

ROBERT SMITHSON IN SPACE
SCIENCE FICTION IN THE GALLERY AND BEYOND

by

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Robert Smithson in Space: Science Fiction in the Gallery and Beyond

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In the mid to late 1960's and throughout the 1970's many contemporary American artists mounted critical attacks on the art world, shaking up long-held beliefs and inciting heated conversations still being addressed today. The arguments offered during this time questioned the relevance of modernist criticism and modernist institutions such as the gallery and the museum. Important artistic personalities interested in finding and creating new pathways out of modernist frameworks arose as a result of these discussions and contributed to the wide diversification of artistic practice prevalent during this time.

One such artist heavily involved in the shaping of 1960s and 1970s art discourse was Robert Smithson whose critical views of the art world led him towards an investigation of perception itself. In doing so Smithson came to perform some of the most effective critiques on vision, time, and location in regards to art and its viewers. This author wishes to highlight the artist's use of science-fiction type imagery, as gleaned from contemporary film and literature, and its employment within the artist's larger cultural critiques against capitalist trends and habits within the art world. Smithson's attraction toward science fiction stems from a need for a conceptual system able to incorporate such disparate themes and subjects as geologic time, abstraction, alternate dimensions, and barren landscapes. Through his adoption of science-fiction imagery, Smithson constructed a critical framework aimed at the dissolution of Greenbergian modernism and what he saw as institutionally endorsed trends within the art world. While much has been and continues to be written on Smithson's relevance, I wish to argue for the importance

of the science-fiction trope and its essentialness to any understanding of Smithson's larger body of work.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.	TIME AND ITS DISCONTENTS.....	6
	Critiques of Time.....	9
	Smithson, the 1960s, and Minimalism.....	12
	The <i>Alogon</i> Series.....	16
	The <i>Time Machine</i>	18
	Modernist Time Schemes.....	22
	Time and Speed.....	24
III.	NETWORKS OF SIGNIFICATION.....	28
	Ballard and the Photo Works.....	29
	Crystals.....	33
	Early Fascination with Time.....	37
	The Future is Red.....	38
	Futuristic Suburbia.....	40
	A Broken Down Suburbia.....	46
IV.	EPILOGUE.....	49
	FIGURES.....	60
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	70

FIGURES

Figure

1. Robert Smithson <i>Alogon #1</i> , 1966.....	60
2. Robert Smithson <i>Alogon #2</i> , 1966.....	61
3. Honeycomb Illusion, 1966.....	62
4. Robert Smithson, <i>Alogon #2</i> (side-view), 1966.....	63
5. Robert Smithson <i>Terminal</i> , 1966.....	64
6. Robert Smithson <i>Terminal</i> : Plans for Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport, 1966.....	65
7. Cubic Corporation SECOR Surveying Satellite, 1962.....	66
8. Robert Smithson <i>Untitled (SF Landscape)</i> , 1966.....	67
9. Robert Smithson <i>Proposal for a Monument at Anartica</i> , 1966.....	68
10. Robert Smithson <i>Proposal for a Monument on the Red Sea</i> (formerly <i>Cube in Seascape</i>), 1966.....	69
11. Robert Smithson <i>Grave Mounds with Object</i> , c.1966.....	70
12. Robert Smithson <i>Nonsite (Slag)</i> , <i>Oberhausen, Germany</i> , 1968.....	71
13. Robert Smithson <i>Cryosphere</i> , 1966.....	72
14. Robert Smithson <i>Untitled</i> , 1964-65.....	72
15. “Screw Dislocation,” 1964.....	73
16. Robert Smithson <i>Untitled</i> , 1969.....	74
17. Robert Smithson <i>Mirror Stata</i> , 1966 (all).....	75
18. Paraffin Hydrocarbon Hectane Showing Sprial Layer Formation, 1964.....	76
19. Robert Smithson’s Childhood Museum.....	77
20. The Laguna Colorada.....	78

21. Robert Smithson <i>Spiral Jetty</i> , 1973.....	79
22. Robert Smithson <i>Broken Circle / Spiral Hill</i> , 1971.....	80
23. Robert Smithson <i>Lake Edge Crescents – Egypt Valley, Ohio</i> , 1972.....	81
24. Robert Smithson <i>Bingham Copper Mining Pit</i> , 1973.....	82
25. Robert Smithson <i>Tailings Pond</i> , 1973.....	83

Chapter 1

Introduction

Robert Smithson is an artist concerned with moving beyond a human-centered understanding of the world. As if from a fantastic journey, his writings and artworks bring with them spatial and chronologic specimens of thought from the distant future and the prehistoric past.¹ His works perturb and fascinate us in their ability to suggest new trajectories for human reconciliation with the pessimism of an indifferent and often hostile universe. His material rendering of history as embodying a sense of disorganized geologic strata and crystalline impersonality, while bleak, offers insightful commentary on the capitalistic machinations of a progressive model of history. Smithson's work, in its relation to science-fiction, takes on a perspective akin to a satellite in outer space, offering us a pulled-back look at history and an insightful critique on the potential future to come.

Throughout his career Robert Smithson has maintained an interest in science fiction. From the inclusion of spaceships and astronauts in his early drawings, to the constant referencing of some of his favorite sci-fi authors, such as Damon Knight or Brian Aldiss, in his later writings, Smithson was a lifelong fan of science fiction.² That such a connection exists is not a

¹ See Peter Hutchinson, "Science-Fiction: An Aesthetic for Science," *Art International*, October 1968, 32, where he states that, "It would make more sense to find contemporary art by Donald Judd, Larry Bell, Robert Smithson or Lila Katzen, for example, published in these [science-fiction] magazines. Some of the descriptions of invented forms found in science-fiction writing have remarkable application to the above artists." Or also, Thomas A. Zaniello, "Our Future Tends to be Prehistoric": Science Fiction and Robert Smithson," *Arts Magazine*, May 1978, 114: "The 1970s saw a consolidation of Smithson's dialectic of future and past: major projects such as *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and *Amarillo Ramp* (1973) stand *either* as the "new monuments" of a science fiction future *or* the earthworks of an unknown past."

² For early examples of Smithson's dalliance with science fiction see Eugenie Tsai's, *Robert Smithson Unearthed* (New York: Columbia Press, 1991). Early drawings and collage such as *Bellini Dead Christ Supported by Angels* (1963) p. 148, *Untitled* [Spaceman Shooting] (c.1961-63) p. 140, plate 6, and *Untitled* [Spaceship] (c.

new concept. Smithson was originally associated with a “science fiction aesthetic” as early as 1968 in Peter Hutchinson’s article, “Science-Fiction: An Aesthetic for Science.”³ Hutchinson’s article attempted to make clear morphologic and thematic counterpoints between the often stark and streamlined look of then-Minimalist sculptures and objects or settings found within contemporaneous movies – for example the design of a spaceship in *Planet of the Vampires* (1965).⁴ Smithson’s *Enantiomorphic Chambers* was said to strive toward the “look” of science but was essentially useless – Hutchinson’s main parallel between Minimalist sculpture and science-fiction stage design. Later, in 1978, T.A. Zaniello published an article titled, “Our Future Tends to be Prehistoric: Science Fiction and Robert Smithson,” in which he alighted on a number of important connections between Smithson’s use of the concept of entropy and a bewildering number of science fictions novels.⁵ Zaniello’s is the first at trying to establish a comprehensive iconography of science fiction within Smithson’s work and arguably is the groundwork for any future study of the topic. More recent publication on the topic include two master’s thesis published in 2009 and 2013 which can be seen to expand in depth on Zaniello’s initial articulation of a science fiction connection.⁶

1961-63) p.142, show, arguably in a much more direct way, Smithson’s interest in typical sci fi characters and settings – perhaps derived from his interest in 1950s sci fi B-movies given their dated appearance.

³ Hutchinson, “Science-Fiction,” 32-34, 41.

⁴ “The following description of the sets of a film might easily apply to the sensibilities that gave rise to some recent art: In the film, “Planet of the Vampires”, we see an enormous spaceship, the construction of which includes no right angles. The metal interior compartments have sloping walls, rounded corners, and are symmetried after geometric figures other than the rectangle. As the film progresses, we enter yet another, alien, spaceship, long abandoned on an airless planet. Even more enormous, this ship takes us a step further; the huge corridors are circular and segmented, the segments being divided by bivalve doors. A magnetic property activates the ship’s mechanisms when living bodies enter a section. Triangular plastic forms, pale orange and opaquely florescent, rhythmically pulsate. Electronic mechanisms without wires, moving parts or obvious power source activate the atmosphere locks. Plastic objects pulsate, glow and throb. Weird electronic tapes begin to speak an undecipherable tongue in the subjective time sequence of an alien race.” (Ibid., 32).

⁵ Thomas A. Zaniello, “Our Future Tends to be Prehistoric’: Science Fiction and Robert Smithson,” *Arts Magazine*, May 1978, 114-117.

⁶ See Eric J. Saxon, “Science Fictional Transcendentalism in the Work of Robert Smithson,” Master’s thesis, University of Nebraska, 2013 and Marco Antonini, “The Obsolete in Reverse: Robert Smithson and Science Fiction,” City College of New York, 2009.

This thesis however, is not an attempt at a complete comprehensive overlay of Smithson's appropriation or citation of science fiction sources, motifs, and/or themes. Instead, I will be focusing on the ways in which science fiction was employed within certain phases of Smithson's career, specifically his early minimalist sculpture, mid-career photo works, and late career land projects. I will be elaborating on how science fiction factored into Smithson's personal artistic reaction against modernism as well as its value for his understanding of landscape and the environment. I hope to showcase how the use of entropy and geometry, in their entwinement with science fiction, allowed him to perform critiques and explorations into new and iconoclastic subject matter. In my conclusion I perform a roundup of my earlier ideas for the purpose of presenting Smithson as a model for future relations between art, industry, and the environment. I believe that Smithson possessed a pessimism informed by a certain vision of the future gleaned from dystopic science fiction. Given this, and the increasingly heightened awareness of violence and destruction that has beset the last half century, Smithson's thinking, though seemingly outlandish during his lifetime, offers potential new visions for our own.

Within this study it has become necessary to maintain a working definition and conceptual framework for the use of science fiction. When it is stated that I aim to discuss a specific science fiction "presence," "element," or "quality" within Smithson's work, I am referring to both the genre itself – the works that (though always contested) make it up – as well as qualities commonly associated with the genre. In my selection of that which falls under the category of "science fiction" I have chosen to avoid a method of genre definition that attempts to see genres as separate cubbyholes into which certain works or qualities might be placed. To help in this delineation I have relied upon the work of Carl Freedman, who in problematizing genre definition offers a dialectic method:

...a genre is not a classification but an element or, better still, a *tendency* that, in combination with other relatively autonomous generic elements or tendencies, is active to a greater or lesser degree within a literary text that is itself understood as a complexly structured totality. In other words: a text is not filed under a generic category; instead, a generic tendency is something that happens within a text.⁷

In regards to science fiction, Freedman states that it can be grouped by those works whose dominant *tendencies* reflect science fiction concerns. Within this theory it is assumed that no examples of perfect science fiction exist, works where science fiction can be said to be the only generic tendency.⁸ Likewise, in the opposite sense any work may be seen to contain science fiction tendencies, albeit in different quantities or degrees. Nonetheless, to theorize in such a way allows for the inclusion of works written well before Hugo Gernsback ever published his first edition of *Amazing Stories* in 1926, meaning that H.G. Wells, Edgar Allan Poe, and Jules Verne may all be thought of as legitimate progenitors to the genre.⁹

Due to the fact that this thesis explores instances of science fiction in more than just texts, it was necessary to combine Freedman's theory of genre definition with Eric Rabkin's idea of a "cultural system." Rabkin sees science fiction, in a similarly expansive way like Freedman, as more than a genre, he feels that science fiction might include innumerable vast objects of study such as:

...nonfiction (like James D. Watson's *The Double Helix: A Personal Account of the Discovery of the Structure of DNA* [1968]), biography (like Paul de Kruif's *The Microbe Hunters* [1926]), policy studies (like Vannevar Bush's *Science, the Endless Frontier: A Report to the President* [1945]), and even science itself (like Einstein's famous gedankenexperiments). To this list we should add science fiction poetry, music, industrial design, city planning, architecture, politics, fashion, and world's fairs. Science fiction, in other words, is no more limited to science fiction literature than love is limited to love letters.¹⁰

⁷ Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 20.

⁸ Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, 20-21.

⁹ Hugo Gernsbeck is arguably hailed as the "father of science fiction" for his founding of the American science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories* in April, 1926. The magazine was the first of its kind to be devoted to the genre, in effect helping to define and promulgate it into public circulation.

¹⁰ Eric S. Rabkin, "Science Fiction and the Future of Criticism," *PMLA* 119, No. 3 (May 2004), 461.

In this way I would also add fine art, so that we may come to think of and apply the term science fiction in a similar manner to Smithson's oeuvre. Science fiction, in this expanded sense, will be used in my study to specifically refer to ideas of the future, variations on the normal passage of time, advanced technology, outer space, and visions of the beginning and the end of the universe. With these main ideas I aim to perform a thorough investigation on the implementation of science fiction tendencies and their lasting significance within Robert Smithson's mid-to-late career work.

Chapter 2

Time and its Discontents

I am proposing the notion that we are here in the presence of something like a mutation in built space itself. My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object, unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject; we do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it, in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism.

– Frederic Jameson (*The Cultural Turn*)¹¹

In regards to the hyperspace, which Jameson describes above, I feel Smithson to be a crucial harbinger. Smithson's works, which so often drew from science-fiction sources, can in many ways help to initiate us into new visual and spatial understandings that, to this day, are constantly unfolding before us as a result of scientific discovery. Since the end of World War II ours is a world in which the terms that define basic relationships between objects and forces have undergone major revision. Time, space, and speed - when pushed to their limit - come to embody traits often associated more with the supernatural or irrational, than with sober scientific thought. Lacking formal training in the new advanced sciences can make these discoveries appear like fantastic stories or simply inexplicable babble. What often helps in such situations are visual examples. Even here though, one can run into trouble; some scientific discoveries – like those concerning the often bizarre relationship between space and time – continue to perplex us even when admirable attempts to depict their behavior have been made.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (New York: Versa), 10-11.

In many ways, science fiction as a genre or creative space stands as a useful imaginative outlet where ideas like time travel, immortality, and advanced technology may find a context in which to be played with and/or observed in detail. The ability to interact creatively with scientific fact is not always a necessary denominator for science fiction. Nevertheless, it possesses value in its potential to offer experimental perspectives which can suggest new trajectories of thought and/or understanding.

Corollary to this potential of science fiction I argue that Smithson too, with regard to his adoption of certain sci-fi motifs and ideas, can offer us new and radical possibilities in terms of vision: its premises, purposes, and manifestations. Robert Smithson is sensitive to the illusions and contradictions inherent within the act of sight. His work shows an awareness of its dependence not only on culture but on language for helping to give its objects meaning, purpose, and even shape. In some of Smithson's early sculpture one can see a major critique of perception itself as well as its connection to certain cultural institutions which arguably attempt to control or manage the appreciation or valuation of these perceptions.¹² I argue that Smithson employs tactics of extreme perspective, non-human chronology, and irrational visual languages as drawn from science-fiction sources that are based on real and non-real occurrences. These tactics and their association with science fiction lead us to consider how science fiction is helpful in terms of grappling with the visual representation of advanced notions of time, space, and/or speed. It gives us an account that, while not always based in fact, *is* based in a desire for lucidity. For this

¹² In his 1972 article, "Cultural Confinement," published in *Artforum* Smithson elaborates on his hostile position toward certain approaches in museum curation, "Cultural Confinement takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art exhibition, rather than asking an artist to set his limits. Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories. Some artists imagine they've got a hold on this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of them. As a result, they end up supporting a cultural prison that is out of their control. Artists themselves are not confined, but their output is." These words very nearly express similar thoughts stated by Lucy Lippard in her 1970 article titled "The Art Worker's Coalition" published in *Studio International* where with regard to the relationship between artists institutions she exclaims, "It's how you give and withhold your art that is political."

reason I find Smithson's interest in science fiction to be a welcome addition to his body of work for the ability that I perceive it provides him with to express what once may have been inexpressible. It must be stated that in presenting Smithson in relation to the marvels of actual scientific discovery I do not mean to say that he is a scientist, nor that he is "discovering" anything according to an empirical process. Smithson is far too much of a romantic to obey the strict laws of the scientific method and so should be more accurately considered as an outlet of ecstatic revelation (much to the chagrin of his "crystal" exterior).¹³ Thus, in considering Smithson, science fiction, and the cosmos or otherwise, I hope to flesh out instances and examples which may offer us a better understanding as to the specific nature of the "far out" (punning on Greenberg's words here) aspects that we find in his work.¹⁴

In this chapter I wish to specifically examine Smithson's early Minimalist work during the period of 1964-69.¹⁵ I am concerned with unmasking what I feel to be the presence of varying layers of time within his work. Taken literally, I am investigating Smithson's unique ideas concerning time and to what effect these were employed within his work, as well as how his ideas conflicted with those of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried at the time. The different manifestations of time within his work represent separate facets of a collective attack on

¹³ See Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 113: On the slopes of Rozel Point I closed my eyes, and the sun burned crimson through the lids. I opened them and the Great Salt Lake was bleeding scarlet streaks. My sight was saturated by the color of red algae circulating in the heart of the lake, pumping into ruby currents, no they were veins and arteries sucking up the obscure sediments. My eyes became combustion chambers churning orbs of blood blazing by the light of the sun.

¹⁴ See Clement Greenberg, "The Recentness of Sculpture," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol.4, ed. John O'Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 252. Greenberg refers to Minimalist art as merely trying to assume the most "far out" position in art, meaning that he thought it to be the art which then at the moment most closely hovered on the edge of non-art and for that reason was shallow in its goals – a visual one trick pony.

¹⁵ The controversy over scholarly attempts to subsume this entire period of Smithson's work as being under the guise of Minimalism is discussed in great detail in Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 243-244, n. 11. I have chosen to retain this moniker instead of referring to these as conceptual works due to the fact that the phenomenologic aspects of their appreciation, use of repetition, and disinterest in color call closely to mind concurrent works by Robert Morris and Donald Judd – arguably two of Minimalism's most important spokespersons.

