

ROBERT SMITHSON

Land Reclamation and the Sublime

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LAND RECLAMATION

For the group exhibition of contemporary art *Sonsbeek '71* in the Dutch city of Arnhem, Robert Smithson realized *Broken Circle* and *Spiral Hill* in an inactive sand-pit in Emmen. On a conical mound, a spiral path runs counter-clockwise. At the top of the *Spiral Hill* is an observation platform, from which the best view of *Broken Circle*, located on the edge of the flooded gravel pit, underneath an embankment, is possible. Two circular segments — a dam and a canal — are laid out around an inner circle, which is divided into two segments of water and earth. That which is water in the one half, is earth in the other half. In *Broken Circle*, two semicircles correspond to one another formally and are simultaneously opposed in terms of material. Somewhat removed from the center of the circle lies a large boulder. The rock is one of the largest of its kind in Holland. It was carried here during the Ice Age by a glacier which ran diagonally across present-day Holland. The materialized presence of a center disturbed Smithson. The expense to remove the erratic block, however, was too great. Finally, he thought: *It became a dark spot of exasperation, a geological gangrene on the sandy expanse...a kind of glacial 'heart of darkness' — a warning from the Ice Age.*¹

The centripetal, upward winding spiral path and the centrifugal *Broken Circle*² with its dam and canal, complement each other as much as they neutralize each other.

The sand-pit was already intended as a recreation area when Smithson chose the site. In reaction to the local population's acceptance of the project, Smithson's contribution to the exhibition was maintained as a permanent installation.

The government of the US State of Ohio resolved in April 1972 that owners of abandoned mining pits must adopt precautionary measures since, with high mining walls, poisonous acids are formed as a result of the combining of carbon and air. These acids contribute to the hot-house effect. Since then, in Ohio, the gradient of abandoned mining pits must not exceed 35°. In 1977, President Carter signed the *Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act*, which specifies that revenue from operating coal mines be charged a supplementary tax and that the individual federal states be responsible for the regulation of these measures. The money collected from this supplementary tax is accrued to the *Department of the Interior's Office of Surface Mining*. This 'department' distributes the money to the 'Abandoned Mined Lands Reclamation Councils' (AMLR) of the federal states. In

many states, only superficial measures are required. In some cases, the fines for neglect are less expensive than the measures themselves.³

Beginning in 1972, Smithson attempted to win American firms for *Land Reclamation* projects. Of Smithson's projects being planned just before his accidental death,⁴ *Tailing Pond* in Creede, Colorado had the greatest chances for becoming realized. The *Tailing Pond* contains residues, which are produced as a result of the erosion of metal ore. Over a period of 25 years, nine million tons were to be conducted to the terracing. A circular 'dam tapering into road' with a diameter of 2000 feet (50.8 meters) was to be directed around the terraces, with their concave downward leading curves. In addition, a street was planned, which was to bisect this circle and the 'graded basin' around it.⁵

The Kennecott Copper Corporation declined its support. For their enormous 'Bingham Mine' in Utah, with its three mile wide hole, Smithson had suggested a circular lake.⁶ Four dams comprised of circular segments were to lead into a center consisting only of water. With this liquid center between curved dams, the mining terraces would have appeared as the outer rings of an inwardly (counter-clockwise) or outwardly (clockwise) rotating whirlpool. Smithson's proposals for *Land Reclamation* projects of mining pits formed as a result of inexpensive surface mining made more expensive restoration, such as refilling, for example, unnecessary. Combines active in the mining of raw materials nevertheless preferred to transform the devastated land into recreational areas; they could then advertise with this that they would be leaving the land in a much better condition than it ever had before.⁷ Smithson, on the other hand, planned park-like monuments, in which the loss of non-regenerative resources would not be hushed up.

