ROBERT SMITHSON
Land Reclamation and the Sublime

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LAND RECLAMATION

For the group exhibition of contemporary art Sonsbeek '71 in the Dutch city of Arnhem, Robert Smithson realized Broken Circle and Spiral Hill in an inactive sand-pit in Emmen. On a conical mound, a spiral path runs counter-clockwise. At the top of the Spiral Hill is an observation platform, from which the best view of Broken Circle, located on the edge of the flooded gravel pit, underneath an embankment, is possible. Two circular segments — a dam and a canal — are laid out around an inner circle, which is divided into two segments of water and earth. That which is water in the one half, is earth in the other half. In Broken Circle, two semicircles correspond to one another formally and are simultaneously opposed in terms of material. Somewhat removed from the center of the circle lies a large boulder. The rock is one of the largest of its kind in Holland. It was carried here during the Ice Age by a glacier which ran diagonally across present-day Holland. The materialized presence of a center disturbed Smithson. The expense to remove the erratic block, however, was too great. Finally, he thought: It became a dark spot of exasperation, a geological gangrene on the sandy expanse...a kind of glacial 'heart of darkness' — a warning from the Ice Age.¹

The centripetal, upward winding spiral path and the centrifugal Broken Circle ² with its dam and canal, complement each other as much as they neutralize each other. The sand-pit was already intended as a recreation area when Smithson chose the site. In reaction to the local population's acceptance of the project, Smithson's contribution to the exhibition was maintained as a permanent installation.

The government of the US State of Ohio resolved in April 1972 that owners of abandoned mining pits must adopt precautionary measures since, with high mining walls, poisonous acids are formed as a result of the combining of carbon and air. These acids contribute to the hot-house effect. Since then, in Ohio, the gradient of abandoned mining pits must not exceed 35°. In 1977, President Carter signed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, which specifies that revenue from operating coal mines be charged a supplementary tax and that the individual federal states be responsible for the regulation of these measures. The money collected from this supplementary tax is accrued to the Department of the Interior's Office of Surface Mining. This 'department' distributes the money to the 'Abandoned Mined Lands Reclamation Councils' (AMLR) of the federal states. In many states, only superficial measures are required. In some cases, the fines for neglect are less expensive than the measures themselves.³

Beginning in 1972, Smithson attempted to win American firms for Land Reclamation projects. Of Smithson's projects being planned just before his accidental death, ⁴ Tailing Pond in Creede, Colorado had the greatest chances for becoming realized. The Tailing Pond contains residues, which are produced as a result of the erosion of metal ore. Over a period of 25 years, nine million tons were to be conducted to the terracing. A circular 'dam tapering into road' with a diameter of 2000 feet (50.8 meters) was to be directed around the terraces, with their concave downward leading curves. In addition, a street was planned, which was to bisect this circle and the 'graded basin' around it.⁵

The Kennecott Copper Corporation declined its support. For their enormous 'Bingham Mine' in Utah, with its three mile wide hole, Smithson had suggested a circular lake.⁶ Four dams comprised of circular segments were to lead into a center consisting only of water. With this liquid center between curved dams, the mining terraces would have appeared as the outer rings of an inwardly (counterclockwise) or outwardly (clockwise) rotating whirlpool. Smithson's proposals for Land Reclamation projects of mining pits formed as a result of inexpensive surface mining made more expensive restoration, such as refilling, for example, unnecessary. Combines active in the mining of raw materials nevertheless preferred to transform the devastated land into recreational areas; they could then advertise with this that they would be leaving the land in a much better condition than it ever had before.⁷ Smithson, on the other hand, planned park-like monuments, in which the loss of non-regenerative resources would not be hushed up.

The 'King County Arts Commission of Seattle' organized Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture with seven artists in 1979. For this exhibition, Robert Morris realized a project within a defunct coal mine on the edge of Kent Valley. Except for the largest trees, Morris had all vegetation removed. The remaining trees were cut to a height of approximately 6 feet (1.8 meters) and painted black with creosote. The mining pit was divided into six descending terraces and planted with clover.⁸ The green, terraced mine became a memorial to the exploitation of nature.

