

N6537.S6184 S52 1995
Shapiro, Gary, 1941-
Earthwards : Robert Smithson
and art after Babel

For Barbara Claire Freeman

*The publisher gratefully acknowledges the contribution provided by
the General Endowment Fund of the Associates of the University of
California Press.*

*The publication of this book was also supported by a generous
subvention from the University of Richmond.*

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California
University of California Press
London, England
Copyright © 1995 by The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shapiro, Gary, 1941-

Earthwards: Robert Smithson and art after Babel / Gary Shapiro.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-520-08856-5 (cl)

1. Smithson, Robert—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

N6537.S6184S52 1995

709'.2—dc20

94-26419

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements
of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence
of Paper for Printed Library Materials. ANSI Z39.48-1984 ☉

REED COLLEGE LIBRARY
PORTLAND, OREGON 97202

wrote that "the failure of contemporary theory, which too often operates in a vacuum, to see its own realization in Smithson's practice is, and remains a scandal."¹ Although Smithson is a major force in the writings of Owens and Rosalind Krauss, and although there have been important and illuminating essays on his work by other critics, there has been no attempt beyond the confines of the article or brief essay to articulate the theory in his work and the work that he does with theory. Owens might have written such a book if he had lived; the title of this one is meant in part to evoke both the name and the sense of "Earthwords," his review which I have just cited. It should also, of course, suggest the genre of earthworks, with which Smithson's name is so closely associated, and beyond that it should indicate a certain movement toward the earth, not exclusively in the sense of a biographical destiny, but as an approach, perhaps inevitably asymptotic, to the incalculable and ungovernable, to that place where, in Smithson's words, "the prehistoric meets the posthistoric." That this movement should be a downward one, an abandonment of the privileges of sculptural or architectural erection, a fall that has something to do with the legend (that which we must read) of that first great tower embodying the fantasy of permanence and of a transparent language, is the burden of this book's subtitle, and an index of Smithson's vision of history and entropy. Because of the scope of that vision, we ought to think of him not merely as an artist, but as one of the few American writers and thinkers of this quickly disappearing century who dealt in his own way with the issues of time, disorder, and tradition that also possessed figures such as Henry Adams, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams.

Prologue: The Cinema of the Exploding Sun

It is strange, yet also appropriate, to begin this book by describing a film that only a few readers will have seen, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970). But difficulty of access, in one form or another, is a major theme of much of the work of Smithson and others who pioneered art in the land or earthworks in the late 1960s and in the 1970s. Smithson's best-known work, the rock spiral called the *Spiral Jetty* (plate 1), is in many ways difficult to locate. The jetty spirals out fifteen hundred feet into the Great Salt Lake, and the site can be reached only by a series of dirt roads with the guidance of a detailed map. Should you persist in attempting to visit this desolate site of the art world, you will be rewarded by the discovery that the jetty is underwater, and like the overwhelming number of those who have concerned themselves with it since it was built in 1970, you will have to be contented with representations and reproductions of the work in the form of photographs, film, or words. This sense of distance is at work in the last shot of Smithson's film, which shows the



1. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, Great Salt Lake, Utah, April 1970.
Photograph Gianfranco Gorgoni. Courtesy John Weber Gallery.

editing room for the film itself; on the wall is a large photograph of the *Spiral Jetty* in Utah, emphasizing the fact that the work becomes available to us only through media. Nevertheless, there is much to be said for envisioning the work in its site, under the blazing Utah sun and amidst the surprising red water of the lake (a color caused by the local algae). And who knows, perhaps one day (certainly if you wait long enough) the waters will recede and the work will be visible once more.

There is, however, another sense in which the *Spiral Jetty* is difficult to locate. For there are three things to which Smithson gave that name: the rock structure whose construction he arranged (which we have just been discussing and which we can now refer to as the spiral); a film that he made while the spiral was being built; and an essay (first published in 1972), a text that discusses both the spiral and the film in a language ranging through mythopoetic, art historical, and geological modes. One usual observation that has been made about the genre of earthworks, which Smithson is said to have helped to pioneer, is that the works depend heavily on documentation of various sorts (maps, photographs, descriptive materials, films, and so on). I want to suggest, as do the multiple referents of the title *Spiral Jetty*, that there is no primary, authentic object (the spiral) to which the film and the essay are merely ancillary. One could say either that there are three distinguishable but interrelated works that bear that name or that there is one work existing simultaneously in a number of modes. In any case, the nature of genre and orders of priority among the arts are put into question, as are some of the distinctions to be made and the relations that are said to be enjoyed between art and philosophy or science.

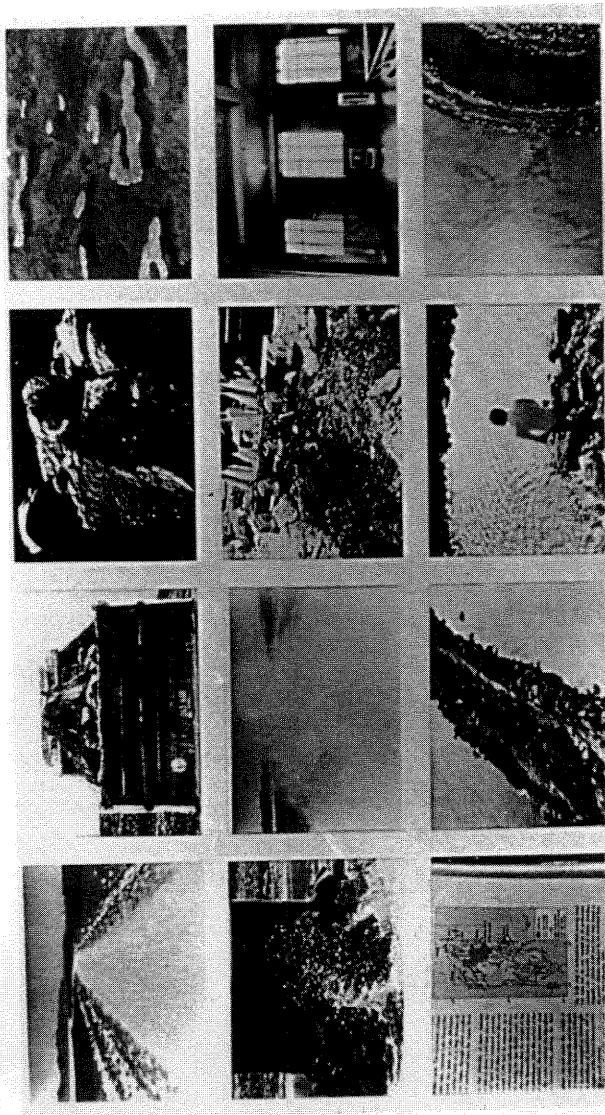
There is no pure *Spiral Jetty*, no work uncontaminated by language or other supposedly nonsculptural media. As Marjorie Perloff suggests in her essay "The Demise of 'and,'" Smithson's project is one of a number that render

problematic the traditional discourse of “art and literature,” “art and philosophy,” “sculpture and film.”¹ And this is because they do not merely combine genres, forms, discourses, and intellectual practices, but because they transgress and question conventional distinctions. Surely the title of Mark Tansey’s *Purity Test*, another refraction of the spiral (and, I would argue, of the essay and the film) is highly ironic (plate 2). This is not because Smithson was aiming at a pure art, free from the constraints of the New York art world, but rather because everything about this image is decidedly impure: the representational character of the painting, which violates the modernist imperative of exploring the flatness of the picture plane, the anachronism of these Native Americans encountering the spiral that was built in 1970, and the blatant depiction of these spectators in costume and poses borrowed from the now antiquated style of the painters of an illusory heroic American past.² As Smithson writes in the essay, “In the Spiral Jetty the surd takes over and leads one into a world that cannot be expressed by number or rationality. Ambiguities are admitted rather than rejected, contradictions are increased rather than decreased—the *alogos* undermines the *logos*. Purity is put in jeopardy” (*Writings*, 113).³ In a major essay of 1967, Michael Fried had argued that art which failed to observe the limitations of its medium necessarily fell into the condition of “theater,” stepping outside the virtual or imaginary space separating it from its audience and eliminating the distance essential to aesthetic contemplation (later we will want to look more closely at Smithson’s response to Fried).⁴ In Fried’s sense, Smithson’s work is unabashedly impure and theatrical, and that is surely one of its strengths.

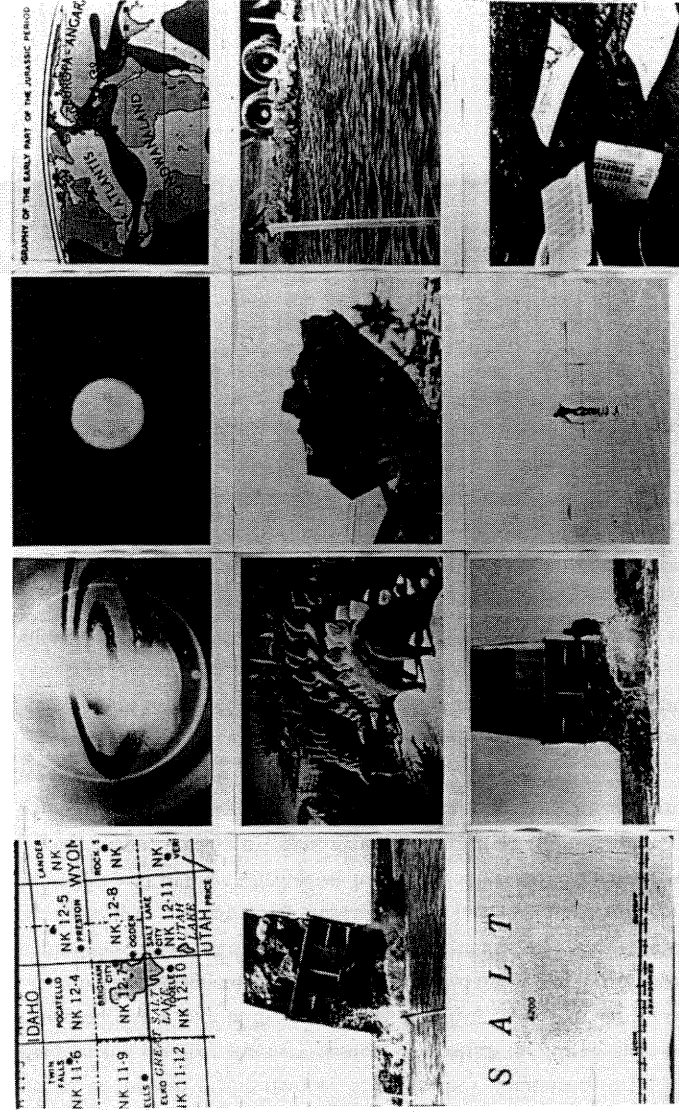
As one way of beginning to map these impurities, let us consider the film of about half an hour that encroaches on and supplements both the essay and the spiral (or, speaking generically, both text and sculpture) (plates 3, 4, and 5). The first image that we see after the title and the artist’s name is that of the



