

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

24 WEST 57TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10019

Robert Smithson

Abstract Cartography

24 June–20 August 2021



Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, *Mono Lake* (still) (1968/2004), 8 mm film and Instamatic slides, color, sound, 19 min. 54 sec. © Holt/Smithson Foundation, Licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York; Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix.

FOREWORD

It is my great pleasure to present for the first time in our New York gallery a solo exhibition by Robert Smithson (1938–73). This presentation holds great personal and historical significance to us as it builds on the relationship I started with Smithson over five decades ago, in 1967, when I invited him to contribute to Multiples, Inc. — the art publishing company I co-founded in 1965. Bob made for us two versions of his *Untitled (Mirror Stratum)*, the first multiples he ever created. I immediately felt a deep connection to his work and I am honored in 2021, following two critically acclaimed exhibitions held last year in Paris and London in exceptional circumstances, to be able to present in New York a special selection of his drawings, sculptures, architectural schemes, films, and photographs. Titled *Abstract Cartography*, the exhibition spans the years 1966 to 1971, a particularly significant period for Smithson, when his ideas for earthworks were beginning to form. It is my sincere hope this presentation will convey Smithson's commitment to the idea that art is a necessary and urgent part of society, and that the relationship it establishes between certain aspects of his practice and projects will further enrich the dialogue surrounding his work while continuing to inspire artists and thinkers into the future. ■

—Marian Goodman

INTRODUCTION

Marian Goodman Gallery New York and Holt/Smithson Foundation are pleased to announce the first exhibition of Robert Smithson at the New York gallery which will run from 24 June to 20 August 2021.

Abstract Cartography focuses on a crucial five-year period in Robert Smithson's development: 1966 to 1971, a time when his "inklings of earthworks" began. This careful selection of artworks traces Smithson's radical rethinking of what art could be and where it could be found.

In 1966 Smithson was part of a symposium at Yale University, where he discussed the idea of the city as a crystalline network. In the audience was a representative of the architectural consulting firm Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton who was working on a proposal for a new Texas regional airport between Dallas and Fort Worth. Right after the

talk, Smithson was invited to join the team in "trying to figure out what an airport is. I invented this job for myself as artist-consultant." He set about the task by studying maps, surveys, reports, specifications, and construction models. Smithson saw the potential airport as a universe resting "on a firmament of statistics" and he considered the vast terminal site as an exploratory landscape.

An autodidact, Smithson's interests in travel, cartography, geology, architectural ruins, prehistory, philosophy, science fiction, popular culture and language spiral through his work. From his landmark earthworks to his 'quasi-minimalist' sculptures, Nonsites, writings, proposals, collages, detailed drawings, and ecologically charged earthworks, Smithson's ideas are profoundly important for our times. By exploring the conceptual and physical boundaries of landscape, Smithson raised questions about our place in the world; heightening the relevance of these issues as the dangers of global warming move ever

closer. *Abstract Cartography* demonstrates the prescient and present importance of Robert Smithson's ideas.

In the South Gallery, *Abstract Cartography* brings together a laboratory of sculptural thinking: sculptures exploring crystal geometry and distorted perspective, and key works showing Smithson's exploratory research into what an airport might be. He was interested in possibilities of artists collaborating with other disciplines, and he was committed to art being a necessary and urgent part of society. His proposals for airport buildings echo his geometrical sculptures that, in turn, were informed by the potential of aerial art. His plan was to place earthworks at the edges of the terminal complex that would be viewable from the air and appear two-dimensional when looked at from an ascending aircraft. The earthworks would be broadcast live to television screens installed in a museum at the center of the terminal, an invitation to watch time pass while waiting. Airports have no centers; they are tran-

sitory zones between places. For Smithson, the fringes were locations for fertile thought—and far more interesting than the center.

Although the scheme did not come to fruition, seeing art from the air consolidated a new interest in mapping, perspective, and scale for Smithson. If one can travel high enough, our planet can be seen in its completeness, an island in the ocean of the universe. Smithson cut existing maps into fragments, shifted their projections, layered them, altered scale using photostats of progressive sizes, and explored the distorting perspectives of longitude and latitude. In the sculpture for *Shift* (1967) these projections are applied to three-dimensions, leading to a collapsed system and a slide into entropy, charted in careful drawings.

Abstract Cartography presents in the North Gallery a wall of maps, a collection of conceptual islands and continents, and the film *Mono Lake* (1968/2004), made with Nancy Holt.

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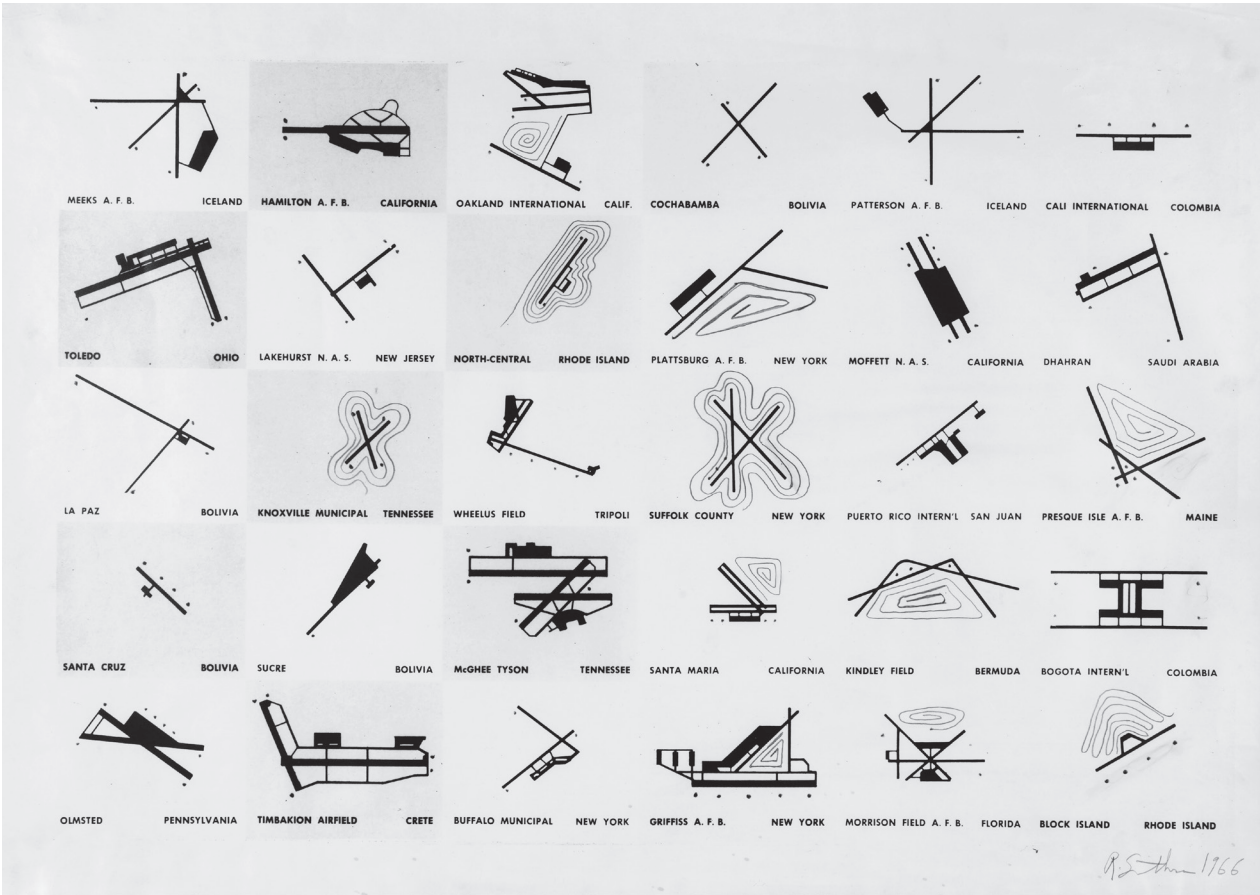
INTRODUCTION
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Mono Lake is concerned with a journey and with a destination. It documents Smithson, Holt, and Michael Heizer as the three artists explore one of the oldest lakes in North America on July 28, 1968. They are seen on the road, rustling maps and consulting rockhounding guides, while Smithson gathers the site material for *Mono Lake Nonsite* (*Cinders Near Black Point*) (1969). Smithson's Nonsites are three-dimensional maps of matter. He described them as "indoor earthworks": they bring material from site into the museum—the Nonsite—with the travel between the two points creating "a vast metaphor" that is as abstract as the maps we use to locate ourselves. *Abstract Cartography* includes a rarely seen photowork for the 1968-69 *Double Nonsite, California and Nevada*.

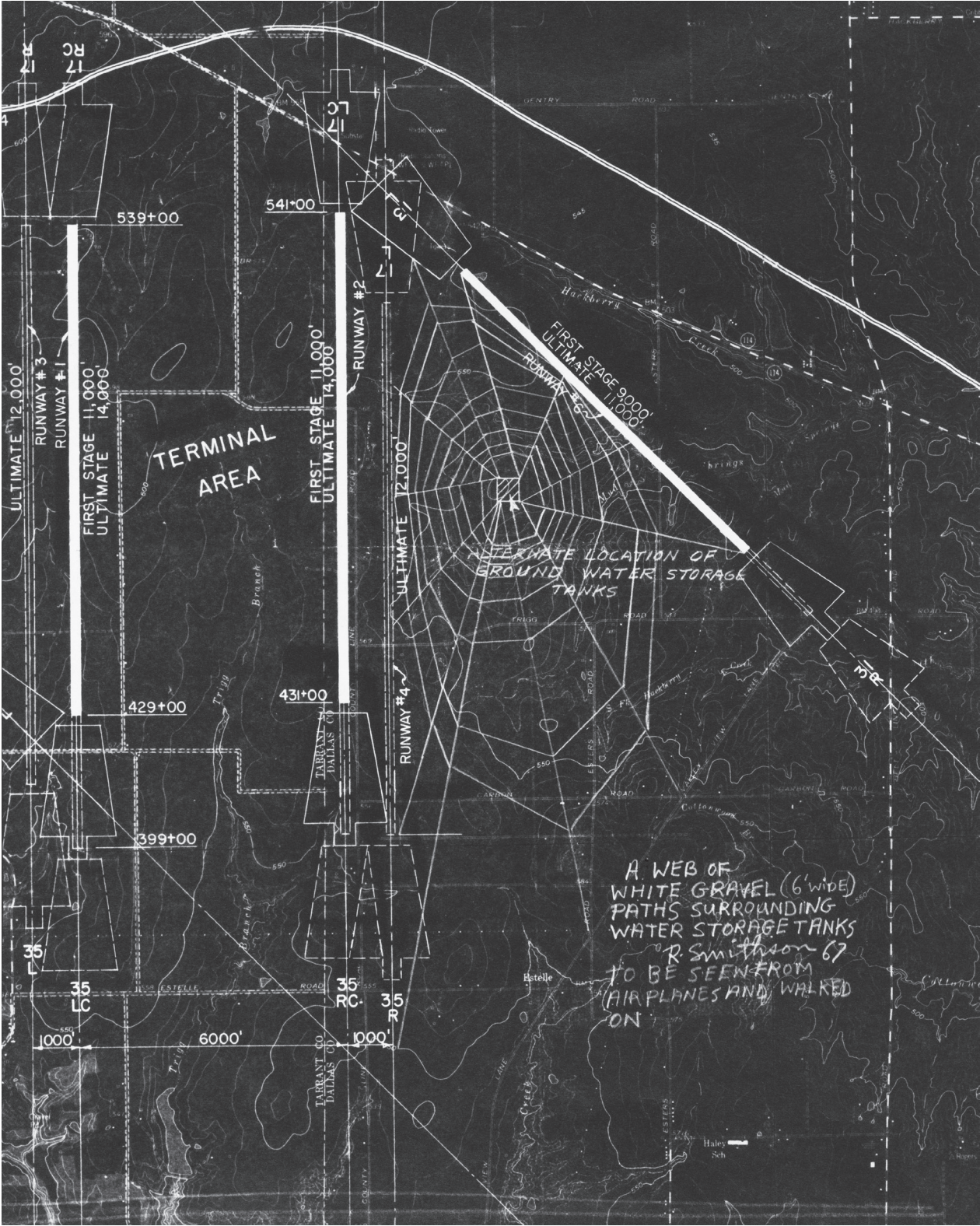
Smithson noted that "the map has exercised a fascination over the minds of artists," referring to himself and to writers important to him. He pointed to Jorge Luis Borges and Lewis Carroll who described maps as fictions, approximations of reality, interpretations always pointing elsewhere. Cartographers drop a grid on to the globe to fix its surface into neat parcels to contain information—a logical system that is also entirely abstract—while geological surveyors build layers to represent the surface of the Earth. Smithson applied these methods to his radical rethinking of sculpture, pulling the maps apart to rethink place and cartographic communication. Considering cartography as an abstraction of landscape, Smithson mapped his ideas on to airports, ruins, swamps, industrial sites, suburbs, and the edges of landmasses to make entropy visible and rethink how scale, site, and sculpture can be understood.

A series of significant works on loan from The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth are presented in *Abstract Cartography*, alongside a careful selection mapping the legacy of Smithson's airport investigations from the collection of Holt/Smithson Foundation. Many of these works are from the personal collection of the artist Nancy Holt—who married Smithson in 1963 and managed his Estate until 2014—and have not previously been made available. ■

—Philipp Kaiser, Chief Executive Director
of Artists and Programs at Marian Goodman
Galleries, and Lisa Le Feuvre, Executive
Director of Holt/Smithson Foundation



Robert Smithson
Texas Airport, 1966
Photostat and pencil
17 ½ × 27 ¾ in. (44.45 × 69.53 cm)
Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of the Estate of Robert Smithson.



Robert Smithson
A Web of White Gravel Paths, 1967
Photostat
10 × 8 in. (25.4 × 20.3 cm)

AERIAL ART (1969)

Robert Smithson

Art today is no longer an architectural afterthought, or an object to attach to a building after it is finished, but rather a total engagement with the building process from the ground up and from the sky down. The old landscape of naturalism and realism is being replaced by the new landscape of abstraction and artifice.

How art should be installed in and around an airport makes one conscious of this new landscape. Just as our satellites explore and chart the moon and the planets, so might the artist explore the unknown sites that surround our airports.

The future air terminal exists both in terms of mind and thing. It suggests the infinite in a finite way. The straight lines of landing fields and runways bring into existence a perception of “perspective” that evades all our conceptions of nature. The naturalism of seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth- century art is replaced by non-objective sense of site. The landscape begins to look more like a three dimensional map than a rustic garden. Aerial photography and air transportation bring into view the surface features of this shifting world of perspectives. The rational structures of buildings disappear into irrational disguises and are pitched into optical illusions. The world seen from the air is abstract and illusive. From the window of an airplane one can see drastic changes of scale, as one ascends and descends. The effect takes one from the dazzling to the monotonous in a short space of time—from the shrinking terminal to the obstructing clouds.

Below this concatenation of aerial perceptions is the conception of the air terminal itself, firmly rooted in the earth. The principal runways and series of terminals will extend from 11,000 feet to 14,000 feet, or about the length of Central Park. The outer limits of the terminal could be brought into consciousness by a type of art, which I will call aerial art, that could be seen from aircraft on takeoff and landing, or not seen at all.

On the boundaries of the taxiways, runways or approach “clear zones” we might construct “earthworks” or grid type frameworks close to the ground level. These aerial sites would not only be visible from arriving and departing aircraft, but

they would also define the terminal's manmade perimeters in terms of landscaping.

The terminal complex might include a gallery (or aerial museum) that would provide visual information about where these aerial sites are situated. Diagrams, maps, photographs, and movies of the projects under construction could be exhibited—thus the terminal complex and its entire airfield site would expand its meaning from the central spaces of the terminal itself to the edges of the air fields.

Letters A, B, C, and D (see aerial map) stand for installations of art on the margins of the main terminal complex. This art is remote from the eye of the viewer the way a galaxy is remote from the earth. In fact, the entire air terminal may be considered conceptually as an *artificial universe*, and as everyone knows, everything in the known universe isn't entirely visible. There is no reason why one shouldn't look at art through a telescope. Our terminal universe is built in the shape of a rectangle with two diagonals set in a photo firmament of haze and non-objective land masses. The double white rectangles within the grid shall someday contain a series of terminals each one the size of Grand Central Station. At the moment we are considering this air terminal through the *camera obscura* of our mind—the camera takes a picture but does not see it. “Some ideas are logical in conception” says Sol LeWitt, “and illogical perceptually.” Visibility is often marked by both mental and atmospheric turbidity. Just how we should look at art is a question that is rarely considered. Simply looking at art at eye-level is no solution. If we consider the aerial map as “a thing in itself,” we will notice the affects of scattered light and weak tone reproduction. High-altitude aerial photography shows us how little there is to see, and seems to prove what Lewis Carroll once said, “They say that we Photographers are a blind race at best.” Carl Andre sees the camera as the most catastrophic invention of the Modern Age.

Aerial art can therefore not only give limits to “space,” but also the hidden dimensions of “time” apart from natural duration—an *artificial time* that can suggest galactic distance here on earth.

Its focus on “non-visual” space and time begins to shape an esthetic based on the *airport as an idea*, and not simply as a mode of transportation. This airport is but a dot in the vast infinity of universes, an imperceptible point in a cosmic immensity, a speck in an impenetrable nowhere—aerial art reflects to a degree this vastness.

A ROBERT MORRIS

His proposal is an “earth mound” circular in shape and trapezoidal in cross section. Its surface would be sod, and its radius might be extended as much as a thousand feet—easily viewed from arriving and departing aircraft.

B CARL ANDRE

A crater formed by a one-ton bomb dropped from 10,000 feet.

or

An acre of blue-bonnets (state flowers of Texas).

