smithson conceived of an engaged art I would like to start with his views on politics and the museum, and then proceed to consider two of his sources from his library: Paul Shepard's Man in the Landscape and Mary Douglas's Purity and Danger. As will be seen, the first of these books provided Smithson a history and lineage to earthwork art, and contributed significantly to his last article "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape". The later provided Smithson with a psychoanalytic and anthropological model for artistic practice in the social sphere. While the objective of this last chapter necessarily takes my analysis beyond the limits of empirical methods, an examination of his library does provide an informative start.

Smithson's political and social concerns developed in his writings and interviews after 1970 and was reflected in his reading. For example, he acquired Henri Lefebvre's Dialectical Materialism, Horkheimer and Adorno's Dialectic of Enlightenment, Mao's Mao Tse-Tung on Literature and Art, and Herbert Marcuse's An Essay on Liberation. While he took an increased interest in macro economic theory, his writings and interviews do not show signs that Marxism, as such, became a central concern. His only remark is to the effect that Marcuse was a "bourgeois reactionary". He also researched the subject of garden history, reading about Italian, French and English garden traditions, including several books on or by Frederick Law Olmsted. In the theory and philosophy of garden art he read and quoted excerpts from Price, Gilpin and Edmund Burke. He also reread Levi-Strauss, Freud's Civilisation and its Discontents, and Totem and Taboo, as well as the more social analysis in Ehrenzweig's The Hidden Order of Art. In anthropology he read two formative books, Mary Douglas' Purity and Danger, and Paul Shepard's Man in the Landscape.

On the whole, the library list suggests that Smithson's acquisition of new books diminished in the last two years of his life. He travelled more extensively at this time and this may have disrupted his habit of reading and writing in the mornings. What this list also shows is that Smithson stuck to his established pattern of reading. When social and political issues were at stake, his main resources were anthropology and psychoanalysis. If the last years of Smithson's life grew ever more involved in the mediation of specific political and social conflicts, then what were his views on politics, and what was the basis of his analysis?

II. "The Rat of Politics and the Cheese of Art"

Overall, Smithson's theoretical basis for making social and political analysis came from anthropology and psychoanalysis. Added to this was his rather unique understanding of language. As was seen in chapter IV, this tended to exclude a theory of language based on the triangle of C. S. Peirce. Properly speaking there was no clear place for an interpretant in Smithson's linguistic theory. Because language was a material substance transmitted between material minds, it did not transmit subjective presence as much as it transmitted material and unconscious drives and instincts. Tracing these material drives in language and vision had the consequence of widening the Peircian concept of the interpretant, in that language was a sequence of material signifiers passed between material minds, which nevertheless was legible and desire-causing. His reduction of language to matters of syntax, and the absence of any serious interest in pragmatics, lent his political views a particular twist. While Smithson proposed that art engage politics along the axis of culture / nature, or as he put it, 'Man / Land', he already had in his linguistic philosophy one way to dissolve this dialectic. Added to this, he knowingly shared with Levi-Strauss, Foucault and others the belief that Man should soon cease to be an object of knowledge. Thus politics was communicated unconsciously through syntax and took as its object an entity (man) which did not properly exist except in language.

There have been a number of commentaries on Smithson's politics, each with important insights. Lucy Lippard has observed that Smithson was a political pessimist, but that he also had faith in new roles and powers for artists in society.[430] Gary Shapiro has observed that his political analysis was made in gendered terms.[431] When she described his position Lippard was probably responding to remarks which Smithson made about the futility of artists who engage in political activity. Typical of Smithson's comments was his remarks at a symposium on the artist and politics:

---

[430] Lucy Lippard, "Breaking Circles: The Politics of Prehistory", Robert Smithson: Sculpture, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1981, p. 31.

[431] Shapiro, Earthwards, p. 149.

> *The artist does not have to will a response to the "deepening political crisis in America." Sooner or later the artist is implicated or devoured by politics without even trying. My "position" is one of sinking into an awareness of global squalor and futility. The rat of politics always gnaws at the cheese of art. The trap is set. If there is an original curse then politics has something to do with it. Direct political action is like trying to pick poison out of boiling stew...* [432]

At a time when a considerable number of artists were joining political action groups, Smithson put the view that such action was futile. In addition to his misgivings over what he saw as the idealism of many of these political action groups, Smithson also objected to their lack of understanding of political unconscious drives. If Lippard detected a pessimism in Smithson's politics it was because he sometimes seemed to hold the view that there were certain unavoidable or perennial qualities to human politics that had a basis in the material laws of matter and language. Smithson was keen to correct this reading of his work. He repeatedly insisted that he was not a determinist. Instead, he argued much as did the structuralists of his day that politics was bound to take form, and that these forms were largely dialectical due to the nature of language and matter. These structures, however, were always insufficient, incomplete and bound to fail. Thus, politics would always fail to represent human needs for many of the same reasons that language failed to represent the world. For Smithson these linguistic and psychoanalytic factors had to be taken into account from the start if the artist was to understand and act in the social arena. Despite this, Smithson was committed to making a socially engaged art. One way in which he tried accomplish this was by avoiding the museum. He did this in part to bring art directly into the social arena, and in part to avoid the detrimental political conditions surrounding the museum and its critics. As will be seen, he was also seeking to avoid an encounter with unconscious social drives in which the artist was bound to loose.

A. The Museum

For Smithson there were two major mistakes at work in museum practice and criticism. The first was making the museum into a repository of social ideals. The second error at work was one of criticism. It was not enough to criticise the museum only on the basis of its ulterior class goals. His alternative assessment of the museum appears in two of his most polemical pieces of writing, "The Establishment", (1968) and "Cultural Confinement", (1972).

In Smithson's view, too many recent attacks on the museum concerned the unjust influence of class interests. This argument mistakenly identified the existence of an 'Establishment' class which did not, for Smithson, exist. This was, as he put it, a bad dream, a shared social fantasy of the existence of an Establishment. There was no conspiracy to control the museum on behalf of an establishment. This

---

[432] "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium", S2, p. 134.

was a social hysterical fantasy which imagined an organised social 'Other'. This view highlighted the ironic aspects of his earlier comments on the museum in "What is a Museum? A Dialogue Between Robert Smithson and Alan Kaprow", (1967). Smithson suggested that a museum be emptied of its contents in order to turn it into a mausoleum of emptiness. As his 1968 comments reveal, not only did his empty museum nullify the expectations of the spectator, it advertised the death or non-existence of the establishment. "The notion of a establishment seems to be a social fairytale" he wrote, "a deadly utopia or invisible system that inspires an almost mythical sense of dread".[433] No doubt it was a fairly bold step to claim that the establishment existed only to the degree that it was imagined to exist. One further punch line in his article "The Establishment" was the remark that the museum collected "'ideals' that killed millions." The ideals most worth dying for were the ones kept in a museum.[434] Regardless of the social class behind the museum, its "strange mixture of politics and madness" led to "indoctrination" and "a deadly utopia".

Smithson made a number of comments about the role and function of the museum. In these comments he was careful to distinguish the conscious social and political aims of such institutions from their serving unconscious social drives. The real institutional goal of the museum was to record, augment and perform the functions of the death drive. For Smithson the tombic affiliations between museum and mausoleum were quite fixed in psychological terms. Smithson agreed that the social fantasies that surrounded the museum, of high ideals, mastery and progress, were the result of conscious social manipulation on the part of certain social groups. In Smithson's view, there was no real benefit in dwelling on the museum's ulterior motives of defending class and economic interests without first recognising that the various social fantasies and ideals that the museum re-enforced were cosmetic screens behind which a social unconscious death drive was at work. In seeking to make art that bypassed the museum he was, in part, seeking to avoid participation in the unconscious drives at work in the museum.

If Smithson's criticism of the museum grew over the years, by 1970 he was working in a way that largely avoided the institution. He was busily working out a way of making art directly in the social arena, and directly in relation to specific sites. If Smithson moved towards making a more engaged art, it remains to ask how he theorised his practice, on what sources he drew, how he analysed specific social sites, and how he sought to change certain prevailing social conditions.

---

433 "The Establishment", S2, p.97.

434 "The Establishment", S2, p.99.

III. An Engaged Earthwork Art

Outside the museum Smithson moved quickly in his last years from earthwork art toward earthwork land reclamation. Smithson seems to have been encouraged by his immediate friends and the art world in general. For example his dealer, Virginia Dwan, was helpful in familiarising Smithson with the milieu of mining companies, as she herself had family connections in this sector of industry.

In moving in this direction Smithson sought to build upon some of the achievements of *Spiral Jetty*, particularly its ability to produce a beneficial effect on the spectator by imbricating him or her in a site. In moving towards a more socially concerned earthwork art, Smithson started to add the argument that earthwork art, with its power to draw the spectator into the site, could also reduce alienation from the land by breaking social taboos and allowing a new relation to emerge. While *Spiral Jetty* was based on a dialectic of mind and matter, the new social dialectic which he developed at this time was one between "man and land". He characterised this relation as fraught with anxiety and alienation, both in the past and in the future. Moreover, the best place for this anxiety to be performed, analysed and assuaged was in the art of gardening. Toward this goal he put together a broadly materialist history of the garden in his last article, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape". One of his chief resources for this was a new study called Man in the Landscape. This book helped Smithson by providing a familiarising historical lineage to what he was doing. Also, it highlighted his work against the broad epic backdrop of geology and biology.

A. Man in the Landscape

Behind Smithson's growing concern for a socially engaged earthwork art lay a number of books which detailed the structure of human society against the background of biology and structural anthropology. Adding to his reading of Levi-Strauss, he read Paul Shepard's Man in the Landscape, which proved a very sympathetic source for distinguishing materialist and idealist views of nature, and for outlining the anthropological history of the relation between hominoid species and the natural environment.

Shepard's book was aimed at an audience that was frustrated with the then-current state of environmental philosophy. It criticised the U.S. Park Service, the Audubon Society, and other older institutions for their ineffectual approach to preserving the land from new technologies. He claimed that technology and humanism posed a real danger to human survival. In trying to create a heaven on earth 1960's society threatened to damage and disrupt the interlocking systems that kept the biosphere intact. He therefore urged that American culture radically reassess its relation to nature. This would best start with an understanding and appreciation of the indivisible links between biological necessity and social practices. Shepard supplied many examples of the ways in which human cultural activity

could be understood as a biological response to nature. This response was even legible in the body. Because the body remembered its arboreal origins in its very design, "there is no clear division of the 'animal' from our higher estate."[435] In keeping with other life forms, hominoid species had developed physical adaptations, and social and psychical relations to the land as a part of a survival strategy.

Shepard also provided an explanation of how language mediates between man and land in biological, linguistic, phenomenological and psychological terms that gave his argument the sort of sweeping interdisciplinary overview which Smithson so often sought in his own writing.

> *Insofar as thinking is prescribed by language, all information about the world which is communicated with words is, to use the analogy of the chromosomes, genetic bits socially transmitted. The words mediate between the otherness... and our necessary construct of the world. We have a primordial syncretic level of confrontation of nature; and to it we add a cultural screening in which the perceptual flow of events is cut up, reorganised, and named.*[436]

For Shepard 1960's American society had so separated itself from the land that its survival was called into question. What Smithson picked up on first was the argument that humanism and technology were superficially admirable conscious aims, but that they were now being blindly pursued to the extent that they now served an unconscious death instinct. Secondly, he took up the argument that the way to balance this situation was to create a new form of signification which would reassert and redirect destructive and erotic instincts. Shepard predicted that this would most likely lie in a re-emergence of garden art. This argument seems to have made a considerable impact in clarifying Smithson's views on the social role of earthwork art. It provided a materialist justification for his work, and placed earthwork art in a long lineage of human attempts to mediate social unconscious drives and natural forces.

Shepard's book presented a detailed historical account of human psychosexual thinking about the land that extended from early hominoid species right up to industrialised society. Starting with the monkey as it left the security of the treetops for the perils of the savannah, Shepard traced a history of the cultivated garden as a biological necessity, and as an arena in which psychosexual instincts were played out. He recounts the efforts of the hunter-gatherers, for whom the garden was a vulnerable site of increased fertility. From Egypt to Babylon, from Medieval Italy to French Baroque and English picturesque, and finally to 19th century nature tourism and the emergence of environmentalism, Shepard built up a picture of the history of gardening in which it consistently was identified with the feminine. The garden both materialised and etherialised organic fertility for biological and psychological reasons. Thus 1960's environmentalism, and the whole history of the love of nature,

---

435 Paul Shepard, Man in the Landscape, p. 31.

were caught up in a rich mix of corporeal, social and psychological needs. Psychic imagery, literary and poetic insight, economic heritage and perceptual habit all played a role in limiting and guiding one's understanding nature.

In the light of this, Smithson began to present the view that earthwork art had, and could continue to have, an important social role. What would make contemporary earthwork art an important new variant of the garden was its ability to cut through the haze of alienation, anxiety and hysteria caused by acquired social meaning, and expose the biological and psychic drives at work in the interaction between man and land. Contemporary earthworks could thereby help to release and orient a new flow of erotic instincts towards the land, and reap a social benefit in the process.

Shepard's book provided many sympathetic lines of thought for Smithson as he sought to continue the making of earthwork art after *Spiral Jetty*. It helped him formulate earthwork art in terms of a biological and social psychology. This contributed greatly to his article "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape", in which Smithson produced his last and most polished piece of theoretical writing. What he sought to do in this article was re-establish a place for earthwork art in the late twentieth century. Under the encouragement of Shepard, Smithson proposed that earthwork art could become a socially negotiated signifier that enabled American society better to enunciate and perform erotically driven interactions with the land. What, though, were some of the consequences of this theory for his later earthworks? In answer to this, I would like to briefly look at his second major earthwork *Broken Circle / Spiral Hill.*

Broken Circle / Spiral Hill

This was Smithson's first land reclamation earthwork, and one that required a limited amount of political and financial negotiation. It was made in Holland in the summer of 1971 on the invitation of a Dutch symposium on land art, with funding from the national government. Robert Morris, who was also invited, produced his *Observatory* on a green field site. Smithson chose an uncultivated sand quarry site where the geology was exposed, and a reclamation could be made. **[Plate 29]**.

Broken Circle / Spiral Hill was an early example of his psychoanalytic and anthropological engagement of a site. In this case he identified a set of specifically Dutch anxieties over the re-flooding of land reclaimed from the sea. The earthwork was meant to shake up the spectator's social and historical anxieties over flooding by creating a variety of what he called 'scales' and 'distances'. The first of these involved a walk through a lakeside construction called *Broken Circle*. This part of the site consisted of an earthwork which closed out water with a jetty and also allowed it into the land

---

436 Paul Shepard, Man in the Landscape, p. 41.

mass in the form of a canal. The combination of canal and jetty were arranged to make a totemic site in which human and natural forces were brought into reciprocal balance. Smithson also worked on a film for this earthwork which was probably intended to set out the psychological tensions and material processes involved in his land reclamation in parallel with the local social anxieties surrounding the reclamation of land from the sea.

In relation to the psychological effect of *Broken Circle*, Smithson spoke of the need for the spectator to experience a period of undifferentiation that took the form, in this case, of an experience of mental flooding. He hoped to augment this through the film, which featured a number of shots showing the flooding of the earthwork, and scenes which were intended to stir memories of a major flood in Holland in the 1950's. This temporary state of undifferentiation was intended to have a positive effect on anxiety and hysterical reaction to flooding. He remarked that "If you are immersed in a flood you can drown, so it's wiser to perceive it from a distance. Yet, on the other hand, it is worth something to be swept away from time to time." Smithson seems to have been proposing that his totemic reforming of the land could instigate a "swept away" state of undifferentiation that later led to an amelioration of anxiety and hysteria.

Nearby the totemic *Broken Circle* Smithson also constructed a *Spiral Mound* as a place to observe mental and physical flooding from a distance. Rich in associations, this mound made reference to prehistoric and tribal European land art, and possibly even Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel scene of the biblical flood, in which desperate survivors scramble up the last remaining piece of dry ground. It provided a static and safe point from which to observe the *Broken Circle* and consider its totemic enactment of reclamation and flooding.

Spiral Hill embodied a spatial and temporal change that bracketed the spectator's anxiety by placing it at a distance. Smithson may have been drawing here on the picturesque landscape garden tradition, with its use of temporal and spatial shifts to induce changes of mood and thought. In the face of the fear of death from flooding experienced at the side of the *Broken Circle*, there was a chance to climb *Spiral Hill* and experience such events as small increments in a long history of human and geological agency. With distance and dedifferentiation, human reclamation of land from the sea was rendered as natural rather than as cultural, as a mere variant on the constant natural events of erosion and sedimentary deposition. While this sensibility was somewhat depressing, it was constructively stripped of its initial hysteria and anxiety.[437]

Smithson's argument here seems to be that if the artist makes a linguistically inscribed space, complete with totemic representations of social danger and security, then the reader-spectator would

be free to move around the space to experience a range of reactions and memories. Overall, the experience was meant to cause or facilitate a psychical readjustment or, in Ehrenzweig's terms, a re-introjection that led to a calm acceptance of the limits of the Dutch struggle with the land and an erotic drive to carry on with it.

Smithson found something unfinished in this earthwork, and spoke of returning to it at a later date. It is complexly and partially theorised, due in part to the unexpected appearance of a large boulder on the site. The film was never finished, and he never wrote about the work in a dedicated article such as "Spiral Jetty". Smithson may have found that this earthwork did not quite strike the note that he wanted. Therefore, in concluding his interview on the Dutch earthwork, Smithson described the sort of erotic, detached and non-hysterical engagement which his land reclamation fostered in him. He did this by ending with a story of an encounter he had had in the Florida mangrove swamps. He described his pleasure in stopping to help the trees reclaim land from the sea by planting *Mangrove Ring*, a hundred foot wide ring of mangrove seedlings. The point of this story, coming as it does as a conclusion to the Dutch earthwork, was to show how the earthwork left him in a state in which he could perform an impersonal mangrove-like pleasure in openly recuperative tasks. The mangrove produced land out of the sea with greater success than any society, and he could happily sit and assist these trees without lamenting the paucity of human endeavour.

Because Smithson tried to respond to local social concerns, this work was not addressed to anxiety over the damage which the sand quarry had caused to the environment. Instead it addressed the anxiety over reclaiming land from the sea. Further earthwork proposals, however, would turn more directly to the arena of mining and the growing social debate about the impact of industrialisation on the environment. This was a larger more global anxiety. Given that this anxiety persists in the present day and is bound to continue it seems a relevant issue to examine further.

