

“Follow the Scale of the Earth”: Robert Smithson and Globalization

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Sooner or later the artist is implicated or devoured by politics without even trying. My “position” is one of sinking into awareness of global squalor and futility. *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*¹

To posterity, the name of Robert Smithson will always be associated with the art form he helped bring into being, namely that of land art—or “earthworks” as he preferred to call them.² More broadly, Smithson, whose most famous work, *The Spiral Jetty*, by some accounts is the most important American work of art of the last 150 years,³ can be seen as the embodiment and at least partial inspiration behind several trends that are still very much prevalent in the contemporary world of fine arts on a global scale. These include site-specificity; the turn toward industrial and natural materials, such as rocks and dirt; and an immanent critique of the institutions that sustain the art world although the latter has by now become almost completely co-opted by the very institutions supposedly under critique. Smithson is, of course, not solely responsible for all these movements and trends, but his artistic practice and perhaps especially his extensive writings contribute to the vocabulary with which we discuss art today. Not without reason is he the artist whose name is most frequently invoked by both artists and curators in Ruben Östlund’s 2017 Palme D’or–winning film *The Square*, which satirizes the contemporary art world. Whereas nobody would dispute the global

reach of Smithson's influence, there is another, more elemental way in which he should be considered a global artist. I argue that Smithson's work should be seen as fundamentally global rather than as the work of a quintessentially American artist that eventually made it to the world stage. The potentials and aporias that haunt what has come to be called globalization animated Smithson's entire body of work from his earliest sculptural work through most of his writing to his final gigantic earthworks. This aspect of Smithson's work has largely gone unnoticed despite the huge and nearly constant interest in his work from scholars and artists in the nearly five decades since his death. Throughout his oeuvre, I contend, Smithson time and again returned to some of the same questions that animate present-day historical, philosophical, and political discussion of the interconnectedness of the planet. Through his investigations of media, his meditations on landscape and space, and his implicit rejection of a national frame of reference for his art, Smithson's practice in many ways situates him closer to our twenty-first century present than to his own time.

The broad scholarly consensus regarding Robert Smithson, with which I am also in accord, sees him as a playful uprooter of nearly any stable category, a kind of poststructuralist *avant la lettre* (or, really, *pendant la lettre* as Smithson was working concurrently with the first wave of French poststructuralists).⁴ It is curious, then, that the national perspective remains so prevalent among Smithson scholars, who seem more than happy to follow Smithson in destabilizing the subject, language, nature of perception, and Immanuel Kant's a priori intuitions but seemingly draw the line at questioning the nation state.⁵ One reason for this blind spot might be disciplinary boundaries (most Smithson scholars are art historians specializing in American art), yet this focus on Smithson's Americanness has occluded what is arguably one of the most important aspects of his work. If we take globalization to mean the gradual integration of the world, the potential interconnection between any and every person, idea, particle of capital, pathogen, and point on the earth's surface rather than simply the increase in international trade to which it is sometimes reduced, we can begin to see its relevance to Smithson's uncontainable artistic practice.⁶ To be globalized is to be connected to people, places, and things not in our immediate vicinity—in other words, to be constantly mediated—and Smithson, perhaps more than any other artist of his time, devoted his writings and works of art to a relentless explicit and implicit exploration of this condition.⁷

To understand Smithson's characteristic use of media, the best place to start is probably the famous opening of his 1968 article "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," the closest Smithson ever got to writing a manifesto:

The earth's surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other—one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects, or what I will call "abstract geology." One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason. Vast moving faculties occur in this geological miasma, and they move in the most physical way. This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries. This slow flowage makes one conscious of the turbidity of thinking. Slump, debris slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain.⁸

The constant switch between abstract and material referents in passages such as these (as when Smithson has "ideas decompose into stones") confuse the conventional ways we distinguish between mind and matter and between the fictional and the real. Geology is not simply a metaphor for the mind nor vice versa; rather, Smithson presents them as part of the same field of reality and possibility, somehow, as he puts it, trading places with each other. Each of the "various agents" populating Smithson's ontology (or "geological miasma") forge connections with each other across and between differences of kind and scale, endlessly mediating one another.

Media, then, in this context, should not be understood chiefly as referring to the materials of which Smithson makes use although Smithson undoubtedly was a significant early multimedia artist, helping to expand the notion of what can make up a work of art to include things such as rocks, sand, and broken glass. Instead, Smithson's writings and earthworks conjure up complex systems or environments of mediation, ultimately pointing to the whole planet itself as the real context for his work. References to this idiosyncratic globalization occur throughout Smithson's texts as when he told an interviewer in 1970 about a series of his works that they "incorporate not just the abstract spaces, but the raw material aspects. If you pile something up, all you are faced with is a pile of materials. If you follow the scale of the earth, everything is miniscale. The idea was to set up the scale."⁹ As some scholars note, it is hardly a coincidence that Smithson is discussing "the scale of the earth" during the decade when astronauts, cosmonauts, animals, and man-made devices were launched into orbit; landed on the moon; and perhaps

most crucially, brought back the first photographs of planet earth taken from space, producing one of the most iconic visual representations of the world as a unified totality.¹⁰ As I show, Smithson's work was global in many senses, but perhaps never more than in his insistence that his material, his medium, the true context for his art, was earth—thus, his preference of the moniker “earthworks” rather than “land art,” favoring the dual connotations of earth as planet and as material over the more stable, limited, and national horizons of meaning conjured up by the word “land.”

