

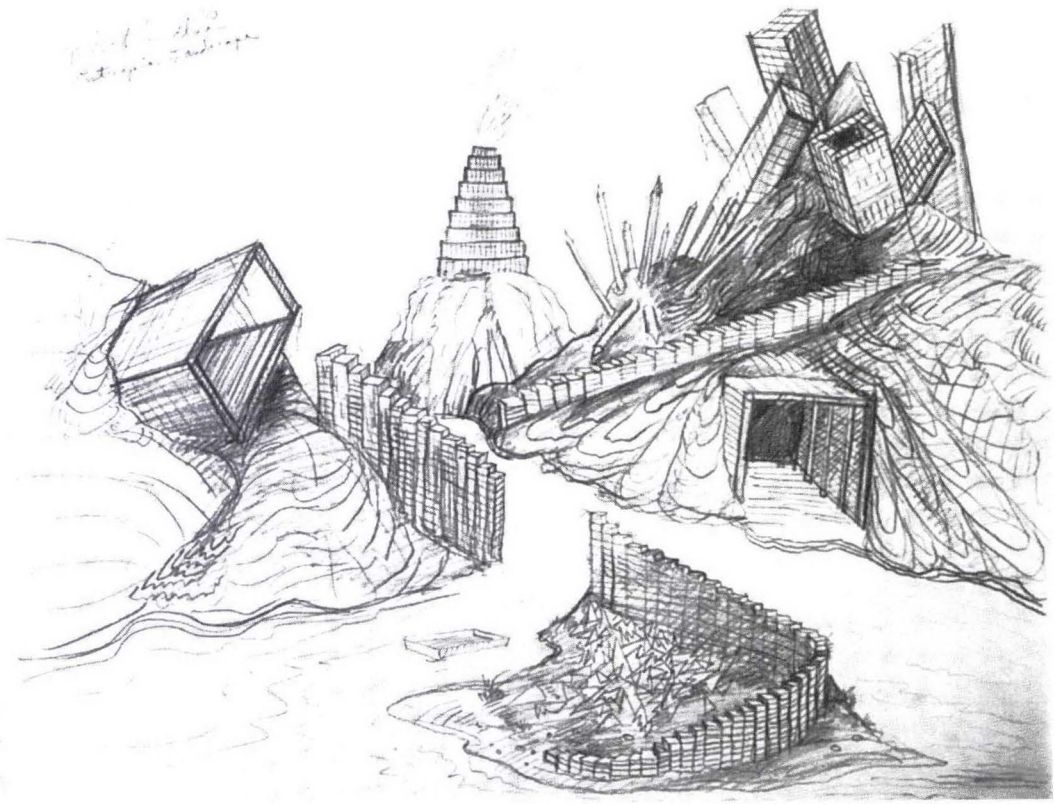
EARTHWARDS



Robert Smithson and Art after Babel

Gary Shapiro

Earthwards



Robert Smithson, *Entropic Landscape*, 1970, pencil on paper, 19" x 24". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

EARTHWARDS

Robert Smithson and Art after Babel

Gary Shapiro

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For Barbara Claire Freeman

Contents

	Plates	<i>ix</i>
	Acknowledgments	<i>xiii</i>
	Introduction	<i>1</i>
	Prologue: The Cinema of the Exploding Sun	<i>5</i>
1	Time and Its Surfaces: Postperiodization	<i>21</i>
2	Uncanny Materiality: Decentering Art and Vision	<i>59</i>
3	Rifts: Beyond the Garden to the Sites of Time	<i>113</i>
4	Printed Matter: A Heap of Language	<i>153</i>
5	Spiraling Signatures: <i>Et in Utah Ego</i>	<i>191</i>
	Sources and Criticism	<i>235</i>
	Notes	<i>241</i>
	Index	<i>261</i>

Plates

1. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970 6
2. Mark Tansey, *Purity Test*, 1982 9
3. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty Film Stills Photo Documentation*, 1970 10
4. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty Film Stills Photo Documentation*, 1970 11
5. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty Film Stills Photo Documentation*, 1970 12
6. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970 16
7. Robert Smithson, *Ultramoderne* (Century Apartment Building, New York City), 1967 30
8. Robert Smithson, *Ultramoderne* (Century Apartment Building, New York City), 1967 31
9. Robert Smithson, *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970 40
10. Robert Smithson, *The Museum of the Void*, c. 1967 53
11. Robert Smithson, *Untitled*, 1963–1964 63

12. Robert Smithson, *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1965 66
13. Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey*, 1968 70
14. Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey*, 1968 71
15. Robert Smithson, *Mono Lake Nonsite*, 1968 75
16. Robert Smithson, *Untitled (Pink Linoleum Center)*, 1964 78
17. Robert Smithson, *Untitled (Second Stage Injector)*, 1963 79
18. Robert Smithson, *Forking Island*, 1971 87
19. Robert Smithson, *Fifth Mirror Displacement*, 1969 99
20. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Hill*, 1971 108
21. Robert Smithson, *Broken Circle*, 1971 109
22. Robert Smithson, *Alogon I*, 1966 116
23. Robert Smithson, *Alogon I*, 1966 117
24. Robert Smithson, *A Heap of Language*, 1966 158
25. Robert Smithson, about one-third of *Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction*, c. 1972 162
26. Robert Smithson, first page of "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," 1966 167
27. Robert Smithson, *Ziggurat Mirror*, 1966 181
28. Ad Reinhardt, *A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala*, 1955 183
29. Robert Smithson, *A Surd View for an Afternoon*, 1970 188
30. Nicolas Poussin, *Arcadian Shepherds*, 1630 216
31. Nicolas Poussin, *Arcadian Shepherds*, 1636 217
32. Pieter Brueghel, *The Tower of Babel*, 1563 222
33. Robert Smithson, *Gyrostasis*, 1968 224
34. Robert Smithson, *Shift*, 1967 225

-
35. Robert Smithson, *Aerial Map: Proposal for Dallas–Fort Worth Regional Airport*, 1967 227
 36. Robert Smithson, *Spirals*, 1971 229
 37. Robert Smithson, *Pierced Spiral*, 1971 230
 38. Robert Smithson, *Pierced Spiral*, c. 1971 231

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Introduction

Why should there be a critical, theoretical, even philosophical essay on Robert Rauschenberg now, twenty years after his accidental death? Rauschenberg (1925–1997) is acknowledged as a major figure of the American and global avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s; exhibitions of his work continue to be mounted and new publications discuss various aspects of his art. The year 1997, for example, saw a comprehensive European show of his work, accompanied by a lavish catalogue and translations of some of his writings into Spanish; in this same year the Los Angeles County Museum of Art mounted an exhibition devoted to Rauschenberg and photography, with an important catalogue and essays. The artist would perhaps have been both gratified by and suspicious of this afterlife of his work. He was concerned to question the presuppositions and limits of museums, galleries, and other traditional frames for art by taking his work into the isolation of the Great Salt Lake or the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, yet he never imagined that these frames could be shattered altogether, developing

instead his concept of a dialectic between the site (the source of material or the place of a physical alteration of the land) and the nonsite (its parallel or representation in the gallery). Later exhibitions of his work, while fully informative *about* this aspect of his art, are not informed *by* it, as were the ones he organized himself; they continue to “take place” within the traditional structures that Smithson sought to unsettle. And the avalanche of critical writings about his work would appear to be an instance of that “printed matter” that he, like Borges in his “Library of Babel,” found to be constitutive of the universe. Yet that writing and commentary, because of the very limits of its genre, cannot be adventurous in the way that Smithson’s was, combining as it did theories of art, installations, or descriptions of his work (the *Spiral Jetty* or the *Mirror Displacements* in the Yucatan) with travelogue, fantasy, and his own photography (the present work will be no exception to this law of genre).

Despite the exhibitions and the commentaries, Smithson has still to be recognized, as he might be described in his own terms, as one of the *sites* where some of the most significant lines of twentieth-century art and thought intersect with one another. He is, we might say, a major fault line in the shifting of the ground under our feet that arises from the deflation of modernist visions of social and artistic progress, from the suspicion that the center is destined to be caught up in a constant circuit of displacements, from acknowledging that the history of art as we know it is but a minor blip in our dealings with the earth (so that the prehistoric has a growing resonance for the contemporary), and from the insight that language, too, has an ineluctable materiality that ought not to be idealized. In one of the plays on words in which he delighted, plays enabled by the givenness of language itself, Smithson described the artist as a “site-seer.” This does not mean that the artistic personality is, as Plato said, a lover of mere sights and sounds, but that he or she is a visionary, a seer, whose vocation is to see beyond accustomed limits, although Smithson’s seer

does not claim a totalizing vision that marks out new maps and boundaries. Since the art world does typically tend toward presenting its resources as a series of enjoyable sights and sounds, the force of the seer's work is often attenuated. Smithson was prepared to resist that sort of packaging because he managed to avoid many of the restraints to which the artist is usually subject. His early fascination with geology and prehistory provided a counterweight to the assumption that the trajectory and canon of Western art, as established in the textbooks and museums, was the very paradigm of history's process and meaning. As an autodidact, whose formal education stopped with high school, he escaped some of the modernist dogmas that the universities would have attempted to instill in him. As a voracious and eclectic reader, he absorbed writers like Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault, years before they began to have a noticeable impact on the American intellectual and artistic scene, and he developed his own critique of structuralism, which he called "destructuration," that both parallels and gives a distinctively American accent to what has come to be known as deconstruction; Jacques Derrida's *aperçu* that "America is deconstruction" is matched by Smithson's meditations on urban sprawl and the uncanniness of the movie theater, as well as by his works and theories.

To explore the site and the site-seer that bear Smithson's name, I have followed neither the path of biography nor of art history. There is no comprehensive biography of the artist yet, and this is appropriate; for any such attempt to tell the story of his life would have to be informed by a sense of the meaning of his work, with which we are still coming to terms. And the approaches that have been typical in the history of art, valuable as they are for matters of chronology, influence, and iconology, would have to confront Smithson's serious critique and interrogation of art history itself. Reviewing *The Writings of Robert Smithson* when they appeared in 1979, Craig Owens

wrote that “the failure of contemporary theory, which too often operates in a vacuum, to see its own realization in Smithson’s practice is, and remains a scandal.”¹ Although Smithson is a major force in the writings of Owens and Rosalind Krauss, and although there have been important and illuminating essays on his work by other critics, there has been no attempt beyond the confines of the article or brief essay to articulate the theory in his work and the work that he does with theory. Owens might have written such a book if he had lived; the title of this one is meant in part to evoke both the name and the sense of “Earthwords,” his review which I have just cited. It should also, of course, suggest the genre of earthworks, with which Smithson’s name is so closely associated, and beyond that it should indicate a certain movement toward the earth, not exclusively in the sense of a biographical destiny, but as an approach, perhaps inevitably asymptotic, to the incalculable and ungovernable, to that place where, in Smithson’s words, “the prehistoric meets the posthistoric.” That this movement should be a downward one, an abandonment of the privileges of sculptural or architectural erection, a fall that has something to do with the legend (that which we must read) of that first great tower embodying the fantasy of permanence and of a transparent language, is the burden of this book’s subtitle, and an index of Smithson’s vision of history and entropy. Because of the scope of that vision, we ought to think of him not merely as an artist, but as one of the few American writers and thinkers of this quickly disappearing century who dealt in his own way with the issues of time, disorder, and tradition that also possessed figures such as Henry Adams, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams.

Prologue: The Cinema of the Exploding Sun

It is strange, yet also appropriate, to begin this book by describing a film that only a few readers will have seen, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970). But difficulty of access, in one form or another, is a major theme of much of the work of Smithson and others who pioneered art in the land or earthworks in the late 1960s and in the 1970s. Smithson's best-known work, the rock spiral called the *Spiral Jetty* (plate 1), is in many ways difficult to locate. The jetty spirals out fifteen hundred feet into the Great Salt Lake, and the site can be reached only by a series of dirt roads with the guidance of a detailed map. Should you persist in attempting to visit this desolate site of the art world, you will be rewarded by the discovery that the jetty is underwater, and like the overwhelming number of those who have concerned themselves with it since it was built in 1970, you will have to be contented with representations and reproductions of the work in the form of photographs, film, or words. This sense of distance is at work in the last shot of Smithson's film, which shows the



1. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, Great Salt Lake, Utah, April 1970.
Photograph Gianfranco Gorgoni. Courtesy John Weber Gallery.

editing room for the film itself; on the wall is a large photograph of the *Spiral Jetty* in Utah, emphasizing the fact that the work becomes available to us only through media. Nevertheless, there is much to be said for envisioning the work in its site, under the blazing Utah sun and amidst the surprising red water of the lake (a color caused by the local algae). And who knows, perhaps one day (certainly if you wait long enough) the waters will recede and the work will be visible once more.

There is, however, another sense in which the *Spiral Jetty* is difficult to locate. For there are three things to which Smithson gave that name: the rock structure whose construction he arranged (which we have just been discussing and which we can now refer to as the spiral); a film that he made while the spiral was being built; and an essay (first published in 1972), a text that discusses both the spiral and the film in a language ranging through mythopoetic, art historical, and geological modes. One usual observation that has been made about the genre of earthworks, which Smithson is said to have helped to pioneer, is that the works depend heavily on documentation of various sorts (maps, photographs, descriptive materials, films, and so on). I want to suggest, as do the multiple referents of the title *Spiral Jetty*, that there is no primary, authentic object (the spiral) to which the film and the essay are merely ancillary. One could say either that there are three distinguishable but interrelated works that bear that name or that there is one work existing simultaneously in a number of modes. In any case, the nature of genre and orders of priority among the arts are put into question, as are some of the distinctions to be made and the relations that are said to be enjoyed between art and philosophy or science.

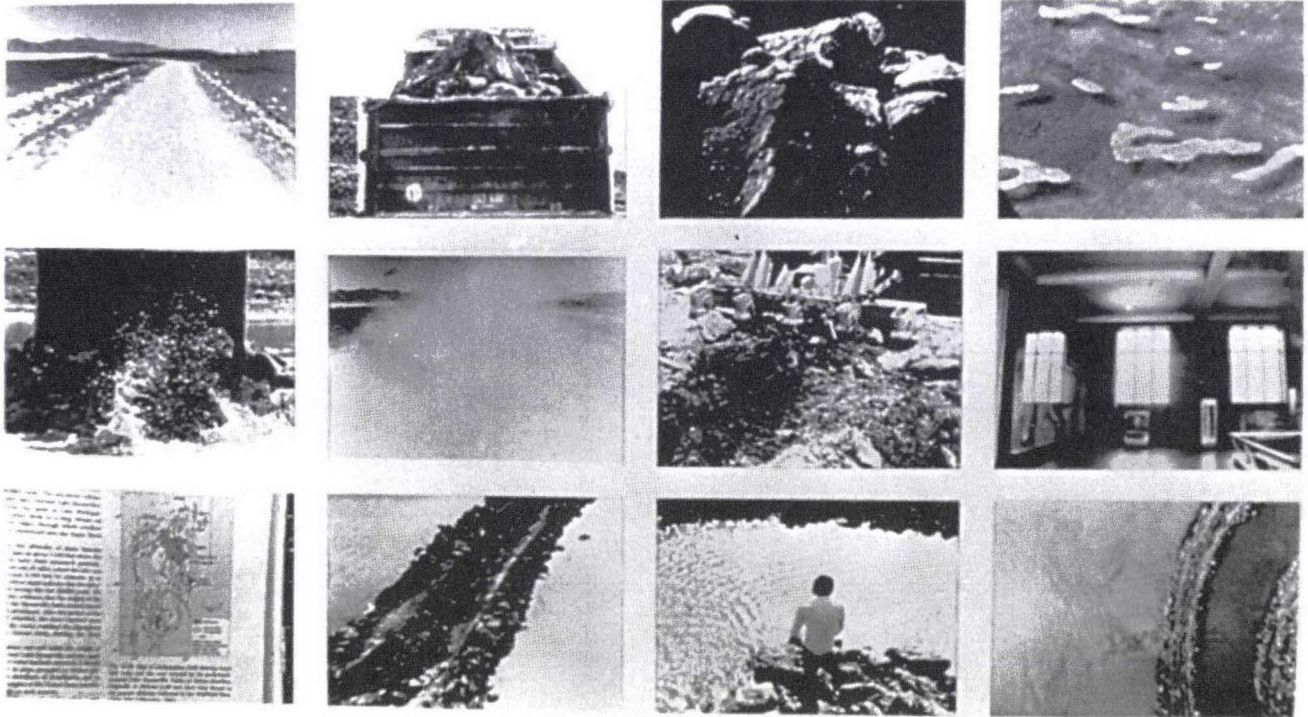
There is no pure *Spiral Jetty*, no work uncontaminated by language or other supposedly nonsculptural media. As Marjorie Perloff suggests in her essay "The Demise of 'and,'" Smithson's project is one of a number that render

problematic the traditional discourse of “art *and* literature,” “art *and* philosophy,” “sculpture *and* film.”¹ And this is because they do not merely combine genres, forms, discourses, and intellectual practices, but because they transgress and question conventional distinctions. Surely the title of Mark Tansey’s *Purity Test*, another refraction of the spiral (and, I would argue, of the essay and the film) is highly ironic (plate 2). This is not because Smithson was aiming at a pure art, free from the constraints of the New York art world, but rather because everything about this image is decidedly impure: the representational character of the painting, which violates the modernist imperative of exploring the flatness of the picture plane, the anachronism of these Native Americans encountering the spiral that was built in 1970, and the blatant depiction of these spectators in costume and poses borrowed from the now antiquated style of the painters of an illusory heroic American past.² As Smithson writes in the essay, “In the Spiral Jetty the surd takes over and leads one into a world that cannot be expressed by number or rationality. Ambiguities are admitted rather than rejected, contradictions are increased rather than decreased—the *alogos* undermines the *logos*. Purity is put in jeopardy” (*Writings*, 113).³ In a major essay of 1967, Michael Fried had argued that art which failed to observe the limitations of its medium necessarily fell into the condition of “theater,” stepping outside the virtual or imaginary space separating it from its audience and eliminating the distance essential to aesthetic contemplation (later we will want to look more closely at Smithson’s response to Fried).⁴ In Fried’s sense, Smithson’s work is unabashedly impure and theatrical, and that is surely one of its strengths.

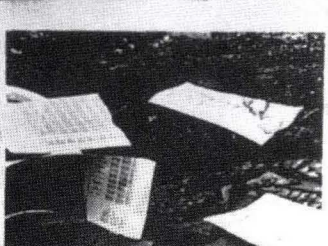
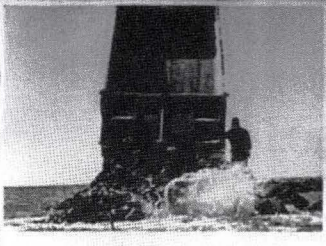
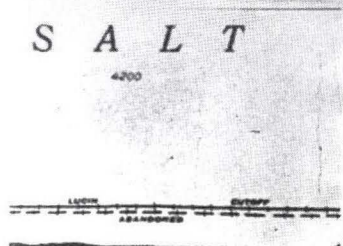
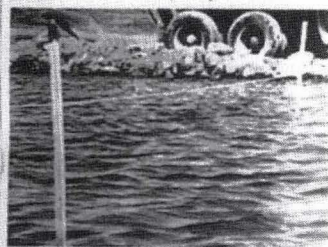
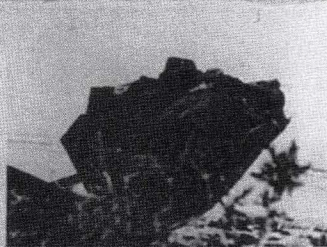
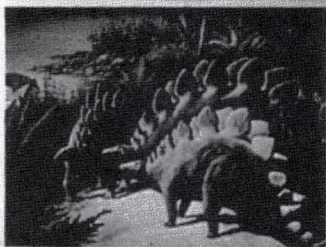
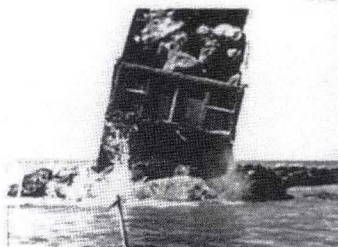
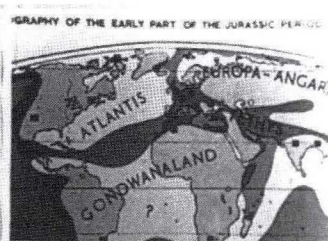
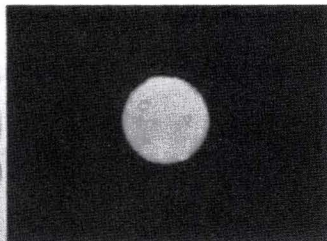
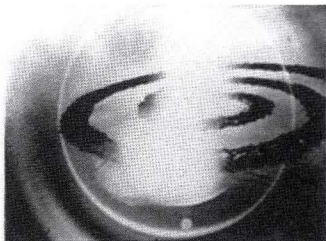
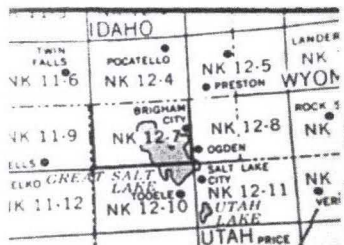
As one way of beginning to map these impurities, let us consider the film of about half an hour that encroaches on and supplements both the essay and the spiral (or, speaking generically, both text and sculpture) (plates 3, 4, and 5). The first image that we see after the title and the artist’s name is that of the



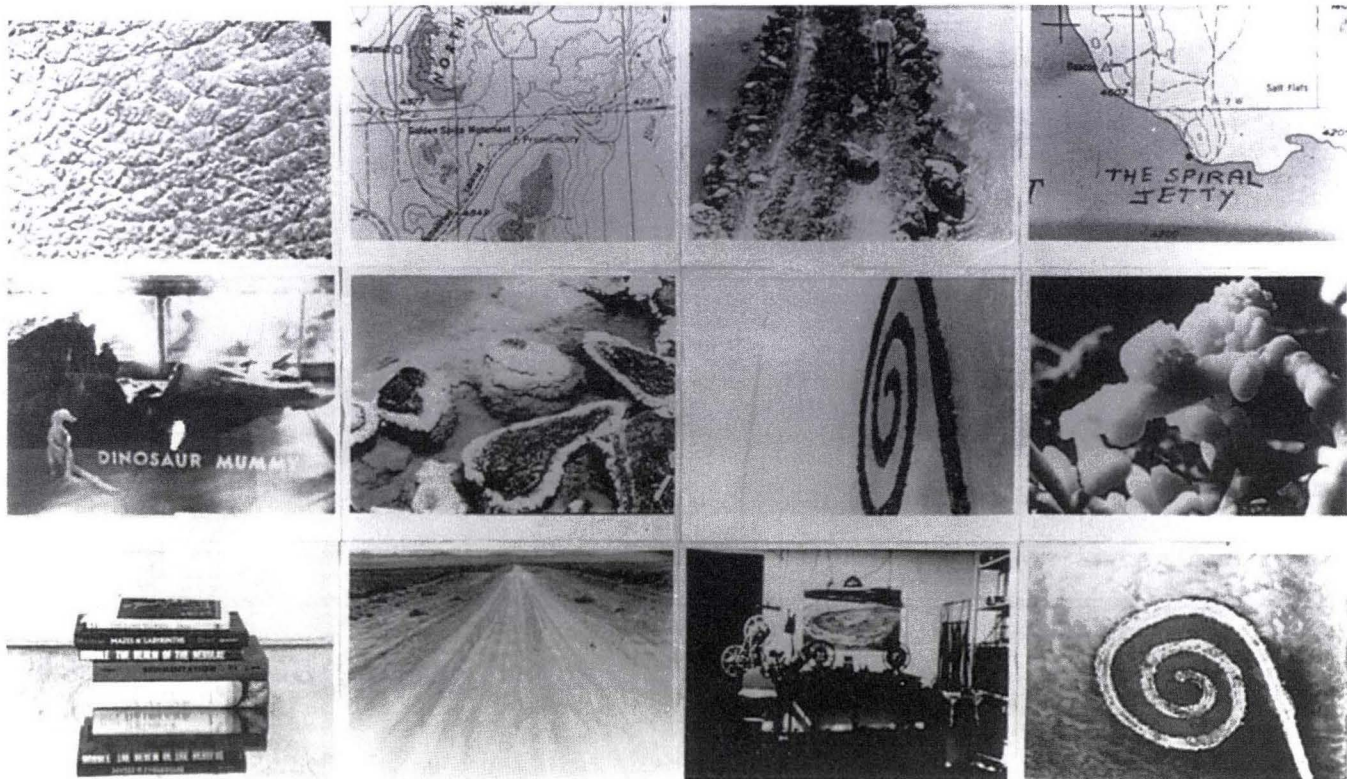
2. Mark Tansey, *Purity Test*, 1982, oil on canvas, 72" x 96".
Copyright © 1982 by Mark Tansey. Collection Chase Manhattan
Bank, N.A. Courtesy Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.



3. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty Film Stills Photo Documentation*, 1970, panel one, photo collage documentation, 25 1/4" x 43 1/2".
Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.



4. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty Film Stills Photo Documentation*, 1970, panel two, photo collage documentation, 25 1/4" x 43 1/2".
Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.



5. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty Film Stills Photo Documentation*, 1970, panel three, photo collage documentation, 25¼" × 43½".
 Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

sun, a sequence of telescopic photography in which this distant source of light fills most of the screen and appears against a black background that we usually see only at night when the sun is absent. But the sun that centers our days is further defamiliarized because we see explosions on its surface that are normally invisible to the unassisted eye. The sun here is no longer a simple, continuous body but one marked by disruptions and accidents; it is not the eternal divinity of Aristotle but the sun of Heraclitus, which is “new each day.”⁵ Placing us immediately in a cosmic setting, the film greets the overwhelming power of the sun in the manner of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra or of Georges Bataille; and the light and fiery element over which the sun presides will also frame our experience of the spiral, what Smithson describes in his essay as a “flaming chromosphere” (*Writings*, 113). Toward the end of the film we hear a clinical description of the effects of sunstroke, including loss of memory and the inability to concentrate. At that point, after half an hour of blaze and glare, we might well wonder whether we have been subjected to a similar form of disorientation, because by then, deprived of our accustomed sense of time and narrative (memory), we have lost that ability to clearly focus from a center that is necessary for concentration.

The exploding sun establishes a cosmic context for the film that immediately unfolds into a sequence of episodes that has the effect of juxtaposing a variety of temporalities. If the sun is the grand measure of earthly time, it also allows for a number of temporal variations. We see the first of a series of shots low to the ground, apparently taken from a vehicle approaching the site of the jetty. Shots like these are interspersed throughout the film, sometimes taken from the rear of the truck so that we see the great clouds of dust raised on the dirt road. These moments are extremely monotonous and have the effect of making us concentrate on the real time of travel; despite the fact that we, as viewers, are arriving at the site by way of the film, we still share some of the

sense of actual duration, in the sun and the dust, that is involved in ground travel (the dust is also a reminder of the inescapable residue left by all processes, of the entropic tendency toward disorder). The minimalist artists of the 1960s also introduced real time into the gallery by erecting structures that demand to be circumnavigated rather than contemplated by a spectator who can imagine herself in a virtual space and time of a painting. Later we will see earth-moving machinery slowly and ponderously dumping rocks into the lake to build up the jetty. The ticking of a clock reminds us of mechanical, regular, chronological time, a time that could be filled with anything. A geiger counter measures local radiation, and so the half-life of the elements, another form of entropy. Geological and paleontological scales of time are also put into play. Pages from a geology text flutter down to an earth that is cracked and fissured, as we hear Smithsonian reading in an expressionless voice, "The earth's history seems at times like a story recorded in a book each page of which is torn into small pieces. Many of the pages and some of the pieces of each page are missing."⁶ Later there are eerie shots of dinosaur skeletons in red light at the Museum of Natural History in New York, accompanied by an otherworldly music of the sort one might hear in a 1960s science fiction movie. The time that is conspicuously absent in this film is the time of the art world, the time of a meaningful narrative of the succession of styles and periods. This is instead a world, as Smithsonian put it elsewhere, "where remote futures meet remote pasts" (*Writings*, 91). So shots of earth-moving equipment are quickly interspersed with images of dinosaurs, in order to stress similarities in their structure and movement. Maps of hypothetical earlier stages of the earth representing lost continents remind us of time's continental drift. What exploded with the sun was the familiar time of art history, the museum, and the gallery, all of which, at their different paces, assume the primacy of a certain humanistic story of art.

The film has an oddly decentering effect. On our trip to the site we not only see where we are going but where we have been. Movement, whether horizontally linear (to the site, on the road), spiral (the machines and later Smithson on the jetty), or vertical (surveying the jetty from a helicopter), is consistently reversible: every motion that we see in one direction is doubled by motion in the opposite direction. Journeying to the center of the spiral, as Smithson does at one point, does not provide a stable, substantial focus, for there is nothing there, and all that he can do (or that we can do, following him) is to reverse course and unwind our tracks, just as the helicopter's counterclockwise movement around the jetty is doubled by a clockwise one. When the helicopter is over the jetty it seems as if the earth might be coming up to meet us as we descend, and when it spirals toward the center it seems as if the jetty itself might be revolving; as Smithson runs along the spiral, the film keeps his body at the same point on the screen, so that he might be running in place, as if on a treadmill. The loss of the center induces vertigo, like the historical vertigo consequent upon the proliferation of multiple temporalities and the disappearance of expected narrative. The permutations of perspective are rigorously varied and articulated, so that now we see the spiral from a great height, from which it appears as a flat insignia on the water, while again we see it from ground level, where it appears more like a series of dikes or bulwarks (plate 6). The voiceover stresses the senselessness of the jetty's center when (again, in a characteristic deadpan) it intones:

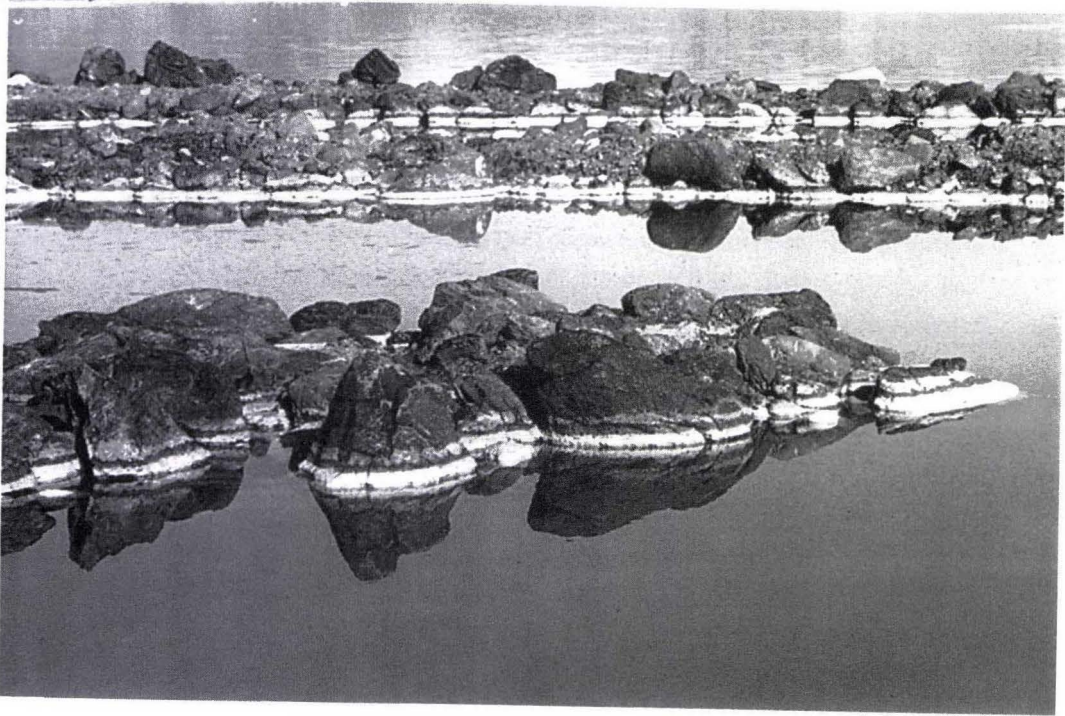
From the center of the Spiral Jetty

North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water

North by East—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water

Northeast by North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water

Northeast by East—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water



6. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970.
Photograph Gianfranco Gorgoni. Courtesy John Weber Gallery.

and so on through the twenty points of the compass (Smithson records the same set of directions in the essay [*Writings*, 113]). We also hear eventually that the sun is not really a center either; again reading from a text (John Taine's *The Time Stream*), Smithson announces that the secret of the sun is that it is not one star but millions; it's really a "spiral nebula."

There is something archaic about the film's concern with the elements: earth, air, fire, and water. All of these manifest themselves in the blazing and withering light of the sun. The heaviness of the rocks, the uncanny way in which crystals "grow" and replicate spiral shapes, the water that ripples calmly or becomes a giant solar reflector are constant presences. The human figure emerges only relatively late in the film when we see a shot of Smithson's legs from the knees down as he wades through the water; we see his upper body and face only when he begins to stake out the outline of the spiral. When we compare the film to some others of artists at work—for example, the dramatic exhibition of Jackson Pollock at work over a large canvas on the floor—we note immediately that except for the scene where Smithson is wading and staking, we do not see him—or any other human being—involved in shaping, moving, or applying materials. The earth-moving machines are shot from angles in which their human operators never appear, so that they become independent agents, "grim tractors that have the clumsiness of armored dinosaurs" (*Writings*, 82).⁷ This is an earth that has not yet and never will be fully rationalized, an earth that submits only partially to art and technology. The map of lost continents that shows Utah to occupy a site that was once part of Atlantis suggests a powerful, unpredictable earth that goes its own way.

While there is little obvious or explicit human agency here, there is an intermittent voice that comments on or provides a counterpoint to the visual images. Yet this monotone voice never asserts itself, and its speech is largely limited to factual information about the spiral's natural setting and to

quotations from a variety of texts (geological treatises, Beckett's *The Unnameable*, science fiction, a clinical description of sunstroke). If the earth's history is like a fragmented text, then fragmented texts drift into strata and sediment themselves, so that film images and texts form alternating or parallel levels in a larger formation (this is a form with which Smithson experimented in print; see "Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction," *Writings*, 129–131). The voice and the texts emerge out of a broader aural world, filled with a variety of sound and noise: a clock, a geiger counter, the wheezing of a hospital respirator machine, the truck on the dirt road, lapping water, heavy machinery on the earth, the whirl of the helicopter's blades in the air. As Smithson writes in the essay,

This description [of multiple forms of spiraling] echoes and reflects Brancusi's sketch of James Joyce as a "spiral ear" because it suggests both a visual and an aural scale, in other words it indicates a sense of scale that resonates in the eye and ear at the same time. (*Writings*, 112)

At one point a stack of books appears, including *The Lost World*, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, and *The Realm of the Nebulae*; this stratum of books indicates the cosmic affinities of the spiral and its place within a tradition of human artifice. The lines from *The Unnameable* are read while the camera pans over the dinosaurs in the Natural History Museum, and signal again the loss or disappearance of the subject:

Nothing has ever changed since I have been here. But I dare not infer from this that nothing ever will change. Let us try and see where these considerations lead. I have been here, ever since I began to be, my appearance elsewhere having been put in by other parties. All has proceeded, this time, in the utmost calm, the most perfect order, apart from one or two manifestations, the meaning of which escapes me. No, it is not that their meaning escapes me, my own escapes me just as much. Here all things, no, I shall not

say it, being unable to. I owe existence to no one, these faint fires are not of those that illuminate or burn. Going nowhere, coming nowhere.

This is a parody of the founding statement of modern philosophy, in which Descartes discovers the certainty of his own thought and existence; here it marks our position as lost among the many time frames, adrift and without a center, and floating among the texts that constitute the film's library of Babel. Smithson had borrowed the last figure from Borges in explaining the role of "printed matter," a term by which he indicates both the materiality of language and the textuality of the material. Significantly, he describes "printed matter" as having an effect like that of the movies:

Time is compressed or stopped inside the movie house, and this in turn provides the viewer with an entropic condition. To spend time in a movie house is to make a "hole" in one's life. . . . Like the movies and the movie houses, "printed-matter" plays an entropic role. Maps, charts, advertisements, art books, science books, money, architectural plans, math books, graphs, diagrams, newspapers, comics, booklets and pamphlets from industrial companies are all treated the same. . . . it is best to think of "printed-matter" the way that Borges thinks of it, as "The universe (which others call the library)" or like McLuhan's "Gutenberg Galaxy," in other words as an unending "library of Babel." (*Writings*, 15)

If language is used to disperse any conception of a sovereign agent or self in the film, there is nevertheless someone who appears, the artist, who is first shown staking out the spiral and then running to its center. But this figure never speaks; the voice (even though it is Smithson's) that we sometimes hear is never embodied. Language and action never coincide in a single figure. The film gives a special position to the artist who made both the spiral and the film itself, by casting him as a solitary individual among the elements, recalling in

this respect romantic motifs analogous to those in a painting by Caspar David Friedrich. Yet this persona is also undermined by being split into voice and image; when he is shown running counterclockwise to the center of the spiral, we can imagine that he is trapped in the maze or labyrinth.⁸ Toward the end of the film we hear, “He leads us to the steps of the jail’s main entrance, pivots and again locks his gaze into the sun.” Who is the jailer here and who is the prisoner? What the film does is to problematize, radically, the figure of the artist whose signature it bears (Smithson’s name appears at the beginning, under the title, and again at the end with the credits). The smith, the maker is both present and absent, his signature everywhere and nowhere. The smith who works under the sun, whose work is introduced to us by an exploding sun, and who is (as we shall see later) the son of the smith, is the figure whose very name is divided and inscribed in his work.

The themes that I have drawn from Smithson’s film suggest the concerns of the essays that follow in this book, concerns that I think are also significant for much of the art that we vaguely call postmodern.⁹ They are, to put it summarily: art’s place in time and history; the possibilities and the limits of the process of decentering the structure, site, and context of the work; the question of the medium (earth, for example), its resistance to form and art’s ability (or inability) to let matter challenge our conceptions and presuppositions; the role of language and textuality (is everything a text?); and the place of the artist after and despite the collapse of modern conceptions of creativity, genius, and autonomy. That Smithson’s work engages seriously with all of these helps us to understand why it has been and continues to be an unavoidable point of reference in the art world.

1 Time and Its Surfaces: Postperiodization

In the museum one can find deposits of rust labeled 'Philosophy,' and in glass cases unknown lumps of something labeled 'Aesthetics.' —ROBERT SMITHSON, *Writings*

Robert Smithson's first major published essay begins with nothing less than a theory of time. Since his death in 1973 at the age of thirty-five while surveying his own *Amarillo Ramp* from the air, Smithson has been incorporated into art-historical narrative as the pioneer and theorist of earthworks or environmental art and as a precursor of some of the best-known works of Christo, Michael Heizer, and Richard Serra (death, of course, for reasons that are not foreign to this study, often contributes to canonization). Yet all of Smithson's writings and constructions—his nonsites, ephemeral arrangements (the mirror displacements), plans (for airports, underground theaters, and reclaimed strip mines)—are not only directed against the modernist discourse of art history whose hegemony had been almost unquestioned since its Hegelian foundation but are also meant to articulate and question the institutions and practices of the museum, criticism, and the gallery with which it is complicit. But beyond this—and already in those writings that could be considered the

first manifestos of a postmodern art—Smithson recognized the strategic and philosophical necessity of challenging the modernist view of time and history, and so eventually, the entire construction of the conceptual pairs of nature and culture or matter and meaning that constitute the legitimation of modernist art and its discourses.

The occasion of Smithson's 1966 essay "Entropy and the New Monuments" (but what will happen now to the notion of an "occasion" for a critical discussion of art when time itself is in question, as in the "postmodern"?) is the appearance of the installations and minimalist constructions of such artists as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, and Dan Flavin. In one sense Smithson was never concerned with anything other than the monumental, that is, with the huge, the enduring, the public, that which marks and transforms a space. This is the case in his criticism, in his production (even in the form of the ruined monument—for example, the "Partially Buried Woodshed"), and in his references to prehistory. The monument, as Hegel pointed out, is to be construed as a way of marking time; significant events are marked by the erection or destruction of monuments, as with Napoleon's Vendôme column that was later toppled by the Paris commune (with Courbet's help—artists destroy as well as build). Hegel produced the most ambitious, one might say the most monumental, of all histories of art, setting the stage for the disciplines of art history and the history of literature. While Smithson is always an avowed enemy of any grand historical conception of art such as Hegel's metanarrative in which humanity comes to understand itself through artistic self-expression, he also displays some affinities with Hegel in so far as he describes his own thought and practice as dialectical. There is some point, then, in considering Smithson's concept of the "new monuments" of minimalist art—or what he calls the monuments of the industrial wasteland which begin to decay as soon as they arise—against the background of Hegelian aesthetics.

For the Hegel who will later announce something like the death of art, monumental architecture is simultaneously the beginning of art and of the historical sense. Moreover, the monument is a *public* work of art, one that is meant to focus a general attention on whatever it is that is vital to the way in which a community understands itself. The merely natural becomes spiritual, historical, and specifically human in these works. Despite the typically phallic shape of these towers and obelisks, Hegel wants to emphasize that they go beyond the natural tie of sexual reproduction, for which his word in the following passage is “patriarchal”:

“What is holy?” Goethe asks once in a distich, and answers: “What links many souls together.” In this sense we may say that the holy with the aim of this concord, and as this concord, has been the first content of independent architecture. The readiest example of this is provided by the Tower of Babylonia [Babel]. In the wide plains of the Euphrates an enormous architectural work was erected [*errichtet*]; it was built in common, and the aim and content of the work was at the same time the community of those who constructed it. And the foundation of this social bond does not remain merely a unification on patriarchal lines; on the contrary, the purely family unity has already been superseded, and the building, rising into the clouds, makes objective to itself this earlier and dissolved unity and the realization of a new and wider one.¹

The “earlier . . . dissolved unity” that is made objective is clearly the phallic shape that has now been both superseded by and incorporated (*aufgehoben*, which could also be translated as “sublimated”) in a cultural and political union. From now on art’s destiny, as Hegel tells the story, will be to become ever more spiritual as it rises over and beyond the earth, creating architectural works that withstand gravity, erecting freestanding sculpture and then moving on to the virtual spaces of painting, music, and poetry, which float free, as one

might say, in the clouds. More recent artists have frequently tended to reverse the Hegelian account by abandoning the “spiritual” mode of abstraction for a more conscious erotic engagement with forms and materials in order to assert the sexuality of their work. When Smithson was accused of symbolically raping mother earth, for example, he did not deny that it was relevant to discuss his activity in sexual terms, but he did insist that rape was not the only form of sex (*Writings*, 123). The main point here is that far from turning away from the earth, which is the trajectory of Hegel’s art-historical narrative, Smithson worked in it and with it; if the Hegelian story has some claim to account for the meaning of Western art, then it will be important to ask whether the turn of art back to the earth shows the limits and perhaps the end of that story.

Questions along these lines arise now even with respect to our obvious and public monuments. Consider the controversy regarding the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, a work that as John Beardsley intimates in *Earthworks and Beyond*, could hardly have been contemplated before the work of artists such as Smithson and Michael Heizer.² Does it honor and celebrate the dead or does it mark them quite specifically, unambiguously, and—in Smithson’s language—entropically as part of an arbitrary sequence of deaths and losses? Does it present them as having contributed to a greater good by making a meaningful sacrifice? Or does it, by descending gradually below the surface of the earth, emphasize the expenditure of life with no return and the fact of burial—a “fact” complicated by the alleged MIAs—that serves no heroic end? The shape and location of the monument could suggest attributes that are conventionally female rather than male. No column rises from the ground to mark the glory that has been achieved and there are no images of soldiers standing proudly upright or raising the flag (as on the Iwo Jima monument). The latter absence resulted in political pressure to erect the figurative sculpture of three soldiers that now stands opposite the V-shaped work designed by

Maya Lin. In this case would Hegel have to admit that the monument signifies that history, which he acknowledges to be “the slaughter-bench of peoples,” is not in any way overcome (*aufgehoben*) by “the cunning of reason”? This may be the place to note that although Smithson is typically classified as a sculptor, he pointedly eschews the form of verticality: his “nonsites” tend to be low groupings of containers on the floor of the gallery, the *Spiral Jetty* never rose more than a few feet out of the Great Salt Lake and then sank under water, and the *Partially Buried Woodshed* was an already existent structure that Smithson put into a condition of perpetually teetering on the verge of collapse. (Later we will have to return both to the question of such divisions of the arts into painting, sculpture, and architecture—which Smithson contested—and to the meaning of his horizontal mode or style.)

What is the function of what Smithson called “the new monuments”? According to his essay, “Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future. Instead of being made of natural materials, such as marble, granite, or other kinds of rock, the new monuments are made of artificial materials, plastic, chrome, and electric light. They are not built for the ages, but rather against the ages” (*Writings*, 10). The reader is immediately confronted here with a paradox. Smithson appears to be writing within one of the current genres of art history and criticism, genres that are dedicated, so it seems, to a progressive conception of history, to an attempt to identify the avant-garde, to periodize by telling us where art has been, where it is now, and sometimes to announce its future (paradigmatically in the manifesto, of which it is no coincidence that the best exemplars are the Futurist manifestos, linking as they do the characterization of favored artistic work as an “ism,” embodied in a “period,” with the commitment to the new and emergent). We might say that this is precisely the modernist impulse, for to distinguish oneself as

“modern,” whether this is done by fourth-century writers marking themselves off from their classical predecessors in Periclean Athens or by T. S. Eliot and his poetic generation insisting on the gap that separates them from the late Victorians, is to envision history as a succession of periods or epochs that constitute an intelligible sequence. Yet within this modernist discourse (in the pages of *Artforum*) Smithson is at one and the same time identifying and placing a style (with all that this means for the network of criticism, galleries, and the market) and also announcing that this particular “movement” is not at all a movement but an antimovement, one that if taken seriously leads to a perception of time at fundamental odds with everything characteristic of modernism. “Time as decay or biological evolution,” he writes, “is eliminated by many of these artists; this displacement allows the eye to see time as an infinity of surfaces or structures, or both combined, without the burden of what Roland Barthes calls ‘the undifferentiated mass of organic sensation’” (*Writings*, 10). Already, in 1966, Smithson displays a sensibility informed by French structuralism, with its skepticism directed toward narrative conceptions of history and its ability to see unlimited numbers of articulated configurations.

Notice what Smithson does *not* say; he does not say that these are post-modern artists. It is not that he lacks the genius to invent the term (it had already been employed by Arnold Toynbee in the 1930s) but that he recognizes that “postmodernism” would be an oxymoron. If “postmodernism” names a particular period, the latest one, the successor of modernism, then it is intelligible only within the confines of modernism and simply confirms modernism’s view of time. Periodization is the very life blood of modernism; if there is a postmodern intervention that interrogates the modern in a fundamental way, then it could be called “postperiodization” in order to suggest what is at stake.³ And in attempting to transvalue the concepts of the

monument and of (not only) art-historical temporality, Smithson is beginning to elaborate a form of postperiodization. Periodization is the modernist ailment for which the postmodern ought to be the antidote; postmodernism conceived as a period is just more of the same thing. It is also significant that the artist criticizes what he takes to be the biological metaphors of growth and evolution presupposed by modernist, periodizing discourse and his attempts to substitute physicalistic conceptions of entropy for them. Not only historical and art-historical time are put into question here, but the biological time that they presuppose.

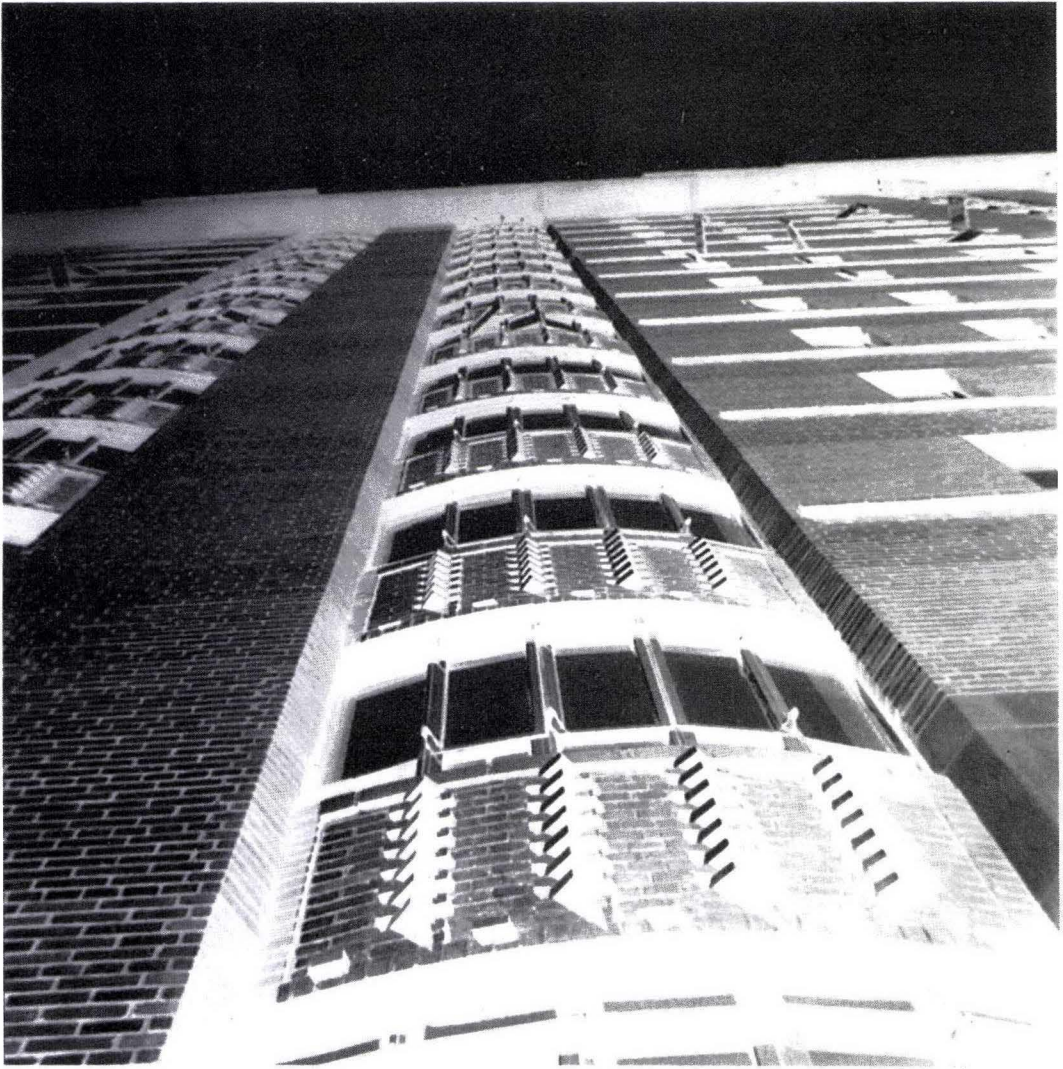
In a significant, if somewhat flippant and perverse gesture, Smithson begins this first *Artforum* essay with a quotation from a favorite science fiction author, Eric Temple Bell (John Taine). In retrospect, *The Time Stream*, which he cites, is remarkable not only for its images of ruins, entropy, cosmic disorder, and fantastic architecture but for its presentation of a conception of time as eternal recurrence. Bell's characters, in one of their many incarnations, puzzle about the meaning of an ancestral symbol that is, appropriately enough, inscribed on the ceiling of their most significant building. It is a snake that forms a circle with its own tail in its mouth (*ouroboros*). They gradually come to see that the symbol and its motto "The whole is one" refer to the cyclical structure of time.⁴ It was Nietzsche, of course, who announced the thought of eternal recurrence and who was being fervently read and reinterpreted in the 1960s by European philosophers seeking a counterbalance to modernity and especially to Hegelian conceptions of time and history. Smithson never explicitly addresses the thought of eternal recurrence, but his indebtedness to Bell and specifically to Bell's conception of time leaves little doubt that he found a great appeal in this radical alternative to evolutionary and progressive temporality, whether that temporality is deployed in biology or in art history's construction of a canonical succession of styles proceeding meaningfully out of

one another. We have here already, then, two conceptions of time in Smithson and his sources: that of eternal recurrence (in the background) and the theory of entropy. As the latter name suggests, temporal happenings (one hesitates to say “developments”) are understood as forms of turning away or deviation (*en-tropos*)—that is, as dispersion or diffusion. Smithson, borrowing the term in his autodidactic way from the psychoanalyst Anton Ehrenzweig, will speak of “dedifferentiation,” and at one point he will coin the term “destructuralized” (*Writings*, 100). Yet understood in a certain way, these conceptions are not so opposed as they might at first appear. For if, as Nietzsche insists, *what* recurs in eternal recurrence is the particular moment of experience in all its specificity, then to think that thought through in a rigorous way is to focus one’s attention precisely on the dimension of the differential and differentiating moments—that is, on that which from the standpoint of continuing and stable identities (individual, historical, or social) must appear as entropic.

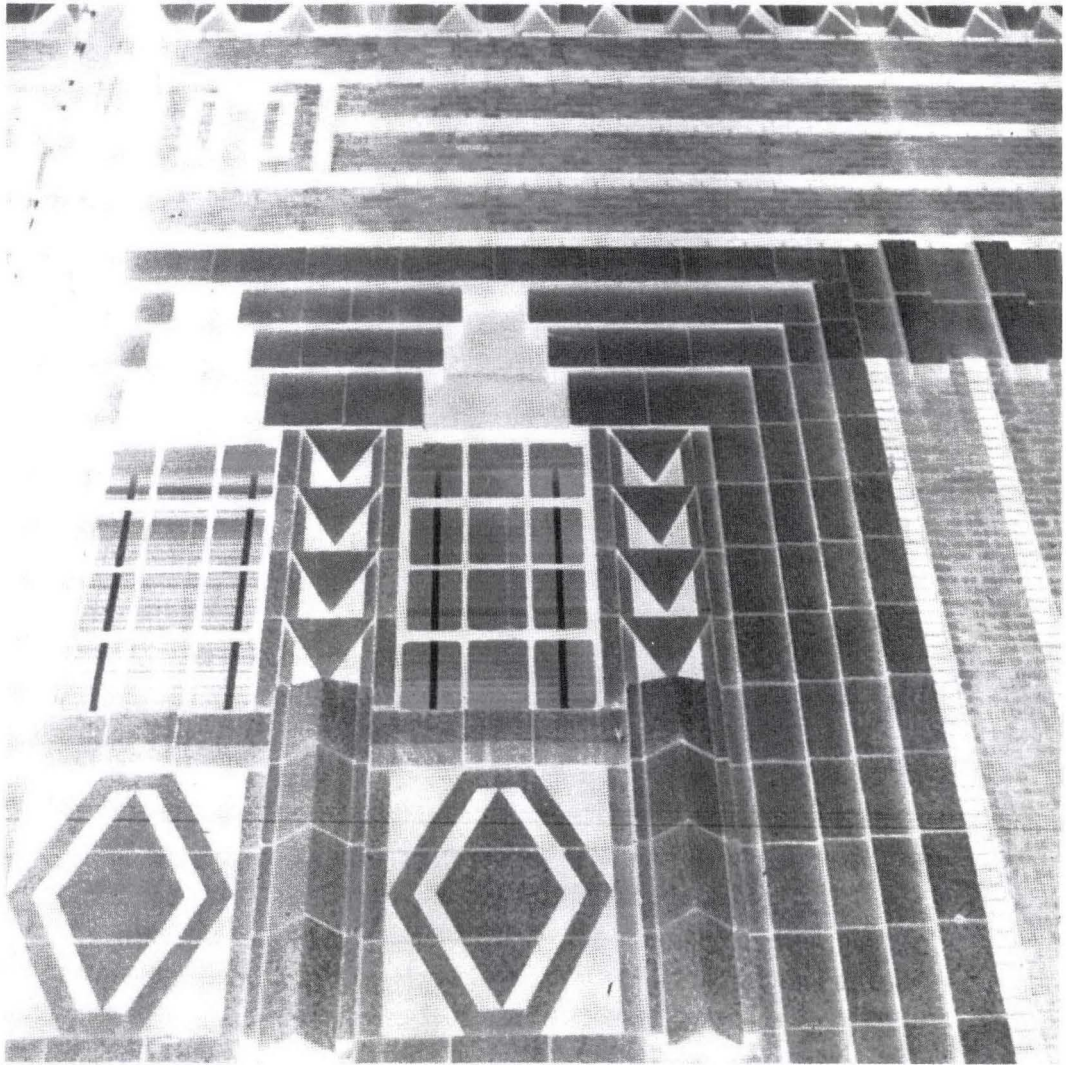
In “Ultramoderne,” a 1967 essay for *Arts Magazine*, Smithson discusses certain art of the 1930s as transhistorical, anti-avant-garde, and productive of a sense of time as both “circular and unending” (*Writings*, 51). The prime examples here are structures—including the Empire State, Radio City, and a host of New York apartment buildings—that are based on a principle of repetition, mirroring, and maze: “The ’thirties recover that much hated Gnostic idea that the universe is a mirror reflection of the celestial order—a monstrous system of mirrored mazes. . . . The cold distant people of the Ultramoderne installed themselves in many versions of the Hall of Mirrors. They lived in interiors of gloss and glass, in luminous skyscrapers, in rooms of rarefied atmospheres and airless delights” (*Writings*, 50; plates 7 and 8). Here we might think of certain films of the decade that dwell on this architecture and its inhabitants and of more recent films like *Ghostbusters* or *Batman* that exhibit an apparently paradoxical nostalgia for the timeless. The word “postmodern” was not in

circulation yet, but in Smithson's text "Ultramoderne" fulfills one of its many roles, that which I have termed postperiodization, suggesting a critique of modernist functionalism, a sense of time stopping or rotting, and an openness to pastiche (Smithson notes such features as the miniature ziggurats that put the ultramoderne in contact with a range of monumental art, "Egyptian, Mayan, Inca, Aztec, Druid, Indian, etc." [*Writings*, 49]). In this world, "Nothing is new, neither is anything old" (*Writings*, 51). There is a strong polemic against modernism here that is reminiscent of some critical strains within what is usually thought of as the modernist movement itself.