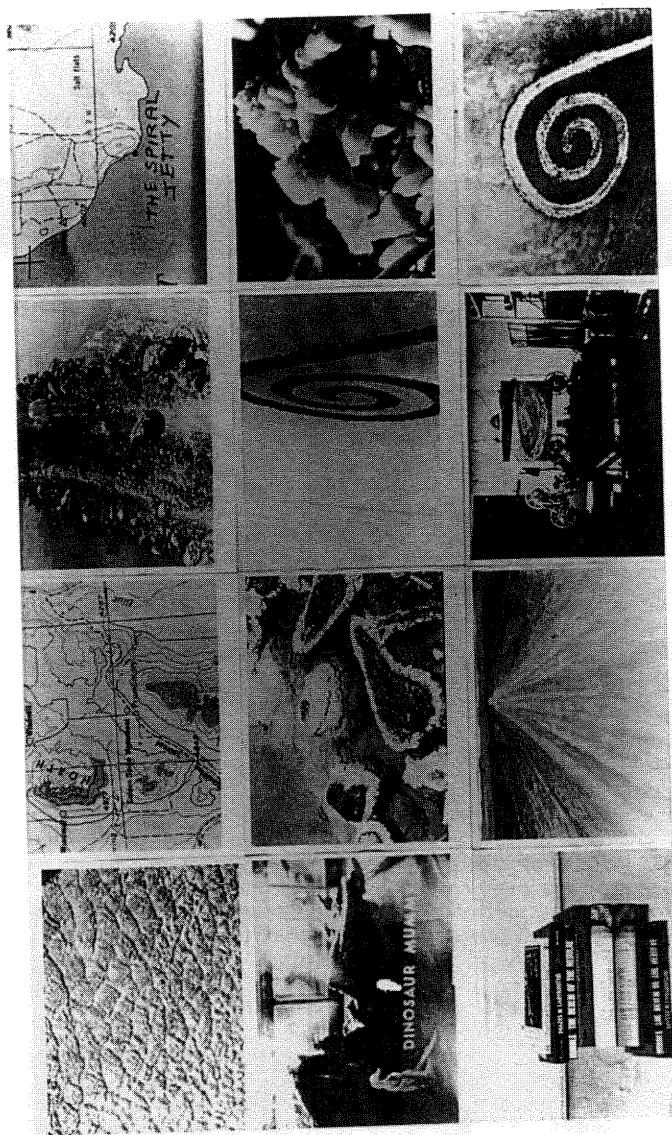
2. Mark Tansey, *Purity Test*, 1982, oil on canvas, 72" x 96".
Copyright © 1982 by Mark Tansey. Collection Chase Manhattan
Bank, N.A. Courtesy Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.



3. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty Film Stills Photo Documentation*, 1970, panel one, photo collage documentation, 25 1/4" x 43 1/2".
Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery



4. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty Film Stills Photo Documentation*, 1970, panel two, photo collage documentation, 25 1/4" x 43 1/2".
Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery



5. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty Film Stills Photo Documentation*, 1970, panel three, photo collage documentation, 25 1/2" x 43 1/2". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson and John Weber Gallery.

sun, a sequence of telescopic photography in which this distant source of light fills most of the screen and appears against a black background that we usually see only at night when the sun is absent. But the sun that centers our days is further defamiliarized because we see explosions on its surface that are normally invisible to the unassisted eye. The sun here is no longer a simple, continuous body but one marked by disruptions and accidents; it is not the eternal divinity of Aristotle but the sun of Heraclitus, which is "new each day."⁵ Placing us immediately in a cosmic setting, the film greets the overwhelming power of the sun in the manner of Nietzsche's Zarathustra or of Georges Bataille; and the light and fiery element over which the sun presides will also frame our experience of the spiral, what Smithson describes in his essay as a "flaming chromosphere" (*Writings*, 113). Toward the end of the film we hear a clinical description of the effects of sunstroke, including loss of memory and the inability to concentrate. At that point, after half an hour of blaze and glare, we might well wonder whether we have been subjected to a similar form of disorientation, because by then, deprived of our accustomed sense of time and narrative (memory), we have lost that ability to clearly focus from a center that is necessary for concentration.

The exploding sun establishes a cosmic context for the film that immediately unfolds into a sequence of episodes that has the effect of juxtaposing a variety of temporalities. If the sun is the grand measure of earthly time, it also allows for a number of temporal variations. We see the first of a series of shots low to the ground, apparently taken from a vehicle approaching the site of the jetty. Shots like these are interspersed throughout the film, sometimes taken from the rear of the truck so that we see the great clouds of dust raised on the dirt road. These moments are extremely monotonous and have the effect of making us concentrate on the real time of travel; despite the fact that we, as viewers, are arriving at the site by way of the film, we still share some of the

sense of actual duration, in the sun and the dust, that is involved in ground travel (the dust is also a reminder of the inescapable residue left by all processes, of the entropic tendency toward disorder). The minimalist artists of the 1960s also introduced real time into the gallery by erecting structures that demand to be circumnavigated rather than contemplated by a spectator who can imagine herself in a virtual space and time of a painting. Later we will see earth-moving machinery slowly and ponderously dumping rocks into the lake to build up the jetty. The ticking of a clock reminds us of mechanical, regular, chronological time, a time that could be filled with anything. A geiger counter measures local radiation, and so the half-life of the elements, another form of entropy. Geological and paleontological scales of time are also put into play. Pages from a geology text flutter down to an earth that is cracked and fissured, as we hear Smithson reading in an expressionless voice, "The earth's history seems at times like a story recorded in a book each page of which is torn into small pieces. Many of the pages and some of the pieces of each page are missing."⁶ Later there are eerie shots of dinosaur skeletons in red light at the Museum of Natural History in New York, accompanied by an otherworldly music of the sort one might hear in a 1960s science fiction movie. The time that is conspicuously absent in this film is the time of the art world, the time of a meaningful narrative of the succession of styles and periods. This is instead a world, as Smithson put it elsewhere, "where remote futures meet remote pasts" (*Writings*, 91). So shots of earth-moving equipment are quickly interspersed with images of dinosaurs, in order to stress similarities in their structure and movement. Maps of hypothetical earlier stages of the earth representing lost continents remind us of time's continental drift. What exploded with the sun was the familiar time of art history, the museum, and the gallery, all of which, at their different paces, assume the primacy of a certain humanistic story of art.

The film has an oddly decentering effect. On our trip to the site we not only see where we are going but where we have been. Movement, whether horizontally linear (to the site, on the road), spiral (the machines and later Smithson on the jetty), or vertical (surveying the jetty from a helicopter), is consistently reversible: every motion that we see in one direction is doubled by motion in the opposite direction. Journeying to the center of the spiral, as Smithson does at one point, does not provide a stable, substantial focus, for there is nothing there, and all that he can do (or that we can do, following him) is to reverse course and unwind our tracks, just as the helicopter's counterclockwise movement around the jetty is doubled by a clockwise one. When the helicopter is over the jetty it seems as if the earth might be coming up to meet us as we descend, and when it spirals toward the center it seems as if the jetty itself might be revolving; as Smithson runs along the spiral, the film keeps his body at the same point on the screen, so that he might be running in place, as if on a treadmill. The loss of the center induces vertigo, like the historical vertigo consequent upon the proliferation of multiple temporalities and the disappearance of expected narrative. The permutations of perspective are rigorously varied and articulated, so that now we see the spiral from a great height, from which it appears as a flat insignia on the water, while again we see it from ground level, where it appears more like a series of dikes or bulwarks (plate 6). The voiceover stresses the senselessness of the jetty's center when (again, in a characteristic deadpan) it intones:

From the center of the Spiral Jetty
 North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
 North by East—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
 Northeast by North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
 Northeast by East—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water



6. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*. Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970.
Photograph Gianfranco Gorgoni. Courtesy John Weber Gallery.

and so on through the twenty points of the compass (Smithson records the same set of directions in the essay [*Writings*, 113]). We also hear eventually that the sun is not really a center either; again reading from a text (John Taine's *The Time Stream*), Smithson announces that the secret of the sun is that it is not one star but millions; it's really a "spiral nebula."

There is something archaic about the film's concern with the elements: earth, air, fire, and water. All of these manifest themselves in the blazing and withering light of the sun. The heaviness of the rocks, the uncanny way in which crystals "grow" and replicate spiral shapes, the water that ripples calmly or becomes a giant solar reflector are constant presences. The human figure emerges only relatively late in the film when we see a shot of Smithson's legs from the knees down as he wades through the water; we see his upper body and face only when he begins to stake out the outline of the spiral. When we compare the film to some others of artists at work—for example, the dramatic exhibition of Jackson Pollock at work over a large canvas on the floor—we note immediately that except for the scene where Smithson is wading and staking, we do not see him—or any other human being—involved in shaping, moving, or applying materials. The earth-moving machines are shot from angles in which their human operators never appear, so that they become independent agents, "grim tractors that have the clumsiness of armored dinosaurs" (*Writings*, 82).⁷ This is an earth that has not yet and never will be fully rationalized, an earth that submits only partially to art and technology. The map of lost continents that shows Utah to occupy a site that was once part of Atlantis suggests a powerful, unpredictable earth that goes its own way.

While there is little obvious or explicit human agency here, there is an intermittent voice that comments on or provides a counterpoint to the visual images. Yet this monotone voice never asserts itself, and its speech is largely limited to factual information about the spiral's natural setting and to

quotations from a variety of texts (geological treatises, Beckett's *The Unnameable*, science fiction, a clinical description of sunstroke). If the earth's history is like a fragmented text, then fragmented texts drift into strata and sediment themselves, so that film images and texts form alternating or parallel levels in a larger formation (this is a form with which Smithson experimented in print; see "Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction," *Writings*, 129–131). The voice and the texts emerge out of a broader aural world, filled with a variety of sound and noise: a clock, a geiger counter, the wheezing of a hospital respirator machine, the truck on the dirt road, lapping water, heavy machinery on the earth, the whirl of the helicopter's blades in the air. As Smithson writes in the essay,

This description [of multiple forms of spiraling] echoes and reflects Brancusi's sketch of James Joyce as a "spiral ear" because it suggests both a visual and an aural scale, in other words it indicates a sense of scale that resonates in the eye and ear at the same time. (*Writings*, 112)

At one point a stack of books appears, including *The Lost World*, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, and *The Realm of the Nebulae*; this stratum of books indicates the cosmic affinities of the spiral and its place within a tradition of human artifice. The lines from *The Unnameable* are read while the camera pans over the dinosaurs in the Natural History Museum, and signal again the loss or disappearance of the subject:

Nothing has ever changed since I have been here. But I dare not infer from this that nothing ever will change. Let us try and see where these considerations lead. I have been here, ever since I began to be, my appearance elsewhere having been put in by other parties. All has proceeded, this time, in the utmost calm, the most perfect order, apart from one or two manifestations, the meaning of which escapes me. No, it is not that their meaning escapes me, my own escapes me just as much. Here all things, no, I shall not

say it, being unable to. I owe existence to no one, these faint fires are not of those that illuminate or burn. Going nowhere, coming nowhere.