In some respects Smithson's work in Holland was based on a model of artistic practice which was drawn from Shepard and Ehrenzweig. The artist took on the anxieties and fears of a society and worked them through to create a site in which the spectator and society could recuperate their feelings for the land. Smithson's appreciation of the social and psychoanalytic role of the artist in this process was further enriched by a book by Mary Douglas. Before discussing his last mine reclamation, I would like to pause to examine this book and its effects on Smithson's theorisation of the role of the artist as a mediator in social conflict over land.

---

[437] "'...The Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, Is a Cruel Master' / Gregoire Muller", S2, p. 254.

B. Purity and Danger

Douglas' book Purity and Danger, 1970, combined psychological theories of differentiation, dedifferentiation and re-introjection with a detailed anthropological knowledge of the functioning of taboos surrounding pollution and dirt in pre-industrial societies. She explained how the ritual expulsion of pollution and impurity enforced social life and cohesion. Dirt was what must be excluded in order to maintain pattern, category, and the safety of society. Many primitive totemic rituals of purity and impurity were designed to create a unity in experience by invoking laws of nature in order to sanction and enforce social codes of behaviour.

The greatest effect of Douglas's anthropological account of book was to draw Smithson's attention to a need in man for ritual and symbolic action in expelling and controlling pollution. In these rituals, there was a unique role for certain individuals. Often called shaman, their task was to journey out of the social order into undifferentiated formlessness, in order to return and re-introject society with a new sense of order. The descriptions Douglas gives of those primitives who did enter into taboo areas, who risked impurity and disorder, was that it brought them special social powers. "The man who comes back from these inaccessible regions of the mind brings with him a power not available to those who have stayed in the control of themselves and society."[438] While Smithson did not hold to the belief that he was a shaman, he learned of the long and varied history of practical social power exercised by shaman through the creation of totems and taboos which restricted behaviour towards the land. Prompted by Douglas, he began to be of the view that social change might ensue in contemporary society if an artist reinstated the right totemic language and stimulated the right taboos.

In light of Douglas' book, Smithson's theorisation of the role of mediator focused on the artist's skill in breaking down or dedifferentiating social conflict caused by alienation from the land. Exercising this power required finding ways to re-introject new unconscious patterns into the society at large. For Smithson this was best done through a language of earthwork art. Combining Shepard and Douglas with other psychoanalytic and phenomenological studies of perception, he thus came to hold the view that the forms he used on a site could enter the spectator to refigure thought and unconscious drives.

According to this view, what placed the artist in a position of social power was his or her non-hysterical transgression of existing taboos followed by a re-introjection of new taboos into language and society. If artists were to warrant a special status in society, then it was necessary that they find new signifiers of man's relation to the world. This involved re-staging primitive totemic language in a way that made it effective in contemporary society. Smithson saw a need in American society for

---

[438] Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo, Routledge Keegan and Paul, London, 1966, p. 95. This book was also very important to the development of psychoanalytic theory, and in particular to Julia Kristeva's The Powers of Horror.

someone who could mediate between man and land without playing the priest. for someone who could make the commanding totemic signifiers that would renegotiate a new relation between man and land without recourse to idealism, spiritualism or shamanism.

1. Mediation

Smithson rejected the role of the artist as priest or shaman, but regularly advocated the role of the artist as type of highly skilled mediator. This mediation was to lead to "Nature and necessity in consort".[439] Smithson defined his idea of mediation largely in the light of the social conflict surrounding land reclamation:

> *A dialectic between mining and land reclamation must be developed... The artist and the miner must become conscious of themselves as natural agents... Art can become a physical resource that mediates between the ecologist and the industrialist.*[440]

He expanded on this view repeatedly, for example adding here a comment on the need to avoid idealism and promote co-operation:

> *Our ecological awareness indicates that industrial production can no longer remain blind to the visual landscape. The artist, ecologist and industrialist must develop in relation to each other, rather than continue to work and to produce in isolation... The artist must come out of the isolation of galleries and museums and provide a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists, and not simply present abstractions and utopias... Art would then become a necessary resource, and not an isolated luxury... There should be artist-consultants in every major industry...* [441]

The details of this mediation were largely worked out in the field of land reclamation, in which industrialists and ecologists came into conflict. Smithson concentrated on this social conflict because of the possible application of earthwork art as a solution. It's general theory, however, was offered as suitable to a wider range of social conflicts. Smithson was interested in a general and a specific theory, and envisaged that each conflict would require a different analysis. In this sense he imagined a large project that would direct the arts toward reducing social conflict and alienation, and increasing the harmony between human needs and the land. I would like, therefore, to look at his specific analysis, and one proposed earthwork. By way of conclusion I would then like to examine his general theory for a socially engaged art practice.

---

[439] "Untitled, (1971)", S2, p. 376.

[440] "Untitled (1972)", S2, p. 379.

[441] "Proposal", S2, p. 379.

a) Ecologists

Smithson began to conceive of a role for himself as an artist-analyst in which an encounter with one of his earthwork land reclamations had the effect of a successful analytic session. To do this he needed to understand how concerned parties such as ecologists and industrialists were alienated. This alienation was more than just a matter of economics or class. It was also a matter of the psycho-sexual relations that came into play in the gendering of the garden and the earth. In tribal cultures, totem and taboo mediated land relations *and* sexual relations. The mistake of the ecologists of his day was to believe that they had escaped this totemic structure and its underlying sexual qualities.

Smithson made this clear in defending an attack made on Earthwork art by the ecologist / artist Allan Gussow in The New York Times. In his article "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape" Smithson addressed what he called an ecological spiritualism:

> *Alan Gussow...projects on to "earth works artists" an Oedipus Complex born out of a wishy-washy transcendentalism. Indulging in spiritual fantasy, he says of representational landscape painters... "What these artists do is make these places visible, communicate their spirit-- not like the earth work artists who cut and gouge the land like Army engineers..."*
>
> *Gussow's projection of the "Army engineers" on what he imagines to be "earth work artists" seems linked to his own sexual fears. As Paul Shepard in his* Man in the Landscape *points out, "Those [army] engineers seem to be at the opposite extreme from esthetes who attempt to etherialise their sexuality. Yet the engineers' authority and dominance over land carries the force of sexual aggression..."*
>
> *An etherialised representational artist such as Gussow (he does mediocre Impressionistic paintings) fails to recognize the possibility of a direct organic manipulation of the land devoid of violence and "macho" aggression. Spiritualism widens the split between man and nature. The... artist's treatment of the land depends on how aware he is of himself as nature; after all, sex isn't all a series of rapes.*[442]

While Smithson made earthwork art that prompted an encounter with unconscious drives, he was clearly disappointed that this encounter could, in some spectators, be based on infantile sexual neurosis, including hysteria. Smithson drew here on Freud's view that the horror of incest displayed by totemic cultures was an infantile feature.[443] Like hysterical behaviour, totemic systems failed to get free of the psychosexual conditions of childhood, in which initial love objects such as the mother and sister later became subject to sexual taboo and eventually incorporated into feelings about the land. In this way, Smithson argued that Gussow's art and ecological views were stifled and distorted by an incomplete traversal of the Oedipus complex. He repeated this criticism a number of times, and found numerous examples of infantile neurosis in environmentalist literature:

---

[442] "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape", S2, p. 163-4.

[443] Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo, Routledge, London, 1950, pp. 17 & 129. Smithson also described a fetishistic excitement from filth in "Can Man Survive", S2, p. 367.

In fact there is a book that the Sierra Club put out called Stripping. *Strip mining actually does sort of suggest lewd sex acts and everything, so it seems immoral from that standpoint. It's like a kind of sexual assault on mother earth which brings in the aspect of incest projections as well as illicit behavior and I would say that psychologically there's a problem there.*[444]

Smithson much preferred Olmsted, who did not passively paint lyric landscapes, but went to work with "ten million horse-cart loads of earth" in an effort to make a "concrete dialectic between nature and people." For Smithson Olmsted's practice was sexually balanced and unhysterical and, as a consequence, more able to make substantial changes to real landscapes without falling foul of fantasies of macho aggression and rape.

Smithson generally regarded the ecological movements of his day to be alienated from the land by virtue of their neurosis and over-idealisation of nature. The problem was that sexual fears led to a withdrawal from nature into a spirituality often based on an idealised memory, or a retreat to scenic beauty. This was a "pseudoinnocence" that led to "pseudospirituality" and "pseudoart". Smithson argued that ecologists were too often hysterical in tone and neurotic in behaviour. They were hysterical because their ideal notion of nature that did not exist, and otherwise neurotic because their infantile associations of mother and land forbade them any real erotic satisfaction in nature.

b) Industrialists

In Smithson's view the mining industry was prone to internal alienation resulting from economic exploitation. What concerned him more, however, was the way in which the abstraction of capitalism led to alienation from the land. The miner did not see the land, but only its potential as a commodity. Smithson accepted the need for coal and metal, but questioned whether miners were aware of their role as agents of natural and unconscious drives. Typical of his isomorphic view that human drives arose from inert material forces, he argued that miners unconsciously imitated geological and material events such as volcanoes, earthquakes and erosion. Yet, if miners played out unconscious drives, they only performed a limited repertoire. As a consequence of economic alienation they could not perform their erotic instincts for the land. Because of this imbalance at the level of the unconscious, they failed consciously to recognise their duty to reclaim areas of mining devastation. The role of the artist in this was to analyse this alienation and to reintegrate erotic drives back into mining practices.

In proposing an artist mediation between miner and ecologist, Smithson first had to address the ways in which each was alienated. The objective of the mediator's non-hysterical journey out onto a mining site was to pin point alienation with a view to putting the miner and ecologist to better work. The end

---

444 "Entropy Made Visible", S2, p. 301.

result was to be an earthwork site which was partly phenomenological "primordial signifier" and partly an anthropologically and psychoanalytically effective totem produced by co-operation between otherwise conflicting sectors of society. An example of this can be found in his proposal for the Bingham Copper Mine. In this reclamation Smithson can be seen to shift his conception of the distinction between mand and nature. While his is not a romantic theory proposing a 'natural order' of man Shepard nevertheless led Smithson toward trying to explain human behaviour in terms of biological instincts. Previously man was quite cut off from the natural world by the alienation and separation of language.

2. Bingham

In 1973, shortly before commencing work on *Amarillo Ramp*, Smithson reworked a series of photographs of the Bingham Copper Mine **[Plate 31]**. In that this was the largest open cast mine in the world it was a rather ambitious project. The dark brooding photographs show a man-made hole more than three miles in diameter, a blasted spiralling vortex bare of vegetation. In graphite on wax he drew at the bottom of the pit a series of swirling jetties that extend into an enclosed pool. Playing off *Spiral Jetty*, the multiple jetties of this proposal might have been an attempt to register an orchestration of multiple drives around a single geological site. Interpreting this work involves some conjecture, in that he died before writing about it.

Smithson's proposal was probably meant to provide two readings. On the one hand the pit was made to look infinitely deep, an illusion of an infinite void or gap in the earth. In this case the jetties produce the illusion that the spiralling cuts of the mine continue downward. When the sun reflected in the water, however, the pit would take on the semblance of a giant eye, thus filling it with a subjectless type of presence not unlike *Spiral Jetty*. The earthwork may have been meant to recall the infantile fantasy of an infinite hole in the ground, as mentioned by Douglas, combined with the totemic force of a giant eye. Fantasies from both miners and ecologists were represented here, unified over time under a single earthwork signifier. Smithson hoped this proposal would have the benefit of leading to a partnership between miners and ecologists. The role of the artist was to produce the site which could bind the community together under a single totemic sign or gaze. In many respects, Bingham represents Smithson's most ambitiously engaged earthwork. The sheer scale of the project would have insistently declared the power of art to mediate in the social arena. While this project was left in proposal stage by his death, we can gain some idea of Smithson's general theorisation of the social function of the artist from the surviving comments on the subject.

IV. The Engaged Artist

Smithson advocated certain social practices of engagement for artists in the last years of his life. These practices of engagement were sometimes negatively defined by differentiating them from other practices. For this reason he rejected those typical of Vietnam War protests, as well as the studied detachment of artists such as Duchamp. These negative definitions were meant to demonstrate the importance and difficulties of managing alienation and hysteria.

In speaking of current politics and the Vietnam War, Smithson observed that the political and social concerns of many contemporary artists started with hysterical emotions of horror and disgust. This reaction then drew artists into politics, where they encountered and were overwhelmed by the functioning of powerful unconscious social drives. Initially, humanist values led to horror, but they then continued by releasing unconscious desires for sacrifice and death:

> *Conscience-stricken, the artist wants to stop the massive hurricane of carnage, to separate the liberating revolution from the repressive war machine. Of course, he sides with the revolution, then he discovers that real revolution means violence too...politics thrives on cruel sacrifices. Artists tend to be tender; they have an acute fear of blood baths and revolutionary terror. The political system that now controls the world on every level should be denied by art. Yet, why are so many artists now attracted to the dangerous world of politics? Perhaps, at bottom, artists like anybody else yearn for that unbearable situation that politics leads to: the threat of pain, the horror of annihilation, that would end in calm and peace. Disgust generated by fear creates a personal panic, that seeks relief in sacrifice...The blind surge of life, I'm afraid, threatens itself. Modern sacrifices become a matter of chance and randomness...Student and police riots on a deeper level are ceremonial sacrifices...* [445]

In the interaction between politics and art, Smithson warned artists of the dangers of being drawn into a social death wish, a homeostatic force that would reduce the tension inherent in society by sacrificing some of its members, artists included. As deceived individuals, artists could unwittingly be drawn in and destroyed by unconscious drives in society at large. For Smithson every conscious aim had an unconscious goal, and artists had to understand unconscious material forces before trying to engage social change. Therefore, the first task of the artist was to begin to come to terms with his or her unconscious so as not to get caught up in hysterical reactions such as horror and disgust, leaving them freer to grasp the functioning of the drives in arenas of social conflict.

Smithson criticised Duchamp for rather different reasons. In 1973, in his last recorded interview before his death, Smithson expressed a considerable concern over the widespread admiration for this artist. Though Smithson agreed that Duchamp was one of the first artists really to understand that his personal charisma could render an object desirable, this did not justify his practice of reifying

---

[445] "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium", S2, p. 134.

economic alienation using occult spiritualism. In his view Duchamp was a "spiritualist of Woolworth". As he put it, "There is no viable dialectic in Duchamp because he is only trading on the alienated object and bestowing on this object a kind of mystification."[446].

For Smithson there was a public responsibility not to make objects that seemed to achieve a state of transcendence. He felt that artists were misguided to believe that art could transcend industry, commerce, or the bourgeoisie. Such transcendentalism led only to the formation of cults and religions around art. "My view is more democratic, and that is why the pose of priest-aristocrat that Duchamp takes on strikes me as reactionary." In addition to this, Smithson observed that Duchamp made no attempt to address unconscious drives because his art had lost its ability to respond anew, to be dialectical. Duchamp's transcendence was an escapist strategy to alienation that had no power to diminish it or its causes. By attacking Duchampian disengagement he sought to define his own practice of engaging with instincts in order to redirect their social functioning.

Smithson rejected religious treatments of art and nature partly because they diminished the social power of art by encouraging isolation. "Some artists are more oriented toward co-operation, others are oriented more toward isolation. I would say those are the two kinds of political attitudes."[447] For Smithson, Greenbergian and Duchampian modernist purity amounted to a type of religion, and consequently failed to foster an encounter between artist and democratic community. Smithson hoped that he had found an alternative that would reduce alienation and help balance democratic society. This process could best begin when the artist identified and addressed personal sources of alienation.

A. Alienation

Smithson remarked that, in the case of the artist, the most potently alienating personal experience was the economic process of capitalist abstraction. "What is it that separates? It's the abstract value."[448] This alienated the artist from the value of his work and led to isolation. The compensation for this isolation was a sense of spiritual purity. In the early 1970's Smithson felt this was often the case with abstract art that withdrew from directly representing the world. As a consequence he started to disagree with the psychological theories of Worringer.

As has been discussed earlier, Worringer argued that abstract art was the product of alienation, a dread of space, a withdrawing from the outer world for the inner world of tranquillity, security and

---

446 "Interview with Moira Roth", S2, p. 310. Smithson was responding particularly to Duchamp's work with alchemy

447 "Interview with Bruce Kurtz", S2, p. 268.

448 " Interview with Bruce Kurtz", S2, p. 266.

stability. Smithson now regarded this as an unwise and futile attempt to escape from the world of sex and death, commerce and competition. Abstract art *was* an encounter with the external world, in that it was an encounter with the abstract structural level of nature. As in his Non-sites, Abstract art was not just an escape into spirit or mind because the Non-sites always returned the artist to the world. It didn't escape the natural world, it moved closer to it by uncovering the eidetic and unconscious forms of thought.

> *Abstraction emerges from a psychological fear of nature and a distrust of the organic. Cities are abstract complexes of grids and geometries in flight from natural forces. The primitive dread of nature that Wilhelm Worringer put forth as the root of abstraction has developed into what David Antin calls "affluent spirituality." Rather than turn their backs on nature, certain artists are now confronting it with the medium of the camera, as well as working directly with it.*[449]

In a rather fundamental way the abstraction of economics and the abstraction of art led to an alienation which greatly hindered the artist in formulating a direct co-operative practice, or a response to the external world. The best way for the artist to cope with alienation was to create alternatives to the economics of the art world, and to reconsider the basis of abstract art. As well, he suggests that before acting on behalf of society the artist needed to address the causes of personal alienation. Only then could the artist set to work dedifferentiating social conflict. This done, the artist would then proceed to the stage of social re-introjection. Overall, Smithson proposed that the stage of re-introjection, coming after a period in which conflicting demands have been left to stew in an undifferentiated state, posed the greatest benefit to the reduction of social alienation. In terms of an engaged art practice, re-introjection involved the creation of totems that combined and resolved conflicting social forces. The making of socially transformative totems, however, meant negotiating and mastering neurotic behaviour such as hysteria. It is on this point that I would like to conclude.

B. Hysteria and the Totem

One of the most intriguing aspects of Smithson' s late work was his thinking about hysteria and the totem. Yet, as it stands, it is a partially articulated theory. There is simply not enough empirical evidence to say that he had a clear concept of how the artist was to work with them. It may have been that Structuralist anthropology and psychoanalysis provided a theoretical resource which was not entirely worked through at the time of his death. It may have been that he deemed his theory inappropriate for publication. In any case, there is no major article on Bingham or private theoretical writing surrounding this proposal. One reason that the evidence is fragmentary is that much of his writing at this time was meant for the public domain and concerned government and industrial policy.

Given the increasingly sensitive nature of his role as mediator, there may have been less room for him to publish theoretical writings. In this sense he may have paid a price for his wish to make earthwork art a useful asset to society, in that mediators are often in the position of having to keep their strategy out of the public domain. This may even have been a factor in his reported sense of impatience and frustration in mid 1973.

