

*Spiral Jetty*  
A Critical Challenge

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# A CRITICAL CHALLENGE

## S p i r a l J e t t y



Robert Smithson's short career began in 1960 and ended when he was killed in an airplane crash in 1973. At the time of his death, he had gained an international reputation as an earthworks artist but was, and still is, associated with the 1960s-1970s American art category of Minimalism. Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* of 1970 is by far his most renowned work. It is a 15-foot wide, 1500-foot long spiral of rock and gravel extending from the shore of Rozel Point into Great Salt Lake, Utah. The work is most usually encountered in Smithson's own film about it, which was shown at the Dwan Gallery, New York City, November, 1970, and in a limited number of photographic images of *Spiral Jetty* which have been widely distributed through the art-world media. There have been few first-hand experiences because the site is extremely difficult to visit and, at present, the lake level has risen and submerged the work.

Robert Smithson,  
*Spiral Jetty*, 1970.  
Great Salt Lake,  
Utah (USA).

*Spiral Jetty* is both challenging and very photogenic, and, since the debut of Smithson's film, there have been more than 100 reviews,

essays, and illustration-references in English-language North American magazines and journals alone. Although a great deal has been written about it, strangely, there is no consensus of opinion. The various articles show that *Spiral Jetty* remains compelling, but they do not lead to an understanding of how the jetty does its job as a work of art. A semiotic approach, for example, Suzanne K. Langer's theory, leads to new insights and creates a synthesis of many of the opinions. Langer's semiotic theory of art will be considered after a selected review of the critical literature.

John Beardsley claims that Smithson has called up the picturesque, «We are too corrupt, Smithson implied, too responsible for the degradation of the earth, to try to recreate even an artificial Eden. Smithson's picturesque is thus not of the rustic or the pastoral but of the post industrial». <sup>1</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that pretty well every one involved with Modernist or avant-garde thought has shared Smithson's understanding of the picturesque; so-called "post-industrial" picturesque is a response to the aesthetic age of bourgeois ascendancy<sup>2</sup> and

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was equally alive and well in the heyday of industrialism—the Eiffel Tower is a perfect example. Sentimentality has absorbed the rustic and the pastoral into its degraded understanding of beauty. This leaves the desolate, the spoiled, and the industrial as possible sites for the picturesque.

Joseph Masheck claims that *Spiral Jetty* forces us to contemplate the biological-human place in the unimaginable continua of space and time. «Perhaps what the superficial landscape is to sentiment, Smithson's geologic landscape is to the intelligence». <sup>3</sup> Masheck's proposal is consistent with seeing the picturesque as an aspect of sentimentality, and implies that the jetty is more sublime than picturesque.

When Beardsley and Masheck are considered together, the old distinction between the picturesque and the sublime disappears. For Beardsley, Smithson redeems the picturesque; for Masheck, Smithson writes it off. There is not much difference calling natural desolation or industrial scarring either picturesque or sublime: the definitive idea is an aesthetic response without sentimentality.

Minimalism and Conceptualism can be seen as the logical apotheosis of Modernism. Henry Martin states that the Minimalist context is the source of meaning in Smithson's work. <sup>4</sup> However, John Coplans, along with Lawrence Alloway<sup>5</sup>, disagree, «Robert Smithson was a problem from the beginning. ... his sculpture looked eccentric compared with the prevalent notion of the Minimalist style». <sup>6</sup> Coplans and Alloway are convincing for two reasons: First, Smithson's sculptures seem to concern the actual material of their construction more than most Minimalist sculpture (Judd or André, for example). The objective qualities of the substances (especially entropy) interest Smithson while the perceptual-phenomenal qualities are more relevant to Judd and André. Second, most Minimalist work is limited to arrangements of parallel lines and 90 degree angles (in retrospect it is like the employment of "Mon-

drian—restrictions” analogous to writing a sonnet in the Petrarchian form). Smithson’s sculpture, on the other hand, often involves odd acute angles, curves, and natural irregularities.

John Coplans considers *Spiral Jetty* to be outside of the Minimalist discourse, «Not until the building of *Spiral Jetty* in 1970 did Smithson’s usage become clearer; the spiral is related to his notions of entropy and irreversibility». <sup>7</sup> Like Martin, Coplans sees the jetty as imputed with meaning by the artist but, for Coplans, the meaning cannot “abandon” the work (as Martin claims) since its context includes, along with the historical style, the actual object and the geographical location, the artist’s intentions. Rather, Coplans tends to embrace the possibility of symbolism.

Willis Domingo points in the symbolic direction when he says, «for Smithson, abstraction has gone so far that it has over-turned into a sort of naive realism». <sup>8</sup> Naive realism here, is not the usual technical term (the epistemological position that we have unmediated knowledge of the external world) but rather that Smithson feels his art embodies his ideas so perfectly that the idea actually exists in the thing. Domingo continues that Smithson’s work is heroic and mythological. This locates the jetty in a primordial dream-time, as a component of a cosmology or myth.