The 'King County Arts Commission of Seattle' organized *Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture* with seven artists in 1979. For this exhibition, Robert Morris realized a project within a defunct coal mine on the edge of Kent Valley. Except for the largest trees, Morris had all vegetation removed. The remaining trees were cut to a height of approximately 6 feet (1.8 meters) and painted black with creosote. The mining pit was divided into six descending terraces and planted with clover.⁸ The green, terraced mine became a memorial to the exploitation of nature.

In terms of his Earth Art projects, Michael Heizer, unlike Morris, was interested solely in artistic aspects, even when working in abandoned mines: *I don't support reclamation-art sculpture projects.*⁹



Robert SMITHSON *Broken Circle*, 1971-72 and *Spiral Hill*, 1971 (Emmen, Holland) Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York

Morris' projects and especially Heizer's project *Effigy Tumuli* on the Buffalo Rock Mesa (1983-85) throw light upon the financing of *Land Reclamation* in America after Carter's signing of the 1977 Act. The Foundation of the Ottawa Silica Company, which owned the former coal mines along the Illinois River, selected and paid the artist. Furthermore, they donated the land to the State of Illinois, which integrated it into the 'Buffalo Rock State Park'.¹⁰ On the land decontaminated by AMLR, Heizer formed five forms recalling regional animals from walls of earth with linear edges. The 'diffracted gestalt'¹¹ of the large earth walls can only be seen in full view from an aircraft. Earlier, the Indians of the northern part of Illinois had also built such walls of earth representing animal forms ('effigy tumuli'); Heizer was not making references to ecology, but rather to history.

Smithson became for Morris a stimulus for ecologically based outdoor art, which would hinder further damage caused by the nonregenerative exploitation of nature.¹²

This ecological, contextual art transforms the devastated land into public, grass covered open spaces, without concealing the consequences of the devastation.

Intervention is reduced to the ecologically necessary, with accents also referring to the exploitation of nature.

Whereas Smithson was interested in both ecological and aesthetic questions of landscape architecture and planning, Morris limited himself to exploring the difference between economy and ecology. Heizer's *Effigy Tumuli*, on the other hand, withdraws from ecological conflicts in a history oriented park situation.

THE SUBLIME AND THE PICTURESQUE

In his last article, *Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape*,¹³ Smithson establishes a relationship both to aesthetic discourse by means of the sublime as well as to the tradition of the picturesque. Smithson analyzes New York's 'Central Park' (Manhattan, 1858-1874), which was laid out by Olmsted and Calvert Vaux over a 'man-made wasteland'¹⁴ in the face of strong opposition on the part of speculators. Smithson refers to the — for Olmsted paradigmatic — treatises on the picturesque by the Englishman William Gilpin (1724-1804) and Sir Uvedale Price (1747-1829). Following Edmund Burke's (1729/1797) definitions of the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime¹⁵, Gilpin and Price situate the picturesque between these two poles. According to Gilpin, the strong impression of the sublime, aroused by simple ideas, is weakened in picturesque representations of landscapes by variety through narrative elements, such as ruins, cottages, people, etc.¹⁶

Smithson did not place his *Earthworks* in picturesque, diversified landscapes, but rather in uniform and vacant ones, preferably in 'scenes of desolation'.¹⁷ Furthermore, in the *Land Reclamations* mentioned above, he did not work with the variety of the picturesque, which provokes attention, but rather with uniformity. Burke had described the *succession and uniformity of parts* as *artificial infinite* in the sense of the sublime: *I. Succession; which is requisite that the parts may be continued so long, and in such a direction, as by their frequent impulses on the sense to*



Robert SMITHSON *Island Project*, 1970
Pencil on paper 48 x 61 cm Courtesy John
Weber Gallery, New York

impress the imagination with an idea of their progress beyond their actual limits.

