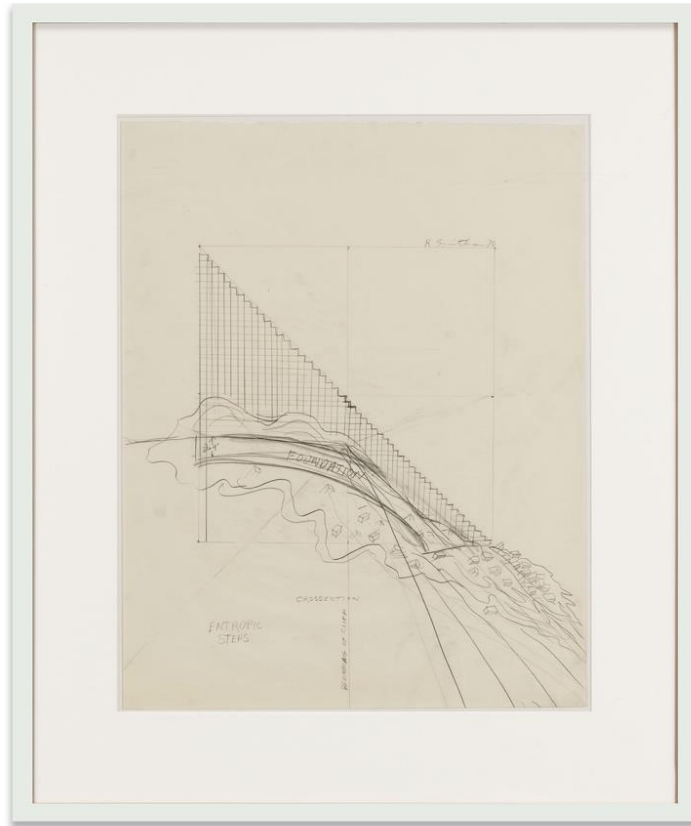


## *Robert Smithson: Abstract Cartography*

by Ann McCoy (July/August 2021)



Robert Smithson, *Entropic Steps*, 1970. Pencil on paper, 19 x 24 inches. Courtesy Holt/Smithson Foundation and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Holt/Smithson Foundation, Licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

This museum-quality exhibition gem gives us a window into Robert Smithson’s “inklings” of his imminent earthworks, during a germinal period (1966–71). Smithson would die two years later, in 1973, at the age of 35. The vast expanse of Smithson’s artistic vision is staggering, and in this exhibition, we are transported on a geological timeline from the Proterozoic to a futuristic possibility of entropic collapse. Smithson’s work explores crystalline dimensions beyond Frank Stella’s “what you see” and the stationary world of his fellow Minimalists. We cheer him on as he rails against Clement Greenberg or gets into fights at Max’s Kansas City. Smithson was an autodidact and encyclopedist reminiscent of Harry E. Smith, who also dodged formal education and vaulted into his own exploration of the American landscape. Both men occupied an art world before the theoretical programming of the MFA industry, following the beat of their own drummers.

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

The curators Lisa Le Feuvre, Executive Director of Holt/Smithson Foundation, and the gallery's Philipp Kaiser have given us a scholarly exhibition which, in a perfect world, would travel to every university museum for the benefit of students.

Two films introduce the artist: *Mono Lake* (1968/2004) (edited by Nancy Holt after his 1973 death), shows Smithson, Michael Heizer in his James Dean incarnation, and Holt exploring the shores of Mono Lake. The barren landscape with its tufa towers resembles the far side of the moon. Heizer and Smithson read from *Rock Hounding Out of Bishop* by Cora B. Houghtaling, describing the glacial history, salt concentration through evaporation over millennia, and algae, worms, flies, and ducks that fed bands of Paiutes through lean winters. Smithson is the adult incarnation of the boy who haunted the Natural History Museum, as he collects cinders and surveys a landscape not unlike the Great Salt Lake, site of his future *Spiral Jetty* (1970). A second film shot by Holt—*Bob with Books: Roof of 799 Greenwich St., New York, 1971*—gives us a portrait of Smithson as autodidact. Here, Smithson has chosen the story of Atlantis and the works of the Marquis de Sade, which, along with his science fiction obsession, make us suspect his reading had an imaginal arc reminiscent of Borges.



