

QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

Although Robert Smithson died aged only 35, his short career has inspired more young artists than most among the generation that emerged in the 1960s. A formidable writer and critic as well as an artist, his interests ranged from Catholicism to mineralogy to science fiction. His earliest pieces were paintings and collages, but he soon came to focus on sculpture; he responded to the Minimalism and Conceptualism of the early 1960s and he started to expand his work out of the galleries and into the landscape. In 1970 he produced the Earthwork, or Land Art, for which he is best known, *Spiral Jetty*, a remarkable coil of rock composed in the colored waters of a shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. And in 1973 he died in a light aircraft accident when he was surveying the site for another Earthwork in Texas.

Key Ideas

- Smithson is one of the most influential of the diverse generation who emerged in the wake of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, and who are known as Postminimalists. Although inspired by Minimalism's use of industrial materials, and its interest in the viewer's experience of the space around the art object (as much as the object itself), the Postminimalists sought to abandon even more aspects of traditional sculpture. Smithson's approaches are typical of this group: he constructed sculptures from scattered materials; he found ways to confuse the viewer's understanding of sculpture (often by using mirrors, or confusing scales); and his work sometimes referred to sites and objects outside of the gallery, leading the viewer to question where the art object really resided.
- Much of Smithson's output was shaped by his interest in the concept of entropy, the second law of thermodynamics which predicts the eventual exhaustion and collapse of any given system. His interest in geology and mineralogy confirmed this law to him, since in rocks and rubble he saw evidence of how the earth slows and cools. But the idea also informed his outlook on culture and civilization more generally: his famous essay, "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1969), draws analogies between the quarries and the strip malls and tract housing

of New Jersey, suggesting that ultimately, the later will also perish and return to rubble.

- Smithson's concepts of "Site" and "Nonsite" - the former being a location outside the gallery, the latter being a body of objects and documentation inside the gallery - were important contributions to the body of ideas surrounding Land Art in the 1960s. His discussion of monuments and ruins in his writing also helped many to think about the purpose art might have in the landscape, after the demise of the tradition of commemorative public sculpture.

DETAILED VIEW:

Childhood

Robert Smithson expressed a profound interest in the arts from an early age. While still attending high school in Clifton, New Jersey, during the mid 1950s, he attended art classes on the side in New York City. For two years he was enrolled at The Art Students League in New York, and, for a briefer period, at The Brooklyn Museum School.

Through his studies and training, Smithson became fascinated with the Abstract Expressionists, in particular with David Smith, Tony Smith, Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis. Later in his career Smithson said that he found David Smith's sculpture

particularly captivating for its use of unnatural materials (steel) that were allowed to be altered (i.e. rust, decay and discoloring) by time and natural elements. Several years before Smithson expressed any interest in Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and working with the natural environment, the young artist was drawing, painting, and making collages.

Early Period and Training

In the late 1950s Smithson was noticed by art dealer Virginia Dwan, and granted his first solo show at the Artists' Gallery in 1959. At this time, Smithson's paintings, drawings, and collages (he had yet to begin sculpting), drew in part on Abstract Expressionism; his works were multi-media, but still two-dimensional artworks made using gouache, crayon, pencil, and photography.

Through his connection with Dwan, Smithson was introduced to several key artists and sculptors who were pioneering the Minimalist art movement of the early 1960s, including Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, and Smithson's soon-to-be wife, Nancy Holt. Holt and Smithson married in 1963. The formation of these friendships would mark a significant turning point in Smithson's career.

The collages he produced in the early 1960s, including *Untitled (Tear)* (1961-63), *Untitled (Conch Shell, Spaceship and World Land Mass)* (1961-63), and *Algae* (~1962), were still very much in keeping with an abstract and expressionist aesthetic, but

they clearly suggest the artist's growing fascination with the earth as an inspirational resource, and his concern with themes of permanence, natural and unnatural materials, and site-specific art.

