Unnatural fact: the fictions of Robert Smithson

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Abstract
Robert Smithson is an influential figure in the history of contemporary writing in creative practice. Indebted as his work is to Lewis Carroll, Edgar Allan Poe, Vladimir Nabakov and Antonin Artaud this paper will argue for a distinctly literary examination of Robert Smithson’s art. Smithson is best known for his earthworks such as The Spiral Jetty (1972) and Asphalt Rundown (1969) in which he offsets cultural and natural forms of production. Yet Smithson’s ‘site-specific’ practice must be situated in terms of his textual approach. By focusing on aspects of Smithson’s writing which call into question mediation, representation, mimesis and documentary, the paper will demonstrate how, throughout Smithson’s approach, writing is a means of unsettling the cultural and the textual space of art production. Texts such as ‘A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art’ (1968), ‘The Spiral Jetty’ (1969) and ‘A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic’ (1967) are written in correspondence with artworks as a means of relocating the place of production with the reader. ‘The Spiral Jetty’ essay, for instance, which combines aspects of photography, documentary and film-making stages the Jetty’s production by drawing attention to its form as a textual, cultural and factual production. The paper will argue, as indeed Smithson’s obsessively essayistic reportage seems to acknowledge, that The Spiral Jetty is a matter of writing. Emblematic of Smithson’s work with site-specificity more broadly, the paper will argue that the earthwork exists most fully in the correspondence between writing and fact.

Robert Smithson is a seminal figure in the history of conceptual art. The Spiral Jetty (1972). Smithson’s major earthwork, enjoys iconic status as a masterpiece of the site-specific tradition. Yet The Spiral Jetty, more often reported on than seen directly, exists at least in part as a condition of documentary. With writing at the heart of his practice Smithson himself has instigated this form of reporting as seeing. The essay ‘The Spiral Jetty’, written in 1972 a year before Smithson is killed in an aeroplane accident, is an important document of conceptual practice and is one of a number of texts that attempt to de-centre the cultural production of art. Smithson’s other key writings stem from a period of roughly five years between 1967 and 1972 (Flam 1996). With ‘A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey’ written in 1967 and the publication the following year of ‘A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art’ Smithson begins to demonstrate the variety and scope of an increasingly writerly practice. This paper will consider the textual construction of Smithson’s earthworks by evaluating the role of his documentary reportage (the ‘factual account’) as a site of art production.
2. Here Smithson is discussing the out-of-the-wayness of his ‘Mirror-displacements’, in ‘Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan’ (Flam 1996: 132): ‘If you visit the sites (a doubtful probability) you find nothing but memory-traces, the mirror displacements were dismantled right after they were photographed.’ But a similar feeling for (near) remoteness underpins The Spiral Jetty project.

Reading The Spiral Jetty

The Spiral Jetty’s field of experience is defined by inaccessibility. Well removed from the cosmopolitan settings of contemporary American art institutions and beyond the reach of accessible roads, visiting the site, as Smithson concedes, is of ‘doubtful probability’.

Instead the Jetty is accessed in writing. Smithson’s textual account intervenes in the place of a more material encounter, creating a tension between the very heavy reality of the Jetty and the lightness of its reception. This is perhaps implicit in Craig Owens’ observation that The Spiral Jetty is a textual construction: ‘that Smithson has transformed the visual field into a textual one represents one of the most significant aesthetic “events” of our decade’ (Owens 1992: 42). This is not to say, however, that the text is a cancellation of the object, the two should be considered in relation as a form of correspondence more familiar to the documentary tradition. The Spiral Jetty as document and art object is an expression of what James Agee calls ‘actuality’ or the relationship between actual experience and the representation of actual experience (Agee 2001). For Smithson the documentary account is not separate from the field of investigation and representation but is a part of it. The actuality of The Spiral Jetty is, for Smithson, a question of documentation as an act of correspondence; Smithson’s texts exist in correspondence with the cultural material of representation, an unstable and contingent medium more commonly associated with permanence and truth.