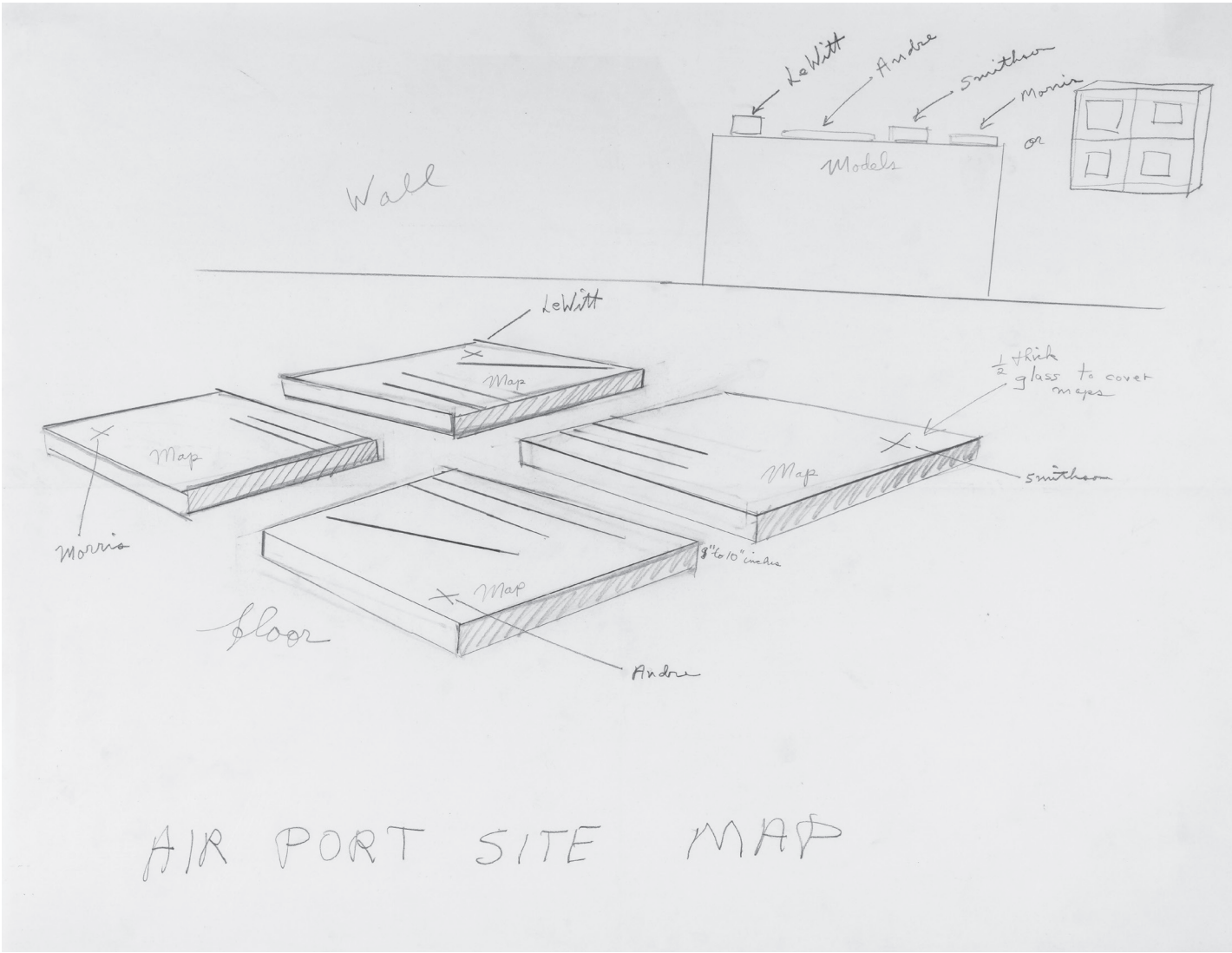
C ROBERT SMITHSON

A progression of triangular concrete pavements that would result in a spiral effect. This could be built as large as the site would allow, and could be seen from approaching and departing aircraft.

D SOL LEWITT

His proposal is “non-visual” and involves the substratum of the site. He emphasizes the “concept” of art rather than the “object” that results from its practice. The precise spot in the site would not be revealed—and would consist of a small cube of unknown contents cast inside a larger cube of concrete. The cube would then be buried in the earth. ■

Robert Smithson
Airport Site Map, 1967
Pencil on paper
19 × 24 in. (48.26 × 60.96 cm)
Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth,
Gift of the Estate of Robert Smithson.



TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN AIR TERMINAL SITE (1967)

Robert Smithson

*If it resembles something, it would
no longer be the whole.*
—Paul Valéry

Since July, 1966 I've been rendering consultation and advice as an "artist consultant" to Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton (Engineers and Architects). The project concerns the development of an air terminal between Fort Worth and Dallas. From time to time, after studying various maps, surveys, reports, specifications, and construction models, I meet with Walther Prokosch, John Gardner and Ernest Schwiebert in order to discuss the overall plan. I have engaged in these discussions not as an architect or engineer, but simply as an artist. The discussions do not operate on any presupposed notion of art, engineering or architecture. The problems disclose themselves, as we encounter them. Everything follows an exploratory path.

The actual meaning of an air terminal and how it relates to aircraft is one such problem. As the aircraft ascends into higher and higher altitudes and flies at faster speeds, its meaning as an object changes—one could even say reverses. The streamlined design of our earlier aircraft becomes increasingly more truncated and angular. Our whole notion of airflight is casting off the old meaning of speed through space, and developing a new meaning based on instantaneous time. The aircraft no longer "represents" a bird or animal (the flying tigers) in an organic way, because the movement of air around the craft is no longer visible. The meaning of airflight has for the most part been conditioned by a rationalism that supposes truths—such as nature, progress, and speed. Such meanings are merely "categorical" and have no basis in actual fact. The same condition exists in art, if one sees the art through the rational categories of "painting, sculpture and architecture." The rationalist sees only the details and never the whole. The categories that proceed from rational logic inflate a lin-

guistic detail into a dated system of meaning, so that we cannot see the aircraft through the "speed." Language problems are often at the bottom of most rationalistic "objectivity." One must be conscious of the changes in language, before one attempts to discover the form of an object or fact.

Let us now try to delimit some new meanings in terms of the actual facts of today's new aircraft. By extracting esthetic morphologies from existing aircraft, the same way an artist extracts meanings from a given "art object," we should find a whole new set of values.

If an aircraft discloses itself on an instant network of time, the result is an immobilization of space. This immobilization of space becomes more apparent if we consider the high altitude satellite. The farther out an object goes in space, the less it represents the old rational idea of visible speed. The streamlines of space are replaced by a crystalline structure of time. An example of this is the SECOR surveying satellite fabricated by the Cubic Corporation. This 45-pound object enables surveyors to tie together land masses separated by more than 2000 miles of land or water, or roughly the distance between the U.S. mainland and Hawaii. It increases the capability of the geodetic surveying program.

This kind of "aerosurveying" derives from a more elementary type of land surveying. The instrument that the surveyor uses on the ground level is a telescope mounted on a tripod and fitted with cross hairs and a level. This enables the surveyor to find the points of identical elevation. The surveyor locates the boundaries of land tracts by measuring various sites within a network of lines and angles. This he does with the aid of the "surveyor's measure:"

7.92 inches = 1 link
100 links = 1 chain or 66 feet
80 chains = 1 mile
625 square links = 1 square pole
16 square poles = 1 square chain
10 square chains = 1 acre

640 acres = 1 section, or 1 square mile
36 sections = 1 township

The maps that surveyors develop from coordinating land and air masses resemble crystalline grid networks. Mapping the Earth, the Moon, or other planets is similar to the mapping of crystals. Because the world is round, grid coordinates are shown to be spherical, rather than rectangular. Yet, the rectangular grid fits within the spherical grid. Latitude and longitude lines are a terrestrial system much like our city system of avenues and streets. In short, all air and land is locked into a vast lattice. This lattice may take the shape of any of the six Crystal Systems. "...I saw all the mirrors in the planet and none reflected me..." (Borges).

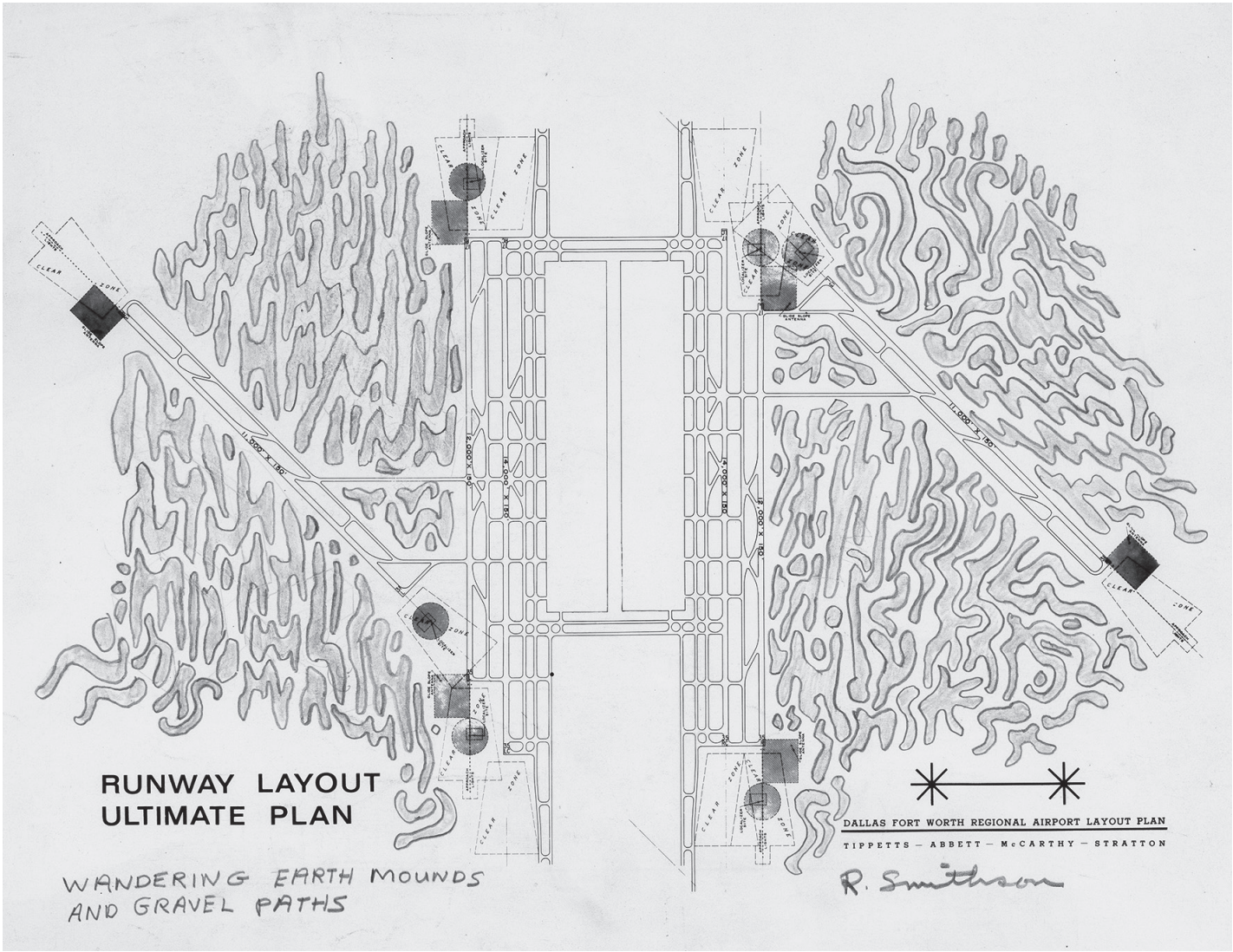
Alexander Graham Bell (1847–1922), known to most people as the inventor of the telephone, was also interested in the problems of aerodynamics, aeronautics, shipbuilding engineering science, medicine, electrical engineering, and surveying. In Konrad Wachsmann's book *The Turning Point of Building*, we learn something of Bell's concern with "airborne structures" and how they relate to mass production. Bell designed kites based on tetragonal units, that on an esthetic level resemble the satellites such as the SECOR. His units were prefabricated, standardized and crystalline, not unlike Buckminster Fuller's inventions. He also built a pyramid-shaped outdoor observation station that reminds one of the art of Robert Morris. (Unlike Bell, Morris would not want to "live" in his art.) From inside his solid tetrahedron Bell surveyed his "flight" projects—the tetragonal lattice-kites. A grid connection was established by him between ground and air through this crystalline system. The solid mirrored the lattice. The site was joined to the sky in a structural equation. Bell's awareness of the physical properties of language, by way of the telephone, kept him from misunderstanding language and object relationships. Language was transformed by Bell into *linguistic objects*. In this way he avoided the rational

categories of art. The impact of "telephone language" on physical structure remains to be studied. A visual language of modules seems to have emerged from Bell's investigations. Points, lines, areas, or volumes establish the syntax of sites.

All language becomes an alphabet of sites, or it becomes what we will call the air terminal between Fort Worth and Dallas. The entire project shall rest on an elevation of about 550 feet to 620 feet. The area is well drained and practically free of trees and natural obstructions. The subsurface site of the project contains sediments from the Cretaceous Age. This underground site was penetrated by "auger borings" and "core borings." All the soil samples encountered in the borings were visually classified and tested. These samples ranged from clay to shale rock. The "boring" if seen as a discrete step in the development of the whole site has an esthetic value. It is an "invisible hole," and could be defined by Carl Andre's motto—"A thing is a hole in a thing it is not." The "boring," like other "earth works," is becoming more and more important to artists. Pavements, holes, trenches, mounds, heaps, paths, ditches, roads, terraces, etc., all have an esthetic potential.

Remote places such as the Pine Barrens of New Jersey and the frozen wastes of the North and South Poles could be coordinated by art forms that would use the actual land as a medium. Television could transmit such activity all over the world. Instead of using a paintbrush to make his art, Robert Morris would like to use a bulldozer. Consider a "City of Ice" in the Arctic, that would contain frigid labyrinths, glacial pyramids, and towers of snow, all built according to strict abstract systems. Or an amorphous "City of Sand" that would be nothing but artificial dunes, and shallow sand pits.

The air terminal—also known as the Universe—rests on a firmament of statistics. Here statistics are the abysmal archetypes that engender the entire complex of buildings. This terminal area of approximately 600 acres is en-



Robert Smithson
*Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport Layout Plan:
Wandering Earth Mounds and Gravel Paths*, 1966
Pencil and crayon on map
11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm)

closed by a two-way taxi system approximately 9,000 feet in length by 3,000 feet in width. This inscrutable terminal exceeds and rejects all termination. The following “spaces” have been engendered by the individual airlines:

TERMINAL BUILDINGS	
AIRLINES	SQUARE FEET
American	1,400
Braniff	100,300
Central	14,500
Continental	34,400
Delta	70,700
Eastern	13,700
Mexicana	3,400
Trans-Texas	17,700
Western	13,800
Total	329,900

The process behind the air terminal endlessly plans and replans its concessions, agencies, and facilities from masses of information. Here unit terminals are not conceived as trip terminus points. Here no gate position has a unique location. The distribution of car traffic is maintained by a central axis of roadways that develops according to statistical probability. Extra terminal space may crystallize off this central linear axis. Framing this central complex of terminal units are the runways and taxiways.

Width of Land Strip	500 ft.
Width of Runway (R/W)	150 ft.
Width of Taxiway (T/W)	75 ft.
Distance between R/W Centerline and T/W Centerline	500 ft.
Distance between Parallel T/Ws	300 ft.
Distance between Centerline T/W and Aircraft Parking	300 ft.
Distance between Centerline and Obstacle	250 ft.
Distance between Centerline and Building Line	750 ft.
Maximum Runway Effective Gradient	0.25%
Maximum R/W and T/W Longitudinal Grade	1.00%
Maximum R/W and T/W Transverse Grade	1.50%

It is most probable that we will someday see upon these runways, aircraft that will be more crystalline in shape. The shapes suggested by Alexander Graham Bell and the Cubic Corporation show evidence of such a direction. Already certain passenger aircraft resemble

pyramidal slabs, and flying obelisks. Perhaps aircraft will someday be named after crystals. As it is now, many are still named after animals, such as DHC 2 Beavers; Vampire T.; Chipmunk T. Mk. 20; Dove 8s; Hawker Furies; Turkey; etc. At any rate, here are some names for possible crystalline aircraft: Rhombohedral T.2; Orthorhombic 60; Tetragonal Terror; Hexagonal Star Dust 49; etc.

The enormous scale of the runways will isolate such aircraft into “buildings” for short spaces of time, then these “buildings” will disappear. The principal runways will extend from 11,000 feet to 14,000 feet, or about the length of Central Park. *Consider an aircraft in the shape of an enormous “slab” hovering over such an expanse.*

Tippetts-Abbott-McCarthy-Stratton have developed other sites that have limits similar to the air terminal project. They include port and harbor facilities like the Navy pier in Chicago, a port in Anchorage and San Nicholas Harbor in Aruba. Such sites rest on wide expanses of water, and are generated by ship voyages and cargo movements. Bulk storage systems are contained by mazes of transfer pipelines that include hydrant refueling pump houses and gas dispensers. The process behind the making of a storage facility may be viewed in stages, thus constituting a whole “series” of works of art from the ground up. Land surveying and preliminary building, if isolated into discrete stages, may be viewed as an array of art works that *vanish* as they develop. Water resources that involve flood control, irrigation, and hydroelectric power provide one with an entirely new way to order the terrain. This is a kind of radical construction that takes into account large land masses and bodies of water. The making of artificial lakes, with the help of dams, brings into view a vast “garden.” For instance, the Peligre Dam in the Republic of Haiti consists of 250-foot high concrete buttresses. This massive structure, with its artificial cascades and symmetrical layout, stands like an immobile facade. It conveys an immense scale and power. By investigating the physical forms of such projects one may gain unexpected esthetic information. I am not concerned here with the original “functions” of such massive projects, but rather with what they suggest or evoke.

It is important to mentally experience these projects as something distinctive and intelligible. By extracting from a site certain associations that have remained invisible within the old framework of rational language, by dealing directly with the appearance or what Roland Barthes calls “the *simulacrum* of the

object,” the aim is to reconstruct a new type of “building” into a whole that engenders new meanings. From the linguistic point of view, one establishes rules of structure based on a change in the semantics of building. Tony Smith seems conscious of this “simulacrum” when he speaks of an “abandoned airstrip” as an “artificial landscape.” He speaks of an absence of “function” and “tradition.”

What is needed is an esthetic method that brings together anthropology and linguistics in terms of “buildings.” This would put an end to “art history” as sole criterion. Art at the present is confined by a dated notion, namely “art as a criticism of earlier art.” The myth of the Renaissance still conditions and infects much criticism with a mushy humanistic content. Re-birth myths should not be applied as “meanings” to art. Criticism exists as *language* and nothing more. *Usage precedes meaning*. The “meanings” derived from the word Renaissance, such as “truth,” “beauty,” and “classic,” are diseased words and outmoded criteria. As one becomes aware of discrete usages, the syntax of esthetic communications discloses the relevant features of both “building” and “language.” Both are the raw materials of communication and are based on *chance*—not historical preconceptions. Linguistic sense-data, not rational categories, are what we are investigating. Carl Andre has made it clear that without linguistic awareness there is no physical awareness.

Tony Smith writes about “a dark pavement” that is “punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights.” (*Artforum*, December 1966.) The key word is “punctuated.” In a sense, the “dark pavement” could be considered a “vast sentence,” and the things perceived along it, “punctuation marks.” “...tower...” = the exclamation mark (!). “...stacks...” = the dash (—). “...fumes...” = the question mark (?). “...colored lights...” = the colon (:). Of course, I form these equations on the basis of sense-data and not rational-data. Punctuation refers to interruptions in “printed matter.” It is used to emphasize and clarify the meaning of specific segments of usage. Sentences like “skylines” are made of separate “things” that constitute a *whole* syntax. Tony Smith also refers to his art as “interruptions” in a “space-grid.”