This dream-like, surreal quality is also commented on by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, «Smithson’s juxtaposition of sculpture and landscape, like Barnett Newman’s identification of scale and size, relies at some level on the Surrealist’s idea of the work as that in which the dream and the everyday—and by extension, the thought and the thing, the object and its perception—may occupy the same space». <sup>9</sup> Michael Fitzgerald also points out an affinity with Surrealism, «Smithson and [André] Breton both rejected a formalist definition of art ... Both artists acknowledged the limitations of reason and wished to substitute natural orders, but in Smithson’s work the intervening void is less definitely bridged». <sup>10</sup>

All the same, I disagree with Fitzgerald’s caveat, and would claim that Smithson bridges all putative “voids” just as thoroughly as Breton. The gap for both artists is between psychic natural orders and physical natural orders. Both agree that reason is only one possible common ordering and that coincidence is more germane to our existence than reason. For Breton, coincidence is just as semantically charged as metaphor, and coincidence is found in both the mental and the material worlds. Breton replaces reason with coincidence as the common principle which bridges the gap between the psychic and the physical.

Smithson would find Breton’s view agreeable: Coincidence is fundamentally important to Smithson’s work but he has selected entropy as the principle common to both worlds. They really only differ in the orientation of coincidence. Breton’s coincidence is horizontal and parallel to the physical and psychic continua: Coincidence is created or selected in the physical world and is understood to be the same as, or similar to, coincidence and metaphor in the psyche. Smithson’s Coincidence is vertical and oblique to the physical and psychic continua: coincidence is created or selected across the two continua (*Spiral Jetty* for instance, is understood to be entropic and thus (coincidentally) similar to, or the same as, our minds). It is like a parody of rational meaning: creating coincidental similarities between the psychological and the physical, and intentionally not discriminating co-relation from cause.

To the extent that Surrealism is “make-believe”, or “magic-talk”, I would agree with Smithson’s affinity. The most interesting Surrealist works have a just-so-ness about them—they are metaphysical statements as God would make them. In other words, the statement is the creation: this confound of mind and matter results in truth by causality. Of course, for mere mortals such as ourselves, ontogenetic articulations only happen in our dreams. To the extent that Smithson was modifying the world to make it congruent with his ideas, rather than modifying his ideas to make them congruent with the world, Smithson was acting as a Surrealist with *Spiral Jetty*.

Donald Kuspit states that Smithson dialectically restores, «the lost but not completely forgotten faith in the eternal, which now no longer can be understood as an order of things—although, in the entropic structures Smithson admired, it first appears as such—but rather as an interruption or an intervention in the apparently existing order of things». <sup>11</sup> This leads to an aesthetic interest in the “spaces between supposed “things”, very reminiscent of Stéphane Mallarmé. Smithson and Mallarmé have many themes in common including the lack of thingness about things (they would probably both hate Heidegger); the mystery of spaces and gaps; the possible identity of objects and ideas; and the contingency of the world on our making it as it is (Nietzsche’s thought is in the background of all these themes).

The generating principles in Smithson’s work include more than just formalism: there is a Surrealism which commingles thoughts and things, and a symbolism which synthesizes them. Apparently true symbols are aesthetically received as sublime, and poignant symbols are felt as picturesque. Considerations of the symbolic are difficult

and complex. Various writers have found all these things in *Spiral Jetty*. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe observes, «Smithson’s activation of the landscape is indeed that, a situation in which it is that which surrounds the work which is activated by it ... A situation in which it is hard to describe meaning as either constructed, or subtracted, but which is rather a context in which meaning comes to one as articulated without being interpreted». <sup>12</sup> This idea alludes to Langer’s concept of significant form (an apt concept for *Spiral Jetty*, as will be seen shortly).

Donald Kuspit refers to the symbolical aspects of *Spiral Jetty*, «The coincidentia oppositorum conveyed by the coimplication [sic] of physical sensation and symbolic form ... puts clearly before us Smithson’s mode of viewing the world. Smithson was knowingly dialectical. For him, the spiral was best described in dialectical terms, in terms of what he calls “a bipolar rhythm between mind and matter” (Nancy Holt (ed.), *The Writings Of Robert Smithson*, New York, 1979, p. 112)». <sup>13</sup> Besides having a closeness to Surrealism and mythological thinking, the convergence of mind and matter once again points to Langer.

