ROBERT SMITHSON: PLOTTING A LINE FROM PASSAIC, NEW JERSEY, TO AMARILLO, TEXAS

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Robert Smithson is perhaps best known as a pioneer of the Earthworks movement and the creator of the iconic *Spiral Jetty* (1970). However, his involvement in the development of Earthworks is only one of his many contributions to postwar American art. One of the most important concepts Smithson advanced was that of the "site," a place in the world where art is inseparable from its context.[1] His sites included remote locations like Rozel Point, on the north shore of the Great Salt Lake; the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico; the art museum and the white cube of the gallery; and the pages of art magazines like *Artforum*, where he published some of his essays. By encompassing both conventional exhibition venues and far-flung locations within his practice, Smithson performed a kind of institutional critique, pointing to the geographical and cultural limitations that the purportedly neutral spaces of museums impose on art.

In addition to large-scale land interventions, Smithson's artistic practice included photography and film; he seamlessly crossed the boundaries between media and site to expand the parameters of art as it was defined in the 1960s, both in the formalist terms of Clement Greenberg and those of his Minimalist contemporaries. Language also played a prominent role in Smithson's practice. He was a prolific writer, publishing articles and essays in the leading art magazines of his day as well as utilizing language as another concrete material to be used to construct his work. While formally diverse, the continuity of ideas that he played out in different media made for a unified artistic practice. Although a plane crash ended his life prematurely at the age of thirty-five, Smithson's originality and influence more than compensate for the brevity of his career.

From what we know, there was nothing out of the ordinary about Robert Irving Smithson's middle-class upbringing in suburban New Jersey. Born in 1938 in Passaic, Smithson, an only child, moved shortly thereafter with his parents to nearby Rutherford. His father, Irving, was an automobile mechanic who later became vice-president of a mortgage firm. He was a Protestant and his wife, Susan, a Catholic. Smithson's well-known love of travel, natural history, and the earth sciences developed during his childhood. At the age of eight his parents took him on his first major trip, a tour around the United States. The trip made a huge impression on him, and he later recalled putting on postcard shows for his friends upon his return.[2] Two years later, his family moved to Clifton, where his father built a small natural history museum and zoo with reptiles, fossils, and artifacts in the basement of the house. Smithson planned the itineraries of family vacations, which included trips to Sanibel Island, Florida; the Grand Canyon; Yellowstone National Park; and northern California. They visited Ross Allen's Reptile Institute in Silver Springs, Florida, twice. Thinking he might become a naturalist or zoologist, Smithson paid frequent visits to the American Museum of Natural History in New York with his father, who particularly liked the dioramas.[3]

Smithson's New Jersey upbringing shaped his artistic sensibility. The Garden State offered an abundance of raw material for his future art practice in that it contained both a geological record of the earth's past and a cultural landscape of modern America—with its diners, tract housing, shopping malls, and highways. Poet William Carlos Williams (who happened also to be Smithson's pediatrician) echoed Smithson's deep affinity for the distinctive archaeology of New Jersey in his prose poem *Paterson* (1946–58). As Smithson later recalled, "the Paterson area is where I had a lot of my contact with quarries and...that is somewhat embedded in my psyche. As a kid I used to go and prowl

Opposite:
Smithson on the steps of his childhood home, Clifton, New Jersey, c. 1960

Below:
Quicksand, 1959

1. For a list of "recent site developments," see Robert Smithson, "Untitled (Site Data)" (1968), in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 362 (hereafter *Writings*).
2. Smithson, interview with Paul Cummings, 14 and 19 July 1972, in *Writings*, 278–79.
3. Ibid., 279.

around all those quarries."[4] He linked his essay "The Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967) to *Paterson*, which he felt captured "that kind of New Jersey landscape."[5] As an adult, Smithson made frequent excursions back across the Hudson River, guiding friends from his adopted home of Manhattan to out-of-the-way quarries and airfields. Shuttling back and forth contributed to an awareness of "here" and "there," center and periphery, which he explored in many aspects of his work.

Like many teenagers, Smithson found high school boring and the suburban atmosphere of his hometown, Clifton, "stifling."[6] In search of a more stimulating and open environment, in the fall of 1954, during his third year of high school, he enrolled in evening classes at the Art Students League in New York, where he continued to study through the spring of 1956. On the basis of *Woodcuts* (1955), which features vignettes of teenage life,[7] he received a scholarship for the 1955–56 academic year. Smithson's training at the Art Students League focused on basic foundation courses: cartooning, life drawing, painting, and composition.[8] In his last two years of high school, he added a sketch class, spending Saturdays at painter Isaac Soyer's studio.[9] Of his time at the Art Students League, Smithson said, "it gave me an opportunity to meet younger people and others who were sort of sympathetic to my outlook. There wasn't anybody in Clifton who I was close to except for one person—Danny Donahue. He got interested in art, but eventually he did go crazy and was killed in a motorcycle accident."[10]

Around this time Smithson met Alan Brilliant, an undergraduate at Columbia University with artistic and literary aspirations, and joined the Friday Night Seminar, a non-credit seminar Brilliant had formed with the help of one his professors.[11] A dozen or so students from Columbia and the High School of Music and Art met weekly to discuss visits made beforehand to an art gallery, "usually Sidney Janis," focusing on a particular artist, "usually an Abstract Expressionist."[12] Often on Friday nights, Smithson would stay over at Brilliant's apartment on Upper Park Avenue, visiting museums, galleries, and bookshops the following day. He also began to frequent the Cedar Tavern, the legendary hangout of New York School painters and poets.[13]

Smithson in his childhood museum of reptiles, fossils, and artifacts, Clifton, New Jersey, c. 1960

Despite the physical awkwardness of adolescence, Smithson was articulate and self-possessed when it came to his views on art. Brilliant's recollection was that "Bob was utterly confident of his own art opinions—of his own talent. He never had any doubts whatsoever.... [He] never *discussed* art. He pronounced. Bob didn't 'dialogue' with people. His sentences didn't end, '...isn't it?' He didn't speak to you. He spoke about art in a *monologue*.... Bob had no interest in what other people said about art unless it led him to some primary source that he would then investigate (in his botanist way) *himself*."[14]

Through Brilliant, a day manager at the Eighth Street Bookshop in the West Village, which served as a magnet for artists and writers and a source for the latest intellectual

4. Ibid., 285.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 271.
7. Per Bj. Boym points out that *Woodcuts* (1955) corresponds to Smithson's description of a series of woodcuts he made to apply for admission to the Art Students League. Boym, "Sensuous Ethos," in *Robert Smithson: Retrospective, Works 1955–1973* (Oslo: The National Museum of Contemporary Art; Stockholm: Modern Museum; and Ishøj, Denmark: Arken Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 43 n. 1.
8. Smithson's card at the Art Students League listing classes and scholarships was shown to me in 1988 by Lawrence Campbell.
9. Smithson, interview with Cummings, *Writings*, 271, 279.
10. Ibid., 274.
11. According to Alan Brilliant, the seminar ran from 1955 to 1959 and was held at the home of Gilbert Carpenter, his art and humanities professor at Columbia. Carpenter later became the director of the Weatherspoon Art Gallery at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Undated letter from Brilliant to the author, postmarked 13 April 1989.
12. Ibid.
13. Smithson, interview with Cummings, *Writings*, 281.
14. Undated letter from Brilliant to the author, postmarked 13 April 1989. The words "unless it led him to some primary source" were written in capital letters.

trends, Smithson got a job at the store packing books. Ted Wilentz, one of the bookstore's owners, remembered Smithson as "young and unprepossessing, tall, lean and gangly with a bad complexion." He was "a shy young man who stood with his arms crossed," although he was "a great talker when asked."[15] Wilentz recalled being as impressed by the way Smithson said things as by what he said. When Smithson left the bookstore after six months, he had made enough of an impression on Wilentz that they stayed in touch for the next several years.

In the summer of 1956, Brilliant commissioned the eighteen-year-old Smithson to design the cover for the first issue of *Pan*, a small poetry magazine he published at Columbia. Smithson's design for this cover and the three that followed are in a bold expressionist style that reflect his admiration for the work of artists such as Oskar Kokoschka, James Ensor, and Hieronymous Bosch. Brilliant admired Dante Alighieri and Willam Blake and, accompanied by Smithson, visited an exhibition of British art at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where they were thrilled to see original works by Blake.[16] Smithson's favorites were Blake's *Jerusalem* (1804–20) and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790). In addition to the ideal of the poet-painter, Smithson and Brilliant both admired what Brilliant called "the art of the French book," collaborations between painters and poets exemplified by Edouard Manet and Stéphane Mallarmé.[17] According to Brilliant, Smithson didn't know a great deal about poetry but liked Blake, Ezra Pound, and Williams.[18] At the same time he was drawn to visionary and expressionistic traditions in art and literature, Smithson was also familiar with the rationality of scientific thinking, having studied physical, chemical, and botanical texts. Brilliant recalled Smithson's talent for employing scientific jargon in an artistic context; he coined the term "chromium monolith" to describe the newly completed Seagram Building (which Brilliant said Smithson didn't like). His friendship with Brilliant reinforced Smithson's respect for the artist-writer along with his regard for language as material and writing as an art form, concepts that played significant roles later in his career.

After graduating from high school in 1956, Smithson joined the United States Army Reserve, where he was assigned to special services and sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for basic training. After receiving an honorable discharge the following year, he hitchhiked around the United States and Mexico, visiting a Hopi Indian reservation and hiking the length of Canyon de Chelly[19] before settling in Manhattan. Smithson never attended college; instead he acquired a vast reservoir of knowledge through his travels and extensive reading. His unconventional way of looking at things reflected the vantage point of an autodidact.

By Smithson's own assessment, he "began to function as a conscious artist around 1964–65": "I think I started doing works then that were mature. I would say that prior to the 1964–65 period I was in a kind of groping, investigating period."[20] As for his writing, "that started in 1965–1966. But it was a self-taught situation. After about five years of thrashing around on my own, I started to pull my thoughts together and was able to begin writing."[21] Smithson's work during this period of groping and investigation reveals a young artist attempting to find his way, swinging between the sacred and secular, drawing on themes from religion and science, mythology, and popular culture. The work also reveals consistent areas of interest—such as language as a means of expression, a unique vision of the landscape, and a cosmic sense of time—which were to remain constant throughout his career.

