

**The Archive, the Collection, the Museum
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Fall 2005
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Final Paper**

Aligning the Artist as Collector

We have spoken about many different collections in class and many types of collectors, from the personal to the institutional, from the single purpose, to the conflicting, paradoxical or schizophrenic. We have come to understand that people themselves can be seen as a collection of qualities and natures, just as a collection can be made up of numerous people with their multiple qualities and natures. We've seen professional and amateur collectors, official and unofficial collections, collections considered high art and collections meant to go against any notions of high art. We've spoken briefly about the filmmaker as collector (with Monteriero, Varda, Baldwin and Morrison). Though we have not talked about the artist as collector, I would like to venture some thoughts on this now. I am posing the artist as collector against the idea of the collector who collects finished art work. I am interested not in the post production status of the art object as it is treated in the hoarding, display, and exchange value circuitry of the art market. But rather I am interested in the artist as the individual who works with the raw elements of creation, and how that person defines and maintains order in the time of pre-production and production.

One could argue that any artist and/or filmmaker is a collector simply by the nature of what they do, assembling parts into a whole, which is to be viewed as a final product to be displayed and ideally purchased. This argument needs to be expanded and further defined as the role of art in a larger media saturated system (that also includes digital entertainment, moving images, fashion, and technology) is growing more and more indistinct. This growing indistinction will inevitably have an effect on how historic art

objects are further treated, perceived and collected. However for now I am interested in looking at how the needs and motives of an artist define what collecting means to them in the production and pre-production states of art making, and not in the post-production circuitry of the art market.

Robert Smithson's Collecting

I will discuss the artist Robert Smithson and how he is related to certain ideas and theories of collecting that we have discussed this semester. I feel that he was aware of the phenomena of collecting and that he exercised his understanding through his art-making tactics and processes. He was a keen participant in the New York art world and was unique in his ability to interface equally well with other artists and gallerists at a time when certain art making practices were intentionally going against the established gallery order.

Smithson was aligned with the movements of minimalism, conceptualism, and land art as they developed in America in the 1960s and 70s. Smithson synthesized and exemplified many of the concerns and issues that were present in those movements. He created physical art objects, he wrote theoretical and critical texts, and he had a strong sense of the graphic, using drawings, photography and film to illustrate his ideas. He understood the validity of an idea or theory being equal to an art object which had previously in art history been given priority in value. He shared the conceptualists' desire to dematerialize the art object and accepted the non-traditional methods of production, location and display of the art. Smithson blended the conceptualists' desire to dematerialize the art object with the earth or land artist's intent to drive art out of the galleries and museums, where it had been traditionally held and reified.

Smithson saw the historical and ordering forces of technological determinism in Western civilization skeptically. This is not to say that he was a Luddite, or anti-technology. Aware of certain modernist's attempts at totalizing history through narrative, Smithson moved away from this totalizing by accepting and posing alternate histories and narratives, or alternate patterns of arranging and collecting these histories and narratives. Smithson appreciated natural geological and astrological formations. He saw patterns of aggregation and diffusion interacting in various systems, in natural matter as well as in ideas and language and social behavior. Smithson was an archeologist and archivist, though his methods of drawing relations, ordering, and collecting if only to disperse again could be considered unorthodox. Smithson used science fiction tropes of prehistoric or futuristic civilizations to suggest alternate ways of placing or interpreting history. The fracture becomes a leitmotif for Smithson on all levels or registers: be it of the immaterial in time or ideas, or be it in the material, in physical objects, in photography and film, or in text. History, and also time, for Smithson were just other materials to be manipulated as the stuff of his art-making process. Smithson's sensitivity to the qualities of materiality and of time, link him to both the Conceptualists and Earth artists, but make him akin to certain structuralist filmmakers as well. Smithson's willingness to mix and match modernist and post-modernist tendencies, is what still makes him influential on artists coming of age in his wake. Cornelia Butler condenses it in her essay "A Lurid Present: Smithson's Legacy on Post-Studio Art" when she says: "The extraordinary permission inherited by the two generations of artists emerging after Smithson is twofold: art as an open-ended activity encompassing, indeed even privileging, discursivity; and art as a mobile practice whose porosity allows for writing, documentation, video and photography, and the subjective culling of artifacts and information."¹ This last "permission" she cites is proof of a cataloging tendency (both

¹ Cornelia Butler, "A Lurid Present: Smithson's Legacy on Post-Studio Art", in *Robert Smithson, The*

burden and strategy perhaps) innately lodged in the strata of the post-Smithson artistic landscape.

