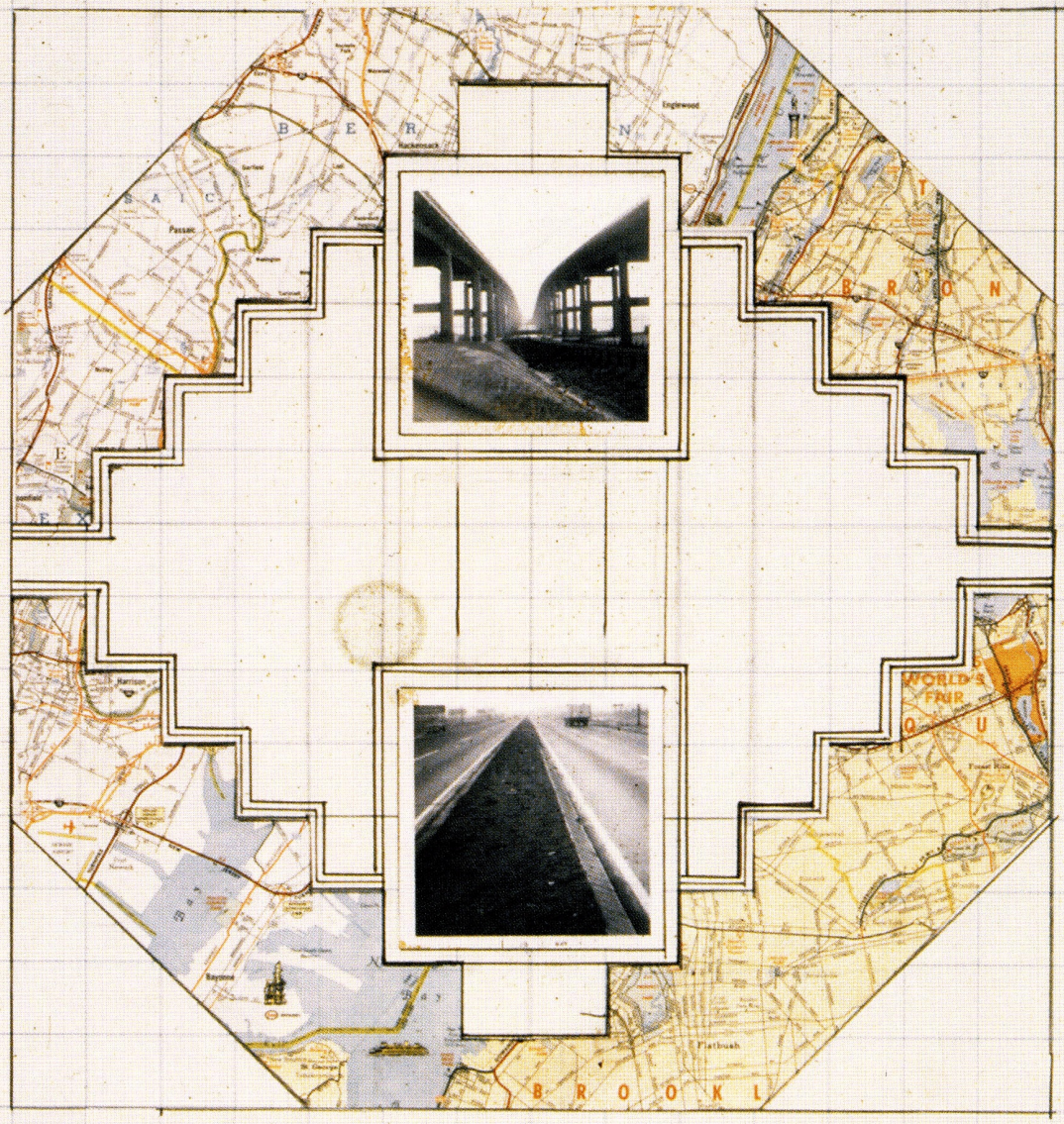
Robert Smithson's Photoworks



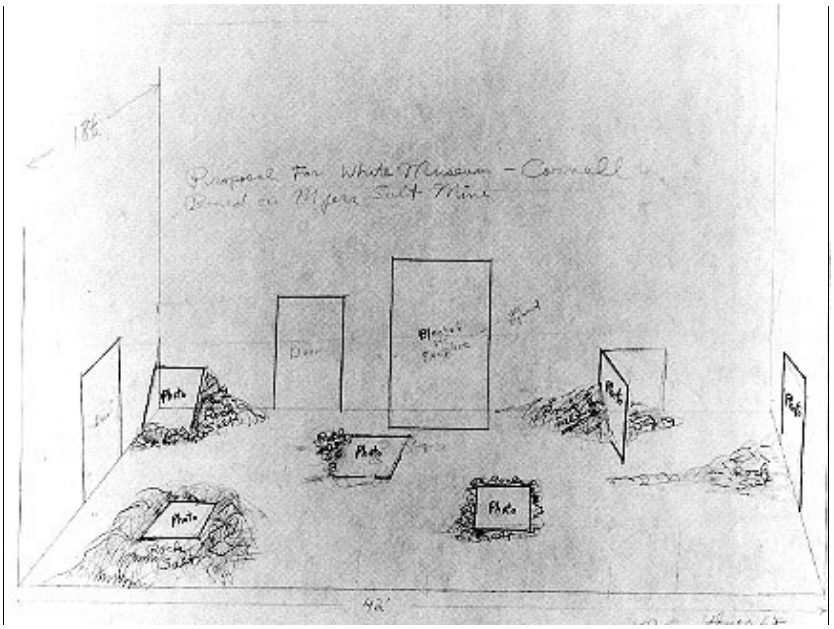
A Dialogue

It's Art, But is it Photography?

by James R. Hugunin

It's Art, But Is It Photography?