The impressionistic¹ world-view imitates that architectural detail—the window. The rational category of “painting” was derived from the visual meaning of the word “window” and then extended to mean “wall.” The transparency of the window or wall as a clear “surface” becomes diseased when the artist defines his

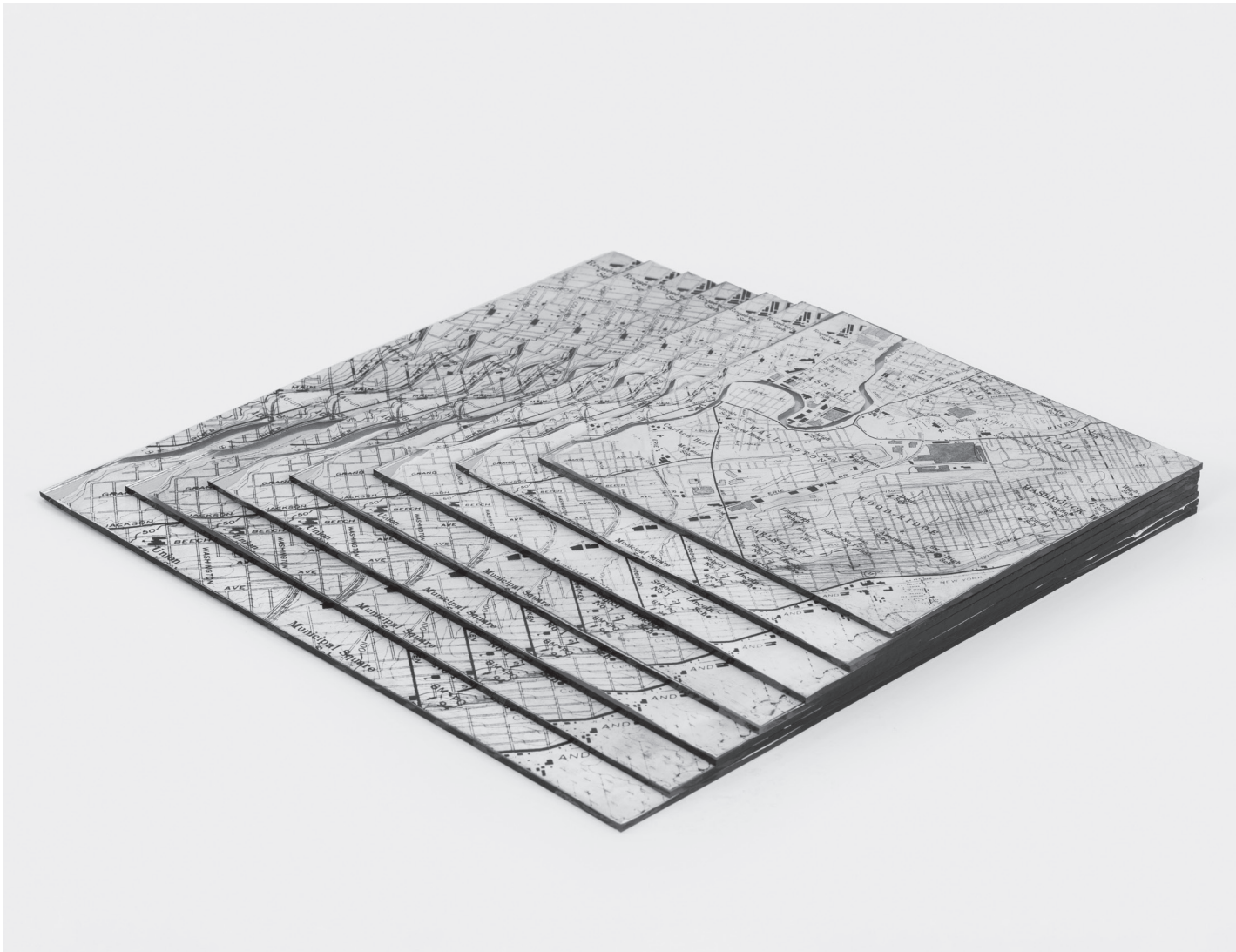
art by the *word* “painting” alone. Perhaps that is what Tony Smith is getting at when he says his works are “probably malignant.” “Painting” is not *an end*, but a *means*, therefore it is linguistically an out-of-date category. The linguistic meaning of a “wall” or “window,” when emptied of rational content, becomes surfaces, and lines.

The most common type of window in the modern city is composed of a simple grid system that holds panes of clear glass. The “glass wall” is a part of many standard stores and office buildings. By emphasizing the transparent glass we arrive at a total crystalline consciousness of structure, and avoid the clotted patchy naturalistic details of “painting.” The organic shapes that painters put on the “canvas-pane” are eliminated and replaced by a consciousness that develops a new set of linguistic meanings and visual results.

“Sculpture,” when not figurative, also is conditioned by architectural details. Floors, walls, windows, and ceilings delimit the bounds of interior sculpture. Many new works of sculpture gain scale by being *installed* in a vast room. The Jewish Museum and the Whitney Museum have such interiors. The rooms of these museums tend away from the intimate values of connoisseurship, toward a more public value. The walls of modern museums need not exist as walls, with diseased details near or on them. Instead, the artist could define the interior as a total network of surfaces and lines. What’s interesting about Dan Flavin’s art is not only the “lights” themselves, but what they do to the *phenomenon* of the “barren room.”

“Site Selection Study” in terms of art is just beginning. The investigation of a specific site is a matter of extracting concepts out of existing sense-data through direct perceptions. Perception is prior to conception, when it comes to site selection or definition. One does not *impose*, but rather *exposes* the site—be it interior or exterior. Interiors may be treated as exteriors or vice versa. The unknown areas of sites can best be explored by artists. ■

1. Impressionism is a popular theory derived from “symbolist theory.” It has nothing to do with individual artists. I use the word “impressionism” according to its recent linguistic mutation. The original meaning of the word is less important than its recent usage. We are not concerned with what “impressionism” was but rather what it is today. But it should be remembered that symbolist theory is prior to impressionist theory.



Robert Smithson
Untitled, 1967
Cut map on 7 mirrors
14 × 14 × 1 ½ in. (35.6 × 35.6 × 3.8 cm)

A SEDIMENTATION OF THE MIND: EARTH PROJECTS (1968)

Robert Smithson

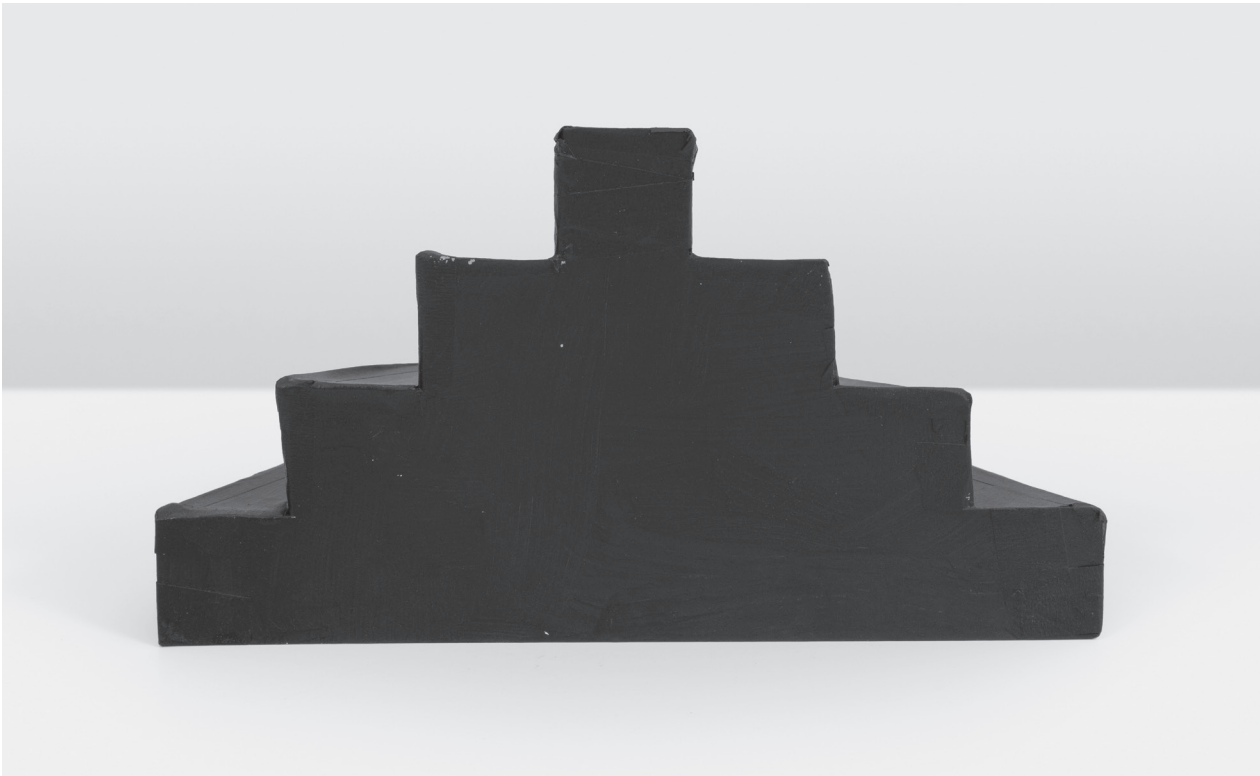
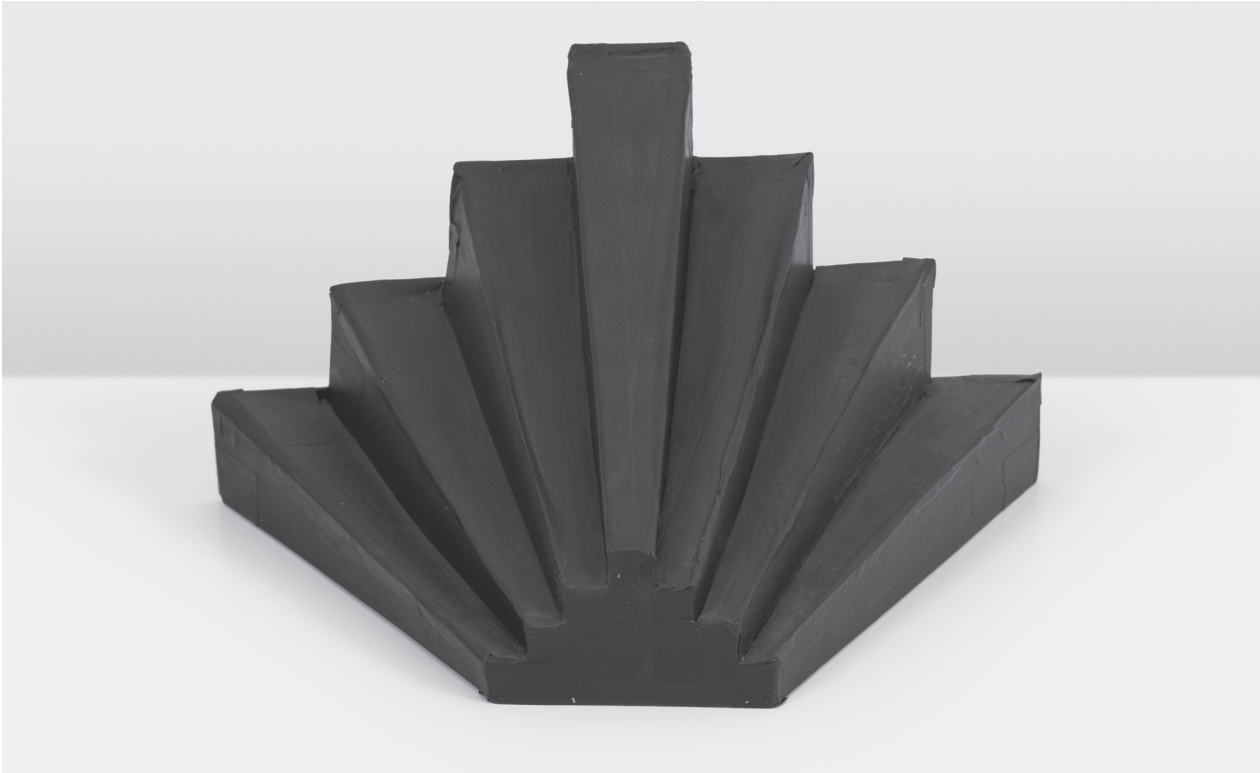
The earth's surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other—one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects, or what I will call “abstract geology.” One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason. Vast moving faculties occur in this geological miasma, and they move in the most physical way. This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries. This slow flowage makes one conscious of the turbidity of thinking. Slump, debris slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain. The entire body is pulled into the cerebral sediment, where particles and fragments make themselves known as solid consciousness. A bleached and fractured world surrounds the artist. To organize this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids, and subdivisions is an esthetic process that has scarcely been touched.

The manifestations of technology are at times less “extensions” of man (Marshall McLuhan's anthropomorphism), than they are aggregates of elements. Even the most advanced tools and machines are made of the raw matter of the earth. Today's highly refined technological tools are not much different in this respect from those of the caveman. Most of the better artists prefer processes that have not been idealized, or differentiated into “objective” meanings. Common shovels, awkward looking excavating devices, what Michael Heizer calls “dumb tools,” picks, pitchforks, the machine used by suburban contractors, grim tractors that have the clumsiness of armored dinosaurs, and plows that simply push dirt around. Machines like Benjamin Holt's steam tractor (invented in 1885)—“It crawls over mud like a caterpillar.” Digging engines and other crawlers that can travel over rough terrain and steep grades. Drills and explosives that can produce shafts and earthquakes. Geometrical trenches could be dug with the help of the “ripper”—steel toothed rakes mounted on tractors. With such equipment construction takes on the look of destruction; perhaps that's why certain architects hate bulldozers and steam shovels. They seem to turn the terrain into unfinished cities of organized wreckage. A sense of chaotic planning engulfs site after site. Subdivisions are made—but to what purpose? Building takes on a singular wildness as loaders scoop and drag soil all over the place. Excavations form shapeless mounds of debris, miniature landslides of dust, mud, sand and gravel. Dump trucks spill soil into an infinity of heaps. The dipper of the giant mining power shovel is 25 feet high and digs 140 cu. yds. (250 tons) in one bite. These processes of heavy construction have a devastating kind of primordial grandeur, and are in many ways more astonishing than the finished project—be it a road or a building. The actual *disruption* of the earth's crust is at times very compelling, and seems to confirm Heraclitus's *Fragment 124*, “The most beautiful world is like a heap of rubble tossed down in confusion.” The tools of art have too long been confined to “the studio.” The city gives the illusion that earth does not exist. Heizer calls his earth projects “The alternative to the absolute city system.”

Recently, in Vancouver, Iain Baxter put on an exhibition of *Piles* that were located at different points in the city; he also helped in the presentation of a *Portfolio of Piles*. Dumping and pouring become interesting techniques. Carl Andre's “grave site”—a tiny pile of sand, was displayed under a stairway at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts last year. Andre, unlike Baxter, is more concerned with the *elemental* in things. Andre's pile has no anthropomorphic overtones; he gives it a clarity that avoids the idea of temporal space. A serenification takes place. Dennis Oppenheim has also considered the “pile”—“the basic components of concrete and gypsum ... devoid of manual organization.” Some of Oppenheim's proposals suggest desert physiography—mesas, buttes, mushroom mounds, and other “deflations” (the removal of material from beach and other land surfaces by wind action). My own *Tar Pool and Gravel Pit* (1966) proposal makes one conscious of the primal ooze. A molten substance is poured into a square sink that is surrounded by another square sink of coarse gravel. The tar cools and flattens into a sticky level deposit. This carbonaceous sediment brings to mind a tertiary world of petroleum, asphalts, ozokerite, and bituminous agglomerations.

PRIMARY ENVELOPMENT

At the low levels of consciousness the artist experiences undifferentiated or unbounded methods of procedure that break with the focused limits of rational technique. Here tools are undifferentiated from the material they operate on, or they seem to sink back into their primordial condition. Robert Morris (*Artforum*, April 1968) sees the paint brush vanish into Pollock's “stick,” and the stick dissolve into “poured paint” from a container used by Morris Louis. What then is one to do with the *container*? This entropy of technique leaves one with an empty limit, or no limit at all. All differentiated technology becomes meaningless to the artist who knows this state. “What the Nominalists call the grit in the machine,” says T. E. Hulme in *Cinders*, “I call the fundamen-



tal element of the machine.” The rational critic of art cannot risk this abandonment into “oceanic” undifferentiation, he can only deal with the limits that come after this plunge into such a world of non-containment. At this point I must return to what I think is an important issue, namely Tony Smith's “car ride” on the “unfinished turnpike.” “This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art.” (“Talking with Tony Smith” by Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., *Artforum*, December 1966.) He is talking about a sensation, not the finished work of art; this doesn't imply that he is anti-art. Smith is describing the state of his mind in the “primary process” of making contact with matter. This process is called by Anton Ehrenzweig “dedifferentiation,” and it involves a suspended question regarding “limitlessness” (Freud's notion of the “oceanic”) that goes back to *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Michael Fried's shock at Smith's experiences shows that the critic's sense of limit cannot risk the rhythm of dedifferentiation that swings between “oceanic” fragmentation and strong determinants. Ehrenzweig says that in modern art this rhythm is “somewhat onesided”—toward the oceanic. Allan Kaprow's thinking is a good example—“Most humans, it seems, still put up fences around their acts and thoughts.” (*Artforum*, June 1968.) Fried thinks he knows who has the “finest” fences around their art. Fried claims he rejects the “infinite,” but this is Fried writing in *Artforum*, February 1967 on Morris Louis: “The dazzling blankness of the untouched canvas at once repulses and engulfs the eye, like an infinite abyss, the abyss that opens up behind the least mark that we make on a flat surface, or *would* open up if innumerable conventions both of art and practical life did not restrict the consequences of our act within narrow bounds.” The “innumerable conventions” do not exist for certain artists who *do* exist within a physical “abyss.” Most critics cannot endure the suspension of *boundaries* between what Ehrenzweig calls the “self and the non-self.” They are apt to dismiss

Malevich's *Non-Objective World* as poetic debris, or only refer to the “abyss” as a rational metaphor “within narrow bounds.” The artist who is physically engulfed tries to give evidence of this experience through a limited (mapped) revision of the original unbounded state. I agree with Fried that limits are not part of the primary process that Tony Smith was talking about. There is different experience before the physical abyss than before the mapped revision. Nevertheless, the quality of Fried's *fear* (dread) is high, but his experience of the abyss is low—a weak metaphor—“like an infinite abyss.”

