

Reflections on Robert Smithson

In 1966 the artist Robert Smithson was introduced to me by Sol LeWitt. Because of LeWitt I viewed this enigmatic person with interest.

Lean, gaunt, stooped. Black boots, black trench coat, black trousers, and black hair shaped a dark frame for a Saturnine face suggesting a strange intelligence. His gestures were relaxed to the point suggesting near collapse and he seemed to drape himself over empty space.

Who was he? Was he really properly termed a minimal artist? Was there an existing art category to embrace those faceless mirrors in Mexican motel colors? Were his crystalline structures, so cool and self-contained, really minimal, given their elaboration of surfaces and puzzling multiplicity? Was he presenting a trimmed-down contemplative form or posing disturbing new sets of categories and issues?

Smithson was by the very nature of his thinking a kind of teacher. That is to say that his world view—the particular vantage point from which he looked on—necessitated a context that only he could construct. His articles seemed to say, “Sit here and look in that direction and just let this information flow over you.” His oceanic style could set one adrift in his sea of ruminations. One could also view these writings as sorts of dioramas in which the viewer, in shadow, glides silently through time and space made visible by Smithson’s peculiar awareness. In these dioramas cities collapsed as they were being built, architecture was erected as ruin, deadly chasms appeared in space, and “frozen wastes” or “infinite pools of dust” encompassed one.

But this kind of thinking was not reserved only for his writing; it appeared as well in lengthy conversations which he squandered almost nightly on his friends and colleagues in darkly lit bars. One wasted away in tunnels of formica, neon, and naugahyde to such phrases



Left to right: Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, and Carl Andre. New Jersey, April 1967.

as “tarnished reflections” or “every refutation is a mirror of the thing it refutes—*ad infinitum*” or “the refuse between mind and matter is a mine of information.” And so he spun a holding-space for his ideas.

Often he quoted other authors such as Céline, Robbe-Grillet, Eliot, and Borges, while carefully omitting their names. Oblique references or additional quotes would emerge later, and eventually the listener was obliged to plead for their sources. This was a teaching by teasing; a teaching by tantalizing. There was a sense of urgency at the end of these conversations, a sense that all this would disappear and one would be without this exotic nourishment until the next meeting. Getting the name of an author was akin to getting a fragment of a recipe at the end of a banquet.

What was this perspective that so fascinated? The sense was of stepping over to the other side of Alice’s Looking Glass into a reflected space in which values and visions were reversed. This was an anti-domain in which entropy and dissolution were greeted with the enthusiasm usually accorded to growth and development.

The taboos of negatives and nihilism were tossed aside and from these very places sprang new energy and productivity. Opposites were embraced and their meetings sparked and illuminated hidden places in the mind. The dreadful and the banal were made mythic and romantic.

On a trip to the Yucatan with Nancy Holt and myself, Smithson accorded each of us a Mayan god persona that suited each one best and from which we acted and viewed all about us. Each

became a voice from a different inalienable perspective. There was a sense of heroic mission, and there was little overlapping of viewpoint. Thus, also, the probability of conflict in close quarters was drastically reduced. We were three deities on three separate but parallel paths.

Other trips included two to the Pine Barrens of New Jersey and then two subsequent ones looking for the sites for earth art and, of course, the trips to the Great Salt Lake to visit the *Spiral Jetty*. Wastelands of sand and snow, Citgo stations with their pyramidal logos, swamps, cemeteries, brick factories, diners, and ruins of an industrial age were interpreted and enhanced by Smithson. The negative became a positive, or rather, what was previously designated as above the positive/negative value-judgment ratio was now seen to have a counterpart in the “negative” underworld. The contemporary awareness of negative atomic particles and negative numbers proceeding from zero into infinity was the stuff of which Smithson’s works and thoughts were made. Today it would seem that he also presaged the interest in black holes in space.

Robert Smithson was a man and artist, uniquely aware of his time, who had the courage to be of it, and in it, and for it.

It was a privilege to share some of it with him.

Virginia Dwan was Robert Smithson’s friend and dealer. The above remarks were made at a panel discussion held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in conjunction with the Robert Smithson retrospective.