2. Uniformity; because if the figures of the parts should be changed, the imagination at every change finds a check, you are presented at every alteration with the termination of one idea, and the beginning of another; by which means it becomes impossible to continue that uninterrupted progression, which alone can stamp on bounded objects the character of infinity.¹⁸

Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*,¹⁹ *Spiral Hill* and drawings of spiral *Earth Art* projects can be analyzed in terms of Burke's criteria of 'uniformity' and 'succession'. And Gilpin's criteria of 'simplicity', 'continuation' and 'extension' explain Smithson's spiral Earthworks, whereas William Lock's criteria of 'repetition', 'formality' and 'regularity' apply to minimalist sculptures by Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris and Smithson (1964-68), which consist of series of regular or regularly varying, massive units and/or intervals. Gilpin writes in a letter to Lock written on September 29, 1782: *Now if this be just, there must be a continuation — not a repetition, of the same idea...the continuation of one large object, ranging uninterruptedly, & uniformly, through a vast space. Simplicity is the principal source of sublimity, as variety is of beauty.*²⁰

In the immediately evident complementarity of the circular segment of the *Broken Circle* in Emmen, the double interruption of the circle appears as in a total correlation ('continuation', 'uniformity') of regular intervals ('succession'), not as division for the sake of variety. Smithson's oeuvre encompasses the sublime and the picturesque: the great gesture in grand, simple, expansive and raw nature, next to the picturesque in fantastic drawings from 1970 with the title *Entropic Landscape* and *Island Project*. In project drawings such as *Floating Island: To Travel around Manhattan Island* from 1970 and *Meandering Island (Little Fort Island, Maine)* from 1971, picturesque Earthworks are proposed.²¹

CENTER AND PERIPHERY

In two of his numerous articles, Robert Smithson quotes the following sentence by Blaise Pascal (1623-1662): *Nature is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.*²²

The Jansenist Pascal rejected Jesuit casuistry and 'metaphysical proof for the existence of God'. For Smithson, Pascal's search for meaning between intuition and philosophical cognition, between unconditional faith and rational skepticism, became a stimulant. Pascal wrote: *Car, enfin, qu'est-ce que l'homme dans la nature? Un néant à l'égard de l'infini, un tout à l'égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout. Infiniment éloigné de comprendre les extrêmes; la fin des choses et leurs principes sont pour lui invinciblement cachés dans un secret impénétrable...Ce milieu qui nous est échu en partage étant toujours distant des extrêmes, qu'importe qu'un homme ait un peu plus d'intelligence des choses? S'il en a, il les prend un peu de plus haut, n'est-il pas toujours, infiniment éloigné du bout, et la durée de notre vie ne l'est-elle pas également infiniment de l'éternité, pour durer dix ans davantage?*²³ Smithson secularized Pascal's 'eternity' and 'infinity' into 'geologic time',²⁴ in the face of which the time of (human and) art history become relativized: *When one scans the ruined sites of prehistory one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits...There are...no traces of an end or a beginning.*²⁵

The potentially randomly inwardly and outwardly expandable spiral which can be entered by the viewer represents a standpoint that is always distant from 'nothingness' and 'the infinite': beginning and end are absent, only a distance between these is present.

From Smithson, there are two interpretations of the relationship of center and periphery mentioned by Pascal: a.) Center and periphery are opposites, both of which refer to the other: *You then have a dialectic between the*

point and the edge:...a kind of Pascalian calculus between the edge and the middle or the fringe and the center.²⁶ b.) The center is absent and still or no longer negatively definable by the periphery: *The finite present of the center annihilates itself in the presence of the infinite fringes.*²⁷ In two projects, Smithson addresses the relations between center and periphery particularly clearly in the sense of a.) and b.).

In regards to a.): In *Texas Overflow*, according to Smithson's drawings from 1970,²⁸ a round elevation of light limestone (or bright yellow sulfuric stones) and earth was to be constructed in a semicircular, abandoned mining pit. Into this elevation, asphalt was to be pumped: a closed circle of tar was to open itself up while streaming past towering limestone into the pit.