Robert Smithson, *Surd Deposit*, n.d. Pencil on paper, 19 x 24 inches. Courtesy Holt/Smithson Foundation and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Holt/Smithson Foundation, Licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

The exhibition's first two works, *Entropic Steps* (1970), and *Surd Deposit* (n.d.), are prophetic and resonate today as we see televised images of sinking flooded cities and approaching catastrophe. In essays like *Entropy and the New Monuments* (1966), Smithson understood the inevitability of decay and biological evolution in a way that his fellow artists did not. "Where is time?", "Where is Flavin's Monument?". The artist described entropy as "Humpty Dumpty had a great fall," and "all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put [him] back together again." A series of drawings of whimsical Robinson Crusoe-like fantasy mobile islands supply a microcosmic escape solution of sorts. *Tropical Island* (n.d.) has a lookout tower, brick furnace, and supply of coal and wood. Later island drawings would feature complex rustic villages.

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The exhibition's leitmotif is cartography and his obsessive interest in mapping in all of its manifestations. Smithson airily surveys, Topographic Maps transmogrify into ghostly black photostats of progressive sizes, maps are torn and fragmented, perspectives of longitude and latitude are distorted, latitudes are cut out like a doughnut, and meridians fan out like the peel of an orange. The artist, a writer of magnitude, says it best in his own words:

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 in 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)<sup>2</sup>

*Untitled* (1967) is a pivotal piece. Quadrant maps are stacked on cut-out sheets, the Passaic River shown with sunken mirror cutouts. We are given a glimpse of how these maps dovetailed into the later stacked glass pieces, and how a two-dimensional map surface was returned to three-dimensional form. We see three such pieces in the North gallery.



Robert Smithson, *Untitled*, 1967. Map of Passaic, New Jersey; map on mirrors, 1 x 14 x 14 inches. Courtesy Holt/Smithson Foundation and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Holt/Smithson Foundation, Licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

The artist moves into the world of aerial photography with his interest in Alexander Graham Bell, who developed a grid connection between ground and air using a crystalline system, with tetragonal lattice kites and observation stations; this was key to Smithson's reimagining of the concept of an airport. In 1966 Smithson was asked to work with the architectural consulting firm Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton on a regional Texas airport between Dallas and Fort Worth. Smithson reimagined the airport with the perimeters as art sites viewed both from approaching planes and on television screens from within the terminal. Core and auger borings containing sediments from the Cretaceous Age linked the airport from its foundations in the geologic stratigraphy to outer space. One of the most interesting airport drawings, *A Web of White Gravel Paths Surrounding Water Storage Tanks* (1967), is also shown in a photostat version.

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White gravel paths six feet wide in the shape of a giant spider web may be seen from the air or walked upon. Planes, like flies, are ensnared in this imaginary web, which is among the most poetic images in the exhibition.

*Airport Site Map* (ca. 1967) features four outer sites to be developed by Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Smithson, and Sol Lewitt. Reflecting on this today, we shudder at one of Carl Andre's proposals: dropping a one-ton bomb from 10,000 feet to form a crater. During this period, when women were rarely funded, we can only dream of an alternative site featuring projects by Nancy Holt, Michelle Stuart, Agnes Denes, and Mary Miss.



Robert Smithson, *Shift*, 1967. Painted metal, 23 x 30 x 32 inches. Courtesy Holt/Smithson Foundation and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Holt/Smithson Foundation, Licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

The North gallery offers a treat with a collection of never-before-seen sculptural models made of cardboard and masking tape, which were part of Nancy Holt's private collection. These models offer us a window into the artist's process and his interest in crystalline geometry. They are examples of Smithson's hands-on thinking, which could expand to an architectural scale. Other gems show Smithson's explorations of distorted perspective. The "shifts" are perhaps the most beautiful: *Shift* (1967), a sculpture, and *Drawing for Shift* (1967). The "shifts" and "pointless vanish point" drawings and sculptures are part of a concept the artist defined as Alogons, "something that suspends primary order and rationality. And breaks with a gestalt".<sup>3</sup> The shifts resemble ancient sedimentary strata subjected to warping by geological upheavals and pressure and heat.

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It is nearly impossible to sum up this complex and important period of the artist's work in a short review. The exhibition's newspaper and captions inspire the viewer to explore a wealth of excellent scholarship by Ann Reynolds, Phyllis Tuchman, Thomas Crow, and others, as well as dive into the artist's collected writings. That Smithson produced such a body of writing by the age of thirty-five is astonishing. For those viewers unable to attend the exhibition, the gallery website offers an excellent tour of the exhibition with commentary, and the Holt/Smithson Foundation is another great resource.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 11.

<sup>2</sup> Smithson, 54.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004) 94.