In an interview Smithson says that he came to understand modernism by putting it within a larger historical context, citing Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and T. E. Hulme as his major guides in developing this insight (*Writings*, 146). Wyndham Lewis is a particularly interesting figure here because, like Smithson, he worked simultaneously as an artist and a theorist. In *Time and Western Man* Lewis seeks to expose the nerve of modernist consciousness, which consists, he argues, in its supposition that individual and historical temporality are the fundamental terms for understanding art and the world. Lewis's cast of characters is broad enough to include Bergson and Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Alfred North Whitehead. His attack on the "time-mind" is meant to clear the way for a renewed emphasis on spatiality and vision. While Smithson adopts some of the rhetorical and antiacademic tone of Lewis's polemic, he goes further than Lewis (or Pound and Eliot) insofar as he turns not to the medievals, the troubadours, or the Chinese for alternative models of art, but takes all of these to be contained within an anthropomorphic history whose limits can be questioned by introducing an even more comprehensive perspective inspired by geology and the idea of entropy. Describing his work in the period of the essays we have just been discussing, he says, "I was doing crystalline works and my early



7. Robert Smithson, *Ultramoderne* (Century Apartment Building, New York City), 1967, negative photostat print, 8½" × 8½". Estate of Robert Smithson. Courtesy John Weber Gallery and Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



8. Robert Smithson, *Ultramoderne* (Century Apartment Building, New York City), 1967, negative photostat print, $8\frac{1}{2}'' \times 8\frac{1}{2}''$.
Estate of Robert Smithson. Courtesy John Weber Gallery and Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

interest in geology and earth sciences began to assert itself over the whole cultural overlay of Europe. I had gotten that out of my system” (*Writings*, 147). If what reading Lewis and his contemporaries had done for Smithson was to allow him to put the entire modernist sensibility into parentheses (to perform what phenomenologists might call an *epoché* of modernism), geology and entropy allowed him to do the same with larger chunks of human history: “The entire history of the West was swallowed up in a preoccupation with notions of pre-history and the great pre-historic epics starting with the age of rocks” (*Writings*, 150). Smithson’s notion of the modernist approach to time as a rift or fold in a larger series of archaeological or geological strata is similar to Michel Foucault’s strategy for exhibiting the limits of humanism and its approach to history (at one point he says that he has been “involved in a kind of personal archaeology” [*Writings*, 154], and he shows elsewhere that he has read Foucault [*Smithson Unearthed*, 91–92]).⁵ His artworks and his essays (not always separable) constitute ways of exploring this new (and old) time of art.

What is the time of art? In one of his richest texts Smithson outlines alternatives for the artist that are susceptible of a rigorous articulation:

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. Many would like to forget time altogether, because it conceals the “death principle” (every authentic artist knows this). Floating in this temporal river are the remnants of art history, yet the “present” cannot support the cultures of Europe, or even the archaic or primitive civilizations; it must instead explore the pre- and post-historic mind; it must go into places where remote futures meet remote pasts. (*Writings*, 91)

Three alternatives are considered for the artist here, and despite his iconoclasm Smithson is never really able to contemplate ceasing altogether to be

an artist. (Eventually we will need to examine Smithson's struggles with the vocation and the name of the artist, for they are much more than the idiosyncracies of his biography; they are paradigmatic for all those working in the wake of Duchamp.) The artist can (1) sink deep into the time stream, which will lead to oblivion; (2) forget time altogether, because it conceals the "death principle"; or (3) remain close to the temporal surfaces. This list has some claim to exhausting the possibilities open to the artist, and so I want to consider it in some detail, against the background of modernism from which Smithson departs.

To sink deeply into the time stream would be to internalize the history of the art world, to see oneself as standing on the shoulders of all of the artists from the cave painters to Jackson Pollock and the most recent Soho sensation. Something like this immersion is crucial to modernist theories of art. When Smithson wrote this, Clement Greenberg was perhaps the most influential critical voice providing a theoretical legitimation of modernist artistic practice. In "Modernist Painting," a brief but very significant statement, he tries to show that painting has a rational and in some respects necessary development, grounded on its interrogation of and reflection on its own fundamental conditions as a medium. (One could insert Greenberg's attempt to derive an art's history from its fundamental nature in a long line of such efforts, ultimately going back to Aristotle's claim in the *Poetics* that tragedy has attained its "true nature" and exhausted its possibilities by making explicit all that is implicit in it.) In this respect Greenberg proposed an ambitious analogy between Kant's critical philosophy and modernism in painting: each practices an immanent criticism, attempting to articulate those features of an activity that constitute its limits, construing them not as hindrances or problems but as the very enabling features of the activity in question. As Kant had insisted that the limitation of our knowledge to the world of perceived space and time provided a

means for establishing the legitimacy of science, so Greenberg sketched a way of understanding painting and its history as the immanent critique of its own limitation to the canvas. In the following passage we should think of the “Old Masters” as similar to the dogmatic rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz) while the moderns are analogues of Kant and his philosophical allies.

Realistic, illusionistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment—were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged openly. Manet’s paintings became the first Modernist ones by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted.⁶

Despite all appearances, then, Greenberg insists that modernism is traditional—that is, deeply immersed in the time stream—because it continues some of what painting has always been doing, for example, distinguishing itself from the sculptural. Yet there is an *aporia* in Greenberg’s account in so far as he insists that modernism’s interrogation of its medium’s limitations remains relatively unconscious: “The self-criticism of modern art has never been carried on in any but a spontaneous and subliminal way. It has been altogether a question of practice, immanent to practice and never a topic of theory. . . . To the extent that it succeeds as art, Modernist art partakes in no way of the character of a demonstration.”⁷

Why should (or must) self-criticism remain unconscious? Here Greenberg seems to be shifting from Kant’s general practice of critique to his aesthetic principle that art must not be reducible to the conceptual. But as Hegel asked

with reference to Kant, how can we draw limits to the process of reflecting on and articulating limits? In fact, art since Greenberg's announcement and even in the developments taking place as he issued it (his essay first appeared in 1965, a year before *Smithson* began publishing in *Artforum*) seems to take an unmistakable turn to self-consciousness (as opposed to Greenberg's "self-criticism"). Greenberg has, of course, left himself an out by the qualification "to the extent that it succeeds as art," which would seem to leave no alternative to a certain formalist aestheticism (despite the tension that may obtain between that aestheticism and the view of art as progressively self-critical). Yet not only is the more self-conscious art of Warhol, Rauschenberg, and the conceptual artists difficult to ignore (Duchamp could for a while be dismissed as an anomaly), but once one takes them seriously the history of art itself begins to emerge as a story of self-consciousness. This is the kind of history that leads to the narratives of a Hegel or an Arthur Danto, a history requiring that artists become self-conscious, perform their own narrativizations of the history of art, and so become practitioners of parody and pastiche.⁸ The latter result could be called postmodernism; that is, it could be understood as a new period, the next step after modernism. But of course this sort of periodization is just what modernism *desires*, and so it is triumphantly vindicated (in a very traditional Hegelian way) by the attempt to go beyond it. (When Fredric Jameson defines postmodernism as a self-conscious pastiche, he is simply extending this Hegelian story and perhaps implicitly asserting its inevitability by construing the postmodern as a period.)

In "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space" *Smithson* satirizes the avant-garde and avant-gardist conceptions of art's history by suggesting that the avant-garde is actually in thrall to the bourgeois notion of progress that it explicitly seeks to oppose. In attempting to substitute the time of art for that of material "progress," artists are simply mimicking their supposed enemy;

both are committed to a logic of constant innovation in which the present supersedes the past and will be superseded by the future. Smithson compares the quest of the avant-garde to overtake the bourgeoisie to Achilles' race with the tortoise in Zeno's paradoxical formulation. Achilles will never overtake the tortoise because whenever he covers half the distance another half still remains to be covered, and no matter how small the interval becomes, it will never be completely closed (*Writings*, 35). Presumably Smithson does not actually believe that motion and change are impossible as Zeno did in attempting dialectically to argue for Parmenides' idea of a world without change. Is the point simply that the avant-garde can never replace the bourgeoisie at the head of the historical enterprise since they are indebted, albeit unconsciously, to its ideology? Here one might consider the role of the earthworks artist. The latter is deeply suspicious of progress and conscious of industrial devastation, decay, waste, and the general tendency toward entropy. Rather than attempting to catch up with "progress," he regressively allows the waste and the ground to emerge in its wake; the very contrast will suggest that history and "progress" are limited by entropy, the ineluctable undertow of all human and natural processes.

Addiction to "going beyond" by deep immersion in the art world's time stream, and the quest to come up with the latest style that will meet the demands of the critics, the historians, and the art market, lead, as Smithson says, to "oblivion"—that is, to the loss of any awareness that there is anything outside the trajectory one is riding or that one imagines oneself to be riding. It is instructive here to see how Smithson distances himself from Marcel Duchamp, an artist who, as he points out, had recently enjoyed a great renaissance and whose influence was evident in the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Morris. Smithson sees Duchamp not as a rebel but as a high priest of the history of art. By now, he claims, Americans have constructed a canonical

lineage of art history that comes out of the Armory Show of 1913:

And the notion of art history itself is so animated by Duchamp. . . . Hardcore modernism is Picasso and Matisse and T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Then, in the postwar period, we get Duchamp coming on very strong. Duchamp is really more in line with postmodernism insofar as he is very knowledgeable about the modernist traditions but disdains them. So, I think there is a kind of false view of art history, an attempt to set up a lineage. And I would like to step outside that situation. (*Writings*, 197)

This may be the only time that Smithson speaks of postmodernism, and it is revealing that he sees it as one more period which aspires to be the necessary vantage point for apprehending the art of the past. In his comments Smithson goes on to describe Duchamp (and his followers) as practicing religion under another name: they are attempting to transfer the aura of traditional art to their own productions, even to ready-mades, offering “a sanctification for alienated objects” (*Writings*, 197–198). To take a “step outside” would be to give up the religion of art and the religion of art history that still lives on in Duchampian postmodernism; while Smithson “would like” to take such a step, he is also aware (as we shall see) that it is not so easy to effect an exit from history.

With regard to the time stream in which even postmodernism seems to remain immersed, let us recall that the notion of a river or stream of forgetfulness is at least as ancient as the Greek river Lethe; as Martin Heidegger recalls, the latter is inscribed in the fateful Greek name of truth, *aletheia*, which he takes to mean the un-hidden or the un-concealed. Heidegger’s claim that we suffer from the oblivion of Being can be compared with Smithson’s description of the oblivion of the time-bound artist. In each case the relevant distinction is between mere forgetting (as in Heidegger’s example of the professor

who has forgotten his umbrella) and the forgetting of forgetting, the condition in which we no longer know that something has been forgotten. Both bear comparison with the mnemotechnics of psychoanalysis and its conception of the repression of the primal scene.

But the favored alternative to oblivion is not the escape from time. The project of escape would presumably be motivated by the wish to avoid the “death principle,” or the realization that every gesture within the art-historical world is necessarily impermanent, destined to be surpassed within the accelerating succession of styles and movements. This Platonistic rebellion against modernism had a certain attraction within the modernist movement, actually constituting a kind of antimodernist modernism, as in Wyndham Lewis. The escape from time, if rigorously carried through, would require not only the repression of art’s history but that of the artist’s own sense of his or her own temporal existence. Smithson’s appeal here is phenomenological: “The existence of the artist in time is worth as much as the finished product” (*Writings*, 90). The artist is time-bound to the extent that a Byzantine quest for the “artifice of eternity” (Yeats) is ultimately unsustainable by human beings.

It is the third alternative that Smithson favors: staying close to the temporal surfaces. But what does this mean? Let us begin by noting the plural in this formulation: there is not just one temporal surface but many. This suggests that the search for the cutting edge of the art world is not only difficult but intrinsically impossible. There is no single high crest of the wave for the avant-garde surfer of the art world to ride. The “present” (to continue with Smithson’s formulation) cannot support either European or archaic cultures. Smithson seems to be thinking of the “present” both in temporal terms, as that which is happening *now*, and in terms of cognition or consciousness, as what is in principle fully accessible and available. These senses are often fused, a move that is typical for those who, immersed in the time stream, are

oblivious to all else. Staying close to the temporal surfaces would seem to involve attending to actual, experienced time rather than to an ideological time that is constructed through the grand narratives of art history. The artists who are roughly grouped together as the minimalists of the 1960s (and Smithson is often considered one of them) attempted to emphasize the time of art's process, including its performance and reception. One has to walk around a minimalist work rather than see it from a distance as a structure complete in itself without reference to any viewer. The aim is to avoid either falsely eternalizing the artwork or inserting it precipitously into the history of art (the time stream). Rather, the point is to see the actual *work* of the artist, the elapsed time that he or she puts into the work, and to be aware of the time that passes as we view it.

Smithson called the large works of the minimalists "obstructions" rather than abstractions because they force the viewer to become aware of his or her path around and through these objects (*Writings*, 13). To these aims of the minimalists Smithson adds his own specific interest in long-term physical processes. The work will change over time, and these changes, Smithson always insists, are part of its texture. The *Spiral Jetty's* appearance changed with the varying chemical constitution of the waters of the Great Salt Lake; the *Partially Buried Woodshed* gradually gave in to the force of gravity (plate 9); and all things, works of art included, participate in the dispersive process of entropy. Smithson illustrates this last notion with the story of Humpty Dumpty, who once broken cannot be put back together again. Disorganization, so the second law of thermodynamics has it, tends to increase, and the process is irreversible. The surfaces of time are personal, geological, and cosmic; among them the trajectories traced by the art history that was invented in the nineteenth century are minor glitches or blips. Smithson emphasized entropic time in such works as *Asphalt Rundown*, outside Rome, where a



9. Robert Smithson, *Partially Buried Woodshed*, Kent State University, Ohio, 1970. Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

dump truck dropped a load of asphalt down an eroded hillside. The hillside was already eroded, exhibiting a first level of entropy; the asphalt, following in its flow the gullies and fissures wrought by earlier erosion, both highlights the earlier process and overlays it with a second (*Robert Smithson*, 174–176).⁹ The “first” erosion is underlined and made more permanent by the solidified asphalt, whose “rundown” suggests an irreversible process of its own (I speak guardedly of a “first” erosion, since part of what Smithson is attempting to bring to awareness is the fact that everything always has been running down). Although Smithson rejected many of the ideas and attitudes associated with abstract expressionism, such as that of the individual, heroic artist-as-creator, he was impressed by the use of the pouring and dripping techniques for which Jackson Pollock is known because they lead to a product that embodies and exhibits the real physical time of its making. Smithson projected an *Island of Broken Glass* in which a small rocky island in Vancouver harbor was to be covered with broken glass that would eventually, through natural and accidental causes, be broken into smaller and smaller pieces; centuries later it would be sand (*Robert Smithson*, 185–186). Ecologists opposed the work, and the ensuing conflict caused plans for construction (or destruction) to be canceled. Smithson was sometimes critical of the ecological movement for holding what he took to be a naive aesthetics that sought to preserve and maintain what was fundamentally a humanized nature, constructed according to a particular conception of beauty (*Smithson Unearthed*, 91). Presumably he would have been more sympathetic to “deep ecology,” which claims to value the earth for what it is independently of all human considerations.

The notion of “temporal surfaces” seems to owe much to George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time*, a work that Smithson cites frequently. Smithson was perhaps almost alone in recognizing the potential of Kubler’s argument

for articulating what we now would call a structuralist and poststructuralist theory of the arts. Building on his readings in the French theorists (Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and perhaps others), Smithson interprets Kubler as providing a way of understanding art that eliminates both the usual notion of the work of art's identity and the conventional crutches of biography and developmental history. Kubler's book is in large part a polemic against an art history based on biological models of development. For these he would substitute an approach emphasizing the plurality of temporalities according to which art and artifacts are produced. The different forms and rates of change are likened, in Kubler's account, to physical phenomena, as in his claim that there are two fundamentally different velocities in the world of art: these are analogous to glacierlike drift and the suddenness of a forest fire.¹⁰ His discussion of the "shapes of time" is a suggestive typology of variant forms of artistic careers, the crystallization of a certain procedure or type, and the length of time required for the solution of artistic problems. The same work, or work done at the same time, will typically consist of components or dimensions of diverse temporalities. When Kubler does resort to a biological comparison, it is to point out that even an organism is not temporally homogeneous:

Thus everything is a complex having not only traits, each with a different systematic age, but having also clusters of traits, or aspects, each with its own age, like any other organization of matter, such as a mammal, of which the blood and the nerves are of different biological antiquity, and the eye and the skin are of different systematic ages.

Because duration can be measured by the two standards of absolute age and systematic age, historic time seems to be composed of many envelopes, in addition to being mere flow from past to future through the present.¹¹

Since simultaneous events have different systematic ages, it follows that the “present was never uniformly textured, however much its archaeological record may appear to have been homogeneous.”¹² Kubler concludes his lapidary study with an image of the history of art that dovetails nicely with Smithson’s appeal to geological and entropic patterns of thought, and may have been a source of the latter:

The history of art is very much like a vast mining enterprise, with innumerable shafts, most of them closed down long ago. Each artist works on in the dark, guided only by the tunnels and shafts of earlier work, following the vein and hoping for a bonanza, and fearing that the lode may play out tomorrow. The scene is also heaped with the tailings of exhausted mines: other prospectors are sorting them to salvage the traces of rare elements once thrown away but valued today more than gold. Here and there new enterprises begin, but the terrain is so varied that old knowledge has been of little use in the extraction of these altogether new earths which may prove worthless.¹³

The particular twist that Smithson gives to this perspective is to envision an art that can bear witness to its power and truth in its incorporation of various temporalities and the entropic tendency to which all work is subject.¹⁴ In his writing Smithson describes the earth as a “jumbled museum” while portraying museums as storehouses filled with the miscellaneous leavings of the past. In general, he wanted his works to show the effects of time, decay, natural and human change. When he made proposals for earthworks that would occupy former strip mining sites, he emphasized that the works ought not to obliterate the traces of the mining but disclose its past while adding a new layer to the strata of the place (*Robert Smithson*, 215–227). The work would, in effect, be an archaeological site, both in the ordinary use of that term and in Michel

Foucault's generalized sense of a location that reveals distinctively different levels of thought and practice.

Smithson urges the artist to turn his or her attention away from the elusive "present" and "explore the pre- and post-historic mind . . . go[ing] into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts." Again, a comprehensive and relatively nonselective approach to the temporal surfaces takes us away from the immediate present or from the time of art history or the West to the fringes and margins of human history. These margins are themselves marked by a different attitude toward history itself; one might say that they are less concerned with marking time than with marking the earth. It is a striking fact that many early cultures which seem not to have possessed writing in the conventional sense and which, so far as we know, kept no chronicles or histories, nevertheless put surprising efforts into inscribing the earth itself with mounds, lines, and monuments.¹⁵ A good bit of hermeneutic labor has gone into deciphering the "mysteries" of Stonehenge or the Nazca lines; without venturing into any of those disputed territories, it can be observed that these "earthworks" suggest a concern with place and space rather than time and history; where time is thought to be in question—when Stonehenge, for example, is taken to be an ancient observatory—it is the time of the earth, the sun, and the stars that is at stake, not the time of human history.

We might think of Smithson's criticism of the present and his proposal to put the art history of the West into parentheses as parallel to Martin Heidegger's attempt to demonstrate the limits of the metaphysics of presence and the aesthetics to which it is indebted. Since Heidegger's own philosophy of art relies heavily on a conception of the earth and an archaeological notion of time, the connection with Smithson's views is worth exploring. In both cases, as we shall see, an interrogation of limits is closely bound up with a concern to take a more careful look at what seems to lie beyond the limits, or

the prehistoric and the posthistoric. Heidegger, in his metahistory of philosophy, wants to show that a single impulse has dominated the metaphysical tradition: the desire to identify and capture the present. This begins with Plato's conception of the Ideas as that which is intrinsically present, free from the contingencies of temporal change and context. It proceeds through Christian theology's thought of an eternal God and eventually takes a subjective turn in the Cartesian insistence that what is most present are one's own thoughts, or the *cogito*. The subjective conception of presence then proliferates in a number of modern versions: the rational will (Kant and German idealism), the irrational will (Schopenhauer), and finally the will to power (Nietzsche). For Heidegger this is a story of tragic destiny; it is an Oedipal narrative about the consequences of rigorously adhering to a one-sided conception of knowledge and truth. What began serenely with Plato's vision of the Good ends with Nietzschean madness.¹⁶ This story can easily be translated into the language of art; in fact, Heidegger claims that such a translation has taken place insofar as Western aesthetics, along with its institutions, canons, and practices, has been dominated by metaphysics. Every major change in the conception of presence has been accompanied by a corresponding alteration in the view of what art is. We could, if we wanted to expand on Heidegger's sketch of the dependence of aesthetics on metaphysics, as developed especially in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," elaborate some story such as follows.

The Platonic and Aristotelian identification of forms and essences as the intrinsically real and present was accompanied by a theory of art that oscillated between glorifying it as a means of access to the forms and condemning it as the most powerful and seductive of distractions from the real; Christianity thematized the question of how sensory images and stories could be related to the eternal story of salvation. It ended up with two extreme treatments of the

image: a celebration of its symbolic value on the one hand in linking man and God through the mystery of the incarnation and, on the other, a suspicion of the misleading power of the image which would tend to make its observers forget the immense gap between the temporal and eternal (we can provide images of these two tendencies in the rich Catholic and southern European tradition of the crucified Christ and the northern and Protestant iconoclastic focus on the bare, unornamented cross). The modern world sees art as the expression of the typically and universally human and develops two paradigmatic forms of aesthetic humanism. One is Kant's notion of art and beauty as corresponding to the capacity for taste which brings all of our faculties into play and that allows of no reduction to rule or formula at the same time that it forbids all skeptical dismissals of the overwhelming conviction of the special significance of certain experiences of nature and art. The other is Hegel's aesthetics, in which the universally human unfolds and develops itself historically; in other words, the theoretical underpinnings of that modern art history that we have been calling into question here and against which Smithson's polemics are directed.

These are, of course, only the bare bones of what a Heideggerian history of Western aesthetics would look like. The point of providing the sketch is to suggest how Smithson's criticism of an art and an art world based on "the present" can be articulated with some cogency. (Yet we must also ask whether and to what extent such efforts as Heidegger's and Smithson's succeed in bracketing and escaping from the traditions that they are questioning, and we should attempt to assess the degree of their complicity with those same traditions.) Here we might consider a certain convergence of Heidegger and Smithson with regard to art and death. Smithson spoke of the way in which immersion in the time stream could lead to oblivion and of the realization by some artists that such immersion was necessarily bound up with the "death principle." In

reflecting on Hegel's notorious claims that are sometimes (a bit hastily) said to announce "the death of art," Heidegger asks in effect whether Hegel has not identified something like the "death principle" in any aesthetics that is tied to the metaphysics of presence. This passage is worth citing at length:

In the most comprehensive reflection on the nature of art that the West possesses—comprehensive because it stems from metaphysics—namely Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, the following propositions occur:

Art no longer counts for us as the highest manner in which truth obtains existence for itself.

One may well hope that art will continue to advance and perfect itself, but its form has ceased to be the highest need of the spirit.

In all these relationships, art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest vocation, something past.

The judgment that Hegel passes in these pages cannot be evaded by pointing out that since Hegel's lectures in aesthetics were given for the last time during the winter of 1828–29 at the University of Berlin, we have seen the rise of many new art works and new art movements. Hegel never meant to deny this possibility. But the question remains: is art still an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence, or is art no longer of this character? If, however, it is such no longer, then there remains the question why this is so. The truth of Hegel's judgment has not yet been decided; for behind this verdict there stands Western thought since the Greeks, which thought corresponds to a truth of beings that has already happened. Decision upon the judgment will be made, when it is made, from and about this truth of what is.¹⁷

Heidegger is considering the proposition that thinking of art in terms of the present, as Hegel and art history construe it as a present that has come

about, is to commit oneself to the possibility that art can exhaust itself or be subsumed within some more adequate way of comprehending the present (such as philosophy or the history of art, both of which Hegel thinks of as “science”).

We could put the point in an architectural way that approaches some of Smithson’s formulations. Hegel’s philosophy of art coincides with and is complicit with the rise of the museum. The museum becomes the central artistic institution at that point when art tends to lose religious and civic meaning; but it still can serve as a subject of knowledge in the modern metanarrative that understands, as Hegel did, the succession of styles as humanity’s rise to self-consciousness. We go to the museum in order to see where we have been, to encapsulate a process of acculturation (*Bildung*) on the individual level that occupied thousands of years for the species. A walk through the museum becomes a radically abbreviated form of mankind’s march through history, a “march” that was typically effected by colonial or imperial power. The museum, like Hegel’s philosophy, pays its respects to the time stream while wanting to bring it to an end. For to confine, enclose, and arrange in the museum is to suppose that a final vantage point has been attained from which we can survey the sense of the past. And that in turn supposes that there is some higher standpoint than the artistic one (call it *Wissenschaft*, art history, or philosophy) that enables such a determination of meaning. Of course it is possible to resist the stasis of the traditional museum by creating new museums, museums that emphasize their modernity like the Museum of Modern Art or the New Museum of Contemporary Art. It is clear that there is no intrinsic limit to this process within the horizons of modernism (and if what I have just said is correct, then every museum will be a modern museum). If you want to refute Hegel’s claim that art has effectively come to an end, it is easy enough to point not only to the production of new works of art but to the formation of

new museums designed to keep abreast of the latest developments. Yet from the Hegelian perspective, the proliferation of museums simply demonstrates the culture's insistent need to capture the present and make it accessible to knowledge. In this case the desire implicit in the culture of the museum is precisely the requirement that art be simultaneous both alive and dead.¹⁸

Smithson's comments on the museum and, even more, his production of nonsites, earthworks, films, and other displacements ought to be seen as oblique or lateral interventions rather than as attempts at creating "new" institutions that could be reabsorbed into the museal culture. In this sense all of Smithson's activity is strategic rather than principled. That is, he is aware that there is no easy way out of the museum (which he often compares to a labyrinth) any more than (as Heidegger and Derrida show) there is any simple escape from metaphysics, for to claim that one is "outside" or "beyond" in these cases is to accept the horizon established by that from which one flees. To insist that one is outside is to be limited by the inside/outside parameters that reinforce and establish the discourses and institutions for which alternatives are sought. We might instead think of Smithson as providing a series of strategies for deconstructing the museum and its culture, remembering that this involves questioning the philosophy of time and history that the latter involves. As the title of his essay "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" suggests, one such strategy is to read the museum as a text, and that means to reread it or read it differently—that is, to concentrate not on its contents but on its semiotics and its structure. Smithson's reading of the museum is above all a spatial reading and one that vigilantly attends to the absences that form the other side of the presences that are celebrated in the museum's explicit ideology. In "Some Void Thoughts on Museums," Smithson finds in the museum the same "new consciousness of the vapid and the dull"—that is, the entropic—that he had discerned in the new monuments (*Writings*, 12):

Visiting a museum is a matter of going from void to void. Hallways lead the viewer to things once called “pictures” and “statues.” Anachronisms hang and protrude from every angle. Themes without meaning press on the eye. Multifarious nothings permute into false windows (frames) that open up onto a verity of blanks. . . . Blind and senseless, one continues wandering around the remains of Europe, only to end in that massive deception “the art history of the recent past.” (*Writings*, 58)

Presumably the art history of the recent past is a massive deception because it not only succumbs to the general illusion of temporal development that structures all art history but also because it misses the antitemporalistic point of recent art. This is what Smithson has in mind when he says of the ultra-moderne that it will doubtless “be falsified into a style” (*Writings*, 49). In a dialogue between Alan Kaprow and Smithson called “What Is a Museum?” Kaprow begins by suggesting that “the fact that the museums look like mausolea may actually reveal to us the attitude we’ve had to art in the past. It was a form of paying respect to the dead” (*Writings*, 59). Smithson is suspicious of

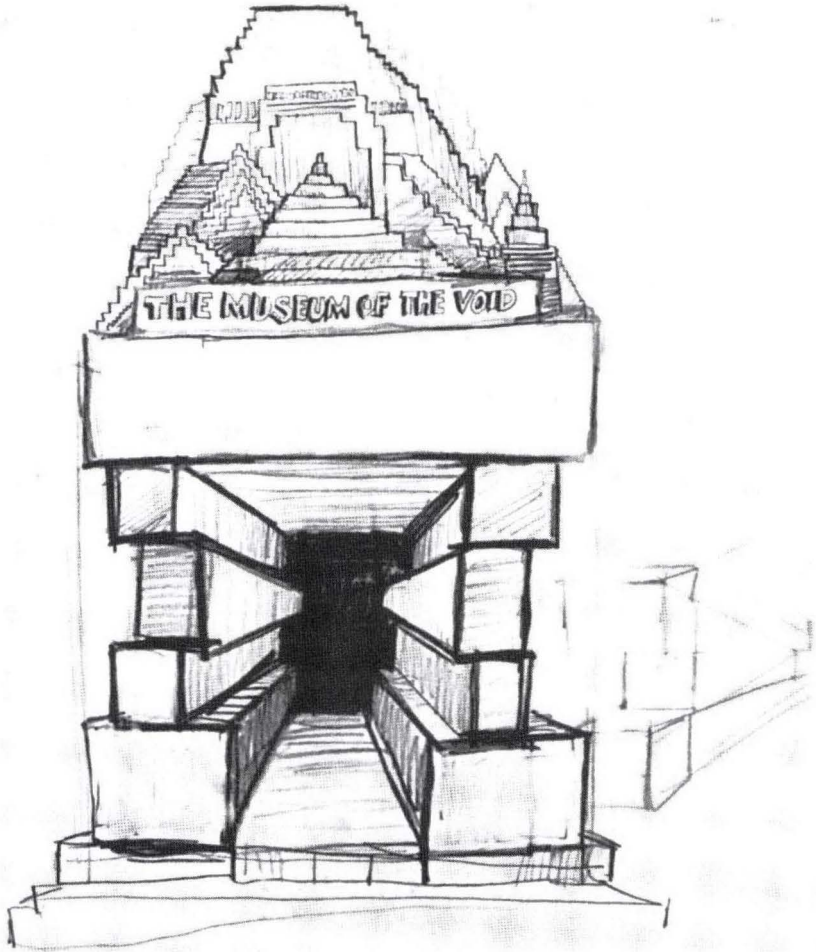
an attitude that tends toward McLuhanism, and this attitude would tend to see the museum as a null structure. But I think the nullity implied in the museum is actually one of its major assets, and that this should be realized and accentuated. . . . It seems that your position is one that is concerned with what’s happening. I’m interested for the most part in what’s not happening, that area between events that could be called the gap. This gap exists in the blank and void regions or settings that we never look at. A museum devoted to different kinds of emptiness could be developed. The emptiness could be defined by the actual installation of art. Installations should empty rooms, not fill them. (*Writings*, 60)

Kaprow, of course, was one of the pioneers of the Happenings of the 1960s; Smithson's response articulates the ontology of the Happening, committed as it is to filling the moment, and implies that despite its relatively aleatory and spontaneous character the genre is continuous with much of the artistic tradition. While the staggers of Happenings might question the "dead" quality of the museum, it is precisely this feature that Smithson values. The museum can now be perceived as void and emptiness; it's simply a question of shifting attention from the figure to the ground, as the Gestalt psychologists would say. Rather than marching through the museum purposefully educating oneself by recapitulating the history of art, it is possible to let the vast spaces, labyrinthine structures, and blank walls (exhibits occupy only a small portion of their space) dominate the field of experience. In this perspective the art museum joins a number of other structures with which it would not ordinarily be closely associated. In the Borgesian essay that he wrote with Mel Bochner on the Hayden Planetarium, "In the Domain of the Great Bear," Smithson celebrates a structure whose dedication to cosmic, infinite, and inconceivable spaces is embodied in its own plan. Like Pascal's infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, the planetarium becomes the map of an unmappable universe: "The ambulatories become vast interminable spaces; traversing them becomes an interstellar journey. Once such expectations occur, there no longer exist any realities. Just vague disorders and contingencies. The planetarium becomes the same size as the universe, which it is" (*Writings*, 25).

We can also consider "new" museums that would differ from the old not by participating in "that massive deception, 'the art history of the recent past,'" but by, we might say (borrowing from Greenberg), becoming resolutely and truly modernist museums that take their conditions and limitations as their own task and subject matter. The kinds of structures that Smithson has in

mind here are not “organic” museums like the Guggenheim, with its intestinal form and its attempt to direct the viewer’s path; in those respects the Guggenheim, and to a lesser but significant extent the High Museum in Atlanta, are regressively modernist. One example that Smithson cites is Philip Johnson’s underground museum “which in a sense buries abstract art in another kind of abstraction, so that it really becomes a negation of a negation” (*Writings*, 61). Abstraction is the negation of figuration, or as Greenberg would have it, the Kantian reflection upon the conditions that make figuration possible. But why stop there? Smithson, who sometimes described himself as a dialectical materialist, suggests here (in Hegelian-Marxist language) that the dialectic may continue by reflecting on the structure of the museum, which in turn makes abstraction possible. Going underground is a theme that he also found appealing. The typical modern museum (leaving aside its postmodern supplements, like the airy wings added recently to the Metropolitan) is above the ground, but could just as well, in a sense, be under it because of the lack of windows and natural light. Yet we know that we are above ground, reaching literally or metaphorically into the clouds, as Hegel describes the Tower of Babel and the history of art that it generates. Literally going underneath the surface involves thematizing the association of museum/mausoleum and of the death of art that is implicit in modernist practice. Smithson’s drawing of *The Museum of the Void* suggests an underground entrance and hints at some monumental works like the tomb of Atreus; to follow out these associations would be to see how the prehistoric may meet the posthistoric (plate 10).

Smithson is deploying strategies with respect to the museum that can be compared with Jacques Derrida’s account of how one might, from the inside, “solicit” the metaphysical tradition (that is, cause it to tremble). That Derrida describes these strategies, their advantages and their pitfalls, in terms of a



10. Robert Smithson, *The Museum of the Void*, c. 1967, pencil on paper, 19" x 24". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

complex of notions involving ground, edifice, and terrain makes his statement particularly appropriate for Smithson's deconstruction of the museum and its culture. This discourse having to do with the inside and the outside of the house pertains in the first instance to Derrida's concern to address Heidegger, who says that "language is the house of Being," and whose own attempts to rewrite philosophy, history, and aesthetics are involved more than accidentally with architectural, topographical, and geographical notions (as we will see later in more detail). The first strategy would be

to attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain, by repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts and the original problematic, by using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house, that is equally in language. Here one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, relifting (*relever*), at an always more certain depth, that which one allegedly deconstructs. The continuous process of making explicit, moving towards an opening, risks sinking into the autism of the closure.¹⁹

Here we might think of several practices already discussed. The risk of confirming and consolidating is evident in the creation of museums dedicated to the most contemporary art; they simply extend the tradition in challenging it. More specific forms of "using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house" would be Johnson's underground gallery and Smithson's proposals for "paramuseums" dedicated to various forms of absence (at one point Kaprow proposed that the Guggenheim could be emptied of its paintings and sculptures in order to become such a museum of the void [*Writings*, 63]). These resources are as linguistic as they are architectural, for they require the recognition of concepts such as emptiness, negation, and infinity. In this particular case we should note that these are what Kant had

called *sublime* ideas that cannot be directly presented, but only suggested, to the senses. Similarly, the attempt to read other structures (the planetarium, the museum of natural history, the movie theater) as analogous to the art museum in their spaciness (both in the sense of the amount and structure of that space and the feeling of aimlessness that a walk through them can produce) is to perceive that the quality of framing and arrangement that is at work in the latter also helps to constitute the former. Yet all of these processes risk “sinking into the autism of the closure” insofar as they are committed to an institution, a building, and (most significantly) to the continuous Kantian (or Greenbergian) activity of reflecting on foundations.

The second strategy sketched by Derrida is

to decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself outside, and by affirming an absolute break and difference. Without mentioning all the other forms of *trompe-l'oeil* perspective in which such a displacement can be caught, thereby inhabiting more naively and more strictly than ever the inside one declares one has deserted, the simple practice of language ceaselessly reinstates the new terrain on the oldest ground.²⁰

This would be to declare that one is, for example, totally outside or beyond the traditional art world, by refusing to collaborate with the museum and its affiliated discourses and institutions. It is sometimes said of “earthworks artists” and of others whose public art seems to deliberately reject the museum (Richard Serra, for example) that by filming, photographing, recording, or reporting their works to the art world, they are necessarily complicit with it. By accepting grants, subsidies, or fees that are contingent upon their identifying themselves as artists, or even by accepting this linguistic designation itself, they would be “inhabiting the inside” despite themselves. Smithson no doubt

indulged occasionally in such a rhetoric of escape, one tinged in his case by a specifically American suspicion of the city and a longing for open, unrestricted spaces. In “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” he declares that “when the artist goes to the desert he enriches his absence and burns off the water (paint) on his brain. The slush of the city evaporates from the artist’s mind as he installs his art. [Michael] Heizer’s ‘dry lakes’ become mental maps that contain the vacancy of Thanatos. A consciousness of the desert operates between craving and satiety” (*Writings*, 89). But Smithson prefaced those remarks by saying that “the desert is less ‘nature’ than a concept, a place that swallows up boundaries.” This suggests that rather than embracing an environmental mysticism and sacralizing the land, Smithson is engaged in a precise conceptual maneuver of transformation, dislocation, and displacement. His frequent name for such a maneuver is “dialectic,” a name that carries its own very heavy baggage of traditional philosophy along with it. Does dialectic transform or confirm that tradition? In a late and surprisingly hostile interview on Duchamp, Smithson criticizes Duchamp’s lack of a dialectical sense, describing him as committed only to a perpetual process of transcendence, in which he was concerned to transform everyday objects (like urinals) into artworks; similarly, Hegel criticized Kant for transforming ordinary moral views into the eternal and universal obligations of the categorical imperative. In this statement made just before his death (a death that can be read either entropically or dialectically), Smithson describes his own artistic coming of age as a discovery of the dialectic: “I never thought of isolating my objects in any particular way. Gradually, more and more, I have come to see their relationship to the outside world, and finally when I started making the Nonsites, the dialectic became very strong. These Nonsites became maps that pointed to sites in the world outside the gallery, and a dialectical view began to subsume a purist, abstract tendency” (*Writings*, 197).

In Smithson's last published piece, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," he uses the language of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis to characterize both certain works, artifacts, and sites (notably Central Park) and the historical development that leads, he claims, from the opposition of an aesthetics of the beautiful to one of the sublime to the rise of the picturesque. Smithson deploys the concepts of dialectic, then, to describe both the evolution of art and his own growth as an artist; the point where they coincide would seem to be a certain form of what Hegel called an absolute identity. Yet at the same time, as I have tried to show, some of the deepest tendencies of Smithson's work, of his projects in and across all media, are aimed at contesting a Hegelian culture of art. It will come as no great surprise, then, if I say that Smithson's work embodies the very tension between the Hegelian culture and the attempt to deconstruct it. He is caught between the inside and the outside of the house, a situation whose emblem might be the *Partially Buried Woodshed* he created at Kent State University, a structure set up to teeter on the verge of collapse from the earth that has been piled on its roof and has broken its central beam, but one that could stand in place and would only gradually succumb to entropic forces. This extremity of placement and displacement is, however, much more than a biographical fact about Robert Smithson (although it is still not clear that we know what we are talking about when we speak of an artist's life or career and how much the ghost of the teleological thinking of a Vasari still lingers in the most contemporary discussions of the avant-garde). The situation or, let us say, the site of these tensions is one that Smithson shares with other artists who come after or want to come after the museum and modernism. It is necessary, then, to interrogate the relation of site and nonsite more carefully, and in general to see how such a "dialectic" is rooted in the ground or the earth that became Smithson's medium and object despite its being the mere residue or waste of such a dialectical aesthetics

as Hegel's. In other words, what happens when the unthought ground of the Hegelian story (remember how that narrative begins with the Tower of Babel reaching into the clouds) becomes, in a rewritten version, both the theme and the medium for art?

2 **Uncanny Materiality: Decentering Art and Vision**

*I became very interested in that whole dialogue between, let's say, the circumference and the middle and how these two things operated together. —ROBERT SMITHSON, *Writings**

*The center is at the center of the totality, and yet since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center. —JACQUES DERRIDA, *Writing and Difference**

In a 1965 catalogue entry concerning the minimalist work of Donald Judd, Smithson describes a decentering effect in Judd's art that could double as a statement of the program that he was following in his own work at the time:

A reversible up and down quality was an important feature of the work which Judd showed in the VIII São Paulo Bienale. It is impossible to tell what is hanging from what or what is supporting what. Ups are downs and downs are ups. An uncanny materiality inherent in the surface engulfs the basic structure. Both surface and structure exist simultaneously in a suspended condition. What is outside vanishes to meet the inside, while what is inside vanishes to meet the outside. The concept of "anti-matter" 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." (*Writings*, 22–23)

What intrigues Smithson is the discrepancy between the apparent, superficial clarity of minimalist surfaces and the uncanny way in which these objects defeat our standard expectations concerning form and order. (The impression that Smithson is formulating his own program here may be intensified by Judd's reply to some similar thoughts he had expressed in *Arts Magazine*. Judd's minimalist response, in a letter to the editor, was just "Smithson isn't my spokesman.")¹

"An uncanny materiality inherent in the surface engulfs the basic structure." This sentence could have been written by Derrida, and its conjunction of the uncanny and the material brings together themes developed by Freud and Marx. The structure—whether of minimalist sculpture, the deliberate and conscious use of language, or the apparently rational arrangements of political and economic matters in bourgeois society—has a deceptive clarity. It is when we look at the multiple senses of the language we use, betraying contradictory or suppressed meanings, or the impoverished and alienated state of the worker and the fetishism of the commodity, that such structures are engulfed and contested by the very words we speak, the conditions of daily life, or objects that we see as repositories of value. Similarly, the actual surfaces of minimalist works—their size, color, texture, the way that they fill or empty the spaces in which they are set—call into question the structures that at first offer an illusion of modular or geometrical order. As in the Kantian conception of the sublime, something that is implicit or unacknowledged overwhelms or engulfs an explicit, communicated structure or content. Freud's account of the uncanny seems particularly relevant here.² The uncanny (*unheimlich*) is the dark and enigmatic side of something well known and familiar (*heimlich*). What could be more ordinary than the industrial steel or plastic of Judd's (and some of the other minimalists') constructions? Yet when they loom repetitively or exhibit an obtrusive uselessness that contrasts strongly

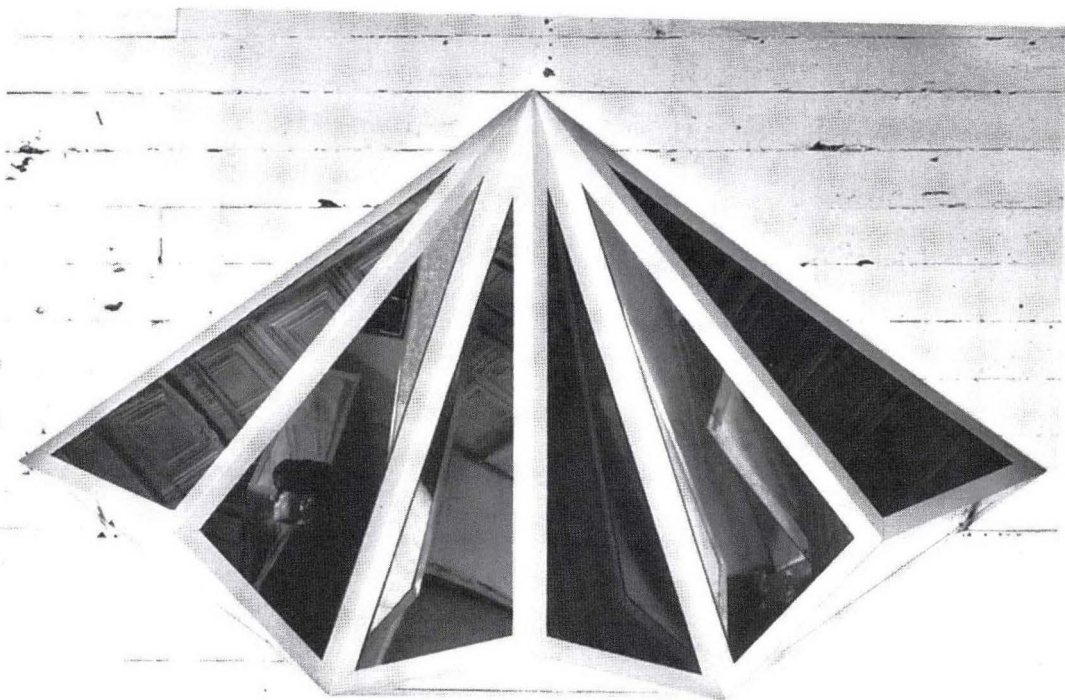
with the utilitarian purposes to which their materials are often put, these objects become strange and estranging. Their matter becomes antimatter. An uncanny quality is also associated, Freud suggests, with certain forms of repetition and recurrence and with the very compulsion to repeat. What Smithson emphasizes about Judd's structures is that they have no true beginning or end, but form a potentially infinite series, repeating the same module exactly or with minor variations. Where everything is repeated, no organization prevails and there is an entropic effect that recalls Freud's idea that all life and activity tend toward the condition of death.

The works that Smithson has in mind are, as he says, "obstructions" not abstractions, frustrating our rational inclinations to identify a center, a base, or a foundation that stands in some intelligible relation to a circumference, or to a supported or dependent object. In an interview of 1972 Smithson says that he "began to function as a conscious artist around 1964–65"—that is, the period in which he was exhibiting self-contained works in galleries, works constructed geometrically, typically involving repetition and mirroring effects, the features usually associated with minimalism (*Writings*, 146).

The category "minimalism" may be misleading, for works like Judd's are quite complex and call for rather articulate responses from the viewer. However, it is now possible in retrospect to identify a minimalist movement that arose and flourished in the 1960s. That movement could be defined in terms of its tendency to construct works out of neutral modular or monolithic units, to produce an impression of inertness that minimized contrast, and to occupy or create a new landscape defined by the sculptural works themselves.³ Despite Smithson's affinities with the movement and his close relations with the artists who spearheaded it, his own work, as Lawrence Alloway points out, deviates from minimalism in several specific ways. Although Smithson uses modules, for example, he tends not to repeat them but to array

them in progressions of changing size according to a rule of progression; since these progressions could be continued indefinitely, they lack the closure of the minimalist style.⁴

To see what defines the art that Smithson produced at the time that minimalism flourished, consider the series of works made with mirrors; it's as if the artist were both adopting and displacing Plato's conception of the work of art as a mirror so as to literalize it to the point of rendering it impossible. Each untitled mirror construction of 1964–1965 (*Robert Smithson*, 58–59; plate 11) contains a number of mirrored surfaces set at oblique angles to one another and so providing skewed and multiple mutual reflections. “You want a mirror?” Smithson says to Plato, “I’ll give you a mirror, but it will reflect nothing but other mirrors, or it will be an object sufficient unto itself.” Of course, the mirror has often been used in painting to suggest a certain self-referential dimension that qualifies the traditional notion of art as a reflection or a window; think of the mirrors in Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage* or Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. For Smithson, however, who constructs the work from nothing but mirrors, the external mirroring function breaks down and one is left with an uncanny autonomous object whose outside (its reflecting properties) has become interchangeable with its inside (its meaning or essence). Because of the structure of these mirror works, the viewer not only looks “into” an individual mirror, as our language has it, but also into the conjunction of several mirrors set up at angles to mirror one another. In this way the experience simultaneously juxtaposes the two metaphors for art as representation: looking into a mirror and looking through a window. The two metaphors seem opposed, because one suggests that we look through the window into something else, into another space, while the other has to do with what we precisely do not look through but which reflects back what lies before us. If seeing through a window is looking at reflections in a mirror, then both transparency



11. Robert Smithson, *Untitled*, 1963–1964, steel, mirrorized plastic, 50' × 12' × 18 1/2". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

and mirroring lose their separate structures, and these two very ordinary structures are fused into an “uncanny materiality.”

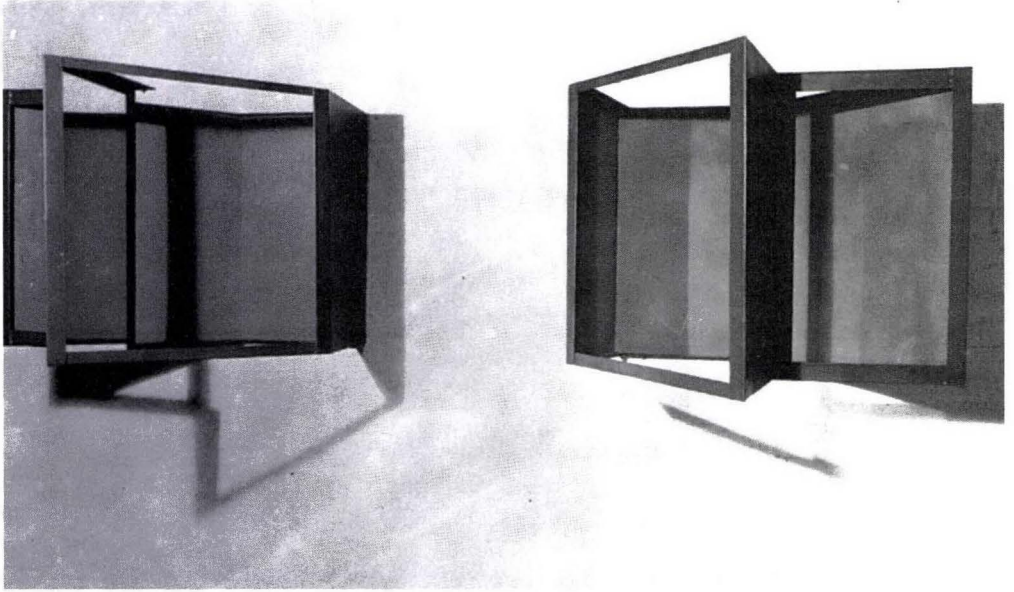
In his essay “Ultramoderne” Smithson had written around this same time about one possible complicity between the mirror and the window:

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 tomblike mouldings and casements, but the interior mirrors multiplied and divided “reality” into perplexing, impenetrable, uninhabitable regions. . . . The window and the mirror are secret sharers of the same elements. The window contains nothing, while the mirror contains everything. . . . The “ultra-window” is a privileged post for these “site-seers” of trans-modernism. The window doubles as an open and closed space, and this is accentuated in many ’thirties buildings. (*Writings*, 50)

One of the constant themes of Smithson’s work is art’s peculiar power to empty out matter, to turn it into nothing. (In other contexts, as we will see especially in “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Yucatan,” this evacuation or evisceration takes on a specifically sacrificial character.) The uncanny effect here is achieved by the extreme opposition experienced between the solid mass of the buildings and the dematerialization produced by a complex of mirrors and windows. The passage is vintage Smithson in its precise analysis of a specific effect, articulated by linguistic play and literary references that evoke some of the same responses as the objects or experiences that are being described. “Site-seers” are *not* “sight-seers”; they do not simply look around at a miscellaneous collection of views. They are seers, visionaries or prophets, of the site, or place. It is not a hedonistic and random visual itinerary that Smithson is describing but a comprehension of what it is to be in a place in a way that

would undermine the very possibility of rootless sight-seeing. The use of the phrase, transforming the ordinary sense that remains close to the surface, is itself a demonstration of the uncanny properties of language as a material medium. When Smithson speaks of the mirror and window as “secret sharers” he alludes to Joseph Conrad’s story, which is concerned with the theme of the double. In Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny” such doubling is described as profoundly unsettling and disturbing, because an ordinary person or object (the *heimlich*) becomes weird and unfathomable through duplication or repetition.

If mirrors and windows indeed become fused into a unitary self-referential object, what role is left for vision, which Plato called the “noblest of the senses”? One radical answer to this question is proposed by the *Enantiomorphic Chambers* of 1965 (plate 12). Here Smithson sets out to deconstruct the *video* or “I see” in a way that suggests the deconstruction of the *cogito* or “I think” that was simultaneously taking place in European philosophy. The chambers are “enantiomorphic”; that is, they are mirror images of one another or what Kant called “incongruous counterparts” that like right- and left-handed gloves have the same internal structure and yet cannot be substituted for one another because of their different spatial orientations (the gloves can only become congruent if one turns one of them inside out). But the *Enantiomorphic Chambers* are also literally mirror images because each contains a mirror set at an oblique angle that produces an unusual set of reflections. Smithson described the chambers in an essay he wrote on perspective as a realization of the physics of vision that would help to free us from the illusions of Renaissance ocularcentrism. From the standpoint of the perspectivism developed in the Renaissance, the visual world is laid out before our gaze in such a way that it can be recaptured by a representation in which all the lines of sight converge at a single vanishing point. Such a construction of



12. Robert Smithson, *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1965, painted steel and mirrors, blue and green. Location unknown. Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

vision tends to elevate sight above the other senses and has come in for a variety of criticisms in the twentieth century. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for example, argued that this is an after the fact, rationalized reconstruction of experience that is not phenomenologically faithful to the actual interconnection of sight and mobility in a world where the tactile and visual dimensions of experience can be separated only in thought and not in lived experience.⁵ Other thinkers, like Martin Heidegger and John Dewey, have protested that Renaissance perspectivism, when generalized into a universal model of human perception, contributes to the unfortunate illusion that we can attain a perfect God's-eye view of the world in which it is completely present to us and spread out for our observation and manipulation.⁶ The reciprocal centers of such a world would be the human eye and the vanishing point of the visual scene; within this world everything can be understood as occupying a certain position with relation to the center and the periphery. What Smithson set out to do was to demonstrate that neither of these presumed centers has the solitary independence that perspectivism attributes to it.