Although he had presented a large number of his paintings and works on paper in 1957 at Brilliant's apartment,[22] Smithson's first one-person gallery exhibition in New York took place in fall 1959 at the Artists' Gallery.[23] Portraying fantastic and literary themes, the

15. Ted Wilentz, telephone conversation with the author, fall 1987.
16. The exhibition must have been "Masters of British Painting 1800–1950," on view from 2 October through 2 December 1956.
17. Brilliant, conversation with the author, 12 July 1990.
18. Ibid.
19. Smithson, interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 280.
20. Ibid., 283.
21. Ibid., 272.
22. Brilliant recalled that Smithson showed about fifty works in his apartment at 1265 Park Avenue in December 1957. Conversation with the author, 12 July 1990.
23. For a checklist of the exhibition, see the Artists' Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter AAA), reel D313, frame 1182.

Coronado's Journey, 1959
Acrylic on canvas
Dimensions and location unknown

sixteen paintings on view continued Smithson's exploration of expressionism. Thickly impastoed and collaged images of snarling monsters—*White Dinosaur*, *Blue Dinosaur*, and *Flesh Eater* (all 1959)—received the most attention and were described by one critic as portraying "caged, raving, multi-eyed dinosaurs and flesh eaters" that were "whelped by Surrealism and primitive art...reared by frenzied Action Painting."[24] A similar creature occupies the central panel of the triptych *Walls of Dis* (1959) presented in the exhibition and one of several paintings and poems Smithson based on Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1307–21). Other paintings in the exhibition bore titles including *Portrait of a Lunatic*, *Portrait of a Transvestite*, *Coronado's Journey*, *The Ruins*, and *The Assassin* (all 1959).[25]

In Smithson's second one-person exhibition during the summer of 1961, the emergence of religious themes in paintings like *Jesus Mocked*, *Consumatum Est*,[26] and *Blind Angel* (all 1961) represented a dramatic new turn in his work. The exhibition took place at Galleria George Lester in Rome, the result of Lester's visit to New York in the fall of 1960, when he spotted Smithson's *Quicksand* (1959) in the window of Charles Alan Gallery.[27] Lester found the painting intriguing, tracked down the artist, and offered him a show. Some of the paintings at Galleria Lester were part of a larger body of work based on themes from the Passion of Christ and the overarching theme of redemption.[28] This group included *Ecce Homo* and *Creeping Jesus* (both 1961), two paintings with collage featured in a group show at Alan Gallery in spring 1961.[29] The distinctive color combination of black, white, and red that characterizes *Jesus Mocked*, *Feet of Christ* (1961), and *The Eye of Blood* (1960) is echoed in some of the twenty-two poems Smithson wrote during this period. The poems appear to be part of an intended series of twenty-five "Incantations" that he hoped to publish along with reproductions of some of his paintings.[30] He intended to include his incantation "To the Flayed Angels" as a preface to the catalogue for the exhibition at Galleria Lester.[31] In this incantation the colors red, black, and white correspond to the sacrament of communion in Catholicism:

> In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.
> In the colors of the White, Red and Black
> Action against Passion
> Passion against Action.
> This is the Divine Agony, the Blood
> Drenched Glory and the Wound of Infinite Joy.
> Let the color Red turn into Wine and blood.
> Let the Flesh and Blood atone
> For the emptiness.[32]

24. I[rving] H. S[andler], "Robert Smithson at Artists'." *ARTnews* 58, no. 6 (October 1959): 18. An altogether different point of view is expressed by Margaret Breuning, who refers to "blue and white dinosaurs, which look like objects out of a Victorian china closet," *Arts Magazine* (October 1959): 53. Smithson later discussed these paintings in the exhibition in relation to Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Jean Dubuffet. Interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 275.
25. An excellent discussion of this exhibition can be found in Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 282–87.
26. Illustrated in *Robert Smithson: Retrospective*, 19. Smithson felt this was one of the "best paintings" he'd ever done. Letter to George Lester, 1 May 1961, Robert Smithson letters to George B. Lester, 1960–63, AAA (hereafter RSGBL), reel 5438, frame 1257. Interestingly, the painting wasn't shown in the exhibition.
27. Lester, in conversation with the author, 18 November 1987. Smithson described *Quicksand* (1959) as "fundamentally abstract, [with] sort of olives and yellows and pieces of paper stapled onto it; it had a kind of incoherent landscape look to it." Interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 275.
28. A checklist of the twenty-four paintings on view appears in the brochure that accompanied the exhibition. The evolution of the exhibition can be traced through Smithson's letters to Lester in RSGBL.
29. The reviewer singled out *Ecce Homo* in his discussion of Smithson's work. See R[ichard] H[ayes], "New Work By New Artists at Alan," *ARTnews* 60, no. 2 (April 1961): 20.
30. Smithson, letter to Lester, 17 May 1961, RSGBL, reel 5438, frames 1262–66. I thank Tom Crow for bringing these letters to my attention.
31. Smithson letter to Lester, 1 May 1961, RSGBL, reel 5438, frame 1255. Lester remembered vetoing an "extremely religious" preface, conversation with the author, 18 November 1987. Smithson, "Incantation to the Flayed Angels," RSGBL, reel 5438, frames 1248–51. Smithson changed the phrases "white paint" and "red paint" into "color white" and "color red," frame 1252, which appears in an alternate version, "To the Flayed Angels," published in my *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings*, exh. cat. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 56–58.
32. Smithson, RSGBL, reel 5438, frame 1252.

These colors would appear a decade later in *Spiral Jetty*, a 1,500-foot coil of black basalt and earth encrusted with white salt crystals rising out of the red water of Utah's Great Salt Lake.

By no means a practicing Catholic, Smithson later felt that his adoption of religious imagery grew out of his fascination with the "façade" of Catholicism,[33] which he saw, in retrospect, as an outgrowth of his interest in beginnings: "the archetypal nature of things.... this was always haunting me all the way until about 1959 and 1960 when I got interested in Catholicism through T. S. Eliot and through that range of thinking."[34] His trip to Rome for the exhibition at Galleria Lester and excursions to other cities in Italy led him to further consider the history of the Judeo-Christian origins of Western civilization and the role religion played in art.[35] In works such as *Dies Irae* (1961), only the title (Day of Wrath) indicates the religious significance of a cross section of landscape representing heaven, earth, and the underworld, realms relevant to the Day of Judgment. The exhibition at Galleria Lester also included other fantastic landscapes utilizing cross sections, with titles like *Vile Flower*, *Black Grass* (both 1961), and *Petrified Wood* (1962)[36] suggestive of malevolent forces of nature rather than overtly religious content.

Some of the desolate landscapes described by Smithson in the Incantations seem to anticipate his later work:

> On the dim landscape
> On the desolate mountain
> On the parched earth.
> On the burnt desert.
> On the dusty ground.
> On the garbage dump.
> On the dung heap.
> On the blasted heath.
> On the empty plain.
> This is our inheritance...
> La Bas: Rocks falling on rocks
> Stones falling on stones.
> Sand falling on sand.
> Dust falling on dust.[37]

Vile Flower, 1961

Dies Irae, 1961

The bleak apocalyptic landscapes described in "To the Man of Ashes" (c. 1961) resemble the kind of desolate and disrupted sites he later sought out for his Nonsites and Displacements and as locations for his Earthworks. *A Quarry in Upper Montclair, New Jersey* (1960), a rare early landscape drawing that appears to be based on observation, suggests that Smithson overlaid the vision of apocalyptic landscapes described in his poetry onto the "entropic" landscapes of the quarries he explored in his youth. Swirling lines radiating from several circular foci that cover the quarry wall resemble the stigmata in some of Smithson's depictions of Christ from this period, such as *Feet of Christ*. The wound-like shapes depicted in *A Quarry in Upper Montclair* imbue this otherwise straightforward drawing with a visionary quality not unlike the works from this period based on religious themes.

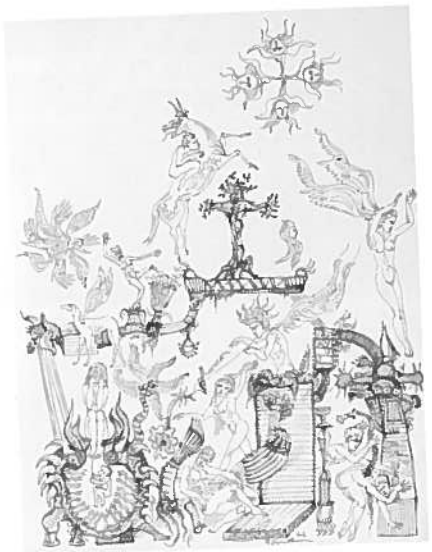
In 1960 Smithson also produced a series of pencil drawings collectively titled The End of Man. The title is announced on a frontispiece in large embellished letters, accompanied by a quotation from St. Ignatius of Loyola: "Man has been created to praise, reverence [*sic*], and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul: and the other things upon the face of the earth are created for man; to help him in the pursuit of the end for

33. Smithson, interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 282.
34. Ibid., 286.
35. Ibid., 282.
36. Boym links these paintings to the Cobra artists in "Sensuous Ethos," 21.
37. Smithson, "To the Man of Ashes" (c. 1961), unpublished manuscript, Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers, 1905–1987, AAA (hereafter RSNHP), reel 3834, frame 21

which he is created." Characterized by a linear style reminiscent of Byzantine art, these figurative allegorical drawings depict *The City*, *The Museum*, *Empire*, *The Street*, and *Earth*.[38] They correspond to Smithson's recollection of "phantasmagorical drawings of cosmological worlds somewhat between Blake and...oh, a kind of Boschian imagery.... They were sort of based on iconic situations.... They dealt with explicit images like, the city; they were kind of monstrous as well, you know, like great Moloch figures."[39] Although the themes are secular, the frontispiece, with the quotation from St. Ignatius, serves as a reminder of the series' spiritual dimension. Around this time Smithson produced several series of drawings, including *Hitler's Opera* (1960) and *The Days of Atrophy: A Preparation for Annihilation* (1961).[40] While the former series demonstrates a narrative not always evident in the other, Smithson's utilization of the serial format suggests a desire to incorporate the passage of time in his art, a concern manifested in his later sculpture and films and in the storyboards he drew for them.