This is a parody of the founding statement of modern philosophy, in which Descartes discovers the certainty of his own thought and existence; here it marks our position as lost among the many time frames, adrift and without a center, and floating among the texts that constitute the film's library of Babel. Smithson had borrowed the last figure from Borges in explaining the role of "printed matter," a term by which he indicates both the materiality of language and the textuality of the material. Significantly, he describes "printed matter" as having an effect like that of the movies:

Time is compressed or stopped inside the movie house, and this in turn provides the viewer with an entropic condition. To spend time in a movie house is to make a "hole" in one's life. . . . Like the movies and the movie houses, "printed-matter" plays an entropic role. Maps, charts, advertisements, art books, science books, money, architectural plans, math books, graphs, diagrams, newspapers, comics, booklets and pamphlets from industrial companies are all treated the same. . . . it is best to think of "printed-matter" the way that Borges thinks of it, as "The universe (which others call the library)" or like McLuhan's "Gutenberg Galaxy," in other words as an unending "library of Babel." (*Writings*, 15)

If language is used to disperse any conception of a sovereign agent or self in the film, there is nevertheless someone who appears, the artist, who is first shown staking out the spiral and then running to its center. But this figure never speaks; the voice (even though it is Smithson's) that we sometimes hear is never embodied. Language and action never coincide in a single figure. The film gives a special position to the artist who made both the spiral and the film itself, by casting him as a solitary individual among the elements, recalling in

this respect romantic motifs analogous to those in a painting by Caspar David Friedrich. Yet this persona is also undermined by being split into voice and image; when he is shown running counterclockwise to the center of the spiral, we can imagine that he is trapped in the maze or labyrinth.⁸ Toward the end of the film we hear, "He leads us to the steps of the jail's main entrance, pivots and again locks his gaze into the sun." Who is the jailer here and who is the prisoner? What the film does is to problematize, radically, the figure of the artist whose signature it bears (Smithson's name appears at the beginning, under the title, and again at the end with the credits). The smith, the maker is both present and absent, his signature everywhere and nowhere. The smith who works under the sun, whose work is introduced to us by an exploding sun, and who is (as we shall see later) the son of the smith, is the figure whose very name is divided and inscribed in his work.

The themes that I have drawn from Smithson's film suggest the concerns of the essays that follow in this book, concerns that I think are also significant for much of the art that we vaguely call postmodern.⁹ They are, to put it summarily: art's place in time and history; the possibilities and the limits of the process of decentering the structure, site, and context of the work; the question of the medium (earth, for example), its resistance to form and art's ability (or inability) to let matter challenge our conceptions and presuppositions; the role of language and textuality (is everything a text?); and the place of the artist after and despite the collapse of modern conceptions of creativity, genius, and autonomy. That Smithson's work engages seriously with all of these helps us to understand why it has been and continues to be an unavoidable point of reference in the art world.

1 Time and Its Surfaces: Postperiodization

In the museum one can find deposits of rust labeled 'Philosophy,' and in glass cases unknown lumps of something labeled 'Aesthetics.' —ROBERT SMITHSON, *Writings*

Robert Smithson's first major published essay begins with nothing less than a theory of time. Since his death in 1973 at the age of thirty-five while surveying his own *Amarillo Ramp* from the air, Smithson has been incorporated into art-historical narrative as the pioneer and theorist of earthworks or environmental art and as a precursor of some of the best-known works of Christo, Michael Heizer, and Richard Serra (death, of course, for reasons that are not foreign to this study, often contributes to canonization). Yet all of Smithson's writings and constructions—his nonsites, ephemeral arrangements (the mirror displacements), plans (for airports, underground theaters, and reclaimed strip mines)—are not only directed against the modernist discourse of art history whose hegemony had been almost unquestioned since its Hegelian foundation but are also meant to articulate and question the institutions and practices of the museum, criticism, and the gallery with which it is complicit. But beyond this—and already in those writings that could be considered the

returned to Holland, and so the accidental center has been transmuted into something less variable than he anticipated. His own accidental death two years later left open the question of the center (or provided the work with an aleatory center), just as the *Spiral Jetty* and the *Partially Buried Woodshed* have been left to the entropic effects of the water level in the Great Salt Lake or of gravity. Effects such as these are exactly what Smithson sought out in taking his chances with the earth; no matter how many mirrors (or other strategies) are applied to the earth, it persists through them all.

3 Rifts: Beyond the Garden to the Sites of Time

At any rate, the "pastoral," it seems, is outmoded. The gardens of history are being replaced by sites of time.

—ROBERT SMITHSON, *Writings*

My work is impure; it is clogged with matter. I'm for a weighty, ponderous art. There is no escape from matter. There is no escape from the physical nor is there any escape from the mind. The two are in a constant collision course. You might say that my work is like an artistic disaster. It is a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter. —ROBERT SMITHSON

Let's begin dialectically by explaining what Smithson knows that the earth is not. He knows that it is not the idealized landscape of the eighteenth-century English estate and the aesthetics that legitimates it, and he knows that it is not the contemporary versions of that ideal, whether inspired by commercial promotion or the utopian promises of certain strains of environmentalism:

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. . . . Could one say that art degenerates as it approaches the condition of gardening? (*Writings*, 85–86)

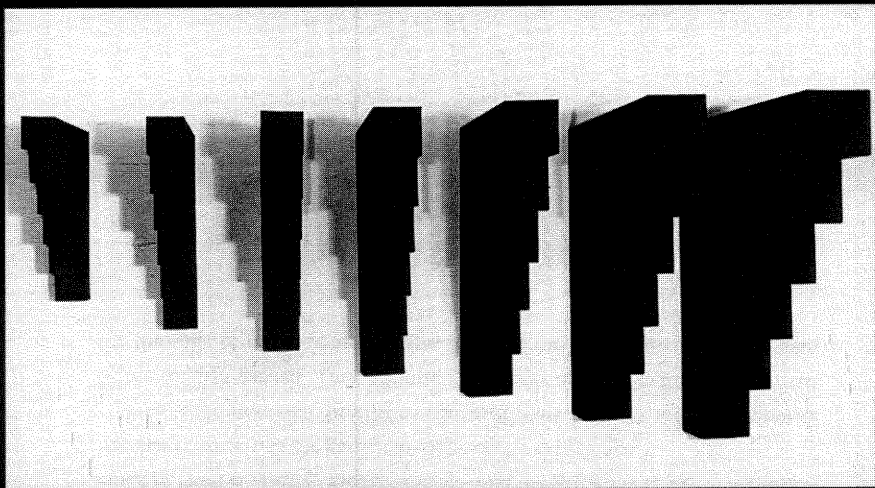
Smithson knows that our conceptions of nature and the landscape, and consequently our notions of the beautiful, sublime, or picturesque in nature, all

have a history. He knows, for example, that before the eighteenth century mountains were generally considered to be ugly and terrible things, perhaps God's way of marking the expulsion from Eden by defacing the earth to which we are condemned (*Writings*, 177).¹ In a sentence that might have been written by Michel Foucault, he says that "'Nature' is simply another 18-th and 19-th century fiction" (*Writings*, 71). Nature as the restful antidote to culture or civilization, nature as the play of titanic forces that awakens a sense of the sublime—these are not constant features of "human nature" (another concept that Smithson would have trouble with) but constructions related to specific historical contexts.

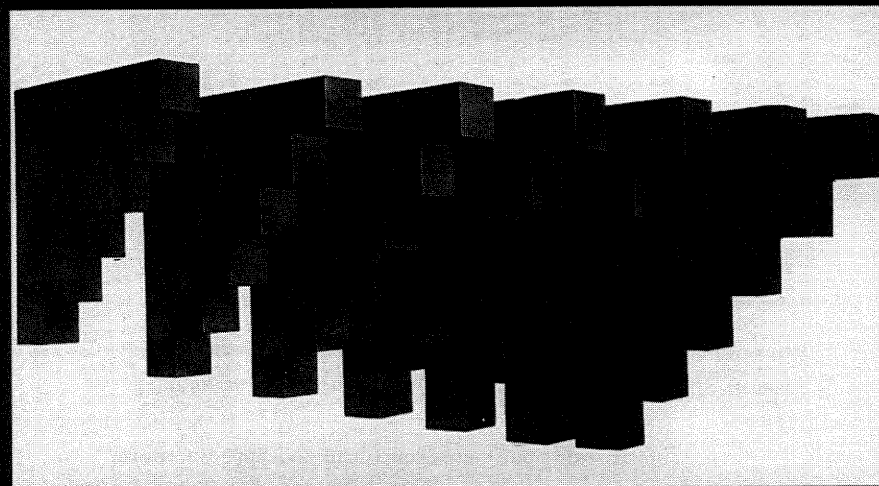
It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that Western thought has had only two main conceptions of the intersection of the natural and the beautiful, those stemming from Pythagoreanism and from the (mainly British) revolution in taste of the eighteenth century in which landscapes come to have an aesthetic value that is no longer derivative from rational order.² On the Pythagorean view the world is essentially a cosmic harmony whose lineaments reveal themselves to a mathematical and philosophical intelligence. The canon of Polyclitus seems to have been based on just such a conception of the ideally proportioned human body, and (as Smithson notes) Plato, in what was his most influential dialogue up to the eighteenth century, elaborated a vision of the cosmos as modeled on a perfect mathematical harmony: "Plato's *Timaeus* shows the demiurge or the artist creating a model order, with his eyes fixed on a nonvisual order of Ideas" (*Writings*, 87). The vision is still at work in an early "modern" astronomer like Kepler, who thought that the orbits of the planets must follow a pattern derived from the group of regular solids. We can take Smithson's *Alogon* series (1966) as his succinct response to such ideas of cosmic order and beauty (plates 22 and 23). For the Pythagoreans the *alogon* is the irrational and the unspeakable. It was known to the initiates of the cult that

certain fundamental quantities, for example the square root of two, were not commensurable or rational numbers. But this fact was not to be divulged exoterically because it would raise suspicions about the claim to be in possession of the formulas of a perfectly ordered cosmos.³ (This may be the closest approach made by the ancient world before Longinus to formulating a concept of the sublime, or even of the uncanny.) There are three groups of pieces that Smithson titles *Alogon*. Each consists of a series of graduated steps constructed according to two mathematical formulas, one governing the internal relations within each object in a series, the other determining the relation of the objects to each other. The first order is determined by a linear equation and the second by a quadratic one. Visually, this produces a sense that something is not quite right—an atmosphere of incommensurability that discloses the impossibility of a totally consistent ordering. As Robert Hobbs observes, "The intended misalliance of two logical systems creates an alogical situation."⁴ It is sublime because it defeats all of our desires for comprehensive and ordering perception. Given the minimalists' penchant for employing uniform modules at the time, Smithson's *Alogon* series could be read as a corrective warning against the misleading impression that some new model of rational order was being constructed.

