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RISING SIGN: RETURN OF SPIRAL JETTY

by Jean-Pierre Criqui (Summer 1994)
[Translated from French by Diana C. Stoll]

SPIRAL JETTY IS BACK, and it doesn't look like itself. Robert Smithson's epochal earthwork of 1970 no longer has the appearance preserved for us in photographs and on film shot before it disappeared beneath the surface of Utah's Great Salt Lake. Submerged for twenty-odd years, its aspect has changed: the stones are completely covered with crystallized salt and the dirt between them has eroded so that at first glance the once solid promontory evokes a discontinuous ribbon of frost. Now that a falling water level has exposed it again, the jetty's appearance brings it closer to the fusion with site that Smithson envisioned:

I thought of making an island with the help of boats and barges, but in the end I would let the site determine what I would build. . . . This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concept, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence.¹

Today the jetty—its spiral form already a reminder of the way the crystals in the lake grow—seems composed of nothing but salt and water; it does belong a little more to its site, and in this respect, though it has changed, it is as much Smithson's work as ever.

Interested in diverse kinds of entropy, Smithson invoked notions of “de-architecture,” or “ruins in reverse,” in his writings, and often played a kind of game with the idea of disappearance. *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970, realized just before *Spiral Jetty*. is a good example: the work—it is adequately described by its title—involves the partial interment of a modest architectural structure, a process that turns out to give the building an undeniable allegorical power (in the manner of the “buried architecture” projects imagined by Étienne-Louis Boullée at the end the 18th century). Equally striking, Smithson considered building an underground *Spiral Jetty* Museum near the work's site. The entrance was to be down a spiral staircase, itself buried within a pile of rocks in the form of a truncated pyramid. Inside, surrounded by stone walls encrusted with salt crystals, one would be able to attend screenings of the film *Spiral Jetty*.

The jetty's vicissitudes, then—disappearance, reappearance, transformation—are clearly relevant to the nature of the work as it was conceived by its (co-) author. Any attempt to restore or to reconstruct it would run counter to its concept. Should the *Spiral Jetty* someday disappear forever, what would take its place beneath its title would be no less powerful: an entire network of signs, visible or not—a text, a

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film, photographs, drawings, and numerous subjective elaborations, including those of the author of this article, who has never been to Utah yet would say, without hesitation, that *Spiral Jetty* is among his favorite works of art.

NOTES

1. Robert Smithson. "The Spiral Jetty." 1971, in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt. New York: at the University Press, 1979. p. 111.