Modernism and can be seen to be informed by a particular understanding of both art history and certain perceptual determinants inherent within the traditional gallery system. Implicated within Smithson's visions on the nature of time are a number of science-fiction novels that when considered alongside these works, offer themselves as useful assets in attempting to gauge the breadth of Smithson's thought. Taking these in combination with a look into Smithson's writings, one can derive a more thorough understanding of some of the esoteric-seeming aspects of his early sculpture.

Critiques of Time

Smithson, it must be stated, was very much involved with the heady climate of the 1960s. During this time, a growing antipathy toward the authority of European modernism as handed down to American critics, such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, exploded into a number of movements based as much on a dissolution of the past as on the paving of a way for a new egalitarian aesthetic.¹⁶ Smithson was a part of and helped to further the desires of this generation, desires perhaps best articulated by Robert Morris who, in an autobiographical article from 1989, described himself and his intentions as a young artist in 1961:

At 30, I had my alienation, my Skilsaw and my plywood. I was out to rip out the metaphors, especially those that had to do with 'up,' as well as every other whiff of transcendence. When I sliced into the plywood with my Skilsaw, I could hear, beneath the ear-damaging whine, a stark and refreshing "no" reverberate off the four walls: no to transcendence and spiritual values, heroic scale, anguished decisions, historicizing narrative, valuable artifact, intelligent structure, interesting visual experience.¹⁷

One can see these desires reflected in the deflation of emotion and grandeur accomplished through the cold, intellectual auspices of minimalism and conceptualism practiced by Morris.

¹⁶ See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973) as proof of the sheer variety of work being made between 1966-1972.

¹⁷ Robert Morris, "Three Folds in the Fabric and Four Autobiographical Asides as Allegories (or Interruptions)," *Art in America*, November 1989, 144.

Smithson inaugurated a similar brand of attack, one heavily reliant on his own favored notion of entropy – a concept envisioning the universe as in a constant state of decline toward a neutral state of diffused equilibrium. Smithson’s adherence to the idea of entropy puts him in line with the sentiments expressed by Morris above, especially with regard to the idea of deflating historicizing narratives. This would remain a consistent concern in the numerous physical and written works of Smithson, in which his interest in science fiction and its nontraditional temporalities lent themselves well to a critique of modernist “time” and a vision of history as essentially progressive.

It would be inaccurate to say that Smithson was able to “eject” himself from a progressive history. However I would argue that Smithson, like other artists and writers of the 1960s and early 1970s, was seeking to unmask and bring to light the shortcomings of a modernist art history. His writing suspects a Hegelian sentiment as underwriting the chronology of art history and suggests that a history framed as such is problematic in terms of its admission of capitalist interest.¹⁸ Smithson is interested in the persistent tendency toward periodization inherent within art history - the idea that movements or styles necessarily grow out of or in reaction to one another. Smithson found the ideas proffered by Clement Greenberg to be supportive of this tendency and saw the resulting subscription of artists seeking to work within a dynamic of contemporary-ness as a stance to be avoided at all costs.

The desire for artists to be recognized as operating on the cutting edge of the art world is a belief that plays perfectly into the hands of its economic outlets. In celebrating and encouraging the avant-garde disposition, the art market ensures itself of continuous reinvention. Seemingly new and iconoclastic artistic gestures can be seen to be absorbed by a larger historical framework

¹⁸ See Chapter 1: Time and its Surfaces: Postperiodization in Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art After Babel* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

that benefits from the attempts to transcend it. Smithson elaborated on this state of historical progression as representing a conflict over time itself, “An artist is enslaved by time, only if the time is controlled by someone or something other than himself. The deeper an artist sinks into the time stream the more it becomes *oblivion...*”¹⁹ To work in collusion with a modernist art historical time - in other words, to acknowledge history as progressive - is to deny accountability to one’s own worth and in effect, become the plaything of a capitalistic engineering of time.

Of note concerning Smithson’s disdain toward modernist art history is that the “time stream” he references is a term taken from science-fiction author Eric Temple Bell (John Taine) and his 1937 novel of the same name.²⁰ In this work, Bell creates characters who inhabit several different lives across time, experiencing moments of *deja-vu* that refer to actual memories of their multiple pasts. Based on their gradual awareness of these “pasts,” the characters are moved to solve the meaning of one of their society’s most ancient symbols - a snake eating its own tail. Their ultimate realization turns out to be a revelation about the structure of time that it is eternally cyclical, a position that Gary Shapiro, in his philosophic monograph of Smithson, relates to Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence. Both views acknowledge time to be essentially repetitive: (as Nietzsche writes)

‘Now I die and decay,’ you would say, ‘and in an instant I shall be nothingness. Souls are as mortal as bodies.

‘But the complex of causes in which I am entangled will recur – it will create me again! I myself am part of these causes of the eternal recurrence.

‘I shall return, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent – *not* to a new life or a better life or a similar life:

‘I shall return eternally to this identical and self-same life, in the greatest things and in the smallest, to teach once more the eternal recurrence of all things,²¹

¹⁹ 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), 91.

²⁰ John Taine, *The Time Stream* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1975), 2.

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961) 237-38.

Such attitudes toward time were especially popular during the 1960s in which Smithson worked. As Shapiro states, “[Nietzsche] was being fervently read and reinterpreted in the 1960s by European philosophers seeking a counterbalance to modernity and especially to Hegelian conceptions of time and history.”²² Arguably Smithson would have found Nietzsche’s philosophy useful, not only as a result of his being a voracious auto-didact with a penchant for continental philosophy, but for the similar desire of undoing Hegelian periodization. Smithson seemingly augmented Nietzsche unknowingly with examples drawn from his own interest in science fiction. Eclectic citation of literature and philosophy in his own work was not uncommon for Smithson and, as stated earlier, was especially pronounced with regard to science fiction. Thus it is of great interest to us as historiographers of Smithson’s oeuvre to locate and understand his interaction with this genre insofar as it has been employed in his artistic and critical framework.

Smithson, the 1960s, and Minimalism

I find that the proper starting place for investigating Smithson’s involvement with science-fiction is the year 1964, a year Smithson describes as the one in which he finally “...began to function as a conscious artist.”²³ This year marks Smithson’s initial shift away from his expressionist drawings toward the production of sculpture.²⁴ Between 1964 and 1968, Smithson experimented with Minimalist forms and materials, showing work which made use of industrial metals and plastics as well as a host of mirrors and glass. During this period, he also befriended artists like Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, and Robert Morris, all of whom were working

²² Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art After Babel* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 27.

²³ Paul Cummings, “Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institute,” in *Writings*, 147.

²⁴ For a comprehensive outline of Smithson’s early career including his student days in the New York City Student Artist’s League see Eugenie Tsai, *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1-24.

with similar materials and toward similar aims. Works such as the *Alogon* (1966) series, *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1965), *Gyrostasis* (1968), and *Terminal* (1966) all show a Smithson that is experimenting with new notions of time and space, doing so to oppose and reveal those same spatio-temporal parameters that he saw as governing the gallery and the art market within which he worked. His familiarity with the proto-science fiction novels of H.G. Wells, 1950s B-movies involving space-travel and futuristic architecture, and real satellites being used by science at the time can be seen extensively throughout his work of this time period. I will argue that the incorporation of such science-fiction-type ideas offered Smithson a more nuanced critique of Modernist paradigms of exhibition and production than his contemporaries.

Within Smithson's written work, an effective summary of the main themes and ideas that Smithson was exploring during the mid-sixties may be found in his first published article, "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966). The article, published in *Artforum*, finds Smithson speaking extensively about his perception of science-fiction ideals within much of the contemporary work being done by his peers. As a theoretical backdrop to this observation, Smithson references the concept of entropy, a process referring to the natural tendency of energy to disperse toward equilibrium over time – that energy is easier lost than gained. This process was originally a topic discussed within the field of thermodynamics in reference to specific closed systems. Smithson, however, took scientific liberties and enlarged its application to include his own artwork as well as the natural world at large. Smithson found entropy to be a visually detectable quality within the work of the artists loosely grouped as Minimalists during the 1960s, including for instance, Dan Flavin, Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris and even others such as Paul Thek and Larry Bell. Despite Smithson's lengthy discussion concerning the presence of entropic qualities within his contemporaries' work, I argue that in fact these observations apply

more accurately to the sculptures he himself was making during the middle of this decade. In order to prove this, I will be performing a close reading of Smithson's writings, placing these thoughts alongside my own formal readings and, by also including ideas presented in particular science fiction publications, will attempt to articulate a perceived synthesis.

Within "Entropy and the New Monuments," Smithson describes for us a number of new ways in which Minimalist sculptures interact with time and space. I wish to focus on the concepts expressed within this article, as they can be seen to relate to works such as the *Alogon* series and *Terminal*. These works, and their associated writings, offer us a nearly comprehensive understanding of the main ideas with which Smithson concerned himself during this time. Within his article, Smithson makes a number of comments on the behavior that he saw Minimalist sculptures enacting with regard to time including, "[t]hey bring to mind the Ice Age rather than the Golden Age."²⁵ He also says that they exhibit an "inactive history," or "energy-drain."²⁶ The language employed by Smithson is heavily informed by science fiction, but it is also indicative of his interest in entropy, an idea that is present in further description of how these works engaged in a "...systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds."²⁷ All of these descriptions concerning a null, entropic aura surrounding Minimalist works done by himself and others can be seen to embody this younger generation of American artists' desire to further distance themselves from their Abstract-Expressionist predecessors. Going a step further Smithson's particular attraction toward this "entropic aesthetic" reflects not only an attempt to get out from under the shadow of his artistic forebears but evinces the enactment of a far-reaching critique on Modernism in general - its institutions in particular.

²⁵ Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," in *Writings*, 9

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

Prevalent in Smithson's article is a blatant concern for and fascination with time. His ability to articulate the many and often bizarre ways in which he sees these works bend, distort, and/or stop time altogether displays familiarity with a wide array of science-fictional pontification on the passage of time. It also comes to play an important role in how we as readers may come to understand the depiction of time within his very own Minimalist works.²⁸ In the course of his discussion, he mentions the special role which he sees science fiction coming to play within the lives of these artists. He is reminded of the 1958 Sci-fi/Horror film *The Blob* in thinking of Paul Thek's vacuum-formed plastic reliefs, and he sees Robert Morris as providing us with a "...fossilized sexuality...mixing the time states or ideas of '1984' with 'One Million B.C.'"²⁹ Movies, for Smithson, are seen to replace nature as a sole cause of inspiration for the artist where, "[t]he 'blood and guts' of horror movies provide for their [the artist's] 'organic needs,' while the 'cold steel' of Sci-fic [sic] movies provide for their "inorganic needs."³⁰ Smithson continues in this vein, listing nearly a dozen of such films, all of which we may presume he himself watched.³¹ Science fiction becomes a near bottomless resource from which

²⁸ See Lori Cavagnoro's catalogue of Smithson's library as compiled from existing lists and the holdings of the Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers, 1905-1987, in the Archives of American Art, as it appears in Ann Reynolds' *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003). One may note a plethora of science-fiction related novels including multiple works by H.G. Wells, JG Ballard, Damon Knight, and William Burroughs as well as works of criticism on the genre including Sam Moskowitz' *Explorers of the Infinite: Shapers of Science Fiction* (Meridian, 1960) and Thomas D. Clareson's *Science Fiction: The Other Side of Realism; Essays on Modern Fantasy and Science Fiction* (Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1965) in addition to the inclusion of various science-fiction magazines from the early and mid-1960s such as *Amazing*, *Analog*, *Fantastic*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Galaxy*, *If*, and *Worlds of Tomorrow*. There were 24 of these issues in total. Also worthy of mention is an issue of *Flying Saucers* magazine (October, 1965).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

³¹ Smithson's avid interest in Science-Fiction film can be evinced by a quick glance at a number of his early collages and painting made during the early 1960s. Works such as *It's King Kong the Monster* and *The Time Travelers* draw imagery from their cinematic namesakes respectively. Smithson's deep interest in film is also reflected in his desire to fashion his own theater for the viewing of his *Spiral Jetty* film, this can be seen in drawings such as *Underground Projection Room* (1971). Smithson refers to the following movies in his article: *The Queen of Sheeba Meets the Atom Man* (1963), *The 10th Victim* (1965), *One Million Years B.C.* (1940), *The Blob* (1958), *Horror at Party Beach* (1964), *Creation of the Humanoids* (1962), *The Planet of the Vampires* (1965), *The Thing*

Smithson culls both his vocabulary as well as his understanding of the artistic moment in which he is operating.

The *Alogon* Series

Smithson's *Alogon* series offer an excellent example of Smithson's early use of entropy as derived from science-fiction, and its being put toward a disintegration of the usual gallery-going experience. His specific language in "Entropy" is especially prescient in regards to these pieces as well. The *Alogons* are extended meditations on seriality, perspective, and space (Fig. 1). These multi-unit works consist of repeated cubic configurations which appear to diminish or expand in accordance with a real-life vanishing point. The first of the series, *Alogon* (1966), is a basic stair-like structure repeated seven times in decreasing scale. The effect of the works' diminishment is similar to that of an illusionistic painting that uses fixed-point perspective; a sense of depth and space are achieved from a particular vantage point. What makes these sculptures different, however, is the fact that they exist within real-space, a place where the privileged vantage point which orients illusionistic painting cannot be manifest, destroying any attempt by the viewer to achieve a "gestalt" or unified visual understanding of the work. The second installment in this series, *Alogon #2*, also from 1966 (Fig. 2), performs similarly. Its shape, however, is expanded into a three-dimensional representation of an isometric projection (Fig. 3), a honeycomb-like optical illusion Smithson took from Ronald G. Carraher and Jacqueline B. Thurston's *Optical Illusions and the Visual Arts*.³² The fact that these shapes were derived from a book of optical illusions adds credence to their titles – *Alogon*, meaning

(1955), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1958), *The Time Machine* (1960), *Village of the Giants* (1965), and *War of the Worlds* (1953).

³² Ann Reynolds discusses the impetus of these works' particular imagery as having been numerous influenced by a number of books owned and sketched in by Smithson also including such publications as Henry Asher's *Experiments in Seeing* (1961) - a psychological study on perception.

irrationality in Greek, can be seen to represent the sheer incoherence that these shapes permute when placed in a traditional gallery setting.

The importance of the visual confounding as well as lack of a “gestalt” within the experience of these works is of note to Ann Reynolds who, in her study *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*, describes her experience of *Alogon #2* as thus, “[a]ny logical relationship between the space and the work that might have been granted from one position in the room dissolves into a series of disconnected views that don’t add up to anything but increasing perceptual disorder.”³³ For example these works operate in stark contrast to Robert Morris’ *Three L-Beams* (1965), pieces which best emulate Morris’ concept of the gestalt as it refers to the ease of the viewer’s ability to understand the totality of a shape from any viewpoint. Morris’ pared-down works draw strength from their inconspicuous simplicity, shifting the aesthetic focus away from their static surfaces and onto the viewer’s physiologic awareness of his environment with regard to an object. Notions of scale, light, and time are tethered to and dependent on the viewer’s specific experience, in effect subsuming the actions of the viewer into the content of the work. Smithson, however, convoluted and disturbed the three-dimensional purity of Morris’ experience by introducing a traditionally two-dimensional system of rendering (linear perspective) into the hostile territory of real-space. As a result, the viewer continuously finds herself “linking up” with and then shortly after becoming estranged from the limited unified perspective that Smithson’s *Alogons* suggestively possess. All of these experiences come to be dependent on the cubic space of the gallery, an environment in which a neutral viewing experience is only ostensibly assured. Smithson’s *Alogons* make a pun on the idea of a single, unified vanishing point as being a referent for Modernist vision, a vision not

³³ Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 26.

only reliant on the required setting of a gallery or museum, but also shown, by Smithson, to be limited in its actual application.

In thinking further about the indeterminate experience of the *Alogon* sculptures, they can be seen to constitute affronts against the basic coupling of time and space. Their odd behavior is recounted by Reynolds in a Wells-ian manner:

The work is willfully static and resistant to a spectator's movements and to the time he or she invests. As a result, the unfolding of time and of space seem to split apart. The passage of time becomes an experience that is separate from and offers no guarantee of a cumulative experience of space.³⁴

The works themselves offer no unified visual experience in relation to the specific space in which they are exhibited, granting only a limited number of logically cohesive views to the viewer who ambulates around them. One can locate within this double act of unravelment a distinct harkening back to science-fiction approaches to time travel.

The Time Machine

In order to illustrate this relationship, let us consult perhaps the most well-known of all time-travelling novels, that of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. Published in 1895, this proto-science fiction novel envisioned a bleak future, one beset by issues of degeneration and an unavoidable ultimate collapse. The main character's exploits into the distant future leave him weary of humanity's fate, and perhaps more singularly aware of the terrors of entropy than Smithson himself could have ever known:

I cannot convey the sense of abominable desolation that hung over the world. The red eastern sky, the northward blackness, the salt Dead Sea, the stony beach crawling with these foul, slow-stirring monsters, the uniform poisonous-looking green of the lichenous plants, the thin air that hurts one's lungs: all contributed to an appalling effect.³⁵

³⁴ Reynolds, *Robert Smithson*, 26.

³⁵ H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, Inc., 1992), 108-109.

The outlook of *The Time Machine* could be considered overly pessimistic, but such an attitude was actually quite reflective of the *fin de siècle* culture out of which it was born. Publications such as Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) evince a marked belief across society during this period that it was headed toward a pronounced moral and ethical decline. Pessimistic philosophy dominated the time as well, with the writings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche again being read fervently.³⁶ This, in many ways, is reflected in Wells' admission of the entropic nature of time one that is similar to Smithson's.³⁷

In Robert Linsley's article "Minimalism and the City," he makes note of how the *Time Machine* would have fit in with Smithson's larger critiques of Modernist art history noting that the novel is, "...a social satire in the Swiftian tradition, but...also a serious meditation on the notion of progress as decay."³⁸ Such a vision of time's passing fits well with Smithson's allegiance toward entropic processes. Smithson may indeed have had his first exposure to the concept of entropy from reading Wells' novels, for he references using them for a project which he completed in high school, one which sought to refute the premises of religion.³⁹

In the beginning of the *Time Machine*, the main character, referred to simply as the "Time Traveler," attempts to explain to his dinner guests the interaction of time and matter. In

³⁶ See "What is Fin de Siecle?" *The Art Critic*, (Nov. 1893), 9. The author, known only as "Critic Fin De Siecle" criticizes the tone of the arts and culture movement surging all around him/her: "They are a set of strange young men, dreamers and visions—often morbid, broken-hearted, and poor, always nervous and impossible in society, whose first and last endeavor is to do something original, however odd and erroneous it may be." The author also provides a list of these supposed individuals, "Only to mention a few among the dead, Wagner, Schopenhauer, Walt Whitman, Taine, Rossetti, Darwin, Poe, Manet; and among the living, Ibsen, Tolstoj, Monet, Puvis de Chavannes, Zola, Nietzsche [sic], etc."