Around 1961–62 Smithson authored one of his earliest essays, "The Iconography of Desolation,"[41] which can only be called an impassioned phantasmagorical rant about the state of art at that time. With far-ranging references to then-recent art movements—Abstract Expressionism, Pop, and Happenings—and artists, religious iconography, Albert Einstein, space, time, and vernacular culture (Hamburger Heaven), the essay reveals Smithson's soul-searching struggle to come to terms with what art-making could mean in the modern world. Although the religious references that dominated his Incantations are still in evidence, incipient tones of the cool irony that came to characterize his published writings can be detected beneath his smoldering text. The wild mix of imagery found in the twelve-page typewritten manuscript, not published during his lifetime, corresponds to the various themes in his art of the period.

Untitled, 1962



An untitled drawing from 1962 depicting fluidly drawn frolicking nudes and imaginary creatures that could have been derived from pagan myths[42] appeared on the poster for his solo exhibition "Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings for Lent," held in spring of that year at Richard Castellane Gallery. One reviewer wrote that Smithson "bases his hard edgy single-line drawings on a dream sequence mystagogy complete with anthropomorphic appearance and several types of many-splendored apparitions. His out-of-mind creatures with doodled heads move atop burdensome, boneless limbs through a Saul Steinberg dream of a Breughel gambol."[43] A number of drawings from 1962 featuring trees morphing into humans show Smithson revisiting Dante's *Divine Comedy*, specifically the canto in *Inferno* describing a forest that imprisons the souls of those who die by their own hand. Among the works are the drawings *Blind in the Valley of the Suicides* and *Birth in the Valley of the Suicides*, as well as the painting *From the Valley of the Suicides* (all 1962).[44] The anthropomorphism of these early images potentially colors the view of Smithson's later sculptures using dead trees long after he had abandoned figurative work.

38. The precise number of drawings in this series has yet to be determined with certainty. In a letter to Lester, Smithson mentioned this series: "William Lieberman Curator of Graphic Art at the Museum of Modern Art likes my series of pencil drawings called *The End of Man* and has put them before 'the Board' for possible purchase." Smithson, letter to Lester, 3 September 1961, RSGBL, reel 5438, frame 1291.
39. Smithson, interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 289.
40. These are illustrated in *Robert Smithson: Retrospective*, 138–41. The intended sequence is unknown. John Weber, Smithson's former dealer, arranged them in their current order. In a letter to Lester, Smithson wrote: "I also have about 60 new drawings for a series called *The Last Day: A Preparation for Annihilation*." Smithson, letter to Lester, 26 December 1961, RSGBL, reel 5438, frame 1299. In another letter, probably from around the time of his show at Richard Castellane Gallery in spring 1962, he mentioned a series of forty to fifty drawings titled "The Days of Atrophy—A Preparation for Annihilation." Smithson, letter to Lester, undated, RSGBL, reel 5438, frame 1302.
41. Smithson, "The Iconography of Desolation" (c. 1962), in *Writings*, 320–27.
42. Although the specific works included in this exhibition cannot be determined, they might be related in style and imagery to *Drawings from Shrovetide*, eight pen-and-ink drawings from 1961–62 reproduced in *The Minnesota Review* 3, no. 2 (winter 1963): 246–54. The works were reproduced courtesy of Richard Castellane Gallery, New York.
43. V[alerie] P[etersen], "Robert Smithson at Castellane," *ARTnews* 61, no. 2 (April 1962): 58.
44. Boym compares these works to Ovid's Daphne in "Sensuous Ethos," 21.

Blind in the Valley of the Suicides, 1962

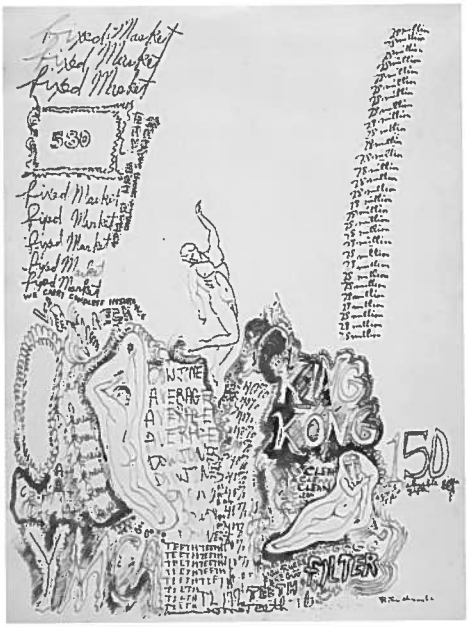
Birth in the Valley of the Suicides, 1962

From the Valley of the Suicides, 1962

Blind in the Valley of the Suicides is one of a handful of works from 1960–62 that explores the theme of vision, or its absence, in different ways. The absence of sight is evident in *Jesus Mocked*, which portrays a blindfolded Christ in a moment of doubt, enduring the insults of his captors. *Blind Angel* juxtaposes the empty sockets of an angel's sightless eyes with the stigmata on its upraised hands. *The Eye of Blood* presents a close-up of an iris and pupil, encircled by drops of red that trickle like tears of blood. Smithson continued to address visuality in his work at various points in his career, including the essay "The Spiral Jetty" (1972). Here, he once again linked the eye to the color red: "On the slopes of Rozel Point I closed my eyes, and the sun burned crimson through the lids.... My eyes became combustion chambers churning orbs of blood blazing by the light of the sun."[45]

One writer summed up Smithson's fourth solo show, at Richard Castellane Gallery in fall 1962, by saying that "harmless horror is the theme of Robert Smithson's exhibition of 'bio-icons, specimens, chemicals,'"[46] while another mentioned "images [that] come from the biology labs."[47] Apparently Smithson had eliminated the mythological and religious imagery that characterized his earlier exhibitions. In a photograph of the installation, the artist stands next to several mixed-media pieces that would look at home in Chelsea today. Adopting the look of a science-fair project, one work features a panel bearing the stenciled words "Ammonium Hydroxide" hanging high on the wall with a row of glass jars, each labeled "sponge," lining its bottom edge. Another features jars lined up neatly in two rows on shelves. A third is a panel inscribed with the phrase "blue chemical" in stenciled letters that rests on the floor. At the time Smithson remarked: "I'm trying to achieve a sublime nausea by using the debris of science and making it superstitious. Religion is getting so rational that I moved into science because it seems to be the only thing left that's superstitious."[48] Smithson's decision to distance himself from religious themes around 1962–63 is also evident in *Bellini Dead Christ Supported by Angels* (1963), in which he transposed the religious imagery of Giovanni Bellini's painting into the language of popular culture. Or, as a comparison of *Dies Irae* and *Untitled (Permian Parapoid)*

45. Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty" (1972), in *Writings*, 148.
46. Fred W. McDarrah, "Harmless Horror," *Village Voice* (1 November 1962): 17.
47. G. R. Swenson, "Robert Smithson at Castellane," *ARTnews* 61, no. 8 (December 1962): 58.
48. His statement continued: "It's not that I'm for science, or anything like that. I just want to be completely uninvolved. All of this is a metamorphosis from religious iconology which I found a rather atrophied realm." See McDarrah, "Harmless Horror," 17. In 1972, Smithson described the wor in the exhibition: "For instance, I started working from diagrams. I would take like an evolutionary chart and then paint it somewhat in a kind of Johnsian manner...I took pickle jars and made up specimens and labeled them with curious scientific names.... I did a series of chemicals—I guess there was a tug of war going on between the organic and the crystalline." Interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 289–90.



Untitled (Fixed Market King Kong), 1962

(c. 1961–63) shows, Smithson was also capable of translating the structure of the schematic Christian cosmology of heaven, earth, and hell into the strata of geological ages, over which he inscribed text. The fall exhibition at Castellane was Smithson's last until 1965, when he reemerged in several group exhibitions with a new identity as a sculptor.

Science fiction, along with the earth sciences, provided themes for some of the collages Smithson began to make around 1960.[49] In contrast to *Ecce Homo* and *Creeping Jesus*, these collages are strictly secular. Space exploration appears in two untitled collages: in one, an astronaut advances across what resembles a lunar landscape, while in the other, a barely visible spaceship soars high above an ocean. Later collages—including *Untitled (The Time Travelers)* from 1964—approach science fiction from a slightly different angle. The contents of Smithson's library reveal that he was an avid fan of science fiction, both the traditional kind—with its optimistic belief in the progress made possible by technology—and the more pessimistic new wave of writers such as J. G. Ballard.[50]

King Kong, the freakish monster of science-fiction films, was one of Smithson's favorite subjects, appearing in works such as an untitled pen-and-ink drawing of 1962 and the collage *King Kong Meets the Gem of Egypt* (1972). *It's King Kong* (c. 1961–63) goes so far as to show the giant ape amidst a collage of New York landmarks and fragments of dialogue from the 1933 film *King Kong*. Coincidentally, the narrative of the film—in which a famous director of adventure movies journeys through uncharted waters, discovers a prehistoric world, and collects a colossal specimen to bring back to the center of civilization—shares similarities with the process through which Smithson produced his Nonsites.

Language provided visual building blocks for the collages, serving both compositional and signifying functions. For example, in *St. John in the Desert* (c. 1961–63), a reproduction of the painting by Raphael is surrounded by collaged notational diagrams of electrical circuits in a clever juxtaposition of the theological and technical symbols of light and energy. *Snow* (c. 1961–63) contrasts a newspaper photo of a polar bear with a mountain covered with the word "snow" delineated a number of times, like brushstrokes visually building up the mountain.

The collage technique extended to a series of graphic pen-and-ink drawings from 1962 in which Smithson inscribed what appear to be randomly selected words, numbers, and phrases on the page, employing a range of sizes and styles of script. Some parts of the drawings highlight a single word or phrase, such as "King Kong," and other parts consist of phrases like "fixed market" or "Dow Jones Average" scrawled a number of times. Small, neatly delineated nude figures are sometimes inserted into the rows of words or phrases. Not the least bit narrative, the combined words and phrases result in unexpected juxtapositions. When read aloud, the drawings create an incantatory tongue twister that suggests Smithson's delight in extravagant and nonsensical language.

