

Robert Smithson

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Robert Smithson (January 2, 1938 – July 20, 1973) was an American artist famous for his use of photography in relation to sculpture and land art.

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Early life and education

Smithson was born in Passaic, New Jersey and early on lived mostly in Rutherford. In Rutherford, William Carlos Williams was Smithson's pediatrician. When Smithson was nine his family moved to the Allwood section of Clifton.^[1] He studied painting and drawing in New York City at the Art Students League of New York from 1955 to 1956 and then briefly at the Brooklyn Museum School.^[2]

Career

Early work

His early exhibited artworks were collage works influenced by "homoerotic drawings and clippings from beefcake magazines",^[3] science fiction, and early Pop Art. He primarily identified himself as a painter during this time, but after a three-year rest from the art world, Smithson emerged in 1964 as a proponent of the emerging minimalist movement. His new work abandoned the preoccupation with the body that had been common in his earlier work. Instead he began to use glass sheet and neon lighting tubes to explore visual refraction and mirroring, in particular the sculpture *Enantiomorphic Chambers*. Crystalline structures and the concept of entropy became of particular interest to him, and informed a number of sculptures completed during this period, including *Alogon 2*. In Smithson's eyes entropy was the second law of thermodynamics, which exploits the range of energy by telling us that energy is easier lost than obtained. He said that in the ultimate

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Spiral Jetty from atop Rozel Point, in mid-April 2005. It was created in 1970 and still exists although it has often been submerged by the fluctuating lake level. It consists of some 6500 tons of basalt, earth and salt.

Birth name	Robert Irving Smithson
Born	January 2, 1938 Passaic, New Jersey
Died	July 20, 1973 (aged 35) near Amarillo, Texas
Nationality	American
Training	Art Students League of New York
Movement	Land art
Works	Spiral Jetty, 1970
Patrons	Virginia Dwan

future the universe will burn out into an all encompassing sameness. Smithson used the idea of entropy to explore ideas of decay and renewal, chaos and order, non-sites and earthworks, trying to find equilibrium between these opposites. His ideas on entropy also branched out into culture, “the urban sprawl and the infinite number of housing developments of the post war boom have contributed to the architect of entropy”. Smithson did not see entropy as a disadvantage he saw it as a form of transformation of society and culture, which is shown in his artwork like his non-site pieces. Smithson became affiliated with artists who were identified with the minimalist or Primary Structures movement, such as Nancy Holt (whom he married), Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt. As a writer, Smithson was interested in applying mathematical impersonality to art that he outlined in essays and reviews for *Arts Magazine* and *Artforum* and for a period was better known as a critic than as an artist. Some of Smithson's later writings recovered 18th- and 19th-century conceptions of landscape architecture which influenced the pivotal earthwork explorations which characterized his later work. He eventually joined the Dwan Gallery, whose owner Virginia Dwan was an enthusiastic supporter of his work.

Later work

In 1967 Smithson began exploring industrial areas around New Jersey and was fascinated by the sight of dump trucks excavating tons of earth and rock that he described in an essay as the equivalents of the monuments of antiquity. This resulted in the series of 'non-sites' in which earth and rocks collected from a specific area are installed in the gallery as sculptures, often combined with mirrors or glass. In September 1968, Smithson published the essay "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" in *Artforum* that promoted the work of the first wave of land art artists, and in 1969 he began producing land art pieces to further explore concepts gained from his readings of William S. Burroughs, J.G. Ballard, and George Kubler.

As well as works of art, Smithson produced a good deal of theoretical and critical writing, including the 2D paper work *A Heap of Language*, which sought to show how writing might become an artwork. In his essay "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan" ^[4] Smithson documents a series of temporary sculptures made with mirrors at particular locations around the Yucatan peninsula. Part travelogue, part critical rumination, the article highlights Smithson's concern with the temporal as a cornerstone of his work.