In terms of his Earth Art projects, Michael Heizer, unlike Morris, was interested solely in artistic aspects, even when working in abandoned mines: I don't support reclamation-art sculpture projects.⁹
Morris’ projects and especially Heizer’s project Effigy Tumuli on the Buffalo Rock Mesa (1983-85) throw light upon the financing of Land Reclamation in America after Carter’s signing of the 1977 Act. The Foundation of the Ottawa Silica Company, which owned the former coal mines along the Illinois River, selected and paid the artist. Furthermore, they donated the land to the State of Illinois, which integrated it into the ‘Buffalo Rock State Park’. On the land decontaminated by AMLR, Heizer formed five forms recalling regional animals from walls of earth with linear edges. The ‘diffracted gestalt’ of the large earth walls can only be seen from full view from an aircraft. Earlier, the Indians of the northern part of Illinois had also built such walls of earth representing animal forms (‘effigy tumuli’): Heizer was not making references to ecology, but rather to history.

Smithson became for Morris a stimulus for ecologically based outdoor art, which would hinder further damage caused by the nonregenerative exploitation of nature. This ecological, contextual art transforms the devastated land into public, grass covered open spaces, without concealing the consequences of the devastation. Intervention is reduced to the ecologically necessary, with accents also referring to the exploitation of nature.

Whereas Smithson was interested in both ecological and aesthetic questions of landscape architecture and planning, Morris limited himself to exploring the difference between economy and ecology. Heizer’s Effigy Tumuli, on the other hand, withdraws from ecological conflicts in a history oriented park situation.

The Sublime and the Picturesque

In his last article, Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape, Smithson establishes a relationship both to aesthetic discourse by means of the sublime as well as to the tradition of the picturesque. Smithson analyzes New York’s ‘Central Park’ (Manhattan, 1858-1874), which was laid out by Olmsted and Calvert Vaux over a ‘man-made wasteland’ in the face of strong opposition on the part of speculators. Smithson refers to the — for Olmsted paradigmatic — treatises on the picturesque by the Englishman William Gilpin (1724-1804) and Sir Uvedale Price (1747-1829). Following Edmund Burke’s (1729-1797) definitions of the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime, Gilpin and Price situate the picturesque between these two poles. According to Gilpin, the strong impression of the sublime, aroused by simple ideas, is weakened in picturesque representations of landscapes by variety through narrative elements, such as ruins, cottages, people, etc.

Smithson did not place his Earthworks in picturesque, diversified landscapes, but rather in uniform and vacant ones, preferably in ‘scenes of desolation’. Furthermore, in the Land Reclamations mentioned above, he did not work with the variety of the picturesque, which provokes attention, but rather with uniformity. Burke had described the succession and uniformity of parts as artificial infinite in the sense of the sublime: I. Succession; which is requisite that the parts may be continued so long, and in such a direction, as by their frequent impulses on the sense to
impress the imagination with an idea of their progress beyond their actual limits.

2. Uniformity; because if the figures of the parts should be changed, the imagination at every change finds a check, you are presented at every alteration with the termination of one idea, and the beginning of another; by which means it becomes impossible to continue that uninterrupted progression, which alone can stamp on bounded objects the character of infinity.  

Smithson’s Spiral Jetty, Spiral Hill and drawings of spiral Earth Art projects can be analyzed in terms of Burke’s criteria of ‘uniformity’ and ‘succession’. And Gilpin’s criteria of ‘simplicity’, ‘continuation’ and ‘extension’ explain Smithson’s spiral Earthworks, whereas William Lock’s criteria of ‘repetition’, ‘formality’ and ‘regularity’ apply to minimalist sculptures by Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris and Smithson (1964-68), which consist of series of regular or regularly varying, massive units and/or intervals. Gilpin writes in a letter to Lock written on September 29, 1782: Now if this be just, there must be a continuation — not a repetition, of the same idea...the continuation of one large object, ranging uninterruptedly, & uniformly, through a vast space. Simplicity is the principal source of sublimity, as variety is of beauty.  