³⁷ Robert Linsley, "Minimalism and the City: Robert Smithson as a Social Critic," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 41 (Spring 2002), 40. Well's vision of entropy as a universal all-encompassing force draws serious parallels with Smithson's own attitude toward this concept, "Yet though the idea that increasing specialization of social functions can lead to an overall breakdown of society is informed by entropy, when Wells explicitly introduces the Second Law [of Thermodynamics] it is as a cosmic principle to which all social life is ultimately subject."

³⁸ Robert Linsley, "Minimalism and the City: Robert Smithson as a Social Critic," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 40.

³⁹ Cummings, "Interview with Robert Smithson," in *Writings*, 148.

arguing over the requirements for the existence of a simple three-dimensional cube – one “...having only length, breadth, and thickness” the Time Traveler disagrees with his companions in his assertion that duration is the final necessary component that enables any real object’s existence to be ensured. “Any real body must have extension in four directions: it must have length, breadth, thickness, and—duration.”⁴⁰ An “instantaneous cube” cannot exist.⁴¹ The Time Traveler also provides us an example so as to make visible this conception of duration: he invites us to imagine four separate portraits of a man at different ages of his life, identifying them as thus, “All these are evidently sections, as it were, Three-Dimensional representations of [a] Four-Dimensioned being, which is a [biologically not necessarily chronologically] fixed and unalterable thing.”⁴²

In thinking of Smithson’s *Alogons* (fig. 4), what might we as viewers say to this passage in regards to the repetitive enlargements (or subtractions) of the identical geometric shapes? Do these not also provide for us *sections* within the existence of an object? If so, how do we make sense of their progressive (or de-gressive) manipulations of scale? There is no anchoring indication to us as viewers as to whether these shapes are primarily involved in a depiction of time that is evolving or degenerating.

We must again turn to Smithson in “Entropy and the New Monuments,” for it is here that we find a clue as to perhaps the true nature of these chronologically unhinged sculptures. Smithson offers us, in the same article, another of the dominant theories of time with which he can be said to adhere; that of infinite nonduration, an incessant cyclicity. When Smithson states that “[b]oth past and future are placed into an objective present,” in reference to the “New

⁴⁰ H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, 2.

⁴¹ Wells, *The Time Machine*, 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

Monuments” of his contemporaries, I believe that he is better describing the nature of his *Alogons* and their seeming ability to conflate a sense of time-travel in two directions.⁴³ Instead of reading the following remarks in relation to Dan Flavin’s light piece, *Monument 7 for V. Tatlin*, we can come to see them as describing Smithson’s sculpture:

[the artist] makes ‘instant-monuments’...The ‘instant’ makes [the artist’s] work a part of time rather than space. Time becomes a place minus motion. If time is a place, then innumerable places are possible. [The artist] turns gallery-space into gallery time. Time breaks down into many times. Rather than saying, “What time is it?”, we should say, “Where is the time?”⁴⁴

Indeed, where is the time in Smithson’s *Alogons*? Thinking again of Reynold’s description of how the experience of time and space with these structures seem to split apart, one might say that the time we put into and expect out of Smithson’s sculptures is instantly discarded. One “wastes” time when experiencing these works, for they suggest to us that there is a succession of some sort, a visual indication of duration through the repetition and change of the units – and yet they ultimately come to diffuse this, too. Given Smithson’s manner of paring down a sense of the infinite alongside that of the entropic, his description of Robert Grosvenor’s suspended work, *Transoxiana*, is an exemplary counter-argument to the Modernism that Clement Greenberg championed through his valorization of the Abstract Expressionists. Smithson says, “[t]his reduction of time all but annihilates the value of the notion of “action” in art.”⁴⁵ Smithson’s work is slow if not forever stalled in the frozen depiction of its own demise.

Modernist Time Schemes

In order to better understand how Smithson’s simultaneously time-traveling, time-effacing sculptures stand as a major critique of Modernist-time one must have a basic

⁴³ Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” 10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

understanding of what a Modernist approach toward time consisted of during the 1960s. To accomplish this, conceptions of time with regard to the proper presentment and appreciation of Modern Art as put forth by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried will be reviewed. In a 1959 article, “The Case for Abstract Art,” Clement Greenberg states that a successful abstract painting is one that can be appreciated in its entirety within a moment’s glance:

...ideally the whole of a picture should be taken in at a glance; its unity should be immediately evident, and the supreme quality of a picture, the highest measure of its power to move and control the visual imagination, should reside in its unity. And this is something to be grasped only in an indivisible instant of time.⁴⁶

Greenberg’s stance toward temporality within art can be seen to be taken up and expanded upon by Michael Fried. In the now infamous critique of Minimalist sculpture, “Art and Objecthood,” Fried defends the pretenses of Modernist painting and sculpture against the reactive ideas of artists like Donald Judd and Robert Morris, both of whom he makes references specifically.⁴⁷

Fried’s article stands on the premise that art is weakened through its association with theatre, a term which, according to him, denotes and groups works whose formal characteristics cannot be squarely fit into any one specific medium. Theatre became a realm of interstitial mediumistic incoherence for Fried. Minimalism on the other hand, as touted by artists such as Judd, aspired toward work that was void of self-referential interrelationships, attempting instead to shift those relationships into a phenomenologic realm. Here, the facets of the aesthetic experience – aspects of light, space, and surface – become solely resultant from the physiologic relationship between viewer and object, a relationship liable to and not unsupportive of its being

⁴⁶ Clement Greenberg, “The Case for Abstract Art,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol.4, ed. John O’Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 80.

⁴⁷ Fried is here most likely expanding on ideas already expressed by Greenberg in regards to Minimalist art. For Greenberg’s view on Minimalism see Clement Greenberg, “The Recentness of Sculpture,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol.4, ed. John O’Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

changed as the viewer's position and distance with regard to the object changed. Fried was unsympathetic to these aims and especially to Robert Morris' sentiment that, "the experience of the work necessarily exists in time."⁴⁸ For Fried, the experience of time within the Minimalist work was, "essentially a presentment of endless, or indefinite, *duration* [his emphasis]."⁴⁹

This is contrasted against his own Modernist belief in a temporality that shows "...at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest" and that, "...a single infinitely brief moment would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it."⁵⁰ Fried's words would, for Smithson, come to display a disregard for both the sense of a real-time that is expended in the act of appreciating a work of art as well the real-time that (almost) any artwork's existence is contingent on.⁵¹ What is meant by this is that Fried's words reflect a denial of the processes of entropy, in both its lesser and wider scopes. Fried would lead one to believe that the artwork remains motionless, timeless, and pristine when not under the amorous gaze of the viewer, and that upon returning time and time again a piece will essentially remain exactly as fresh and bright as it always was and always will be.⁵² This is exactly the type of scenario that Minimalist art was opposed to, in that it was concerned with all

⁴⁸ Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 234.

⁴⁹ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art*, 144.

⁵⁰ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art*, 146.

⁵¹ For Smithson's detailed response to Fried's accusations see Robert Smithson, "Letter to the Editor," in *Writings*, 38.

⁵² For further evidence of how Smithson's position toward time and aesthetics differs from that of Fried, see Smithson article "Cultural Confinement," in *Writings*, 133. Here Smithson further divulges his antagonism toward Fried's "infinitely brief moment," by stating, "I am for an art that takes into account the direct effect of the elements as they exist from day to day apart from representation. The parks that surround some museums [and I would argue Smithson would here have us think of museums themselves as just like those parks] isolate art into objects of formal delectation. Objects in a park suggest static repose rather than any ongoing dialectic. Parks are finished landscapes for finished art. A park carries the values of the final, the absolute, and the sacred. Dialectics have nothing to do with such things. I am talking about a dialectic of nature that interacts with the physical contradictions inherent in natural forces as they are—nature as both sunny and stormy. Parks are idealizations of nature, but nature in fact is not a condition of the ideal. Nature does not proceed in a straight line, it is rather a sprawling development. Nature is never finished. When a finished work of 20th-century sculpture is placed in an 18th century garden, it is absorbed by the ideal representation of the past, thus reinforcing political and social values that are no longer with us."

of the real and constantly changing environmental effects that impose themselves on an object. As much as the white cube convention of exhibition may wish to convey itself as a pure setting for unmediated aesthetic experiences, such a setting is not a vacuum and must be thought of as still affected by all of the idiosyncrasies of matter and space – it is still subject to the basic laws of nature. This applies also to the viewers. Smithson, in turn, was also resistant toward Fried's view, as for him the only fact with regard to objects that can remain constant is that of their perpetual dissolution. Smithson was making objects, with a little help from science fiction, that reflect this.

Time and Speed

What else can be gleaned about Smithson's vision of time from his sculpture may be deduced from a rather nondescript work that has its origin in one of Smithson's most fruitful artistic moments. *Terminal* (fig. 5) is a work made during a one-year artist consultancy position that Smithson filled at the engineering and architectural firm of Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton (TAMS) for the design of the new Dallas-Fort Worth airport (DFW). Also relevant to this project were two important articles which Smithson published in *Artforum* and *Studio International*, respectively, "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site" (1967) and "Aerial Art" (1969). Within these articles, Smithson addresses the idea of the airport, and subsequently, his own ideas for "aerial art" installations that were to be placed on the site. It was his conviction that the airport as both a thing and an idea is profound for its ability to suggest "galactic distance here on earth" as well as "the infinite in a finite way."⁵³ Smithson's reasoning for this lies in his observations about the shifting nature of time and of shape, when both are affected by significant increases in speed and distance. For Smithson, the idea of an airport

⁵³ Smithson, "Aerial Art," in *Writings*, 92.

seemed to possess qualities far beyond that of just domestic and/or international travel. For him the airport seemed to hint at broader, more interstellar distances and speeds, “The terminal...ceased being an end in itself, and generated a condition of timelessness.”⁵⁴

Unfortunately, Smithson’s work with TAMS did not result in any actual alteration of the airport site, his firm never received the commission for the project. Smithson did, however, produce a near life-size sculpture named *Terminal*, which, along with his proposed sketches, offers the opportunity for new and revealing readings of his earlier Minimalist sculpture. This sculpture is discussed by Janna Eggebeen in her article, “Between Two Worlds: Robert Smithson and Aerial Art,” in which she discusses it alongside another work that was a proposed piece of earth art meant for the flat fields surrounding the runway (Fig. 6) The piece was meant to be a series of seven square-shaped asphalt pavements, “evenly spaced, and the dimensions of each square were to increase proportionally.”⁵⁵ Both the number of units as well as the systematic manipulation of their scale call to mind a landscape-oriented reiteration of Smithson’s *Alogons*. Regarding his thoughts on how these pavements might have been experienced when viewed from the air, one is able to piece together what could very well be a particular attitude toward both speed and time that Smithson chose to articulate primarily through his use of basic geometry:

The world seen from the air is abstract and illusive. From the window of an airplane one can see drastic changes of scale, as one ascends and descends. The effect takes one from the dazzling to the monotonous in a short space of time—from the shrinking terminal to the obstructing clouds⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Linsley, “Minimalism and the City,” 93.

⁵⁵ Janna Eggebeen, “Between Two Worlds’: Robert Smithson and Aerial Art,” *Public Art Dialogue*, Vol. 1 (March 2011), 94.

⁵⁶ Smithson, “Aerial Art,” in *Writings*, 92.

Smithson's description of the earth from above enacts precisely the same type of visual effect exuded by his *Alogon* series in the way that both appear to playfully enlarge and contract their scale and direction.

Terminal, in its placid, all-white sheen, retains a similar gesture of proportionate geometry. The piece consists of nearly twelve conjoined hexagrams, all of varying sizes that enlarge and elongate themselves in succession toward a dominant central block, "[its] white metal form of telescoping hard edges [suggests] high technology, spatial progression, the rocky ground and the pure atmosphere of space."⁵⁷ This sculpture represents the effect that thinking about airport design had on Smithson. In "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site," Smithson describes how commercial air travel, as well as orbiting satellites, represent the beginning of a paradigm shift in terms of understandings objects with regard to their speed:

As the aircraft ascends into higher and higher altitudes and flies at faster speeds, its meaning as an object changes—one could even say reverses. The streamlined design of our earlier aircraft becomes increasingly more truncated and angular. Our whole notion of airflight is casting off the old meaning of speed through space, and developing a new meaning based on instantaneous time.⁵⁸

Smithson is addressing that fact that, at the time of his writing this in 1967, the fastest objects created by humanity were actually its blocky geometric satellites that orbited the earth. In evolving from cross-continental air travel to atmospheric satellites, our vessels appear to have almost devolved morphologically from the aerodynamic shape of "a bird or animal" into that of a flying space-age Rubix Cube.⁵⁹ Smithson cites for us the example of the SECOR surveying satellite, produced by the Cubic Corporation (fig 7). The boxy shape of the satellite conflicts with our usual image of speed, one that is more often seductively aroused by aircraft which

⁵⁷ Eggebeen, "Between Two Worlds," 98.

⁵⁸ Smithson, "Towards the Development of An Air Terminal Site," in *Writings*, 41.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

appear as if carved by the wind itself. Thus, it is not so far off for us to think of not only his *Terminal* but also his *Alogons* as emblems for a new age of space travel and galactic speed.

So, to return to the very beginning of this chapter, I wish to conclude with the idea that Smithson's sculptures are in fact representative of and also predictive of the new "hyperspace" which Jameson argues arises with the dawn of post-war "Late-Capitalism." Smithson's sculptures promote near-incomprehensible vestiges of time and space. Though they are static and austere in form, these works come to effectively disassemble the traditional parameters of space and time by which gallery and museum spaces may be seen to operate. Smithson purposefully bends western perspectival systems and cubic spaces through science fictions' multi-faceted prism of time. Whether these facets of his works are gleaned from science fiction film or literature, actual or imagined scientific theory, and/or merely the wonder of looking up to the stars, these works propel our visual understanding outside the gallery walls and into the limitlessness of a world barely imagined.

Chapter 3

Networks of Signification

Awareness of the particular presence of time(s) within select early sculptures by Smithson is important for considering how these and other concepts produce a mélange of science-fictional thinking within his mid-to-late career output. Smatterings of crystallography and an obsession with desolate landscapes are seen as a definite link through which to view and compare Smithson to his favored science fiction sources. What makes analysis of Smithson's incorporation of science fiction difficult is that particular ideas, such as entropy, can be seen repeatedly in different contexts within his work. Tracing these ideas is akin to following a feedback loop, in which their initial use and appearance amplify and modify future manifestations. The tendency for certain ideas to "feedback" into Smithson's oeuvre is common; to follow trajectories and/or locate origins amidst them is near impossible. What can be done instead is, locate themes of signification and orbits of common meaning. To do this I will analyze the specific connotation that I perceive particular places, objects, and/or time periods to have when understood as interconnected parts within a larger network of ideas.

My major area of focus will be on Smithson's treatment of landscape as it consistently conjures up and juxtaposes ideas of outer space with mundane settings on Earth, remote terrestrial settings with desolate states of mind, and mysterious monolithic geometry with the distant future. These confluences are deduced through a close inter-reading of much of Smithson's writing as well as through close analysis of particular works. Of noted interest are the suggested connections within written articles, such as *The Crystal Land*, *Donald Judd*, and *The Artist as Site-Seer*, and within certain photostats, such as *Untitled (S.F. Landscape)*, *Proposal for*

a Monument at Anartica, and *Proposal for a Monument on the Red Sea*. All of these works share formal as well as conceptual similarities with actual science-fiction works, such as J.G. Ballard's *The Crystal World* and *The Terminal Beach* as well as Roger Corman's sci-fi/horror film, *X: The Man With the X-Ray Eyes*. In many ways, this chapter will fill out and deepen the backstory of the Minimalist works already mentioned in the first chapter. It should be seen not as having completely separate goals from first, but is meant to act in a spiral manner, branching out to establish new meanings and subsequently turning back inward to re-inform itself.

Ballard and the Photo Works

To begin, one may discuss Smithson's *Untitled (S.F. Landscape)* (fig.8). The work is an enlarged negative photostat done in 1966, the same year as the *Alogon* series. It is important for its revealing of a few of the standards that have come to define Smithson's particular sci-fi vision. The work depicts a dark scene involving a group of men seen on-shore pulling a mooring rope attached to a large ship. Two additional ships sit far off in the distance and all are witness to a bizarrely out of place geometric structure, a conglomerate of perfect cubes extended in axonometric projection. Robert Sobieszek writes in "Robert Smithson's *Proposal for a Monument at Anartica* [sic]" that the work appears as though Smithson collaged the polygon onto an original photograph and had it made into a positive and negative photostat.⁶⁰ The photostat mentioned here is the original negative. The positive, however (fig. 9) was discovered in a warehouse in 2001 in a "nondescript cardboard package with taped sides...[n]early thrown

⁶⁰ Robert A. Sobieszek, "Robert Smithson's *Proposal for a Monument at Anartica*," in *Robert Smithson*, eds. Eugenie Tsai and Cornelia Butler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 144.

out as trash.”⁶¹ The discovery of the original positive caused quite a stir when on the back was discovered the handwritten title, *Proposal for a Monument at Anartica* [sic].⁶²

Understanding of the original negative (*Untitled [S.F. Landscape]*) has been changed as a result of this discovery. One can see clearly in the newly unearthed positive that the once inconspicuous ground has revealed itself to be an ice sheet, which in turn marks the ships as icebreakers. The flipped identity of this piece does not seem to have diverted any understanding of its content, however, as even before Eugenie Tsai appended the parenthetical words “SF landscape” to *Untitled*, it was being discussed in terms of a depiction of an alien environment.⁶³ In regards to Smithson’s fascination with entropy and its manifestation within the landscape, a setting like Antarctica would have been perfect for illustrating the 3rd law of thermodynamics, which, according to Sobieszek, states that, “any change of entropy ceases at the absolute temperature of zero degrees Kelvin.”⁶⁴ He goes on, noting, “At zero degrees’ entropy stops; all matter may well be converted into a sludge of energy in the far-distant future.”⁶⁵ It is interesting to see how Smithson himself expresses a belief in the collusion between cold environs, the distant future, and the deepening of an entropic condition. In an unpublished piece of prose titled “The Shape of the Future and Memory” also from 1966, Smithson describes a vision of the distant future, citing H.G. Wells and subsequently offering salient thoughts on such a foreign realm:

The ‘time traveler’ as he advances deep into the future discovers a decrease in movement, the mind enters a state of ‘slow motion’ and perceives the gravel and dust of memory on

⁶¹ Sobieszek, “Robert Smithson’s *Proposal for a Monument at Anartica*,” 144.