In many ways Smithson pioneered this expansive understanding of media, simultaneously abstract and material, and according to which, anything—whether ideas and words or rocks and crystals—can be made to function as a medium for anything else. To be sure, Smithson took his inspiration from the then-emergent discipline of media studies as can be seen from the numerous references scattered throughout his writings to the work of Marshall McLuhan in particular. However, at the time, no scholar of media operated with as expansive a concept of media as Smithson's. Indeed, media studies has only recently begun to catch up, as it were, with Smithson's conception of what media can be. Of particular note here is the work of a scholar such as John Durham Peters, who in *The Marvelous Clouds* argues for an expanded concept of media that covers not just technologically produced and unidirectional mass media, such as television and newspapers, but anything conforming to the original meaning of the word “medium” as “an element, environment, or vehicle in the middle of things.”¹¹ Rather than discrete technologies, Durham argues, media are almost always parts of vast environments of relation. For Durham, the development of the internet, in particular, has alerted us to the multidirectionality and totalizing potentials of media in general.¹² Although naturally unaware of the internet and other recent media developments, Smithson foreshadows this movement from broadcast media and geopolitical unipolarity or bipolarity toward the more chaotic globalized world of media and politics in which media and mediated are part and parcel of one another.

The difference that still exists between Smithson's philosophy of media and much of contemporary media studies can be seen in the fact that approaches such as those of Peters still think of media as an intermediary term between a human subject and something else, whether human or nonhuman. These approaches still build on Marshall McLuhan's classic insight—one of the founding axioms of media studies—that media should be understood as “any extension of ourselves,”¹³ whereas Smithson often seems determined to deemphasize or even eliminate the human component in his conception of mediation. As he writes in “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,”

The manifestations of technology are at times less "extensions" of man (Marshall McLuhan's anthropomorphism), than they are aggregates of elements. Even the most advanced tools and machines are made of the raw matter of the earth.¹⁴

Foregrounding the material, often geological components of media, Smithson's media do not so much work to justify the ways of the world to man, but rather make up a complex environment in which the human element plays a part, to be sure, but one that is largely incidental.

The only philosophy of media that attempts to follow Smithson all the way past McLuhan's anthropomorphisms is the one espoused in Jussi Parikka's *Geology of Media*, mapping out "the weird intersections of earth materials and entangled times."¹⁵ In one of Smithson's earliest texts, the 1966 essay "The Crystal Land," we get a sense of this idiosyncratic sensibility in a description of the landscape of Northern New Jersey:

Most of the houses are painted white, but many are painted petal pink, frosted mint, buttercup, fudge, rose beige, antique green, Cape Cod brown, lilac, and so on. The highways crisscross through the towns and become man-made geological networks of concrete. In fact, the entire landscape has a mineral presence. From the shiny chrome diners to glass windows of shopping centers, a sense of the crystalline prevails.¹⁶

In descriptions such as these, which can be found throughout Smithson's writings, the human element is viewed through a geological lens rather than the other way around. In one sense, what interests Smithson is what later generations of geologists and other earth scientists have named the Anthropocene—the geological era named after the impact humans have had on the crust of the earth as well as the planet's atmosphere—yet unlike most scholars who invoke this term, Smithson seems uninterested in describing how humans managed to alter, if not critically ruin, the planet and what might be done to alter this state of affairs.¹⁷ Rather, the perspective Smithson employs on the Anthropocene "man-made geological networks" seems to come *from* the earth rather than being directed *toward* it. As Gary Shapiro notes, Smithson's "abstract geology" changes the implicit grammar of the name of the academic discipline: rather than a discourse about earth, for Smithson, the term "geology" comes to mean the earth's own discourse—Gaia's *logos*.¹⁸

If his reliance on this philosophy of media, his interest in the earth as opposed to mere land, and his references to the abstract geology of what would come to be named the Anthropocene give us cause

to classify Smithson as an artist with a keen interest in what we in the twenty-first century call “the global,” his artistic practice also, in fundamental ways, turns away from the national and often nationalistic implications of several artistic traditions of which he is often thought to be part. Although few deny that Smithson’s contemporary influence over the world of visual art manifests itself on a global scale, he is still considered a quintessentially American artist. Not only did Smithson live in the United States, through his work, writings, and influences, he is also associated with American locales from the art galleries of Manhattan and New Jersey’s Pine Barrens to the deserts of the American west.¹⁹ There is nothing surprising, then, in the fact that art historians have, by and large, seen Smithson’s practice as part of a tradition within American arts and letters invested in the places, landscapes, and scenery of the United States. Nevertheless, I contend Smithson’s work does not fit as neatly within this American tradition of landscape art as we might expect. To see Smithson’s unique approach to the landscape, let us turn to his most famous work, *The Spiral Jetty*.

