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Source: *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, Spring, 2000, No. 37 (Spring, 2000), pp. 7-30

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20167491>

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# Mirror travel in the Yucatan

*Robert Smithson, Michael Fried, and the new critical drama*

ROBERT LINSLEY

Why is man afraid of dying? What man fears is the moment he will survey from the other world everything he has experienced on earth.

*Rabbi Ger in Tales of the Hasidim*

. . . for the only human race to which it is forbidden to sever the bonds of time is the race of those who create art.

*Alejo Carpentier, The Lost Steps*

The most opaque of all Robert Smithson's texts is the comic travelogue "Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan." Smithson invites the reader to become lost in a jungle of overgrown metaphors and clinging adjectives; but then, "that is the only way to make art."<sup>1</sup> For Smithson, to be conceptually lost is the first determinant of an art that uses ideas rather than paint or steel as its material. The text is built around experiences of color and light given by the temporary installation of a dozen or so mirrors at various points on a journey through the Yucatan. In both the experiences and the recounting of them, the mirrors have a way of becoming lost—"On the site the rows would come and go as the light fell. . . . A mirror on the third row jammed between two branches flashed into dematerialization." It is no accident, then, that the piece is also about the course of abstract painting as it approached its own "dematerialization" in the 1960s and 1970s. When Smithson says that "real color is risky, not like the tame stuff that comes out of tubes," or "acrylic and Day-Glo are nothing to these raw states of light and color," he is travelling the distance measured from, say, Morris Louis to James Turrell. But further, though he is one of the originators of conceptual art, which through its turn toward language is supposed to bring painting into question in a fundamental way, his mirroring in the text of the mirror paintings lost in the jungle refuses the categorical distinction between painting and conceptualism that is crucial for the latter movement. It

is, therefore, one of the most important works of conceptualism, not least because it is one of the most important paintings produced under that rubric.<sup>2</sup>

It may be hard to see Smithson as a painter. "Incidents" depends on the old metaphor of art as a mirror of the world, an image decisively repudiated by American painters of the 1950s and 1960s. He both accepts and rejects this repudiation by taking actual mirrors as metaphors for art. Mirrors are superior to traditional paintings because they give moving pictures without any effort; they are passively up-to-date, like any avant-gardist of Smithson's generation would want to be. In the jungle setting, they offer pictures of the world and abstract experiences of color and light, and Smithson's descriptions include both. Where their edges catch the light, we can see them for what they are, and so in classic modernist style, they use immediate, unsublimated experience to sustain and strengthen the aesthetic. The pictures they show are fragmentary by nature, and when placed in the landscape, they add more fragments to an already broken world, producing a montage without boundaries. Mirror placement as painting steps out of the charmed realm of art, for it is a manipulation of real things in the world, yet it includes illusionism and the kind of aesthetic distance peculiar to painting.<sup>3</sup>

2. I realize that this summary does not adequately differentiate between mirrors, performance, and text as discrete works, or explain how they might be treated as one. The problem will seem less important as my argument proceeds.

3. My claim that Smithson's work should be viewed in the context of the problems and procedures of painting is not new. Stephen Melville made much the same point a number of years ago. Caroline Jones goes as far as to say that Smithson resembles Cézanne at Bibemus. Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 273, 276. Stephen Melville, "Robert Smithson: 'A Literalist of the Imagination,'" in *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context*, ed. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (Amsterdam: G & B Arts, 1996), pp. 32, 34. In addition, I have to acknowledge Stephen Melville's priority in advancing many of the larger claims I make in this essay. See his "Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism," also reprinted in *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context*, ed. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (Amsterdam: G & B Arts, 1996).

1. Further quotes from Smithson's essay are not attributed. All quotes are from "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," *Artforum*, Sept. 1969:28–33.



Figure 1. First Mirror Displacement. Robert Smithson, *Nine Mirror Displacements*, Yucatan 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: Robert Smithson.

For all of that, it is too reductive to claim that the mirror works are just painting. The mirror surfaces have the property of denying surface, and the marks they bear are perceptual and cognitive events floating in a mental space. The way that these immaterial "materials" are knitted together could be called the *faktura* of conceptualism. Smithson's text, with its alternation between vivid description and abstract rumination, tracks this articulation of conceptual surfaces, while posing the question of exactly where such surfaces would lie. His provisional answer is within the social and literary space of criticism, art's mirror. The art of painting cannot dissolve into pure concept for the open-

ended interrelationship between painting and spectator depends on a temporal tracking of visible form. Conceptual art, on the other hand, cannot traffic in visible form and still sever its ties with painting; it has to seek its domain elsewhere, in literary or philosophical form. As a conceptualist using language to carry his ideas out of the traditional "frames" of painting and sculpture, Smithson finds that he has to work with literary genres that already have their own complex histories—in this case, travel writing, but also art criticism. By virtue of the double sense of the term "reflection," the Yucatan piece is both painting and conceptual art; its positioning somewhere between the

two antagonistic practices keeps both of them alive, but as conceptual art, it is also engaged in a struggle to establish its own identity with respect to criticism.<sup>4</sup>

The themes of the Yucatan piece were prefigured in "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," an essay published in *Artforum* the year before. It is as if the later work, including both mirror installations and text, is an enactment of ideas only talked about in the earlier:

Robert Morris (*Artforum*, April 1968) sees the paint brush vanish into Pollock's "stick" and the stick dissolve into "poured paint" from a container used by Morris Louis. What then is one to do with the *container*?<sup>5</sup>

The paint can has to be disposed of because the various neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s were reducing representation to a gesture of pointing at the world, a gesture continuous with other behaviors. In "Incidents," Smithson is pouring art out of its containers. The gallery is an obvious one, and that observation is now fairly banal. It's also clear that categories such as "painting" or "sculpture" are containers of a sort, but it's harder to see that what results when the category of painting is emptied of its matter is still painting. Yet this is only one of the surprising insights offered by Smithson's text, insights that become available once we recognize it as a sustained engagement with Morris Louis and a polemic with that artist's major critic, Michael Fried.

Smithson's parodic mimicry of Louis's stain paintings, in pieces such as the *Asphalt Rundown* and the *Glue Pour*, came later in the same year as the Yucatan trip (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> These pieces were produced within the context

4. For those who may find it hard to see Smithson as a conceptualist, I suggest that it is precisely his extreme skepticism about the movement that guarantees his important place within it. His critique of conceptualism takes place at the very moment of its emergence and raises the question of whether there could be a conceptual art practice exempt from critical contact with other philosophical and literary genres. The implication of Smithson's work is that the avant-gardist claim that painting is dead is, in part, a red herring, the function of which is to enable conceptualism to avoid the real and more compelling problem—its own relation to criticism and therefore to the social frame within which art exists. This places Smithson's work within the orbit of a post-conceptual critical practice even before such a practice emerged in the early 1970s and suggests an affinity with the work of figures such as Marcel Broodthaers.

5. Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), pp. 82–91. Further references to this article are not footnoted.

6. The Vancouver Art Gallery is planning a major show for 2001 of the *Glue Pour* and other works of Smithson's period in Vancouver.

of anti-form and post-minimalist sculpture—the work of Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, and Robert Morris<sup>7</sup>—and they worked to critique both minimalism and stain painting. Nevertheless, Smithson's antagonistic engagement with Louis's work does put a mark on "Incidents," only here mediated by his quarrel with Fried. Louis is subterranean in the Yucatan essay, and perhaps all the stronger a presence for that, but Fried, though never mentioned, is right on the surface, and Fried's article on Louis, published in the February 1967 *Artforum* is as much present as his "Art and Objecthood," which appeared later the same year. I will demonstrate this in more depth later, but to cite only one example, Smithson's notion that an artist has to become lost in order to find his or her proper work is a rebuke to the assumptions behind Fried's claim that Louis had "lost his way" for a brief period after 1954.<sup>8</sup> For Smithson, the schematic historical structures of criticism would be a deterministic prison for any artist who took them seriously.<sup>9</sup>

"A Sedimentation of the Mind," in itself a kind of schema for the Yucatan piece, is, among other things, a polemic on behalf of the artist against the critic, and against both Fried and Clement Greenberg specifically. It contains the following claim for the priority of the artist's experience of his or her own work, a claim that also reveals the considerable anxiety Smithson finds in the relationship of artist and viewer, the critic presumably being the closest and most astute of viewers:

Not everybody sees the art in the same way, only an artist viewing art knows the ecstasy and the dread, and this viewing takes place in time. A great artist can make art by simply casting a glance.

This art of glances is the next step after the discarding of Morris Louis's container, but here the creative act is associated with the act of reception, specifically with the rapid and arrogant evaluative glance of Greenberg rather than the sustained contemplation of Fried or the dry but steady gaze of Donald Judd. Smithson's piece is

7. A show at the Whitney Museum of American Art called "Art and Process" was reviewed in the same issue of *Artforum* in which Smithson's essay appeared. The same issue also featured a discussion of Lynda Benglis's floor pours.

8. Michael Fried, "Morris Louis," *Artforum*, Feb. 1967:37.

9. In the "Sedimentation" article Smithson says, "Artists with a weak view of time are easily deceived by this victimizing kind of criticism, and are seduced into some trivial history. An artist is enslaved by time, only if the time is controlled by someone or something other than himself."



Figure 2. Robert Smithson and the *Glue Pour*, Ilyas Pagonis and Lucy Lippard on the right, Vancouver 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: © Christos Dikeakos.

as much engaged with the major developments in criticism during the 1950s and 1960s as it is with the art of the same period, and it is a slippage between the gaze of the artist and that of the critic that makes "Incidents" both artwork and criticism. The original works, the mirror placements, were ephemeral, and so the article itself became another piece of art, an art of glances presented in the canonical form of the review but enriched by its articulation with other literary genres.<sup>10</sup> Here "Incidents" has an advantage over the articles and reviews commonly found in *Artforum*, because the art it describes is not hanging on a gallery wall—it is first-order experience.<sup>11</sup> Smithson will find in the jungle, in the "undifferentiated" mimetically

reproduced by the descriptive anarchy of his prose, complexity enough to absorb and neutralize any critical judgments, even those of Greenberg. Greenberg himself will make an appearance at the crux of the Yucatan text, but at first, Smithson takes as an opponent his peer, the younger critic, who, at this early stage of his career, is struggling to master his own anxiety.