⁶² Sobieszek cites the complete catalogue information as: *Proposal for a Monument at Anartica*, 1966, positive photostat, 16 1/8 x 23 1/8 in. (40.96 x 58.74 cm.), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum purchase, Ralph M. Parsons Discretionary Fund; provenance, the artist’s estate.

⁶³ See Eugenie Tsai, “The Sci-Fi Connection: The IG, J.G. Ballard, and Robert Smithson,” in *Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Pop* (London: The Institute for Contemporary Art; and Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1988), 73-74.

⁶⁴ Sobieszek, “Robert Smithson’s *Proposal for a Monument at Anartica*,” 147.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

the empty fringes of consciousness. Like H.G. Wells, he sees the “ice along the sea margin”—a double perspective of past and future that follows a projection that vanishes into a nonexistent present. I have constructed some replicas of such perspectives, but I find they tell me less and less about the structure of time.⁶⁶

Smithson’s words here are potent. Not only do they cement a belief in the relation between the cold and the entropic, but his choice to quote from Wells’ “ice along the sea margin”— makes the depiction of Antarctica in his photo collages that much more clearly relevant to a discussion about the nature of the distant future. It also provides us with the potential for a new interpretation of two other important photoworks that may also be seen to contain sci-fi trappings.

Proposal for a Monument on the Red Sea (1966) (fig. 10) is a black and white photograph done by Smithson. It contains a placid coastal expanse abruptly halted by the insertion of a single plainly drawn cube. This shape, so universally indicative of the Minimalist movement with its rigid geometry, calls to mind Tony Smith’s *Die* (1962) or one of Donald Judd’s boxes. Smithson interprets the box-like shape as symbolically indicative of a psyche turned entropic. For him, this form brings to mind the “slow motion” of the future where, “perception as a deprivation of action and reaction brings to mind the desolate, but exquisite, surface-structures of the empty ‘box’ or ‘lattice.’”⁶⁷

Smithson’s equation of geometry, form, and cognition appears drawn from the ideas of noted New-Wave science-fiction author J.G. Ballard. Ballard’s breed of dystopian, post-apocalyptic sci-fi contrasts sharply with the optimism of earlier “Golden Age” science fiction written during the 1940s by such famed authors as Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clark, and Robert

⁶⁶ Robert Smithson, “The Shape of Future and Memory,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 211.

⁶⁷ Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” in *Writings*, 23.

Heinlen.⁶⁸ The effect of Cold War paranoia was a constant fixture in the imagination of New-Wave sci-fi, which became a sub-genre mainly involved with plots focused on galactic destruction and human helplessness.⁶⁹ In Ballard's 1964 short story, "The Terminal Beach," a pessimistic view of a post-apocalyptic future is presented through the perspective of a hallucinating castaway stranded on a decrepit post-war atomic test-site. The island, once a military base, is filled with seemingly endless identical concrete blockhouses "...together forming a continuous concrete cap upon the island, a functional, megalithic architecture as grey and minatory (and apparently as ancient, in its projection into, and from, time future) as any of Assyria and Babylon."⁷⁰ Much like Smithson's observation of his peers' Minimalist sculpture conflating the past with the future, Ballard's landscapes operate for him on a frozen, entropic level of 'no-time.' This state is described by Robert Hobbs, writing of Smithson's first retrospective in 1980, as a component of Smithson's own personalized vision of the future. He says, "[f]or Smithson outer space became equated with the nonspace of the future, and of a certain mental state—one that had little to do with feeling or thinking, but rather... about nonthinking and nonfeeling, a depressing blankness, a vacuity at the heart of being."⁷¹

A "depressing blankness" is also found in Smithson's ominous photo collage, *Grave Mounds with Object* (c.1966) (fig. 11), in which another mundane crystalline shape, in this case a rhombohedral, hovers mysteriously above an Arabian landscape dominated by the presence of numerous grave mounds. And, perhaps Smithson's best tribute to Ballard's dystopic vision can

⁶⁸ Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 78.

⁶⁹ Bould and Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*, 80.

⁷⁰ J.G. Ballard, "The Terminal Beach," in *The Terminal Beach* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1966), 139.

⁷¹ Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Retrospective* (Paris: Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; and Ithaca: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1982), 14.

be seen in his photoseries, *Nonsite (Slag), Oberhausen, Germany* (1968) (fig. 12)⁷². This incredibly solemn series of photographs captures differing viewpoints of what appear to be either a construction site or a wasted industrial landscape. Some photos include a hazy set of smokestacks seen far in the background, spouting a noxious gas which almost completely obscures the photo itself. These images suggest a capturing of Smithson's interest in what he terms "ruins in reverse" as well as the paradoxes inherent in our aims to "progress" toward the future.⁷³

Crystals

Thus, by looking at Smithson's early treatment of landscape in these select photoworks a number of patterns concerning associations with the future and with entropy emerge. In these works the significance of the crystal is asserted as a model for entropic time. After reemerging from a time of artistic inactivity between the years of 1962-64, Smithson became increasingly interested in crystalline forms. The years between 1964 and 1967 are a particularly specific period of Smithson's output in which his latent interest in science-fiction manifested itself in the form of a number of works and publications all dealing with futuristic conceptions of time and space. Even Jennifer Roberts, in her book *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, points out how saturated a time this was for Smithson in terms of his affinity for the otherworldly (but also what an important germinating stage it would come to be):

Although his writings after 1968 were rarely as explicit in their crystallographic reference (largely because by then he had toned down much of the science-fictional tenor of his first writings), certain motifs borrowed from crystallography would remain operative in his work throughout his career.⁷⁴

⁷² In Robert Sobieszek's *Robert Smithson: Photo Works* (Los Angeles: LACMA in association with University of New Mexico Press, 1993), he makes a distinct sci fi reference to Smithson's Oberhausen series, "Compared with Smithson's Oberhausen photographs, the opening shots of Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* of 1982 may be considered nearly picturesque." (p.35).

⁷³ Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," in *Writings*, 55.

⁷⁴ Jennifer L. Roberts, *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 40.

Works like *Cryosphere* (1966) (fig. 13) and *Untitled* (1964) (fig. 14) show a definite shift toward sharp, smooth, geometrically faceted forms. This was a major break from his earlier, highly expressionist drawing and collage methods. Not only had Smithson completely effaced the anthropomorphic, but he can also be seen as purposely trying to counter established human perceptions of art. One of the ways in which he promoted this shift was through the use of mirrors, as both a disturbance to detectable surfaces and as a way to “crystallize either the rooms in which they were installed or objects brought near them.”⁷⁵ During this period of artistic activity, crystalline form and terminology became a regular part of not only his sculptural vocabulary, but they also played an important part within the voluminous amount of publication he was producing.

So how does one understand crystals as figuring into a discussion of time and futuristic landscape? For Smithson, crystals became a perfect means for expressing temporal progression, “[they] suggested a way of fracturing and freezing the movement of time, converting it from a dynamic to a depositional state.”⁷⁶ By using this model, Smithson was able to move away from organic models in his art work, pushing him farther away from his Abstract-Expressionist predecessors and more firmly aligning him with the “cool” sensibilities of the sixties. The tendency for odd, mirror-like symmetric formations as well a sense of thermodynamic neutrality inherent in crystal structure worked in tandem with Smithson’s burgeoning explorations into models of vision informed by contradiction and entropy. The manner in which crystals grow (crystal deposition) actually depends on a molecular misalignment. Smithson’s seems to have been most interested in what is called a “screw dislocation.” Within this process (fig. 15), crystal

⁷⁵ Roberts, *Mirror Travels*, 39.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

layers form upon a step, an edge created by molecular incongruity, which then causes ensuing layers to grow around a central point, “it can go on happening indefinitely; the layer is never completed, and the crystal, so to speak, grows ‘up a spiral staircase.’”⁷⁷

Particular works of Smithson draw from this fascination with inorganic growth. *Untitled* (1969) (fig. 16) and the *Mirror Strata* works (all 1966) (Fig. 17) consist of a stacked set of slowly tapered mirrors whose structure very closely resembles a set of electronic micrographs pictured in Charles William Bunn’s, *Crystals: Their Role in Nature and Science* (1964) (fig. 18). We know that Smithson owned this book and that he had even removed the photos from his own copy suggesting a close study of their structure.⁷⁸ His sculpture nearly replicates the effect of the crystal’s growth, each reflective layer creating the illusion of space between the next, successfully purporting a visage of geographic layering that opposes itself to a model of tree-like evolution.⁷⁹ Each layer, as it reflects those above and below, comes to incorporate and dispel notions of itself and the other. The relationship, between each layer become ambiguous and imperfect, most likely a by-product of Smithson’s earlier reflective investigations in works like *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1965). This is an example of a piece that highlights and capitalizes on the inherent differences between mirrored reflections. Enantiomorphic reflections are characterized by appearing to be identical in every aspect, but being ultimately unmatchable – the right and left hands of the human body being an example. Smithson utilized this notion of reflection not only within *Enantiomorphic Chambers* but also within *Untitled* as a means to explore his own conceptions on the perplexing nature of time and history. If time is merely

⁷⁷ Charles Bunn, *Crystals: Their Role in Nature and Science* (New York: Academic Press, 1964), 45.

⁷⁸ Roberts, *Mirror Travels*, 42.

⁷⁹ In a 1972 interview with Paul Cummings Smithson directly attests to the relevance of crystals to these works, “I become more and more interested in the stratifications and the layerings...I think it had something to do with the way the crystals build up too. I did a series of pieces called *Stratas*. Virginia Dwan’s piece called *Glass Strata* [sic] is eight feet long by a foot wide, and looks like a glass staircase made out of inch-thick glass; it’s very green, very dense and kind of layered up.” (Cummings, “Interview with Robert Smithson...,” in *Writings*, 154).

reflective, or, rather, is isolated in stages which are seen to be separate from each other, it becomes possible to reconsider the notion again of “time as a place” and that, then, “innumerable places are possible.”⁸⁰ In an undated letter, Smithson’s personal temporal cosmo-vision can be seen as heavily informed by reflective behavior, “[s]ometimes I think the whole universe is a Hall of Mirrors. Reflections reflecting reflections.”⁸¹ What are the consequences then for an understanding of time as linear if the past, present, and future are no more than abutted fractals of each other? Or rather, is time merely an act of perspective, consistently panning back to reveal one massive fractal mirroring itself? These ideas are profound and not dissimilar to Smithson’s thinking, especially with regard to his constant affection for the combination of aspects of past and future. One might best describe *Untitled* and the *Mirror Strata*, in their stacked nature, as a type of sculptural chrono-pastiche. This is evident in their progressive accumulations (or depositions), but also in the connotations that their surfaces and arrangement suggest. The mirrored surfaces call to mind streamlined alien technology from the future, while paradoxically they are arranged into a structure associated with one of humanity’s oldest architectural forms, that of the ziggurat. These Mirrored echoings of the past and the future help one to visualize what exactly Smithson might be imagining when he invokes Nabokov to describe how the future is “but the obsolete [meaning the past] in reverse.”⁸² Smithson’s affinity for these types of aesthetic and conceptual situations extends beyond an interest in crystals toward vaster geologic subjects and processes related to his earlier childhood hobbies of specimen collecting and travelling.

⁸⁰ Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” in *Writings*, 10.

⁸¹ Smithson, undated letter to an unidentifiable individual, Smithson Papers, AAA, roll 3832, frame 749.

⁸² The quote is from Vladimir Nabokov’s, “Lance,” in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage House Books, 2011), 635. This short story is seen as one of Nabokov’s only stabs at science fiction.

Early Fascination with Time

Smithson's initial attraction to the extremities of history appears to have started with an early interest in the prehistoric. While a child, his father built him a museum in the basement of the family home in which Smithson displayed his wide collection of fossils, shells, insects, and other objects accumulated while on family trips (fig. 19).⁸³ Dinosaurs were a major interest for young Smithson and may be seen as a recurrent theme in his work throughout his entire life:

When I was about seven I did very large paper constructions of dinosaurs which in a way, I suppose, relate right up to the present in terms of the film I made on *The Spiral Jetty* – the prehistoric motif runs throughout the film. So in a funny way I guess there is not that much difference between what I am now and my childhood.⁸⁴

Smithson's interest in beginnings was sustained into his early twenties, when as a young artist living in New York City, he began to make heavily Christian-influenced work. He described this period as a kind of “groping, investigating period”- one in which he was fuelled by a desire to uncover the origins of modernism. In an interview with Paul Cummings done for the Smithsonian Museum in 1972, Smithson elaborates on how his interest in early Modernist writers such T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme, and Wyndham Lewis enabled him to “...understand, let's say, the mainspring of what European art was rooted in prior to the growth of Modernism.”⁸⁵ This understanding, according to Smithson, is what then led to his exponentially expanded focus on prehistory, “The entire history of the West was swallowed up in a preoccupation with notions of pre-history and great pre-historic epics starting with the age of rocks.”⁸⁶

By choosing to look at chronology through a geologic lense, Smithson found a method that would enable him to think outside of an anthropomorphically grounded view of time. In one

⁸³ Paul Cummings, “Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institute,” in *Writings*, 137.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

of his last interviews, Smithson spoke on the topic of Duchamp and his relation to Modernism's penchant for periodization. He identified the renewed enthusiasm for Duchamp during the postwar era as primarily a result of Duchamp's "disdain" for Modernism – a sentiment shared by other contemporary artists at the time. Despite Duchamp's desire to undermine Modernism, Smithson points out that his actions were ultimately reabsorbed within the emergent time-construct of postmodernism, "So, I think there is a kind of false view of art history, an attempt to set up a lineage. And I would like to step outside of that situation."⁸⁷ The notion that Duchamp could have been selectively inserted into Modernism's timeline was problematic for Smithson, arguably because it presented an art history unsure of the value and meaning of its own constituents. Factors like this are what made Smithson hostile to critics like Clement Greenberg, and artistic views inculcated with Modernist thinking – a mindset no longer fit for the brave new world of the future, seen to be revealing itself bit by bit during the sixties.

The Future is Red

Returning to Smithson and his conceptual mapping of time and space, it is important to keep in mind both the special significance that the crystal held for him at this point in his career, and also how later, mature works would come to build off of these initial observations. For instance, Smithson's photoworks from the mid-sixties, in their concern for remote locations and imposing structures, can be seen to foreshadow Smithson's earthworks to come.⁸⁸ Similar in effect to both *Proposal for a Monument on the Red Sea* and *Grave Mounds with Object*, Smithson's iconic *Spiral Jetty* (1970) shares with these works what I perceive to be a concern for the 'nonspace' of the future.

⁸⁷ Moira Roth, "Robert Smithson on Duchamp," in *Writings*, 197.

⁸⁸ Sobeiszek, "Robert Smithson's *Proposal for a Monument at Anartica*," in *Robert Smithson*, 145-146.

That Smithson chose the Red Sea as his location for a potential Minimalist monument is not inconspicuous when considering the meanings that this particular color had in relation to both the *Spiral Jetty* and H.G. Well's, *The Time Machine*. One may recall in Smithson's introduction to the essay, "The Spiral Jetty," that the artist quoted famous writer and Christian apologist, G.K. Chesterton as saying:

Red is the most joyful and dreadful thing in the physical universe; it is the fiercest note, it is the highest light, it is the place where the walls of this world of ours wear the thinnest and something beyond burns through.⁸⁹

For Smithson, the thing which "burnt through" was the sun as he stood on his own sculpture glancing skyward and exclaimed, "I had the red heaves, while the sun vomited its corpuscular radiations. Rays of glare hit my eyes with the frequency of a Geiger counter. Surely, the storm clouds massing would turn into a rain of blood."⁹⁰ In ecstatic prose, Smithson, perhaps consciously, conjured forth H.G. Wells and his time traveler, standing on the shore at the end of the world, "all bloody under the eternal sunset."⁹¹ Much like the contrast between the frozen ice underneath the blood-red end of the world in Wells' novel, the encrusted white salt crystals on the surface of the Jetty's stone walkway contrast with the surrounding crimson water. In Smithson's essay, he specifically states that it was his desire to find a site with just such a coloration.⁹² He quotes from *The Useless Land: A Winter in the Atacama Desert*, written by John Aarons and Claudio Vita-Finzi, a description of the Laguna Colorada (fig. 20), a rare red lake that exists high in the Bolivian altiplano, "The basalt (at the shores) is black, the volcanoes

⁸⁹ G.K. Chesterton as quoted in Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in *Writings*, 109.

⁹⁰ Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in *Writings*, 113.

⁹¹ H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Tom Doheny Associates, Inc., 1992), 87.

⁹² "My concern with salt lakes began with my work in 1968 on the Mono Lake Site-Nonsite in California. Later I read a book called *Vanishing Trails of Atacama* by William Rudolph which described salt lakes (salars) in Bolivia in all stages of desiccation, and filled with micro bacteria that give the water surface a red color. The pink flamingos that live around the salars match the color of the water." (Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in *Writings*, 109.)

purple, and their exposed interiors yellow and red. The beach is grey and the lake pink, topped with the icing of iceberg-like masses of salts.”⁹³

Inspired by the qualities of this lake, but dismayed by its remoteness, Smithson set his sights on the Great Salt Lake. There in the shallow waters of Rozel Point on the northern coast of the Great Salt Lake Smithson found his analogue to the Laguna Colorado, a red-colored lake with an unusually high saline content. An ironic twist that Smithson himself would have surely enjoyed occurred in 1990 when one of NASA’s main rocket engine producers built a facility not far from the *Spiral Jetty*. Perhaps here, in the distant placidity of Utah, where the means for and fictional setting of space travel sit nearly side-by-side, one can read Smithson as attempting to manifest his own sci-fi setting, one able to simultaneously project and neutralize the past, present, and future within an aesthetic of nowhere.