Given the lack of evidence about his specific aims at this time, it can only be surmised that Smithson regarded earthwork art to have a social power by virtue of its function as a totem.[450] While Smithson never directly claimed that he was making totemic earthworks, he does intersperse his description of *Broken Circle – Spiral Hill* with discussions of American Indian art.[451] There is some ambiguity and contradiction in his comments about the relation between earthworks and totems, as well as in the relation of totems to hysterical and neurotic sexual behaviour. On the one hand he shared Freud's view that totems were the products of infantile neurosis. In this sense totemic art might be regarded as something more typical of Gussow than Smithson. Yet, on the other hand he observed that totemic societies had no difficulty in sacrificing a part of their wealth towards the totem:

> *Primitive people had a different intention... They didn't have a concept of love, only pleasure and pain-- the two interweaving, that is all there was. There was no goddess of love, or Judeo-Christian heritage to relate to. Sacrifice was a renewal; when they made the sacrifice, people internally did not feel disgust and nausea, they were gratified by sacrifice. People don't know where their heads are now.*[452]

Given the bare political and financial necessities of large earthwork projects, Smithson needed to justify the large expenditure of time and money in realising his work. It required a certain sacrifice of profits and leisure that would have been unquestioned in a society guided by totem and taboo, no matter how infantile. While contradictory, perhaps it is fairest to say of his thinking that the full relation of the artist to hysteria and totems remained unclear to him, yet enormously challenging:

> *It seems that all great thinkers have always in a weird way come on to the problem of the totemic, totem and taboo situations. Like Freud and Marx and Frazer-- but they never come up with the right thing... Freud--no--Levi-Strauss says that totemism comes from hysteria. It's very similar to hysteria... it is completely unknown territory that you are*

---

[449] "Art Through the Camera's Eye", S2, p. 374.

[450] Mark Tansey's painting *Purity Test*, 1982, shows a group of Navaho Indians gathering on horseback to look at *Spiral Jetty*. I would disagree with Shapiro on the nature of the irony in this painting. It is not a test of medium purity that is at stake. It is the test of the efficacy of *Spiral Jetty* as a primitive totem. The irony is that Smithson passes the test, and provides a totem that is effective for post-industrial and Indian societies. Granted there is an irony in the fact that the Indians are represented as historical idealisations rather than contemporary Navaho, who are more likely to arrive in pick-up trucks.

[451] "'...The Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, Is a Cruel Master' / Gregoire Muller", S2, pp. 253-258.

[452] . "Interview with Paul Toner", S2, p. 241.

> *going into, and that's what is exciting, the whole element of exploration, expedition. Then making some kind of coherence.*[453]

Further on from this remark Smithson adds that primitive thinking remained unclear to him, perhaps as a sign that the had not seen his way to developing a fully unified a theory that combined Freud's analysis of totemic society's psychosexual dramas with Levi-Strauss' conception of mythical geographies and totemic topographies.

In my view, the better part of the evidence suggests that Smithson was trying to conceptualise a way in which he could use the neurotic, hysterical power of the totem to 're-introject' the social unconscious with the aim of bring a balance to the relation between "Man and Land". If I am correct in this assumption then the management of social and personal hysteria was very important. His case seems to have been that the artist had to be as free of hysteria as possible. Reacting to man-made environmental damage and pollution with hysteria solved very little. Although it gave vent to private neurosis, it produced no basis on which to solve problems, and it generally increased social conflict in an arena that rather required greater co-operation. This set of views is fairly clear in the writings. What is less clear is his view on the ways in which the artist had strategically to create social hysteria through totemic art. This bears more on the question of mediation as a type of re-introjection. What he seems to have argued was that earthwork art should function as a social totem, as a sign which enforced new social taboos. Hysteria was not a problem *per se*, but it had to be carefully produced in the social arena in ways that created the right kinds of restrictions on human society. In this case he was seeking to make totemic earthwork reclamation into taboos on the wanton destruction of the environment. It also led to a greater erotic bond with the land.

Ultimately, then, the role of the mediator included the task of making a detailed social analysis, and an engineering of social drives through linguistic and psychosexual messages in which hysteria played an important but very specific role. For this manipulation to work, however, it was necessary to draw the curtain somewhat on the details of his analysis and theory. After all, it is all too like the hysteric to challenge an analysis.[454] In his mind it was far from certain that such an opportunity would come to pass. In his last public address this new role for the artist hardly had a presence at all, so entirely thwarted was it by "blind progress".

---

[453] "Four Conversations with Dennis Wheeler", S2, p. 207. Smithson is probably thinking of Freud rather than Levi-Strauss. The confusion itself is telling of the way he ran these theories together.

[454] I have in mind here the observation that Freud made about the consequences of explaining psychoanalytic theory to his hysterical patients. While initially their criticisms of the theory were helpful to its development, in the long run the analysis was more successful when the theory was not revealed. This was because it was symptomatic of hysteria to always question theory. For Freud hysteria was caused by the irresolution of the question of the subject's sexual position in the family and social context.

In conclusion, I would observe that the late work bears some similarities to his early work. In the one he makes icons, and in the other he makes totems. Both share a curious mixture of metaphysics and materialism. In both he seeks a recuperative art that has beneficial social effects. His turn to totemic earthwork land reclamation might be regarded as a pragmatic application of typically Abstract Expressionist interests in primitive art. In the late work, however, he draws on contemporary philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis and finally anthropology to underwrite a project that amounted to a sophisticated form of psycho-social engineering in which the artist created new totemic representations designed to bring society back into balance with nature. This was an ambitious project, and one never to be realised, whose strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures he did not live to see tested.

ARTICLES, MANUSCRIPTS, INTERVIEWS AND LETTERS BY ROBERT SMITHSON

Unmarked items appear in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, Jack Flam (Ed.), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996. This is abbreviated in the footnotes of the text as S2.

Further sources are marked as follows:

* Tsai, Eugenie, Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991.

Robert Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, Cornell University Press, Ithica, N.Y., 1981.

+ Private collection of the Estate of George Lester.

% Robert Smithson Collection, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington ,D.C., microfilm rolls 3832-3837.

Items are listed in chronological order. The order of undated items has been estimated based on available evidence.

1960
"From the Walls of Dis", unpublished poem.

"From the Temptations," unpublished poem.

*"To the Flayed Angels," unpublished poem, Tsai, p. 56.

"From the City", unpublished poem.

+ Letters to George Lester, 1960-63, private collection of the Estate of George Lester.

December 4, 1960, NYC.
February 13?, 1961, NYC. Sale of 3 paintings.
Undated 1961, NYC. Two year contract negotiation.
April? 1961, NYC. Illustrated with drawing
May 1, 1961, NYC.
May 8, 1961, NYC.
May 17, 1961, NYC.
Undated (May?), 1961, NYC. List of works for exhibition.
Undated (May?), 1961, NYC, Amended list of works for exhibition.
Undated (May?), 1961, NYC. "Don't worry..."
Undated (May?), 1961, NYC. Change of titles.
Undated (May?), 1961, NYC. "The crisis of the Renaissance..."

Undated (late May?), 1961, NYC. Details for arrival in Rome.
September 3, 1961, London.
September 22, 1961, NYC.
December 26, 1961, NYC.
July 18, 1962, NYC.
Undated, 1962, NYC. "A terrible error..."
February 22, 1963, NYC.

1961

"The Lamentations of the Paroxysmal Artist", c.1961?

% "Letter to Nancy Holt", July 24, 1961. Smithson Archives, roll 3832.

% "Letter to Nancy Holt", August 1, 1961. Smithson Archives, roll 3832.

"The Iconography of Desolation", Autumn 1961.

1964
"The Eliminator", 1964.

1965
% "No title", manuscript draft statement for "Plastics" exhibition, 16 March to 3 April, 1965. roll 3834, frame 0113.

"Quick Millions", Lesser Known and Unknown Painters, Brian O'Doherty, (Ed.), American Express Pavilion, Worlds Fair, New York, 1965

"The Hum", 1965.

% "Space the Mirror of Time", typescript, dated October 3, 1965. An early draft for the '7 Sculptors' exhibition? roll 3834, frame 0883-0884.

"A Short Description of Two Mirrored Crystal Structures", 1965

% "Untitled", typescript draft of "Donald Judd"?, 1965, roll 3834, frame 0687.

"Donald Judd", 7 Sculptors, Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, December 3, 1965 to January 17, 1966.

1966
"A Refutation of Historical Humanism", undated, c. 1965-66.

"Sol LeWitt", Dwan Gallery press release, April 1966.

"The Cryosphere", Primary Structures, Jewish Museum Catalogue, New York, April 1966.

"Interpolation of the Enantiomorphic Chambers", Art in Process, Finch College, New York, May 1966.

"The Crystal Land", Harpars Bazaar, May 1966.

"Entropy and the New Monuments", Artforum, June 1966.

% "Interstellar Flit", Draft for "Domain of the Great Bear"?, undated c. 1966, roll 3834, frames 0643-0645.

"The Domain of the Great Bear", Art Voices, Fall, 1966.

"The Pathetic Fallacy in Esthetics", undated, c. 1966?

% "Art and Time", typescript draft of "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space", 1966, roll 3834, frame 0273-0293.

"Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space", Arts Magazine, November 1966.

% "The Shape of the Future and Memory", typescript, c. 1966, roll 3834, frame 0859.

"The Shape of the Future and Memory", 1966.

"An Esthetics of Disappointment", 1966.

"Response to a Questionnaire from Irving Sandler", 1966.

"Proposal for Earthworks and Landmarks to be Built on the Fringes of the Fort Worth-Dallas Regional Air Terminal Site", late 1966.

"What Really Spoils Michelangelo's Sculpture", late 1966 to early 1967.

% "Abstract Mannerism", typescript, c. 1966-67?, roll 3834, frame 0252.

% "Abstract Mannerism", manuscript, c. 1966-67?, roll 3834, frames 0245-0251.

% "Conscious and Unconscious Art", Notebook III, 1966, roll 3834, frames 0070-0083.

% "The Magazine as Quasi-Object", Notebook III, 1966, roll 3834, frames 0084-0089.

% "A Morphology of Mirrors", Notebook III, 1966, roll 3834, frames 0092-0100.

"Colossal Nullifications (Part I)", c. 1966.

"Atlantic City (H-13)", 1966.

"Predictable Model for an Unpredictable Project", c. 1966.

"Proposal for the Detection of Approximate Period Quantity", c. 1966.

1967

% "The X Factor in the New Art", typescript, Undated, Feb. 1967?, roll 3834, frames 0950-0956.

"Some Void Thoughts on Museums", Arts Magazine, February 1967.

*"The Monument: Outline for a Film", April 1967. Tsai, p.81.

"Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site", Artforum, Summer 1967.

"Language to be Looked at and / or Things to be Read", Dwan Gallery press release, June 1967.

"Ultramoderne", Arts Magazine, September-October, 1967.

"Letter to the Editor", Artforum, October 1967.

"The Artist as Site-Seer; or, A Dintorpic Essay", late 1967?

"A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey", Artforum, December 1967.

"What Is a Museum? A Dialogue Between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson", Arts Yearbook, 1967.

"Pointless Vanishing Points", 1967.

"From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman: or, Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema", 1967.

% "Fiction and Language in Art", typescript, draft of "From Ivan the Terrible...", 1967, roll 3834, frames 0429-0448.

"Untitled (Air Terminals - Windows)", 1967.

1968

% "Letter to James Fitzsimmons", (Editor and Publisher of Art International), January 3, 1968, roll 3832.

"A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", Art International, March 1968.

"A Thing is a Hole in a Thing it is Not", Landscape Architecture, April 1968.

"The Establishment", Metro, June 1968.

"Minus Twelve", Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology, Gregory Battcock (Ed.), Dutton Signet, New York, 1968.

"A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", Artforum, September 1968.

"A Small Test for Jo Baer", 1968.

"Outline for Yale Symposium: Against Absolute Categories", 1968.

"Nature and Abstraction", c. 1968.

"Sites and Settings", 1968.

"Untitled (Site Data)", 1968.

"A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites", 1968.

"Non-Site Number 2", 1968.

1969

"Smithson's Non-site Sights", Interview with Anthony Robbins, Art News, February 1969.

"Fragments of a Conversation", edited by W. Lipke, February 1969.

"Earth", excerpts from a symposium at the White Museum, Cornell University, Feb. 6, 1969.

"Aerial Art", Studio International, February-April 1969.

"Hidden Trails in Art", dated April 1, 1969.

"Fragments of an Interview with P.A. Norvell", April 1969, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972, Lucy Lippard (Ed.), 1973.

% "Draft of a Letter to Martin Friedman", manuscript, Mid 1969?, roll 3834, frame 0049.

"Letter to Gyorgy Kepes", July 3, 1969.

"Can Man Survive?", 1969.

"Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan", Artforum, September 1969.

"Dog Tracks", manuscript, description of "Six Stops on a Section", 1969. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, Vienna. Reproduced in Robert Hobbs Robert Smithson: A Retrospective View, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1982, p.119.

"Well in Nature you can fall off cliffs...", Four unpublished conversations with Dennis Wheeler, 1969/1970. Edited by Eva Schmidt.

% "Well in Nature you can fall off cliffs...", transcript of Dennis Wheeler conversations by Dennis Wheeler, roll 3833 , frame 1104-1152.

1970

"Interview with Robert Smithson", edited by Paul Toner, 1970.

"Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson", Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, Avalanche, fall 1970.

"Art and Dialectics", 1970.

"Look", 1970.

"The Artist and Politics: A Symposium", Artforum, September 1970.

"Gyrostasis", 1970, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Catalog, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C., 1974.

"Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction", Aspen, no. 8, Dan Graham, (Ed.), winter 1970-71.

1971

"A Cinematic Atopia", Artforum, September 1971.

"...The Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, Is a Cruel Master", Interview with Gregory Muller, Arts Magazine November 1971.

"Untitled", 1971.

"Art Through the Camera's Eye", c. 1971-2.

1972

"The Spiral Jetty", Arts of the Environment, edited by Gyorgy Kepes, 1972.

"Conversation with Robert Smithson on April 22, 1972", edited by Bruce Kurtz, The Fox II, 1975.

"Letter to Ralph Hatch", June 10, 1972. Hobbs, p. 217.

"Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art / Smithsonian Institute", Interview with Paul Cummings, July 14 & 19, 1972.

"Cultural Confinement", Artforum, October 1972.

"Conversation in Salt Lake City", Interview with Gianni Pettena, Domus, November 1972.

"Untitled", 1972.

"Proposal (For the Reclamation of a Strip Mine in Terms of Earth Art), "1972.

% "Ecology and the Incest Taboo", draft version for article on Olmsted, late 1972?, roll 3834, frames 1203-1204.

"Letter to John Dixon", March 13, 1972.

"Production for Production's Sake", 1972.

1973

"Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape", Artforum, February 1973.

"Letter to W.G. Stockton", March 1, 1973 Extract in Hobbs, Robert Smithson: A Retrospective View, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1982, p. 220.

"Entropy Made Visible", Interview with Alison Sky, On Site, #4, 1973.

"Robert Smithson on Duchamp", Interview with Moira Roth, Artforum, October 1973.

GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

* indicates books consulted from the Smithson library lists. Where ever possible I have consulted the same edition owned by Smithson.

-A-

Lawrence Alloway, "Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism", Artforum, November 1973.
---. "Space as a continuum...", Artforum, September 1967.

Carl Andre, "Robert Smithson: He Always Reminded Us of the Questions We Ought to have Asked Ourselves", Arts Magazine, May 1978.

*G. E. M. Anscombe, An Introduction to Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus', Hutchinson University Library, London, 1959.

Mark Antliff, Inventing Bergson, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1993.

*Rudolph Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception, U. of California Press, Berkeley, 1966.
*---. Entropy and Art: An Essay on Order and Disorder, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971.

A. J. Ayer, The Central Questions of Philosophy, Pelican, London, 1977.
*---. Philosophy in the Twentieth Century, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1982.

-B-

*Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969.
*---. The Psychoanalysis of Fire, Beacon Press, Boston, 1968.

*J. G. Ballard, Terminal Beach, Victor Gollancz, London, 1964.
*---. The Drought, Penguin, 1968.
*---. The Voices of Time and Other Stories, Victor Gollancz, London, 1962.

*Roland Barthes, Elements of Semiology, Hill and Wang, New York, 1968.
*---. Mythologies, Hill and Wang, New York, 1967.
*---."The Structuralist Activity", Partisan Review, Winter 1967, p. 82.
*---. Writing Degree Zero, Hill and Wang, New York, 1968
---. "On Racine", A Roland Barthes Reader, Susan Sontag (Ed.), Vintage Press, London, 1982, p. 169.
---."The Face of Garbo", A Roland Barthes Reader, Susan Sontag (Ed.), Vintage Press, London, 1982, p. 82.

*Georges Bataille, Death and Sensuality, Ballantine Books, New York, 1969.

*Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, Bantam, New York, 1949.

*Samuel Beckett, Molloy, Malone and The Unnamable, Grove Press, New York, 1965.
*---. Murphy, Grove Press, New York, 1 957.
*---. Poems In English, Grove Press, New York, 1963.

*Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, Schlocken Paperback, New York, 1969.

*Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution, Macmillan, London, 1960.

*Isaiah Berlin, The Age of Enlightenment, Locke, Bereklev, Voltaire, Hume..Condillac, Hamann, Lamettrie, New American Library, Mentor Press, New York, 1956.

Leo Bersani, The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986.

*Alvah Bessie, The Symbol, Random House, New York, 1966.

*Ludwig Binswanger, Being-In-The-World Selected Papers Existential Psychoanalysis, Harper Torchbooks, 1968.

Leonard Bloomfield, Language, Henderson and Spalding, London, 1935.

*Harold Blum, Time's Arrow and Evolution, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N. J., 1968.

Yves-Alain Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll Around 'Clara-Clara'", October: The First Decade, MIT Press, Boston, 1987, p.342.

Jonathan Bordo, "The Witness in Contemporary Art", The Rhetoric of the Frame, Paul Duro, (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, New York, 1996, p. 189.

* Jorge Luis Borges, Ficciones, Grove Press, New York, 1962.
*---. Labyrinths, New Directions, New York, 1964.
*---. Other Inquisitions 1937-1952, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1964.
*---. The Aleph and Other Stories, *1933-1969*, Pan Books, London, 1973.

*Max Born, Natural Philosophy of Cause and Chance, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1949.

*Jacques Bousquet, La Peinture Maniériste, Ides et Calendes, Neuchâtel, 1964..

Mark Bracher, "On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language," Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society, Bracher and Alcorn (Eds.) New York University Press, New York, 1994.

*G. Briganti, Italian Mannerism, Thames and Hudson, London, 1962.

*Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Conn., 1959.

*Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.

*Kenneth Burke, Language as Symbolic Action, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968.

*William Burroughs, Nova Express, Grove Press, New York, 1965.
*---. The Naked Lunch, Grove Press, New York, 1966.
---. Ghost of a Chance, Serpent's Tail Press, London, 1995

-C-
*Rudolph Carnap, The Logical Syntax of Language, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., London, 1937, p.xiii. Smithson's copy was the 1959 edition.
---. "Philosophical Problems", The Philosophy of Rudolph Carnap, P. A. Schilpp, (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1963.

*Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Form, Vol. 2, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1965.

*Stanley Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays, Scribners, New York, 1969.

*Germano Celant, Arte Povera: Conceptual, Actual, or Impossible Art?, Studio Vista, London, 1969.

*G. Charbonnier, Conversations with Claude Levi-Strauss, Cape, London, 1969.

*Colin Cherry, On Human Communication, MIT Press, Boston, 1957.

*G. K. Chesterton, The Amazing Adventures of Father Brown, Dent Everyman's Library, London, 1991.

*Kenneth Clark, Landscape into Art, John Murray, London, 1949. Beacon Press, Boston, 1949.
*---. The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art, John Murray, 1956. Doubleday, New York, 1956.

T. J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art", Pollock and After: The Critical Debate, Paul Chapman Publishers, London, 1985, p. 50.

W. K. Clifford, "Body and Mind", A Modern Introduction to Philosophy, Edwards and Pap (Eds.), Free Press, New York, Third Edition, p. 181.

Francis Colpitt, Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1994.

Antoine Compagnon, The Five Paradoxes of Modernity, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995.

*James Cornman, Metaphysics, Reference and Language, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1966.

Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Eds.), Derrida and Negative Theology, SUNY Press, New York, 1992.

Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism, Routledge & Keegan Paul, London, 1983.

Suzanne Cunningham, Language and the Phenomenological Reductions of Edmund Husserl, Martinus Nijhoff Press, The Hauge, 1976.

-D-

*Dante, The Portable Dante, Viking Press, New York, 1959.

Jacques Derrida, "Parergon", The Truth in Painting, University. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987.
---. "Dissemination", Dissemination, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982.
---. Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1983.

*E. Donato and R. Macksey, The Structuralist Controversy, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1972.
*Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo, Routledge Keegan and Paul, London 1966.

-E-

Edwards and Pap, A Modern Introduction to Philosophy, Third Edition, The Free Press, New York, 1973.

*Anton Eherenzweig, The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination, Weidenfiled Press, London, 1993.

*Mercia Eliade, Cosmos and History The Myth of the Eternal Return, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1959.
*---. Myths Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities, Harvill Press, London, 1960.
*---. Mephistopholes and Androgyne, Studies in Religious Myth and Symbol, Sheed and Ward, n.p., 1965.
---. Myth and Reality, Allen and Unwin, London, 1961.
---. "Prolegomenon to Religious Dualism: Dyads and Polarities", The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1969.

*T. S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood Essays on Poetry and Criticism, University Paperback, Methuen, 1967.

*William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, Chatto and Windus, London, 1965.
*---. Some Versions of Pastoral, Chatto and Windus, London, 1950. [New Directions, New York, 1960.]
*---. The Structure of Complex Words, U of Michigan Press, Ann Arbour, 1967.

*Alfred Cyril Ewing, The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1951.

-F-
*Franz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, MacGibbon and Kee, London, 1963. Grove Press, New York, n.d.

Marvin Farber, The Foundations of Phenomenology: Edmund Husserl and the Quest for a Rigorous Science of Philosophy, State University of New York Press, New York, 1943.
*---. The Aims of Phenomenology: The Motives, Methods and Impact of Husserl's Thought, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1966.

Bruce Fink, The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance, Princeton UP, Princeton, New Jersey, 1995.

Henry L. Finch, Wittgenstein, Element Press, Shaftsbury, Dorset, 1995.

Joel Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire", October: The First Decade, MIT Press, Boston 1988, p. 376.
Hal Foster, The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century, M.I.T. Press, Boston, 1997.

Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, Tavistock Press, London, 1970.
*---. Madness and Civilisation, Mentor, Tavistock, London, 1971.

*James George Frazer, The Golden Bough, A Study in Magic and Religion, Macmillan, New York, 1960.

*Sigmund Freud, Civilisation and its Discontents, Doubleday, New York, 1958.
*---. Collected Papers, Hogarth Press, London, 1964.

*---. Moses and Monotheism, Hogarth Press, London, 1934.
*---. Totem and Taboo, Vintage, New York, 1918.
---. Totem and Taboo, Routledge, London, 1950.
---. "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes", The Freud Reader, Peter Gay (Ed.), Vintage Press, London, p. 567.

Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", Artforum, Summer, 1967.
---. "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings", Artforum, November 1966.

-G-
*Ludwig Goldscheider, Michelangelo: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Phaidon, London, 1959.

Clement Greenberg, Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism, John O'Brian (Ed.), Chicago University Press, Chicago, Vols. 1-4, 1993.
*---. Art and Culture: Critical Essays, Thames and Hudson, London, 1973. n.p., Boston, 1961.
---."Clement Greenberg with Peter Fuller", Linda Saunders (Ed.), Modern Painters, Vol. 4, No. 4, winter 1991, pp. 19-20.

Richard Griffiths, The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature 1870/1914, Constable, London, 1966.

-H-
*Jane Harrison, Prologomenia to the Study of Greek Religion, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1922 and1957.

*John Harrison, The Reactionaries, A Study of Anti-Democratic Intelligentsia, Victor Gollancz, London, 1967.

*Arnold Hauser, Mannerism, The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art, Vol. I and II, Knopf, New York, 1965.

*Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, Harper and Row, New York, 1971.
*---. An Introduction to Metaphysics, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1959.

*Rayner Heppenstall, Leon Bloy, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1954.

Erwin Hiebert, "The Uses and Abuses of Thermodynamics in Religion", Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Vol. 95, no. 4, Fall 1966, p. 1046.

Jaakko Hintikka, "The Phenomenological Dimension", The Cambridge Companion to Husserl, Smith and Smiths (Eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge , 1995, p. 83.

Robert Hobbs, "Introduction", Robert Smithson: Sculpture, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1981.
---. Robert Smithson: A Retrospective View, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1982.

*Max Horkheimer and T. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, Verso, London, 1986.

Graham Hough, Image and Experience: Reflections on a Literary Revolution, Duckworth, London, 1960.

*T. E. Hulme, Speculations, Brace and Co., New York, 1924.
---. Speculations, Routledge, London, 1960.
*---. Further Speculations, University of Nebraska Press, Evanston, 1962.

*Edmund Husserl, Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology, Collier, New York, 1967.
*---. The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness, Nijhoff, The Hauge, 1964.

-I-

-J-

Fredric Jameson, Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1979.

*Max Jammer, Concepts of Mass in Classical and Modern Physics, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1964.

Martin Jay, Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century Thought, U. of California Press, Berkeley, 1993.

Galen Johnson, "Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of Painting", The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader Northwest University Press, Evanston, 1993.

*Carl Jung, Man and his Symbols, Dell Paperback, New York, 1964.
*---. Modern Man in Search of a Soul, Harvest, New York, 1933.
*---. Psyche and Symbol, Doubleday, New York, 1958.

-K-

*Wolfgang Kayser, The Grotesque in Art and Literature, McGraw Hill, New York, 1963.

*Gyorgy Kepes, (Ed.), Module, Proportion, Symmetry, Rhythm, Braziller, New York, 1966.

Joseph Kockelmans, Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretation, Doubleday, New York, 1967.

*Siegfried Kracaner, Theory of Film The Redemption of Physical Reality, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1960.

*Rosalind Krauss, The Sculpture of David Smith, MIT Press, Boston, 1971.
---. "Using Language to Do Business as Usual", Visual Theory, Norman Bryson (Ed.), Polity Press, Oxford, 1992, p.88.
---. "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd", Artforum, May 1966.
---. "Death of a Hermeneutic Phantom: Materialisation of the Sign in the Work of Peter Eisenman", The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity, Backless Books, London, 1998, p. 45.
---. and Yve-Alain Bois, Formless: A User's Guide, Zone Books, Boston, 1997.
---. Robert Morris: The Mind / Body Problem, Guggenheim Museum Publications, New York, 1994.
---. Richard Serra / Sculpture, Thames and Hudson, London, 1986.

Julia Kristeva, "The True-Real", The Kristeva Reader, Toril Moi (ed.), Blackwell's, London, 1995, p.214.

*George Kubler, The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1962.

Donald Kuspit, Clement Greenberg: Art Critic, University of Wisconsin Press, London, 1978.

-L-
Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis, Penguin, London, 1994.
*---. " The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious", Ecrits, Routledge, London, p. 146. This article was in Smithson's library in the 1966 issue of Yale French Studies.
---. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I", Ecrits, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 1.

*R. D. Laing, The Divided Self, Pelican, New York, 1959.

*Susan Langer, Symbolic Logic, Dover, New York, 1967.
---. Philosophy in a New Key, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1942.

*Quentin Lauer, Phenomenology, It's Genesis and Prospect, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1965.

Michael Leja, "Jackson Pollock and the Unconscious", Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940's, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993.

*Claude Levi-Strauss, "Overture to *Le Cru et le Cuit*", Yale French Studies, October 1966.
*---. Triste Tropique, Antheneum Press, New York, 1967.
*---. Man's Discovery of his Past, Literary Landmarks in Archaeology, Prentice-Hall, New York, 1962.
*---. The Savage Mind, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1968.
*---. Totemism, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1973. Beacon Press, Boston, 1968.

Phillip E. Lewis, "Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of Language", Yale French Studies, October 1966, p.19.

*Wyndham Lewis, Time and Western Man, Beacon Press, 1957

Lucy Lippard, "Breaking Circles: The Politics of Prehistory", Robert Smithson: Sculpture, Cornell University Press, Ithaca New York, 1981.
*---. Changing: Essays in Art Criticism, Dutton, New York, 1971.
*---. Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, Praeger, New York, 1973.

*Kevin Lynch, What Time is the Place, MIT Press, Boston, 1972.

-M-
Louis Martin, "The Frame of Representation", The Rhetoric of the Frame, Paul Duro, (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, New York, 1996.

Tim Martin and Penelope Curtis, Robert Morris: Recent Felt Pieces and Drawings 1996-1997, Henry Moore Institute exhibition guide, Leeds, 1997.

*Warren McCulloch, Embodiments of Mind, MIT Press, Boston, 1965.

Thomas McEvilley, Art and Discontent, Documentext, New York, 1993.

*Marshall McLuhan, The Medium is the Message, Bantam Press, New York, 1967.
*---. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, McGraw Hill, New York, 1965.

J. McManners, (Ed.), Oxford History of Christianity, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Primacy of Perception, J. M. Edie (Ed.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1964.

---. The Phenomenology of Perception, Routledge, London, 1989.

Anette Michelson, "10 x 10: Concrete Reasonableness", Artforum, January 1967.

Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects", Artforum, April, 1969.

*Lewis Mumford, The Brown Decades, Dover Press, New York, 1955.

-N-

-O-

Brian O'Doherty, "Minus Plato", Art and Artists, London, September, 1966.
*---. Object and Idea: An Art Critic's Journal, 1961-67, Simon and Shuster, New York, 1967.

*C. K. Ogden & I. A. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1936.

Craig Owens, "Earthwords", October, vol. 10, Fall, 1979.
---. "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a theory of Postmodernism", Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, Brian Wallis, (Ed.), Godine Press, Boston, 1984.
---. "Photography en Abyme ", October, vol. 5, 1978.

-P-

*Erwin Panofsky, Studies in Iconology, Harper and Row, New York, 1973.
*---. Tomb Sculpture Its Changing Aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini, Abrams, New York, 1964

*John Weir Perry, The Self in Psychotic Process: Its Symbolisation in Schizophrenia, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1953.

*Nikolaus Pevsner, Studies in Art Architecture and Design, From Mannerism to Romanticism, Thames and Hudson, London, 1968.

*J. R. Pierce, Symbols, Signals, and Noise: The Nature and Process of Communication, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1965.

*Max Planck, The Philosophy of Physics, Norton, New York, 1963.

Michael Podro, The Critical Historians of Art, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1982.

Alex Potts, Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994.

*Karl Popper, The Poverty of Historicism, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1961.

*Georges Poulet, Studies in Human Time, John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1956.
*---. The Interior Distance, John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1959.

*Ezra Pound, The Cantos of Ezra Pound, New Directions, New York, 1948.

Donald Preziosi, Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989.

-Q-

-R-
*Otto Rank, Beyond Psychology, Dover Press, New York, 1941.
*---. Psychology and the Soul, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950.

Ann Reynolds, "Reproducing Nature: The Museum of Natural History As Nonsite", October, vol. 45, 1988.

*Alain Robbe-Grillet, The Voyeur, Grove Press, New York, 1958.
*---. The Erasers, Grove Press, New York, 1964.
*---. "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy", For a New Novel, Essays on Fiction, Grove Press, New York, 1965.
*---. Snapshots, Grove Press, New York, 1968.

Harold Rosenberg, "Past and Possibility", The Anxious Object, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966.
---. "The American Action Painters", The Tradition of the New, De Capo Press, N.Y., 1994.

*Daniel Rowland, Mannerism, Style and Mood, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1964.

-S-
*Georges Santayana, Scepticism and Animal Faith: Introduction to a System of Philosophy, Dover, New York, 1955.

*Jean Paul Sartre, Nausea, New Directions, New York, 1964.
*---. The Emotions: Outline of a Theory, Philosophical Library, n.p., 1948.

*Rolf Schott, Michelangelo, Abrams, New York, 1962.

Dorthy Seckler, "Arty May Die But the Ideal Will Not", The Narrative Art of Peter Hutchinson: A Retrospective, Provincetown Arts Press, Provincetown, 1994.

Richard Serra, Richard Serra: Writings Interviews, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994.

David and Cecile Shapiro, "Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting", Pollock and After: The Critical Debate, F. Frascina (Ed.), Paul Chapman Publishers, London, 1985.

Gary Shapiro, Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art After Babel, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995.

*John Shearman, Mannerism, Penguin, New York, 1967.

*Paul Shepard, Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature, 1st edition, Knopf, New York, 1967.

Goran Sonesson, Pictorial Concepts: Inquires into the Semiotic Heritage and its Relevance for the Analysis of the Visual World, Lund U. Press, Sweden, 1988.

*Georges Sorel, Reflections of Violence, Collier, New York, 1950.

Robert Smithson, Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, Jack Flam (ed.), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.

*Gertrude Stein, The Structuralist Controversy, John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1972.

Leo Steinberg, "The Eye is a Part of the Mind", Other Criteria, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975.

*Wylie Sypher, Four Stages of Renaissance Style, Doubleday, New York, 1955.
*---. Literature and Technology, Random House, New York, 1968.
*---. Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art, Vintage Press, New York, 1962.

-T-
*Theodore Thass-Thienemann, The Subconscious Language, Washington Square Press, New York, 1967.

Jon Thompson, "New Times, New Thoughts, New Sculpture", Gravity and Grace: The Changing Condition of Sculpture, South Bank Centre, London, 1993.

Gilles Tiberghien, Land Art, Art Data, London, 1995.

Eugenie Tsai, Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings, University of Columbia Press, New York, 1991.

-U-

-V-

-W-
Samuel Wagstaff and Tony Smith, "Talking with Tony Smith", Artforum, December 1966.

John Welchman, "In and Around the 'Second Frame'", The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork, Paul Duro, Ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

*Norbert Wiener, The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society, Sphere Books, London, 1954. Avon Books, n.p., 1967.

*Edgar Wind, Art and Anarchy, Vintage, New York, 1963.
*---. Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1958.

*John Wisdom, Problems of Mind and Matter, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1963.

*Ludwig Wittgenstein, Notebooks 1914-1916, Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Harper, New York, n.d.
*---. Selected Texts, George Pitcher (Ed.), Anchor Press, New York, 1966.

Helmut Wohl, "Review of *Mannerism* by Arnold Hauser", Artforum, June 1966.

Heinrich Wolfflin, Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art, Dover, New York, 1950.
*---. Renaissance and Baroque, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1966. n.d., 1964?

Richard Wollheim, Painting as an Art, Thames and Hudson, 1987.
*---. Art and Its Objects, Harper and Row, New York, 1968.

*Willhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style, Routledge, Keegan & Paul, London, 1963. Meridian, New York, 1967.

*Franzsep Wurtenberger, Mannerism: The European Style of the Sixteenth Century, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1963. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, n.p., n.d.
-Y-
*Louise B. Young, The Mystery of Matter, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965.

-X-Y-Z-
Slavoj Zizek, Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture, MIT Press, London, 1992.