Magazine as cultural production

As a canvas for this correspondence Smithson, like Dan Graham and other artists of the time, employs the magazine. The published writings appeared in Artforum and Art International. The reading experience associated with magazines – one of leisure and pastime, an undirected reading pattern interrupted by mass-produced images and an arbitrary movement back and forth (in and out) rather than a linear passage of beginning, middle and end – appears to influence Smithson’s style and qualifies the type of folding or self-reflection in his work. As will be shown, what makes the magazine form attractive to Smithson is its transient and ephemeral form. It provides an uncertain support for his ideas, identifying his writing with a literary tradition that acts according to its displacement. Here for instance is one moment of disassembly in ‘The Spiral Jetty’:

The preceding paragraphs refer to a ‘scale of centres’ that could be disentangled as follows:

(a) ion source of cyclotron
(b) a nucleus
(c) dislocation point
(d) a wooden stake in the mud
(e) axis of helicopter propeller
(f) James Joyce’s ear channel
(g) The Sun
(h) A hole in the film reel

Spinning off this uncertain scale of centres would be an equally uncertain ‘scale of edges’:
The equation of my language remains unstable, a shifting set of coordinates, an arrangement of variables spilling into surds. My equation is as clear as mud – a muddy spiral.

(Flam 1996: 150)

It is this insistent referring back-and-forth, spiralling and destabilizing that characterizes Smithson’s key writings. Smithson introduces an earlier essay, ‘A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art’ (published in Art International in 1968), by testifying to a similar instability:

The following is a mirror structure of macro and micro orders, reflections, critical Laputans, and dangerous stairways of words, a shaky edifice of fictions that hangs over inverse syntactical arrangements…coherences that vanish into quasiexactitudes and sublunary and translunary principles.

(Flam 1996: 78)

The mirror properties of reflection and refraction, a consistently seductive presence in Smithson’s work might be thought of as a system of reference and quotation, an openly constructed cultural context rather than a verifiable reality. Smithson’s use of quotation is ambivalent. Arguably it provides a literary and cultural context in which appropriation becomes an organizing principle, one that may suggest an inherent order in the canonical or received tradition. Yet Smithson’s use of quotation differs, say, from early modernist systems of reference that infer a prejudice for archaic authorities. For instance the Latin and Hellenic coding in the poetry of Eliot and Pound (and, at times, Joyce). Apparently random, the form assembled from found texts is often one of barely coherent field notes compiled in drafts rather than as finished products. To read Smithson’s work is to be involved in an act of production. Openly drawing direct attention to the disparate array of sources it is possible to note the artificial arrangement, or stage-setting, in Smithson’s work. Quotation is used to highlight the fiction of its embeddedness, reminiscent of Peter Bürger’s conception of the non-organic in avant-garde traditions. In the organic work of art, that of symbolist illusionism, the unity of the work (its non-problematic relation to the viewer) is assumed to exist without mediation. In the non-organic work the unity is openly mediated. Art can be produced only in terms of how it is received, that is to say, only in terms of mediation:

The organic work of art seeks to make unrecognisable the fact that it has been made. The opposite holds true for the avant-gardiste work: it proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artefact.

(Burger 1984: 54)
For Smithson, media and material are one and the same; utilized as part of a non-organic contingency. The essay, ‘A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art’ positions itself as a review of artists’ writing at the time and employs a mock documentary style dedicated to its status as an artificial construct, or artefact. The language of the artists and critics referred to in this article becomes paradigmatic, reflections in a looking-glass Babel that is fabricated according to Pascal’s remark, ‘Nature is an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.’ The entire article may be viewed as a variation on that much misused remark; or as a monstrous ‘museum’ constructed out of multi-faceted surfaces that refer, not to one subject but to many subjects within a single building of words – a brick = a word, a sentence = a room, a paragraph = a floor of rooms, etc. Or language becomes an infinite museum, whose center is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere. (Italics in the original) (Flam 1996: 71)

In a collage-like collection of quotes, illustrations and speculative suggestions, Smithson’s ‘textual analysis’ is drawn to the variety of ‘textual uncertainties’ that define the work of contemporaries such as Donald Judd, Ed Ruscha and Sol LeWitt, in terms of the material of failure. The films of Andy Warhol, for instance, are revered precisely because their ‘language has no force’:

It’s not very convincing – all the pornographic preoccupations collapse into verbal deposits, or... ‘degenerative information’. Warhol’s syntax forces an artifice of sadomasochism that mimics its supposed ‘reality’. Even his surfaces destroy themselves. (Flam 1996: 82)

It is the self-destructive, the throwaway and the ephemeral that characterize Smithson’s sense of the non-organic. LeWitt’s handwriting, in an announcement for an exhibition at the Dawn Gallery, Los Angeles, 1967, is ‘like getting words caught in your eyes’ and so takes its place in the ‘museum of language’ (Flam 1996: 80). Likewise, Ruscha’s book Royal Road Test (1967) which documents the unhappy fate of a Royal (Model X) typewriter thrown from a speeding 1963 Buick on a ‘perfect’ day in August 1966, is included as a book ‘carrying within itself the seeds of its own destruction’ (Flam 1996: 83). In this way Smithson documents the un-seeable and replaces the gallery or the museum with textual presentation in an attempt to displace the centre of cultural authority with an openly contingent value system or cultural context.