Futuristic Suburbia

Much as Smithson can be seen at times to be concerned specifically with remote sites and barren landscapes, he also has much to say about the significance of the suburbs and sites more commonly associated with urban blight. In two prose pieces from 1966 and 1967, Smithson can be seen to extend his ruminations on the idea of the entropic landscape to his own childhood backyard in New Jersey. In “The Crystal Land,” Smithson begins by offering a description of one of Donald Judd’s plexiglass boxes as being like “a giant crystal from another planet.”⁹⁴ In this seemingly banal travelogue, Smithson immediately draws a connection between the act of travelling outside of New York City to the act of leaving the comfortable atmosphere of Earth. In

⁹³ John Aarons and Claudio Vita-Finza, *The Useless Land: A Winter in the Atacama Desert* (London: R. Hale, 1960), 129.

⁹⁴ Robert Smithson, “The Crystal Land,” in *Writings*, 19.

Upper Montclair, New Jersey, Smithson, along with Donald Judd and their wives, visited the Upper Montclair quarry, a geologic site that, according to Brian H. Mason's guide *Trap Rock Minerals of New Jersey*, contained numerous samples of, "actinolite, albite, allanite, analcime, apatite, anhydrite...[etc.]"⁹⁵ The list continues on for well over thirty different entries and Smithson chose to cite its entirety in his piece.⁹⁶ In Philip Ursprung's co-study on Smithson and Kaprow, he mentions Smithson's inclusion of these various minerals as being like "an almost endless supply of readymades."⁹⁷ The disinterested act of listing these minerals presages Smithson's later use of such a method in his film and essay for the *Spiral Jetty* for which, in incantatory speech, he unceasingly reads the lines, "North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water. North by East—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water..." while the camera, increasingly unfixed, spirals out of control, creating a sense of mental and physical vertigo.⁹⁸

While scavenging about the quarry site, Smithson found himself on a precipice overlooking a host of New Jersey suburbs as well as the New York City Skyline. Smithson notes the particular visual qualities of suburban infrastructure that lay out before him, "The highways crisscross through the towns and become man-made geological networks of concrete. In fact, the entire landscape has a mineral presence. From the shiny chrome diners to glass windows of shopping centers, a sense of the crystalline prevails."⁹⁹ Smithson's passage, as

⁹⁵ Brian H. Mason, *Trap Rock Minerals of New Jersey* (Bureau of Geology and Topography, Bulletin 64: New Jersey, 1960), 1.

⁹⁶ "In these rocks one might find: 'Actinolite, albite, allanite, analcime apatite, anhydrite, apophyllite, aurichalcite, axinite, azurite, babingtonite, bornite, barite, calcite, chabazite, chalcocite, chalcopyrite, chlorite, chrysocolla, copper, covellite, cuprite, datolite, dolomite, epidote, galena, glauberite, goethite, gmelinite, greenockite, gypsum, hematite, heulandite, hornblende, laumontite, malachite, mesolite, natrolite, opal, opiment, orthoclase, pectolite, prehnite, pumpellyite, pyrite, pyrolusite, quartz, scolecite, siderite, silver, sphalerite, sphene, stevensite, stillbite, stilpnomelane, talc, thaumasite, thomsonite, tourmaline, ulexite.'" (Robert Smithson, "The Crystal Land," in *Writings*, 19).

⁹⁷ Philip Ursprung, *Allan Kaprow, Robert Smithson, and the Limits to Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 125.

⁹⁸ Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in *Writings*, 113. This is also a subtle reference to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1985)

⁹⁹ Smithson, "The Crystal Land," in *Writings*, 19.

well as the title of his piece, can be seen to be inspired by a novel written by J.G. Ballard that same year, *The Crystal World*. In the story, an old satellite in space has begun reflecting a finely distilled pinpoint of light onto a jungle in West Africa, where it begins morphing everything around it into a crystallized version of itself:

The long arc of trees hanging over the water seemed to drip and glitter with myriads of prisms, the trunks and branches sheathed by bars of yellow and carmine light that bled away across the surface of the water, as if the whole scene were being reproduced by some over-active Technicolor process.¹⁰⁰

In the same way in which we now know the light of the stars that we see in the sky at night to be hundreds of millions of years old, this same ‘light of the past’ is reflected by the satellite in the story, but, in a bizarre twist, it is materialized into a crystal matrix. In the novel, a young army doctor attempts to account for this occurrence, “It’s as if a sequence of displaced but identical images of the same object were being produced by refraction through a prism, but with the element of time replacing the role of light.”¹⁰¹

Ann Reynold’s study of *Smithson* describes the interpenetration of past images into the present as creating a “collapse into an infinity of timeless, almost archetypal images of paradise.”¹⁰² Ballard’s confounding of past and present creates within his novel a crystallized zone of infinite fascination coupled with infinite non-action. One gets the sense that where the past and the present meet nothing can happen. The “crystal world,” as it might be called, holds for Ballard’s main character, Dr. Sanders, “a curious premonition of hope and longing” that is for him worth the risk of being immolated by it. He states, “its hazards were a small price to pay for

¹⁰⁰ J.G. Ballard, *The Crystal World* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1966), 68.

¹⁰¹ Ballard, *The Crystal World*, 73.

¹⁰² Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 81.

its illumination of my life.”¹⁰³ The novel, in its radical manipulation of both time and space, highlights Smithson’s own goals toward the paradoxical juxtapositions brought about in “The Crystal Land.”

In Smithson’s story, he can be seen to describe the way in which time may manifest itself within sedentary objects or how it may be trapped within the ‘crystalization’ of matter. The ‘mineral presence’ which Smithson refers to in describing the New Jersey suburbs carries over onto the dashboard of his car, “...it became a complex of chrome fixed into an embankment of steel.”¹⁰⁴ Smithson draws attention to the geologic history embedded within our modern fixtures – within the blankly reflective surface of a chrome panel millions of years of natural processes are pressed together and effectively neutralized. How does one make sense of a world in which the present is inhabited by millions of surfaces, each of them crystallizations of other various time-states? This is the paradox of the present for Smithson as it may be related to science-fiction, each present has its own imagination of the future and those futures effect subsequent presents. It is a bizarre feedback loop in which the future can be seen to influence the present, in affect also giving us new perspectives of the past. Frederic Jameson associates such an effect directly with science fiction, “...the most characteristic science fiction does not seriously attempt to imagine the ‘real’ future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come.”¹⁰⁵ Smithson’s observations as he is driving in “The Crystal Land” begin to look like

¹⁰³ Reynolds, *Robert Smithson*, 81.

¹⁰⁴ Smithson, “The Crystal Land,” in *Writings*, 20.

¹⁰⁵ Frederic Jameson, “Progress Versus Utopia: or, Can We Imagine the Future?” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (Boston: David R. Godine in association with The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984), 245.

minute obsessions about the locations (or dislocations) of time - where it is trapped, or where it is being signified in an unlikely way:

A glass disc covered the clock. The speedometer was broken. Cigarette butts were packed into the ashtray. Faint reflections slid over the windshield. Out of sight in the glove compartment was a silver flashlight and an Esso map of Vermont. Under the radio dial (55-7-9-11-14-16) was a row of five plastic buttons in the shape of cantilevered cubes. The rearview mirror dislocated the road behind us.¹⁰⁶

Everything in the passage acts to signify time, its passing (reflections slid), its having passed (cigarette butts), the inability to locate its flow (broken speedometer), and its often paradoxical nature in which even the past is able to manifest itself (the rearview mirror). The objects reflect the passing of time but also, simply in their formal or material makeup, *are* the structure they come to reflect. Ann Reynolds discusses this point as being a characteristic of Smithson's conjoining of science fiction and reality, "This reflective relation between objects and structures also provides a way of connecting two disparate realities without necessitating a disjunctive gaze into the center of reference where lie the inequalities between images and reflections—and specificities of both time and place."¹⁰⁷ In this way, it is not so much a literary garnish when Smithson says that the Jersey Meadows would be "a good location for a movie about life on Mars" but rather a decisive comment on the often paradoxical relations that exist between place and time.¹⁰⁸ We must also make note, however, of the particular and intrinsically "foreign" value that Smithson comes to place on suburbia

Smithson's other well-known travelogue, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," is effectively an elaboration of the topics first broached in "The Crystal Land." It is a shift deeper into the heart of suburbia, and an examination of another type of 'entropic

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁷ Reynolds, *Robert Smithson*, 82.

¹⁰⁸ Robert Smithson, "The Crystal World," in *Writings*, 20.

landscape,' one befit with a collection of 'anti-monuments' that in their sheer ephemerality, rival the timelessness of Rome only in their potential to disappear. Smithson takes us on a guided trip into the 'nowhere' of this New Jersey suburb, introducing us to its most anti-iconic fixtures: *The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks, Monument with Pontoons, The Great Pipe Monument, The Fountain Monument, and The Sandbox Monument*. All of these points within his narrative add up to nothing. They are sad indications of post-industrial exhaustion. For Smithson, they come to represent "[a] Utopia minus a bottom, a place where the machines are idle, and the sun has turned to glass."¹⁰⁹ Upon seeing a billboard that spells out the allocation of federal taxes toward the town's highways, Smithson is moved to exclaim:

[t]hat zero panorama seemed to contain *ruins in reverse*, that is—all of the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of "romantic ruin" because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built.¹¹⁰

Passaic's progression into the future becomes so entropic to the point that it may be referred to as "a typical abyss or an ordinary void."¹¹¹

Smithson's passage on the city's growth into ruin has a visual correlate in one of his favorite B-grade science fiction films, Roger Corman's *X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* (1963). In the film, an aspiring doctor experiments on himself with a newly discovered compound made to aid in the augmentation of sight. His tinkering provides him with the miraculous ability to see through physical bodies, but it soon becomes apparent that it is more curse than cure. The character progresses through the film attempting to escape humanity, of which he has seen too

¹⁰⁹ Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," in *Writings*, 55.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

much, but ultimately is unable to hide from the attention that his nightmarish abilities beget.

Near the film's end, as the doctor sits in a car where a female friend is escorting him out of the city, he describes to his driver his nightmarish visions looking back:

The city as if it were unborn, rising into the sky with fingers of metal, limbs without flesh, girders without stone, signs hanging without support, wires dipping and swaying without poles. The city unborn, its flesh dissolved in an acid of light. The city of the dead.¹¹²

Corman achieved the effect of this “unborn city” by filming an actual construction site in progress over time, playing the footage backward in the finished movie.¹¹³ The actual dissolution of the city in real life then comes to stand as the model for its own unsheathed future in the film, a scene which acts as a useful representation of the way in which, Smithson himself, as Robert Hobbs says, “creates a realm in which the distant past and ultimate future are self-canceling reflections of each other, forming a continuous desert of differentiated, undifferentiated, and dedifferentiated matter.”¹¹⁴

A Broken Down Future

The way Smithson elaborates on the nullified qualities of the city offers a point of reference for understanding other work of his, both written and sculptural. At the end of the tale, Smithson happens upon a sandbox which he describes as being “a model desert.”¹¹⁵ His inflation of scale with regard to meaning gives the reader insight in that it helps to parse out the ways in which he is able to detect “a kind of cliché idea of infinity” echoing from the drab parking lot that he is standing in.¹¹⁶ Despite all of the post-war optimism that went into the construction of

¹¹² *X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, Directed by Robert Corman (1963; Los Angeles: Alta Vista Productions), Film.

¹¹³ Reynolds, *Robert Smithson*, 116.

¹¹⁴ Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 27.

¹¹⁵ Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” in *Writings*, 56.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

Passaic's infrastructure, it still comes off, for Smithson, as "a clumsy eternity, a cheap copy of The City of the Immortals."¹¹⁷ This idea of an "out of date" or "old-fashioned" future arguably found its origin within an article Smithson co-authored with Mel Bochner in 1966 titled, "The Domain of the Great Bear." The work is a parody on the Hayden Planetarium in the American Museum of Natural History, in which Smithson's description becomes full of jest equating the museum's ambulatories with "vast interminable spaces," and noting that "traversing them becomes an interstellar journey."¹¹⁸ His words here predict his later language in the "Spiral Jetty" essay in which he describes the ambiguities inherent in the act of determining scale, "A crack in the wall if viewed in terms of scale, not size, could be called the Grand Canyon. A room could be made to take on the immensity of the solar system."¹¹⁹ However, "The Domain of the Great Bear" offers its readers one of Smithson's most profound, and most scathing, entropic critiques on the processes of the universe at large.

Much like in "The Monuments of Passaic," Smithson here retains an unflinchingly ironic tone. The planetarium is described punningly in terms of its acting as the physical manifestation of humanity's collective imagination of the future. This future however is seen to be updated as more attractive 'futures' come into fashion, "New notions of the future and space, more optimistic and satisfying, are supplanting the dreary void. Formica and fluorescent, chrome and plexiglass are replacing the beaver-board, textured cement, glass and plywood."¹²⁰ He describes the setting of the planetarium, its concentric seating, sluggish lighting, and odd inclusion of a twelve foot replica of the Aztec Calendar Stone. Within this setting strange perversions of time and space occur, "[t]he doors, once closed, expel temporality. Enormous lengths of time are

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 56.

¹¹⁸ Robert Smithson and Mel Bochner, "The Domain of the Great Bear," in *Writings*, 25.

¹¹⁹ Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in *Writings*, 112.

¹²⁰ Smithson, "The Domain of the Great Bear," in *Writings*, 25.

compressed into the room.”¹²¹ The Solar System itself, “this mechanical collection of tracks, boxes, bulbs, gears, armatures, rods, seems tired, torpid.”¹²² The planetarium, in its attempt to depict deep space and time fails miserably, but, despite this comes to embody the fallibility that Smithson saw as inherent in any human-designed system. Seeing the Hayden Planetarium as reflecting the visage of a run-down future connects with Lawrence Alloway’s reasoning for why Smithson enjoyed sci-fi B movies “[w]hat he liked about *The Man from Planet X*, and other movies of the genre, was its artificiality, the fact that its conventions could be seen falling apart as one watched the actor in an alien suit totter about the diminutive, foggy set.”¹²³

In many ways Smithson’s specific adoption of science-fiction motifs, themes, and settings all in one way or another contribute to the sense of an aesthetic that is recalcitrant to Modernist authority. His fascination with desolate landscapes and entropic attitudes, as they are seen to be embodied in certain forms and processes, contrast sharply with the purity of the white cube. Modernist art was fuelled by a desire to make statements and gestures that could stand like monuments in the landscape, proud and erect in the face of an uncertain future – but a future that would assuredly one day be domesticated and controlled. No such control exists in Smithson’s work because the idea of a permanence outside that of perpetual dissolution is a fantasy – perhaps one more fit for a science-fiction novel. Thus, in analyzing Smithson’s highly articulate constellation of ideas, the meandering and interpenetrative nature of the work illustrates a system in flux, or rather a landscape whose fissures, slides, cave-ins, and odd accoutrements all signal an ultimate flexibility and tendency toward the shifting of foundations. These motions resemble

¹²¹ Ibid., 25.

¹²² Ibid., 25.

¹²³ Lawrence Alloway, “Sites/Nonsites,” in Robert Hobbs’ *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 44.

what Darko Suvin calls the “cognitive estrangement” of science fiction, the ability of the genre to so vigorously defamiliarize oneself to everyday reality.

Epilogue

In the preceding chapters I have attempted to portray the significance that I perceive science-fiction to hold within a particular phase of Robert Smithson’s career. In doing so I have drawn attention to the existence of new articulations of time as being present within certain of Smithson’s minimalist-type sculpture. I have also attempted to map what I garner to be an interconnected, specifically science-fiction oriented, structure of signification existing between ideas of landscape, outer space, human cognition, and crystal deposition. In doing so, I have merely been attempting to draw the reader’s attention to and invoke their appreciation for the unique presence of a distinct genre-tinged set of ideas and subject matters. In this epilogue however, I would like to move beyond the act of description and attribution by using this collection of ideas to help direct future reception of Smithson’s work.

What I am positing is that the sheer prevalence of science-fictional thought as it may be seen to exist latently through various aspects of Smithson’s physical and written works offer the potential for a new articulation of Smithson’s historical artistic position. Smithson in particular has been used as a model for artistic movements in the past, most notably by Rosalind Krauss

and Craig Owens for the occurrence of a postmodern shift in art praxis that began in the 1970s.¹²⁴ What I am suggesting however, is the consideration of Smithson as an artist whose art practice is an example of a contemporary strain of nihilism.

Prevalent trends of dystopic thinking pervade Smithson's body of work, especially the persistence of entropy as a working concept and his vision of the future as being "prehistoric" The prominence given to ideas such as these mark them not only as formal interests but thematic ones as well. It is my belief that Smithson, like Nietzsche, was aware of, arguably welcome to, and even inspired by the perception of a "lack of meaning" in this world. His obsession with rubble, degeneration, and a distant future where humans no longer exist appears predicated on the certainty that meaning in itself is always already crumbling. The direness of these particular preoccupations of Smithson's, when framed within Nietzsche's thoughts on nihilism and Eugene Thacker's idea of the "horror of philosophy," suggest however, that it is from these very seemingly fatalistic concerns that Smithson is able to derive his most progressive articulations on the relevance of art in the on-going and often uncertain relationship between humanity and its world of often inconceivable forces.

I argue that Smithson's interest in science fiction is representative of his desire to know and actualize that which is beyond a strictly anthropocentric understanding of the universe. Through harboring a nihilist-like perspective toward human constructions of meaning, as exemplified by his desire to work alongside the forces of entropy rather than logic, Smithson embarked upon an artistic journey in pursuit of an aesthetics suitable to a world where

¹²⁴ See Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30-44, reprinted in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 276-290; Craig Owens, "Earthwords," *October* 10 (Fall 1979): 120-130; Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 67-86; and Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism (Part 2)," *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 58-80. All of the Owens articles have been reprinted in Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

seemingly, everything wanes. Late career interventions into the landscape including the iconic *Spiral Jetty* (fig. 21) in Utah and his *Broken Circle/ Spiral Hill* (1971) (fig. 22) in Holland, as well as proposed land reclamation projects such as *Lake Edge Crescents – Egypt Valley, Ohio* (1972) (fig. 23) and *Bingham Copper Mining Pit—Utah Reclamation Project* (1973) (Fig. 24) display a dialectic investigation of hope and despair on a cosmic level. Thus, to think Smithson in nihilist terms is to transcend a program of despair and instead demonstrate how his visions of renewal, reflection and awareness sprang forth from a predominant emptiness.