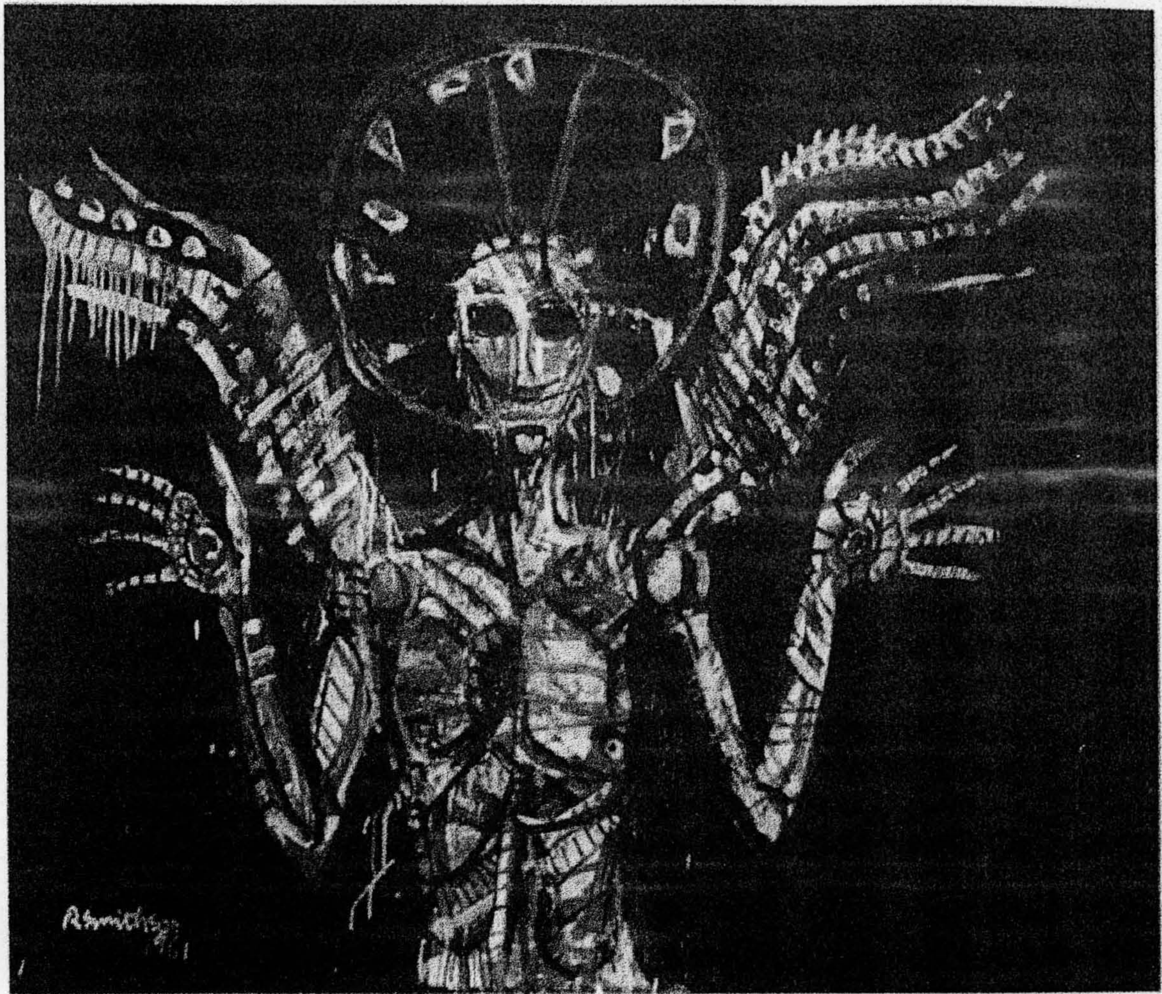


Plate 1. Robert Smithson, *Blind Angel*, 1961, 112 x 135cm.
George Lester Estate

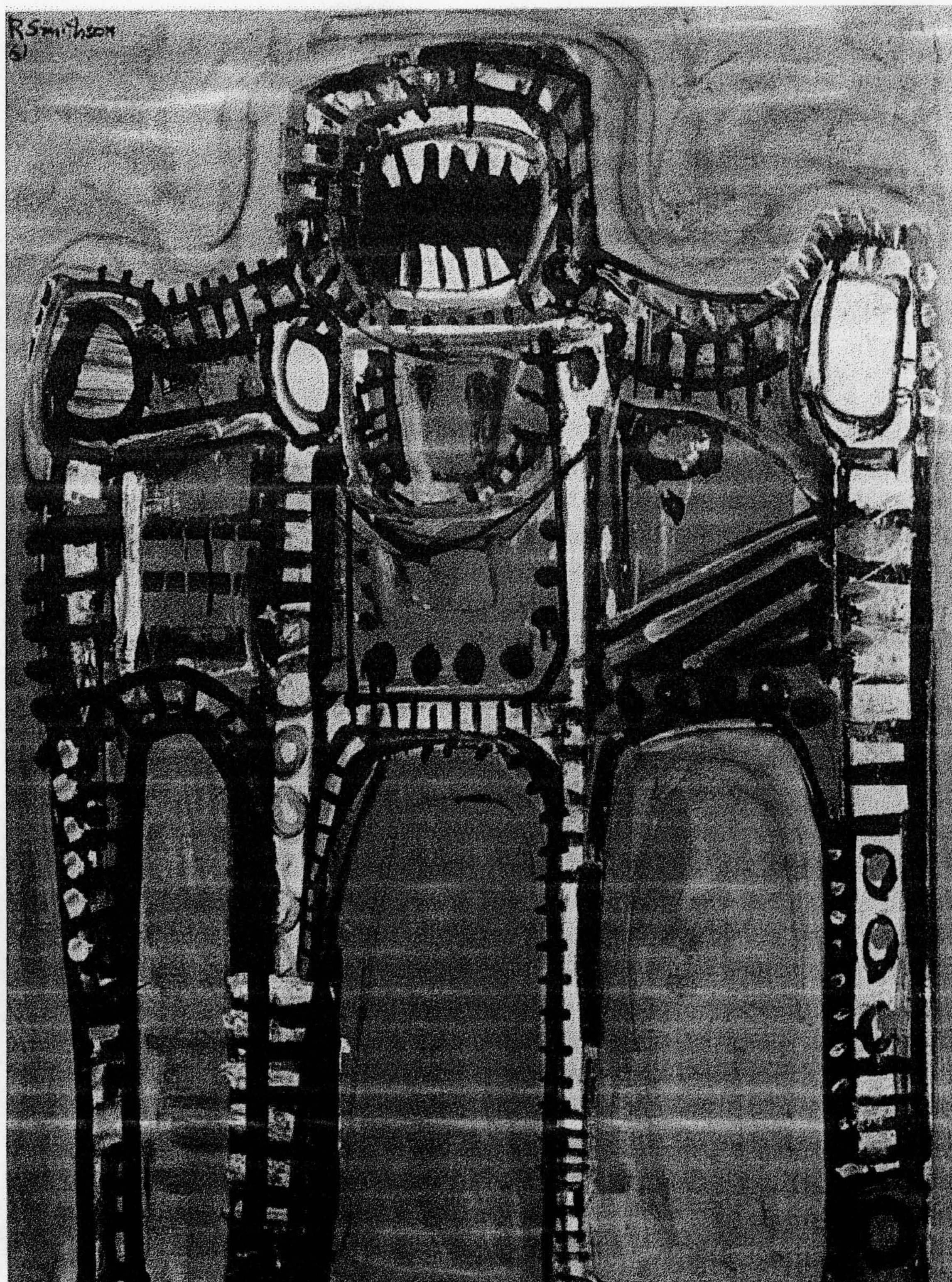


Plate 2. Robert Smithson, *Device for Removing the Death Rattle from Typewriters*, 1961, 90 x 70 cm.
George Lester Estate

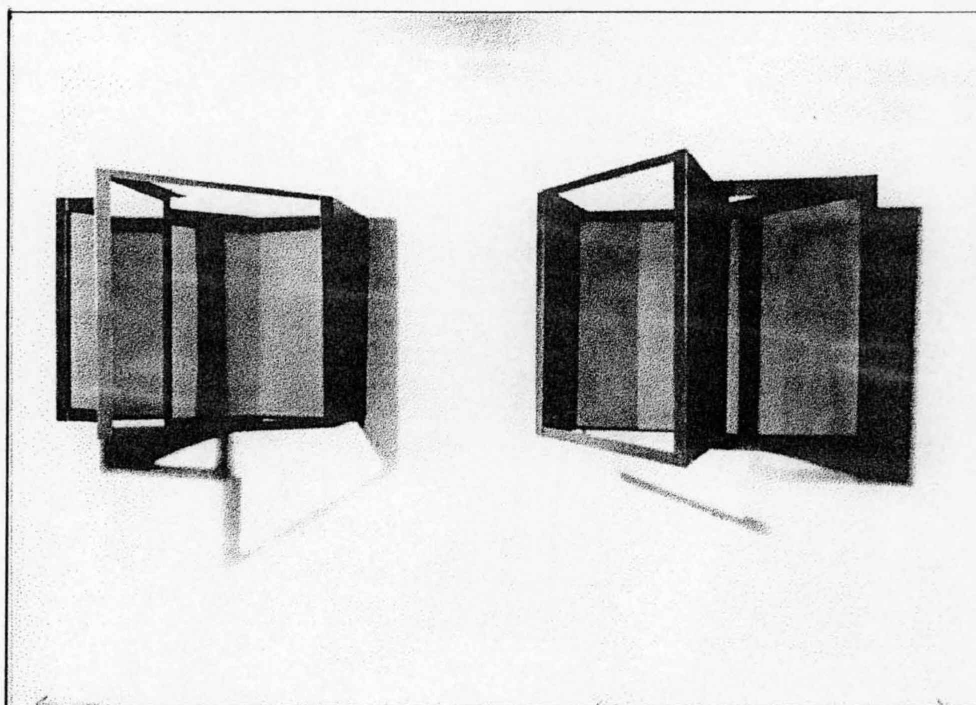


Plate 3. Robert Smithson, *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1965, 24" x 84" x 31". Whereabouts unknown

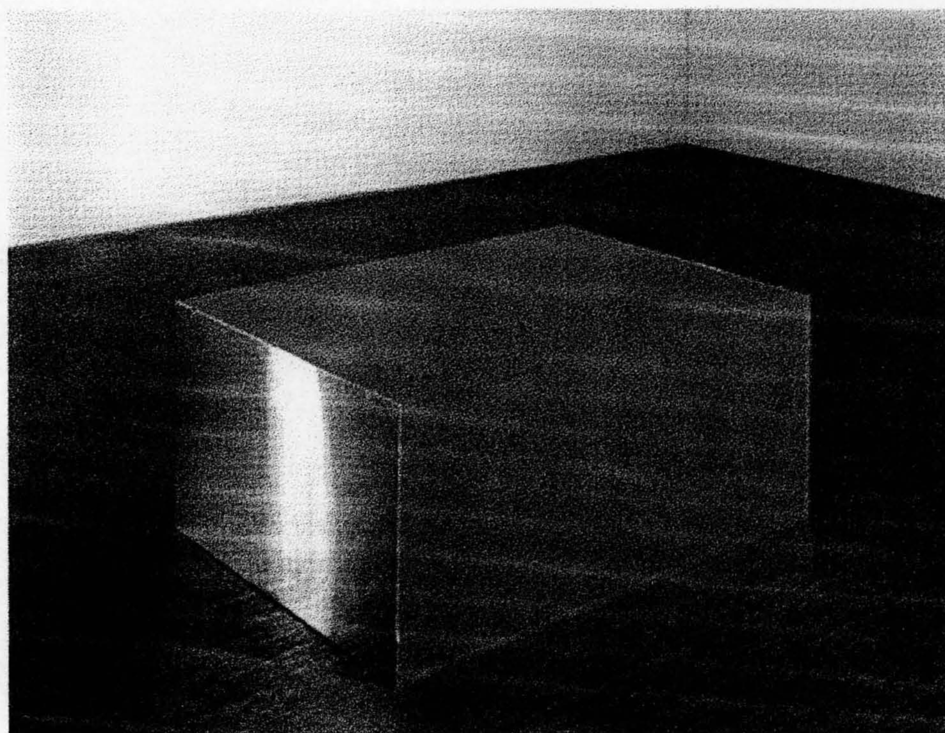


Plate 4. Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1965, 20" x 48.25" x 34".
Centre Pompidou, Paris

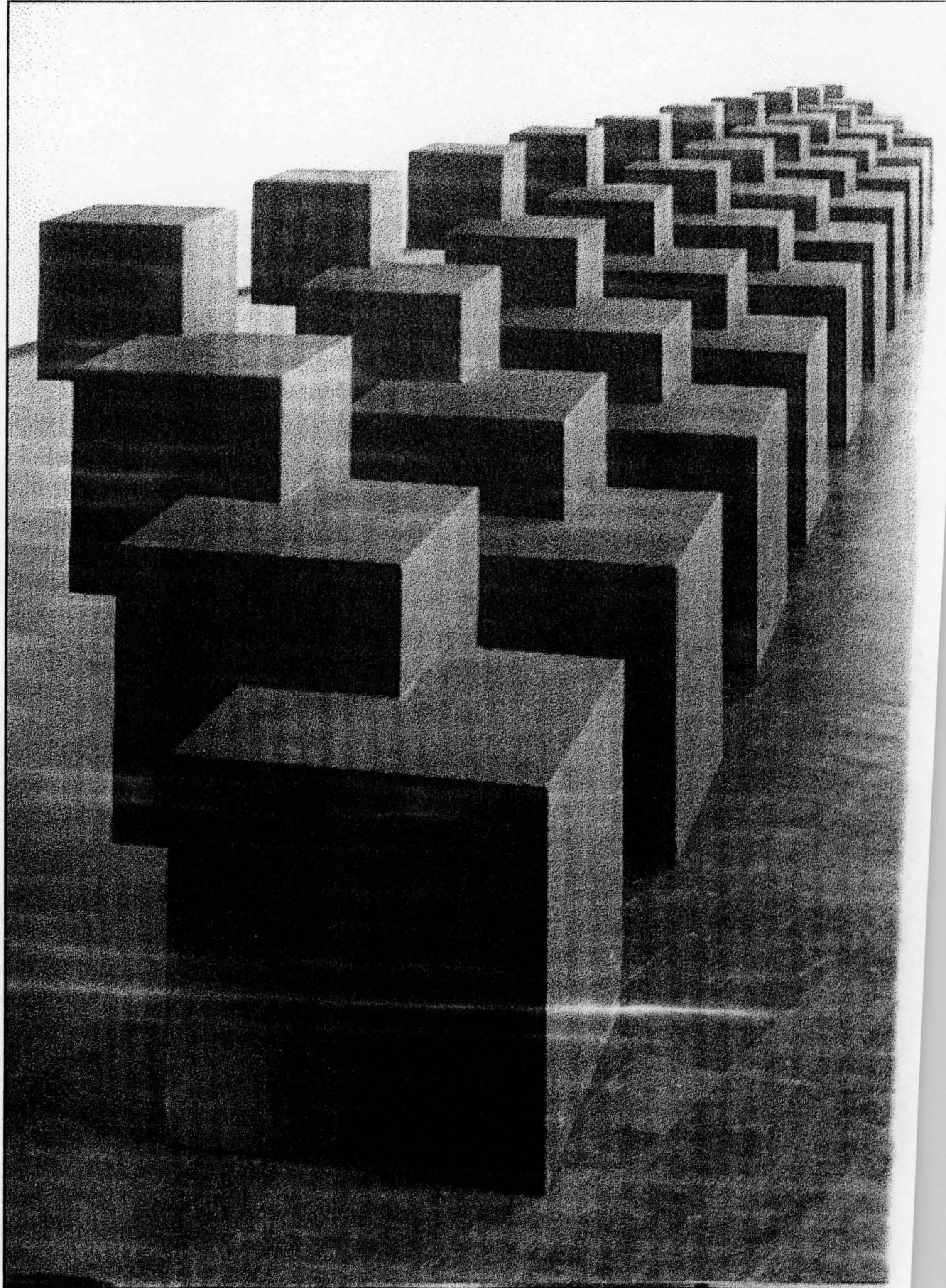


Plate 5. Robert Smithson, *Plunge*, 1966, 10 units, total length 520 cm.
Denver Art Museum, Denver Colorado

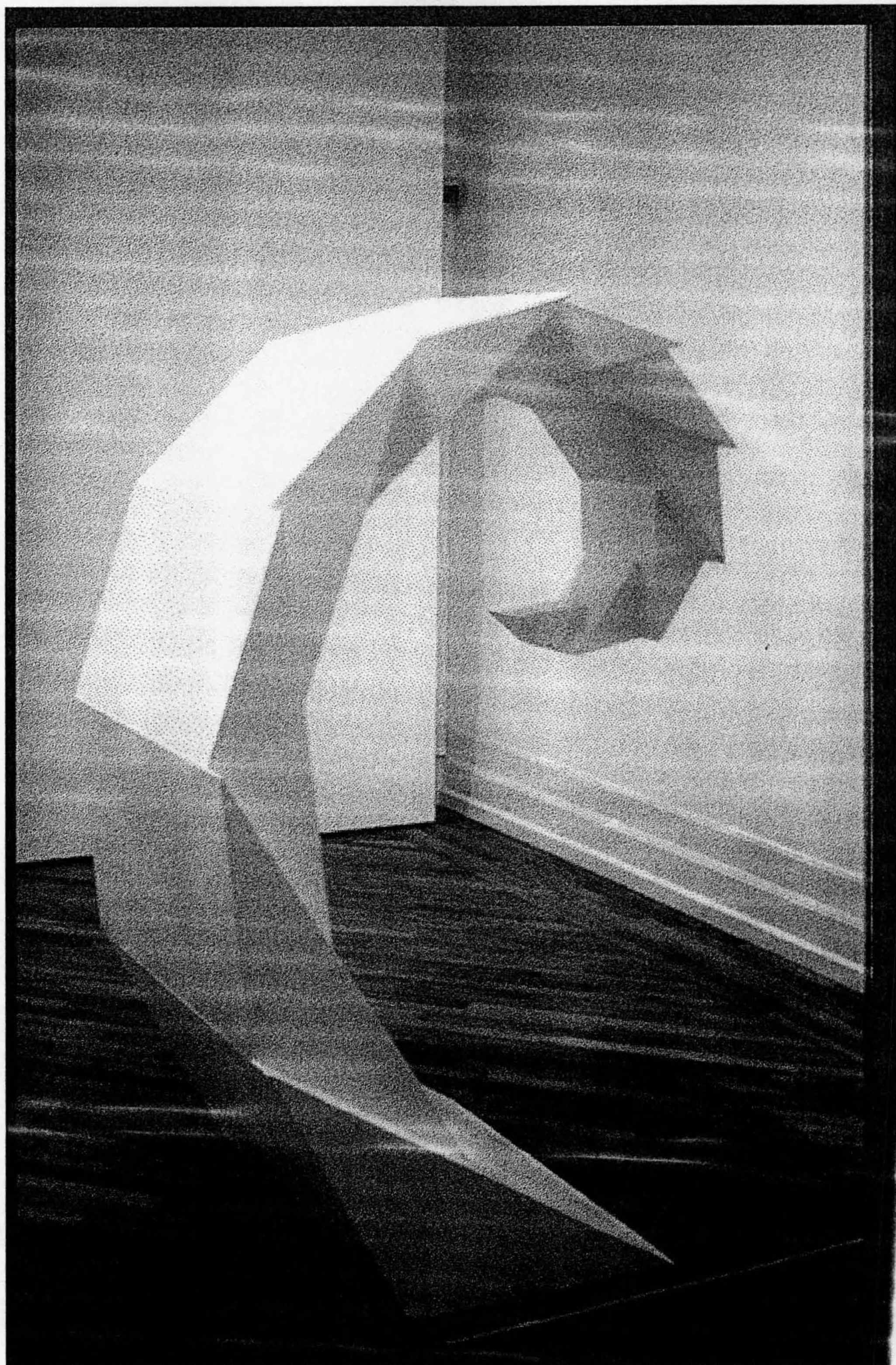


Plate 6. Robert Smithson, *Gyrostasis*, 1968, 182 x 137 x 99 cm.
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Gallery

