

ETC



"Operation on Nature"

José M. Springer

Number 32, December 1995, January–February 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35846ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

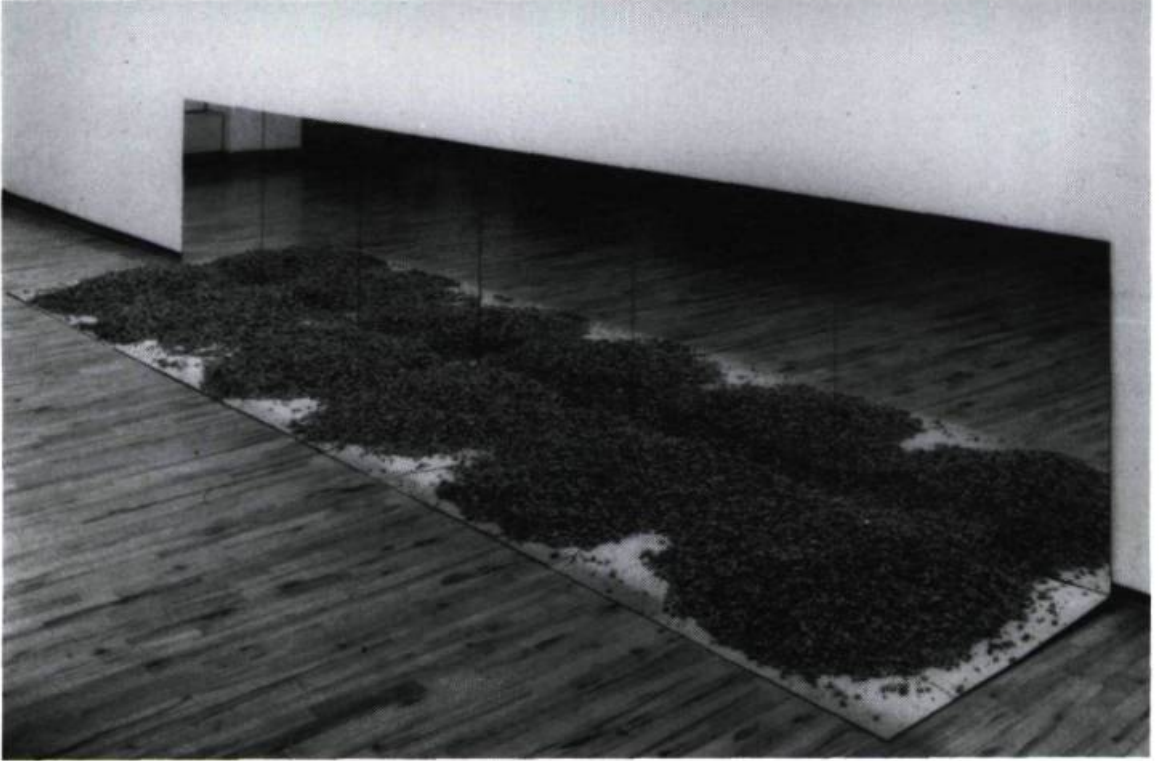
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Cite this review

Springer, J. M. (1995). Review of ["Operation on Nature"]. *ETC*, (32), 43–44.

TORONTO "OPERATION ON NATURE"

Robert Smithson; Operations on Nature, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, August 16 - October 29, 1995



Robert Smithson, *Gravel Mirrors with Cracks and Dust*, 1968. 12 mirrors with gravel. Estate of Robert Smithson. Courtesy John Weber Gallery.

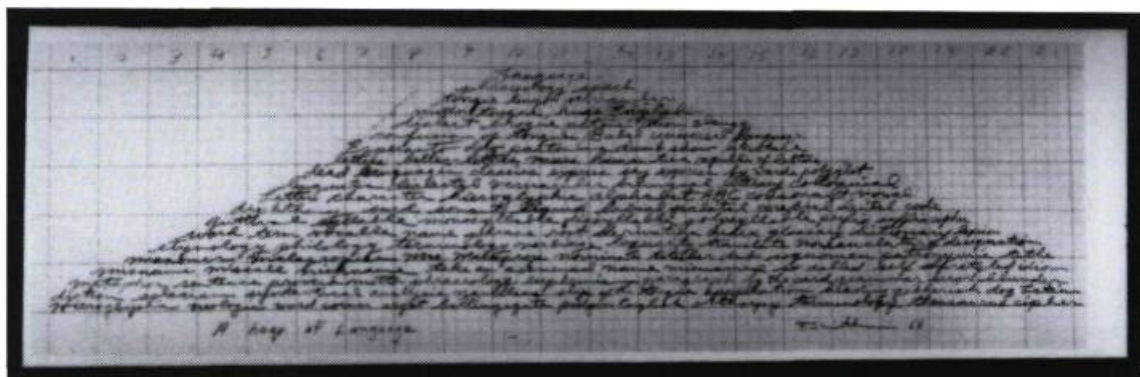
What is the point behind the rendition of an inert landscape when the tradition of landscaping was to represent the changes of Nature? Any notion of aesthetic pleasure calls for a passive element: that which remains holding the rest together. The American artist Robert Smithson (b. 1938-1973) came to the conclusion that for a rendition of Nature to be complete, it was necessary to depict the energy as well as the stillness of the system as they manifest physically. His works in the open land are presentations rather than representations of geography. But he also brought into the gallery or the museum – non-sites to him – pieces of landscape, displaced from their context.