In the immediately evident complementarity of the circular segment of the Broken Circle in Emmen, the double interruption of the circle appears as in a total correlation (‘continuation’, ‘uniformity’) of regular intervals (‘succession’), not as division for the sake of variety. Smithson’s oeuvre encompasses the sublime and the picturesque: the great gesture in grand, simple, expansive and raw nature, next to the picturesque in fantastic drawings from 1970 with the title Entropic Landscape and Island Project. In project drawings such as Floating Island: To Travel around Manhattan Island from 1970 and Meandering Island (Little Fort Island, Maine) from 1971, picturesque Earthworks are proposed.

CENTER AND PERIPHERY

In two of his numerous articles, Robert Smithson quotes the following sentence by Blaise Pascal (1623-1662): Nature is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. The Jansenist Pascal rejected Jesuit casuistry and 'metaphysical proof for the existence of God'. For Smithson, Pascal’s search for meaning between intuition and philosophical cognition, between unconditional faith and rational skepticism, became a stimulant. Pascal wrote: Car, enfin, qu’est-ce que l’homme dans la nature? Un néant à l’égard de l’infini, un tout à l’égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout. Infinitement éloigné de comprendre les extrémes; la fin des choses et leurs principes sont pour lui invinciblement cachés dans un secret impénétrable...Ce milieu qui nous est échu en partage étant toujours distant des extrémes, qu’importe qu’un homme ait un peu plus d’intelligence des choses? S’il en a, il les prend un peu de plus haut, n’est-il pas toujours, infinitement éloigné du bout, et la durée de notre vie ne l’est-elle pas également infiniment de l’éternité, pour durer dix ans davantage? Smithson secularized Pascal’s ‘eternity’ and ‘infinity’ into ‘geologic time’, in the face of which the time of (human and) art history become relativized: When one scans the ruined sites of prehistory one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits...There are...no traces of an end or a beginning.  

The potentially randomly inwardly and outwardly expandable spiral which can be entered by the viewer represents a standpoint that is always distant from ‘nothingness’ and ‘the infinite’: beginning and end are absent, only a distance between these is present. From Smithson, there are two interpretations of the relationship of center and periphery mentioned by Pascal: a.) Center and periphery are opposites, both of which refer to the other: You then have a dialectic between the
point and the edge:...a kind of Pascalian calculus between
the edge and the middle or the fringe and the center.26
b.) The center is absent and still or no longer negatively
definable by the periphery: The finite present of the center
annihilates itself in the presence of the infinite fringes.27
In two projects, Smithson addresses the relations between
center and periphery particularly clearly in the sense of a.)
and b.).
In regards to a.): In Texas Overflow, according to
Smithson’s drawings from 1970,28 a round elevation of light
limestone (or bright yellow sulfuric stones) and earth was
to be constructed in a semicircular, abandoned mining pit.
Into this elevation, asphalt was to be pumped: a closed
circle of tar was to open itself up while streaming past
towering limestone into the pit.
In regards to b.): In 1969, Smithson had asphalt poured
down the embankment of a garbage dump in Rome (Cava
di Selce).29 The black mass ran along the channels of the
eroded hillside. In Asphalt Rundown, as in Texas
Overflow, a continuous, informally extensive surface was
created. A primary form as the central starting point of
the extension, however, was lacking. In one drawing, the
rectangular loading areas of four trucks are the source of
an entropy of 1000 tons of Asphalt.30 The dried asphalt
was the trace of an action, which referred to an absent
source, an absent center. The hardened tar surfaces were
exposed to future soil erosion, to which they — in
contrast to their original, hot fluid state — were no longer
able to adapt. Asphalt Rundown, as long as it did not fall
into ruin, was ‘in a state of arrested disruption’.31
The Earthworks Asphalt Rundown and Texas Overflow
are narrative and therefore picturesque, because they can
be read as traces of actions, which proceeded from a
center to a periphery. Smithson’s sublime Earthworks
abandon this readability. With the complementarity of
direction and counter-direction in the simultaneously
progressive and regressive spirals and the reversely
symmetric analogy in Broken Circle, , traces of an action-
time are negated. Asphalt Rundown and Texas Overflow,
unlike the sublime Earthworks, cannot be entered, but
only viewed and are, therefore, as a result of their
pictorial nature, picturesque.