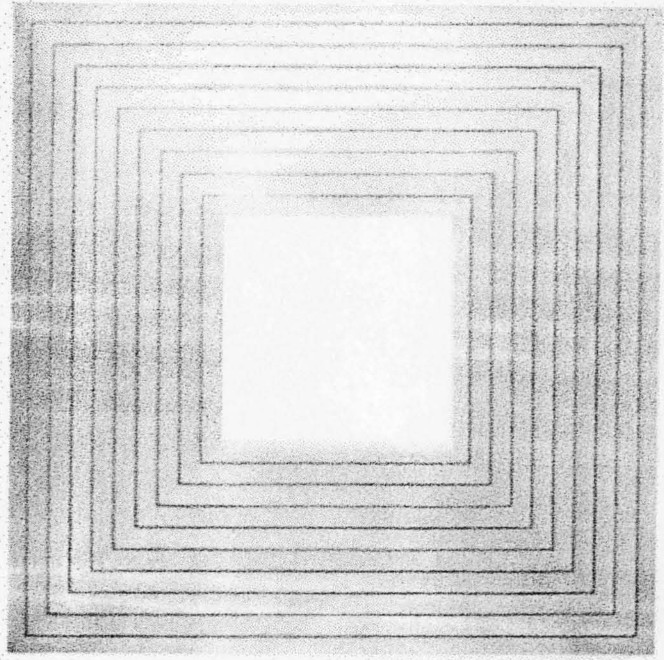


Plate 7. Frank Stella, *Hollis Frampton*, 1963, 7' x 7', Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

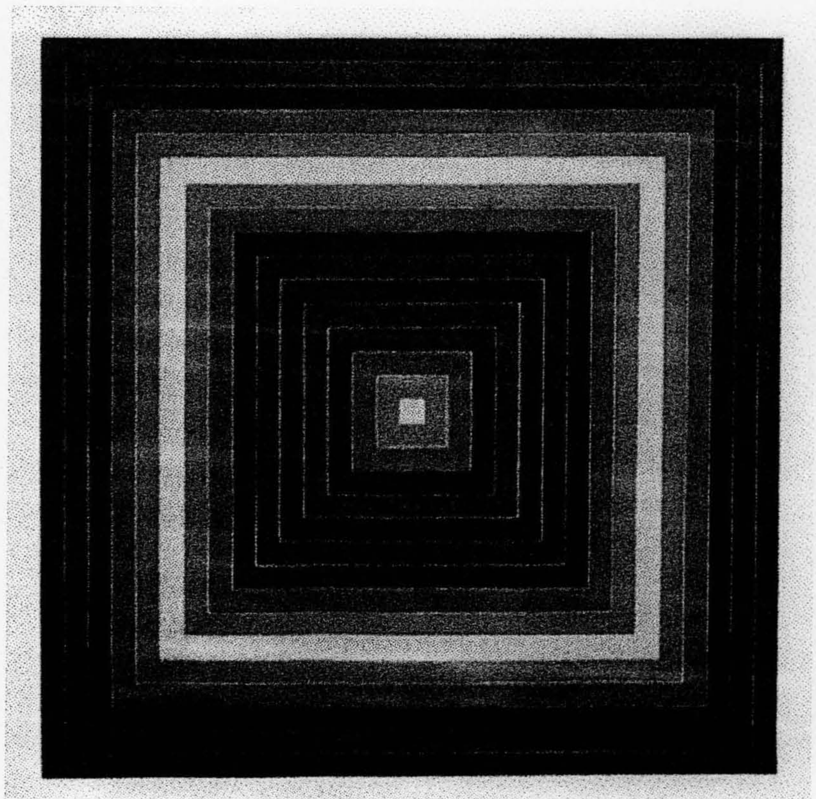
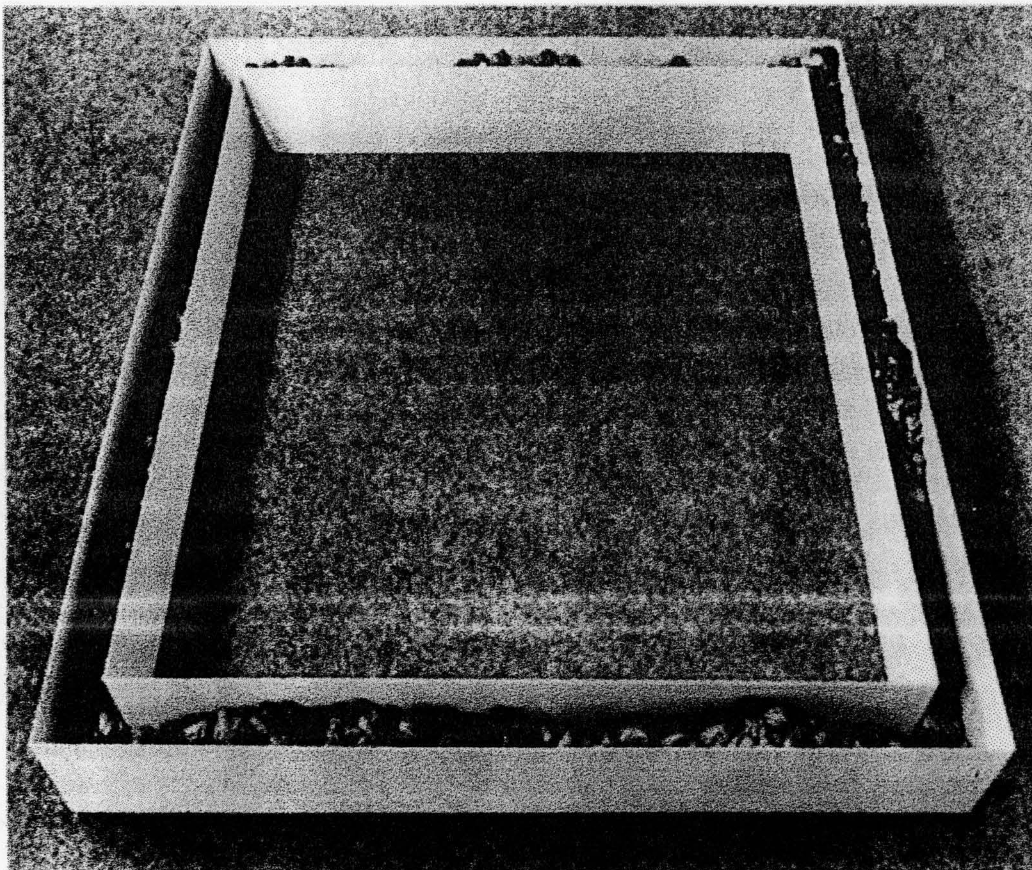


Plate 8. Frank Stella, *Honduras Lottery Company*, 1963, 7' 1" x 7' 1".
Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Plate 9. Robert Smithson, *Non-site, Franklin N. J.*, 1968, 42 x 209 x 24 cm & 102 x 76 cm. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago



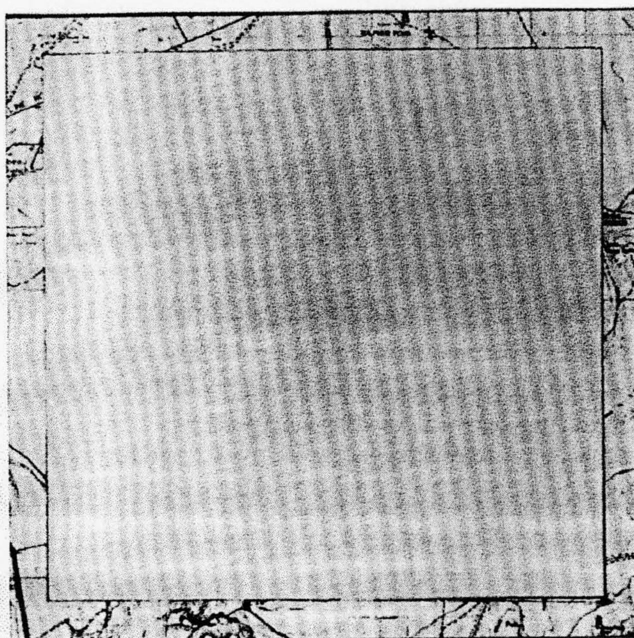


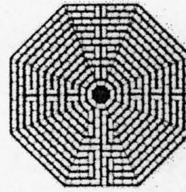
Plate 10. Robert Smithson, *Non-site, Mono Lake*, 8” x 40” x 40” & 40” x 40”.
La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla California

Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space

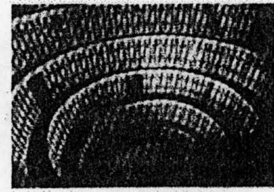
For many artists the universe is expanding; for some it is contracting.

By ROBERT SMITHSON

"Without a time sense consciousness is difficult to visualize." J. G. Ballard, *The Overloaded Man*



1 The Amiens Labyrinth (France)



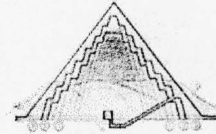
2 Built for Fabricus at the University of Padua

A ROUND FOUR BLOCKS of print I shall postulate four ultramundane margins that shall contain indeterminate information as well as reproduced reproductions. The first obstacle shall be a labyrinth[1], through which the mind will pass in an instant, thus eliminating the spatial problem. The next encounter is an abysmal anatomy theatre[2]. Quickly the mind will pass over this dizzying height. Here the pages of time are paper thin, even when it comes to a pyramid[3]. The center of this pyramid is everywhere and nowhere. From this center one may see the Tower of Babel[4], Kepler's universe[5], or a building by the architect Ledoux[6]. To formulate a general theory of this inconceivable system would not solve its symmetrical perplexities. Ready to trap the mind is one of an infinite number of "cities of the future[7]." Inutile codes[8] and extravagant experiments[9] adumbrate the "absolute" abstraction[10]. One becomes aware of what T. E. Hulme called "the fringe . . . the cold walks . . . that lead nowhere."

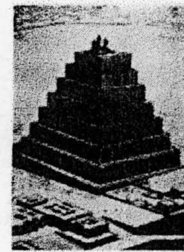
In Ad Reinhardt's "Twelve Rules for a New Academy" we find the statement, "The present is the future of the past, and the past of the future." The dim surface sections within the confines of Reinhardt's standard (60" x 60") "paintings" disclose faint squares of time. Time, as a colorless intersection, is absorbed almost imperceptibly into one's consciousness. Each painting is at once both memory and forgetfulness, a paradox of darkening time. The lines of his grids are barely visible; they waver between the future and the past.

George Kubler, like Ad Reinhardt, seems concerned with "weak signals" from "the void." Beginnings and endings are projected into the present as hazy planes of "actuality." In *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, Kubler says, "Actuality is . . . the interchronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events." Reinhardt seems obsessed by this "void," so much that he has attempted to give it a concrete shape—a shape that evades shape. Here one finds no allusion to "duration," but an interval without any suggestion of "life or death." This is a coherent portion of a hidden infinity. The future criss-crosses the past as an unobtainable present. Time vanishes into a perpetual sameness.

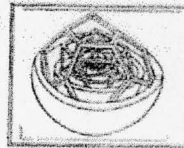
Most notions of time (Progress, Evolution, Avantgarde) are put in terms of biology. Analogies are drawn between organic biology and technology; the nervous system is extended into electronics, and the muscular



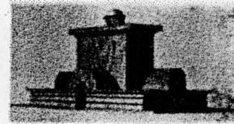
3 The Pyramid of Meidum



4 The Tower of Babel

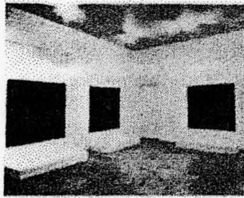


5 Kepler's model of the universe

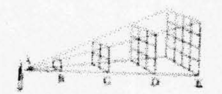


6 Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806)

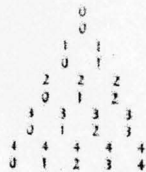
7 "City of the Future"



10 Ad Reinhardt installation (March 1965) Betty Parsons Gallery



9 From Edgar Allan Poe's *Eureka*

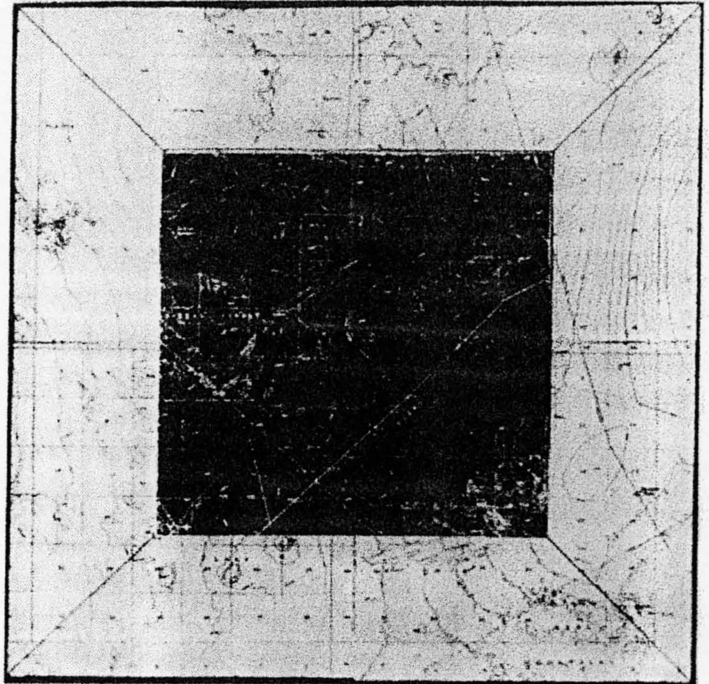


8 A. *Discrete Scheme Without Memory* by Dan Graham

HGFEDCBA
GHFEDCBA
FGHEDCBA
EFGHDCBA
DEFGHCBA
CDEFGHBA
BCDEFGHA
ABCDEFGH

8 B. Non-code based on *The Ars Magna* of Ramon Lull

Plate 11. Robert Smithson, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space", 12" x 12".
Art International, November 1966



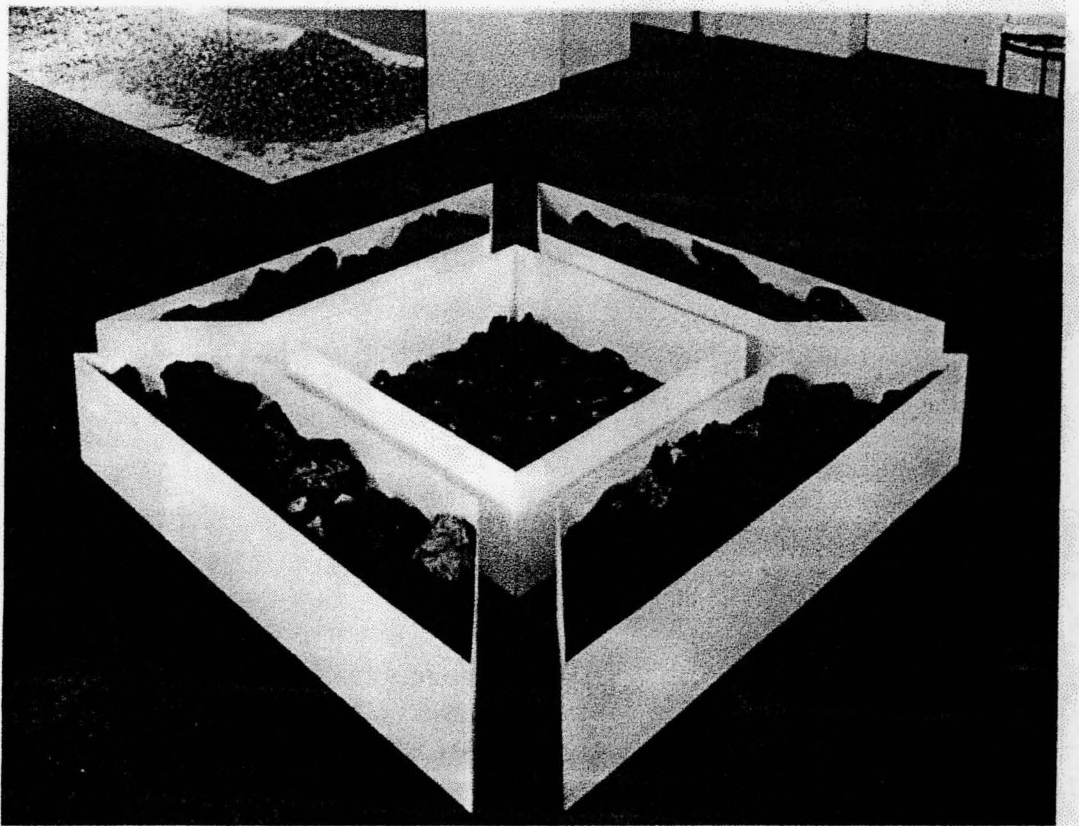


Plate 12. Robert Smithson, *Double Non-site, California and Nevada*, 1968, 12" x 71" x 71" & 71" x 71". Private Collection

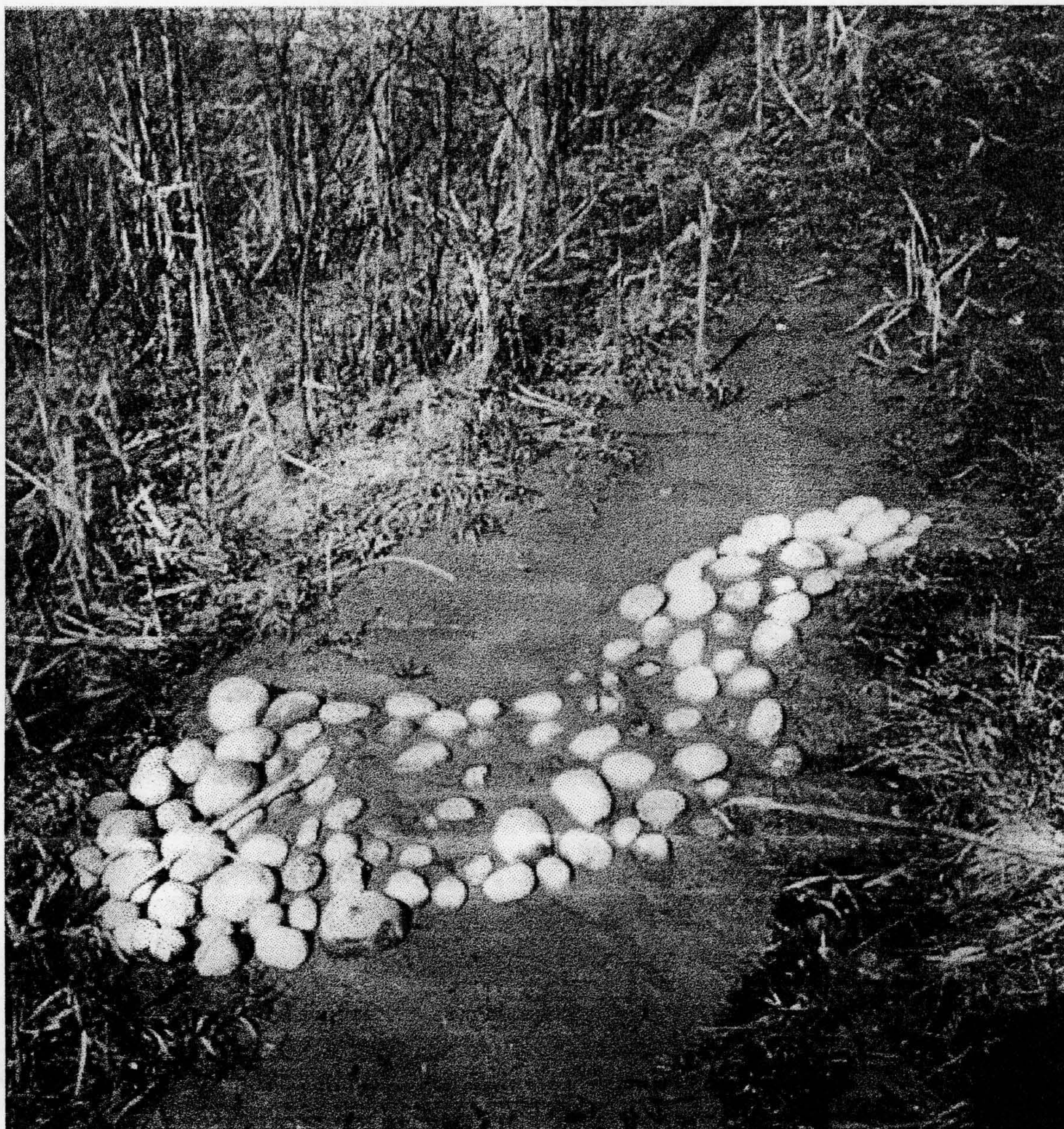


Plate 13. Robert Smithson, *Hypothetical Continent, (Cathaysia) in Stone*, 1969.
Robert Smithson Estate