Langer develops a theory of art as a non-discursive symbol of feeling; that is, as a morphology of feeling, or as the perceptual aspect of feeling. For Langer, art is not an articulation which makes reference (in agreement with Gilbert-Rolfe’s articulation without interpretation), nor is art a synthesis of pre-existing elements (such as language): She calls it a “significant form” (perhaps the same as Kuspit’s symbolic form). She states, «In creating an emotive symbol, or work of art, the creator articulates a vital import which he could not imagine apart from its expression, and consequently cannot know before he expresses it». <sup>14</sup> Coincidentally, Smithson claimed that he conceived a spiral jetty only when confronted with the future site. <sup>15</sup>

Langer elucidates three conditions for art: (a) it must have otherness—be estranged from actuality and engage in abstraction; (b) it must manipulate expressively and have plastic freedom; and (c) it must be transparent and have expressiveness. Langer’s first condition is closely related to Kant’s claim that the aesthetic sense, in opposition to reason, finds delight in an object while taking no interest in either the existence of the object or the practical use which it may have. As Langer describes it, «The knowledge that what is before us has no practical significance in the world is what enables us to give attention to its appearance as such». <sup>16</sup>

Langer’s second condition of “plasticity” is made possible by the first condition of estrangement. As she states, «The second thing is to make it [the work of art] plastic, so it may be manipulated in the interests of

expression instead of practical signification. This is achieved by the same means—uncoupling it from practical life, abstracting it as a free conceptual figment.<sup>17</sup>

Langer's third condition of art is transparency. In her definition of art as symbol, form and feeling become aspects of each other—there is no signifying relationship. Thus, the idea of "content" as distinct from form becomes absurd; the form is the content. Transparency is that quality of an art work which allows the perception of its form to lead immediately to understanding its idea (similar to the "naive realism" suggested by Domingo).

Without a doubt, *Spiral Jetty* possesses Langer's quality of otherness. Beardsley, Masheck, Domingo, Gilbert-Rolfe, Fitzgerald, Kuspit agree that the jetty has otherness. The work is formed like a single element from a decorative-border pattern, yet it is made from the material of geographical features. Although it has one size, it has many scales: a small decorative motif, the beginning of a border to decorate the shoreline of the Great Salt Lake (making the lake a map of itself), an enormous geographical feature, a tiny crystal structure, a solar flare, or a spiral galaxy. This zoom effect of scales is truly dizzying and it is intentional on Smithson's part: «The scale of *Spiral Jetty* tends to fluctuate depending on where the viewer happens to be. Size determines an object, but scale determines art. A crack in the wall if viewed in terms of scale, not size, could be called the Grand Canyon».<sup>19</sup>

The form releases other ambiguities besides scale. A spiral jetty creates a spiral bay; thus, there is confusion whether the work is in the figure or the ground. Additionally, the jetty is a separate artefact but it remains continuous with the surrounding geography. This last ambivalence suggests many oppositions such as discreet object/continuum; intentionality/randomness; mind/matter; culture/nature; perception/sensation; reason/coincidence and; readability/visibility. *Spiral Jetty* seems futile and useless, only existing to exist (as if we, ourselves, had any better reason to be here).

*Spiral Jetty* also possesses plasticity. The spiral motif is a conventionalized sign in the decorative arts where it makes "natural" reference to living, growing, expanding, contracting, swirling, flexing, moving (abstractions from ferns, vines, snakes, whirlpools, intestines, etc.). Smithson's use of the form completely cancels all the conventional meanings of the motif. *Spiral Jetty* is hard, inflexible, barren, and immobile; it prevents the free movement of the water and it is situated in a lifeless saline lake in an arid climate. Besides, I cannot think of any natural spirals in the size-neighbourhood of the jetty. Most natural spirals are either much bigger or much smaller: the jetty is

quite humanly scaled (it was obviously built with dump trucks and bulldozers). The human sizing is a poignant inversion of Smithson's explicit goal of producing work outside the biological metaphor. Smithson's use of form is therefore highly plastic—all conventional meanings of the motif have been negated and it stands as a free form embodying its own expression through size, shape, material and location.

*Spiral Jetty* is also transparent. The spiral stands with a stark, eloquently mute presence because the form (which in an earth-work includes the site) negates all the culturally conventional meanings which have accrued to the spiral form as a motif. Its "is-ness" has a searing quality, enhanced by its placement in the hot, clear, dry sunshine of a desert. The form has been contrived to make all conventional readings of the motif impossible. The viewer is forced to see the jetty as a (semantically) bleached form and, therefore, must contemplate its obdurate existence and create a new articulation to replace the lost conventional meanings. There is no Saussurian langue to provide meaning, it must come entirely from the viewer and fit the work, as if by coincidence. Perhaps, among other things, *Spiral Jetty* tells us that discreet objects are the decoration of cognition and decoration, instead of being ancillary, is actually the vehicle of meaning (a somewhat Nietzschean epistemology). As Oscar Wilde apparently said, «It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.»<sup>20</sup>