As even the most casual observer of twentieth-century art history knows, *The Spiral Jetty* is a 1,500-foot-long spiral constructed of black rock, salt crystals, and earth jutting out into the Great Salt Lake at Rozel Point in Utah. This is, however, only part of the story. *The Spiral Jetty* is also a film of that same name, also from 1970, as well as an essay from *Artforum* from 1972. Despite its renown, very few people have actually seen Smithson’s earthwork; not only is it located in the middle of the desert far away from any human habitation or properly paved roads—let alone cities with art museums—it is also frequently submerged in the lake and disappeared from sight. Shortly after its construction in 1970, the water level of the Great Salt Lake rose and swallowed up the jetty. It has since reappeared and resubmerged numerous times. If *The Spiral Jetty* is still one of the most famous American works of art made in the last fifty years, this is mainly due to mediated representations of it, including photographs and anecdotes about visits to its physical location (what Smithson referred to as its “site”) as well as Smithson’s own essay and film. The work *The Spiral Jetty* can be said to encompass all of this. As Gary Shapiro writes, “There is no primary, authentic object (the spiral) to which the film and the essay are merely ancillary.”²⁰ Earthwork, film, and article all form part of a vast network or, even better, a spiral of text and context, words and rocks, matter and ideas in a constant state of erosion, partially submerged, and embedded in its context, broken down, and encrusted with other matter.

In the essay “The Spiral Jetty,” Smithson writes the following about finding the site for the earthwork and the process of its conception:



Approaching the dry Spiral Jetty on June 18th, 2018. Photo by Matthew Kowal.

As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizon only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and nonsite whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other. It was as if the mainland oscillated with waves and pulsations, and the lake remained rock still. The shore of the lake became the edge of the sun, a boiling curve, an explosion rising into a fiery prominence. Matter collapsing into the lake mirrored in the shape of a spiral.²¹

At first sight, this comes across as something like an origin story for the earthwork. The artist has traveled out into the wilderness, and once there, overwhelmed by its sublime grandeur, he receives a vision. The desert landscape, the heat of the sun, and the arid salt lake together conspire to suggest in the mind of the perceptive (or perhaps delirious)

artist the idea of a giant spiral, which he then proceeds to construct. On this reading, Smithson himself is something like a medium between the landscape and the earthwork, the means by which the landscape expresses itself, communicating what Smithson often called his "oceanic" experiences in strange peripheral spaces back to the galleries and art journals of Manhattan like some psychedelic desert father. There is almost a sense of inevitability about the construction and placement of *The Spiral Jetty* as if the earthwork were simply the result of some natural process in which the artist played no more crucial a role than the salt crystals, chemical constitution of salt water, rocks, and all the other parts of the landscape.

This notion of the landscape speaking through the artist, however, only constitutes one layer of meaning in *The Spiral Jetty*. Throughout the essay and the film, Smithson repeatedly sets up such origin narratives for the work only to move on to others, methodically invalidating the notion that it is even possible to pinpoint one single source or foundation, not just for a work of art, but for anything at all. Even in the passage quoted above, we can see how alternative narratives to the landscape mastering the artist begin to accrue as when Smithson mentions his dialectic of site and nonsite, which is to say, the theoretical underpinnings behind some of his earlier works. Readers familiar with Smithson's earlier artistic practice would also be aware of his career-long fascination with spirals,²² complicating the notion that the earthwork somehow emanated from the landscape on its own with Smithson as an empty mediating vessel.

The complexity does not stop here. In the film *The Spiral Jetty*, Smithson relates the old myth (which was not dispelled until the 1870s) that a giant whirlpool existed in the middle of the Great Salt Lake, connecting the lake with the Pacific Ocean more than 500 miles away. Other possible reference points suggested by Smithson include Chris Marker's 1962 science fiction film *La Jetée*, artworks by Constantin Brancusi, and texts by James Joyce and Samuel Beckett as well as the form of the human ear. On the next page of the essay after the preceding quote, Smithson writes,

...each cubic salt crystal echoes the Spiral Jetty in terms of the crystal's molecular lattice. Growth in a crystal advances around a dislocation point, in the manner of a screw. The Spiral Jetty could be considered one layer within the spiraling crystal lattice, magnified trillions of times.²³

With logic such as this, it becomes difficult to distinguish not just between inside and outside, origin and endpoint, but also between media

and what is being mediated. Just as any fact or piece of matter could potentially form part of the work, each potential part can be conceived of as a medium for another part; there is no node in the network comprising *The Spiral Jetty* that could not be conceived of as a medium for some other node. The earthwork, rocks, dirt, and salt crystals in the shape of a spiral can be seen as a medium for the landscape surrounding it, which, in turn, can be seen as the medium for an essay or any number of other endlessly multiplying spirals whether real or imagined. *The Spiral Jetty* as a work of art is not representational in the usual sense in which an artist expresses their impression of an external phenomena. Rather, *The Spiral Jetty* itself constitutes a physical part of the landscape just as the landscape genuinely partakes of the work of art.

