

History of the Sandbox: Between the Intimate and the Vast

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In September 1967, Robert Smithson set to revisit some defunct landscapes of his childhood. In a “Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (Artforum, December 1967), he described decaying industrial structures, including a sandbox or “model desert,” which became for him the epitome of disintegration; as if the dissolution of the world was embodied in the grains of sand. It is in this empty, desolate space— doubling as “a grave,” Smithson noted—that children have always played. This paper examines how play-scapes and artworks created in sand have evoke entropy, chance and the passage of time. The intimate history of the sandbox is tied to the vast landscape of social changes and to some immense works of art.

Fifty years ago, on September 30th 1967, Robert Smithson boarded a bus at the Port Authority in New York City, and headed to Passaic New Jersey, the town where he was born. He was planning to write a “Guide to the Monuments of Passaic,” as his notebooks attest, there was already a first draft written, and he had taken friends along on previous visits.¹ This time he set out on his own, Instamatic camera in hand, a copy of the New York Times and a science fiction novel called *Earthworks*, by Brian Aldiss, which he had just bought.

As the bus was making its way out of the city, he looked through the Art Section at a column by John Canaday, then the leading art critic of the New York Times who was often critical of contemporary art, and at the illustration – a painting by Samuel Morse called “Allegorical Landscape of New York University,” showing a new building on Washington Square East in 1836, in an arcadian view of a future—or may be past—Greenwich Village. Smithson described the sky in the black and white newspaper reproduction of the painting as a “subtle newsprint gray and the clouds resemble[ing] stains of sweat,” while in the apocalyptic novel *Earthworks*, the sky appeared as “a great black and white shield on which moisture gleamed.” Both visions differed sharply from the sky on that September 30th: “a clear cobalt blue, a perfect Indian summer.”² That bright color would

stand in stark contrast to the lackluster photographs of the decaying landscape that was unfolding, and which would become the focus of his attention.

By Rutherford, Smithson located the first “monument.” It was an old revolving bridge built in 1896, a plaque stated, a steel structure with wooden planks, which he recognized as the “Monument of Dislocated Directions” when it began to rotate. Off the bus, walking, Smithson then saw in the middle of the Passaic River and on its banks, long pipes supported by pontoons which he identified as “The Pumping Derrick Monument” and “The Great Pipes Monument,” followed by the “The Fountain Monument,” which consisted of six pipes gushing water into the Passaic. He shot 7 rolls of film that day, 80 frames, although only 6 photographs of the trip were included in the article that was published that December in *Artforum*.³

A road sign announcing impending construction work seemed to explain the dilapidation to Smithson, who called the breakdown around him and the structures yet to come – “ruins in reverse,” meaning the works would rise into ruin – or appear to decay and become obsolete, right at the beginning of construction. Fluctuating back and forth between deterioration and progress to come, this landscape presented, Smithson wrote, the “memory traces of an abandoned set of futures.”⁴

The last monument that Smithson encountered on this tour of abandoned sites—was a sandbox in a deserted playground. He called the “Sandbox Monument” a ‘model desert’, a specific desert that became for him the epitome of disintegration; the dissolution of the world was embodied in the grains of sand. It is this empty desolate space— doubling as “an open grave,” Smithson noted—“that children cheerfully play in.”⁵

The “Monuments of Passaic” travelogue became instrumental in architecture, landscape and their related discourse by establishing the unmemorable periphery as a possible point of interest and acceptable destination. Opposed to Manhattan’s dense proximity of solid monuments, this photo-essay pointed to holes and vacancies that Ignasi de Solà-Morales would later call “terrains vagues,” interstitial sites framed as worthy of observation. “In these apparently forgotten places, the memory of the past seems to predominate

the present,” he wrote.⁶ Stillness and decay overwhelmed these sub-urban and highway views, peripheral territories whose drab ordinariness made them resemble ruins, rather than recall the sleekness of some contemporary minimal art.