He begins with the rather prosaic observation that we (typically) have two eyes rather than one, yet perspectivism supposes a kind of Cyclopean vision in which there is a single center of sight. The two *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, then, correspond to our two eyes. In "Pointless Vanishing Points" Smithson writes that

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. A symmetrical division into two equal parts is what makes it enantiomorphic; this division exists also in certain crystal structures. . . . The two separate "pictures" that are usually placed in a stereoscope have been replaced by two separate mirrors in my *Enantiomorphic Chambers*—thus

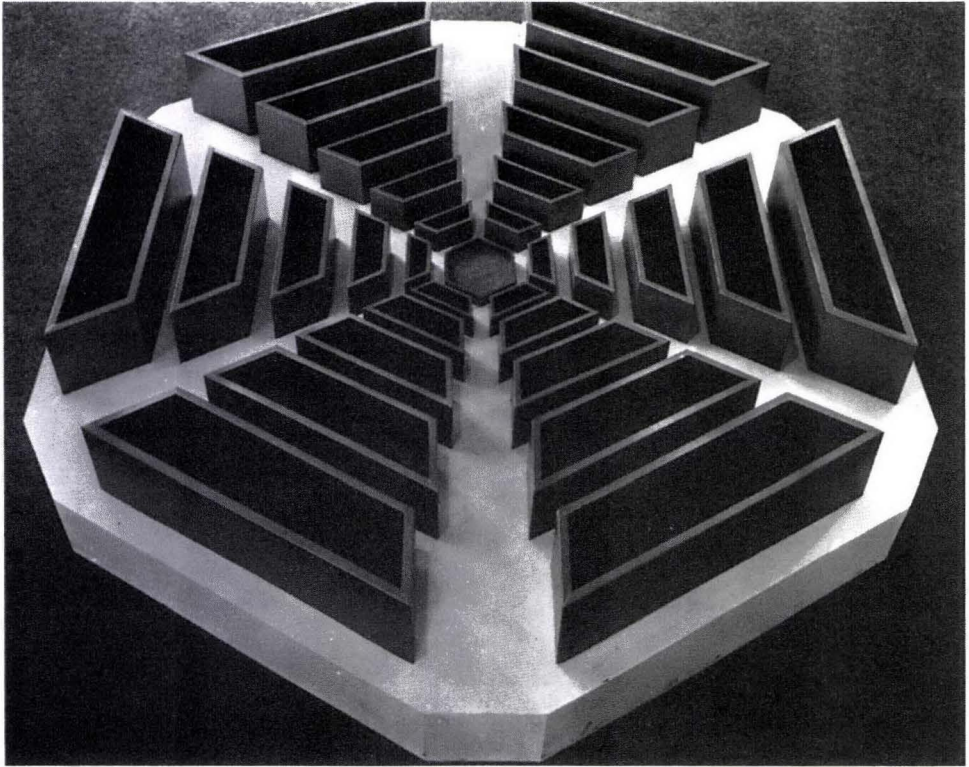
excluding any fused image. This negates any central vanishing point, and takes one physically to the other side of the double mirrors. It is as though one were being imprisoned by the actual structure of two alien eyes. It is an illusion without an illusion. (*Writings*, 209)

Or, as he sums it up elsewhere, “To see one’s own sight means visible blindness” (*Writings*, 39); this thesis is strikingly similar to the leading idea of Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind*, which argues that the representational claims of the Western visual arts are undermined by the failure of vision that occurs in the shifts and displacements between the hand and eye of the artist.⁷ Binocular vision, in which two eyes function together to produce the single fused image of the perspectival model, has been differentiated or deconstructed into stereometric vision in which we are not allowed to forget that we see with two eyes and that nothing guarantees the production of the imperial gaze fetishized by Renaissance painting and Cartesian philosophy.

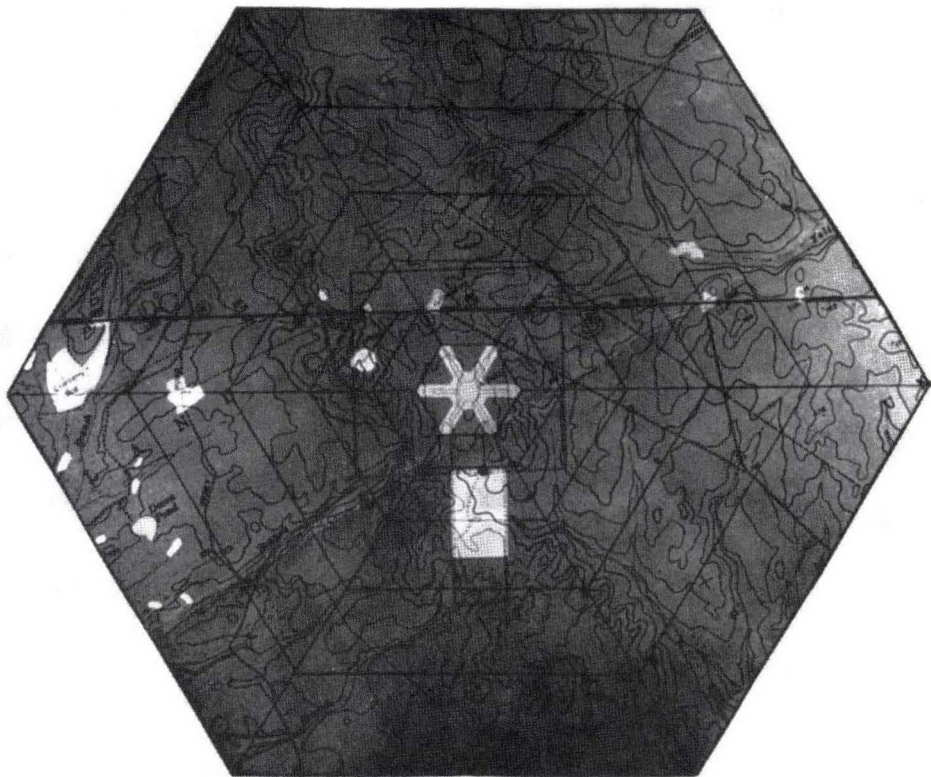
Since Nietzsche (perhaps since Kant) philosophers have been questioning the alleged self-evidence, certainty, and autonomy of the *cogito*; to this Smithson, along with some other thinkers, has undertaken an interrogation of the *video*. Heidegger attempted to put the recent fascination with the *video* into a wider context by observing that the Greeks had no such concept: “In the discourse of the Greeks there is no trace of an act of vision in the sense of the Latin *videre*; it is simply a matter of a glinting and gleaming. But to gleam is only possible if the open is already there.”⁸ No seeing or appearing (“gleaming”) is self-sufficient, Heidegger is maintaining, but presupposes a more primordial condition of things being open or accessible. He and Smithson would warn us against assuming uncritically that the form of this openness is the form of sight privileged by the perspectival tradition. One might think of Smithson’s artistic project as a continual expansion of the usually unexamined and unthought conditions of our experience in which our understanding

of sight will necessarily be transformed. This aspect of the project can be heard in this observation from *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan*: “To reconstruct what the eyes see in words, in an ‘ideal language,’ is a vain exploit. Why not reconstruct one’s inability to see? Let us give passing shape to the unconsolidated views that surround a work of art, and develop a type of ‘anti-vision’ or negative seeing” (*Writings*, 101). Freud says that the morbid fear of losing one’s eyes is closely connected to fears of castration; in his analysis of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Sand Man” he suggests that the fear is a paradigmatic occasion for the uncanny.⁹ For Smithson to question the sense of sight itself is to engage in an analysis of these frightening possibilities; it is to undermine and reverse what is both the most familiar of our sensory ties to the world and the presupposition of the visual arts.

The works that I have just been discussing do indeed mount a powerful challenge to a certain centered conception of vision, yet they seem to accept without question the centering role of the gallery or museum. Each was made to be shown in a specific exhibition in one of these conventional artistic locations. Yet as Smithson constantly emphasizes, the museum and the gallery are places of constraint and limitation: “Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells—in other words, neutral rooms called ‘galleries.’ A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral” (*Writings*, 132). One of the senses of the series of nonsites that Smithson produced was to contest the authority of the institutionalized centers of art in galleries and museums. He is questioning the site or context of the *video* as well as the internal structure that he interrogated in works such as *Enantiomorphic Chambers*. The nonsites have a gallery or museum component, consisting usually of a container or set of containers that hold rocks, soil, or some other material from a specific place or “site” (plates 13



13. Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey*,
1968. Collection Dwan Gallery, New York. Courtesy Estate of
Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.



A NONSITE (an indoor artwork)

31 sub-divisions based on a hexagonal "airfield" in the Woodmansie Quadrangle - New Jersey (Topographic) map. Each sub-division of the Nonsite contains sand from the site shown on the map. Tours between the Nonsite and the site are possible. The red dot on the map is the place where the sand was collected.

14. Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey*, 1968. Collection Dwan Gallery, New York. Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

and 14). However, the site from which the material is taken is also a part of the work, and the effect of the work as a whole is to defeat any sense of simple location and to set up what Smithson calls a dialectic between the site and the nonsite. The point is to avoid the temptation to be a mere sightseer and to become a “site-seer” with a transformative vision of what it is to be in (and out of) a site. The nonsite is both a nonplace (it is not the place from which the material was taken) and a “non-sight,” because in seeing it one is *not* seeing the site/sight to which it refers.¹⁰ We are not there and we are not seeing it; we are reconstructing “the inability to see.” Yet we should not imagine that the “original” site is itself well defined, as a landscape or garden might be within the conceptual framework of natural beauty. The sites were not chosen for their natural beauty but precisely for their entropic characteristics. The writings abound in descriptions, like this one of a quarry, of the sites that were found compelling and became associated with nonsites:

Cracked, broken, shattered; the walls threatened to come crashing down. Fragmentation, corrosion, decomposition, disintegration, rock creep, debris slides, mud flow, avalanche were everywhere in evidence. The gray sky seemed to swallow up the heaps around us. Fractures and faults spilled forth sediment, crushed conglomerates, eroded debris and sandstone. It was an arid region, bleached and dry. An infinity of surfaces spread in every direction. A chaos of cracks surrounded us. (*Writings*, 20)

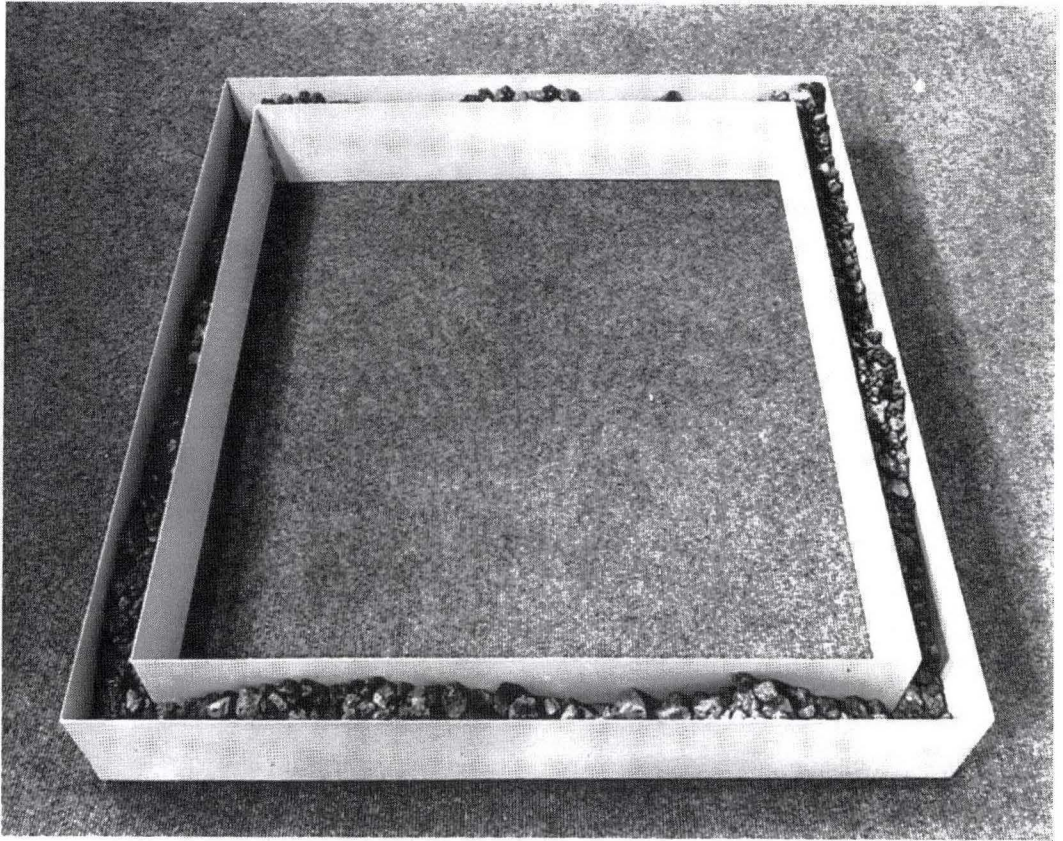
This is the “uncanny materiality” of the earth which we might be tempted to see otherwise in terms of the schematic structures we find on a map, as a natural resource or as an idealized landscape. The rush of Smithson’s prose, heaping one form of threat or fall upon another, has the same quality as the site it evokes. We should not suppose that the nonsites are simply an intermediate step in Smithson’s development, linking his quasi-minimalist gallery

pieces to the later earthworks; such a narrative would suppose that he found his true goal in the actual landscape. Constructing a trajectory like that might satisfy a certain urge to render an artist's work intelligible by situating his or her various "styles" or "periods" within a biographical narrative, but it would seriously misread works like the *Spiral Jetty*, which, we shall see, can be described in terms of a decentering process very much like the one at work in the nonsites. Specifically, we might note now that the earthworks also have no simple location; they can be difficult of access (like the *Spiral Jetty*) and the photographs, films, and records that document their making and existence are equally "parts" of the work along with the topographical location (in the Great Salt Lake, for example) itself. In a discussion with Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim, Smithson was asked just what his concept of the nonsite was. His reply constitutes an articulate account of his program:

There's a central focus point which is the non-site; the site is the unfocused fringe where your mind loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades, as it were. I like the idea of quiet catastrophes taking place. . . . The interesting thing about the site is that, unlike the non-site, it throws you out to the fringes. In other words, there's nothing to grasp onto except the cinders and there's no way of focusing on a particular place. One might even say that the place has been absconded or lost. This is a map that will take you somewhere, but when you get there you won't really know where you are. In a sense the non-site is the center of the system, and the site itself is the fringe or the edge. (*Writings*, 176)

Freud's oceanic feeling (and Ehrenzweig's notion of dedifferentiation) are invoked here, oddly displaced to a desert landscape, in order to convey a sense of the boundless. While the object or place, the site, would ordinarily be thought to take precedence over and center its referents or replicas, here the

centering function is variable; in the site/nonsite Smithson reverses the Pascalian definition of God, because now the center is nowhere and the circumference is everywhere. In “The Uncanny” Freud reports his own strange adventure of losing his place when he found himself repetitively and uncontrollably returning to a red-light district that he had accidentally wandered into in a provincial Italian town.¹¹ In that experience the geographical and psychological center (the piazza) was displaced by what would ordinarily be its repressed periphery. The remark that “there’s nothing to grasp onto but the cinders” calls to mind T. E. Hulme’s essay “Cinders,” which Smithson cites several times. For Hulme there is ultimately nothing but cinders—disjoint, miscellaneous leavings and fragments that may by temporary artifice or coincidence come to form apparent unities. To imply that there are only cinders would be self-defeating, because cinders are the remains of something else that has been consumed and transformed; but strategically the hyperbolic statement has the effect of suggesting the fragility of all structures, centers, and identities.¹² Here Smithson is discussing the *Mono Lake Nonsite*, which literally does consist of a great deal of cinders and pumice (plate 15). But if the cinders are read through Hulme’s sketch of a philosophy, then the work becomes textual, an example of entropic “printed matter,” of the earth as a “jumbled museum” or a materialized Borgesian library. The *Mono Lake Nonsite* is a frame constructed around an empty space; the frame itself is several inches wide and the cinders and pumice from Mono Lake in northern California are placed within this outer frame. Smithson’s documentation for the nonsite consists of a map presented in a fashion parallel to that of the empty frame, in which a large center square is left blank and portions of the map are seen in the narrow peripheral frame. In discussion Smithson says, “This map of Mono lake is a map that tells you how to get nowhere. . . . If you look at the map you’ll see it is in the shape of a margin—it has no center” (*Writings*, 176).



15. Robert Smithson, *Mono Lake Nonsite*, 1968, steel, cinders, container 8" × 40" × 40". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

This play with the center and the margin is also at work in a number of drawings that Smithson made in 1964 and earlier, which he describes as cartouches, in which the frame has a relatively lively texture and the center is monotonous or trivial (plates 16 and 17).¹³ Smithson said later that these cartouches “freed me—from the whole notion of anthropomorphism” (*Writings*, 151). At first glance this seems to be a high intellectual gloss to apply to these images of bodies that appear to owe much more to erotics than to formal concerns, more to the American soft-core porn of the 1960s than to the antihumanist philosophy that was being formulated in France in that decade. But the figure here is parodied, pushed to the margins, and often transformed into a winged angelic or hermaphroditic figure. It is precisely the form (*morphē*) and centrality of the human figure (*anthropos*) which is put into question in this attempted liberation from anthropomorphism. What Smithson also seems to imply here is that there is something anthropomorphic about the need to fill and occupy the center, as in the humanistic conception of vision that would make us the unitary source of the *video*. If we cannot escape this anthropomorphism altogether (and Smithson is sometimes more cautious about this), perhaps we can loosen its grip sufficiently to concentrate on things in their dispersions, on cinders that point to no center. Commenting on his choice of Mono Lake, the artist says that

the whole site tends to evaporate. The closer you think you're getting to it and the more you circumscribe it, the more it evaporates. It becomes like a mirage and it just disappears. The site is a place where a piece should be but isn't. The piece that should be there is now somewhere else, usually in a room. Actually everything that's of any importance takes place outside the room. But the room reminds us of the limitations of our condition. (*Writings*, 177)

Smithson's strategic questioning of the concept of the frame is a pervasive theme in his work, whether in the sites and nonsites, the early cartouches, the mirror displacements of several sorts, or the "dialectical" relations he institutes between a relatively permanent earthwork and its pertinent mediations through the media of photography, film, drawings, and texts. The minimalist artists had raised some analogous questions concerning the role of filled and empty space. While the tradition would have it that a sculpture is the tangible object crafted and exhibited by the artist (typically by being placed on a base or pedestal), the minimalists tended to think of the work as a space that was designed or framed by the objects that they introduced into it (these might be designed, geometrical shapes like those of Judd and Robert Morris or the boulders and hay bales deployed by Carl Andre). This tendency persists in works like Christo's *Running Fence* or Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*; both of these were temporary because of the extraordinary changes each effected in its space, Christo's being planned as deliberately ephemeral and Serra's being destroyed when a loose coalition of local workers and government officials demanded that their space be returned to the *status quo ante* art. According to Carl Andre's dialectical definition of the new situation, "A thing is a hole in a thing it is not" (quoted in *Writings*, 44). Smithson's principle that "the site is a place where a piece should be but isn't" seems to be a conscious variation on Andre, as well as an uncanny definition of place.¹⁴

By reversing the roles of the framer and the framed or of the physical objects and their correlative spaces, the minimalists demonstrated that all of these concepts are much more volatile than traditional aesthetics has taken them to be. The seizure or occupation of space entailed by much of this work, minimalist and otherwise, can be seen either as an aggressive exercise of power or, more subtly, as displaying and making explicit the acts of power by which public life in general is determined.¹⁵ Perhaps the perception of violence



6. Robert Smithson, *Untitled* (Pink Linoleum Center), 1964, mixed media with collage, 20 1/2" x 22". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.



17. Robert Smithson, *Untitled (Second Stage Injector)*, 1963, mixed media with collage, $20\frac{1}{8}'' \times 22\frac{1}{16}''$. Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

here has to do with our observing that certain values and properties have been torn away from their usual exemplars and attached to what have been thought to be the sites or objects appropriate to contrasting categories. Serra's *Tilted Arc*, for example, was said to be out of place, to have usurped a space to which it had no right, and so to be a parasite. Yet surely part of the point of such art is to provoke the realization that the conventional use of figure and ground or frame and work pairs is also the expression of certain choices reinforced by custom, institutions, and disciplines. If Serra's work is indeed a parasite, it is because it is placed alongside or on top of a site in order to transvalue it.¹⁶

Smithson's work would probably have been impossible without that of the minimalists. However, he is involved in a more radical activity; rather than simply reversing traditional assignments of values, he is calling those values into question by displaying their variability and volatility. This is a deconstructive enterprise that parallels Derrida's account of the deconstruction of concepts. Traditional philosophy, on this view, depends upon an extensive set of binary oppositions such as the mental and the physical, the real and the apparent, the soul and the body, form and content, meaning and its concrete vehicle, and so on. The main line of the tradition insists on giving a positive value (valorizing) the first item in each of these pairs (the mental, the real, the soul, etc.) and so constructs a systematic network of reinforcing concepts. There are also relatively minor heretical strains of thought such as empiricism that reverse these values by arguing, for example, that the soul is only a mode of the body or meaning only an effect of specific linguistic sounds or marks. But the heretical reversal of values still depends upon the assumption of the binary matrix according to which one or the other of each opposed pair must be the superior or genuine concept.¹⁷ What I am suggesting is that the minimalists stand in the relation of metaphysical heretics to their modernist predecessors, who, with their insistence on purity and form, sound very much

like the idealist tradition in philosophy. (Indeed, as we have already seen in the case of Clement Greenberg, the Kantian affiliations of modernist theory are quite explicit; but the commitment to such traditional aesthetic notions as form, disinterested contemplation, and the separability of the genres of art is a pervasive mode of thought that is hardly limited to Greenberg and Kant.) Smithson, then, with his emphasis on the play between the site and the nonsite or the frame and its content would stand in the position of the deconstructive philosopher who questions the necessity of the binary matrix of conceptual values itself. (We should think of “play” here as a back and forth movement, like the play of a machine, as well as the playful, even humorous, aspects of Smithson’s work; Smithson often calls this play dialectics, although this is a dialectic that will never culminate in a realized totality or absolute.) Like Derrida, Smithson practices a kind of double rhetoric or double gesture here. On the one hand, he sometimes speaks as if it would be possible to transcend the traditional oppositions (as when he says that his early work with cartouches freed him from anthropomorphism); on the other, he tends to acknowledge that these concepts are so deeply rooted that it will be a sufficient achievement to have illuminated their structure and the variability of that structure (as when he says that “the room reminds us of the limitations of our condition”). This double gesture both acknowledges the ineluctable boundaries of artistic work and the necessary, if impossible, project of deforming them.

Smithson’s deconstruction was homespun but not naive; there is no indication that he was familiar with any of Derrida’s writings, very few of which were translated at the time of his death.¹⁸ But the “quixotic autodidact” (a phrase he uses to describe Flaubert’s Bouvard and Pecuchet) does cite Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and many other theorists whom he found useful in formulating his positions (*Writings*, 67). Smithson could introduce a

structuralist perspective into a narrative account of his process of selecting a site, as in an interview with Dennis Wheeler:

SMITHSON: Actually we just drove out and ignored the “No Trespassing” signs. Once you get out into these areas there is always no trespassing . . . taboo, totem taboo. . . . Once again you can even conceive of this like a taboo territory, this is very primitive in a sense. . . . If we get into the primitive structural setups, non-site is . . .

WHEELER: Totemic.

SMITHSON: In a real conscious sense, not in any kind of fantasy sense. . . . If you read some anthropology books you will find that that’s true. . . . This is what Lévi-Strauss points out in his *Savage Mind*. (*Smithson Unearthed*, 102)

It is not only Lévi-Strauss who enters into this conversation, but Freud. *Totem and Taboo* is concerned with the tendency in archaic peoples to establish systems of inclusion and exclusion that distinguish between the licit and the illicit in a vast array of areas, including divisions of space and place. He noted that the strong feelings attached to these separations, which he claimed were founded in the horror of incest and guilt stemming from the primal horde’s murder of the father, lived on in various ways in the behavior of neurotics and children. Smithson points out that the separation of space in the contemporary world is accompanied by analogous patterns of emotion and behavior. As with his suggestion that the artist can articulate the impossibility of sight, here he proposes that the practice of constructing and exploring the dialectic of site/nonsite can be a way of disclosing and analyzing powerful structures of perception and action that are ordinarily hidden from consciousness.

Smithson was far from taking the structuralist binaries as ultimate, even if he does say in the same conversation that he’s interested in Lévi-Strauss’s “cool” cultures with relatively stable conceptual pairs rather than in the more

contemporary and dynamic “hot” cultures (*Smithson Unearthed*, 102–103). The notion of entropy, as he employs it, has a meaning far broader than it does in physics, and he associates it with what we would now call a poststructuralist perspective, as in a second interview, one year later. The structural binaries marked by “no trespassing” signs are now seen to be permeable and fragile:

I’m interested in collaborating with entropy. Some day I would like to compile all the different entropies. All the classifications would lose their grids. Lévi-Strauss had a good insight, he suggested we change the study of anthropology into “entropology.” It would be a study that devotes itself to the process of disintegration in highly developed structures. After all, wreckage is often more interesting than structure. (*Writings*, 181)

One might think here of a number of recent artists who have worked with the theme of wreckage. John Chamberlin’s sculptures of smashed cars and Joseph Beuys’s repeated testimonies to his airplane crash in World War II come to mind. Smithson’s remarks on the great power blackout of 1965 in New York remind us that we are still waiting for an entropic artist of the age of electronics and information who will disclose the possibilities lurking in the shutdown of computers and other information networks.

Just as Smithson displaced and expanded the sense of entropy, so he adapted the concept of dialectics to his own purposes. What he finds useful in dialectics is not the idea of a higher synthesis or attained totality, as in Hegel or some versions of Marxism, but rather the idea of a play or movement that breaks down fixed oppositions. Here he deploys his concept of dialectic to clarify the site/nonsite relation and that of the center/circumference:

The notions of centrality give people a security and certainty because it’s also a place where most people gather. But they tend to forget the fringes. I have a dialectic between the center and the outer circumferences. You really

can't get rid of this notion of centrality nor can you get rid of the fringes and they both sort of feed on each other. It's kind of interesting to bring the fringes into centrality and the centrality out to the fringes. (*Writings*, 188)

Nothing could be more familiar than the expectation that life and art can always be structured in terms of the center and the periphery; any work or practice that both plays upon and frustrates these expectations, like deconstruction or Smithson's art, will be experienced as uncanny.

Smithson tended to see this process of decentering as having occurred in other ways and at other times in the history of art. In contrast to the modernist narrative that would tell a story of artists, at least since Manet, as exploring the limits of the basic medium of paint and the flat canvas, he suggests that Cézanne, for example, should be seen as having initiated a decentering departure from such a progression that failed to be taken up by his successors. According to Smithson, Cézanne was forced out of his studio and into the countryside by the advent of photography, so that his work consisted of a perpetual play between the canvases and the landscape. But the cubists "brought Cézanne back into the studio" by interpreting him as a formalist, thus legitimating narratives of the Greenbergian variety (*Writings*, 168; cf. *Smithson Unearthed*, 123–124). The history of art begins to take shape quite differently when it is seen to oscillate between the studio and the outdoors, to shift sites, rather than as a development that unfolds from the limits of the canvas in the studio: "For too long artists have taken the canvas and the stretchers as given, the limits" (*Writings*, 159).

In articulating his theory and practice of decentering, Smithson drew on a wide range of sources, including Borges, Pascal, and two writers on art who provided him with conceptual alternatives to modernist orthodoxy, George Kubler and Anton Ehrenzweig. From Kubler, as we have already seen, he

found support for thinking of the history of art in stratified and archaeological terms rather than as a single line of historical development. In addition to pluralizing the many surfaces and shapes of art-historical and artifactual time, Kubler also suggested a way of thinking about art that freed artworks from the usual centers and sources to which we attribute them, biography and the history of style, and provided a means of considering them as parts of orders that resemble mathematical series and sequences rather than narrative constructions. This was intended to be an alternative to biologism, with its centered concepts of the organism and the species that develop through individual stages or evolutionary change. Kubler's own schema involves a notion of artworks (or artifacts, for he wants to soften the conventional distinction between them) as arrayed in series that consist of "prime objects" and "replications." The prime objects are those monumental works which are then replicated, always with a drifting deviation, by countless imitations, derivatives, and variants.

What is striking about Kubler's notion of the prime object is that it is typically lost and can be reconstructed only in the most tentative and hypothetical way, as with the sculptures of Polyclitus or the works that preceded the wall paintings at Bonampak and Ajanta, concerning which Kubler says that they "are probably only pale reflections of a lost art that graced the more urban halls of living princes."¹⁹ So the center is regularly a void. The mathematical and physical analogies that Kubler uses to describe the prime objects emphasize their irrational and uncanny qualities, rather than enabling us to think of them as intelligible sources of order:

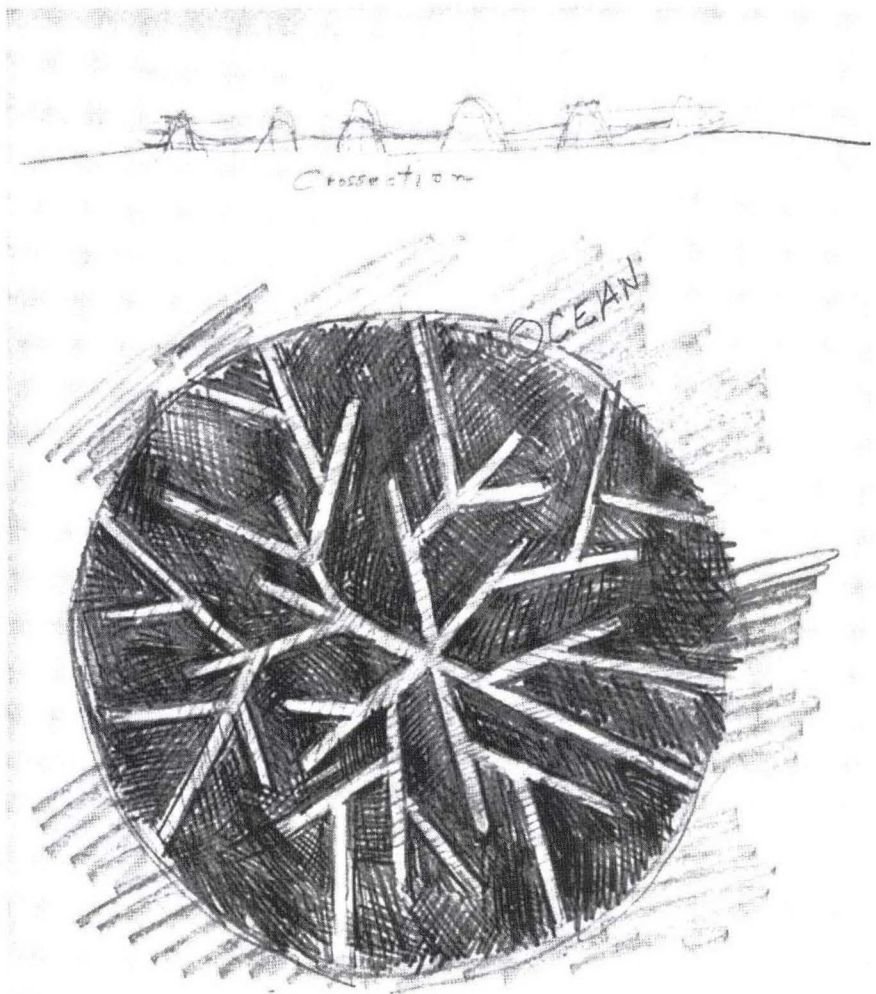
Prime objects resemble the prime numbers of mathematics because no conclusive rule is known to govern the appearance of either, although such a rule may someday be found. . . . Prime numbers have no divisors other than

themselves and unity; prime objects likewise resist decomposition in being original entities. Their character as primes is not explained by their antecedents, and their order in history is enigmatic. . . . When we consider the class of these great moments, we are usually confronted with dead stars. Even their light has ceased to reach us. We know of their existence only indirectly, by their perturbations, and by the immense detritus of derivative stuff left in their paths.²⁰

Of course such a schema still leaves room for the center, much in the manner of a negative theology. Smithson, however, took Kubler's categories one step further, describing the objects of the ultramoderne, for example, as generated by primes that take repetition and replication as their very theme, thus reinscribing and obliterating themselves simultaneously and to infinity:

It is not an accident that "the mirror" is one of the more widely used materials of the 'thirties, and that the facades of buildings contained countless variations of brickwork. Repetition and serial order run constantly through the buildings of that paradigmatic period. . . . The Ultramoderne contains the "primes" that establish enigmas not explanations. The Modernist claims to originality have made the primes less rigorous. The more exact the primes, the clearer the Time-Crystal. (*Writings*, 49; cf. 51)

In this "abyss" or gnostic "hall of mirrors" Kubler's decentering gesture has been grafted onto a Borgean vision of the world as an infinite labyrinth or maze. Smithson at one point projected a series of works consisting of nothing but interconnected forking paths, such as a *Forking Island* and a *Forking Peninsula*, that recall both his description of the ultramoderne in Kubler's terms and Borges's story "The Garden of the Forking Paths" (plate 18).²¹ In a text entitled "The Artist as Site-Seer; or, a Dintorphic Essay," Smithson again deploys Kubler's conception of prime objects and replications to discuss a



Forking Island - R.S. 71

18. Robert Smithson, *Forking Island*, 1971, pencil on paper, 12" x 9". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

number of structures, ranging from the contemporary works of Robert Morris through the Great Pyramid, the imagined megaliths of J. G. Ballard's science fiction, Alexander Graham Bell's tower built of tetrahedral units, and "that elusive prime object—the Tower of Babel" (*Smithson Unearthed*, 75).²² This last absent center, it will be remembered, is also the lost prime element in Hegel's philosophy of art. In Hegel's case we have a classical narrative account of why the center is lacking: God himself has destroyed it precisely so that the humanistic project by which men would make themselves the center through artistic construction, political hegemony, and a single language and culture would be defeated. As Derrida points out in his biblical commentary, this makes God the first deconstructor, enforcing the principle that there will always be more than one language.²³ We might also say that God was the first entropic artist, anticipating on a rather brutal scale the more nuanced and balanced *Partially Buried Woodshed*.

While Kubler provides a theory and a vocabulary that allows Smithson to think about finished works of art in terms of decentered matrices, he also needed a way of conceptualizing the artistic process itself. One of his main resources for thinking about that process in terms of difference and decentering was Anton Ehrenzweig's *The Hidden Order of Art*, especially Ehrenzweig's concept of "dedifferentiation." Ehrenzweig's psychoanalytic theory of art appeals to Smithson because it provides a way of understanding and articulating the process of artistic perception and production as entertaining and playing with differences that associates it with the chaotic and entropic. For Ehrenzweig, as for Freud, the unconscious mind is timeless and undifferentiated, without negation, failing to make distinctions, identifying opposites and allowing "all firm boundaries to melt in a free chaotic mingling of forms."²⁴ Consciousness lives in a differentiated world where these boundaries and distinctions are well in place, sometimes too rigidly so. Dedifferentiation

is typical of artistic perception. As Smithson explains Ehrenzweig's view, "There's a sort of rhythm between containment and scattering. . . . An artist in a sense does not differentiate experience into objects. Everything is a field or maze, and you get that maze serially, in the salt mine in that one goes from point to point [Smithson is discussing his *Cayuga Salt Mine Site*]. The seriality bifurcates; some paths go somewhere; some don't" (*Writings*, 168–169).

"Dedifferentiation," Ehrenzweig says, is "the dynamic process by which the ego scatters and represses surface imagery."²⁵ In this creative scanning the conventional differences are broken down not to create an undifferentiated unity, but to articulate a fluid and multidimensional system of differences, differences that emerge as (in Smithson's term) "overlapping" (*Smithson Unearthed*, 103). Much of what Smithson finds helpful in the concepts of entropy and dialectics is sometimes better expressed (without implications of either a reductionistic physicalism or Hegelian philosophy) by the notion of dedifferentiation; and much of this is implicit in his remarks on the uncanny. When he deploys this idea to describe his process of site selection, for example, he uses it in order to explain the decentering involved in his work: "Any site that lends itself to the dedifferentiate low-level kind of situation excites me because everything is sort of moving toward a background, an ever-deepening background. There's an almost complete loss of foreground in terms of the site. And then the only thing that holds it together is the shrunken containment of the non-site" (*Smithson Unearthed*, 116).

In his account of artistic imagination Ehrenzweig stresses the fruitful role of accident and the artist's need of disruptive techniques. These allow the relaxation of hardened boundaries of every sort and open up a space for an emerging play of scattering and order. Like Smithson, Ehrenzweig sees art as having an essential self-referential dimension, declaring that "the minimum content of art is the representation of the creative process in the ego."²⁶ He

traces this self-representation of the artistic process in works that have apparent breaks and discontinuities on the surface, like the second part of Goethe's *Faust* or Schoenberg's opera *Moses and Aaron*. These very difficulties, often dismissed as failures by conventional criticism, are explained by Ehrenzweig as expressions of the necessary surrender of conscious control involved in art and the institution of a new and deeper order. It is instructive to compare one of his descriptions of artistic process with Smithson's account of the genesis of the idea of the *Spiral Jetty*:

As we reach the deepest oceanic levels of dedifferentiation the boundaries between the inside and the outside world melt away, and we feel engulfed and trapped inside the work of art. . . . The deepest oceanic experience, however, dissolves space and time itself, which are the very modes by which our reason works. [Ehrenzweig]²⁷

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. . . . 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 nonsite whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other. . . . No sense wondering about classifications and categories, there were none. [Smithson] (*Writings*, 111)

Smithson also appeals to Ehrenzweig in a critique of his *bête noire* Michael Fried. In his well-known essay "Art and Objecthood" Fried had discussed Tony Smith's description of a car ride on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. Smith found the experience liberating, giving him a larger sense of reality and

landscape than he thought it was possible to encompass by pictorial means. For Fried the privileging of such experiences implies an abandonment of the public art object, with its specific limits and within a particular genre, in favor of an amorphous and undiscussable personal experience.²⁸ In replying to Fried, Smithson distinguishes Smith's "sensation" from a finished work of art and says that Smith was describing his own "'primary process' . . . called by Anton Ehrenzweig 'dedifferentiation,' and it involves a suspended question regarding 'limitlessness' (Freud's notion of the 'oceanic')." Fried's problem, Smithson suggests, is that he has no tolerance for the temporary suspension of limits or the experience of the "abyss." "Most critics," he adds, "cannot endure the suspension of *boundaries* between what Ehrenzweig calls the 'self and the non-self.'" He then suggests an analogy between this play of the self and nonself and his own development of a relation between site and nonsite (*Writings*, 84–85).

The abyss that Smithson invokes in this polemic recurs (opens up) frequently in his writing (see *Writings*, 50, 55, 58, 69, 84, 98, 107, 168, 198). In the abyss there is no ground or foundation. In the dispute with Fried, Smithson thinks of the abyss in its psychological sense, as an entry into uncharted primary process, the experience of the oceanic, the sublime, or the uncanny. But the abyss is also a geographical term, being that which opens up in the earth to reveal its absence of ultimate foundation (the German *Abgrund*, a falling away or absence of the ground, suggests this even more clearly than does the English word). The vertigo provoked by the fear of the abyss is the horrible suspicion that there is an ultimate groundlessness in things.²⁹ For Smithson the abyss is what is there where we would have expected the center. As with his definition of the site as "a place where a piece should be but isn't," it is the experience of encountering a void where we anticipate some definite content that is uncanny. In "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," the

writer follows up his visit to the entropic landscape and the monuments that “rise into ruin” with an exploration of Passaic center; but “Passaic center was no center—it was instead a typical abyss or an ordinary void. What a great place for a gallery!” (*Writings*, 55). The choice of the circle (that which preeminently has a center) or abyss is one that Derrida describes as the central or abysmal question for aesthetics.³⁰

If the beautiful is that which is harmonious and self-contained and the sublime is that which evokes the unlimited and threatening, then we can see how the two main traditional categories of aesthetic thought coincide with this opposition. Either art will be something integral, and perhaps integrated within a larger circle (such as the full circle of Hegelian aesthetics, which comprehends everything from the monumental to the poetic), or it will call us up short, producing anxiety and vertigo. (Later we will see that the abyss and the sublime are not Smithson’s only aesthetic categories; in an important text, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,” he seems to endorse the idea that the picturesque is a synthesis to be preferred to the extremes of the beautiful and sublime.) The abyss can open up anywhere in Smithson’s world and frequently does. In one of the Yucatan mirror displacements, the artist discovers it under every rock that is turned over: “Each pit contained miniature earthworks—tracks and traces of insects and other sundry small creatures. In some beetledung, cobwebs, and nameless slime. In others cocoons, tiny ant nests and raw roots. . . . Each one of these secret dens was also the entrance to the abyss” (*Writings*, 98).

The abyss also lurks within, as Smithson noted in his adaptation of Ehrenzweig; it can be revealed by cinema, for example, which in altering scale and alternating between sites projects us into a condition in which “we are lost between the abyss within us and the boundless horizons outside us” (*Writings*, 107). As a geological and archaeological site, the earth is poised on the edge of

“the abyss of time” into which lost civilizations and strata have vanished and from which bits and traces may be retrieved (*Writings*, 168). Language itself may not only describe or evoke the abyss but have its own abyssal character, as Smithson claims in an analysis of Donald Judd’s writing: “Judd’s syntax is abyssal—it is a language that ebbs from the mind into an ocean of words” (*Writings*, 69). While writers like Judd and Fried may attempt to avoid the abyss, it has an uncanny way of emerging in their own language; rather than engaging in impossible efforts to suppress it, Smithson wants to construct strategies that would allow us to acknowledge it, even if this involves an uncontrollable vertigo. He points out that Fried, turning away from the abyss in his criticism of Tony Smith, nevertheless finds an abyss, a “good” abyss this time, in the painting of Morris Louis (*Writings*, 84). Paradoxically, the abyss may even have a centering and organizing function. Smithson often describes museums as voids, tombs, or uncanny labyrinthine chambers. In this epitaph for art, we find the abyss taking on the role of the center: “Painting, sculpture and architecture are finished, but the art habit continues. Art settles into a stupendous inertia. Silence supplies the dominant chord. Bright colors conceal the abyss that holds the museum together” (*Writings*, 58).

The role of the work of art is neither to mask the abyss (as an Apollinian critic like Fried suggests) nor to throw us headlong into it, but to draw upon it and disclose it. Contrary to Fried, who says that life and art both require a set of conventions to shield us from the abyss, Smithson claims that there are “certain artists who *do* exist within a physical ‘abyss’” (*Writings*, 84). Of course, he includes himself in this group and goes on to give this account of his own work: “The bins or containers of my *Non-Sites* gather in the fragments that are experienced in the physical abyss of raw matter” (*Writings*, 85). The talk of gathering in the fragments from the experience of the abyss draws again on Ehrenzweig’s analysis of artistic process, according to which a phase

of dedifferentiation (a moment in the Hegelian sense, although we must remember that it is not voluntarily undertaken) or looking into the abyss is necessary for envisioning a new organization of experience.

In 1968 Smithson complicated and combined his site/nonsite work and his concern with the abyss in the *Cayuga Salt Mine Project* that he made for an “Earth Art” exhibition at Cornell University. He chose as the site pole of the work a mine operated by the Cayuga Rock Salt Company north of the university. The mine, which is half a mile underground, can be seen as the abyss that opens up under the earth, the failure or absence of a ground. In describing the project, Smithson argues that art since cubism has turned away from a reference to the physical site; there is a need, he says, to balance abstraction and “decorative design. . . . because we’re now into such a kind of soupy, effete thing. It’s so onesided and groundless” (*Writings*, 168). The abyss of the mine is also groundless in a sense, but it does give the work its physical reference. Phenomenologically speaking, the mine is a dark, confused place—a nonsight that can be seen only in fragments and is often identified with blindness. Within romantic art, especially in German literature, the mine has the meaning of another world, a counterearth that balances life on the surface.³¹ While Smithson would reject the romantic and anthropomorphic conception of the mine, his incorporation of it into the site/nonsite dialectic suggests a similar interest in a dual or inverted world. It is also worth noting that the topography of the Cornell campus has another abyss, a gorge spanned by a bridge that is known as a site for suicidal leaps. Smithson placed a series of mirrors in the mine. At the campus gallery he installed a number of mirrors, mounting them on rock salt from the mine. The mine and the gallery were connected by a “mirror trail” through the intervening countryside (deliberately not following a road). The work was complicated further by the installation of a subsite above ground at the Cayuga company’s crushed rock quarry and a

sub-nonsite in the basement of the gallery. The mirrors in the mine were blind or inoperative, because in normal conditions there was no illumination to allow visible reflections. Reflection was buried in the earth, so that the principle of visibility was overwhelmed by the site. The mirrors in the gallery reversed this situation, reflecting the nonsite, while being mounted on the material from the site; these mirrors rose above the materials while at the site the mirrors were overcome by the materials.

If the mirror has a Platonic reference, so does its placement in a mine or cave. In the *Republic* Plato compares the nonphilosophical state of mind to that of prisoners in a cave who take artificial illusions for reality. The philosopher is the one who would liberate these prisoners from bondage and bring them out of the ground into the sunlight where they will be able to see things as they really are. The artist, however, would put them in thrall to the “sights and sounds” of mirror projections and shadow play. Through vision, in the Platonic allegory, everything will become present.³² Smithson’s entire *Cayuga* project can be seen as a parody of the Platonic myth of the cave as well as of Plato’s conception of art as a mirror. That the institutional site of this work should be a university, presumably dedicated to something like the Platonic principle of reason, adds another dimension to it. Some years later, in an inaugural lecture at Cornell, Jacques Derrida spoke on “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils” and articulated the parallel contrasts between the topography of the campus, with its gorge and its elevated buildings devoted to humanistic and scientific research on the one hand, and the absolute foundation or ground offered by the principle of reason and the abyss that lurks beneath it on the other.³³ Smithson’s introduction of the indeterminate relation between the abyss of the mine and the citadel of the gallery effects a similar interrogation of the institution of learning. The very relation between site and nonsite is an abyss: “The route to the

site is very indeterminate. It's important because it's an abyss between the abstraction and the site; a kind of oblivion" (*Writings*, 169).

The *Cayuga* project is a departure from Smithson's other sites/nonsites in several respects. It employs mirrors that add another degree of displacement to the process already at work, it develops a physical trail connecting site and nonsite (while making that trail into a question itself), and it reverses the relation of physical material and container that the artist had used earlier. Now the rock salt is placed directly on the gallery floor in a set of clumps and the mirrors are mounted on those clumps rather than being placed in containers. What is at stake here is the idea of framing. Contrary to the modernist claim (by Greenberg and Fried, for example) that the frame is an absolutely necessary presupposition of the artwork, giving it a location, an independence, and some aesthetic distance from the viewer, Smithson thinks that the framing function is rather more variable and complex. He is not so much interested in eliminating the frame as in exploring the possibilities and limits of the framing structure in order to see how far art can go in shaking the traditional distinction between what is inside and what is outside the work. The twentieth century has seen sculpture (usually said to be Smithson's art form) wrestling with the problem of the pedestal.³⁴ Does a sculpture require a pedestal (or frame) to set it off from its surroundings? Can the pedestal be incorporated into the work? Does the option of jettisoning the pedestal lead to a horizontal sculpture that thematizes the fact of its not being "set up" or "erected"?

Perhaps the fundamental question is whether the frame is inside or outside the work of art. To the extent that it is necessary to set the work off from its background or context, then the frame seems to be part of the work, on the inside rather than the outside. But insofar as it is merely a frame for the work itself, then it is extraneous and falls outside of it. Derrida attempts to map this peculiar logic of the frame or *parergon* in a close reading of the founding text

of modern philosophical aesthetics, Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.³⁵ Aesthetic judgment, from a Kantian or modernist perspective, seems to require a clear distinction between what is intrinsic and what is extrinsic to the work of art, yet the systematic indeterminacy of the frame renders that distinction impossible. The minimalist artists were probing the limits of the frame or framing function when they began to operate on the assumption that the space of the gallery or museum was itself a frame that ought to be treated as the field of the artwork and not as a neutral container. The site/nonsite dialectic was intended to loosen or relax the role of the frame by inducing some movement and interaction between the indeterminate physical site and the strictly defined containers within the designated space of art (typically a boxlike room with white walls). In his discussion of the *Cayuga* project Smithson came to the conclusion that the frame may be inescapable and yet that its very limits can become a theme for art:

I don't think you can escape the primacy of the rectangle. I always see myself thrown back to the rectangle. That's where my things don't offer any kind of freedom in terms of exhibition space. I see it as an inevitability; of going toward the fringes, towards the broken, the entropic. But even that has limits.

Every single perception is essentially determinate. It isn't a question of form or anti-form. It's a limitation. I'm not all that interested in the problems of form or anti-form, but in limits and how these limits destroy themselves and disappear. (*Writings*, 170)³⁶

This formulation is surprisingly close to Derrida's program for the deconstruction (not destruction) of the frame: "Deconstruction must neither re-frame nor dream of the pure and simple absence of the frame. These two apparently contradictory gestures are the very ones—and they are systematically indissociable—of *what* is here deconstructed."³⁷

Smithson carried his use of mirrors as a means of interrogating and disturbing the dichotomy of inside and outside a step further in his 1969 *Artforum* essay “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Yucatan.” The title refers to a series of “mirror displacements” that he executed in traveling through the Yucatan peninsula, and it alludes to the classic travel book by James Stephens which Smithson has altered or displaced by the addition of the word “mirror.” The conventional question to ask in this case would be what exactly is the work of art here? Or, better, *where* is the work of art? The article is an autobiographical narrative describing nine separate occasions on which Smithson set up, photographed, and then dismantled a group of twelve square mirrors (plate 19). Is the work in those ephemeral “incidents” themselves, in their photographic documentation, or in the essay that describes them and contains the photographs? There is, of course, no answer to these questions as posed because the complex structure here is an extension of the practice begun with the decentering process of sites and nonsites. Here everything is displacement. But *here* is a word that can hardly be used without irony “here,” just because of this constant shifting; we might be reminded of Hegel’s celebrated demonstration in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that indexical words like *here* and *there* lose their intended specificity as soon as they are pronounced and so turn into the most universal of linguistic gestures. The mirrors are only temporarily set up at the various sites; they do not belong there. And what do mirrors do, anyway? They reflect an image from another place than the one they occupy. Since there is a series of such installations, the mirrors are themselves constantly displaced and never come to rest. They are displaced displacers. Our access to all of this can only be through the photographic and written record that appears in the pages of a magazine published in New York, distributed in multiple copies and dispersed to various locations. There would seem to be a play between the site-specific work that



19. Robert Smithson, *Fifth Mirror Displacement*, Yucatan, Mexico, 1969. Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

retains the aura or *genius loci* and the literary text that necessarily cannot be identified with any of its particular tokens. Yet the work was in situ only in the most attenuated sense. There were no spectators but the artist and his immediate party, and if we should travel back to the site we would find no traces of the works. This is “mirror travel” because it is a kind of inversion of a conventional travel narrative like Stephens’s in which we should be able to reconstruct the path of the author. It is travel through the looking glass that systematically disorders the places that it passes through as well as the sense of place itself.

Smithson’s narrative begins by problematizing the concepts of place and travel. Craig Owens, relying heavily on Smithson’s example, has suggested that allegory is the typical genre of the postmodern, where allegory involves the doubling of one text by another.³⁸ In this case Smithson’s “Incidents” would be an allegorical version of a whole series of travel narratives, including the one by Stephens to which it most obviously refers. But it also doubles and rewrites the many “Tours” of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that are concerned with directing the reader to experience the picturesque, usually in the form of English landscape. Later we will need to consider Smithson’s general alteration (or allegorization) of the picturesque (see chapter 3); but for now we should note that it involves a certain dematerialization of the landscape insofar as it is directed at seeing a natural scene as if it were a picture.³⁹ Driving is always directed toward the horizon (from the Greek *horismos* or boundary), but the horizon becomes uncanny: “One is always crossing the horizon, yet it always remains distant. In this line where sky meets earth, objects cease to exist. . . . Since the car was at all times on some leftover horizon, one might say that the car was imprisoned in a line, a line that is in no way linear. The distance seemed to put restrictions on all forward movement, thus bringing the car to a countless series of standstills” (*Writings*, 94).

Here we are with Zeno's paradox of motion again: since the horizon (any horizon) is always receding, we never reach it, and so we never move. In any case, where are we? A map rests on the car seat, we are told, but we are also told that Tezcatlipoca, "demiurge of the 'smoking-mirror,'" spoke to Smithson and advised him to "travel at random" because "that is the only way to make art" (*Writings*, 94–95). On the cover of the guidebook, which is not to be used, is a cartoon telling us that we are in a nameless place, or a site like Babel whose name is the sign of a confusion of tongues:

"'UY U TAN A KIN PECH' (listen how they talk)— EXCLAIMED THE MAYANS ON HEARING THE SPANISH LANGUAGE." . . . "'YUCUTAN CAMPECHE' REPEATED THE SPANIARDS WHEN THEY HEARD THESE WORDS." (*Writings*, 94)

The proper name of the place designates a space of unknowing; it is a place whose identity must be in question. In this Babel there will be no tower erected by those who "wanted to make a name for themselves"; Smithson's mirrors will be horizontal, fragile, and ephemeral—they are antimonuments. Smithson's work—that is, his writing, photographs, and mirror displacements—do not provide a new identity for the place. As he says at the end of the essay, visiting the sites would yield nothing but "memory-traces," for the displacements were all dismantled (or displaced) immediately: "It is the dimension of absence that remains to be found. . . . Yucatan is elsewhere" (*Writings*, 103).

Smithson's response to the place mixes all levels of time, history, geography, perception, and fantasy. Taking little interest in the Mayan monuments that would be the main attraction for the art-minded traveler, he is nevertheless inspired by the voices of Aztec gods, as extrapolated from a text on the gods of Mexico. Any expectation that the reader might have of getting an eyewitness report on Yucatan is derailed as the essay refers us to this text on the gods, or

to a guidebook or a geological work on lost continents. (Smithson gave a lecture later at Yale University on “The Monuments of Palenque” which surprised his audience by turning out to be about the decaying hotel where he stayed, a structure that was being simultaneously torn down and rebuilt [*Robert Smithson*, 164–165].) What Smithson does absorb from the local, text-mediated gods, is the theme of blood, sacrifice, and death. Sacrifice has been displaced from its historical roots (like the upside down tree that the artist installed on this trip) and has become a process of emptying out the material world:

Through the windshield the road stabbed the horizon, causing it to bleed a sunny incandescence. One couldn't help feeling that this was a ride on a knife covered with solar blood. As it cut into the horizon a disruption took place. The tranquil drive became a sacrifice of matter that led to a discontinuous state of being, a world of quiet delirium. Just sitting there brought one into the wound of a terrestrial victim. This peaceful war between the elements is ever present in Mexico—an echo, perhaps, of the Aztec and Mayan human sacrifices. (*Writings*, 95)

The “sacrifice of matter” is an artistic allegory of the human sacrifices alluded to, and it recalls Smithson's description of the “uncanny materiality” of Judd's sculptures as introducing a form of “antimatter” and verging on disappearance. In a much more discursive context, in a work that involves performance, reproduction, and text, the artist has found a way of realizing the effects that he had attributed to one of his models.

