

An interview

ROBERT SMITHSON

Prologue by IRVING SANDLER; *edited* by ALEXANDER NAGEL

Prologue

In the sixties, as was common at the time, I thought a lot about the social usefulness of art, and more specifically, about the potential of works of art in public places. The customary practice was to commission an artist to create a work for an existing building. In most cases, the art served as a kind of cosmetic for the architecture. As I viewed it, there had to be another approach, more imaginative and serious. My solution was to allow artists to choose public locations best suited to their artistic intentions and create works for them. In dealing with the formal problems the sites presented, the artists might consider the people who lived in the neighborhoods. This might generate a new content—and perhaps change the outlook of the inhabitants.

In 1967, I asked Doris Freedman, New York's Commissioner of Parks, if I could curate a show of works in the city. She agreed and we mounted *Sculpture in Environment*, the first show of its kind in New York. We asked twenty-seven artists to choose locations in Manhattan in which to either create new work or situate existing work and had them installed. The show was a critical success. One of the works on view, Tony Rosenthal's large black cube, is still in place across from the Cooper Union and is now an East Village landmark.

I kept wondering what the opinions of artists about public art might be. I had a chance to find out when I taught a graduate seminar at New York University, the subject of which was public art. In collaboration with my students, I devised a questionnaire and sent the class members out to interview artists who had indicated an interest in public art and made work that seemed to lend itself to being installed in public places or had indicated an interest in the issue. One such interview was by Carol Ross with Robert Smithson, published here.

Irving Sandler

Editorial note

The original typescript does not include the list of questions with which the student-interviewer Carol Ross was provided, and instead inserts shorthand references to "Question 5," "Question 6," etc. Thus, the original list

of questions has been provided in Appendix A, and the questions addressed throughout the interview have been introduced into the text in brackets at the appropriate places. Footnotes provide some context as to the original circumstances of the interview, and link statements made by Smithson here to views expressed in his writings before and after.

Orthographic errors in the original typescript have been corrected and at times sentence structure has been altered. The original typescript tends to interpret the flow of speech as long, non-syntactical series of clauses separated by commas. The approach adopted here is to introduce periods after syntactically complete statements. In those places where possible errors of transcription have occurred, the original wording has been maintained and alternative words have been suggested in brackets. Where the original typescript itself indicated some doubts about the transcription with a bracketed question mark, a *[sic]* has been added.

Alexander Nagel

Interview with Robert Smithson—March 20, 1968

The interview began with Mr. Smithson explaining a few of his ideas before approaching the actual questionnaire.

SMITHSON: I do think though that scale is always diminished no matter how large the site, and that happens if you fly over it in an airplane. Immediately the site disappears, it becomes small so that scale loses a lot of its interest to me. I don't think really that scale is an important factor in art. In the project that I was working on, I had planned to put low-level art on the fringes of the airport, where there would be absolutely no public involvement.¹ At most you would see the configurations from the sky. One was a low-level spiral

1. See R. Smithson, "Proposal for Earthworks and Landmarks to be Built on the Fringes of the Fort Worth–Dallas Regional Air Terminal Site" (1966–1967), and "Aerial Art" (orig. pub. in *Studio International*, Feb–Apr 1969), in *Collected Writings*, ed. J. Flam (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 354–355 and 116–118.

that I designed, another was Robert Morris's circular earth mound, and another involved Sol LeWitt's buried cube, which has absolutely no scale, would only be a cube the size of about a foot, and this would be buried somewhere on the outreaches of the airport and would in no way involve any aspect of involvement or scale or anything like that. It would function more on a conceptual level. I think that the preoccupation with public art leads to the problem of time and involvement. To get involved in the work becomes environmental and what I would like to do is avoid that temporal, time aspect. In other words, public scale is always a limited scale, it's like any place you might walk. I mean you could find a ruined building and that would have some kind of temporal aesthetic value, but it wouldn't necessarily be a work of art.²

ROSS: It would seem to me from reading the articles that you are almost more interested in the site itself than the work of art or the people that would see it.

SMITHSON: Yes, I am. In fact, the site for me is abolished. I have a work up now in my show called "Non-site" which involves a site in South Jersey, an airport.³ I've subdivided this site—it's about a mile across—and then contracted it into what I call a Non-site. In other words, the site is abolished through the work of art, so there's no really [reality?] in sites or environments or participation in terms of walking past it or playing in it. It all takes place in your mind's eye, let's say. But the site exists, the site exists in time and the work of art doesn't exist in time.⁴ There's an exclusion of durational, temporal time, which I think art has to do if it's going to be art. Otherwise it gets caught up in the flux of duration and ceases to exist.

ROSS: In other words you're not interested in having it last.

