Robert Smithson's
Partially
Buried
Woodshed

Essay by Dorothy Shinn
Foreword

This catalogue and exhibition on Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* reflect the Gallery's long-term commitment to exhibiting and documenting the work of innovative twentieth century artists. The Gallery is especially interested in those artists and works that have a special connection to northeastern Ohio. On January 22, 1970, Robert Smithson donated the *Partially Buried Woodshed* to the School of Art at Kent State University. The work had just been created by Smithson who, along with a handful of students from the School of Art, rented a backhoe and piled 20 cartloads of dirt on an abandoned woodshed until the center beam cracked. After an eventful history, the physical remains of the *Woodshed* were removed in January 1984.

The exhibition represents the support and collaboration of many individuals and organizations. First of all, I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Ohio Arts Council. Additional support was provided by the Art History Club and the Friends of the Gallery. Dorothy Shinn served as guest curator, and I am deeply indebted to her for her expertise, enthusiasm, and hard work. It has, in fact, been a great pleasure working with her. The ideas and knowledge of the material that Ms. Shinn contributed made the planning and organization of this very important project an enjoyable and exciting experience. The advice of Alex Gildzen, Brinsley Tyrrell, Mel Someroski, and Nancy Hot is greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank the Gallery staff - especially project designers Bruce Morrill and Steve Timbrook - for their hard work and creative input. Without the lenders there would be no exhibition. Therefore I am grateful to: The Akron Art Museum; The Cleveland Museum of Art; The Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University; The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution; The John Weber Gallery, New York; the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, The Ohio State University; and Stanford Apseloff, Kent.

Fred T. Smith, Director
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Sometime in the winter of 1984, the wood and stucco remains of Partially Buried Woodshed disappeared. The earth sculpture had been created in 1970 by Robert Irving Smithson (1938-1973), who along with a handful of students from the Kent State University School of Art, rented a backhoe and piled twenty cartloads of dirt on an abandoned woodshed until the center beam cracked. Smithson then named the work and gave it to the University along with the admonition to allow it to decay naturally. Smithson's main purpose in making this work was to demonstrate the idea of entropy. But he was also interested in the accumulation of history, envisioning a work that would increase in meaning as it decreased in physical reality, a work that would gain in legend as it diminished in existence. And Partially Buried Woodshed did precisely that. From the moment it was conceived, The Woodshed collected attitudes, events, actions and associations, so that by the time it vanished from the earth, it had become synonymous with an artist, a movement, and an era. Smithson was born in Passaic, New Jersey, and died thirty-five years later in a plane crash in Amarillo, Texas, while surveying his earth sculpture, Amarillo Ramp, a last work that is in many respects a continuation of the ideas presented in Partially Buried Woodshed. In 1969-70 he had done Asphalt Rundown in Rome, Italy, Concrete Pour for the Chicago "Art by Telephone" exhibit, and Glue Pour in Vancouver. Smithson, who had agreed to come to Kent in January 1970 for a week for $1000, was to be artist-in-residence, give lectures and critiques, and culminate his week-long activities with a mud pour, which would have been an extenuation of his most recent activities. But in the frigid cold of that Northeast Ohio winter, mud would not pour; Smithson got the flu and retreated to the house of sculpture professor Brinsley Tyrrell, where he made plans to return to New York. But, Tyrrell said, the students would not let him: "They came out to the house and sat about on the living room floor and talked about what else they could do. Well, I remember standing by a fire while Smithson, sketchbook in hand, explained with gestures... how to bury the Woodshed. Alex Gildzen

said Smithson, he had always liked the idea of burying a building."(3) How the Woodshed was chosen was partly a matter of chance, partly of convenience. The shed, a wood lath and stucco structure filled with dirt, gravel and firewood, was part of an old farm acquired by the University and at the time was located on an unused back lot of the