The horizon here is simultaneously a site of violence and displacement. Since the gods have been invoked, we recall that as “the line where sky meets earth” it is also the mark of the bloody conjunction of Gaia (Earth) and Uranous (Sky), the primordial divine parents of the Greeks, whose story is

recorded in Hesiod. Sky, who is clearly involved with the values of space, was defeated by an Oedipal alliance between Mother Earth and Chronos (Time). In Smithson's narrative, space is annihilated by time, as Chronos performed a bloody castration of Uranous with the jagged toothed sickle provided by his mother. Chronos will in his turn be overthrown, and Smithson suggests an allegory for this in the second mirror displacement when he describes the timeless condition that has been attained both through the mirrors' alteration of perception and the conjunction of Mayan gods with the ghost of a lost continent (*Writings*, 96). The mirrors are merely innocent reflectors, producing nothing of their own, as the Platonic conception of art as imitation would have it. Yet they are also glass instruments that cut into the material substance of things, liberating appearances from matter. Smithson stages the entire series of displacements in terms of the "sacrifice of matter," with resonances of Hesiod's story of divine violence, ancient American human sacrifice, and the stations of the cross by which the material, incarnate body of the Christian god is artistically envisioned on its way to sacrifice. He identifies Coatlicue, the Mayan goddess known as the serpent lady with "Mother Earth" and constructs a dialogue between her and her (Greek) son Chronos in which the two of them muse about their own nonexistence (*Writings*, 98). Mirrors are not only Mother Earth's chosen weapons but the instruments of her own dispersion into an "inefficient memor[y]" without a present.

As sacrificial dematerialization, mirror travel eliminates the earthly focus or referent of the mirrors' images. Mirrors displace the objects that common sense and Plato say that they reflect. If the work of art is a mirror, then art becomes the sacrificial executioner and matter the victim: "Space is the remains, or corpse, of time, it has dimensions. 'Objects' are 'sham space,' the excrement of thought and language. Once you start seeing objects in a positive or negative way you are on the road to derangement. Objects are phantoms of

the mind, as false as angels" (*Writings*, 96). In an interview Smithson describes the mirrors as a "slash" creating a disjunction connected with the sense of sacrifice described by Georges Bataille in *Death and Sensuality* (*Smithson Unearthed*, 122). He also says, in the spirit of Bataille, that "waste and enjoyment are in a sense coupled. There's a certain kind of pleasure principle that comes out of a preoccupation with waste" (*Writings*, 190).

Smithson's use of mirrors here has a function similar to his fascination with the "Hall of Mirrors" world of the ultramoderne, in which mirrors and windows effect a systematic decentering. Yet the ultramoderne, despite its timeless character, was nevertheless localized to New York in the 1930s. Mirror travel suggests a way of globalizing the decentering process beyond the center that is New York. As Smithson realized, decentering is never accomplished absolutely, once and for all; one never escapes altogether from limits. It is rather a strategic activity involving, as in this case, a number of displacements in which art and chance collude. We read of this work in the pages of a New York art magazine, which is a displacement of the mirror displacements. But since every limit may be put into question in an abyssal progression, there is no reason to think that the text is a final term:

The reflections abolished the supports, and now words abolish the reflections. The unnameable tonalities of blue that were once square tide pools of sky have vanished into the camera and now rest in the cemetery of the printed page—*Ancora in Arcadia morte*. (*Writings*, 97)

One must remember that writing on art replaces presence by absence by substituting the abstraction of language for the real thing. There was a friction between the mirrors and the tree, now there is a friction between language and memory. A memory of reflections becomes an absence of absences. (*Writings*, 100)

The range of Smithson's works can be read as an exploration of the structural possibilities having to do with the center and the periphery, the play of presence and absence, and the disruption of structure by the uncanny. The deliberate nature of the project that is concerned with permutations of the center and periphery becomes clear in his repeated citations of and allusions to Pascal's pronouncement that "Nature is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere" (*Writings*, 67).⁴⁰ Calling himself a dialectician and citing Pascal as the first dialectician suggests that insofar as Smithson acknowledged something like the dialectical ideal of a totalistic or systematic comprehension, that totality can be found in his work in the form of an attempt to construct and embody a matrix of possible relations of center and periphery (*Smithson Unearthed*, 103). Smithson mentions Georges Poulet's *Metamorphoses of the Circle* as a source for his understanding of Pascal's principle. Poulet emphasizes that although Pascal's formula is verbally a repetition of a maxim of medieval and Renaissance thought, Pascal radically transforms the sense, no longer taking it, as the earlier thinkers did, as an expression of the astounding fullness of God's world, but as a way of marking the impossibility of finding any organizing principle in a world that spirals off to infinity in all directions.⁴¹ The infinite permutations of center and periphery are found in the world at large as well as in what is ordinarily called art, as in the observation that "suburbia is a circular gulf between city and country—a place where buildings seem to sink away from one's vision—buildings fall back into sprawling babels or limbos" (*Writings*, 75–76). As Donald Kuspit suggests in commenting on Smithson's frequent talk of sprawl, "Pascal's description of nature is the description of a sprawling infinity, the sprawl of infinity."⁴² What the artist adds to the placements and displacements that he finds readymade in the environment is a disciplined activity of exploration and investigation; as he says in describing the genesis of

the sites/nonsites works, “I began to question very seriously the whole notion of *Gestalt*, the thing in itself, specific objects. I began to see things in a more relational way. In other words I had to question, where the works were, what they were about” (*Writings*, 155). Three forms of identity are called into question: the psychological or perceptual gestalt, the philosophical conception of substance (somewhat misleadingly designated by Kant’s term for the unknown source of experience), and the artistic conception of “specific objects,” a notion introduced by Donald Judd to name works of art that have an integrity independent of their belonging simply to the class of architecture or sculpture. All of Smithson’s work might be seen as variations on the question “Where are the works?” That question might be voiced by the naive visitor to the gallery confronted by a bin of rocks or a mirror and a pile of gravel; but it is also the leading edge of an unrelenting interrogation of what constitutes artistic identity and location.

Two other strategies of displacement, two other possible variations of the center need to be articulated: the *imploding center* of Smithson’s proposed underground cinema and the *accidental center* of the *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill*. In his *Artforum* essay “A Cinematic Atopia” Smithson investigates the phenomenology of seeing films, discarding what he takes to be the superficial interest in stories, characters, and stars. What attracts Smithson’s attention are the fundamental parameters of the situation: being immobilized, doing nothing but looking and listening, and consequently tending to distance oneself temporarily from the outside world. What such a phenomenologically reduced cinema amounts to is an infinite, open set of sounds and images, such that “the ultimate film-goer . . . would drown in a vast reservoir of pure perception. . . . He would not be watching films, but rather experiencing blurs of many shades” (*Writings*, 107). One can imagine the cinema “expanding into a deafening pale abstraction controlled by computers.” When *all* filmic

possibilities are deployed, we get “the sprawl of entropy. The monad of cinematic limits spills out into a state of stupefaction. We are faced with inventories of limbo” (*Writings*, 106). The description is structurally similar to the one given of the museum as a series of voids, in which the works of art are only incidentally present. Smithson proposed the construction of a theater that would be completely self-referential, something like the filmic equivalent of an Ad Reinhardt painting, except that sound and motion would be able to disclose quite literally the very process of construction: “What I would like to do is build a cinema in a cave or an abandoned mine, and film the process of its construction. That film would be the only film shown in the cave. The projection booth would be made out of crude timbers, the screen carved out of a rock wall and painted white, the seats could be boulders. It would be a truly ‘underground’ cinema” (*Writings*, 108).

If the ordinary experience of going to the movies is a bit like being in Plato’s cave, where one is unaware of the outside and is fixated by “sights and sounds,” the underground cinema would push this tendency to its limits, centering everything on the cinema itself and rigidly suspending any reference to the outside. While such a self-referential theater might also have been constructed above the ground, placing it within the earth intensifies the atmosphere of complete enclosure. The film that records its installation would have fewer shots to recall any visible surroundings on the periphery of the theater itself. The center implodes here and we are left with nothing but the center; but this means that the center disappears, since there is no center without a periphery.

In contrast to this imploding center and to the variety of strategic displacements is Smithson’s *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill*, which he built in Holland on a commission in 1971 (plates 20 and 21). As the title suggests, the work attempts to effect a decentering at several levels. It is, first, a conjunction of two parts, a



20. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Hill*, Emmen, Holland, 1971, 75' at base.
Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.



21. Robert Smithson, *Broken Circle*, Emmen, Holland, 1971.
Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

semicircular extension of land into a flooded former quarry and a hill built nearby in a spiral shape. The two parts are conjoined and disjoined by the virgule (the slash mark) of the title and by the shift or disparity of attention that they will receive from a viewer at the site. They reflect the complexity of this former industrial site, with the *Broken Circle* projecting into the water and the *Spiral Hill* rising out of the land. The contrast and the variety have a reference to the topography and history of Holland, an artificial land periodically devastated by floods.⁴³ Moreover, both parts have been subjected to internal decentering. The circle has been truncated, reduced to half its expected size, while one arm of its circumference juts out into the water. The spiraling structure of the hill simultaneously suggests centrifugal and centripetal motion; rather than being a stable landmark, it is set into motion of an undecidable direction.⁴⁴

In the midst of his work Smithson found that the land to be shaped into the *Broken Circle* had a large boulder at its (geometrical) center. Smithson says that it was originally his intention to have the boulder moved, presumably because he did not want to create a conventionally centered piece, and nothing could be more regular than a circle with a center. But the logistics of moving the boulder would have been very difficult; it was so massive that only the Dutch army could have transported it. Yet Smithson thought that the work would be disrupted (or decentered?) by leaving the boulder in its original place. This was the only point in the quarry where the circumference was available for his earthwork, and the sand flats there “were to be a field opening up into a range of vacancy, a site unburdened by any middle point.” Smithson seemed to have been caught by a center that he could not displace. His narrative of the problem suggests that as others might suffer from anxiety connected with the possible loss of the center and the opening of an abyss, his own angst was provoked by the center’s apparent ineluctability:

By an unforeseen chance, I was trapped in Emmen with a monstrous point to contend with. . . . I returned to New York without solving the riddle of the accidental center. Once in New York, after studying photographs of *Broken Circle*, I was haunted by the shadowy lump in the middle of my work. Like the eye of a hurricane, it seemed to suggest all kinds of misfortunes. . . . The perimeter of the intrusion magnified into a blind spot in my mind that blotted the circumference out. (*Writings*, 182)

The center, it is suggested, is a catastrophe like cancer, a hurricane, or blindness. Smithson, who at one point had seen the artist's role as exploring the limits or the impossibility of vision, now finds himself stricken, "trapped" like a tragic hero in a "blind spot" that both is and is not of his own making.

However, the stringency of this looming center was softened by the realization that a shift from the vertical position of the photographer to the level of the work itself altered the perception of the complex: "When one is on the *Broken Circle* itself . . . one's eye level tends to see the boulder as part of the circumference." From the perspective of the top of the hill there is something of an elliptical structure with two centers or foci, the one where the spectator is standing (and so absent to vision) and the visually present one of the boulder. Still, this does not eliminate the centering tendency. "Neither eccentrically nor concentrically is it possible to escape the dilemma," Smithson writes, "just as the Earth cannot escape the Sun. Maybe, that's why Valéry called the sun a 'Brilliant Error.' When I return to Holland, I might bury the boulder in the center, or move it outside the circumference, or just leave it there—as a kind of glacial 'heart of darkness'—a warning from the Ice Age" (*Writings*, 182). As a "heart of darkness"—another figure of the uncanny borrowed from Conrad—the boulder would be a reversal of the traditional value accorded to the center, a malignant rather than a beneficent force. Smithson never

returned to Holland, and so the accidental center has been transmuted into something less variable than he anticipated. His own accidental death two years later left open the question of the center (or provided the work with an aleatory center), just as the *Spiral Jetty* and the *Partially Buried Woodshed* have been left to the entropic effects of the water level in the Great Salt Lake or of gravity. Effects such as these are exactly what Smithson sought out in taking his chances with the earth; no matter how many mirrors (or other strategies) are applied to the earth, it persists through them all.

3 Rifts: Beyond the Garden to the Sites of Time

At any rate, the “pastoral,” it seems, is outmoded. The gardens of history are being replaced by sites of time.

—ROBERT SMITHSON, *Writings*

My work is impure; it is clogged with matter. I’m for a weighty, ponderous art. There is no escape from matter. There is no escape from the physical nor is there any escape from the mind. The two are in a constant collision course. You might say that my work is like an artistic disaster. It is a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter. —ROBERT SMITHSON

Let’s begin dialectically by explaining what Smithson knows that the earth is not. He knows that it is not the idealized landscape of the eighteenth-century English estate and the aesthetics that legitimates it, and he knows that it is not the contemporary versions of that ideal, whether inspired by commercial promotion or the utopian promises of certain strains of environmentalism:

Memory traces of tranquil gardens as “ideal nature”—jejune Edens that suggest an idea of banal “quality”—persist in popular magazines like *House Beautiful* and *Better Homes and Gardens*. A kind of watered down Victorianism, an elegant notion of industrialism in the woods; all this brings to mind some kind of wasted charm. . . . Could one say that art degenerates as it approaches the condition of gardening? (*Writings*, 85–86)

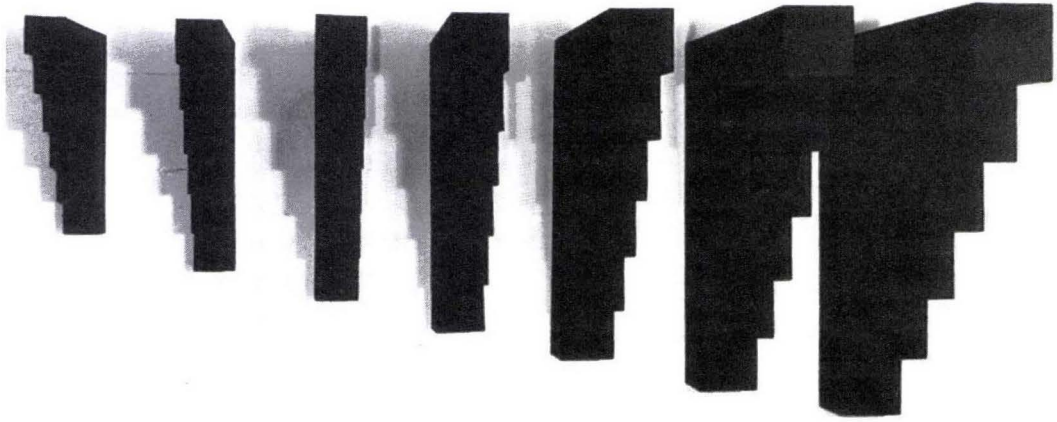
Smithson knows that our conceptions of nature and the landscape, and consequently our notions of the beautiful, sublime, or picturesque in nature, all

have a history. He knows, for example, that before the eighteenth century mountains were generally considered to be ugly and terrible things, perhaps God's way of marking the expulsion from Eden by defacing the earth to which we are condemned (*Writings*, 177).¹ In a sentence that might have been written by Michel Foucault, he says that "'Nature' is simply another 18-th and 19-th century fiction" (*Writings*, 71). Nature as the restful antidote to culture or civilization, nature as the play of titanic forces that awakens a sense of the sublime—these are not constant features of "human nature" (another concept that Smithson would have trouble with) but constructions related to specific historical contexts.

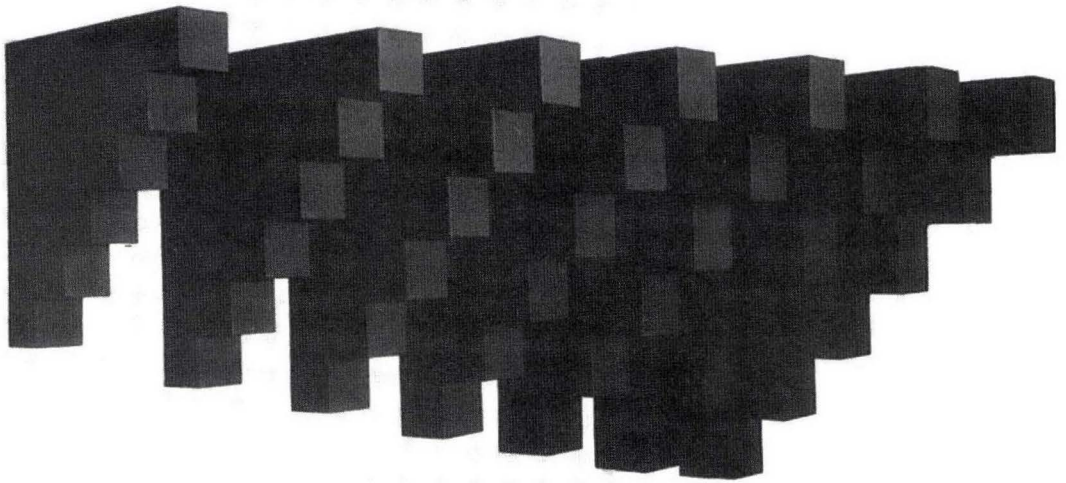
It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that Western thought has had only two main conceptions of the intersection of the natural and the beautiful, those stemming from Pythagoreanism and from the (mainly British) revolution in taste of the eighteenth century in which landscapes come to have an aesthetic value that is no longer derivative from rational order.² On the Pythagorean view the world is essentially a cosmic harmony whose lineaments reveal themselves to a mathematical and philosophical intelligence. The canon of Polyclitus seems to have been based on just such a conception of the ideally proportioned human body, and (as Smithson notes) Plato, in what was his most influential dialogue up to the eighteenth century, elaborated a vision of the cosmos as modeled on a perfect mathematical harmony: "Plato's *Timaeus* shows the demiurge or the artist creating a model order, with his eyes fixed on a nonvisual order of Ideas" (*Writings*, 87). The vision is still at work in an early "modern" astronomer like Kepler, who thought that the orbits of the planets must follow a pattern derived from the group of regular solids. We can take Smithson's *Alogon* series (1966) as his succinct response to such ideas of cosmic order and beauty (plates 22 and 23). For the Pythagoreans the *alogon* is the irrational and the unspeakable. It was known to the initiates of the cult that

certain fundamental quantities, for example the square root of two, were not commensurable or rational numbers. But this fact was not to be divulged exoterically because it would raise suspicions about the claim to be in possession of the formulas of a perfectly ordered cosmos.³ (This may be the closest approach made by the ancient world before Longinus to formulating a concept of the sublime, or even of the uncanny.) There are three groups of pieces that Smithson titles *Alogon*. Each consists of a series of graduated steps constructed according to two mathematical formulas, one governing the internal relations within each object in a series, the other determining the relation of the objects to each other. The first order is determined by a linear equation and the second by a quadratic one. Visually, this produces a sense that something is not quite right—an atmosphere of incommensurability that discloses the impossibility of a totally consistent ordering. As Robert Hobbs observes, “The intended misalliance of two logical systems creates an alogical situation.”⁴ It is sublime because it defeats all of our desires for comprehensive and ordering perception. Given the minimalists’ penchant for employing uniform modules at the time, Smithson’s *Alogon* series could be read as a corrective warning against the misleading impression that some new model of rational order was being constructed.

Smithson also rejects the pastoral aesthetics of the garden, mainly on the grounds that it is untruthful insofar as it gives us an illusory, anthropomorphic image of nature. “Nature,” of course, is not Smithson’s term of choice, presumably because in an artistic context it has too many associations with a tamed natural beauty. He prefers to speak of “earth,” since this is more concrete, less ethereal, and does not encourage us to abstract from its heavy mass, its chaotic formations, continental drift, confused strata, cataclysms (like earthquakes), and its sheer *thereness* (what the medieval philosophers called *haecceitas*). Nevertheless, Smithson does personify the earth on at least four



22. Robert Smithson, *Alogon I*, 1966, painted steel, black, 35 1/2" x 35 1/2" x 73". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.



23. Robert Smithson, *Alogon I*. 1966, painted steel, black,
35½" × 35½" × 73". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson
and John Weber Gallery.

occasions as “mother earth” (*Writings*, 98, 122, 175, 195); this suggests that the earth has a divine, maternal identity, and that the smiths who work in and with her are her sons. Eventually we will need to explore the tension between the personal and impersonal constructions of what became the artist’s most significant context and medium.

The garden is a special object of Smithson’s contempt. His saying that perhaps art degenerates as it approaches the condition of gardening is a variation on Walter Pater’s dictum that all art aspires to the condition of music. To understand why he would see the garden as a danger to the arts, let us think a bit about its history. The English garden arose as a “natural” response to the French garden, whose strict geometric design exhibited an affinity with Pythagorean aesthetics and whose centered structure was congenial to an explicitly hierarchical political order. This “natural garden” is specifically modern in its claimed timelessness; it is meant to exemplify the contrast between nature and culture and to offer aesthetic pleasure to a universal humanity. In fact the garden is the way in which the landowning class provides an ideological justification for its own status. The garden disguises the labor process that goes into its making, creating the illusion that it is nature as found. It validates the status quo by suggesting the superior taste of those who own the land. At the very same time that landowners were making vast changes in the informal, multidimensional, and quasi-feudal arrangements in the countryside and rationalizing its landscape for their profits, they were laying out and providing a theory for their gardens. As Simon Pugh formulates it, “In developing a more efficient rural economy, the landowner used the garden as a way of legitimating that economy in the garden as an aesthetic experience.”⁵

We should note that Smithson’s earthworks are in many ways the opposite of the English garden. They are often not easily accessible; they do not exist for the sake of pleasure and escape; they are explicitly entropic rather than

creating the illusion of timelessness; they make manifest the work that has gone into their production; and they involve a theoretical critique of the humanism that is essential to the garden's aesthetics. In an extended footnote on "the abysmal problem of gardens" Smithson suggests a contrary reading of the garden, usually understood as a utopian and paradisaical topos: "The sinister in a primitive sense seems to have its origin in what could be called 'quality gardens' (Paradise). Dreadful things seem to have happened in those half-forgotten Edens. Why does the Garden of Delights suggest something perverse? Torture gardens. Deer park. The Grottos of Tiberius. Gardens of Virtue are somehow always 'lost'" (*Writings*, 91). Even allowing for the irony and hyperbole of this statement, one that eventually mocks itself with the remark that the note "is turning into a dizzying maze, full of tenuous paths and innumerable riddles," part of the claim here is that gardens falsify materials and that art has the vocation of disclosing these materials in their truth. What such truthfulness could be is not immediately clear, especially since Smithson is critical of representational or realistic concepts of art, as well as of an expressionistic aesthetic that would take art to be the authentic manifestation of the artist's psyche. He does sometimes propose what he calls a dialectical concept of art, in which truthfulness would consist in an interaction of man and nature that does not mask but thematizes that interaction itself. In articulating Smithson's thought it will be necessary to articulate this dialectical idea of art as well as Heidegger's notion of art's truth as the joint revelation of world and earth.⁶

The garden, Smithson says, is not dialectical, and he understands dialectic here as involving movement, interaction, and displacement:

I am for an art that takes into account the direct effect of the elements as they exist from day to day apart from representation. The parks that

surround some museums isolate art into objects of formal delectation. Objects in a park suggest static repose rather than any ongoing dialectic. . . . A park carries the values of the final, the absolute, and the sacred. . . . I am talking about a dialectics of nature that interacts with the physical contradictions inherent in natural forces as they are—nature as both sunny and stormy. (*Writings*, 133)

When Smithson says that the “gardens of history are being replaced by the sites of time,” he is outlining a parallel between forms of spatial and temporal location and organization. The “gardens of history” are situated, despite their ideological pretensions of timelessness, within history; they reflect specific ways of construing nature and the earth that we are now in a position to analyze and criticize. They are not escapes from time and history but hostages to temporality. The “sites of time” are those locations that manifest the forces of growth, change, decay, spoliation, mixture, and drift. They confirm rather than contest the temporality to which they (and we) are subject. We might think of the gardens and sites as two series of objects (in Kubler’s terms) in which the first has as a prime the lost Garden of Eden, a paradise whose loss marks our fall into time and whose replicas aim at an aesthetic transcendence of that fall. The sites of time would constitute a series with a less determinate prime object, or perhaps this series has no prime. If it did, it would be something like an eroded and eroding structure in an eroded and eroding setting, for example, an ancient decaying megalith that is only partially amenable to our hermeneutic inquiries, or the *Spiral Jetty*, which gathers together ancient legends about the gods of the place, modern earth-moving equipment, and cinematographic documentation, and is composed of diverse crystalline forms that produce a structure always subject to entropy.

The art of the “sites of time,” then, is more closely allied with truth than with beauty. Smithson criticizes “representation,” or a pictorial approach to

nature, in the name of an art that would somehow disclose the very unrepresentability of the earth. The earth “is built on sediment and disruption” (*Writings*, 87); it is an accidental assemblage of differential strata whose relations are variable and which cannot be reduced to either a rational or a pictorial ideal of nature. Human intervention in the earth should be thought of as part and parcel of its chaotic diversity. Smithson observes that building and earth moving typically redouble the effect of geological change and cataclysm; with the use of heavy equipment “construction takes on the look of destruction,” something that is emphasized in the film of the *Spiral Jetty*, in which the earth-moving machines are seen in close up pouring out chaotic masses of rock. What should attract our interest in a building project is not the finished product but the “processes of heavy construction [which] have a devastating kind of primordial grandeur.” This way of being attuned to man’s place on the earth suggests something of the quality of presocratic philosophy with its sense of elemental conflict and upheaval: “The actual *disruption* of the earth’s crust is at times very compelling, and seems to confirm Heraclitus’s *Fragment 124*, ‘The most beautiful world is like a heap of rubble tossed down in confusion’” (*Writings*, 83). Heraclitus is often said to be the original dialectical thinker, and Smithson’s invocation of him at this point is significant. It occurs in an essay whose very title recalls the thought of those early Greeks who, before the rise of Socratic and Platonic idealism, saw the world as the play of elements in conflict and refused to separate mind and nature: “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects.” Another translation of the Heraclitus fragment runs: “The fairest universe is but a heap of rubbish piled up at random.”⁷ Heraclitus is usually taken to be saying that what human beings ordinarily take to be most beautiful, the *kosmos* that appears ordered and harmonious, is in fact a random product. The point would be that human conceptions of beauty are naive and do not go beyond surface appearances. Smithson has

reversed this usual reading of the fragment to say that a world that *appears* (and is) chaotic and disordered is a beautiful one. Perhaps Heraclitus would have wanted to say this also, suggesting that we might find beauty in precisely those places, heaps of rubble or rubbish, where we usually deny its possibility. Certainly Heraclitus is a better emblem for Smithson's aesthetic than the Pythagoreans, with their mathematical conception of cosmic harmony, or Plato, whose cosmology has a Pythagorean tendency and inspiration.

Like many of Smithson's texts, "A Sedimentation of the Mind" varies in tone from the parodic and ironic to a high seriousness of thought and the strident voice of the artistic manifesto. The governing insight or metaphor is the identification of thought with processes of the earth; it is a defense of "muddy thinking" based on a structural similarity of the earth and the mind: "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, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason" (*Writings*, 82). I have already quoted the principle with which Smithson concludes this essay: his injunction that art should "explore the pre- and post-historic mind: it must go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts" (*Writings*, 91). What can be emphasized now is that there is a specific *site* where these meetings are to take place, and that is the earth. In exploring this site of all of Smithson's sites and nonsites we will see that he is calling on the artist and the thinker not only to envision a conjunction of prehistoric monuments (like Stonehenge or the Nazca lines, for example) and contemporary earthworks (like his own or Michael Heizer's); he is also asking for a certain mode of thinking that would bring together pre- and post-technological and -philosophical orientations, like those of the early Greeks and of a postmodern thinker like Martin Heidegger.

In beginning to articulate such a conjunction of the prehistoric and the posthistoric we might give some thought to the fact that the most decisive confrontation in the Western tradition between philosophy and art begins with Plato's proposed censorship of a story about the earth. In those notorious books of the *Republic* where Socrates issues a series of criticisms and prohibitions concerning the traditional poetic stories, the "greatest lie" which stands at the head of the litany of charges has to do with violence against Earth (Gaia) and Earth's revenge: "First, I said, 'the man who told the biggest lie about the biggest things didn't tell a fine lie—how Uranus [Heaven or Sky] did what Hesiod says he did, and how Cronos [Time] in his turn took revenge on him.'"⁸ In Hesiod's version of the story (one that Smithson alludes to in his *Yucatan* essay), Earth comes first, Heaven himself being her child born from a shadowy union with darkness. At the beginning then, in this narrative of the prehistoric, genealogical lines are jumbled, resembling perhaps the tangled strata of the geological earth. Mother Earth and Father Heaven were prolific lovmakers and parents, finally producing the monstrous trio of Cottus, Briareus, and Gyes. At this point let us allow Hesiod to tell the story about Earth that Plato condemns:

This unruly brood had a hundred monstrous hands sprouting from their shoulders, and fifty heads on top of their shoulders growing from their sturdy bodies. They had monstrous strength to match their huge size.

Of all the children born to Earth and Heaven, these were the boldest, and their father hated them from the beginning. As each of them was about to be born, Heaven would not let them reach the light of day; instead he hid them all away in the bowels of Mother Earth. Heaven took pleasure in doing this evil thing. In spite of her enormous size Earth felt the strain within her and groaned. Finally she thought of an evil and cunning stratagem. She instantly

produced a new metal, gray steel, and made a huge sickle. Then she laid the matter before her children.⁹

We are at a loss in reading this story to sort out the elemental forces of earth and heaven from the personages of a story who speak, think, and act. What we can recognize is a tale of chaotic and terrible beginnings, one that involves a primal violence inflicted upon the earth and a convulsion of the elements. It is Time (Chronos) who will play the role of avenger, but he will set off a series of generational conflicts, a dialectical story, that may continue indefinitely. The sickle to be applied to Heaven can be thought of as continuous with the violence that has already taken place, as in Smithson's description of the technological instruments that cut into and rearrange the earth: "The manifestations of technology are at times less 'extensions' of man (Marshall McLuhan's anthropomorphism), than they are aggregates of elements. Even the most advanced tools and machines are made of the raw matter of the earth. . . . Most of the better artists prefer tools that have not been idealized, or differentiated into 'objective' meanings" (*Writings*, 82). In the extensive description that follows, it is the archaic, dinosaurlike character of these tools that is emphasized, and their abilities to dig, crawl, and rip with "steel toothed rakes." While Smithson sometimes wants to defend "mother earth" against assault, his enthusiasm for earth-moving machines seems to qualify that concern: "Strip mining actually does suggest lewd sex acts. . . . It's like a kind of sexual assault on mother earth which brings in the aspect of incest projections as well as illicit behavior" (*Writings*, 195). But let us return to Hesiod's narrative, where the tools are put to use to liberate Earth. Chronos says, "'I have no respect for our infamous father, since he was the one who started using violence.' . . . Huge Heaven came drawing night behind him and desiring to make love; he lay on top of Earth stretched all over her. Then from his ambush his son

reached out with his left hand and with his right took the huge sickle with its long jagged teeth and quickly sheared away the sexual organs from his own father and threw them away, backward over his shoulder.”¹⁰

We can understand Plato’s reasons for not wanting to include this part of the “great books” in the core curriculum for future generations. Not only is it a tale of monstrosity, child abuse, and mutilation of the father by the child; it is also a myth asserting that at the origin of things we find violence done to and by the earth, in which time appears as both savior and destroyer. What we might call Plato’s moral and aesthetic objections to the story are supported by an ontological critique (bearing in mind that Plato would not acknowledge these terms, which reflect more recent divisions of philosophy). In the Platonic cosmos, the earth is benign, and her convulsions, even if catastrophic, like the story of Atlantis, are cyclical and devoid of vengeance.¹¹ (Perhaps Plato can adopt such a confident tone because patriarchal power has been powerfully consolidated by the time that he writes.) Time is not to be thought of as the violence of aimless becoming or decay but as “the moving image of eternity,” so that the heavens and time cooperate, as the stars encircle the benign earth, in providing a temporal analogue of a timeless model.¹² In the *Republic* the citizens will indeed be told that the earth is the mother of us all, in a “beautiful story” (the words are usually translated as “noble lie”) that will replace Hesiod’s horrid myth. In this story the earth regularly gives birth to social order without violence and (apparently) by parthenogenesis: the metals of the earth are discovered not as instruments of destruction but as emblems of a rational, philosophical order of the soul and the state. Although there is an “ancient difference” between philosophy and poetry, Hesiod’s story cannot be completely suppressed (the difference or *diaphora* has come to be known in English as a “quarrel”; we might think of Derrida’s *differance* here or of Ehrenzweig’s notions of differentiation and dedifferentiation). For after

condemning this “greatest lie about the most important matters,” Socrates allows that it might be told with circumspection and secrecy: “If there were some necessity to tell it only a few people should hear it, and in secret, after sacrificing not a pig but some great and scarce victim, so that as few people as possible should hear it.”¹³ (Perhaps this tale will be told in a cave, the place itself being the topic of the story told there, as in Smithson’s underground cinema.)

What is suggested by the competing stories of Plato and Hesiod is the compelling need that cultures have to produce some intelligible narrative about the earth and our place on it. Between them the two exemplify the contrast between a dynamic, agonistic conception of the earth and the standpoint of a rational cosmology in which order prevails. From this perspective many conceptions of the earth turn out to be either Platonic or Hesiodic. Heraclitus, Heidegger, and Smithson all join Hesiod in seeing the earth primarily as the site of flux and conflict; and while Smithson might at first seem to reject any trace of the anthropomorphism and myth that are so prominent in Hesiod, this rejection is qualified, as we shall see, by his allusions to Mother Earth. The need for a coherent story about the earth may be related to the prehistoric proliferation of markings and mounds by which early people produced enigmatic inscriptions of the land. The Jewish stories of Eden and the flood and the Christian *Book of Revelation* with its detailed description of a fiery destruction of the world exhibit the same tendency. At the beginning of the modern era one of the most influential “geonarratives” was Thomas Burnet’s *Sacred Theory of the Earth*. In what now seems like a strange mixture of speculative geology and a literal reading of the Bible, Burnet set out to demonstrate that the earth’s topography has a definite religious and aesthetic history. Before the fall of man, it was a completely smooth globe; the cataclysm of the flood produced the ugly mountains and other deformities that now mark the earth’s

surface. Finally, Burnet thought that he could demonstrate the general changes that must occur in the conflagration predicted in Revelation.¹⁴ Our contemporary speculations about ecological disaster or utopia, on the possibility of nuclear winter or global warming, the anticipation of massive earthquakes (in California, for example), and the large number of people who subscribe to the notion that the Christian apocalypse will be realized literally and soon testify to the persistence of a passionate interest in geonarrative. Smithson remarks in “Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction”: “*The Sacred Theory of the Earth* causes bewilderment. Some books concerning the deluge bring chaos to many” (*Writings*, 129).

Martin Heidegger is a thinker whose project bears some surprising relations to Smithson’s concern with the intersection of the pre- and the post-historic on the site of the earth. A large part of Heidegger’s thinking consists in uncovering and clarifying traces of those stories told by the early Greeks (poets or thinkers) in order to clarify our own situation at the culmination of a certain kind of history—the technological fulfillment of Western metaphysics. It is on the ground of the earth and in the conjunction of art and earth that Heidegger allows us to glimpse significant connections between some very recent art and some of the oldest traces and monuments that we have of human life. These ancient stories about violence done to the earth have a special resonance today when environmental crisis is part of popular consciousness. Heidegger is perhaps alone among the major philosophers of the twentieth century in posing the question of the “meaning of the earth” (a phrase that occurs in Nietzsche with a quite different resonance).¹⁵ This meaning is hardly fixed, and Heidegger wants to suggest that we are situated at a unique turning point where that meaning may undergo an epochal shift, something like a transition from one geological age to another except that the very meaning of “geo-logy,” the discourse of the earth, is brought into

question here. The place of the earth in our thinking is clearly different than it was for early Christianity, and we may not be committed forever to the sense that it has in enlightenment and technological thought. For Christianity the earth is simply the site where the human drama of salvation is played out. Any talk of the earth's divinity (as in Hesiod) would literally be paganism (the thought of those who live beyond the bounds of the city, in the countryside). Christianity divides the world, as in Saint Augustine, into the city of God and the city of man; as Smithson observes, "The city gives the illusion that earth does not exist" (*Writings*, 83). The modern project of mastering nature that is marked by the Cartesian dualism of rational mind and mathematically organized matter, by the event of the industrial revolution, and by the triumph of technology takes further, more radical steps in desacralizing the earth.

Heidegger asks what has become of the earth in our technological world. He is not merely interested in exposing the waste, abuse, and negligence decried by any thoughtful person who is concerned for future generations. More specifically, Heidegger is claiming that our very sense of what the earth is has been shaped by technology and that technology's reign is so deeply rooted that it cannot be contested simply by appealing for a more prudent management of resources. The problem goes deeper, down to our very assumption that the earth is nothing but resources or "standing reserve" at our disposal. Consider what Heidegger has to say about how the earth is revealed through technology:

The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit. The field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order appears different from how it did when to set in order still meant to take care of and maintain. The work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In sowing grain it places seed in the keeping of the forces of growth

and watches over its increase. But meanwhile even the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another kind of setting-in-order, which *sets upon* nature. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry [“agribusiness,” we would say]. Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium, for example.¹⁶

Not only is the face of the earth changed, its *meaning* is transformed. Consider a mighty river like the Mississippi or the Rhine. Rivers once figured very prominently in our sense of the lived world, often conceived of as demigods and usually encrusted with thick layers of legend and history (they still do so, for example, in the poetry of Hölderlin). Now the river appears as a source of energy, a “standing reserve” of hydroelectric power. Of course, someone might object that the river is still a feature of the landscape, to be enjoyed and contemplated by visitors. Heidegger’s answer is that it is available “in no other way than as an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry.”¹⁷ The vacation industry may be seen as the commodified descendant of the English landowner’s garden. Like the garden, this apparent alternative to culture, modernity, and the city is, as an escape, infected by that from which it tries so hard to distinguish itself. There is, then, no more poetry or religion of the Rhine, no more romance of the Mississippi. Something like this realization was marked by the 1976 production of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, in which the opening scenes are set in the den of the Nibelungs, which now appears as the recesses of a huge hydroelectric power station under the Rhine.

Just as Wagner’s original opera dramatizes the danger of a monetary culture in which values are interchangeable, so the contemporary setting suggests that technology obliterates even the earth that would be the scene of this story. Like Wagner, Heidegger has seemed to many critics to be in the grip of a

romantic nostalgia for a pretechnological and premodern past. Some of this apparent nostalgia can be found in his writings on art and the earth and in his musings on “things” like the handcrafted peasant jug, discussed in his essay “The Thing,” that gathers or assembles earth, heavens, mortals, and gods.¹⁸ What has been called Heidegger’s “peasant ontology” would not appear to sort well with Smithson’s acceptance of large-scale mechanically produced changes in the surface of the earth and his criticisms of pastoral illusions. Yet Heidegger, unlike other thinkers, makes the relation with earth a significant, even an indispensable dimension of the work of art. Heidegger’s conception of the work of art as a struggle between the world and the earth, I want to suggest, can be sufficiently disentangled from his bouts of feudal nostalgia and his apparent attempts to articulate a national (even Nazi) aesthetic, so as to provide a way of clarifying what is at stake in Smithson’s call for an art that will yield the truth of the earth.

Heidegger spends a good deal of effort on posing the question of what kind of art might provide a “saving power” in the age of technology and of the “devastation of the earth.” He repeatedly quotes Hölderlin’s lines “But where danger is, grows / The saving power also” in order to evoke the possibility of a new orientation that would, at the very least, show us that the truth of the technological world is not the only mode of truth.¹⁹ But Heidegger also has withering criticism for those who might fantasize about escaping the technological world altogether by fleeing into an aesthetic retreat (or, we could add, an ecological utopia). He knows that an escape is always structured and determined by the very thing from which one is trying to flee. An art that would respond to the decay of modernism and to the hollowness of the technological vision of things would be one that speaks to these very themes. Some of Heidegger’s own discussions of art have been trenchantly criticized precisely for their apparently naive nostalgia for an earlier, idealized peasant life on the land. His account of Van Gogh’s painting of a pair of shoes as revealing the

world and the earth of the peasant woman who presumably wears them now sounds naive and anachronistic. When we read that “from the dark opening of the worn inside of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth,” we are aware of other possibilities. Iconographically, as Meyer Schapiro pointed out, these could be the shoes of Van Gogh, the urban male artist. In his reading of Heidegger and Schapiro on the shoes, Derrida asks whether both have ignored the fact that these are empty, painted shoes, perhaps not even a pair, that belong to nobody and consequently uncommitted, ideologically, to either city or countryside.²⁰ Perhaps Heidegger can be freed from this nostalgia by seeing that his thought about art could be realized in works like Smithson’s that do not long for a pretechnological past but incorporate the history of technology in order to express a nontechnological sense of time.

Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” begins with a criticism of the narrowness of the Western tradition of aesthetic thought which, he says, is tied to the ancient categories of matter and form. These, he argues, are more appropriate to equipment of a useful sort than to works of art. An ax must be made of a certain material in order to cut, and it must also be shaped and designed according to a certain form. To construe the work of art as a piece of equipment would be to assign it similar utilitarian functions, ignoring the paramount fact that we are struck or held by the sheer fact of the work, rather than employing it to produce a specific effect. The work illuminates something, Heidegger claims; what it does is to disclose a certain truth, and that truth consists in a relationship between a human world and the earth or ground on which that world rests. Consider a Greek temple, a work whose truthfulness could not be supposed to consist in its representing or depicting something (for what is like it other than such a temple itself?). Heidegger says that the people who make and live with this temple receive from it their most fundamental orientations toward the meaningful structures of their life (which he calls the “world”) and that which is in itself the unrepresentable

ground of that life, a ground that can never be completely known, reduced, or assimilated to those structures (the name of this ground is the “earth”): “It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people.”²¹ The temple is that place that clarifies the connections between war and peace, public life and life in the household, economic endeavor and religious ritual, legend and daily practice. But it does so only within a context that is best described as the earth (although we will need to refrain from identifying this as a purely geological notion):

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock’s clumsy yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to light the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night. The temple’s firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air. The steadfastness of the work contrasts with the surge of the surf, and its own repose brings out the raging of the sea. Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are. The Greeks early called this emerging and rising in all things *phusis*. It clears and illuminates, also, that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the *earth*.²²

Heidegger’s “earth” is not strictly identical with the physical materials that we might take that term to name. It is a feature of our technological world (the

structure of meanings that things have for us), he claims, that leads us to make that identification. More generally earth is what both resists and grounds meaning, it is what never becomes completely present and therefore cannot be re-presented, but it can emerge in the struggle or *agon* that a work of art sets up between earth and world. “What this word says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere, or with the merely astronomical idea of a planet. Earth is that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises without violation.”²³ We can now suggest that this conception of the earth as that which resists representation is a constant element of Smithson’s work. From the *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, which questions the hegemony of an all-seeing vision, through the sites/nonsites that work on the limits between the meanings and structures of the art world (a word with a new resonance when juxtaposed with Heidegger’s “world”), to the works like *Partially Buried Woodshed* and *Spiral Jetty* that stress the entropy of the elements, Smithson is attempting to disclose that surd and ineluctable dimension of things which Heidegger calls the earth. The scientifically and technologically defined earth is a first approximation to this wider understanding of earth. Certainly without this larger sense of earth it would be difficult to make the connection between the prehistoric and posthistoric earthworks that Smithson announces several times and which receives its fullest actualization in the *Spiral Jetty*’s concatenation of the ancient legend of the numinous whirlpool at the heart of the lake, the allusion to sacred inscriptions of the earth by peoples who have left us little other writing, and the contemporary technology and sense of inevitable entropy that inform the work’s construction.

For Heidegger the conception of an earthwork is a pleonasm. Every work involves its earthly side, both in the materials that go into it and in what it discloses about the elements around it. Every work exhibits a constant tension

between its worldly side, which as a structure of meanings aspires to dominate and comprehend the earth, and the earth that withdraws into self-seclusion, refuses to completely yield itself, and always hinders the world's aim at self-sufficiency:

The world grounds itself on the earth and earth juts through world. But the relation between world and earth does not wither away into the empty unity of opposites unconcerned with one another. The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there. . . . In the struggle, each opponent carries the other beyond itself. . . . The earth cannot dispense with the Open of the world if it itself is to appear as earth in the liberated surge of its self-seclusion. The world, again, cannot soar out of the earth's sight if, as the governing breadth and path of all essential destiny, it is to ground itself on a resolute foundation.²⁴

This Heraclitean sense of the creative antagonism between world and earth also allows us to hear the active, verbal *working* that is in play both in Smithson's earthworks and in Heidegger's notion of the work of art: "Setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work accomplishes this striving. The work-being of the work consists in the fighting of the battle between world and earth."²⁵ Heidegger calls this antagonism a rift (*Riss*), suggesting a tension or disruption that has overtones both of artistic process and of the physical earth, as when we speak of a rift between different geological strata. The rift is "the intimacy with which opponents belong to each other."²⁶ Heidegger quotes Albrecht Dürer, who had said, "For in truth art lies hidden within nature; he who can wrest (*reissen*) it from her, has it" and suggests that what lies hidden in nature is the rift itself which can "become manifest only

through the work of art.”²⁷ It is difficult to translate Heidegger’s *Riss*, which has overtones of design and shape as well as a tear or gap. The English “render” and some of its cognates may do part of the job, as in Yeats’s “For nothing can be sole or whole / Which has not been rent.” It is in and through the rift that the earth appears in the distinctive mode of art. While earth is also used in equipment, it tends to vanish into the finished product. We don’t appreciate the steel, glass, and chrome of a new automobile for their original character and texture but as shaped and subordinated to the sleek machine that will take us racing down the road. As we use the car, both it and its matter are “used up”; they “disappear in usefulness.”²⁸ Smithson’s preference for “dumb machines” that may be dated and rusting, whose materials betray their affinity with the elements upon which they are exercised, is perhaps a recognition of this duality and a strategy for softening it.

The *Spiral Jetty* can be seen as a work of art that discloses the truth of earth and world in Heidegger’s sense, although the spirit of the work differs markedly from any poem, painting, or building with which Heidegger ever entered into conversation. A simple observation of the jetty’s condition of being under water since 1972 might lead to the conclusion that earth has won its battle with world here. But the work, we should remember, is not identical with the fifteen-hundred-foot coil that is now under the surface of the Great Salt Lake (Smithson, by the way, had intended to add another fifteen feet of rock to raise it above the water).²⁹ The work has a centrifugal and centripetal dynamic, like the spiral itself, that comprehends its photographic documentation, the film that Smithson made of it, his essay “The Spiral Jetty,” and perhaps his plans, notes, drawings, and sketches, including the proposed subterranean theater or museum nearby that would have shown the film. As he says, “One ceases to consider art in terms of an ‘object’” (*Writings*, 112). Working in all of these dimensions, the *Jetty* may seem diffuse, and Heidegger might have

found it confusingly eclectic. Since it draws on the most ancient and the recent past, on the symbolism of the spiral which recurs globally in myth and religion, on the play between a remote site and the contemporary technology which gives us indirect access to it, on inspirations drawn from such human wreckage as abandoned oil rigs and the now defunct optimism of the Golden Spike monument in the vicinity, from crystallography and Pascal's idea of the spiral, and includes references to Brancusi, Jackson Pollock, Poussin, and Pythagoreanism, Heidegger might have pronounced it to be a mere assemblage of scientific and cultural references. This, however, may be unfair to Heidegger, whose concept of the *Riss* allows a way of acknowledging artworks that, far from being what an older critical tradition would call "organic unities," are rent or torn along internal fault lines; in some ways his paradigmatic poet Friedrich Hölderlin is like Smithson in his wide-ranging attempt to construct a metahistorical vision that in his case includes Greece, Christianity, the modern world and its philosophy, and that announces the dawn of a new age. Ezra Pound seems to have played a similar role for Smithson, as a poet who aspired to write a poem (*The Cantos*) that would "include history." Yet confronted with the jetty's spiraling movement out into the amazingly red water, and the rugged texture of its rock and crystal materials, one feels the force of Heideggerian statements like "The rift must set itself back into the heavy weight of stone, the dumb hardness of wood, the dark glow of colors. As the earth takes the rift back into itself, the rift is first set forth into the Open and thus placed, that is, set, within that which towers up into the Open as self-closing and sheltering."³⁰

"*The work*," says Heidegger, "*lets the earth be an earth.*"³¹ Certainly this is true of the *Spiral Jetty*. Smithson explains that he was first attracted to the site because of the red saline water in this area of the lake. The red is striking and is associated with the often blazing sun and with human blood; but blood is

also connected with the salt water, both by their similar chemical composition and by the fact that the sea is the original source of all life. Smithson describes this heightened sense of the elements and their interconnections:

On the slopes of Rozer Point I closed my eyes and the sun burned crimson through the 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, no they were veins and arteries sucking up the obscure sediments. My eyes became combustion chambers, churning orbs of blood blazing by the light of the sun. All was enveloped in a flaming chromosphere. (*Writings*, 113)

The spiraling coil is composed in part of salt crystals that reflect its shape: “Each cubic salt crystal echoes the *Spiral Jetty* in terms of the crystal’s molecular lattice” (*Writings*, 112). Although this may sound like a miscellaneous bit of geological and crystallographic knowledge, it is deployed here to suggest a movement, an interchangeability between the lowest and highest ends of the scale of the artwork. Just as the spiral can move inward or outward, from microcosm to macrocosm or the reverse, so the structure and its components have the same reversible relationship. Similarly, the parallel between human blood and salt water is not merely a digressive bit of learning but is part of the overwhelming sense of the power of redness, of the body, the light, and the elements. In one of its dimensions the earth here is the earth as known by physical science and manipulable by the somewhat antiquated technology of the machines that Smithson compared to dinosaurs; yet the earth is the perceived, felt, and experienced earth that can lead Smithson to use his work’s ontology to recapitulate human phylogeny: “Following the spiral steps we return to our origins, back to some pulpy protoplasm, a floating eye adrift in an antediluvian ocean. . . . 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" (*Writings*, 113–114). The resistance of earth, what Heidegger calls its self-sheltering and concealment, bears the name of entropy in Smithson's writings. At the site in Utah and in the recorded and documented experience there, there is a sense of flux, alteration, and decay. The salt lake is no longer part of the great ocean but is detached from it, as abandoned and useless in its way as the disused machinery that litters its banks. While the spiral alludes to a Native American legend that a deep whirlpool connects the Great Salt Lake with the Pacific, this is a past, hypothetical conduit that no longer has any force other than through these narrative traces. The color of the water, we know, will change as the algae thrive or disappear. The elements will continue to interact and new strata and faultlines will be formed, outdating the present arrangement in the way that the lake itself has been left stranded within the continent.

This entropic earth, with its spiraling dynamism of microcosm and macrocosm and its fusion of the organic and inorganic, emerges in struggle with a certain world or structure of meanings. The world, Heidegger says, is fundamentally a set of paths; there is one literal path here and it takes the form of a spiral, which can be traced inward or outward, clockwise or counterclockwise. On such a path we can go everywhere or nowhere. Everywhere, if we move outward and yield to the centrifugal movement which, in Smithson's associations, can extend through seas and continents, echoing even the spiral movement of the galaxies. Nowhere, if we follow the inward direction of the path, ending at a point where motion is no longer possible, an entropic rundown, suggestive of a return from our complex state to that of our one-celled ancestors. The film shows Smithson running around the jetty, perhaps alluding to the famous scene in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* where Cary Grant is chased by a crop-dusting plane.³² The helicopter in the film exhibits another

form of spiral motion with its blades (*helix*, we are reminded in the essay, is Greek for spiral). The machines are depicted moving slowly and ponderously around the spiral, sometimes forward and sometimes backward, in order to fill in the entire coil. Motion on the path of this world is not dependent upon a meaningful center but is fundamentally decentering. Time and history are also subject to dislocation.

The spiral is one of the most ancient and widespread of religious and spiritual symbols, so its use evokes the prehistoric and the archetypal. Yet the spiral is also multiplied, subjected to its own centrifugal force, and its motion turns up in the earth-moving machines, the helicopter, and even in the technology of filming itself with its reeling and unreeling. This is a world full of debris, of equipment that no longer works, bearing witness to a defunct modernity. The old machinery and deserted buildings in the vicinity might recall Heidegger's observation that we become aware of the texture and look of equipment only when it fails to function. Nearby is the Golden Spike monument, Smithsonian points out, which was a symbol of modernist optimism in linking the continent in a network of transportation and communication. That vision is no longer viable, as we are reminded at the site of the *Spiral Jetty*: simply getting to the site requires a difficult journey over roads that dwindle into wilderness, and near the shore "the trapped fragments of junk and waste transported one into a world of modern prehistory. . . . A great pleasure arose from seeing all those incoherent structures" (*Writings*, 111). This pleasure, which is similar to the taste for ruins that becomes so prominent in eighteenth-century painting, might suggest that we are dealing not with a world in Heidegger's sense here but with the ruins of a world. A genuine world, he says, is one that is happening, not one that has simply entered into the record. There would seem to be a clear difference between a world to which "we are subject" and one to which other people were once subject. "The *world worlds*," Heidegger writes, "and

is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home. . . . World is the ever non-objective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into being. Wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds.”³³

Although Heidegger’s account of the Greek temple suggests that a world must be vibrantly self-confident and self-affirming, that suggestion may have more to do with Heidegger’s understanding of the Greeks than with his general conception of what constitutes a world. The description quoted above seems to allow for the sense of loss and the redefinition of a past when it speaks of decisions that are “taken up *and* abandoned” or “go unrecognized *and* are rediscovered” (my emphases). We might point out that the world of the *Spiral Jetty* contains or alludes to paths that have been abandoned, in something like the way in which the Christian world alludes to the abandoned paths of paganism, but that it may still possess a path of its own. Isn’t Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* one of the places where a postmodern world arises, a world aware of many paths not taken and abandoned, a world whose paths have become decentered and reversible? We become uncertain whether we are going forward or backward, in space as well as in time. Are we in touch with the artistic avant-garde or reverting to the most ancient traces of human marking of the earth? Are we being led to a surd center of a spiral in a dead sea, or are we being invited to follow the whirlpool out into the Pacific? This world worlds in the rippling effects generated by its spiraling motions and in its precarious struggle to surmount the entropic undertow of the earth.

However, it is not necessary to travel to remote spots in Utah or to invoke the obscure sayings of German philosophers in order to articulate the possibilities of an art that works with the earth. Smithson found a great American artwork by “America’s first ‘earthwork artist’” just outside the

Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (*Writings*, 123). Central Park, laid out in the nineteenth century by Frederick Law Olmsted, is “an example which throws a whole new light on the nature of American art” (*Writings*, 127). In emphasizing the American identity of the park and its artist, Smithson is affirming the possibility of a landscape art that will be liberated from the narrow confines of the garden and its ideology. The expansive and laudatory tone of the essay seems to aim at providing a legitimating genealogy for the kind of work that he was doing at the time, including a variety of projected works that would have involved cooperation with American industries in employing the sites of former strip mines and other spoliations of the land as the location for an art of the earth. Smithson begins with a discussion of Olmsted’s philosophical sources, implying that a significant new departure in art must involve a comprehensive theoretical vision. Those sources are the British theorists of the picturesque; if not American, they are still opposed to the transcendental idealism of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, which Smithson views here as an alien presence responsible for the limits of a “modernist formalism” that has constrained us for too long in the criticism of a Clement Greenberg and in the institutions of the museum, here given a specific menacing form in the incursions of the Metropolitan into the park (*Writings*, 119). Smithson cites two apposite quotations from William Gilpin and Uvedale Price, the thinkers rightly credited by Olmsted as the pioneer theorists of the picturesque. These are worth repeating, both to help clarify the notion of the dialectical landscape and to renew the word “picturesque,” which Smithson suspects has been distorted to mean nothing more than the pretty or appealing:

The side of a smooth green hill, torn by floods, may at first very properly be called deformed; and on the same principle, though not with the same impression, as a gash on a living animal. When a rawness of such a gash in

the ground is softened, and in part concealed and ornamented by the effects of time, and the progress of vegetation, deformity, by this usual process, is converted into picturesqueness; and this is the case with quarries, gravel pits, etc., which at first are deformities, and which in their most picturesque state are often considered as such by a levelling improver. (Price, cited by Smithson, *Writings*, 119)

A piece of Palladian architecture may be elegant in the last degree, but if we introduce it in a picture it immediately becomes a formal object and ceases to please. (Gilpin, cited by Smithson, *Writings*, 119)

Price's contrast between the "levelling improver" and one who has an eye for the picturesque anticipates Smithson's rejection of "reclamation" projects that would attempt to obliterate all traces of geological or industrial transformations of the land; following Price, he would prefer more subtle alterations in the damaged area that retain a sense of the process that has occurred. Both would maintain some awareness of the "gash" or rift that helps to constitute the picturesque.