The bins or containers of my Nonsites gather *in* the fragments that are experienced in the physical abyss of raw matter. The tools of technology become a part of the Earth's geology as they sink back into their original state. Machines like dinosaurs must return to dust or rust. One might say a “de-architecturing” takes place before the artist sets his limits outside the studio or the room.

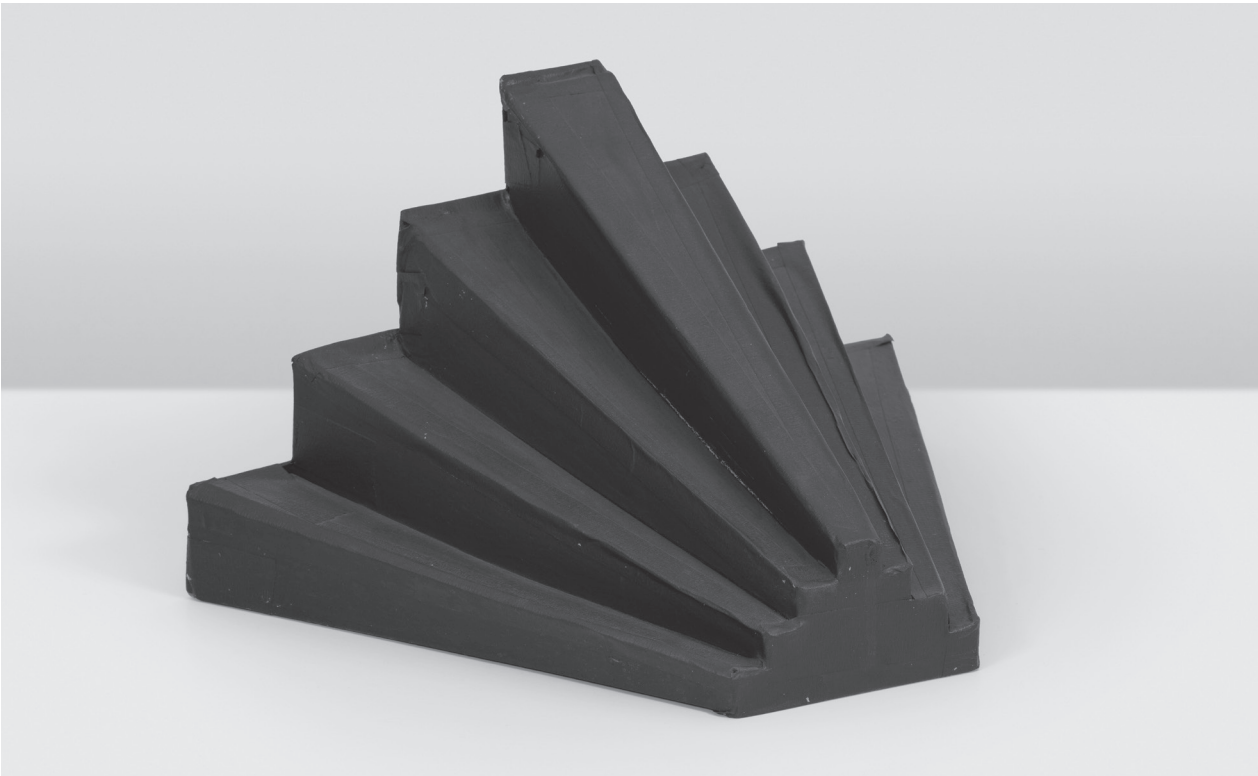
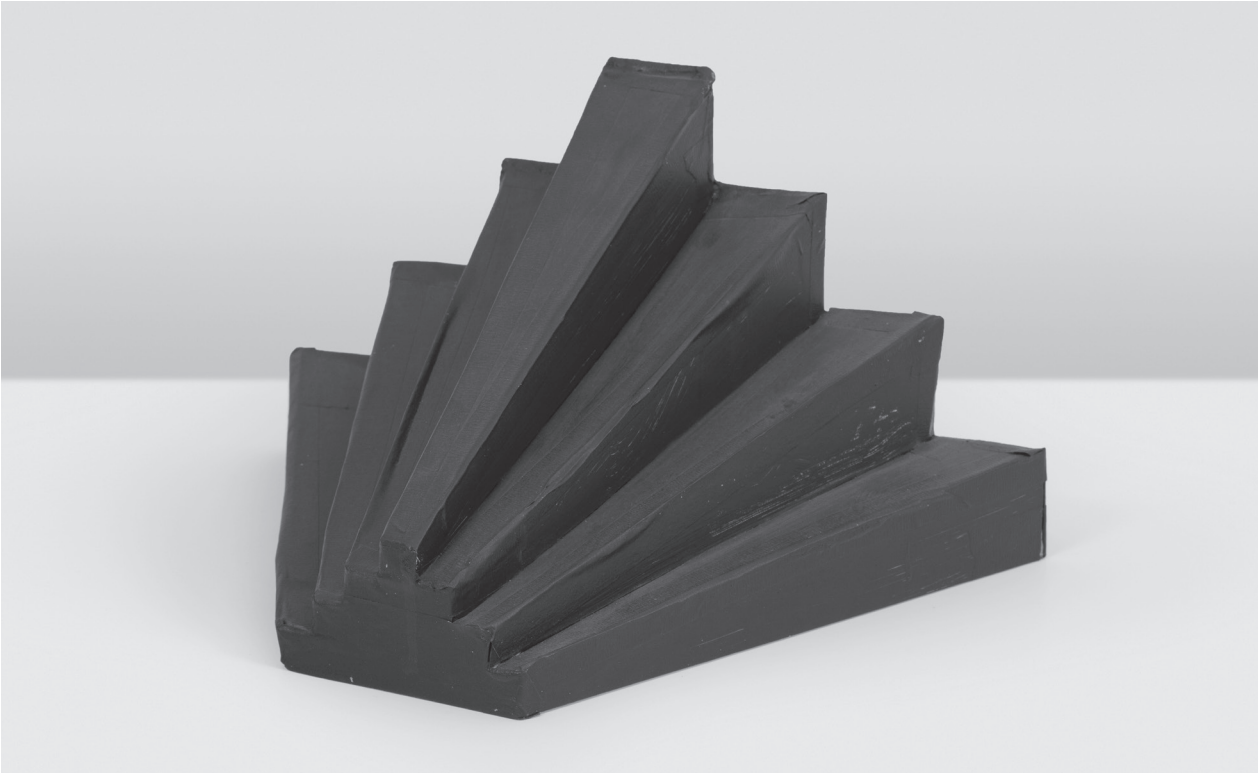
BETTER HOMES AND INDUSTRIES

Great sprays of greenery make the Lambert live-in room an oasis atop a cliff dwelling. In a corner, lighted by skylights and spotlights, “Hard Red,” an oil by Jack Bush. All planting by Lambert Landscape Company.

—Caption under a photograph, *House and Garden*, July 1968

In *Art in America*, Sept.–Oct. 1966, there is a *Portrait of Anthony Caro*, with photographs of his sculpture in settings and landscapes that suggest English gardening. One work, *Prima Luce 1966*, painted yellow, matches the yellow daffodils peeking out behind it, and it sits on a well cut lawn. I know, the sculptor pre-

Robert Smithson
Untitled, 1967
Paint, tape, paper
6 × 10 × 8 in. (15.2 × 25.4 × 20.3 cm)



fers to see his art indoors, but the fact that this work ended up where it did is no excuse for thoughtlessness about installation. The more compelling artists today are concerned with “place” or “site”—Smith, de Maria, Andre, Heizer, Oppenheim, Huebler—to name a few. Somehow, Caro’s work picks up its surroundings, and gives one a sense of a contrived, but tamed, “wildness” that echoes to the tradition of English gardening.

Around 1720 the English invented the antiformal garden as protest against the French formal garden. The French use of geometric forms was rejected as something “unnatural.” This seems to relate to today’s debate between socalled “formalism” and “anti-formalism.” The traces of weak naturalism cling to the background of Caro’s *Prima Luce*. A leftover Arcadia with flowery overtones gives the sculpture the look of some industrial ruin. The brightly painted surfaces cheerfully seem to avoid any suggestion of the “romantic ruin,” but they are on closer investigation related to just that. Caro’s industrial ruins, or concatenations of steel and aluminum may be viewed as Kantian “things-in-themselves,” or be placed into some syntax based on So and So’s theories, but at this point I will leave those notions to the keepers of “modernity.” The English consciousness of art has always been best displayed in its “landscape gardens.” “Sculpture” was used more to *generate a set of conditions*. Clement Greenberg’s notion of “the landscape” reveals itself with shades of T. S. Eliot in an article, “Poetry of Vision” (*Artforum*, April 1968). Here “Anglicizing tastes” are evoked in his descriptions of the Irish landscape. “The ruined castles and abbeys,” says Greenberg, “that strew the beautiful countryside are gray and dim,” shows he takes “pleasure in ruins.” At any rate, the “pastoral,” it seems, is outmoded. The gardens of history are being replaced by sites of time.

Memory traces of tranquil gardens as “ideal nature”—jeune Edens that suggest an idea of banal “quality”—persist in popular magazines like *House Beautiful* and *Better Homes and*

Gardens. A kind of watered down Victorianism, an elegant notion of industrialism in the woods; all this brings to mind some kind of wasted charm. The decadence of “interior decoration” is full of appeals to “country manners” and liberal-democratic notions of gentry. Many art magazines have gorgeous photographs of artificial industrial ruins (sculpture) on their pages. The “gloomy” ruins of aristocracy are transformed into the “happy” ruins of the humanist. Could one say that art degenerates as it approaches gardening?¹ These “garden-traces” seem part of time and not history, they seem to be involved in the dissolution of “progress.” It was John Ruskin who spoke of the “dreadful Hammers” of the geologists, as they destroyed the classical order. The landscape reels back into the millions and millions of years of “geologic time.”

FROM STEEL TO RUST

As “technology” and “industry” began to become an ideology in the New York Art World in the late 50s and early 60s, the private studio notions of “craft” collapsed. The products of industry and technology began to have an appeal to the artist who wanted to work like a “steel welder” or a “laboratory technician.” This valuation of the material products of heavy industry, first developed by David Smith and later by Anthony Caro, led to a fetish for steel and aluminum as a medium (painted or unpainted). Molded steel and cast aluminum are machine manufactured, and as a result they bear the stamp of technological ideology. Steel is a hard, tough metal, suggesting the permanence of technological values. It is composed of iron alloyed with various small percentages of carbon; steel may be alloyed with other metals, nickel, chromium, etc., to produce specific properties such as hardness and resistance to rusting. Yet, the more I think about steel itself, devoid of the technological refinements, the more

rust becomes the fundamental property of steel. Rust itself is a reddish brown or reddish yellow coating that often appears on “steel sculpture,” and is caused by oxidation (an interesting non-technological condition), as during exposure to air or moisture; it consists almost entirely of ferric oxide, Fe₂O₃ and ferric hydroxide, Fe(OH)₃. In the technological mind rust evokes a fear of disuse, inactivity, entropy, and ruin. Why steel is valued over rust is a technological value, not an artistic one.

By excluding technological processes from the making of art, we began to discover other processes of a more fundamental order. The breakup or fragmentation of matter makes one aware of the sub-strata of the Earth before it is overly refined by industry into sheet metal, extruded I-beams, aluminum channels, tubes, wire, pipe, cold-rolled steel, iron bars, etc. I have often thought about non-resistant processes that would involve the actual sedimentation of matter or what I called “Pulverizations” back in 1966. Oxidation, hydration, carbonatization, and solution (the major processes of rock and mineral disintegration) are four methods that could be turned toward the making of art. The smelting process that goes into the making of steel and other alloys separates “impurities” from an original ore, and extracts metal in order to make a more “ideal” product. Burnt-out ore or slag-like rust is as basic and primary as the material smelted from it. Technological ideology has no sense of time other than its immediate “supply and demand,” and its laboratories function as blinders to the rest of the world. Like the refined “paints” of the studio, the refined “metals” of the laboratory exist within an “ideal system.” Such enclosed “pure” systems make it impossible to perceive any other kinds of processes than the ones of differentiated technology.

Refinement of matter from one state to another does not mean that so-called “impurities” of sediment are “bad”—the earth is built on sedimentation and disruption. A refinement based on all the matter that has been discarded by the technological ideal seems to be taking place. The coarse swathes of tar on Tony Smith’s plywood mock-ups are no more or less refined than the burnished or painted steel of David Smith. Tony Smith’s surfaces display more of a sense of the “prehistoric world” that is not reduced to ideals and pure gestalts. The fact remains that the mind and things of certain artists are not “unities,” but *things* in a state of arrested disruption. One might object to “hollow” volumes in favor of “solid materials,” but no materials are solid, they all contain caverns and fissures. Solids are particles built up around flux, they are objective illusions supporting grit, a collection of surfaces ready to be cracked. All chaos is put into the dark inside of the art. By refusing “technological miracles” the artist begins to know the corroded moments, the carboniferous states of thought, the shrinkage of mental mud, in the geologic chaos—in the strata of esthetic consciousness. The refuse between mind and matter is a mine of information.

THE DISLOCATION OF CRAFT—AND FALL OF THE STUDIO

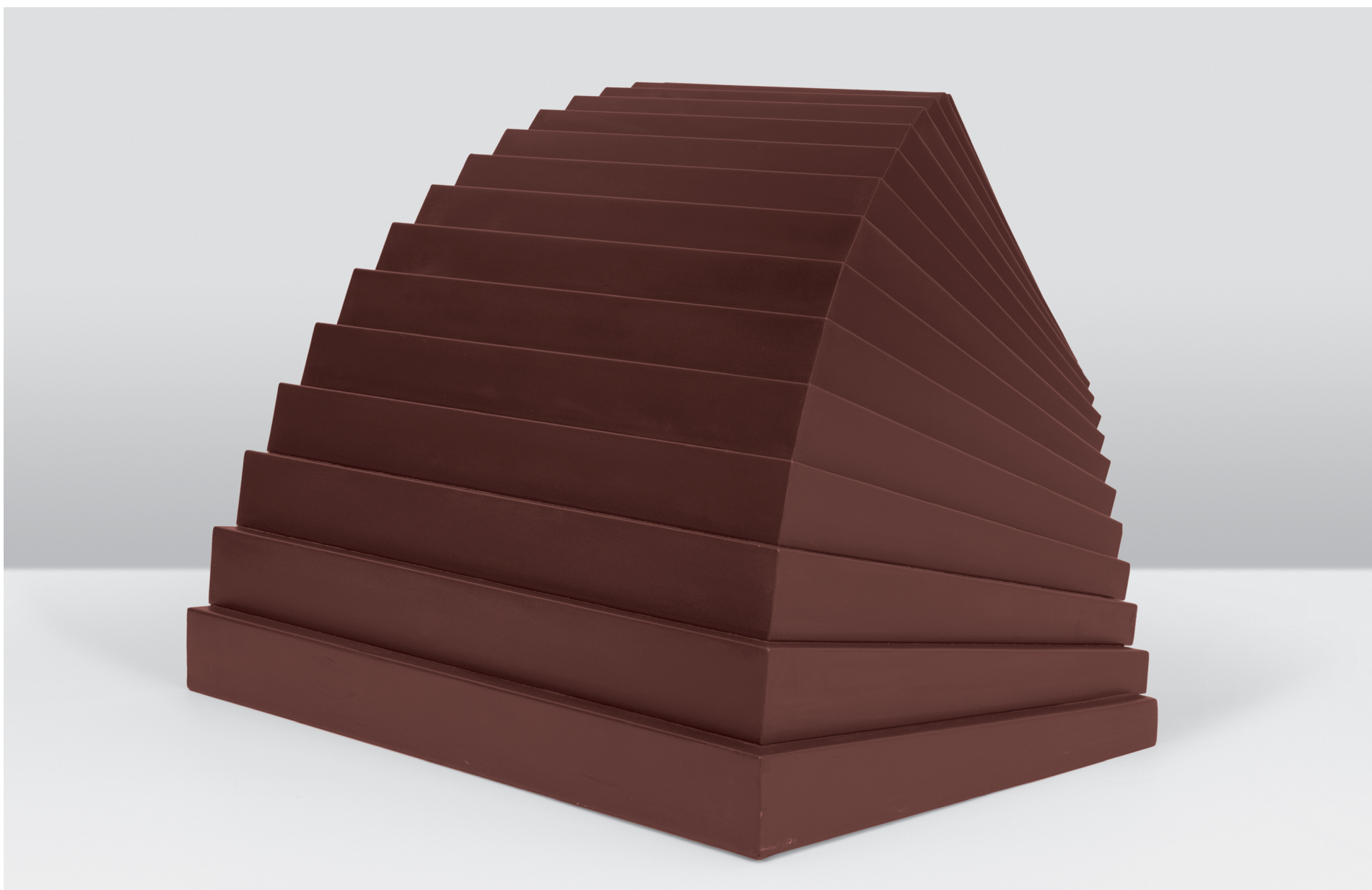
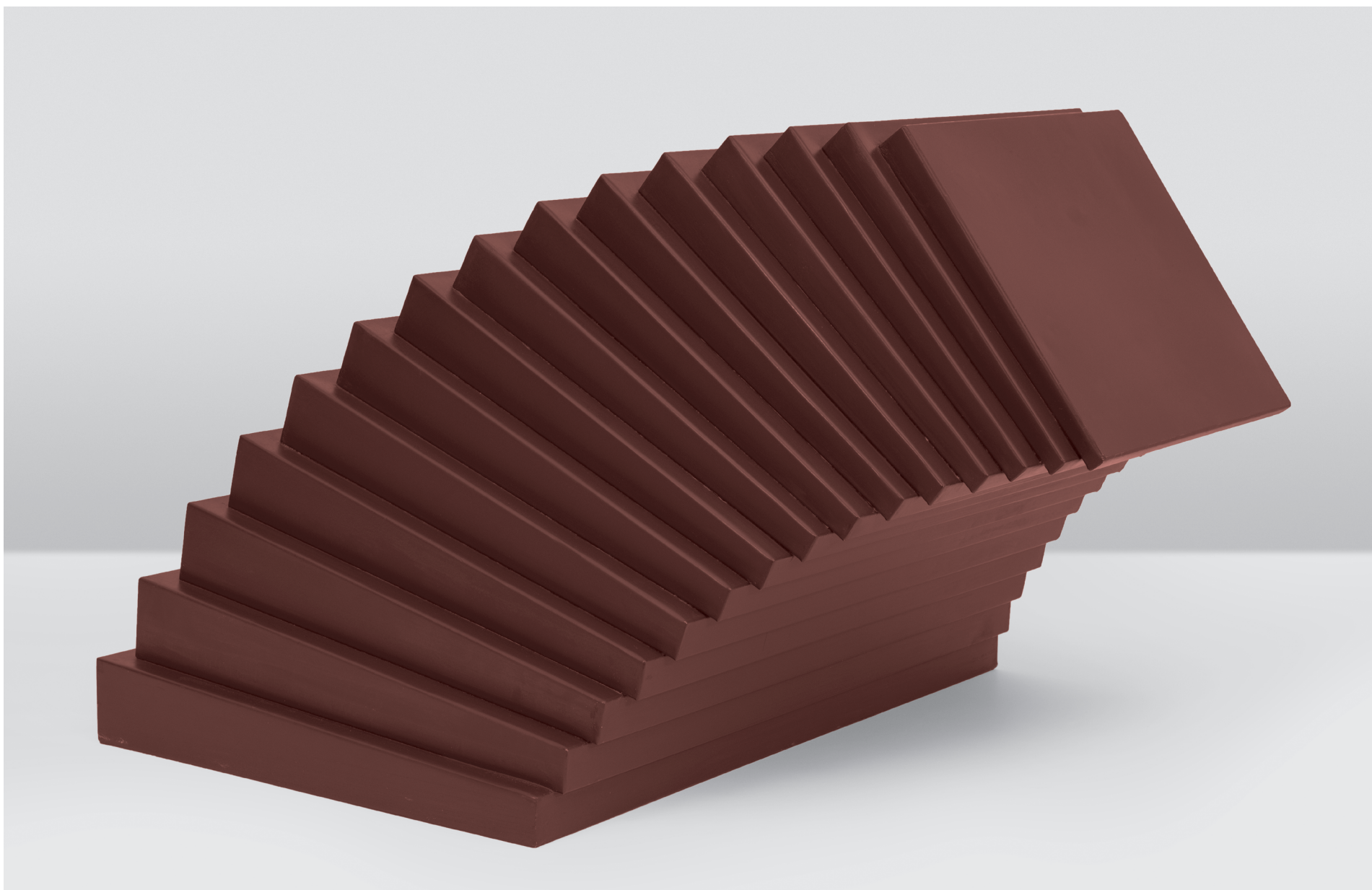
Plato’s *Timaeus* shows the demiurge or the artist creating a model order, with his eyes fixed on a non-visual order of Ideas, and seeking to give the purest representation of them. The “classical” notion of the artist copying a perfect mental model has been shown to be an error. The modern artist in his “studio,” working out an abstract grammar within the limits of his “craft,” is trapped in but another snare. When the fissures between mind and matter multiply into an infinity of gaps, the studio begins to crumble and fall like The House of Usher, so that mind and matter get endlessly confounded. Deliverance from the confines of the studio frees the artist to a degree from the snares of craft and the bondage of creativity. Such a condition exists without any appeal to “nature.” Sadism is the end product of nature, when it is based on the biomorphic order of rational creation. The artist is fettered by this order, if he believes himself to be creative, and this allows for his servitude which is designed by the vile laws of Culture. Our culture has lost its sense of death, so it can kill both mentally and physically, thinking all the time that it is establishing the most creative order possible.

