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Robert Smithson and the gold rush

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It is alongside a highway under construction that we find Robert Smithson, whose work we analyzed in the previous post . Where does this long expanse of asphalt the construction equipment is unfurling actually lead? What does it tell us about the way we develop? What drives us to build it?

"Actually, if you think about tracks of any kind you'll discover that you could use tracks as a medium. [...] These tracks around a puddle that I photographed, in a sense explain my whole way of... going through trails and developing a network and then building this network into a set of limits ¹."

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Our discussion will focus on the "narrative work of art," or "narrative sculpture ³," The Monuments of Passaic, a work consisting of a text in conjunction with a series of 24 photographs, published for the first time in the December 1967-edition of Artforum magazine. Starting in late 1966, Robert Smithson carried out expeditions, often accompanied by a group of artist friends, sometimes abroad (like his trip to the ruins of Yucatan in 1969) but oft times to transitional areas in the U.S. (typically suburbs) bearing the earmarks of entropy ⁴ , which the artist viewed as latent in the development of modern capitalism.

Passaic, New Jersey is a place the artist knew well, as that is where he grew up. This suburb, in which the work originated, most notably features a road lined with shops and a defunct quarry on the edge of a highway under construction that is now a vast wasteland. Robert Smithson clearly places his work in a dynamic, a movement he describes in detail

from the outset:

"On Saturday, September 30, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue. I bought a copy of the New York Times and a Signet paperback called *Earthworks*, by Brian W. Aldiss⁵. Next, I went to ticket booth 21 and purchased a one-way ticket to Passaic. After that, I went up to the upper bus level (platform 173) and boarded the number 30 bus of the Inter-City Transportation Co⁶."

He left New York and got off here, at this stop, in a New Jersey wasteland, which at first glance seems rather surprising. We could not ignore the artist's use of mobility here as a laboratory instrument. By leaving New York by bus, he destabilizes himself, leaving the city but - more importantly - himself, his preconceptions⁷ and the influences and determinism of society behind, as he prepares himself to welcome a new vision. And, along the way, where does he stop? Precisely there, where no one would choose to stop – a place of abandonment and chaos.

His movement should be understood as a lesson in poetry, or, How to give birth to a new vision and a new vocabulary. Smithson did not know where his journey would lead him. He did not set out in search of something specific; he set out as a recipient, to receive by surveying this non-site through photos, metaphors, and visual and verbal bursts. Smithson created in the same way that Jack Kerouac wrote (remember that Smithson was very close to the Beat Generation for a time); not seeking to flush out an idea directly but rather to hover over it, simply letting the words flow, like in free jazz⁸. And Smithson walked and walked, and never stopped moving, following lines like musical themes, taking them to the extreme.

The figure of the line (line-tracking) is essential in Smithson's work. Is mobility, however, something other than a drawing? We recall the line in the sand of which Barnett Newman speaks: pure line, man's first drawing. The author of *Onements* (and a primitive art enthusiast) and Smithson himself would certainly have appreciated the words of Tim Ingold⁹:

"We [spend] our lives not only in places, but also on the road. But roads are, in some ways, like lines. It is also on the road that individuals forge knowledge of the world around them and describe it in the stories they tell... Among the Inuit, a person need only start moving to become a line. To hunt an animal or find someone who may be lost, the Inuit draw a linear path in the wilderness and go in search of clues leading to another path, until they achieve their objective. The whole country is seen as an interlacing of lines and not a continuous surface¹⁰."

Through this clearly marked movement, Smithson plots out the first line of a drawing that he must make the effort to construct himself mentally (one could just as easily do it on paper) throughout the text and photos. Using a thick line (the first), he connects the verticality of New York (the second line), the symbol of an economic model par excellence that was intended to be triumphant, with the horizontality (third line) of the Passaic brownfield. This horizontality quickly gives way to an inverted verticality (fourth line – excuse the didacticism, which I will now abandon but that should, in reality, be pursued), when Smithson tells us that the ruins we see are not those of the past but those of the future, of the world in the making—a system that inherently tends towards its own entropy.

