

Robert Smithson and the Nonsites: Constructing the Site as a Dialectic

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SITE: IN TRANSITION

In architecture the notion of “site” commonly indicates a state of becoming rather than an end in itself – a place that exists within a precise range of time: the interval during which a project is first being conceived (at which time it is referred to as the *project site*) and later built (*construction site*). Before this period of reflection in which the architect is involved intellectually (and perhaps even physically) with the site, the location exists merely as a place of unfocused attention – a place that doesn’t command any specific meaning attached to architecture and building. In short, the site exists *because* it captures the architect’s attention, his/her energies, and skills. If the project constitutes the means of attaching oneself to a specific location, then the site constitutes the concrete realization of this particular attachment.

CONSTRUCTING A DISPLACEMENT: THE SITE IN THE STUDIO

Ironically, the location of the site is more often than not remote from the place of work – the studio. Architects record impressions and construct representations of the site that will enable them to visualize and conceptualize its attributes while not physically being there – at least not at all times: measurements are recorded, photographs of critical features, surrounding context and light orientation are noted, etc . . . During the design process, this record of observations, which form the basis of the site documentation, is supplemented by occasional visits to the site to verify particular informations, or to simply to get a fresh sense of the place: a visit allows one to access the place physically in a way that representations simply cannot allow. And yet more often than not, the site exists in the mind through these constructed representations – maps, drawings, measurements, impressions – in short, as a product of the architect’s making and decisions: the representations *become* the site.

Can such gaps (site) between place of work and place of building, between site and project, constitute productive creative opportunities in the design process? And if so, what constitute some of the techniques involved in constructing the site as a displaced, conceptual other – which denote the site not simply as location, but as a place in the mind which invites architectural speculation? Do specific techniques affect the way one perceives the site *as a site*, and consequently how it is subsequently appropriated conceptually and physically through design? Does the site still exist as a tangible entity once the project is completed, or it is bound to a sort of strict time line involving the conception and realization of the project? Better yet, can we talk of architecture, of site and project, as being engaged in a mutual process of dis-placement rather than simply in an act of re-placement – literally, one replacing or erasing the other?

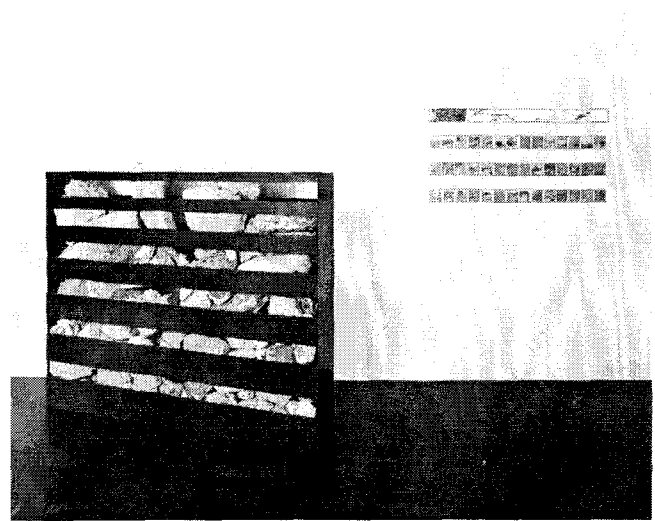
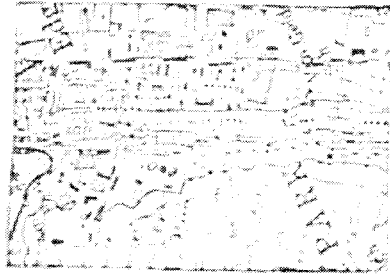


Fig. 1. Robert Smithson, Nonsite “Line of Wreckage”, Bayonne, New Jersey, 1968.

THE NONSITES

I was initially drawn to Robert Smithson's Nonsites because of the inherently rich contradictions embedded in the name of the works themselves: the Non-*sites*. The Nonsites suggested the idea of the site literally as an artistic project — as an act of the making, as the object of the art. This interested me a great deal. And yet curiously associated with this promise of the site as a

project is an apparently deliberate and contradictory lack of resolution not typically associated with our use of the word "site". Identifying a "site" as such suggests a clear set of intentions, combined with a sense of precise, geographic location: *this is the murder "site"*. *This is the project "site"*. Embedded in term "nonsite" is the notion of an incomplete or imprecise process (literally, not a site; not what it claims to be) — a failure perhaps, or a case of mistaken identity? At the



A NONSITE (THE PALISADES)

The above map shows the site where trap rocks (from the Swedish word trapp meaning "stairs") for the Nonsite were collected. The map is $1\frac{7}{8}$ " X 2". The dimensions of the map are 18 times (approx.) smaller than the width 26" and length 36" of the Nonsite. The Nonsite is 56" high with 2 closed sides 26" X 56" and two slatted sides 36" X 56" -- there are eight 8" slats and eight 8" openings. Site-selection was based on Christopher J. Schubert's The Geology of New York City and Environs -- See Trip C, Page 232, "The Ridges". On the site are the traces of an old trolley system that connected Palisades Amusement Park with the Edgewater-125th St. Ferry. The trolley was abolished on August 5, 1938. What was once a straight track has become a path of rocky crags -- the site has lost its system. The cliffs on the map are clear cut contour lines that tell us nothing about the dirt between the rocks. The amusement park rests on a rock strata known as "the chilled-zone". Instead of putting a work of art on some land, some land is put into the work of art. Between the site and the Nonsite one may lapse into places of little organization and no direction.

Robert Smithson 68



Fig. 3. Robert Smithson. *Dialectic of Site and Non-Site*. Excerpt from the *Spiral Jetty* article, 1972.

very least, Smithson's Nonsites suggest multiple, and possibly even contradictory interpretations of the ideal of site.