In trying to grasp the work in its entirety and deciding what constitutes the medium versus the message (to invoke another McLuhan adage that does not quite capture Smithson's implicit philosophy of media), viewers might almost feel as if they are replicating the disorientated sunstroked experience Smithson evokes in his description of the site.²⁴ Moreover, like the growing layer of salt crystals encrusted on the earthwork, the growing discourse about *The Spiral Jetty* represents additions to a potentially infinite work.

This aspect of Smithson's work can also help explain the curious attention to space we find in his works and writings and his antipathy to the word and concept of "place." From Smithson's perspective, the term "place," like many other terms he tended to avoid (such as "land" or the metaphors from evolutionary biology so dear to many art historians),²⁵ serves to hide and suppress an originary confusion. "Place" gains this sense of coherence through its association with—which is to say, its subordination to—human consciousness. As the human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan defines it, "[p]laces are centers of felt value," in opposition to the freedom and anxiety that characterize "space," "place's" opposite.²⁶ The term "site," on the other hand, which, as Edward Casey notes, gained prominence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is defined in a general sense by relative positions, "the way that things are situated vis-à-vis one another,"²⁷ a conception of space Casey characterizes as "the *relative global*."²⁸ In other words, while retaining the specificity of place, "site" is a spatial term evacuated of its immediate relation to human feeling and perception and defined by its mediations.

This sense of place is one that also characterizes globalization. As the geographer Doreen Massey notes, globalization gives rise to a

...questioning of the notion of places simply as settled, enclosed and internally coherent...and its replacement or supplementation by a concept of place as a meeting-

place, the location of the intersections of particular bundles of activity spaces, of connections and interrelations, of influences and movements.²⁹

This formulation precisely describes Smithson's conception of space. The mediation of the site in Smithson does not create an absence, but rather a conglomeration of different conceptions of that particular space. It is not the case that the many different mediations take the place of a more immediate and authentic feeling of a place as, say, with a person too engulfed in a cell phone to realize where they are. Rather, by jettisoning a certain understanding of place—namely, a discrete, unified, and enclosed space that is predominantly and ultimately defined by a given person's sense or feeling—Smithson's practice gives rise to other and possibly more constructive and authentic understandings of a space. Smithson's implicit critique of the concept of place seems to be exactly this: the feeling that creates the place as such is itself a mediation, one that is usually allowed to dominate all others and one that (perhaps because it feels natural and immediate) obscures other kinds of mediation, especially ones grounded in the actual material circumstances of the space.

As so often with Smithson, the main antagonist seems to be Immanuel Kant. As mentioned, Smithson often referred to the experience of the site using the term "oceanic,"³⁰ a concept originally described by Sigmund Freud in *Civilizations and its Discontents* but more recently deployed by the Austrian art historian Anton Ehrenzweig, a perennial Smithson favorite,³¹ who uses it to describe the way that modern artists supposedly attempt to break down the barrier between the self and the world and thereby circumvent the Kantian pure intuitions (*Anschauungen*) of space and time. In his 1967 book *The Hidden Order of Art*, Ehrenzweig claims,

As we reach the deepest oceanic levels of dedifferentiation the boundaries between the inside and outside world melt away and we feel engulfed and trapped inside the work of art. ...The deepest oceanic experience, however, dissolves space and time itself, which are the very modes by which our reason works.³²

Leaving aside for the moment the accuracy of Ehrenzweig's use of Freud's term to describe the psychic processes of artists and viewers of art, we can see why this theory would be so attractive to Smithson: Moving beyond the constraints imposed on the world by human consciousness, it allows for a closer approximation to the world in itself if we want to stay within Kantian terminology or, to use more recent

examples, something like Jacques Lacan's order of the Real³³ or even what the twenty-first century philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, another contemporary Smithsonian thinker with his own brand of abstract geology, calls the "Great Outdoors."³⁴

Smithson's insistence on the mediated conception of space constitutes one of the most important global aspects of his work, and it demonstrates the way in which we should think of him as a global artist. One of the axioms of his work is that globality, the potential interconnection of the whole earth, forms the true context of the work and any other aspect, including human consciousness or nationality, must necessarily be secondary. This sets his work at odds not just with other American artists of his generation, but with a whole long tradition of American arts and letters that might be said to include such different artists as Thomas Cole, Henry David Thoreau, Jack Kerouac, John Ford, and Terrence Malick.

I use the term "tradition" here in a very loose sense. Indeed, it is perhaps only by contrasting the approach these artists have taken to the representation of the American landscape with that of Smithson that any kind of unity between these highly dissimilar perspectives can be discerned. Again, a rejection of Kantian categories constitutes the crux of his theoretical approach, and elucidating this rejection clarifies both the semi-obscure consensus that binds together the loose tradition of American landscape art as well as Smithson's withdrawal from it. On the face of it, Smithson's artistic practice seems closely related to the Kantian sublime with its notion of a natural world that exceeds our capacity to make sense of it, yet Smithson's rejection of the primacy of human consciousness changes the equation in important ways. As Lytle Shaw writes in his analysis of *The Spiral Jetty*,

No longer the overwhelming threat that generates a new sense and measure of the human (and, therefore, allows new modes of expression of that humanity), sublimity becomes, rather, that which confounds the legibility of the human as a category. Smithson thus moves toward a kind of dynamic sublimity stripped of its recuperative humanist payoff."³⁵

Shaw alludes to Kant's assertion that the natural sublime ultimately functions to reaffirm reason's conceptual mastery over nature.³⁶ The artistic equivalent of this can be found in traditional representations of a sublime nature that, at least in its American iterations, not only yields a humanist payoff, but also a nationalist one.