Excursus on archival theory

When we speak of Smithson as collector we mean that as an artist he collects his materials to produce a piece, and these pieces which accumulate as part of his history of artistic production can be seen to have meaning in relation to each other both with and without Smithson speaking about the works and their relations. Smithson's sense of the collection, his grand unifying theory of collections is that there is no grand unifying theory, but rather multiple, temporary, and varying strategies of collecting. Smithson's Ur-model for this is an organic one in that there may be multiple ordering systems depending on the local forces and elements of a given sampling area. One can also see his ideas in light of archival theory which allows for two basic ordering structures: choosing to arrange material by strict historical provenance and chronological order regardless of type of material, or by an imposed order, such as by subject matter or type of material. Another parallel could be drawn to the database and the ordering structure, and how a collection of material and its relations is to be reflected in the catalog or database that points to the content. One could also pose this as a form and content issue: should a catalog attempt to mirror the form of the material that it points to, or should the catalog be a grid to be laid over the chaos of the collection and to bring order to it? Horizontally controlled databases or catalogs are the former, presenting information in a hierarchical categorization of general to specific, with specific topics (or subject headings) arranged at the head or top of the catalog. This is considered a tree-like structure. On the other hand, the vertical arrangement aligns content without a leading hierarchy and stresses networked, faceted and circulating access points. This is

considered a rhizome structure. This vertical structuring sees relations changing and in flux rather than fixed as they are in the horizontal example. This vertical structuring may seem to border on the completely relative, but can also be thought of as operating over a period of time, in that a localized area may be more influential an ordering principle depending on how material is to be considered and accessed at a particular point in time which will change and later be the focus of another localized area. As much as Smithson acknowledges and uses ordering principles to present the material and immaterial (time, physical space, and ideas) he also understands and accepts the impossibility of any total, overall ordering principle. To that end, he propagates art that poses systems against each other to show the possibilities, but also the limits of attempting ordering amidst forces, objects and ideas that may ultimately be irreducible to one force, object or idea. Noting sameness and difference, accepting a certain degree of incompatibility, Smithson acknowledges the ordering principles and the material to be ordered. He acknowledges the form and content, the edges and the center of a collection. By doing so he suggests that perhaps collecting and arranging is not an either/or proposition, that the leading interpretation does not come from understanding one over the other (form over content, or vice versa) but that an interpretation of a collection comes from understanding the admixture of forces (even if contradictory) that effect a collection. This collection theory is evidenced most clearly in his essay on the endeavor of viewing and valuing film, "A Cinematic Atopia". Though it was written in 1971, the work describes a very real and current state, for the film and video archivist, of being overwhelmed by the glut moving images. How to put meaning to this, Smithson asks. Prefiguring his answer he already seems to know that given the amount of material one ordering principle could be as good as another: "Not one order but many orders clash with one another, as do "facts" in an obsolete encyclopedia. . . .Where is the coherence? The

logic threatens to wander out of control.”² Film has a particular relevance here, as the chosen exemplary media to catalog, and the one that perhaps by its own production and reception, represents in our cultural consciousness, a catalog of who we are. But he continues:

In this cinematic atopia orders and groupings have a way of proliferating outside their original structure or meaning. There is nothing more tentative than an established order. What we take to be the most concrete or solid often turns into a concatenation of the unexpected. Any order can be reordered. What seems to be without order, often turns out to be highly ordered. By isolating the most unstable thing, we can arrive at some kind of coherence, at least for a while. The simple rectangle of the movie screen contains the flux, no matter how many different orders one presents. But no sooner have we fixed the order in our mind than it dissolves into limbo.³

With this we wonder if the parts to Smithson’s whole threaten to overwhelm him, and whether there isn’t a deeper complex within him that, though conflicted, allows for this chaos to reside with, if not pervade over, order.