By 1964 Smithson had taken up sculpture, inspired in large part by the Minimalism that was coming into vogue. It was clear from the beginning, however, that Smithson was not entirely comfortable confining himself and his work to the studio. Throughout the mid 1960s he made several trips to New Jersey to visit quarries and industrial wastelands. He also paid several visits to the American West and Southwest, sparking in him an interest in deserts and sprawling tracts of land which appear unblemished by human intervention.

Mature Period

Smithson's sculptures of the mid 1960s maintain a strong resemblance to the Minimalist installations of Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Morris. Painted steel works such as *Plunge*, *Alogon #2*, and *Terminal* (all from 1966), employed industrial materials, geometric forms, and a restricted palette. They were built indoors and intended for indoor display.

By 1967-68 Smithson was focused on two peculiar forms of sculpture, *Sites* and *Non-sites*, using mirrors and natural materials to create a new form of three-dimensional work. For his *Sites* projects, Smithson made several trips to New Jersey, Mexico, England, and West Germany, among other places, often accompanied by his wife Nancy Holt and dealer Virginia Dwan. While at these chosen sites (barren wastelands, salt flats, and wooded areas), Smithson placed a series of mirrors in natural settings and photographed the newly altered landscapes. The results created an effect of beauty and unease at having inserted such blatantly unnatural materials into an untouched setting.



For his *Non-sites*, Smithson situated mirrored surfaces into the corner or center of a room, in effect creating virtual doorways. Contrasting with these mirrors were the natural materials Smithson had scavenged from his trips, including mica, essen soil, red sandstone, limestone, sand, gravel, and other materials. Many of these *Non-site* projects would directly mirror his *Sites*, as in the case of *Chalk Mirror Displacement* (1969), a single work located in two different locales: its original quarry site in Oxted, England (*Site*), and later in the gallery space (*Non-site*). What made the *Sites/Non-sites* such a unique artistic endeavor was that Smithson was first altering the landscape, then bringing the exhibiting

materials from the site in the gallery.

Simultaneous with Smithson's production of *Sites/Non-sites*, the artist was also creating a series of works called *Photo-Markers*, which were in many ways the direct opposite of *Sites/Non-sites*. *Photo-Markers* also explored the effects of human intervention into the natural landscape, but applied a very different methodology. Smithson would photograph specific sites, enlarge the images, and place these enlargements into the physical landscapes they depicted. He then re-photographed the landscapes, creating an odd juxtaposition of the natural and the reproduced in the same shot - as if nature were referencing itself.

Smithson's first fully-fledged Earthworks were little more than preliminary sketches; site-specific proposals that existed only on paper. Throughout 1969 and 1970 he created a large number of drawings depicting projects that would soon come to fruition - and a few that would not. Early Earthworks, such as *Asphalt Rundown* (Oct. 1969) and *Glue Pour* (Dec. 1969), were inspired in part by his interest in entropy and abstraction, since the dumped and cooled materials created hardened abstract forms which resulted from their loss of heat. They were also demonstrations of Smithson's growing fascination with industrial areas and human neglect of wastelands.

His grandest achievement, and his most famous work,

was *Spiral Jetty* (1970). After much searching, Smithson purchased a plot of land on the northern shore of the Great Salt Lake, Utah, and inserted into the violet-red water a massive spiral constructed of some 6,650 tons of earth. The *Jetty*, unlike previous Earthworks, maintained a harmony with its natural environment; it is an unnatural extension of the natural landscape, albeit one that, according to Smithson "[had been] disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization, or nature's own devastation.". In subsequent years Smithson embarked on other Earthworks projects that were in keeping with this artistic philosophy. In 1971 he completed *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill*, located in a quarry near Emmen, Holland, after which he returned to the United States to undertake what would be his last project, and one Smithson himself would never realize.