SMITHSON: I am interested in having the work of art lasting; the site itself will pass away, eventually erode and enter into passing time, but the work of art more or less has to exclude any kind of time, any kind of participation. I'm not interested in people walking into it or touching it—the thing that comes out of Happenings. A lot of the new sculpture is involved in the structure

of Happenings, in that it involves participation or involvement the way a Happening would and I think a work of art has to exist apart from time.⁵

ROSS: In that article you said something about building-sites. It led me to believe that you consider a building-site, in process, a work of art.

SMITHSON: Only for a short period of time.

ROSS: Until it's completed?

SMITHSON: It could be if you designate it as such. If you select a site, let's say, and give it a certain relevance, a duration, a photograph of the process, and then make a work of art out of that, that art is durational in that it really doesn't exist.⁶

ROSS: Do you consider that public art?

SMITHSON: Well, I tend to agree with Marcel Duchamp in that the public tends to make everything look indifferent. Art involves a language that doesn't involve participation and this language is not really a matter of playgrounds. That's all really well and good but that's not really what art is involved in.

ROSS: So what do you think happens, say, in this Sculpture in Environment show? They put art outside . . .

SMITHSON: I don't think it works. First of all you get far away enough from New York and you find that it diminishes in scale. If you're on the Staten Island Ferry, you find that New York looks like a little toy log (?) [sic]. If you go up in an airplane, it diminishes. If you get far enough back you find that the world itself begins to lose all its scale, so that you're back to a point. For instance, you could take all the grid lines of the earth and draw them up to the North Pole, South Pole instead of working on a square grid, as many artists do. They simply fill up space. I'm not interested in filling up gallery space, environmental space. Any kind of large space seems to be rather limited, [a] limited type of art, it's art but it's durational art and lasts only for a short period of time.⁷

5. In an undated letter (certainly written in May 1961) to his dealer, George Lester, he reported on the emergence of the Happenings trend: "Witness the new vogue of 'Happenings' sweeping N.Y.C.'s Beatnik realm, where art is swallowed up by action. The Happenings are simply 'The Black Mass' for the retarded [sic], and should be stopped. Sometimes, I wish somebody would free us from freedom." Archives of American Art, Robert Smithson Letters to George Lester, reel 5438, frame 1282.

6. Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in Smithson (see note 1), pp. 112–113: "An artist is enslaved by time only if the time is controlled by someone or something other than himself. The deeper an artist sinks into the time stream the more it becomes *oblivion*; because of this, he must remain close to the temporal surfaces."

7. Smithson, "Aerial Art," in Smithson (see note 1), p. 117: "Aerial art can therefore not only give limits to 'space,' but also the hidden

2. Smithson tested this idea in his slide-show work *Hotel Palenque*, 1969–1972.

3. This is a Non-site, *Pine Barrens, New Jersey*, illustrated in Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" (orig. pub. in *Artforum*, Sept 1968); Smithson (see note 1), p. 105.

4. See Smithson, "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites" (1968), and more generally "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in Smithson (see note 1), pp. 364 and 100–113.

Ross: Have you had any work in public places, like in this show?

SMITHSON: Which show?

Ross: The “Sculpture in Environment” show. Have you had anything exposed like that?

SMITHSON: No, it seems like I would be interested in that, but I really think that scale is probably one of the easiest ways of accomplishing any kind of effect, and I don’t think it’s really that compelling. I’m more interested in the concept. I’m interested in taking a vast magnitude—let’s say we take the grid lines of the earth again, and we compress those. I’m interested in compressing enormous magnitudes into a small area, rather than trying to fill a large area. Once you get beyond the whole idea of the sensate world and get into ideation, you’re dealing with abstract magnitudes that are really so huge and so vast that you’re into an idea of infinity, finite [*sic*] in terms of physical material. So that in a sense I’ve gone through all the temporal or visual possibilities and have [been] thrown back onto my conceptualization and I’ve had to make those concepts work.

Ross: So that if you put a work of art in public, it would almost be putting an idea in public, and the work itself wouldn’t be the most important thing.

SMITHSON: No, the work to me is the most important thing. You arrive at it through the idea, but the work is the most important thing. In other words, let’s say we have a concept of enormous infinite distances, now how do we make this into a work of art? We have to compress it in our minds and then make a representation of this abstract magnitude, but just to put something out in public . . .

Ross: Do you think they could view it as art—or does it matter?

SMITHSON: Oh, I think it matters, otherwise there wouldn’t be much point to it. It just seems limited to me.

Ross: Where would be your most ideal place to show?