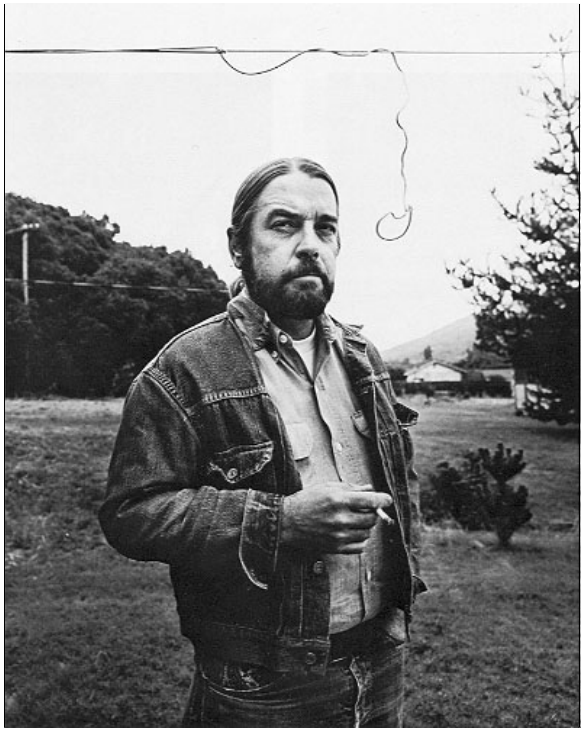
A Dialogic Essay on Robert Smithson's Photoworks



Proposal for White Museum, Cornell University
(based on Myers Salt Mine, 1968) Robert Smithson

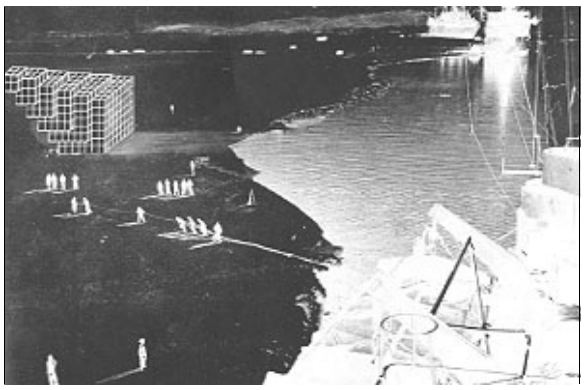
454 Iowa St., Oak Park, IL 60302

To the late Robert Heinecken



Bob Heinecken (1973) Jerry N. Uelsmann

The strata of the Earth is [sic] a jumbled museum,
Embedded in the sediment is a text . . .
—Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of Mind: Earth Projects"



Untitled (S.F. Landscape) (1966) Robert Smithson

In a millennium or two, a seeming paradox of our civilization will be best understood by those men versed in the methods of counter-archaeology. They will study us not by digging into the earth but by climbing vast dunes of industrial rubble and mutilated steel, seeking to reach the tops of our buildings.
—Don DeLillo, *Great Jones Street*

Far from disfiguring the landscape, these discarded products of Twentieth-Century industry had a fierce and wayward beauty ... more splendid than any Arcadian meadow.
—J. G. Ballard, "The Ultimate City"

'Marey's Chronograms are multiple-exposure photographs in which the element of time is visible . . . Your husband's brilliant feat was to reverse the process. Using a series of photographs of the most commonplace objects . . . he treated them as if they already were chronograms and extracted *the element of time.'*
—J. G. Ballard, "The Atrocity Exhibition"

Scene I: Clear hot day in July at a barren space 4200 feet above sea level. Rudimentary mountains surround a briny lake in which a peculiar coiled form extends. It's Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty *(1970) winding its way from the northern shore of the Great Salt Lake. Purchased by the Dia Foundation—once submerged due to the rise of the lake—this Earthwork has been restored to visibility. It is once more walkable and photographable. Two visitors approach each other from opposite directions on this fifteen hundred foot-long coil. Cameras dangle from sunburned necks. As they get closer, we see one wears dark pants and a light shirt, the other light pants and a dark shirt. Both sport greying beards and green military-advisor sunglasses. One wears a straw cowboy hat, the other a khaki cap. They look like what one of my students calls 'retreads,' that is, people over fifty who once were overweight and flabby, but after five years in their local gym are now buff and only minutes away from starting to dye their hair—what's left of it—back to the color it was in their mid-thirties. They meet precisely in the middle of the spiral's length and engage in a dialogue.*

A: Hi. *[Stops. Licks his lip. Notices B's right shoulder sags a bit, head tilts eastward, right arm hangs slightly lower.]*

B: Hi. *[Pauses. Looks the fellow over. Notices A's left shoulder sags, head tilts westward, left arm hangs lower. Nods—the kind of greeting exchanged by men confined in submarines for long periods.]* Tourist or . . .

Spiral Jetty (1970) Robert Smithson

A: Kind of business, I guess. The art biz. I came *in* to see this resurrected Earthwork.

B: *[Looks around at the vast space, distracted.]* Where are you when you're *out*? . . . Ahhh. . . . Me too. Art biz, that is.

A: Very funny. Quite an addition, this spiral, to this desolate landscape, huh? *[Looks upwards. Flawless sky. A day scaled to the pure tones of being and sense.]* Nice location. Things here aren't deprived of their emanations; noise is undisguised, and the air is allowed to flow without recirculation.