Smithson also includes the work of Dan Graham. Well known for his use of magazines and print advertising space, Graham’s ability to ‘read the language of buildings’ informs Smithson’s conception of the museum as an architecture of fiction; an anxious space in which the document is more real than the reality it purports to document (Flam 1996: 82). Here Smithson is referring to Graham’s magazine piece ‘Homes for America’ originally published in Arts Magazine in 1966 (Wallis 1993: 14–21). Graham presents photographs of purpose-built tract housing developments.
in Jersey City as well as statistics and interviews acquired ‘in the field’ in order to document the effect of the ‘technologies of mass-production’ and models of ‘land-use economics’ on the living environment of American suburbs. Graham appears to detect in this apparently new relationship between production and reception (or, more specifically, between architect and inhabitant) an analogue to the aesthetic position, or point of view, of the artist. The artist is, like the architect, subordinate to the technologies of reproduction that repeat designs and materials irrespective of the local environment. The architect/artist is as such denied the ‘unique role’ associated with the cultural authority of the individual producer (again, conventionally associated with the architect or artist):

Contingencies such as mass-production technology and land-use economics make the final decisions, denying the architect his former ‘unique’ role. Developments stand in an altered relationship to their environment. Designed to fill in ‘dead’ land areas, the houses needn’t adapt to or attempt to withstand nature. There is no organic unity connecting the land site and the home. Both are without roots – separate parts in a larger, predetermined, synthetic order.

(Wallis 1993: 21)

As part of this position in terms of reception and production, Graham uses the magazine format in order to inhabit this territory of disconnection; a territory he identifies implicitly as a process of description and mediation, a process that otherwise accommodates the disunity of home and land-site. It is here that he locates his ‘earthworks’. Yet Graham also emphasizes the uncertainty or the contingency of the artist assuming this role through the very medium he employs in order to communicate his message – namely the throwaway and ephemeral medium of magazine publication. Indeed, the organic unity he alludes to may in itself be a construction of description and mediation and is perhaps attested to (through form) by positioning the art work within the transient permutations of the magazine rather than the permanent or culturally secure realm of the museum or gallery. Magazine and gallery are juxtaposed in this way in order, arguably, to challenge the established conventions of the art world as a system of language. As Smithson points out, paraphrasing Graham: ‘The “block houses” of the post-war suburbs communicate their “dead” land areas or ‘sites’ in the manner of a linguistic permutation’ (Flam 1996: 82). Thus the relationship between language and space is challenged in order to call into question the relationship between production and reception as prearranged, built into what Smithson calls ‘an architecture of fiction’ (Flam 1996: 84).

The ‘linguistic permutations’ of Smithson and Graham open up the question of textuality and the mediation of space. There is a sense that both artists are attempting to occupy the space between production and reception as a space which is not fixed but is instead a shifting representational process. This is certainly the driving force behind Smithson’s famous binary of ‘site and non-site’ which underpins his understanding of earthworks as a form of art production:

In a sense my non-sites are rooms within rooms. Recovery from the outer fringes brings one back to the central point...The scale between indoors and
outdoors and how the two are impossible to bridge…What you are really confronted with in the non-site is the absence of the site. It is a contradiction rather than an expansion of scale. One is confronted with a very ponderous, weighty absence.

(Flam 1996: 234)

The field of representation, identified by Smithson as a relationship between art histories and the ways in which art histories are reported upon, is wide. As Smithson notes, it includes all of the elements of mass media (books, magazines, newspapers, radio, television – to these might be added direct and outdoor advertising, film and later the Internet), as well as being a field of representation, or territory, that includes direct experience, or the ‘being there’, of everyday life. The scope and pervasiveness of representation informs the position of the artist constructing representations in a field of representation and leads not just towards a discussion of texts (or written language) as a means of occupying this territory of representation but towards the discussion of what is meant by textual practice.