To take an example from what might be thought of as the center of the canon of American landscape art, the Hudson Valley School painters

represent the American landscape as imposing and sublime in ways that ostensibly resemble Smithson's practice. However, as several scholars note, to these painters, the represented landscapes, however awe-inspiring, align with human cognition along Kantian lines.³⁷ The sublime landscapes appear overwhelming, yet the aesthetic representation of this sublimity suggests a certain kind of mastery, a "superiority over nature" as Kant puts it, which, in turn, perpetuates the American nationalist myth of settler-colonialism expressed in the nineteenth-century idea of manifest destiny.³⁸ In fact, the conceit insinuates that the landscape gains its nationalist potency through its sublimity: By forcing the artist and viewer to expand their faculties of mental and artistic representation of the sublime, the landscape itself seems to lend Americans the very power needed to appropriate it.

The aesthetic association between nature and nation pervades much of American arts and letters. As Jedediah Purdy notes, the word "nature" derives from the Latin word for birth, "natal," which also gives us the words "native," "nation," and "nationalism."³⁹ We can find examples of this dynamic at least as far back as Thomas Jefferson's obsession, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, with proving that the bones found in Big Bone Lick in Kentucky belonged to mammoths and this proved that America did not, as the French naturalist Buffon claimed, have a degenerative climate.⁴⁰ The urgency with which Jefferson pursued this question can perhaps best be explained by the postrevolutionary fervor by which, as Stanley Heeden writes, "American nationalism soon came to be expressed by the relics of the mammoth in the New World's unspoiled landscape."⁴¹ The dynamic by which a sublime natural phenomenon is represented and mastered and, in turn, interpolated into a nationalist myth might be said to be one of the foundations of American exceptionalism.

Smithson disavowed this tradition both implicitly in his artistic practice and explicitly as when he stated in an interview that

...a kind of "virgin" beauty was established in the early days of this country and most people who don't look too hard tend to see the world through postcards and calendars and so that that affects their idea of what they think nature should be rather than what it is.⁴²

The idea of ascribing virginity to a landscape manifests the Kantian anthropomorphism that Smithson tried so hard to avoid. The perhaps inadvertent but nevertheless unmistakable effect of Smithson's reduction of human consciousness in the representation of landscapes is an abdication from the nationalist foundations of most artistic engagements with the American landscape.

We can even find echoes of this logic within what would come to be called American Studies. In his influential study of the frontier in American history, Frederick Jackson Turner writes,

The wilderness masters the colonist. ...at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness...⁴³

We see here again the same Kantian dynamic: the American wilderness, for all its sublime power, eventually yields to the colonialist in a dialectical process and becomes part of a mythical national regeneration. We find the same intense engagement with the American landscape as the key to understanding the national character in such scholars as Perry Miller, Leo Marx, Henry Nash Smith, and Richard Slotkin.⁴⁴ For all their differences, these scholars saw the American landscape as a specific and particular national resource, a resource that influenced or even, as in Turner, forged a specific American character qualitatively different than its European counterparts. Especially in the decades after the Second World War, as the discipline of American Studies came into its own and found institutional support in universities across the United States, these conceptions of American nationalism became linked to an American exceptionalism inflected by the Cold War.

Here, it should be noted that, despite Smithson's renunciation of a certain brand of American nationalism, he shares the implicitly anti-Indigenous attitude of large parts of the nationalist tradition from which he otherwise deviates. Although often mentioning the significance of Indigenous peoples to the kinds of spaces he chose for his sites, Native Americans are often relegated to the past. This is perhaps most obvious in his work "Incidents of Mirror-Travels in the Yucatan," which uses Maya-cosmology as one of the mediations of the Mexican landscape yet fails to acknowledge any still existing Indigenous people, thus contributing to the myth of the "vanishing Indian."⁴⁵ This aspect of Smithson's practice can't simply be explained away by referencing his diminution of the human aspect of space, but rather, in my view, represents a significant shortcoming when it comes to the mapping of all possible mediations of a given space and, thus, a failure to achieve the truly global scale that Smithson's works strive to achieve.

The global aspect of Smithson's practice also sheds new light on his most famous aesthetic feud, against the influential school of postwar American art criticism that proclaimed the purity and grace

of each artistic medium, exemplified by the critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. This enmity is well-trodden ground in Smithson scholarship.⁴⁶ Indeed, not even a casual reader of Smithson's writing can avoid the sometimes rancorous, often very funny invectives against Greenberg and particularly Fried. This disagreement, one of the by-now-classic generational feuds in American art and art criticism, ostensibly revolves around the questions of media specificity, aesthetic experience, and the viewer.⁴⁷ Smithson was far from the only artist of his generation who sought to fight back against what was perceived as a too strictly defined modernism of Greenberg and Fried. However, even as he agreed with the implicit and explicit responses of such artists as Donald Judd and Robert Morris, there was a particular idiosyncratic and political valence to Smithson's rejoinders to Greenberg and Fried that tends to fly under the radar.