(Smithson) envisioned a work that would increase in meaning as it decreased in physical reality.
campus, far away from the main buildings. As Tyrrell recalled, "One of
the students got permission for that building. Smithson didn't like all of
the wood in there, so we carted most of it out. We spent all day carting
wood out. It was a miserable job. He sat around and did drawings of
how the earth was going to go." (4) Alex Gildzen, professor of library
administration, was among the witnesses, freezing, but fascinated
with what was happening. "I remember standing by a fire while
Smithson, sketchbook in hand, explained with gestures to local con­
tractor Rich Helmling how to bury the Woodshed. The earth had been
truck there from a construction site on another part of campus. Smithson took pictures of the process with an Instamatic and in­
structed University photographer Doug Moore, who also documented
the site's construction, to try to avoid photographing people, just the
shed and earth and backhoe." (5) The earth was piled on the Wood­
shed until the center beam cracked. For Smithson the cracking of the
beam was crucial to the concept of the piece, for it symbolized the
beginning of the process of entropy, which he compared to Humpty
Dumpty: "A closed system which eventually deteriorates and starts to
break apart and there's no way that you really piece it back together
again." Entropy is a concept that has manifested itself in many of
Smithson's works. He believed that not only were the processes of
creation important, but also the processes the piece experienced after
the creating was complete. These processes he called entropy, the
gradual dissolution and decay of organic matter. Smithson saw
entropy as part of an ongoing dialectic between accepted, but for him
intolerable, notions about the permanence, fixity and preciousness of
art as object. (6) At that time not only these notions but the concept
of the gallery system itself were under intense debate in the art world.
The building of art works in remote locations or the initiation of unique,
temporary art works were some of the new approaches to art making
sparked by these discussions. Michael Heizer was one of the first
artists to bring the gallery, as it were, to the landscape. In 1968 he
created a series of excavations in Massacre Dry Lake, Nevada, called
Nine Nevada Depressions. This work, now deteriorated, can be seen
most easily in photographic documentation. Smithson and his
wife, artist and filmmaker Nancy Holt, joined Heizer in Nevada that
summer and Holt took pictures of Smithson digging a trench for
Isolated Mass/Circumflex, the ninth of the depressions. Smithson had
been experimenting with serial sculpture of progressively increas­
ing size, such as the illusionistic Plunge (1966) and the Alogon
series, when he began to make the shift to working with large outdoor
sites. The first of these was Proposals for the Dallas-Fort Worth
Regional Airport (1966), never re­
alized. The most significant of
them was Partially Buried Wood­
shed, for it marked the beginning
of outdoor works on a grand scale.
(7) Smithson had been work­
ing in the actual landscape for two
years when he began making ex­
cursions to "urban, industrial and
quarry sites in New Jersey, many
of which he documents in a photo­
journal." The year Heizer made his
Nevada work, Smithson made three works which he called Nonsites. These involved traveling to a particular location, mapping the location with aerial maps, collecting material from the site and placing it in painted metal bins. He exhibited the bins along with maps of the area, so that the non-site (the bins) actually and conceptually would reflect the site (maps). Later, Smithson played further on the concept of site displacement and reflection—the actual and the conceptual—through the use of mirrors. He wrote: "I'm using a mirror because the mirror in a sense is both the physical mirror and the reflection: The mirror as a concept and abstraction; then the mirror as a fact within the mirror of the concept...Here the site/non-site becomes encompassed by mirror as a concept—mirroring, the mirror being a dialectic...The mirror is a displacement, as an abstraction absorbing, reflecting the site in a very physical way...It's another level of process that I'm exploring. A different method of containment." (8)

Smithson also used mirrors in the landscape to effect an onsite displacement as it were. The most notable of these mirror displacements occurred in Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan, published in Artforum in September 1969. Smithson took a trip to the Yucatan Peninsula and documented a series of nine mirror displacements through photographs and an essay. The published article is considered a work of art. Seen as one of Smithson's most complex pieces, it combines imagery, narration, art history, and criticism. While in the Yucatan, Smithson stayed at the Hotel Palenque, a run-down establishment in simultaneous states of ruin and renewal. The hotel was being rebuilt, but instead of being leveled at once, as we would do it in the U.S., it was being torn down in some places, newly built in others. The notion of slow destruction and an architecture that defies functionalism fascinated Smithson, and he used his photographs as the basis of a lecture delivered to architecture students at the University of Utah in 1972. (9)