**Smithson’s fictions**

Interestingly Smithson draws on a literary tradition in order to navigate this field of representation. The fictional gesture is most explicit in his piece, ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects’ (Artforum 1968) which is in many ways a straightforward, even journalistic, account of the fashion for earthworks, in which Smithson makes explicit reference to Edgar Allen Poe’s novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1994). He does so in order to demonstrate the nature of a conception of fieldwork that ‘muddies’ the distinction between real and non-real, or site and non-site. In this piece, Smithson suggests that the cultural geographer’s anxiety over fieldwork and representation has always been manifest in the operation of fiction:

Poe’s *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* seems to me an excellent art criticism and prototype for rigorous non-site investigations. ‘Nothing worth mentioning occurred during the next twenty-four hours except that, in examining the ground to the eastward third chasm, we found two triangular holes of great depth, and also with black granite sides.’ His descriptions of chasms and holes seem to verge on proposals for ‘earthwords’. The shapes of the chasms themselves become ‘verbal roots’ that spell out the difference between darkness and light. Poe ends his mental maze with the sentence – ‘I have graven it within the hills and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock.’

(Flam 1996: 108)

In his book on the shifting critical and cultural reception of Poe’s *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* (the text provocatively defined in the manner of an art object, according to a system of framing), Ronald C. Harvey notes the post-structuralist approach to Pym that re-qualifies a text dismissed by many as Poe’s least important work and no doubt mirrors something of
Smithson’s evaluation of the novel. According to Harvey, Pym appeals to scholars in the 1970s because:

Its self-referentiality, in the form of metaphors of scripting that effectively textualise the landscape, interrogate the nature of representation. At the same time its confused claims of authorship and grounds of authority among the multiple narrators places selfhood in a relative position to language. Modernist readings of Poe recognise that legibility, the very condition for reading the text, exists as a core theme within the book, with basic epistemological implications.

(Harvey 1998: 138)

As a novel re-negotiated and re-interpreted as being somewhere between accident and hoax, Smithson’s allusion to Pym is demonstrative of the textual operation that defines his sense of fieldwork. The illegibility that defines his distinction between site and non-site actively displaces the field by alluding to the role played by reading in the form of everyday experience and perception. It is not by accident that Smithson cites a novel very much in the genre of imaginary travel, adventure and the encounter of alien tongues, nor is it by accident that Poe makes so many of the textual errors that his contemporaries deride. Plot lines are left incomplete, characters disappear (and reappear even once they have been killed off), and personalities warp in and out of recognition. The novel itself remains radically incomplete as the apparent death of Pym the narrator leaves the meta-narrator and author, Poe (who is excused at the outset), to make the most of traces of narrative fragments. This mistaken machination of the narrator appears to organize the very nature of the narrative and, as with Smithson’s writing, guides the nature of its operation.

With its shifts and active unsettling, it is perhaps the novel’s uncertain authorial point of view that most appeals to Smithson. In the introductory note the novel is framed and then re-framed in terms of a material textual encounter as Pym acknowledges the efforts of ‘Mr Poe’ and the part he plays in the writing and publication of the opening chapters in the Southern Messenger, a magazine Poe edits in 1836 until he is fired in 1837 for alcoholism. According to Pym, Poe ‘proposed that I should allow him to draw up, in his own words, a narrative of the earlier portion of my adventures, from facts afforded by myself, publishing it… under the garb of fiction’ (My italics) (Poe 1994: 4). Writing, memory, experience and truth are each intensely fictionalized in the manner of a throwaway hoax:

Among those gentlemen in Virginia who expressed the greatest interest in my statement…was Mr Poe, lately editor of the Southern Messenger’…He strongly advised me, among others, to prepare at once a full account of what I had seen and undergone…insisting, with great plausibility, that however roughly, as regards mere authorship, my book should be got up, its very uncouthness, if there were any, would give it all the better chance of being received as truth.