Several scholars note that the seemingly purely formal and apolitical stakes of Greenberg's writing of the 1940s and 1950s conceal a political agenda. As Serge Guilbaut notes in his *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, American art of this period "could be politicized only if it was apolitical."⁴⁸ We might see an example of this dynamic in Greenberg's 1948 article "The Decline of Cubism," in which he writes that "the conclusion forces itself, much to our own surprise, that the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power."⁴⁹ However surprised Greenberg might have claimed to be, as Frances Stonor Saunders shows, it was a development that powerful forces within American society were more than eager to help along in an effort to use American culture as a cudgel in Cold War geopolitics, chiefly among them the then-nascent CIA, with which Greenberg was loosely affiliated.⁵⁰ The abstract expressionist painters, in particular, were seen as perfect examples of an unfettered individual freedom without any overt political references (or "free enterprise painting" as Nelson Rockefeller, the director of the Museum of Modern Art referred to it),⁵¹ which paradoxically made them the perfect political weapon in the cultural cold war.

Greenberg's distaste for artists who sought not just to introduce new artistic media and, thus, dissolve the boundaries between the different art forms, but perhaps even more, who took up the credo from the historical avant-garde of breaking down the barriers between art and life was taken up by Fried in the 1960s. In the 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," Fried fulminated against what he called the "theatricality" of contemporary artists, including Tony Smith and Robert Morris, who deviated from established artistic media and the media auto-critique prescribed by Greenberg.⁵² Fried is appalled at Morris's suggestion that

the work of art amounts to not just the object of the artwork but rather "the entire situation," a phrase that, as Fried correctly but not without a note of alarm, notes "means exactly that: *all* of it—including, it seems, the beholder *body*."⁵³ Fried's almost explicit theology of modernist art—according to which "presentness is grace,"⁵⁴ as he famously declares in the essay's last sentence—serves to keep at bay any commingling of art and world and, thus, to maintain the sphere of art as separate, individual, and apolitical. This theology also holds that true media-specific modernist art transcends both its own objecthood as well as the spectator's subjecthood. According to Fried, viewing a painting by, say, Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko, means that you transcend yourself, your surroundings, and your "situation," a kind of individualized sublimity with a humanist—or perhaps even divine—payoff, to use Shaw's terms.

As Fred Moten argues, Fried's invectives against theatricality are meant to maintain a separation between the work of art and "the world of things" to keep at bay what Moten names as "a field in which the human and the (disorderly) thing are precisely, pathologically, theatrically indistinct."⁵⁵ This field is Smithson's as well; his refusal to stay within the boundaries of discrete artistic media amounts to a refusal to achieve Fried's grace of presentness. As is also true of many other artists of his generation, Smithson was interested in involving as many aspects as possible in his artworks. However, where the minimal artists wanted to involve the material aspects of the artwork and the body of the spectator, Smithson went further in creating works that, as I argue, ultimately sought to invoke the whole globe as their context.

Whereas it is true that Smithson never brought up what we might call the nationalist propaganda aspects of Greenberg's and Fried's injunctions to create transcendent art (aspects that, as with Greenberg's involvement with the CIA, in any case, did not become fully uncovered until later), Smithson's repudiation of these injunctions was not as abstract and apolitical as they might appear. The belief in the individual, transcendent experience implied a kind of human mastery of the world, the corollary to which, as Greenberg was keenly aware, was the investiture of the United States as the world leader of art, industry, and politics. In explaining what he called his nonsites, a series of works he created in the years leading up to the construction of *The Spiral Jetty* consisting of different representations of a remote site, Smithson once remarked,

The site is a place where a piece should be but isn't. The piece that should be there is now somewhere else, usually in a room. Actually everything that's of any importance takes place outside the room. But the room reminds us of the limitations of our condition.⁵⁶

We recognize the play of mediation that would reach even higher levels of complexity in mature works such as *The Spiral Jetty*, here phrased in the language of inadequacy: Something important is taking place elsewhere; the spectator is in the wrong place; the site where things are really happening is in the Utahan desert, the jungles of the Yucatan peninsula, or the postindustrial wastelands of New Jersey.⁵⁷ The complex meditation on centers and peripheries and the play of mediation between them in Smithson's abstract geology works, I contend, counter a certain narrative of American global power: not to claim that America is not the dominant global superpower, but to refuse to conform to a triumphalist if partly obscured nationalist status quo that takes American global dominance as the natural state of things.

Nowhere is this dynamic clearer than in Smithson's attack on the Kantian underpinnings of the tradition of American landscape aesthetics: the notion that human consciousness can master the sublimity of the natural world and that this should undergird an American exceptionalism that propels a continued American continental and global expansion. In other words, the notion that, in seeing the American landscape, the settler colonialist, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous words from the last page of *The Great Gatsby*, comes "face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder."⁵⁸ But why, Smithson's artistic practice invites us to ask, would that necessarily be true? Why wouldn't nature routinely exceed our faculties, and why would the American landscape be more sublime than any other?

