

# THE NEW YORKER

## *The Source of Robert Smithson's Spiral*

by Robert Sullivan (June 18, 2014)



Robert Smithson in 1969. Photograph by Jack Robinson/Hulton Archive/Getty.

In 1959, Robert Smithson, a young abstract painter who would eventually become known as a pioneer of land art, went back to his boyhood home, in New Jersey, to visit his pediatrician. Smithson was twenty-four years old and living in New York City at the time but knew the route out of Manhattan and across the garbage-covered Jersey Meadows by heart. His parents had driven him regularly to the Museum of Natural History, in New York, as a child, and, during high school, he often left early to take classes at the Art Students League, taking a bus back and forth to New Jersey, past smoldering dumps, through fields of rubble-strewn reeds. “Those landscapes embedded themselves in my consciousness at a very early date,” Smithson once said.

Smithson had skipped college for the Army, where he worked as an artist on a base in Georgia, and, after his discharge, had driven across the country several times, hiking and camping, and investigating geology. By the time he was returning to his hometown to see the retired family doctor, he had shown his paintings in New York galleries but was about to take a profound new direction with his art, one that would take him out of the studio, and out of the gallery and the museum itself. His break from painting would eventually lead him to construct—with the help of bulldozers and pilots and his wife and

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collaborator, the late Nancy Holt—“Spiral Jetty,” his best-known project, completed in 1970. It’s a fifteen-hundred-foot-long, fifteen-foot-wide spiral of stone that extends out into the Great Salt Lake, in Utah. According to the catalogue for an exhibition at the Montclair Art Museum, entitled “Robert Smithson’s New Jersey,” it was Smithson’s visit to his pediatrician that helped steer him toward that new work, and began a new chapter for American landscape art. His pediatrician was William Carlos Williams.

The ailing poet’s home was on Ridge Road, in Rutherford, only a few blocks from the house where Smithson grew up before moving to nearby Clifton, and both places are on the edge of a bowl-like swamp, known then as the Hackensack Meadows and now as the Meadowlands. If Smithson had driven to see Williams in Rutherford, or had taken the bus from the Port Authority Bus Terminal, he would have travelled beneath the Hudson River and up onto the Lincoln Tunnel’s sky-climbing elevated ramp—a trip that Smithson details in “The Monuments of Passaic,” an essay that ran in *Artforum* in December of 1967.

The essay was illustrated with Smithson’s black-and-white snapshots of the industrial Passaic River, and the piece reads like Smithson’s version of Thomas Cole’s “The Course of Empire,” written and illustrated rather than painted, and infused with a vague sense of futuristic dystopia set in construction rubble. “Across the river, in Rutherford, one could hear the faint voice of a P.A. system and the weak cheers of a crowd at a football game,” he observes. Smithson asks, “Has Passaic replaced Rome as the Eternal City?”

When Smithson arrived at Williams’s home, the older poet had recently suffered several strokes but had just published the final volume of “Paterson,” his epic set in and around the Great Falls of the Passaic, the raging seventy-seven-foot-high cataract in Paterson. In an essay written by the exhibition’s guest curator, Phyllis Tuchman, we learn that Smithson looked at paintings by Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth, and Ben Shahn in Williams’s home, and that, according to Smithson’s friends, the artist took to heart Williams’s axiom “No ideas, but in things.” In 1972, shortly before Smithson died, he would describe “The Monuments of Passaic” in terms of “Paterson.” “In a way, this article that I wrote on Passaic could be conceived of as a kind of appendix to William Carlos Williams’s poem *Paterson*,” he said.

The far-ranging influence of “Spiral Jetty” and “The Monuments of Passaic” is easy to follow, not just in terms of landscape art but in the fields of architecture and urban planning. Maya Lin’s “Storm King Wavefield,” on the Hudson River at the Storm King Art Center, has “Spiral Jetty” in its genetics. James Corner and Field Operations’s design for the High Line, the reclamation of the old elevated train line on Manhattan’s West Side, could also be an appendix of the tour offered in “The Monuments of Passaic,” although nowadays, given what might be called a fetishization of ruins, industrial artifacts are less likely to be disused spaces; they are increasingly likely to be private and expensive.