(Poe 1994: 4)
The rough unreliability of Pym’s account ‘of what I had seen and undergone’ is the condition under which Poe establishes a textual field that frames the peculiar reception of his text. Poe and Smithson, in this sense, have a lot in common: both authors arrange a fiction of the mediated – a decoy embodying the ‘reception of truth’. Both authors are preoccupied by a fiction of seeing or, more to the point, not seeing. Magazine publishing, authorship, and documentation are each used in order to textualize the perennial hoax that (as with The Spiral Jetty) at the centre of the fiction there ‘exists’ an experience defined only in terms of its irrevocable lack or absence. This absence defines the suspect legibility that impacts radically upon the text.

Indeed, the subject and theme of legibility is broached on many occasions in Poe’s novel and in each event there is the suggestion that Poe understands ‘reading’ and ‘seeing’ to be mutual equivalents (Flam 1996: 153). Pym’s repeated failure to decipher found hieroglyphs, and the blindness of the whaler’s hold in which Pym attempts to read the torn fragments of a note scrawled in blood by his sea-faring companion, Augustus, undermine Pym’s ideological eyeglass; he can reflect nothing but his own inadequacy, something that might aid an understanding of Smithson’s sense of the fictional and ‘anti-vision’ (as before). As if he is himself a mirror displacement, all Pym is able to reflect is his tawdry failure to reflect. Rather than represented, experience is framed in terms of its strategy for interpretation. ‘The imaginary and the factual, the fantastic and the verisimilar’ (as before) blend into a ‘poetics of geography’ (as before) that explode the field defined in terms of a distinction between the real and the unreal, the site and the non-site. Instead, Smithson’s textual operations, as with those of Poe’s Pym, employ the waste products of this ‘naturalisation’ (of the field) and form a ‘range of convergence’ (as before). The ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’ are muddied according to a ‘course of hazards, a double path made up of signs, photographs and maps that belong to both sides of the dialectic at once’; both ‘are present and absent at the same time’ (as before).

This ‘range of convergence’, relegated to a footnote in ‘The Spiral Jetty’ essay, in which real and unreal, present and absent fail to correspond, is further emphasized by the nonsensical hoax of another important quotation. The authorial uncertainty of the Poe/Pym paradigm is illustrated by the Bellman’s map of Lewis Carroll’s The Hunting of the Snark (1876) which the reader finds embedded in the collage-text, ‘Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art’:

He had bought a large map representing the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
A map they could all understand.
‘A perfect and absolute blank!’

(Flam 1996: 93)

The Bellman’s ‘map’ should help to further understand the nonsensical ploy of Smithson’s ‘dialectical’ construct ‘Site and Non-Site’. The map, which might otherwise be used to point out the real locations of earthworks such as The Spiral Jetty, is a recurring discrepancy in Smithson’s writing. His mapping
of Passaic, New Jersey for instance, is ‘negative’ (Flam 1996: 72). ‘Passaic is full of holes’ and so the maps Smithson uses in his collages (as illustrations ‘embedded’ in his writing) become, in a sense, the coordination of these ‘holes’ (Flam 1996: 72).\(^5\) As with the Bellman’s map in Carroll’s *Snark*, the production or reproduction of its sense involves a disqualification of logic (nonsense) in the material correspondence of the map (the text) and the representation of experience (place):

![Figure 1: The Bellman’s Map from The Hunting of the Snark.](image)

Carroll invents two versions of the ideal map. One is an ‘absolute blank’, the other is the equivalent of life; one that contains nothing, the other everything. Smithson notes them both, including a photocopy of the

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5. Passaic seems full of holes compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes, in a sense, are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures. Using the map as a series of holes, Smithson attempts to ‘read’ the material monuments of absence that proliferate there – generally the detritus of the industrial/suburban landscape.
Bellman’s map in his essay, as well as quoting from Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893), where ‘a German professor tells how his country’s cartographers experimented with larger and larger maps until finally they made one with a scale of a mile to a mile’:

> It has never been spread out, yet. The farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So now we use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.

(Flam 1996: 93)

The ‘country’ becomes its equivalent. Like the mirror, the map is informed by this notion of the equivalent, or at least the will to formalize a very particular relationship with space that positions the reader/writer inside and outside at once. In the case of Smithson’s sense of mapping, one he openly borrows from Carroll, experience and reading are organized and re-organized around a fictional correspondence of positions (holes). According to these uncertain coordinates of correspondence, rather than placement (cultural, ideological, aesthetic or otherwise), the map functions in terms of the nature of its (material) displacement:

From *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* of Orrelius (1570) to the ‘paint’-clogged maps of Jasper Johns, the map has exercised a fascination over the minds of artists. A cartography of uninhabitable places seems to be developing – complete with decoy diagrams, abstract grid systems made of stone and tape (Carl Andre and Sol Le Witt), and electronic ‘mosaic’ photomaps from NASA. Gallery floors are being turned into parallels and meridians. [CarlAndre… covered an entire floor with a ‘map’ that people walked on – rectangular sunken ‘islands’ were arranged in a regular order. Maps are becoming immense, heavy quadrangles, topographic limits that are emblems of perpetuity, interminable grid coordinates without Equators and Tropic Zones.