Smithson saw entropy as part of an ongoing dialectic between accepted notions about the permanence, fixity, and preciousness of art as object.
I look back, were the Kent shootings. It shocked me more than the president getting assassinated. I think it changed everyone’s mind, even those who were conservative. So many people just switched their beliefs overnight after that. Everything just became very, very clear.” (16) Sometime during the period when the University was closed (Gildzen believes it was in July, six months after Smithson left), someone painted in bold white letters on the Woodshed “May 4 Kent 70.” Thus, the piece which had already undergone some controversy became irrevocably linked with the shootings at Kent State University. (17) Said Holt: “Obviously, the students, or whoever did that graffiti-it’s an example of graffiti that enhances—the students obviously recognized the parallel. Piling the earth until the central beam cracked, as though the whole government, the whole country were cracking. Really, we had a revolution then. It was the end of one society and the beginning of the next.” This view of the work reflects the same sentiments voiced in a 1975 letter from Holt to Gildzen in which she said she believed the Woodshed to be “intrinsically political” and that Smithson himself had seen the work as “prophetic”: (18) Had it not been for those few strokes of white paint, one wonders if the Woodshed might not have been left to rot in relative quiet. Even Gildzen, who normally takes a laissez-faire view of bureaucratic machinations, wondered if the May 4 link did not eventually alienate, as he put it, “certain University administrators who were to stand against the piece’s preservation.” (19) For about two years while the University was otherwise occupied in rebuilding its shattered reputation, the Woodshed enjoyed a brief peace. Then, in 1973 Smithson died in an airplane crash while on an aerial observation flight for the final planning stages of a site on a private ranch in Texas owned by Stanley Marsh, fifteen miles northwest of Amarillo Township—a site that would eventually become Amarillo Ramp. (20) Seven months after Smithson’s death, gallery owner John W. Weber, representing Nancy Holt, wrote Gildzen, asking about the state of the Woodshed and wondering if "the
school is informed of the considerable intrinsic value of the work. Weber also told Gildzen that when "Bob made the piece, the original idea was that it be allowed to 'go back to the land', however, Mrs. Smithson feels that because the piece is an important work, it should be preserved and taken care of." Gildzen forwarded a copy of Weber's letter to then University president Glen A. Olds. (21)