B: I know what you mean. We spend too much time inside hermetically-sealed buildings! Moreover, the distance seems vivid, not abstract. *[Stuffs his hands in his pants pockets]*. Let's walk to the innermost end of the spiral.

A: Sure. The *Spiral* is certainly more interesting than the oolites on the beaches, those concentric layers of calcium carbonate that build up around a central mineral fragment, like a pearl. *[Takes his sunglasses off. Kicks the dry surface with his desert boots, first the left, then the right, stirring up crystalline salt deposits left when the water receded, and knocking a few oolites about. Puts his sunglasses back on.]*

B: But Smithson once remarked in an interview, 'You know, one pebble moving one foot in two million years is enough action to keep me really excited.' I'm sure he'd say the same about these infernal oolites! And, in fact, he did do a project with oolites, *Oolite Island, Summerland Key, Florida*!

Oolite Island, Summerland Key, Florida (1971) Robert Smithson

A: That's nearly an interesting remark!

B: A man of understatement, I see. *[Notices his interlocutor has the universal face of alumni bulletins, eyes panes of muddy glass, gray and very distant. That he has a formality about his movements, a tiller-distinct precision. Probably a man deeply pleased by the appreciation of others.]* But, you know, it's not just this place as is Smithson's work is also about how one *looks* at the landscape; the view, is also very important. Like many of his contemporaries, Smithson was drawn to Phenomenology's concept of the mutual implication of world and self, of the procedure by which one might see beyond the natural attitude toward things into the essences of existents, if you know what I mean. A mental 'phenomenological reduction' explored by J. G. Ballard, a British author that Smithson admired, in his short story "The Overloaded Man."

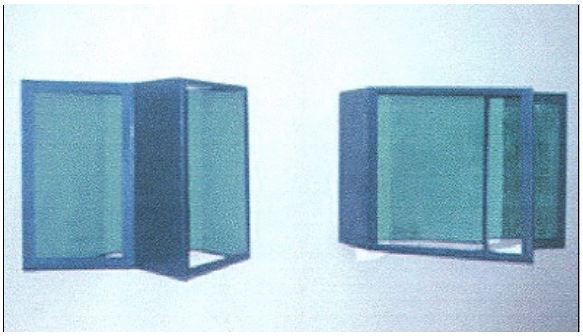
A: *[Wind force increases, a whistling gritty sound as it whips their bodies as they slowly make their way further into the spiral.]* Sure. Phenomenological essences, *epoche*. Merleau-Ponty. Intentionality, the Life-World, noesis/noema, blah-blah-blah.

B: *[Nods a silent assent, enjoying the alliteration.]* For instance, in his essay, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," Smithson, echoing Ballard's treatment of exterior spaces, said a park can no longer be seen as 'a thing-in-itself, ' but as a process of ongoing relationships existing as a 'thing-for-us.' Intentionality. Self and world conjoined. The world is *for us.* Get it? *[Puts his right hand over eyes, looks about carefully like a half-breed scout in an old Western.]* Ah, the desert. Archetypal American space, low horizontals, high verticals. Jazzed up with this massive mandala, this earthen snake. The landscape as an already-written text, a set of ciphers, just begging to be appropriated by a

mind working analogously to J. G. Ballard's literary celebration of the postindustrial landscape as a network of signs! I'm thinking, shades of *Spiral Jetty,* of Ballard's short story "The Voices of Time" wherein a bizarre rebus-like altered landscape with three concentric circles rimming it becomes the focus for the protagonist's imagination.

A: How one looks at it—hmmm—why Smithson photographed and filmed this Earthwork, interjected "text" between the spiral and viewers. *[Adjusts his sunglasses. Takes a swig from his round western-style canteen.]* But one can't ignore his use of Structuralism either. A seemingly paradoxical interplay between those two theoretical methods being *simpàtico* with his pervasive fascination with dualities, dialectics, a massive return to language characteristic of Sixties art. You know . . . those *Sites/Nonsites*, *Enantiomorphic Chambers* from the mid-sixties, and so forth. Enantiomorphic referring to mirrored objects or images.

B: And he did an essay on the *Spiral* too. But not only that. He accomplished a wide-range of photographic practice besides photographing his Earthworks and found sites—post-industrialscapes that recall the dystopic spaces elaborated in J. G. Ballard's stories in which such places are imagined as 'fossils of time future'. As Mike Kelley has pointed out, Smithson was fixated on the peculiar quality of the industrial landscape which reminded him, simultaneously, of both the long past and distant future. 'Industrial ruins,' Smithson said, 'rise into decay rather than fall; they are like films run backwards.' From photo-mechanical print collages—a piece sometimes known as "Big Fish" from the early sixties and "Spaceman Shooting" in which gouache was added over a magazine illustration comes to mind . . . *[Both are distracted by the sound of an Air Force jet above in the bright blue sky, contrail marking a bee-line over them to some unknown destination.]*



Enantiomorphic Chambers (1965) Robert Smithson

A: Sort of like in that 1954 film *The Creature from the Black Lagoon.* What Smithson called a collapsed time where 'Space Age and Stone Age attitudes overlap to form the Zero-Zone.' I even see something of that in California photographer Robert Heinecken's photo-litho overprinting of magazine ads. Specifically, I recall his *Magazine Page (Helena Rubenstein)* from the late-sixties—you know—the image where the South Vietnamese soldier is holding the heads of two Viet Cong, printed over a cosmetic ad. High-tech war, caveman brutality. In Don DeLillo's first novel from the early seventies, *Americana,* his protagonist remarks upon the juxtaposition of an image of decapitated villagers with a panty-girdle ad in a magazine. Wonder if Don saw Heinecken's piece? *[Fumbles with something in his pocket; casually pops a Cert's breath mint in his mouth.*

B: That weird place of dualities where, as Smithson put it, spacemen meet a dinosaur in a Jurassic swamp on Mars—or something like that. Smithson's penchant for collage also led him to conflate various pages he culled from popular magazines into an atemporal composite of overlapping images and texts. A species of postmodernist appropriation *avant la lettre.*

Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing? (collage, 1956) Richard Hamilton

A: You might also include English Pop artist Richard Hamilton's collages in that category.