Robert Smithson; Operations on Nature is devoted to the works of one of the latest artists of landscape, geography and energy. The show makes the viewer experience the notions of landscape from the perspective of works Smithson created in the late 1960's and the early 1970's. It also brings out the similarities shared by countries and cities when it comes to the view of their wastelands and the ever-expanding suburban

sprawl. To underline this sharing, the curator, Matthew Teittelbaum, introduces the show with a couple of landscapes from the nineteenth century English painter John Constable, which make a contrast between the last century's romantic version of landscape and Smithson's conceptual and desolated view.

Robert Smithson was like many of us attracted to the sight of the land. Most probably his interest was fostered by the first images of the Earth taken from spaceships in the sixties. For him landscape is a site, something that comprises more than that which is beautiful and pleasing to the eye – the traditional approach of painters. Landscape depicts the human interactions with Nature. In his depiction the artist used real matters unadorned by imagination, an approach that became characteristic of the so called Earth Art of the seventies.

Looking at the way a city grows and expands, the way motor vehicles and people move through a grid of streets, one may get a sense of the energy that articulates the system from within. As the plane in which I traveled approached the runway and its surroundings, I realized



Robert Smithson, *A Heap of Language*, 1966. Pencil on paper marker. Estate of Robert Smithson. Courtesy John Weber Gallery.

the contrast between the moving inhabited parts of the city and those that remain forgotten and bleak. Smithson became interested in the latter, the entropy of a geographical place, a.k.a. the unavailable energy of a system.

As we look to Nature we may come to the realization that landscape is the outcome of the invisible forces within. The pouring and sliding of great masses of matter in the course of time have shaped our natural horizons. Smithson expressed visually and physically that the position of the individual is critical to one's rendition of landscape. This American artist studied these ideas through drawings and by his intervention in industrial wastelands. He poured asphalt and glue over hills of rocks and soil. By so doing, he created landscapes within a landscape. The mounds of gravel and soil we see in the gallery are his recreations of the relationship between viewer and landscape.

Robert Smithson used mirrors in his works on to convey the idea of displacement of the viewer in relationship to landscape. Several works made of crushed rock and salt crystals with mirrors partially buried by them are on display at the OAG. When looking at the reflections of one's own body in the mirror it is puzzling, even amusing, to see the shapes of those inert mounds change according to our distance and inclination from the mirrors. Because of these works Smithson was credited with bringing the landscape into the museum, the non-site, the place that showcases the operations performed at the site.

His famous *Spiral Jetty* (1970), made in the Great Salt Lake in Utah, consisted in 6,650 tons of rock, mud and salt crystals moved to create an earth coil one half a kilometer in length. *Spiral Jetty* became a seminal work of art, because it was an operation to present art beyond from the confines of the museum and the city into Nature. Even now when the piece has been

swallowed by the lake, its presence in photographs and a 16 mm documentary by the artist remains a striking proof of the fusion of art and nature. Because of the gigantic proportions and the ephemeral qualities of Smithson's work, they have been documented in photographs paradoxically considered art works in their own right. Along with these printed images, the maps that Robert Smithson folded, cutted and pasted are essays in form that alter the conventional systems of reference and representation.

The short and prolific career of this artist, he died at 42, presents a continuum of places and recordings. His understanding of the nature of vision led him to work in faraway places such as the jungle in Yucatan, Mexico, a river in Holland and the desert-lands of Texas. His influence can be seen in the works of Canadian artist Rodney Graham, a landscape photographer, and the Mexican Gabriel Orozco, whose minimal installations are often assimilated by the context in which he presents them. The contrast between art as a representation of Nature and sheer nature as the place for art is at the core of the ideas that contemporary art explores.

JOSE M. SPRINGER