Smithson enters into traditional discussions of aesthetic theory by arguing that the picturesque is a dialectical solution to the antithesis of the beautiful and the sublime. If the beautiful is the smooth and the regular or symmetrical, and the sublime is that which inspires terror by qualities like vastness and solitude (following Edmund Burke), then the picturesque would be "a *synthesis* . . . which is on close examination related to chance and change in the material order of nature" (*Writings*, 119). In Price's account the main characteristics of the picturesque are variety and intricacy, and the "efficient causes" of the picturesque are said to be roughness and sudden variation.³⁴ "Intricacy" involves complexity and "partial concealment." An intricately structured or

disposed natural scene is one in which the relations of various objects are not immediately transparent to the gaze; they may overlap one another and present themselves as obstructions.

The picturesque may please us because of the difficulties and challenges it offers to the hegemony of the all-seeing *video*. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has described the spatiality of Cézanne's painting as one that cannot be accounted for by such a *video*, for in Cézanne objects block one another and have a tangible presence. They reflect the lived experience of finding our way around in a world of objects rather than the rational reconstruction of a monocular grid which is classical Renaissance perspectivism. (Smithson says that there is a sense of the picturesque in Cézanne and mentions his *Bibemus Quarry*, pointing out once more that his work was derailed by "cubistic reductionism which would lead to our present day insipid notions of 'flatness' and 'lyrical abstraction'" [*Writings*, 121].) The picturesque is like a picture, or suited to be pictured, insofar as its appearance lends itself to the sorts of effects found in complex landscapes. Price points out the inconsistency displayed by landowners who value the picturesque in the paintings on their walls but who turn their grounds over to "improvers" who will level the land and chop down trees.³⁵ Clearly part of the appeal of the theory of the picturesque for Smithson is that it introduces time into the experience of the landscape; a "deformity" due to natural or human causes, which is then modified by further change of either sort, already involves two distinct temporalities and would seem to qualify the picturesque as a "site of time."

The picturesque has been strangely neglected at a time when theorists have been attempting to rework its companion eighteenth-century category of the sublime in order to give some account of recent art. According to Jean-François Lyotard, following Burke and Kant, the sublime is concerned to present the unrepresentable. Barnett Newman's painting or the work of the

minimalists is said to provide so little in the way of a complex and absorbing visual experience in order to provoke indeterminate thoughts of that which is not visually presented.³⁶ There is a terror elicited by these stark experiences, Lyotard claims, the terror that there will be a fundamental interruption in things, that nothing will happen and that the reassuring continuities on which we depend will be destroyed. Certainly much of Smithson's work and sensibility could be described in the terms that Lyotard employs in his analysis of the sublime and the avant-garde. The gallery works like the *Enantiomorphic Chambers* that involve the deconstruction of the *video* correspond to the latter's conception of the task of the avant-garde visual artist: "These painters discover that they have to present that there is something that is not presentable according to the legitimate construction. They begin to overturn the supposed 'givens' of the visible so as to make visible the fact that the visual field hides and requires invisibilities, that it does not simply belong to the eye (of the prince) but to the (wandering) mind."³⁷ While some of Smithson's work can be described in this way, he would not accept this statement of the artist's project insofar as it calls for a progressive series of eliminative or reductive steps that requires the one-dimensional temporality of the avant-garde caught in "the time stream." In the picturesque mode that he describes in the essay on Olmsted there is something that is neither the sheer presentation of the beautiful nor the sublime's awareness of the unrepresentable. In intricacy, variety, obstruction, and in labyrinthine and mazelike forms there is a play of the presented and the unrepresented rather than a reduction to one of these.

More significantly, the picturesque, as Smithson understands it, involves an interaction between human beings and nature that is precluded by the classical categories of the beautiful and the sublime. The picturesque is not only dialectical because it overcomes the dichotomy of these two concepts; it is dialectical in its content, Smithson maintains, because it expresses the ne-

cessity of chance and change and of an ongoing interaction between man and nature. Central Park is a dialectical and picturesque landscape in all of the respects noted. It is intricate and various; Smithson's essay concludes with a narrative of a walk through the park, beginning with the Ramble, that takes him through "a tangled net of divergent paths," and he endorses Olmsted's construction: "The network of paths he twisted through this place out-labyrinthed labyrinths. For what really is a Ramble, but a place to walk aimlessly and idly—it is a maze that spreads in all directions. . . . Olmsted had brought a primordial condition into the heart of Manhattan. . . . Beneath leafless tree limbs the windings grow more complex, and seem to turn on themselves, so that the walker has no sense of direction" (*Writings*, 127).

Central Park is not a classical eighteenth-century garden, a fact that goes beyond Smithson's references to drug dealers, other dangerous characters, rubbish, and graffiti. Those gardens were typically bounded by "hahas," mounded earth modeled on military earthworks; the haha was invisible from within the garden in order to promote the illusion that within it we are in a pure piece of nature.³⁸ The frame of Central Park is brutally marked by 59th and 110th streets on the south and north and Fifth Avenue and Central Park West on the east and west. This is not to say that the question of what is inside and outside the park is settled without ambiguity—far from it, as we shall see—but rather to point out that there is no need, as there was in the eighteenth-century garden, to disguise the frame in order to mask an artificial construction legitimating a specific cultural order as the access to an idyllic nature. We are dealing here with a blatantly public work of art whose frame is designed not to exclude outsiders or, as in the case of a painting, to show what one must not touch, but to define an area that is open to public access and to the changes wrought by nature and history. Central Park offers no illusion of the eternal but is radically temporal. Smithson begins his account by reminding his readers that the site was once covered by glaciers and ends

by discussing the most contemporary changes introduced by humans (the encroachments of the Metropolitan and the appearance of a new generation of graffiti). The photographs chosen for the *Artforum* essay are mostly either before and after shots of the “same” spot in the park at one-hundred-year intervals or older photos emphasizing how different the current park is from its earlier site (the recent photos are Smithson’s snapshots). The park is inscribed with its own history and will never be complete; it has no *telos* that would bring its flux to a conclusion and so can never be understood in static, formalistic terms. In Smithson’s paradoxical formulation, “Olmsted’s parks exist before they are finished, which means in fact they are never finished; they remain carriers of the unexpected and of contradiction on all levels of human activity, be it social, political, or natural” (*Writings*, 119). When the park was first laid out, he tells us, it was strewn with rubbish, deep in mud, occupied by empty squatters’ huts and populated by goats that had been left behind; but “all of this is part of the park’s dialectic” (*Writings*, 123).

While Hegel and Marx had developed dialectical theories of art, this meant generally for them that an artwork could be understood as embodying an internal dialectic between its subjective and objective poles, a tragic conflict between equally valid moral claims, or the contradictions of the class struggle and its associated ideological expressions.³⁹ Hegel had gone so far as to articulate a sense in which there could be a dialectical relationship among the artist, the artwork, and the audience, such that they could come to constitute an identity-in-difference. But Smithson proposes a much more radical notion, namely, that an artwork would always be in a process of differentiation and interaction:

Looking on the nature of the park, or its history and our perceptions of it, we are first presented with an endless maze of relations and interconnections, in which nothing remains what or where it is, as a thing-in-itself, but

the whole park changes like day and night, in and out, dark and light—a carefully designed clump of bushes can also be a mugger’s hideout. . . . Central Park is a ground work of necessity and chance, a range of contrasting viewpoints that are forever fluctuating, yet solidly based in the earth. (*Writings*, 123–124)

Presumably Smithson would accept the mugger’s hideout (and the mugger?) as part of the *artwork* that is Central Park, not just an extraneous addition to it, while a more “formal” aesthetics would distinguish, in an apparently similar instance, between the actor performing his assigned role in the play and his stepping out of character to assassinate a member of the audience. In fact, Smithson does make distinctions between proper and improper changes in the park and in some of his own works (he thought that the Metropolitan and graffiti on walls did not belong in the park or contribute to its dialectic). This suggests that he required more formal criteria than he was prepared to acknowledge, and it may be that no conception of art can abandon formalism altogether. The artist seems not to have been familiar with John Dewey’s theory of art, which might have been used to support in part his radical conception of the openness of the actual work of art as well as his attempt (in the essay on Olmsted and his last proposals for reclamation works) to project a distinctively American vision of art within the North American landscape and in a democratic society. Dewey had written that “the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience,” a dictum that has led critics to ask whether *any* experiential involvement with a work is then part of its nature—leaving us with the problems of landscape as mugger’s hideout or actors turned assassins.⁴⁰ Smithson would probably have suspected that Dewey’s notion of “experience” was too subjectivistic, not allowing for the dialectic of the artwork and nature.

In Smithson’s essay, Central Park, the product of America’s first earthworks

artist, emerges as the paradoxical prime of a series of works that include his own. While this prime is not lost, as George Kubler suggested that primes typically are, it offers no constant form or definition that can be referred to in comparing it with other members of the series. While those other primes are (accidentally) lost, Central Park is always in the process of losing itself in its changing intricacy and variety. This site of time is a strange companion of the ultramoderne in Smithson's inventory of New York and its art forms. By the 1950s, as Serge Guilbaut's book describes it, New York had stolen the idea of modern art (from Paris) and had become the *center* of the art world, through the financial and political power of institutions and patrons and by means of the formalist art theory of critics like Clement Greenberg.⁴¹ The critics explained why Pollock and other abstract expressionists were at the very center (or at the front of the avant-garde) by constructing a theory that makes the enterprise of art a search for its own genuine center hinging on its accepting the limits of its frame. At this center of the art world Smithson identified two orders of art that deviate in striking ways from the centering process itself. In the ultramoderne there are the mirroring mazes that replicate one another to infinity without any prime or central instance. Central Park, in the geographical center of the city and so at the center of the center, is an elusive, Protean prime, an earthwork that calls into question the possibility of formalism. From a conventional aesthetic perspective these buildings and the park constitute only the backdrop or context for the significant activity by which the frontiers of art are being pushed ever further back. What Smithson has done again is to reverse and then deconstruct the relation of frame and center by taking the frame or context to be the significant aspect of the work and showing that the criteria of significance can themselves be interrogated and displaced. (The operation gains an added piquancy from the fact that the buildings of the ultramoderne partially form the frame of Central Park.) Just as Smithson decentered the New York art world in his sites/nonsites, so in his

essays on the architecture and topography of Manhattan that art world becomes a mere blip in the sites of time that converge in the city.

Smithson was already suspicious, in 1972, that purism and formalism might be marshaled against the art of earthworks or used in order to promote a beautified genre of art in the land that would repeat the art of the “gardens of history” with a new ecological rationale. In the essay on Olmsted, he takes up the criticisms of Alan Gussow, a representational landscape painter who had published a book entitled *A Sense of Place: Artists and the American Land*. Gussow had said of the landscape painters that he praised in his book, “What these artists do is make these places visible, communicate their spirit—not like the earth works artists who cut and gouge the land like Army engineers. What’s needed are lyric poets to celebrate it” (Gussow, cited in *Writings*, 122). Since Gussow’s book was published by the Friends of the Earth and was given publicity by Grace Glueck in *The New York Times*, Smithson thought that this was the point to draw the line between a nostalgic return to the aesthetics of the garden and a truthful, dialectical art of the earth. “Artists like Gussow,” he says, “are the type who would rather *retreat* to scenic beauty spots than try to make a concrete dialectic between nature and people” (*Writings*, 123). The polemic with Gussow is important because it is (along with some passages in “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Yucatan”) the occasion for Smithson to consider the sexual dimension of earthworks art. The *Times*’s headline had called Gussow an “Artist-in-Residence for Mother Earth,” and it is the ancient identification of earth as mother that Smithson proceeds to interrogate. His first gesture is to suggest that there is an illegitimate metaphor here, in which human relations are apparently rediscovered in the natural world:

Reading the article, one discovers what might be called an Ecological Oedipus Complex. Penetration of “Mother Earth” becomes a projection of the incest taboo onto nature. In Theodore Thass-Thienemann’s book, *The*

Subconscious Language, we find a quote from a catatonic schizophrenic, “they should stop digging [now shouting petulantly in rage] down inside the earth to draw metals out of it. That’s digging down into Mother Earth and taking things that shouldn’t be taken.” (*Writings*, 122)

Citing Aeschylus (who says that Oedipus “dared to seed the sacred furrow where he was formed”), Smithson wants to establish that there is something pathological about Gussow’s repudiation of earthworks artists, claiming that he “projects onto ‘earth works artists’ an Oedipus Complex born out of a wishy-washy transcendentalism.”⁴² The analysis continues by suggesting that Gussow’s identification of Army engineers and earthworks artists “seems linked to his own sexual fears” (*Writings*, 122). So far Smithson’s critique seems to imply that any sexualization of the relation between human beings and the earth is inappropriate. This would be consistent with his attempt in other contexts to avoid an anthropomorphic view of nature. Yet in the same paragraph Smithson allows that the relation might be sexual after all, although he wants to insist that it is not the equivalent of rape: “An etherealized representational artist such as Gussow (he does mediocre impressionist 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 farmer’s, miner’s, or 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” (*Writings*, 123).

So one can make love to Mother Earth or rape her, it seems; strip miners are now said to be guilty of “sexual aggression,” while the Mesa Verde cliff dwellings and the Indian mounds in Ohio are held up as examples of appropriate cultivation or interaction with the earth. Nevertheless, Smithson reinforces a traditional division of genders in describing the artist, farmer, or

miner as “he.” This ambiguity about the dispensability of the Mother Earth metaphor was already implicit in Smithson’s use of the Freudian concept of the Oedipus complex to describe Gussow’s reactions, for part of Freud’s theory is that such fears and apprehensions are an inevitable component of the process of male development. Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of the Oedipus myth is also relevant, since on his account the point of the story is to allow us to think two contradictory thoughts: that humans are born of the earth, chthonically, and that they are born of women.⁴³ Smithson oscillates between a strict rejection of anthropomorphism (which bears some resemblance to the Jewish or Puritan rejection of religious imagery) and a moderate acceptance of the ancient metaphors of Mother Earth. The reference to Native Americans and the frequent invocation of the prehistoric reinforces the second alternative, as do similar gestures in much land art of the last twenty years, which is often explicitly concerned to revive an archaic sense of the nurturing, maternal earth.⁴⁴

Earth plays two roles in Smithson’s art and thought; it is both the unrepresentable or surd dimension of things and the object of “man’s” desire to cultivate a relationship with his environing context, in which case it often becomes “Mother Earth” (the masculine forms here are used following Smithson’s “man and nature”). These two tendencies can be associated respectively with two key words in Smithson’s thought: entropy is the concept used to reject anthropomorphic notions of representation and limited historical perspectives, while dialectic is deployed to suggest the possibility of a real relationship between the artist and nature, a relationship that could be extended through the artist to other people. Entropy would be associated with the sublime and dialectic with the picturesque. Smithson may be struggling with an apparently contradictory set of beliefs like that described by Lévi-Strauss, or with the contradictory form of all desire (a thought pursued by Jacques Lacan). His

own work, as well as the earth, is sedimented, striated, and marked by fault lines. The rift between Plato and Hesiod, or the one that Heidegger explores between the world and the earth, is paralleled by the rift in Smithson's conception of his own work. Dialectic would appear to be on the side of meaning, Plato, and Heidegger's "world." Entropy would be aligned with primordial Hesiodic conflict, the unrepresentable, and Heidegger's "earth." Dealing with and delving in the earth, fractures and fissures always seem to be opening up. To articulate these, if not to resolve them, we should turn to a more explicit reflection on the artist's language, which is both a dimension of his art and the arena within which these thoughts and desires become manifest, and to his concern with his own place and origins, to the way in which he inscribes himself in his works, that is, with his signature.

4 Printed Matter: A Heap of Language

Perhaps words themselves, in the most secret place of thought, are its matter, its timbre, its nuance, i.e. what it cannot manage to think. Words “say,” sound, touch, always “before” thought. And they always “say” something other than what thought signifies, and what it wants to signify by putting them into form. Words want nothing. They are the “un-will,” the “non-sense” of thought, its mass. They are innumerable like the nuances of a colour- or sound-continuum. They are always older than thought.

—JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD, *The Inhuman*

Robert Hobbs’s book *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* is mostly devoted to an inventory with critical commentary of the artist’s works; for some time it is likely to be the closest thing we have to a catalogue raisonné. Two works that find places here are “The Monuments of Passaic” and “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan”; these same essays also appear (without commentary) in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*. Part of what makes them so provocative is the very difficulties they present to the attempt to classify them as either visual or literary works. Both are texts Smithson published (in *Artforum*), and both contain a number of photographs that he took. Why should these pieces appear in both books? Are they “works” (possibly even “sculptures”) or are they “writings”? For centuries the institutions of art have operated in such a way as to suppose that questions like this are not problematic. Works are visual surfaces or structures, it has been thought, to which any linguistic content, depiction, or accompaniment is a secondary or incidental supplement. Writings

might be manifestos, letters, essays on technique, or belles lettres, which might, again incidentally, be illustrated by sketches or other images. We have no trouble distinguishing between Leonardo da Vinci's treatises on painting and the *Virgin of the Rocks* or between Michelangelo's poetry and the painting of the Sistine Chapel. Why in Smithson's case (which can serve as an emblem for much recent art) should we not be able to make the same distinctions? A look at the two essays is not immediately helpful if we assume traditional conceptions of genre. "The Monuments of Passaic" could be taken as a record of found sculptures such as *Monument with pontoons: The Pumping Derrick*, which Smithson discusses in the essay and illustrates with Instamatic snapshots. Similarly, the "Incidents" essay contains photos of nine mirror displacements. But then why not include only the snapshots under the category of works? On the other hand, it could be argued that in an essay illustrated by the artist, and even more in one that he has laid out on the page (Smithson's frequent practice), that the entire text should be considered a work. (In fact Smithson's most elaborate typographical constructions—"In the Domain of the Great Bear," "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," and "Strata: A Geophotographical Fiction"—are included by both editors among his writings rather than his works.)

It is not just a question of an artist having produced some peculiar things that are not easily classified as works or texts. Smithson's art clearly and often explicitly aims at shaking or repudiating the concepts that would enable the classification. In an interview Paul Cummings asks Smithson about his writing, "Do you find it augments your work? Or is it separate from it?" and receives the reply, "Well, it comes out of my sensibility—it comes out of my own observation. It sort of parallels my actual art involvement—the two coincide; one informs the other" (*Writings*, 139). This exchange seems to cover the gamut of possibilities while keeping them all in play. Cummings's question

neatly illustrates what Derrida calls the logic of the supplement. Assuming that the “work” is what is primary, writing may be conceived as a supplement which *adds* something to it (“augments”) or, since it is a supplement, something that is other than the work, and that will, after all, be “separate from it.”¹ Smithson’s reply suggests, although not as clearly as one might wish, a closer relationship, but wavers between a stronger version (“they coincide”) and a language suggesting some degree of separation (they “parallel” or “inform” each other). All of this is said in an interview, which is by traditional conventions a tertiary product of the artist, outranked by both his works and his writings. Yet it is just such classifications that Smithson calls into question both here, in this official interview for the Archives of American Art, and throughout his career.

What are these classifications and principles? In his meditation on René Magritte, *This Is not a Pipe*, Michel Foucault claims that since the Renaissance the West has been operating with a set of conventions requiring that any conjunction of the visual image and writing be capable of being sorted out so that one mode is dominant and the other subordinate. In a dictionary or encyclopedia visual materials are subordinate to the entries they illustrate; in a painting the title of a book depicted (as in a Van Gogh still life) is subordinate to the visual image as a whole, as is the title of the painting itself or the signature of the artist. But the twentieth century has witnessed a systematic assault on these conventions that Foucault associates with the names of Kandinsky, Klee, and Magritte.² To these we might add a further protocol, the transgression of which is symbolized by Marcel Duchamp. The artist is expected to shape and create the object that he or she produces, to give it a distinctive appearance and texture; the work should bear witness to the hand of the artist. Duchamp notoriously violated this artistic convention when he exhibited ready-mades like a urinal and a snow shovel. Smithson’s writings not only violate the

presumed boundaries of image and text, but the care and attention with which they are devised and laid out contrasts significantly with his use of raw materials and agents in constructing such things as his earthworks. While artists have often employed assistants or agents in making their works, contrary to the romantic myth of the solitary creator, Smithson's use of hired crews who operate bulldozers and other "dumb machines" seems a much more dramatic move in this direction. Yet he insisted that in all of these cases he was dealing with material, or more specifically *matter*, that has its own inertia, resistance, and entropy. Just as works like the *Spiral Jetty* or the *Mirror Displacements* have a textual dimension (as well as a photographic and sometimes a cinematic one), so the language that goes into an essay, what Smithson calls "printed matter," has its own look, weight, and feel. Language is a kind of elemental matter, or "earthwords," as Craig Owens designates Smithson's own writings in the most perceptive commentary that has appeared on the artist.³

Smithson sees language as a medium to be worked and shaped; but he also sees the matter of sculpture and earthworks as constituting a language. At the heart of this analogy is a differential conception of the linguistic: "Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. 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" (*Writings*, 87). Language is characterized by splits, ruptures, faults, and voids. As structuralist linguistics formulates it, language is a series of differences; the meaning of a word is in its differential relations with others to which it is similar or which are to be contrasted with it. In Saussure's formulation, "There are no positive terms in language but only differences."⁴ Looking at a word for a long time reveals that its meaning is not an intrinsic property but is constituted by the gaps between it and others. Smithson apprehends these gaps as faults, ruptures, splits, and voids, emphasizing the absences or empty spaces that go into the constitution

of language. Here his analysis is similar to the one he provides of the museum as a set of void spaces (walls, rooms, hallways) that are punctuated by works of art. There are no ultimate units of language; when we think that we have found such a unit—the word, for example—we see it “open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void.” Smithson finds a structuralist view of language compelling because it decenters meaning in much the same way as his own investigations of the site and alleged autonomy of the artwork exhibit the overwhelming role played by structure, context, and setting.

Smithson displays the uncanny materiality of printed matter in *A Heap of Language*, a work/writing in pencil in which a pyramid is built up of a variety of linguistic terms that designate different forms, uses, or characteristics of language, including “letters,” “belles-lettres,” “muses,” “humanities,” “republic of letters,” “Babel,” “confusion of tongues,” and other building blocks (plate 24). Interestingly, this work or writing is reproduced in both Smithson’s *Writings* (*Writings*, 104) and in Hobbs’s inventory of his works (*Robert Smithson*, 70). Like so many of Smithson’s pieces, it forces us to attend to the way in which it transgresses the presumed boundary between work and text. It asks whether all works consist of writing and whether all writing is matter to be arranged. The pyramidal shape suggests that which is most monumental and material, and so least linguistic, in the world of art; Hegel, for example, took the pyramids to be the emblem of symbolic art, an art that desperately tries to speak but never fully expresses itself, an art that struggles without success to liberate meaning from its heavy materiality. Yet the shape of the pyramid also suggests, especially when it is drawn, as it is here, the initial letter of the alphabet; that letter can represent language itself, or more specifically our Western “phonetic” language, which, Hegel claims, provides a uniquely transparent medium for thought since it simply represents a sound and,

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21
 Language
 phonology speech
 tongue linguistics
 mother tongue, lingua, English
 dialect, langue, patois, broken, slang
 confusion of tongues, Babel, universal language
 Esperanto, diglossia, canting, dumb show, letter
 letters, belles-lettres, missive, humanitas, republic of letters
 dead languages, classics, express, say, express, for words, polyglot
 lingua, lingua franca, vernacular, bilingual, literary, colloquial
 letter character, hieroglyphic, alphabet, ABC, consonant, vowel
 diglossia, surd, sonant, lingua, labial, palatal, cerebral, dental, code
 gutter, syllable, monosyllable, dissyllable, polysyllable, prefix, suffix, affix
 word, term, vocable, name, phrase, root, derivation, index, glossary, dictionary, lexicon
 etymology, philology, terminology, verbage, logomachy, translation, nomenclature, designation
 man, name, malapropism, Mrs. Malaprop, nominal, titulus, dub, cognomen, patronymic, title
 mononym, miscell, nickname, take an assumed name, misnomer, so called, self-styled, lion
 sentence, proverb, motto, phraseology, euphemism, paragraph, by the card, grammar, syntax, structure
 idiom, locution, syntax, syntax, analysis, morphology, style of the tongue, epigram, heading, gibberish, dog Latin
 hieroglyphic, neologism, word, cover, argot, bilingualism, pidgin, English, orthography, terminology, thesaurus, cipher
 A heap of Language
 Smith 66

24. Robert Smithson, *A Heap of Language*, 1966, pencil on paper, 6 1/2" x 22". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

unlike calligraphic or hieroglyphic language, does not force us to be concerned with its appearance.⁵ We are reminded of these multiple possibilities of the shape of the “heap” by a line almost exactly in its middle: “Letter character hieroglyphic alphabet ABC consonant vowel.” Here language becomes “printed matter,” strangely intermediate between what a dualistic philosophy would take to be the linguistically spiritual and the absolutely surd of the material. This heap can be read both as a pyramid and as self-referential language; it operates on much the same principle as Smithson’s nearly contemporaneous *Alogon* series, which uses mathematical idealism against itself in order to evoke an abyss between two different orders of meaning. The great initial letter A is here in a somewhat truncated form like a pyramid that has suffered some injury. We are confronted with something that is both material and linguistic at the same time or which systematically oscillates between these categories. It is undecidably one or the other. The form of the heap suggests that the accumulation of parts is governed by gravity, hence the need for a broad base to support the accumulations that it bears. Yet as a linguistic, and especially an alphabetical element, it should escape from materiality, according to “the metaphysics based on phonetic writing (for example, of the alphabet).”⁶ But it is precisely that metaphysics (and idealistic theories of art like Hegel’s that build upon it) which Smithson is rejecting. Once the graphic and material nature of language is acknowledged, as well as the structural and syntactical properties of the visual medium (even earth), then the distinction between literary text and visual image becomes highly problematic.

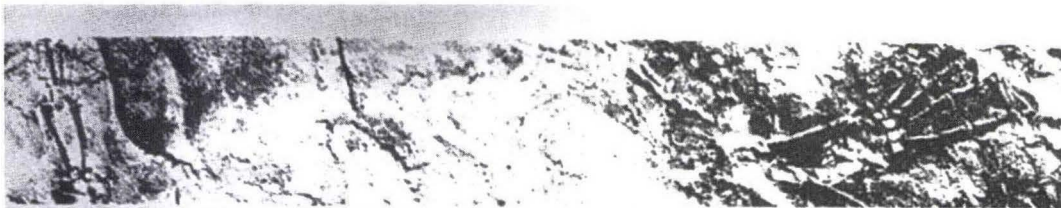
In an essay called “After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics,” Jean-François Lyotard argues that the ancient conception of art as formed matter has gradually been breaking down, both in artistic practice and in the theory of the arts. If the idea of a natural fit between matter and form is no longer plausible, then “the aim for the arts, especially of painting and music, can only

be that of approaching matter.”⁷ The same might be said about writing, which in this instance (in “A Heap of Language”) approaches the condition of drawing, and architectural drawing at that, as the graph paper on which it is inscribed suggests. As Lyotard goes on to extend his argument, he asks, “Can we find an analogue of matter in the order of thought itself? Is there a matter of thought, a nuance, a grain, a timbre which makes an event for thought and unsettles it, analogously with what I have described in the sensory order? Perhaps here we have to invoke words. Perhaps words themselves, in the most secret place of thought, are its matter, its timbre, its nuance, i.e. what it cannot manage to think.”⁸ Language manifests an uncanny materiality, defeating our expectation to find integral meaning in words, and this dooms all idealistic attempts to reduce it to structure or conceptual order. In Smithson’s words, “Language is as primary as steel. And there’s no point in trying to wish it away” (*Smithson Unearthed*, 109). Such wishes will always be frustrated by what Lyotard calls the “inhuman” and Smithson terms the earth. If language can be built up into a mute heap or pyramid, so the geological strata can be *read* as lines or paragraphs that constitute a text: “The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth’s crust. When one scans the ruined sites of prehistory one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits” (*Writings*, 89). Reading the rocks seems to entail becoming aware of their indefinitely ramifying differential relations with others; it means sorting them out into strata of various eras. The strata are not neatly divided, however, but often intertwine or intersect as a result of geological change. These prehistoric sites are “ruins,” structures whose meanings are always in decay, always subject to incursions

and interruptions from the geological process. To see them as “a heap of wrecked maps” is to understand that these entropic structures are always simply piled on top of one another, by a principle of accumulation, addition, or metonymy that undercuts any possible claim that one of them would provide the key for a definitive reading.

As a companion piece to “A Heap of Language” let us consider “Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction” (this piece appeared in the *Aspen Review* in 1972) (plate 25). The text could be read as providing a literal sense to the word “geology,” for what it does is to give us the earth and its words, the *logos* of *gaia*. In three pages it alternates horizontal columns of language with photographs of fossils or earth that are representative of different geological eras. Just as the strata of the earth are simply piled one on top of another, so the columns of majuscule print appear as layers of language that have sedimented together, squeezed between the geological eras. The language fills up the space available for it in the way that rocks and fossils fill a site, caught by a tar pit, a glacier, or crushed, twisted, and compacted by overwhelming masses. Syntax has often been elided or abbreviated by these forces, leaving a metonymic series of words or phrases, which sometimes are interrupted by a quotation—a piece of language that has been amazingly preserved whole, like a mastodon in the ice—as in this bit of printed matter from the Triassic stratum:

OBSCURE VALLEYS. DATA FROM DRILLED HOLES. HE MAY EVEN NOW—IF I MAY USE THE PHRASE—BE WANDERING ON SOME PLESIOSAURUS-HAUNTED OLLITIC CORAL REEF, OR BESIDE THE LONELY SALINE LAKES OF THE TRIASSIC AGE (H. G. WELLS). TRACKS OF DINOSAURS DISCOVERED AT TURNERS FALLS, ON THE CONNECTICUT RIVER IN MASSACHUSETTS. THE COLUMNAR JOININGS OF THE PALISADES. INERT. ALL SLIDES INTO A LOST MOMENT. (*Writings*, 129)



CRETACEOUS GLOBIGERINA DOZE AND THE BLUSH MUDS. Creta THE LATIN WORD FOR CHALK (THE CHALK AGE). AN ARTICLE CALLED GROTTODES, GEOLOGY AND THE GOTHIC REVIVAL. PHILOSOPHIC ROMANCES. GREENSANDS ACCUMULATED OVER WIDE AREAS IN SHALLOW WATER. UPRaised PLATEAUX IN AUSTRALIA. SEDIMENT SAMPLES. CONIFERS REMAINS OF A FLIGHTLESS BIRD DISCOVERED IN A CHALK PIT. CAUSES OF EXTINCTION UNKNOWN. THE FABULOUS SEA-SERPENT. THE CLASSICAL ATTITUDE TOWARD MOUNTAINS IS GLOOMY. A DISPLAY OF PLASTER TRICERATOPS EGGS IN A GLASS CASE. THE ROCKS OF MONTANA. GLOBIGERINA CRETACEA ENLARGED 30 TIMES IN A BOOK. THE WEARING PROCESS CONTINUES. A CONSTANT GRINDING DOWN OF ROUGH TERRAINS. SOMETHING HAD FANGS 6 INCHES LONG. KILLED BY THE HEAT OF THE SUN. THE SACRED THEORY OF THE EARTH CAUSES BEWILDERMENT. SOME BOOKS CONCERNING THE DELUGE BRING CHAOS TO MANY. GRAY MISTS AND MUCH HEAT. PERPLEXED BY PEBBLE DEPOSITS, COLUMNS OF BASALT ILLUSTRATED IN DE PERUM FOSSILUM. PAINTINGS OF CRETACEOUS PERIOD SHOWN AS ARTIST'S CONCEPTIONS ON LARGE PANELS. FROM 135 TO 70 MILLION YEARS AGO. TRAITE DE PETRIFICATIONS. WOODCUT SHOWING TWO STONES FALLING FROM THE HEAVENS DURING A STORM. A DEAD TORTOISE IN THE ZONE OF AIR. THUNDERBOLTS, E.G. CERAMUMUS, BELEMNITE, ETC. CERTAIN BEDS OF THE KEOKUK IN THE CENTRAL MISSISSIPPI VALLEY. THE FLAMING RAMPARTS OF THE WORLD (LUCRETIIUS). DE MINERALI BUS BY ALBERTUS MAGNUS. FEATHER IMPRESSIONS EXHIBITED IN A PALEONTOLOGICAL MUSEUM. FOSSILIZED VENOM THE TREE ONICIA WHOSE TEARS HARDEN INTO THE MINERAL ONYX. (FROM THE HORTUS SANITATIS). SOME GRAINS OF SAND WERE SQUARE AND OTHERS PYRAMIDAL. CAMERAS LOST IN SHELLS AND SKELETONS.



JURASSIC A LABEL UNDER A STEGOSAURUS SKELETON. BONY PLATES. THREE OUNCES OF BRAIN. 45,000,000. NO WORDS COULD DESCRIBE IT. CRAGGY CLIFFS, INDEPENDENT OF LIFE. EXTENSIVE LAKES OR INLAND SEAS MARKED AS BLUE STRIPES ON AN OVAL MAP. PLASTIC SEAWEEDS IN THE MUSEUM. A GREAT COLLECTION OF FOSSILS IN THE ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM AT OXFORD. MUNDUS SUBTERRANEUS, KIRCHER AMSTERDAM 1678. STONE PLANTS. JOHN CLEVELAND'S NEWS FROM NEWCASTLE OR NEWCASTLE COAL PITS PUBLISHED IN 1699. AGE OF CYCADS. A FINE CHALKY DEPOSIT PERHAPS DUST BLOWN FROM RAISED CORAL REEFS. MOND LAKE - THE DEAD SEA OF THE WEST. BELEMNITES SWARMED IN THE MUDDY SEAS. POETS CELEBRATING GROTTODES. THE RECENT MONKEY PUZZLE HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE JURASSIC PERIOD. WELL PRESERVED PTERODACTYLS. THE BURNET CONTROVERSY. MANY CRAWLED ON THE OCEAN FLOOR. DELTAIC SANDSTONES OUTCROPPING IN YORKSHIRE. A MODEL OF A BRYOZOA ONE MILLION TIMES LIFE SIZE. MEANDERING RIVERS. GO MY SONS. BUY STOUT SHOES, CLIMB THE MOUNTAINS, SEARCH THE VALLEYS, DESERTS, THE SEA SHORES, AND THE DEEP RECESSES OF THE EARTH (SEVERINUS) IN BRITAIN THE JURASSIC CONSISTS MAINLY OF OOLITES AND CLAYS. THAETIC BEDS. SEVERAL LAND MASSES NOT SHOWN ON A MAP. LUXURIANT VEGETATION. PARADISE LOST. INVASION OF THE OCEAN. ARCHAEOPTERYX. FLESH EATERS WALKED ON THEIR HIND LEGS USING THEIR FORE LIMBS FOR GRABBING PREY. BONES WITH AIR CAVITIES SHOWN IN LINE DRAWING. LOW TIDE. DEAD JELLY-FISH IN A LAGOON. PAINTING OF FERN FOREST. POST CARDS OF ZION CANYON. A BOOK ON URANIUM. AN ARTIST'S CONCEPTION OF DINOSAURS IN A SWAMP. CHART TITLED OF THE EVOLUTION OF WASTE. OVER-EXPOSED PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE SUNDANCE SEA. A NOVEL ABOUT THE LIFE OF AN ICHTHYOSAUR. NO ICE SHEETS MARKED THE POLES. INFRA-RED PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE GULF OF GEOSYNCLINE.



TRIASSIC OBSCURE VALLEYS. DATA FROM DRILLED HOLES. HE MAY EVEN NOW - IF I MAY USE THE PHRASE - BE WANDERING ON SOME PLESIOSAURUS HAUNTED OLLITIC CORAL REEF. OR BESIDE THE LONELY SALINE LAKES OF THE TRIASSIC AGE (H.G. WELLS). TRACKS OF DINOSAURS DISCOVERED AT TURNERS FALLS. ON THE CONNECTICUT RIVER IN MASSACHUSETTS. THE COLLUMAR JOININGS OF THE PALISADES. INERT. ALL SLIDES INTO A LOST MOMENT. A CLIFF BELOW THE WEST END OF THE GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE. VOLCANIC VAPORS. AT THE CHILLED ZONE. A RESTORED SECTION OF A TRIASSIC FAULT BLOCK SHOWING LAVA DIKES. A BOOK IS A PAPER STRATA. A COLORED PHOTOGRAPH OF THE PETRIFIED FOREST, ARIZONA. A LANDSLIDE OF MAPS. ECLIPSE OF THE MOON. GYPSUM. AN ILLUSTRATION FROM THE PALESTECTONIC ATLAS. DYING IN THE YUKON AMID THE PLUTONIC ROCKS. TECTONIC ISLANDS SURROUNDED BY GREEN FOAM. ...NOTHING CAN APPEAR MORE LIFELESS THAN THE CHAOS OF ROCKS... (DARWIN). SOUTHERN ELLESMERE LAND. ABUNDANT QUANTITIES OF GRANULAR MINERALS. THE EXHUMED PRE-LATE TRIASSIC PENEPLANE CAN BE SEEN NEAR THE GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE. A GENERALIZED GEOLOGIC CROSS SECTION SHOWING MAGMA OFFSHOOTS. A DIAGRAM SHOWING A FAULT ZONE. WEDGES OF SEDIMENTARY STRATA. A PHOTOGRAPH OF ROTTEN DIABASE. RAPID HEAT LOSS. A RESTORATION OF A ICAROSAURUS. FALL ZONE. SWASH. 600,000 CUBIC YARDS OF SOMETHING. A BLOCK DIAGRAM SHOWING DRIFT. BARRIERS OF MUD. THE EARLIEST OF THE THREE GEOLOGICAL PERIODS COMPRISED IN THE MESOZOIC ERA (DICTIONARY OF GEOLOGICAL TERMS). BLACK HEATHS, WILD ROCKS, BLACK CRAGS, AND NAKED HILLS (CHARLES COTTON). IN THE WAKE OF LAVA FLOWS. CHROMATIC EMULSIONS OF NAMELESS ROCKS. A NARROW RANGE OF GREY TONALITIES. THE ANONYMOUS SURFACE UNIFORMITY OF MUSEUM PHOTOGRAPHS. DEGENERATE TECHNIQUES. DISPLAYS IN PLASTIC.

STRATA A GEOPHOTOGRAPHIC FICTION

25. Robert Smithson, *Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction*,
c. 1972, *Aspen Review* (about one-third of the entire piece,
which consists of an extended fold-out from the magazine).
Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson.

While language assumes a material form here, being broken into fragments and interspersed with chance elements, the patterns in the photographic columns display the regular indentations of fossil forms or crystalline patterns that suggest a meaningful structure, a series of shapes that can be read. A geo-aesthetics emerges that is firmly opposed to the one implicit in this quotation that has fallen into the Precambrian era: “*IF ONLY THE GEOLOGISTS WOULD LET ME ALONE, I COULD DO VERY WELL, BUT THOSE DREADFUL HAMMERS* (JOHN RUSKIN)” (*Writings*, 131). One wonders what Ruskin would have made of Smithson’s earth-moving equipment.

Smithson gave a great deal of thought to the limits and possibilities of the printed page. The strategic decentering that he practices in his sites/nonsites finds a fertile ground in the structure of the graphic medium. His draft for an essay on “Hidden Trails in Art” bears the revealing date of April 1, 1969, but its playfulness embodies Smithson’s philosophy of composition (which, as we shall see, takes laughter very seriously):

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 and Ulysses, will be transported into a world of traps and marvels. The axis splits into a chasm in your hands, thus you could begin your travels by being immediately lost. In this magazine is a series of pages that open into double terrains, because “we always see two pages at once” (Michel Butor). Writing drifts into stratas [*sic*], and becomes a buried language. (*Smithson Unearthed*, 83)

Ordinarily one supposes that reading is a linear activity; with Western languages one begins with the first page and reads across from left to right and

down the page until one comes to the next and so on until one has reached “The End.” The magazine already varies this structure somewhat insofar as it invites us to choose for ourselves what sequence to follow in reading its articles or glancing through its photographs or illustrations. A magazine with square pages (like *Artforum*, which may be the destination at which this stray text never arrived) emphasizes the ineluctability of the frame, but as soon as we open it up we may be lost. When the pages are open, they turn around an axis (the binding, or center that would constitute a “volume”) that itself has no content; for Smithson it is another abyss that opens up where we had expected a substantial point of purchase. The minimal fact of the printed work is that “we always see two pages at once,” a duality that corresponds to the stereometric vision that Smithson finds lurking under the illusions of monocular perspectivism and which he exposes in *Enantiomorphic Chambers*. Some texts attempt to evade this plurality by softening transitions and encouraging the reader to turn the pages continuously (“a real page-turner” we sometimes say). Others exploit the play between frame and framed in a variety of ways, including ornate lettering, illustrated manuscripts, marginalia, or the use of multiple type sizes and distinct columns of print. Instances of the latter are to be found in older commentaries, like the Talmud, where a small bit of text is surrounded by several separate levels of interpretation, or in a contemporary experiment like Derrida’s *Glas*, in which each page is constituted by two different columns, one on Hegel, the other on Jean Genet, that make no explicit reference to each other, but in which the open book always presents an unavoidable image of two mutually mirroring pages and where the columns begin and end in midsentence, looping around to join their beginnings and forming something like a Moebius strip.

Beyond the question of the elusive center or point of orientation in reading, there is a geological and archaeological dimension in writing since it

“drifts into stratas [*sic*], and becomes a buried language.” The strata of writing are constituted by accumulations and drifts of all kinds, not only libraries, files, archives, bookstores, publishing warehouses, and the like; even within what we typically call a single text we can detect different strands, themes, or voices that can be to some extent sorted and articulated in relation to one another. Finding the vein or nerve that we are seeking in a piece of writing is like unearthing the remains of a buried culture or an ancient geological era. Smithson’s “Strata” displays the analogy and shows that “reading” and “reading the rocks” share the same principles.

Discussing his own writing with Dennis Wheeler, Smithson speaks of “the integrity of the fiction,” which Wheeler at first takes to mean “the integrity of the will to create.” But the artist makes it clear that he is speaking of the integrity “of the writing.” He is not concerned with expression or creativity but with translating “codes or totemic hieroglyphs” in such a way that they do not lapse into myth, but remain as fictions, that is, as things *made*.⁹ By speaking of codes and hieroglyphs here Smithson emphasizes that writing is always a process of inscribing or printing. He does not want to efface the actuality of language, but to ensure that “the materiality of the writing emerges. And that’s why it tends to communicate graphically” (*Smithson Unearthed*, 108–109). Smithson explores the circular and decentering potential of printed matter in several essays. In the apparently incomplete “The Artist as Site-Seer; or a Dintorphic Essay,” he overwhelms the short text with footnotes, parodying the form of the academic essay by adding superfluous or irrelevant information so that the margins displace the center.¹⁰ The essay “itself”—that is, the part that would conventionally be printed as its main text—inquires about the relation of the linguistic to the material, speculating that ancient megaliths are an encoded language and suggesting that “the abyss of language erases the supposed meanings of general history and leaves an awesome ‘babel’”

(*Smithson Unearthed*, 75). The text goes on to make clear that Smithson is thinking here specifically of “that elusive prime object—the Tower of Babel.” Babel is both a destroyed structure and the destruction of the illusion of a single language in control of its own use. Babel is the sign that every utterance or every text is riven by faults and fissures, as this essay suggests by rushing away into the vacuum formed by its own notes.

Smithson’s “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space” again takes up the theme of Babel, that strange conjunction of construction, deconstruction, linguistic materialism, and entropy. The layout of “Quasi-Infinities” resembles that of the cartouche, with which Smithson also experimented (plate 26). This self-referential, abyssal text begins with a clear statement of its own rule of construction: “Around four blocks of print I shall postulate four ultramundane margins that shall contain indeterminate information as well as reproduced reproductions” (*Writings*, 32). Or perhaps we should not say that the text “begins”; these are the first words in the first block of print, but the blocks’ primacy is already put in question by the frames of images that surround them. This occurs visually as the eye is distracted by images like those of Babel, the Guggenheim Museum, an Ad Reinhardt installation, codes, labyrinths, and quotations from John Cage and Martin Heidegger. These are not only visual interventions, however. They are also “indeterminate information” that both illustrates the blocks of print and poses enigmatic alternatives to and amplifications of the blocks; and the “reproduced reproductions,” images that we know have been reproduced many times before, suggest the abyssal nature of replication, paralleling the discussion within the blocks of Kubler’s theory of prime objects and replicas.

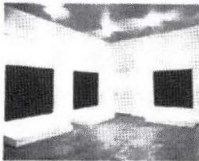
The images circle around the blocks of print, providing the text with an alternative framing device to the heavily scored enclosures of the essay that begins with “Around four blocks of print . . .” The text “ends” with a discussion

Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space

For many artists
the universe is
expanding; for
some it is
contracting.

By
ROBERT SMITHSON

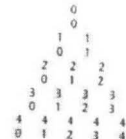
"Without a time sense conscious
ness is difficult to visualize." E. G.
Ballard, *The Overboard Man*



10 Ad Reinhardt installation
(March 1965) Betty Parsons
Gallery



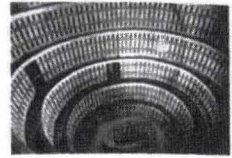
9 From Edgar Allan Poe's
Entelechion



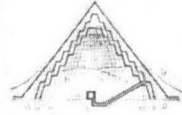
8 A Discrete Scheme Without
Memory by Dan Graham



1 The Amiens Labyrinth
(France)



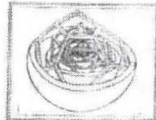
2 Built for Fabrice at the
University of Padua



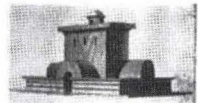
3 The Pyramid of Meison



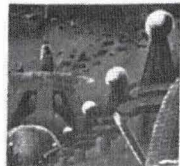
4 The Tower of Babel



5 Kepler's model of the un-
iverse



6 Claude Nicolas Ledoux
(1736-1806)



7 "City of the Future"

AROUND 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 labyrinth¹², through which the mind will pass in an instant, thus eliminating the spatial problem. The next encounter is an abyssal anatomy theatre¹³; Quickly the mind will pass over this dizzying height. Here the pages of time are paper thin, even when it comes to a pyramid¹⁴. The center of this pyramid is everywhere and nowhere. From this center one may see the Tower of Babel¹⁵, Kepler's universe¹⁶, or a building by the architect Ledoux¹⁷. 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"¹⁸. Inutile codes¹⁹ and extravagant experiments²⁰ adumbrate the "absolute" abstraction²¹. 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

HGFEDCBA
GFHEDCBA
FGHEDCBA
EFGHDCBA
DEFGHCB
CDEFGHBA
BCDEFGHA
ABCDEFHG

B Non-code based on *The
Art Museum* of Ramon Llull

of Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, the last line being a mathematical formula for the progression involved in the impossible attempt of the avant-garde to overtake progress:

$$10 + 1 + \frac{1}{10} + \frac{1}{100} + \frac{1}{1000} + \frac{1}{10,000} + \dots$$

Whether this formula should be called the end of the essay in any definitive sense, indeed the answer to the question whether the essay in fact has an identifiable end and beginning, is not so clear. Since the formula itself is an infinite progression, it signals that for which there is no end. And matched with the Amiens labyrinth, the piece's "first" image which problematizes the nature of entrances and exits, is a description of Donald Judd's "progressions" and "regressions" and a photo of one of them. These works of Judd's are based on mathematical series that could (like Zeno's) go on endlessly and so reinforce the refusal of an ending. The avant-garde will never overtake progress, just as the piece we are reading with its criticism of "the ideological concept of time" will have no proper beginning or end.¹¹

In viewing and reading "Quasi-Infinities" we always see two pages at once, reinforcing the sense of repetition, mirroring, and replication. The work has a heading or subtitle printed in bold letters between the title and Smithson's name (is the author/artist's name then also part of the labyrinth and abyss and why is it matched with Babel on the other side of the page?): "For many artists the universe is expanding; for some it is contracting." In the blocks of print Smithson argues that modernism has assumed a biological model of space and time that presents them as avenues for infinite growth and exploration. Evidence is drawn from de Kooning, Pollock, and Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum (which he says is an "inverse digestive tract"), all of which are illustrated in the margins. Abandoning the biomorphic model leads to the "waning" of space, substituting meaningless and diminishing progressions, labyrinths, and the antianthropomorphic works of Eva Hesse

and the early Giacometti for the romantic gestures of an art that would extend its living principle throughout space and time.

Smithson's willingness to abandon the transcendental aesthetic of space and time signals a departure from the Kantian framework that, while claiming to be eternal, has provided an unlimited field for modernity. Jean-François Lyotard's analysis of the modern and the postmodern dovetails with Smithson's here. Lyotard amplifies Hölderlin's *Remarks on Oedipus*, in which the poet says that "the true tragedy of Oedipus is that the god has categorically turned away from man." The problem for tragedy is that without gods and destiny we are constantly under the threat that nothing is happening. As Lyotard argues in his essays on the sublime, the main threat faced by art is the possibility of the void, the danger that continuities will be disrupted and meaning will be destroyed: "The loss of all destiny is the essential feature of the drama and in this 'nothing happens' also lies the essential feature of our problematic. It is clear that what is called communication is always, in every case, that nothing happens, that we are not destined. And in this connection Hölderlin adds this quite remarkable sentence: 'At the extreme limit of distress, there is in fact nothing left but the conditions of time and space.'" ¹²

Implied here is an entire account of modern aesthetics (although the "modern" is redundant), which assumes that art is no longer, if it ever was, a vehicle for the holy, the transcendent, and the numinous. It is a way of shaping and deploying the common human fabric of spatial and temporal experience. So Lessing in his *Laokoön* will attempt to formulate the rules governing arts of space and arts of time; while the former must present everything in a single instant and so must find a pregnant moment to depict, the latter cannot present such a moment and so must reveal their subject through a series of narrated or performed actions, as when Homer suggests the beauty of Helen not through direct description of her appearance but by means of an account of her effects on the Trojan elders. Smithson reproduces photos of both the

original Hellenistic sculpture, *Laokoön*, on which Lessing's book is based, and of Eva Hesse's work of the same name, which is, as he notes, "transformed into a dry, skeletal tower that goes nowhere." Nothing happens; space is no longer the setting of dynamic action but is hollowed out and reduced. Smithson might have gone on to say explicitly that the aesthetics derived from meditation on that work (and we can think of the monumental works of German aesthetics—Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer—as all concerned to refine and rework Lessing's account of the arts in terms of the media of space and time) has also been reduced and put out of play.

In "Quasi-Infinities" Ad Reinhardt and George Kubler play the role that Hölderlin does for Lyotard; the essay explains that Reinhardt's paintings are a way of "darkening time" or attenuating it and cites Kubler's dictum that "Actuality is . . . the interchronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events." Smithson's ellipsis adds to the sense that nothing is happening even episodically within Kubler's sentence; the omitted words give a vivid sense of what is at stake: "when the lighthouse is dark between flashes: it is the instant between the ticks of the watch: it is a void interval slipping forever through time: the rupture between past and future: the gap at the poles of the revolving magnetic field, infinitesimally small but ultimately real."¹³ Smithson omits, we might say, the happening of "nothing happens" in Kubler's text. As Lyotard goes on to formulate it, there is a difference between the modern and the postmodern in their response to this "nothing is happening": "modern—there no longer remains anything but space and time; and postmodern—we no longer *even* have space and time left."¹⁴ On that analysis, Smithson's "Quasi-Infinities" is a pioneering postmodern statement. And it is a statement that operates simultaneously on many levels, by emptying out the space and time of "printed matter" itself, contracting it into a labyrinth, or dispersing it to the circling margins of the page.

A brief but important document of Smithson's was issued by the Dwan Gallery in connection with an exhibition in 1967. It bears the title "Press Release: Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read" (*Writings*, 104). It is signed "Eton Corrasable," perhaps the only time that Smithson adopted a nom de plume. This signature reinforces the conception of the materiality of language which is the theme of the statement: just as language can be drawn, painted, or constructed (as it was in the painted letters of Jasper Johns and other artists working at this time), so it is subject to the forces of decay, erasure, and entropy. "Press Release" also suggests the weightiness of language, since it can designate not only the genre by which an institution communicates with the media but also the alternation of pressure and release that is necessary in any process of inscribing or printing. Both the title and the subtitle play on binary oppositions. We alternate between pressing and releasing as we do between looking at language, being presented with it as a material fact in sight or sound, and reading things—that is, making sense of what we experience (when we read the geological record, for example). Reading and understanding, then, are caught up in a back and forth play that recalls the alternations of biological process, the play of presence and absence, Freud's conception of the *fort/da* that is, at the heart of language itself, or Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence—that is, the sense "now it's gone"/"now it's here" by which we struggle to make sense of loss and in doing so enter into symbolic expression and communication.¹⁵ The form of the "between" that Smithson investigates here is the play of the literal and the metaphorical:

Language operates between literal and metaphorical signification. The power of a word lies in the very inadequacy of the context in which it is placed, in the unresolved or partially resolved tension of disparates. A word

fixed or a statement isolated without any decorative or “cubist” visual format, becomes a perception of similarity in dissimilars—in short a paradox. Congruity could be disrupted by a metaphorical complexity within a literal system. Literal usage becomes incantatory when all metaphors are suppressed.

Language again is seen as marked by rifts or tensions. The principles announced here could be applied in the first instance to Smithson’s own text (or to that of Eton Corrasable—even the signature here alternates between the literal and the metaphorical). This “press release” is framed by a title and signature that move in an undecidable way between the two poles. What language will mean will be a function of how it is presented: “The scale of a letter in a word changes one’s visual meaning of the word. Language thus becomes monumental because of the mutations of advertising.” We might think here of the posters of Barbara Kruger or of the linguistic installations of Jenny Holzer, where electronic words move across a narrow screen, alerting us to the uncritical assumptions we make in crediting or doubting messages conveyed by conventional media. The issues of life, death, and letters that can die become explicit in the last few lines of Smithson’s passionately serious and strategically playful communication: “A word outside of the mind is a set of ‘dead letters.’ The mania for literalness relates to the breakdown in the rational belief in reality. Books entomb words in a synthetic rigor mortis, perhaps that is why ‘print’ is thought to have entered obsolescence. The mind of this death, however, is unrelentingly awake.”

Both religion and philosophy have hoary traditions according to which “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” Plato has Socrates launch an elaborate criticism of the written word in the *Phaedrus*, according to which writing is a mere substitute for living thought and speech. While the latter is

capable of continuous expansion, elaboration, and criticism, the former is static, like the painted pictures of animals, whose life cannot be captured by their images. Moreover, writing is dangerous because it might be confused with living thought and we would then come to rely on an artificial memory when we need to think things out for ourselves.¹⁶ Derrida has argued that it is a series of idealistic gestures like this, repeated by thinkers like Rousseau, Husserl, and Saussure, that enables and legitimizes the hegemony of logocentrism, the position that thought has a meaning completely independent of any of its material vehicles, a meaning that would not be disrupted by the phonic and graphic qualities of language. Smithson challenges this metaphysics, a metaphysics that is indispensable to the contrast between fully present works of art and the mere writing that may accompany them. He does this not by denying the deathlike dimension of writing but by suggesting that all language and thought have material and entropic qualities. Letters may be dead, but because the mind of this death is awake they are also alive. The contrast between a fully present visual experience and writing, which is alleged to be absent and deficient in relation to that presence, is questioned by an art/writing like that of the sites/nonsites in which the site becomes accessible only through linguistic and graphic documentation.