Of course, Smithson wasn’t the only person taking art out the studio in 1968. The artist Richard Long took one of his first walks that year, and Long was a student of Anthony Caro, the sculptor who worked with industrial ruins and was an influence on Smithson, too. Claes Oldenburg dug a grave-shaped ditch in Central Park, and Sol LeWitt buried a cube in Holland. All of these artists were featured in the Dwan Gallery’s fall 1968 show, entitled “Earthworks.”

But Smithson was the driving philosophical voice in large part because of the strength and inventiveness of his writing: essays that almost seemed to parody art writing but came in the shape of the experimentation that he promoted. Often they were travel narratives about art in the landscape. In

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1966, when Sol LeWitt wrote a letter to Virginia Dwan, who had organized “Earthworks,” LeWitt praised Smithson’s essays: “I think it is the first good explanation of the sort of art I’m involved with, even though I don’t buy everything he says.” The explanation is maybe more praised today, or at least more people are buying. In 2012, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, a Los Angeles-based research and education group that operates along the lines of a university of Robert Smithson, offered a tour of the Meadowlands, entitled “Eulogy to Robert Smithson.” Last fall, the artist Tacita Dean showed a film entitled “JG” at the Firth Gallery, in London, inspired by her correspondence with British author J.G. Ballard, regarding connections between Ballard’s work and “Spiral Jetty.”

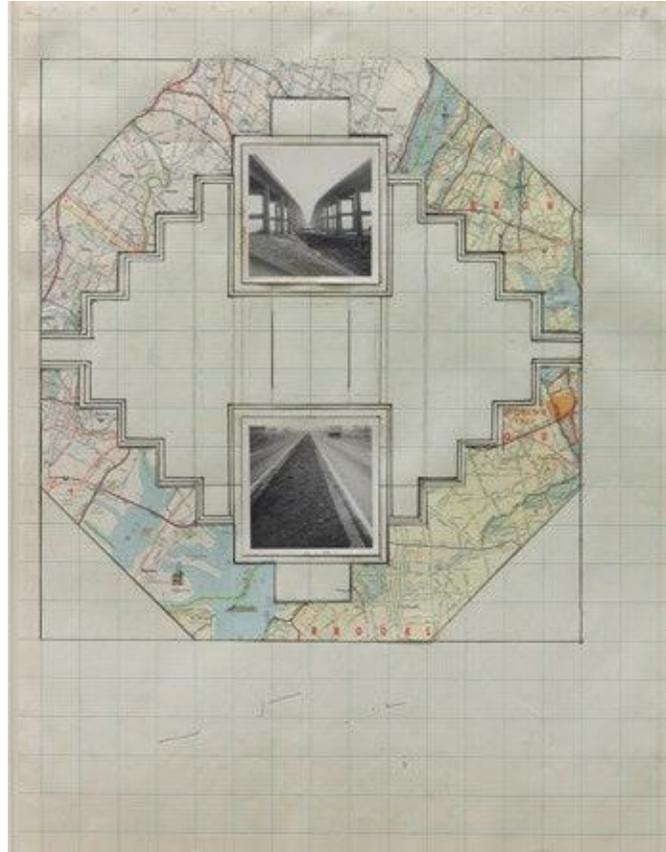
Where the spiral in “Spiral Jetty” came from—what *things* inspired it—has always been a kind of riddle for students of Smithson’s work. Smithson the list-maker left lots of hints—Constantin Brancusi’s spiral-ish portrait of James Joyce, a line from Vladimir Nabokov’s “Speak, Memory” (“The spiral is a spiritualized circle”)—but this exhibit offers a new and constructive insight. Tuchman makes the point that Smithson’s intense exploration of his home landscape between 1967 and 1968, involving actual excavations on more than one occasion, brought Smithson to the productive last seven years of his life.

This might seem like just more hopeful boosterism by a Garden State that exists in the shadow of a Big Apple, except that it’s true.