THE DYING LANGUAGE

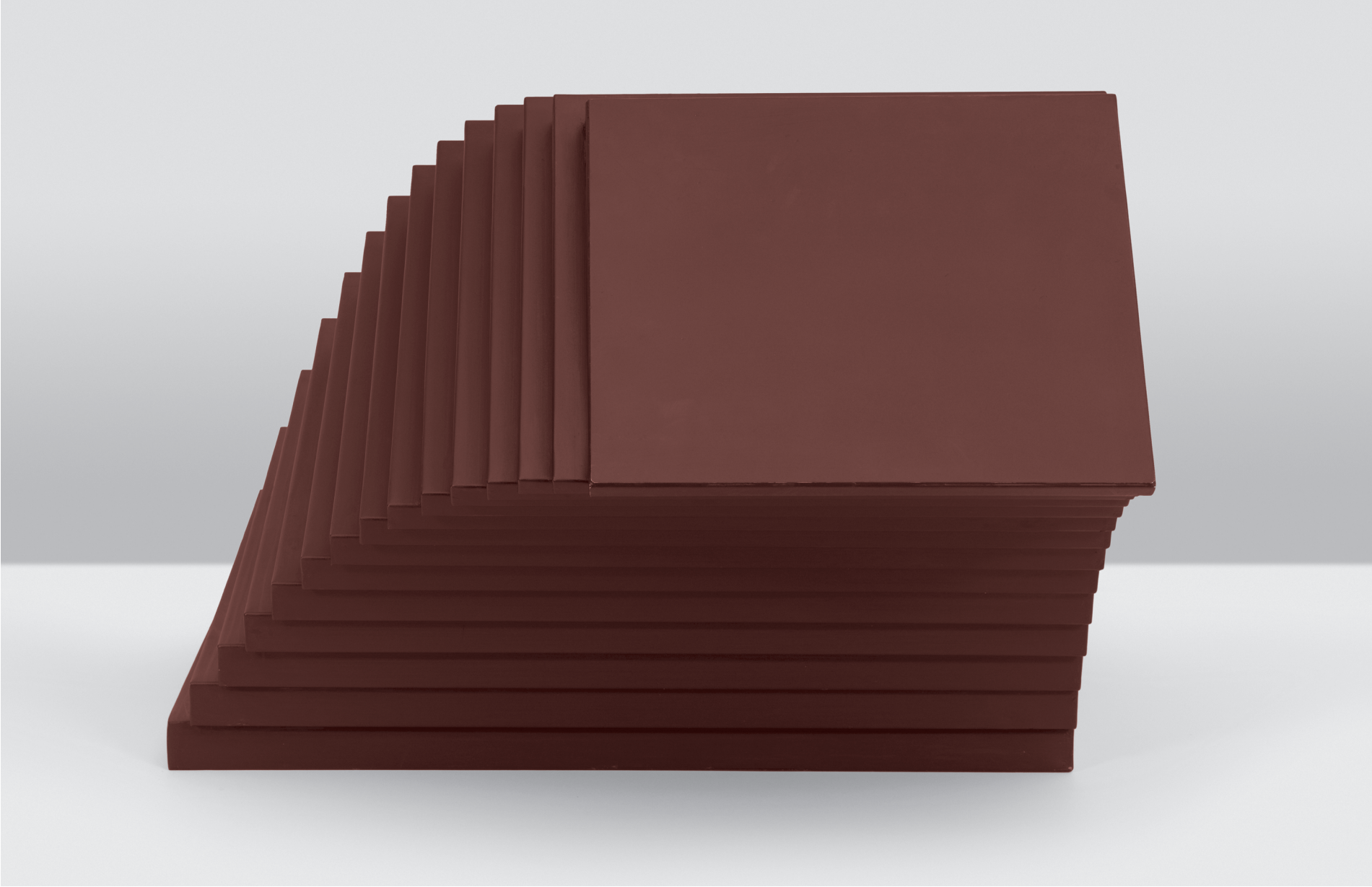
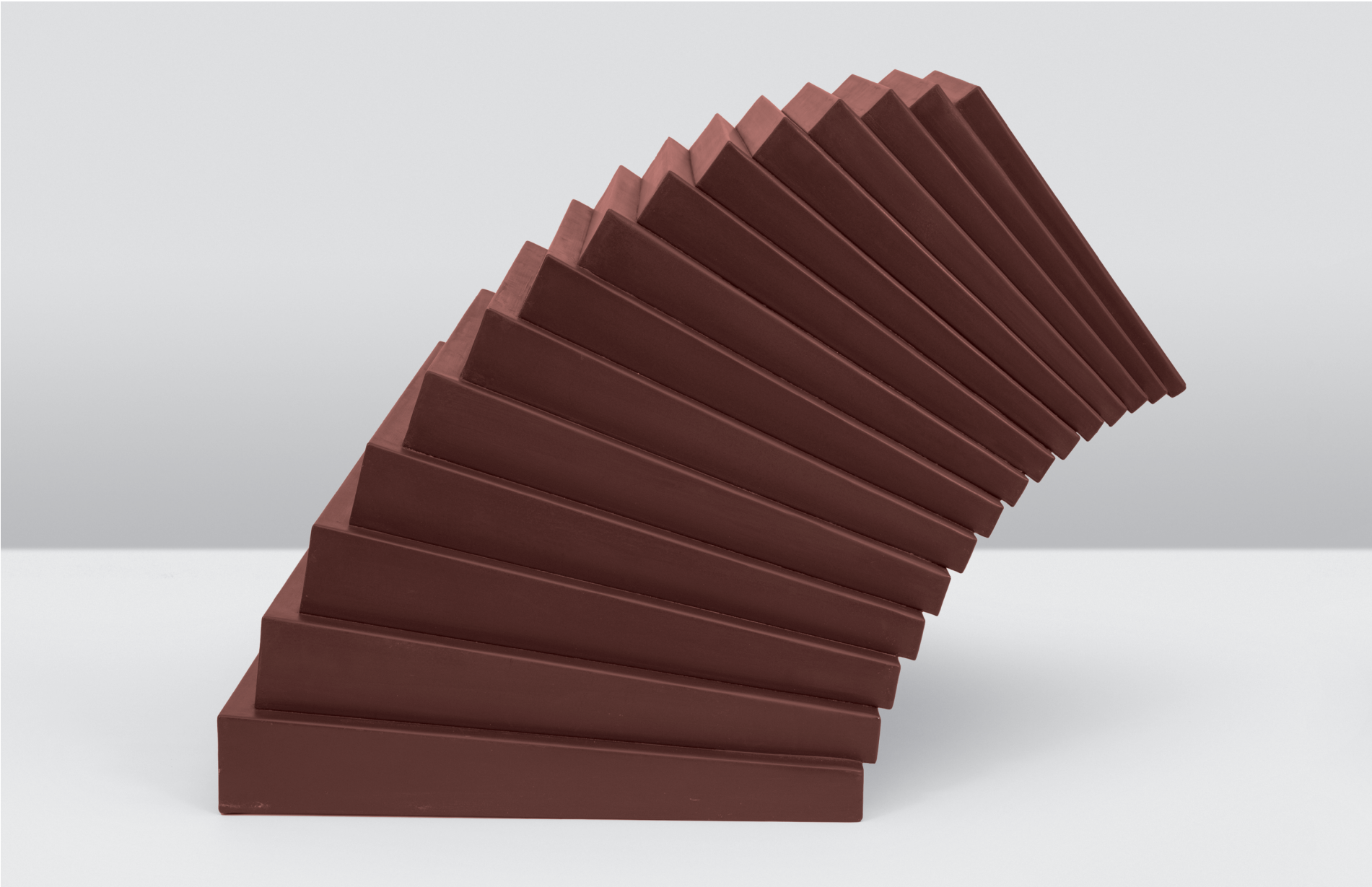
The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of

continues on p. 10

1. The sinister in a primitive sense seems to have its origin in what could be called “quality gardens” (Paradise). Dreadful things seem to have happened in those half-forgotten Edens. Why does the Garden of Delights suggest something perverse? Torture gardens, Deer Park. The Grottos of Tiberius. Gardens of Virtue are somehow always “lost.” A degraded paradise is perhaps worse than a degraded hell. America abounds in banal heavens, in rapid “happy-hunting grounds,” and in “natural” hells like Death Valley National Monument or The Devil’s Playground. The public “sculpture garden” for the most part is an outdoor “room,” that in time becomes a limbo of modern isms. Too much thinking about “gardens” leads to perplexity and agitation. Gardens like the levels of criticism bring one to the brink of chaos. This footnote is turning into a dizzying maze, full of tenuous paths and innumerable riddles. The abysmal problem of gardens somehow involves a fall from somewhere or something. The certainty of the absolute garden will never be regained.



Robert Smithson
Shift, 1967
 Painted metal
 33 × 30 × 20 in. (83.8 × 76.2 × 50.8 cm)



fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. This discomforting language of fragmentation offers no easy gestalt solution; the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle. Poetry being forever lost must submit to its own vacuity; it is somehow a product of exhaustion rather than creation. Poetry is always a dying language but never a dead language.

Journalism in the guise of art criticism fears the disruption of language, so it resorts to being “educational” and “historical.” Art critics are generally poets who have betrayed their art, and instead have tried to turn art into a matter of reasoned discourse, and, occasionally, when their “truth” breaks down, they resort to a poetic quote. Wittgenstein has shown us what can happen when language is “idealized,” and that it is hopeless to try to fit language into some absolute logic, whereby everything objective can be tested. We have to fabricate our rules as we go along the avalanches of language and over the terraces of criticism.

Poe’s *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* seems to me excellent art criticism and prototype for rigorous “non-site” investigations. “Nothing worth mentioning occurred during the next twenty-four hours except that, in examining the ground to the eastward third chasm, we found two triangular holes of great depth, and also with black granite sides.” His descriptions of chasms and holes seem to verge on proposals for “earth words.” The shapes of the chasms themselves become “verbal roots” that spell out the difference between darkness and light. Poe ends his mental maze with the sentence—“I have graven it within the hills and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock.”

THE CLIMATE OF SIGHT

The climate of sight changes from wet to dry and from dry to wet according to one’s mental weather. The prevailing conditions of one’s psyche affect how he views art. We have already heard much about “cool” or “hot” art, but not much about “wet” and “dry” art. The *viewer*, be he an artist or a critic, is subject to a climatology of the brain and eye. The wet mind enjoys “pools

and stains” of paint. “Paint” itself appears to be a kind of liquefaction. Such wet eyes love to look on melting, dissolving, soaking surfaces that give the illusion at times of tending toward a gaseousness, atomization or fogginess. This watery syntax is at times related to the “canvas support.”

The world disintegrates around me.
—Yvonne Rainer

By Palm Desert springs often run dry.
—Van Dyke Parks, *Song Cycle*

The following is a proposal for those who have leaky minds. It could be thought of as The Mind of Mud, or in later stages, The Mind of Clay.

THE MUD POOL PROJECT

- 1. Dig up 100 ft. sq. area of earth with a pitchfork.
- 2. Get local fire department to fill the area with water. A fire hose may be used for this purpose.
- 3. The area will be finished when it turns to mud.
- 4. Let it dry under the sun until it turns to clay.
- 5. Repeat process at will.

When dried under the sun’s rays for a sufficiently long time, mud and clay shrink and crack in a network of fissures which enclose polygonal areas.
—Fredric H. Lahee, *Field Geology*

The artist or critic with a dank brain is bound to end up appreciating anything that suggests saturation, a kind of watery effect, an overall seepage, discharges that submerge perceptions in an onrush of dripping observation. They are grateful for an art that evokes general liquid states, and disdain the desiccation of fluidity. They prize anything that looks drenched, be it canvas or steel. Depreciation of aridity means that one would prefer to see art in a dewy green setting, say the hills of Vermont, rather than the Painted Desert.

Aristotle believed that heat combined with dryness resulted in fire: where else could this feeling take place than in a *desert* or in Malevich’s head? “No more ‘likenesses of reality,’ no

idealistic images, nothing but a desert!” says Malevich in *The Non-Objective World*. Walter DeMaria and Michael Heizer have actually worked in the Southwestern deserts. Says Heizer, in some scattered notes, “Earth liners installed in Sierras, and down on desert floor in Carson-Reno area.” The desert is less “nature” than a concept, a place that swallows up boundaries. When the artist goes to the desert he enriches his absence and burns off the water (paint) on his brain. The slush of the city evaporates from the artist’s mind as he installs his art. Heizer’s “dry lakes” become mental maps that contain the vacancy of Thanatos. A consciousness of the desert operates between craving and satiety.

Jackson Pollock’s art tends toward a torrential sense of *material* that makes his paintings look like splashes of marine sediments. Deposits of paint cause layers and crusts that suggest nothing “formal” but rather a physical metaphor without realism or naturalism. *Full Fathom Five* becomes a Sargasso Sea, a dense lagoon of pigment, a logical state of an oceanic mind. Pollock’s introduction of pebbles into his private topographies suggests an interest in geological artifices. The rational idea of “painting” begins to disintegrate and decompose into so many sedimentary concepts. Both Yves Klein and Jean Dubuffet hinted at global or topographic sedimentary notions in their works—both worked with ashes and cinders. Says Dubuffet, regarding the North and South Poles, “The revolution of a being on its axis, reminiscent of a dervish, suggests fatiguing, wasted effort; it is not a pleasant idea to consider and seems instead the provisional solution, until a better one comes along, of despair.” A sense of the Earth as a map undergoing disruption leads the artist to the realization that nothing is certain or formal. Language itself becomes mountains of symbolic debris. Klein’s IKB globes betray a sense of futility—a collapsed logic. G. E. M. Anscombe writing on “Negation” in *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus* says, “But it is clear then an all-white or all-black globe is not a map.” It is also clear that Klein’s all blue globe is not a map; rather it is an anti-map; a negation of “creation” and the “creator” that is supposed to be in the artist’s “self.”

THE WRECK OF FORMER BOUNDARIES

The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which

Robert Smithson
Floating Island—Barge to Travel around Manhattan Island, 1971
Graphite on paper
18 ¼ × 23 ¼ in. (46.2 × 58.9 cm)



evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth's crust. When one scans the ruined sites of pre-history one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits. A rubble of logic confronts the viewer as he looks into the levels of the sedimentations. The abstract grids containing the raw matter are observed as something incomplete, broken and shattered.

In June, 1968, my wife Nancy, Virginia Dwan, Dan Graham, and I visited the slate quarries in Bangor-Pen Angyl, Pennsylvania. Banks of suspended slate hung over a greenish-blue pond at the bottom of a deep quarry. All boundaries and distinctions lost their meaning in this ocean of slate and collapsed all notions of gestalt unity. The present fell forward and backward into a tumult of "de-differentiation," to use Anton Ehrenzweig's word for entropy. It was as though one was at the bottom of a petrified sea and gazing on countless stratigraphic horizons that had fallen into endless directions of steepness. Syncline (downward) and anticline (upward) outcroppings and the asymmetrical cave-ins caused minor swoons and vertigos. The brittleness of the site seemed to swarm around one, causing a sense of displacement. I collected a canvas bag full of slate chips for a small Nonsite.

Yet, if art is art it must have limits. How can one contain this "oceanic" site? I have developed the Nonsite, which in a physical way contains the disruption of the site. The container is in a sense a fragment itself, something that could be called a three-dimensional map. Without appeal to "gestalts" or "antiform," it actually exists as a fragment of a greater fragmentation. It is a three-dimensional *perspective* that has broken away from the whole, while containing the lack of its own containment. There are no mysteries in these vestiges, no traces of an end or a beginning.

CRACKING PERSPECTIVES AND GRIT IN THE VANISHING POINT

Parallactic perspectives have introduced themselves into the new earth projects in a way that is physical and three-dimensional. This kind of convergence subverts gestalt surfaces and

turns sites into vast illusions. The ground becomes a map.