In "Art and Objecthood," Fried makes his now-famous claim that the theatrical is ". . . the negation of art."<sup>12</sup> Smithson's oft-quoted response in a letter to the editor of *Artforum* is to the point:

What Fried fears most is the consciousness of what he is doing—namely being himself theatrical. He dreads "distance" because that would force him to become aware of the role he is playing.<sup>13</sup>

10. Examples include the tourist guide book, the explorer's memoir, and perhaps accounts of drug experiences.

11. This does not cancel the rather dismal comedy of the artist who writes his own review.

12. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Artforum*, Summer 1967:15.

13. In *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (see note 5), p. 38

According to Smithson, Fried does not want to recognize that art itself has become "critical" in a new way, and yet it is from this recognition that conceptual art begins. The new "theatrical" style of art makes it clear that the viewer and the work together are part of a larger system, and the scandal and embarrassment for Fried is that the work not only asks to be considered in and for itself but also poses questions to the viewer about what he or she is going to do. In other words, the new art has turned the self critique of art inside out, into politics, however unclear that may have been to the artists themselves. I take this as a standard avant-gardist reading of the turn from minimalism to conceptual art, and one supported by Smithson's writing and his work.<sup>14</sup>

The scathing sarcasm of Smithson's response to "Art and Objecthood" is easy to explain as a gesture of loyalty to his friends the minimalists, yet by 1967 Smithson was already putting some large distance between his own position and the work that had given him an important starting point both as a writer and as an artist. Despite his scorn for Fried, he knew that it wasn't enough to simply turn his back; Smithson's riposte to the critic is also one moment in the ongoing development of a kind of art antagonistic to Judd and the canonical minimalist object.<sup>15</sup> His reply to Fried's article sets the stage for the "mirror travel" of two years later: "Every refutation is a mirror of the thing it refutes—*ad infinitum*. Every war is a battle with reflections. What Michael Fried attacks is what he is." It was certainly not lost on Smithson that his own attack drew him into a complementary, mirroric relation with the critic. To say that Fried is as much engaged in the theatrical as the artists he attacks is to pull him closer, to maliciously involve him in a context that he evidently

14. Here, as throughout, I use Peter Bürger's definition of avant-garde—the social critique of art undertaken from within the practice.

15. The axial relationship between Smithson and Fried was recognized early on. When Judd complained to Philip Leider that *Artforum* was dominated by Fried, Leider replied that "he didn't think it was biased, that he published Robert Smithson too." For Judd, that was "balanced mediocrity." Apparently the constellation of Judd, Smithson, and Fried is held together by mutual repulsion. Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), p. 198 According to Leider though, Judd has it wrong: "Judd never actually said anything at all about balanced mediocrity in that conversation. I said I published Smithson and Flavin and he said yeah, but you'd never publish an article about Flavin and I said I would if you (Judd) wrote it" (pers. comm., Philip Leider, March 2000).

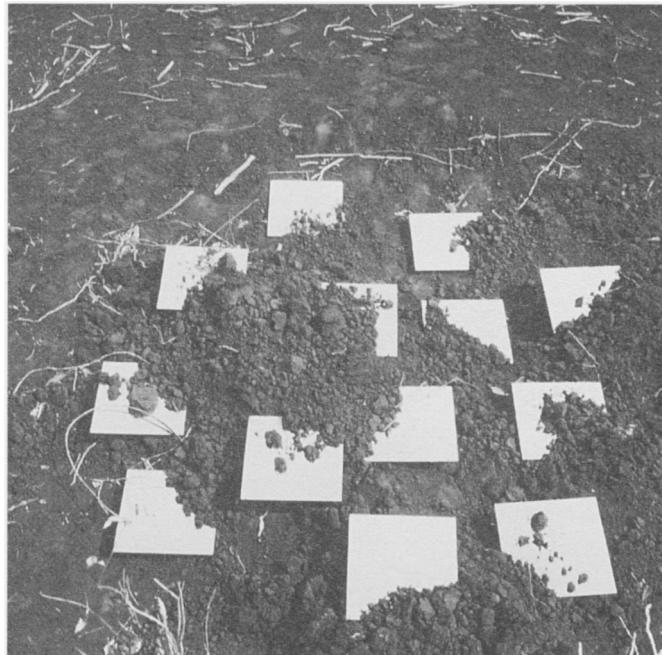


Figure 3. Second Mirror Displacement. Robert Smithson, *Nine Mirror Displacements*, Yucatan 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: Robert Smithson.

wants to flee, but in the Yucatan essay, Smithson's own mirroring of Fried becomes even more intimate, and critical in a more sophisticated way.

After reading Fried, one could not be blamed for asking what is the difference exactly between "art" and "objecthood," or between "theatrical" and "authentic" art. That there may not be much difference gives Smithson the opening for his letter to the editor. But the tortuous, self-reflexive hesitations and qualifications of Fried's article on Louis that are the more immediate references for the Yucatan essay (fig. 4):

Roughly, Louis discovered that if successive waves of thinned pigment, each a different color, were stained into a length of canvas, what was produced was a single, visually continuous configuration within which the individual configurations left by each wave in turn—or, perhaps more accurately, the limits of these configurations—were still visible. That is, by laying down wave on top of wave of liquid pigment Louis literally put color into color—more precisely, color-configuration into color-configuration—so that, within the stained portion of any veil painting, the perception of a change in color, almost no matter how



Figure 4. Morris Louis, *Saraband*, 1959. Acrylic resin on canvas, 257 x 378.5 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 64.1685. © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. Photo: Robert E. Mates.

small or seemingly insignificant, indicates a transition between configurations. One might say, in fact, that the perception of such a change *is* the perception of figuration. This is true even when, as often happens, one cannot make out the shape, or even the original color, of the configurations involved.<sup>16</sup>

Fried's anxiety about "limits" is expressed in his efforts to draw fine distinctions, distinctions that he himself seems to have trouble perceiving. As he tries to grasp the matter more firmly or, as he reiterates, "more precisely," "more accurately," he becomes lost somewhere at the intangible edges of the "color-configurations"; finally "one cannot make out the shape." In this passage from "Incidents," Smithson is both more concise and more vivid:

16. Fried (see note 8), p. 37.

Countless chromatic patches were wrecked on the mirrors, flakes of sunshine dispersed over the reflecting surfaces and obliterated the square edges, leaving indistinct pulverizations of color on an indeterminate grid.

In passages such as this, Smithson dialogically incorporates Fried; his success may be measured by the extent to which the critic at times begins to sound like Smithson. Consider Fried's description of Louis's "Unfurleds" article (fig. 6):

One's experience of the unfurleds can be vertiginous. The banked rivulets—and here again their intense, biting color is crucial—open up the picture-plane more radically than ever, as though seeing the first marking we are for the first time shown the void. The dazzling blankness of the untouched canvas at once repulses and engulfs the eye, like an infinite abyss, the abyss that opens up behind the least mark that we make on a flat surface, or *would* open up if innumerable

conventions both of art and of practical life did not restrict the consequences of our act within narrow bounds.<sup>17</sup>

It is Fried's acceptance of self-posed "conventions" that provokes Smithson's amusement, as it was the emphasis that the critic gave to "limits" that must have drawn his attention in the first place, allowing him to see himself as "the mirror of [what he] refutes." Smithson's critique of Fried is not academic, it is spontaneously mimetic. He doesn't quote chapter and verse, he takes his antagonist's language into his own, but he is only able to do this because Fried's ideas have worked their way under his skin, and interestingly, the essay on Louis seems to be more on his mind than "Art and Objecthood." Fried is "ventriloquized" again in the "Fifth Displacement" (fig. 10), the most painterly of all the chapters in Smithson's essay,<sup>18</sup> in the description of another series of works made on the Yucatan trip, the *Overted Rocks* (figs. 8–9):

The double allure of the ground and the mirrors brought forth apparitions. Out of green reflections came the networks of Coatlicue, known to the Mayans as the Serpent Lady: Mother Earth. Twistings and windings were frozen in the mirrors. On the outskirts of the ruins of Palenque, or in the skirts of Coatlicue, rocks were overturned; first the rock was photographed, then the pit that remained. "Under each rock is an orgy of scale," said Coatlicue, while flashing a green snake from a nearby "killer tree" (parasite vines that smother a tree, till they become the tree). Each pit contained miniature earthworks—tracks and traces of insects and other sundry small creatures. In some beetle dung, cobwebs and nameless slime. In others cocoons, tiny ant nests and raw roots. If an artist could see the world through eyes of a caterpillar he might be able to make some fascinating art. Each one of these secret dens was also the entrance to the abyss. Dungeons that dropped away from the eyes into a damp cosmos of fungus and mold—an exhibition of clammy solitude.

17. Fried (see note 8). It was precisely this passage that Smithson singled out for ridicule in his "Sedimentation" essay: ". . . the quality of Fried's fear (dread) is high, but his experience of the abyss is low—a weak metaphor—"like an infinite abyss." *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (see note 5), pp. 84–85.

18. The essay is divided into nine chapters corresponding to descriptions of the nine "mirror displacements," and each one has a laconic heading—"First Displacement," "Second Displacement," and so forth. The implication is that the heading also refers to that section of text; that the text itself is also a displacement. Each section generally starts with a description of the mirrors and then goes into other areas, and each has its own theme and character.

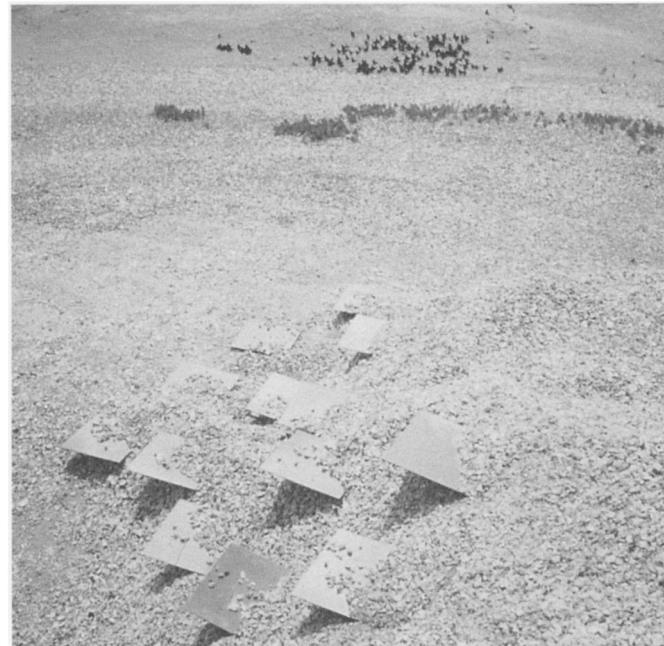


Figure 5. Third Mirror Displacement. Robert Smithson, *Nine Mirror Displacements*, Yucatan 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: Robert Smithson.