Smithson also rejects the pastoral aesthetics of the garden, mainly on the grounds that it is untruthful insofar as it gives us an illusory, anthropomorphic image of nature. "Nature," of course, is not Smithson's term of choice, presumably because in an artistic context it has too many associations with a tamed natural beauty. He prefers to speak of "earth," since this is more concrete, less ethereal, and does not encourage us to abstract from its heavy mass, its chaotic formations, continental drift, confused strata, cataclysms (like earthquakes), and its sheer *thereness* (what the medieval philosophers called *haecceitas*). Nevertheless, Smithson does personify the earth on at least four



22. Robert Smithson, *Alogon I*, 1966, painted steel, black,
35 1/2" x 35 1/2" x 73". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson
and John Weber Gallery.



23. Robert Smithson, *Alogon I*, 1966, painted steel, black,
35 1/2" x 35 1/2" x 73". Courtesy Estate of Robert Smithson
and John Weber Gallery.

occasions as "mother earth" (*Writings*, 98, 122, 175, 195); this suggests that the earth has a divine, maternal identity, and that the smiths who work in and with her are her sons. Eventually we will need to explore the tension between the personal and impersonal constructions of what became the artist's most significant context and medium.

The garden is a special object of Smithson's contempt. His saying that perhaps art degenerates as it approaches the condition of gardening is a variation on Walter Pater's dictum that all art aspires to the condition of music. To understand why he would see the garden as a danger to the arts, let us think a bit about its history. The English garden arose as a "natural" response to the French garden, whose strict geometric design exhibited an affinity with Pythagorean aesthetics and whose centered structure was congenial to an explicitly hierarchical political order. This "natural garden" is specifically modern in its claimed timelessness; it is meant to exemplify the contrast between nature and culture and to offer aesthetic pleasure to a universal humanity. In fact the garden is the way in which the landowning class provides an ideological justification for its own status. The garden disguises the labor process that goes into its making, creating the illusion that it is nature as found. It validates the status quo by suggesting the superior taste of those who own the land. At the very same time that landowners were making vast changes in the informal, multidimensional, and quasi-feudal arrangements in the countryside and rationalizing its landscape for their profits, they were laying out and providing a theory for their gardens. As Simon Pugh formulates it, "In developing a more efficient rural economy, the landowner used the garden as a way of legitimating that economy in the garden as an aesthetic experience."⁵

We should note that Smithson's earthworks are in many ways the opposite of the English garden. They are often not easily accessible; they do not exist for the sake of pleasure and escape; they are explicitly entropic rather than

creating the illusion of timelessness; they make manifest the work that has gone into their production; and they involve a theoretical critique of the humanism that is essential to the garden's aesthetics. In an extended footnote on "the abysmal problem of gardens" Smithson suggests a contrary reading of the garden, usually understood as a utopian and paradisaical topos: "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'" (*Writings*, 91). Even allowing for the irony and hyperbole of this statement, one that eventually mocks itself with the remark that the note "is turning into a dizzying maze, full of tenuous paths and innumerable riddles," part of the claim here is that gardens falsify materials and that art has the vocation of disclosing these materials in their truth. What such truthfulness could be is not immediately clear, especially since Smithson is critical of representational or realistic concepts of art, as well as of an expressionistic aesthetic that would take art to be the authentic manifestation of the artist's psyche. He does sometimes propose what he calls a dialectical concept of art, in which truthfulness would consist in an interaction of man and nature that does not mask but thematizes that interaction itself. In articulating Smithson's thought it will be necessary to articulate this dialectical idea of art as well as Heidegger's notion of art's truth as the joint revelation of world and earth.⁶

The garden, Smithson says, is not dialectical, and he understands dialectic here as involving movement, interaction, and displacement:

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. The parks that

surround some museums isolate art into objects of formal delectation. Objects in a park suggest static repose rather than any ongoing dialectic. . . . A park carries the values of the final, the absolute, and the sacred. . . . I am talking about a dialectics of nature that interacts with the physical contradictions inherent in natural forces as they are—nature as both sunny and stormy. (*Writings*, 133)

When Smithson says that the “gardens of history are being replaced by the sites of time,” he is outlining a parallel between forms of spatial and temporal location and organization. The “gardens of history” are situated, despite their ideological pretensions of timelessness, within history; they reflect specific ways of construing nature and the earth that we are now in a position to analyze and criticize. They are not escapes from time and history but hostages to temporality. The “sites of time” are those locations that manifest the forces of growth, change, decay, spoliation, mixture, and drift. They confirm rather than contest the temporality to which they (and we) are subject. We might think of the gardens and sites as two series of objects (in Kubler’s terms) in which the first has as a prime the lost Garden of Eden, a paradise whose loss marks our fall into time and whose replicas aim at an aesthetic transcendence of that fall. The sites of time would constitute a series with a less determinate prime object, or perhaps this series has no prime. If it did, it would be something like an eroded and eroding structure in an eroded and eroding setting, for example, an ancient decaying megalith that is only partially amenable to our hermeneutic inquiries, or the *Spiral Jetty*, which gathers together ancient legends about the gods of the place, modern earth-moving equipment, and cinematographic documentation, and is composed of diverse crystalline forms that produce a structure always subject to entropy.

The art of the “sites of time,” then, is more closely allied with truth than with beauty. Smithson criticizes “representation,” or a pictorial approach to

nature, in the name of an art that would somehow disclose the very unrepresentability of the earth. The earth “is built on sediment and disruption” (*Writings*, 87); it is an accidental assemblage of differential strata whose relations are variable and which cannot be reduced to either a rational or a pictorial ideal of nature. Human intervention in the earth should be thought of as part and parcel of its chaotic diversity. Smithson observes that building and earth moving typically redouble the effect of geological change and cataclysm; with the use of heavy equipment “construction takes on the look of destruction,” something that is emphasized in the film of the *Spiral Jetty*, in which the earth-moving machines are seen in close up pouring out chaotic masses of rock. What should attract our interest in a building project is not the finished product but the “processes of heavy construction [which] have a devastating kind of primordial grandeur.” This way of being attuned to man’s place on the earth suggests something of the quality of presocratic philosophy with its sense of elemental conflict and upheaval: “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’” (*Writings*, 83). Heraclitus is often said to be the original dialectical thinker, and Smithson’s invocation of him at this point is significant. It occurs in an essay whose very title recalls the thought of those early Greeks who, before the rise of Socratic and Platonic idealism, saw the world as the play of elements in conflict and refused to separate mind and nature: “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects.” Another translation of the Heraclitus fragment runs: “The fairest universe is but a heap of rubbish piled up at random.”⁷ Heraclitus is usually taken to be saying that what human beings ordinarily take to be most beautiful, the *kosmos* that appears ordered and harmonious, is in fact a random product. The point would be that human conceptions of beauty are naive and do not go beyond surface appearances. Smithson has

reversed this usual reading of the fragment to say that a world that *appears* (and is) chaotic and disordered is a beautiful one. Perhaps Heraclitus would have wanted to say this also, suggesting that we might find beauty in precisely those places, heaps of rubble or rubbish, where we usually deny its possibility. Certainly Heraclitus is a better emblem for Smithson's aesthetic than the Pythagoreans, with their mathematical conception of cosmic harmony, or Plato, whose cosmology has a Pythagorean tendency and inspiration.

Like many of Smithson's texts, "A Sedimentation of the Mind" varies in tone from the parodic and ironic to a high seriousness of thought and the strident voice of the artistic manifesto. The governing insight or metaphor is the identification of thought with processes of the earth; it is a defense of "muddy thinking" based on a structural similarity of the earth and the mind: "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" (*Writings*, 82). I have already quoted the principle with which Smithson concludes this essay: his injunction that art should "explore the pre- and post-historic mind: it must go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts" (*Writings*, 91). What can be emphasized now is that there is a specific *site* where these meetings are to take place, and that is the earth. In exploring this site of all of Smithson's sites and nonsites we will see that he is calling on the artist and the thinker not only to envision a conjunction of prehistoric monuments (like Stonehenge or the Nazca lines, for example) and contemporary earthworks (like his own or Michael Heizer's); he is also asking for a certain mode of thinking that would bring together pre- and post-technological and -philosophical orientations, like those of the early Greeks and of a postmodern thinker like Martin Heidegger.

In beginning to articulate such a conjunction of the prehistoric and the posthistoric we might give some thought to the fact that the most decisive confrontation in the Western tradition between philosophy and art begins with Plato's proposed censorship of a story about the earth. In those notorious books of the *Republic* where Socrates issues a series of criticisms and prohibitions concerning the traditional poetic stories, the "greatest lie" which stands at the head of the litany of charges has to do with violence against Earth (Gaia) and Earth's revenge: "'First,' I said, 'the man who told the biggest lie about the biggest things didn't tell a fine lie—how Uranus [Heaven or Sky] did what Hesiod says he did, and how Cronos [Time] in his turn took revenge on him.'"⁸ In Hesiod's version of the story (one that Smithson alludes to in his *Yucatan* essay), Earth comes first, Heaven himself being her child born from a shadowy union with darkness. At the beginning then, in this narrative of the prehistoric, genealogical lines are jumbled, resembling perhaps the tangled strata of the geological earth. Mother Earth and Father Heaven were prolific lovemakers and parents, finally producing the monstrous trio of Cottus, Briareus, and Gyes. At this point let us allow Hesiod to tell the story about Earth that Plato condemns:

This unruly brood had a hundred monstrous hands sprouting from their shoulders, and fifty heads on top of their shoulders growing from their sturdy bodies. They had monstrous strength to match their huge size.