(Flam 1996: 92)

Accordingly, each of Smithson’s fictions acts as a map, but a map that operates in the manner of a corresponding absence – a mapping operation conducted in terms of its ever-absent point of reference. Representation, for Smithson, is defined by this shifting play of absence, and figures heavily in his hoax-dichotomy of ‘site’ and ‘non-site’.

**Sites as non-sites**

From around 1968, ‘non-sites’ are a prominent preoccupation in Smithson’s work and often take the form of small floor-standing sculptures made to occupy gallery spaces. In the text, ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects’ (1968), in which Smithson directly associates his fictional constructions with those of Edgar Allen Poe, he describes the production of a ‘non-site’. As with the mediation surrounding *The Spiral Jetty*, the non-site is born out of an enigmatic sense of material experience. Visiting slate quarries in Pennsylvania in June 1968, Smithson (accompanied by his wife, Nancy Holt, as well as Virginia Dawn and Dan Graham) subjects himself to a landscape where ‘all boundaries and distinctions lost their meaning in this ocean of slate’ (Flam 1996: 110). As with Pym’s oceanic mist of unknowing, up is
down and down is up: ‘the brittleness of the site seemed to swarm around one, causing a sense of displacement’ (Flam 1996: 110–111). In response, and in the guise of a perverse form of fieldwork, he ‘collected a canvas bag of slate chips for a small Non-site’ (original emphasis) (Flam 1996: 111). Balanced precariously between the outcrops of industrial materialism and the white gallery space, it is hard not to associate this nullified form of abstracted and yet material documentation with the disposable notion of written media. The map and its scale of representation might, after all, best exemplify the inept relation of ‘site’ and ‘non-site’. As Smithson puts it:

I have developed the Non-Site, which in a physical way contains the disruption of the site. The container is in a sense a fragment itself, something that would be called a three-dimensional map… It actually exists as a fragment of a greater fragmentation. It is a three-dimensional perspective that has broken away from the whole, while containing the lack of its own containment. There are no mysteries in these vestiges, no traces of an end or beginning.

(Emphasis in original; Flam 1996: 111)

Later, in the near-redundancy of a footnote Smithson includes in ‘The Spiral Jetty’ text, he lays out the ‘Dialectic of Site and Non-Site’ in these terms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Non-site</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Open Limits</td>
<td>Closed Limits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A Series of Points</td>
<td>An Array of Matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Outer Coordinates</td>
<td>Inner Coordinates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Subtraction</td>
<td>Addition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Indeterminate</td>
<td>Determine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Scattered Information</td>
<td>Contained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Reflection</td>
<td>Mirror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Edge</td>
<td>Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Some Place (physical)</td>
<td>No Place (abstract)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Many</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Emphasis in original; Flam 1996: 152)

That Smithson constructs a series of reference points that fail to correspond is not only signalled by the type of problematic binary of ‘field’ and ‘representation’, but also by the embedded inclusion of Carroll’s ‘absolute blank’. Framed in terms of an irrevocable absence as a site of disappearance or ‘blank’, coordinates such as ‘place’ and ‘no place’ form a collapsible binary (‘an equation as clear as mud’) in which the non-site (the map – a textual matter rather than the ‘non-place’ figured in the arguments of Marc Augé) can only ever exist as a hoax, a mistaken machination of an uninhabitable (un-representable) ‘site’. What matters here are the by-products or side effects of this fictional equation. The result is a littering of empty containers and redundant perspectives; ‘texts’, or ‘containers’ such as maps, photographs, and collections of rock are the entropic deposits that accumulate according to the form of its mediation – its true site of
production. This is perhaps the most provocative aspect of Smithson’s work. The oppositional status of his texts (in terms of the ‘experience’ of the earthworks) is derived, as in Carroll’s fictional map, from a failed correspondence that frames this employment of textual mediation. The map becomes an active displacement in its failure to correspond.