The two facing mirrors of pictorial ground and reflective consciousness produce the ghostly figure of the critic and the networks of art history. But further, the "abyss" that Fried sensed beneath the surface of Louis's paintings is here equated by Smithson with the entrance to the underworld, an important stop on the poet's journey since mythic times. But though Smithson may be summoning up Alice's hookah-smoking caterpillar as an image of the artist, he is also enacting a performative mimesis of the critic who leaves no stone unturned to find the "deeper" meaning of a work, who as he penetrates in imagination the optical spaces opened up by a flat surface a few inches from his face, or dawdles through the shallow depths of a Pollock with its entangled tracks and traces and knotted, writhing roots, is here, in the "skirts of Coatlicue," himself giving an exhibition of the clammy solitude of masturbation. The critic, caught up in his private response to art, is inadvertently enacting a comic theater.

As a close, if cursory, reading of this passage demonstrates, the allusive richness of Smithson's writing

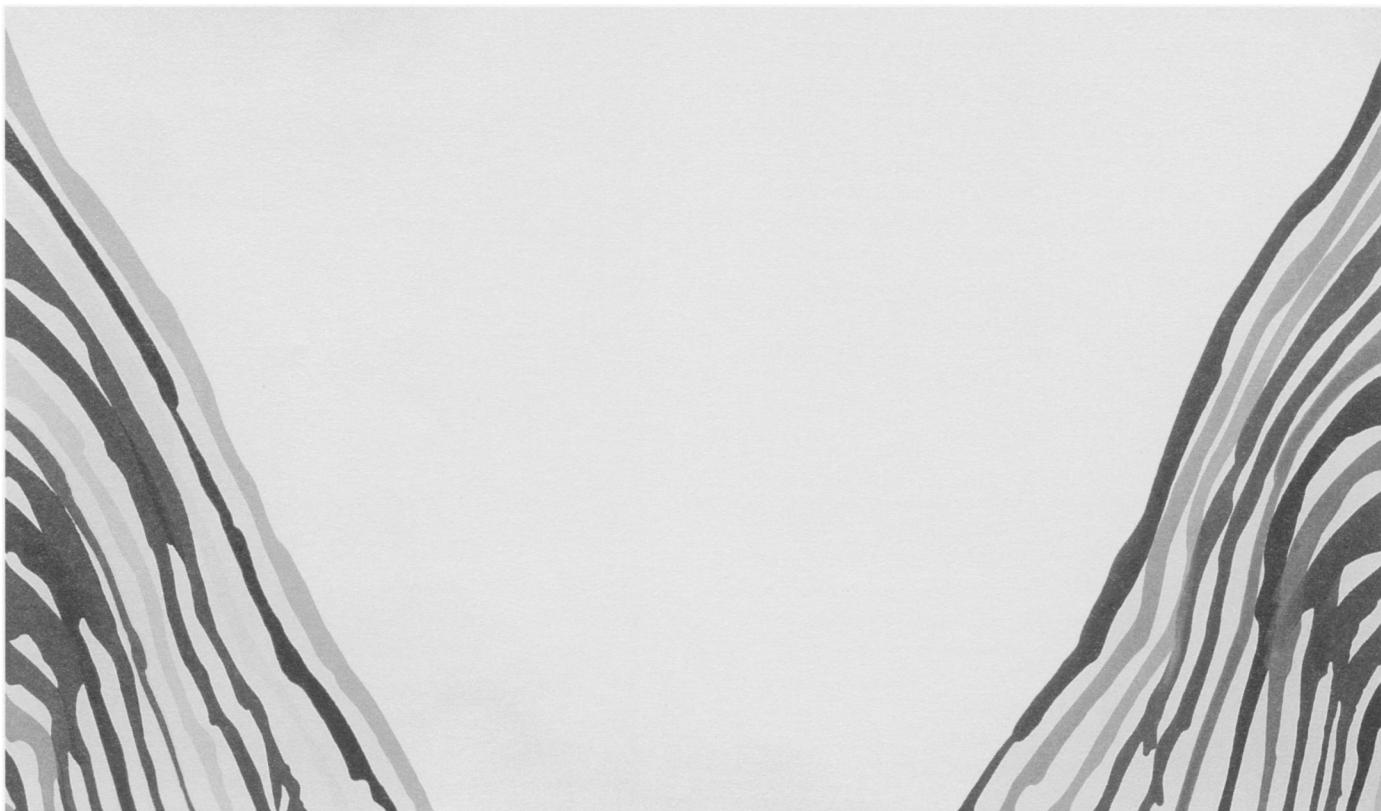


Figure 6. Morris Louis, *Alpha Pi*, 1961. Acrylic resin on canvas, 102 1/2" x 177". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund. Photo: All rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

has scarcely been recognized, never mind examined. His mimetic critique of Fried is only one of the themes that twist and wind their way through the text—it is the “parasite vine” of criticism, and of the artist as critic.

In the last passage quoted from the Louis essay, it is Fried’s emphasis on the conditional that highlights his fear of becoming lost, whereas for Smithson, “lostness” is a necessity for any productive position. It is this lostness that is at the heart of Smithson’s critique of criticism, and it is therefore at the heart of the possibility of a conceptual art that really could replace painting. Is the “blindness” of the critic—the incommensurability of commentary with its object—a consequence of the critic’s limitations, or a limitation of language itself? This is the question that possesses language-based conceptual art, but as Smithson trumps Fried, he turns the void that the critic

recognizes but doesn’t dare enter into a jungle of possibilities. I’d like to make a line-by-line reading of a passage from the “Seventh Displacement” to demonstrate what I mean. I don’t claim that this is *the* crucial passage, but it does contain a gesture that is repeated throughout the piece and throughout Smithson’s writing:

Art brings sight to a halt, but that halt has a way of unravelling itself. All the reflections expired into the thickets of Yaxchilan. One must remember that writing on art replaces presence by absence by substituting the abstraction of language for the real thing. There was a friction between the mirrors and the tree, now there is a friction between language and memory. A memory of reflections becomes an absence of absences.

The important thing to see in this short section is its dramatic shape—the way that it descends and then attempts to rise again.

### (1) "Art brings sight to a halt, but that halt has a way of unravelling itself."

The first line is one of many ruminations on Greenbergian/Friedian "opticality" that attempt to move art, and criticism, beyond limiting categories by making the act of looking itself the object of perception. In the text, the line now under discussion is immediately preceded by the following:

The eyes seemed to look. Were they looking? Perhaps. Other eyes were looking. A Mexican gave the displacement a long, imploring gaze. Even if you cannot look others will look for you.

Greenberg's notion of opticality objectifies the process of seeing even as it cuts aesthetic experience loose from matter. Smithson was long interested in the objectivization of sight;<sup>19</sup> some of his early abstract sculptures could even be described as engaged in a theatricalization of vision. In "Incidents," the awareness that other eyes are looking is the fall into the theatrical, which is also therefore the social. Fried has recently claimed that "[his] attack on minimalism in 'Art and Objecthood' was not made in the name of the optical versus the literal,"<sup>20</sup> but Smithson certainly took it that way, and he didn't believe that the concept of opticality, with its built-in distancing and implicit aestheticism, was going to give any stability to the experiences of the modernist critic. Fried is riveted by the paintings of Morris Louis, but the very substance of perception itself is always in motion, and therefore so is art, and this motion is set off by the presence of other eyes. One simply cannot count on coming back to the same picture twice.

From the start, the point of disagreement between Smithson and Fried had been Tony Smith's famous car ride. Smithson was convinced that a journey was a productive form in itself; Smith's description of his ride was the immediate stimulus for Smithson's "Tour of the Monuments of Passaic." In the Yucatan essay, he wants to try this mode again, engaging polemically with Fried's critique of Smith. He begins the piece by invoking the road:

19. Some of his early sculptures were three-dimensional representations of perspective. In 1966 he wrote "To see one's own sight means visible blindness." *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (see note 5), p. 39. His theater of vision is decidedly comic.

20. Michael Fried, "An Introduction to My Art Criticism," in *Art and Objecthood* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 1-74

Driving away from Merida down Highway 261 one becomes aware of the indifferent horizon. Quite apathetically it rests on the ground devouring everything that looks like something.

But he is not really going anywhere:

One is always crossing the horizon, yet it always remains distant. . . . The distance seemed to put restrictions on all forward movement, thus bringing the car to a countless series of standstills.

Perpetual instability and lack of progress characterize what could be called Smithson's dialectic of action and contemplation; the result is a practice that moves intellectually in the most dramatic way but that leaves behind a series of rather inert objects.<sup>21</sup> Fried's thought, on the other hand, in the late 1960s at least, assumes a definitive form that he believes registers real historical progress,<sup>22</sup> and his faith in his ideas is founded on an experience of a "continuous and entire presentness"<sup>23</sup> given by the artwork. As it crystallizes into a definite form, art brings experience to a stop and the Yucatan piece identifies this halt with the way that criticism puts a stop to the productivity of the artwork in the reduction of a necessarily finished, rounded-off verbal description. The expansion of his practice to include criticism is one stage of Smithson's effort to make an art that registers both the moment and its passing. Smithson had asked "Could it be there is a double Michael Fried—the atemporal Fried and the temporal Fried?"; in the mirror of the Yucatan piece, there is only one Smithson, who experiences both the passage of time and "presentness."

### (2) "All the reflections expired into the thickets of Yaxchilan."

Smithson's concern is the primary condition, whatever it might be called. As a consequence of an unavoidable movement, reflections in every sense of the word fade away into the jungle from whence they have been plucked, or differentiated, by artistic form. This is

21. Not all of Smithson's sculptural works can be described in this way, although this description is not out of line with his intentions.

22. Today Fried takes a much less determinist view of stylistic change, but it's safe to say that in 1967 he was still enough within the Greenbergian rhetoric to feel that Louis's work was a real step forward, an advance on Pollock; at least his Louis essay would suggest as much.