Smithson's interest in the temporal is explored in his writings in part through the recovery of the ideas of the picturesque. His essay "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape" was written in 1973 after Smithson had seen an exhibition curated by Elizabeth Barlow Rogers at the Whitney Museum entitled “Frederick Law Olmsted’s New York” as the cultural and temporal context for the creation of his late-19th-century design for Central Park. In examining the photographs of the land set aside to become Central Park, Smithson saw the barren landscape that had been degraded by humans before Olmsted constructed the complex ‘naturalistic’ landscape that was viscerally apparent to New Yorkers in the 1970s. Smithson was interested in challenging the prevalent conception of Central Park as an outdated 19th-century Picturesque aesthetic in landscape architecture that had a static relationship within the continuously evolving urban fabric of New York City. In studying the writings of 18th- and 19th-century Picturesque treatise writers Gilpin, Price, Knight and Whately, Smithson recovers issues of site specificity and human intervention as dialectic landscape layers, experiential multiplicity, and the value of deformations manifest in the Picturesque landscape.

Smithson further implies in this essay that what distinguishes the Picturesque is that it is based on real land ^[5] For Smithson, a park exists as “a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region” ^[6] Smithson was interested in Central Park as a landscape which by the 1970s had weathered and grown as Olmsted’s

creation, but was layered with new evidence of human intervention.

Now the Ramble has grown up into an urban jungle, and lurking in its thickets are “hoods, hobos, hustlers, and homosexuals,” and other estranged creatures of the city.... Walking east, I passed graffiti on boulders... On the base of the Obelisk along with the hieroglyphs there are also graffiti. ...In the spillway that pours out of the Wollman Memorial Ice Rink, I noticed a metal grocery cart and a trash basket half-submerged in the water. Further down, the spillway becomes a brook choked with mud and tin cans. The mud then spews under the Gapstow Bridge to become a muddy slough that inundates a good part of The Pond, leaving the rest of The Pond aswirl with oil slicks, sludge, and Dixie cups”^[7]

While Smithson did not find “beauty” in the evidence of abuse and neglect, he did see the state of things as demonstrative of the continually transforming relationships between man and landscape. In his proposal to make process art out of the dredging of The Pond, Smithson sought to insert himself into the dynamic evolution of the park ^[8]

Smithson became particularly interested in the notion of deformities within the spectrum of anti-aesthetic dynamic relationships which he saw present in the Picturesque landscape. He claimed, “the best sites for ‘earth art’ are sites that have been disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization, or nature’s own devastation.” ^[9] While in earlier 18th-century formal characterizations of the pastoral and the sublime, something like a “gash in the ground” if encountered by a “leveling improver”, as described by Price, would have been smoothed over and the whole composition returned to a more aesthetically pleasing contour ^[10] For Smithson, however, it was not necessary that the deformation become a visual aspect of a landscape; by his anti-formalist logic, more important was the temporal scar worked over by natural or human intervention. He saw parallels to Olmsted’s Central Park as a “sylvan” green overlay on the depleted landscape that preceded his Central Park ^[11] Defending himself against allegations that he and other earth artists “cut and gouge the land like Army engineers”, Smithson, in his own essay, charges that one of such opinions “failed to recognize the possibility of a direct organic manipulation of the land..” and would “turn his back on the contradictions that inhabit our landscapes” ^[12]

In revisiting the 18th- and early 19th-century treatises of the Picturesque, which Olmsted interpreted in his practice, Smithson exposes threads of an anti-aesthetic anti-formalist logic and a theoretical framework of the Picturesque that addressed the dialectic between the physical landscape and its temporal context. By re-interpreting and re-valuing these treatises, Smithson was able to broaden the temporal and intellectual context for his own work, and to offer renewed meaning for Central Park as an important work of modern art and landscape architecture.

Other theoretical writings explore the relationship of a piece of art to its environment, from which he developed his concept of *sites* and *non-sites*. A *site* was a work located in a specific outdoor location, while a *non-site* was a work which could be displayed in any suitable space, such as an art gallery. *Spiral Jetty* is an example of a sited work, while Smithson's non-site pieces frequently consist of photographs of a particular location, often exhibited alongside some material (such as stones or soil) removed from that location.