Smithson often displaces “art” by “writing” in order to call into question the distinction between one as present and the other as absent. In “Incidents of Mirror-Travel,” for example, we are constantly reminded that the presence of the mirror displacements was transitory and ephemeral; indeed, Smithson’s narrative, with its invocation of Mayan gods, its acknowledgment that his own perception was becoming confused, and the ironic claim that he was hearing voices and seeing visions could lead us to doubt that anything was ever present. The Instamatic photographs accompanying the article do not provide much reassurance, since they can hardly render the sites of the mirrors or the

passing reflections that filled them. We seem to be dealing with what Emmanuel Levinas has called “a past that has never been present,” an event that is accessible only through traces that can never be followed all the way back to a moment of presence.¹⁷ Smithson enables the reader to acknowledge the abyss that writing opens up. “Art brings sight to a halt,” he writes, “but that halt has a way of unravelling itself. All the reflections expired into the thickets of Yaxchilan. One must remember that writing on art replaces presence by absence by substituting the abstraction of language for the real thing. There was a friction between the mirrors and the tree, now there is a friction between language and memory. A memory of reflections becomes an absence of absences” (*Writings*, 100). While Smithson uses the expression “the real thing” here, everything in the performance that his essay both enacts and records leads to a systematic evisceration of the real. As he says just before the passage cited, “The mirror surfaces being disconnected from each other ‘de-structuralized’ any literal logic.”

Smithson knows that he is not alone in introducing language into art. He addresses the explosion of language into the art world of the 1960s in his “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,” which reviews the writings of Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, and others. As Craig Owens observes, the possibility that writing should become indispensable to sculpture is even more surprising than the convergence of painting and writing, for the latter two “share a common origin in inscription” on a two-dimensional plane.¹⁸ Yet as we have seen (and as Owens points out), Smithson understands language not only as a visual phenomenon but as something dead and alive, haunted by splits and faults, tangible “printed matter” that can be arranged in strata and heaps. When he comes to review the “exhibits” in his imaginary museum of language, he describes the weight, feel, texture, and structure of each artist’s

writing, implying that their written works are simply the pursuit of sculptural aims by other means, as their works in galleries and museums are texts to be read. When Smithson cites Flavin's citations of Flaubert, it is not so much to emphasize the rhetorical tropes or images that the American sculptor draws from the French writer as to evoke the combination of the static and the entropic that the two share: "Here we have a chronic case of mental immobilization that results in leaden lyrics. Language falls toward its final dissolution like the sullen electricities of Flavin's 'lights.' His slapstick 'letters to the editor' also call forth the assorted humors of Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pecuchet*—the quixotic autodidacts" (*Writings*, 67).

Immobility and dissolution, a leaden language that can fall, are recognizable themes in Smithson's own work. He too is a "quixotic autodidact." Like Flaubert's scribes, he demonstrates the entropy that overtakes all human efforts; but while Bouvard and Pecuchet return to the replication of texts after character, weather, and circumstances have led to the dissolution of their efforts to master a variety of activities, including farming and the construction of a museum of natural history, Smithson's writings evoke and reflect the entropic process as well as submitting to it.¹⁹ As Smithson points out at the beginning of the essay, "The following is a mirror structure built of macro and micro orders. . . ." (*Writings*, 67). Despite the parodic tone of his observations on the writing of Flavin and others (and laughter as a material form of language is thematized elsewhere), he is building a mirror structure that exhibits his own art and writing while it reflects that of his explicit subjects.

We might read the essay, then, as a companion piece to Smithson's many other mirror structures, which also reflect and exhibit simultaneously. Carl Andre's writings are described as massive weights by which "Thoughts are crushed into a rubble of syncopated syllables. Reason becomes a powder of vowels and consonants" (*Writings*, 67). Judd has an abyssal syntax, reading

LeWitt is “like getting words caught in your eyes,” while Dan Graham, who “has a way of isolating segments of unreliable information into compact masses of fugitive meaning,” also manages to construct homologies between the structure of buildings and the syntax of language (*Writings*, 68–70). As in the library of Babel, all the texts are strangely refracted images of one another; they constitute a literalization of Leibniz’s world of monads, each of which mirrors all the others. Although Smithson might appear to be practicing a crudely materialistic reduction of language, he does not accept the notion of materialism satirized in his citation from Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*: “Materialism. Utter the word with horror, stressing each syllable.” (Of course, stressing each syllable inadvertently discloses the materiality of speech itself.) Rather, he is working to break down distinctions like that between materialism and romanticism; both are fictions and can coexist without difficulty. Smithson explains that Carl Andre could describe his sculpture as purely material and Lucy Lippard could see it as “rebelliously romantic,” because “the romanticism of the 60s is a concern for the surfaces of materialism, and both are fictions in the chance minds of the people who use them” (*Writings*, 71).

The mirror structure of language that the artist is constructing here is without foundation but is constituted by an infinite system of cross-references. It is, he says, “a looking-glass babel that is fabricated according to Pascal’s remark, ‘Nature is an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.’” Sometimes language is a heap of disjoint particulars, sometimes it is a series of strata, and sometimes it is a set of mirrors, a labyrinth that one could build for oneself only to lose oneself in it:

In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections

of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge . . . but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures. . . . at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations. (*Writings*, 67; author's ellipses)

The idea of a loss or emptying out of the self recurs throughout the essay in the theme of the imploding or disappearing center or in Flaubert's clerks who submit to replicating the texts of others. Here it is the artist as writer who loses himself, paralleling Smithson's address to the reader in "Hidden Trails in Art" who is situated like Gulliver and Ulysses: "You begin your travels by being immediately lost" (*Smithson Unearthed*, 83). In the uncanny materiality of writing, readers can no longer detach themselves from the fate of these wandering characters.

What Smithson explores is a specifically linguistic form of self-loss. He tells us that "each word contains its own void" and warns us of the "voids of knowledge" that lie in wait for the artist who explores the labyrinths of language. Constituted as speaking subjects, we are all containers of our own voids, in thrall to the language that speaks us. Language is no one's possession, it does not issue from a single masterful speaker, we have always been in Babel, or more specifically in its library where the dispersion and brute juxtaposition of many languages, each fractured and fissured, takes its most material form. The loss of a psychological center is one consequence of the general failure of organizing principles. When Nietzsche announced the death of God he anticipated the possibility that other centers would come to take the place of the lost theological one; these might be political, humanistic, or even linguistic, as in his observation that "I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar."²⁰ Smithson reported in interviews that he spent

his early twenties wrestling with traditional religion, having been attracted by Anglo-Catholicism and inspired by T. S. Eliot (*Writings*, 145). By the time he emerges as a writer, having (he says) put this struggle behind him, he would join Nietzsche in asking, “Now that God is dead, who is speaking?”²¹ From a theological perspective the confusion of Babel is to be contrasted with the authority of the divine word. Without God, from a sheerly entropic perspective there is no divine word, no authoritative Bible and no master voice in a text that would prevent either authors or readers from losing themselves.

For Smithson the collapse of theism, the decentering of the subject, and the sense that language is everywhere (even if barely legible) are often given the collective name of Babel, as in his reference to “the illusory babels of language.” More than once Smithson alludes to Jorge Luis Borges’s story “The Library of Babel,” in which the universe is identical with a vast library, containing every possible combination of letters and marks of punctuation. Everything is language, but there is no master speaker or interpreter. The library includes all actual languages, every possible language, and much that has no discernible meaning. Language has been dispersed and materialized into an infinite number of volumes, and although somewhere there must be a master key to the library, it would be impossible to distinguish it, should it be found, from the almost infinite number of false catalogues. The art world, Smithson says, has a strange tendency to collapse into such a Borgesian labyrinth:

“Printed matter” plays an entropic role. Maps, charts, advertisements, art books, science books, money, architectural plans, math books, graphs, diagrams, newspapers, comics, booklets and pamphlets from industrial companies are all treated the same. Judd [so frequently Smithson’s mask for himself] has a labyrinthine collection of “printed-matter,” some of which

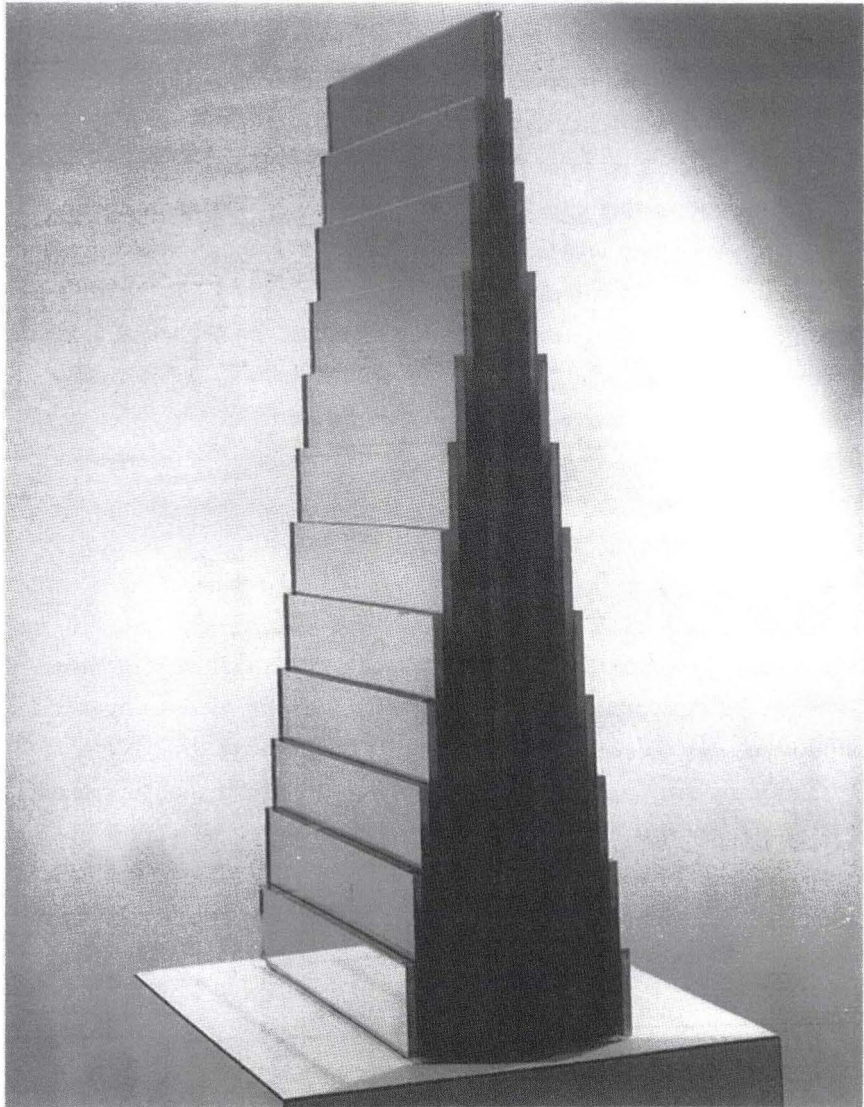
he “looks” at rather than reads. . . . In this context, it is best to think of “printed-matter” the way Borges thinks of it, as “The universe (which others call the library),” or like McLuhan’s “Gutenberg Galaxy,” in other words, as an unending “library of Babel.” (*Writings*, 15)

In Borges’s story the universe or library may or may not be infinite, it may be cyclical or unbounded, its texts may be meaningful or absurd: these are the questions that various religious sects and philosophers dispute. What is indisputable in the narrative is the ineluctable graphic proliferation of the text by which the inhabitants of the library are surrounded, a text that constantly tempts them to hermeneutic speculations and then frustrates the apocalyptic expectations that these raise. Since everything is written somewhere (including the true account and all the false accounts of each person’s life), “the certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms.”²² What the omnipresence of printed matter does is to eliminate hope for the future or the idea of progress, because everything is already inscribed and we can add nothing to it. The “new monuments” produce a similar effect, insofar as they “cause us to forget the future.” To think of printed matter as Borges does is to see everything as text, as an infinite, decentered field which is susceptible to minor shufflings and rearrangements.

In a revealing exchange with Paul Cummings, Smithson confesses that his sense of printed matter—that is, “information which has a kind of physical presence for me”—leaves him somewhere between Marxist theory and an art like Borges’s. When Cummings asks, concerning printed matter, “Does it relate to philosophy? or semantics? Or do you find that it relates to a more aesthetic attitude toward art?” Smithson explains: “Well, I think it relates probably to a kind of physicalist or materialist view of the world, which of course leads one into a kind of Marxian view. So that the old idealisms of

irrational philosophies begin to diminish. Although I was always interested in Borges's writings and the way he would use leftover remnants of philosophy" (*Writings*, 154–155). Smithson's materialism here means both that writing and language are materials to be arranged by the artist and also that the artist is arranged by them. He says that his writings are extensions of his interest in the "stratifications and layerings" he did with glass and mirrors (*Writings*, 154); those mirror structures include a *Ziggurat Mirror* that recalls the Tower of Babel and many others that suggest the form of the ziggurat (plate 27). Smithson describes his elective affinity with Borges as the recognition of an artist with a similar principle (or of one who lacks a principle in a similar way): "That kind of taking of a discarded system and using it, you know, as a kind of armature, I guess this has always been my kind of world view" (*Writings*, 155). So his work is that of a *bricoleur*, an ingenious craftsman who operates with whatever materials come to hand, producing an astonishing assemblage out of other people's castoffs and garbage. While Smithson says that "in the museum one can find deposits of rust labeled 'Philosophy,' and in glass cases unknown lumps of something labeled 'Aesthetics,'" this does not mean that these linguistic deposits and lumps are useless. They lend themselves to the most unexpected uses, as in Borges's appropriation of Schopenhauer or Smithson's incorporation of Pascal.

Smithson's writing, far from evincing any nostalgia or sense of loss for the absent center of language, either human or divine, is typically parodic, joyous, and affirmative; it exhibits the effusive delight in transforming materials that we might expect of the *bricoleur*. In Babel there is nothing to do but shore up fragments, as Smithson learned from Eliot and Pound. By punning and word play he demonstrates that without an authoritative speaker, language collapses into multiple senses. "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



27. Robert Smithson, *Ziggurat Mirror*, 1966, mirrors,
24" × 10" × 5½". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and
John Weber Gallery.

void" (*Writings*, 87). Even a major category of Smithson's artistic production, the sites/nonsites, are designated by a pun (sights/nonsights; and there is also a play upon "cite" here, since the sites become available, or sighted, only by the documentation that cites them). He takes jokes very seriously and he transforms what others take seriously into jokes. In "A Museum of Language" Smithson engages in a complex interpretation of one of Ad Reinhardt's cartoons, "A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala," a work whose title uses the linguistic sensibility of the later Joyce against the high seriousness of his first novel (plate 28). Here the language of the art world itself has been spatialized in a figure whose center is empty. In reading this joke Smithson notes that prehistoric creatures are presented along with fantastic ones like angels and devils; art's pretentious "history breaks down into fabulous lies that reveal nothing but copies of copies." The periphery of the mandala is occupied by "an ill-defined set of schemes, entities half abstract half concrete, half impersonal fragments of time or de-spatialized oddities and monsters, a Renaissance dinosaurism hypostatized by a fictional ring of time—something half way between the real and the symbolic" (*Writings*, 73).

It's unlikely that Smithson was familiar with the psychoanalytic categories of Jacques Lacan that "the real and the symbolic" suggest for a contemporary reader. But with or without that theoretical perspective it seems that he is locating the place where the conceptual order of language is shaken by the real, by that which exceeds conceptualization or, in Smithson's language, the earth. In the joke, multiple meanings show that language is beyond our control and in part controls us; and we are brought through a surprisingly complex mechanism, as Freud argued, to the verge of acknowledging something repressed (perhaps something "earthy") that the standard language of sobriety cannot allow or articulate.²³ Reinhardt is praised for not pretending to be honest but for explicitly fictionalizing and suggesting the all-too-human parameters of

the art world such as “Art and Government” and “Art and Business.” (Smithson is apparently contrasting this frank recognition of institutional parameters with the abstract expressionists’ cult of authenticity.)

At the end of his essay on “Entropy and the New Monuments” Smithson suggests that laughter and abstract analysis are not incompatible; for example, “the seemingly topsy-turvy world revealed by Lewis Carroll did spring from a well ordered mathematical mind.” If one could work from the mathematical to the ridiculous, one might also reverse the process and proceed to analyze the physical and formal properties of laughter. “Laughter,” Smithson claims, “is in a sense a kind of entropic verbalization.” Laughter, that is, would be a sign that language is dissolving, failing to hold its order and structure, being fissured and fractured by multiple meanings and incongruities. Laughter can be provoked by such entropy, but it is also itself a stage of the process; it comes at the point where we can barely maintain our own verbalization, which is slipping and dissolving into the absurd. Pursuing his own joke (and so, like Reinhardt’s cartoon, testifying to the ridiculousness of art) and also his project of equating the linguistic and the material, Smithson asks, “How could artists transform this verbal entropy, that is ‘ha-ha,’ into ‘solid-models?’” (*Writings*, 17). Commenting on the work of the Park Place Group of artists, he offers a classification of “the different types of General laughter, according to the six main crystal systems.” Tongue in cheek, Smithson concludes after this exercise that “we must not think of Laughter as a laughing matter, but rather as the ‘matter-of-laugh’s”’ (*Writings*, 18). As we heard Nietzsche’s question before, we might also hear the reverberations of his laughter which is consequent upon the disappearance of the center and especially of its linguistic versions. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the heaviest thought of the eternal recurrence of all things is one that Zarathustra must confront in anguished solitude. But once he has struggled with the weight of this most godless of thoughts, he goes

on in the last part of the book to orchestrate a scene of fantastic laughter in which the body is torn between the verbal habits of making sense and the reality of the material body.²⁴ Smithson's laughter, like Nietzsche's, erupts at that tenuous juncture between the coded systems of language and the excessive and unrepresentable reality of the body that Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic dimension.

Between writing in the conventional sense and the earth, which can be considered as a text, are maps. The map is an artifact, constructed according to a number of codes, that purports to represent the earth. Signs here waver between what is usually thought to be language and what is taken to be mere brute material. Smithson was aware of semiotic approaches to considering maps and other signs that do not consist of words and of Charles Peirce's idea that thought could be represented by diagrams and graphs (*Smithson Unearthed*, 109; *Writings*, 18). As he knows, there is no normal or ideal form of mapping, and he reproduces or comments on a variety of mappings, including the standard road map or topographical survey, the Dymaxion projections employed by Buckminster Fuller, and the fantastic maps of Lewis Carroll. Maps are part of the documentation of the sites/nonsites, and Smithson produced a number of other maps: of lost continents, planned earthworks or airport sites, and even a fanciful mapping of many of his own works called "A Surd View for an Afternoon" (plate 29). The last section of "A Museum of Language" is devoted to a consideration of mapping which notes the fascination that maps have held for artists for the last four centuries. A closer look at that phenomenon might lead to some revisions in the view that painting and writing were always and necessarily incompatible during this era, if the map is thought of as a form of writing. As Smithson notes, now "a cartography of uninhabitable places seems to be developing—complete with decoy diagrams,

abstract grid systems made of stone and tape (Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt), and electronic ‘mosaic’ photomaps from NASA. Gallery floors are being turned into collections of parallels and meridians” (*Writings*, 76). Art, it seems, is approaching neither the condition of music nor of the garden, but that of the map. Like language in general, for which it can serve as a paradigm, the map presupposes a code and a syntax; it is subject to change and re-configuration. At its extremes the map can contain everything or nothing. Nothing, when it is like the map in *The Hunting of the Snark*, as Lewis Carroll describes it:

He had bought a large map representing the sea,
Without least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
A map they could all understand.

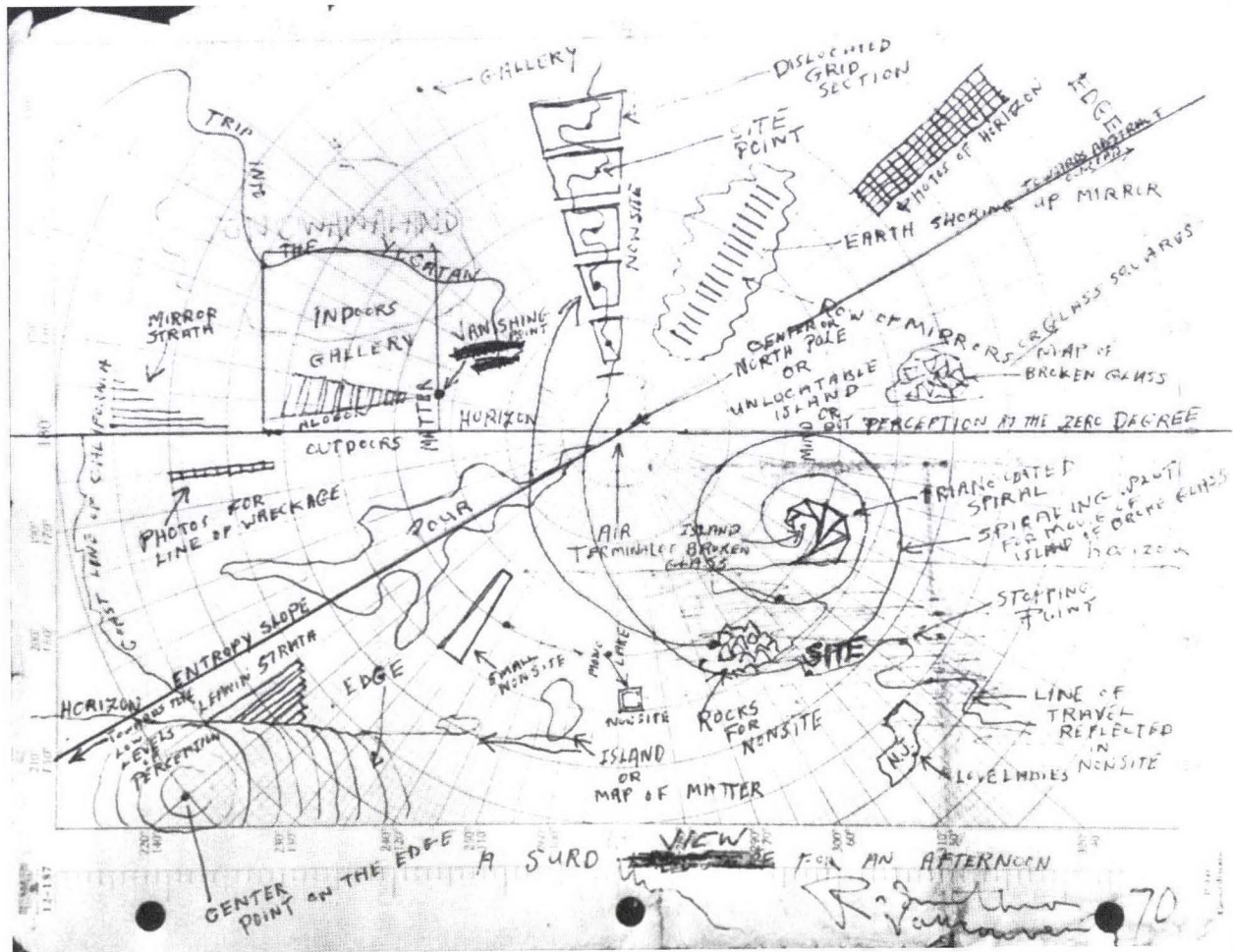
(Cited by Smithson, *Writings*, 77)

At the other end of the spectrum, in Carroll’s *Sylvie*, as Smithson reports, the map becomes everything; that is, it becomes identical with the territory when it is constructed on the same scale as the territory itself. Locating art within this larger context of the cartographic seems to effect the same sort of displacement in space that Smithson’s introduction of the pre- and post-historic accomplishes with regard to art in time. Artworks are now situated within an array of mapping structures whose informational content varies from the empty to the densest possible and from the conventional to the speculative. Among the maps that Smithson studied and drew were a number displaying the alleged lost continents of Atlantis and Gondwanaland. That the map itself might no longer be valid because of the entropic effects of time, or that the temporal record might be seen as a heap of superimposed maps, would confirm the artist’s idea of the universe as a Babel of printed matter.

Scale is everything. Smithson's work for the proposed Dallas–Fort Worth airport focused on the changes of scale that arise from aerial views, when the earth becomes a simulacrum of its own map (or of the artist's plans and sketches). As he insisted in this case, and with regard to Olmsted's Central Park, the artist's maps and plans are essential parts of the work. But the question arises as to what is and is not a map. As with the concept of "printed matter," the mapping function, it seems, can emerge anywhere. "The nonsite," for example, might appear to be an assemblage of rocks in a container in a gallery (sometimes, but not always, accompanied by maps in the conventional sense), yet Smithson says that it "exists as a kind of deep three-dimensional abstract map that points to a specific area on the surface of the earth" (*Writings*, 155). Moreover, the areas pointed to may themselves be maps: "When one scans the ruined sites of [geological] prehistory one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits" (*Writings*, 89).

In her essay "Mapping Robert Smithson" Eugenie Tsai draws attention to the importance of Smithson's maps and his concern with cartography generally. However, she tends to subordinate the maps to a narrative of Smithson's career that emphasizes the artist's travels, suggesting that he was drawing on the literary model of the *Divine Comedy* and on the imaginary voyages of science fiction. From her perspective,

The travelogues adopt the narrative structure of the journey, although they replace the allegorical structure of the journey and its lofty moral purpose with a record of empirical data gathered from sites visited by the artist. They transform the fictional journey through a metaphorical landscape into an actual trip through an existing landscape, but by parodying literary genres (especially science fiction or the guidebook), they make the "real" landscape fictional. (*Smithson Unearthed*, 27–28)



29. Robert Smithson, *A Surd View for an Afternoon*, 1970, ink on paper, 8 1/2" x 11". Collection of Susan Penner, Montreal.

Some of Smithson's essays, like "Incidents of Mirror-Travel" and "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic," can be read as travel narratives that have the effect of derealizing the landscape or as allegorical versions of earlier excursions that aimed at experiencing the picturesque; yet the generalized spatiality of the mapping process ought not to be reduced to a biographical account of the artist's development, nor should we assume that his career can be understood as the transposition of a religious journey into a secular mode. The journeys to Yucatan or Passaic ought to be seen as reinscriptions or as simulacra of the maps rather than as experiences to which the maps are simply instrumental. "A Surd View for an Afternoon" should be read not as a map that "charts his career," as Tsai puts it, suggesting a temporal sense of "career," but as one more fantastic map of a topography all of whose landmarks are Smithson's works. As the title of this map suggests, there is something oblique or unintelligible about the view that is taken or implied here. Many of the works named in the diagram are themselves "surd" in their positioning of vision. The afternoon is the time after the high point of the sun and its blinding light; it is also the time of play, rest, or siesta. This is not so much an overview or prospectus of the artist's life work as it is one more grid, another instance of "printed matter" by which his art situates itself with respect to language and the earth. Given the generality of the mapping function, we need to remember that each site on "A Surd View" is also a map pointing to others.

One of Smithson's maps, "Entropic Pole," places its center in the middle of the desolate Pine Barrens of New Jersey, a location that could hardly be taken to be central or significant in any conventional sense (*Smithson Unearthed*, 161). The center of "A Surd View" is virtually empty. It is an "air terminal," itself a kind of empty center, one that was never completed, but which could serve as a take-off point for Smithson's other works, actual, projected, or abandoned. In both cases we have representations that lack a center; no religious

drama or secular analogue is the key to the map on which his artworks are located, just as the entropic pole is a meaningless dot; like all dots thought of as centers, these can produce the vertigo of the abyss (*Writings*, 78). If Smithson the artist is to be discovered in his art, it will not be in the form of a story that he tells us about himself but in the signature with which his works are marked, a signature that sometimes approximates a map.

5 **Spiraling Signatures: *Et in Utah Ego***

I think the new tombs will have to avoid any reference to life or death. —ROBERT SMITHSON, *Writings*

We live ruins amid ruin.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, *quoted by Smithson*

Smith: One who works in iron or other metals; esp. a blacksmith or farrier; a forger, hammerman.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

What happens to the artist when art submits to the law of entropy and when the prehistoric meets the posthistoric? Will a loosening of the boundaries and identity of the work lead to a correlative attenuation of the artist as presiding presence or genius? If the work of art is not a monument for the ages, it cannot bear the name of its maker into the future, assuring the vicarious immortality that art has so often promised. To the extent that Smithson's program of assimilating prehistoric and posthistoric is successful, it would *seem* to entail an abandonment of the heroic persona of the individual artist as cultural hero, although Smithson was the opposite of a retiring or reticent figure. For what is characteristic of the prehistoric is that it is anonymous and lacks a signature. We tend to think of the early "earthworks"—Stonehenge, the Nazca lines, and their like—as collective products, expressive of an entire culture, not of a single creative imagination. We may suppose that there is no prehistoric signature, that mark by which the artist assumes ownership and

responsibility for the work. Nor do we find a signature here in the sense of a distinctive style, a personal stamp imparted to what has been made. The signature, then, seems to be characteristic of history rather than prehistory, a correlation that is not surprising if the signature is a form of writing and if history is the era recorded in writing. Yet the situation is more complex. Prehistoric markings or inscriptions of the earth could be construed as forms of writing, as ways of indicating significance, even if they do not point to an individual maker who has legibly inscribed a name.

It seems too simplistic, then, to suppose that the signature is to be understood as either wholly present or wholly absent in different forms or phases of art. And one does not have to go very far back into the archaeological record in order to discern the limits of the concept of the artist as creator, one who gives an indelible stamp of individuality to the product of inspiration. One of the main lessons of a rich series of studies of the history of aesthetics that has been undertaken in the last forty years is the anachronistic character of the assumption that other times have shared such a romantic notion of the artist. As Foucault suggests with regard to writing in "What Is an Author?" we ought not to speak of the author ahistorically and uncritically as if such a figure is always the necessary presupposition of our understanding a text; instead, he proposes that we attempt an archaeological inquiry into the constitution, limits, and changing fields of influence of the "author function."¹ Such an inquiry would ask questions like these: When and how does it become customary to seek to attribute texts (or paintings, musical scores, or buildings) to specific individuals and to ask about the meaning and significance of the author's work? What leads to the elevation of a text, something to be read, interpreted, perhaps altered or censored, into a component of the author's or artist's oeuvre, to be understood as part of a meaningful development or as the expression of a single commanding vision of the world? Why and how is the

earlier status of craftsman or technician that was ascribed to the painter or sculptor replaced by the more recent roles of cultural hero and genius? As Roland Barthes suggests, the rise of the author-work constellation, in which the sovereign creator gives an identity to his creations, is not irreversible and we can conceive of the possibility of moving from works back to texts, which would no longer be seen as functions of an authorial presence.²

Smithson would seem to endorse this tendency insofar as he conceives of the earth and his work on it as textual and adopts a view of language as relatively impersonal. His celebration of dedifferentiation, following Ehrenzweig, and his indebtedness to Kubler's protostructuralist perspective, in which the proper names of artists and the attribution of works to them are of minimal importance, seem to put him on the side of those who endorse the disappearance of the artist. The turn to industrial techniques, nonsites, and the production of works like *Glue Pour* or the *Partially Buried Woodshed*, where the physical work can be assigned to others, demonstrates that the hand or touch of the artist is no longer necessary. Once the fetishism of the artist's touch is abandoned, the way seems open to weakening the notion that his or her role is to infuse the work with spiritual life; the artist no longer resembles Michelangelo's God making Adam into his living image. However, the notion of the artist as genius does not disappear so easily; a figure like Marcel Duchamp, for example, retained a highly assertive, if ironic, artistic authority even in ready-mades like *Fountain* (a urinal) and *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (a snow shovel). Yet Smithson is critical of Duchamp and the Dadaists for practicing a form of religion in disguise, a religion that depends upon the artist-priest being regarded as the possessor of extraordinary powers that can transform the most banal objects by the application of the signature: "At bottom I see Duchamp as a kind of priest of a certain sort. He was turning a urinal into a baptismal font. My view is more democratic and that is why the pose

of priest-aristocrat that Duchamp takes on strikes me as reactionary. . . . he is just using manufactured goods, transforming them into gold and mystifying them” (*Writings*, 198). Duchamp’s baptizing of the ready-mades can be seen as an ironic comment on the avant-garde’s flight from commodification, in which the artist would be demonstrating that it is not individual touch, craft, or style that is necessary for something to be a work of art but the artist’s placement of it within the world of museums, galleries, and critics.³ For Smithson, this practice is rightly called “alchemy,” a label that he says Duchamp accepted when they met (*Writings*, 198). Rather than magically transmuting the base into the rare and precious, Smithson chose to let materials retain their humble beginnings and to accept the more modest role of the smith, *bricoleur*, or craftsman who shapes and rearranges existing materials, accepting the ultimately contingent and impermanent nature of his constructions.

Nevertheless, in what may be his most Duchampian work Smithson adopted a pseudonym that reminds one of the “R. Mutt” whose name graces *Fountain* or Duchamp’s stand-in Rose Selavy (*eros c’est la vie*). This very brief “press release,” “Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read,” bears the signature “Eton Corrasable.” If Duchamp’s R. Mutt suggests the German *Armut*—that is, poverty or emptiness—Eton Corrasable is a signature under erasure and could be the watermark of the blank page that forms the surface on which Smithson’s words are printed. It is a mechanical inscription telling us that the medium of writing is itself not a tabula rasa but always already an instance of printed matter. In the case of both Smithson and Duchamp, the gesture appears to point to the inevitable presence of the artist, even in his ironic denial of himself or the art world; we might also think here of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning* in which the trace of an erasure becomes, as if by magic, an independent work of its own.⁴ Smithson’s piece begins by noting that “language operates between literal and metaphorical signification”

(*Writings*, 104). Certainly this is true of the signature at the bottom of the text, which plays both with the literality of the writing, or more precisely the typing surface, and the metaphorical notion of the disappearing or dispensable author. Yet if Smithson was attracted to this pose, he added a postscript five years later in 1972, inscribing his initials so as to neutralize the original gesture: “[My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas—i.e. ‘printed matter.’ (R. S. June 2, 1972)].” Of course, the ironic, impossible signature “Eton Corrasable” simply reinforces the desire of the art world to attribute the work. A masked artist like Duchamp does not surrender authority but intensifies it by giving the appearance of abandoning it. In “Language to be Looked At” the absence and presence of Smithson’s signature become sequential characteristics of the text over a period of time. However, in other works, as we shall see, more complex variations on the possibilities of the signature are developed.

Beyond such ironic gestures that reinscribe the signature of the modernist artist, it is possible to fantasize an embrace of entropy so complete that all traces of agents, artists, or authors would be obliterated. While Smithson may have flirted with this possibility, it is excluded by his persistent claim of authorship or proprietorship with regard to *his* works. The donation of the *Partially Buried Woodshed* to Kent State University, for example, specifies the conditions under which it must be maintained and preserved. Smithson’s donation states that “the work should be considered permanent and be maintained by the Art Department according to the above specifications” (*Robert Smithson*, 191). These instructions are for the preservation of a legacy in the form of a grave or crypt that is itself always in process of burial. Just as the burial or entombment of a dead person is not complete oblivion, but a way of marking, remembering, and memorializing, so the woodshed is not meant to decay with the elements but to remain as a specific site. What is unusual here

is not only that it is a burial in process, but that what is preserved is not some specific person or thing (such as a time capsule, for example) that has been buried, but the process of burial itself. Of course, Smithson's deed can be construed with some complexity; to "maintain" the *Woodshed* in process is to allow that some changes will certainly occur. The donation says:

Nothing should be altered in this area. Scattered wood and earth shoring should remain in place. Everything in the shed is part of the art and should not be removed. The entire work of art is subject to weathering and should be considered part of the work. The value of this work is \$10,000. The work should be considered permanent and maintained by the Art Dept. according to the above specifications.

In fact the university which owned (owns?) the work has had a difficult time living up to the requirements of the donation. Damaged by weather, time, and vandals, the *Woodshed* became the focus of campus controversy, with one faction wanting to tear down the work and another to restore it. The building had become a political symbol because someone painted "MAY 4 KENT 70" after four students were shot and killed during the 1970 protest against the Vietnam War. During this dispute the construction was the target of an arsonist who succeeded in spoiling the building even further. Campus workers removed bits of the main structure as they fell off, on the grounds that they were debris; arguments by the art faculty that these were in fact intrinsic parts of the work were not heeded. Since 1984 all that is left of the *Woodshed* is the mound on which it once stood.⁵

Similarly, Smithson did not want to abandon the *Spiral Jetty* to the rising water level of the Great Salt Lake, but said shortly before his death that he wanted to build it up so that it would once again be visible. As with the *Woodshed*, Smithson's rights were secured by a legal contract, in this case

a twenty-year lease. Such property rights in the name of the artist can be inherited by a survivor or an estate; another person (actual or legal) can become the agent to preserve the will of the artist. In these works that open themselves up to various forms of erosion, collapse, decay, and spoliation Smithson employs his rights as maker, as *auctor*, implying a permanent husbandry over what he has made. The legal and artistic identity and power that stem from his name, and are enforced by his signature, contrast with the explicitly fragile nature of the objects (and we shouldn't describe these objects as "the works themselves," for that would imply that the works exist independently of the signature).

There is a clear tension between Smithson's pursuit of entropy (or its close kin, an open-ended materialist dialectics) and the will to own, preserve, and sign what he has made. Adrian Stokes speculated about what might happen to art at the entropic extreme: "Some painters explore relationships to objects so manifold that the attempt is sometimes made *not* to conceive the work of art as a closed system, closed against the contingent circumstances of its viewing. Will art pass on to join all the accidents of Nature and, through an excess of the 'carving' principle, expire?"⁶ That much of what is to be preserved and identified by the artist's signature is precisely the quality of entropy and dialectical process makes the situation complex but does not eliminate the tension. The conflict is not to be evaded narratively, by telling the familiar story of the rebellious young artist whose early challenges to tradition are eventually superseded by a reconciliation with the world that follows upon success and acceptance. Such a narrative might point to the fact that Smithson's last works, such as the park in Holland (*Broken Circle/Spiral Hill*) have a strong public dimension, and it might suggest that his proposals to reclaim the three-mile-wide Bingham Copper Mine pit show us an artist ready to cooperate fully with existing institutions. Nevertheless, the thematic interest in the entropic per-

sists in these “late” works and writings. For example, Smithson wanted it to be clear that the Bingham mine site had indeed been the locus of devastation, and he rejected efforts to disguise such sites of time as pleasant parks or gardens (*Robert Smithson*, 215–221). Still, there may be a temptation to associate Smithson’s entrance into the world of real estate contracts and negotiations with major corporations as part of a trajectory in which he would assume a comfortable identity in the world of public art. But his gestures can just as well be read as dispersals of his signature and identity by submitting them to the law and the hazards of the market. That is, the official aesthetic tradition has prided itself upon preserving the integrity of the artist by treating the economics of the art market, not to mention the wider economy within which it functions, as secondary and adventitious. Yet Smithson’s business correspondence with a corporation constitutes, structurally speaking, the risk of dispersing his identity in all of those indeterminacies, those glacial shifts of the larger economy from which the conception of artistic autonomy would serve as a refuge.

Perhaps we can gain some perspective on these apparently conflicting desires, to sign and not to sign, by exploring a text in which Smithson himself investigates the identity and signature of an artist. This essay, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,” was the last that Smithson published. With the exception of a much briefer earlier catalogue entry on Donald Judd, it is his only published writing devoted to the work and thought of a single artist; in both cases the essays display a strong identification with their subjects, each serving as a paradigm for Smithson’s own work at quite different stages in his career. Smithson describes Olmsted, the nineteenth-century designer of many great North American parks as “America’s first ‘earthwork artist’” (*Writings*, 123). The sense of filiation by which Smithson might be claiming to be the true artistic heir of Olmsted is qualified by the scare quotes

around “earthwork artist,” a term that may have provoked an ambivalence concerning the simultaneous wishes both to have a distinguished line of descent and to stand outside any system of classification. We will return later to this genealogical or patriarchal motif.

Smithson begins his essay as an historian, even as an *art* historian (despite his suspicions of the teleology to which the discipline seems committed), by attempting to explain how Olmsted could have come to the point of planning landscapes that revealed the “glacial aftermath along its geological profiles” (*Writings*, 117). The presupposition, then, is that Olmsted did not make an absolutely fresh beginning, sidestepping the art world—and the same may be true for his entire progeny of “earthworks artists,” including the single son (Smith the son) who has managed to reconstitute the origins of geological art. Smithson adroitly places Olmsted within a dialectical narrative of the history of aesthetics, a narrative that proceeds according to a somewhat crude “Hegelian” schema of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, but which arrives at a distinctly non-Hegelian position. In this account Edmund Burke’s concepts of beauty and sublimity constitute the thesis and antithesis that eventually yield a synthesis in the eighteenth-century theory and practice of the picturesque. According to Smithson, thinkers like Price and Gilpin see the picturesque as necessarily involving “chance and change in the material order of nature” (*Writings*, 101). He views this progression as offering a way around the idealism of Kant, Hegel, and Fichte. Olmsted is certainly not committed to the principles of formal unity that governed Kant’s conception of the garden, for he sees his parks as responding to climatic, human, and geological changes. Smithson quotes and endorses Elizabeth Barlow’s description of the early park, and he implies that the park retains traces of its history: “The political quagmire was matched by the appearance of the park itself, which was rubbish-strewn, deep in mud, filled with recently vacated squatters’ huts, and

overrun with goats left behind by the squatters. Until they were eventually impounded, the goats were a great nuisance, eating the foliage of the park's few trees" (*Writings*, 123). "All of this," Smithson observes, "is part of the park's dialectic."

I want to emphasize that for Smithson what gives Olmsted the right to sign the landscape in all of its contingency and complexity, and so to deserve the title "America's first 'earthwork artist,'" is that he both understood the English derivation of the picturesque (in contrast to the German idealist alternative) and at the same time insisted that "Europe would not be our model" because the aristocratic private park was inconsistent with American openness and democracy. He is authorized to sign both by his origins (in aesthetics) and by his originality in the American scene. Smithson too, in describing his own work, expressed pride in having gotten "the whole cultural overlay of Europe" out of his system and in having "developed something that was intrinsically my own and rooted to my own experience in America" (*Writings*, 147). When he speaks of "working my way out from underneath the heaps of European history to find my own origins," we can hear a certain valorization of his American identity that has resonances in the discovery of abstract expressionism as a distinctively American achievement in the 1950s.⁷ The fact that a certain approach to the aesthetics of the earth is an American one, close to his origins, may help to explain why, despite his championing of contingency, change, and the park's general openness to transformation, Smithson jealously defends Olmsted's rights to preserve the park in *proper* fashion. He recalls that Olmsted was unjustly dismissed as New York's commissioner of parks in 1874; even the creator of a radically changing earthwork, he implies, should not be expropriated from his legitimate rights of proprietorship.

In concluding the essay with an account of a ramble through Central Park, Smithson's narrative alternates between respectfully recalling Olmsted's in-

tentions in laying out the park and his own censorious observations on the contemporary abuses that the park has suffered, abuses that might be seen as continuations of the act by which the work was taken away from the artist. He contrasts Olmsted's plan for labyrinths in the Ramble with its current role as an urban jungle that shelters sinister characters. Smithson is disconcerted by the appearance of graffiti on boulders, although he acknowledges that he can accept them on subway trains. Is the principle here that no inscriptions are to be allowed that supplement those of the original author? Smithson is particularly outraged by the intrusion of buildings, mentioning a "kiddy land" (playground) and "kiddy zoo"; is there a sensitivity here to the possibility that children may usurp the property and frustrate the plans of the founding father? Urban garbage such as grocery carts, trash baskets, tin cans, and oil slicks leads to the observation that "maintenance . . . seems long overdue" (*Writings*, 127).

Here Smithson exhibits a commitment to preservation and restoration that would seem to presuppose a conception of the identity of the artwork and the inviolability of the artist's signature. He particularly rejects the proliferation of printed matter and those interventions that challenge the boundaries or frames of the work. Olmsted, having understood and incorporated the dialectics of art and nature, embodied that sense in a work that ought to be preserved and restored. Restoration and preservation, of course, will not mean, as they might in the case of painting and sculpture, the part by part identity or exact similarity of physical elements or the impressions we receive from them; but they do require that certain principles (perhaps they can even be called formal principles) should hold sway over the whole. Like Greenberg, Smithson would not allow the frame to intrude into the picture (that is the danger of zoos and playgrounds). The broad outlines of geological truth, even in its changes, must be allowed to shine forth; like Heidegger,

Smithson could say that the work lets the earth be an earth, and that the *Riss*, rift or rendering of world and earth that it embodies requires “preservers.”⁸

I want to suggest, then, that all of Smithson’s work exhibits the thematics and problematics of the artistic signature in a heightened form—made possible by his impossible desire of being the artist who steps outside of the art world. (Of course it may be, as Jacques Lacan suggests, that all desire is directed toward the impossible.) How does the signature function within that art world? In Western art, especially in painting, the signature flourished from the seventeenth century on, becoming normative and indispensable in the nineteenth. The artist and the institutions of art find it necessary that each work be legibly signed by and identified with a single artist. Much of the comprehensive analysis of the role of the signature in art (which has yet to be written) would deal with questions and themes such as those that Foucault deals with in “What Is an Author?” And it would also have to do with the rise of easel painting, the collapse of patronage, the establishment of the institutions of the museum and the gallery, and the hegemony of the art market.

As Jean-Claude Lebensztejn suggests in one of the very few serious efforts to understand the phenomenon, the modern artist’s signature typically “illustrates the fetish that museological culture makes of his name.”⁹ Lebensztejn’s typology of the signature displays a spectrum of possibilities, ranging from the signature that appears outside the work itself (on the frame, for example) to one that is more completely integrated into the composition of the work. He observes that the rise of the signature coincides with the exclusion of other linguistic and graphic elements from painting, suggesting that the signature may be the sign of the return of a writing that has been repressed. On the surface, the elimination of writing from the visual work coincides with the modernist project, as articulated by critics like Clement Greenberg, in which it is the task of each art to strive for its own specific achievements within the limits of its

medium. Nevertheless, we find interesting variations on the signature's role in some of the heroes of modernism. Manet signs one of the bottles in *The Bar at the Follies Bergere*, a bottle which is the only one of its group that is reflected (although the signature itself is not reflected) in the painting's enigmatic mirror; representation is put into question by this mirror, but the signature remains outside that questioning. In Manet's portrait of Theodore Duret, the artist's name appears on the same surface that the subject stands on, as if it had been inscribed by the cane he is holding. These obvious and designedly integrated signatures may be contrasted with others that are incorporated in less obvious ways. Lebensztejn offers a provocative reading of Klee's *Zerbrochene Schlüssel* (broken key) which, unlike almost all of Klee's other paintings, contains no conventional, easily recognizable signature. But across the linguistic gap between German and French (*Schlüssel/clé*) it is possible to see the name of the Swiss artist in the orthographical shapes on the canvas. This dispersion of the signature in the very moment of its incorporation could be read, Lebensztejn suggests, in terms of the artist's approaching death, and indicates that some of the most important thematics of the signature will lie outside the domain of conscious intention.

Lebensztejn's typology helps to problematize the apparent clarity and simplicity of any distinction between a signature that is outside a work and one that falls within it. Such a distinction must become especially questionable with respect to work like Smithson's, which aggressively interrogates the nature of the relation between inside and outside, as it volatilizes the relation of site and nonsite. We may also doubt whether the signature is to be identified always and primarily with the conventional sequence of letters that spell the artist's name; Lebensztejn allows for a broader understanding in the case of Klee and also in that of Jackson Pollock, whose inscribed gesture he takes to be a signature. Derrida has proposed that there is a law of the signature, such that

the latter can never fulfill the function of authorizing and controlling the work, whether it appears to lie inside or outside it. If it were external to the work, then the latter would function autonomously and the signature would be irrelevant; but if the signature is inscribed in the work it no longer occupies a free position from which a sovereignty could be exercised. Derrida traces out the consequences of the law in *Signéponge*, which is devoted to the complex ways in which the signature of the poet François Ponge plays through and inhabits the texts of his poems. According to Derrida,

The law producing *and* prohibiting the signature (in the first modality) of the proper name, is that by not letting the signature fall outside the text any more, as an undersigned subscription, and by inserting it into the body of the text, you monumentalize, institute and erect it into a thing or a strong object. But in doing so, you also lose the identity, the title of ownership over the text; you let it become a moment or a part of the text, as a thing or common name. The erection-tomb falls. Step, and stop, of man.¹⁰

When one's name is written in stone, we might say, then a death is in some sense being memorialized. The signer abandons an imaginary position of privilege. The gesture of inscription that might at first appear to be a way of asserting the autonomy of the signatory becomes a form of sacrifice or self-loss when the name becomes a part of the work. Michael Fried observes such a petrification of the signature in Courbet's *The Stonebreakers*, where the artist's name, G. Courbet, is inscribed on the hard ground where stones are broken, such that the letters are a series of incised marks that themselves appear as if cut into stone, rather than the sign by which an artist takes possession of accommodating matter through his sovereign flourish. At the same time, the two principal figures of the painting are arrested in postures very close to the two initials of the painter's name. Fried describes these signature-

effects as a way that the artist has of placing himself within the painting so as to challenge a certain specular illusion of theatricality. The painter, at least, will be no spectator; freed from the “spectatorial position,” he emerges as another worker immersed in the mineral world and laboring with very material tools, like the almost faceless subjects of the painting.¹¹ One is reminded here of Smithson’s plan for an underground theater that would narrativize the history of its own construction. Such works tend toward self-referentiality by focusing on the material process and agents of their own production.

Smithson’s work explicitly challenges any distinction between text and earth. His name becomes part of the earth’s text and announces the complexity of his project and desire. His activity is always double, divided between a writing that is obviously signed and a series of works that ostensibly escape the modern fetishism of the name. Some of his writings, like “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic” and “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Yucatan,” refer to the artist’s activities and travels and so bear his signature. At the same time, the appeal to a cosmic, geological temporality that would put brackets around human history, and incidentally around the parochial narratives of art history, looks like a refusal of the signature and all of the practices with which it is associated. Derrida’s observation is appropriate here: “The bar does not pass between the signature and the absence of signature, but *through the signature*. Which is therefore always overflowing.”¹² That is, there is no clear choice between the presence and the absence of the signature; rather, there is something like a signature-effect or a signature-function that involves a desire both to sign and not sign.

On the one hand, Smithson is a smith, a skilled worker rather than an artist, one who works with heavy and recalcitrant materials, employing a variety of tools. By antonomasia the common noun becomes a proper name. The works created by smiths are not usually signed as are those of artists; and

when they are signed the name does not typically suggest a unique touch and style. On the other hand, Smithson is the *son* of the smith, the one who goes further, transforming what he has inherited. (There is also some onomastic evidence that the family name Smithson denotes the son of a smith who does *not* take up his father's work.¹³) In many Western narratives of the origin of art—for example, in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which recapitulates a number of such stories—we find accounts of how the smith or artisan who begins as a builder, planner, and engineer, with a mathematical and physical knowledge of the materials, prepares the way for and yields a place to the artist who invigorates his constructions with imaginative ideas. In Hegel's discussion, the smith is limited to the production of crystalline forms; he *becomes* an artist by means of that biologism and anthropomorphism that Smithson would avoid.¹⁴ That avoidance, if successful, would make him the smith's true son or heir, who refuses the siren calls of art and Western history. At the same time, he finds it necessary to differentiate himself from other artists who have seemed to adopt technological and industrial techniques:

As "technology" and "industry" began to become an ideology in the New York Art World in the late '50s and early '60s, the private studio notions of "craft" collapsed. The products of industry and technology began to have an appeal to the artist who wanted to work like a "steel welder" or a "laboratory technician." This valuation of the material products of heavy industry, first developed by David Smith and later by Anthony Caro, led to a fetish for steel and aluminum as a medium. . . . Steel is a hard, tough metal, suggesting the permanence of technological values. . . . Yet the more I think about steel itself, devoid of the technological refinements, the more *rust* becomes the fundamental property of steel. . . . In the technological mind rust evokes a fear of disuse, inactivity, entropy and ruin. Why steel is valued over rust is a technological value, not an artistic one. (*Writings*, 86)

Smithson needed to distinguish his role as an artist from that of the smiths or Smiths (David and Tony) with whom he might have been confused. His notion of the aesthetic value of rust anticipates Richard Serra's use of rusting Cor-Ten steel and introduces a sense of real temporality into the artwork. In many ways "A Sedimentation of the Mind" (from which I have been quoting) replies to Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood," which had appeared one year earlier in the same magazine, *Artforum*. Fried had argued for a timeless art that would admit its viewers into the "grace" of "presentness" and had attacked the "theatricality" of much contemporary work, concentrating specifically on Tony Smith and Robert Morris along with a compendious list of others, including Smithson, Rauschenberg, Kaprow, Oldenburg, Kienholz, and Christo. Smithson objects that "for too long the artist has been estranged from his own 'time'. . . . The mental process of the artist which takes *place* in time is disowned, so that a commodity value can be maintained by a system independent of the artist" (*Writings*, 90). The artist's goal will not be to divest his works of their "objecthood," as Fried urges, but to open them up to temporality and an indefinitely peripheral context—precisely the features that Fried had associated with theatricality. The choice of materials is crucial insofar as it will define the work's and the viewer's relation to time. Smithson suggests that the categorial distinction between a mere object and a work of art is not its removal from time, as Fried and so much of the aesthetic tradition maintain, but its being made ineluctably temporal:

When a *thing* is seen through the consciousness of temporality, it is changed into something that is nothing. This all-engulfing sense provides the mental ground for the object, so that it ceases being a mere object and becomes art. The object gets to be less and less but exists as something clearer. Every object, if it is art, is charged with the rush of time even though it is static, but all this depends on the viewer. (*Writings*, 90)

In all of this analysis Smithson is intensely concerned to define the artist's role by distinguishing artistic activity from that of craft and by specifying a certain relation that the artist has to materials and time. The alternative is represented as a sterile trap: "The modern artist, trapped in his 'studio,' working out an abstract grammar within the limits of his 'craft,' is trapped in but another snare," comparable to the Platonic artist who is in thrall to an unchangeable idea (*Writings*, 87). This talk about "the snares of craft" and the "bondage of creativity" can be read as a redescription of the modernist artist as understood by Greenberg and Fried, who is set the task of finding a further variation on painting's project of exploring the fundamental limits and conditions of the medium: the flat canvas to be painted within the confines of the studio.

Against the servitude induced by "the biomorphic order of rational creation" and the "vile laws of Culture," Smithson, in "A Sedimentation of the Mind," urges the artist to seek out the desert, either literally or metaphorically: "The desert is less 'nature' than a concept, a place that swallows up boundaries. When the artist goes to the desert he enriches his absence and burns off the water (paint) on his brain. The slush of the city evaporates from the artist's mind as he installs his art" (*Writings*, 89). Smithson's signature is not only that of the son of the smith but also that of the smith or artisan of the sun encountered in the desert. He duplicates and supplements the primary source of light and heat. Smithson's taste for dry and fiery places, for deserts, and for aerial views suggests this solar connection. Echoing Heraclitus, Smithson says, in effect, that it is death for the artist's soul to become moist.¹⁵ The sun is the source of change, of cracks and fissures; the sun crystallizes. The film *Spiral Jetty* is periodically flooded by the sun's blazing glare and the red water and crystals reinforce its fiery power. There is an aerial or imaginary sun's-eye view of art on the surface of the earth, a view that is evoked by the as-

cents of the helicopter in the film. As in his plans for the Dallas–Fort Worth air terminal, Smithson was interested in what could be seen in a solar ascent or descent. That he died while conducting an aerial survey of his own incomplete *Amarillo Ramp* in the heat of a Texas July suggests a certain filiation with Icarus, another daring son of a smith, who flew too close to the sun.¹⁶

Smithson's own interests in his name and genealogy emerge in several interviews. He is proud of his great-grandfather Charles Smithson, a prolific worker in the very earthy medium of plaster, who is depicted as having made an important contribution to public art. He is also aware of his possible descent from the English Smithson whose donation founded the Smithsonian Institution (where Smithson's papers are now appropriately housed in the Archives of American Art). Nancy Holt, Smithson's wife, records that his interest in certain New Jersey quarries was intensified because they are among the few sites in the world that contain smithsonite, a mineral owing its name to the founder of the Smithsonian.¹⁷ Not only does Smithson return to his ancestors of the same name (following a patrilineal structure); he also had something approaching an obsession with the sites of his native New Jersey. Its industrial wastes, rockpiles, quarries, the Pine Barrens, and the "monuments" of Passaic constitute, it would seem, the true ground of his artistic ventures. Smithson was both autochthonous, born from the rocks and soil to which he constantly returned, and the legitimate descendant of the line of Smith's and smith's sons, including the illustrious predecessor who gave his name to the rocks of his birthplace.