Plate 14. Robert Smithson, *Hypothetical Continent (Map of Broken Glass, Atlantis)*, 1969, 20' x 16'. Loveladies Island, New Jersey, Robert Smithson Estate

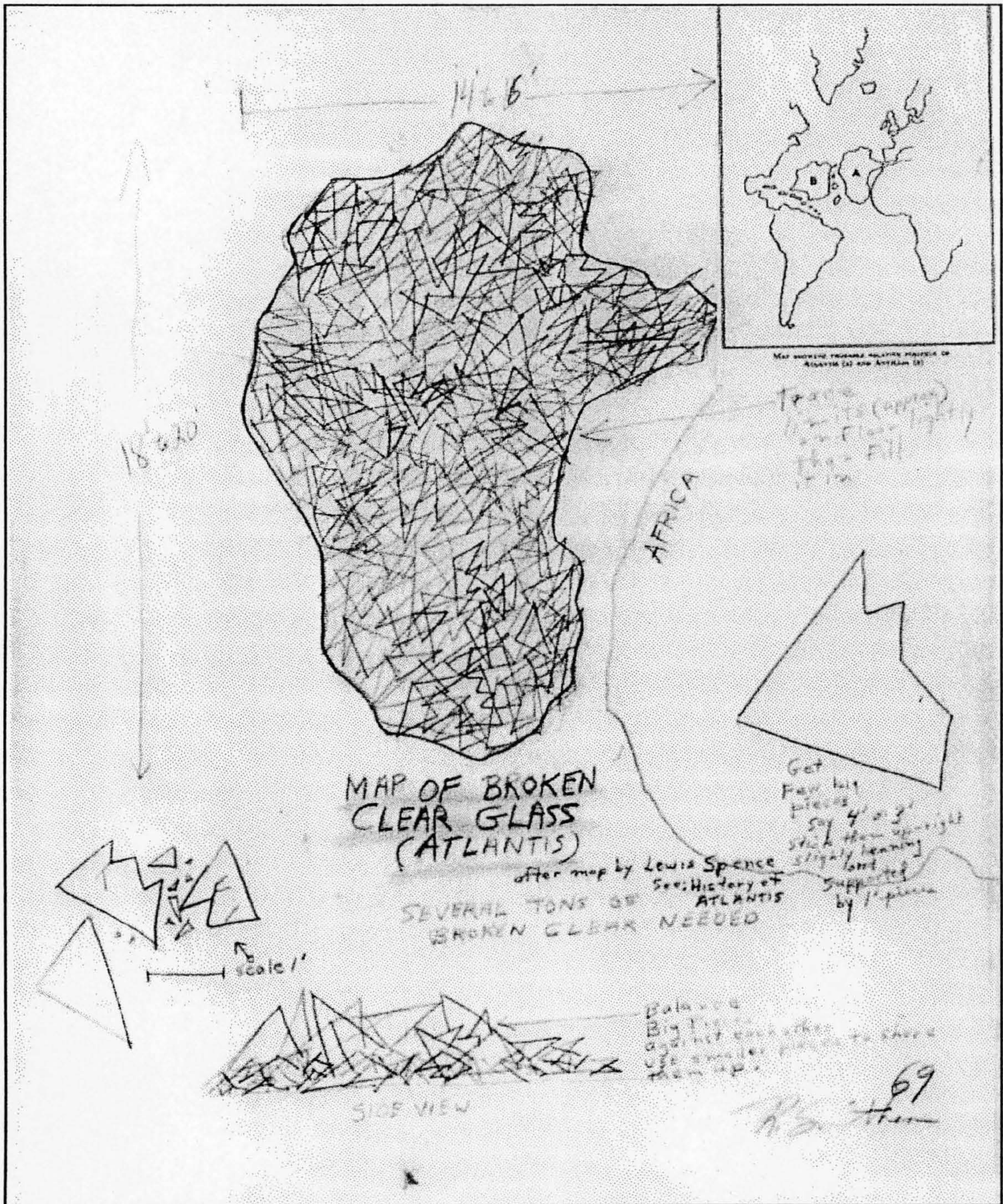
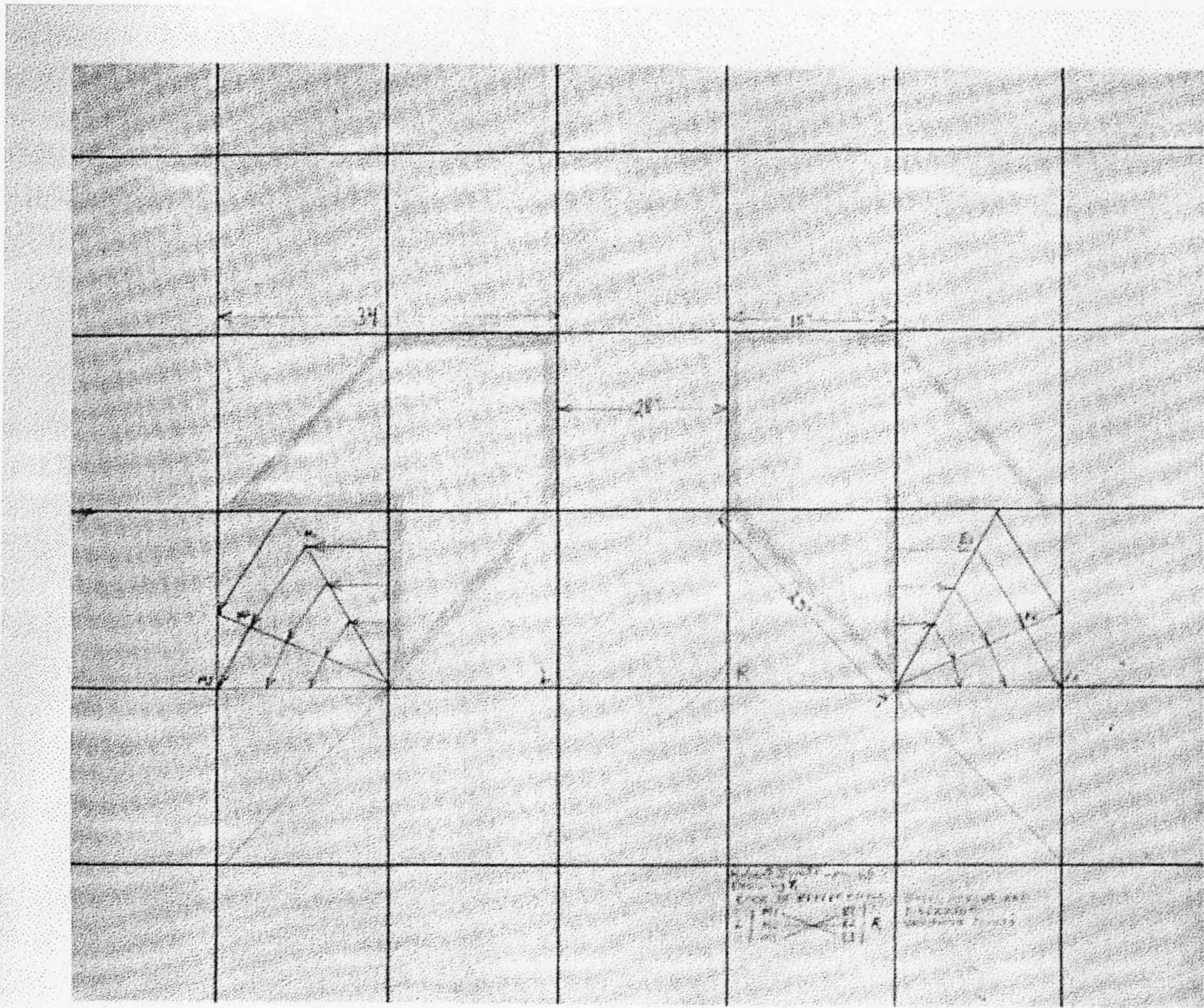


Plate 15. Robert Smithson, *Map of Broken Glass (Atlantis)*, 1969, 42.5 x 35.5 cm.
Robert Smithson Estate

Plate 16. Robert Smithson, *A Heap of Language*, 1966, 16 x 56 cm.
Museum Overholland, Nieuwersluis, Holland



Robert Smithson 65
Drawing Y.
CODE OF REFLECTIONS
L | M1 E1 | R
M2 E2
M3 E3

Plate 17. Robert Smithson, *Drawing Y*, 1965, 11.25" x 13.5".
Museum of Modern Art, New York

Plate 18. Reconstruction of *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1999.
Robert Smithson Estate

Plate 19. Reconstruction of *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1999.
Robert Smithson Estate

Plate 20. Reconstruction of *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1999.
Robert Smithson Estate

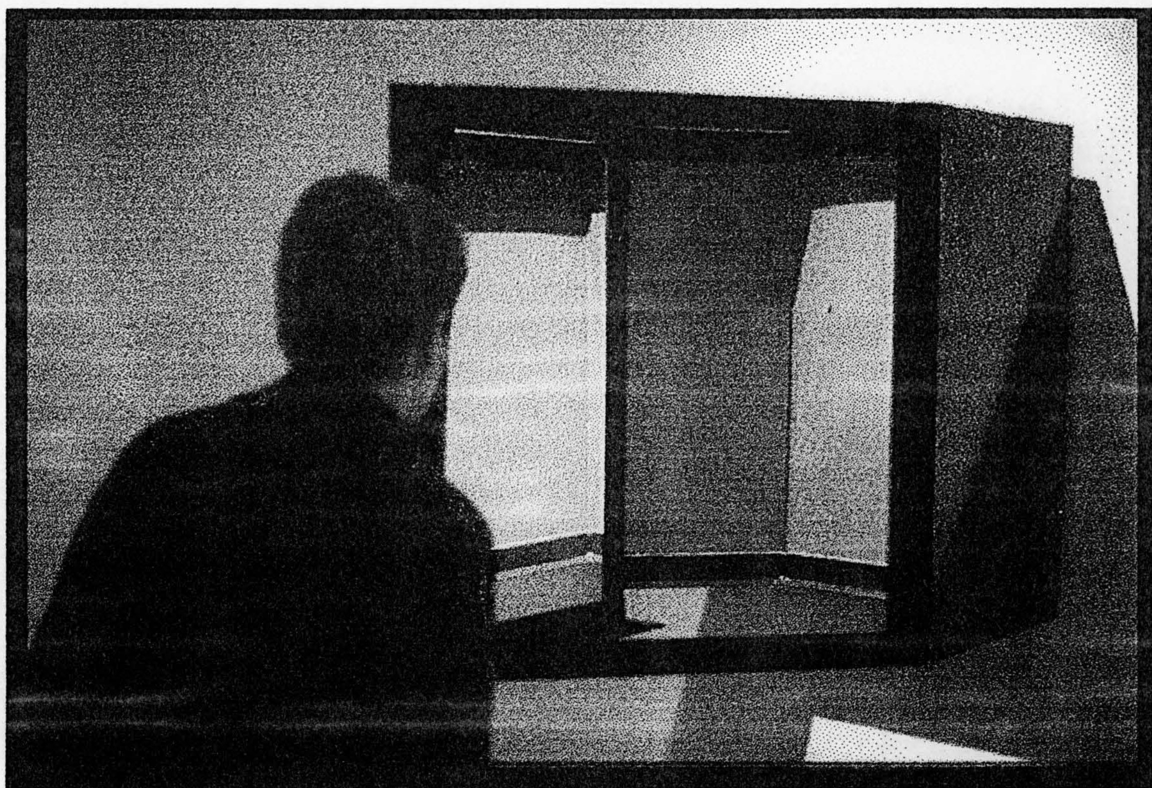


Plate 21. Reconstruction of *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1999.
Robert Smithson Estate

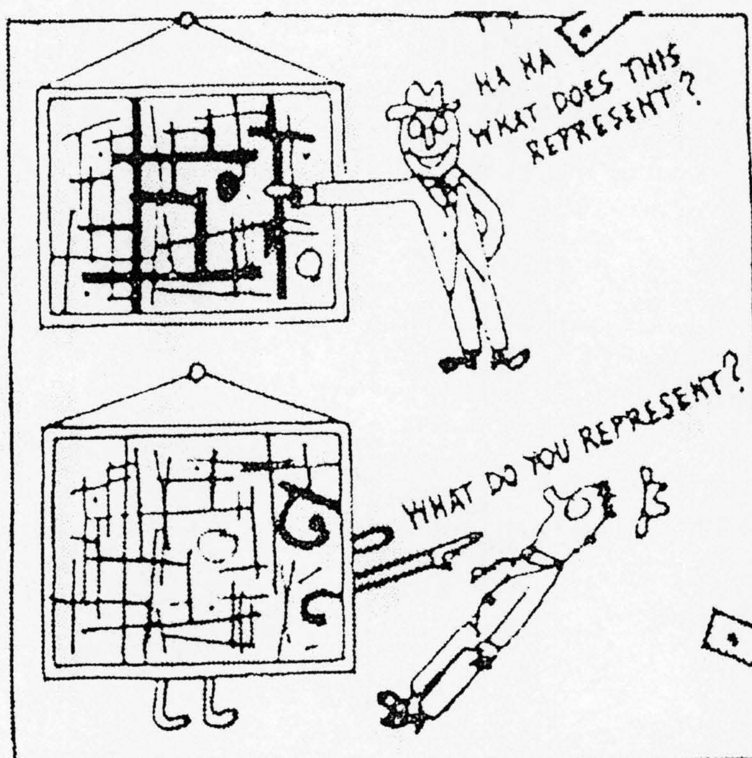


Plate 22. Ad Reinhardt, "How to Look at Modern Art in America", detail, *PM Magazine*, June 2, 1946.

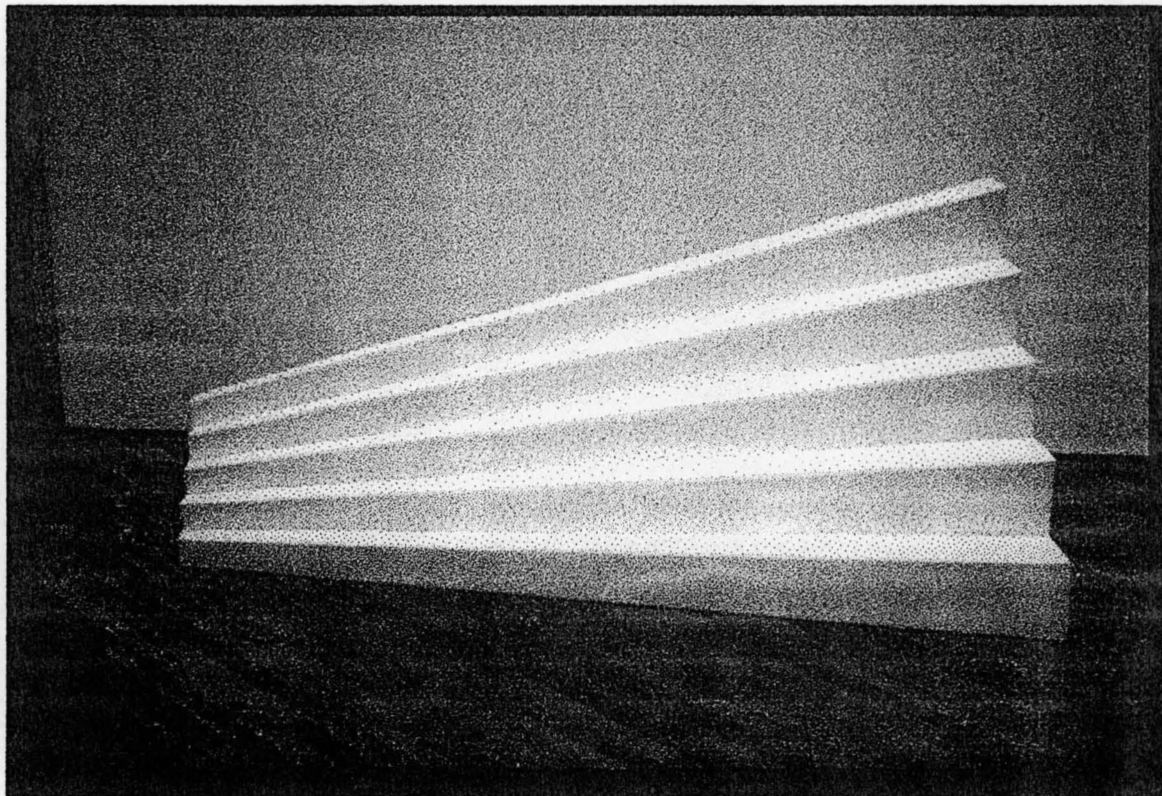


Plate 23. Robert Smithson, *Pointless Vanishing Points*, 1968, 102 x 102 x 244 cm. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithica New York