The journeys he undertook were central to his practice as an artist, and his non-site sculptures often included maps and aerial photos of a particular location, as well as the geological artifacts displaced from those sites. In 1970 at Kent State University, Smithson created *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) ^[13] to illustrate geological time consuming human history. His most famous work is *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a 1,500-foot (460 m) long spiral-

shaped jetty extending into the Great Salt Lake in Utah constructed from rocks, earth, and salt. It was entirely submerged by rising lake waters for several years, but has since re-emerged. The lake waters may be pinkish due to high concentrations of β -carotene in the halophyte green alga *Dunaliella salina*. Of the work, Greg Lindquist professed that it was a "quintessential example of fusing the natural and its human manufacture."^[14]

In 1971 he created *Broken circle/Spiral Hill* for the exhibition for the Sonsbeek'71 art festival at Emmen, the Netherlands. The subject of the 1971 Sonsbeek exhibition was *Beyond Lawn and Order* (Dutch: Buiten de perken).

In 1973 he designed the Bingham Canyon Reclamation Project.

On July 20, 1973, Smithson died in a plane crash, while surveying sites for his work *Amarillo Ramp* in the vicinity of Amarillo, Texas.^[15] Despite his early death, and relatively few surviving major works, Smithson has a following amongst many contemporary artists. In recent years, Tacita Dean, Sam Durant, Renée Green, Lee Ranaldo, Vik Muniz, Mike Nelson, and the Bruce High Quality Foundation have all made homages to Smithson's works.

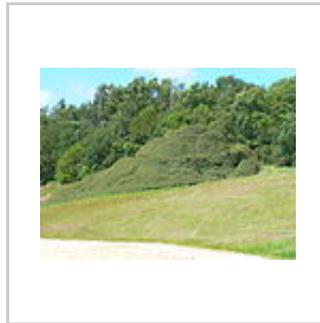
The Estate of Robert Smithson is managed by James Cohan Gallery.



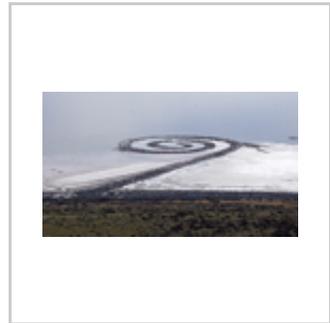
Broken Circle, Emmen, The Netherlands



Broken Circle detail of materials, Emmen, The Netherlands



Spiral Hill, Emmen, The Netherlands



Spiral Jetty, Utah, USA

Notes

1. ^ Cummings, Paul, "Interview with Robert Smithson" (<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-smithson-12013>), Archive of American Artists oral history webpage, conducted July 14 and 19, 1972. Retrieved 2013-07-16.
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3. ^ [1] (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/24/arts/design/24kimm.html?ex=1180929600&en=97cea2a283bb6762&ei=5070>) Kimmelman Ny Times, 2005, retrieved October 21, 2009
4. ^ (Smithson 1969),
5. ^ (Smithson 1996, p. 160).
6. ^ (Smithson 1996, p. 160).
7. ^ (Smithson 1996, pp. 169–170).
8. ^ (Smithson 1996, p. 170).
9. ^ (Smithson 1996, p. 165).

10. ^ (Smithson 1996, p. 159).
11. ^ (Smithson 1996, p. 158).
12. ^ (Smithson 1996, p. 163).
13. ^ <http://www.robertsmithson.com/earthworks/partially.htm>
14. ^ Lindquist, Greg (April 2012). "A Letter to Robert Smithson from Greg Lindquist" (<http://brooklynrail.org/2012/04/artseen/a-letter-to-robert-smithson-from-greg-lindquist>). *The Brooklyn Rail*.
15. ^ http://www.nts.gov/aviationquery/brief.aspx?ev_id=85872

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- Ingrid Commandeur and Trudy van Riemsdijk-Zandee: *Robert Smithson: Art in Continual Movement*. Alauda Publications, Amsterdam (2012), ISBN 978-90-815314-8-1