The map of my *Nonsite #1 (an indoor earthwork)* has six vanishing points that lose themselves in a pre-existent earth mound that is at the center of a hexagonal airfield in the Pine Barren Plains in South New Jersey. Six runways radiate around a central axis. These runways anchor my 31 subdivisions. The actual *Nonsite* is made up of 31 metal containers of painted blue aluminum, each containing sand from the actual site.

De Maria's parallel chalk lines are 12 feet apart and run a half a mile along the Dry Lake of El Mirage in the Mojave Desert. The dry mud under these lines is cracking into an infinite variety of polygons, mainly six-sided. Under the beating sun shrinkage is constantly going on causing irregular outlines. Rapid drying causes widely spaced cracks, while slow drying causes closely spaced cracks. (See E. M. Kindle's "Some Factors Affecting the Development of Mud Cracks," *Journal of Geology*, Vol. 25, 1917, p. 136.) De Maria's lines make one conscious of a weakening cohesion that spreads out in all directions. Nevada is a good place for the person who wants to study cracks.

Heizer's *Compression Line* is made by the earth pressing against the sides of two parallel lengths of plywood, so that they converge into two facing sunken perspectives. The earth surrounding this double perspective is composed of "hardpan" (a hard impervious sediment that does not become plastic, but can be shattered by explosives). A drainage layer exists under the entire work.

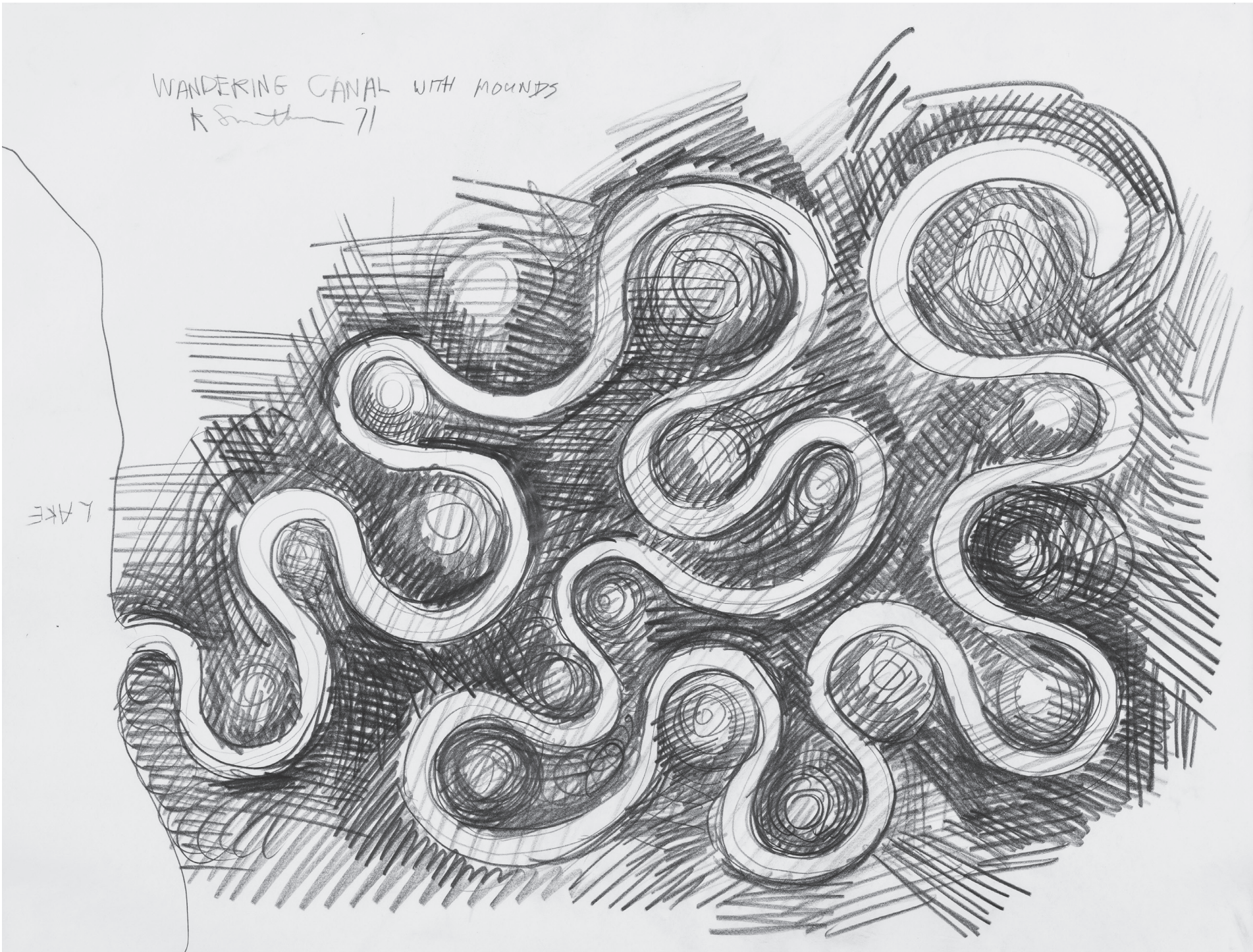
THE VALUE OF TIME

For too long the artist has been estranged from his own "time." Critics, by focusing on the "art object," deprive the artist of any existence in the world of both mind and matter. The mental process of the artist which takes place in time is disowned, so that a commodity value can be maintained by a system independent of the artist. Art, in this sense, is considered "timeless" or a product of "no time at all"; this becomes a convenient way to exploit the artist out of his rightful claim to his temporal processes. The arguments for the contention that time is unreal is a fiction of language, and not of the material of time

or art. Criticism, dependent on rational illusions, appeals to a society that values only commodity type art separated from the artist's mind. By separating art from the "primary process," the artist is cheated in more ways than one. Separate "things," "forms," "objects," "shapes," etc., with beginnings and endings are mere convenient fictions: there is only an uncertain disintegrating order that transcends the limits of rational separations. The fictions erected in the eroding time stream are apt to be swamped at any moment. The brain itself resembles an eroded rock from which ideas and ideals leak.

When a *thing* is seen through the consciousness of temporality, it is changed into something that is nothing. This all-engulfing sense provides the mental ground for the object, so that it ceases being a mere object and becomes art. The object gets to be less and less but exists as something clearer. Every object, if it is art, is charged with the rush of time even though it is static, but all this depends on the viewer. Not everybody sees the art in the same way, only an artist viewing art knows the ecstasy or dread, and this viewing takes place in time. A great artist can make art by simply casting a glance. A set of glances could be as solid as any thing or place, but the society continues to cheat the artist out of his "art of looking," by only valuing "art objects." The existence of the artist in time is worth as much as the finished product. Any critic who devalues the *time* of the artist is the enemy of art and the artist. The stronger and clearer the artist's *view* of time the more he will resent any slander on his domain. By desecrating this domain, certain critics defraud the work and mind of the artist. Artists with a weak view of time are easily deceived by this victimizing kind of criticism, and are seduced into some trivial history. An artist is enslaved by time only if the time is controlled by someone or something other than himself. The deeper an artist sinks into the time stream the more it becomes *oblivion*; because of this, he must remain close to the temporal surfaces. Many would like to forget time altogether, because it conceals the "death principle" (every authentic artist knows this). Floating in this temporal river are the remnants of art history, yet the "present" cannot support the cultures of Europe, or even the archaic or primitive civilizations; it must instead explore the pre- and post-historic mind; it must go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts. ■

Robert Smithson
Wandering Canal with Mounds, 1971
Pencil on paper
19 × 24 in. (48.3 × 61 cm)



INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT SMITHSON

Robert Smithson interviewed by Paul Cummings, recorded between July 14 and 19, 1972 at Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt’s loft on 799 Greenwich Street, New York City.

This text has been edited to focus on topics related to Abstract Cartography, and the full interview can be accessed on the website of the Archives of American Art. For readability, connecting words—such as ‘kind of,’ ‘sort of,’ ‘like’—and repetition have been removed. Extended sections that have been edited out are indicated with [...]. Editorial interpolations are in brackets.

PAUL CUMMINGS You were born in New Jersey?

ROBERT SMITHSON I was born in Passaic and lived there for a short time. We moved to Rutherford, New Jersey. William Carlos Williams actually was my baby doctor in Rutherford. We lived there until I was about nine and then we moved to Clifton, New Jersey to a section called Allwood. Around that time, I had an inclination towards being an artist.

Were you making drawings?

Oh, yes. I was working in that area even back in the early phases in Rutherford.

How did you like all the business of moving around all the time?

Actually, we moved only twice: to Rutherford and to Clifton. I was very interested in that time in natural history. In Clifton my father set up, built, what you could call a suburban basement museum for me to display all my fossils and shells, I was involved with collecting insects and... We traveled a lot at that time. Right after the war in 1946 we went out West. I was about eight years old. It was an impressionable period. I started to get involved in that at that time. I was pretty much unto myself. I was very much interested in field naturalist things, looking for insects, rocks, and whatever.

Did you have any books around that were involved with these topics?

Yes. And I went to the museum of Natural History. When I was about seven I did very large paper constructions of dinosaurs which in a funny way I suppose relate right up to the present in terms of the film I made on the *Spiral Jetty*. I used the prehistoric motif running through that. So, in a funny way, there is not that much different between what I am now and my childhood. I really had a problem with school. I mean there was no real understanding of where I was at. I didn't know where I was at that time.

[...]

How did you like the Art Students League? What did you do there?

It gave me an opportunity to meet younger people and people who were sympathetic to my outlook. I mean there wasn't anybody in Clifton who I was close to except for one person. His name was Danny Donahue. He got interested in art. But eventually he did go crazy and was killed in a motorcycle accident. He joined a Brooklyn gang of motorcyclists and ... I mean it was a very difficult time, I think for people to find themselves. This was I'd say, around 1956-57. I spent a short period, six months, in the army.

Were you drafted? Or did you join?

No, I joined. Actually, I joined with Danny Donahue, Joe [Eli] Levin, and Charlie Hasloff. Charlie came from Dusseldorf. Both Danny and Joe were excluded, and that left Charlie and me. The reason I joined was because it was a special plan; it was Special Services and it was an art group, art situation.

Oh, really! What was that?

[...]

It turned out that I went to Fort Knox, went through basic training, spent some unhappy hours in cartographer's school, and then ended up as artist-in-residence at Fort Knox. I did watercolors for the mess hall there for local army installations. I want to make the point that it was a very confusing period.

[...]

How much of the country have you traveled

around? I know you've been here, there, and everywhere.

I concentrated on it in my childhood and adolescence. My first major trip was when I was eight years old and my father and mother took me around the entire United States. Right after World War II we traveled across the Pennsylvania Turnpike, out through the Black Hills and the Badlands, through Yellowstone, up into the Redwood Forests, then down the Coast, and then over to the Grand Canyon. I was eight years old and it made a big impression on me. I used to give little post card shows. I remember I'd set up a little booth and but a hole in it and put postcards up into the

period of the Beat Generation. When I got back *On the Road* was out, and all those people were around, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, both of whom I met. And Hubert Selby, I knew him rather well; I used to visit him out in Brooklyn and we'd listen to jazz.

[...]

I gave up painting around 1963 and began to work plastics in a crystalline way. I began to develop structures based on a particular concern with the elements of the material itself. This was essentially abstract and devoid of any mythological content.

There was no figurative overtone to it?

No, I had completely gotten rid of that

system. Out of the defunct, I think, class culture of Europe I developed something that was intrinsically my own and rooted to my own experience in America.

[...]

Around this time 1965-66 I was asked to be on a panel up at Yale with Brian Doherty, John Hightower, and Paul Weiss. The topic was art in the city. At that time my ideas of crystalline structure and lattices and that thing had developed. I had met people who were sympathetic to that view, and who were beginning to emerge themselves. As a result of that, I got a job with Tibbetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton as an artist consultant. That was for the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, which never came into existence. They eventually lost the contract. I would go there from month to month and talk to the architects. The abstract works that I was working with there were essentially rooted in a crystalline type of mapping. This mapping extended itself to a more global sense, and I got involved in mapping sites, and then the emergence of the landscape.

What was it about the crystalline structures that you picked up on?

I think it goes back to my earlier childhood responses. I have always been interested in collecting rocks and I did have a rather large rock collection. The first thing I wrote was in 1966 for *Harper's Bazaar*. The article was called *The Crystal Land* and it was about a journey to New Jersey to a rock quarry with Donald Judd.

What's the name of the place out there?

Montclair.

Isn't there a famous rock place in New Jersey?

Yes. Franklin Furnace. That's where I did one of my Nonsites. [...] Gradually I recognized an area of abstraction that was really rooted in crystal structure. In fact, the first piece that I did was in 1964. It was called the *Enantiomorphic Chambers*. I think that was the piece that really freed me from all these preoccupations with history; and I was dealing with grids and planes and empty surfaces. The crystalline forms suggested mapping. Mapping in what way?

If we think of an abstract painting, for instance, like Agnes Martin's, there's a certain grid there that looks like a map without any countries on it. I began to see the grid as a mental construct of physical matter, and my concern for the physical started to grow. And right along I always had an interest in geology as well.

Did you want to go into geology as an activity?

No, I think the geology developed out of my perception as an artist. It wasn't predicated on any scientific need. It was an aesthetic. The entire history of the West was swallowed up in a preoccupation with notions of pre-history and the great pre-historic epics starting with the age of rocks and going up, you know, through the Triassic and Jurassic and all those different periods subsumed all the efforts of these civilizations that had interested in me.

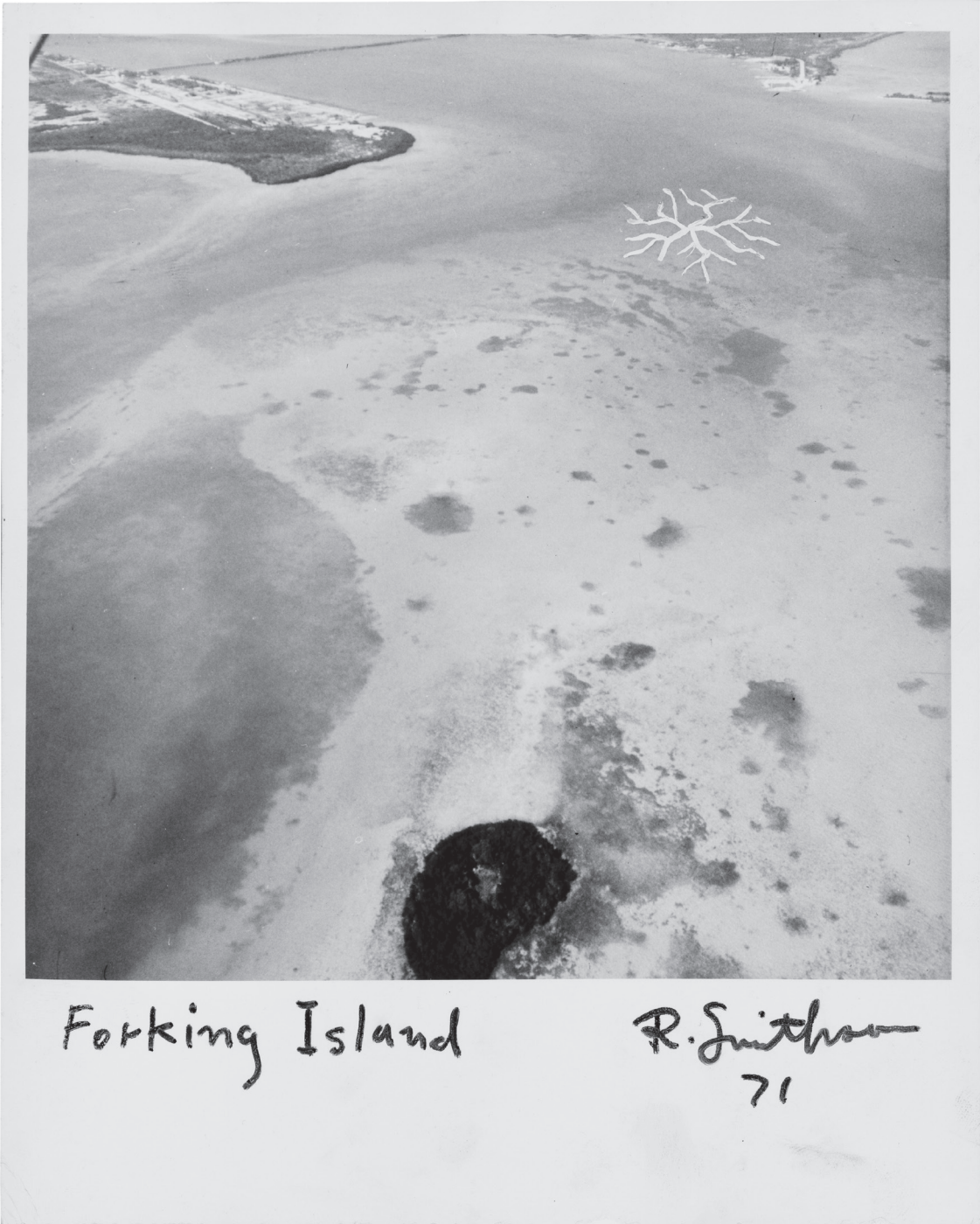
What was happening prior to the clarification of the grid system idea? Had you continued painting? Or did you stop painting? Or were you making things that were a combination?

I stopped. I did drawings actually. They were phantasmagorical drawings of cosmological worlds somewhat between Blake and—I'm trying to think—oh, a Boschian imagery, you know.

There were still figurative overtones?

Very definitely. They were based on iconic situations. I think I made those drawings around 1960-61. They dealt with explicit images like the city; they were monstrous as well, you know, like great Moloch figures.

And the grids appeared in...



Robert Smithson
Forking Island, 1971
Ink on photograph
12 × 12 in. (30.5 × 30.5 cm)

slot and show all the kids all these postcards. [...]

When did you move to New York?

Right after I got out of the Army—which was when, Nancy? I moved to New York in 1957. Then I hitchhiked all around the country. I went out West. I visited the Hopi Indian Reservation and found that very exciting. Looking back on that, quite by chance, I was privileged to see a rain dance at Oraibi [Arizona]. I was about eighteen or nineteen.

Had you been to the museum of the American Indian ever?

No.

You hadn't? So, it was a new experience.

Yes. I knew about Gallup, New Mexico. I knew about, and made a special point of going to, the Canyon de Chelly. I had seen photographs of that. I hiked the length of Canyon de Chelly at that point and slept out. It was the

problem. I felt that Jackson Pollock never really understood that. And although I admire him still, I still think that was something that was always eating him up inside.

[This was a] development away from the traditional imagery and yet an involvement with natural materials...