23. Fried (see note 12), p. 23.

all that Smithson really has to say, and this could be the end of the story. If Smithson was interested in writing poetry rather than a travelogue, this single line might suffice to express all of his meaning. But to continue his agon with Fried, he must defer to the critical need to explain, and he does this by referring back to the artwork that his readers themselves are looking at, itself a set of very much less vivid reflections:

**(3) “One must remember that writing on art replaces presence by absence by substituting the abstraction of language for the real thing.”**

This simply means that art writing doesn’t offer an experience as rich as art itself. But it also reminds us that the text is divided within itself, that it is both art and “writing on art”; and that as writing on art, it is further split into a genre of conceptualism and ordinary art criticism of a sort that Smithson could not take very seriously. Line three is typical of this type of “critical” observation: it sounds deep but doesn’t really say much. The banality of the thought marks it as the low point of the passage, a depression in the text, perhaps parallel to the hole left by the *Overted Rock* illustrated on the previous page. The piece is studded with these explanatory moments, and I fear most art historians and critics cannot resist taking them literally as indicators of Smithson’s meaning—as a series of high points, as it were.<sup>24</sup> Smithson’s greatest talent as a writer is his ability to turn banality into an expressive strength,<sup>25</sup> but the question for conceptual art is whether it can incorporate the critical observation that brings art to a halt and still keep moving. This third line tells us how to interpret the jungle of the text, and as it does so, we may be reassured to find ourselves in the presence of “art about art,” Greenberg’s “Alexandrianism,” and a canonical modernist view of art history as a sequence of “negations.” However, we have no sense of what “negation” really means to an

24. An example is David Carrier, who in his introduction to a recent edition of Smithson’s *Collected Writings* suggests that this same sentence should be taken at face value as an indication of Smithson’s views on criticism. *Collected Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Jack Flam, introduction by David Carrier (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

25. Smithson’s sensitivity to the redundancy of Fried’s “infinite abyss,” which he characterizes as a “weak metaphor,” testifies to the self-consciousness of his own employment of deflating gestures.

artist unless we can see how this very act of interpretation, introduced into the work, is also the self-sacrifice of art.

At the beginning of the piece, in the context of his introduction of the motif of the journey, Smithson the minimalist, the artist of the inorganic and the crystalline, surprisingly introduces the theme of sacrifice:

Through the windshield the road stabbed the horizon, causing it to bleed a sunny incandescence. One couldn’t help feeling that this was a ride on a knife covered with solar blood. As it cut into the horizon a disruption took place. The tranquil drive became a sacrifice of matter that led to a discontinuous state of being, a world of quiet delirium. Just sitting there brought one into the wound of a terrestrial victim.

The incongruity of a Bataillean invocation of sacrifice in the context of conceptual art is not as great as it may seem. In February 1970, about a year after his Mexican trip, during a discussion about the Yucatan essay with Dennis Wheeler, Smithson referred to Bataille’s *Death and Sensuality*.<sup>26</sup> Bataille sees the ritual of sacrifice as a means of reconciling transient and isolated beings with the continuity of life as a whole:

The individual discontinuous existence of the animal was succeeded in its death by the organic continuity of life drawn into the common life of the beholders by the sacrificial feast. . . . It is the common business of sacrifice to bring life and death into harmony. . . .<sup>27</sup>

Bataille seems to be arguing against the finality of death; for him, there is something redemptive about sacrifice:

We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire

26. Smithson’s copy of Bataille’s book was a translation not published until 1969, so it may not have been available to him during the writing of “Incidents,” but the productivity of the Yucatan work extends beyond the trip itself and beyond the composition and publication of the essay into later discussions and reflections. In other words, it is both temporal and conceptual.

27. This is the passage Smithson is referring to, for it is immediately followed by the observation that “Cattle being slaughtered or cut up often makes people sick today, but there is nothing in the dishes served at tables to remind them of this.” Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), pp. 91–92.

that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is.<sup>28</sup>

In the conversation with Wheeler, Smithson's misreading of Bataille is very revealing:

Well, that's what I talk about in the beginning [of the Yucatan essay] with the sacrifice of matter as a kind of very primordial idea. Not a human sacrifice, but there's a disjunction. And that disjunction releases a certain kind of awareness. And this is what George Bataille in his book *Death and Sensuality* points out. The disjunction was what was so liberating to the primitives. But to us, the disjunction becomes almost disgusting, this revulsion enters into it. . .<sup>29</sup>

He sees sacrifice in terms that resemble modernist negation—a disjunction in the fabric of an artwork or a break in the art-historical continuum—either of which can liberate energy and generate insight. He has no desire that the evanescent should last and no yearning for a lost continuity. Sacrifice is one metaphor for the disjunctive operation of the mirrors in the landscape, for the "displacement" that they produce, but for Smithson, it should also be understood as a metaphor for the progressively disruptive gestures of modernism, a series of conscious breaks produced by and causing the forward movement of thought.

Smithson understood the many reductions of modernist history as reenactments of the archaic blood ritual. In a recent book, Roberto Calasso has made a clear statement of this very position:

A sacrificial act is any act in which the actor contemplates himself as he acts. The victim, the offering, is he who acts. The sacrificer is the eye that contemplates him.<sup>30</sup>

28. Ibid., p. 15.

29. "Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson" in *Robert Smithson Unearthed*, ed. Eugenie Tsai (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 122.

30. Roberto Calasso, *The Ruin of Kasch* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1994), p. 137. Calasso's theory of art as a post-Enlightenment continuation of sacrifice has suggestive parallels with Smithson's description of criticism: "The very act of naming, the arbitrary decision that enables a thing to be annulled and replaced with a sound, contains the same primordial murder that the sacrifice at once exposes and tries to heal. The continually renewed fabric of correspondences, the meanings each time attributed to the single syllable, to the single meter: it is all a vast attempt to mend the woof around that minuscule rent produced by the word, by the mental image that annuls a presence to evoke an absence, by the sign, by all that replaces something else and that stands for something else" (p. 137).



Figure 7. Fourth Mirror Displacement. Robert Smithson, *Nine Mirror Displacements*, Yucatan 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: Robert Smithson.

Calasso's formulation illuminates the internalization of mythic guilt in the constitution of the divided, self-critical modern subject as an eye that passively watches while time consumes everything, including itself. With every new opening of the eye—read with every new repositioning of modernist self-critique—the sacrifice occurs again.

Bataille's theory of sacrifice is a philosopher's defense against the fear of death.<sup>31</sup> This theme of defensive anxiety further illuminates Fried's hostility to the moving consciousness foregrounded by Tony Smith's ride and takes us into the heart of Smithson's own critique of Fried's position—his valorizing of the temporal and his claim, which I have adopted in this essay, that Fried's critique of minimalism is also driven by anxiety. The productive moment, the moment that makes new, is death, and so fear is art's motivating

31. And even as it interests Smithson, it triggers another defensive gesture, for he is perhaps a bit too quick to say that he doesn't mean "a human sacrifice."



Figure 8. Robert Smithson, *Overturned Rock*, First Phase, Yucatan 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: Robert Smithson.

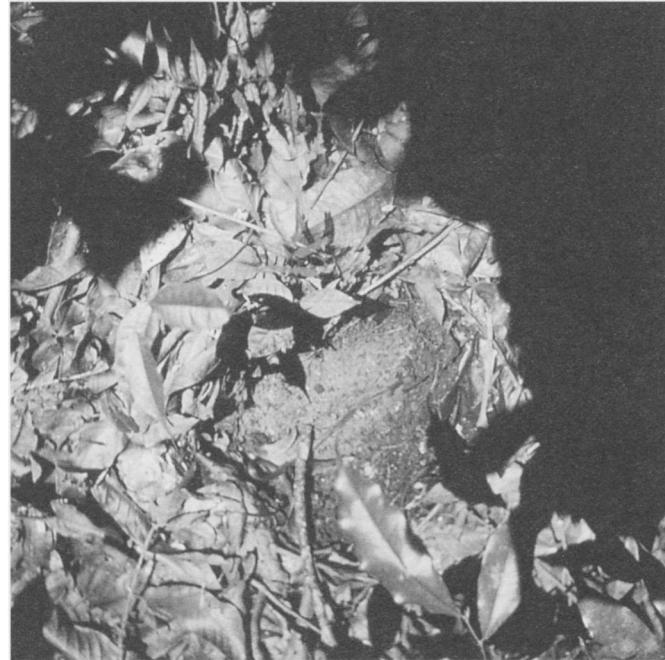


Figure 9. Robert Smithson, *Overturned Rock*, Second Phase, Yucatan 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: Robert Smithson.

affect. Smithson quotes T. S. Eliot, "I'll show you fear in a handful of dust," and then observes that ". . . the frightening problems are the ones that really need investigation."<sup>32</sup> For Smithson, all change is entropic, a running down, a *falling*, and he makes considerable use of a melancholic and comic rhetoric of decay and collapse. Yet Smithson's manner doesn't explain why his ideas are so interesting. As he goes forward and downward, each new move gives new possibilities to art, but each new move is another death. The artist Smithson is not necessarily continuous over time; the implication here is that the genuine artist has no fixed positions. If he had, in fact, lived longer, this may have become more evident.

Is the anxious self-consciousness that Fried feels in front of the "abyss" of Louis's unpainted canvas an awareness of death? For Smithson, the viewing that "takes place in time," in other words, in the shadow of

death, knows "ecstasy and dread." Is criticism just an elaborate mechanism of avoidance, chatter that always fails to get to the point, or is it something worse? The artist uses up his time making art so that the critic, the consumer, can have a temporary sensation of timelessness, of "a continuous and perpetual present." Like the profligate heir, he spends his capital while others collect the paradoxically increasing interest. Smithson's resentment is clearly stated in "A Sedimentation of the Mind," the text that I believe has an anticipatory or prospective relationship to "Incidents":

Any critic who devalues the *time* of the artist is the enemy of art and the artist. The stronger and clearer the artist's view of time the more he will resent any slander on this domain. By desecrating this domain, certain critics defraud the work and the mind of the artist.

He protests too much—the individual critic, however annoying, doesn't have that much power. In fact, in Smithson's own terms, the critic's devaluation of time and overvaluation of "presentness" is a defensive

32. "Four Conversations" (see note 29), pp. 121–122.

reaction based in weakness, in an inability to face the “death principle.”

Critical language works to protect the reader from the artist’s truth: Journalism in the guise of art criticism fears the disruption of language, so it resorts to being “educational” and “historical.” Art critics are generally poets who have betrayed their art, and instead have tried to turn art into a matter of reasoned discourse, and, occasionally, when their “truth” breaks down, they resort to a poetic quote.

The language of criticism fails through exactness *and* through ambiguity. “Incidents,” on the other hand, is a poetic text that necessarily fails in the places where it becomes explanatory discourse. These are the points where Smithson must try to overcome criticism in the name of art, but his own poststudio, nonpictorial practice of representation is a mimesis of criticism. The Yaxchilan of the text is a representation, and hence a reduction, as all art must be, but Smithson is not content to merely bring the inadequacy of the text forward in a now canonically sublime gesture, he makes the killing blow and turns it into criticism.

In line four, a sideways movement brings the text under the bosky shadows of poetry, but this is only a holding action.