B: Ah, good point. Say, you mentioned DeLillo. Are you a fan of his?

A: *White Noise* is my favorite contemporary novel. *[Places his arms akimbo.]*

B: Mine too.

A: I'm always copping from DeLillo. I started reading him after I found out our department's chairman adored him. So I read him and started citing him during departmental meetings; especially, after I kept hearing the phrase 'waning funding mechanisms' repeated over and over. That's how I eventually got my promotion to full prof. After a while, I found I was hooked. Read everything DeLillo wrote. *[With a proud glow to his face.]* Now I think like him, talk like some of his characters.

Magazine Page (Helena Rubenstein) (1969) Robert Heinecken

B: It's a postmodern thing, huh?

A: Can't help myself. It's in the air we breathe. By the way, to get back to our topic, photo historian Robert Sobieszek, in

Robert Smithson: Photo Works, mentions in this regard an unpublished, single-page typescript entitled "Look." Therein, Smithson messed with—today we'd say 'deconstructed'—a nineteen-seventy issue of *Look* magazine, conjoining product ads, news stories, and photographs into a literary collage. Sobieszek notes how both artists respond to what he calls 'the absurd potency' of the mass media's undifferentiated intermixture of fashion and human tragedy, sex and war. *[As if on cue, both squat down. A absentmindedly runs dirt through his fingers, while B blows his nose.]*

Yucatan Mirror Displacements/First Mirror Displacement (1969) Robert Smithson

B: Yeah, all that, and Smithson did a plethora of negative photostats that function as *reversals* of normal vision, as well as large serial pieces like *400 Seattle Horizons* and *The Monuments of Passaic* from the late-sixties that play on systems and . . .

A: *[Interrupts.]* Not to mention his various photo works, those justly famous *Mirror Displacements,* that reverse the direction of the gaze and laterally flip what's reflected. *[Sniffs the air loudly.]* Speaking of swamps, don't you just love that rotten egg smell here?

B: Decay of plant and animal remains in this shallow lake. *[Stands up, takes off his straw cowboy hat bought at the airport, mops his brow.]* Say, you know quite a bit about Smithson.

A: *[Stands also. B notices he's wearing a khaki cap with the words 'Big Bugs' and a large black ant embroidered on it.]* Teach a series of photo history courses on the East Coast—Columbia. Admire the photo historian Jonathan Green. Did a seminar with him once in Ohio.

B: That state's name being *almost* a perfect enantiomorphic word. Just drop the 'I.'

A: Smithson would've loved that! Did I mention I just made full professor? *[A trace of surprise brushes across his face as he finally notices that his interlocutor is, with the exception of the hat, dressed as mirror-image of his own getup.]*

B: Yeah, you did! *[Annoyance in his voice.]* I do the New Forms and Concepts studio at Cal State, Northridge.

A: Oh, you're a TJ—a Theory Jockey—one who samples from a variety of art theories like a disc jockey does music.

B: *[Ignores the taunt.]* Our classes are held in a stale-air windowless basement room. But the wisdom of our photo history courses are promulgated from a lecturer's podium on a platform in front of a huge sanitized hall resembling a cafeteria in the second-best pavilion at some international exposition! *[Chuckles. Notices his interlocutor's hairy, powerful forearms, high, dark-veined. Reminds him of actor Robin Williams's arms. Arms that say 'I could strangle a German Shepherd with rosary beads.' As unusual in an academic, he thinks, as in a comedian.]* Say, do you know the academic's prayer?

A: Huh?

B: It goes thus: *[In a subdued and earnest manner, hands raised in the prayer position.]* 'O Transcendental Signifier, give me strength and leisure and zeal to enlarge my knowledge. Our work is great and the mind of Man/Woman presses forward forever. Thou hast chose me in Thy grace to watch over the canon, the student body, and the accuracy of my bibliographies. As I am about to fulfill my duties, guide me in this immense work so that it may benefit Humankind for without Thy help not the least footnote would be accurate, nor would I be without the sinful stain of plagiarism. Amen.'

A: A Modernist prayer. That bit about plagiarism. Now everyone cops from everyone.