I would say that begins to surface in 1965-66. That's where I really began to get into that. I mean that I consider my emergence as what I call a conscious artist. Prior to that was my struggle to get into another realm. In 1964, 1965, 1966 I met people who were more compatible with my view. I met Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, and Donald Judd. At that time, we showed at the Daniels Gallery; I believe it was in 1965. I was doing crystalline type works and my early interest in geology and earth sciences began to assert itself over the whole cultural overlay of Europe. So that I had gotten that out of my

It was more of a crystalline thing, more of a triangulated situation. I started using plastics. I made flat plastic paintings. I have one in the front room that I can show you.

How did you pick plastics?

Actually, there was an interim period there when I was doing mainly a collage writing situation. I did writing paintings, you'd call it, you know, I was writing but they included pasting, like I would do—

—like Burroughs cut out and paste poetry?

Not exactly. I would take a magazine that had, oh, a lot of boats in it and then paste all these boats on a piece of wood or something like that. There was a lot of nebulous stuff I was doing then.

Testing materials?

Oh, I know what I was doing. Actually, there was a show at the Castellane Gallery which sums it all up to a great extent. I started working from diagrams. I would take like an evolutionary chart and then paint it somewhat in a Johns-ian manner, scientific diagrams and paint those. But it was a very confused period around 1961 or so. It [had] a lot of these paintings of—not only paintings but also—oh, it was a curious mélange of things—I took a stuffed pigeon and took it apart and pasted it on a board. Things like that. I took pickle jars and made up specimens and labeled them with curious scientific names. Then I started pasting all these similar photographs.

[...]

The Castellane Show was in 1962. When did you get involved with the Dwan Gallery?

That was in about 1965 I'd say. I met Ad Reinhardt in 1965. In 1963-64 I was doing these plastic paintings, these crystalline paintings, and I started to get more into the serial structures that I showed at Dwan in 1966. Ad Reinhardt asked me along with Robert Morris to help organize a show at Dwan—the *Ten Show*. Then I did a piece called *Alogon*, the one which the Whitney owns now. In effect it was like the seven inverted staircases. That was in the *Ten Show*. Around that time I had a lot of dialogues with Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd. A lot of things began to pull together at that time. Prior to my going with the Dwan Gallery I showed the *Enantiomorphic Chambers* that Howard Lipman owns. That impressed Virginia Dwan. Right after I showed in the *Ten Show*, she asked me to be in the gallery. And at the same time, in 1965, I had given [the] talk at Yale on art in the city. A lot of my thinking about crystalline structures came through there, I was discussing the whole city in terms of crystalline network. [As I said] an architect from Tibbetts-Abbott-McCarthy-Stratton was sitting in the audience and he asked me if I would like to participate in the building of the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, trying to figure out what an airport is. I invented this job for myself as artist-consultant. For about a year and a half, from 1965 though 1966, I went there and talked with the architects. That's where the mapping and the intuitions in terms of the crystal structures really took hold, in terms of large land masses where one is dealing with grids superimposed on large land masses. The inklings of the earthworks were there.

What did you do with the architects, what conversations did you have with them? What activity were you able to do with them?

Most of the building process was done through computers. I was more or less looking at the layout of the airfield. My final proposal was something called *Aerial Art* which would be earthworks on the fringes of the airfield that you would see from the air.

Flying over.

They would provide me with all the mapping material. We had interesting discussions. I

made models of possible airports. But I became less and less interested in the actual structure of the building and more interested in the process of the building and all the different preliminary engineering things. For instance, the boring holes to take earth samples. I later wrote an article called *Toward the Development of an Air Terminal*, which was all speculation on the different aspects of building. I was interested in the preliminary aspects of building.

Were you with them toward the end, building particular sculptures or earthworks? Or were you really involved with them on a theoretical...

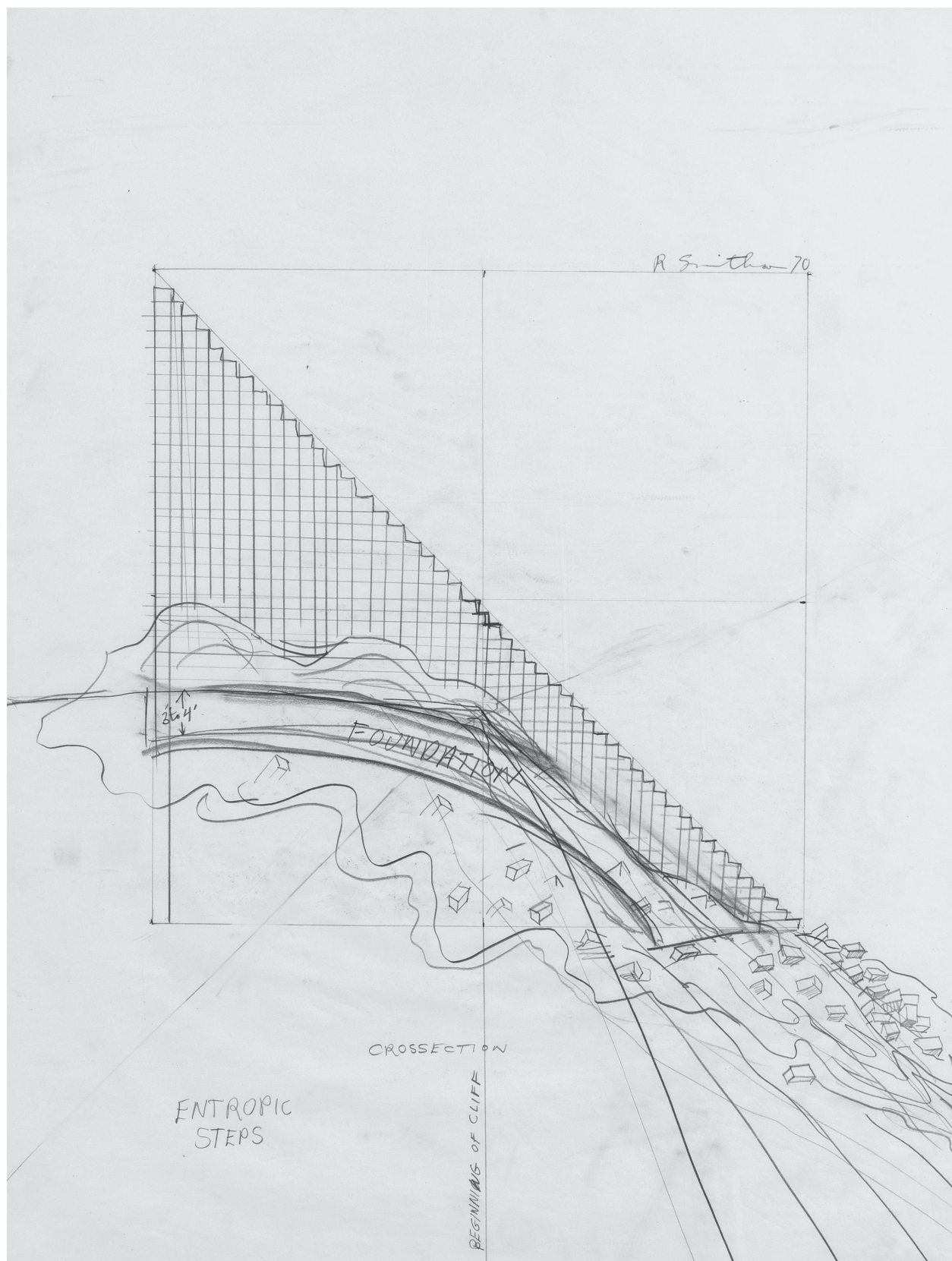
...on a theoretical level. In 1966 I showed a model at the Dwan Gallery right after my show, a model for a tar pool in a gravel enclosure. I would say that it was mainly theoretical at that time. But right along, right from that point, well,

nal units that were linked up somehow in my mind with a notion of ice crystals. Then I made a breakdown of the actual, almost a statistical analysis of the piece which I included in the catalogue, marking down the qualities of the paint that I had painted it with.

Have you gotten involved in the mathematical structure? Or the mathematical ideas in some of the crystalline developed structures? Or not?

The title *Alogon*—the piece that I showed in the *Ten Show*—comes from the Greek word which refers to the unnamable and the irrational number. There was always a sense of ordering, but I couldn't really call it mathematical notation. But there was a consciousness of geometry that I worked from in an intuitive way. But it wasn't really in any way notational.

It wasn't like a theoretical map or any sort?



Robert Smithson
Entropic Steps, 1970
Pencil on paper
19 × 24 in. (48.3 × 61 cm)

around 1966 there was an inkling or an intuition that earthworks might be an interesting idea to get into. I had also suggested to the architectural company to let Robert Morris and Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt do something, and they each presented proposals which I included in the aerial art program. I wanted to do a spiral actually, a triangulated spiral made out of concrete. And then there were also other projects; there was another spiral of a reflecting pool, in other words, a basin.

[...]

There were always things that seemed to be happening. You were in *Primary Structures* at The Jewish Museum in 1966. As well as *Art in Process* at Finch.

Yes. That piece I did up there was called *The Cryosphere*, and that essentially is hexago-

No. It was a lattice structure, you know, that could be conceived of in a crystalline way.

Apropos of that one title, how do you develop the titles for your things? Some of them seem to have very long names. Are they specific references?

Like the *Enantiomorphic Chambers*? That refers to two shapes that tend to mirror each other. In other words, the left and right hand could be considered an enantiomorph. It was a bi-polar notion that comes out of crystal structure. They are two separate things that relate to each other. I would say that in the *Enantiomorphic Chambers* there is also the indication of a dialectical thinking that would emerge later very strongly in the Nonsites.

What about all this endless series of group exhibitions that you've been in around the

country over the years? Do you find them useful for you? Or are they exposure?

At that time, I thought there was a need for them. I think that there was something developing—this was in the mid-sixties—that wasn't around before, in terms of spaces, and in terms of exhibitions. The works were making greater demands, I think, on interior spaces. The small galleries of the late fifties were giving way to these large white rooms and they seemed to be a growing thing.

But by the late sixties everybody worked out of the buildings.

Well, that's what happened. There was always this element toward public art. But that still seemed to be linked somewhat in large works of sculpture that would be put in plazas in front of buildings. I became interested in sites, in a sense these sites had something

to do with entropy. This is one dominant theme that runs through [my work]. You might say that early preoccupation with the early civilizations of the West was a fascination with the coming and going of things. I brought that all together in the first published article that I did for *Artforum*, which was the entropy article. I became interested in low profile landscapes, once again the quarry or the mining area which we call an entropic landscape, a backwater or fringe area. The entropy article was full of suggestions of sites external to the gallery situation. There were all kinds of material in there that broke down the usual confining aspect of academic art.

Also, the material has no sense of scale, doing things that were out of doors, very large, almost competing with any architectural activity that might be around.

I was also interested in a suburban architecture: plain box buildings, shopping centers, that sprawl. And I think this is what fascinated me in my earlier interest with Rome, let's say, this collection, this junk heap of history. But here we are confronted with a consumer society. I know there is a sentence in *The Monuments of Passaic* where I said, "Hasn't Passaic replaced Rome was the Eternal City?" So, there is this almost Borgesian sense of passage of time and labyrinthine confusion that has a certain order. I was looking for that order, an irrational order that developed without any design program.

But it becomes, in a way, an altering of nature someplace, doesn't it?

Well, that's something that I think in the course of one's preoccupation with abstraction, the tendency toward abstraction, this is lodged, I think, in books like [Wilhelm Worringer's] *Abstraction and Empathy* where the tendency of the artist was to exclude the whole problem of nature and dwell on these abstract mental images of flat planes, and empty void spaces, and grids and single lines and stripes, that thing tended to exclude the whole problem of nature.

Right now I feel that I am part of nature and that nature isn't really morally responsible. Nature has no morality.

How do you feel a part of it? I get the feeling that you have a different sensibility now than, say, in the late fifties.

To an extent. I think it's extended over greater stretches of time. It's almost as though I was involved in a personal archaeology all though this, going through the layers of, let's say, the last 2,000 years of civilization and going back into the more archaic civilizations—the Egyptian and Mayan and Aztec civilizations. I did travel. I hitchhiked to Mexico when I was about nineteen and visited the pyramids outside of Mexico City.

Was that because you knew about them? Or you wanted to go to Mexico?

I always had this urge, there was something about that civilized refuse around. That entropy article was more about a built in obsolescence. In fact, I remember I was impressed by [Vladimir] Nabokov, who says that the future is the obsolete in reverse. I became more and more interested in the stratifications and the layerings. I think it had something to do with the way crystals build up too. I did a series of pieces called *Stratas*. Virginia Dwan's is called *Glass Strata* which is a lot of pieces of glass; it's eight feet long by a foot wide, looks like a glass staircase made out of inch-thick glass; it's very green, very dense and layered up. And my writing proceeded that way. I thought of writing more as a material to put together than as an analytic searchlight.

But did the writing affect the development of things that you made?

Language tended to inform my structures. If there was any notation it was a linguistic notation. I, together with Sol LeWitt, thought up the Language shows at the Dwan Gallery. I was interested in language as a material entity at that time, as something that wasn't involved in ideational; a lot of conceptual artists become essentially ideational and —

How do you mean as a material?

As printed matter. The information has a physical presence for me rather than ... I would construct my articles the way I would construct my work.

I'm curious about that. Does it relate to philosophy? Or to semantics? Or do you find it relates to a more aesthetic attitude toward art?

I think it relates to a physicalist or materialist view of the world, which of course leads one into a Marxist view. So that the old idealisms of irrational philosophies began to diminish. Although I was always interested in [Jorge Luis] Borges' writings and the way he would use left-over remnants of philosophy.

When did you get interested in him?

Around 1965. That taking a discarded system and using it as an armature. This has always been my world view.

Do you think it's so much the system that's the valuable aspect, or the utilization of it?

It's a convenience, you might say. It's another construction on the mires of things that have already been constructed. My thinking became increasingly dialectical. I was still working with the resolution of the organic and the crystalline, and that seemed resolved in dialectics for me. I created the dialectic of site and Nonsite. The Nonsite exists as a deep three-dimensional abstract map that points to a specific site of the surface of the earth and that's designated by a mapping procedure. These places are not destinations; they're backwaters or fringe areas

How do you arrive at those different areas?

I don't know — it's a tendency toward a primordial consciousness, a tendency toward the prehistoric after digging through the histories.

Do you work from a large map? Or do you work from having been in that part of the world?

A lot of the Nonsites are in New Jersey. I think that those landscapes embedded themselves in my consciousness at a very early date, so that in a sense I was beginning to make archaeological trips into the recent past to Bayonne, New Jersey.

So, in a sense it was a real place that then became abstracted into a Nonsite?

Yes. And which then reflected the confinement of the gallery space so that the site itself was open and, although the Nonsite designates the site, the site itself is open and really unconfined and constantly being changed. And then the thing was to bring these two things together. To a great extent that culminated in the *Spiral Jetty*. But there are other smaller works that preceded that — the investigations in Yucatán.

How did that come about?

Here was an alien world, a world that couldn't really be comprehended on any rational level; you know, the jungle had grown up over these vanished civilizations. I was interested in the fringes around these areas.

What do you mean, fringes?

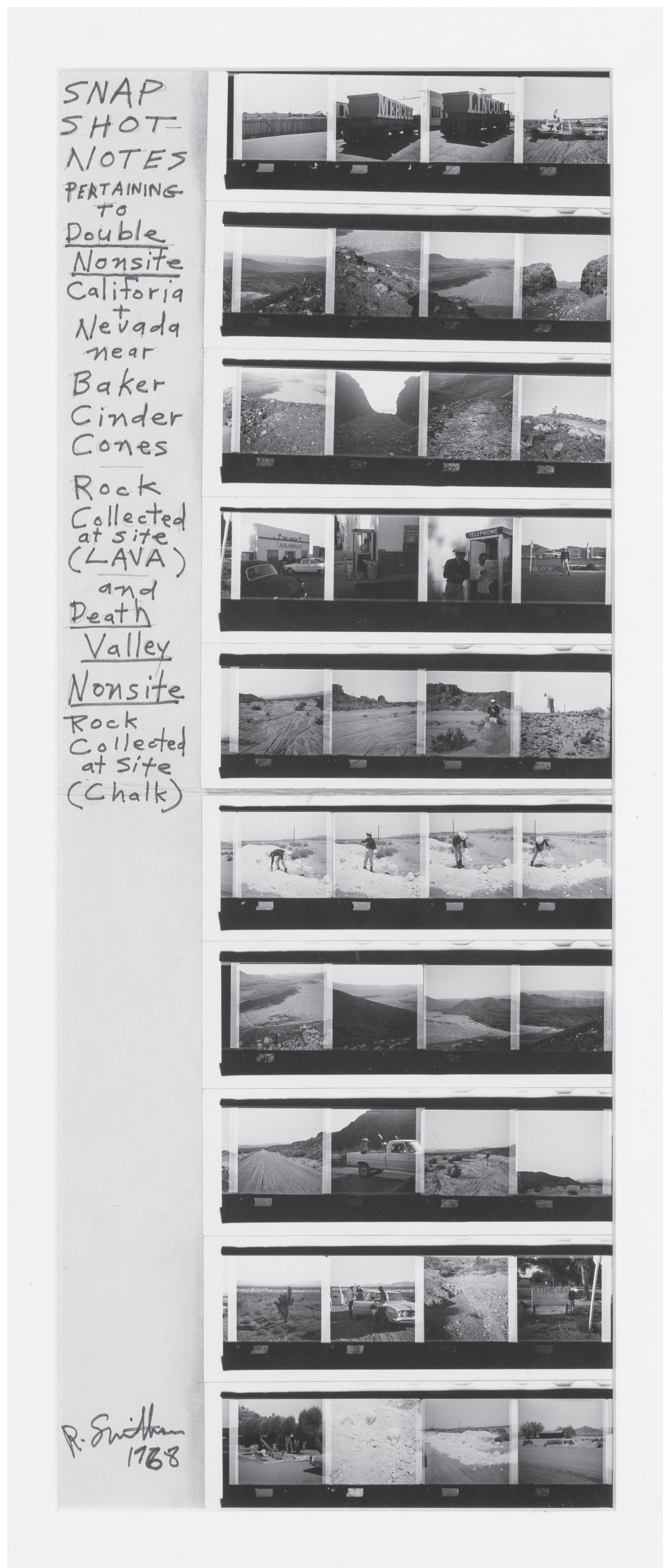
Like these backwater sites again, maybe a small quarry, a burnt out field, a sand bank, a remote island. I found that I was dealing not so much with the center of things, but with the peripheries. So that I became very interested in that whole dialogue between the circumference and the middle and how those two things operated together.

But most of the sites are not in metropolitan areas, are they? They're usually in the country.