In taking such a tack I do not wish to romanticize Smithson, nor his accomplishments. Rather I want to draw from the crucial historic moment that Smithson worked in, one that saw the beginnings of a number of new crises, concerns, and reactionary political positions. The rise of the global environmental movement, the moon landing, the globalizing effects of late capitalism, and Moore's Law of 1965 are just a few examples of the types of far reaching movements that can be traced to this decade.¹²⁵ Each of these developments suggest themes that received major attention in Smithson's work: the relation of the artist to the environment, the position of humanity within the universe, the problematic money-politics of the art market, as well as the rampant proliferation of advanced technology. All of these developments can be seen as still having a profound effect on humanity today. For this reason Smithson's interventions on the part of these issues hold worth for us because of their innovation in breaching boundaries seen to exist between industry, artist, and the land.

¹²⁵ The modern environmental movement as we know it today as well as the Federal Environmental Protection Agency were arguably started in part by the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1962). Moore's Law of 1965 was originally described by Gordon E. Moore in his paper, "Cramming More Components onto Integrated Circuits," *Electronics* (April 1965): 114-117. He first conceived of and popularized the notion that every two years computing power exponentially doubles. The paper is concerned with the future of integrated electronics, technologies first investigated in the late 1950s for the sake of "miniaturiz[ing] electronic equipment to include increasingly complex electronic functions in limited space with minimum weight." (p. 82).

Science fiction factors into Smithson's late-career output mainly as a result of his continued fascination with entropy. Entropy as a concept is one that automatically leads the mind toward a future where sources and energies are depleted or exhausted - observing its aftereffects requires the imagining of time's passing. Smithson's choice of "industrial waste, sludge, heaps, tailings, [and] suburbs" in his late works are conscious odes to a universe in the midst of slow exhaustion, realized through humanity's own material participation.¹²⁶ This is similar in behavior to science fiction cinema and literature where futurity is often signified by images of technologic innovation or industrial collapse – these being the hubs of society where humanity's capable limits are most visibly pushed to their limits. Smithson's plans for *Tailings Pond* (1973) (fig. 25) an unrealized reclamation project in Colorado, dealt specifically with the tailings from ore excavation. Ore tailings contain micro amounts of valuable minerals, the extraction of which require a process yet to be made feasibly affordable. The tailings are often left in pools on-site where, now only useless sludge, they solemnly await their refinement. In Smithson's plan these pools of dormant minerals were to be kept visible within the artwork. Their passive presence act as represented hopes for a more advanced future. The tenuousness of this future's arrival however causes these tailings to co-signify as ominously ugly reminders of the potential destruction inherent within humanity's strivings toward progress. Within this sense of forlorn loss that permeates sites of waste and blight Smithson manifests a material evocation of contemporary society, one that is dark, but honest.

Smithson's predilection for science fiction in his work gains a visionary significance when discussed in light of Eugene Thacker's theory of the "horror of philosophy." Thacker's theory is an attempt to bridge the cultural imaginings found within the filmic and literary genres

¹²⁶ Lucy Lippard, "Breaking Circles: The Politics of Pre-History," in *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 39.

of science fiction and supernatural horror to the desire of philosophy to interrogate the limits of human thought. Thacker's thesis, in his book *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1*, rests on the assumption that modern-day catastrophes have become so archetypally frightening that they are now increasingly "unthinkable." To help illustrate the impact of this idea Thacker segregates the entire universe into three categories: the world-for-us (anthropocentrism), the world-in-itself (the physical world which we attempt to manipulate into the world-for-us) and the world-without-us (the world where humanity has ceased to exist).¹²⁷ Thacker focuses on events currently most threatening to humanity: global climate change, energy crises, and worldwide species extinction.¹²⁸ Disasters such as these represent for Thacker, "the thought of the unthinkable that philosophy cannot pronounce but via a non-philosophical language."¹²⁹ That language, within contemporary western society, is the language of supernatural horror and science fiction, "The world-without-us is as much a cultural concept as it is a scientific one, and...it is in the genres of supernatural horror and science fiction that we most frequently find attempts to think about and to confront the difficult thought of, the world-without-us."¹³⁰ Thacker is most concerned with an imagining of the world and by extension, the universe, as it will eventually (purportedly) exist without humanity's presence. To suggest this he states that, "[u]sing advanced predictive models, we have... imagined what would happen to the world if we as human beings were to become extinct. So, while we can never experience the world-in-itself, we seem to be almost fatalistically drawn to it, perhaps as a limit that defines who we are as human beings."¹³¹ Smithson, operating some forty years before Thacker is

¹²⁷ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol.1* (Washington: Zero Books, 2011), 4-5.

¹²⁸ Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet*, 2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

attracted similarly to the ends and absences of humanity, and arguably substantiates many of Thacker's ideas. Smithson was in pursuance of an understanding of the world-without-us both in his interest for "the politics of the Triassic Period" and end-of-the-world science fiction novels like JG Ballard's *The Drowned World* or *The Crystal Land*.¹³² There appears an articulable relation between what I will term "forms of unthinkability" which for Smithson were found in modern industry's detrimental environmental effects, science-fiction's innumerable visions of the future and the past, and his own late Earthworks. Ideas of a distant, entropic future informed Smithson and his actions, while a science-fiction imagination aided him in somehow making sense of and then pursuing visual solutions for new forms of catastrophe in his own time.

Smithson's untimely death cut short late goals to fuse his artistic process with larger politically-tectonic forces for the sake of reinvigorating the transformative power of vision – in all its manifestations,

WHEN THE MINER OR BUILDER LOSES SIGHT OF WHAT HE IS DOING THROUGH THE ABSTRACTIONS OF TECHNOLOGY HE CANNOT PRACTICALLY COPE WITH NECESSITY. THE WORLD NEEDS COAL AND HIGHWAYS, BUT WE DO NOT NEED THE RESULT OF STRIP-MINING OR HIGHWAY TRUSTS. ECONOMICS, WHEN ABSTRACTED FROM THE WORLD, IS BLIND TO NATURAL PROCESSES. ART CAN BECOME A RESOURCE, THAT MEDIATES BETWEEN THE ECOLOGIST AND THE INDUSTRIALIST [sic].¹³³

Smithson's seemingly optimistic desire to integrate his art within a positive-minded ecologic movement however did not come from a simple desire for preservation (not that such positions should be necessarily thought of as simple). Smithson's position was in reality much more complex as when Lucy Lippard notes in her posthumous piece "Breaking Circles: The Politics of Prehistory" how Smithson "predicted the evangelical popularization of ecology: 'All those sins.

¹³² Quoted in Philip Leider, "How I Spent My Summer Vacation, or, Art and Politics in Nevada, Berkeley, San Francisco and Utah," *Artforum*, September 1970.

¹³³ Robert Smithson, "Untitled, 1971," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 220.

And here's 2000 coming so near. Sins everywhere. The dead river with its black oil slime. The crucified river instead of the crucified man. When do you think they'll start burning polluters at the stake?"¹³⁴ Smithson was conscious of the ecology movement but would not have considered himself a member. He was notably un-political as compared with others in his generation preferring instead to take the position of "sinking into an awareness of global squalor and futility" surmising that, "[s]ooner or later the artist is implicated or devoured by politics without even trying."¹³⁵ His words reflect both a constant concern for the geologic as well as a highly acute sense of the entropic, both of which when considered against the "healing" effect that his land reclamation projects were to have create a specific dialectic between indifference and involvement that make this discussion especially important for his future reception.

Such a political position, or non-position, illustrates one of the main ways in which Smithson's thought and work display an affiliation with nihilism. To speak on such a connection it is first necessary to outline a basic framework for considering nihilism. Nihilism, as I refer to it, depends heavily on the meaning attributed to it by Nietzsche:

Nihilism as a psychological state will have to be reached *first*, when we have sought a "meaning" in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged. Nihilism then, is the recognition of the long *waste* of strength, the agony of the "in vain," insecurity, the lack of any opportunity to recover and to regain composure—being ashamed in front of oneself, as if one had *deceived* oneself all too long.—This meaning could have been: the "fulfillment" of some highest ethical canon in all events, the moral world order; or the growth of love and harmony in the intercourse of beings...any goal at least constitutes some meaning. What all these notions have in common is that something is to be achieved through the process—and now one realizes that becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Lippard, "Breaking Circles," in *Robert Smithson Sculpture*, 37.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 12.

Nietzsche's words are harrowingly bleak, but are not meant to condemn his reader into a crushing depression. Instead they are to be seen as means for alleviating the shackling effects of ideology and religion as Nietzsche had similarly fought against the values and morals of the Christian church of his time. For Smithson, the dominant ideology of his day was the artistic formalism boasted by Clement Greenberg against which Smithson strove to repeal. Inversely though, were the idealistic, egalitarian politics and artistic practices of his contemporaries symbolized by groups such as the AWC (Art Workers Collective). Smithson was not an active member of the AWC, nor did he involve himself in much of the politics of his time.¹³⁷ Smithson's ambiguous position should not mark him as indecisive nor as one who viewed direct political action as essentially pointless, but rather his position is nihilistic and should be viewed positively for this reason. According to Nietzsche, nihilism can be "a sign of strength: the spirit may have grown so strong that previous goals ('convictions,' articles of faith) have become incommensurate..."¹³⁸ Smithson's goals certainly were different from his contemporaries, at least in terms of his attempts to bridge gaps between art and industry. His land reclamation projects were unprecedented in the way they envisioned a new sense of nature that saw man as a self-same agent acting as "...part of the process rather than overcoming it."¹³⁹ Thus, if nihilism is thought of simply, as Johan Goudbloom roughly defines it, as "a state of mind in which nothing appears to have value or meaning" then Smithson's lack of faith in the meaning of history, nature, the future, and all of the human traces found therein would suggest that he operated on a similar trajectory.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ See Lucy Lippard, "The Art Worker's Colition," *Studio International* (November 1970): 171-174 for further reading on the artist's involvement in politics in New York City, of which Smithson was implicated indirectly.

¹³⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 17-18.

¹³⁹ Lippard, "Breaking Circles," in *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 38.

¹⁴⁰ Johan Goudbloom, *Nihilism and Culture* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), ix.

With nihilism workingly-defined, Smithson's sci-fi tinged thoughts on entropy, time, and landscape come to mind strongly both for their marked pessimism and disregard for conventional systems. Smithson's favorite metaphor for entropy was that of a child's sandbox. The box was to be imagined filled with equal parts black and white sand and a child asked to run in a circle numerous times. The circular motion of the child, while regular and controlled in its direction, induces a chaotic mixing of the colored sand. The child is asked to run counterclockwise in the same sandbox the same number of times in the hopes that this reversive process would reinstate a sense of order. The child's actions only further reinforce the already dismantled state of the sandbox. For Smithson, the child's actions were equivalent to the meta-workings of history where the passage of time comes to appear only as an inducement to further and further dissolution. Such metaphors connote strong feelings of nihilism, ones that Smithson also harbored toward theories of absolute systems or solutions:

There is no point in trying to come up with the right answer because it is inevitably wrong. Every philosophy will turn against itself and it will always be refuted. The object or system will always crush its originator. Eventually he will be overthrown and be replaced by another series of lies. It is like going from one happy lie to another happy lie with a cheerful sense about everything. An art against itself is a good possibility, an art that always returns to essential contradiction. I'm sick of positivists, ontological hopes, and that sort of thing, even ontological despairs. Both are impossible.¹⁴¹

It was within contradiction that Smithson could, and did, work. Smithson's devaluation of both hope and despair emerged as a powerful dialectic, one in between which he often ambiguously hovered.

One can contrast Smithson's acceptance of worldwide entropic tendencies to Nietzsche's concept of decadence, that "[w]aste, decay, elimination need not be condemned: they are the

¹⁴¹ Smithson, Robert. "Fragments of an Interview with P.A. Norvell." In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Ed, Jack Flam. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 195.

necessary consequences of life, of the growth of life.”¹⁴² Nietzsche describes how waste is created in direct proportion to a society’s level of advancement, “[a] society is not free to remain young. And even at the height of its strength it has to form refuse and waste materials. The more energetically and boldly it advances, the richer it will be in failures and deformities, the closer to decline.”¹⁴³ In this sense the accumulation of waste, or as Smithson might refer to it, of “nonspace,” is a natural result of any society. The desolate landscapes of science-fiction that fascinated Smithson in their entropic time-states are purposeless, they stand as testaments to a psycho-geologic layer of uselessness within humanity and its environment. Yet, it was these very sites: parking lots, suburbs, industrial wastelands, that attracted Smithson and that can be seen to ultimately define him as an artistic agent of affirmation. In this sense his position is opposed to one of unattempting pessimism – what I perceive to be the difference between a nihilist and a defeatist. Like waste, Smithson believed that humanity’s inclusion within nature was a natural one and that a shift in perception toward this view could be garnered through artistic interaction with the landscape, “New York [City] itself is natural like the Grand Canyon. We have to develop a different sense of nature...that includes man...[a]s an artist it is sort of interesting to take on the persona of a geologic agent where man actually becomes part of the process rather than overcoming it.”¹⁴⁴ In this way working in collusion with entropy could act to break down what were for him artificial distinctions separating art from nature or humanity from nature. In attempting to dissolve such categories Smithson utilized a nihilist vision of valuelessness to create fissures within the meanings of particular words, like “nature” for instance, whose specific

¹⁴² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 25.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴⁴ Lippard, “Breaking Circles,” in *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 38.

signification had real effects on how individuals considered themselves in relation to their environment.

Thus, when looking at the history of art in the 20th century, Robert Smithson becomes especially important for his insistence on the importance of perspective. Whether this be thought of as personal, historic, or aesthetic, an act of vision is involved. That perspective can be thought of as able to be manipulated, rewound, expanded, or altogether collapsed was valuable for Smithson. At times emulating the mind-bending elasticity so often brought to bear on reality by science fiction, Smithson in many ways transformed the present through his own evocation of the future. In a somewhat circular fashion I wish to conclude this paper, as I began it, with Frederic Jameson in order that we might understand better how crucial science fiction was in augmenting Smithson's artistic flight:

In reality, the relationship of this form of representation [the imagining of the future], this specific narrative apparatus, to its ostensible content—the future—has always been more complex than this. For the apparent realism, or representationality, of science fiction has concealed another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us 'images' of the future – whatever such images might mean for a reader who will necessarily predecease their 'materialization' – but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamilization.

The defamilization felt upon standing in the center of Smithson's magnum opus, the *Spiral Jetty*, is undeniably as specific as that which Jameson attests to be the critical arc of science fiction. In this way further artistic and intellectual exploration, of the inquiring kind akin to science fiction, seems in order if humanity is to mitigate its current problematic relationship with the world, the environment, and most importantly itself. Robert Smithson is just one example of a model and a method for coming to terms with contemporary life. Science fiction, in its ability to imagine numerous other presents and near-futures, is another, and one which deserves renewed interest for its seemingly powerful ability to turn imagination into reality.

Illustrations

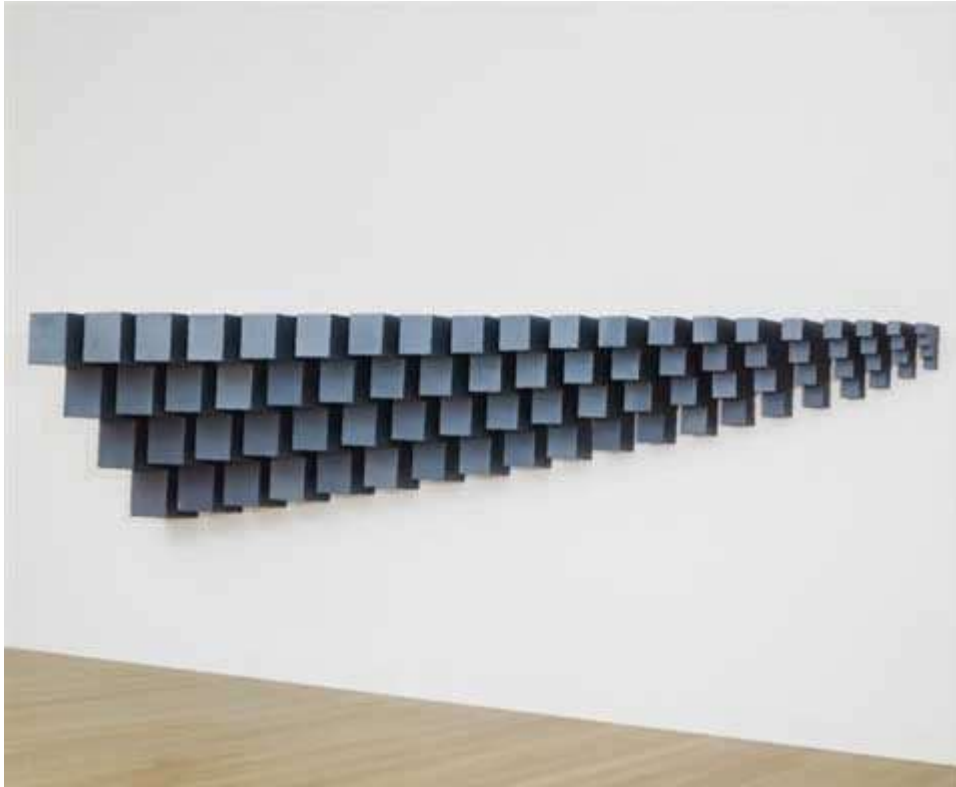


Figure 1:

Alogon #1

Robert Smithson

1966

Painted Stainless Steel; 7 units

Square surfaces: 3, 3 ½, 4, 4 ½, 5, 5 ½, 6 in.