In regards to b.): In 1969, Smithson had asphalt poured down the embankment of a garbage dump in Rome (Cava di Selce).²⁹ The black mass ran along the channels of the eroded hillside. In *Asphalt Rundown*, as in *Texas Overflow*, a continuous, informally extensive surface was created. A primary form as the central starting point of the extension, however, was lacking. In one drawing, the rectangular loading areas of four trucks are the source of an entropy of 1000 tons of Asphalt.³⁰ The dried asphalt was the trace of an action, which referred to an absent source, an absent center. The hardened tar surfaces were exposed to future soil erosion, to which they — in contrast to their original, hot fluid state — were no longer able to adapt. *Asphalt Rundown*, as long as it did not fall into ruin, was 'in a state of arrested disruption'.³¹

The Earthworks *Asphalt Rundown* and *Texas Overflow* are narrative and therefore picturesque, because they can be read as traces of actions, which proceeded from a center to a periphery. Smithson's sublime Earthworks abandon this readability. With the complementarity of direction and counter-direction in the simultaneously progressive and regressive spirals and the reversely symmetric analogy in *Broken CircleL*, traces of an action-time are negated. *Asphalt Rundown* and *Texas Overflow*, unlike the sublime Earthworks, cannot be entered, but only viewed and are, therefore, as a result of their pictorial nature, picturesque.

ABSENCE

The sublime represents, according to Immanuel Kant (1724|1804), the expression of a difference between the subject of representation (an idea or a perception) and representation: if — says Kant — the subject cannot be adequately represented in sensual media, then the 'objective inadequacy of the power of imagination' should be expressed: *Erhaben ist, was auch nur denken zu können ein Vermögen des Gemüts beweiset, das jeden Mastab der Sinne übertrifft.*³²

Jean-François Lyotard uses the sublime to confront the 'philosophical discourse of modernity'³³ inaugurated by Kant and Hegel with a question that is not inferable from consciousness: I Why does something happen rather than nothing?³⁴

Kant's special sphere of the sublime is transformed by Lyotard into an inquiry into the adequacy of rationality on



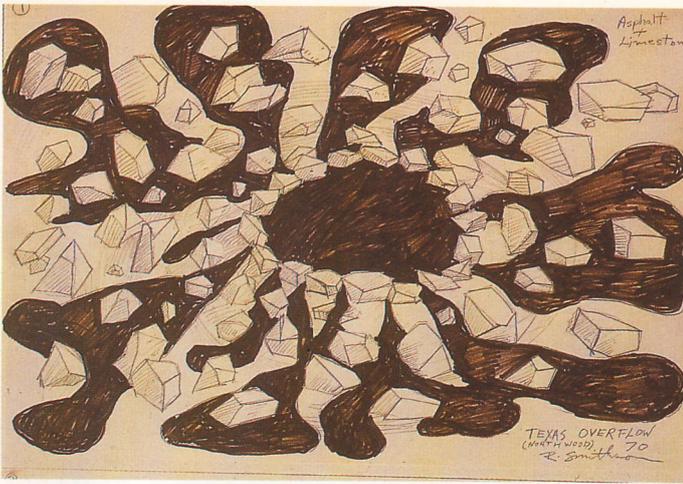
Robert SMITHSON *Asphalt Rundown*, 1969 (Roma, Italy)
Courtesy Estate of R.S. and John Weber Gallery, New York

the whole: what would still need to be explained, if it is questionable whether there is indeed anything to explain at all? Smithson termed the sphere of being not inferable from consciousness the 'dimension of the absence's'³⁵ — the absolutely unfathomable, the center of being closed to consciousness.

In the sublime, the narrative — the picturesque — is abstained from as far as possible to be able to concentrate on the border between 'the 'self and the non-self'³⁶: the simple, continuous form as cipher in simple, extensive landscape formations confronts the viewer-self with something foreign, which possesses too little to stimulate the fantasy. The form appears detached from its origin: the formal continuity of a spiral does not appear conclusive to the recipient — as with *Texas Overflow* and *Asphalt Rundown* — only after the reconstruction of its processes of realization. In walking along the dams, the recipients are given time to fill the void with their own projections — or they simply take note of the being of the work in a 'walking time', which is exempt from goal directed haste. With its properties of 'simplicity', 'continuation' and 'extension', the sublime Earthwork casts the receiving-self back onto itself.