Two ideas that Smithson used in his work can further help us to see his artistic production related to our discussions of film and collections. One is Smithson’s concept of the site/nonsite, and the other is Smithson’s over-riding conviction in the principle of entropy.

Site/Non-site

The making of the piece really involves collecting—Robert Smithson⁴

Coming out of theories of time and materiality Smithson invented the proposition of the site/non-site. The site/nonsite existed for Smithson as both a concept and a material attempt to describe or represent the concept, and can be looked at as a collection strategy. On the physical and material level, Smithson would venture out of the urban,

² Robert Smithson, “A Cinematic Atopia”, in *Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam. University of California Press: London. 1996. P 140.

³ Ibid

⁴ In *Fragments of an Interview with P.A. Norvell* (1969), in *Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam. University of California Press: London. 1996. P 193.

through the suburban to the rural and industrial zones to explore and navigate landscapes. Sometimes he would prepare and research the areas with maps and readings, sometimes the journey would be more indeterminate. The act of surveying the landscape was an important part of work for Smithson, being in the place, and experiencing locality. He would record the experience in text, in photos, and in some instances, super8 and 16mm film. This journey out into the fields was a real time discovery of the work, just as an 18th or 19th century painter would prepare a canvas, oils, varnishes and sketches as steps toward the final painting. Assessment of a site and what it might tell about our complicated modern relations to nature and industry was one of Smithson's main intents. But this assessment could only truly happen at the site. To look at a photo, read a description or hear a telling of the journey was a different experience. For Smithson this dislocation in experience of time and place was key for the non-site. Smithson would collect and bring back material from the site to be arranged and displayed in the gallery. This gallery installation would include some two dimensional representation of the site, in photos and maps, as well as actual samples of the site (usually rocks) in metal bins which in and of themselves echoed minimalist sculptural qualities. The photos and maps would usually have some graphical correlative between the two dimensional and three dimensional. For instance a map and photo might be cut or cropped in a wedge shape, and the metal bins might also be arranged in a similar wedge shape. This installation method was meant to do two things. One it aimed to refer outward and away from the commercial zone represented by the gallery space. And two, this installation method was an attempt to encourage the viewer to locate and map a place that was not immediately physically or entirely mentally available to them. Via this strategy of trying to compose a whole from the disparate parts, Smithson constantly pitted disorder against a possible order. He referred to this opposition as a dialectic, where the thesis could be equated to the actual experience of a

place in that place. The antithesis could be equated to the representation of that site. The synthesis of this dialectic is the resulting limbo in a space and time other than the original—usually that of viewing in the gallery— of trying to situate oneself in multiple time space locations. But unlike a traditional Hegelian or Marxist dialectic where a thesis and the antithesis come to a balanced and integrated synthesis, Smithson's dialectic of the site and nonsite produced a skewed or off-kilter synthesis, in which both qualities and quantities of the opposing components (thesis and antithesis, or differing places and times) coexist, not necessarily integrated or at rest but potentially still in opposition and discord.

I would suggest that this phenomenon of dislocation that he was trying to elicit is linked to the basic suspension of disbelief that we take for granted when watching any narrative film, or some non-fiction films wherein we ignore the fact that a film is not a continuity, but a series of disynchronous parts linked together to give the sense of a true linearity. Practicing this cognitive exercise of considering the form and structure at the same time as the content of the art work again aligns Smithson with other structuralist filmmakers, including Hollis Frampton. Both the Structuralists and the Conceptualists were interested in the process of a work, and how the process or means to an end could be more informative than purely aesthetic ends.