In discussing Smithson's Nonsites, I am interested in considering some of the pedagogical lessons which might benefit architects (read: students) in developing their own poetic approach toward site-making. Does documentation ever constitute an objective process of recording? How can the architect achieve a certain level of criticality about the site? What should one measure and record? How does one construct a framework of ideas within which to document a site? Does this framework vary from site to site? Can there be, as are suggested in Smithson's works, contradictory measures and perceptions linked to the same site? How do these frameworks reflect a particular set of values with regard to the site – frameworks which, in other words, *construct* the site in a particular way, revealing or not-revealing its potentials, the very conditions one wishes to attach their work to? When does an act of documentation become an act of intervention or appropriation with regard to a site?

A NONSITE: AT FIRST SIGHT

Given this set of questions, as well as the aspirations of this conference in mind, an encounter with one of Robert Smithson's Nonsites in a gallery or museum – *A Nonsite (The Palisades)*, for example, in the Whitney Museum's permanent collection – may provoke even far *more* questions than they would answers. *A Nonsite (The Palisades)*: if the work is a nonsite – literally, a non-work – , then what, and where, is the real work, the real site promised in the title, located? Is Smithson (identified as the author of the nonsite work) the author of this *site* as well? If this is not the real work, then why are we *here* to begin with? Perhaps this nonsite, in this room, is as good any other place to begin with . . .

A NONSITE (THE PALISADES)

The above map shows the site where trap rocks (from the Swedish word trapp, meaning "stairs") for the Nonsite were collected. The map is 1 7/16" x 2". The dimensions of the map are 18 times (approx.) smaller than the width 26" and length 36" of the Nonsite. The Nonsite is 56" high with 2 closed sides 26" x 56" and 2 slatted sides 36" x 56" – there are eight 8" slats and eight 8" openings. Site-selection was based on Christopher J. Schubert's *The Geology of New York City and Environs* – see Trip C, page 232, "The Ridges". On the site are traces of an old trolley system that connected Palisades amusement park with the Edgewater-125th St. ferry. The trolley was abolished on August 5, 1938. What was once a straight track has become a path of rocky crags – the site has lost its system. The cliffs on the map are clear cut contour lines that tell us nothing about the dirt between the rocks. The amusement park rests on a rock strata known as "the chilled-zone". Instead of putting a work of art on some land, some land is put into the work of art. Between the site and the Nonsite one may lapse into places of little organization and no direction".

Robert Smithson '68.

Smithson's writing combines the mystery of a riddle with a precise sense of description, supported by noted and verifiable sources (including the book title, page number, etc). This narrative does not simply explain the other visual elements that constitute the nonsite (the rock bin on the floor, the map accompanying the text) but rather offers ideas that are not available elsewhere in the work: in short, the text is conceived as an integral part of the piece itself. The nonsite deliberately presents itself not as a singular object (which we might infer from the title of the work: *A Nonsite*) but rather as a multi-faceted installation composed of (typically, though this is not always the case) several elements: maps, bins, rocks (the rocks

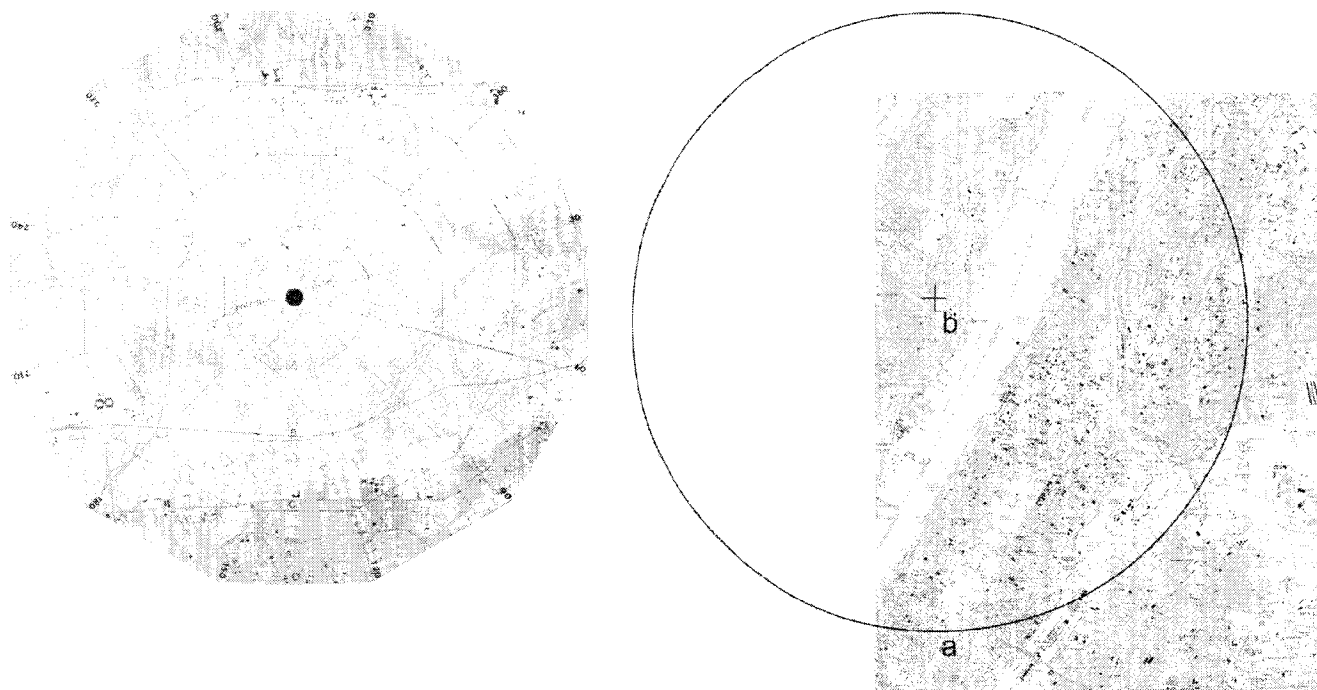


Fig. 4. Reconfiguring center and periphery: Left: Robert Smithson. *Entropic Pole*, 1967.

themselves constitute a multiple of sorts), photos, each visually and conceptually augmenting the sense of this landscape that constitutes the subject of Smithson's descriptions.