Final Years and Death

In the summer of 1973 Smithson was traveling in a small airplane to survey the site for his newest project, called *Amarillo Ramp*. The plane crashed, killing him, the pilot, and the photographer who was accompanying them. Even though Smithson was robbed of the opportunity to build *Amarillo Ramp*, the project was completed shortly after his death by his widow Nancy Holt, Richard Serra, and others.



Writings

In addition to being an artist, Smithson was also an accomplished critic, essayist, and theoretician. Writing for the publications *Artforum* and *Arts Magazine*, mostly between the years 1967 and 1970, he developed intriguing theories involving the convergence of earth, language, and art. In a September 1968 *Artforum* piece entitled "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," he wrote: "Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which 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 prehistorical material that is entombed in the Earth's crust."

The above text is indicative of a constant theme in Smithson's writings and art: time. Throughout his career, he became increasingly fascinated with the element of time, and with humankind's repeated attempts to control it. These attempts, according to Smithson, were foolish. He viewed any attempt to control time as tantamount to devaluing it altogether and defrauding the earth of its essential right to exist. He also presented this theme in his 1970 Earthwork *Partially Buried Woodshed*, located in Kent, Ohio, which consisted of a woodshed partially buried under 20 truckloads of earth. This piece was "built" to illustrate the effects of geologic time and its eventual consumption of all man-made endeavors. Incidentally, other major works, such as *Spiral Jetty*, would

eventually be consumed (temporarily) by the waters that surrounded it.

Legacy

Robert Smithson not only coined the term "Land Art," he gave birth to the movement itself. Interestingly, Smithson's death could be said to have accelerated the Land Art movement. Inspiring a new generation of artists to leave the studio altogether and create art out in the open, the movement represented a unique convergence of installation, Conceptual Art, and environmental awareness. Adding a strange twist to the world of popular art, most of Smithson's works were designed to be consumed by time and nature; thus they were constructed to have a finite life span. Predating Smithson's arrival into the art world, artists hoped to immortalize themselves by creating works that would easily outlast the span of human life. Smithson, in a sense, sought the opposite. His incursions into wastelands and no-man's lands were dialectical attempts to show nature's fragility in the industrial world and its powerful ability to defend itself against such incursions.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES:

Below are Robert Smithson's major influences, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