Of all the children born to Earth and Heaven, these were the boldest, and their father hated them from the beginning. As each of them was about to be born, Heaven would not let them reach the light of day; instead he hid them all away in the bowels of Mother Earth. Heaven took pleasure in doing this evil thing. In spite of her enormous size Earth felt the strain within her and groaned. Finally she thought of an evil and cunning stratagem. She instantly

produced a new metal, gray steel, and made a huge sickle. Then she laid the matter before her children.⁹

We are at a loss in reading this story to sort out the elemental forces of earth and heaven from the personages of a story who speak, think, and act. What we can recognize is a tale of chaotic and terrible beginnings, one that involves a primal violence inflicted upon the earth and a convulsion of the elements. It is Time (Chronos) who will play the role of avenger, but he will set off a series of generational conflicts, a dialectical story, that may continue indefinitely. The sickle to be applied to Heaven can be thought of as continuous with the violence that has already taken place, as in Smithson's description of the technological instruments that cut into and rearrange the earth: "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. . . . Most of the better artists prefer tools that have not been idealized, or differentiated into 'objective' meanings" (*Writings*, 82). In the extensive description that follows, it is the archaic, dinosaurlike character of these tools that is emphasized, and their abilities to dig, crawl, and rip with "steel toothed rakes." While Smithson sometimes wants to defend "mother earth" against assault, his enthusiasm for earth-moving machines seems to qualify that concern: "Strip mining actually does suggest lewd sex acts. . . . It's like a kind of sexual assault on mother earth which brings in the aspect of incest projections as well as illicit behavior" (*Writings*, 195). But let us return to Hesiod's narrative, where the tools are put to use to liberate Earth. Chronos says, "I have no respect for our infamous father, since he was the one who started using violence." . . . Huge Heaven came drawing night behind him and desiring to make love; he lay on top of Earth stretched all over her. Then from his ambush his son

reached out with his left hand and with his right took the huge sickle with its long jagged teeth and quickly sheared away the sexual organs from his own father and threw them away, backward over his shoulder."¹⁰

We can understand Plato's reasons for not wanting to include this part of the "great books" in the core curriculum for future generations. Not only is it a tale of monstrosity, child abuse, and mutilation of the father by the child; it is also a myth asserting that at the origin of things we find violence done to and by the earth, in which time appears as both savior and destroyer. What we might call Plato's moral and aesthetic objections to the story are supported by an ontological critique (bearing in mind that Plato would not acknowledge these terms, which reflect more recent divisions of philosophy). In the Platonic cosmos, the earth is benign, and her convulsions, even if catastrophic, like the story of Atlantis, are cyclical and devoid of vengeance.¹¹ (Perhaps Plato can adopt such a confident tone because patriarchal power has been powerfully consolidated by the time that he writes.) Time is not to be thought of as the violence of aimless becoming or decay but as "the moving image of eternity," so that the heavens and time cooperate, as the stars encircle the benign earth, in providing a temporal analogue of a timeless model.¹² In the *Republic* the citizens will indeed be told that the earth is the mother of us all, in a "beautiful story" (the words are usually translated as "noble lie") that will replace Hesiod's horrid myth. In this story the earth regularly gives birth to social order without violence and (apparently) by parthenogenesis: the metals of the earth are discovered not as instruments of destruction but as emblems of a rational, philosophical order of the soul and the state. Although there is an "ancient difference" between philosophy and poetry, Hesiod's story cannot be completely suppressed (the difference or *diaphora* has come to be known in English as a "quarrel"; we might think of Derrida's *différance* here or of Ehrenzweig's notions of differentiation and dedifferentiation). For after

condemning this "greatest lie about the most important matters," Socrates allows that it might be told with circumspection and secrecy: "If there were some necessity to tell it only a few people should hear it, and in secret, after sacrificing not a pig but some great and scarce victim, so that as few people as possible should hear it."¹³ (Perhaps this tale will be told in a cave, the place itself being the topic of the story told there, as in Smithson's underground cinema.)

What is suggested by the competing stories of Plato and Hesiod is the compelling need that cultures have to produce some intelligible narrative about the earth and our place on it. Between them the two exemplify the contrast between a dynamic, agonistic conception of the earth and the standpoint of a rational cosmology in which order prevails. From this perspective many conceptions of the earth turn out to be either Platonic or Hesiodic. Heraclitus, Heidegger, and Smithson all join Hesiod in seeing the earth primarily as the site of flux and conflict; and while Smithson might at first seem to reject any trace of the anthropomorphism and myth that are so prominent in Hesiod, this rejection is qualified, as we shall see, by his allusions to Mother Earth. The need for a coherent story about the earth may be related to the prehistoric proliferation of markings and mounds by which early people produced enigmatic inscriptions of the land. The Jewish stories of Eden and the flood and the Christian *Book of Revelation* with its detailed description of a fiery destruction of the world exhibit the same tendency. At the beginning of the modern era one of the most influential "geonarratives" was Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth*. In what now seems like a strange mixture of speculative geology and a literal reading of the Bible, Burnet set out to demonstrate that the earth's topography has a definite religious and aesthetic history. Before the fall of man, it was a completely smooth globe; the cataclysm of the flood produced the ugly mountains and other deformities that now mark the earth's

surface. Finally, Burnet thought that he could demonstrate the general changes that must occur in the conflagration predicted in Revelation.¹⁴ Our contemporary speculations about ecological disaster or utopia, on the possibility of nuclear winter or global warming, the anticipation of massive earthquakes (in California, for example), and the large number of people who subscribe to the notion that the Christian apocalypse will be realized literally and soon testify to the persistence of a passionate interest in geonarrative. Smithson remarks in "Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction": "*The Sacred Theory of the Earth* causes bewilderment. Some books concerning the deluge bring chaos to many" (*Writings*, 129).

Martin Heidegger is a thinker whose project bears some surprising relations to Smithson's concern with the intersection of the pre- and the post-historic on the site of the earth. A large part of Heidegger's thinking consists in uncovering and clarifying traces of those stories told by the early Greeks (poets or thinkers) in order to clarify our own situation at the culmination of a certain kind of history—the technological fulfillment of Western metaphysics. It is on the ground of the earth and in the conjunction of art and earth that Heidegger allows us to glimpse significant connections between some very recent art and some of the oldest traces and monuments that we have of human life. These ancient stories about violence done to the earth have a special resonance today when environmental crisis is part of popular consciousness. Heidegger is perhaps alone among the major philosophers of the twentieth century in posing the question of the "meaning of the earth" (a phrase that occurs in Nietzsche with a quite different resonance).¹⁵ This meaning is hardly fixed, and Heidegger wants to suggest that we are situated at a unique turning point where that meaning may undergo an epochal shift, something like a transition from one geological age to another except that the very meaning of "geo-logy," the discourse of the earth, is brought into

question here. The place of the earth in our thinking is clearly different than it was for early Christianity, and we may not be committed forever to the sense that it has in enlightenment and technological thought. For Christianity the earth is simply the site where the human drama of salvation is played out. Any talk of the earth's divinity (as in Hesiod) would literally be paganism (the thought of those who live beyond the bounds of the city, in the countryside). Christianity divides the world, as in Saint Augustine, into the city of God and the city of man; as Smithson observes, "The city gives the illusion that earth does not exist" (*Writings*, 83). The modern project of mastering nature that is marked by the Cartesian dualism of rational mind and mathematically organized matter, by the event of the industrial revolution, and by the triumph of technology takes further, more radical steps in desacralizing the earth.

Heidegger asks what has become of the earth in our technological world. He is not merely interested in exposing the waste, abuse, and negligence decreed by any thoughtful person who is concerned for future generations. More specifically, Heidegger is claiming that our very sense of what the earth is has been shaped by technology and that technology's reign is so deeply rooted that it cannot be contested simply by appealing for a more prudent management of resources. The problem goes deeper, down to our very assumption that the earth is nothing but resources or "standing reserve" at our disposal. Consider what Heidegger has to say about how the earth is revealed through technology:

The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit. The field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order appears different from how it did when to set in order still meant to take care of and maintain. The work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In sowing grain it places seed in the keeping of the forces of growth

and watches over its increase. But meanwhile even the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another kind of setting-in-order, which *sets upon* nature. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry ["agribusiness," we would say]. Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium, for example.¹⁶

Not only is the face of the earth changed, its *meaning* is transformed. Consider a mighty river like the Mississippi or the Rhine. Rivers once figured very prominently in our sense of the lived world, often conceived of as demigods and usually encrusted with thick layers of legend and history (they still do so, for example, in the poetry of Hölderlin). Now the river appears as a source of energy, a "standing reserve" of hydroelectric power. Of course, someone might object that the river is still a feature of the landscape, to be enjoyed and contemplated by visitors. Heidegger's answer is that it is available "in no other way than as an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry."¹⁷ The vacation industry may be seen as the commodified descendant of the English landowner's garden. Like the garden, this apparent alternative to culture, modernity, and the city is, as an escape, infected by that from which it tries so hard to distinguish itself. There is, then, no more poetry or religion of the Rhine, no more romance of the Mississippi. Something like this realization was marked by the 1976 production of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, in which the opening scenes are set in the den of the Nibelungs, which now appears as the recesses of a huge hydroelectric power station under the Rhine.

Just as Wagner's original opera dramatizes the danger of a monetary culture in which values are interchangeable, so the contemporary setting suggests that technology obliterates even the earth that would be the scene of this story. Like Wagner, Heidegger has seemed to many critics to be in the grip of a

romantic nostalgia for a pretechnological and premodern past. Some of this apparent nostalgia can be found in his writings on art and the earth and in his musings on "things" like the handcrafted peasant jug, discussed in his essay "The Thing," that gathers or assembles earth, heavens, mortals, and gods.¹⁸ What has been called Heidegger's "peasant ontology" would not appear to sort well with Smithson's acceptance of large-scale mechanically produced changes in the surface of the earth and his criticisms of pastoral illusions. Yet Heidegger, unlike other thinkers, makes the relation with earth a significant, even an indispensable dimension of the work of art. Heidegger's conception of the work of art as a struggle between the world and the earth, I want to suggest, can be sufficiently disentangled from his bouts of feudal nostalgia and his apparent attempts to articulate a national (even Nazi) aesthetic, so as to provide a way of clarifying what is at stake in Smithson's call for an art that will yield the truth of the earth.

Heidegger spends a good deal of effort on posing the question of what kind of art might provide a "saving power" in the age of technology and of the "devastation of the earth." He repeatedly quotes Hölderlin's lines "But where danger is, grows / The saving power also" in order to evoke the possibility of a new orientation that would, at the very least, show us that the truth of the technological world is not the only mode of truth.¹⁹ But Heidegger also has withering criticism for those who might fantasize about escaping the technological world altogether by fleeing into an aesthetic retreat (or, we could add, an ecological utopia). He knows that an escape is always structured and determined by the very thing from which one is trying to flee. An art that would respond to the decay of modernism and to the hollowness of the technological vision of things would be one that speaks to these very themes. Some of Heidegger's own discussions of art have been trenchantly criticized precisely for their apparently naive nostalgia for an earlier, idealized peasant life on the land. His account of Van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes as revealing the

world and the earth of the peasant woman who presumably wears them now sounds naive and anachronistic. When we read that "from the dark opening of the worn inside of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth," we are aware of other possibilities. Iconographically, as Meyer Schapiro pointed out, these could be the shoes of Van Gogh, the urban male artist. In his reading of Heidegger and Schapiro on the shoes, Derrida asks whether both have ignored the fact that these are empty, painted shoes, perhaps not even a pair, that belong to nobody and consequently uncommitted, ideologically, to either city or countryside.²⁰ Perhaps Heidegger can be freed from this nostalgia by seeing that his thought about art could be realized in works like Smithson's that do not long for a pretechnological past but incorporate the history of technology in order to express a nontechnological sense of time.

Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" begins with a criticism of the narrowness of the Western tradition of aesthetic thought which, he says, is tied to the ancient categories of matter and form. These, he argues, are more appropriate to equipment of a useful sort than to works of art. An ax must be made of a certain material in order to cut, and it must also be shaped and designed according to a certain form. To construe the work of art as a piece of equipment would be to assign it similar utilitarian functions, ignoring the paramount fact that we are struck or held by the sheer fact of the work, rather than employing it to produce a specific effect. The work illuminates something, Heidegger claims; what it does is to disclose a certain truth, and that truth consists in a relationship between a human world and the earth or ground on which that world rests. Consider a Greek temple, a work whose truthfulness could not be supposed to consist in its representing or depicting something (for what is like it other than such a temple itself?). Heidegger says that the people who make and live with this temple receive from it their most fundamental orientations toward the meaningful structures of their life (which he calls the "world") and that which is in itself the unrepresentable

ground of that life, a ground that can never be completely known, reduced, or assimilated to those structures (the name of this ground is the "earth"): "It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people."²¹ The temple is that place that clarifies the connections between war and peace, public life and life in the household, economic endeavor and religious ritual, legend and daily practice. But it does so only within a context that is best described as the earth (although we will need to refrain from identifying this as a purely geological notion):

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock's clumsy yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to light the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air. The steadfastness of the work contrasts with the surge of the surf, and its own repose brings out the raging of the sea. Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are. The Greeks early called this emerging and rising in all things *phusis*. It clears and illuminates, also, that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the *earth*.²²

Heidegger's "earth" is not strictly identical with the physical materials that we might take that term to name. It is a feature of our technological world (the

structure of meanings that things have for us), he claims, that leads us to make that identification. More generally earth is what both resists and grounds meaning, it is what never becomes completely present and therefore cannot be re-presented, but it can emerge in the struggle or *agon* that a work of art sets up between earth and world. "What this word says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere, or with the merely astronomical idea of a planet. Earth is that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises without violation."²³ We can now suggest that this conception of the earth as that which resists representation is a constant element of Smithson's work. From the *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, which questions the hegemony of an all-seeing vision, through the sites/nonsites that work on the limits between the meanings and structures of the art world (a word with a new resonance when juxtaposed with Heidegger's "world"), to the works like *Partially Buried Woodshed* and *Spiral Jetty* that stress the entropy of the elements, Smithson is attempting to disclose that surd and ineluctable dimension of things which Heidegger calls the earth. The scientifically and technologically defined earth is a first approximation to this wider understanding of earth. Certainly without this larger sense of earth it would be difficult to make the connection between the prehistoric and posthistoric earthworks that Smithson announces several times and which receives its fullest actualization in the *Spiral Jetty's* concatenation of the ancient legend of the numinous whirlpool at the heart of the lake, the allusion to sacred inscriptions of the earth by peoples who have left us little other writing, and the contemporary technology and sense of inevitable entropy that inform the work's construction.

For Heidegger the conception of an earthwork is a pleonasm. Every work involves its earthly side, both in the materials that go into it and in what it discloses about the elements around it. Every work exhibits a constant tension

between its worldly side, which as a structure of meanings aspires to dominate and comprehend the earth, and the earth that withdraws into self-seclusion, refuses to completely yield itself, and always hinders the world's aim at self-sufficiency:

The world grounds itself on the earth and earth juts through world. But the relation between world and earth does not wither away into the empty unity of opposites unconcerned with one another. The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there. . . . In the struggle, each opponent carries the other beyond itself. . . . The earth cannot dispense with the Open of the world if it itself is to appear as earth in the liberated surge of its self-seclusion. The world, again, cannot soar out of the earth's sight if, as the governing breadth and path of all essential destiny, it is to ground itself on a resolute foundation.²⁴

This Heraclitean sense of the creative antagonism between world and earth also allows us to hear the active, verbal *working* that is in play both in Smithson's earthworks and in Heidegger's notion of the work of art: "Setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work accomplishes this striving. The work-being of the work consists in the fighting of the battle between world and earth."²⁵ Heidegger calls this antagonism a rift (*Riss*), suggesting a tension or disruption that has overtones both of artistic process and of the physical earth, as when we speak of a rift between different geological strata. The rift is "the intimacy with which opponents belong to each other."²⁶ Heidegger quotes Albrecht Dürer, who had said, "For in truth art lies hidden within nature; he who can wrest (*reissen*) it from her, has it" and suggests that what lies hidden in nature is the rift itself which can "become manifest only

through the work of art."²⁷ It is difficult to translate Heidegger's *Riss*, which has overtones of design and shape as well as a tear or gap. The English "render" and some of its cognates may do part of the job, as in Yeats's "For nothing can be sole or whole / Which has not been rent." It is in and through the rift that the earth appears in the distinctive mode of art. While earth is also used in equipment, it tends to vanish into the finished product. We don't appreciate the steel, glass, and chrome of a new automobile for their original character and texture but as shaped and subordinated to the sleek machine that will take us racing down the road. As we use the car, both it and its matter are "used up"; they "disappear in usefulness."²⁸ Smithson's preference for "dumb machines" that may be dated and rusting, whose materials betray their affinity with the elements upon which they are exercised, is perhaps a recognition of this duality and a strategy for softening it.

The *Spiral Jetty* can be seen as a work of art that discloses the truth of earth and world in Heidegger's sense, although the spirit of the work differs markedly from any poem, painting, or building with which Heidegger ever entered into conversation. A simple observation of the jetty's condition of being under water since 1972 might lead to the conclusion that earth has won its battle with world here. But the work, we should remember, is not identical with the fifteen-hundred-foot coil that is now under the surface of the Great Salt Lake (Smithson, by the way, had intended to add another fifteen feet of rock to raise it above the water).²⁹ The work has a centrifugal and centripetal dynamic, like the spiral itself, that comprehends its photographic documentation, the film that Smithson made of it, his essay "The Spiral Jetty," and perhaps his plans, notes, drawings, and sketches, including the proposed subterranean theater or museum nearby that would have shown the film. As he says, "One ceases to consider art in terms of an 'object'" (*Writings*, 112). Working in all of these dimensions, the *Jetty* may seem diffuse, and Heidegger might have

found it confusingly eclectic. Since it draws on the most ancient and the recent past, on the symbolism of the spiral which recurs globally in myth and religion, on the play between a remote site and the contemporary technology which gives us indirect access to it, on inspirations drawn from such human wreckage as abandoned oil rigs and the now defunct optimism of the Golden Spike monument in the vicinity, from crystallography and Pascal's idea of the spiral, and includes references to Brancusi, Jackson Pollock, Poussin, and Pythagoreanism, Heidegger might have pronounced it to be a mere assemblage of scientific and cultural references. This, however, may be unfair to Heidegger, whose concept of the *Riss* allows a way of acknowledging artworks that, far from being what an older critical tradition would call "organic unities," are rent or torn along internal fault lines; in some ways his paradigmatic poet Friedrich Hölderlin is like Smithson in his wide-ranging attempt to construct a metahistorical vision that in his case includes Greece, Christianity, the modern world and its philosophy, and that announces the dawn of a new age. Ezra Pound seems to have played a similar role for Smithson, as a poet who aspired to write a poem (*The Cantos*) that would "include history." Yet confronted with the jetty's spiraling movement out into the amazingly red water, and the rugged texture of its rock and crystal materials, one feels the force of Heideggerian statements like "The rift must set itself back into the heavy weight of stone, the dumb hardness of wood, the dark glow of colors. As the earth takes the rift back into itself, the rift is first set forth into the Open and thus placed, that is, set, within that which towers up into the Open as self-closing and sheltering."³⁰

"The work," says Heidegger, "lets the earth be an earth."³¹ Certainly this is true of the *Spiral Jetty*. Smithson explains that he was first attracted to the site because of the red saline water in this area of the lake. The red is striking and is associated with the often blazing sun and with human blood; but blood is

also connected with the salt water, both by their similar chemical composition and by the fact that the sea is the original source of all life. Smithson describes this heightened sense of the elements and their interconnections:

On the slopes of Rozer Point I closed my eyes and the sun burned crimson through the lids. I opened them and the Great Salt Lake was bleeding scarlet streaks. My sight was saturated by the color of red algae circulating in the heart of the lake, pumping into ruby currents, no they were veins and arteries sucking up the obscure sediments. My eyes became combustion chambers, churning orbs of blood blazing by the light of the sun. All was enveloped in a flaming chromosphere. (*Writings*, 113)

The spiraling coil is composed in part of salt crystals that reflect its shape: "Each cubic salt crystal echoes the *Spiral Jetty* in terms of the crystal's molecular lattice" (*Writings*, 112). Although this may sound like a miscellaneous bit of geological and crystallographic knowledge, it is deployed here to suggest a movement, an interchangeability between the lowest and highest ends of the scale of the artwork. Just as the spiral can move inward or outward, from microcosm to macrocosm or the reverse, so the structure and its components have the same reversible relationship. Similarly, the parallel between human blood and salt water is not merely a digressive bit of learning but is part of the overwhelming sense of the power of redness, of the body, the light, and the elements. In one of its dimensions the earth here is the earth as known by physical science and manipulable by the somewhat antiquated technology of the machines that Smithson compared to dinosaurs; yet the earth is the perceived, felt, and experienced earth that can lead Smithson to use his work's ontogeny to recapitulate human phylogeny: "Following the spiral steps we return to our origins, back to some pulpy protoplasm, a floating eye adrift in an antediluvian ocean. . . . I was slipping out of myself again, dissolving into a

unicellular beginning, trying to locate the nucleus at the end of the spiral. All that blood stirring makes one aware of protoplasmic solutions" (*Writings*, 113–114). The resistance of earth, what Heidegger calls its self-sheltering and concealment, bears the name of entropy in Smithson's writings. At the site in Utah and in the recorded and documented experience there, there is a sense of flux, alteration, and decay. The salt lake is no longer part of the great ocean but is detached from it, as abandoned and useless in its way as the disused machinery that litters its banks. While the spiral alludes to a Native American legend that a deep whirlpool connects the Great Salt Lake with the Pacific, this is a past, hypothetical conduit that no longer has any force other than through these narrative traces. The color of the water, we know, will change as the algae thrive or disappear. The elements will continue to interact and new strata and faultlines will be formed, outdating the present arrangement in the way that the lake itself has been left stranded within the continent.

This entropic earth, with its spiraling dynamism of microcosm and macrocosm and its fusion of the organic and inorganic, emerges in struggle with a certain world or structure of meanings. The world, Heidegger says, is fundamentally a set of paths; there is one literal path here and it takes the form of a spiral, which can be traced inward or outward, clockwise or counterclockwise. On such a path we can go everywhere or nowhere. Everywhere, if we move outward and yield to the centrifugal movement which, in Smithson's associations, can extend through seas and continents, echoing even the spiral movement of the galaxies. Nowhere, if we follow the inward direction of the path, ending at a point where motion is no longer possible, an entropic rundown, suggestive of a return from our complex state to that of our one-celled ancestors. The film shows Smithson running around the jetty, perhaps alluding to the famous scene in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* where Cary Grant is chased by a crop-dusting plane.³² The helicopter in the film exhibits another

form of spiral motion with its blades (*helix*, we are reminded in the essay, is Greek for spiral). The machines are depicted moving slowly and ponderously around the spiral, sometimes forward and sometimes backward, in order to fill in the entire coil. Motion on the path of this world is not dependent upon a meaningful center but is fundamentally decentering. Time and history are also subject to dislocation.