In addition, those Passaic “Monuments” identified by Smithson, were so named precisely at the time when the historic preservation movement in New York City grew louder. What constituted a historical monument? Smithson’s designation seemed to ask. Following the devastating demolition of Penn Station in 1964, the Landmarks Preservation Act was signed in 1965, leading to the accelerated establishment of numerous Historical Landmarks during 1966 and 1967. Smithson’s own New York City neighborhood – Greenwich Village, which he left to travel to Passaic that morning, was declared in its entirety a National Historical Landmark in March 1967. It would be preserved, fixed—as the Allegorical Landscape of NYU perhaps—and would stand in stark contrast to the decaying landscape, at the other side of the Hudson, reflecting - oblivion, neglect and the passage of time.

The ‘Sandbox Monument’ epitomized for Smithson disintegration and entropy more than any other monument did. He recalled an experiment in physics, in a sandbox, to demonstrate “the irreversibility of eternity”:

“picture in your mind’s eye the sand box divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy.”⁷

Smithson copied verbatim the experiment from a physics textbook where the mix was between red and white sands and changed it to black and white, certainly to match, for the reader’s eye, the black and white photographs; but also to emphasize the racial divide in Passaic, which specifically took place on either sides of the railroad tracks – now covered by the ‘Parking Monument’.⁸

While the sandbox, the ultimate monument in this day-trip, has been read as Smithson’s return to his childhood grounds, or as a prefiguration of his Non-Sites – the framing and displacement of different soils to display an ‘earthwork’ in a gallery; I am interested in the ‘Sandbox Monument’ because the publication of Smithson’s article coincides precisely with a time, when in the history of the sandbox—the play space for children, it was reaching a low point and was disappearing from most playgrounds.⁹ In fact, since its early beginnings as a pedagogical tool in the 19th century, the sandbox always stood for construction and building up, a positive act of constant growth. In 1967 however, the sandbox as a place of play, was radically on the decline and was disappearing from most playgrounds.

When in 1885, Marie Zakrzewska, one of the pioneering women doctors in the U.S.A., first saw sand hills in the public gardens of Berlin, where children of all economic backgrounds played, she immediately

wrote a recommendation to the authorities in Massachusetts. Her letter resulted in the placement of the first sand heap in Boston in 1886; and following its enthusiastic reception—sand piles were believed to keep children out of trouble during the summer months—ten more heaps were placed by the following year. The experiment proved so successful—and inexpensive too—that additional sand-gardens were permanently established for the summer the following years.

By the end of the 19th century, the educational profits of the sandbox were unanimously recognized. After Frederick L. Olmstead incorporated the first sandbox in Charlesbank Park in Boston (1892), other sandboxes were included in park designs elsewhere.

Sandboxes—considered to be the direct precursors of the playground, which in turn led to the establishment in 1906 of the Play Movement in the United States, built communities through play. For the next half century, till WWII, the sandbox appeared in numerous photographs, as if testifying to an ordinary life: children in a variety of difficult circumstances could be seen playing within it – blind girls, orphan boys and children in migrant workers camps. It is as if play in the sandbox testified to a normal life. Inside the magical realm anyone would be an equal partner at play.

Post-war, the sandbox became a symbol of social healing and civic recovery. Most strikingly in Amsterdam, Aldo Van Eyck (1918-1999) used the playground at the urban scale as an instrument of social reconstruction. He transformed hundreds of derelict, interstitial sites across the city into play-scapes, with benches, trees and minimal yet original play equipment that he designed. A large sandbox where children and families would congregate was always included and created a space that the residents could call their own after years of devastation all around. Neighborhoods were rebuilt through experiences of play. Yet, despite numerous creative implementations and many successes, concerns grew in relation to sand, and the dominant trend in American playground design became that of safety. Growing fears, on both sides of the Atlantic, led during the late 1960s to the gradual demise of the sandbox. It was deemed unsanitary, a danger for children, a breeder of disease – in short, an unacceptable urban site and public place for play. In the early 1970s, New York City banned sandboxes altogether; by 1980 Chicago removed all its sandboxes as well.

While the downfall of the sandbox, the space of play, could (obviously) not be instigated by Smithson’s reflections about entropy and gradual decline that day in Passaic, there exist parallel views of the sandbox, aligning it, in 1967 with a model desert, with a grave as well as with a monument.