ABSENCE

The sublime represents, according to Immanuel Kant
(1724–1804), the expression of a difference between the
subject of representation (an idea or a perception) and
representation: if — says Kant — the subject cannot be
adequately represented in sensual media, then the
‘objective inadequacy of the power of imagination’ should
be expressed: Erhaben ist, was auch nur denken zu
können ein Vermögen des Gemüts beweiset, das jeden
Mastab der Sinne übertrifft.32
Jean-François Lyotard uses the sublime to confront the
philosophical discourse of modernity33 inaugurated by
Kant and Hegel with a question that is not inferable from
consciousness: I Why does something happen rather than
nothing?34
Kant’s special sphere of the sublime is transformed by
Lyotard into an inquiry into the adequacy of rationality on
the whole: what would still need to be explained, if it is
questionable whether there is indeed anything to explain at
all? Smithson termed the sphere of being not inferable
from consciousness the ‘dimension of the absence’35 —
the absolutely unfathomable, the center of being closed to
consciousness.
In the sublime, the narrative — the picturesque — is
abstained from as far as possible to be able to concentrate
on the border between ‘the self and the non-self’36: the
simple, continuous form as cipher in simple, extensive
landscape formations confronts the viewer-self with
something foreign, which possesses too little to stimulate
the fantasy. The form appears detached from its origin:
the formal continuity of a spiral does not appear conclusive
only viewed and are, therefore, as a result of their
pictorial nature, picturesque.

THE PRESERVATION VERSUS THE DOMINATION
OF NATURE

In Heizer’s Earthworks, which are pictorial and, at the
same time, sculpturally break the pictorial, natural and
artificial materials are subjugated to a technical domination
organized according to artistic points of view. This is true
not only for Effigy Tumuli, but also for geometric works
such as Complex One/City (1972–76)37 of compressed
earth, concrete and steel in the Nevada Desert. Heizer
provokes the viewer to reconstruct his self-contained
monuments, whereas Smithson, with his contextualized, water permeated, spiral works, offers passages between nothingness and infinity. With Smithson's Spiral Jetty or Broken Circle, the viewer is 'in' the work; with Heizer, on the other hand, he is 'in front of' or 'on' it: between the representative form of the Tumuli and the possibilities of walking on them, exists at best a distanced correlation in contrast to Smithson's dams, which feign the possibility of walking upon them. The viewer who walks on Smithson's Spiral Jetty or Broken Circle looks beyond the work itself onto the surrounding environment — The relationship of the viewer 'in' the work to the landscape is, for Smithson, at least as important as the top view. With Heizer, on the other hand, the view of the Tumuli from an airplane is of at least as important as the top view. Smithson's forms are easily recognizable from the ground. Whereas, in Effigy Tumuli, Heizer romanticizes the past, Morris, in his Land Reclamation for the 'Kings County Arts Commission of Seattle', demonstrates the dark side of the present. With his works, which are both ecologically oriented in Morris' sense and formally conscious in Heizer's sense, Smithson appears to mediate between both of these standpoints by preserving their contrast in the sublime. Ecologically oriented Land Reclamation and the post-modern interpretation of the sublime, radicalized to a criticism of rationality, are complements: the unbroken domination of nature in the modern tradition stands in opposition to the admission of the 'objective inadequacy of the power of imagination' embodied within the sublime. 

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