The spiral is one of the most ancient and widespread of religious and spiritual symbols, so its use evokes the prehistoric and the archetypal. Yet the spiral is also multiplied, subjected to its own centrifugal force, and its motion turns up in the earth-moving machines, the helicopter, and even in the technology of filming itself with its reeling and unreeling. This is a world full of debris, of equipment that no longer works, bearing witness to a defunct modernity. The old machinery and deserted buildings in the vicinity might recall Heidegger's observation that we become aware of the texture and look of equipment only when it fails to function. Nearby is the Golden Spike monument, Smithson points out, which was a symbol of modernist optimism in linking the continent in a network of transportation and communication. That vision is no longer viable, as we are reminded at the site of the *Spiral Jetty*: simply getting to the site requires a difficult journey over roads that dwindle into wilderness, and near the shore "the trapped fragments of junk and waste transported one into a world of modern prehistory. . . . A great pleasure arose from seeing all those incoherent structures" (*Writings*, 111). This pleasure, which is similar to the taste for ruins that becomes so prominent in eighteenth-century painting, might suggest that we are dealing not with a world in Heidegger's sense here but with the ruins of a world. A genuine world, he says, is one that is happening, not one that has simply entered into the record. There would seem to be a clear difference between a world to which "we are subject" and one to which other people were once subject. "The world worlds," Heidegger writes, "and

is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home. . . . World is the ever non-objective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into being. Wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds."³³

Although Heidegger's account of the Greek temple suggests that a world must be vibrantly self-confident and self-affirming, that suggestion may have more to do with Heidegger's understanding of the Greeks than with his general conception of what constitutes a world. The description quoted above seems to allow for the sense of loss and the redefinition of a past when it speaks of decisions that are "taken up *and* abandoned" or "go unrecognized *and* are rediscovered" (my emphases). We might point out that the world of the *Spiral Jetty* contains or alludes to paths that have been abandoned, in something like the way in which the Christian world alludes to the abandoned paths of paganism, but that it may still possess a path of its own. Isn't Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* one of the places where a postmodern world arises, a world aware of many paths not taken and abandoned, a world whose paths have become decentered and reversible? We become uncertain whether we are going forward or backward, in space as well as in time. Are we in touch with the artistic avant-garde or reverting to the most ancient traces of human marking of the earth? Are we being led to a surd center of a spiral in a dead sea, or are we being invited to follow the whirlpool out into the Pacific? This world worlds in the rippling effects generated by its spiraling motions and in its precarious struggle to surmount the entropic undertow of the earth.

However, it is not necessary to travel to remote spots in Utah or to invoke the obscure sayings of German philosophers in order to articulate the possibilities of an art that works with the earth. Smithson found a great American artwork by "America's first 'earthwork artist'" just outside the

Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (*Writings*, 123). Central Park, laid out in the nineteenth century by Frederick Law Olmsted, is "an example which throws a whole new light on the nature of American art" (*Writings*, 127). In emphasizing the American identity of the park and its artist, Smithson is affirming the possibility of a landscape art that will be liberated from the narrow confines of the garden and its ideology. The expansive and laudatory tone of the essay seems to aim at providing a legitimating genealogy for the kind of work that he was doing at the time, including a variety of projected works that would have involved cooperation with American industries in employing the sites of former strip mines and other spoliations of the land as the location for an art of the earth. Smithson begins with a discussion of Olmsted's philosophical sources, implying that a significant new departure in art must involve a comprehensive theoretical vision. Those sources are the British theorists of the picturesque; if not American, they are still opposed to the transcendental idealism of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, which Smithson views here as an alien presence responsible for the limits of a "modernist formalism" that has constrained us for too long in the criticism of a Clement Greenberg and in the institutions of the museum, here given a specific menacing form in the incursions of the Metropolitan into the park (*Writings*, 119). Smithson cites two apposite quotations from William Gilpin and Uvedale Price, the thinkers rightly credited by Olmsted as the pioneer theorists of the picturesque. These are worth repeating, both to help clarify the notion of the dialectical landscape and to renew the word "picturesque," which Smithson suspects has been distorted to mean nothing more than the pretty or appealing:

The side of a smooth green hill, torn by floods, may at first very properly be called deformed; and on the same principle, though not with the same impression, as a gash on a living animal. When a rawness of such a gash in

the ground is softened, and in part concealed and ornamented by the effects of time, and the progress of vegetation, deformity, by this usual process, is converted into picturesqueness; and this is the case with quarries, gravel pits, etc., which at first are deformities, and which in their most picturesque state are often considered as such by a levelling improver. (Price, cited by Smithson, *Writings*, 119)

A piece of Palladian architecture may be elegant in the last degree, but if we introduce it in a picture it immediately becomes a formal object and ceases to please. (Gilpin, cited by Smithson, *Writings*, 119)

Price's contrast between the "levelling improver" and one who has an eye for the picturesque anticipates Smithson's rejection of "reclamation" projects that would attempt to obliterate all traces of geological or industrial transformations of the land; following Price, he would prefer more subtle alterations in the damaged area that retain a sense of the process that has occurred. Both would maintain some awareness of the "gash" or rift that helps to constitute the picturesque.

Smithson enters into traditional discussions of aesthetic theory by arguing that the picturesque is a dialectical solution to the antithesis of the beautiful and the sublime. If the beautiful is the smooth and the regular or symmetrical, and the sublime is that which inspires terror by qualities like vastness and solitude (following Edmund Burke), then the picturesque would be "a *synthesis* . . . which is on close examination related to chance and change in the material order of nature" (*Writings*, 119). In Price's account the main characteristics of the picturesque are variety and intricacy, and the "efficient causes" of the picturesque are said to be roughness and sudden variation.³⁴ "Intricacy" involves complexity and "partial concealment." An intricately structured or

disposed natural scene is one in which the relations of various objects are not immediately transparent to the gaze; they may overlap one another and present themselves as obstructions.

The picturesque may please us because of the difficulties and challenges it offers to the hegemony of the all-seeing *video*. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has described the spatiality of Cézanne's painting as one that cannot be accounted for by such a *video*, for in Cézanne objects block one another and have a tangible presence. They reflect the lived experience of finding our way around in a world of objects rather than the rational reconstruction of a monocular grid which is classical Renaissance perspectivism. (Smithson says that there is a sense of the picturesque in Cézanne and mentions his *Bibemus Quarry*, pointing out once more that his work was derailed by "cubistic reductionism which would lead to our present day insipid notions of 'flatness' and 'lyrical abstraction'" [*Writings*, 121].) The picturesque is like a picture, or suited to be pictured, insofar as its appearance lends itself to the sorts of effects found in complex landscapes. Price points out the inconsistency displayed by landowners who value the picturesque in the paintings on their walls but who turn their grounds over to "improvers" who will level the land and chop down trees.³⁵ Clearly part of the appeal of the theory of the picturesque for Smithson is that it introduces time into the experience of the landscape; a "deformity" due to natural or human causes, which is then modified by further change of either sort, already involves two distinct temporalities and would seem to qualify the picturesque as a "site of time."

The picturesque has been strangely neglected at a time when theorists have been attempting to rework its companion eighteenth-century category of the sublime in order to give some account of recent art. According to Jean-François Lyotard, following Burke and Kant, the sublime is concerned to present the unrepresentable. Barnett Newman's painting or the work of the

minimalists is said to provide so little in the way of a complex and absorbing visual experience in order to provoke indeterminate thoughts of that which is not visually presented.³⁶ There is a terror elicited by these stark experiences, Lyotard claims, the terror that there will be a fundamental interruption in things, that nothing will happen and that the reassuring continuities on which we depend will be destroyed. Certainly much of Smithson's work and sensibility could be described in the terms that Lyotard employs in his analysis of the sublime and the avant-garde. The gallery works like the *Enantiomorphic Chambers* that involve the deconstruction of the *video* correspond to the latter's conception of the task of the avant-garde visual artist: "These painters discover that they have to present that there is something that is not presentable according to the legitimate construction. They begin to overturn the supposed 'givens' of the visible so as to make visible the fact that the visual field hides and requires invisibilities, that it does not simply belong to the eye (of the prince) but to the (wandering) mind."³⁷ While some of Smithson's work can be described in this way, he would not accept this statement of the artist's project insofar as it calls for a progressive series of eliminative or reductive steps that requires the one-dimensional temporality of the avant-garde caught in "the time stream." In the picturesque mode that he describes in the essay on Olmsted there is something that is neither the sheer presentation of the beautiful nor the sublime's awareness of the unrepresentable. In intricacy, variety, obstruction, and in labyrinthine and mazelike forms there is a play of the presented and the unrepresented rather than a reduction to one of these.

More significantly, the picturesque, as Smithson understands it, involves an interaction between human beings and nature that is precluded by the classical categories of the beautiful and the sublime. The picturesque is not only dialectical because it overcomes the dichotomy of these two concepts; it is dialectical in its content, Smithson maintains, because it expresses the ne-

cessity of chance and change and of an ongoing interaction between man and nature. Central Park is a dialectical and picturesque landscape in all of the respects noted. It is intricate and various; Smithson's essay concludes with a narrative of a walk through the park, beginning with the Ramble, that takes him through "a tangled net of divergent paths," and he endorses Olmsted's construction: "The network of paths he twisted through this place out-labyrinthed labyrinths. For what really is a Ramble, but a place to walk aimlessly and idly—it is a maze that spreads in all directions. . . . Olmsted had brought a primordial condition into the heart of Manhattan. . . . Beneath leafless tree limbs the windings grow more complex, and seem to turn on themselves, so that the walker has no sense of direction" (*Writings*, 127).

Central Park is not a classical eighteenth-century garden, a fact that goes beyond Smithson's references to drug dealers, other dangerous characters, rubbish, and graffiti. Those gardens were typically bounded by "hahas," mounded earth modeled on military earthworks; the *haha* was invisible from within the garden in order to promote the illusion that within it we are in a pure piece of nature.³⁸ The frame of Central Park is brutally marked by 59th and 110th streets on the south and north and Fifth Avenue and Central Park West on the east and west. This is not to say that the question of what is inside and outside the park is settled without ambiguity—far from it, as we shall see—but rather to point out that there is no need, as there was in the eighteenth-century garden, to disguise the frame in order to mask an artificial construction legitimating a specific cultural order as the access to an idyllic nature. We are dealing here with a blatantly public work of art whose frame is designed not to exclude outsiders or, as in the case of a painting, to show what one must not touch, but to define an area that is open to public access and to the changes wrought by nature and history. Central Park offers no illusion of the eternal but is radically temporal. Smithson begins his account by reminding his readers that the site was once covered by glaciers and ends

by discussing the most contemporary changes introduced by humans (the encroachments of the Metropolitan and the appearance of a new generation of graffiti). The photographs chosen for the *Artforum* essay are mostly either before and after shots of the "same" spot in the park at one-hundred-year intervals or older photos emphasizing how different the current park is from its earlier site (the recent photos are Smithson's snapshots). The park is inscribed with its own history and will never be complete; it has no *telos* that would bring its flux to a conclusion and so can never be understood in static, formalistic terms. In Smithson's paradoxical formulation, "Olmsted's parks exist before they are finished, which means in fact they are never finished; they remain carriers of the unexpected and of contradiction on all levels of human activity, be it social, political, or natural" (*Writings*, 119). When the park was first laid out, he tells us, it was strewn with rubbish, deep in mud, occupied by empty squatters' huts and populated by goats that had been left behind; but "all of this is part of the park's dialectic" (*Writings*, 123).