As educational tools, sand tables have acted as model deserts for years, as devices for teaching military tactics and practicing strategic formations. While seemingly an act of play, this planning for war and destruction in a sandbox has persisted well into the 20th century, when aerial views of the desert were already made possible.

Other, circulating photos of contemporary world events—such as wars in the Middle East and Africa—propagated images of sands and deserts as places of burial and decay, rather than places of construction and play. Yet children have always buried things in sand and simulated graveyards in the sandbox; the sand grains that one manipulates in thoughtful acts of play – are reminiscent of the “bribes et morceaux,” or the “bits and pieces” of left over material that Claude Levi-Strauss speaks of in regards to the bricoleur, the maker of forms.¹⁰ In turn Giorgio Agamben, in “In Playland, Reflections on History and Play,” has talked of objects of play—such as toys—as human crumbs, as they are imbued with the memory of human touch.¹¹ The sand particles are human crumbs too, although they are much smaller particles. It is a fine line between the human dust and the particles of play.

And the sandbox-as-a-grave has also acted, in Smithson’s time, as a monument. On October 1st 1967, a day after the Passaic trip, Claes Oldenburg executed his first public art installation – Placid Civic Monument. He hired two gravediggers who dug a large rectangular hole, the size of a grave - 6 feet by 3 feet grave, just behind the Metropolitan Museum. It was a spectacle for the boys who assembled around the hole, photographs testify, as if exciting digging was happening in the sandbox. After a lunch break the gravediggers filled back the hole, leaving only a trace of the negative monument. Like the ‘ruins in reverse’ of the Passaic, this grave was a monument in reverse.

But not all views of the sandbox in 1967 were negative. At that time, another model desert simulated the face of the moon. In 1966, the Lunar Orbiter, photographed the surface of the moon from orbit, relaying for the first time the moon’s topography; and in March 1967, NASA fired shots in large sandboxes, and then in the earth itself, precisely recreating craters, not in preparation for war but in anticipation of landing. A large semblance of a sandbox was created in Arizona for the astronauts to train in, anticipating a new playground – the moon—full of possibilities.

Yet another large sandbox, to be viewed from outer space proposed hope. Two decades earlier before the appearance of land art, in 1947, Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) conceived of a large earthwork, “To Be Seen from Mars.” It was to be a ten miles long face of a man, carved in sand, which could only be comprehended in its totality from outer space. In an era preceding space travel, this memorial—prompted by the death of Noguchi’s father and created two years after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—would attest to the humanity of earth’s inhabitants, if only one were to look at it from high above.

Fluctuating between the intimate human scale and the planetary, the vast, the sandbox as a space of experimentation and destruction deals with aspects of chance, memory and with the passage of time.

ENDNOTES

1. Two thorough studies of the Passaic trips are in Ann Reynolds, Robert Smithson: *Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 100-121; and Jennifer L. Roberts, *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 60-85.
2. All three quotes in Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” *Artforum*, Vol. VI, No. 4, December 1967, 48.
3. The contact sheets are published in Robert A. Sobieszek, *Robert Smithson: Photo Works*. (LACMA and University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 86-91.
4. Smithson, *Passaic*, 51.
5. *Ibid.*, 52.
6. Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, “Terrain Vague” in *Anyplace*, Cynthia Davidson, ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press/Anyone Corporation, 1995), 120.
7. Smithson, *Passaic*, 51.
8. See Roberts, *Mirror Travels*, 84 for the physics experiment; Reynolds and Roberts for the racial tension in Passaic, NJ.
9. Additional readings of the “Monuments of Passaic” are in Sebastien Marot, *Sub-Urbanism and the Art of Memory*, (London: AA publications, 2003), 42-50, and Philip Ursprung, *Allan Kaprow, Robert Smithson and the Limits to Art*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 133-137.
10. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) Chapter One: “The Science of the Concrete.”
11. Giorgio Agamben, “In Playland: Reflections on History and Play,” in *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience* (London and New York, Verso, 1993). 65-88