#### **(4) “There was a friction between the mirrors and the tree, now there is a friction between language and memory.”**

If the relation between art and the world is essentially the same as the relation between the memory of an artwork and the language within which that memory must be embodied, then criticism, including Smithson’s own text, is legitimately another kind of art, one very close to poetry, which has always had its origin in memory. But this generous accommodation, one of many Derridean anticipations to be found in Smithson’s texts, is not going to serve—the critical perspective has to be definitively overcome by art. Smithson doesn’t want to write criticism as art or produce art as criticism. He wants his jungle to encompass both and to be large and florid enough that we must lose the distinction between them and, in the face of that immensity, recognize the contingent, nonbinding nature of all distinctions. Smithson’s incorporation of weak critical judgments that reduce the jungle to a metaphor threaten to kill off the work from within, and he only has language with which to save it.

#### **(5) “A memory of reflections becomes an absence of absences.”**

The critic is absent—that is his necessary condition and his disqualification—and so a critique of criticism, a mirror displacement of mirror displacements, is less than nothing. The joke is on Greenberg and Fried, of course—because they take exception to the “presence” of the minimalist work, they invite the observation that their own practice is an “absence.” The nonsense of “absent absences” is a spinning or swirling gesture that attempts to send thought back into the jungle. Smithson can only hope that Fried and all his ilk will go down in the whirlpool with the ship; only Smithson the artist will return to tell us. But clearly it doesn’t work. No poetic flourishes will deliver art from criticism, not after the stakes have been raised so high.

There are other places in the text where Smithson goes through the same turn. In the first paragraph of the “Fourth Displacement” (fig. 7), for example:

Jade colored water splashed near the mirrors, which were supported by dry seaweed and eroded rocks, but the reflections abolished the supports, and now words abolish the reflections. . . . “The true fiction eradicates the false reality. . . .”

But it’s a losing game. The paradoxical formulations may confuse us at first, and make us laugh, but if we pause and listen when Smithson says “The questions the mirrors ask always fall short of the answers,” we can hear him confessing, however ironically, the inadequacy of art to deliver a plenitude of meaning, and we have to admit that the strategy of paradox and contradiction is not strong enough to cancel the threat that criticism poses to the work.<sup>33</sup> When he states “The jungle grows only by means of its own negation—art does the same,” we know what that means in art-historical terms, but here art is not gaining anything from proximity to its primordial counterpart, the jungle; instead, reality is reduced to a conventional modernist schema. It is only when Smithson takes that history of negation seriously enough to acknowledge that it entails the continuation of a history of painting, when Morris Louis becomes, for a moment, a presence in the text, that he finds a way of convincing us. And it works because his own signature

33. Although the passage that this phrase comes from is an attempt to turn that “falling short” into a means of transcending the rational answers.



Figure 10. Fifth Mirror Displacement. Robert Smithson, *Nine Mirror Displacements*, Yucatan 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: Robert Smithson.

negation, the invocation of entropy, is also present in the pour painter's work as passive technique.

Both Greenberg and Fried emphasized the control that Louis held over his pouring technique; in a recent study, Shep Steiner has brilliantly discussed Louis's poetics of passivity.<sup>34</sup> Where Fried and Greenberg stress the positive formal achievements of Louis's work in the development of possibilities opened by Pollock, Steiner shows how Louis's automatism is an exemplary falling off from that of Pollock, an example of what Harold Bloom calls an *askesis*, or curtailment. As Louis waits for gravity to do the work, he falls further than Pollock in the salutary impoverishment of his art. Smithson goes further downward still, letting random lights fall on the mirrors uncontrollably, and scandalously, as the pictorialism of the mirrors

34. "High Modernist Painting and Cold War America: Irony, the Atomic Age, and the Rhetoric of the Everyday in the Work Of Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland" (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1997).

abandons the moral/aesthetic choice of abstraction. In the "Eighth Displacement," Smithson reaches the negative climax of his piece, in a colorist passage strongly suggestive of Louis's "Veils" (fig. 13):

Were the mirrors mounted on something that was dropping, draining, eroding, trickling, spilling away? Sight turned away from its own looking. Particles of matter slowly crumbled down the slope that held the mirrors. Tinges, stains, tints, and tones crumbled into the eyes. The eyes became two wastebaskets filled with diverse colors, variegations, ashy hues, blotches and sunburned chromatics.

And when he once again immolates himself by turning the work into intelligible self-description, the momentum of this slippage catches up with the descending gesture in time to make an avalanche that finally carries the critic away:

To reconstruct what the eyes see in words, in an "ideal language" is a vain exploit. Why not reconstruct one's inability to see? Let us give passing shape to the unconsolidated views that surround a work of art, and develop a type of "anti-vision" or negative seeing. The river shored up clay, loess, and similar matter, that shored up the slope, that shored up the mirrors. The mind shored up thoughts and memories, that shored up points of view, that shored up the swaying glances of the eyes. . . . The eyes, being infected by all kinds of nameless tropisms, couldn't see straight. Vision sagged, caved in and broke apart. . . . All the clear ideas of what had been done melted into perceptual puddles, causing the brain to gurgle thoughts. Walking conditioned sight, and sight conditioned walking, till it seemed only the feet could see. . . . Oh, for the happy days of pure walls and pure floors! Flatness was nowhere to be found. Walls of collapsed mud and floors of bleached detritus replaced the flatness of rooms.

Oh happy traveler, to be lost at last! The movement of thought is constant and involuntary, the optical is unstable, and the world erodes without cease; the peripatetic artist participates in all three motions. Smithson's identification of mental and physical events, already prepared in the opening paragraph of "A Sedimentation of the Mind," allowed him to see the entropic nature of Louis's abstract paintings and that insight finally cuts the ground from under Fried, for the "dropping, draining, trickling, spilling" movement of Louis's paint is equivalent to the conceptually mobile but fundamentally passive practice Smithson is here developing, which, as I have already made clear, is also a continuation of that art of movement initiated by Tony Smith's car ride. Painting and conceptual art are

wrapped together in the geological image, but the overcoming of criticism within the text cannot be accomplished in general, theoretical terms: it has to be the refutation of one particular critic through a rereading of one of his favorite artists. Smithson's materialism could have it no other way.

In a summation of his position, Smithson makes a final gesture toward Louis and rescues the painter from his admirers:

Judgements and opinions in the area of art are doubtful murmurs in mental mud. Only appearances are fertile; they are the gateways to the primordial. Every artist owes his existence to such mirages. The ponderous illusions of solidity, the non-existence of things, is what the artist takes for "materials." It is this absence of matter that weighs so heavily on him, causing him to invoke gravity.

Though Louis, as a stain painter, had a "dank brain," his painterly efforts, including his invocation of gravity, are at least understandable once the critic's explanations have been dismissed. In this passage, the extended polemic with Fried breaks through to Greenberg, in particular to one of his earliest engagements with problems of literalness and "opticality," a 1958 article called "Sculpture in Our Time:"

One of the most fundamental and unifying emphases of the new common style is on the continuity and neutrality of a space which light alone inflects, without regard to the laws of gravity. . . . Rendering substance entirely optical, and form, whether pictorial, sculptural or architectural, as an integral part of ambient space—this brings anti-illusionism full circle. Instead of the illusion of things, we are now offered the illusion of modalities: namely that matter is incorporeal, weightless, and exists only optically like a mirage.<sup>35</sup>

This now-famous passage was quoted by Fried in "Art and Objecthood," so it would have been in Smithson's mind at the time of the composition of the Yucatan essay, but I think the way in which he transforms its terms demonstrates how closely he had read Greenberg's essay; that the very concept of opticality has a curiously Smithsonian flavor today testifies to the depth of his engagement with the critic's ideas.

Instead of agreeing that developments in sculpture have produced a new kind of illusionism, Smithson starts from appearances, in other words, from an optical

35. Clement Greenberg, "Sculpture in our Time," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*. Vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 60.

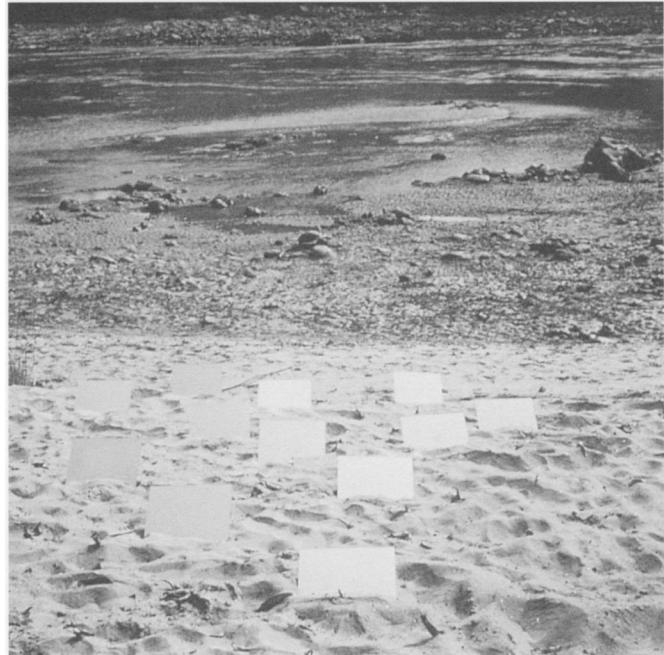


Figure 11. Sixth Mirror Displacement. Robert Smithson, *Nine Mirror Displacements*, Yucatan 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: Robert Smithson.

experience of the world, and derives the modalities of sculpture from that. But the only kind of art that could be made out of the immaterial "materials" of cognition would be a conceptual one. For Smithson, there is a slippage between the optical and the conceptual. Negatively, this is because in their abstraction from the historically emergent object, they both become idealisms; positively, because they are both "modalities" of the contact between consciousness and the irreducible materiality of that same object. Smithson synthesizes two opposing positions that may prove to be as constitutive for art theory in the second half of the twentieth century as color and drawing were throughout the nineteenth—the optical moment of Greenbergian formalism and Duchampian conceptualism. He accomplishes this through the way he articulates both terms with his own materialist stress on the primacy of the object, an articulation that then itself functions as a critique of positivism. This is philosophically the most sophisticated moment in Smithson's work, and one generative for much of it, yet the clue to this development can also be found in Greenberg's essay:



Figure 12. Seventh Mirror Displacement. Robert Smithson, *Nine Mirror Displacements*, Yucatan 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: Robert Smithson.