THE PRESERVATION VERSUS THE DOMINATION OF NATURE

In Heizer's Earthworks, which are pictorial and, at the same time, sculpturally break the pictorial, natural and artificial materials are subjugated to a technical domination organized according to artistic points of view. This is true not only for *Effigy Tumuli*, but also for geometric works such as *Complex One/City* (1972-76)³⁷ of compressed earth, concrete and steel in the Nevada Desert. Heizer provokes the viewer to reconstruct his self-contained



Robert SMITHSON One of the *Nine drawings for Texas Overflow*, 1970. Drawing 30 x 45 cm Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York

monuments, whereas Smithson, with his contextualized, water permeated, spiral works, offers passages between nothingness and infinity. With Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* or *Broken Circle*, the viewer is 'in' the work; with Heizer, on the other hand, he is 'in front of' or 'on' it: between the representative form of the *Tumuli* and the possibilities of walking on them, exists at best a distanced correlation in contrast to Smithson's dams, which feign the possibility of walking upon them. The viewer who walks on Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* or *Broken Circle* looks beyond the work itself onto the surrounding environment — The relationship of the viewer 'in' the work to the landscape is, for Smithson, at least as important as the top view. With Heizer, on the other hand, the view of the *Tumuli* from an airplane is of considerable importance to the perception of its total form and descriptive function. Smithson's forms are easily recognizable from the ground.

Whereas, in *Effigy Tumuli*, Heizer romanticizes the past, Morris, in his *Land Reclamation* for the 'Kings County Arts Commission of Seattle', demonstrates the dark side of the present. With his works, which are both ecologically oriented in Morris' sense and formally conscious in Heizer's sense, Smithson appears to mediate between both of these standpoints by preserving their contrast in the sublime. Ecologically oriented Land Reclamation and the post-modern interpretation of the sublime, radicalized to a criticism of rationality, are complements: the unbroken domination of nature in the modern tradition stands in opposition to the admission of the 'objective inadequacy of the power of imagination' embodied within the sublime. ■