Langer's theory of significant forms appears to be applicable to Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and is, in fact, very helpful for understanding how the jetty produces its effects. Langer's theory on the semiosis of art does not exhaust *Spiral Jetty*, or any other work of art for that matter, but she has developed some useful heuristics which deserve acknowledgement. Talk of feelings and form and plasticity rings of early Modernism and is somewhat unpleasant to the late modern ear: it is too optimistic and ambitious—I think we are jealous of the simplicity of revolution. I have hopefully demonstrated that tolerance of the middle past can produce useful insights. As for Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, it has sufficient complexity and poignancy to interest people for a long time to come. I suspect that essays on the jetty will be published regularly for the foreseeable future. ◆

#### NOTES :

1. John Beardsley, "Traditional Aspects of New Land", in *Art Journal*, Fall, 1982, p. 231.
2. c.f., Clement Greenberg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch in Art and Culture*, Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1965, pp. 3-21. Greenberg's distinction between art and popular culture includes the fundamental idea that good art is aesthetically inconsistent with sentiment.
3. Joseph Masheck, "Review of the *Spiral Jetty* Film", in

- Artforum*, January 1971, p. 73.
4. Henry Martin, "Venice 1982: Or, Is The Biennale Sinking?", in *Art International*, September-October 1982, p. 90.
5. Lawrence Alloway, "Robert Smithson's Development", in *Artforum*, November 1972, p. 53.
6. John Coplans, "The Amarillo Ramp", in *Artforum*, April 1974, p. 36.
7. Ibid.
8. Willis Domingo, "Galleries", in *Arts Magazine*, December 1970 - January 1971, p. 57.
9. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "Gallery Reviews", in *Artforum*, September 1974, p. 79. Also, Smithson tended to a monism of mind and matter. c.f. *A Museum of Language on the Vicinity of Art*, in Nancy Holt (ed.), *The Writings of Robert Smithson*: New York, New York University Press, 1979, pp. 67-78.
10. Michael Fitzgerald, "Certain Vagaries: Robert Smithson, Science, and Surrealism", in *Arts Magazine*, May 1983, p. 126. And Smithson "The brain itself resembles an eroded rock from which ideas and ideals leak", *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*, ibid. Holt (ed.), p. 90.
11. Donald Kuspit, "The Pascalian Spiral: Robert Smithson's Drunken Boat", in *Arts Magazine*, October 1981, p. 84.
12. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "Sculpture as Everything Else, Twenty Years or so of the Question of Landscape", in *Arts Magazine*, January 1988, p. 75.
13. Ibid., D. Kuspit, p. 83.
14. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, p. 389.
15. Ibid., N. Holt (ed.), *The Spiral Jetty*, p. 111.
16. Ibid., p. 49.
17. Ibid., p. 60.
18. Smithson had an abiding interest in maps and makes reference to a fictional map in the scale of 1:1 (c.f. *A Museum of Language on the Vicinity of Art*, in ibid. Holt (ed.), p. 76).
19. Ibid., Holt (ed.), *The Spiral Jetty*, p. 112. All the same, Smithson's theorizing on scale is slightly bogus. It is true that one can fabricate an object which enhances or even induces the experience of scale change, but at bottom, scale is entirely a viewer's discretion. It is, I believe, an extremely common experience: After all, isn't scale changing involved whenever a child plays with a toy?
20. Cited by Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, New York: Dell Pub., 1966, p. 7. It is claimed to be excerpted from a letter but no detailed reference is given.

**On a diversement interprété l'oeuvre maîtresse du regretté Robert Smithson, cette Jetée en spirale longue de 450 mètres qu'il fit construire, en 1970, en bordure du Grand Lac Salé dans l'Utah. Associé au courant minimaliste américain, Smithson voyait dans son oeuvre un rapport dialectique entre l'esprit et la matière. Bien qu'elle soit aujourd'hui recouverte par l'eau, *Spiral Jetty* a alimenté une vive critique (plus de cent articles dans les journaux et revues) qui est loin d'être consensuelle. D'abord, d'où vient qu'elle soit sacrée oeuvre d'art? Et, que signifie-t-elle?... C'est avec l'aide d'éminents critiques - dont John Beardsley, Joseph Masheck, Henry Martin, John Coplans, Lawrence Alloway, Willis Domingo, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Michael Fitzgerald, Donald Kuspit et Suzanne K. Langer— que l'auteur de l'article dresse un état des lieux de la pensée critique entourant cette oeuvre. Au terme d'une randonnée de haute voltige qui fait intervenir des noms aussi prestigieux que André Breton, Stéphane Mallarmé, Heidegger et Nietzsche, Armstrong plaide finalement pour une plus grande tolérance, le respect des différentes approches étant le moyen le plus sûr d'enrichir le débat.**