**Artaud: non-correspondence and the text**

Smithson’s interest in failed correspondence is perhaps best illuminated in light of another of his key citations, Antonin Artaud. The act of correspondence is at the heart of Artaud’s work and provides a useful analogy if we are to agree that the actuality of *The Spiral Jetty* is in its written account. Artaud’s work is framed by two series of letters, those of his correspondence with Jacques Rivière in 1923–4 and his letters, written not long before his death, from the asylum in Rodez where he is held for much of the Occupation. Among a disparate, and elliptically broken body of work (much of which is lost or destroyed due to the very nature of Artaud’s craft), Artaud seizes upon letter writing as a means of examining himself and the non-correspondence of writing. Similarly, in Smithson’s work, experience and representation are inseparable to such an extent that the author writes in correspondence with the absence of *The Spiral Jetty*. Albeit an absence endowed with very material dimensions where, in Maurice Blanchot’s words, the essay is a correspondence with ‘something that fails to exist’ (Blanchot 1982).

In his work on Artaud, Blanchot pays close attention to the ‘correspondence’ between Artaud and Jacques Rivière (Holland 1995: 53–62). At the heart of Artaud’s correspondence with Rivière is an insolvent misunderstanding (Hirschman 1965). In 1923, when he is twenty-seven, Artaud submits a handful of poems to the *Nouvelle Revue Française* of which Rivière is then the editor. Rivière rejects the poems, but they stir enough of the editor’s interest in Artaud for him ‘to wish to make the acquaintance of their author’ (Hirschman 1965: 7). Unable to accept, not necessarily their rejection, but certainly the susceptible matter of their existence, Artaud then attempts to account for his attachment to, indeed, the very materialization of these poems in spite of their apparently ‘defective’ and ‘abortive’ shortcomings. An imbalanced correspondence ensues in which on the one hand Artaud is able to, within the personal remit of the letter, that is from out of life itself, interrogate the nature of his writing, while on the other Rivière, somewhat inadvisably, attempts to reassure Artaud ‘that the future will bring the coherence which he lacks’ both poetically and mentally (Holland 1995: 130).

What makes this process so enticing in terms of the discussion of Smithson’s writing is the very value that is attached to the abortive and defective nature of these texts as a representative process in itself. The ‘failure’ of the submitted poems to either correspond with Rivière’s sense of publishable poetry, or with Artaud’s physical struggle with the nature of his own ‘thought’, is that which informs and defines entirely the status and the operation of Artaud’s ‘texts’. The obvious ‘anomaly’ that so intrigues Blanchot and throws light on Smithson’s peculiar form of ‘fiction-making’, is the manner in which the text, the very poems that generated the event in the first place, are dissolved as matter might be into their flawed correspondence.
That the poems disappear within ‘the account of the experience of their inadequacy’ (Holland 1995: 129), as Blanchot puts it, is an unusual form of experience, one well removed from any notion of the ‘unmediated’. As with ‘The Spiral Jetty’ text, at the centre of the attempt at correspondence is an absent material encounter; a lost economy or even, an economy of refusal which creates a space that can only operate according to the integrity of its failure.10 It is not merely the internal or internalizing narratives of The Spiral Jetty (entropy, failure and running out, which are in a sense most compatible with Artaud’s thought: its futility and despair) that should be of most interest (or indeed disinterest) to the reader, but the material of its artifice, in this case, the peculiar nature of The Spiral Jetty’s non-correspondence. Indeed, in his letters, Artaud discovers that he is able to write towards the inadequacy of writing; operating in terms of a series of mistakes and misunderstandings, he is able to mediate (organize material in terms of) the dubious economy of mediation: The unrelatedness to the object which characterises all literature is in my case an unrelatedness to life. (Hirschman 1965: 20)

Artaud’s sense of the ‘unrelated’ is, so to speak, ‘Snarked’ by Smithson in his witty (near) non-reference to Artaud in his piece ‘A Cinematic Atopia’ (1971):

If we put together a film encyclopaedia in limbo, it would be quite groundless. Categories would destroy themselves, no law or plan would hold itself together for very long. There would be no table or contents for the Table of Contents. The index would slither away into so much cinematic slime. For example, I could make a film based on the A section of the index in Film Culture Reader. Each reference would consist of a thirty-minute take. Here is the list of the takes in alphabetical order: Abstract Expressionism, Agee James, Alexandrov Grigory, Allen Lewis, Anger Kenneth, Antonioni Michelangelo, Aristarco Guido, Arnheim Rudolf, Artaud Antonin, Astruc Alexandre. Only the letter A gives this index its order. Where is the coherence? The logic threatens to wander out of control.

