

# MOUSSE

## *The Artist in Earnest: Robert Smithson*

by Rose Vickers (August 27, 2020)



Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, *East Coast/West Coast* (still), 1969  
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Indifference is no counterpoint to difference, at least in common parlance. While the term “difference” suggests a divergence of any two things, be they objects, thoughts, cultures, or landscapes, “indifference” invokes something entirely else. It is a peculiar emotion to associate with art practice and grates against many of our ingrained ideas about artists. Following the Romantic tradition, and depending on whom you are talking to, “indifference” manifests only in art: as received from a god; as bound deeply to an artist’s personal identity; as removed from the market; and/or as an expression of cynicism, perhaps to denote a psychological or political attitude. Though debate over questions of representational difference are quite frequent in the art world, an attitude of artistic indifference is elusive, and therefore intriguing.

In her article “Indifferent and Detached: Modernism and the Aesthetic Affect” (2018), scholar of literary modernism Alys Moody proposes attitudinal indifference as a “meta-modernist” paradigm, arguing that scholars coming after the tradition of modernism have embraced indifference and detachment as a dominant mode. This, in Moody’s view, can be set against pre-modern—or Romantic—approaches to

earnestness, emotion, site-related participation, and creative investment. Moody's scholarship, which is equally relevant to current academic practice, raises the specter of earnestness in literature and the arts as one ingredient in a cocktail of potential aesthetic options. Where Moody examines instances of indifference in classical art and literature as a counterpoint to earnestness, the two are cast, in her writing, as mutually exclusive—even dichotomous—modes of creative practice. She outlines disjunctures between pre-modern ways of seeing emotional participation and creativity, attending specifically to how these forms have shifted under the guise of postmodern literature and art. Moody describes “the relationship between aesthetics and affect, which tend to understand art in post-Romantic terms, as an expression or outpouring of emotion [where] . . . [modernist and postmodernist] indifference, too, might be understood as something lived, embodied, and embedded—less a retreat from emotion than an attempt to fashion a new emotion, particular to art.”<sup>1</sup>

These are postmodern practices that nevertheless tend toward modernism (harboring modernism's modalities), and Moody's argument is specific to them. She also brackets it all with a strong caveat. Indifference *can be* the antithesis of earnestness (but not difference). More usually, both indifference and earnestness appear in art under complex guises that pose the idea of dichotomy, then complicate it.<sup>2</sup> Apparent detachment on the part of an artist or writer is akin to an alternative mode; it springs not from apathy so much as from a sentiment that parallels Romantic art's deep and abiding interest in worldly emotion. Artistic seriousness is held to be implicit, if not direct—expressed from another vantage point.

Looking at performative artworks complicates an interpretation of artistic indifference, because for an artist to perform does not necessarily require a state of earnestness. An artist might perform indifference without *being* indifferent. To US land artist Robert Smithson, “difference” could feasibly have meant the place contrasts of the United States versus Mexico, which he observed on a road trip in 1969, just a few years before his fatal plane crash over the Texas desert. The deadpan lecture-performance *Hotel Palenque* (1969/1972), made on that journey, is a study in indifference (or something that, vocally, sounds indifferent). The artwork comprises thirty-one chromogenic slide transparencies—photographed in Mexico's Palenque—and an audiotaped lecture by Smithson, presented to a group of architecture students at the University of Utah. Captured in 1969, it remained dormant for three years before manifesting as the lecture in 1972, and is currently held in the New York archives of the Guggenheim Museum. The slides depict an atypical hotel.

The reasons for Smithson's excursion to Mexico are unchronicled, yet there seems to have been intent behind it—perhaps a search for new markets, or fatigue with New York's urbanism and an attraction to the Yucatán jungle. Coming off the back of an earthwork staged in Rome—the well-received *Asphalt Rundown* (1969)—it's probable that Smithson was compelled by the visual possibilities of Land art outside the United States. In Mexico he rented a car and studied a tourist guide of the Yucatán peninsula. He was accompanied by his gallerist, Virginia Dwan, and his wife, Nancy Holt. He and Holt had previously collaborated, and she was a well-regarded earthwork artist in her own right.

Smithson's performance of indifference (delivered ad hoc, casual, or even stoned) in *Hotel Palenque* might have conveyed his ideas about any number of things. He was, at the time, deploying visual devices to make points on entropy—a theme running through his artworks long before encountering Mexico. The *Hotel Palenque* performance feels circuitous, self-referential. It might be institutional critique about the nature of performance itself. It could be a comment on mirrors—a mirror of creative performativity staged on vague, indeterminate ground. The register is unusual for an artist who seemed

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to be always working, in control. But yet again, this kind of paradox underscores his entire oeuvre, to the extent that it can even be considered a unifying feature.

