

# The New York Times

## *Sculpture From the Earth, but Never Limited by It*

by Michael Kimmelman (June 24, 2005)

WHEN Robert Smithson died at 35, in a plane crash in 1973, overseeing one of his earthworks, he gave the art world its own Buddy Holly. Who knows whether he now is, as the excellent touring retrospective freshly arrived at the Whitney advertises, the most influential postwar American artist. But he certainly fascinates a slew of young art worldlings.

It would be heartening if this were attributable to some longing for a less money-besotted day, one that pressed art to go beyond the upholstered confines of institutions and commerce. The New York art scene of Smithson's time was grittier, angrier and more open to all sorts of splendid, hare-brained, homegrown schemes, of which Smithson had plenty. They helped to shove Minimalism, Conceptualism and Pop in various messy new directions. In an era of crabbed imagination and short-term profiteering, the sheer chutzpah of artists like Smithson is instructive.

He was shrewd, caustic, competitive and ingenious. During a career that effectively lasted not even a decade, he anointed himself the spokesman -- and in the process made himself an inevitable target -- for a generation of fellow chest-thumping innovators and troublemakers who were about as amenable to herding as alley cats. Smithson's goal both for radical art and for himself depended on the dissemination of ideas via the printed page, through writings, photographs and film. Native touch, as this show demonstrates without actually diminishing him, was never his forte.

The turning point came in the mid-60's when he proposed making art for an airport in Texas, involving mirrors, cameras and other things he imagined putting out in fields, to be seen from airplanes, opening up sculpture to vast scale, the outdoors and aerial views. A few years later came "Spiral Jetty," 6,650 tons of black basalt and earth in the shape of a 1,500-foot-long coil or fiddlehead, projecting into the remote shallows of Rozel Point on the northeast shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, where the water is rose red from the brine shrimp and algae. There is a photograph of him in the show's catalog, young, pockmarked, bespectacled and shaggy, with sketchpad on lap, gazing raptly toward "Jetty," as if into the great beyond, like one of Caspar David Friedrich's romantic loners on a misty mountaintop.

For Smithson, the allusions in his work (he completed "Jetty" in 1970) were to lost worlds and imaginary cosmologies. He was as enamored of Borges and Blake as he was of horror movies and the dinosaur displays at the American Museum of Natural History. He read the science fiction of J.G. Ballard (he likened the red Salt Lake to a Martian sea), and he was inspired by geological formations and religious rituals (brought up Roman Catholic, he went through a phase of making religious art), of which pilgrimage was an aspect.

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The popular allure of "Jetty" was enhanced by Smithson's writings about it, part poetry, part hokum, and by the 16-millimeter color movie he shot of its construction: trucks and loaders lumbering like barosaurs across a prehistoric panorama to his narrative. Cunning and prescient, he grasped that in the modern age a sculpture in the middle of nowhere could have a life separate from itself, through reproductions and other simulacra, which is how most people would see the work. This gap between the real world and its translation into a gallery via photographs, maps or whatever became an abiding theme.

The film of "Spiral Jetty" occupies a room in the exhibition. I stopped by to remind myself of the end of it, an aerial view when the sun, reflected in the lens of the movie camera, makes "Jetty" evaporate in an epiphany of light. It's treacly and compelling. To watch the film is also to be reminded how heavy machinery and raw materials made Smithson's hamfistedness more or less irrelevant, distancing him from the physical task of making sculpture, but paradoxically making that art more distinctly his own.

"Jetty" (it's actually smaller than you might think from looking at pictures) acts as a kind of sign outdoors, pointing visitors to the surroundings -- moving attention from center to periphery, where there is not just nature to look at but also rusting cars and a decrepit pier. An ancient sea and industrial ruin, "the site," as Smithson wrote, was "evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes." His fascination was with the grandeur of such industrial decay, from which he came.

He was born in New Jersey in 1938 and commuted as a teenager to classes at the Art Students League. (He never went to college.) New Jersey became the periphery of his universe, New York the center.

One day in 1967, he hopped a bus from the big city to stroll around his hometown, Passaic, sporting a Kodak Instamatic and snapping highway abutments and drainage pipes. He published his deadpan travelog in Artforum as "The Monuments of Passaic," opening up a world of artistic inquiry -- and introducing, with comedic élan, a fresh mythology -- to the dystopian sprawl across the Hudson River from Manhattan.