Overall: 35 ½ x 73 x 35 ½ in.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

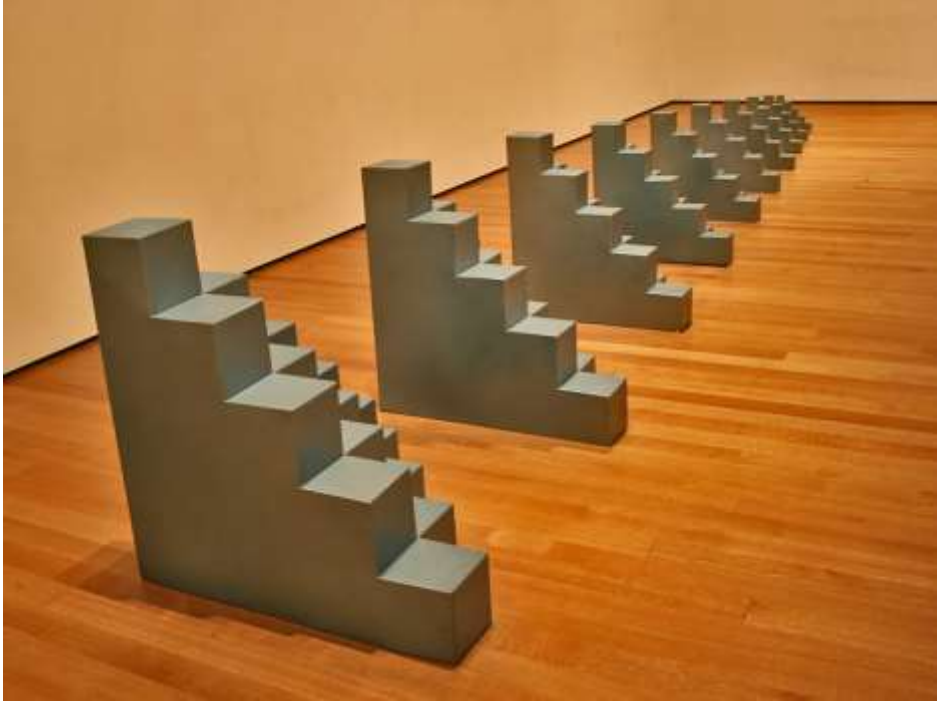


Figure 2:

Alogon #2
Robert Smithson
1966
Painted Steel; ten units
12 ½, 15, 17 ½, 20, 22 ½, 25, 27 ½, 30, 32 ½, 35
Museum of Modern Art New York

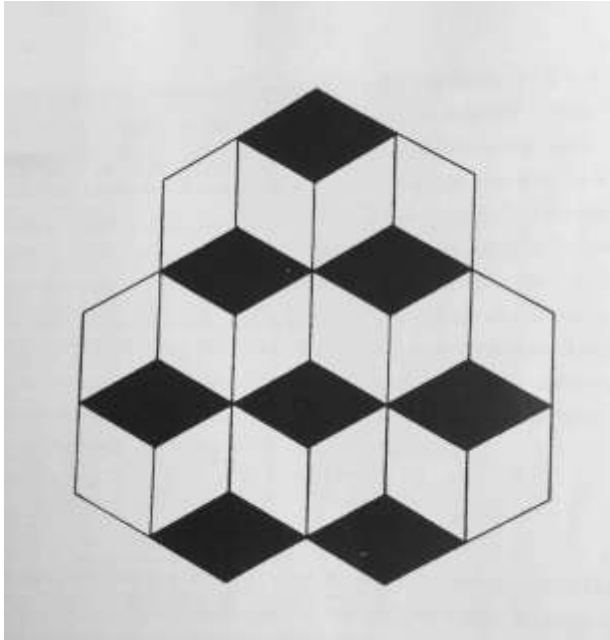


Figure 3:

Honeycomb Illusion from Ronald G. Carragher and Jacqueline B. Thurston's *Optical Illusions and the Visual Arts* (1966).

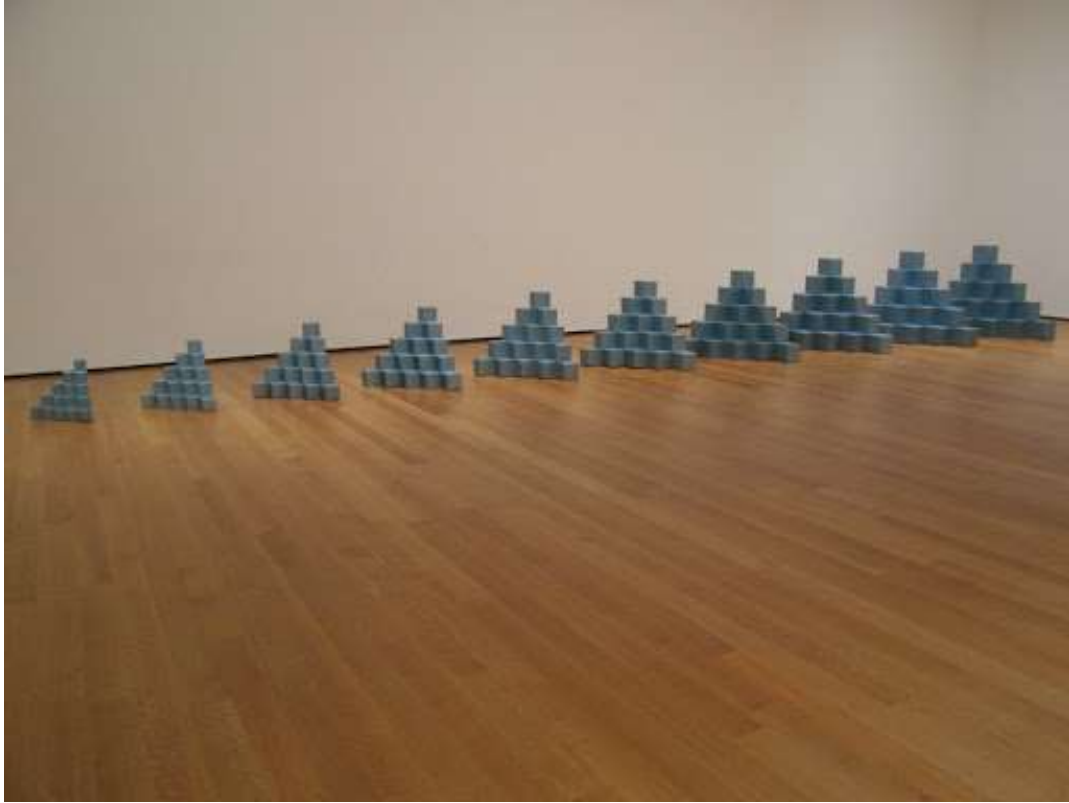


Figure 4:

Alogon #2

Robert Smithson

1966

Painted Steel; ten units

12 ½, 15, 17 ½, 20, 22 ½, 25, 27 ½, 30, 32 ½, 35 in.

Museum of Modern Art New York



Figure 5:

Terminal
Robert Smithson
1966
Painted Steel
52 ½ x 36 x 56 ½ in.

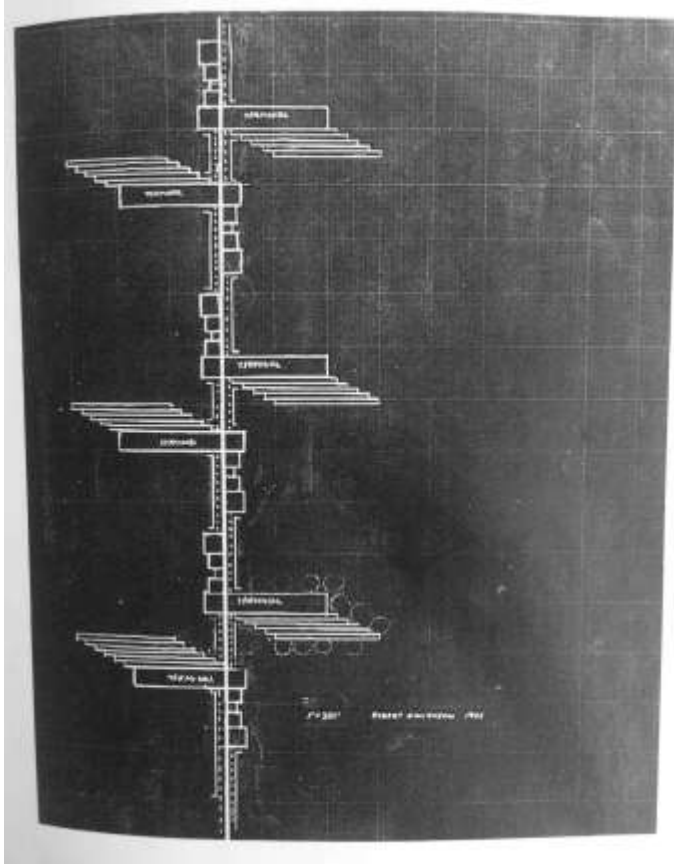


Figure 6:

Terminal: Plans for Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport
Robert Smithson
1966
Photostat
Estate of Robert Smithson

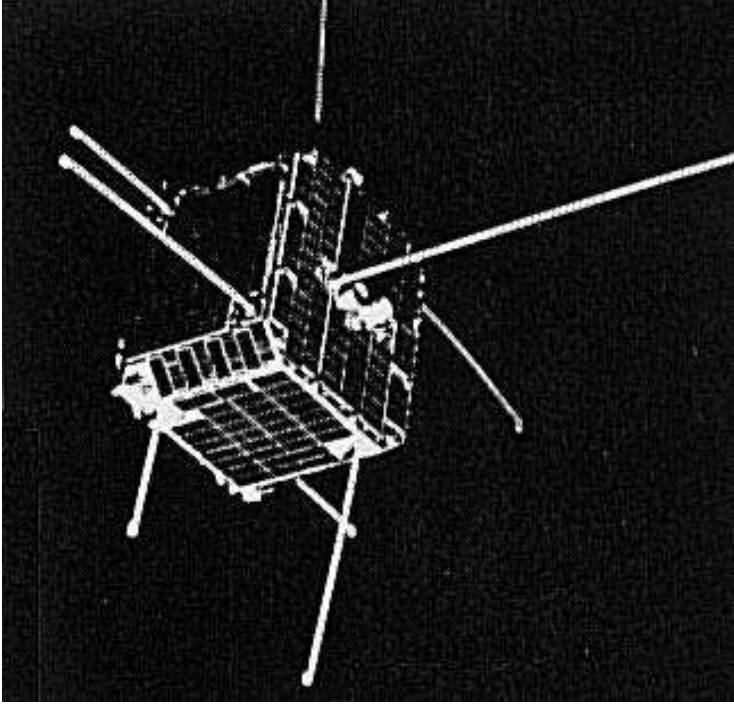


Figure 7:

SECOR Surveying Satellite. (Cubic Corporation, San Diego, California.)



Figure 8:

Untitled (SF Landscape)

Robert Smithson

1966

negative Photostat

H: 8 1/2" W: 12"

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

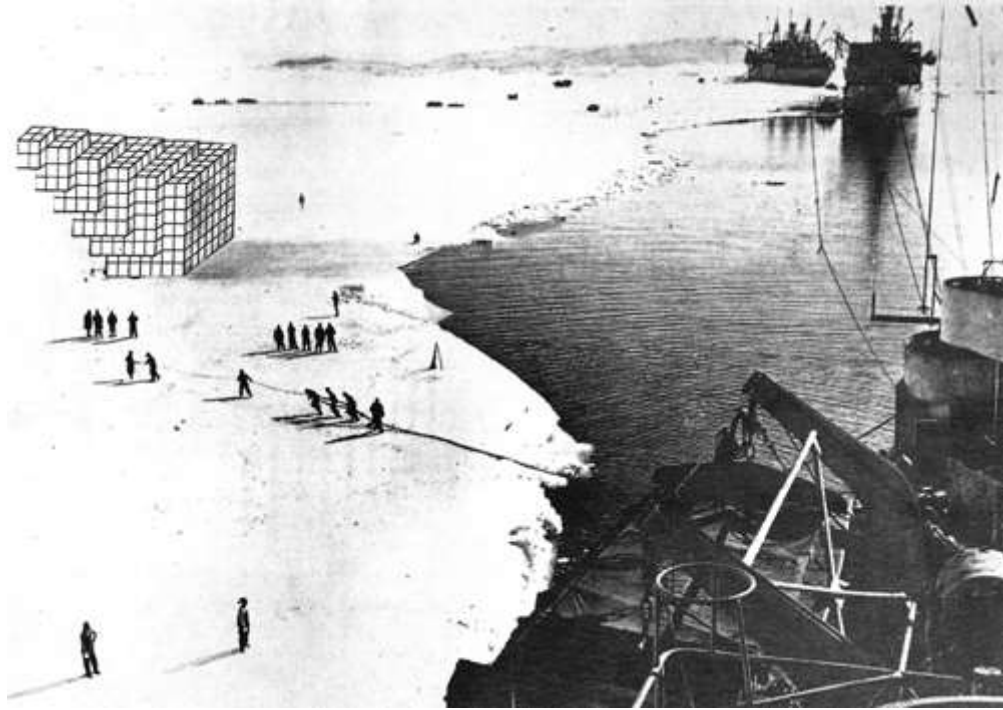


Figure 9:

Proposal for a Monument at Anartica

Robert Smithson

1966

Black and white silver gelatin photograph with collage

H: 16 1/8" W: 23 1/8"

Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Figure 10:

Proposal for a Monument on the Red Sea (formerly Cube in Seascape)

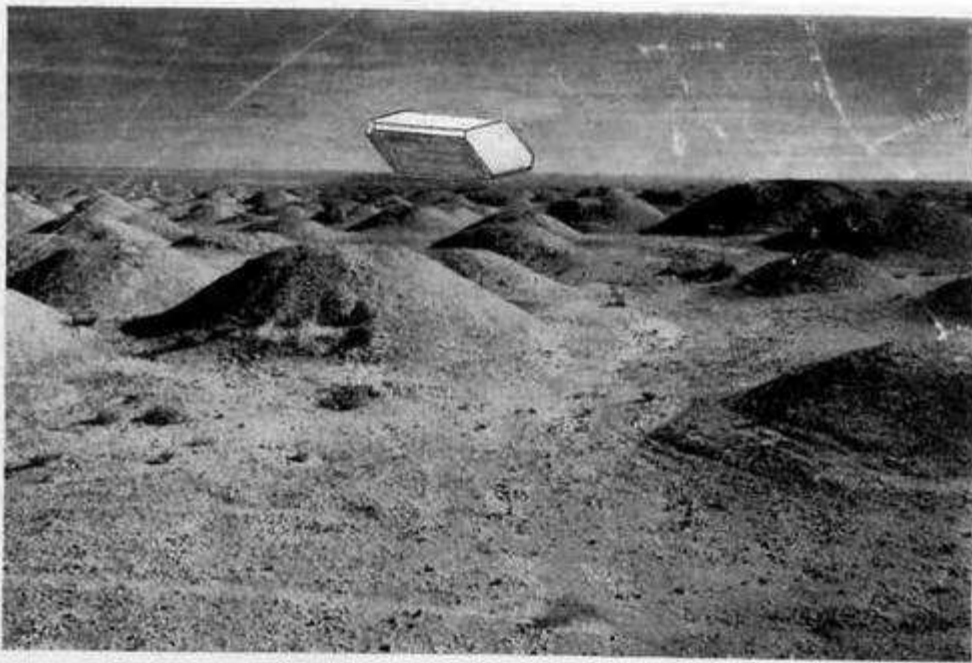
Robert Smithson

1966

Paper on gelatin-silver print

H: 8 ¼ x 6 ¼ in.

Museum of Modern Art, New York



GRAVE MOUNDS in this photograph are some of the estimated 100,000 that lie on Bahrain Island. Each of the mounds covers one or two stone chambers. The chambers contain human burials and objects of gold, copper and ivory that are more than 3,000 years old.

Figure 11:

Grave Mounds with Object

Robert Smithson

c. 1966

H: 6" W: 7 5/8"

Estate of Robert Smithson, James Cohan Gallery,
New York



Figure 12:

Nonsite (Slag), Oberhausen, Germany

Robert Smithson

1968

Gelatin-silver prints, 8 x 10in. each

Robert Smithson Papers, Archives of American Art

Smithsonian Institution

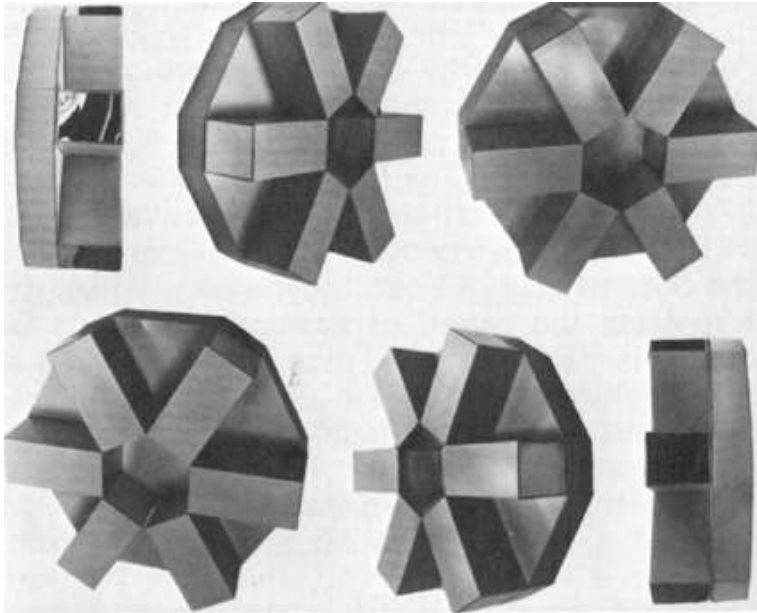


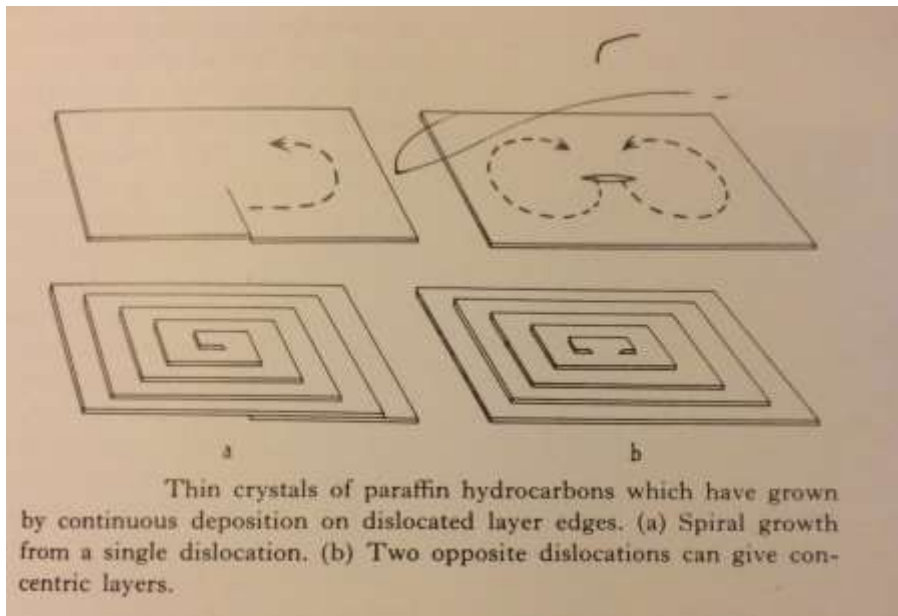
Figure 13:

Cryosphere
1966
Robert Smithson
Painted Steel with Chrome Insert
Six modules 17 x 17 x 6 in.