8. *The Drawings of Robert Morris*. Exhibition Catalogue. Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts 1982, unpaginated; J. BEARDSLEY, *Earthworks and Beyond...*, New York 1985, pp. 90-95
9. M.H. in: D.BOURDON, *Working with Earth...*, in: *Smithsonian*, No. 17, April 1986, p. 74.
10. D. MCGILL, M. HEIZER: *Effigy Tumuli*, New York 1990, pp. 16, 21, 35, 37, 40 (M.H. received an additional \$ 25,000 from the «National Endowment for the Arts»)
11. MCGILL, p. 43
12. In: J. BEARDSLEY, *R.S. and the Dialectical Landscape*, in: *Arts Magazine*, May 1978, p. 134; J. BEARDSLEY, *Earthworks and Beyond...*, New York 1985, pp. 89ff. Harvey Fite is mentioned here as a forerunner, whose modification of an abandoned cupric sulphate pit from 1939 to 1976 did not, however, result from ecological necessity. For another ecologically oriented project, which sought to protect the environment from further destruction see: H. STACHELHAUS, *Joseph Beuys*, Düsseldorf 1987, p. 181
13. R.S., pp. 117, 128
14. R.S., p. 117
15. E. BURKE, in: J.T. BOULTON (ed.), *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, London 1958
16. P. BARBIER, *William GILPIN...*, Oxford 1963, pp. 98-121
17. W. GILPIN, *Dialogues on Various Subjects*, London 1807, pp. 393-397; BARBIER, p. 109
18. BURKE, p. 74
19. HOBBS, pp. 191-197; R.S., pp. 109-116
20. BARBIER, p. 129
21. *R.S.: Drawings*. Exhibition Catalogue. The New York Cultural Center, New York 1974, pp. 24, 37, 74; *R.S. 1938/1973: Zeichnungen*. Exhibition Catalogue. Galerie Rolf Ricke, Cologne 1980, unpaginated; *R.S.: Drawings from the Estate*. Exhibition Catalogue. Westfälisches Landesmuseum, Münster 1989, p. 135; E. TSAI, *Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings*, New York 1991, p. 184
- Hobbs and Beardsley placed Smithson's Earthworks in the tradition of the picturesque, whereby the latter regards the landscapes chosen by Smithson as sublime (J. BEARDSLEY, *Traditional Aspects of New Land Art*, in: *Art Journal*, Fall 1982, pp. 227, 231; HOBBS, p. 29). Adcock, Kuspit and Sayre connected Smithson's Earth Art to the sublime (C. ADCOCK, *The Big Bad...*, in: *Arts Magazine*, April 1983, p. 104; D. KUSPIT, *R.S.'s Drunken Boat (1981)*, in: id. *New Subjectivism...*, Ann Arbor/London 1988, pp. 218, 229; H.M. SAYRE, *The Object of Performance...*, Chicago/London 1989, pp. 216 with note 13, 260ff.). Each of these approaches is only partially adequate.
22. Quoted without reference in: *R.S.*, pp. 25, 67, 73; also quoted in Smithson's words in: TSAI, p. 106. From Smithson's method of quoting, it follows that he copied from Jorge Luis Borges' *The Fearful Sphere of Pascal* (according to Eva Schmidt in: TSAI, p. 125, from id. *Labyrinths*, New York 1964, pp. 189-192). In the original it reads: *C'est une sphere infinie dont le centre est partout, la circonference nulle part* (B. PASCAL, in: L. BRUNSCHVICG, (ed.) *Pensées*, Paris 1904, Vol. 1, p. 73) In 1966, playing on Borges' title, Smithson wrote about Pascal's 'fearful sphere' (R.S., p. 34). Smithson's understanding of Pascal was not limited, however, to the content of Borges' article — see also his notes on Pascal's dialectics and his comparison of Pascal and Descartes in: TSAI, p. 103.
23. PASCAL, pp. 78, 86ff.
24. R.S., p. 89
25. R.S., pp. 89ff.
26. R.S., p. 168
27. R.S., p. 73
28. (not realized) HOBBS, pp. 198ff.; BEARDSLEY, p. 20
29. HOBBS, pp. 174-177
30. R.S. *Drawings from the Estate*. See note 21, p. 115
31. R.S., p. 87
32. I. KANT, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Frankfurt am Main 1977, pp. 172, 195
33. J. HABERMAS, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main 1985, p. 30
34. B. BLISTENE, *A Conversation with J.-F. Lyotard*, in: *Flash Art*, No. 121, March 1985, p. 33
35. R.S., p. 103; cf. J.F. LYOTARD, *Philosophie und Malerei...*, Berlin 1986, p. 35
36. R.S., p. 84
37. E.C. BAKER, *Artworks on the Land*, in: *Art in America*, January-February 1976, pp. 93ff.; MCGILL, pp. 19ff.

Translation from the German by Gérard A. Goodrow and Andreas Fritsch, Cologne.

1. R.S. *Writings...*, New York 1979, p. 182; cf. R.C. HOBBS, *R.S.: Sculpture*, Ithaca/London 1981, pp. 139, 208/214
2. HOBBS, p. 209
3. R. MORRIS, *Notes on Art as/and Land Reclamation*, in: *October*, No. 12, Spring 1980, p. 91; HOBBS, p. 217; J. BEARDSLEY, *Earthworks and Beyond...*, New York 1989, pp. 97ff.
4. Plane crash on July 20, 1973, near his planned Earthwork *Amarillo Ramp*, Stanley Marsh Ranch, Amarillo, Texas
5. HOBBS, pp. 224-227
6. HOBBS, pp. 223ff.
7. MORRIS, p. 90; HOBBS, p. 219

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