Smithson delivered voice “deliberately” in two artworks made prior to *Hotel Palenque*, both recorded in 1969, the same year he sourced material for his *Hotel Palenque* lecture and slideshow. These two—a video work with voice-over, *Swamp*, and the audiovisual experiment *East Coast, West Coast*—both take the form of an apparently improvised dialogue between Smithson and Holt. They chronologically enact a noticeable vocal indifference, as Smithson’s voice traverses a great deal of liminal space, from downtown Manhattan, to the suburbs of New Jersey, before finally coming to rest at Palenque, the former Maya city-state in southern Mexico. I often think about voice as a renewed area of theoretical exploration in art practice, and here are three well-known works with voice components by, arguably, the world’s most famous Land artist.



Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, *Swamp* (still), 1971  
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Looking at the years from 1969 to 1972, it seems that voice was on Smithson’s mind. It appears in these iterations as an artistic tool that obliquely engages with social, political, economic, and cultural phenomena. Smithson and Holt’s strategic deployment of voice amplifies stereotypes of otherness and difference in *East Coast, West Coast* (which parodies a New York and Los Angeles art milieu) and reflects the couple’s concern with nature and ecology in *Swamp* (as Smithson instructs Holt to advance, perilously, into a dense thicket). The defining quality uniting the three—*Hotel Palenque, Swamp, and East Coast, West Coast*—is Smithson’s noticeable vocal flatness.

As the final manifestation of his Mexican excursion, Smithson’s seeming indifference appears to be communicated not just visually, but also vocally. In the sense of (probably) being an artwork—but also, more independently, a lecture—*Hotel Palenque* can be seen to take its form from Smithson’s voice. As a medium it is composed, in large part, of Smithson’s voice. One might say that mainly, it *is* Smithson’s

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voice. Though tempting to read the artist's deadpan delivery as parody or satire (as an opaque form it could equally be irony, or even actual indifference), the artwork's obscurity at least allows space for interpretation. It's possible that *Hotel Palenque* communicates through a range of devices, including speech, although Smithson's voice has not yet been academically examined in this way.

In linguistics, phonaesthesia (sound symbolism) holds that meaning can be transmitted via vocal phonemes, and that this is so even in isolation from other indicators of semiotic meaning. The most famous example is the bouba/kiki effect, first documented in a 1929 study by the German psychologist Wolfgang Köhler, who found a surprising pattern: non-random mapping of object shapes and speech sounds carries across cultures. In other words, some sounds match shapes. The study was repeated decades later by neuroscientists Vilayanur S. Ramachandran and Edward M. Hubbard, who found that both US undergraduate students and native Tamil speakers of India would attribute the sound "bouba" to a curved, blobby shape, and the sound "kiki" to a sharp, angular one.

Of course, to say that a performance is indifferent goes beyond assigning meaning to any one particular sound, or the simple pairing of a sound to a shape. Lectures are long (an extended string of words), and also visual. I bring in these references as a starting point for thinking about artists' voices, as they remain foundational to how sound and shape semiotize.

I spoke with Lisa Le Feuvre, director of the Holt/Smithson Foundation in Santa Fe, about the possibility of Smithson's voice as an aesthetic tool. Was it intention or coincidence that voice seemed to have been delivered in a particular way—performed or altered—in each of the three artworks he staged or drafted in 1969? Le Feuvre explained to me:

Smithson described his writings as artworks—he was vehement about that. As an example: *Spiral Jetty* comprises an essay (1972), an earthwork (1970), a film (1970), and a suite of drawings (ca. 1970). They are all individual works and exist, I like to think, as a community—they have individual identities, and come together productively with the harmonies and frictions of any gathering. In fact, I would also argue that the journey to the artwork *Spiral Jetty*—be it literal, imagined, desired, or even rejected—is a part of this constellation of artworks. The wonderful slipperiness of Smithson means you can never quite point to exactly where the work is. His lectures were artworks, too. In *Hotel Palenque*, he chose not to talk about the Mayan ruins of Palenque that drew tourists to the area. Instead he presented an eccentrically built hotel that was rising into ruin. Smithson was always more interested in the fringes of a location than its center.

*Hotel Palenque* is formed of the slides and a tape recording of his voice from the lecture: to experience the artwork is to undergo a kind of time travel. Smithson's voice in *Hotel Palenque* offers an undoing of the authority of the travel guide, and of the stability of architecture. By some reports his students found this lecture incredibly frustrating: it was not a show and tell. Smithson talks with his indifferent, bored vocality. Some of the listeners thought he was half asleep, or stoned. The year 1972 was nearly half a century ago, and travel was less common then than it is now. A slideshow to friends on your return from holidays was part of the travel convention. To show the once-traveled-to-elsewhere from home is a kind of "nonsite," to use Smithson's term. The truth is, other people's stories of their holidays are usually pretty boring. What do you do? Feign interest to be polite? Perhaps that tone of voice Smithson used is also a parody of the holiday story, and of the desire for somewhere other than where you are that is

being told to others who never went there, and who are thinking of their own elsewheres rather than yours.<sup>3</sup>

Baffling, vexing, and confusing, *Hotel Palenque* is a highly atypical academic lecture in that it stands as a script and photographic series in its own right. Utterly difficult to categorize, and inhabiting an awkward, quasi-cynical space, it is the Teflon of artist-performances: nothing sticks. Its low-stakes difficulties frustrate the lecture form, and equally exploit it.