Above all, Smithson was a mapmaker; his uncle worked for Hagstrom Maps\*\*, \*\* and the young Smithson was in charge of navigation when his parents took him on natural-history adventures across the country in the family car (Smithson’s older brother died of leukemia at the age of nine). In retrospect, the first New Jersey-centered pieces in 1967 map out his plans with startling clarity. Like his Passaic essay, they are manifestos. “Untitled [Map on Mirror-Passaic, New Jersey]” is seven successively smaller copies of a U.S. Geologic Survey map of the Passaic River, stacked like a small tabletop pyramid. Through each map, the Passaic is represented by a mirror twisting through its eponymous city and neighboring towns—a shining silver sliver that manages to reorient the viewer to the (in life) forgotten waterway, to represent it anew in its own exact factness.

“New Jersey, New York” is a Marsden Hartley-like collage built around the two black-and-white photos that center it: a low-angled view of the “War of the Worlds”-esque legs of the swamp-crossing state highway, and another of a road across the garbage lands of Secaucus and East Rutherford. The photos are set inside the crystalline-shaped, cut-out center of a Greater New York road map. What’s cut away on the map is the Meadowlands. The backdrop to it all is a series of pencil-drawn one-inch squares, which, Tuchman argues, are echoes of the Lincoln Tunnel’s square-tiled walls. Smithson described them in “The Crystal Land,” an essay he wrote for *Harper’s Bazaar* about a trip that he and Holt took with Julie and Donald Judd: “The countless cream colored tiles on the wall sped by, until a sign announcing New York broke the tiles’ order.”

“New York, New Jersey” is the ultimate key to the Utah spiral, in other words. “When he built ‘Spiral Jetty,’ Robert Smithson practically came full circle,” Tuchman writes. The helix built on the side of the Great Salt Lake is a version of the dazzlingly engineered elevated roadway that spun cars out of the tunnel on its Jersey side. Art-history books don’t mention the I-495 tunnel ramp, but it is mentioned in rush-hour traffic reports and Port Authority traffic announcements, and it is referred to as the Helix, a Greek word meaning “twisted” or “spiral.”



"New Jersey, New York" (1967). © Estate of Robert Smithson/VAGA, New York, NY.  
 Courtesy of Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

Transit geeks will recognize the Helix as the most western vestige of the now-dead Cross Manhattan Expressway, a highway that, at one point, was planned to run *through* the Empire State Building: it was to be elevated and would connect the Midtown Tunnel with the Helix. That road died, in the fifties. The idea of the city as a World's Fair Futurama exhibit died then, too. Smithson's late work helps the viewer step out of short-term human time, and into the slower time of ecology and geology. Adopting this long view, we can watch as, on either side of the Helix, the city continues to empty during the seventies and then in the nineties slowly refill, like a tide pool with an incoming tide—as wealth and population begin their still-ongoing shift from the suburbs to the city. Meanwhile, Passaic stayed a ruin, as did so many of the small cities of New York and New Jersey and America, a Detroit-like problem that is everywhere. What becomes clear in Smithson Time is that we still don't have a vision for them.

A place that changed but in many ways stayed the same since Smithson traversed it on his way from Manhattan to William Carlos Williams's house is the Meadowlands. Despite all that has happened since Smithson died, in a small plane crash scoping out "Amarillo Ranch"—a project later completed by Richard Serra and Nancy Holt, who died this past spring—the Meadowlands is still an edge, partly because of failed projects, partly because of local interest in the vast wetland as something like a non-site. Even today, projects get mired in the still-giant swamp—see American Dream, slated to be the largest mall in the world ("the ultimate location for global retail brands looking to debut their flagship concepts"), and only now on again after being primarily off again since it was announced, in 2011, a reboot of a previous failed giant-mall project.

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I went to the press conference announcing American Dream that spring, back when the hope was supposed to open it in time for this past Super Bowl. I remember driving down the old Paterson Plank Road and then heading out to a construction trailer that seemed like it was in the middle of nowhere. I suddenly realized that I was within yards of where Smithson and Holt filmed “Swamp,” the film featured in the last room of the Montclair Art Museum’s exhibit. It’s still a quiet and beautiful showstopper: one person leads another blind through what might be called the mire. There is no end to it, really, and no beginning, really, that being the point.

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