Rather than a fundamentally national outlook that starts with the United States and then looks outward, Smithson's artistic practice invites an always already decentered worldview, one that contemplates both our own position within an unstable and immense global totality as well as the many processes of mediation that makes such contemplation possible in the first place. It can be argued (and, indeed, this seems to be the implicit argument underlying much Smithson scholarship) that, like the Western movie, the hamburger, or rock 'n' roll, Smithson represents something uniquely American that happened to spread across the world alongside other American cultural productions simultaneously with and perhaps even somehow causally connected to America's role as the world's leading superpower. Nevertheless, whereas there is nothing necessarily contradictory in such a national perspective, it risks disregarding some of the most important aspects of Smithson's works and thoughts—just like, incidentally, it overlooks important aspects of the global popularity of ostensibly American film, cuisine, and popular music.

Beneath the seemingly apolitical coffee table-book surface of Robert Smithson's art, then, lies an artistic practice that, by its use of the concept of media and its refusal to engage with an inherited national

framework, not only registers the early conceptual frameworks of what would come to be called globalization, but also points to the potential for an expanded conception of what political art can be. To be sure, politics for Smithson plays a different role than it does in what we usually think of as "political art," most conspicuously in the reduction of the human in favor of questions of geology and mediation, toward a more general understanding of politics as the interplay, mediation, and clash between human and nonhuman forces. But what else could a politics of the global Anthropocene be?

Notes

1. Robert Smithson, "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium," in *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 152.

2. As he recounts in his article "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (Smithson, *Collected Writings*, 68), Smithson took this phrase from a mass-market science fiction novel by Brian W. Aldiss.

3. cf. Nico Israel, "At the End of the Jetty," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 20, no. 1 (2011), 3.

4. The number of readings pairing Smithson's works and writings with continental philosophy are legion; see, for instance, Craig Owens's "Earthwords" (*October* 10 [1979], 120-30), which applies the philosophy of Walter Benjamin (and to a lesser extent that of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes) to Smithson's oeuvre, and Gary Shapiro's *Earthwards* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), which takes an approach inspired by the philosophy of Jacques Derrida and Martin Heidegger.

5. The one exception to this rule is Nico Israel, who has a keen eye for the transnational and geopolitical nature of Smithson's practice.

6. The secondary literature on globalization is vast. For a good introduction to the many different ways that concept has been employed, see Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Peterson's *Globalization. A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

7. Discussions of Smithson's use of media in a general sense and his use of novel artistic media in particular are prevalent in the secondary literature. (See, for instance, Ann Reynolds's *Robert Smithson: Learning From New Jersey and Elsewhere* [Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003] 43-5 and 100-21, and Ron Graziani's *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 39-47 and 79-85.) However, with the possible exception of Jussi Parikka's *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015)—to which I return in the following—no sustained discussion of Smithson's idiosyncratic use of the term and the concept of media exists.

8. *Collected Writings*, 100.

9. "Interview with Robert Smithson/Paul Toner," *Collected Writings*, 234.

10. Benjamin H. Bratton makes this connection in *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015) 85-6. For a discussion of the way satellite images of the earth helped usher in a new wave of culturally mediated globalization, see Lisa Parks, *Cultures in Orbit: Satellites and the*

Televisual (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 2-20 and passim.

11. John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 46.

12. *Ibid.*, 5 and passim.

13. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2003), 19.

14. *Collected Writings*, 100-01.

15. Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 137. Parikka himself acknowledges the debt to Smithson, going so far as to see him as the progenitor of what amounts to a wholly original yet mostly unrealized school of media studies. As Parikka writes, "From our current twenty-first century perspective approximately fifty years later, it starts an imaginary alternative media theoretical lineage that does not include necessarily McLuhan, Kittler, and the likes in its story but materials, metals, waste, and chemistry" (5).

16. *Collected Writings*, 8.

17. This is also why Smithson was critical of the incipient environmental movement, which although it attempted to be global in scope, was far too anthropocentric for Smithson's taste (for more on this, see Graziani, 110-11). For a reading of Smithson's practice that focuses on the correspondence between his writing and the concept of the Anthropocene, see Susan Ballard and Liz Linden's "Spiral Jetty, Geoaesthetics, and Art: Writing the Anthropocene" (*The Anthropocene Review* 6, no. 1-2, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2053019619839443>).

18. Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 161.

19. Smithson did create a few works outside of the United States: most notably *Incidents of Mirror Travels in the Yucatan* from 1969, *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* from 1971, and *Hotel Palenque* from 1973. As these works (situated in or originating from in Mexico, the Netherlands, and Mexico, respectively) show, Smithson's practice could easily travel outside of his native country.

20. *Earthwards*, 7.

21. *Collected Writings*, 146.

22. See, for instance, his earlier work, *Aerial Map-Proposal for Dallas-Forth Worth Regional Airport*.

23. *Collected Writings*, 147.

24. As Rosalind E. Krauss writes in one of the classic readings of *The Spiral Jetty*, "The experience of the work is one of continually being decentered." *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 82.