SMITHSON: The way I feel now is that I’ve gone through the gallery in that I was interested in installing works of art on the edges of this airport. Now this airport is more or less dropped into a point. In other words this airport becomes a point in my mind; from this point I’ve drawn all kinds of abstract magnitudes which have nothing

dimensions of ‘time’ apart from natural duration—an *artificial time* that can suggest galactic distance here on earth. Its focus on ‘non-visual’ space and time begins to shape an esthetic based on the *airport as an idea*, and not simply as a mode of transportation. This airport is but a dot in the vast infinity of universes, an imperceptible point in a cosmic immensity, a speck in an impenetrable nowhere—aerial art reflects to a degree this vastness.”

to do with sites, so I’m back into the room again, or it really doesn’t matter. I mean you can expand so far into the universe and suddenly it contracts, the scale contracts back to a point, from the global concept to a point. I think this is also in a sense how Buckminster Fuller arrived at his ideas.⁸ There are just too many artists who think in terms of filling up gallery space. I’m not interested in filling anything, I’m interested in contracting something so enormous [so] that it is infinitesimal.

Ross: [Question 6: Do you feel that the kind of art you make lends itself to being placed in a public setting? What do you think is the ideal place for your work? Do you think that certain forms lend themselves better to being integrated within the urban environment than others, i.e., the geometric as against the organic? People may respond to your art by touching, climbing, pushing, playing, marking. How would this affect the kind of work you make or the site you find for it? Are there any works that you would like to make that can only be presented in public places?]

SMITHSON: An interesting area. First of all it depends on the spectator. Most spectators conceive of the world as organic, so anything looks organic to them. Then you have something of a concept of a more crystalline or geometric idea, and then once you have this view this would tend to exclude the idea of organic. The city by its very regular nature is crystalline rather than organic.⁹ But there are people who want to perceive it as organic, so there’s a conflict there. As I said there’s a whole language of art that people . . . you just can’t respond to it any old way, there’s a lot of conscious knowledge that you have to have before you can really deal with it. In other words, there’s a language of art and I think that there are areas of geometry that could be explored. I don’t think artists know anything about geometry—they’re always resorting to biomorphical shapes. That’s a fallacy, I think, because it throws you back into yourself in terms of their organic shapes.¹⁰ Practically the whole history of modernism seems to be full of these kidney and organic writhing shapes. Actually, I think there are very few modern artists that are really interesting; even the cubists

8. These points are very close to those Smithson had developed shortly before in “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art” (orig. pub. in *Arts International*, March 1968), in Smithson (see note 1), pp. 78–94, esp. 93–94.

9. Smithson, “Ultramoderne” (orig. pub. in *Arts Magazine*, Sept–Oct 1967), in Smithson (see note 1), pp. 62–65.

10. Smithson, “A Refutation of Historical Humanism” (1966–1967) and “The Pathetic Fallacy in Esthetics” (1966–1967), in Smithson (see note 1), pp. 336–338.

had a kind of stunted idea of geometry. I think that we have to go outside of modernism to find our coordinates, our language, which is more in the area of geometry.¹¹ I'm interested in art of perspective and the deliberate artifices.¹² I'm not interested in the tradition of naturalism or realism which expressionism comes out of—that to me is a philosophically defunct ideology.¹³ That whole area is too sentimental, a social art, social abstraction, I call it. This interest in public art, like social realism—only instead of having a lot of W.P.A. projects somebody gets the idea that a square's important. He's seen enough squares around so that he can make a square, then he puts it in public and people come and feel it and touch it. It's what I would call social abstraction rather than social realism and it's an inferior kind of art. To me it doesn't make it. Instead of having all those W.P.A. murals we have all these silly abstract vacuous things that are just big, pretty shapes.

ROSS: You sound like you want art to go more toward the science of engineering, and architectural complexities.

SMITHSON: Well, I'd like it to go into the complexities; not so much into that as I would into, well, just a more precise aesthetic in terms of geometry. That area, engineering, doesn't especially interest me, or technology for that matter. I think the whole McLuhan idea tends to organicize technology, cybernetics and all that into a rather boring sensibility. I don't care for that. I do think it would be good if artists could be taken on by corporations the way they're taken on by galleries and just work with corporations like that. That would be a way for them to have a lot of equipment. They could just formulate concepts within that area, not necessarily even make objects.

ROSS: As advisors to the industry?

SMITHSON: Yes, as advisors, as aesthetic advisors. I've been contracted, on the airport.

ROSS: How did you get this type of contract?

SMITHSON: I was on a panel at Yale and I discussed art in the city, similar to this, and this person was in the audience and asked me if I'd be interested. I said I would be, so I created this job for myself and I do think that it

would help in the long run. That's one thing that would supplement the galleries, if it were in terms of practical matters. If all the corporations could take on an artist, not to make art, just to come in and go through the information—the information is vast. In fact that's how I got interested in mapping, through the materials there were in the file of the company, otherwise I wouldn't have gotten into those problems. I think that it can be fruitful for both the corporation and the artist.

ROSS: It would be a great place for artists to learn industrial techniques.