Most of them are in New Jersey; there's one in Bayonne, there's one in Edgewater, one in Franklin Furnace, one in the Pine Barrens. Since I grew up in New Jersey, I would say that I was saturated with a consciousness of that. And then, strangely enough, the other ones — I did a

double Nonsite in California and Nevada, so that I went from one coast to the other. The last Nonsite actually is one that involves coal and there the site belongs to the Carboniferous Period, so it no longer exists; the site becomes completely buried again. There's no topographical reference. Its submerged reference based on hypothetical

I began to question very seriously the whole notion of Gestalt, the thing in itself, specific objects. I began to see things in a more relational way. I had to question, you know, where the works were, what they were about. The very construction of the gallery with its neutral white rooms became questionable. I became inter-



Robert Smithson
SNAPSHOT NOTES Pertaining to "Double Nonsite" California + Nevada near Baker Cinder Cones Rock Collected at site (LAVA) and "Death Valley Nonsite" Rock Collected at Site (Chalk), 1968
Black and white gelatin silver contact prints, felt tip marker on paper
20 × 8 in. (50.8 × 20.3 cm)

land formations from the Carboniferous Period. The coal comes from somewhere in the Ohio and Kentucky area, but the site is uncertain. That was the last Nonsite; you know, that was the end of that. So, I wasn't dealing with the land surfaces.

How did you develop the idea of the sites and Nonsites, as opposed to building specific objects?

ested in bringing attention to the abstractness of the gallery as a room, and yet at the same time taking into account less neutral sites, sites that would in a sense be neutralized by the gallery. So, it became a preoccupation with place.

One thing you never finished discussing was the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport.
Well, they eventually lost their contract.

The pieces were never built. Although there was an interest, I don't think that they fully got out of me what they thought they would have gotten. But as far as my relationship there goes, it was very worthwhile for me because it got me to think about large land areas and then, I think to a great extent the dialogue between the terminal and the fringes of the terminal—once again, between the center and the edge of things—has been a going preoccupation, part of the dialectic between the inner and the outer. That range of thinking preoccupies me quite a bit.

[...]

You really like mining sites and quarries and that material. How do you develop the ideas?

Somebody one time defined entropy as what happened when Humpty Dumpty fell down and everybody tries to put everything together, tried to put him together again. There is that continuity. I was trying to develop a reflection in terms of the physical world, so that these two things could coincide. The mental and the material, within a sense inform each other. I would say that what one gets is a dialectics of entropy. There's always this aspect of contrast and conflict with the mirror pieces. You have this raw material played against the very abstractness of the squares in the mirrors. Then gradually, of course, the mirrors would suggest water — the major pieces that I work toward, like the *Spiral Jetty* and the *Broken Circle* in Holland, all involve water.

Do you write as much now as you did through the late 60s?

No, because I feel that the problem right now is very different. I've been writing—it's been mainly trying to coordinate projects, and writing letters which have to make sense to people who don't know anything about art. I find that I'm writing very brass tacks instructional epistles.

Would the writing influence the development of specific pieces? Were they rather separate, or were they very involved?

I think they interrelated. They interconnected sometimes; in many instances I think the writing provided a context that wasn't readily available, that I was going toward, and it tended to reinforce what I was doing. I wrote mainly out of a need to discover things for myself. They were more a speculative writing that did serve to inform my works.

I'm curious about the whole writing process. Building something like the *Spiral Jetty* must have required a certain amount of planning and coordination, and people, and equipment, and all those things. Where does that whole process come into the development of what one finally looks at, sees, or walks on, or drives on, or doesn't see?

More and more, the whole notion of the art as a thing in itself completely dropped away from my interests. And I saw that as why I was never really a minimal artist. I was never involved in that notion, the thing in itself. I always saw these relationships. With the *Spiral Jetty*, it was a matter of making contact with the community out there, researching the area. I went out with Nancy [Holt], and we did all the work ourselves, going through courthouses and meeting with land officials, and searching for contractors that would do it. I wanted to make a film, so it was a matter of coordinating the film situation right into the very process. *Spiral Jetty* took all these seeming disparate things, and then brought them all together in conglomeration of different kinds of work. There were all these facets of art that I think you'd see the boundaries of the enclosed gallery situation. I've always been fascinated by what's open and what's closed. [Those] two things began to operate on a more social level. I became less involved in simply a personal pursuit, and more and more involved. Art is a necessity, rather than a luxury. Art is real estate, more than commodity. The more intimate works, the earlier period, they were fabricated in small factories. There seemed to be a growing relationship with not the New York art world, but with [places] like Brigham City [Utah].

How did you select [the Great] Salt Lake?

I had read a book about salt lakes in Bolivia, and I heard that they had red water in them. I'd always been trying to do a large work, but I didn't want to do it as a gesture. I wanted to have a real physical mass if I did it. The Dwan Gallery was then ready to back such a project because of the *Earth Show* that took place. I wrote an article *Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*, which created a context that gave direction to this thing, which made it easier for people to back it. I got the financing from the Dwan Gallery, and went out and did it quietly.

The thing that intrigues me is the fact that you did make a film of it. There are also still photographs, or were the still photographs taken from the film?

The still photographs were made by Gianfranco Gorgoni, who documented the piece. I, in a sense, directed the photographs. The *Spiral Jetty* was built in 1970, in April, and I returned in June with Gianfranco. We had to rent a helicopter, and I had to get the right angles and the right shots, and that thing. He actually took the photographs of the finished work. I showed that documentation in the Museum of Modern Art *Information* show. That was the first public indication that it was there.

I'm curious about everything that led up to the actual work of building it. How long did it take, and what problems did you run into?

The negotiations took about two months. I went out there, I didn't have anything really specific in mind. The Nonsites really were a matter of investigating the external landscape situations. Prior to that, at Kent State in January of 1970, I did a piece called *Partially Buried Woodshed*, which was the covering-up of this 80-foot rectilinear woodshed with earth. The idea was to keep piling earth on top of the roof of this building until the central beam cracked, and then that was that. Then all of the site investigations in the Yucatán trip. I was very conscious the site in a sense had to tell me what to do. I wasn't working out of a one-sided abstract mode. I had to think about the geology and the ecology and all that thing.

So, there was no real pre-conceived idea?

There was no pre-conceived [idea]. Although the spiral was there, in a work called *Gyrostasis*, which is actually going to be in the Smithsonian Institution, [at the] Hirshhorn. That was the triangulated progression. Once again, it was more crystalline than organic, and also more mental than physical.

One of the things that has interested me, to use the word you used, is documentation. So many people recently seem to be involved in doing things that are generally inaccessible and they end up showing drawings and charts and photographs and films and models, and that thing, almost in the way that an architectural firm might present to a client. You know, "This is what we can build for you for X amount of money, and X space," you know?

The whole aspect of documentary interests me. I've been interested in film for quite a long time. I think my notion of documentation is really that there's a dialectic between the signified and the signifier, that these two things function as an equation. In other words, the photograph X is really a map, it's done with a camera. But

it's an aspect of the piece, it's a facet of the piece, it's a part of a consciousness of the piece that's generated through all these various forms of other kinds of works that relate to the piece. In other words, whether it be drawings, photographs—

Where they're really mediums—

There's a generative aspect to different kinds of responses. Whether it be writing, photographs, all these things seem to generate from something that's very physical and very much there. And I mean, the way the piece is viewed. I know Air West now flies over the *Spiral Jetty* on its way out of Salt Lake [City] to Seattle, and they point it out. There are all kinds of ways of responding to it. The *Jetty* might be underwater at one time, it might not be underwater, everything is in a constant state of change. This is a stabilizing factor. The reason I've insisted on a physicality even in terms of language. Language is a physical thing.

How do you see that?

To me it's opaque, you know? It's a buildup. Language seems to be like stratas in the earth. It's there, has some meaning. A book is like a little strata to me, in the way the words—the way the sentences go—

—go on the page.

It's like there's layers and layers of stuff, and it's printed material.

That's interesting, because so many people think

of books as the linear idea rather than the—

No, it's like the Earth, it's all stratified. It's the Great Circular Book that Borges talks about. So, I see language like that. I wrote something for *Aspen Magazine*, actually called *Strata*. Dan Graham edited it. It's more of an archaeology of reproduction of classification, an investigation of how things are ordered. I would give descriptions of glass cases with rocks in them, or something to that effect. Or how this map represents the Pre-Cambrian period, what it looks like, whether it's a graph on the museum wall, or whatever. You know, all this pileup with information about something external. In other words, so that it becomes a map of a map that points to—

Points to more things than is necessarily apparent, you know?

In fact, Rosalind Krauss, the critic, said that the *Spiral Jetty* itself was a document because of the changes it goes through.

[...]

Since many of these places are generally inaccessible, what meaning does the documentation have to people who can't fly out to Utah or go to New Jersey, or wherever? If they see it only in terms of drawings, photographs, films. Do you think that gets across what you want to do and say?

I think if it's done effectively. If you make a good photograph or a good movie. That's

work that would fit into that [was] more conventional large sculptures, basically movable objects but very big ones. I wrote to [the curator] Wim Beeren, and told him to try to get me something where—well, first I started with the Zuiderzee. I thought I could use dredging machines in the Zuiderzee, and that didn't work out. I was going to work in the peat region, peat mines, and that didn't work out. He contacted a person, Sjouke Zijlstra, in Emmen who was a geographer. He let me know that these quarries were in the northern part of Emmen, sand quarries. When I got there, everything clicked, and after a week of negotiations, we started work immediately, which was very good. I think that the show itself was important. There are flaws in the show, but it was a show that did extend all throughout Holland. It wasn't confined by a park or a museum, which I thought was a very good thing to do. One of the major problems right now, is to overcome that confined shell.

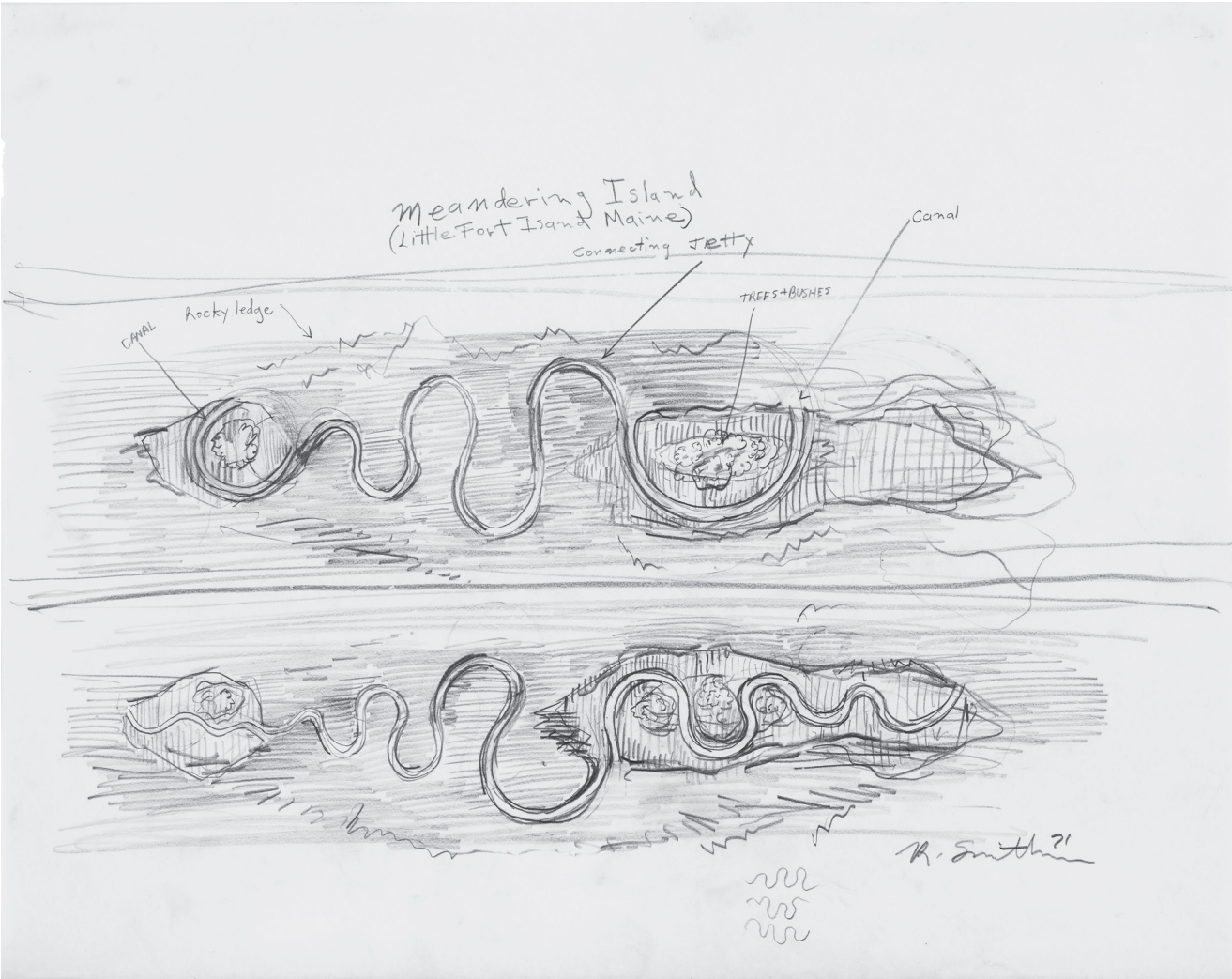
[...]

What about current activities?

I haven't really worked on a major piece since the *Broken Circle*. That's about a little more than a year ago now. I've been trying to since find a way out of the current art world context, into another context.

In what way?

Well, my involvement with the reclama-



Robert Smithson
Meandering Island (Little Fort Island Maine), 1971
Pencil on paper
19 × 24 in. (48.3 × 61 cm)

one aspect of it; it's a generation of material that tends to accumulate around the piece, like the salt crystals. All this material is developing and proliferating and massing itself up, from newspaper articles to photographs to drawings. I wrote an article about it myself; it'll be in a book that [the publisher George] Braziller's putting out, called *Art and the Environment*. I made the movie and photographs, and drawings. I consider all these things, starting with language, right on through to the *Jetty* itself. To an extent, everything is a document.

[...]

A photograph, or a movie, has a tangibility. The piece has a tangibility. I've been out there with people who really don't have a perception of physicality, so they might not be able to respond to it on that level.

That's one of your largest projects?

No, that's the largest. The piece [*Broken Circle/Spiral Hill*] in Holland comes close. It's the extension of the *Jetty* into the lake, that gives it its great size. The piece in Holland I consider quite substantial. That was made in conjunction with [the periodic outdoor exhibition] *Sonsbeek*. I was asked to do something for Sonsbeek Park but I felt that I couldn't do anything in the park. Already that was a work of art in itself. I needed a more differentiated landscape in order to work with. The park had already settled in, and the

tion project, and the strip mining areas is an example. I went up to Maine recently, to look for property up there to possibly do something up there. I'll probably be going out to California, there's a possibility of doing something on the Salton Sea in southern California. I really would like to see myself involved directly in involved in the industry, where the industry actually make needs my art as a necessary part of their reclamation projects, where industry takes on a more acute sense of the visual. I do find perhaps the whole ecological crisis has brought about, in terms of art in the landscape, [the fact that] one has to start thinking about exactly where the art comes from. You can buy your steel plate to make a piece of steel sculpture, but I would be more interested in tracing that back to its origins, back to the smelting and all those elements, and getting them all in the whole apparatus of the company, rather than a gallery. I think the big issue is whether or not art is going to remain an isolated entity within the confines of the art world. Whether it will inflate itself the point of aesthetic fatigue with all this proliferation of objects in SoHo. Or whether it will find a new context. That's really what interests me most. I've been going around talking to people. I talked to the head of the Bureau of Mines in Maine who was very sympathetic, and felt that the mining industry could use somebody like me.

You seem to get a fairly happy response from people you go to see around the country.

It has to do with changing attitudes. I'm not interested in alienating the ordinary person. I think there's a tradition in art, where there's a need to try to shock, in terms of a Dada approach, deepen the artist's alienation. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in having the art effect as many people as possible, and yet keep it as something that really has a strong impact. I would like as many people to be involved with it as possible, from different walks of life. I enjoy talking to these people because they are involved in concrete problems. I could retreat from these problems, and take a pure stance, but I find that doesn't interest me.

Have you had interest in ecology for a long time?

I think it's developed. Ecology to me has, like, replaced—I mean, that's the official religion right, that's another religion, because of all the different views of the landscape. The artist has been locked in his studio so long, preoccupied with these formal problems that can only end up in another vacuum. This is in a sense is post-studio art, it's post-gallery art, it's post-museum art. It belongs to a greater situation. There are more people that have to get involved. It's not collectible.

Do you find that the materials and the situations suggest a great deal? Or do you have ideas that wander around looking for specific situations?

I think it's a little bit of both. When I was painting, immediately you start working with titanium white, you know what I mean? You wonder where that comes from. That was always a boring thing to think, the idea that you go to your corner art store and buy some titanium white. It's all processed and manufactured. To follow that process, of the making of that paint back to its point of origin, and then finding the material as close to the initial source as possible, getting back to that material, then everything starts. Then the very physicality of those rocks with the salt and the water generates all these levels and proliferations of reproduction or documentation. There are people in Utah that see it; it may not be in Manhattan, but there are people out there. It's a different audience that responds to it. I think that artists have tremendous mobility now. The airplane has created such a—

—new way of thinking and looking at things.

[...]

Do you like the activity of traveling?

Yeah, I think that's very much part of it, that's in itself a kind of art. Vacations are another thing, that's a whole other study.

In what way?

They seem a new affluent form of contemplation. It's very hard for me to sit on a beach, or something. When I go away, I prefer to be really engaged and working. In fact, when I'm in New York, it's almost like a vacation. It's an interesting area, the whole notion of guidebooks, the values that come out of that. Tours.

Your *Jetty's* become part of a tour now, for all those people who fly over it.

Yeah, right, but it's there. Students are always going there. There's not a day where I don't get some reference to it. It's very interesting to me, actually. I feel very close to it myself. It's something that all the other work was pointing toward, but all that work is part of it, with all its byways.

[...]

Edited by Lisa Le Feuvre, May 2021, for Abstract Cartography.

Oral history interview with Robert Smithson, 1972 July 14-19. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Full transcript at <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-smithson-12013>

A photograph of Robert Smithson, wearing glasses and a light-colored shirt, looking down at a large geological map of New Jersey. The map is titled "TRAP ROCKS OF THE NEWARK SERIES TRIASSIC OF NEW JERSEY" and shows various geological features and locations. The entire image is overlaid with a red tint.

ROBERT SMITHSON ABSTRACT CARTOGRAPHY

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

NEW YORK

24 JUNE—20 AUGUST 2021

ROBERT SMITHSON WITH MAP OF NEW JERSEY, 1968 PHOTOGRAPH: NANCY HOLT © HOLT/SMITHSON FOUNDATION, LICENSED BY VAGA AT ARS, NEW YORK

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