And in this self-sufficiency of sculpture, wherein every conceivable [emphasis added] as well as perceptible element belongs altogether to the work of art, the positivist aspect of the modernist "aesthetic" finds itself most fully realized.<sup>36</sup>

Every perceptible and every conceivable aspect of an artwork is as one with "the immediate, the concrete, the irreducible"?<sup>37</sup> Could not some conceivable element belong in a small way to the viewer, or to the "ambient space," which Greenberg has just claimed is continuous with the work? If Greenberg is not foreshadowing the turn from minimalism to conceptual art, he is definitely anticipating certain incidents of mirror travel.

When read with the subsequent history of minimalism in mind, Greenberg's essay appears prophetic, if not programmatic. Unlike the Smithson of the "Incidents" essay, who saw contemporary problems in the light of the history of painting, Greenberg says

that "the new sculpture" is "the representative visual art of modernism." However, Greenberg also feels that:

. . . the modernist sensibility, though it rejects sculptural painting of any kind, allows sculpture to be as pictorial as it pleases. Here the prohibition against one art's entering the domain of another is suspended, thanks to the unique concreteness and literalness of sculpture's medium.<sup>38</sup>

If Judd aimed to make works that were neither painting nor sculpture, he was not, as Fried has suggested, drawing one logical though wrongheaded conclusion from Greenberg's teleology. Rather, he was acknowledging Greenberg's view of how things actually stood in contemporary art and then positing a *new form*.<sup>39</sup> The practical feasibility of Judd's double negation has to be measured by the originality of the results, although the strongly pictorial features of many of his works suggest that the program may not have entirely succeeded. Smithson, on the other hand, understood Greenberg better, and therefore saw that *neither* would really have to mean *both*. Smithson's mirror pieces are both sculpture and painting, but in "Incidents," they are both object and concept as well, and both kinds of formal transgression are implicit in the categories of Greenberg's thought. Smithson is less engaged in a break with Greenberg than in a creative sifting of the critic's categories; this is how the Yucatan essay becomes an entanglement of art and criticism. This is also how the persistence of the pictorial in Greenberg's thought carries over and becomes central for conceptual art and why Louis must make another appearance in the text as the Yucatan journey comes to an end. But this is also why Smithson has a stronger claim on Greenberg's theoretical legacy than Judd or Kosuth or even Fried: Smithson's critique of Greenberg is more thoroughgoing because it is less concerned with differentiating his ideas from those of the older thinker. Fried, on the other hand, in his insistence on maintaining the specificity of the different media, and on avoiding the space in between, is actively defending himself against the dizzying implications of Greenberg's "every conceivable element," which, in another context, is precisely the void that opens up behind the purely optical experience of space offered by Louis's "Unfurleds."

Smithson incorporates Fried into the Yucatan essay such that the piece performs Fried's anxiety and

36. Ibid., p. 61.

37. Ibid., p. 55.

38. Ibid., p. 59.

39. Fried (see note 20), pp. 36, 45.

critiques it. The key here is the question of limits and definitions, always important to the critic; the limits of art and the definition of criticism, and the distinction between the two. In "A Sedimentation of the Mind," Smithson states bluntly that ". . . if art is art it must have limits," yet for him the limit becomes visible as it is superseded. Limits become the content of a work that is itself in principle limitless, ". . . containing the lack of its own containment." The frame is inside the picture. These thoughts are not so far from Fried's description of how Louis's "Veils" problematize figuration through the uncertain boundaries that articulate the interior of their imagery, and it was Fried's response to the disappearance of boundaries in the centers of Louis's "Unfurleds" that alerted Smithson to the nature of the critic's stake in that work. Smithson, as a competitive producer of anxieties, intends to take things further than Louis had, and by the time of the Yucatan trip, he had also had time to rethink his own criticism of "Art and Objecthood," a criticism in which, through the mention of the mirror, he had implicated himself. From a consideration of limits, he moves to an in-depth engagement with the concepts of theatricality and presentness, concepts that track a deeper level of anxiety in the critic and are set into resonance by Smithson's removal of art away from the "eyes" of the art world. A set of ephemeral gestures in the jungle is a test of art's reality, of its intrinsic value and, for that matter, its autonomy.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, that isolated place, far away from any viewer, is where the eye inside the work, the extreme self-consciousness that is now constitutive for contemporary art, takes on its own phantom autonomy, where it becomes a vivid "presence."<sup>41</sup> The Yucatan essay comes back to New York as an uncanny witness of art's current condition, and of its ever more evident "absence." Fried's inability to see that a poststudio practice is another attempt to defeat theatre is probably the strongest evidence of the acuteness of Smithson's letter to the editor of 1967, but now we can

40. By late 1969 at least, Smithson's attitude toward Fried's notion of theatricality seems to have shifted, to have become much friendlier than it seems in the letter to the editor: "I'm in a sense not interested in an audience of a show, a gallery show. The very word *show* connotes a certain kind of theatrical presence, most shows are three weeks, so the duration of the show is rather shortlived." "Four Conversations" (see note 29), p. 105.

41. Smithson allegorizes that presence through the voices of the Maya gods that punctuate his text.



Figure 13. Eighth Mirror Displacement. Robert Smithson, *Nine Mirror Displacements*, Yucatan 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: Robert Smithson.

see that "Incidents" is really a rewriting of that letter in which Smithson himself takes to the stage, playing both roles in the comedy of artist and critic.

\* \* \*

This article is essentially a gloss on Smithson's diagnosis of Fried's "dread," and it is therefore necessarily an analysis of Smithson's anxiety and how it is integral to his conception of art. It would make sense to suggest that Fried's anxiety is of a kind typical of a critic, and that it is rooted in a critic's usual concerns—decorum, appropriateness, the correctness of a decision or a gesture, in other words with criteria of evaluation. From the detached perspective of the historian, Fried is able to observe with serene understanding as time renders an artist's most sincere efforts "theatrical," yet while claiming today to be "resolutely nonjudgmental with respect to individual works and oeuvres in the antitheatrical tradition," Fried could not, in the 1960s, give contemporary art the same kind of allowance because of what that would mean for himself. When he insists "on the futility of trying to determine whether or not a given painting conclusively succeeded or for that



Figure 14. Ninth Mirror Displacement. Robert Smithson, *Nine Mirror Displacements*, Yucatan 1969. Courtesy of the estate of Robert Smithson. © VAGA/SODART 2000. Photo: Robert Smithson.

matter conclusively failed in overcoming the condition I have been calling theater,”<sup>42</sup> he is, perhaps unwittingly, reiterating Smithson’s critique of “Art and Objecthood,” but Fried’s anxiety in the late 1960s, as glossed by Smithson, is that criticism itself is now foregrounded in a new way, and this is an effect produced by modernist art. Artists are writing criticism with a high level of philosophical sophistication, but more important, critics such as Greenberg and Fried are producing the most astute analyses of the expressive means available to the modern artist and suggesting how pictures can be reconfigured to open out the potentials present in those means. The critic’s insights may even at times move ahead of the thinking of artists themselves; in the face of Greenberg’s strenuous denial that he ever had any influence on the artists he supported, one has to admit that it is at least *possible* that a critic could play a role in

42. Fried (see note 20), p. 49.

the opening up of productive potentials in contemporary art.<sup>43</sup> The appearance of “literalist” art crystallized a new situation, one that had been long preparing and owed as much to the work of Greenberg and Fried as to anyone. Critics now found themselves on both sides of a boundary that had hitherto been inviolable. Criticism depends precisely on where the critic stands, or rather, on which way he or she is *facing*. Is it at least possible that in the 1960s looking *at* an artwork for the first time opened into an uncanny experience of looking *out from* an artwork?

In “Introduction to My Art Criticism,” Fried makes the following observation:

In fact, Greenberg writes in “Modernist Painting”: “No one artist was, or is yet, consciously aware of [the self-critical tendency of modernist painting], nor could any artist work successfully *in conscious awareness of it*” [emphasis added]—a surprising claim in view of Greenberg’s having just elucidated that tendency with all the clarity at his command. What did he think would become of modernist painting now that he had laid bare its inner workings?<sup>44</sup>

Fried goes to some length to assure us that he thinks Greenberg’s reductive logic was wrong, but at this point, the specific content of any particular modernist conception of art’s historical movement doesn’t matter as much as the insight, or even just the feeling, however wrong, that the critical intelligence had probed so deeply that something essential to art was in danger. The greatest threat to “presentness” is precisely the way that criticism has gained a new analytical strength and hence a new ability to lay bare “the inner workings” of art. Another way of saying this is that the critic proves to be his or her own worst enemy, as criticism, the “parasite vine,” threatens to destroy even as it recognizes the very elements that give art its value and which thereby also sustain criticism. But in any event, it is up to artists to draw the implications in the only way they can, by accepting them, by willingly discarding experiences that the critic still wants to cling to. One might suggest that in the 1960s art about art reached a new level at which aesthetic elation was no longer strengthened and enabled by a critical self-awareness, but threatened by it. And yet, as Smithson

43. Of course, history provides many examples of precisely that, but there is a qualitative difference in the artist/critic relationship in the period we are discussing, perhaps a more dynamic closeness.

44. Fried (see note 20), pp. 75, 65, n. 48.

clearly realized, the threat was precisely the productive moment. Smithson's effort to defeat criticism, in Fried's terms, theater, in the full realization that his own work marked the emergence of a newly critical "theatrical" practice, was the forward movement that left Fried and the artists he championed behind.

Fried feels that in the 1960s writers trained in philosophy,<sup>45</sup> had brought a new rigor to critical writing, an assessment shared by Judd. It only remains to link this development to another internal to art itself, remembering that for Fried the artist is also a beholder:

... no one of all those who have written against "Art and Objecthood" has contended that literalist art was not theatrical; instead, they have tried to reverse my negative assessment of theatricality itself, which is understandable but also suggests that the relation of work to beholder took a new, as yet "unhistoricizable" form with and around the literalist adventure.<sup>46</sup>

Fried's response to this new situation within both art and criticism was to turn to art history, but since his historical work is itself postliteralist, I suggest that he projects a newly felt critical anxiety onto the past. To say this is not to dismiss the historical nature of the categories of absorption and theatricality, or to deny the role they play in the criticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it is just that Fried's interest in that history is, or rather it belongs to the period between 1967 and 1997, which may in fact be bracketable as one epoch in the history of the neo-avant-garde. If we are going to put Fried's ideas into productive dialogue with Smithson's, we will have to untangle the relationship between his criticism of the 1960s and his later art-historical work. Fried himself has claimed that there is "an unbridgeable gulf" between the two, but he does it in terms that suggest that the situation may not be so clear:

It's as if somewhere around 1960 time undergoes a twist, and as if this side of that twist my relation to that issue [theatricality] remains implacably critical, not historical. . . . Shortly after "Art and Objecthood" appeared, Robert Smithson wrote a characteristically brilliant letter to *Artforum* in which he asked: "Could it be there is a double Michael Fried?" Whatever the right answer was in 1967, the answer now is yes.<sup>47</sup>

45. Ibid., pp. 3, 10.

46. Ibid., p. 52.

47. Ibid.

This acknowledgement of Smithson's position, in a mirroring of the artist's own practice, is only the latest form of that mechanism of denial that the artist was alluding to. What Smithson meant, of course, is that there is only one, internally divided Michael Fried. This paper must follow up that insight and show how the same "twist" noticed by Smithson is embedded in Fried's art history.