Figure 14:

Untitled
1964-65
Robert Smithson
Metal and plexi-
mirrors
81 x 35 x 10 in.



Thin crystals of paraffin hydrocarbons which have grown by continuous deposition on dislocated layer edges. (a) Spiral growth from a single dislocation. (b) Two opposite dislocations can give concentric layers.

Figure 15:

Example of a “Screw Dislocation”

Charles Bunn’s *Crystals: Their Role in Nature and Science* (New York: Academic Press, 1964)

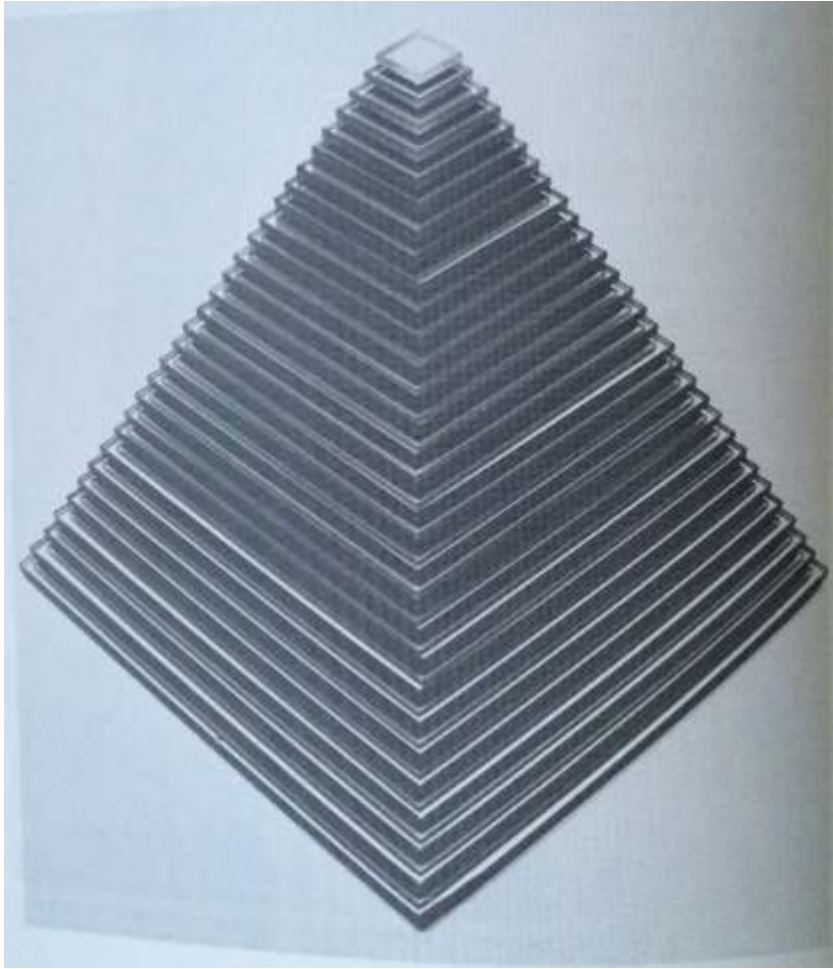


Figure 16:

Untitled

Robert Smithson

1969

Mirror, glass; 2 versions

$5 \times 8 \frac{3}{8} \times 8 \frac{3}{8}$, $7 \frac{1}{4} \times 12 \frac{1}{2} \times 12 \frac{1}{8}$

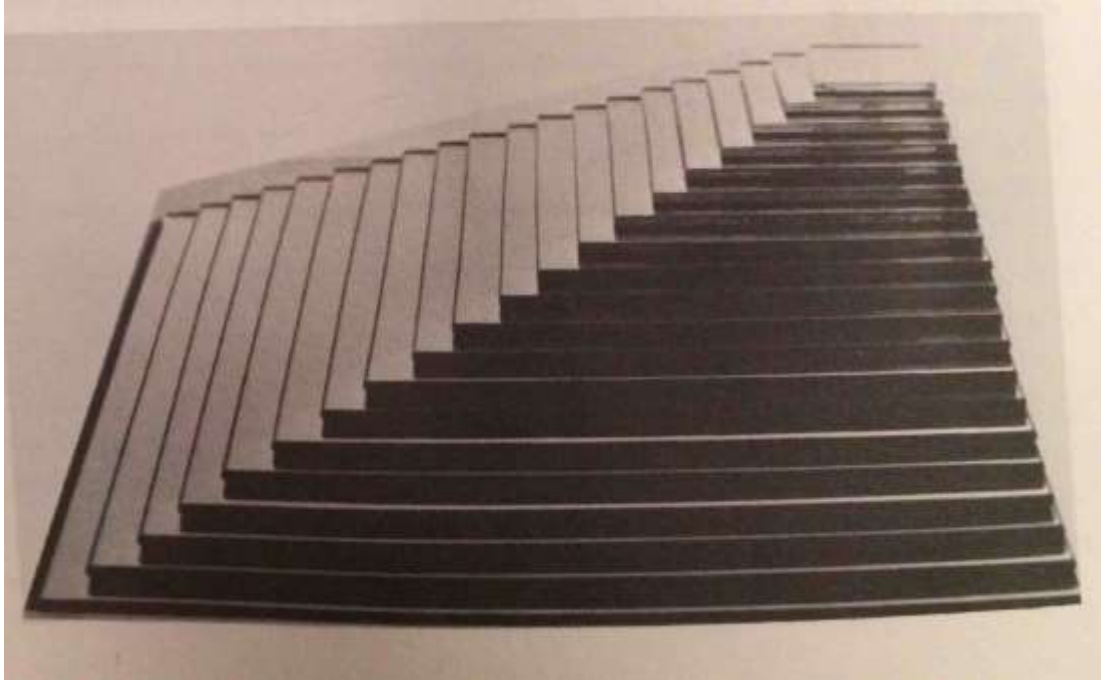


Figure 17:

Mirror Stratum

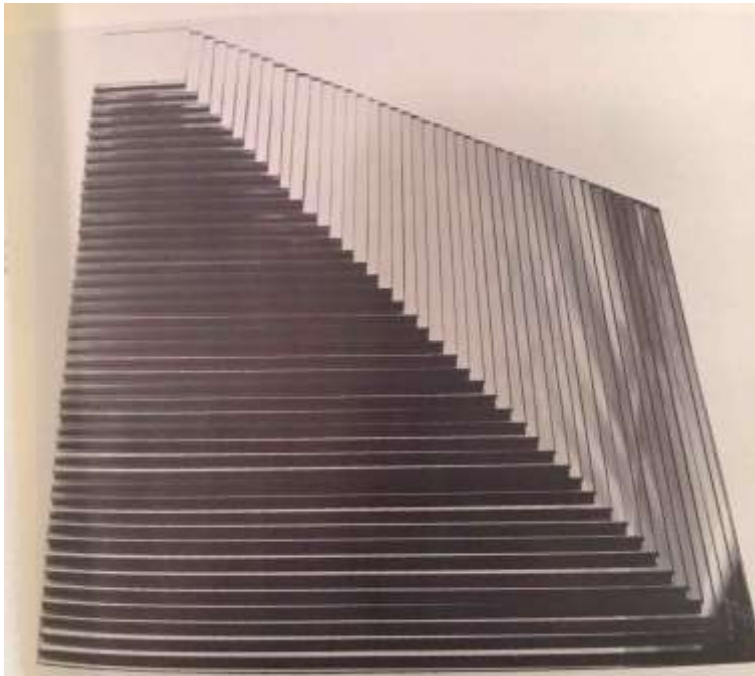
Robert Smithson

1966 (all)

Mirrors

Fig. above: 14 x 14 x 6 in. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Schwartz

Fig. below: 10 ¼ x 25 ½ x 25 ½ in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York



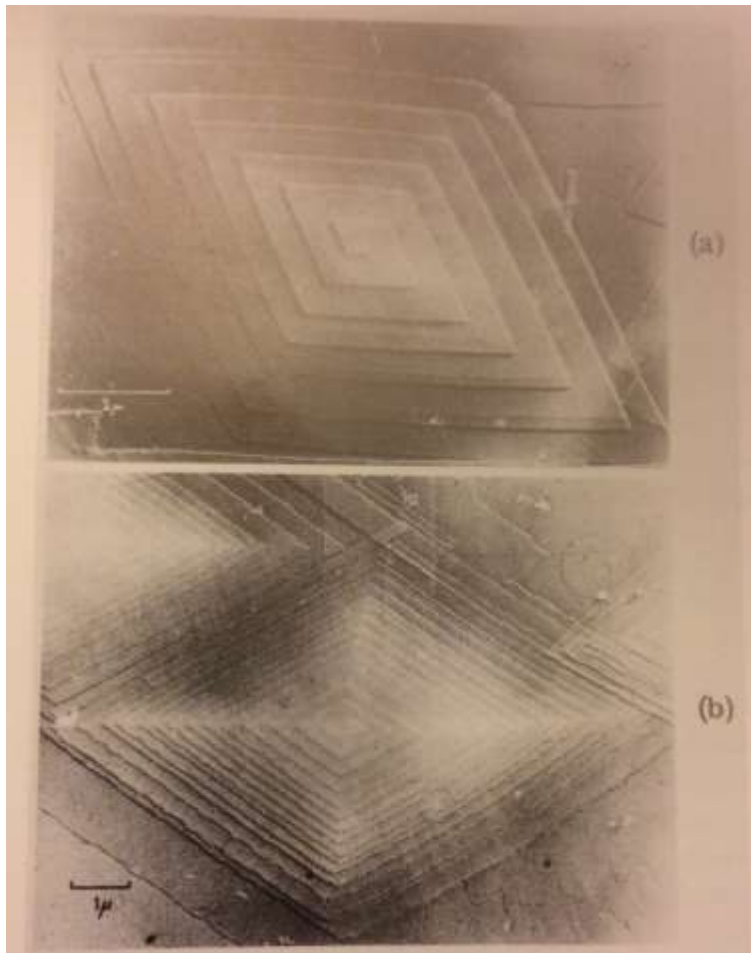


Figure 18:

Electron Microscope photos by L.M. Dawson of the paraffin hydrocarbon heptane showing (a) spiral layer formation from a single screw dislocation and (b) concentric layer growth originating from a pair of opposite dislocations.

Charles Bunn's *Crystals: Their Role in Nature and Science* (New York: Academic Press, 1964)



Figure 19:

Smithson's childhood museum of reptiles, fossils, and artifacts, in the basement of his New Jersey home, c. 1948. Photograph courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson.



Figure 20:

The Laguna Colorada Lake
Southwest Potosí Department, Bolivia



Figure 21:

Spiral Jetty

Robert Smithson

Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah

April 1970

Mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water

Coil 1500 ft. long and 15 ft. wide



Figure 22:

Broken Circle / Spiral Hill

Robert Smithson

Emmen, Holland

Summer 1971

Broken Circle: Green water, white and yellow sand, earth

Diameter: 140 ft. Canal: approx. 12 ft. wide

Depth of quarry lake; 10-15 ft.

Spiral Hill: earth, black topsoil, white sand

Base: approx. 75 ft.

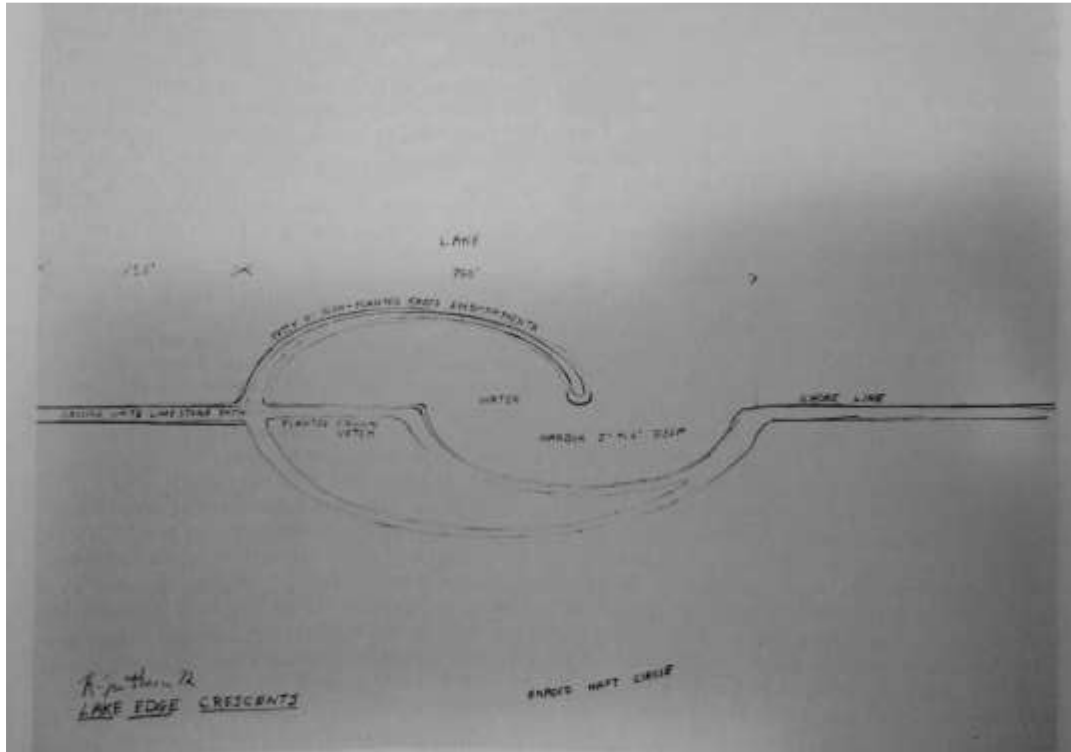


Figure 23:

Lake Edge Crescents – Egypt Valley, Ohio (Hanna Coal Reclamation Project) (never built)

Robert Smithson

October 1972

Water, earth, limestone, crown vetch

Diameter: 750 ft.

Jetty: 4 ft. high

Water: 5 ft. deep.



Figure 24:

Bingham Copper Mining Pit—Utah Reclamation Project (never built)

Robert Smithson

1973

Wax, pencil, tape, plastic overlay, map

20 x 30 ½ in.

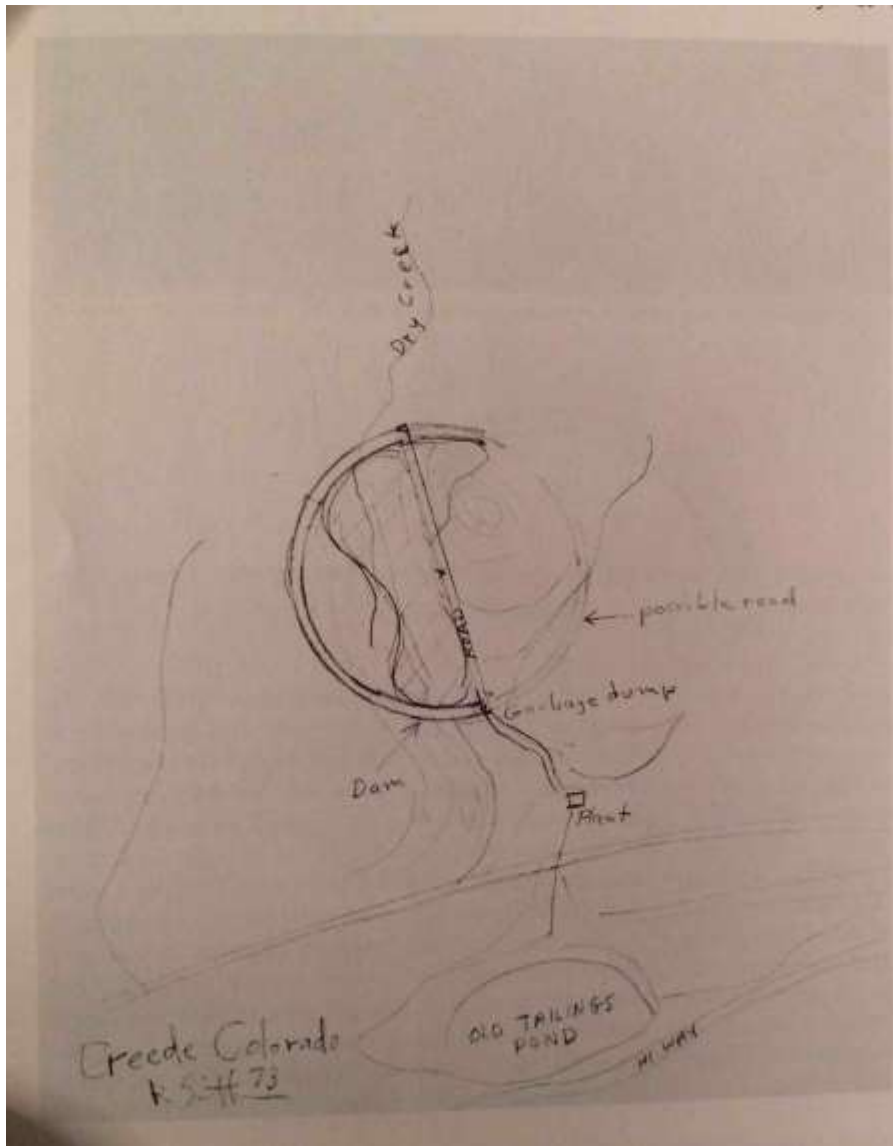


Figure 25:

Tailing Pond, Creede, Colorado (never built)

Robert Smithson

1973

Pencil

12 x 9 in.

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