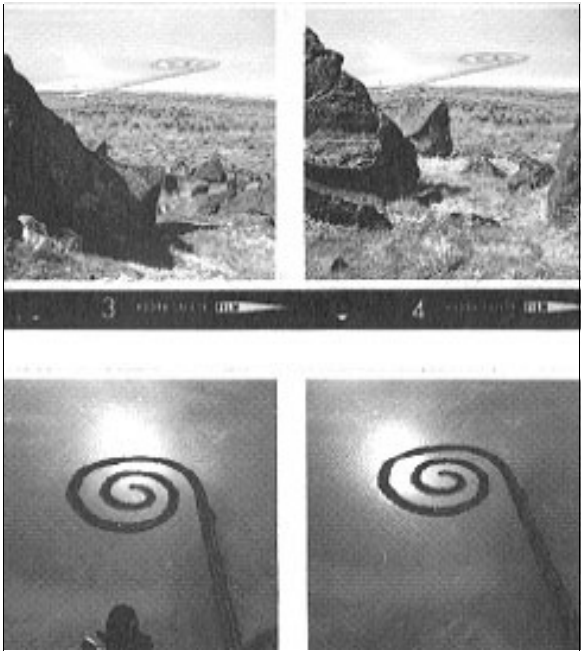
B: In the Beginning was the Word, now there's the Quote.

A: Yeah, you sure must hail from La-La-Land—Southern California. *[A vague grimace fleetingly appears across his face. He hates Los Angeles ever since the last Society for Photographic Education National Meeting held at U.C. Riverside, where he nearly died of the choking smog, tasteless fast food, and catty remarks.]*

B: *Et in San Fernando Valley ego*. The last big quake took down our art department. Spent two years in temporary classrooms, 'nonpedagogical spaces' our chairman called them, probably thinking of Smithson's nonsites. I'm on sabbatical this whole year. *[He lies. He's only an adjunct professor on enforced—his classes didn't make enrollment—summer vacation.]*

A: *Et in Utah ego. [They cautiously shake sweaty hands, acknowledging their mutual standing as longsuffering art world professionals. He notices something of a surfer's numinous gleam in his interlocutor's silky blue eyes.]* Well, here we are at the center, which refers us to the outer margins. Stillness at the center of a thing in motion. I mean walking here was like standing still with the vista, instead, moving around us. Rosalind Kraus experienced it as 'being decentered within the great expanse of lake and sky'. Optical illusion. Makes me feel like we are fragile creatures surrounded by a world of hostile facts.

B: *[Those silky blue eyes scan the horizon.]* Yes. The desert fits the film frame, the screen. It seems meant for framing. Ah, my mind works better in the desert. It becomes a *tabula rasa* eager for new impressions. The simplest shape has enormous power.



Spiral Jetty (contact prints) Robert Smithson

A: Smithson remarked that 'The mind is always being hurled toward the outer edge into intractable trajectories that lead to vertigo.'

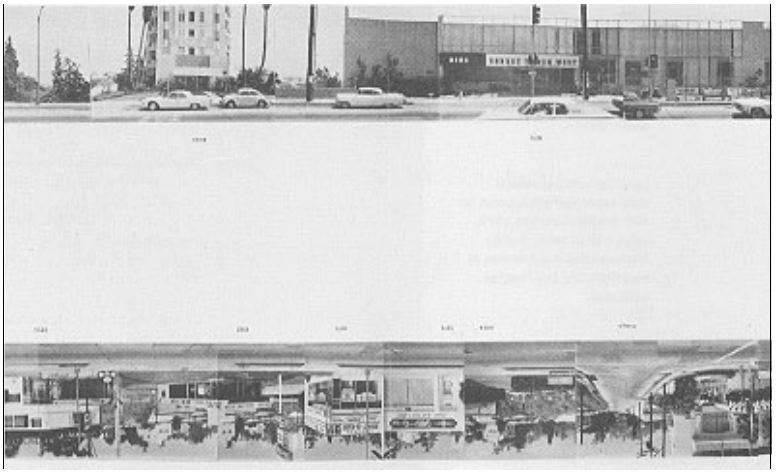
B: That from Smithson's essay "A Museum of Language?"

A: Uh-huh. Here at the center, this *Jetty* is less intelligible than when it is seen from a distance, and 'that distance'—as Craig Owens observes in his nineteen seventy-nine essay "Earthwords"—'is most often achieved by imposing a *text* between viewer and work.' This is the case even with those industrial wastelands Smithson was drawn to—from Passaic, New Jersey to Oberhausen, Germany—and which he obsessively photographed. The more dangerous the waste, the more heroic it will become.

B: *[Ignores the remark.]* Think of those classic American Westerns, pardner. Look at us here. Figures with dusty boots in open space. A place of hesitations. Textures. It's what Westerns are all about, right? Mountain man, Jim Bridger, was the first white man to see this place. In 1825, I believe. But they didn't have photography to memorialize the event, provide evidence. *[Despite his sunglasses, he turns slightly to avoid the direct sunlight.]*

A: People didn't take the first-hand descriptions of Yellowstone area as truthful until in the late-nineteenth century William Henry Jackson gave them photographic evidence. Later the area was declared a National Park. In a reversal of type of subject, Smithson documents dystopic, wasted landscapes, but in hopes of redeeming them.

B: And, like Jackson's images, Smithson's photographs were framed as *art*. On the one hand, Smithson's photo works are *documents* of those trashed landscapes, and on the other, they are *art.* In modernist photo historian Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography* separate chapters reenforce the difference between 'art photography' and 'documentary photography.' Smithson's and other conceptualists' photo works certainly challenge reductive, traditional pigeonholes. Craig Owens says this due to Smithson's use of allegory which 'marks the dissolution of the boundaries between the arts.'



Every Building along Sunset Boulevard (detail, 1966) Ed Ruscha

A: *[Ignores B's remarks.]* Yes, the West ... Smithson died in Texas . . . with his boots on and his camera around his neck. *[An awkward moment of silence passes between them. Are they reflecting upon their own mortality? A vulture flies in the distance. Watches it soar toward the mountains, wind-assisted, rising gradually—a very familiar sight out here—then offers a bit of doggerl.]* Roses roses never red/Sweet the buzzard sings.

