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Fictioning the Landscape: Robert Smithson and Ruins in Reverse

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-imagination of what’s already there and a foregrounding of other, often non-human temporalities). A work like Spiral Jetty for example, where 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. 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.

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 is 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.

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” (1966) 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 — before its ‘capture’ by critics, and, we might, say, by Art History (that then goes on to ‘explain’ the art) Smithson (1996c: 105). 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). 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).^{3}

To return to Smithson’s writings as an art work we have briefly considered 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 New York. (NCY 1996d: 9).

Both involved a journey ‘beyond’ Smithson’s habitual environment and a fictioning of the landscape he found himself in, with Smithson ‘overlaying’ 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 ‘invent’ anything that is not already there. In the Passaic essay 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 is layering one fiction on another, nesting one narrative inside another.

Robert Smithson, Hotel Palenque, dimensions variable 1969-72. Slide projection of thirty-three 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.


Bibliography


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3 For an argument along these lines see Trevatt 2014.