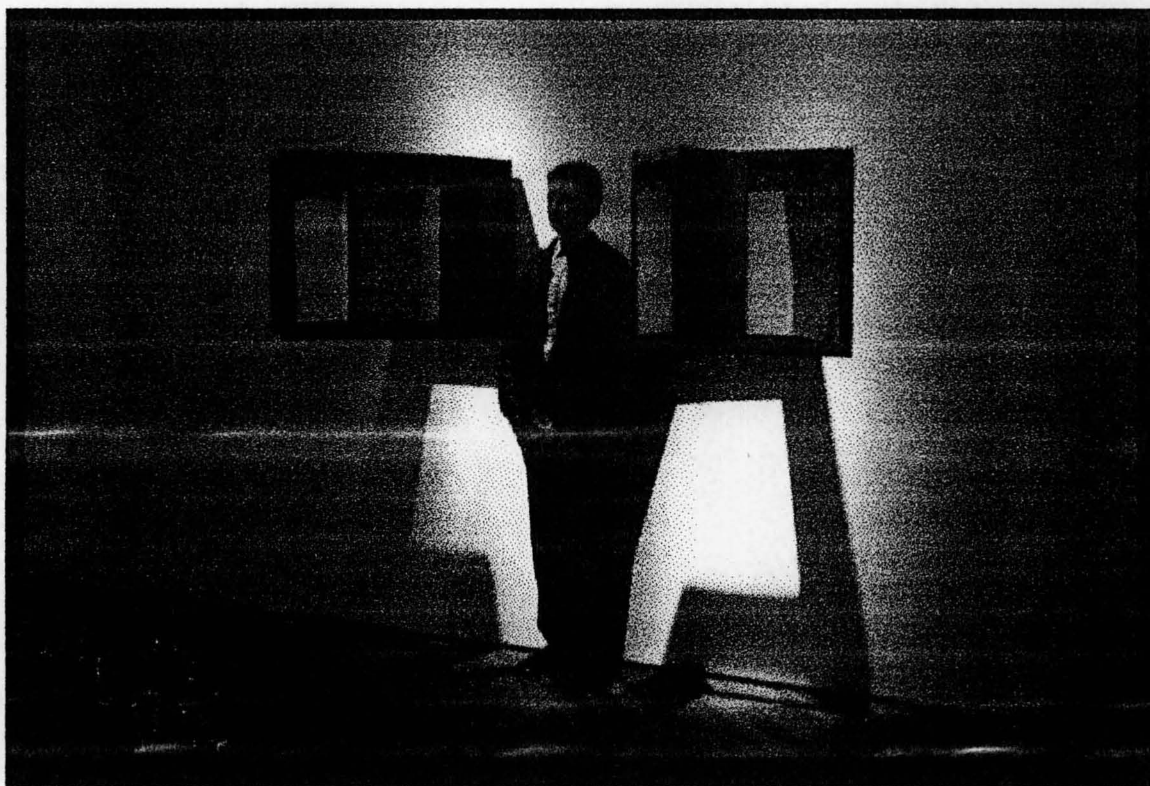


Plate 24. Reconstruction of *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1999. Robert Smithson Estate

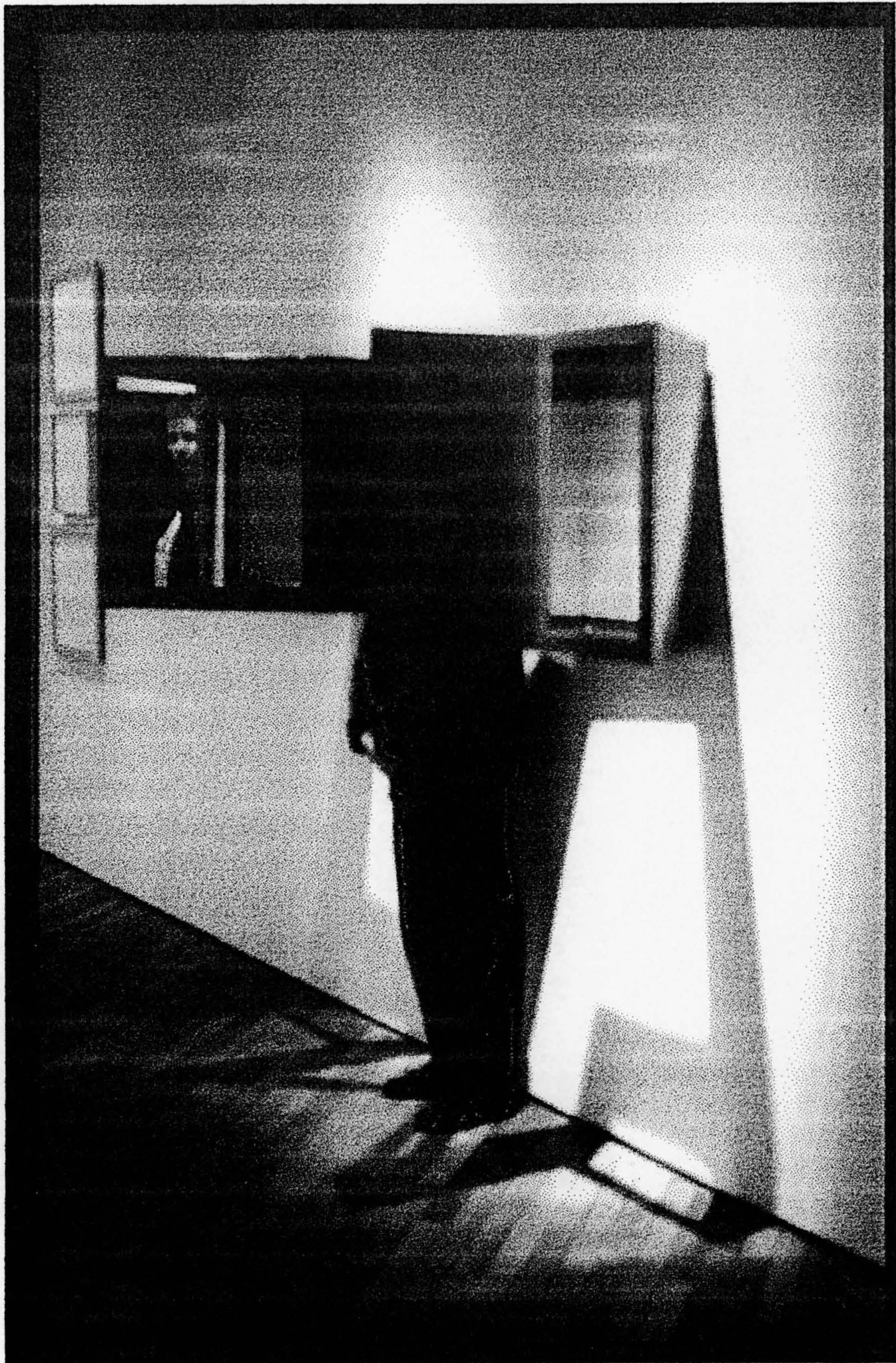


Plate 25. Reconstruction of *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1999.
Robert Smithson Estate

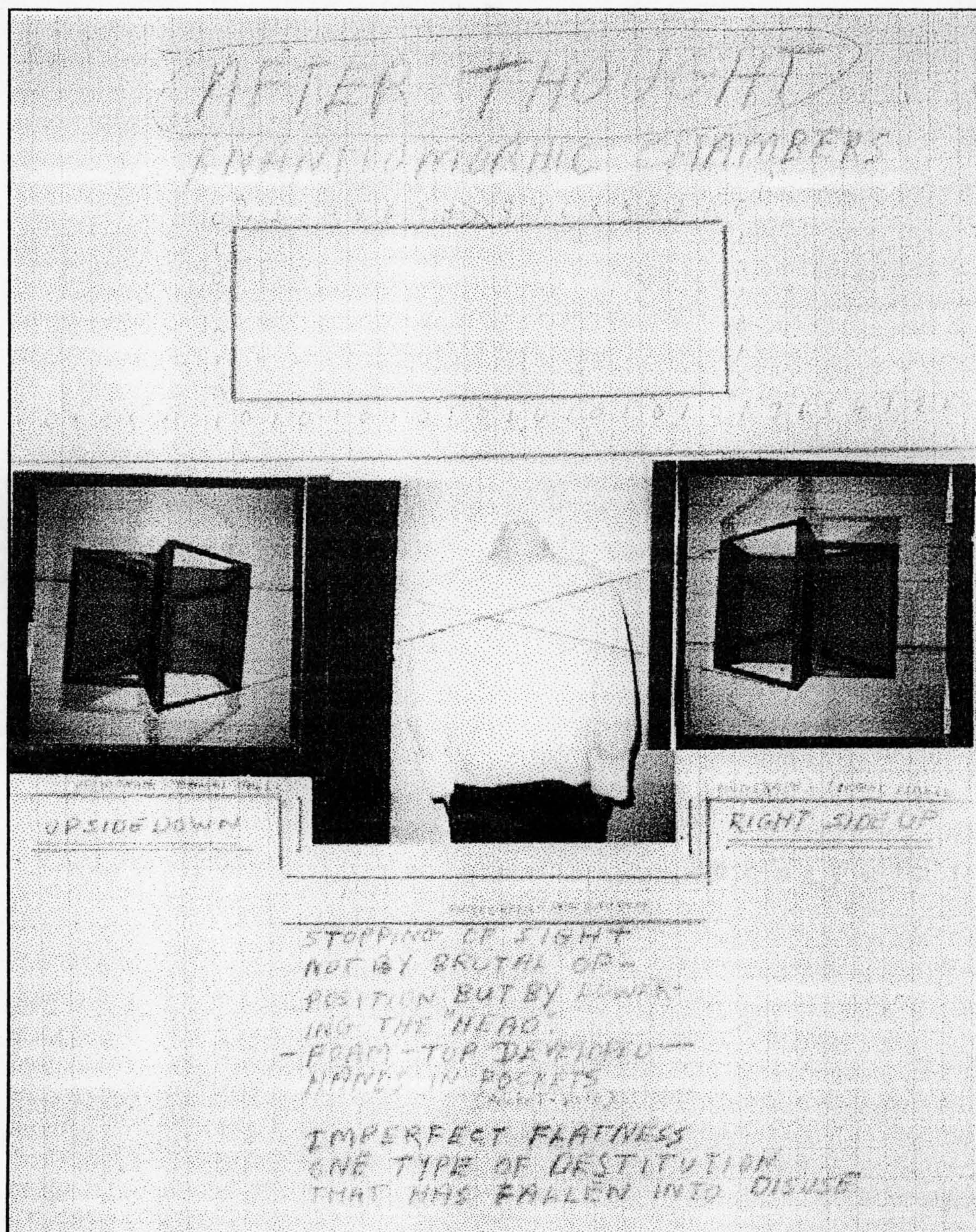


Plate 26. Robert Smithson, *Afterthought Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1965, 28 x 22 cm.
Robert Smithson Estate

Plate 27. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, 1500' long x 15' wide.
Salt Lake, Utah

ALL MISSING PAGES ARE BLANK IN ORIGINAL

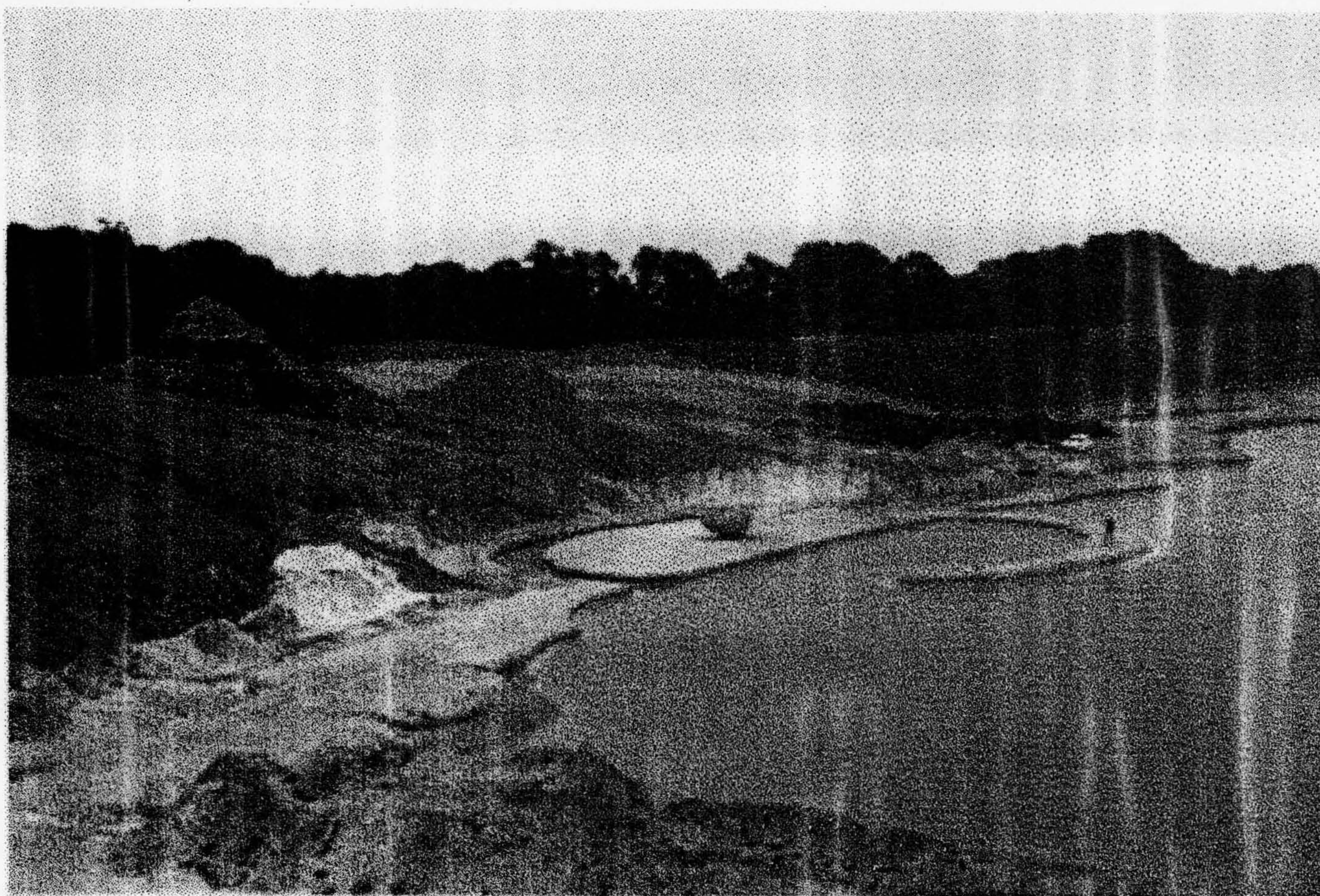


Plate 29. Robert Smithson, *Broken / Circle Spiral Hill*, 1971, canal 140" D, Hill 75' D at base. Emmen, Holland

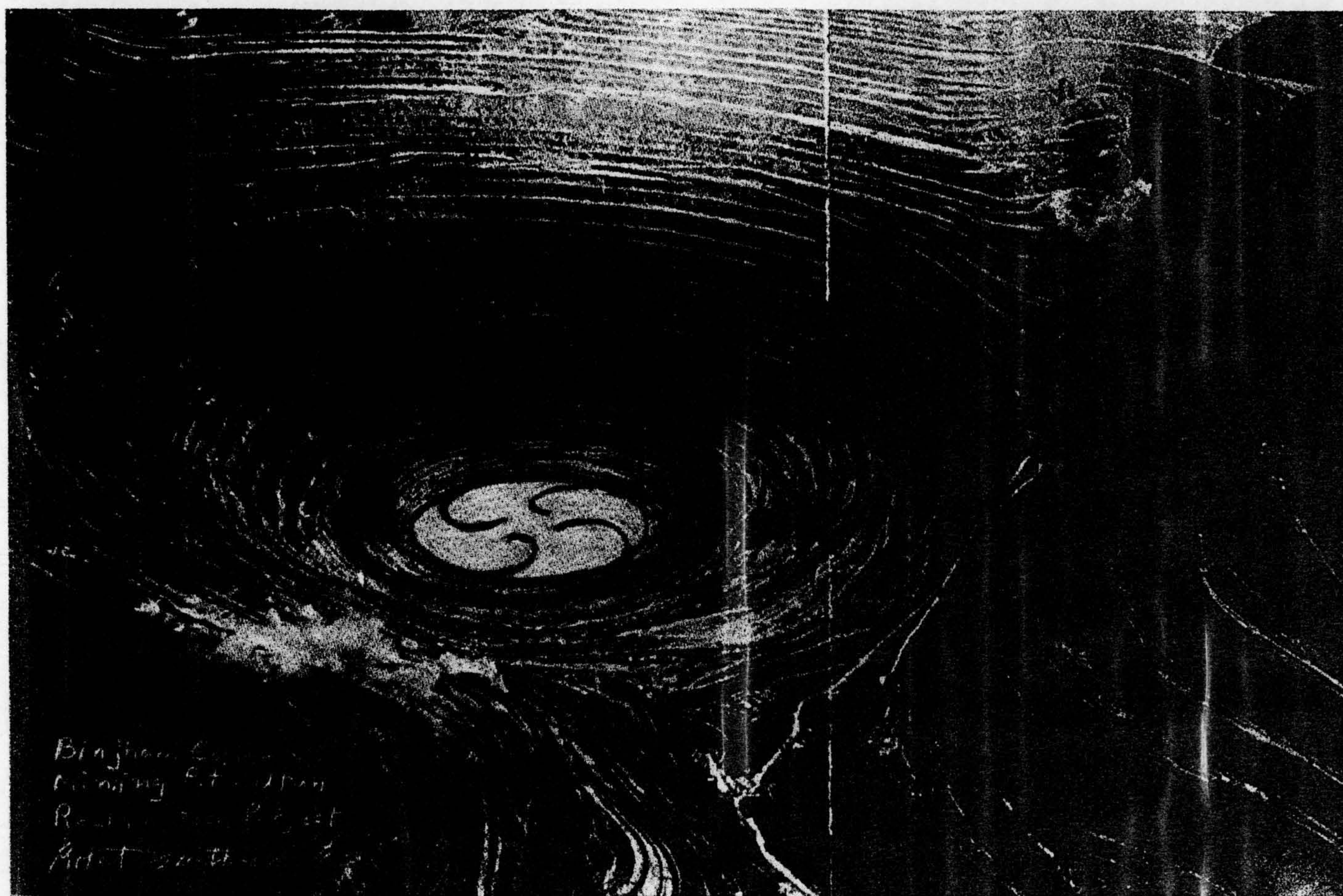


Plate 30. Robert Smithson, *Bingham Copper Mining Pit – Utah Reclamation Project*, 1973, 50.8 x 77.5 cm. Estate of Elmer Johnson