B: DeLillo?

A: Baba. Baba. Baba.

B: I'll take that as a 'yes.' I always believed I could see things other people couldn't. When I first saw Smithson's—as you put—'photo works' in *Art-forum,* I sensed a fellow-traveler. Back in the early seventies. Just starting grad school at UCLA. His photographic works confirmed my sea-change from a mediocre sort of photo-surrealism—I was living in the San Francisco Bay area earlier—to a more demotic conceptualism that seemed to resonate with the banality of Los Angeles.

A: A banality well-captured in Ed Ruscha's marvelous little photo books, such as *Real Estate Opportunities* and *Various Small Fires and Milk*.

B: Yes, of course. But I was also influenced by a collection of snapshots of visually ugly piles recalling Smithson's photos of industrial debris, *A Portfolio of Piles,* published in nineteen sixty-eight by Ian Baxter's N. E. Thing Co.

A: From the Vancouver area?

B. Yes. The portfolio consists of photomechanical reproductions of photo works of various types of piles—dirt, trash, objects, and so forth—shot by Ian Baxter, Fred Herzog, and Duane Lunden. In his Introduction to this publication, Kurt von Meier asks the question whether the 'effluvium, the detritus, the jetsam of existence' can be 'more adventurous, demanding, and, in the end, more promising and positive' than the usual sought-after beauty of conventional landscape imagery. His answer is a resounding *yes*. Those snapshots

—we can call them photo works—are akin to Duchampian Ready-Mades, that is, they are indexical signs which put the real in quotation marks. They induce a *snapshot effect* having the capacity to turn reality into a simulacrum of itself.

A: Photo works—like he's not a photographer in the traditional sense. *[Picks up an oolite, skips it across the salty water, half expecting it to float due to the extreme brine.]* Robert Sobieszek labels them as such in that seminal catalogue essay I referred to before.

B: Like Robert Heinecken being referred to as a 'photographist' in the catalogue from his recent retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. *[Sneezes. Blows his nose. The dust here is wrecking havoc with his sinuses.]*

A: Yeah, yeah. *[Nods. Notices remnants of the sneeze linger on B's mustache.]* Seems we got two different types of practice here.

B: One fetches more money on the art market, and I don't mean *photography*!

A: Yep. Some bitter memories there. Curators were paying big bucks for a drug store print, while the print craftspeople were getting a faction of that. One institution spent as much on a single work by Smithson as the photography department spent all year on a myriad of traditional photographs by the likes of Weston, Adams, Winogrand, and so forth.

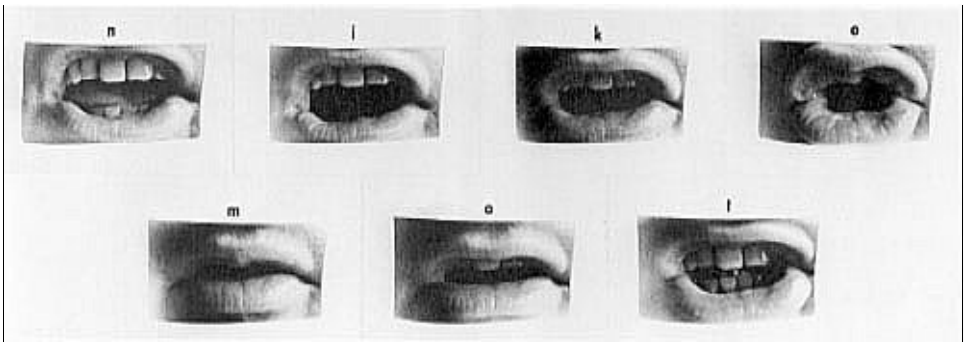
B: *[A bit miffed.]* Oh, so he *uses* photography, but doesn't *work* in it, as does Ansel Adams?

A: You might say he *ab-uses* the medium. *[Thinks: 'I've taken the offensive. Now will this discussion erupt in small arms fire like our last faculty meeting?']*

B: Once read a review, in 1975 in *Artweek*, of San Francisco photographer Lew Thomas's work . . .

A: *[Interrupting.]* The infamous Lew Thomas. The high-priest of that 'Photography and Language' movement during the seventies? Published *Structural(ism) and Photography*? Curated shows at La Mammelle, which later became Camerawork Gallery?

B: The very same, yes. The critic in question, Joseph Czarnecki, quipped: 'One might ask . . . it's art, but is it photography?' In an answer to that review I wrote concerning how this critic was policing the boundaries between traditional photography and more conceptual explorations of the medium by abusing language. My reply went something like this: Given the following propositions, the task is to discern similarities and differences between them and apply these results to the present discussion: *[Takes out a small pad of paper and a ballpoint pen from his rucksack, goes down on one knee, props the pad on it, and jots out the following three propositions.]*



Sounding the N–I-K-O-M-A-T (1973) Lew Thomas

A: Gotcha. I think. *[Scratches his head.]*

a) X works in the photographic medium;
b) X uses the photographic medium;
c) X's medium is photography.