"I am convinced," he wrote, "that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the nonhistorical past; it is in yesterday's newspapers, in the jejune advertisements of science fiction movies, in the false mirror of our rejected dreams. Time turns metaphors into things, and stacks them up in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs."

This was his rejoinder to the formal insularity of Minimalism, but it was also a way of reclaiming, as if through a back door, the quasi-spiritual ambitions of Abstract Expressionism. And it was more than that.

Smithson carted slag and dirt from quarries and dumps back to New York to stack them in steel bins, which he called Non-sites, sculptural evidence of his eccentric archaeology, Minimalist in design, accompanied by maps and photographs -- the periphery literally brought to the center as visionary evidence of a kind of new Whitmanesque poetry. These clunky sculptures were both dumbly matter of fact and abstract. Their subject was vernacular America, but not transcribed from comic books into zippy Pop paintings. They were a different sort of Pop art.

After the Non-sites came the "Mirror Displacements," sometimes placed outside: more assemblages of dirt, sand, shells and salt, now piled to support mirrors (prop art) in geometric arrangements that multiplied and refracted the piles, dematerializing the materials. Like much of Smithson's work, the displacements were a good idea that did not automatically look great. That said, they have never looked

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better than they do at the Whitney, where they almost make Smithson into an elegant formalist and subtle colorist.

The retrospective, organized by Eugenie Tsai, a Smithson expert, and in New York after much ballyhooed stops in Los Angeles and Dallas, consists mostly of drawings, photographs and films. Smithson didn't really make that many sculptures, not ones that could fit into a museum, anyway. This is the first full-scale overview of him in the country. His legacy endures in prospective plans and endless, indulgent prose. There is, consequently, a documentary aspect to much of the show. But it is compelling testimony to an exuberance cut drastically short.

Some years ago, Ms. Tsai put together an eye-opening display of early work by Smithson at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University. Early work -- what Smithson did from his teenage days at the Art Students League, starting in 1955, until he had his breakthrough in 1964 -- is what's especially fascinating here, too.

You see in a teenage woodcut the early mixing of text and image; in collages from the early 60's, the arrangement of shapes with a distinct center and periphery. Throughout these years are all manner of roiling obsessions, conveyed via homoerotic drawings and clippings from beefcake magazines, expressionistic religious paintings, and oddball sculptural contraptions that are attempts at Duchampian Pop.

I was struck by an early collage of "St. John in the Desert," a reproduction of a painting cut out of a book in which the Holy Spirit is transferred as if by magnetic attraction to the saint's upraised finger; the reproduction is surrounded by further clippings of diagrams from electrical manuals. "I'm trying to achieve a sublime nausea by using the debris of science and making it superstitious," Smithson wrote. "Religion is getting so rational that I moved into science because it seems to be the only thing left that's religious."

There are also drawings of quarries whose scars can bring to mind stigmata (entropic landscapes as apocalypse), and cartoonish sketches of figures turned into trees, like the mythic Daphne, connecting the body to nature.

All of these themes seem to be funneled into the first mature sculptures: mirrored steel boxes and gaudily painted metal wall reliefs: dizzy abstractions, like psychedelic Minimalism, sometimes with zigzag flashing lights (like the electric charge in the St. John). The mirrors call into play the rooms and the people in the rooms, who can disappear if they look for themselves in the mirrored boxes. Angled, these mirrors deflect direct sight, creating a visual sleight of hand, a kaleidoscopic universe of refracted space.

Refraction, or maybe it is repression. If you look for it, you may detect a campy undercurrent to some of Smithson's work. It's hard not to read into his mature art a simmering stew of sexual and spiritual infatuations, boiled down to blunt, geometric forms. Call it ecstasy, or anger, in a box. Smithson's sculptures are allusive fragments of something larger, whether what's larger is a site in New Jersey or an emotion.

One of the more eloquent rooms in the show contains black and white sculptures that he devised in the mid-60's, about the time of the airport project. These are crystalline shapes, repeated forms in series, from large to small, or vice versa, and they also include a kind of stepped sculpture, like an elongated

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staircase in sharply receding perspective, titled "Pointless Vanishing Point." The work invites your movement across and around it, to see how space shifts. Like all of Smithson's sculpture, it orchestrates sight. And as I said, it is a fragment. That perspective goes on forever -- from site to mind, from something we can see to something we imagine.

Smithson's works are little pieces of infinity, his widow, the artist Nancy Holt, has said. Which is not a bad way to look at them.

Robert Smithson, organized by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, remains at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, (212) 570-3676, through Oct. 16.