The text makes reference to different places and times. There is a here and a now: the bin standing next to us, its physical dimensions (26"x56"x56"), its contents (trapp rocks), etc.. The bin might be a sort of substitute for Smithson's on-site activities of selecting and collecting the trap rocks. The heaviness of the bin contrasts the delicate, paper-printed map and text hanging on the wall. The container seems deliberately not full, as if perhaps to suggest something which could not be captured from the site. The bin, map, and soil samples establish a series of dimensional relationships among one another: the artist explains that the map and bin are proportionally related and, one might infer, related to the site as well, while the rock samples are not dimensionally reduced but rather full scale artifacts. Smithson notes some dirt between the rocks – a reference to the microscopic scale of the site – as he found them on location, and yet this dirt has been swept off these very same rocks in the gallery. Their arrangement inside the bin suggest a rather flat landscape, which differs from the strong topography of the site noted in the text. The rocks rest on the floor of the gallery – a reference perhaps to the way they were found on the ground of the site – yet the bin objectifies their identity as samples: we can no longer walk *on* this ground, we must walk *around* it (on its periphery), trapped as we are between the walls of the gallery and the walls of the bin to consider the object(s) from a range of distances – a reference perhaps to the varying scales suggested in the various elements constituting the nonsite. The post stamp-sized map describes no visible path borrowed by the

artist. no clear location where the samples were taken: were these samples collected at a single location, or in various places described in the territory of the map?

Underlined passages suggest a mysterious, code-like emphasis on certain terms and ideas: "trap", "Nonsite". A chronology of events is mapped out: the geology of the site, noted in the Schubert reference and visually augmented with actual rock samples from the site, establishes a reference to an extended interval of time clearly outside of human experience – millions of years in the making. To this idea of time are opposed a series of more recent events: the presence of a trolley line, which traversed the site some 30 years prior to Smithson's arrival – originating, like him, from the city (the disappearance of the trolley may raise some questions as to how the artist actually reached the site himself). An amusement park is also mentioned, presumably still in operation (unlike the trolley). Smithson offers that the site contains no visible trace of his passage: "Instead of putting a work of art on some land, some land is put into the work of art".¹

THE SITE AS A DIALECTIC

Smithson described the Nonsites as "both visual and intellectual exercises". In this way, the artist invites the viewer to personally engage the nonsite not as a finite condition but rather as a potentially much more evocative construct which transcends its physical characteristics. Right: location map showing site of *Nonsite (Palisades)* (b) in relation to Smithson's current New York City dealer (a). The work acquires an

intimate dimension related to the experience of the viewer: it may exist for different people in different ways, literally, *as different sites*. As a project, the site exists not in the gallery but rather in the mind, somewhere between memory and anticipation: some may already be familiar with the site (and thus may view the work through this set of preconceptions), others might see the nonsite as a challenge to visit the actual site, while others still may be discouraged from going altogether.

By constructing the site as a conceptually dislocated condition, Smithson celebrates its capacity to invite speculation, to engage the imagination. The site affirms the many conceptual gaps and fissures which constitute traditional limitations of site-making: "Between the site and the Nonsite one may lapse into places of little organization and no direction".² The site is a veritable process of displacement and negotiation engaging the near (nonsite, museum) and the distant (Palisades), the artist and the viewer, the small and the large (rock, territory), the concrete and the imaginary (sight and non-sight) – the nonsite and the site. Smithson invites us to consider the site as a continuous condition of time, uninterrupted though continually affected by specific events, past, present, and future, near and distant, which take place inside it.

THE NONSITES: JOURNEY AS ARTISTIC PROJECT

"The site is where something should be but isn't".³

We have seen that the idea of nonsite suggests an interest in visually complex installations composed of multiple artifacts (maps, bins, text, etc.). Similarly, the term also refers not to a single work but rather to an extensive period of reflection and artistic activity which resulted in a series of works, the Nonsites, produced by Smithson in 1968 (though not labeled specifically as such, the concept of nonsite would reappear in later works as well). Embedded in the very title of the works (non-site) are the signs of an emergent critical stance toward to the studio and gallery as given or immutable conditions for the production and display of art. It was first through writings such as *Entropy and the New Monuments* and with the photo essay *Minor Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (a critical account of a day trip the artist had taken to his native New Jersey to explore industrial sites around the city of Passaic), that Smithson himself began to substantiate this personal critique.⁴

It is with this visit to Passaic that Smithson first recognizes that the idea of journey as artistic project could provide the critical grounds upon which to base new artistic endeavors. This critique is polarized in Smithson's work as a dialectic between the center and the periphery.⁵ Like the multiple identities around which each nonsite is constructed, we come to expect from Smithson that the opposing terms in this dialectic are not resolved in simple ways: as it was said earlier, the nonsite,

though located in the gallery (long understood as the center of artistic display), points to a location outside the visual field (nonsight), a periphery out of our immediate reach. A conceptual disorientation takes place: are the Nonsites (and therefore the viewer) located on the periphery of the work – with the site as center – , or does the nonsite constitute is center? It might be observed that the Nonsites, in the way they are displayed, occupy the very periphery of the gallery – its edges, its walls and floor. The discrete presence of a gallery attendant in the background might remind us that should *not* touch the work of art – thus putting us on its physical periphery as well. If the site itself contains no traces of Smithson's passage, the nonsite literally transposes the evidence of Smithson's labor to the gallery: the site and resulting project (the nonsite) as disengaged from one another. The viewer is trapped in this space. The site exists as a sort of resonating consciousness, not strictly visual but intellectual as well.