B: Now in sentence 'a' the key word is 'in' and is employed as an indication of situation, action, and manner. In sentence 'b' the word 'uses' is defined as 'employs for some purpose.' *[Intensity and vigor; seems spellbound by his own ideas, a twinkle in his eyes.]* In the last statement the copula 'is' serves to establish an identity between medium and photography and 'X'. Basically, the denotation of the last sentence is the meaning contained in the first two. However, while the final proposition is precise and emotionally neutral, the propositions 'a' and 'b' are evocative on a connotational level. Sentence 'a' suggests a more committed and deeper involvement *in* photography than 'b,' since the spatial aspect of the meaning of 'in' is carried into the meaning of the sentence. The word 'uses' in 'b' has overtones of utility, or even abuse. The connotation of 'b' suggests less respect and involvement with the medium. *[Resolute, he strokes the air with his pen as he speaks, then cuts it with emphatic gestures of his right hand.]* Both 'a' and 'b' have connotations that distort the actual denotation lurking in the sentences, which is made explicit in the last proposition 'c.' But at the level of denotation all three sentences mean the same, and no real distinction should be drawn between them. *[Then finishes with a distinct note of triumphant emphasis.]* Q. E. D. . . . So much for Czarnecki's quip.

A: An Analytic Philosopher in desert drag! A Carnap napping in his car as he sojourns through the Southwest. *[He exudes self-satisfaction.]*

B: Funny. But to be more specific, he was a Logical Positivist. *[Immediately wishes he hadn't corrected his academic* Doppelgänger*.]*

A: I stand corrected. *[A slight blush crosses his face. 'Nitpicker,' he thinks.]* But at that time that kind of division between *artists* versus *photographers* was as often used by the likes of John Baldessari and *[takes his hat off, holds it over his heart]* our dearly departed Douglas Huebler to maintain their self-conscious rejection of traditional photographic practice. And, as you pointed out, it kept prices up for artists *using* photography. It's still going on, too.

B: If such 'idea-oriented' artists balk at being referred to as photographers—largely due to that category's negative connotation in the art market and their rebellion against traditional crafting—they are as guilty as Czarnecki, but from the opposite end. *[A tinge of self-righteousness inflects his voice.]*

A: You know, it might be nice to get into the shade before we become barbecue for the vultures. We can continue this discussion at . . .

B: That new greasy spoon down the road a while there, huh? The Gut Bucket.

A: In Locomotive Springs? Okay, let's go! I'm done here.

B: They have a great drink . . . Zou Zou Bop tea from Paris, served hot or cold. Prefer the cold. *[They both walk northward back to the shore and their respective SUV rentals. When A turns around and leads off, B notices A has a paperback of DeLillo's* Americana *jammed in his pants between back and belt.]*

A: On the drive out here from the airport. I couldn't help recall Tony Smith's infamous 'revealing experience' while driving on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. A text which was the pretext for Michael Fried's attack on 'theatricality' in art. In an interview with Sam Wagstaff, Jr. Smith mentions abandoned works, denuded Zeppelin fields, Surrealist landscapes, all places akin to those that fascinated Smithson.

B: So you also flew into Salt Lake? *[Noticing the green and white Enterprise Rent-a-Car sticker on the white Chevrolet Blazer parked next to his Alamo rental black Blazer.]*

A: Yep. Not only faster, of course, but air travel allows us to recognize ourselves as modern. *[Adopting a tone of voice he uses in his class lectures.]* The process removes us from the world and sets us apart from each other. *[Takes out his car keys.]*

B: But after nine-eleven, can't help see ourselves as postmodern! Crap going on in air travel now puts a new spin on our multicultural society: foreground issues of post-colonialism, sparks rétro-fascism, paranoia, permits us to see naked claws of the bunker state, and . . .

A: *[Climbs in, tosses the DeLillo novel on the front seat, sticks his head out the SUV window.]* Okay, okay. Point made. *[Sighs.]* Saddle-up and we're off to the watering hole before I croak on your Krokerisms! *[Referring to arcane jargon in media theorist Arthur Kroker's book,* Data Trash.*]*

Salt Lake Overflows and Floods Local Area (1986)

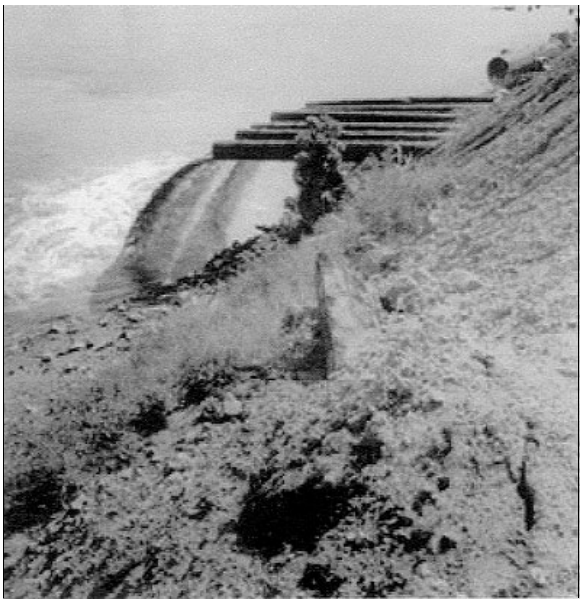
B: Hey, you aren't one of those dudes who goes everywhere twice . . . once to get the wrong impression, once again to strengthen it? *[Laughing, runs to his SUV to prevent reprisals. Both SUVs turn around and head down the dirt road, A's SUV following B's. A frenzy of tires, a lot of dust, but the road is in such a bad state they end up reducing speed and enduring the bumps and grinds. B glances upwards and is startled to see five blanket-wrapped Hollywood-style Indians on horseback watching them from a mountain top.]*