SMITHSON: I think the artist has to assert his art. I wasn't there to compete with the engineers—the engineers know their engineering and it's up to the artist to have a clear idea of aesthetics, not engineering, so he can assert art over engineering technology. That's what's important, not the artist learning what they know how to do but just to come up with fresh concepts that aren't already there. There's absolutely nothing known about this—it's an unknown area. It really doesn't involve the public anymore than an engineer would want to go out and bring in the public and have a Happening in his offices. I think it's just a way to exercise your mind; it's not a fun thing.

ROSS: But could you also envision the artist making art for the corporation?

SMITHSON: Yes, he could. I did. I advised on the shape of the airport, all these things.

ROSS: How long was this project?

SMITHSON: About a year and a half.

ROSS: And did you get into all kinds of angles of this?

SMITHSON: Yes, it just came up. I just developed what came up. They didn't ask me, I didn't have any job, they didn't know what they were going to get. That's what it really has to be; you have to know how to develop ideas.

ROSS: You didn't have any specific commitment so you could pervade the whole situation instead of just one element—because we were talking about artists coming in and doing a piece of artwork for a specific spot in a building and arguing with architects and with people who were telling them exactly what kind of art they wanted. [Question 15: Would you like to see your work integrated with architecture? Under what conditions would you like to work with architects? Do you think that this kind of collaboration is possible today?]

SMITHSON: That's very limited, that goes back to what I was saying before. That's filling up space and I think we have to get a concept of the entire system of the building. It certainly is not an object that you hang other objects on. And that's how I feel, we have to get into an area of conception and perception and avoid that kind

11. Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art," in Smithson (see note 1), esp. pp. 84–85.

12. Smithson, "Pointless Vanishing Points" (1967), in Smithson (see note 1), pp. 358–359.

13. Smithson, "From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema" (1967), in Smithson (see note 1), pp. 349–353. See also my introductory essay above.

of tacking on objects. I did write this thing called “Aerial Art”—it will be reprinted in the catalogue in Holland. There’s a show on now of ten sculptors and it goes into some of the ideas about just what the building is. Buildings are becoming more like systems, systems of thought rather than simply a building space I don’t think you should normally turn on the public.

ROSS: [Question 7: How do you think art in public places might affect the lives of the people who are exposed to it? Might the awareness of a different audience change your work? Would the thought of people rushing past your work without looking at it bother you? Is a busy public place the place to experience art?]

SMITHSON: Yes, that’s really what I’m saying, I don’t think they’ll do anything more than rush past it. I don’t expect them to do anything. In fact, I’d rather have them do that than climb all over it—that to me is fine for a jungle gym, or something like that, but the playground idea of art just doesn’t appeal to me.¹⁴ I do think that people rush past and you don’t necessarily have to see it; it has to be there and artists are really interested in making these things and they don’t have to justify it in terms of a public audience. The important thing is that the artist makes his things and they don’t have to be justified any more than a computer has to be justified. Nobody knows what really goes on in a computer station—they’re there, and that’s the way art should be, it shouldn’t involve great groups of public. I think to go back to that phrase—social abstraction—I have to insist on that. If you get into the social aspect of art it’s probably the worst thing that could happen.

ROSS: You seem not to want to make a big deal over art, like people stopping in Astor Place and looking at that piece.¹⁵

SMITHSON: It’s theatrical. I just don’t care. I mean, I’d rather see that empty island. I know of people who are doing more interesting things than that. That particular piece is transitory, like a stage set, like what I was talking about. It’s durational, it exists for a short period of time. It did exist for a short duration, or is it permanent?

ROSS: That specific one is—it’s been bought for the city, all the others have been removed.

SMITHSON: Well, so you can see it’s like putting up a theater and taking it down. It doesn’t last, it’s wiped out.

14. See Appendix B.

15. Bernard Rosenthal, *Alamo*, installed as part of the Sculpture in Environment show, October 1–31, 1967, and retained in place by the city.

The article I wrote in *Artforum* is an oblique criticism of that in a sense.¹⁶ The things I discuss—the things I did out there, the pumping stations—it’s a kind of anti-monument. You just can’t put things up in front of a stage, or a building becomes a stage backdrop and then you have this object and I think we have to get away [from that]. Scale is of no importance—interesting material and a rather trite idea, putting a lot of flashy materials around.

ROSS: [Question 14: Can the materials you use withstand weather? Would you allow a work to be fabricated by others? . . .]

SMITHSON: Yes, I do that all the time.

ROSS: Do you prefer it?

SMITHSON: I just do it. I design it. It’s all complete in my mind.

ROSS: It’s just blueprints?

SMITHSON: Yes, I do a model and some drawings, take them to my fabricator and they do it. I have to paint it.

ROSS: Do you have good luck with them?

SMITHSON: Yes, well you have to find out what they can do. I’ve worked with this one fabricator.

ROSS: What materials are the pieces you now have showing?