Fig. 5. *Tactics of appropriation: Robert Smithson collecting samples for Double Nonsite, 1968.*

NONSITES: SITE-MAKING TACTICS

The Nonsites bring Smithson's critical vision of artistic activity to a new level. Each title denotes the location visited (*Nonsite (Line of Wreckage)*, for example, makes reference to an textual inscription on a map, while *Mono Lake Nonsite* refers to a very real salt lake in California) – at first Jersey sites, but, later on, to other, more peripheral places as well like Ithaca, New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Maine and California, and Germa-

ny. On these trips Smithson was frequently accompanied by friends (his wife Nancy Holt, the gallery owner Virginia Dwan, Donald Judd, Claes Oldenburg, Michael Heizer and Carl Andre, to name a few). The places visited are in themselves not places we would normally acknowledge as having artistic potential: Smithson's destinations barely register in the margins of our consciousness. They are non-places, non-sites – industrial fields (Passaic, Pine Barrens, or Franklin, New Jersey) or distant landscapes (Mono Lake), clearly outside of the circle of influence of New York City art world. Smithson is photographed by Holt climbing across fences, reminding us that he has no business being where he is going: the site is located beyond the limits of human accessibility. The artist quite literally tries to bring this periphery into focus by drawing our attention to it – turning the periphery into the center, into the *site*.

Certainly, one might argue that in the late 60s the idea of journey was literally quite central to the some of Conceptual Art's great protagonists (Smithson among them) and their critique of traditional artistic practices (painting, sculpture, etc.). In "Monuments", Smithson does not shy away from the

dimensions of travel in the work, characterizing with great minutia not only the trip *within* Passaic itself (the destination suggested in the title: a trip to Passaic) but the journey *to* Passaic as well: we learn about the bus ride taking him from New York to New Jersey (a periphery of a major urban center), the reading material he brought along for the trip (a science-fiction novel), as well the films rolls he had to buy on the way (suggesting perhaps a lack of preparation, or an informal quality to the trip).⁶ While there has been little published about the Nonsites as expeditions, we might imagine that Smithson brings into focus his activities of travel (described in "Monuments" with photographs and written narrative) with the collection of rock samples from the site. The choice of rocks as site samples is interesting given the artist's continued interest (center) in geology (as artifacts the rocks are themselves located on the surface (periphery) of the earth). Transporting the samples back to the city gives the journey an added sense of baggage – a symbolic weight or knowledge the artist did not possess before, now bearing upon him. The journey resonates dialectically, both for its physical (weight of the rocks, walking, etc . . .) and intellectual demands (a creative journey into the unknown): the Nonsites are not predetermined objects for which Smithson

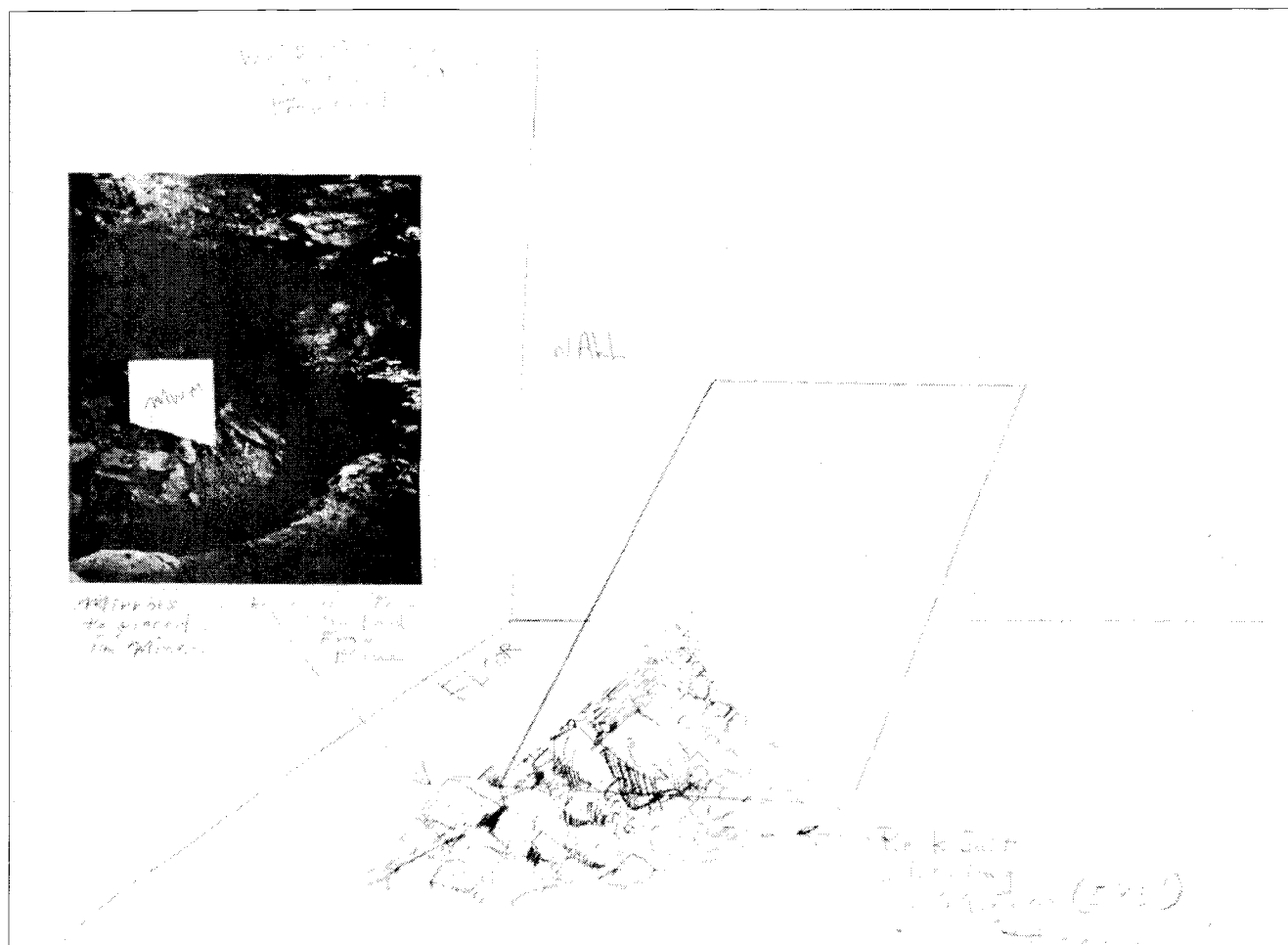


Fig. 6. Robert Smithson. *Mirror with Rock Salt*, 1968. Though intended to represent a mirror, the cut-out in the photograph suggests that the process of site-making literally exists as an extraction.