Some homages

- Lee Ranaldo, *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill (EP)*, 1994, CD, 17 min
- Lee Ranaldo, *Amarillo Ramp (for Robert Smithson)*, 1996, CD, 52 min
- Tacita Dean, *Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty*, 1997, 27 min. presentation (<http://collection.britishcouncil.org/collection/artist/5/18576/object/44979>), Publishing (<http://www.copyrightbookshop.be/nl/books/details/1825/0>), exposition (http://www.frithstreetgallery.com/shows/view/tacita_dean2/), Photo (<http://earthworksnearyou.blogspot.fr/2009/02/tacita-deans-visit-to-spiral-jetty.html>)
- Renée Green, *Partially Buried Continued*, 1997 (installation in Lausanne, 2009). CEPA Gallery (<http://www.cepagallery.org/exhibitions/ruinsinreverse/RIR.2100.gallery.greenvid.html>), Media Art Net (<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/partially-buried-continued/>)
- Vik Muniz, *Spiral Jetty after Robert Smithson*, 1977. drawing (<http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/103205>)
- Sam Durant, *Partially Buried 1960s/70s Dystopia Revealed (Mick Jagger at Altamont) & Utopia Reflected (Wavy Gravy at Woodstock)*, 1998. Photo (<http://www.samdurant.net/index.php?/projects/partially-buried--altamont/>)
- Mary Brogger, *Earthwork*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2000. Photo (<http://www.mcachicago.org/exhibitions/now/2012/252>)
- Mike Nelson: *Triple Bluff Canyon*, Modern Art Oxford, 2004. (homage to *Partially Buried Woodshed*).

Photo (<http://www.modernartoxford.org.uk/whats-on/mike-nelson-triple-bluff-canyon/about/>)

- The Bruce High Quality Foundation, *The Gate, Not the Idea of the Thing But the Thing Itself on New York's Waterways*, 2005 Photo (<http://thebrucehighqualityfoundation.com/Site/Gate.html>)

External links

- www.robertsmithson.com (<http://www.robertsmithson.com>)
- *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill (1971-2011)* (http://www.landartcontemporary.nl/programma_2011) an historic Dutch program (video, exhibition and publication).
- Plans to Mix Oil Drilling and Art Clash in Utah (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/27/us/27spiral.html?ref=arts>), article by Kirk Johnson in the New York Times, 27 March 2008.
- 'An interminable avalanche of categories': conceptual issues in the work of Robert Smithson (or, once more, against 'sculpture') Lecture by Peter Osborne given at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, in 2008, which is available to download in audio form [2] (http://www.wdw.nl/event.php?act_id=142)
- Smithson Sightings (http://3quarksdaily.blogs.com/3quarksdaily/2005/07/negotiations_4_.html) Short essay on Smithson by Timothy Don of *3 Quarks Daily* (<http://3quarksdaily.com>).
- Pictures of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (<http://scenicutah.com/spiral-jetty/robertsmithson.php>).
- 'Extra Terrestrial' - a 1993 monograph from *frieze* (http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/extra_terrestrial/)
- Robert Smithson exhibition at (<http://renaissancesociety.org/site/Exhibitions/Intro.171.0.0.0.0.html>) The Renaissance Society, 1976.
- Robert Smithson and *Floating Island* (<http://www.haberarts.com/smithson.htm>), by John Haber
- Nonsite from Smithson to New Media (<http://www.haberarts.com/nonsite.htm>), by John Haber
- Robert Smithson. Land Reclamation and the Sublime (http://dreher.netzliteratur.net/6_LandArt_Smithson.pdf), by Thomas Dreher
- Illustrations of Broken Circle/Spiral Hill (http://dreher.netzliteratur.net/6_LandArt_Smithson_SpiralHill.html), by Thomas Dreher
- Broken Circle &/ Spiral Hill: Smithson's Spirals, Pataphysics, Syzygy, and Survival. (<http://artextra.files.wordpress.com/2009/02/shanken-smithson-2013.pdf>) Edward A. Shanken, 2013.

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Categories: 1938 births | 1973 deaths | American artists | Contemporary artists | Land artists

| Postmodern artists | Art Students League of New York alumni

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