ARTISTS



Allan Kaprow



Donald Judd



William S. Burroughs



J.G. Ballard

FRIENDS



Virginia Dwan



Carl Andre



Claes Oldenburg



Robert Morris



Nancy Holt

MOVEMENTS



Abstract Expressionism



Minimalism



Conceptual Art



Happenings



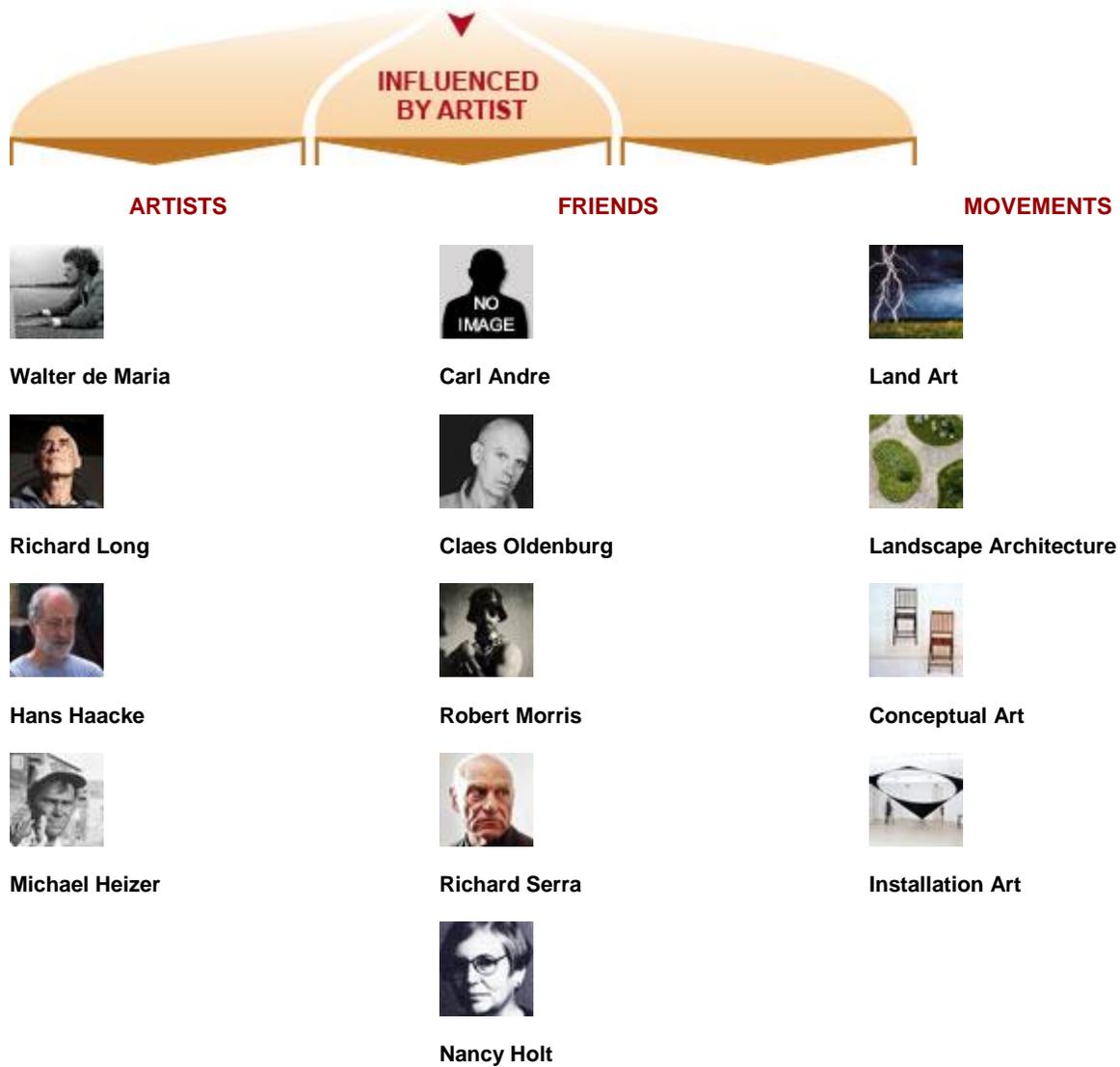
Landscape Architecture

INFLUENCES
ON ARTIST



Robert Smithson

Years Worked: 1959 - 1973



Quotes

"By excluding technological processes from the making of art, we begin to discover other processes of a more fundamental order."

"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.'"

"The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art."

"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."

"I am for an art that takes into account the direct effect of the elements as they exist from day to day apart from representation."

"Nobody wants to go on a vacation to a garbage dump."

ARTWORKS:



Title: *Blind in the Valley of the Suicides*

Year: 1962

Materials: ink on paper

Description: *Blind in the Valley of the Suicides* depicts a human transforming into a tree, and may have been inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It is one of a series of early drawings from 1960-2 that explore the themes of vision and blindness. Smithson would continue to explore the theme of vision throughout his later work - particularly in pieces involving mirrors - but he soon abandoned figurative drawing. Works such as this belong to a part of his career in which he was preoccupied by imagery drawn from the repertoire of science fiction and Catholicism (his mother's religion).