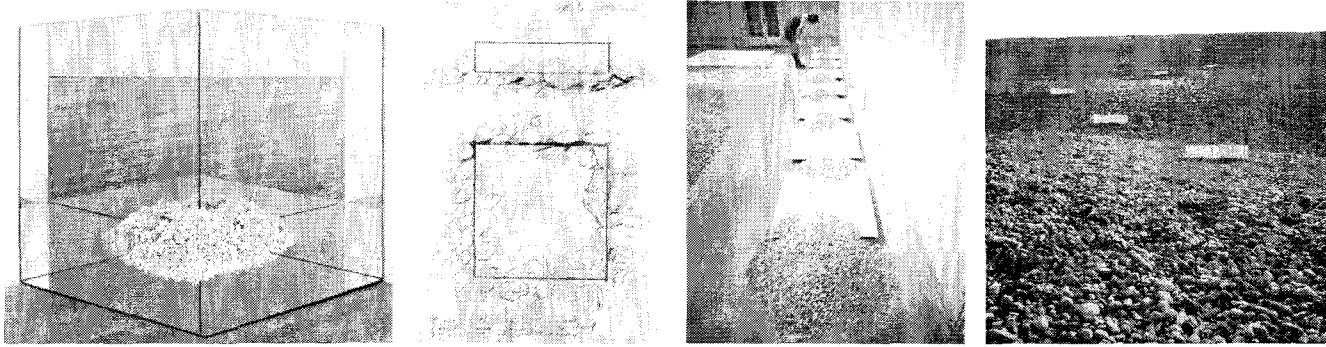


Fig. 7. Evolution of Smithson's tactics of containment: later projects such as *Rocks and Mirror Square* (1969) and *Cayuga Salt Mine Project* (1969) (middle images) suggest that the relationship between container and contained material in a state of flux.

simply went away to collect samples. Rather they are conceived – literally made – on the site. After all, the periphery of creative production is, by definition, an unknown place, which cannot be known without leaving the places one is familiar with, often with only little promise of achievement.

As a series, the Nonsites point to a strong, emerging, creative interest in the idea of site and site-specific works. We recognize throughout them a slow, considered and deliberate process of exploration. While they each refer to single sites, the Nonsites as a series of works elaborate a remarkably consistent set of techniques (some Nonsites could easily be mistaken for one another), offering a sort of de facto context from which to consider the specific operations of a particular nonsite with regard to others in the series. It is as a set of site-making tactics rather than as specific works that I propose to continue this discussion.

TACTICS OF APPROPRIATION

The notion of appropriation is perhaps the most literal and most significant technique deployed in constructing the site/nonsite dialectic. Before Smithson's arrival, locations like the Pine Barrens or Mono Lake existed merely as places of unfocused attention – on-sites of industrial wasteland or vast expanses of uninhabited landscape. It is Smithson's level of intentionality with regard to each place that gives the site its identity. The areas of Pine Barrens or the Palisades, in New Jersey, were known as places long before Smithson's arrival, their names immediately recognized by local residents (for others they might be known only as words on a map). For those not familiar with the Nonsites, these locations continue to exist as such, unchanged. Those in turn familiar with Smithson's work will associate with these locations a new identity (site), known as the work of a specific author (Smithson) and as the result of specific artistic intentions (appropriation, claiming).

If the site is thus appropriated, the nonsite could be construed as the byproduct of this process (literally, *not* the site). The

samples are carefully chosen: they are not fragments of dilapidated buildings, nor are they empty beer bottles, leaves or flowers – in short, evidence which would point to recent human activity or life on the site. The rocks reference times both near and far: a moment in the recent past when they were taken from the site, but also an extended geological timeline which far precedes and will most likely long exceed (for other similar rocks which remain on location) any human occupation of the site. As seen from this perspective, the artist's passage literally leaves no physical trace (as he himself claims *not* have done) – a mere blip on the radar screen.

We tend to think of site-documentation not as a physical activity – or at least not as a process of any real physical consequence. Unlike the collected material samples, other devices used by Smithson in constructing the Nonsites (maps, photographs, text) certainly do not possess the same physical characteristics. The collection of physical samples produces a kind of deep delamination of identities between the nonsite and the site (understood here as the original location of the appropriation): clearly, the rocks cannot exist in both places at the same time.⁷ One is not the other, the nonsite is not-the-site. While no new physical form is made – which lends authority to the gesture as an intentional act of appropriation –, the rocks, in a fundamental way, cannot be replaced (the way a or the way a map can be copied, a magazine issue replaced, or a photograph duplicated, with the help of a negative).

Recognizing that in the act of site-making lie potentially crucial consequences is central to an approach which privileges site-specific works: in a fundamental way, any site constitutes an act of appropriation, the sum of the ideas that we have about it. The site does not exist casually, prior to our arrival, as simply something in waiting. This is true not only of the way we might go about documenting a site but also how we might begin to conceive of gestures of design and intervention on this site. The line between research and design is difficult to draw: in a sense, a condition revealed through design also exists as the consequence of an act of documentation. In this way, a site constitutes a set of dormant conditions until we choose to

recognize (or not-recognize) them specifically. This is true of the way we construct the site for ourselves – a first privately, in the studio, and later publicly, through a work of architecture. How buildings meet the ground, how they appropriate views, light, air, people, context, are matters of crucial importance and specificity: a site never exists in isolation, but rather as a series of gestures connecting to other things, places, opportunities. This idea of the specificity of the site, of simultaneously recognizing through making, certainly prefigures for Smithson the earthworks which would consume the late part of this career. In the act of appropriation lie both the project and the site, the object of the art.

