

fiction.

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Fictioning the Landscape: Robert Smithson and Ruins in Reverse



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Left side image: Robert Smithson, *Hotel Palenque*, dimensions variable 1969-72. Slide projection of thirty-one 35mm color slides (126 format) and audio recording of a lecture by the artist at the University of Utah in 1972 (42 minutes, 57 seconds). Image courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

That zero panorama seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is – all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built.

–Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey"

There is a case to be made that Robert Smithson's expanded practice is a form of mythopoesis that involves a very particular 'fictioning' of the landscape (when this names a re-imagining of what's already there and a foregrounding of other, often non-human temporalities). A work like *Spiral Jetty* for example – when this includes the film and essay as well as the actual jetty in the Great Salt Lake – operates as a complex myth-making machine (one that is accentuated through the jetty's disappearance and relatively recent re-emergence) that activates its particular context whilst also producing a particular scene in which past and future co-exist. As far as the past goes, *Spiral Jetty* resonates with ancient earthworks and other prehistoric monuments and markings (which Smithson was interested in); in terms of the future, the essay and film of *Spiral Jetty* borrow tropes from science fiction (Smithson was himself a fan of the genre). But also, in the narrative they

construct, operate as a form of Science Fiction (or science fictioning) themselves.¹ Other of Smithson's essays on his own work also have this character, for example, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan", which records a mythic journey Smithson and his partner, the artist Nancy Holt, made through the Yucatan landscape and the insertion of small mirrors into this landscape in order to both foster mirror travel (a form of space-time travel), but also, as laid out in the essay, to summon forth Mayan deities.²

Smithson's other writings on the artists that were his contemporaries also involve a particular kind of fictioning of their work. For example "The Crystal Land" (1966) on Don Judd where the references are as much to a writer like J. G. Ballard as they are art historical: "The first time I saw Don Judd's 'pink plexiglass box', it suggested a giant crystal from another planet. After talking to Judd, I found out we had a mutual interest in geology and mineralogy, so we decided to go rock hunting in New Jersey" (Smithson 1996a: 7). Smithson alerts us to something 'alien' about the box and, indeed, other of Judd's 'specific objects' (should they also be called 'science fiction objects?'). They have a certain otherworldly and 'non-artistic' character (especially for audiences

at the time). The essay (and others like it) offer a kind of counter history of minimalism to those more sanitised accounts that 'explain' these new kinds of 'industrially produced objects in reference to art history, spectatorship and an all-too-human phenomenology. Smithson's account fictions this new kind of art as arriving from some other space-time.

The essay "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966) is also a good example of this fictioning (Smithson 1996b). It makes many remarkable connections: between art practice and, again, science fiction; between entropy/thermodynamics and the new sculpture; and between writing on art and fiction per se. It is a playful and endlessly productive text, not just in the different content it draws in, but also in how it writes about this, with a layering of references and a certain density that means that it reads like a work of art itself. There is also a certain irreverence to Smithson's writing, a humorous counter aesthetic. Again, it could not be more different from the seriousness of, for example, Michael Fried.³ An example of this is where Smithson writes about science fiction (and horror) film as artistic resource: "The movies give a ritual pattern to the lives of many artists, and this induces a kind of 'low-budget'

mysticism, which keeps them in perpetual trance. The ‘blood and guts’ of horror movies provides for their ‘organic needs,’ while the ‘cold steel’ of sci-fi movies provides for their inorganic needs.” (Smithson 1996b: 16)

There is also the manner in which Smithson’s writings attend to the actual matter of art as well as its ‘meaning’ or signifying properties, whilst also foregrounding the matter of writing itself. This is even more pronounced in a key text like “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” (1968) where Smithson writes about what he calls (following the artist Tony Smith, but also the psychoanalytic art theorist Anton Ehrenzweig) the ‘primary process’ of art production — the artist’s contact with matter —



Robert Smithson, *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1-9)*, nine chromogenic prints from chromogenic slides (126 format) 24 x 24 inches each, 1969. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Image courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

before its ‘capture’ by critics, and, we might say, by Art History (that then goes on to ‘explain’ the art) (Smithson 1996c: 103). In that essay Smithson again writes about landscape and time — and the production of a present in which “remote futures meet remote pasts” (Smithson 1996c: 113).⁴ He also reflects on what he calls the time of the artist as being at odds with typical capitalist time (of work/leisure; of commodities and the market) (Smithson 1996c: 111-3). Indeed, Smithson, like his art, operated in a different, more non-human temporality (and, as such, might be seen as a kind of precursor to what has become known as the ‘speculative turn’ in the theoretical humanities).⁵

To return to Smithson’s writings as art I want to briefly consider two further essays that are case studies of his method: the diaristic “Hotel Palenque” — from the same Yucatan journey mentioned above — which was originally a slide presentation (and, as such, perhaps one of the earliest forms of the ‘docu-fiction’) (Smithson 1969); and “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (1967) which records a trip Smithson made into the industrial landscape just outside NYC (Smithson 1996d). Both involved a journey ‘beyond’ Smithson’s habitual environment

and a fictioning of the landscape he found himself in, with Smithson ‘overlying’ his own view on the terrain, whilst at the same time producing an account that is both believable and somehow more accurate. Indeed, as with Ballard, after reading the essays one cannot but see a certain kind of landscape through Smithson’s eyes.