(Flam 1996: 140)

It seems significant that Smithson decides to correspond with Artaud in terms of an imaginary index in order to dematerialize any possibility of the textual organization and control of the mediated. Through the index, textual mediation is made material in the world as an economy of relations. As such, both Artaud and Smithson are bound by the necessary paradox of their materialism: their texts are organized around the absence or disappearance of experience, and yet there remains the unavoidable probability that the world may only exist within the artifice of its mediation (this is something, it should be said in light of Smithson’s allusion to Film Culture, that Structural film-makers of the period were heavily investigating). As if ‘embodying’ the economic contingency of this paradox, the index is a textual and economic coordination. Economically, the index signifies a correspondence between related values. Yet other than the mode in which it operates, funnily enough, it is distinguished by being somewhat immaterial. In ‘expressing some relation’, in ‘showing the relative changes’, in its ‘denotation’, and in its ‘pointing’ the index constitutes a motor-function of reference and control.
The indices of the Bellman’s map are useful in this context if one is to ask: what, in relation to the indexical ploy of Smithson and Artaud, is the economy that the coordinates of the Bellman’s map coordinate?

‘What’s the good of Mercator’s North Poles and equators, Tropics, Zones and Meridian Lines?’
So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply, ‘They are merely conventional signs!’
(Carroll 1939: 14)

The textualization of the world (‘Mercator’s projection’ being the ‘projecting of a spherical map of the earth on a flat rectangle so that the parallels and meridians become straight lines, and the poles become the rectangle’s top and bottom edges’ [as defined in the O.E.D.]) is ironically thrown into doubt by a map, by its direct representation. But the lack of correspondence between texts and its all too obviously physical anomaly is bridged, as the word ‘bought’ (‘he had bought a large map representing the sea’) might suggest, economically. The value of the absolute blank, or in other words, the manner in which the crew ‘buy’ the Bellman’s textual discrepancy, is not, however, embodied in the exchange of mediation but in the status of the non-correspondence (the map) as a hoax or decoy. The absolute blank is a decoy both in terms of the narrative, veiling the erotic purposive-ness of the Captain, and in terms of reception and the textual coordination of experience.

That was charming, no doubt; but they shortly found out
That the Captain they trusted so well
Had only one notion for crossing the ocean,
And that was to tingle his bell.
(Carroll 1939: 14)

The use of the word tingle (rather than tinkle) suggests a nervous sensitivity in terms of pursuing some form of direction. The map is the denial of this physical receptivity; and the deciphering of the text, to make one’s way in the material world, is endowed with the formality of high economic principle – the correlation of progress, productivity and being. Unless it is an absolute blank, unless the material of the text (its exchange-value) is its indefinite inadequacy, unless its non-correspondence becomes the compass of its operations, Smithson appears to be suggesting, through this index of referencing as a textualization of the field, that the material of mediation is the means by which the very ‘logic’ of its cultural economy might in turn be resisted.

The paradoxical position of this form of non-correspondence, whether positive or negative, is indeed productive. On the one hand, mediation is activated by these strategies as a space of opposition and refusal. On the other, the act of mediation is characteristic of a wider cultural economy – the matter (rather than ‘manner’) in which the world is organized. Smithson goes some way to exploit this paradox by positioning his textual material in opposition to the experience or ‘materialization’ of his earthworks. It is here that he locates the cultural production of art. Landscapes, like texts, Smithson appears to be saying, materialize in the matter of reading. The emphasis on
reading is crucial. Perhaps this is why Smithson chooses to cite The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, a text which operates in terms of illegibility and the indecipherable, as a kind of guidebook for the paradoxical economy of mediation. Certainly, it underlines the scope of what is meant by representation and illuminates important connections that draw on the fields of literature and art as a mode of representational place-making. It also identifies Smithson’s texts as an important bridge between these fields, as they open up the poetic potential of a textual practice that constructs texts according to the pervasiveness of mediation and representation inherent within the actual or direct experience of art and everyday life.

References

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