During the following year, Smithson experimented with collages arranged in formats resembling cartouches. *Untitled (Hexagonal Center)* and *Untitled (Second Stage Injector)* (both 1963) invert the traditional compositional hierarchy of centrally positioned figures surrounded by a subsidiary frame or margin in that their borders contain small nude figures that draw the spectator's eye away from the center. Brightly colored, crisply delineated starbursts or lightning bolts interspersed among the figures give form to the sexual energy generated there. These works seem to coincide with Smithson's later recollection of drawings that "were somewhat like cartouches," which he credited with freeing him from the "whole notion of anthropomorphism," noting: "I got that out of my system."[51] Smithson later used the structure of the cartouche in his 1966 essay "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space." The layout of the article features centered blocks of texts framed by the "marginal" footnotes and images, which in this case compete with the text.[52]

49. Smithson's use of collage could be seen in the context of a general renewed interest in the technique, exemplified by "The Art of Assemblage," organized by William Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in 1961.
50. The first writer to discuss Smithson and science fiction was Thomas A. Zaniello, "'Our Future Tends to Be Prehistoric': Science Fiction and Robert Smithson," *Arts Magazine* 52, no. 9 (May 1978): 114–17. Also see my "The Sci-Fi Connection: The IG, J. G. Ballard, and Robert Smithson," in *This Is Tomorrow Today: The Independent Group and British Pop Art* (New York: The Institute for Art and Urban Resources, 1987), 71–75; and Robert A. Sobieszek, *Robert Smithson: Photo Works* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 19–22.
51. Smithson, interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 289.
52. For a compelling analysis of "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space" from a post-structuralist perspective, see Jessica Prinz, "Words *en abîme*: Smithson's Labyrinth of Signs," in *Art Discourse/Discourse in Art* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 79–123.

Smithson continued to explore the erotic implications of the cartouches in *Honeymoon Machine* (1964), a mixed-media wall construction whose split-level composition is a nod to Marcel Duchamp's *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–23). The jagged hot-pink frame around the female body in the lower half echoes the lightning bolt forms in his two-dimensional cartouches, once again suggesting a sexual charge. *Malibu* (1964), a wall piece constructed from segments of iridescent sheets of plastic, displays a similar jagged starburst form but has eliminated the figure entirely.[53]

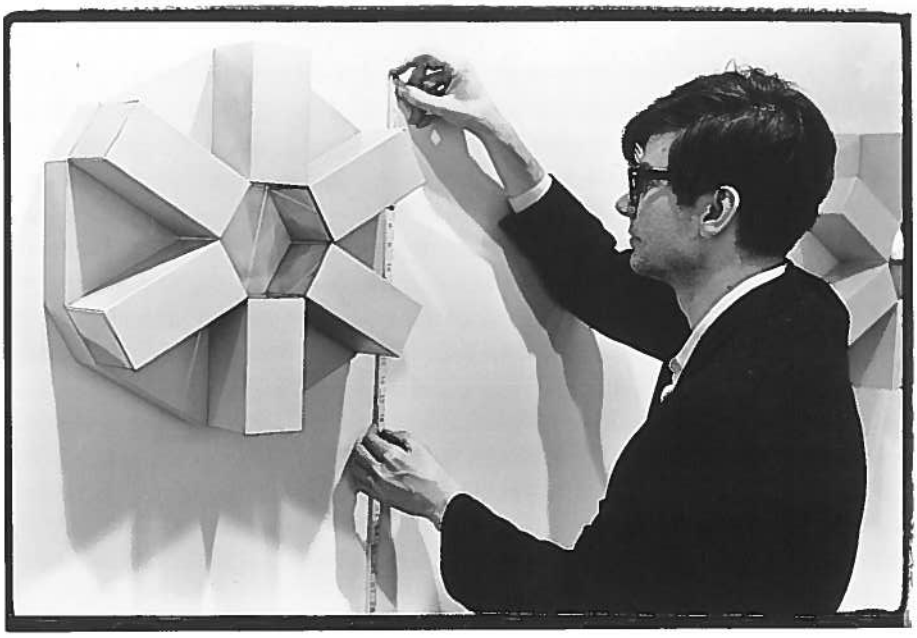
From this point forward Smithson's structures employ the language of abstraction. The zigzagging red neon tubes of *The Eliminator* (1964), Smithson's only sculpture using neon, draw on the motif of the lightning bolt that he utilized in a number of the contemporaneous cartouche collages. And as Robert Hobbs points out, its mirror structure anticipates the artist's mirrored corner pieces of 1969.[54] Flashing on at intervals, with the effect of the red light magnified by the mirrors, *The Eliminator* assaults the viewer's vision and extends the artist's exploration of sight. Smithson wrote: "*The Eliminator* overloads the eye whenever the red neon flashes on, and in so doing diminishes the viewer's memory dependencies or traces."[55]

The angular faceted shapes of his wall structures (1963–65) refer to crystalline structures, which Smithson favored as an alternative to the biological forms and metaphors of Abstract Expressionism. Fabricated from neon-colored plastic, the reflective day-glo surfaces of these structures lead us to believe that we will see ourselves. But the works defy that expectation by instead mirroring the floor, ceiling, or another part of the room—similar to the way the cartouches deflect our gaze away from the center towards the periphery of the work. Although Smithson conceived these wall structures in terms of painting, he also intended that they engage the surrounding architecture, to the point that they "undermined" the interior structure of the room.[56]

Smithson regarded a related piece, *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1965), as representing "an area of abstraction was really rooted in crystal structure" and claimed that the piece freed him from his previous preoccupations with history.[57] Unlike the faceted crystalline wall pieces, the two-part structure of *Enantiomorphic Chambers*[58] refers to an enantiomorph, which is "either of a pair of crystalline chemical compounds whose molecular structures have a mirror-image relationship to each other."[59] In May 1966, the work was shown in "Art in Process: The Visual Development of a Structure" at the Finch College Museum of Art. Smithson's published statement "Interpolation of the Enantiomorphic Chambers" noted: "The chambers cancel out one's reflected image, when one is directly between the two mirrors...To see one's own sight means visible blindness."[60] *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, *The Eliminator*, and the wall structures continued to explore in a more literal fashion the theme of blindness found in Smithson's early religious paintings.[61]

Smithson in his studio on Greenwich Street, New York, 1964

53. Looking back, Smithson observed: "I gave up painting around 1963 and began to work plastics in a kind of crystalline way. And I began to develop structures based on a particular concern with the elements of material itself. But this was essentially abstract and devoid of any kind of mythological content." Interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 284.
54. Robert Hobbs, "The Works," *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 58. This book remains one of the most useful references on Smithson's sculpture.
55. Smithson, "The Eliminator" (1964), in *Writings*, 327.
56. Smithson, "A Short Description of Two Mirrored Crystal Structures" (1965), in *Writings*, 328.
57. Smithson, interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 287.
58. Now lost, a replica of *Enantiomorphic Chambers* was made under the auspices of the Smithson Estate for "Robert Smithson: Retrospective."
59. Hobbs, "The Works," 59, 61.
60. Smithson, "Interpolation of the Enantiomorphic Chambers" (1966), in *Writings*, 39–40. Writing about the exhibition, artist and critic Mel Bochner noted the visual paradoxes caused by the piece: "His *Enantiamorphic* [*sic*] *Chambers* cause the viewer to participate in his own blindness. There is no place from which the entire work can be seen. The mirrors, which reflect the supports and make them appear to be behind the wall plane, throw your point of view to a position behind you. You see what is impossible to see. That is perplexing." Bochner, "Art in Process—Structures," *Arts Magazine* 40, no. 9 (September–October 1966): 39.
61. These works also correspond to a general interest in optic and perceptual issues represented in "The Responsive Eye organized by Seitz at MOMA in 1965.



Smithson with *The Cryosphere* (1966), installation in "Primary Structures," The Jewish Museum, New York, 26 April 1966
Photograph by Fred W. McDarrah

Crystalline imagery continued to pervade Smithson's sculpture and writing. Composed of six hexagonal painted steel units with mirrored chrome insets, *The Cryosphere* (1966), a modular wall piece that refers to ice crystals,[62] appeared in the 1966 exhibition "Primary Structures" at the Jewish Museum, New York. This landmark exhibition set out to define then-recent trends in sculpture, including an expanded sense of scale and the tendency to move work off the pedestal and into the environment.[63] In "The Crystal Land" (1966), Smithson compared a pink Plexiglas box by Donald Judd to "a giant crystal from another planet." In "Donald Judd" (1965), his first published essay, Smithson drew on terminology drawn from crystallography to analyze the structure of this same work.[64] "The Crystal Land"—whose title resembles *The Crystal World* (1966), a science-fiction story by Ballard[65]—introduces Smithson's concept of the "entropic" landscape as a natural and cultural phenomenon. Describing an outing to the Great Notch Quarry taken with Judd and others, Smithson observed: "The walls of the quarry did look dangerous. 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."[66] The dissolution of the natural landscape found its corollary in the surrounding cultural landscape:

> The terrain is flat and loaded with "middle-income" housing developments with names like Royal Garden Estates, Rolling Knolls Farm, Valley View Acres, Split-level Manor, Babbling Brook Ranch-Estates, Colonial Vista Homes—on and on they go, forming tiny boxlike arrangements.... The highways crisscross through the towns and become man-made geological networks of concrete. In fact, the entire landscape has a mineral presence. From the shiny chrome diners to glass windows of shopping centers, a sense of the crystalline prevails.[67]

In *The Crystal World*, Ballard described the mysterious crystallization of a forest in Africa: "The long arc of trees hanging over the water seemed to drip and glisten with myriads of prisms, the trunks and branches sheathed by bars of yellow and carmine light that bled away across the surface of the water, as if the whole scene were being reproduced by some overactive Technicolor process."[68] Smithson explored many aspects of