While Hegel and Marx had developed dialectical theories of art, this meant generally for them that an artwork could be understood as embodying an internal dialectic between its subjective and objective poles, a tragic conflict between equally valid moral claims, or the contradictions of the class struggle and its associated ideological expressions.³⁹ Hegel had gone so far as to articulate a sense in which there could be a dialectical relationship among the artist, the artwork, and the audience, such that they could come to constitute an identity-in-difference. But Smithson proposes a much more radical notion, namely, that an artwork would always be in a process of differentiation and interaction:

Looking on the nature of the park, or its history and our perceptions of it, we are first presented with an endless maze of relations and interconnections, in which nothing remains what or where it is, as a thing-in-itself, but

the whole park changes like day and night, in and out, dark and light—a carefully-designed clump of bushes can also be a mugger's hideout. . . . Central Park is a ground work of necessity and chance, a range of contrasting viewpoints that are forever fluctuating, yet solidly based in the earth. (*Writings*, 123–124)

Presumably Smithson would accept the mugger's hideout (and the mugger?) as part of the *artwork* that is Central Park, not just an extraneous addition to it, while a more "formal" aesthetics would distinguish, in an apparently similar instance, between the actor performing his assigned role in the play and his stepping out of character to assassinate a member of the audience. In fact, Smithson does make distinctions between proper and improper changes in the park and in some of his own works (he thought that the Metropolitan and graffiti on walls did not belong in the park or contribute to its dialectic). This suggests that he required more formal criteria than he was prepared to acknowledge, and it may be that no conception of art can abandon formalism altogether. The artist seems not to have been familiar with John Dewey's theory of art, which might have been used to support in part his radical conception of the openness of the actual work of art as well as his attempt (in the essay on Olmsted and his last proposals for reclamation works) to project a distinctively American vision of art within the North American landscape and in a democratic society. Dewey had written that "the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience," a dictum that has led critics to ask whether *any* experiential involvement with a work is then part of its nature—leaving us with the problems of landscape as mugger's hideout or actors turned assassins.⁴⁰ Smithson would probably have suspected that Dewey's notion of "experience" was too subjectivistic, not allowing for the dialectic of the artwork and nature.

In Smithson's essay, Central Park, the product of America's first earthworks

artist, emerges as the paradoxical prime of a series of works that include his own. While this prime is not lost, as George Kubler suggested that primes typically are, it offers no constant form or definition that can be referred to in comparing it with other members of the series. While those other primes are (accidentally) lost, Central Park is always in the process of losing itself in its changing intricacy and variety. This site of time is a strange companion of the ultramoderne in Smithson's inventory of New York and its art forms. By the 1950s, as Serge Guilbaut's book describes it, New York had stolen the idea of modern art (from Paris) and had become the center of the art world, through the financial and political power of institutions and patrons and by means of the formalist art theory of critics like Clement Greenberg.⁴¹ The critics explained why Pollock and other abstract expressionists were at the very center (or at the front of the avant-garde) by constructing a theory that makes the enterprise of art a search for its own genuine center hinging on its accepting the limits of its frame. At this center of the art world Smithson identified two orders of art that deviate in striking ways from the centering process itself. In the ultramoderne there are the mirroring mazes that replicate one another to infinity without any prime or central instance. Central Park, in the geographical center of the city and so at the center of the center, is an elusive, Protean prime, an earthwork that calls into question the possibility of formalism. From a conventional aesthetic perspective these buildings and the park constitute only the backdrop or context for the significant activity by which the frontiers of art are being pushed ever further back. What Smithson has done again is to reverse and then deconstruct the relation of frame and center by taking the frame or context to be the significant aspect of the work and showing that the criteria of significance can themselves be interrogated and displaced. (The operation gains an added piquancy from the fact that the buildings of the ultramoderne partially form the frame of Central Park.) Just as Smithson decentered the New York art world in his sites/nonsites, so in his

essays on the architecture and topography of Manhattan that art world becomes a mere blip in the sites of time that converge in the city.

Smithson was already suspicious, in 1972, that purism and formalism might be marshaled against the art of earthworks or used in order to promote a beautified genre of art in the land that would repeat the art of the "gardens of history" with a new ecological rationale. In the essay on Olmsted, he takes up the criticisms of Alan Gussow, a representational landscape painter who had published a book entitled *A Sense of Place: Artists and the American Land*. Gussow had said of the landscape painters that he praised in his book, "What these artists do is make these places visible, communicate their spirit—not like the earth works artists who cut and gouge the land like Army engineers. What's needed are lyric poets to celebrate it" (Gussow, cited in *Writings*, 122). Since Gussow's book was published by the Friends of the Earth and was given publicity by Grace Glueck in *The New York Times*, Smithson thought that this was the point to draw the line between a nostalgic return to the aesthetics of the garden and a truthful, dialectical art of the earth. "Artists like Gussow," he says, "are the type who would rather retreat to scenic beauty spots than try to make a concrete dialectic between nature and people" (*Writings*, 123). The polemic with Gussow is important because it is (along with some passages in "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Yucatan") the occasion for Smithson to consider the sexual dimension of earthworks art. The *Times*'s headline had called Gussow an "Artist-in-Residence for Mother Earth," and it is the ancient identification of earth as mother that Smithson proceeds to interrogate. His first gesture is to suggest that there is an illegitimate metaphor here, in which human relations are apparently rediscovered in the natural world:

Reading the article, one discovers what might be called an Ecological Oedipus Complex. Penetration of "Mother Earth" becomes a projection of the incest taboo onto nature. In Theodore Thass-Thienemann's book, *The*

Subconscious Language, we find a quote from a catatonic schizophrenic, "they should stop digging [now shouting petulantly in rage] down inside the earth to draw metals out of it. That's digging down into Mother Earth and taking things that shouldn't be taken." (*Writings*, 122)

Citing Aeschylus (who says that Oedipus "dared to seed the sacred furrow where he was formed"), Smithson wants to establish that there is something pathological about Gussow's repudiation of earthworks artists, claiming that he "projects onto 'earth works artists' an Oedipus Complex born out of a wishy-washy transcendentalism."⁴² The analysis continues by suggesting that Gussow's identification of Army engineers and earthworks artists "seems linked to his own sexual fears" (*Writings*, 122). So far Smithson's critique seems to imply that any sexualization of the relation between human beings and the earth is inappropriate. This would be consistent with his attempt in other contexts to avoid an anthropomorphic view of nature. Yet in the same paragraph Smithson allows that the relation might be sexual after all, although he wants to insist that it is not the equivalent of rape: "An etherealized representational artist such as Gussow (he does mediocre impressionist paintings) fails to recognize the possibility of a direct organic manipulation of the land devoid of violence and 'macho' aggression. Spiritualism widens the split between man and nature. The farmer's, miner's, or artist's treatment of the land depends on how aware he is of himself as nature; after all, sex isn't all a series of rapes" (*Writings*, 123).

So one can make love to Mother Earth or rape her, it seems; strip miners are now said to be guilty of "sexual aggression," while the Mesa Verde cliff dwellings and the Indian mounds in Ohio are held up as examples of appropriate cultivation or interaction with the earth. Nevertheless, Smithson reinforces a traditional division of genders in describing the artist, farmer, or

miner as "he." This ambiguity about the dispensability of the Mother Earth metaphor was already implicit in Smithson's use of the Freudian concept of the Oedipus complex to describe Gussow's reactions, for part of Freud's theory is that such fears and apprehensions are an inevitable component of the process of male development. Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the Oedipus myth is also relevant, since on his account the point of the story is to allow us to think two contradictory thoughts: that humans are born of the earth, chthonically, and that they are born of women.⁴³ Smithson oscillates between a strict rejection of anthropomorphism (which bears some resemblance to the Jewish or Puritan rejection of religious imagery) and a moderate acceptance of the ancient metaphors of Mother Earth. The reference to Native Americans and the frequent invocation of the prehistoric reinforces the second alternative, as do similar gestures in much land art of the last twenty years, which is often explicitly concerned to revive an archaic sense of the nurturing, maternal earth.⁴⁴

Earth plays two roles in Smithson's art and thought; it is both the unrepresentable or surd dimension of things and the object of "man's" desire to cultivate a relationship with his enviroing context, in which case it often becomes "Mother Earth" (the masculine forms here are used following Smithson's "man and nature"). These two tendencies can be associated respectively with two key words in Smithson's thought: entropy is the concept used to reject anthropomorphic notions of representation and limited historical perspectives, while dialectic is deployed to suggest the possibility of a real relationship between the artist and nature, a relationship that could be extended through the artist to other people. Entropy would be associated with the sublime and dialectic with the picturesque. Smithson may be struggling with an apparently contradictory set of beliefs like that described by Lévi-Strauss, or with the contradictory form of all desire (a thought pursued by Jacques Lacan). His

own work, as well as the earth, is sedimented, striated, and marked by fault lines. The rift between Plato and Hesiod, or the one that Heidegger explores between the world and the earth, is paralleled by the rift in Smithson's conception of his own work. Dialectic would appear to be on the side of meaning, Plato, and Heidegger's "world." Entropy would be aligned with primordial Hesiodic conflict, the unrepresentable, and Heidegger's "earth." Dealing with and delving in the earth, fractures and fissures always seem to be opening up. To articulate these, if not to resolve them, we should turn to a more explicit reflection on the artist's language, which is both a dimension of his art and the arena within which these thoughts and desires become manifest, and to his concern with his own place and origins, to the way in which he inscribes himself in his works, that is, with his signature.

4 Printed Matter: A Heap of Language

Perhaps words themselves, in the most secret place of thought, are its matter, its timbre, its nuance, i.e. what it cannot manage to think. Words "say," sound, touch, always "before" thought. And they always "say" something other than what thought signifies, and what it wants to signify by putting them into form. Words want nothing. They are the "un-will," the "non-sense" of thought, its mass. They are innumerable like the nuances of a colour- or sound-continuum. They are always older than thought.

—JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD, *The Inhuman*

Robert Hobbs's book *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* is mostly devoted to an inventory with critical commentary of the artist's works; for some time it is likely to be the closest thing we have to a catalogue raisonné. Two works that find places here are "The Monuments of Passaic" and "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan"; these same essays also appear (without commentary) in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*. Part of what makes them so provocative is the very difficulties they present to the attempt to classify them as either visual or literary works. Both are texts Smithson published (in *Artforum*), and both contain a number of photographs that he took. Why should these pieces appear in both books? Are they "works" (possibly even "sculptures") or are they "writings"? For centuries the institutions of art have operated in such a way as to suppose that questions like this are not problematic. Works are visual surfaces or structures, it has been thought, to which any linguistic content, depiction, or accompaniment is a secondary or incidental supplement. Writings