SMITHSON: Well actually there are a lot of materials: fiberglass, molded steel, laminated plastic foam. But I don’t call attention to materials.¹⁷

ROSS: I realized that; they looked almost as if they were mock-ups.

SMITHSON: Unlike Don Judd, I’m not interested in material.

ROSS: Yes, I saw the two shows in the same day and it was very striking.¹⁸

SMITHSON: Well, some artists are interested in material. That to me is kind of a Marxian idea of reductive materialism, like bringing the thing down to material. Like Carl Andre, where just the material is there and nothing else.¹⁹ It excludes any kind of illusion, it’s a non-illusionistic kind of thing. I’m not interested in materialism, like idealism; I think [they] are two dead ideologies. It seems then you have the worst aspects

16. Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (orig. pub. as “The Monuments of Passaic,” *Artforum*, Dec. 1967), in Smithson (see note 1), pp. 68–74.

17. Smithson’s show was at the Virginia Dwan Gallery, 29 W. 57th St., March 2–27, 1968.

18. Donald Judd’s retrospective exhibition was held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, February 27–March 24, 1968.

19. Smithson, “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,” in Smithson (see note 1), esp. p. 84.

of both, people seeing idealism in materialism and materialism in idealism. I reject both.

Ross: Well the materials that you are using—would they withstand weather? [Question 13: Does the fact that your work might be destroyed or vandalized bother you enough not to want to put it in a public place? Would you be willing to consider a work expendable?]

SMITHSON: They would withstand weather but they wouldn't withstand the playing. They wouldn't withstand all the wonderful . . . I noticed Barnett Newman had "In God We Trust" scratched on his. I really don't see that kind of involvement as anything, I don't think it helps.

Ross: Vandalism would bother you enough not to want to put a piece in public?

SMITHSON: Yes, my piece couldn't stand it. They can go outside but only in a spot free from people.

[*Changed the tape here, we were talking about different kinds of sites.*]

SMITHSON: Yes, that's an interesting area. The way I structure most things springs from an axiom that's been used quite a bit. It states that the world is an infinite sphere and its center is everywhere, its circumference is nowhere. So let's take that nowhere aspect, which would be the circumference or the periphery in terms of the city. What do we think of? We think of the suburbs. I think the most interesting artists like to go to that area. Bob Morris wanted this piece in Staten Island, which is sort of a no-man's-land, suburban blight area.²⁰

Ross: Does it please you to think of your work just sitting out there and have no one see it?

SMITHSON: Yes, that appeals to me; I'm not interested in people seeing it. They might know it's there but I don't seek a large audience. I think that makes it into a theatrical situation. To get back to this idea of center and periphery—I just wrote something about that²¹—an idea like: you set your point, let's say the center point in the city and the suburbs is the periphery, the vague terrains, the thing that nobody ever thinks about, and these are interesting. Those always exist as interesting areas. I've had ideas about taking people on tours to these rather meaningless areas, so the more meaningless the area the more I like it. I find that to put something in front of the Seagram Building is so obvious and so trite. If you can expand out into these suburbs you can get into a very strange area. I did take Claes Oldenburg

and Allan Kaprow to Passaic. They were interested in going out there. When we got there of course all the sites had lost their monuments, there was nothing, they were abolished. These artists are involved in temporal things, they're involved in a kind of art that is in duration. I'm not really interested in that. It's an area that everyone has to know about. I think you can find sites—I refer to sites, just going about photographing sites, sites that have a certain look to them, but that again is a limited kind of art, that only lasts a short time. It's not outside of time. I think tours would be interesting.

Ross: The site itself would be the work of art, it wouldn't be to add anything.

SMITHSON: Nothing, no point in adding anything to it. I have thought—I did a model for a big square tar pit, of course nobody will be encouraged to go there, I guess. . . . But this idea of the periphery of the city, if you just take this into a universal cosmic area you can get into great magnitudes. Just take this axiom, it's always changing, Pascal used it—nature is an infinite sphere, the center is everywhere, circumference is nowhere. That also turns the square grid into a kind of circular thing. You have that shown now, all these rectilinear progressions circling around a still point. All my pieces are sort of involved with making the peripheral thing central, making something that's on the edge in the middle. I think this [is] a very basic geometrical idea, an axiom that once you keep thinking about it, it's full of possibilities—and the ancient Greeks have used it in the past. There's nothing original about it; it's a well-known conceptual axiom. It gives you a clear idea of how to order things.

Ross: Do you believe in ordering nature through this site selection?

SMITHSON: For me, I exclude nature. Pascal brought it in. I'm more interested in artifice. I would say artifice is an infinite sphere, its center is everywhere, circumference nowhere. The artificial, what we've been involved in, we've been suffering from an increased naturalism, increased realism, and we've reduced that to a kind of damp materialism and this abstract socialism that we have.²² We've taken a realistic idea and excluded

20. Smithson's fullest statements both on Pascal's dictum on center and circumference and on the suburbs, where "exterior space gives way to the total vacuity of time," are in "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art," in Smithson (see note 1), pp. 78–94.