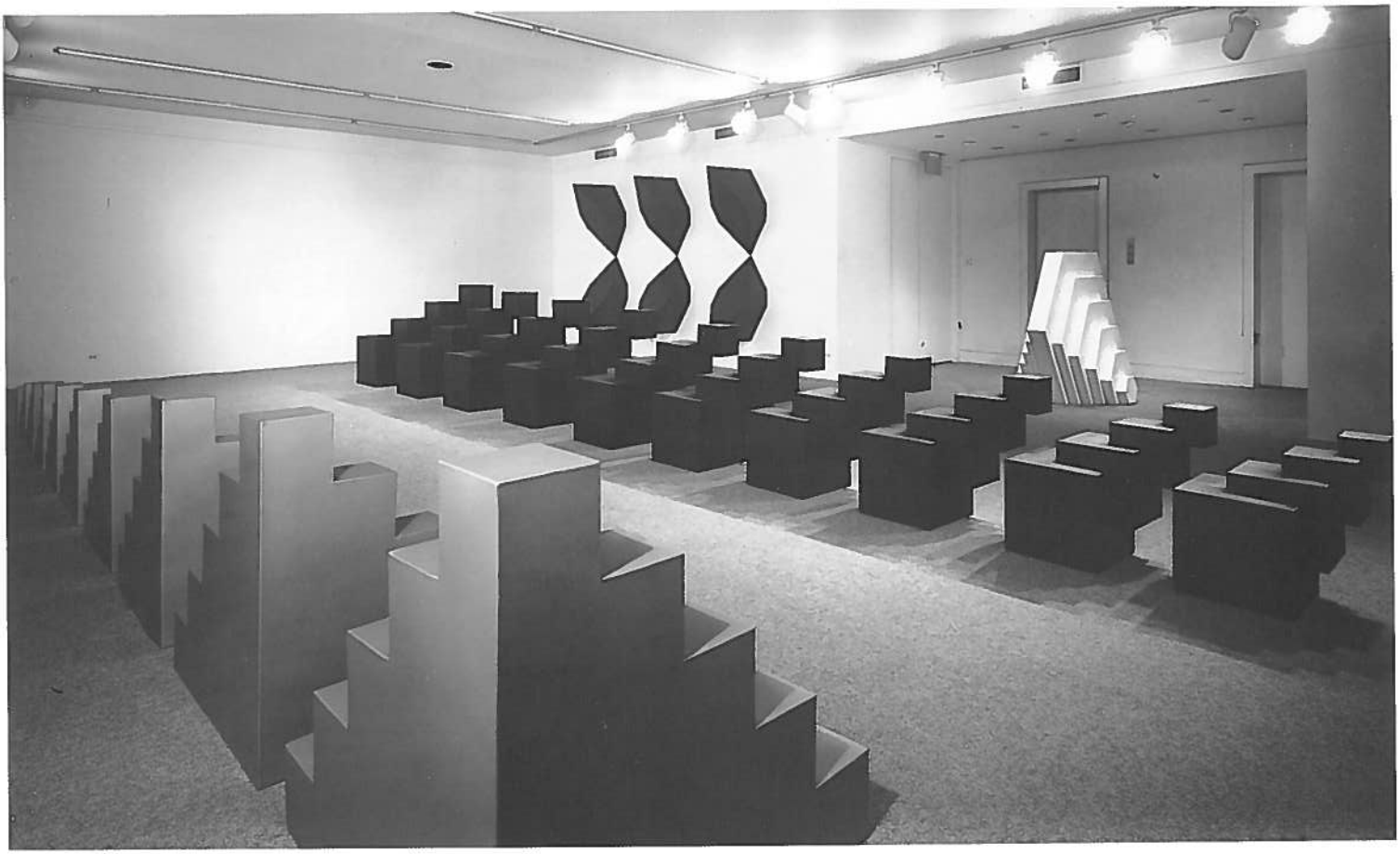
the entropic landscape in his subsequent sculpture and writing. Entropic landscapes are marginal, often removed from Manhattan (the center of the art world), and external to the gallery situation. They are banal, featuring the deadpan, nondescript vernacular architecture of highways, diners, and tract housing. Smithson described entropic landscapes as "low profile landscapes, the quarry or the mining area...a kind of backwater or fringe area."[69]

Two months after "Primary Structures" opened, Smithson's article "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966) addressed examples of new large-scale sculpture from the vantage points of science fiction, monuments, entropy, and the Second Law of Thermodynamics, "which extrapolates the range of entropy by telling us energy is more easily lost than obtained, and that in the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing sameness."[70] The essay moves beyond the narrowly circumscribed realm of art to discuss bland modernist architecture and its vernacular suburban counterpart as well as science-fiction and horror movies (and the movie houses in which such B-movies are shown) and "printed matter," offering a stark contrast to the expository art writing published by Smithson's contemporaries Judd and Robert Morris. Smithson later recalled the essay in terms of placing art outside the context of the museum and gallery: "And so the entropy article was full of suggestions of sites external to the gallery situation. There was all kinds of material in that article that broke down the usual confining aspect of academic art."[71]

"Entropy and the New Monuments" signaled the direction Smithson's own work would take as it moved not just off the pedestal but eventually out of the gallery altogether. Given his fascination with entropy and its implications, it seems ironic that the monument was another concept he continued to investigate in various forms; however, the traditional monument merely provided a point of departure for Smithson to explore his fascination with time on a scale that surpassed the human and encompassed the geological past and science-fiction future. His decision to incorporate mirrors and glass into structures reflects this cosmic sense of time: "Mirrors in time are blind, while transparent glass picks up reflections in this spaceless region of inverse symmetry and shifting perspectives—the mirror reflects the blank surface in the suburbs of the mind.... The mirror and the transparent glass bring us to those designations that remain forever abolished in the colorless infinities of a static perception."[72]

While the modular structure of *The Cryosphere* seems to conform to the characteristics of Minimal art, Smithson's subsequent structures—although sometimes categorized as Minimal—occupy that category with less ease. These works, including *Plunge* and *Alogon #2* (both 1966), debuted in his first solo exhibition at Dwan Gallery, New York, in December 1966.[73] Some critics who wrote about the show referred to Smithson as a leading figure of Minimalism.[74] Yet a number of sculptures on view seemed to contradict this association, as critic Lawrence Alloway pointed out, citing the "morphological"

62. Smithson, interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 292.
63. Kynaston McShine, introduction to *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors*, exh. cat. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1966), n.p. For an excellent analysis of the exhibition drawn from documentary material, see James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), 13–30.
64. Smithson, "Donald Judd" (1965), in *Writings*, 6.
65. J. G. Ballard, *The Crystal World*, first published in Great Britain by Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1966.
66. Smithson, "The Crystal Land" (1966), in *Writings*, 9.
67. Ibid., 8.
68. Ballard, *The Crystal World* (London: Triad/Panther Books, 1978), 68.
69. Smithson, interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 293.
70. Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966), in *Writings*, 11.
71. Smithson, interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 293.
72. Smithson, "The Shape of the Future and Memory" (1966), in *Writings*, 333.
73. A checklist of the exhibition and installation views can be found in the Dwan Gallery Archives, AAA.
74. Jeanne Siegel called him "The spokesman for the so-call 'minimal sculptors' (Judd, Morris, Flavin, LeWitt)," in J[eanne] S[iegel], "Robert Smithson," *Arts Magazine* 41, no. 3 (January 1967): 61.



"Robert Smithson," Dwan Gallery, New York, 1966

distance between seriality, a characteristic of Minimal art, and progression, which characterizes Smithson's works.[75] *Plunge* and *Alogon #2*, arranged in parallel rows as though they were a pair, are each composed of ten stepped units that increase (or decrease) incrementally in size. The invitation card for the exhibition unfolded to reveal data regarding the measurements of the units that constitute *Plunge*, along with a calendar showing the "number of days per positional change" of the units, which were rotated throughout the duration of the exhibition[76] so the positional rotations of *Plunge* present a contrast to the fixed components of *Alogon #2*. *Alogon #2* is the second of three pieces based on "a distinct contrapuntal mathematical system with the linear equation ordering each individual unit and the quadratic equation that the units manifest as a group."[77]

Alogon (1966), a stepped wall piece, had been shown the previous month at Dwan Gallery in "10," a group show organized by Ad Reinhardt and Smithson. Gallery owner Virginia Dwan recalled the "built-in" perspective of *Alogon* and the illusion it projected of "receding into an infinity which was really perhaps fifteen feet long."[78] Writers noted the resemblance of the stepped sculptures to past monuments, contemporary cities, and futuristic "lunar pads,"[79] as well as to *thirties moderne*,[80] an observation that was not so far off the mark considering Smithson's essay from that year, "Ultramoderne" (1967), which looked at Art Deco apartment buildings on Central Park West. Smithson situated a form resembling *Plunge* in two versions of *Proposal for a Monument at Anartica* (1966),[81] exploring the possibility of placing new monuments in situations well outside the gallery context, as he proposed to do in "Entropy and the New Monuments." The tear-shaped

Doubles and the hexagonal *Terminal* (both 1966), the other two major sculptures in the solo exhibition, also explore mirroring.

In 1966 language played a more prominent role in Smithson's work. He published six essays, the most he ever published in one year, and produced *A Heap of Language* (1966),[82] a drawing in which words—all related to language in some way—are arranged into a kind of Tower of Babel. It is not surprising that Smithson later drew analogies between the process of making sculpture and that of writing. Describing a sculpture, one of his Glass Stratas from the mid-1960s that "looks like a glass staircase made out of inch-thick glass," he remarked: "it's very green, very dense and kind of layered up. And my writing, I guess, proceeded that way. I thought of writing more as material to sort of put together than as a kind of analytic searchlight."[83] Smithson utilized this same process of layering in a number of his essays, including "Entropy and the New Monuments," "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" (1968), and "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" (1968). Each is assembled from several discrete, sometimes unrelated sections that were added one after the other, gradually constructing a collage of texts until it culminated in a complete piece.

A comparison of *A Heap of Language* and *Glass Strata* (1969) illuminates analogies between language and the earth's strata[84] that Smithson made in regard to earlier and later works. The interspersion of text in the layers of earth in *Untitled (Permian Parapoid)* occurs later in *Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction* (1970), a printed sheet Smithson made for *Aspen*, "the magazine in a box."[85] The format of *Strata* mimics a chart of the geological ages with excerpts from geological texts printed under photographs of fossils.