TACTICS OF CONTAINMENT

Smithson's conceptual strategies resonate dialectically, and what constitutes an excavation in one place (the removal of rock samples) becomes an act of solidification in another. The installation of the nonsites in the galleries where they have been shown is a strong reminder of their inherent mobility: contrary to our traditional assumptions about site, which suggests a fixed location, the Nonsites are site-generic objects which can be moved (displaced) from one gallery or museum to another. And unlike the site, the Nonsites can be purchased from Smithson's dealers as objects of art. An inversion has taken place: appropriation leads to containment, negative leads to positive, and site to nonsite. We can be reasonably sure that the collection represents a sort of sampling of the territory described in the map precisely because there is no information detailing the exact location of these extractions (the first nonsite in the Pine Barrens, which describes a concrete location where the sampling took place, is the exception). Given the relatively small size of each nonsite and the expansive scale of their respective sites, the tactic of containment is also one of densifying the site conditions into a concentrated whole: *an entire city inside a bin?*

The collected samples are typically held in bins (in *Cayuga Nonsite*, they rest in heaps on a series of mirrors⁸). As was mentioned earlier, the bins in several Nonsites are deliberately kept not full, as if to suggest something which could not be captured. Doing so visually accentuates the rim of each bin, as if the nonsite were enclosed by a strong set of walls. While these walls of course do not exist on the real site, they reflect Smithson's desire to be precise about site-making as a process (defining the site both by what it is, and what it is not): in this sense, the walls of the nonsite operate not only to include but also to exclude. The walls perhaps also serve to undermine the very real boundaries (invisible or other: property lines, fences, etc..) which result from human occupation of any landscape.

The bins themselves sit inside the gallery or museum – another strictly defined spatial container. The nonsite is as solid as the space around it is open. The viewer occupies the interstitial

space *between* the walls of the bin and those of the gallery – a reference perhaps to the dialectic of center and periphery. In *Mono Lake Nonsite*, Smithson explored the idea of literally making the periphery an occupiable space by referencing Lewis Carroll's well-known map of the ocean. Carroll's map exists simply as an outer frame while the center (ocean) is left blank, thus reducing the role of the frame to an empty signifier. The sea exists as a sort of conceptual periphery, a uniform horizon – here's a map, sailors argued, that all could agree upon.⁹ In *Mono Lake Nonsite*, two rectangular bins – one slightly smaller in size which sits inside a larger one – form an interstitial space used to hold collected ground samples, thus leaving the center bin (and consequently the center of the piece) empty. The edge or periphery of the nonsite is occupied while its center is left undefined – a void. A similar interstitial condition is achieved between the gallery and the Nonsites as objects, but this space remains wide enough for the viewer to consider the installation from a number of angles and distances. Perhaps most explicit in *Mono Lake Nonsite*, the reference to the periphery as space is also evident in several other works – Smithson's early cartouche drawings, for example, or the verbal narrative describing the site of the *Spiral Jetty* in the film and article by the same name. The edges hold together the center:

north: mud, salt crystals, rocks, water . . .
north by east: mud, salt crystals, rocks, water . . .
northeast by north: mud, salt crystals, rocks, water . . .
northeast by east: mud, salt crystals, rocks, water . . .
*east by north: mud, salt crystals, rocks, water . . .*¹⁰

This practice of affirming the edges is crucial to the way maps operate in the nonsite as well. It is important to note that these maps were not drawn by Smithson. Rather, they are commercially available documents – USGS maps, aerial photos, and the like. His appropriation of these documents (that is, how the maps become part of the works themselves) lies in the process of cropping – the way one might argue ordinary rocks on the site are appropriated by the bins. The cropping or framing of the map lends a formal quality to the documents. We have come to recognize as a sort of conceptual signature Smithson's square photographs taken with his Instamatic 400. Similarly, the map is formalized in an act of framing (proportionally echoed in the shape of the bins), which also lends a sense of narrative to each journey: the *Nonsite (Pine Barrens)* is an hexagonal territory, inspired by the 6 airport runways converging at the center of the site. The thin map of *Nonsite Line of Wreckage* suggests a linear progression through the site. The map is framed at both ends by a set of boundaries: to the left (West?) we see the dense edge of an urban neighborhood – perhaps a point of departure for the site visit. To the right (East?) lies the invisible intersection between what appear to be 3 adjoining counties. Words on the map lend a descriptive quality to the territory: "Piling", "Foul Area", "wrecks", "Barges". In *Six Stops on a Section* and *A Nonsite, Franklin, New Jersey*, the cutting of the map into separate sections

suggests a series of stops along the way, or perhaps a series of isolated experiences. The installation of *Franklin* and *Mono Lake* nonsites deliberately opposes conflicting systems of reference with respect to ideas of ground: from our privileged vantage point above them, the bins are perceived as perspectival *ground* (sight), lying on yet another ground (the floor of the gallery), while the maps, displayed at eye level on the wall, appear as undistorted, planimetric projections of *site*.