Smithson's creative process developed within a context of continuous movement –

physical movement that doubles (and is inseparable) from movement in time (the past, but also, as in a science fiction novel, the future). Moving helps us see precisely because it allows us to connect a space to the timeline of its history and its destiny.

The context of the mid-60s is important for understanding Smithson's relationship to mobility. Robert Hobbs gives us some insight: "During this decade, in the United States, the inauguration of a vast highway network and the exploration of zones situated beyond the earth's stratosphere revolutionized the concept of space... The highways – or superhighways as they came to be called – would slash the American landscape and lay bare the very fiber of the earth's crust, its synclines and its anticlines, and the roughness of its rock strata. Driving along any superhighway meant going nowhere. Even moving, we seem to remain stationary. Beyond the windshield paraded a series of visual clichés, a landscape of imperturbable monotony: the same service stations, the same rest areas, the same cloverleaf intersections, the same motels... These highways thus constituted a kind of paved corridor that visually contracted America, which hitherto seemed to extend to infinity... The exploration of outer space has shrunk this infinity but this time into a "frozen" void... Although a vacuum, the space was neither open nor free; it wasn't another Far West, but something even greater, waiting to be conquered... In the minds of the late 50s and 60s, man, in space, appeared motionless and helpless. For this reason, space became synonymous with nowhere ¹¹."

The excitement surrounding the conquest of the West, those railroad tracks that opened new horizons of adventure and opportunity, which advanced thanks to the dreams of humankind to build a more just society - proclaimed the values of the New World, the model for all of humanity henceforth. These tracks we build now lead nowhere, Smithson tells us, or rather – which he proves – they lead to the development model that, for better or for worse, conceals its own ruined power, its next cataclysm.

We no longer go forth to lay the foundations for a new society; we do not build highways for ideals of freedom, justice or fulfillment but to respond to the dictates of a system that demands ever-increasing efficiency for even greater profitability, which standardizes and sterilizes the landscape—in short, a system that is doomed. Somewhere along the way, the objective veered from the Cape of Existence to that of a disembodied economy. And Smithson, here the embodiment of the romantic *Wanderer*¹², hides his melancholy in this world so thoroughly disenchanting behind ironic humor. The scar that is Passaic, which he wields before us screamingly, asks us: toward what gold is modern society rushing now?

Robert Smithson was an avid reader and, as we know, was particularly fond of science fiction writer J.G. Ballard ¹³. Many parallels can be drawn between his work and that of Ballard. In the short story "The Voices of Time" (1960), Ballard has his scientist-character Powers build a mandala, a giant concrete ideogram on a salt lake, not unlike Smithson's iconic work Spiral Jetty, on the Great Salt Lake in Utah in 1970. In Ballard's story we also find this idea of roads (here, journeys into outer space) without destination:

"[...] had a long discussion about the Mercury Seven. He's convinced that they refused to leave the moon deliberately, after the 'reception party' waiting for them had put them in the cosmic picture. They were told by the mysterious emissaries from Orion that the exploration of deep space was pointless, that they were too late as the life of the universe is now virtually over ¹⁴ !!!"

Can we see an incarnation of these roads, highways and bus routes in this convoluted

path that is Spiral Jetty, for instance? A path that leads nowhere, that spirals into itself until everything stops (the black hole at the end of the spiral) and dies – the ultimate point of “crystallization.”

“At the end, he [Robert Smithson, walking on Spiral Jetty] takes a few moments, seemingly waiting – for what, it’s not clear. Perhaps this crystallization...of which the forest and people who venture into it in J.G. Ballard’s novel *The Crystal World* - about whose publication Smithson (himself enamored by crystallography) was enthused - are the victims ¹⁵ .”

Over the years, the rising waters of the Great Salt Lake have also destroyed Spiral Jetty, as though the natural processes themselves sought to attest to the modern entropy embodied by the highway to nowhere along which Smithson walks, in Passaic—the aimless path of the “spiral jetty.”

“The big spirals are breaking up, and they’re saying goodbye ¹⁶ .”