Smithson's continued engagement with language and its role in the visual arts compelled him to help organize "Language to Be Looked At and/or Things to Be Read," the first "Language" show at Dwan Gallery in summer of 1967.[86] The exhibition included work by historical figures like Duchamp, René Magritte, and Filippo Marinetti, as well as contemporary figures like Carl Andre, Walter De Maria, Robert Indiana, On Kawara, Sol LeWitt, Morris, and Reinhardt.[87] Smithson showed *Pulverizations* (1967)—"five profiles of foundations" that are diagrams for proto-Earthworks of a sort made by using a typewriter—and *Proposal for the Detection of Approximate Period Quantity* (1966), a sheet of paper visitors were welcome to take containing a set of instructions for determining the number of periods contained in a bookcase full of books. The resulting data was to be sent to the gallery, with "frontal photographs of bookcase—optional."[88] In addition, Smithson wrote the press release for the exhibition and signed it with the pseudonym "Eton Corrasable."[89]

75. Lawrence Alloway, "Robert Smithson's Development," *Artforum* 11, no. 3 (November 1972): 53. Written during Smithson's lifetime, this overview remains an insightful piece on the artist.
76. According to the invitation poster: "Each unit of the 10 units titled PLUNGE consists of 4 cubes (A<B<C<D) sequentially increasing in size by 3 inches from the bottom cube (A) to the top cube (D). The point of positional change is the vertical edge of the angle of A which is the most distral from the angle formed at the point of intersection of A and B." The invitation is in the Dwan Gallery Archives, AAA.
77. Hobbs, "The Works," 66.
78. Virginia Dwan, interview with Charles F. Stuckey, 21 March–7 June 1984, tape #6, AAA, 12–13.
79. Siegel, "Robert Smithson," 61.
80. James R. Mellow, "New York," *Art International* 11, no. 2 (20 February 1967): 66.
81. See Robert A. Sobieszek's essay in this volume for an expanded discussion of this work.
82. See Richard Sieburth's essay in this volume for an expanded discussion of this work.
83. Smithson, interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 294.
84. See Alexander Alberro's introduction to Smithson's library list in this volume for references to a discussion of the earth as text in the film *The Spiral Jetty*. Also see Gary Shapiro, "Printed Matter: A Heap of Language," in *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 153–90.
85. *Aspen*, no. 8 (fall 1970–winter 1971).
86. Smithson recalled that he and Sol LeWitt conceived of the "Language" shows at Dwan Gallery. Interview with Cummings, in *Writings*, 294.
87. A checklist of the exhibition can be found in the Dwan Gallery Archives, AAA. For a review of the exhibition, see Dennis Adrian, "New York," *Artforum* (September 1966): 56–60.
88. Smithson, "Proposal for the Detection of Approximate Period Quantity" (c. 1966), in *Writings*, 334.
89. Smithson, "Language to Be Looked At and/or Things to Be Read" (1967), in *Writings*, 61.

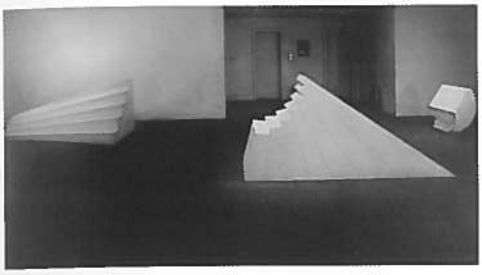
Looking back to Smithson's early career, the image of "the Word" found in his Incantation "From the City" (c. 1960) sheds light on his attitude toward language:

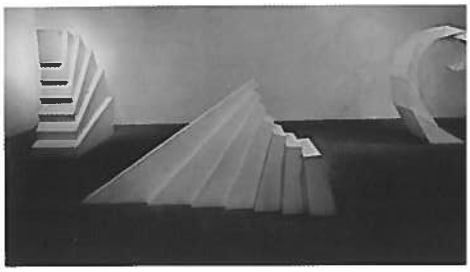
> The tongue
> Did Burst
> Into a bloody Word,
> Unlost;
> It stared
> Back into
> The mouth
> From whence it came.[90]

Smithson's exploration of the "façade" of Catholicism and the belief in the incarnation of Christ—the Word made flesh—seems to have informed his view of language as material.[91] While Smithson's utilization of language as a concrete entity remained constant, his point of reference shifted over the years from theology to geology. In "A Sedimentation of the Mind," he wrote: "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."[92]

In July 1966 Smithson was hired as an "artist-consultant" by the engineering and architecture firm Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton to work with them on design proposals for the Dallas–Fort Worth Regional Airport.[93] Although the firm's attempts to secure the commission did not meet with success and none of Smithson's proposals were ever realized, the opportunity allowed him to develop many ideas that had far-reaching implications for his Nonsites and later monumental Earthworks.[94] Smithson experimented with placing large structures on the fringes of the airfield and invited Andre, LeWitt, and Morris to submit proposals.[95] Airborne passengers taking off and landing would view these "'earthworks' or grid type frameworks close to the ground level."[96] Smithson's proposal for "a progression of triangular concrete pavements that would result in a spiral effect"[97] resembles *Aerial Map—Proposal for Dallas–Fort Worth Regional Airport* (1967), which he made with sections of mirror. In a move that anticipated his Nonsites, he proposed that "the terminal complex include a gallery (or aerial museum) that would provide visual information about where these aerial sites are situated."[98] He even considered the possibility of using television cameras to transmit images of the four structures on the outer edges of the airfields back into the terminal.[99] In a similar move, he proposed to communicate the plans for the project in Texas to the New York art world, "in conjunction with the actual

90. Smithson, "From the City" (c. 1960), in *Writings*, 317.
91. Johanna Drucker was the first to draw the connection between Smithson's early interest in Catholicism and his later Nonsites. See her introduction to my *Robert Smithson Unearthed*, xiv.
92. Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" (1968), in *Writings*, 107.
93. See the letter from Walther Prokosch, one of the partners in the firm to Smithson, confirming the agreement. Letter from Prokosch, 20 July 1966, RSNHP, reel 3832, frame 902. The agreement ran to the end of June 1967. See letter from Prokosch, 29 August 1967, RSNHP, reel 3832, frame 999.
94. See Mark Linder's essay in this volume for an expanded discussion of Smithson's experience as an "artist-consultant."
95. See "4 Artist Proposals: Plans for Landmarks, 1967; Dallas Airport," RSNHP, reel 3832, frames 974–77. Smithson's proposal is not included here.
96. Smithson, "Aerial Art" (1969), in *Writings*, 116.
97. Ibid., 118.
98. Ibid., 116.
99. Smithson, interview with Paul Toner (1970), in *Writings*, 234.
100. Smithson, "Proposal for Earthworks and Landmarks to Be Built on the Fringes of the Fort Worth–Dallas Regional Air Terminal Site" (1966–67), in *Writings*, 354.
101. In "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site" (1967), Smithson proposed: "Remote places such as the Pine Barrens of New Jersey and the frozen wastes of the North and South Poles could be coordinated by art forms that would use the actual land as a medium. Television could transmit such activity all over the world." In *Writings*, 56.
102. Ibid., 54.
103. Smithson, "The Monument: Outline for a Film" (1967), in *Writings*, 356–57. This makes an interesting comparison to Dwan's account of field trips to New Jersey taken with Smithson, Nancy Holt, and others. Dwan, interview with Stuckey, tape #7, AAA, 23–30.
104. See Smithson's statement "Gyrostasis" (1970), in *Writings*, 136.
105. The exhibition ran from 2 through 27 March 1968. A checklist and press release can be found in the Dwan Gallery Archives, AAA.
106. Hobbs, "The Works," 103.
107. See the press release for the exhibition, Dwan Gallery Archives, AAA.
108. Emily Wasserman, "New York: Robert Smithson at Dwan," *Artforum* 6, no. 9 (May 1968): 62.





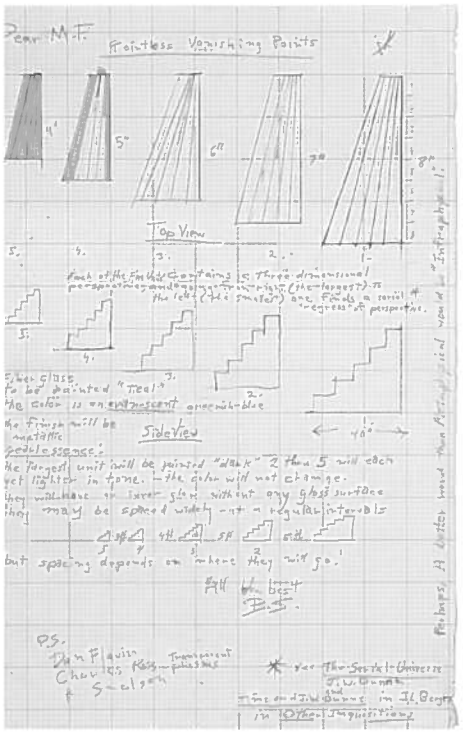
"Robert Smithson," Dwan Gallery, New York, 1968

process going on at the site," by enlarging a map of the site to fit the floor of an exhibition space, placing scale models on the map, and displaying photographs of the construction process.[100]

The idea of transmitting information about a site outdoors to viewers indoors and of establishing a relationship between a site and its representation were key concepts to emerge from Smithson's stint as artist-consultant, concepts he continued to expand upon in his Nonsites and Displacements. As important was the shift in vantage point from a ground perspective to an aerial one, which opened up new possibilities for sites and allowed him to expand his terms of art-making. As the airport project progressed, Smithson became less interested in the actual assignment and more interested in the airport as a site for art on a vast scale.[101] In his work on the airport project, Smithson grew quite familiar with maps developed by surveyors prior to construction, which he saw as resembling "crystalline grid networks."[102] An immediate response to his newfound fascination with cartography was a series of map collages from 1967. Some of these—*New York, New Jersey*; *Untitled (Map on Mirror—Passaic, New Jersey)*; and *Entropic Pole*—explore geographical territory familiar to the artist. In others, such as *Untitled (Antarctica)*, the map is treated as printed matter to be cut up and rearranged.

Combining the concepts of entropic landscape and conventional monument, two divergent embodiments of historical time, Smithson returned to the format of the travelogue in "The Monuments of Passaic," published late in 1967. Documenting a walk through Passaic, it includes musings on history, the future, and entropy along with the resulting snapshots of found monuments such as pipes, a wooden bridge, and a sandbox. In this way, the reader experiences the artist's journey back to his birthplace. Though Smithson's ephemeral site selections do not serve the function of traditional monuments, tongue in cheek he asked: "Has Passaic replaced Rome as The Eternal City?" The travelogue concludes with his well-known suggestion for illustrating entropy by having a child run around a sandbox filled with white sand in one half and black sand in the other. The contemporaneous "The Monument: Outline for a Film" (1967),[103] one of Smithson's earliest film proposals, is also based on a field trip to New Jersey and suggests other possibilities for monuments. His interest in monuments fully developed in the Nonsites of the following year.