In both essays there is then a close imbrication — or blurring — of fiction and reality insofar as Smithson does not actually ‘invent’ anything that is not already there. In the Passaic essay industrial pipelines, buildings, bridges and such like are re-imagined as monuments, but the essay itself begins with Smithson buying a newspaper and Brian Aldiss’ Science Fiction novel *Earthworks* (alongside a map) each of which then serve as guide and commentary for his trip. Each of the documents are, as it were, given equal footing in terms of their ‘account’ of the Passaic area. In “Hotel Palenque”, as the slide images show, Smithson — at least apparently — is ‘just’ reporting on what he sees (and, indeed, what we can see) in the photos he has taken. In both cases ‘everyday’ spaces are re-imagined as something more remarkable.

Reality is then ‘read’ differently by Smithson: that which is often



Robert Smithson, *Hotel Palenque*, dimensions variable 1969-72. Slide projection of thirty-one 35mm color slides (126 format) and audio recording of a lecture by the artist at the University of Utah in 1972 (42 minutes, 57 seconds). Image courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

overlooked, or in the background, is foregrounded. There is a kind of psychosis — or stoned logic — at work here, a vertiable ‘interpretosis’ (in these essays there is less a refusal of interpretation than an acceleration of it) that also gives both essays a certain humour (this also arises from Smithson’s particular attitude and, indeed, voice which in the Passaic presentation is not unlike William Burroughs). Although in the Passaic essay Smithson rails against a ‘psychoanalytic’ reading of, for example, the pipelines (in fact, there is something of the schizoanalytic in his take on the monuments of the Passaic) it is nevertheless the case that Smithson also imposes his own narratives on the real. There is also a sense however that the sites Smithson visits are themselves already fictions — the Hotel Palenque especially with its paths and doorways leading nowhere and façades nested within façades. In this sense Smithson is layering one fiction on another, nesting one narrative inside another.

As I have already intimated both the essays also concern themselves with time loops — to the past but also to the future. In fact, both are concerned with that strange temporality that is characteristic of Smithson’s work more



Robert Smithson, *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1-9)*, nine chromogenic prints from chromogenic slides (126 format) 24 x 24 inches each, 1969. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Image courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

generally: past futures and future pasts. As Smithson puts it in the Passaic essay the industrial monuments are “ruins in reverse”, the “memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures” (Smithson 1996d: 72). Here industrial machines are seen to equate with prehistoric creatures, just as the sites of industry equate with possible future art works (the industrial landscape is littered with what we might call these past-future signs). In *Hotel Palenque* the building looks to ancient ruined Mayan temples (the hotel, we might say, is also a ‘ruin in reverse’). In fact, Smithson sees a homology between these two kinds of building in terms of architectural detail but also in terms of the attitude of the people that built them that are, as it were, connected through time. Indeed, time is itself layered and patch-work in this set-up, and fictioning a method of presenting the co-presence of many different pasts and futures within a given landscape.

¹ Ballard himself picks up on this in his brief ‘Robert Smithson as Cargo Cultist’ when he asks what kinds of ship this jetty might have been built to accommodate (Ballard 2000).

² For an account of *Spiral Jetty* and *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* along these lines, albeit specifically through a Deleuzian optic, see my ‘From Geophilosophy to Geoaesthetics: The Virtual and the Plane of Immanence versus Mirror-Travel and the *Spiral Jetty*’ (O’Sullivan 2006: 98-120). Although not explicitly concerned with narrative there is also a sense that Nancy Holt’s practice was involved in a kind of mythopoesis and fictioning of the landscape. A work like *Sun Tunnels* ‘activates’ its context (the desert, mountains, but also the sun, moon and stars) introducing a different scale, but also a different geologic and, indeed, planetary, temporality. In a resonance with prehistoric monuments the *Sun Tunnels* have also become sites for solstice celebrations.

³ There is a more general point to be made here about the difference between artist’s writing (on their own work as well as that by others) and the writing of historians, theorists and critics. The latter can involve a certain distance (a view from outside as it were); the former a closer, more intimate involvement — which can also manifest itself in the treating of theoretical materials as materials to be played with and manipulated (that is, themselves fictioned).

⁴ With a work like *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* this becomes literally the case. After struggling with a large boulder at the centre of this work — as to whether to bury or remove it — Smithson decided to leave it where it was as an ‘indefinable reminder of the ice age’ (Tegelaers n. d.: n. p.).

⁵ For an argument along these lines see Trevatt 2014.

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