Entropy

Unlike Buckminster Fuller, I'm interested in collaborating with entropy. Someday I would like to compile all the different entropies. All the classifications would lose their grids.—Robert Smithson⁵

Leading from Frampton and his film that we saw, *Nostalgia*, we could now talk about Smithson's ideas of entropy. Perhaps they both shared similar ideas about entropy's role in art making, and thereby in collecting. Frampton's unfinished, ambitious multi-part last

⁵ From an interview with Gregoire Muller in *Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam. University of California Press: London. 1996. p 256-257.

work, *Magellan* is his attempt at a grand unifying summation of film. Over several films included in the Magellan cycle, Frampton struggled to give a form to his content and construct an ordering strategy that would give the proper coherence to this collection of films, and, at the same time reflect in its structuring, film's complicated relation to history, and vice versa. Frampton himself knew this project could become too unwieldy and lose itself to its surroundings instead of synthesizing and making a statement about those surroundings (*which could also be said about some collections*). Frampton says in a post screening talk in 1978:

...my worries aren't the same as they would be if I were for instance writing a 1,000 page novel. I worry about other things, like, for instance, am I totally haywire? Seriously. Am I going to finish the goddamn thing? You see, this is a serious problem. if you don't finish an epic poem it is more or less magnificent ruin. the Canterbury Tales. . .The Cantos...This (meaning the Magellan project) I probably have got to finish or I have blown the whole thing.⁶

The differences between Frampton and Smithson are that Smithson may have seen the “*magnificent ruin*” of an unfinished work to be statement enough about the relation between the content of a work and it's context. Entropy is variously defined as the lessening output versus the greater input of energy into a system, or the tendency towards disorder and eventual stasis in a system.

We could look at the practice of collecting –where items are charged with various meanings or values—as a similar system with which the collector struggles to maintain an internal order and allow for legibility of the system. Or, the collector could be using the collection as an accumulated attempt to stake a claim or maintain an external order in the larger system. These systems within systems intrigued both Smithson and Frampton, but where Frampton sought to control his systems, Smithson was comfortable in allowing some systems to decay at their own natural rates. Some very physical and

⁶ Henry Hills and David Gerstein, “St Hollis, part 2”, transcript of post-screening discussion, Cinemnews 3/4: September 1978, p. 15

rudimentary examples of this are Smithson's pours and spills in which organic based substances such as glue, or asphalt are delivered over a decline and allowed to run down in their own duration. Another example would be his 1970 project on the campus of Kent State University, *Partially Buried Woodshed*, in which earth was piled on top of an abandoned structure until the center support beam began to crack at which point it was left alone. It was not until 1983 that the Woodshed collapsed. A simple idea, the Woodshed piece accreted several meanings as the shootings at Kent State and issues of university stewardship of an unwanted art work complicated and drew attention to the fact of its presence and non presence over the years. A similar long term change of effect on a piece is also occurring to Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, however the forces interacting with it are geological and meteorological rather than political and social.

Smithson and film

For Smithson, filmmaking was another way to exhibit and enact the disjunction of time and space in a concentrated time based experience that was different than viewing an artwork in a gallery. Smithson made five films, with the assistance of his wife, Nancy Holt, and their friend Bob Fiore, and had plans to make others before his premature death in 1974. The films are: *Mono Lake*, 1968/2004, *Rundown*, 1969, *Swamp* 1969, *East Coast-West Coast*, 1969, and *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. Of the five films, *Rundown*, *East Coast-West Coast* and *Swamp* are more straight forward documentaries of events, whereas *Mono Lake* and *Spiral Jetty* are more constructed and nuanced in their editing strategies. Smithson also delivered a slide presentation in 1969 reporting on a trip to Mexico he made and the description of an abandoned structure, the Hotel Palenque. The slide lecture stands as another form of delayed presence and suspended durational perception of a location. Smithson had mixed feelings about cinema. He was well versed in classical Hollywood films, contemporary European films, as well as a slew of B films.

