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Art

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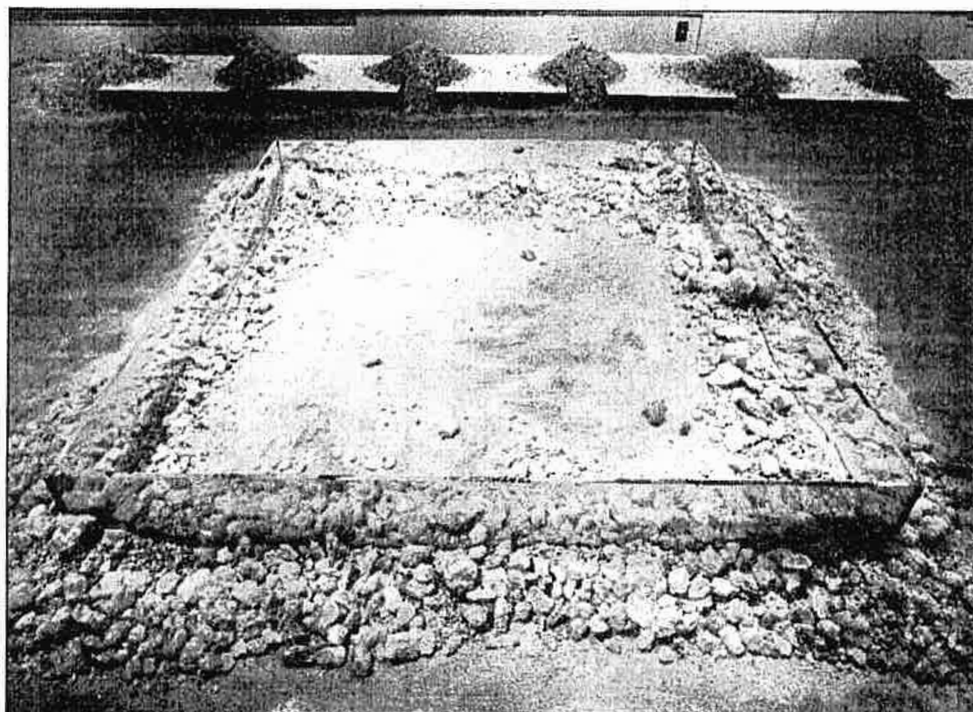

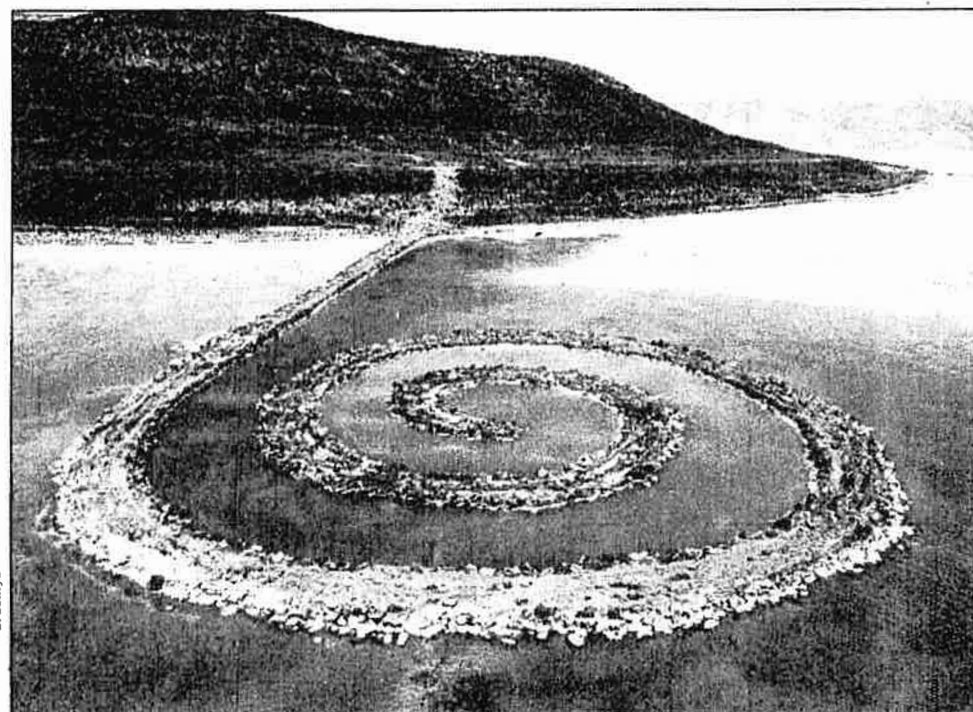

B. Godfryd

Robert Smithson's "Earth Art," left, and "Spiral Jetty," right—"Smithson himself remarked on the 'rhythm between containment and scattering.' "

GALLERY VIEW

JOHN RUSSELL

The Fertile Imagination Of Robert Smithson

ITHACA, N.Y.