The particular mode of engagement with the past characteristic of postwar American artists and critics demands a Bloomian rather than a de Manian art history, for it is totally preoccupied with priority and belatedness.<sup>48</sup> But as Harold Bloom has argued extensively and effectively, all that art can deliver out of itself is another art built around strategies of evasion with respect to the past. The only other possible recourse is "nature," but any new beginning also needs to be reformulated with respect to a tradition of such beginnings, that of Caravaggio, Corot, and Cézanne. Smithson's "tours" belong to this tradition, and his travel guides then have to be seen as formal innovations within it.<sup>49</sup> It is this observation that opens a place for Smithson within the tradition of painting. A Bloomian perspective might also help us to understand why, at the climactic low point of his narrative, in the middle of his theatrical staging of the drama of artist and critic, Smithson should invoke Morris Louis and thereby revert to an earlier moment in his dialogue with Fried. It wouldn't be unreasonable to suggest that for Smithson the most important predecessor in American art was Pollock. Studies of Smithson's early development suggest as much;<sup>50</sup> his first significant works, as he himself claimed, came out of a break with the visceral, fluid manner of abstract expressionism. In effect, he signaled his competitive ambition by confronting Pollock from a geometrically opposite corner. Smithson must have been profoundly irritated by Fried's insistence that Louis was the next significant artist after Pollock. He aggressively questioned the terms of Fried's argument in the

48. Bloom's ideas should not be taken as intrinsically more illuminating than those of other critics, but rather as extraordinarily truthful to their moment, in other words, as sharing the same patterns of thought as the art of the period.

49. I have developed this idea further in an unpublished essay, "Minimalism and the City: Robert Smithson 1965–1968."

50. See, for example, Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

"Sedimentation" article, yet perhaps his strongest move in this piece is his positioning of Pollock as a precursor to himself:

*Full Fathom Five* becomes a Sargasso Sea, a dense lagoon of pigment, a logical state of an oceanic mind. Pollock's introduction of pebbles into his private topographies suggests an interest in geological artifices.

The sedimentary or even entropic aspect of Pollock's work, as well as its articulation of oceanic "dedifferentiation" with logical structure, cuts right across to Smithson, leaving post-painterly abstraction entirely out of consideration. Yet a year later, the Yucatan piece implicitly accepts Louis in the same role. Smithson certainly saw the entropic nature of Louis's pours, but he also realized that the overcoming of painting could occur only as painting. He recognized that the historical development of the painterly means had demanded that the practice surrender some part of its materiality, and he addresses that situation directly, without strategic recourse to the categories of art journalism. In a classic modernist negation, "Incidents" sustains the very tradition with which it breaks, and it is this that gives its novel and forward-looking elements, those that link it with conceptual art, their momentum.

Fried's struggle with his precursors has been a much more drawn-out affair, and the conclusion of *Manet's Modernism* does not bring a resolution yet. The final passage of that study is a brilliantly ambivalent formulation that weaves together several agendas in a self-negating yet self-establishing gesture:

. . . my continued stake in Manet rests importantly on the conviction that Manet's best paintings "sustain comparison" . . . with those of the great painters who preceded him. To the extent that that belief became central to a certain reflection on painting only in the wake of Impressionism, the mind of this book remains divided. But no truly serious book on Manet could be otherwise.<sup>51</sup>

Fried finds his authoritative conclusion on a division, a gap. What lies between the "Impressionist" and the Friedian readings of Manet? Could it be an "infinite abyss" of critical revision? Could it be something like what lies between the Impressionist-derived opticality of Greenberg and the factuality of Morris Louis's raw canvas, namely the menace of theatricality, which is

also the realm of conceptualism and of the artist as critic? To close off this most productive opening, Fried defers to the final authority, the artist himself, but it is at once an act of identification with that authority and a thoroughly Bloomian evasion to suggest that the divisions in Manet are the origin of those in the critic. What Fried's larger project really follows is not Manet's divided practice but his own evaluative reading of the artist: it is the desire that his criticism should "sustain comparison" with that of his great predecessors. For Fried, the solution to the "the art historical problem I initially [emphasis added; he presumably means in the 1960s] set for myself, to understand the seminal role of Manet's paintings of the first half of the 1860s,"<sup>52</sup> is to establish the priority of his history of modernism over Greenberg's, and it is his differentiation of his reading of Manet from Greenberg's (Impressionist) reading that then enables the thoroughgoing critique of Greenbergian concepts undertaken in the introduction to the recent *Art and Objecthood*. But it is characteristic of Fried that after weaving together the conclusion of his multivolume art-historical project with a retrospective summary and defense of his earlier criticism, he still wants them to be fundamentally separate. His argument is essentially reducible to the claim that presentness, the desideratum of "Art and Objecthood," is not exactly the same thing as absorption, yet critics who conflate them are not entirely wrong, and an explication of the relationship between these two will help establish on which side of the historical divide the temporal Fried is found and on which side the atemporal Fried is found.

The concept of absorption is important for Fried, because it gives him an objective perspective on his own experience of art. Put simply, pictures of absorptive states are representations of an experience of presentness that include the entire context in which it occurs.<sup>53</sup> They are then, in some sense, intrinsically theatrical, as Fried himself has thoroughly explained. In art history, Fried finds validation of his own aesthetic experience and explores the threat to, destruction of, and restoration of that experience without having to live it. Distance brings an understanding purged of anxiety.

52. Ibid., p. 416.

53. Consequently, the characters in a picture may be experiencing presentness even in the middle of an action, not only in the contemplative state analogous to the absorbed study of a painting.

51. Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism: or The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 416.

Passionate yet rigorous argumentation puts Fried in the ranks of the great critics, yet in his best writing there is something more. For Fried, figures such as Louis and Stella (to recall Baudelaire on Manet) are first in the decline of their art, and he is one of the few critics today who can make us believe that this firstness is admirable and inspiring. In the major Louis essay, in particular, there is a kind of imaginative reaching threaded through with desire that is genuinely astonishing. Fried believes, or wants to believe, that contemporary art can deliver the deep and meaningful experiences that he needs. Of course, it is the nature, and function, of this projection to ensure that art will always come through; all talk about art that "holds up" beside the old masters is tautological and avoids the fundamental investment, because what the critic sees in the art of the past is what he has already set out to find in the moderns. But ultimately the strength of Fried as a critic lies in his strong mimetic response to art, and I suggest that the character of this response is deeply rooted in classic American modernism and the artists that he learned to see through Greenberg's eyes. Like those American artists—Newman, Gottlieb, Pollock—who wanted to paint as if they were the first painters, Fried wants to see art as if it has never been seen before, to be "first" among critics. A formative moment for the young critic is described in the introduction to *Art and Objecthood*. Fried has been invited to the studio of Anthony Caro, whose work he is completely unfamiliar with:

Finally I arrived; there was a gate, and as I stepped through it into the courtyard beyond I found myself in the presence of two of Anthony Caro's earliest abstract sculptures. . . . I was alone with these for several minutes before Caro came out of the house. But that was long enough to experience the unshakable conviction that they were two of the most original and powerful sculptures I had ever seen . . . and that the aggressive character in the restaurant—whom I had never heard of—was a great sculptor. . . . One reason why this first experience of Caro's work remains so present to me is that it was so unexpected, in that sense so "pure." . . . it was thrilling to discover in myself so intense, spontaneous, and convinced a response to work that I had come upon in this way. (Even in the cases of Stella and Bannard, my friendship with them had preceded my experience of their crucial early pictures.)<sup>54</sup>

The libidinal charge given by the experience of firstness is strong. But though Caro's work is new to *him*, to fully

realize his critical project, Fried will have to achieve a more fundamental firstness.

For Fried, artists are stage characters that begin by striking a new kind of absorptive pose that promises a more compelling and vivid drama, but always ends in acquiescence to the essential theatricality of their activity. He, himself, on the other hand, stands shoulder to shoulder with the other critics in the audience. In this way, he tries to accomplish two tasks: to hold the line against his own theatricality and to establish his theory of the beholder as *the* modernist narrative over and against that of Greenberg. To do the latter, he has to make a close reading of other critics from Diderot onward. Fried's hermeneutics of criticism provides him with a genealogy coeval with Greenberg's own and identifies the theory of the beholder as a dialogical response to the older critic's reading of Kant, a reading that anticipated the critical drama that I have tried to present in these pages.

With the exception of his famous claim that Kant initiated modernist self-critique,<sup>55</sup> virtually every mention of the philosopher in Greenberg's writings refers to the problematic way in which personal responses can claim general validity, to what could be called the ethics of evaluation.<sup>56</sup> For a practical critic such as Greenberg, this aspect of Kant's theory, which demands that the beholder have responses that are both "disinterested" and intuitive, and be both critical and absorbed, is most relevant and yet at the same time most difficult. It is the enabling paradox to which Greenberg must continually return in order to ground his judgments. Fried's dialectic of absorption and theatricality is another formulation of the same problem that can be developed through a study of the historical data, namely the writings of other critics, and is therefore less dependent on rhetorical claims of authority. Art history becomes a good place to stand from which to leverage a position within the critical

55. "I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation [emphasis added], of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant." Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*. Vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 85.

56. From a 1961 piece comes the following typical comment: "Quality in art can be neither ascertained nor proved by logic or discourse. Experience alone rules in this area—and the experience, so to speak, of experience. This is what all the serious philosophers of art since Immanuel Kant have concluded" (*ibid.*, p. 118).