21. See previous note.

22. Damp materialism: "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in Smithson (see note 1), pp. 108–109: "We have already heard much about 'cool' or 'hot' art, but not much about 'wet' and 'dry' art. . . . The wet mind enjoys 'pools and stains' of paint. 'Paint' itself appears to be a kind of liquefaction. Such wet eyes love to look on melting, dissolving, soaking surfaces that give the illusion at times of tending toward a gaseousness, atomization or fogginess. . . . The artist or critic with a dank brain is bound to end up appreciating anything

figures, excluded the representation and just gotten to bare raw material that brings us to the bare grid, square grid lines, and now we have to figure out where to go from there. When you draw a square grid into a point you get perspective and you're back to perspective. I think we're in for a lot of renewed interest in that perspective because everybody's involved with grids and that leads to perspective. Of all the artists that did paintings I think De Chirico is interesting to me because he's involved with concepts which don't involve organic, biomorphic paint smearing. The whole of surrealism became disgustingly wrapped up in that. That's really in abstract expressionism too, all these guts.²³ But the beauty of the early De Chiricos is that they are more conceptual, involving these things. Most modern art leaves me disinterested, especially Picasso.

Ross: Do you think this new thing of people wanting to put art in public places again will change the concepts of the artist working outside? [Question 10: What do you think of the following statement: "An artist can carry his studio ideas out into the city, selecting sites in which he can best realize them. The autonomy of his art is not sacrificed thereby, although his conceptions will probably alter in the process. If enough artists are enabled to work in public places, a new esthetic tradition may develop, a tradition of modern public art, different from that of studio art. When the imagination opens up in the direction of public art, many different ideas will be tested. Most of them will not survive, but a tradition will be started."]

SMITHSON: Once again I think it's great that [we] have many different places to put art but I don't think the place should determine the art. I'm all for the idea of the non-place, non-site, non-environment. I think art tends towards that; it's abstract. I don't like the idea of the public. It isn't necessary. The artist is the important person and he doesn't need the public. He needs support to do his work and whether or not the public likes it is irrelevant—so that it shouldn't depend on public involvement. The only person that should be involved is the artist, so he can follow out his states of

that suggests saturation, a kind of watery effect, an overall seepage, discharges that submerge perceptions in onrush of dripping observation."

23. Smithson, interview with Alan Cummings (1972), in Smithson (see note 1), p. 283: "CUMMINGS: Why do you think you rejected those things? SMITHSON: I just felt that—they really didn't understand, first of all, anthropomorphism, which had constantly been lurking in Pollock and de Kooning. I always felt that a problem. I always thought it was somehow seething underneath all those masses of paint."

consciousness. Every artist is entitled to that whether or not the public approves or disapproves. I do think that the public tends to compromise because it involves a social thing.

Ross: The public compromises or the artist compromises for them?

SMITHSON: It's liable to work both ways; there are a lot of artists today who want to galvanize social movements and that I think is the worst thing. Whenever the artist gets involved, or any kind of sociological thing, the worst happens, it compromises. The artist has to be in full control. It shouldn't depend on any kind of public. This is like [what] Huntington Hartford used to write about—"The Public Be Damned."²⁴ I think he was arguing for the public and I don't think we should resort back to a silly sentimental idea of W.P.A. projects, only abstract ones this time. I'm very much against that but I see it coming and I see it making art mediocre in terms of abstraction rather than in terms of realist art. I know there's a sensibility that can't see beyond. They see everything in terms of social struggles. The genuine artist is indifferent to that and can't stand any kind of social involvement, any kind of social dependency.

Ross: In the recent *Sculpture in Environment* show the problem that most people found the greatest was the selection of sites, where the work was placed. From what you say, this doesn't mean anything to you, for you feel the site shouldn't be so carefully chosen. What did you feel was most wrong with it?

SMITHSON: The whole concept. It's just like mounting some stage set in front of a building. There's no thought about anything outside the center. It's involved almost totally with calling attention to the structure in terms of an object, so that things begin to look like jewelry attached to a dress. It's just a limited concept; the whole idea of the show is limited. First of all, all these artists are participating in the same idea. They shouldn't have to have a show like this. There should always be the work going on somewhere; maybe you don't necessarily have to put it on exhibit like that.

Ross: What did you think of Claes Oldenburg's solution?²⁵

SMITHSON: I thought that it was one of the better solutions. I'm interested in that kind of idea myself.