Collection: Estate of Robert Smithson, James Cohan Gallery, New York



Title: *Plunge*

Year: 1966

Materials: Steel; 10 units with square surfaces

Description: Constructed when Smithson was still mostly confining himself to the studio, *Plunge* is in keeping with Minimalism's preoccupation with geometry, repetition, and industrial materials. And many critics who saw this work in Smithson's first solo show at the Dwan Gallery in 1966 identified him as a leading Minimalist. However, there is much in *Plunge* that departs from the aesthetic of mainstream Minimalists such as Donald Judd. In particular, the work is made of a series of stepped units which are positioned such that they slowly increase (or decrease) in size: this sense of progression is quite different from the kind of straightforward repetition employed by Judd's sculpture. While Judd's work is often quite frank about its scale and dimensions, the changing scale in Smithson's *Plunge* makes it strangely difficult to gauge the scale of its individual components, and this attempt to befuddle the viewer is typical of the latter's work.

Collection: The Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO



Title: *Chalk Mirror Displacement*

Year: 1969

Materials: Six mirrors, chalk

Description: Smithson began making the *Mirror Displacement* series shortly after his *Site/ Non-Site* works. While the *Site* pieces generally used material from outside the gallery - rocks, rubble - which was piled in low containers, the *Mirror Displacements* saw the materials simply dumped in heaps on the floor and divided up by mirrors. And while the *Site* pieces always contained a component situated in the gallery, the *Mirror Displacement* pieces were sometimes situated outside - as was this example, which was set up in Oxted Quarry in England. Smithson described the difference between the two kinds of work: "In other *non-sites*, the container was rigid, the material amorphous. In this case, the container is amorphous, the mirror is the rigid thing." As in the *Sites* series, Smithson was preoccupied with the way material, or another site, might be represented: might the materials in the *Displacement* be thought to "mirror" their presence elsewhere?

Collection: Oxted Quarry, England



Title: *Asphalt Rundown*

Year: October, 1969

Materials: Asphalt

Description: Smithson created *Asphalt Rundown* - the first monumental Earthwork that he made outside, to be seen outside - in a quarry on the outskirts of Rome. He loaded a dump truck with hot asphalt, and then had the truck discharge the contents down the sides of a quarry, so that the mixture cooled and hardened as it fell, ultimately seeming to fuse with the sides of the quarry. Smithson said his intention was to "root it in the contour of the land, so that it's permanently there and subject to the [sic] weathering." It demonstrates the importance of entropy in his thinking, since here gravity, and loss of energy, and integral to the creation of the work.

Collection: Rome, Italy



Title: *Spiral Jetty*

Year: April 1970

Materials: Mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water coil

Description: The northern section of the Great Salt Lake, where Smithson chose to site *Spiral Jetty*, was cut off from fresh water supplies when a nearby causeway

was constructed by the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1959. This encouraged the water's unique red-violet coloration, because it produced a concentration of salt-tolerant bacteria and algae. Smithson particularly liked the combination of colors because it evoked a ruined and polluted sci-fi landscape. And, by inserting the *Jetty* into this damaged section, and using entirely natural materials native to the area, Smithson called attention to environmental blight. Nevertheless, he also sought to reference the importance of time in eroding and transforming our environment. The coiling structure of the piece was inspired by the growth patterns of crystals, yet it also resembles a primeval symbol, making the landscape seem ancient, even while it also looks futuristic.

Collection: Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah



Title: *Amarillo Ramp*

Year: 1973

Materials: Soil, rocks, sand

Description: While tragically, Smithson played no role in the actual construction of *Amarillo Ramp*, the posthumous piece is a fitting tribute to his life's work and artistic philosophy. The ramp has slowly eroded since its construction, thus, like all of Smithson's mature Earthworks, it will eventually succumb to the elements, much like natural landscapes themselves. The ramp was originally commissioned by Stanley Marsh, a local ranch owner, who also commissioned Ant Farm's *Cadillac Ranch*, and several other sculptures located along his 200 square miles of land near Amarillo. *Amarillo Ramp* is comprised of a 140-foot diameter partial circle of rock, which ascends from level ground up to a height of 15 feet. At one time the ramp emerged from an artificial body of water called Tecovas Lake, which has since dried out.

Collection: Tecovas Lake, 15 miles NW of Amarillo, Texas



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