Smithson further examined the possibilities of mapping in his abstract white structures—*Gyrostasis*,[104] *Leaning Strata* (both 1968), and *Pointless Vanishing Point* (1967)—which appeared in his second solo exhibition at Dwan Gallery that spring.[105] Drawings related to *Leaning Strata* (a diagrammatic version was reproduced on the exhibition announcement) show this sculpture growing out of what Hobbs called the conflation of "two systems for representing space—perspective and cartography—in an uneasy alliance."[106] Discussing the structures in relation to systems of mapping the earth, which involve converging orthogonals, Smithson called these "three-dimensional finite compressions *infra perspectives*,"[107] which one critic interpreted as representing "fragments of imaginary perspective projections in compressed form."[108] The essay "Pointless Vanishing



Untitled (Drawing for Pointless Vanishing Points and Nonsite #2), c. 1968

Points" (1967),[109] probably written before the sculpture was fabricated, discusses perspective and its relevance to *Enantiomorphic Chambers*. The anomaly in this exhibition was *A Nonsite (Pine Barrens, New Jersey)* (1968); although it too grew out of cartographic concepts, "in *Non-Site* you can see how a *place* was reduced to a *dot*."[110] The piece, which refers to a small airport in the backwater site of Pine Barrens, New Jersey, possesses a specificity and concreteness that set it apart from the other works in the show. Its blue hexagonal base supports small bins that diminish in size as they approach the center of the base. Sand from the Pine Barrens site fills the containers. The transition Smithson made from mapping in the form of the abstract "infra structures" to the more specific Nonsites is also evident in working drawings he produced for "6 Artists, 6 Exhibitions" at the Walker Art Center in May 1968. The drawings indicate that Smithson initially thought of making five versions of *Pointless Vanishing Point* in "'teal,' an evanescent greenish blue" before deciding to fabricate his second Nonsite,[111] which was shown alongside a selection of other sculptures.[112]

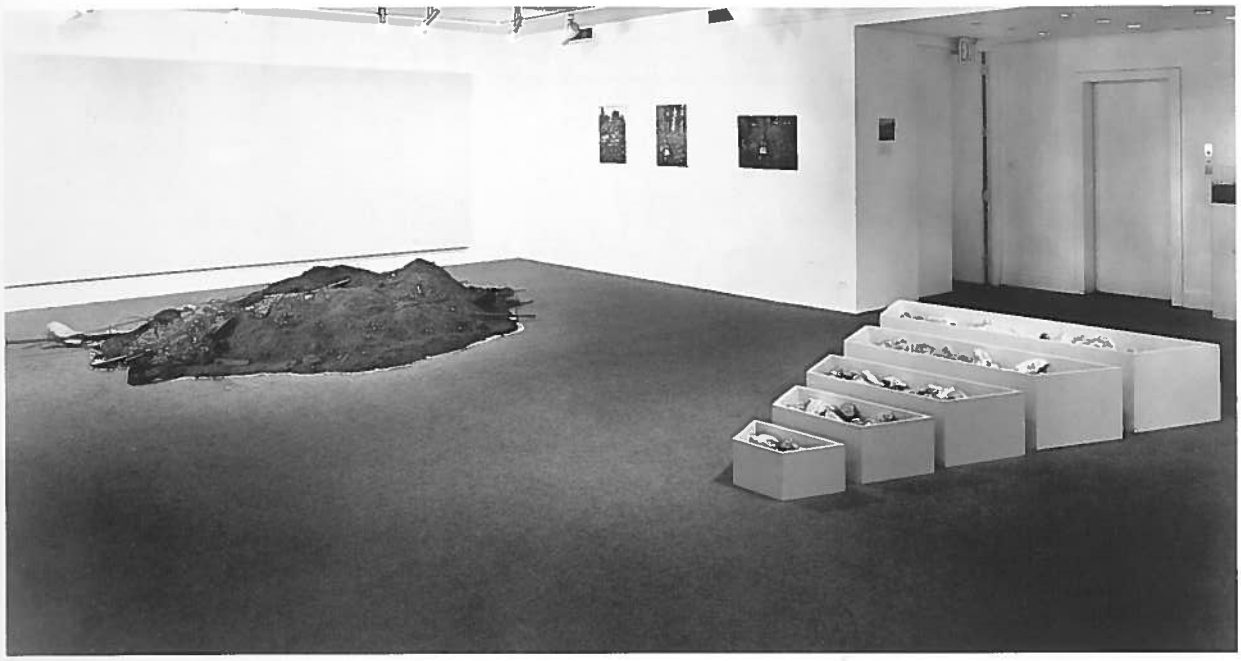
Smithson abandoned the "infra perspectives" in favor of the Nonsites. In October 1968 he showed *A Nonsite (Franklin, New Jersey)* in the groundbreaking "Earthworks" exhibition at Dwan Gallery.[113] The material contained by the bins was drawn from ore deposits in the vicinity of Franklin Furnace Mines.[114] The converging outer edges of the bins continued the play on orthogonals that characterize *Pointless Vanishing Point*. Smithson noted in the text of the work, "the entire *Nonsite* and site map in the room are contained within two 70° perspective lines without center point." In 1968 Smithson made close to a dozen Nonsites, drawing from entropic sites including New Jersey (*Nonsite "Line of Wreckage," Bayonne, New Jersey*); the western United States (*Mono Lake Nonsite [Cinders Near Black Point]*); and Europe, where he visited the Ruhr region in Germany to gather material for *Nonsite (Oberhausen, Germany)* and photograph the industrial landscape.[115] A number of these Nonsites were on view at his solo exhibition at Dwan Gallery in early 1969.[116] Smithson traced the trajectory from his structure proposed for the Dallas–Fort Worth airport to the Nonsites and the development of a dialectic of site and Nonsite:

> I did a large spiral, triangular system that sort of just spun out and could only be seen from an airplane. I was sort of interested in the dialogue between the indoor and the outdoor and on my own, after getting involved in it this way, I developed a method or a dialectic that involved what I call site and nonsite. The site, in a sense, is the physical raw reality—the earth or the ground that we are really not aware of when we are in an interior room or studio or something like that—and so I decided that I would set limits in terms of this dialogue (it's a back and forth rhythm that goes between indoors and outdoors), and as a result I went and instead of putting something on the landscape I decided it would be interesting to transfer land indoors, to the nonsite, which is an abstract container.[117]

By February 1969, the opening of "Earth Art" at Cornell University's Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Smithson had begun to make Mirror Displacements—which like the Nonsites incorporate earth from entropic landscapes in the world at large. In the displacements, organic material is piled onto mirrors rather than being contained in a bin: "In other non-sites, the container was rigid, the material amorphous. In this case, the container is amorphous, the mirror is the rigid thing."[118] For "Earth Art," Smithson orchestrated *Mirror Displacement (Cayuga Salt Mine Project)*, one of his most ambitious displacement projects, involving several structures incorporating salt crystals and mirrors inside the White Museum as well as works inside the salt mine itself, along with a mirror trail that marked the route

Opposite:
"Earthworks," Dwan Gallery, New York, 1968

"Earth Art," Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1969



109. Smithson, "Pointless Vanishing Points" (1967), in *Writings*, 358–59.
110. See note 107.
111. See Smithson's "Non-site Number 2" (1968), reprinted in *Writings*, 365.
112. See checklist in *6 Artists 6 Exhibitions*, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1968), n.p.
113. The exhibition ran from 5 to 30 October 1968. Phil Leider regarded "Earthworks" and "9," organized by Robert Morris at the Castelli Warehouse, as two exhibitions of the season that signaled "the closing of what might be called 'Phase One' of the adventure that might be called 'Minimal,' 'Object,' or 'Literalist' art." Leider, *The New York Times*, 22 December, sec. 2, 31.
114. See checklist of the exhibition in the Dwan Gallery Archives, AAA.
115. A discussion of Smithson's tour of Oberhausen in 1968 with artist Bernd Becher and gallery owner Konrad Fischer can be found in James Lingwood, "The Weight of Time," in *Field Trips: Bernd & Hilla Becher, Robert Smithson*. (Porto, Portugal: Fundação Serralves, 2002), 70–75.
116. See checklist of the exhibition in the Dwan Gallery Archives, AAA.
117. Smithson, "Earth," edited by Thomas W. Leavitt, in symposium at the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 6 February 1969, in *Writings*, 178.
118. Smithson, "Fragments of a Conversation" (1969), edited by William C. Lipke, in *Writings*, 190.

Chalk-Mirror Displacement (Oxted Quarry), Yorkshire, England, 1969

between the museum and the mine. Smithson remarked: "the interior of the Museum somehow mirrors the site."[119] While Smithson situated the Nonsites indoors within a gallery space, he sometimes sited the Displacements outdoors, as in "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan"[120] (1969), another travelogue which takes as its point of departure a nineteenth-century expedition narrative by John Lloyd Stephens titled *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (1843). Consistent with "The Monuments of Passaic," Smithson's account of his trip around the Yucatán Peninsula records the nine sites at which he set up twelve square mirrors, photographed them, and then dismantled the arrangement.[121] The photo essay commemorates the no-longer-extant displacements and reveals that, in characteristic fashion, Smithson avoided altogether the well-known pre-Columbian ruins in favor of peripheral locations. When he did visit Palenque, Mexico, the ruins that attracted him were not historical but contemporary: he photographed the Hotel Palenque, a decrepit cinder-block building that was deteriorating at the same time as it was undergoing construction.[122] In 1972 he gave a slide lecture on his experience of visiting the hotel that is now preserved on audiotape as *Hotel Palenque* (1969/72). In October Smithson set up yet another mirroring situation between indoors and outdoors, exhibiting *Chalk-Mirror Displacement* (1969) in "When Attitudes Become Form" at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and duplicating the piece so that it would appear concurrently in a chalk quarry in Oxted, York.[123]

At the same time, maps and mapping offered possibilities Smithson continued to explore. The drawings *The Hypothetical Continent of Lemuria* (1969) and *Map of Broken Glass (Atlantis)* (1970) depict legendary lost continents that Smithson intended to realize in materials like shells or glass shards. He also drew plans for other sorts of islands, like *Floating Island to Travel Around Manhattan Island* and *Island Project* (both 1970).

In October 1969 Smithson returned to Rome for his first exhibition there since 1961. In the outskirts of the city he executed *Asphalt Rundown*, which was his first monumental Earthwork made and shown at an outdoor site, rather than inside a gallery. From the top of a quarry, a dump truck released a load of asphalt that flowed down the quarry walls, becoming solid as it cooled. Smithson remarked on this thermodynamic aspect to the work while noting his intention to "root it to the contour of the land, so that it's permanently there and subject to the weathering."[124] Similar pieces followed; Smithson executed *Concrete Pour* the following month in Chicago, and *Glue Pour* was done for the Vancouver Art Gallery in early 1970. *Nine Drawings for Texas Overflow* (1970) show Smithson's plan to pump asphalt into a constructed crater of limestone at a quarry in the Dallas–Fort Worth area. His intention was to record the whole event on film, capturing the contrast between the dark viscous asphalt and the light-colored limestone. He also considered the possibilities offered by other types of earth in a series of mudflow drawings.