Four months later. Olds, anticipating the deadline for some landscaping to begin in that area and not knowing the University's commitment to the sculpture, had asked University architect Gae Russo to prepare plans for landscaping the area. This plan called for the elimination of the Smithson earthwork and raised an uproar among the art school faculty. The problem was resolved by the 15-member University Arts Commission (UAC), which, to the relief of the Woodshed supporters, voted to save it. It would be a short-lived relief however, and from this point onward the Woodshed's accumulation of history literally caught fire. On March 28, 1975, during the University's spring break, someone burned the structure, actually destroying most of the left half of the shed, where the logs had been stored, but sparing the significant right half where the earth had been piled. (22) Between the burned half of the shed and the undamaged half, police found an empty, bent Pepsi can with a small amount of kerosene in it. Although arson was suspected, no charges were ever filed. (23) University officials wanted to demolish the whole structure--both the burned left half and the undamaged right half--because, they said, not only was it no longer the original work, it had become unsafe and was an eyesore. Holt, however, wrote a letter to Olds asking that the sculpture be saved. She had visited the site shortly after the fire and had decided that even though the work was partially destroyed, it should be allowed to remain in its damaged condition. She made several suggestions as to how the damaged portions of the shed might be reinforced and asked that she be kept informed about the preservation of "this significant art work." (24) Holt recalled that Olds wrote back "telling me the University was going to keep the woodshed." But her suggestions were never acted upon. Instead, UAC recommended that the burned section and remaining roof be torn down and removed. (25) Meanwhile, debate as to the merits of the Woodshed were being broadcast in the campus newspaper. (26) It was during this debate that a new theme was developed that would eventually lead to the woodshed's disappearance. This was the increasingly voiced concern for the safety of those who might make the trek to the spot and injure themselves on the debris. Thus the policy of labeling whatever fell to the ground "debris" was established. About the same time that UAC voted to save the sculpture, the campus began to hear from a previously dormant committee called the Commission on Campus Physical and Natural Environment (CCPNE), which eventually urged that the Smithson work be destroyed. (27) So Olds had two proposals: To save the Woodshed and to tear it down. And the groundskeepers also had their jobs to do. While Olds was pondering which recommendation to follow, groundskeepers did what they are paid to do--cart away debris, including the charred remains of the left half of the Woodshed. The day the grounds crew arrived with its backhoe, Tyrrell, Gildzen, and acting director of the School of Art, Robert Morrow, went to the site and spent the day arguing which portions of the Woodshed could be removed and which should remain. (28)
they were at the site defining what was and was not debris, Gallery Director Mel Someroski was on the phone to University administrators defining their legal obligations to the work. Their efforts saved the unburned half from the bulldozer’s bucket and provided a few onlookers with momentos. Gildzen managed to collect a relic from the burned left half, a charred piece of siding which he gave to the University’s Special Collections. That was 1975. After that the commotion surrounding the Woodshed seemed to subside, and it was left for a while to seek its own destiny. But the University still wasn’t pleased with the work. There it was, a charred and crumbling shed partially engulfed by a weed-infested mound of dirt, sitting out in the middle of an open field facing Summit Street, which because it led to the new stadium had become a new gateway to the campus. From Summit it was easy to see that on the broken lintel of the Woodshed, standing out bold and white, was the “May 4 Kent 70” graffiti. It was one of the first things visiting alumni saw, and it disturbed them. So the University came up with a solution: They landscaped the site. In reality the landscape was a barricade—a dense cluster of fast growing conifers, strategically placed so as to block a clear view of the work from either Rhodes Road or Summit Street. One actually had to walk out to the site to see it. And walk out to the site they did. The place had become a kind of shrine—one of the first places visiting artists asked to be taken. (29) Ironically, however, among many of the Art School faculty the work was either resented or nearly forgotten. Indeed, one of the ironies of the work is that it usually has been better known and appreciated elsewhere. In 1980 a Kent State University professor told a class that the work had (thankfully) long ago been demolished. (30) This startling, if erroneous, revelation prompted some students to investigate and that same winter make a pilgrimage to the spot to toast the still standing, though much diminished, work on its tenth anniversary. (31) Two more years were to pass with scant notice given to the Woodshed, except for the occasional art class visit or lone student fulfilling an assignment. In the summer of 1982 artist and former Kent graduate student John Parcher took several photographs of the Woodshed. Robert Beckman’s photos were taken in the fall of 1982, and the following winter Patrick Wilbraham used the Woodshed to meet the requirements of a photography class. As these pictures show, the cracked center beam had already fallen down, and the sides were beginning to cave in. The process of entropy was accumulating.

We don’t know precisely when the Woodshed was finally taken away, but we do know whatever debris fell to the ground was carted away by University groundskeepers doing routine maintenance. The fact of its disappearance was not noticed until February 1984. But by reconstructing the events, we can surmise that in January 1984, fourteen years to the month after Smithson piled dirt on the shed and cracked the center beam, the physical remains of the Woodshed were removed. (32) The work, which had become part of the James A. Michener Collection at the Kent State University School of Art, had been given various values. In 1970 Smithson’s gallery came up with the figure $10,000. When the University Art School had the piece reevaluated for insurance purposes in 1981, it was said to be worth $40,000. But John Weber of Weber Gallery, which had represented the Smithson estate since the Sculptor’s death, said, when told of the shed’s disappearance, that the work had a value of $250,000. (33) Some have wondered if the work is worth anything now, because all that’s left of the sculpture is the mound of earth, the foundation of the shed, the memory of the work, and these photographs.

For some, that puts Smithson and several of his works in the conceptual art category, but that not only misrepresents the history of the work but disregards the artist’s point of view. For Smithson was very much against conceptual art as several of his published writings attest. Indeed, all of Smithson’s works, even the unrealized proposals, were meant to be actual, not conceptual. During the last five years of his life Smithson had been at the vanguard of an art movement known as...
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Earth Art, a form that grew out of the Minimalist movement of the late 1960s. The Minimalists changed the basic nature of three-dimensional art, according to sculptor Robert Morris, "from particular forms to ways of ordering, to methods of production, and finally to perceptual relevance." Or from object-oriented art to systems-oriented art; from things to the way things are done. (43)

The growth of Earth Art from Minimalism was progressive rather than radical. Smithson and others, notably Morris, Heizer, and Walter de Maria, gradually shifted their focus from the art making-systems to a more literal use of material and the processes themselves. (35)