24. H. Hartford, "The Public Be Damned," *The American Mercury* (March 1955): 35–42.

25. Oldenburg's *Placid Civic Monument* is described as follows in the *Sculpture in Environment* catalogue: "108 cubic feet of Central Park surface excavated and reinserted northwest of Cleopatra's Needle and behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art."

ROSS: Non-site.

SMITHSON: Yes, it's an abolition of a place. Actually sometime I'd like to write something called "The Abolished Site"—so that you're taken more into your mind and you're not involved with taking up spaces with unnecessary objects. I'm not interested in any kind of object, except more of a non-objective thing. Art always tends toward that, like in Malevich, it tends toward the non-objective world where it's all concept. It's just an aspect of consciousness and it's not simply making things for a better society. I think Claes's thing is a criticism of the whole show. It's also a criticism of what it means to exist sometimes. It's not involved in a kind of escapist thing—cheerful art's going to save us. I think art does anything but that, it just shows us really where we are. It takes the ground out from under you, if it's any good. It doesn't kid you into the fact that we're the center of the universe.

ROSS: We talked in class about art giving neighborhoods identity.

SMITHSON: I think that can lead to . . . One school of thought says that our main problem is that we are searching for identity, it's a school of philosophy in France called the structuralists. They see no difference between the cannibals and the civilized man. They see that self is really the cause of all sickness, and neurosis, and problems, so that [in] giving identity to a place we're actually causing more problems because we're bringing in an aspect of a will to self. I'm more interested in the loss of self, once again the empty, the nullity. You can be aware of this; it's something more total. I don't know, that's to me another silly socialist idea like the W.P.A. giving identity to a post office. That kind of identity I can do without. I prefer an absolutely vapid empty post office to one with all these people and attitudes of soul-search, striving, progress, looking toward a better tomorrow. I think that's the problem. There's nothing you can put in a neighborhood to give it identity. It already has an identity—no identity. That's really the kind of world we live in anyway. The system always tends toward a lower state of complexity it seems to me. It goes from the least probable to the most probable so that everything's flattened out. They've really achieved that. I see no point in putting a Calder in Harlem. Actually the riots are kind of interesting. They just kind of abolish the sites. In a sense it's a great poetic act. Nero burning down Rome—that's a way to get rid of a certain kind of social situation and I don't see any point in preserving all the ideologies that completely fail and I don't see why we should add to it.

ROSS: What would you like to do with Harlem after they destroy it?

SMITHSON: Well, I don't know.

ROSS: Would you like to make a site out of it?

SMITHSON: It would all be there, they will have accomplished something. That's the identity—what more could you want? It's really proving that less is more. If you go up there with some big organic shape and stick it up somewhere, it's completely . . . Actually some of the most interesting things are knocked down buildings, just the basements, holes in the ground. So, they can do that quite easily and at the same time I think to build off the old ideologies is just a drag. I don't see any hope for politics; that's a drag.

ROSS: [Question 17: What economic problems does working on a large scale present? Have you any ideas about how they may be solved? If you had unlimited means, how large would you like to work?]

SMITHSON: Well, that's what I was saying about corporations. Corporations should support artists and not even expect to get anything back. The artist should just demand that; there's enough money. It's just that there are certain horrible types that are controlling the situation and they want to hang onto their control. They'll continue supporting the old idea of art. You know, if you wait around a few years, we'll decide, we'll confer the value and it's always a social value. It has to go to the artist where it doesn't matter what it is. I do think when you get into mapping, here you have a good example of boring the site down to a small work of art. I'd like to see more interest in the abstract art of mapping which is making artificial sites in your head and then translating them into art. This art should exclude everything from objects to sites. It should get to that point so that it's no longer filling up space. We don't want to just fill up space; we want an infinite concept that we contract—so that we can compress space into the smallest area possible. The greatest magnitudes into the smallest area is more interesting to me, rather than filling up something.

ROSS: The actual physical work, the results of your ideas—have you done any in monumental size?

SMITHSON: Well monuments, the whole idea of a monument is something that could be investigated. The most interesting work today tends to be anti-monumental in that it's not involved with the proclamation of personalities or famous people. It doesn't assert any kind of selfhood. It's involved with an abolition of the self. The articles that I've written tend to be somewhat anti-monumental in that sense. I do think that monuments involve time, the temporal monument would be a monument that you would select, you would go out into the city and select something that would not last too long. The a-temporal monument would take you

into the area of mathematics and geometry. You really wouldn't be involved with anything that would resemble a traditional monument. We're more involved with forgetting than with remembering in some of our new works, and I do think a lot of artists are interested in time or the absence of time. You can only get out of time by recognizing the time of the world, which is durational and pretty much organic; you have to get out of that into a timeless state. Artists like Ad Reinhardt have indicated that kind of sense of timelessness; also his slides point that out. If you've ever seen his slides, he just shows all these buildings from every country and they all look alike and they all just kind of transcend any idea of originality. Once you're into real geometry you find that there are limits and you just work within these limits. Everything is rather conventional, it's not radical, and I think that's about it.