By cropping the maps rather than producing his own, Smithson is clearly interested in editing or controlling the space of the landscape, which we know to be mapped continuously – and therefore available as a continuous surface, by joining one map to another, and so on (in *Double Nonsite, California and Nevada* literally splices 2 distinct territories into a single map). The cropping produces isolation: the traditional cartouche frame surrounding the map, which typically contains information with respect to scale, orientation, etc . . . , is eliminated. How large is the area described in the map? Where are the Palisades with respect to well-known landmarks of the New Jersey and New York City skylines? How do we go there? The operation of cropping resonates dialectically between containment and expansiveness: it could be argued that the cropping serves to conceptually *release* the territory from the enclosing frame of Carroll's map. In this way, Smithson was quick to play down the role of the maps with regard to the process of site selection site-occupation. Unlike the work of Richard Long, for example, the maps were obtained after the journey was

completed and did not predetermine or limit the way the landscape was occupied. They are not a conceptual determinant in the process. Similarly, a first-hand experience of the site might prove as open-ended as the nonsite is enclosed: Smithson suggested that trips to the sites were possible (the map might help in this process), but that “once you're there you're on your own”.¹¹

LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION: TACTICS OF ABSTRACTION

Mapmaking is a rigorous process that implies a series of clear and consistent parameters with regard to the information to be included (and excluded) from the map. Similarly, the Nonsites suggest a sense of their own limits as representations of site: by saying that the nonsite is, in fact, *not* the site, Smithson is making evident a series of artistic choices that construct the nonsite as something *other* than the site – an abstraction of the original. Each piece is interesting both for what it says – and for what it does *not* say (the gaps or silences, below) – about each site. Rather than attempt to produce a copy of the site (through mimesis), the artist rather adopts a strategy of metonymy.¹² In this sense, the rocks become a substitute for the materiality of the *entire* site. The artist chooses to foreground the lifeless, inorganic quality of the landscape: omitted here are other potential materialities, living or otherwise – not to mention

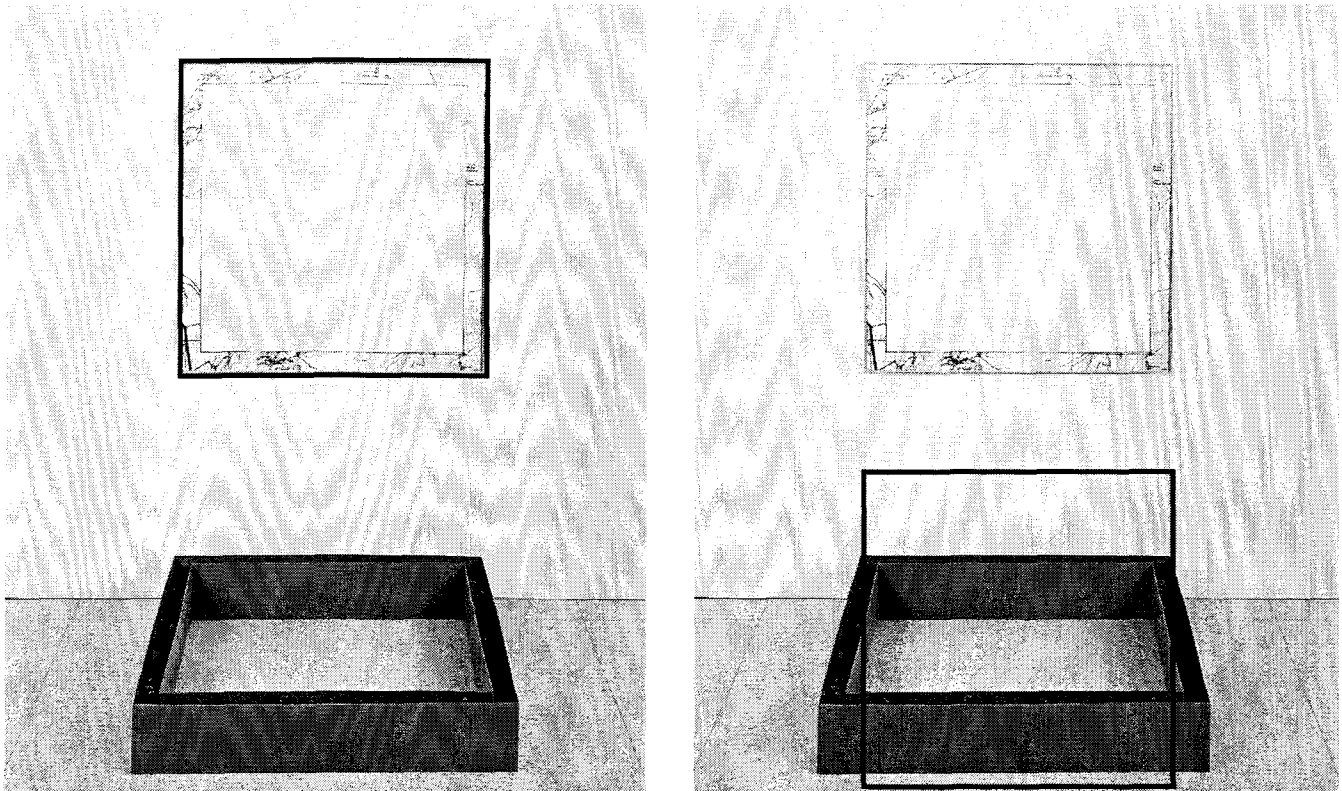


Fig. 8. Dialectical frames: Robert Smithson. *Mono Lake Nonsite*, California, 1968.