Exhibition Centre Pompidou Metz, *Sublime. Les tremblements du monde*, from the 11th of February to the 5th of September 2016. Curator: Hélène Guenin. Informations

Photo credit: "Robert Smithson, Asphalt Rundown, Rome, Italy 1969 © Adagp, Paris 2015 et Art © Holt-Smithson Foundation/ ADAGP, Paris, 2015 pour Robert Smithson"

Notes

1 Robert Smithson, *Earth*, symposium at White Museum, Cornell University, 1970, in *The Writings of Robert Smithson, Essays with illustrations*, Edited by Nancy Holt, designed by Sol LeWitt, New York University Press, New York, 1979, p. 162.

2 See our post : Robert Smithson’s Many Flights.

3 Narrative work of art” and “narrative sculpture” are expressions used by Robert Hobbs in “Robert Smithson, Articulator of Nonspace,” *Robert Smithson: Retrospective, A.R.C* exhibition catalog – Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, The Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1982, p.13 et 19.

4 Entropy is a term used by Robert Smithson. From the Greek entropia, meaning a return to the past. Phys. In thermodynamics, “the degree of disorder or uncertainty in a system: CHAOS, DISORGANIZATION, RANDOMNESS,” in Merriam-Webster, 2014.

5 The story takes place on a land (planet?) rendered inhabitable by the presence of massive quantities of chemicals in the exhausted soil. “The soil surface has become virtually as inhospitable as that of Mars.” As part of a global sanitation project, the seas are crisscrossed by giant freighters carrying sand from Africa to be transformed into earth. In the catastrophic and unpredictable circumstances that govern the times, the hero must make a decision regarding the “desperate act which alone will redeem the dying world” (Kay Larson, “Les Excursions géologiques de Robert Smithson,” in *Robert Smithson, le Paysage Entropique, 1960 – 1973*, exhibition catalogue, Musées de Marseille, RMN, 1994, p.42).

6 Robert Smithson, “Une visite aux monuments de Passaic, New Jersey,” (our translation) in *Robert Smithson, le Paysage Entropique, 1960 – 1973*, exhibition catalogue, Musées de Marseille, RMN, 1994, p.180.

7 See the creative process described by Gilles Deleuze, based notably on the painting of Francis Bacon.

8 Jack Kerouac, *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*: "SET-UP The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image object... CENTER OF INTEREST Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outward swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion...", 1958.

9 British anthropologist and author of *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (2011), Routledge edition, London.

10 INGOLD Tim, *Une brève histoire des lignes*, Editions Zones Sensibles, Brussels, 2011, cited in *Une brève histoire des lignes*, Exhibition catalogue, 2013, Centre Pompidou Metz.

11 Robert Hobbs "Robert Smithson, Articulator of Nonspace," in "Robert Smithson, Articulator of Nonspace," *Robert Smithson: Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue A.R.C – Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, The Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1982, p. 12.

12 The wanderer or traveler, a key figure in German romanticism.

13 The similarities between Smithson's and J.G. Ballard's vision have already been noted... The short stories Ballard published at the beginning of the 60's evoke a post-apocalyptic world inhabited by a few rare survivors; a world that is inexorably shifting towards its original condition, a primordial state where dreams of progress survive only as residue" (our translation) James Lingwood, "L'Entropologue" in *Robert Smithson, le Paysage Entropique, 1960 – 1973*, catalogue d'exposition, Musées de Marseille, RMN, 1994, p. 34.

14 J.G Ballard, *The Voices of Time* (1963), Phoenix, London.

15 Commentary on the film *Spiral Jetty* (Robert Smithson) by Michel Gauthier in *Les promesses du zéro*, Les presses du réel, Collection Mamco, Geneva, 2009, p. 15.

16 J.G Ballard, *Les Voix du temps* (1960), in *Nouvelles complètes*, vol.1 (1956 – 1962), 2008, p. 324.

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

[More](#)

Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

[More](#)

- ¹ <http://www.centrepompidou-metz.fr/robert-smithson>
- ² <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/movement-460>
- ³ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/mobility-450>