54. Fried (see note 20), p. 7.

struggles of the present. As a contemporary counterpart to Kant, Diderot is the crucial figure for Fried, and it is therefore no surprise that he singles out the famous fantasy of immersion in the "Salon of 1767," although Fried seems oblivious to the humor of Diderot's fiction or the theatricality of the essential doubleness it implies. Lost in absorptive contemplation of Vernet's landscapes, Diderot says to himself:

The abbé is right, our artists understand nothing, since the spectacle of their most beautiful productions has never made me feel the delirium I feel now, the pleasure of belonging to myself, the pleasure of knowing myself to be as good as I am, the pleasure of seeing myself and of pleasing myself, the even sweeter pleasure of forgetting myself. Where am I at this moment? I do not know. I am not aware of it. What am I lacking? Nothing. What do I desire? Nothing. If there is a God, this is how he is, he takes pleasure in himself. [Fried's translation]<sup>57</sup>

But Fried's choice of quotation itself registers the contemporary origins of his thinking, for the movement from seeing oneself to forgetting oneself is precisely what literalist art didn't allow. And as the piece continues beyond the section chosen by Fried, Diderot's idyll begins to sound like a *blague*:

A distant noise, that of a washerwoman beating her laundry, suddenly broke the silence, and farewell my divine existence. But while it's sweet to exist like God, it's sometimes just as sweet to exist like men. If only she'd come here, if she'd appear before me, if I could see her large eyes once more, if she'd place her hand softly on my forehead, if she'd smile at me. . . . How handsome is the group of vigorous, luxuriant trees to the right!<sup>58</sup>

Hilarious is the only word. Is absorption divine because it is not an erotic daydream, or is landscape painting only a way of changing the subject, in any case? For that matter, since it is Fried's ideas that are in question here, why shouldn't we read the act of beating laundry as a figure of the painter painting? Diderot himself doesn't take this "divine existence" entirely seriously, Fried's need to do so is exactly the weak point in his entire conceptual system.

In this passage, Diderot is a mask for Fried, who wants the experience of firstness enabled by self-

57. Cited in Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 126.

58. Denis Diderot, *The Salon of 1767*, trans. John Goodman in *Diderot on Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 98.

forgetting; but his strongly mimetic nature, which, in another sense, is his integrity as a critic, requires that he must also find this immersive self-forgetting in an artist. As he then develops his reading of Courbet, it opens into a dialectic of inside and outside identical to the movement between artist and critic, that is, the transformation of artist into critic, in theatrical/antitheatrical poststudio art.

But it can't be emphasized too strongly that all such efforts were doomed to failure—that no matter what steps Courbet took to realize what I have been claiming was his central aim, he couldn't literally or corporeally merge with the canvas before him but instead was compelled to remain outside it, a beholder (albeit a privileged one) to the end. In fact the linkage between immanence and outsideness in Courbet's art is even closer than this suggests. For it isn't merely a contingent fact about Courbet's project that it was bound to fail: on the contrary, *it was precisely the impossibility of literal or corporeal merger that made that project conceivable, or rather pursuable, in the first place* [Fried's emphasis]. . . . To put this another way, had transporting oneself into a painting been physically feasible, which is to say had paintings been altogether different objects from what they are, the issue of theatricality would have taken a wholly different form or indeed wouldn't have arisen.<sup>59</sup>

Fried is right—if paintings were not what they are, the avant-gardist attempt to overcome the pictorial would never have happened; yet it is the persistence of the kind of aesthetic distance characteristic of painting that makes the participant in the staged event or installation feel oddly self-conscious, in other words, theatrical. The literal or corporeal merger with the work is what installations and happenings offered, and the condition of remaining outside that they, in fact, delivered is what Fried called their theatricality. Their outsideness is within them, or rather, it is produced in the viewer as a critical distance. Courbet is then another mask for Fried, and Fried's reading is a good description of what he, or any viewer, might experience as theatricality.

Though the two immersive experiences differ in kind, the chronological priority of Diderot in the immersive mode may suggest that Courbet is engaged in a performative enactment of an earlier critical fantasy—in Fried's historical reading, the critic was there first—yet

59. Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 269.

Diderot's complete account of his pictorial immersion is constituted around a distance that Fried does not attribute to Courbet, implicit in the critic's ironic wit. But then that is as we should expect, for a critic, by Fried's own definition, can never be a first beholder, that role can only be held by the artist, so finally it must be the critic who remains theatrical, both to himself or herself and to others. Fried's thought is necessarily built around a fundamental asymmetry; the critic can never be first beholder, yet the first beholder (the artist) is always the first critic. Fried tries to escape the peculiar social consequences of this asymmetry in his own historical context by turning to the art of the past, but the same conflict can hardly be avoided by the artist, who has to live through the profound relation between theatricality and lateness. In that brief movement from artist to critic, the first beholder also becomes the first latecomer, who recognizes that now, after the completion of a work, or for that matter, in the case of painting, after the application of any single brushstroke, things are different in the world—an experience has become history and is therefore lost forever, and the next move has to be made in conscious response to that lostness.<sup>60</sup> The tradition of absorptive immersion in the artwork from Diderot through Courbet does not, therefore, find its culmination in Fried. It may find one culmination in Smithson's jungle walk, and in his efforts to become lost, but only because the mirrors introduce optical, conceptual, and literalist experiences that also place him, as the first beholder, on the outside of the work. Smithson's practice is the mirror of Fried's: where the critic incorporates immersion into his own work as an image—Diderot and Courbet simultaneously in front of and within a painting—the artist cannot help but recognize the critical distance embedded in and constitutive of his totally immersive experience, also expressed in an image—that of the mirror displacements as painterly events.

In the failure of aesthetic immersion, Fried, like his artist, finds himself outside of the space of art and then has to confront what he really wants, which is not so far from the goal of the avant-garde, namely, to be at home

60. Perhaps Fried's theory of theatricality can then say a lot, for example, about the movement from Cézannian/Cubist analysis of the picture surface to later Pollock/Newman "alloverness" and the subsumption of brush strokes in postpainterly abstraction—but only if it is first returned to its own matrix in the dialectics of critical anxiety.

in the world. This comes through in a theological conceit perhaps originally owed to Diderot:

. . . the wholeness of the world in Courbet's paintings is directly analogous to the sense in which the painter-beholder can be said to inhabit all of his body; anywhere is a good enough place to sit down to paint because he is wholly there. . . . Still another way of putting this might be to say that in Courbet's Realism the world or nature possesses the quality of *omnipresence* that St. Anselm defined as "[existing] as a whole everywhere" and attributed only to God—that is, expressly not to this world—and that what takes the place of the *a priori* conception of God as the supreme being on which Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence relies is the phenomenological *a priori* of the lived body. . . .<sup>61</sup>

But literalist art teaches that any place is as good as any other. Further, it is often made by professional fabricators and thus has brought a new passivity to art production and foregrounded the artist's position as beholder as never before. The artist now works in a space shared with other viewers, a space that has no necessary boundaries; Smithson's trip to Mexico might even serve as an amusing example of the new omnipresence of the artist. What is missing from any of the passages quoted, most notably from the description of how Courbet comfortably inhabits his own body, is the anxiety noticed by Smithson—for Fried, these immersive experiences feel good, and this is enough to bring into question his claim to be doing the work of a disinterested art historian. He may be positing a different sort of immersion in the work than that produced by the situational or participatory art of the 1960s that he regarded as theatrical, but his proposal is grounded in the shock of his response to minimalism, and it is partly a compensatory fantasy in which the anxiety of the critic, exacerbated by that experience, finds the kind of healing "wholeness" no longer offered by contemporary art. Fried's historical work could be seen as a heroic effort to imagine an immersive aesthetic experience free of anxiety, in other words, free of the dividedness intrinsic to the social, and the trope of "the beholder" is an elision of critic and artist that hides the sacrificial knife. This pacific dream is perhaps rooted in the typically modern belief that the religious relationship to the world found at the historical origins of art did, in fact, offer experiences of unproblematic wholeness.

61. Fried (see note 59), p. 282.

In one of the hundreds of footnotes to *Manet's Modernism*, some of them small essays in themselves, are the following most apposite remarks by George Moore:

[Manet] might have lived till he was eighty without obtaining recognition. Death alone could accomplish the miracle of opening the public's eyes to his merit.<sup>62</sup>

With Calasso, we observe that the eye of modernist self-awareness always opens on the already dead, in other words, the transformation of art into history is a sacrificial act. In horse-and-buggy days, the death of an artist—the beginning of their historical afterlife—might well have corresponded with his or her corporeal death; today any artist will probably die more than once during his or her lifetime, and at this particular historical moment, we may all be living through one of those passings that produces understanding. As the curtain goes down on the latest act, with the completion of Fried's massive historical revision of the genetic moment of conceptualism coincident with the valedictory of Documenta X, it becomes apparent that although the avant-gardist view that art which had reached its endpoint of demystification could only debouch into social critique is true enough, the stakes for Smithson were very much like what they are for us today, not what they were for neo-avant-gardists of the 1970s or their critical advocates in the 1980s and 1990s. Smithson's purview includes the contextualization of practice within a social world continuous with art,<sup>63</sup> but now that we understand how art is implicated in social interests and historical struggles—what next?<sup>64</sup>

The avant-garde took painting off the wall, turned it around to expose its back and sides, then put it down and walked away—and looked back from a new distance that revealed how art functioned as both object and as ideological construct. What we learn by reading Smithson through Fried is the capacity still inhering in that strange apparition called the picture plane to put us at a further distance from ourselves than we can put it. This has something to do with reflection but doesn't

need images or even a mirror; it turns us into mirrors into which we can also look. This was also the insight that Smithson himself read out of Fried. His response, faced with the persistence of painting as the paradigm of critical experience, of the optical at the core of the critical, was to seize another potential in the history of that medium. The *Asphalt Rundown*, *Glue Pour*, and *Texas Overflow* are in the Pollock/Louis line as it entered the process and antiform work of the late 1960s and early 1970s. But Smithson understood that the mirroric effect was too deeply constituted to be canceled even by primary physical processes such as entropy. This is what the Yucatan piece is about and why the crux of it is found in lines that I have already quoted and now repeat with some elisions, lines in which Smithson achieves a distance on his own efforts to overcome painting, that keep the theatricality of appearances in tension with the critical desublimation that tries to ground itself behind those same appearances:

Only appearances are fertile; they are the gateway to the primordial. . . . It is this absence of matter that weighs so heavy on him, causing him to invoke gravity.

Smithson is reaching for an ultimate firstness, but he understands, as neither his critics nor many of his colleagues did, that "There is no origin save in ephemeral life."<sup>65</sup>

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65. T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 32.

62. Fried (see note 51), pp. 617–618, n. 19.

63. I have written a long, unpublished paper that argues in detail that Smithson's nonsites and other works from 1965–1968 are critical in the avant-gardist meaning of the term, that they direct the viewer's attention toward their social context. See note 49 above.

64. To quit art altogether is one legitimate response. Figures such as Piero Gilardi and Ian Burn are also "poststudio" and, for that matter, antitheatrical.