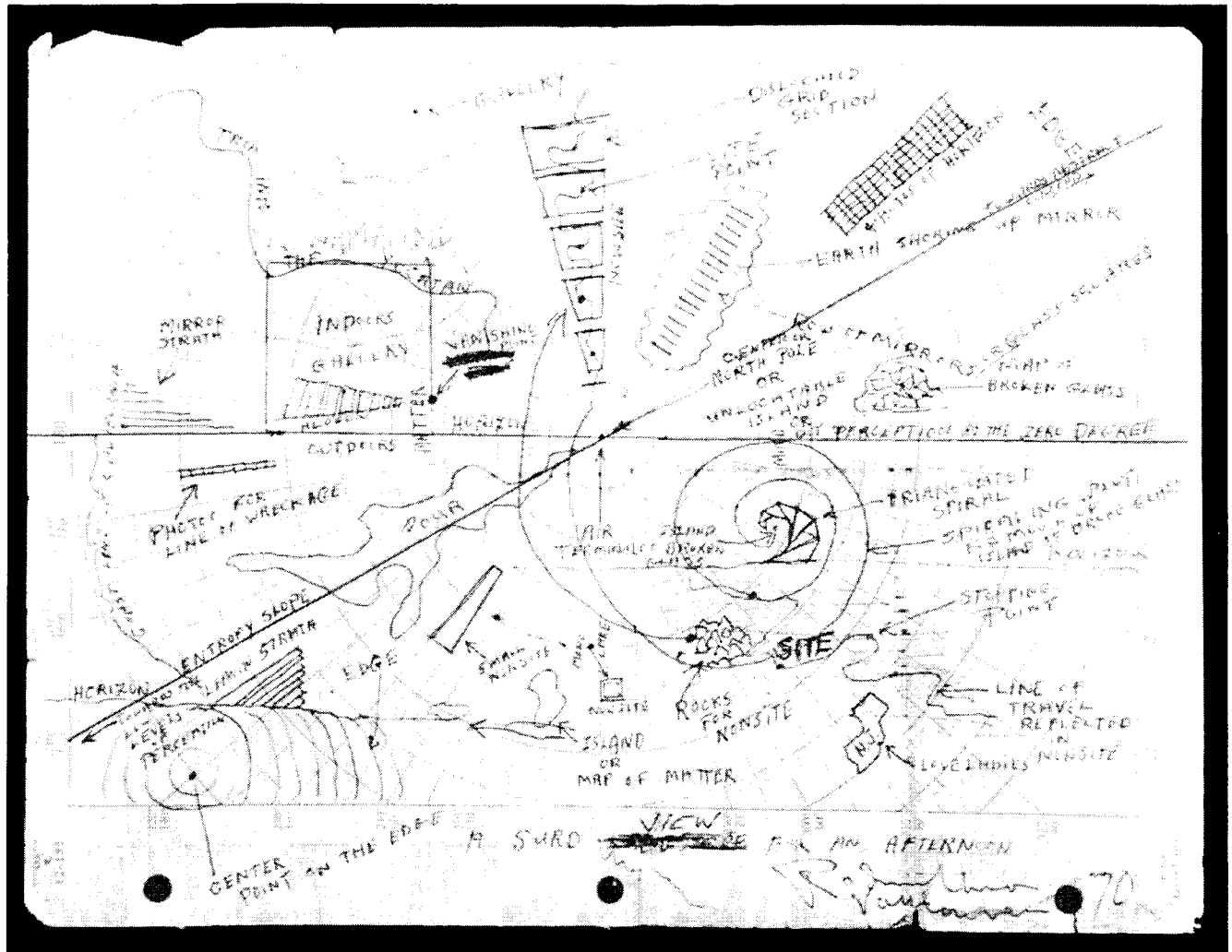


Fig. 9. Robert Smithson, *A Surd View for an Afternoon*, 1970.

sounds, light, views, etc., that make up the landscape. While the bins operate mimetically – they are proportional evocations of the maps, which depict the territory visited –, the rocks, because they are full scale, remind us that not all of the site can fit inside.

CONCLUSION

As a group, the Nonsites construct a creative interval of time, through which we can chart the artist's conceptual progression. Taken as a whole, they suggest a slow and considered process of accretion, by which ideas acquire value through continued exploration – a veritable geological *sedimentation* of his ideas, as the artist noted in the publication of his seminal article from the same year, *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*.¹³

Smithson recognizes that any process of site-making is inherently mysterious, and rather than ponder over what has potentially been lost in the translation (the non-site in the site), the artist allows the viewer to complete the picture he has

begun to assemble. We imagine any site-documentation process to yield specific information, and yet it is precisely by way of Smithson's own opacity – his apparent detachment as a maker – that the site is constructed: the artist makes the viewer establish their own specificity with regard to the work rather than making the site *specific* for us. In this regard, Smithson is suggesting perhaps that our own perceptions are on par with his own or with others'. This conceptual detachment might begin to explain the systematic nature of the artist's own techniques of *not-site making*: shouldn't each site, given its specificity as a landscape, construct its own set of techniques of representation? What are the individualizing characteristics of each site? Is the artist reading the landscape a series of normalized conditions? Is there *specificity* to each site after all?

Most evident perhaps is Smithson's own lack of traces on the site – what is not-made, the way we would expect an intervention by Michael Heizer or Dennis Oppenheim to establish a clear visual presence within the landscape. Perhaps it is Smithson's own way of reminding us that any act of site-making, or any passage on a site, *does* indeed leave traces,

whether these are visible (which we often expect them to be) or not: it is in this way that the architect, and their perceptions, become inextricably linked into a rich and complex construct that is the site.

NOTES

- ¹ Robert Smithson, "A Nonsite: The Palisades".
- ² Robert Smithson, "A Nonsite: The Palisades".
- ³ "Discussion with Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, and Robert Smithson", in Holt, p.177.
- ⁴ This idea emerges in an earlier text entitled "The Crystal Land", in Holt, pp.19-20.
- ⁵ Robert Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", in Holt, p. 73.
- ⁶ Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey", in Holt, p. 52.
- ⁷ Smithson notes the "ponderous, weighty absence" of the site. "Fragments of an Interview with P.A. Norvell", in Lippard, p.88.
- ⁸ Smithson references in the arrangement of salt and mirror their opposed geological structures, offering that the salt, though amorphous in appearance, acts as a container for the mirrors. Hobbs, p.132.
- ⁹ Robert Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art", in Holt, p.77.
- ¹⁰ "The Spiral Jetty", in Holt, p.113.
- ¹¹ "Four Conversations between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson", in Tsai, p. 113.

¹² Metonymy: representing the whole by using some of its parts. See Jones, p.320.

¹³ Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", in Holt, pp.82-91. See also "Strata: a Geophotographic Fiction", in Holt, pp.129-131.

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