Appendix A

Questions provided to interviewees approached in the context of Irving Sandler's 1968 seminar on public art.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to explore the possibilities of a new public art.

1. Do you often work large? What is the value of size to you? Do you conceive of a large work differently from a small one?
2. Has your movement into large size been affected by the sight of abstract expressionist paintings, say those of Pollock, Nauman, Rothko, Still?
3. While we're on abstract expressionism, how have you extended or reacted against their ideas?
4. What exhibition problems does working on a large scale present? Have you any ideas about how they may be solved?
5. What is your attitude toward exhibiting your large works in public places? Have you done so? Would you really prefer to show them in a gallery or museum if they had spaces large enough? Do you think museums insulate the larger public from art or are the ideal places for it? Would you like to make works for specific public places? Would you prefer to make a work in the studio and after it is completed find a public place to put it in, or to work in a public place or with a particular place in mind? How would you take into account the formal problems that a public site presents? What did you think about the recent Sculpture in Environment show?
6. Do you feel that the kind of art you make lends itself to being placed in a public setting? What do you think is the ideal place for your work? Do you think that certain forms lend themselves better to being integrated within the urban environment than others, i.e., the geometric as against the organic? People may respond to your art by touching, climbing, pushing, playing, marking. How would this affect the kind of work you make or the site you find for it? Are there any works that you would like to make that can only be presented in public places?
7. How do you think art in public places might affect the lives of the people who are exposed to it? Might the awareness of a different audience change your work? Would the thought of people rushing past your work without looking at it bother you? Is a busy public place the place to experience art?
8. What is your opinion of the following statement: "Placing works in public settings may generate a new content. That is: When artists begin to consider the cultural, social, political, and economic conditions of the environment in which they will work, these conditions may shape the meanings that the artists desire to express and may suggest new forms."
9. Are you interested in getting your work seen by a larger public than that which goes to galleries and museums? Do you imagine that this potential audience is indifferent, hostile, or friendly to art? Do you imagine that your work would be understood and appreciated by large numbers of people? Have you had any indications of this? Do you care? If you don't care, why are you interested in placing your works in public places? Do you believe that the values embodied in your work are in sympathy with or in opposition to the values of society at large?
10. What do you think of the following statement: "An artist can carry his studio ideas out into the city, selecting sites in which he can best realize them. The autonomy of his art is not sacrificed thereby, although his conceptions will probably alter in the process. If enough artists are enabled to work in public places, a new esthetic tradition may develop, a tradition of modern public art, different from that of studio art. When the imagination opens up in the direction of public art, many different ideas will be tested. Most of them will not survive, but a tradition will be started."

11. Must the development of a public art tradition be trial and error and entail numerous failures? The alternative would be an art based on ideologies, like the public art of the 1930s which attempted to communicate dogmas: Marxian, Regionalist, Neo-Plasticist, Constructivist, Bauhaus. Do you think an art based on ideologies is credible today?
12. To be more specific, what did you learn from the "Art in Environment" show, that is, mistakes that you will not allow the next time you put a work in a public setting?
13. Does the fact that your work might be destroyed or vandalized bother you enough not to want to put it in a public place? Would you be willing to consider a work expendable?
14. Can the materials you use withstand weather? Would you allow a work of your design to be fabricated by others—in material that can withstand the elements? What is your attitude toward giving work out to be fabricated?
15. Would you like to see your work integrated with architecture? Under what conditions would you like to work with architects? Do you think that this kind of collaboration is possible today?
16. Can you conceive of yourself working under the direction of an architect or city planner? Do you believe that patrons, both public and private, will try to influence the kind of work you might make for public settings? How would you react? What kind of organization would you like to mediate between artists and public, that is, who would make the decisions, i.e., the selection of artists? For example, should the committee include artists, curators, critics, public officials? How should they be chosen?
17. What economic problems does working on a large scale present? Have you any ideas about how they may be solved? If you had unlimited means, how large would you like to work?
18. Do you believe that art placed in the city can help renew the city?

1. Does your work relate to a participatory physical contact with the spectator, rather than a purely visual one?

No.

2. Do you willingly, and to what extent, provide various options in arrangement and usage of the work by the spectator?

There is a distance between the site and the Non-Site [sic]. This distance is established by where the Non-site is installed. If a spectator in Milwaukee wants to "participate," he will have to travel to the original site in New Jersey. (A map is provided for such an occasion.) The "option" is what could be called "anti-travel."

Appendix B

Questionnaire distributed by the Milwaukee Art Museum to participating artists in preparation for its exhibition *Options*, June 21–Aug 18, 1968, with handwritten answers (shown below in italics) by Smithson.

Archives of American Art, Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers, microfilm 3835, frame 528.