He took the film production process seriously enough to make a considerable amount of sketches and treatments for the films he did finish and those he did not get to complete. He also proposed an imaginative and yet archivally impractical screening room in an underground cavern which would show only one film, the film of the screening room's making.

What I would like to do is build a cinema in a cave or an abandoned mine, and film the process of its construction. That film would be the only film shown in the cave. the projections booth would be made out of crude timbers, the screen carved out of a rock wall and painted white, the seats could be boulders. It would be a truly "underground" cinema.⁷

The idea that one would have to travel physically beyond the normal limits of our neighborhood theaters, and then to see only one film, may seem preposterous on one level, but conceptually fits into the basic tenets of land art and similar projects of duration and site specificity that the DIA museum, for example, upholds today.

The Spiral Jetty

Smithson may not have realized his cavern cinema, but he did accomplish the film about the making of his large earth work, the *Spiral Jetty*, located in Utah's Great Salt Lake, in 1971. In this way the film is the catalog of a single event which has a permanence beyond its making, a permanence linked to longer durations such as that of the lifetime of film, and the lifetime of rocks. Smithson overlays on top of this scientific and mythological tropes of eternity and prehistory, to situate the *Spiral Jetty* as a singular durational event linked and equal to the solar system, continental tectonics and the era of dinosaurs. Yet as much as this is hyperbole, Smithson also reduces the *Spiral Jetty* to a grain of sand, or rather a crystal of salt. Knowing that the earth work will be covered by water in the future and in a constant state of change, Smithson's film is not an homage to a art work but rather an acknowledgement of art's puny status among the larger scale

² Robert Smithson, "A Cinematic Atopia", in *Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam. University of California Press: London. 1996. P 142.

and process of the world. Scale is one theme that Smithson manipulates throughout the *Spiral Jetty* film. The film is comprised of roughly three parts, the mapping or locating of the site, the making of the Jetty, and then a mostly aerial review of the site. Smithson uses a variety of footage both moving and still images, as we could expect from the lapidary filmmaker, in a collage method intended to locate the viewer in a specific time place (that of the geographical location of the Spiral Jetty) and simultaneously dislocate the viewer from that time place. The viewer receives a similar “here, but not” and “there, but not” experience as they do when viewing Smithson’s site/nonsite pieces for the gallery. The diageitics of the film constrict and expand. The film opens with a close up of the sun and roaring flairs and bursts from its surface. At this point Smithson announces the name of the work and its location clearly flaunting the linking of audio to image referentiality necessary to maintain traditional filmic narrative. Close ups of maps coincide with Smithson’s uninflected narration which consists of quotes from geological surveys, historical texts about the Lake, and an excerpt from Samuel Beckett. Location audio sometimes matches the picture location and other times lingers as other images are replaced or displace the original location image. Other audio tracks include a respirator or Scuba tank, a Geiger counter, and an early electronic music score which even in its dated style sounds contemporary in a 35 year old film. Abrupt patches of silence on the audio track are also used, and a cutting between the roar of the machines used to make the *Spiral Jetty* and scenes of gentle undisturbed lapping of water along the bank of the lake contribute to this constriction and expansion of time-space diageitics. The next to last sequence of aerial review of the site from a helicopter uses the sun’s reflection against the lake water to create in-camera light flairs and spherical halations which overlay themselves on the Spiral structure. This flying sequence builds in speed and angle to disorient the viewer perhaps mimicking the effect of some ancient sun ritual. Then Smithson recites another text describing the experience of sunstroke and

how certain ancient people believed it to be a mystical experience. After a dizzying pass over the inner tip of the Spiral Smithson abruptly cuts to and holds on the final image of the film for several seconds. The last image has no audio but shows an enlarged photo of the Spiral Jetty tacked to the wall of the editing room: a compression of conflicting places, a larger exterior space within the place of the making of the film about the larger exterior space. The site/nonsite ringed with elements of its making, film viewers, rewinds and edit rolls of film. The final shot declares that at last this is only a film, only a representation of that other site, and suggests that both are susceptible to the same material decay and impermanence over time.