Though not traits we typically associate with lectures or performances, indifference and disengagement are immediately registered in a speaker's voice. "We use more range the more emotionally engaged we are" says accent expert Erik Singer. "That's something you can apply across language groups."<sup>4</sup> This is despite performers (including academic ones) sometimes moderating their natural speaking voices on stage. Equally, a flat vocality (as a more consistent vocal range) can accompany theatrical character. However subtle, voice has a bearing on whether we can legitimately categorize *Hotel Palenque* as a performative artwork versus an artwork in the form of a university lecture, or a university lecture per se.

To complicate matters, Smithson had performed before, and arguably performed himself. The first of the 1969 artworks, *East Coast, West Coast*, documents his ad-lib exchange with Holt.<sup>5</sup> It is a staged conversation bordering very slightly on the absurd, grounded in extant geographic stereotypes. Smithson plays the laid-back Californian; Holt takes on an acerbic, scholarly persona as his intellectual, sophisticated New York counterpart. Smithson's voice conveys a good deal of his character—he nails the West Coast drawl, describing the Cali-artist lifestyle. Holt and Smithson's mirroring, their relationality, occurs not only in diametrically opposing dialogue but also in their clothes. She wears a modest white collared shirt, along with a cardigan and dark vest, while he appears in a black turtleneck (a second, white turtleneck peeps out underneath)—a chiaroscuro effect, in double. Not much goes on in the background other than the couple's friends: the performance artist Joan Jonas and new media pioneer Peter Campus. Though the thrust is clearly to explore 1960s US art world stereotypes, it's unclear whether occasional interjections by Jonas, perched on a table behind, are part of the performance (it is also ambiguous whether Smithson and Holt are dressed in character).<sup>6</sup>

The interplay between the two is difficult to pin down: part performance, or perhaps, in a small way, the gendered dynamic of a young marriage. Of the two, it is more puzzling whether Smithson is performing. Certainly the artwork was "staged" as a performance (more so than *Hotel Palenque*), but the character Smithson assumes appears so close to his natural persona as to be almost indistinguishable.

The multiple performative possibilities of self-identity in *East Coast, West Coast* and *Hotel Palenque* are confusing. They return to the idea of what a voice *is*, in an artwork, and specifically what it might have meant for Smithson as an artist standing back from direct political action (although still engaging with activist peers) in 1969. The range of meanings, the possibilities of performance, swirl to form some kind of compelling point, it is one that remains difficult to fix precisely. Though *Hotel Palenque's* categorization as performance matters for construing Smithson's lecture as a more or less valid artistic exercise, there is a serious point, one on entropy, that stands autonomously.<sup>7</sup> Performance (or lack thereof) does not negate that argument, and ultimately, its opacity could be one reason for the lecture's legacy—as Smithson's flat delivery (and aversion to the didactic) opens space for interpretation. The final reading may belong to Singer, who says, "Teaching, or giving a lecture, is a kind of performance no matter what. There is something very performative about it," because "you have to have a character, which is not to say it is not necessarily a conscious construction."<sup>8</sup>

Trying to dismantle these works reminds me that they were, in various ways, ahead of their time—preempting the proclivity for irony and self-consciousness that would later come to dominate the art world. In a humble, slacker-ish way, they discard a presumption of earnestness as an artistic trait. Instead there are uncomfortable bits, aspects that don't quite work, reluctance as it rubs against ambition. It takes a huge amount of nerve to pull it off.

1. Alys Moody, "Indifferent and Detached: Modernism and the Aesthetic Affect," *Modernism/Modernity* 3, no. 4 (December 11, 2018): <https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0075>.
2. For example, Moody argues that where indifference is apparent, it is historically unlikely that an artist is emotionally uninvested in their own work (that is, the emotion of an artist's work as it relates to art and literature, and the emotional world beyond those mediums).
3. Our interview took place over FaceTime on December 18, 2018, with Le Feuvre in New Mexico and me in New York.
4. Erik Singer, interview with the author, February 26, 2020.
5. *East Coast, West Coast* was Holt and Smithson's first collaborative experiment with video. It is a twenty-two-minute recording on black-and-white 35mm film. The recorded conversation veers from bicycle riding, the financial aspects of art, nature worship, Hells Angels, etymology, creative process, conceptual art, and acid to pragmatism, mysticism, philosophy, pantheism, and spiritualism.
6. Perhaps not, as Smithson is wearing aviator-style glasses of the same type he wore in many press and everyday photographs.
7. Smithson's interest in entropy has been covered in Jennifer L. Roberts, "Landscapes of Indifference: Robert Smithson and John Lloyd Stephens in Yucatan," *Art Bulletin* 82, no. 3 (September 2000): 544–67; Rebecca Ann Butterfield, "Colonizing the Past: Archaic References and the Archaeological Paradigm in Contemporary American Earth Art" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1998).
8. Erik Singer, interview with the author, February 26, 2020.

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