In 1970 Smithson continued to pursue the practice of pouring with *Partially Buried Woodshed* at Kent State University in Ohio. As cold weather thwarted his original plan for creating a mudflow, Smithson alternately suggested burying a building. A small woodshed on campus was found for this purpose, and under the artist's direction, a backhoe piled twenty loads of earth onto the shed, cracking its central beam and rendering the piece complete. A few months later Smithson created his iconic Earthwork *Spiral Jetty* at Rozel Point on the Great Salt Lake of Utah. After an unsuccessful attempt to realize an island of broken glass near Vancouver, Canada, Smithson channeled his energies into *Spiral Jetty*,[125] which was to be a monument that related both physically and culturally to its site (including the nearby Golden Spike Monument) and represented the convergence of many ideas. The site itself—a disrupted landscape bearing the remnants of a deteriorated shed and some oil-drilling equipment surrounded by "lurid"[126] red water—resembles an entropic

Broken Circle (foreground) and *Spiral Hill* (background), Emmen, The Netherlands, summer 1971

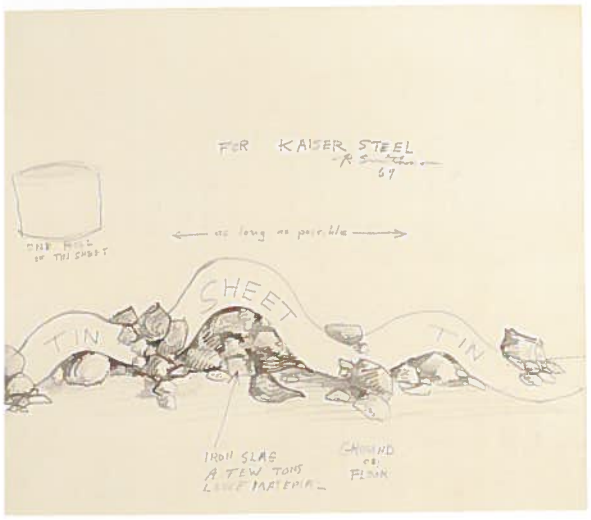
Broken Circle
Sand, earth, and water
Diameter: 140 ft.

Spiral Hill
Earth, black topsoil, and white sand
Base: 75 ft. diameter

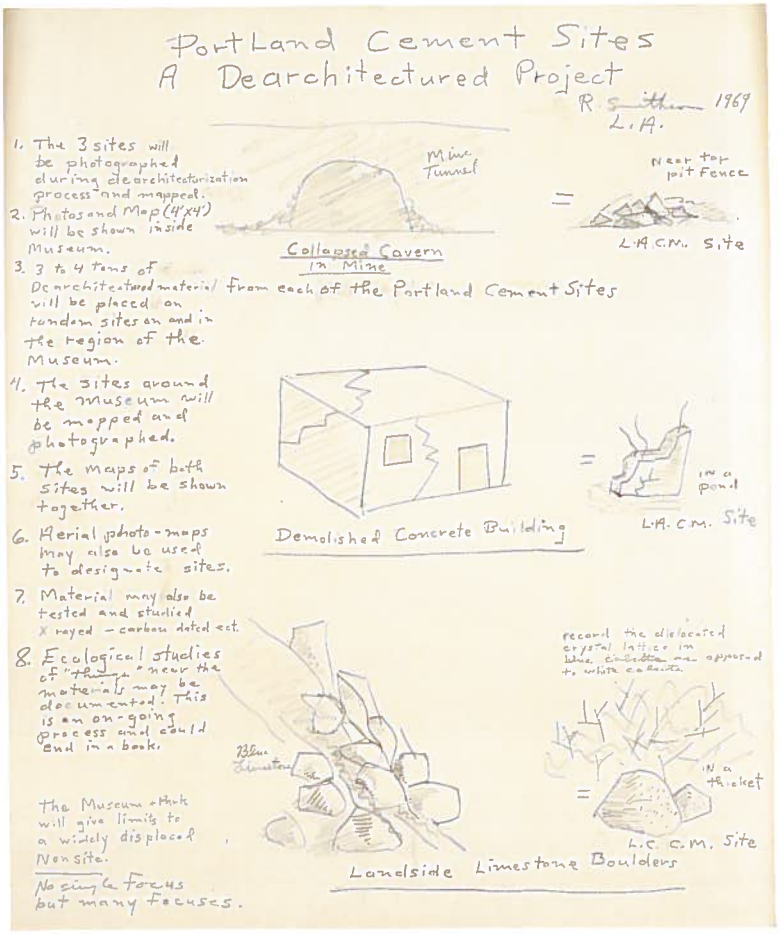
landscape that simultaneously embodies a prehistoric past and a science-fiction future. The film about the making of *Spiral Jetty*, shown at Dwan Gallery late in 1970, juxtaposes footage of dinosaur skeletons shot through a red filter at the American Museum of Natural History with that of the enormous earthmoving equipment used to build the structure in the Great Salt Lake, along with text in the form of his own "geopoetic commentary."[127] Drawings show his plans for a museum with an underground projection room where the film could be screened. He also thought of showing the film on the Staten Island Ferry, envisioning the ferry returning to port "in a spiraling voyage while the film was showing."[128] Smithson published "Spiral Jetty" (1972), his essay on the entire project, two years later.

In 1971 Smithson realized *Broken Circle* and *Spiral Hill* in the town of Emmen, The Netherlands, as part of the Sonsbeek Festival, which featured works made outside the museum context. Made in a working sand quarry, *Broken Circle* and *Spiral Hill* are much more geographically accessible (they can be reached by bicycle from the center of town) than *Spiral Jetty*, which can be visited only by driving over rough terrain on privately owned land. As with *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson filmed the process of making the works but the film was never finished.[129]

119. Smithson, "Earth," in *Writings*, 178.
120. Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan" (1969), in *Writings*, 119–33.
121. The sense of adventure that was part of these journeys is effectively conveyed by Dwan in her interview with Stuckey, AAA, tape #9, 39–43.
122. Dwan stayed at Hotel Palenque with Smithson and Holt and recalled that the garage was filled with cement bags, "cement intended to be used to expand the hotel when and if they had the money to expand the hotel." But in the humid climate, the cement bags had turned into solid rocks. Dwan, interview with Stuckey, AAA, tape #8, 11–12.
123. Hobbs, "The Works," 169.
124. Smithson, "Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson" (1969–70), edited by Eva Schmidt, in *Writings*, 225.
125. See essays by Thomas Crow and Jennifer L. Roberts in this volume.
126. An adjective used by Dwan, interview with Stuckey, AAA, 36.
127. Joseph Masheck, "New York: Robert Smithson," *Artforum* 9, no. 5 (January 1971): 73.
128. Smithson, "'...The Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, Is a Cruel Master,'" interview with Gregoire Müller, in *Writings*, 261.
129. Ibid., 256.



For Kaiser Steel, 1969



Portland Cement Sites, A Dearchitectured Project, 1969

Following *Broken Circle* and *Spiral Hill*, Smithson proposed the possibility of situating Earth art in "mining areas, disused quarries, and polluted lakes and rivers" as a means of mediating between ecology and industry.[130] He began to conceive of large-scale structures utilizing abandoned mines as sites to be made in partnership with industry.[131] He already had a taste of working with corporations. In 1969, as one of seventy-six artists participating in the innovative Art and Technology Program (1967–71) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Smithson toured Kaiser Steel and American Cement (two of the sponsors of the program)[132] to develop proposals for collaboration. The resulting drawings, *For Kaiser Steel* and *Portland Cement Sites, A Dearchitectured Project* (both 1969) show two of Smithson's ideas, but neither of them were realized.[133] In 1972 he explored the possibilities of working with the Hanna Coal Company, which had strip-mined the Egypt Valley in southeastern Ohio, by paying visits to the Peabody and Hanna coal mines. The so-called Gem of Egypt, a gigantic earth-stripping machine used by Hanna Coal, appears in Smithson's fantastic collage *King Kong Meets the Gem of Egypt* in a face-off with the gargantuan ape. He also made proposals for Forest Park South, a city to be built near Chicago; the Salton Sea in Southern California; and the Bingham Copper Mine in Utah.

The project that seemed most likely to be realized was *Tailing Pond*, to be built at a mine in Creede, Colorado, commissioned by the Minerals Engineering Company based in Denver. After working on the project for two years, Smithson learned it would be delayed for two more months. When artist Tony Shafrazi told him of a planned visit to a ranch near

Smithson, "Untitled" (1971), in *Writings*, 376.
John Coplans, "Robert Smithson, *The Amarillo Ramp*," in *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 47–55.
For an overview of the program, see Maurice Tuchman, *A Report on the Art & Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1967–1971* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1971), 9–29.
For a description of Smithson's proposals, see ibid., 320–21.

Tecovas Lake, a man-made dam on the Texas Panhandle, Smithson agreed to go along. Intrigued by its unique system of irrigation, Smithson received permission from the ranch's owner, Stanley Marsh, to build an Earthwork in the lake. While viewing and photographing the staked-out site from the air, Smithson, the pilot, and the photographer were killed when their plane stalled and plummeted to the ground. Smithson's last Earthwork, *Amarillo Ramp* (1973), was posthumously completed by Holt, Richard Serra, and Shafrazi. Smithson's writings were anthologized and published in a 1979 volume edited by Holt. In 1985 Holt gave Smithson's papers (including correspondence, unpublished manuscripts, and photographs) to the Archives of American Art. A second edition of Smithson's collected writings was released in 1996.

As art-making has moved out of the studio and become fully engaged in the cultural landscape, Smithson's stature as a pivotal figure in postwar American art has been established with certainty. The pervasive influence of the expansive artistic vision he put forth in an abbreviated lifetime has already made itself vividly felt.

Amarillo Ramp (1973), Tecovas Lake, Amarillo, Texas, 1973
Rock
Diameter: 150–160 ft.; length 396 ft.
Photograph by Gianfranco Gorgoni

Smithson and Stanley Marsh at Tecovas Lake, Texas, site of *Amarillo Ramp* (1973), July 1973