25. Smithson's distaste for using the vocabulary of biological evolution to describe art is evident in much of his writing. In the article "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," for instance, he writes, "The study of anatomy since the Renaissance lead to a notion of art in terms of biology. Although anatomy is rarely taught in our art schools, the metaphors of anatomical and biological science linger in the minds of some of our most abstract artists. ...Biological science has since the nineteenth century infused in most people's minds an unconscious faith in 'creative evolution.'" *Collected Writings*, 35-6.

26. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 4.

27. Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 167.

28. *Ibid.*, 382, emphasis in original.

29. Doreen Massey, "The Conceptualization of Place," in *A Place in the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 58-9.

30. See, for instance, in the interview "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson/Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp," in which Smithson states, "There's a central focus point which is the non-site; the site is the unfocused fringe where your mind loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades, as it were. I like the idea of quiet catastrophes taking place." *Collected Writings*, 249.

31. References to Ehrenzweig and especially to his central concept of dedifferentiation are legion in Smithson's writing. See, for instance, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in which Smithson writes, "Michael Fried's shock at Smith's experiences shows that the critic's sense of limit cannot risk the rhythm of dedifferentiation that swings between 'oceanic' fragmentation and strong determinants." *Collected Writings*, 103.

32. Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (London: Phoenix Press, 1967) 119-20.

33. As William B. Parsons argues in *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), the oceanic feeling and mystical experience form an important component of Lacan's concepts of jouissance and the Real (134).

34. In his 2006 book *After Finitude* (New York: Verso, 2009), Meillassoux attempts to move beyond what he argues is the "the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant...that of *correlation*. By 'correlation' we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (5, emphasis in original). In contrast to this, Meillassoux writes, "For it could be that contemporary philosophers have lost the great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere" (7). The impetus for the book, as Meillassoux describes it, is the idea of the petrified fossil as a trace of something that existed before the advent of human consciousness.

35. Lytle Shaw, *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2013), 202.

36. In Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), the concept of "dynamic sublime" describes the feeling that "the irresistibility of [nature's] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of nature and a superiority over nature...whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion to the feeling of reason's superiority" (§28, 145), whereas Smithson's sublime, as Shaw points out, lacks this anthropomorphism and the perceived human mastery.

37. This is, naturally, a simplification of a rich and variegated intellectual tradition. However, scholars broadly agree that, despite their important innovations and differences among themselves, American nineteenth-century artists, writers, and philosophers with an interest in nature and wilderness from Thomas Cole, the painters of the Hudson school, and the transcendentalists (an artistic movement whose Kantianism is evident in its name) broadly employed and further developed Kantian categories in the aesthetics and implicit and explicit philosophies of nature. See, for instance, Nicholas L. Guardino's *Aesthetic Transcendentalism in Emerson, Peirce, and Nineteenth-Century American Landscape Painting* (New York: Lexington Books, 2017), xvii-xxiii and 37-58.

38. Guardiano has a version of this argument when he writes of the Hudson School that they helped "shape the American zeitgeist. Through their works they conveyed their admiration of nature as a spiritual entity of rich beauty to other fellow Americans, and a new interest in nature precipitated into such effects as the settlement of the frontier." *Aesthetic Transcendentalism*, 28.

39. Jedediah Purdy, *This Land is Our Land* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 3.

40. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1788), 60.

41. Stanley Heeden, *Big Bone Lick: The Cradle of American Paleontology* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 65.

42. "Conversation in Salt Lake City/Gianni Pettena," *Collected Writings*, 298.

43. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940), 61.

44. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); and Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973). For an early history of the first decades of American Studies, see Gene Wise's "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly*, 31, no. 3 (1979): 293-337.

45. Elizabeth Deen Miller convincingly argues this point in her dissertation "The U.S. Imagination of Maya Ruins: Critical Reflections on Art and Architecture, 1839-1972" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2018), 112-64.

46. See, for instance, Pamela M. Lee's *Chronophobia* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 43-54, and Ann Reynolds's *Robert Smithson. Learning From New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 31-76 and 89-91.

47. Greenberg's self-professed Kantian theory of media holds that each art form, to be considered modern, should preoccupy itself with an immanent critique of its individual and specific media. See especially the essay "Towards a Newer Laocoon" in *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism. Vol. 1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 23-47, and "Modernist Painting" in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism. Vol. 4* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 85-93.

48. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 190.

49. Clement Greenberg: *The Collected Essays and Criticism. Vol. 2* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 215.

50. Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 252-78.

51. See *The Cultural Cold War*, 258.

52. There are important differences between Fried's position and that of his mentor Greenberg; however, they are on the same page when it comes to their distaste for artists who operate outside of established artistic media, such as painting and sculpture.

53. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 155, emphasis Fried's.

54. "Art and Objecthood," 168.

55. Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 167.

56. *Collected Writings*, 250.

57. As Reynolds (15-76) argues, this aspect of Smithson's work can be traced all the way back to some of his earliest sculptural works, the so-called Alogons, which, by manipulating the perspectives and sizes of the sculpture, work to make spectators question their own position in the gallery room.

58. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2013), 180.