In many of his works, and certainly in his last ones--Partially Buried Woodshed, Spiral Jetty, Broken Circle/Spiral Hill in Emmen, Holland, and Amarillo Ramp--both the use of spirals and the process of entropy were of prime importance, and in Smithson's mind, the two ideas fed one upon the other. The idea of the spiral had been used in his work almost from the beginning. (36)

The mound of earth that Smithson used for Partially Buried Woodshed was not casually placed; it formed a climbing, curved ramp shape, hinting at a spiral. According to Robert Swick, a friend of Smithson's and the student responsible for bringing him to Kent: "he (Smithson) made drawings beforehand of exactly how it was going to be, and the earth was put on scoop by scoop, like applying paint with a brush." (37)

Entropy and the spiral are but two aspects of time, and time in all its aspects was extremely important to Smithson throughout his life as an artist. As early as 1964, in an unpublished proposal for a work, titled The Eliminator, Smithson revealed this interest. He described the work as "a clock that doesn't keep time, but loses it. The intervals between the flashes of neon are 'void intervals' or what George Kubler calls 'the rupture between past and future.' The Eliminator orders negative time as it avoids historical space." (38)

But the kind of time Smithson most wanted to represent was not our contemporary sense of time, but a primordial time--time that flows in buried streams, that
shifts in geologic measures and wears in glacial cycles—not measured incrementally nor kept by clocks. (39) Smithson was keenly aware of the many visitudes of time, and his ruminations on the subject eventually led him to the development of a theoretical base for his art that he called entropy. (40) It was, to put it mildly, a philosophy opposed to the mechanistic, time-conquering view of the world and antithetical to notions of preciousness and immutability automatically given to anything called art. (41) This view of art would put Smithson at odds with traditional notions not only of art making, but art buying and preservation. It is a view that flies in the face of the concepts of museums, galleries, and art-as-commodity. (42) In view of Smithson's strong involvement with entropy and his ironical view of technology, Partially Buried Woodshed becomes increasingly important as a manifestation of his philosophy. Its creation and decay serve not only to recognize in the most concrete way time's successive conditions, but to make clear Smithson's ongoing sculptural concern with the problematic nature of form—not its mystique, but its mutability. For Smithson "allowed for seasonal variations in the state of his sculptures. He assumed multiple states, not just one." (43) And in a very real sense, those states continue to multiply, the organization of this exhibit and writing of this catalog being among them. Thus, in many ways the work continues to exist. For just as Partially Buried Woodshed was a "seminal work which has influenced much other art," it is also a work of many parts, the disintegration of the wood-and stucco structure being one. As Tyrrell noted: "All that he (Smithson) was concerned with was that it picked history up—that it didn't get built and bulldozed over. And it's picked up a pretty good history. While it stood, anyone who knew anything about art wanted to see it. Every time we had Blossom, we took visiting artists over there and showed it to them, like a pilgrimage. It's one of the most influential things in contemporary art." (45) The special feature of Partially Buried Woodshed was the notion of a breaking point, and somehow this feature permeated its surroundings. It became not only a sculpture (and for some a shrine), but an important symbol of a period during which the morals and ethics of a University, a state and even a nation were pushed beyond what they could bear.

Olds had asked University architect Gae Russo to prepare plans for landscaping the area.
For some, the processes initiated in 1970 by the breaking of the center beam came to a conclusion almost exactly fourteen years later when the final fallen remains of Partially Buried Woodshed were carted away. But for many others, myself included, even though the mortal remains of the Woodshed have disappeared because of time, the work of art lives on in spite of it.

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3. Tyrrell interview.

4. Tyrrell interview.

5. Gildzen, "Partially Buried Woodshed".


7. Ibid. "there is a shift in Smithson's work to outdoor sites solely, large in scale, and freed of significative bonds, which is marked by his Partially Buried Woodshed, 1970, at Kent State University, Ohio...He had already used a truck in Asphalt Rundown the year before, and now he used a backhoe on a tractor to pile dirt onto the shed until the central beam cracked. The man-made (the structure) and the inchoate (disordered masses of soil) were brought together to create a stress situation. The work was finished when the beam broke, so that the timing of collapse is, in a sense, the subject...landscape and its systems or ordering have been familiar to Smithson most of his life, and their presence can be felt on every level of his art and thinking. He is not building barriers around fragments of personality or stylistic innovation, as happened with a good deal of art in the '60s. He does not attempt to fix reality in a permanent form by means of art, but demonstrates a sustained and interlocked view of a permanent reality