With every year that passes, the accidental death of Robert Smithson in 1973 seems an even greater calamity. Smithson had a natural largeness of spirit. He had big ideas and could carry them through. (He also had engaging quirks and could blow them up like many-colored balloons.) He could talk, he could write, and he could make. And he could communicate his enthusiasm to others. How should we regard him, if not as a lost leader and a source of energy too suddenly cut off?

Anyone who feels that way will want to see "Robert Smithson: Sculpture," an exhibition that will be on view at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art on the campus of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, through Dec. 21. (As Ithaca in December has a climate that some may think less than perfect, it should be added that the show will travel to Minneapolis; Chicago; La Jolla, Calif.; Austin, Tex., and finally, in February 1982, to the Whitney Museum in New York City.) The show includes sculptures, drawings and movies. It has been organized by Robert Hobbs, curator of contemporary art at the Johnson Museum, and it looks very well indeed in the museum, which was designed by I.M. Pei and has a spectacular view over the 40-mile stretch of Cayuga Lake.

Cayuga Lake is integral to the Smithson show. North of the Cornell campus and not far from the lake is the Cayuga salt mine. When Smithson was invited to Cornell in 1968 to discuss what part he could play in the museum's forthcoming show of "Earth Art," his imagination was caught at once by the underground salt mine. The year in question was one in which he produced a whole slew of sculptures that he called "Non-Sites." Whereas his huge environmental sculptures of the early 1970's (above all the "Spiral Jetty" in the Great Salt Lake and the "Amarillo Ramp" in Texas) cannot be imagined except in the sites that they have transformed, the "Non-Sites" were portable exhibition pieces.

They were not, however, like any sculptures that people had seen before. The traditional procedure is for a sculptor to choose a fine piece of stone, take it to his studio, and turn it into something else. (Anyone who has visited the famous quarries in Carrara, Italy, will remember the contrast between the initial nobility of the marble and the hideous uses to which it is usually put.) Robert Smithson chose his stone (to be precise, his ore) as carefully as anyone else. But instead of bending it to his will, he let it go free. Instead of carving it into some semblance of ideal form, isolating it from its natural state, and putting it on a plinth, he packed it in crates the way other people pack grapefruit. "Instead of putting a work of art on some land, some land is put into the work of art" was how he himself put it.

Several of these "Non-Sites" are in the Cornell show. Seen together, they make it clear that what might be read as random activity was in point of fact a search for the inmost identity of the materials in question. Smithson worked with the facts of geology the way other artists work with more traditional materials. He drew with them. He painted with them. He made sculpture with them. He planned and painted the containers (or bins) to bring out their specific qualities.

There was in all this an esthetic element. Only Smithson would have thought of playing off lava against obsidian in such a way that the peculiar deadness of the one would set off the demonic sparkle of the other. There was also a redemptive element. Only Smithson would have worked with broken concrete—one of the most dreary of imaginable substances—and made poetry out of it. But there was also the belief that any one event in history can be as interesting as any other one event.

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In working with traprock from the Palisades-Edgewater area in New Jersey, for instance, Smithson bore in mind that this was not material that had taken the slow boat from prehistory. It bore traces of a trolley system between the Edgewater-125th Street Ferry and the Palisades Amusement Park that had been abolished as recently as 1938. The materials he most liked to contain were the ones that had a compound history. The materials used for the container were important, too: painted wood was played off against slate, for instance, and painted aluminium against the Palisades traprock.

In the case of the Cayuga salt mine, Smithson reversed his usual procedure. The salt, which we might expect to see contained in the bin, was spread over the floor, while sheets of mirror became the contained. The salt took on the positive, dominant role, in other words. It was important to Smithson, as Professor Hobbs points out, that "the amorphous rock salt has a regular molecular consistency, while that of the glass is amorphous." And Smithson himself remarked on the "rhythm between containment and scattering" which in this case was reversed. What was scattered and fragmented (the salt) turned out to have the upper hand over what we take to be strict and finite (the glass).

This piece has been reconstructed for the Cornell show, and it turns out to have acquired a look of history—not least in Smithson's references to Anton Ehrenzweig's then-new and most remarkable book, "The Hidden Order of Art." But since when has it been a fault to be attentive to the best new ideas of the day? Moreover the piece epitomizes what Smithson saw as the natural opposition between the rectangle, with its neat and preordained quality, and the tendency of nature to push out in a disorderly way "towards the fringes, the broken, the entropic."

The show is full of ideas. Not all of them find glamorous expression. Smithson did not draw to make "nice drawings," for instance. He drew to make himself clear, and if that meant scrawling all over the paper he went ahead and did it. But it is clear from the earlier sculptures in the show that if he wanted to make his work look pretty he was perfectly capable of doing it. In one way and another, Robert Smithson changed the course of art, and there is today a whole gamut of sculpture, from Richard Serra across to Carl Andre, that owes something to his dynamic and too-brief presence. ■