Another genealogical tie to an art rooted in these sites is Smithson's affinity with the poetry of William Carlos Williams. In a long interview with Paul Cummings, Smithson was asked about his contacts with Williams, who had been Smithson's pediatrician and whom Smithson had visited with Irving Layton in connection with an introduction that Williams was to do for a book

of Layton's poems. In the interview Smithson explains what Williams's poetry means to him as a way of coming to terms with the New Jersey sites:

I guess the Paterson area is where I had a lot of my contact with quarries and I think that is somewhat embedded in my psyche. As a kid I used to go and prow around all those quarries. And of course, they figured strongly in *Paterson*. When I read the poems I was interested in that, especially this one part of *Paterson* where it showed all the strata levels under Paterson. Sort of a protoconceptual art, you might say. Later on I wrote an article for *Artforum* on Passaic which is a city on the Passaic River south of Paterson. In a way I think it reflects that whole area. Williams did have a sense of that kind of New Jersey landscape. (*Writings*, 148)

In another interview Smithson simply says that the "article that I wrote on Passaic could be conceived of as a kind of appendix to William Carlos Williams's poem *Paterson*" (*Writings*, 187). The conjunction of text and earth in *Paterson*, then, seems to serve as a parallel and model for Smithson's essay, but perhaps also for his sense that "'the earth's history seems at times like a story recorded in a book each page of which is torn into small pieces.'"¹⁸ *Paterson* itself is a collage, in which newspaper items, letters from Allen Ginsberg and others, and excerpts from historical accounts of the city are patched together with the words that Williams has written for the first time. The poem grew beyond its originally intended scope as Williams added on additional books, so that much of the work can be considered as an appendix to itself, exemplifying a principle of metonymic supplementation, of edges and peripheries that are constantly being pushed back. Smithson also employs a principle of supplementarity like this in his work. The section of the collage to which Smithson apparently refers occupies a full page in *Paterson* and begins this way:

SUBSTRATUM

ARTESIAN WELL AT THE PASSAIC ROLLING MILL, PATERSON.

The following is the tabular account of the specimens found in this well, with the depths at which they were taken, in feet. The boring began in September, 1879, and was continued until November, 1880.

DEPTH	DESCRIPTION OF MATERIALS
65 feet. . .	Red sandstone, fine
110 feet. . .	Red sandstone, coarse
182 feet. . .	Red sandstone, and a little shale ¹⁹

It is followed by a description of the earth that in some ways recalls Smithson's account of chaotic quarries, although Williams values the biological in a way that the artist does not:

If it were only fertile. Rather a sort of muck, a detritus, in this case—a pustular scum, a decay, a choking lifelessness—that leaves the soil clogged after it, that glues the sandy bottom and blackens stones—so that they have to be scoured three times when, because of an attractive brokenness, we take them up for garden uses.²⁰

Williams had already seen the multiple levels of the New Jersey earth, its history and landscape. He serves as an artistic fatherly presence for Smithson; that the title of the text which the latter found suggestive can be read as *Pater-son* should also be noted here, along with the way in which the poet's patronymic is echoed in his first name.

In his essay on Ponge, Derrida suggests that typically the artist signs and the philosopher does not, because the latter wants to “deny the idiom of his name,

of his language, of his circumstance, speaking in concepts and generalities that are necessarily improper.”²¹ Smithson, doubling his activities between what would conventionally be called his writings and his works, both observes and undermines this distinction. For as a thinker he is a self-confessed *bricoleur*, a smith of philosophy who is not too proud to gather ideas wherever he can, hammer them into the shape needed for a particular purpose, and later pull them out and refit them to the requirements of a new context. As he says in an interview, “The system is just a convenience, you might say, it’s just another construction on the mires of things that have already been constructed” (*Writings*, 155). The smith of theory is also a smith of language: “I thought of writing more as material to sort of be put together than as a kind of analytic searchlight. I was interested in language as a material entity” (*Writings*, 154).

Smithson’s signature is everywhere and nowhere in his work—like Pascal’s sense of the presence and absence of God. Acknowledging the eros that led him to leave his mark on the earth, he wanted to exemplify a practice in which the signature would no longer have the significance that it does in the Western conception of art that crystallized about two centuries ago. Speaking approvingly of Yves Klein, he says that such work ought to be “a negation of ‘creation’ and the ‘creator’ that is supposed to be in the artist’s self” (*Writings*, 89).

A work may play simultaneously with these two modes, evoking both a loss or decentering of the artist’s self and its reaffirmation in a new form. The crucial case (but not the only one) is the *Spiral Jetty*, which Smithson describes as the culmination “to a great extent” of another play of presence and absence, that of site and nonsite. The essay on the *Spiral Jetty* records an experience of decentering:

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. (*Writings*, 111)

The question of where he, the artist, belongs in this whirl persists even through the making of the film of the *Jetty*. Smithson describes his experience in the helicopter that spiraled into position over the center of the construction:

The helicopter maneuvered the sun's reflection through the Spiral Jetty until it reached the center. The water functioned as a vast thermal mirror. From that position the flaming reflection suggested the ion source of a cyclotron that extended into a spiral of collapsing matter. All sense of energy acceleration expired into a rippling stillness of reflected heat. 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 motor 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, dissolving into a unicellular beginning, trying to locate the nucleus at the end of the spiral. (*Writings*, 113)

Who, exactly, is or was also in Utah? Sandwiched between two sentences that ask whether he has been attenuated to a shadow, and that suggest he is returning to undifferentiated primal protoplasm is a complex variation on one of the best known inscriptions in the history of painting, and one that, as Smithson must have known, has been the subject of intricate iconological commentary and dispute. Disregarding the allusion for the moment, we could

simply translate the sentence as “And I (Robert Smithson) was in Utah.” In other words, this is what the experience was like: a dizzying experience of heat, light, and motion in which it seemed that I was losing myself. The sentence would simply be marking the intensity of immersion. And yet by its appearance in Latin, in its citation of paintings by Poussin and the commentary of Erwin Panofsky, and by means of that very hard and specific word “*ego*,” Smithson interrupts a staging of self-dissolution with a declaration in another language that seems to insist on the presence of an “I” or self at just the moment where we had been led to expect its disappearance.

Now let us attend to the allusion for a moment. Poussin painted two pictures in which this inscription occurs, both entitled *Arcadian Shepherds* (plates 30 and 31). In each painting the words appear upon a tomb that is discovered by a group of shepherds in an idealized pastoral setting. The paintings depict some of the shepherds as reading and responding to the inscription. Erwin Panofsky’s formulation in his study of the paintings, “Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition,” has not only been influential in studies of the artist and the genre but has assumed the role of an exemplary iconological reading of painting. According to Panofsky, the sentence is ambiguous, for it can be interpreted either as “I, Death, am present even in Arcadia” or as “I, the person entombed here, once also lived in Arcadia.” The first of these readings is the more shocking, and Panofsky attributes it to the earlier of the two Poussin paintings, in which a death’s head rests on the top of the tomb; the second he finds to be the meaning of the later painting, provoking an elegiac mood that focuses more on the occupant of the tomb than on the inevitable death that will overtake us all, Arcadian shepherds included. On this reading, the difference between the two versions would exhibit a shift from classical allegory to romantic melancholy. We need not suppose that, in parodying Poussin’s inscription and Panofsky’s interpretation, Smithson accepts the

latter's humanistic principles of iconology, according to which a given work of art (and any human communication) must have a single normative sense.²² That would contrast sharply with his usual attitude toward texts and works. Indeed, we can read Smithson's reinscription as having a number of senses that are not necessarily intentional; we can read it, for example, as his own epitaph, reminding us (as he could hardly have known) that his own death would come while surveying the site of another earthwork, *Amarillo Ramp*, from the air, echoing in some ways this helicopter flight over the *Spiral Jetty*. Like the inscription on Poussin's tomb, "Et in Utah ego" is apparently site-specific, marking a definite place. Yet such places are displaceable. Smithson's version of Poussin's painted inscription here resonates with another echo of it in the earlier "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan." There he suggests, following a logic of displacement and sacrifice, that there is a process by which each member of a series of reproductions and reflections kills or supersedes the preceding member: "Jade colored water splashed near the mirrors, which were supported by dry seaweed and eroded rocks, but the reflections abolished the supports, and now words abolish the reflections. The unnameable tonalities of blue that were once square tide pools of sky have vanished into the camera, and now rest in the cemetery of the printed page—*Ancora in Arcadia morte*" (*Writings*, 97). "Hope is dead in Arcady"—insofar as art can be seen as an inevitable sequence of departures from a presence ("unnameable tonalities of blue" or the sun of Utah) that must now be accessible to us only in the mode of nostalgia. The final shot of the *Spiral Jetty* film also has this quality of elegy and epitaph in its depiction of the motionless projectors of the editing room where an enlarged photograph of the jetty hangs on the wall. As Walter Benjamin wrote about the allegory and the ruin, "The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and



30. Nicolas Poussin, *Arcadian Shepherds*, 1630. Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of the Chatsworth Settlement Trustees. Photograph Courtauld Institute of Art.



31. Nicolas Poussin, *Arcadian Shepherds*, 1636. Louvre. Photo copyright © Réunion des musées nationaux.

significance.”²³ Sometimes that jagged line is the virgule joining and separating the pastoral from the inscription of a tomb; sometimes it is an artifactual spiral in a dead sea.

Utah, however, is very much *not* Arcadia, the idealized garden of the golden age, before the fall into time. The area in and around the Great Salt Lake is, as Smithson describes it, oppressively hot and subject to a “withering light.” Far from suggesting a pastoral landscape untouched by the techniques of civilization, and yet hospitable to humans, this location in Utah is scarred by the decaying debris of industry:

An expanse of salt flats bordered the lake, and caught in its sediments were countless bits of wreckage. Old piers were left high and dry. The mere sight of the trapped fragments of junk and waste transported one into a world of modern prehistory. The products of a Devonian industry, the remains of a Silurian technology, all the machines of the Upper Carboniferous Period were lost in those expansive deposits of sand and mud. . . . A great pleasure arose from seeing all those incoherent structures. This site gave evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes. (*Writings*, 111)

This is not a garden of (legendary) history but a site of time. Smithson’s re-inscription on this site plays on all of the senses that Panofsky found in Poussin, and more. In the case of the *Spiral Jetty* it is clearly the artist who has himself inscribed the sentence that is given to us to decipher, and our deciphering must be reflected back through the attempts at reading made by the shepherds in the Poussin paintings as well as through those by art historians who have, shepherding the meanings of the pictures, attempted to read their readings. Certainly death makes its presence known again here in the dead sea or salt lake that frustrates animal life and in the overwhelming heat and light that give

Smithson the sense of collapsing matter and of his own dissolution into “unicellular beginnings.” And while there is no invitation to elegiac musing here, we can read these four words as marking the fact that the writer was indeed here at this very spot and did have the experiences recorded. He was there precisely to record them in the film of the *Spiral Jetty*, whose production he then proceeds to describe. Yet that film, the essay itself, and the other photographic images of the jetty tend to displace the “original” site from its presumed position of primacy. Just as the work spirals out indefinitely to infinity and back again to the vanishing point of an empty center, so the texts, film, and photographs can evoke an oscillation of centrifugal and centripetal forces that radiate out from a certain site in Utah and then lead one back to it in a dizzying implosion. Smithson speaks of his becoming a shadow or dissolving into earlier life forms exactly when the helicopter hovers over the center of the jetty. The center is the site of the loss of any center. Yes, I was in Utah too—as well as in New York, Yucatan, Holland, Rome, Germany, and in galleries, the pages of magazines, and the frames of film. It is one more of Smithson’s variations on Pascal’s definition of God as a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

These words in Latin interrupt Smithson’s English text and remind us of the materiality of language and its dispersion, after Babel, into many tongues. In this Joycean play of “cite” and “non-cite” we can also hear the “you” in “Utah”—no I without a you. Smithson says in his essay on the jetty that the description he gives “echoes and reflects Brancusi’s sketch of James Joyce as a ‘spiral ear’ because it suggests both a visual and an aural scale, in other words it indicates a sense of scale that resonates in the eye and the ear at the same time” (*Writings*, 112). The text not only parodies Poussin’s treatment of the theme of death by replacing Arcadia with a chaotic and entropic landscape in which the very notion of one’s being in a particular place has been rendered

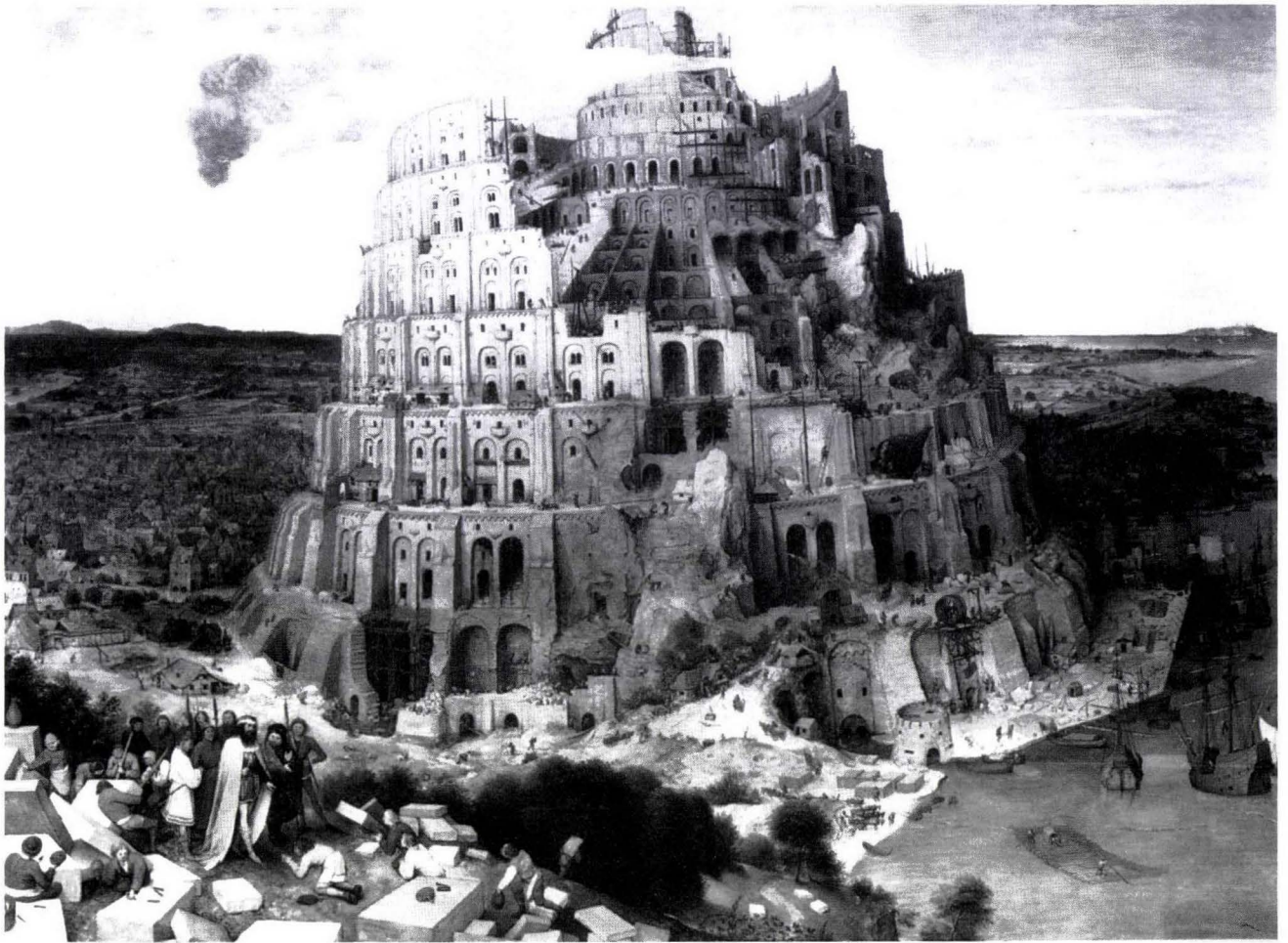
problematic, but it raises questions about any humanistic scheme of interpretation like Panofsky's that seeks to reduce and contain the multiple senses of texts and paintings.

"Et in Utah ego" can hardly be read in context without our recognition that *ego* has been imported into English to translate Freud's *Ich* (which might have been much more straightforwardly translated as "I"). The I or ego here is produced through writing, it is a writing effect, and, as we shall see, it is inscribed on the earth as well as in the pages of the essay. We could paraphrase the sentence as acknowledging that even here, where the self seems to be in danger of becoming a mere shadow or of spiraling back to primitive life forms, there is *ego*.

In Smithson's text the citation follows upon two references to artists who would typically be identified as strong selves, Pollock and Van Gogh: "My eyes became combustion chambers churning orbs of blood blazing by the light of the sun. All was enveloped in a flaming chromosphere; I thought of Jackson Pollock's *Eyes in the Heat* (1964; Peggy Guggenheim Collection). . . . One wants to retreat into the cool rooms of reason. But no, there was Van Gogh with his easel on some sun-baked lagoon painting ferns of the Carboniferous Period" (*Writings*, 113). Pollock, Van Gogh, Poussin, Smithson—the series of figures into which Smithson interpolates himself suggests that the artist is not disappearing or dissolving but asserting his authority by means of his signature. Yet it borrows its authority from these other figures who are themselves constituted by their signatures. Or rather, we could say that there is something like a double gesture here: while the artist and the work acknowledge their inevitable fragility and the entropic limits to their integrity, the artist also and simultaneously displays the fact that this is indeed *his* work. Perhaps this is what a posthistoric signature would be: one that enacts itself in the knowledge of the complex ways in which it is constituted and of the limits of the process of constitution ("the law of the signature").

It is important to keep in mind here that Smithson's "Et in Utah ego" spans three distinguishable works or texts: it refers to the *Spiral Jetty* which is a construction in the Great Salt Lake, it is part of a narration explaining the production of a film, and it occurs in the essay that describes the making of both. As a writer, reflecting on his work making a film of the *Jetty*, Smithson notes that he too was in Utah. By alluding to the way in which Panofsky's commentary doubles Poussin's paintings and by evoking the tension between the visual image and the graphic inscription in these paintings themselves, Smithson reinforces the doubling or multiplying gesture of his own work, which exists as site, photograph, film, and essay.

Here it is helpful to remember Smithson's fascination with that "lost prime," the Tower of Babel, a work that was destroyed, frustrating the goal of its architects to glorify themselves, yet preserving their name in its ruins. That first monumental work of art was erected by men who wanted to make a name for themselves. When God destroyed the tower, he prevented them from signing their work and became the first deconstructive, entropic artist.²⁴ Or perhaps, as in a text by Brecht on Brueghel's *Tower of Babel* that Smithson discusses with approval, the building was doomed from the start, even without divine intervention, because it was put up askew to begin with; the first building, then, would always already have been a ruin (*Writings*, 213; plate 32).²⁵ Babel is the sign of the artists' failure to univocally inscribe their name in their work; in its ruin language is also reduced to rubble and fragments. In "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," a very carefully designed text, Smithson's name appears opposite an illustration of the Tower of Babel, suggesting the desire to sign along with a consciousness of the futility of the signature. The tower is often represented as a ziggurat and sometimes, as in Brueghel's painting, in a way suggestive of a three-dimensional spiral. As a sculptor or builder, Smithson began with three-dimensional forms that gradually succumb to the force of gravity (like the *Woodshed*) or are flattened out



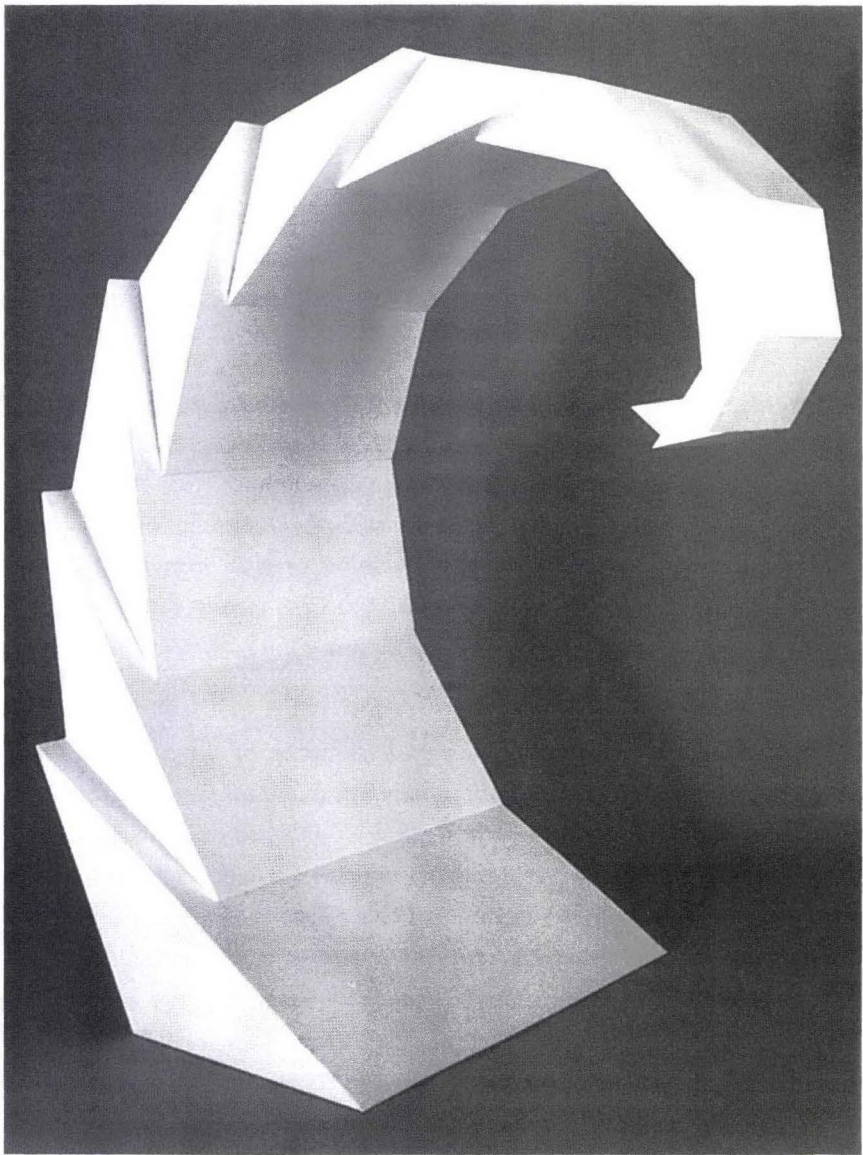
32. Pieter Bruegel, *The Tower of Babel*, 1563. Courtesy
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

into structures at ground zero (or even potentially below water level) like the *Jetty*. There is something like the ruin of the Tower of Babel enacted in this development, which often is tied to a spiral or spirallike shape.

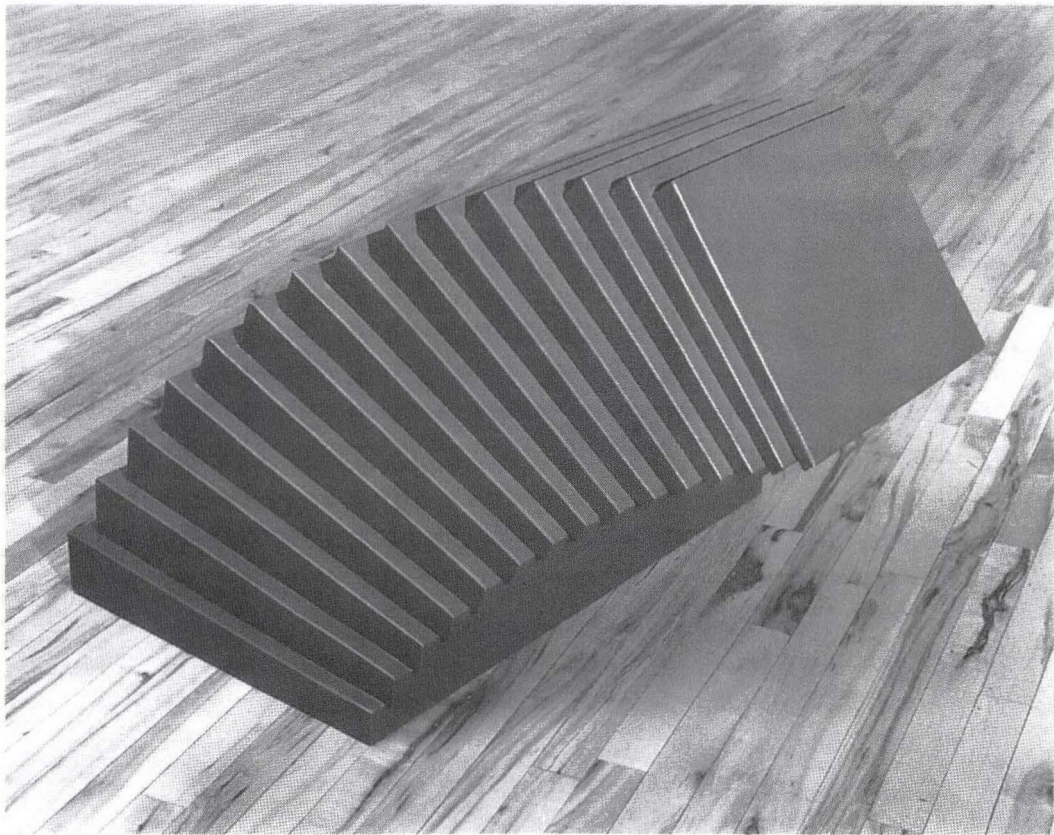
Gyrostasis (1968; plate 33) is a freestanding sculptural piece that begins to spiral inward and that Smithson suggests we should read as a precursor of the *Jetty*:

The title *GYROSTASIS* refers to a branch of physics that deals with rotating bodies, and their tendency to maintain their equilibrium. The work is a standing triangulated spiral. When I made the sculpture I was thinking of mapping procedures that refer to the planet Earth. One could consider it as a crystallized fragment of a gyroscopic rotation, or as an abstract three dimensional map that points to the *SPIRAL JETTY*, 1970 in the Great Salt Lake, Utah. *GYROSTASIS* is relational and should not be seen as an isolated object. (*Writings*, 37)

It is possible, extending Smithson's understanding of *Gyrostasis* as "relational," to see a persistent direction in his work that leads from vertical structures to horizontal ones, in which a spiral is squashed or projected onto a plane. Many of the glass structures that Smithson constructed in the 1960s are reminiscent of ziggurats (the ziggurat may have been the form of the Tower of Babel); one is indeed titled *Ziggurat Mirror* (1966), and is perhaps the most vertically oriented work by the artist (plate 27).²⁶ Taken together with the several *Mirror Strata* (1966–1969), they suggest a sense of the fragility of the erect or towerlike form (*Robert Smithson*, 84–85). In "Ultramoderne" Smithson describes the ziggurats of the timeless style of the thirties, and his reference to these "square spirals" suggests Babel-like structures (*Writings*, 49–51). *Shift* (plate 34) appears in this context as a structure which, if extended, would collapse; it consists of a stacking of rectangular slabs with trapezoidal sides that teeters on the brink of a fall (*Robert Smithson*, 88). If we view these works



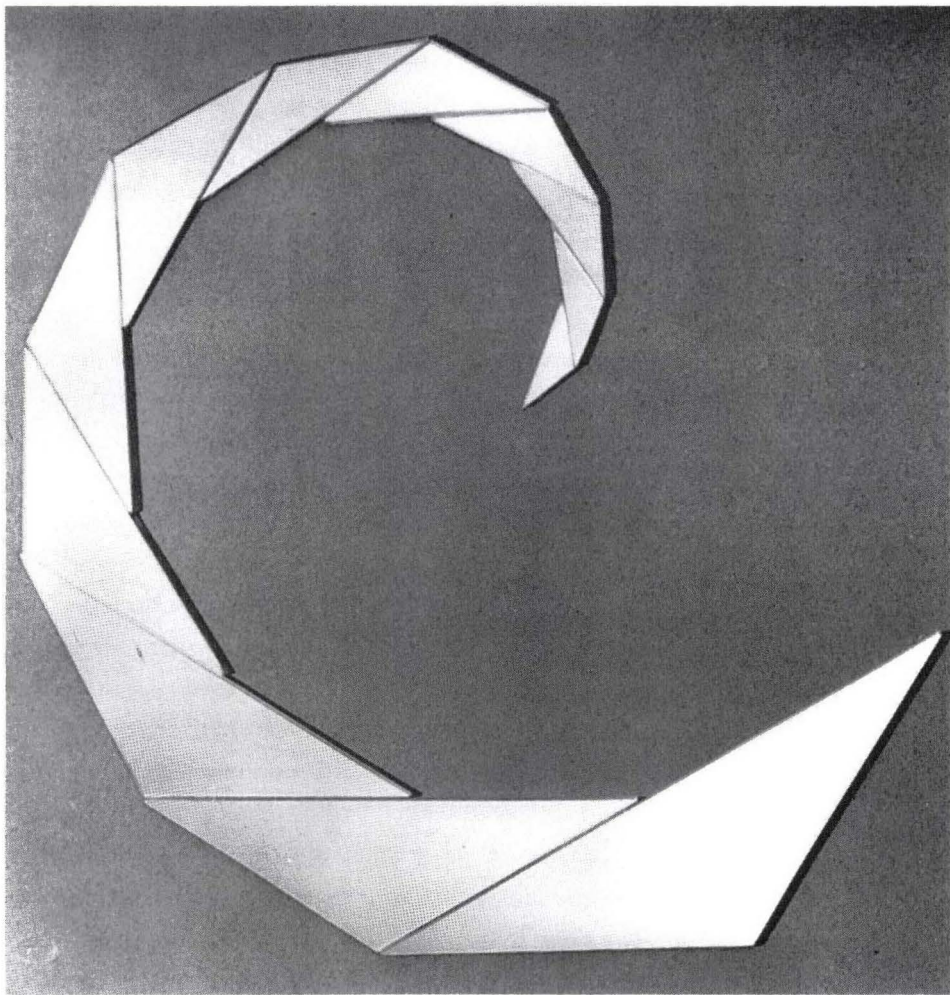
33. Robert Smithson, *Gyrostasis*, 1968, painted steel,
73 $\frac{5}{8}$ " \times 54 $\frac{1}{8}$ " \times 39 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture
Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn,
1972. Photograph Lee Stalsworth. Courtesy of Hirshhorn
Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution.



34. Robert Smithson, *Shift*, 1967, painted metal, brown, 33" × 30" × 20". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

“relationally,” along with *Gyrostasis*, we can see them leading to the more completely horizontal spiral of the *Jetty*. The plans for the Dallas–Fort Worth airport called for a triangulated spiral configuration on the ground whose shape would be visible only from the air (*Writings*, 152; plate 35); this, of course, reverses the relation between vision and structure that obtains in the case of the tower where one best appreciates the vertical direction of the latter by seeing it from the ground.

The *Jetty* then appears as the advanced stage of a process in which a spiraling tower has gradually been flattened to the ground and inserted in water, where it may even sink below the level of the surface. The *Spiral Jetty*, then, is something like a deconstructed Tower of Babel that both exhibits and erases the signature of its maker. It would be a continuation of the entropic slide that began when the first prime object of architecture and sculpture fell into ruin.²⁷ While Hegel saw the Tower of Babel as the first work of art that was both destroyed and retained at a higher level (*aufgehoben*) in subsequent works, Smithson sees this lost and “elusive prime object” as passing on a principle of ruin and destruction. The artist collected a number of reproductions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings of the Tower of Babel, which was a paradigmatic theme for the religious and philosophical differences of the time.²⁸ Smithson describes the suburbs as “sprawling babels or limbos,” suggesting that Babel is a (non)place, leveled out (in relation to an original tower or the city’s skyscrapers). The sprawl is entropic; it “displaces the center” and “glides away toward absence” (*Writings*, 76). The analogy reminds us that Babel was not only an architectural work but a city, a concentration of population that now lies in ruins, like Los Angeles, which “is all suburb, a pointless phenomenon, which seems uninhabitable, and a place swarming with dematerialized distances”; that the sprawl is liable to being fractured by earthquakes makes it even more Babel-like. The *Jetty* and the suburbs are

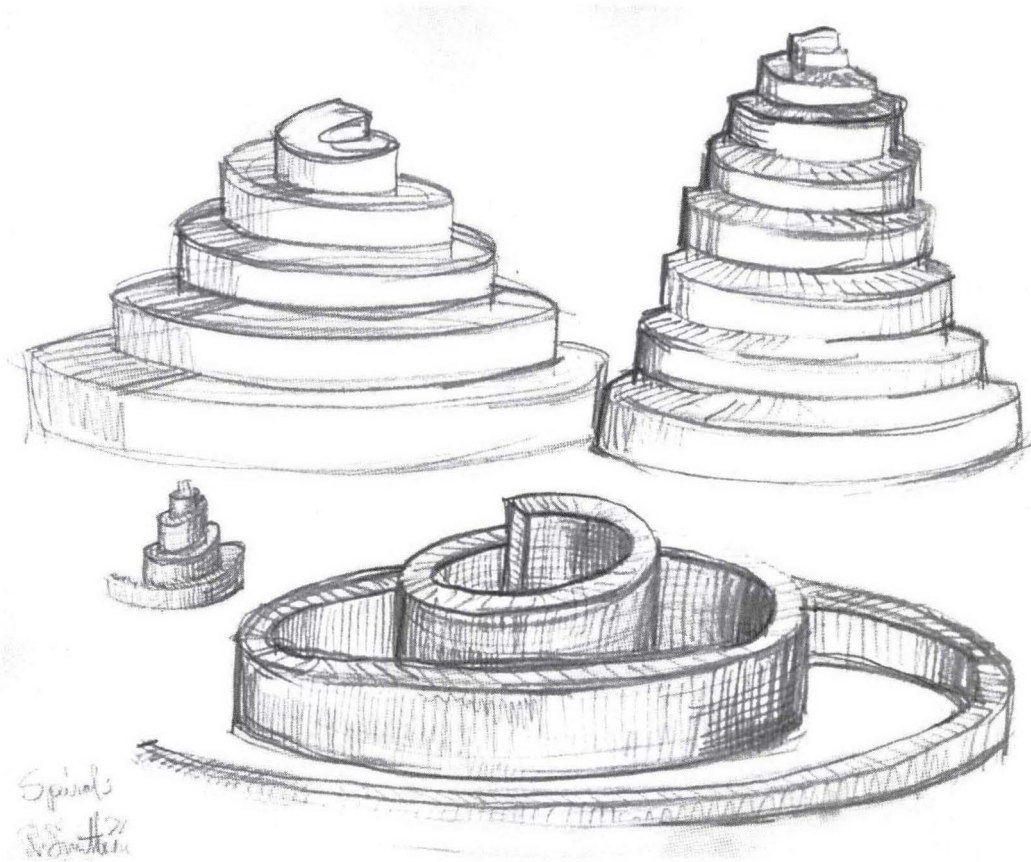


35. Robert Smithson, *Aerial Map: Proposal for Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport*, 1967, mirrors, 8" × 50" × 70". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

secret sharers, despite the fact that one lies in an almost unreachable waste place and the other is a decentered “center” of population (it is also a “limbo,” neither here nor there). The social suggestion is that suburban sprawl is not only entropically doomed to decay, but already a ruin. “The artist,” Smithson says in his discussion of the suburbs, “seeks the fiction that reality will sooner or later imitate.”

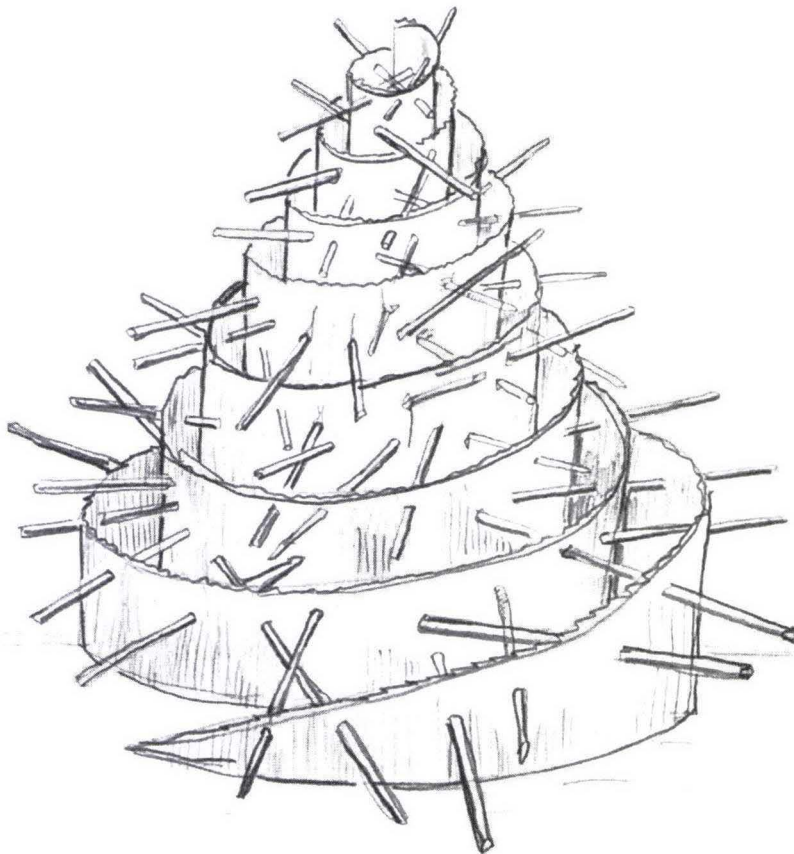
Smithson made a number of sketches and cardboard models of erect, spiraling structures around the time that he was working on the *Jetty* and that we may think of as indications of the preliminary vertical form that has been given a horizontal realization (plates 36, 37, and 38). The spiral is a standing structure of a certain sort that has been reduced to a two-dimensional plane. On that plane it can also be read as an inscription or mark, a way of writing on or signing the earth that would be analogous, as Smithson suggests several times, to the ways in which the earth was marked in prehistoric times, before the institution of the artist’s signature. It is a posthistoric performance and reinscription of the prehistoric. But it is also Smithson’s mark, developing what was there in earlier works such as *Gyrostasis*, and even suggesting in its serpentine shape a gigantic S, the initial letter of the artist’s surname.²⁹ The *Jetty*, unlike the tomb in Poussin’s paintings, is a monument already in ruins and destined for further entropic ruination. Smithson not only signs this work but envelops it in his signature. But just as the structure of the institution of the signature involves mortality insofar as it must be able to function in the absence of the one who signs, so this signature evokes death more explicitly by exhibiting itself as indistinguishable from a decaying work, which is itself the residue of a tradition of destroyed monuments.

In a penetrating interview, Alan Kaprow, as an artist speaking and working against the traditions of art, asks Smithson, “How can your position be

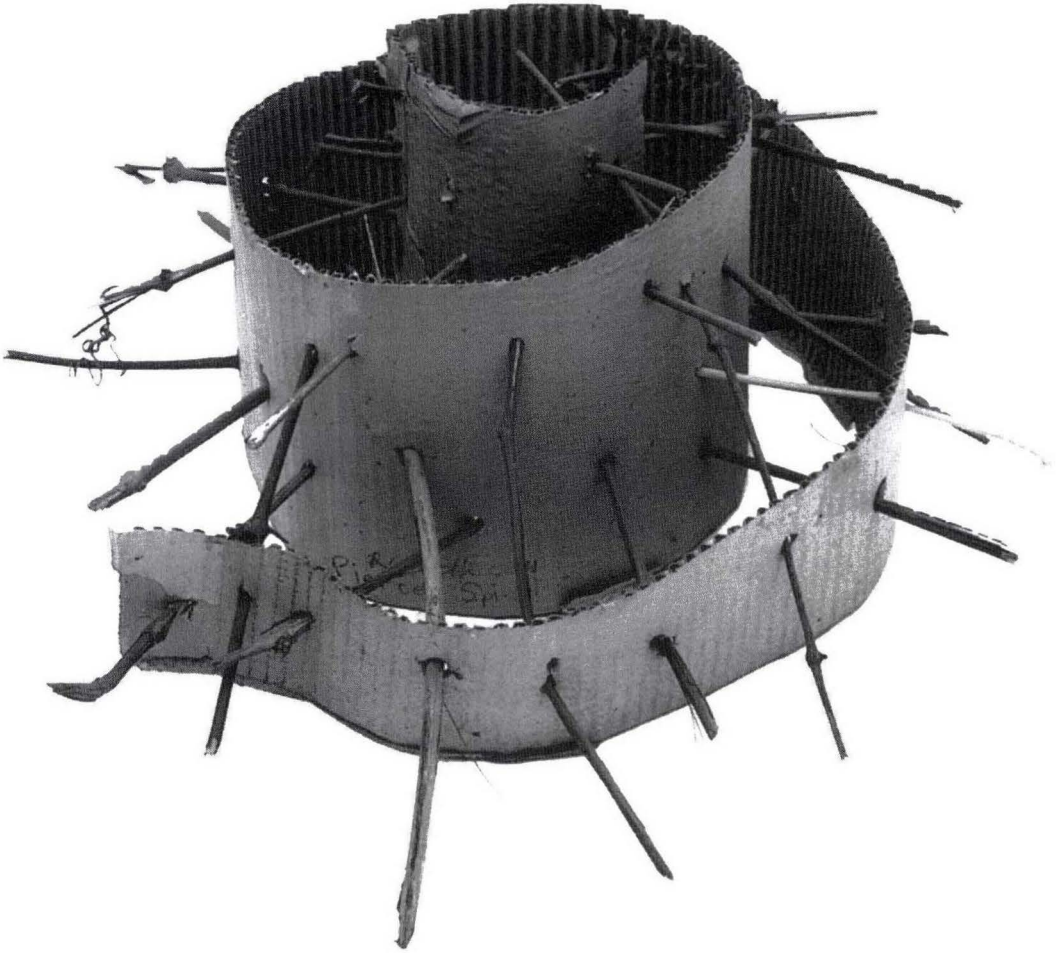


36. Robert Smithson, *Spirals*, 1971, pencil on paper, 12 $\frac{3}{8}$ " \times 15 $\frac{3}{8}$ ". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

PIERCED SPIRAL
R. Smithson 1971
Cardboard + Forks



37. Robert Smithson, *Pierced Spiral*, 1971, pencil on paper,
19" x 14 1/2". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John
Weber Gallery.



38. Robert Smithson, *Pierced Spiral*, c. 1971, cardboard with sticks, 10" × 20". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

anything but ironic. . . . How can you become anything but a sly philosopher—a man with a smile of amusement on your face, whose every act is italicized?” The question is a serious one, and it is only a partial answer to reply, as Smithson did, that “high seriousness and high humor are the same thing”—a dialectical identity in difference that echoes Hegel’s account of the dissolution of art in subjective humor and irony.³⁰ But Kaprow responds by emphasizing the cultural and institutional context that requires the artist to be a *name* and not a philosophical position, even if it be that of the smiling skeptic. If an artist has an uncertain identity, Kaprow observes, “Someone assigns to [him] a new categorical name, usually a variant of some old one, and thus he continues his lineage or family system which makes it all credible. The standard fate of novelty is to be justified by history. Your position is thus ironic.” On one level Kaprow is rigorously correct. Smithson has been incorporated twenty years after his death into the art-historical canon. University survey courses and the books that accompany them often end with an image of the *Spiral Jetty*. Rosalind Krauss’s *Passages in Modern Sculpture* presents a narrative account from Rodin to Smithson, and John Beardsley’s *Earthworks and Beyond* constructs a genealogy in which Smithson figures prominently as one of the founders of a distinctive genre.

Recuperation is in many ways irresistible. Smithson’s reply that his position involves “a contradictory view of things” may seem weak at first. But the contradiction that distinguishes the position from either romantic or Hegelian irony lies in that the “name,” “the family system,” and the “lineage” that Kaprow sees as waiting in the wings to engulf Smithson’s project are not simply those of the art world, but ramify both into family genealogy and into an idiosyncratic set of affiliations by which the artist presents himself as autochthonous, born from the New Jersey earth. If we were to think of the art world as the sphere of culture and the facts of individual genealogy and ties to the

site of one's birth and upbringing as that of nature, then we could say that the contradiction Smithson enacts with his signature is that between nature and culture, in much the way that Lévi-Strauss, in a classical structuralist account, sees the Oedipus myth as providing a way of understanding how Oedipus can have a dual parentage, being both the child of his parents and of the earth. In Smithson's case the binary division can be carried out at least one step further, since his genealogical descent can be opposed as cultural to his natural ties to the land. The signature, then, is itself both inside and outside the world of art, and it must "remain and disappear at the same time." The posthistoric signature inscribes itself in the work or in the text, like the most ancient forms of marking the earth, and it continues, in the mode of deforming it, the modern practice of attaching the individual name of the artist; the deformation occurs in the form of a writing whose traces are legible in the ruins and dispersion of language, of the ambitious erections of art, and of the name. *Et in Utah ego.*

Sources and Criticism

The most comprehensive catalogue of Smithson's work is Robert Hobbs's *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). Hobbs provides an informed and very helpful running commentary on the art works and the artist's career. The book contains a full and annotated bibliography of writings by and about Smithson through 1980. Included are essays by Hobbs, Lawrence Alloway, and Lucy Lippard, all well worth reading. Lippard's essay "Breaking Circles: The Politics of Prehistory" articulates themes that are developed at greater length and with reference to many contemporary artists in her more recent *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).

Almost all of Smithson's published writings and interviews, as well as some previously unpublished pieces, appear in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, edited by Nancy Holt, Smithson's wife and an environmental artist (New York: New York University Press, 1979); the book reproduces a number of Smithson's pieces in the formats designed by the artist for their original appearance in *Artforum* and other publications, although color illustrations are sometimes reproduced here in black

and white. It is instructive to see the essays in their first context, alongside the work of other artists and critics of the sixties and seventies. Only a few small published pieces have escaped the Holt collection, and they are listed in Hobbs's bibliography of Smithson's writings.

Eugenie Tsai's *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) supplements the preceding by excavating and publishing a number of Smithson's early works, challenging the view of most critics (and of the artist himself) that it was only in the nonfigurative works from 1965 or so on that he attained a true artistic identity; the sexual and religious themes of some of the early works will be surprising to those who know Smithson as the creator of earthworks. Tsai's introductory essay explains and questions the critical construction of that well-known Smithson whose art is supposed to culminate in the earthworks; however, while she succeeds in pointing out neglected dimensions of his intellectual and artistic concerns, there is no convincing suggestion that the earlier works are as significant as the later ones. The additional essays and interviews include a number of important texts and will point the intrepid reader to the voluminous material on microfilm in the Archives of American Art, housed appropriately in the Smithsonian Institution, named for Smithson's putative ancestor and predecessor in mineralogy. The archives contain a number of drafts of pieces that were later published, abandoned manuscripts, film scenarios, plans, correspondence, and a few sketches, as well as shopping lists, social invitations, and Christmas cards.

An early and beautifully designed small catalogue is *Robert Smithson: Drawings* (New York: New York Cultural Center, 1974), with a graceful and learned essay by Joseph Masheck, "Smithson's Earth: Notes and Retrievals," that has been reprinted with some changes and along with another very engaging piece, "The Panama Canal and Other Works of Work," in the author's *Historical Present: Essays of the 1970's* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984). Smithson had planned a film that would document a surrealist and entropic passage through the

Panama Canal, and Masheck eruditely explores the literary and artistic impact of this massive earthwork on Smithson and Michael Heizer.

The structural remains of Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* were removed, finally, from the Kent State University campus in 1984. A pamphlet with photos and an essay by Dorothy Shinn, *Robert Smithson's Partially Buried Woodshed* (Kent State University Art Gallery, 1990), documents the history of the building's fall into ruin, including the symbolic meaning it acquired when someone painted "MAY 4 KENT 70" on the shed after four students were shot dead by the national guard that day, its partial destruction by arson, and the internal debates on campus concerning questions of aesthetics and the concept of debris that preceded its final disappearance.

A German exhibit of 1989 is recorded in a bilingual catalogue *Robert Smithson: Zeichnungen aus dem Nachlass/Drawings from the Estate* (Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, 1989). The drawings and photographs are supplemented by five essays and interviews, including pieces on film and entropy. As this book was being completed, two comprehensive exhibitions were held in Los Angeles and in Valenciana, Spain. The Los Angeles event was an exhibit of photographic works (including film) and is recorded in a catalogue edited with an important introduction by Robert A. Sobieszek, *Robert Smithson: Photo Works* (Albuquerque and Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and University of New Mexico Press, 1993). The Valenciana exhibit produced a large and handsome catalogue, *Robert Smithson: El Paisaje Entrópico* (Valenciana: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, 1993); it contains Spanish translations of some of Smithson's writings and a few brief critical essays. The John Weber Gallery in New York holds many of Smithson's works, including the film *The Spiral Jetty* that Smithson made. There is a catalogue, as yet unpublished, of Smithson's library, including phonograph records and magazines, that was compiled by Valentin Tatransky; it is a fascinating documentation of a wide-ranging autodidact, whose interests ranged from geology and philosophy to poetry and popular music.

John Beardsley's *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Land* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984) contextualizes Smithson within the larger world of art in the land and monumental art; the book is well illustrated and has a useful bibliography. Beardsley's book is attractive, but perhaps places Smithson too neatly within the sort of art-historical narrative of which he was suspicious. A comprehensive collection of essays on various aspects of the subject, several of which discuss Smithson, is *Art in the Land*, edited by Alan Sonfist (New York: Dutton, 1983). Craig Owens's essays "Earthwords" and "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" are probably the most theoretically sophisticated essays devoted to Smithson; both are reprinted in *Beyond Recognition*, edited by Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). "Earthwords" investigates decentering and the play between the materiality of language and the language of the material ("printed matter") that runs through Smithson's work. In "The Allegorical Impulse" Smithson's work itself becomes an allegory of allegory; Owens invokes Walter Benjamin's thought about allegory and ruins in order to produce one of the most powerful accounts of what the postmodern could be. Rosalind Krauss has written on Smithson's work in several contexts. In "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (reprinted in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster [Seattle: Bay Press, 1983]) she constructs a structuralist matrix in order to conceptualize the new types of sculpture and its affiliates that have been opened up by Smithson and others. In Krauss's *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981) Smithson's work appears toward the end of a subtle narrative concerning the way in which twentieth-century sculpture has rigorously interrogated and transformed the conditions of verticality and erection on a base that were once supposed to be the pre-suppositions of the art. In May 1978, *Arts Magazine* devoted a special issue to Smithson's work. Smithson has been a strong presence in the journal *October* since its founding. In a long essay that appeared in three parts in *October* (nos. 1, 2, and 3 [1976–1977]), "Gravity's Rainbow and the Spiral Jetty," the literary critic John

Johnston and the artist and critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe offer a productive comparative reading of Thomas Pynchon's novel and Smithson's work; they suggest that the "entropy model, a reliance on digression, and the idea of the signifier preceding the signified, are the three features which seem to connect the Mallarméan modernism of these two works to one's associations with the archaic, especially to the trappings of epic form" (*October*, no. 1, pp. 69–70). The authors succeed in demonstrating the specifically American quality of both works, their common disenchantment with the idea of progress, and the importance of certain significant literary sources (e.g., Henry Adams). However, most writing on Smithson has not been this far-ranging and has tended, at least implicitly, to see his work within a narrower compass, tied to the development of the visual arts in the United States after abstract expressionism.

Two exceptions are found in the writings of Marjorie Perloff and Henry Sayre. In Perloff's *The Futurist Moment* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), Smithson's use of collage, aspects of the manifesto, and his interest in technology are seen as transforms and echoes of the Futurist movement. Henry Sayre's *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) stresses the active process involved in Smithson's work and the movement that is set up between site and nonsite; Smithson ends up being considered alongside performance artists like Laurie Anderson (a juxtaposition also found in Owens's "The Allegorical Impulse").

Discussions of Smithson's work in the 1970s, and a few responses even in the 1960s, tended to take the form of a wide range of attempts, many of them eccentric and idiosyncratic, to understand the distinctive features of the sites/nonsites and earthworks, comparing them with other works of the time (e.g., minimalism, performance works) that challenged expectations geared to high modernism. The 1980s saw the appearance of some more reflective essays, subsequent to the canonization of Smithson's work which is marked by the appearance of the *Spiral Jetty* as one of the last images in textbooks designed for survey courses in art history.

The more theoretical approach, coinciding with the rise of “theory” in literary studies and the beginning of its entrance into writing about the visual arts, is found in the work of Owens and Krauss; another provocative essay is Donald Kuspit’s “The Pascalian Spiral: Robert Smithson’s Drunken Boat” (discussed in the text), which examines the mythological, cosmological, and philosophical dimensions of the spiral, which he takes to be central to the artist’s thought. The late 1980s saw a growing interest in Smithson’s early work, again perhaps reflecting the effect of canonization, which leads us to want to take seriously *all* the work of an artist who has once been pronounced major. This period was also marked by the appearance of several essays that begin to take comprehensive retrospective views concerning the history of the critical reception of the artist’s work and his influence on other artists; significant pieces of this sort include Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe’s “Sculpture as Everything Else, Twenty Years or so of the Question of Landscape” (*Arts*, January 1988) and Dan Cameron’s “Incidents of Robert Smithson: Posthumous Dimensions of a Premature Pre-Modern” (*FlashArt*, November/December 1990).

Notes

Introduction

1. Craig Owens, "Earthwords," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 50; first published in *October*, no. 10 (Fall 1979).

Prologue: The Cinema of the Exploding Sun

1. Marjorie Perloff, "The Demise of 'and': Reflections on Robert Smithson's Mirrors," *Critical Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 81–101.

2. Arthur Danto argues that Tansey sees Smithson as having aimed at and failed at achieving artistic purity in his introductory essay to *Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions* (New York: Abrams, 1992), 18–20.

3. Smithson's writings, as collected in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), will be referred to in the text by *Writings* followed by page number(s).

4. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), 116–147.

5. Heraclitus, fragment 36, in Philip Wheelwright, *Heraclitus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 37; I cite this edition because it is the one that Smithson owned and to which he apparently referred in citing and echoing Heraclitus several times.

6. Thomas H. Clark and Colin W. Stern, *Geological Evolution of North America* (New York: Ronald Press, 1960), 5; quoted again by Smithson in the essay “The Spiral Jetty” (*Writings*, 114).

7. There is, however, one brief shot of a workman standing by one of the machines.

8. Eva Schmidt notices the importance of the quotations from Beckett and the lines about the sun and the prison (from *The Most Dangerous Man*) but believes that there is a restoration of human agency in the film because “in the course of the film, step by step, a double self is constructed. . . . Thus the construction of the spiral becomes the function of the moviegoer, who himself wants to force his way into the deeps of the water” (“Et in Utah Ego: Robert Smithson’s ‘Entropologic’ Cinema,” in *Robert Smithson: Zeichnungen aus dem Nachlass/Drawings from the Estate*, ed. Klaus Bussmann, Christian Gether, and Michael Tacke [Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, 1989], 55). While the desire for a reconstitution or reestablishment of a presiding self is understandable, I think that the film and Smithson’s work generally problematize the status of the artist, as indicated by Smithson’s deformed quotation from Poussin, about death and loss, that Schmidt includes in the title of her essay; see chapter 5. In contrast, Joseph Masheck writes that “Smithson’s geopoetic commentary accompanies images . . . in such a natural rhythm that the sculpture seems gradually to grow forth, almost by some developmental necessity on the earth’s part” (“The *Spiral Jetty* Movie,” in *Historical Present: Essays of the 1970’s* [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984], 137). While Masheck sees the occlusion of human agency in the film, I think the process by which the jetty emerges is rather more chaotic. According to Nancy Holt (personal conversation, December 1993), Smithson was fascinated by Chris Marker’s 1964 film *La Jetée*, which he viewed repeatedly. *La Jetée* is concerned with death, entropy, and time; after a war of nuclear devastation, scientists select a man to travel backward and forward in time to gain the assistance of those periods for the present. Because of the subject’s strong imaging powers

(the film's narrative voice speaks of "the museum which is perhaps his memory"), he finds himself back in a peacetime world, on a jetty, and meets and loves a woman whom he continues to visit on his directed excursions into the past. They are shown together in a museum of natural history, walking past the skeletons of dinosaurs; this complicates the many layers of the past as Smithson does in his own *Jetty* film. The "present" from which he is projected is seen as a past or a ruin from which one ought to escape. Rejecting a possible journey into the future, he returns to the past, to the woman, and to the jetty; running to her, he notices a man from the underground camp of the postwar time, and the voice of the film tells us that "one can't escape time." Dying as he reaches the woman, he demonstrates the inevitability of death and the paradoxes of desire. While Marker's jetty is straight, Smithson's jetty spirals, and the film complicates time without the science fiction device of time travel. In both films there is a split between the visual and the aural; no characters speak on camera, and this produces an effect of splitting, a sense that no one is really quite present.