9. Ibid. Pages 164-5.

10. Tyrrell interview.

11. Smithson's Deed, in his own handwriting giving Partially Buried Woodshed to Kent State University Department of Art.

12. Tyrrell interview.


17. Gildzen, Alex. Interview on April 17, 1984.

18. Holt interview. See also Hobbs, page 191.

19. Gildzen interview. Holt agreed with Gildzen's assessment, but for other reasons. "The history of the woodshed really reflects on a lot of the politics and social behavior and the theories of maintenance and danger," she said. "Works of art tend to be focal points and centers of energy that other people spin off of, and that's because works of art have no other reason for existence; they are not there for any functional reason, so they get right to the heart of things."


21. Gildzen, "Partially Buried Woodshed".


25. Holt interview. See also Bierman, p. 6, and Gildzen, "Partially Buried Woodshed," p. 119-120.


27. Bierman, p. 6-7.

28. Tyrrell interview. See also Gildzen, "Partially Buried Woodshed," p. 120.

29. Tyrrell interview.

30. This is the recollection of the author. The event occurred in a painting class.


32. Shinn, Dorothy. "KSU Woodshed Disappears: Only Foundation, Pile of Dirt Remain." Akron Beacon Journal, February 25, 1984, Sec. C, P. 1, co. 1-6. "Richard E. Dunn, KSU vice-president of business affairs and treasurer, said the university groundskeepers had instructions not to remove any standing structure at the site. "The only thing we have done with it is to take away the loose debris that was around the outside," he said. This "loose debris" was removed, according to his records, on April 22, July 20, and October 25, 1983, and again on January 3, 1984."

33. Shinn. See also Keuhner, John C. "Artful Vanishing Act? 'Shed Gone, Valued at $25,000.'" Record Courier, Kent-Ravenna, Ohio, February 27, 1984, pp. 1 and 11.


35. One of the earliest pieces to engage in the objectification of systems are the Alogon sculptures. In 1966 using contradictory mathematical systems, Smithson designed three groups of stepped sculptures that he named Alogon. Combining a linear equation that ordered each individual unit and a quadratic equation that ordered the units as a group, Smithson set up a contradiction that resulted in a subtle tension between the static consecutive grouping of repeated forms land the dynamic ordering of space. They appear to recede to a vanishing point, warping real space and making it seem illusionistic.

36. When he first exhibited at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966 in a show called "Primary Structure," his work, shown with those of other Minimalists, seemed, as one critic puts it, "eccentric, compared to the prevalent notion of the Minimalist word which refers to the unnameable, and irrational number. There was always a sense of ordering, but I couldn't really call it mathematical notation. There was a consciousness of geometry that I worked from in a kind of intuitive way. But it wasn't in any way notational."

In ancient Greek philosophy, Logos referred to the logic behind the controlling principle in the universe as well as the genius manifest in creation. But Smithson saw many of man's efforts to order and explain the universe through systems of logic as absurdities--analogous to the medieval scholastic argument about the number of angels that could dance on the head of a pin--systems confine and limit, rather than explain--conceal more than they reveal.

Thus through their inert and static qualities, the Alogons manifest an absurdity as well as a conceptual entropy because, in Smithson's view, "they absorb the viewer's active vision and yield nothing in return except their own emptiness." They "empty vision of meaning; they dully appear to be logical but in fact confute logic, rendering it illogical and meaningless." Hobbs, pp. 66-70.

37. Bierman.


39. Smithson. "Entropy and the New Monuments." The Writings of Robert Smithson. Also see Artforum, June, 1966. He wrote that "Instead of
causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future. Instead of being made of natural materials, such as marble, granite, or other kinds of rock, the new monuments are made of artificial materials, plastic, chrome, and electric light. They are not built for the ages, but rather against the ages. They are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than in representing the long spaces of centuries. Both past and future are placed into objective present. This kind of time has little or no space; it is stationary and without movement, it is going nowhere, it is anti-Newtonian, as well as being instant, and is against the wheels of the time-clock.

40. Smithson. "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space." The Writings of Robert Smithson. "At the turn of the century a group of colorful French artists banded together in order to get the jump on the bourgeois notion of progress. This Bohemian brand of progress gradually developed into what is sometimes called the avant-garde. Both these notions of duration are no longer absolute modes of 'time' for artists. The avant-garde, like progress, is based on an ideological consciousness of time. Time as ideology has produced many uncertain 'art histories' with the help of the mass media. Art histories may be measured in time by books (years), by magazines (months), by newspapers (weeks and days), by radio and TV (days and hours). And at the gallery proper--instant! Time is brought to a condition that breaks down into 'abstract objects.' The isolated time of the avant-garde has produced its own unavailable history or entropy." See also ARTS Magazine, November, 1966.

Later, in "Ultramoderne," (see Writings and also ARTS Magazine, September/October, 1967), he explores his growing awareness of time further. "There are two types of time," he wrote, "organic (Modernist) and crystalline (Ultraist). Within the boundaries of the thirties, that multifaceted segment of time, we discover premonitions, labyrinths, cycles, and repetitions that lead us to a concrete area of the infinite... The 'shape of time,' when it comes to the Ultramoderne, is circular and unending--a circle of circles that is made of 'linear incalculables' and 'interior distances'... The Ultramoderne puts one in contact with vast distances, with the ever-receding square spirals, it projects one into mirrored surfaces or into ascending and descending states of lucidity. Walls, rooms, and windows take on a vertiginous immobility--Time engulfs space.

41. Smithson. "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects." The Writings of Robert Smithson. "... Steel is a hard, tough metal, suggesting the permanence of technological values... Yet, the more I think about steel itself, devoid of the technological refinements, the more rust becomes the fundamental property of steel... In the technological mind rust evokes a fear of disuse, inactivity, entropy and ruin. Why steel is valued over rust is a technological value, not an artistic one." See also Artforum, September, 1968. Smithson writes that by "excluding technological processes from the making of art (sculpture), we begin to discover other processes of a more fundamental order. The breakup or fragmentation of matter makes one aware of the sub-strata of the Earth before it is overly refined by the industry... I have often thought about non-resistant processes that would involve the actual sedimentation of matter or what I called 'Pulverizations' back in 1966. Oxidation, hydration, carbonization, and solution (the major processes of a more fundamental order. The breakup or fragmentation on matter makes one aware of the sub-strata of the Earth before it is overly refined by the industry...) are four methods that could be turned toward the making of art... Burnt-out ore or slag-like rust is as basic and primary as the materials smelted from it. Technological ideology has no sense of time other than its immediate 'supply and demand,' and its laboratories function as blinders to the rest of the world."

42. In an important interview shortly before his death in 1973 with Alison Sky for On Site, a short-lived publication dealing with Earth Art and art-ists, Smithson laid out further his views on entropy and how it related his art.

"On the whole I would say entropy contradicts the usual notion of a mechanistic world view. In other words it's a condition that's irreversible, it's a condition that's moving towards a gradual equilibrium and it's suggested in many ways. Perhaps a nice succinct definition of entropy would be Humpty Dumpty... One might even say the current Watergate situation is an example of entropy. You have a closed system which eventually deteriorates and starts to break apart and there's no way that you can really piece it back together again... if we consider earth in terms of geological time we end up with what we call fluvial entropy. Geology has its entropy too, where everything is gradually wearing down... It may be that human beings are just different from dinosaurs rather than better... I propose a dialectic of entropic change... At Vestmann Islands an entire community was submerged in black ashes. It created a kind of buried house system. It was quite interesting for a while. You might say that provided a temporary kind of burial architecture which reminds me of my own Partially Buried Woodshed out in Kent State, Ohio..."

Smithson went on to say: "...There is an association with architecture and economics, and it seems that architects build in (an) isolated, self-
contained, a-historical way. They never seem to allow for any kind of relationships outside of their grand plan. And this seems to be true in economics too. Economics seems to be isolated and self-contained and conceived of as cycles, so as to exclude the whole entropic process...I don’t think things go in cycles. I think things just change from one situation to the next. There’s really no return.


44. Holt, letter to Olds.

45. Tyrrell interview.
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