9. For an essay that convincingly suggests some of the range of Smithson's importance for recent artists, see Dan Cameron, "Incidents of Robert Smithson," *FlashArt*, no. 155 (November–December 1990): 103–107.

Chapter 1. Time and Its Surfaces: Postperiodization

Epigraph: Robert Smithson, *Writings*, 79.

1. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 2:638.

2. John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 124–125.

3. See *After the Future: Postmodern Times and Places*, ed. Gary Shapiro (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), especially the introduction and essays by Mary Wiseman, "Photographs: Primitive and Postmodern" (pp. 17–38), and Anthony J. Cascardi, "History, Theory, (Post)Modernity" (pp. 1–16). For a provocative attempt to articulate the general nature of narrativity in art-historical thought and writing, see David Carrier, *Artwriting* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), and my essay "Deaths of Art: David Carrier's Metahistory of Artwriting," *Leonardo* 25, no. 2 (1992): 189–204; and David Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing* (University Park:

Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), and my review in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 335–336.

4. Eric Temple Bell (John Taine), *The Time Stream* (Buffalo Book Company and G. H. E., 1946), 40.

5. Eugenie Tsai, *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawing, Collages, Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 91–92. Further references to Tsai’s book will be cited in the text as *Smithson Unearthed* followed by page number(s).

6. Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *The New Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1966), 102–103.

7. *Ibid.*, 108.

8. See Arthur Danto’s “The Artworld,” *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964): 571–584, and “Narratives of the End of Art,” in *Encounters and Reflections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991); see also my reflections on Danto’s Hegelianism in “Art and Its Doubles: Danto, Foucault and Their Simulacra,” in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 129–141.

9. Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 174–176. Further references to Hobbs’s book will be cited in the text as *Robert Smithson* followed by page number(s).

10. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 95.

11. *Ibid.*, 99.

12. *Ibid.*, 120.

13. *Ibid.*, 125.

14. The entropic dimension enters into Kubler’s analysis when he writes: “An unmistakable erosion wears down the contours of every work of art, both in its physical form, which is gradually obliterated by dirt and wear, and by the disappearance of so many steps in the artist’s elaboration of his conceptions” (*ibid.*, 46).

15. For a striking photographic inventory of prehistoric earthworks, see Marilyn Bridges, *Markings: Aerial Views of Sacred Landscapes* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1986). Lucy Lippard’s *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: Random House, 1983) contains a number of photographs of such sites, as well as of contemporary analogues to them and of other land art. Jacques Derrida argues

against Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) that the so-called “peoples without writing” actually do write (in an expanded sense) by inscribing the earth and marking out paths (pp. 101–140).

16. For a brief account of Heidegger’s metahistory of philosophy, see “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” in *Basic Writings of Martin Heidegger*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 369–392. For a masterful account that draws on a wide range of Heidegger’s writings, see Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987).

17. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 79–80.

18. For some thoughts on the so-called death of art, see my essays “Gadamer, Habermas and the Death of Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 39–47; “Deaths of Art: David Carrier’s Metahistory of Artwriting”; and “Art and Its Doubles: Danto, Foucault and Their Simulacra.”

19. Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 135. It should be noted that Derrida has issued some cautions concerning an overtly architectural reading of the notion of deconstruction in “Jacques Derrida in Conversation with Christopher Norris,” in *Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume*, ed. Andreas Papadakis, Catherine Cooke, and Andrew Benjamin (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 71–75; however, the theme is unavoidable in this crucial statement of his strategy.

20. Derrida, “The Ends of Man,” 135.

Chapter 2. Uncanny Materiality: Decentering Art and Vision

Epigraphs: Robert Smithson, *Writings*, 155; Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 279.

1. Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 217. Smithson’s unpublished papers contain several detailed drafts of essays about Judd; see, for example, Robert Smithson Papers,

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., reel 3834, frames 699–703. John Weber reports that around this time, when Smithson was beginning to publish essays on the contemporary scene, a number of artists wore buttons saying “Smithson is not my spokesman” to an opening (personal conversation, 6 November 1992).

2. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *On Creativity and the Unconscious*, ed. Benjamin Nelson (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 122–161.

3. See Lawrence Alloway, “Robert Smithson’s Development,” *Artforum* 11, no. 2 (November 1972): 52.

4. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *Sense and Nonsense*, trans. Hubert L. and Patricia A. Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 9–25, and “Eye and Mind,” trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159–190.

6. See my essay “In the Shadows of Philosophy: Nietzsche and the Question of Vision,” in *The Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 124–142, and Martin Jay, “In the Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought,” in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (New York: Blackwell, 1986).

7. See Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascal-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

8. Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1969), 73; cf. Michel Haar, *The Song of the Earth*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), and the references given there.

9. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 136–137.

10. For one recognition of this play on “site” and “sight” in Smithson’s “nonsites,” see Hobbs, *Robert Smithson*, 14.

11. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 143–144.

12. T. E. Hulme, “Cinders,” in *Speculations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924). Jacques Derrida’s *Cinders* (trans. Ned Lukacher; Lincoln: University of Nebraska

Press, 1991) plays upon a similar theme, although it seems to suggest that the conflation of which cinders are the residue is a specifically human event. Derrida and Hulme might agree with Smithson that cinders are traces without an original.

13. On Smithson's cartouches, see Tsai, *Smithson Unearthed*, 23–24.

14. Carl Andre, *Carl Andre*, exhibition catalogue (The Hague: Haags Gemeentemuseum, 1969).

15. See Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64, no. 5 (January 1990): 44–63.

16. On the concept of parasitism, see Michel Serres's *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), and my discussion in *Alcyone: Nietzsche on Gifts, Noise and Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 53–107.

17. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41–44.

18. However, Derrida's lapidary statement "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences" was delivered as a lecture at Johns Hopkins University in 1966 and was published in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Eugenio Donato and Richard Macksey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), a book that was in Smithson's library, although he would have had it for only a year before his death.

19. Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 40.

20. *Ibid.*, 39–40.

21. Kubler's *The Shape of Time* contains an extended footnote in which Kubler quotes a mathematician who suggests that a graphic model for the kinds of relations he envisages among works might be best embodied by "a directed graph or network" in which "at each stage there is therefore a number of alternative edges which may be followed, and also a number of incoming edges from which this stage could have resulted" (pp. 33–34).

22. For a more extended meditation on Bell's thought and architecture, see Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990). Smithson says that Bell "may be viewed esthetically as the first 'structuralist' to deal with language in a concrete way" (*Smithson Unearthed*, 76).

23. See Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” trans. Joseph F. Graham, in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165–207.

24. Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 3.

25. *Ibid.*, 19.

26. *Ibid.*, 174.

27. *Ibid.*, 119–120.

28. Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 130–135.

29. On the notion of vertigo as the experience of the radical freedom to throw oneself into the abyss, see Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 55, and Jean-Paul Sartre, “Anguish,” in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Robert Cumming (New York: Random House, 1965), 115–123.

30. See Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 24.

31. See, for example, Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, trans. Palmer Hilty (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1964).

32. Plato, *Republic*, 514a–517c; for a criticism of the ocularcentric and phallogocentric presuppositions of the myth of the cave, see Luce Irigaray, “Plato’s *Hystera*,” in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 243–364.

33. Jacques Derrida, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils,” trans. Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, *Diacritics* 13, no. 3 (1983): 3–20.

34. See Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), especially chapter 2, “Analytic Space: Futurism and Constructivism,” 39–68.

35. See Jacques Derrida, “The Parergon,” in *The Truth in Painting*, 37–82.

36. It should be noted that Smithson’s comments on the *Cayuga* project are taken from a reconstruction of their conversation by William Lipke.

37. Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 73. Derrida also agrees with Smithson in according some priority to the square and rectangular forms of the frame.

38. Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” in *Beyond Recognition*, 52–69.

39. See Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodern Repetition,” in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: David R. Godine and The New Museum, 1984), 22–25.

40. See Donald Kuspit, “The Pascalian Spiral: Robert Smithson’s Drunken Boat,” *Arts Magazine* 56, no. 2 (October 1981): 82–88. Kuspit’s essay is the most sophisticated account to date of Smithson’s philosophical dimension. As Kuspit’s reference to Rimbaud suggests, he sees Smithson’s fundamental project as a rather romantic and irrational one, claiming for example that “Smithson shows the romantic’s narcissistic preoccupation with the process of creativity—the romantic artist’s concern to find the secret of creativity and thereby guarantee it” (p. 86). From my perspective a more significant reading of Smithson’s work would see it as concerned with the logic of the center and the periphery and the testing of limits while acknowledging their necessity. A purely “Pascalian” dialectics of center and circumference—in Kuspit’s sense—would ignore Smithson’s deep interrogation of temporality and language, which are not completely explicable in these terms. A somewhat richer concept of Pascal’s dialectics, or at least one more appropriate to Smithson’s use of it, is found in Lucien Goldmann’s *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: The Humanities Press, 1964), a book that Smithson owned and which sees Pascal as the first modern dialectical thinker (indeed, “the first modern man,” [p. 171]), foreshadowing the work of Hegel and Marx. Goldmann finds Pascal’s dialectics in his insistence on holding or moving between contradictory thoughts, and he cites with approval Pascal’s saying that “One does not show one’s greatness by being at one extreme, but by touching both of them at the same time, and by filling up all the space between” (p. 184). Like Smithson, Pascal’s dialectic is always open and unresolved: “Pascal sees no possibility for man to achieve progress in human time, and his thought remains paradoxical because he looks upon all reality as consisting of a clash between opposites, and a conflict that cannot be transcended in this world” (p. 195).

41. See Georges Poulet, *Metamorphoses of the Circle*, trans. Carley Dawson and Elliott Coleman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 32–49.

42. Kuspit, “The Pascalian Spiral,” 84. On the idea of decentered cities, see Roland Barthes’s description of Tokyo in *The Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), 30–32.

43. Smithson would, I suppose, be gratified to learn that, for ecological reasons, the Dutch are now (summer 1993) letting the sea back in to flood some sections of Holland.

44. See Hobbs, *Robert Smithson*, 208–213.

Chapter 3. Rifts: Beyond the Garden to the Sites of Time

Epigraphs: Robert Smithson, *Writings*, 85; Robert Smithson in an interview with P. A. Norvell, in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 89.

1. A classical statement of the theological view of the earth before the eighteenth century, including the conception of mountains and other irregularities as God's punishments, can be found in Thomas Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (London, 1697). For a historical survey of changing conceptions of nature and natural beauty, see Jörg Zimmermann, "Zur Geschichte des ästhetischen Naturbegriffs," in *Das Naturbild des Menschen*, ed. Jörg Zimmermann (Munich: Fink, 1982), 118–154.

2. See Zimmermann, "Zur Geschichte des ästhetischen Naturbegriffs."

3. On the Pythagorean conception of nature as mathematical harmony, see Zimmermann, *ibid.*, 119–124; on the *alagon*, see Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. Edwin L. Minar, Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 454–465.

4. Hobbs, *Robert Smithson*, 66; cf. 66–70.

5. Simon Pugh, *Garden, Nature, Language* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 2. As Pugh observes, "The importance of the 'natural' increases directly in proportion to the distance *from* nature in the world outside the garden" (p. 56). See also Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), who writes that "the rustic landscape erases its idealizing signs by naturalizing them and allows what is erased still to stand as informing presence" (p. 11). See also Zimmermann, "Zur Geschichte des ästhetischen Naturbegriffs," 129–133.

6. It is worth noting that Smithson quotes Heidegger at least once (*Writings*, 34) and owned copies of several of Heidegger's books, including *Poetry, Language, Thought* (English translation, 1971), which contains the essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." See Valentin Tatransky, "Catalogue of Robert Smithson's Library" (unpublished), courtesy of John Weber Gallery. The quotation is from Heidegger's *Introduc-*

tion to *Metaphysics*, which contains a discussion of the world-earth relationship.

7. *The Presocratics*, ed. Philip Wheelwright (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 72.

8. Plato, *Republic*, 377e, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 55.

9. Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Norman O. Brown (New York: Liberal Arts, 1953), 57.

10. *Ibid.*, 58.

11. In the *Timaeus*, 25e–26e, Plato tells a playful story about the destruction of Atlantis, as a prelude to a dialogue in which the rather Pythagorean harmony of the cosmos is affirmed. While Plato effects a containment of the themes of ruin and disruption, later enthusiasts of theories of lost continents, like Smithson, have typically been drawn to and exploited the catastrophic dimensions of the story.

12. Plato, *Timaeus*, 37d; I am summarizing and translating Plato's views rather brutally here. A fuller analysis would involve considering whether a distinction is to be made between Socrates, the character in the dialogue, and Plato, as the author who does not himself appear. One would also need to take account of all of Plato's discussions that concern the earth, notably the story in the *Phaedo*, according to which our earth is only a small and unrepresentative segment of the "true earth"; see *Phaedo*, 108c5–114c6, and Ronna Burger, *The Phaedo: A Platonic Labyrinth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 191–203.

13. Plato, *Republic*, 378a.

14. Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*. The order of Burnet's narrative is interesting. Although the earthly paradise preceded the flood, he begins with the devastations wrought by the latter, suggesting an interest in the violent and cataclysmic dimensions of the story. For an account of Burnet's importance for the religious and aesthetic sensibility of his time, see M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 99–101. Smithson shows some knowledge of the massive shift in taste between Burnet's time and the rise of a picturesque sensibility when he speaks of the "mountain controversy" about whether mountains were an ugly punishment visited upon us by God or a proper object of aesthetic appreciation.

15. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), 13. Nietzsche has Zarathustra ask "what shall be the meaning of the earth?" with the implication that only now is it possible to ask this question; see Haar, *The Song of the Earth*.

16. Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings of Martin Heidegger*, 296.

17. *Ibid.*, 297. For some thoughts on Heidegger’s relevance to contemporary concern for the earth, see Michael Zimmerman, “Implications of Heidegger’s Thought for Deep Ecology,” *The Modern Schoolman* 54 (November 1986): 19–43.

18. Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 163–186.

19. Friedrich Hölderlin, “Patmos,” quoted by Heidegger in “The Question Concerning Technology,” 310.

20. For Heidegger’s *ekphrasis* of the painting, see “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 33–34. Meyer Schapiro’s critique is contained in “The Still Life as Personal Object,” in *The Reach of Mind: Essays in Memory of Kurt Goldstein*, ed. Marianne L. Simmel (New York: Springer, 1968); Derrida’s response is “Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing,” in *The Truth in Painting*.

21. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 42.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 42. In Heidegger’s *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), a copy of which was in Smithson’s library and which he quotes in “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space,” Smithson could have read a lengthy exegesis of the great ode from Sophocles’ *Antigone*:

He wearies even the noblest
of the gods, the Earth
indestructible and untiring,
overturning her from year to year,
driving the plows this way and that
with horses. (pp. 146–147)

Heidegger’s translation and commentary on the ode stresses that man is the most uncanny (*unheimlich*) of creatures because of his disruption and questioning of his world. As Heidegger comments, man is shown here as engaged in “eruption and upheaval,” committing a “never-resting incursion into the indestructible power of the earth. Here the earth is the highest of the gods. Violently, with acts of power, man disturbs the tranquility of growth, the nurturing and maturing of the goddess who lives

without effort” (p. 154). A few pages later Heidegger defines art in a way that might have been appealing to Smithson: “The Greeks called art in the true sense and the work of art *techné*, because art is what most immediately brings being (i.e., the appearing that stands there in itself) to stand, stabilizes it in something present (the work). The work of art is a work not primarily because it is wrought, made, but because it brings about being in an essent; it brings about the phenomenon in which the emerging power, *physis*, comes to shine” (p. 159).

24. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 49.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 63.

27. *Ibid.*, 70.

28. *Ibid.*, 65.

29. For Smithson’s intention to raise the *Jetty*, see Hobbs, *Robert Smithson*, 196–197.

30. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 63–64.

31. *Ibid.*, 46.

32. See Hobbs, who suggests the reference to Hitchcock (*Robert Smithson*, 195).

33. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 44–45.

34. Uvedale Price, *On the Picturesque* (London, 1842), 69, 82. The *Essay on the Picturesque* to which I have referred was published originally in 1810.

35. Price, *On the Picturesque*, 64–65.

36. See Jean-François Lyotard, “Newman: The Instant” and “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991), 78–107.

37. Jean-François Lyotard, “Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable,” in *The Inhuman*, 125.

38. Pugh, *Garden, Nature, Language*, 12.

39. See, for example, my article “Hegel’s Dialectic of Artistic Meaning,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35 (1976): 26–35.

40. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), 3.

41. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

42. Smithson cites Aeschylus indirectly, through Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (trans. H. M. Parshley; New York: Knopf, 1953). De Beauvoir's book is based on a dialectical account of human relations which both she and Jean-Paul Sartre adapted from Hegel. But unlike Hegel (who thought that the earth was a living being), de Beauvoir is extremely suspicious of amalgamating human and natural characteristics, and her book offers a detailed critique of such assimilations on the grounds that they offer a way of legitimating specific historical patterns of gender relationships by appealing to "natural" models, whose natural appearance is already the result of a projection.

43. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *The Structuralists*, ed. Richard and Fernande DeGeorge (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 169–194.

44. See Lippard, *Overlay*, for a comprehensive review of such art, including a substantial amount of feminist work that is indebted to recent revivals of interest in goddess religions and speculations concerning early matriarchal social forms.

Chapter 4. Printed Matter: A Heap of Language

Epigraph: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991), 142.

1. On writing as a supplement, and on the logic of the supplement, see Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

2. Michel Foucault, *This Is not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 32–35.

3. Craig Owens, "Earthwords," *October*, no. 10 (Fall 1979): 120–130. Owens rightly observes that "the failure of contemporary theory, which too often operates in a vacuum, to see its own realization in Smithson's practice is, and remains, a scandal" (p. 130).

4. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965), 166.

5. For Hegel's account of the pyramids, see Hegel's *Aesthetics*, 2:650–654. For his contrast of alphabetical and nonalphabetical writing, see *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 213–218. See also Jacques Derrida's essays "Differance" and "The Pit and the Pyramid," in *Margins of Philosophy*, 1–27, 69–180.

6. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 3.

7. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 139.

8. *Ibid.*, 142.

9. Tsai makes the helpful suggestion that Smithson here is working with a distinction between myth and fiction that is drawn from Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*, in which myth is conceived as rigid and attached to ritual, while fictions "are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change" (*Smithson Unearthed*, 125 n. 26).

10. Smithson's editor, Eugenie Tsai, rightly points out the parodic role of the footnotes in the essay (*Smithson Unearthed*, 51).

11. Smithson presumably knew of the modern mathematical reply to Zeno's paradox: an infinite diminishing series can in fact have a finite sum, and motion has to be conceived as continuous rather than as a discrete series of steps. For a basic account, see Bertrand Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1929), 180–198. The usual formula for the progression ($1 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8} + \frac{1}{16} \dots$) is somewhat more perspicuous than Smithson's and sums to 2.

12. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 114.

13. Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 17.

14. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 116.

15. See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Bantam Books, 1959), 31–37, and Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 103–104.

16. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275a.

17. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 355.

18. Owens, "Earthwords," 123.

19. For a powerful reading of *Bouvard and Pecuchet* as an entropic novel, see Eugenio Donato, "The Museum's Furnace: Notes Toward a Contextual Reading of *Bouvard and Pecuchet*," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 213–238.

20. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books), 38.

21. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale and Walter

Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), no. 275 (p. 157).

22. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel,” in *Labyrinths*, trans. James E. Irby (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 58.

23. See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963). Julia Kristeva defines the semiotic, the special domain of art, as the place where the real breaks through the linguistic; see *Desire in Language*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), especially “Giotto’s Joy” (pp. 210–236) and “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini” (pp. 237–270).

24. See my “Festival, Carnival and Parody,” in *Nietzschean Narratives*, 97–123, and *Alcyone: Nietzsche on Gifts, Noise and Women*. See also Jean-Luc Nancy, “Wild Laughter in the Face of Death,” *MLN* 102, no. 4 (September 1987): 719–736, and “Corpus,” in *Thinking Bodies*, ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1994), and my response “Jean-Luc Nancy and the Corpus of Philosophy,” in the same volume, 52–62.

Chapter 5. Spiraling Signatures: *Et in Utah Ego*

Epigraphs: Robert Smithson, *Writings*, 63; Ralph Waldo Emerson quoted in Robert Smithson Papers, Archives of American Art, reel 3834, frame 142, and attributed to Emerson’s “Society and Solitude—Domestic Life”; *Oxford English Dictionary*.

1. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in *Langage Counter-Memory Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113–138.

2. Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 155–164.

3. See Danto, “The Artworld,” and Yves-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 245–257.

4. See my essay on Nietzsche’s practice of erasure, “The Text as Graffito: Historical Semiotics,” in *Nietzschean Narratives*, 124–141.

5. See *Robert Smithson’s Partially Buried Woodshed* (Kent State University School of Art Galleries, 1990), photographic documentation and an essay by Dorothy Shinn.

6. Adrian Stokes, *The Image in Form: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes*, ed. Richard Wollheim (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 322.

7. See Guillaubaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, for a critical account of the political, ideological, and personal dimensions of the way in which abstract expressionism and Jackson Pollock in particular became American icons in the Cold War.

8. For Heidegger's conception of the "preservers" necessary to a work of art, see "The Origin of the Work of Art," 66–68.

9. Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, "Esquisse d'un typologie," *Revue de l'art* 26 (1974): 50.

10. Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 56.

11. Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 99–110; Fried suggests that Courbet sometimes situates bowing figures in his paintings in order to make an ironic play on his name, one that he expressed in a letter to Victor Hugo as "*Courbet without Courbettes* (bowing and scraping)" (p. 107). Another artist of the nineteenth century with whom Smithson might be compared in terms of their fascination with the sun is Turner. See Ronald Paulson, "Turner's Graffiti: The Sun and Its Glosses," in *Images of Romanticism*, ed. Karl Kroeber and William Walling (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 167–188. Paulson sees the congruence of image and name as "something like this: Turner, my name; a maker or artist; a constructor of vortices in particular; a revolutionary; he who revolves the earth ('as the world turns')" (p. 186). See also Sidney Geist, *Interpreting Cézanne* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), *passim*, for a number of suggestions concerning Cézanne's possible plays upon his name in his paintings. On the artist as inscribing and marking the painting, see also Michael Fried's *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

12. Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, 34.

13. Elsdon C. Smith, *New Dictionary of American Family Names* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 476, and *The Book of Smiths* (New York: Irvington, 1984).

14. See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 421–424, and my "Hegel's Dialectic of Artistic Meaning," 23–35.

15. Heraclitus in G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 203.

16. I wonder if Smithson knew that Amarillo was both the site for the final assembly

of United States nuclear warheads and also the center of several Christian sects which, following the *Book of Revelation*, believe that the world is about to end; for an essay on the complicity of these two approaches to apocalypse in Amarillo, see A. G. Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986). Joseph Masheck says that the *Amarillo Ramp* suggests the figure of a serpent swallowing its own tail (*Historical Present*, 135); if so, this could connect the *Ramp* with the emblem of circular time in John Taine's *The Time Stream*, which (as I suggest in chapter 1) has an important role to play in Smithson's conception of time. Then we might have to ask whether Smithson's death is what closes the circle or what prevents it from closing.

17. James D. and Edward S. Dana, *The System of Mineralogy*, 7th ed., rewritten and enlarged by Charles Palache, Harry Berman, and Clifford Frondel (New York: John Wiley, 1951), 2:180.

18. Smithson quotes this sentence from Thomas H. Clark and Colin W. Stern, *Geological Evolution of North America* (New York: Ronald Press, 1960), 5, and it is read aloud in the *Spiral Jetty* film along with shots of pages from what seems to be a geological book fluttering to the ground (*Writings*, 114).

19. William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 139.

20. *Ibid.*, 140.

21. Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, 32.

22. See Erwin Panofsky's essay "Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 295–320; for some questions concerning the limits of Panofsky's principles of interpretation, see my essay "Intention and Interpretation in Art: A Semiotic Analysis," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33 (1974): 33–42, and Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing*, 179–184.

23. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), 166.

24. See Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," 165–173.

25. Brecht's notes are available in *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), 157–159; Smithson owned this book (see Tatransky, "Catalogue of Robert Smithson's Library"). In general Brecht stresses the contradictions in Brueghel's paintings, suggesting some similarities with what we have seen in Smithson's idea of dialectics (which is partially modeled on Pascal).

26. It is also worth noting Smithson's long-standing interest in pyramids and his early visits to the pyramids in Mexico (*Writings*, 154).

27. For a suggestion that the lost prime of the Tower of Babel can be traced back even further to a lost continent, a hypothesis that might have been attractive to Smithson, see Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), 32–33: “There is much support for the theory that these progressive foreigners were colonists from Atlantis, and it appears that these sun-worshippers and astrologers incarnate always made it their first care, wherever they went, to set up mighty watch-towers before the faces of the astonished natives, modelled upon the high towers of their native land, and in particular upon the lofty mountain of the gods of which Plato speaks. In Atlantis, then, we may seek the prototype of the Great Tower.”

28. These reproductions, along with some modern photos of dams and motion picture stills suggestive of ziggurats, are in a file titled “sources,” donated in 1991 or 1992 to the Archives of American Art by Nancy Holt; see Stephen Policari, “Regional Reports: New York,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 32, no. 1 (1992): 23–24.

29. In this connection there is an interesting image of a mnemonic for the ancient Peruvian calendar in a book that Smithson owned, Walter Herdeg's *The Sun in Art* (Zurich: Amstutz and Herdeg, 1962), 29. It is a diagram of the sun and its rays within which there is inscribed an S-shape: “The solar year is represented by the wealth of rays, the movement of the sun by the S inscribed at the center.”

30. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2: 593–611.

Index

Note: Works and writings by Robert
Smithson are listed individually by title

Abyss, 91–96, 110–111, 119, 166, 168, 174, 190
Achilles, 36, 168
Adam, 193
Adams, Henry, 4
*Aerial Map: Proposal for Dallas–Fort Worth
Regional Airport* (Smithson), 187, 208–209,
226–227
Aeschylus, 150, 254 n.42
Agon, 133
Ajanta, 85
Alchemy, 194
Aletheia, 37. *See also* Truth
Alloway, Lawrence, 61, 235
Alogon series (Smithson), 114–118, 159

Alogos, 8
Amarillo Ramp (Smithson), 21, 209, 215
Amiens labyrinth, 168
Anderson, Laurie, 239
Andre, Carl, 77, 174, 175, 176, 186
Anglo-Catholicism, 178
Anthropomorphism, 76, 81, 94, 124, 150–151,
168, 206
Antigone (Sophocles), 252 n.23
Apocalypse, 126–127, 179, 258 n.16
The Arcadian Shepherds (Poussin), 214–218
Archaeology, 42–44, 85, 91–92, 164–165, 192
Archetypes, 139
Archives of American Art (Smithsonian
Institution, Washington, D.C.), 155, 209,
236
Aristotle, 13, 33, 45
Armory Show, 37

- Arnolfini Marriage* (Van Eyck), 62
Artforum, 26, 27, 35, 98, 106, 146, 164, 207, 235–236
Art in the Land (Sonfist), 238
 “The Artist as Site-seer; or, a Dintorphic Essay” (Smithson), 86–87, 165–166
Arts Magazine, 28, 60, 238
Asphalt Rundown (Smithson), 39, 41
 Atlantis, 17, 125, 186, 259 n.27
 Atreus, 53
Auctor, 197
 Augustine, 128
 “Author function,” 192–193, 202. *See also* Signature
 Aztecs, 29, 101–102
- B**abel, 101, 186, 219; Library of, 2, 19, 74, 176–178; Tower of, 157, 165–166, 167, 180, 221–223, 226, 259 n.27
 Ballard, J. G., 88
The Bar at the Folies Bergere (Manet), 202–203
 Barlow, Elizabeth, 199
 Barthes, Roland, 3, 26, 41–42, 81, 193
 Bataille, Georges, 13, 104
Batman (film), 28
 Beardsley, John, 24, 232, 238
 Beauty, 41, 57, 72, 199–200; and the aesthetics of the garden, 113–115, 120–122; in Kant, 46; and the picturesque, 141–145; and the sublime, 92, 142–143
 Beauvoir, Simone de, 254 n.42
 Beckett, Samuel, 18
 Bell, Alexander Graham, 88
 Bell, Eric Temple. *See* Taine, John
 Benjamin, Walter, 215, 238
 Bergson, Henri, 29
 Beuys, Joseph, 83
 Bible, 126–127, 178, 258 n.16
 Bingham Copper Mine, 197
 Biology, 27, 42, 85, 168, 171, 206, 211
 Bochner, Mel, 51
 Bonampak, 85
Book of Revelation, 126–127, 258 n.16
 Borges, Jorge Luis, 2, 19, 51, 84, 86, 178–179, 180
 Bourgeoisie, 35–36, 60
Bouvard et Pecuchet (Flaubert), 175
 Brancusi, Constantin, 136, 219
 Brecht, Berthold, 221
 Briareus, 123
 Bricoleur, 180, 194, 212. *See also* Smiths (craftsmen)
Broken Circle/Spiral Hill (Smithson), 107–112, 197
 Brueghel, Pieter, 221, 222
 Burial process, 195–196. *See also* Death
 Burke, Edmund, 142, 143, 199
 Burnet, Thomas, 126–127, 257 n.14
- C**age, John, 165
 Cameron, Dan, 240
The Cantos (Pound), 136
 Caro, Anthony, 206
 Carroll, Lewis, 184, 185, 186
 Cartography. *See* Maps
 Catholicism, 46, 178
 Cave, myth of the, 95, 107
Cayuga Salt Mine Site (Smithson), 89, 94–97
 Central Park (New York City), 56–57, 141, 145–149, 187, 200–201
 Cézanne, Paul, 84, 143

- Chamberlin, John, 83
 Chinese art, 29
 Christ, 46
 Christianity, 45–46, 103, 126–128, 136, 140
 Christo, 21, 77, 207
 Chronos, 103, 123–125
 Cinema, 3, 106–107, 126
 “A Cinematic Atopia” (Smithson), 106–107
 Coatlicue, 103
 Cogito, 45, 65
 Conrad, Joseph, 65, 111
 Cornell University, 94
 Cottus, 123
 Courbet, G., 22, 204
Critique of Judgment (Kant), 97
 Cross, stations of the, 103
 Cubism, 84, 94, 172
 Cummings, Paul, 154–155, 179, 209
 Cyclops, 67
- D**adaists, 193
 Dallas–Fort Worth airport, 187, 208–209, 226–227
 Dante, 187
 Danto, Arthur, 35
 Death, 132, 140, 214–215, 218–219; of art, 23; and the death principle, 33, 38, 46–47; in Freud, 61; of God, 177–178; and monuments, 24–25; and the museum, as a institution, 51, 52; and rites of human sacrifice, 102, 103–104; and the signature, 203; and Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, 215, 218–219, 243n.8; and the written word, 172, 173. *See also* Sacrifice
Death and Sensuality (Bataille), 104
 Deconstruction, 3, 84; in Derrida, 77, 81–82, 97; of the frame, 97; and God, as the first deconstructor, 88; of the museum, 52–54; and representation, 68; of the video, 144
 Dedifferentiation, 28, 73, 88–89, 91, 94, 125, 193
 De Kooning, William, 168
 Derrida, Jacques, 3, 49, 77, 80, 88, 131, 164, 173; on the abyss and the circle, choice of, 92; difference in, 125; and double rhetoric, 81; *Glas*, 164; on the logic of the supplement, 155; *Memoirs of the Blind*, 68; parergon (logic of the frame) in, 96–97; on reason, 95; representation in, 68; and the signature, 203–205, 211–212; *Signéponge*, 204; and Smithson’s deconstruction of the museum, 52–55; and Smithson’s descriptions of Judd’s art, 60; *Writing and Difference*, 59
 Descartes, René, 19, 34, 45, 68, 128
 Destructuration, 3, 28, 174
 Dewey, John, 67, 147
 Dialectic: and the aesthetics of the garden, 119–120; discovery of the, 56; and Heidegger’s “world,” 152; and Olmsted’s parks, 144–145, 146, 148; and the picturesque, 144–145, 151; play, 81, 83–84; and totality, 105. *See also* Sites/Nonsites, dialectic of
Dictionary of Accepted Ideas (Flaubert), 176
 Differance, 125
Divine Comedy (Dante), 187
 Druid art, 29
 Duchamp, Marcel, 33, 36–37, 56, 155–156, 193–195
 Dürer, Albrecht, 134–135
 Duret, Theodore, 203
 Dwan Gallery (New York City), 171

- Earth Art** exhibition, 94
Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Land (Beardsley), 24, 232, 238
 Ecology, 41, 127, 130, 149
 Eden, Garden of, 114, 120, 126
 Ego, 89, 214–215, 220, 233
 Egyptian art, 29
 Ehrenzweig, Anton, 28, 73, 84–85, 88–93, 125, 193
 Eliot, T. S., 26, 29, 37, 178, 180
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 191
 Empiricism, 77
Enantiomorphic Chambers (Smithson), 65–69, 133, 144, 164
 English garden, 113–120, 129, 145. *See also* Gardens
 “Entropic Pole” (Smithson), 189–190
 Entropy, 4, 24, 27–29, 32, 191; and the aesthetics of the garden, 118–119; and anthropomorphism, rejection of, 151; and the artist’s integrity, 220; characteristics of, sites chosen for, 72; and cinematic experience, 107; and dedifferentiation, 89; and Freud’s concept of death, 61; and God, 88; and the Hesiodic conflict, 152; and laughter, 184; and long-term physical processes, 39, 41, 43; and maps, 186, 189–190; and museums, as institutions, 49–50; notions of, and post-structuralism, 83; and “Passaic center,” 92; and “printed matter,” 74; and progress, 36; and the signature, 195, 197–198; and Smithson’s *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 57, 88, 112; and Smithson’s “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space,” 166; and Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, 112, 133, 138–140; and the sublime, 151; and suburban landscapes, 226, 228; and the written word, 173, 175, 178–179, 184
 “Entropy and the New Monuments” (Smithson), 21–23, 25, 184–185
Erased de Kooning (Rauschenberg), 194
 Erasure, 194–195
 Eroticism, 76. *See also* Sexuality
 Eternal recurrence, 27–29, 171, 184
 Eternity, 38, 169
 “Eton Corrasable” signature, 171–172, 194, 195
Eyes in the Heat (Pollock), 220
Faust (Goethe), 90
 Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, 141, 199
Fifth Mirror Displacement (Smithson), 99
 Flaubert, Gustave, 81, 175, 176, 177
 Flavin, Dan, 22, 174, 175
 Flood, cataclysm of the, 126–127
Forking Island (Smithson), 86, 87
Forking Peninsula (Smithson), 86
 Foucault, Michel, 3, 32, 42–43, 114, 155, 202
Fountain (Duchamp), 193–194
 Frame, concept of the, 74–80, 96, 145, 148–149, 164, 166, 201, 202
 France, 76
 “Frederic Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape” (Smithson), 56–57, 92, 141, 146, 148, 149–150, 198–199
 French language, 203
 Freud, Sigmund, 171, 182, 220; oceanic feeling in, 73–74, 91; Oedipus complex in, 151; *Totem and Taboo*, 82; the uncanny in, 60–61, 65, 74; the unconscious in, 88
 Fried, Michael, 8, 90–91, 93, 96, 204, 207, 208

- Friedrich, Caspar David, 20
 Friends of the Earth, 149
 Fuller, Buckminster, 185
 Functionalism, 29
 Futurism, 25, 239
The Futurist Moment (Perloff), 239
- Gaia** (Mother Earth), 102–103, 123–124, 126
 Gallery, as an institution, 69, 72, 202
 Gardens, 72, 149, 199, 218; English, 113–120, 129, 145; the Garden of Eden, 114, 120, 126.
See also Parks
 Genealogy, 199, 209–210, 232–233
 Genet, Jean, 164
 Geology, 3, 14, 29, 32, 39, 43, 91–92, 121–137
 passim, 161, 163–165, 187, 199, 201, 205
 German language, 203
 Gestalt, notion of, 51, 106
Ghostbusters (film), 28
 Giacometti, Alberto, 169
 Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy, 239, 240
 Gilpin, William, 141, 199
Glas (Derrida), 164
 Glueck, Grace, 149
Glue Pour (Smithson), 193
 Gnosticisim, 28
 God, 45–46, 103, 114, 192, 212, 221; death of, 177–178; as the first deconstructor, 88; in Heidegger’s metahistory of philosophy, 45; Pascalian definition of, 74, 105, 219; world-view of, and perspectivism, 67. *See also* Gods/Goddesses
 Gods/Goddesses, 101–103, 173. *See also* God
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 23, 90
 Golden Spike monument, 136, 139
 Goldmann, Lucien, 249 n.40
 Gondwanaland, 186
 Graham, Dan, 176
 Grant, Cary, 138
 Great Pyramid, 88
 Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1, 5, 135, 137, 138, 218, 221
 Greenberg, Clement, 33–35, 51, 55, 81, 84, 96, 141, 148, 201–202, 208
 Guggenheim Museum (New York City), 51–52, 54, 165
 Guilbaut, Serge, 148
 Gussow, Alan, 149, 150, 151
 Gyes, 123
Gyrostasis (Smithson), 223, 224, 226, 228
- Happenings**, 50–51
 Hayden Planetarium (New York City), 51
A Heap of Language (Smithson), 157–159, 160–161
 Hegel, G. W. F., 27, 46–49, 52, 56–58, 98, 141, 146, 170, 199, 206, 232, 254 n.42; absolute identity in, 57; and the abyss, concept of, 94; articulating limits in, 34–35; the death of art in, 46–48; Derrida on, 164; dialectic in, 83, 89; God and the center in, 88; and the monumental, 21–24, 25, 92, 157; on morality, 56; on “phonetic” language, 157–158, 159; and the rise of the museum, 48–49; and the Tower of Babel, 23, 58, 226
 Heidegger, Martin, 44–49, 67, 122, 165; on the death principle, 46–48; earth in, 44, 126–140, 152, 201; language as the “house of Being” in, 54; the oblivion of being in, 37–38; “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 45, 131–134; quotations from, in Smithson’s “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space,”

- Heidegger (*continued*)
 166, 252 n.23; the *Riss* (rift) in, 134–136, 201;
 truth in, 37, 45, 119, 131, 134–136; and the
 video, 68; “world worlds” in, 139–140
- Heizer, Michael, 21, 24, 56, 73, 122, 237
- Heraclitus, 13, 121, 122, 126, 134, 208
- Hermaphroditic figures, 76
- Hesiod, 103, 123, 125–126, 128, 152
- Hesse, Eva, 168–169
- The Hidden Order of Art* (Ehrenzweig),
 88–89
- “Hidden Trails in Art” (Smithson), 177
- High Museum (Atlanta), 52
- Hitchcock, Albert, 138–139
- Hobbs, Robert, 115, 153, 157, 235, 236
- Hoffmann, E. T. A., 69
- Hölderlin, Friedrich, 129, 130, 136, 169, 170
- Holland, 107–110, 112, 197, 219
- Holt, Nancy, 209, 235, 236
- Holzer, Jenny, 172
- Homer, 169
- Hulme, T. E., 29, 74
- “Human nature,” 114
- Humpty Dumpty, 39
- Husserl, Edmund, 173
- Icarus**, 209
- In Advance of the Broken Arm* (Duchamp),
 193–194
- Inca art, 29
- “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan”
 (Smithson), 51, 64, 69, 98–104, 123, 149,
 153–154, 173–174, 189, 205, 214
- Indian mounds (Ohio), 151
- “In the Domain of the Great Bear”
 (Smithson), 51, 154
- Island of Broken Glass* (Smithson), 41
- Iwo Jima monument, 24
- Jameson**, Fredric, 35
- La Jetée* (film), 242 n.8
- Johns, Jasper, 36, 171
- Johnson, Philip, 52, 54
- Johnston, John, 238–239
- John Weber Gallery (New York City), 237
- Jokes, 182, 184–185
- Joyce, James, 29, 182, 219
- Judaic tradition, 126, 151, 164
- Judd, Donald, 22, 59–61, 77, 93, 102, 106, 168,
 174, 175, 198
- Kandinsky**, Wassily, 155
- Kant, Immanuel, 33–35, 45–46, 52, 54–56, 60,
 65, 68, 81, 106, 141, 143, 169, 170; *Critique of
 Judgment*, 97; on the garden, 199; the sub-
 lime in, 54–55, 60
- Kaprow, Alan, 50–51, 54, 207, 228, 232
- Kent State University, 57, 195–196, 237
- Kepler, Johannes, 114
- Kienholz, Edward, 207
- Klee, Paul, 155, 203
- Klein, Yves, 212
- Krauss, Rosalind, 3–4, 232, 238, 240
- Kristeva, Julia, 185
- Kruger, Barbara, 172
- Kubler, George, 41–43, 84–88, 120, 148, 170,
 193, 244 n.14, 247 n.21
- Kuspit, Donald, 105, 240, 249 n.40
- Labyrinth** (maze), 28–29, 49, 86, 88–89,
 119, 144, 145, 168, 170, 176–179, 201
- Lacan, Jacques, 152, 182, 202

- Language, materiality of, 2, 19, 20, 65, 153–190. *See also* “Printed matter”
- Laokoön (Lessing), 169–170
- Latin, 219
- Layton, Irving, 209–210
- Lebensztein, Jean-Claude, 202–203
- Leibniz, G. W., 34, 176
- Leonardo da Vinci, 154
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, 169–170
- Levinas, Emmanuel, 174
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 3, 42, 81–82, 151–152
- Lewis, Wyndham, 29, 32, 38
- LeWitt, Sol, 22, 174, 176, 186
- Lin, Maya, 25
- Lippard, Lucy, 176, 235
- Loginus, 115
- Logocentrism, 173
- Logos, 8
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1, 237
- Louis, Morris, 93
- Lyotard, Jean-François, 143–144, 153, 159–160, 169, 170
- McLuhan**, Marshall, 50, 124, 179
- Magritte, René, 155
- Mandala, 182
- Manet, Édouard, 34, 84, 202–203
- Maps, 163, 185–190
- Marker, Chris, 242 n.8
- Marx, Karl, 60, 146. *See also* Marxism
- Marxism, 52, 83, 179. *See also* Marx
- Masheck, Joseph, 236–237, 242 n.8
- Matisse, Henri, 37
- Mausoleum, 52–53
- Maya, 29, 101–102, 103, 173
- Maze. *See* Labyrinth
- Memoirs of the Blind* (Derrida), 68
- Las Meninas* (Velázquez), 62
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 67, 143
- Mesa Verde cliff, 150–151
- Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City), 141, 146, 147
- Michelangelo, 154, 193
- Mirror Displacements* (Smithson), 2, 156
- Mirroring, 28–29, 62, 64–67, 77, 86, 92, 112; and the signature, 203; in Smithson’s *Cayuga Salt Mine Project*, 94–95, 96; and Smithson’s “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space,” 168; and windows, 64, 65; and the written word, 173–175, 176–177. *See also* “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan” (Smithson); *Mirror Displacements* (Smithson); *Mirror Strata* (Smithson)
- Mirror Strata* (Smithson), 223
- Mono Lake Nonsite* (Smithson), 74–76
- Monument with Pontoons: The Pumping Derrick* (Smithson), 154
- Morris, Robert, 22, 36, 77, 88, 174, 207
- Moses and Aaron* (Schoenberg), 90
- Mother Earth, 118, 123–124, 126, 149–151
- Movie theaters. *See* Cinema
- Museum, as an institution, 48–55, 69, 72, 93, 160, 180, 202
- “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art” (Smithson), 174–175
- Museum of Modern Art (New York City), 48
- Museum of Natural History (New York City), 14, 18
- The Museum of the Void* (Smithson), 52, 53
- Napoleon Bonaparte**, 22
- NASA, 186

- Native Americans, 8, 29, 138, 151
 Nazca lines, 44, 122, 191
 Nazism, 130
 New Jersey, 90–91, 189, 209, 210–211, 232
 New Jersey Turnpike, 90–91
 Newman, Barnett, 143–144
 New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York City), 48
 New York power blackout (1965), 83
New York Times, 149
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 127, 177–178; and the cogito, critiques of, 68; eternal recurrence in, 27, 28, 171, 184; madness in, 45; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 13, 184–185; will to power in, 45
North by Northwest (film), 138–139
 Nostalgia, 130–131, 149
- Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970** (Sayre), 239
 Oceanic feeling, 90, 91, 137–138
October (journal), 238–239
 Oedipal complex, 45, 82, 150, 151, 169, 233
 Oldenburg, Claus, 207
 Olmsted, Frederick Law, 92, 141, 144–147, 187, 198–201
 Ontogeny, 137–138
 Oppenheim, Denis, 73
Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory (Lippard), 235
 Owens, Craig, 3–4, 100, 156, 174, 238–240
- Panofsky, Erwin**, 214, 218, 220–221
 Parergon (logic of the frame), 96–97
 Park Place Group, 184
 Parks, 56–57, 141, 145–149, 187, 198–202. *See also* Gardens
- Parmenides, 36
 Parody, 35
Partially Buried Woodshed (Smithson), 25, 39–40, 57, 88, 112, 133, 193, 195–197, 221, 237
 Pascal, Blaise, 51, 74, 84, 105, 136, 176, 180, 212, 219, 249 n.40
Passages in Modern Sculpture (Krauss), 232, 238
 Pastiche, 35
 Pater, Walter, 118
Paterson (Williams), 210–211
 Patriarchy, 23, 125, 199
 Pedestal, problem of, 96
 Peirce, Charles, 185
 Pericles, 26
 Periodization, 25–27, 29
 Perloff, Marjorie, 7–8, 239
 Permanence, fantasy of, 4
 Perspectivism, 67–68, 143, 164
Phaedrus (Plato), 172
Phenomenology of the Spirit (Hegel), 98, 206
 Phylogeny, 137–138
 Picasso, Pablo, 37
 Picturesque, 141–145, 151, 189
Pierced Spiral (Smithson), 230, 231
 Pine Barrens (New Jersey), 1, 70–71, 189, 209
 Place, 43, 64–65, 100. *See also* Sites/Nonsites
 Plato, 2, 38, 208; and the aesthetics of the garden, 121–123; art as imitation in, 103; in Heidegger's metahistory of philosophy, 45; and Hesiod's earth myth, 123, 125–126, 152; myth of the cave in, 95, 107; *Phaedrus*, 172; *Republic*, 95, 123, 125; *Timaeus*, 114, 257 n.11, 257 n.12; vision in, 65, 95; the work of art as a mirror in, 62; and the written word, criticism of, 172–173
 Play dialectics, 81, 83–84, 95, 105, 171–172

- Pleasure principle, 104
- Poetics* (Aristotle), 33
- “Pointless Vanishing Points” (Smithson), 67–68
- Pollock, Jackson, 17, 33, 136, 148, 168, 203, 220
- Polyclitus, 85
- Ponge, François, 204, 211–212
- “A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala” (Reinhardt), 182, 183
- Poulet, Georges, 105
- Pound, Ezra, 4, 29, 37, 136, 180
- Poussin, Nicolas, 136, 214–218, 219–221, 228
- Prehistory, 3, 4, 122–123, 139–140, 160–161, 182, 187, 191–192, 228
- “Press Release: Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read” (Smithson), 171–172, 194
- Price, Uvedale, 141–142, 143, 199
- Prime object, notion of, 85–88, 166, 226
- “Printed matter,” 19, 74, 153–190, 194–195. *See also* Language, materiality of
- Progress, notion of, 35–36
- Protestantism, 46
- Psychoanalysis, 38, 88–89, 182–184
- Pugh, Simon, 118
- Puritanism, 151
- Purity Test* (Tansey), 8–9
- Pynchon, Thomas, 239
- Pythagoras, 114–115, 118, 122, 136
- “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space” (Smithson), 35–36, 154, 166–169, 170, 221
- R**
- Rationalism, 34
- Rationality, 45, 114–115, 128, 172. *See also* Rationalism; Reason
- Rauschenberg, Robert, 35, 194, 207
- Reason, 95. *See also* Rationality
- Reinhardt, Ad, 107, 165, 170, 174, 182–184
- Religion, 37, 48, 236; and Dadaism, 193–194; and maps, 189; and the written word, criticism of, 172–173. *See also* Bible; Christianity; God; Gods/Goddesses; Judaic tradition
- Remarks on Oedipus* (Hölderlin), 169
- Renaissance, 65, 67–68, 105, 143, 155, 182
- Repetition, 28
- Replications, notion of, 85, 86–88
- Republic* (Plato), 95, 123, 125
- Revelation* (Bible), 126–127, 258 n.16
- Ring cycle (Wagner), 129–130
- Robert Smithson: Drawings* (catalogue), 236
- Robert Smithson: El Paisaje Entrópico* (catalogue), 237
- Robert Smithson: Photo Works* (catalogue), 237
- Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Hobbs), 235
- Robert Smithson: Zeichnungen aus dem Nachlass/Drawings from the Estate* (catalogue), 237
- Robert Smithson's Partially Buried Woodshed* (Shinn), 237
- Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings* (Tsai), 236
- Rodin, Auguste, 232
- Rome, exhibition in, 39, 219
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 173
- Running Fence* (Christo), 77
- Ruskin, John, 163
- S**
- Sacred Theory of the Earth* (Burnet), 126–127
- Sacrifice, human, 101–104, 126, 215
- Saussure, Ferdinand de, 156, 173
- Sayre, Henry, 239
- Schapiro, Meyer, 131

- Schmidt, Eva, 242 n.8
- Schoenberg, Arthur, 90
- Schopenhauer, Arthur, 45, 170
- “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” (Smithson), 56
- A Sense of Place: Artists and the American Land* (Gussow), 149
- Serra, Richard, 21, 55, 77, 80, 206–207
- Sexuality, 23, 124, 125, 150–151, 236
- The Shape of Time* (Kubler), 41–43
- Shift* (Smithson), 223, 225
- Shinn, Dorothy, 237
- Signature, 190, 191–233; “Eton Corrasable” signature, 171–172, 194, 195
- Signéponge* (Derrida), 204
- Sites/Nonsites: and the abyss, 91–96; and the aesthetics of the garden, 120–122, 143; and dedifferentiation, 89–91; dialectic of, 1–3, 20, 49, 56–57, 69–96 passim, 149; formulation of the term, and Smithson’s plays upon language, 182, 219; and galleries and museums, as institutions, 69, 72–73; and Gestalt, 106; and Heidegger’s “world,” 133; and maps, 185–186, 187; and the picturesque, 143; and the role of the frame, 97; and the signature, 193, 203; Smithson’s comments on, 73, 83–84; and Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, genesis of the idea for, 90; and Smithson’s use of mirrors, 98–104; and Smithson’s works on the printed page, 163. *See also* Sight-seer, the artist as
- Site-seer, the artist as, 2–3, 64–65, 72, 165
- Smith, David, 206
- Smith, Tony, 90–91, 93, 206, 207
- Smiths (craftsmen), 180, 205–206, 208, 212, 219. *See also* Bricoleur; Genealogy
- Smithson, Charles, 209
- Smithson, Robert, works and writings of. *See individual works and writings, by title*
- Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.), 209, 236
- Sobieszek, Robert A., 237
- Socrates, 121, 123, 126, 172, 257 n.12
- “Some Void Thoughts on Museums” (Smithson), 49–50
- Sonfist, Alan, 238
- Sophocles, 252 n.23
- Spain, exhibition in, 1, 237
- “Specific objects,” 106
- Spinoza, Benedict de, 34
- Spiral Hill* (Smithson), 107–110
- Spiral Jetty* (Smithson), 2, 4–20, 25, 39, 90, 112, 133, 135–140, 156, 196, 208, 212–215, 221, 223, 226, 228, 232, 237, 239; the essay, 7, 13, 17, 212–213; the film, 5–20, 73, 120–121, 135–136, 215, 218–219, 243 n.8, 258 n.18
- Spirals* (Smithson), 229
- Stein, Gertrude, 29
- Stephens, James, 98, 100
- Stokes, Adrian, 197
- The Stonebreakers* (Courbet), 204
- Stonehenge, 44, 122, 191
- “Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction” (Smithson), 154, 161–163, 165
- Structuralism, 3, 26, 82–83, 156–157, 233, 238
- Sublime, 92, 113–114, 169, 199–200; and entropy, 151; and nature, 115; and the picturesque, 142–145
- “A Surd View for an Afternoon” (Smithson), 185–188, 189
- Sylvie* (Carroll), 186

- Tabula rasa**, 194
 Taine, John, 17, 27, 258 n.16
 Talmud, 164
 Tansey, Mark, 8–9
 Tatransky, Valentin, 237
 Technology, 122, 124, 127–131, 133, 136–137, 206
 Tezcatlipoca, 101
 Thass-Thienmann, Theodore, 150
This Is not a Pipe (Foucault), 155
Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Nietzsche), 13, 184–185
Tilted Arc (Serra), 77
Timaeus (Plato), 114, 257 n.11, 257 n.12
Time and Western Man (Lewis), 29
The Time Stream (Taine), 17, 27, 258 n.16
Totem and Taboo (Freud), 82
 “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (Smithson), 91–92, 153, 154, 189, 205
 Tower of Babel. *See* Babel, Tower of
Tower of Babel (Brueghel), 221
 Toynbee, Arnold, 26
 Troubadours, 29
 Truth, 43, 119, 120–121; geological, 201; in Heidegger, 37, 45, 131, 134–136
 Tsai, Eugenie, 187, 236
- Ultramoderne**, 28–31, 86, 104, 223
Ultramoderne (Smithson), 28–31
 Uncanny, 64–65, 72–74, 84, 91–93; in Freud, 60–61, 65, 74; the horizon as, 100–102, 105; qualities, of prime objects, 85–86
 Unconscious, 88
The Unnameable (Beckett), 18
- Uranous, 102–103, 123
 Utah, 7, 17
 Utopianism, 113, 119, 127, 130
- Valéry**, Paul, 111
 Vancouver harbor, 41
 Van Eyck, Jan, 62
 Van Gogh, Vincent, 130–131, 155, 220
 Vasari, Giorgio, 57
 Velázquez, Diego, 62
 Vendôme column, 22
 Vertigo, 91, 93
 Victorian era, 26, 113
 Video (“I see”), 65, 68, 76, 144
 Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, 24–25
 Vietnam War, 196
- Wagner**, Richard, 129–130
 Warhol, Andy, 35
 “What Is a Museum?” (Smithson), 50
 Wheeler, Dennis, 82, 165
 Whitehead, Alfred North, 29
 Williams, William Carlos, 4, 209–211
 World War II, 83
 Wright, Frank Lloyd, 168
- Yale University**, 102
 Yaxchilan, 174
 Yeats, William Butler, 38, 135
 Yucatan, 2, 69, 92, 98–104, 123, 189, 219
- Zeno’s paradox**, 36, 101, 168, 255 n.11
Zerbrochene Schlüssel (Klee), 203
Ziggurat Mirror (Smithson), 180, 181, 223

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