2002 Chevrolet Blazer

* * *

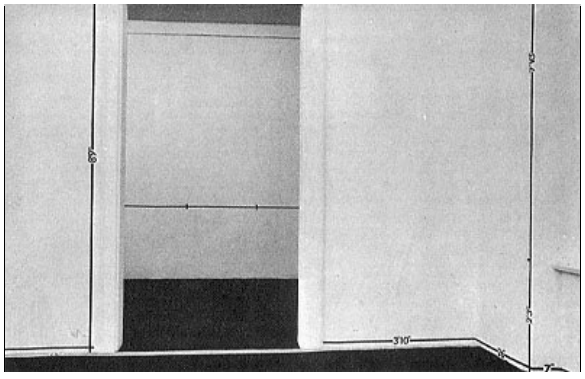
Scene II: The Gut Bucket, a café in an aluminum Quonset hut topped by an aging swamp cooler. Previously used to store construction materials after the 1986 lake rise and subsequent flooding, some five miles from Smithson's Earthwork. Sawdust strewn on the floor, decorative spittoons. No one is in the place, except the help and a tanned construction worker in overalls sporting dim, bloodshot eyes, a two-day stubble, reddish blond, darker than the hair on his head; fingernails yellowish and thick. He sits before a greasy steak smothered with onions and mushrooms, a cup of hot java in hand. His shoulders are hunched in a way that indicates a special depth of solitude, like a figure in a Hopper painting. Looks dumbly out the window at the Promontory Mountains in the distance. Behind the counter a radio spouts old-time rock 'n roll. On television, muted, a crowd of vestmented white people—what must be the Mormon Tabernacle Choir—dumbly work their mouths as if eating invisible food. Our two interlocutors gingerly sit down. Remove their shades in unison. They are given menus by a tall thyroid blond in sneakers and a getup that recalls the dress always worn by Timmy's mother in the original TV series "Lassie." There's a low flame in her eyes. Asks what they want, chewing gum mechanically, waiting.

A: *[Scans menu. Forgot he was in Utah, disappointed no alcohol served.]* Just your ice coffee, please. *[In walks a state trooper, his reflective sunglasses becoming mini-mirror-displacements within the long room. He gives our duo a studied glance.]*



From *Monuments of the Passaic (The Fountain Monument)* (1967) Robert Smithson

B: Panopticism. *[Nudges his head in the direction of the cop.]* Our beards must make us look a bit suspicious. *[Waitress taps her foot impatiently.]* Oh, I'll take the Zou Zou Bop ice tea with lemon and a dollop of sugar. And a bagel. Toasted. *[The waitress seems to draw a blank on the words 'bagel' and 'dollop' but she gets the drift. Easy cadence as she walks away from their table with their order, substituting toast for bagel. The cop sits at the counter, periodically looks over his shoulder at the bearded strangers. B whispers after the waitress leaves with their order.]* I've been here before. Don't draw her into a chitchat. With strangers talk comes out of her like the product of some damn irreversible technology. Ya grok? *[His eyes schemed like dice.]*



Measurement Series: Goup B (1967) Mel Bochner

A: I grok. *Strangers in a strange land. [Getting the reference to Heinlein's famous sci-fi book.]* That's what we are. No alcohol served here! God, was I wanting my favorite drink-dessert: the Spontaneous Abortion—gin, vodka, rye, scotch, brandy and a large measure of cherry vanilla ice cream. Used to serve it at faculty parties. Always a hit.

B: Spontaneous and even stranger here in eighty-six when the lake rose some twelve feet above where it was when Smithson's piece was in place. Utterly submerged it. Smithson aficionados had to rent scuba gear if they wanted to see the thing. Can you just see it? People swimming spirals under the water. Smithson would've enjoyed the thought. After all, he partially buried a woodshed on Kent State's grounds.

A: Smithson would see such submergence as 'entropy made visible,' and his buried shed as 'de-architectured'. In both cases boundaries are lost, like in Barthes's notion of the open text. So, it sounds like you were profoundly influenced by Smithson's —er—photo works.

[Brushes some toast crumbs off the table, annoying a man who was mopping the floor near their table, eliciting from him a low growl like that of a jazz bassist.]

B: I see Smithson's work involved in a type of knowledge theory inherent in Minimalism and Post-Minimalism. A remark made in 1967 by Mel Bochner in "Serial Art, Systems, and Solipsism" captures it well: 'Things being what ever [sic] they happen to be, all we can know about them is derived from directly from how they appear.' Smithson is interested in such 'appearing,' whether taken from acquaintance—direct sense perception—or from description—films, photos, text. *[Still chewing gum, their waitress arrives with their orders. A and B nod a 'thank you' without breaking off their conversation.]* In fact, Smithson's 'unresolved dialectics'—I cop the term from a catalogue essay by Robert Hobbs I once read—*blurs* the distinctions between fact/fiction, site/nonsite, object/concept, presence/absence.

A: Yes. The result is what Sobieszek sees in Smithson's work as 'a collision of mediums.' In fact, *somebody* Prinz—I forget the first name—labeled Smithson's artworks a 'picto-ideo-photographic-filmic-text.'

B: Quite a mouthful. *[Takes a big bite of his rye toast, the top of which looks like scorched earth.]* Smithson, of course, never claimed to be a photographer. If I recall correctly, Sobieszek calls him a 'mannerist artist' thriving on a plethora of styles, mediums. In that aspect, Smithson certainly prefigures the multimedia approach of so many artists who employ photography in their work.

A: But Smithson turns to photography as a convenient *means* to record the various terrains he visits and plods around in. *[Sips his drink. Recalls all those photos and films of Smithson climbing fences, walking around, commenting on what he sees.]*

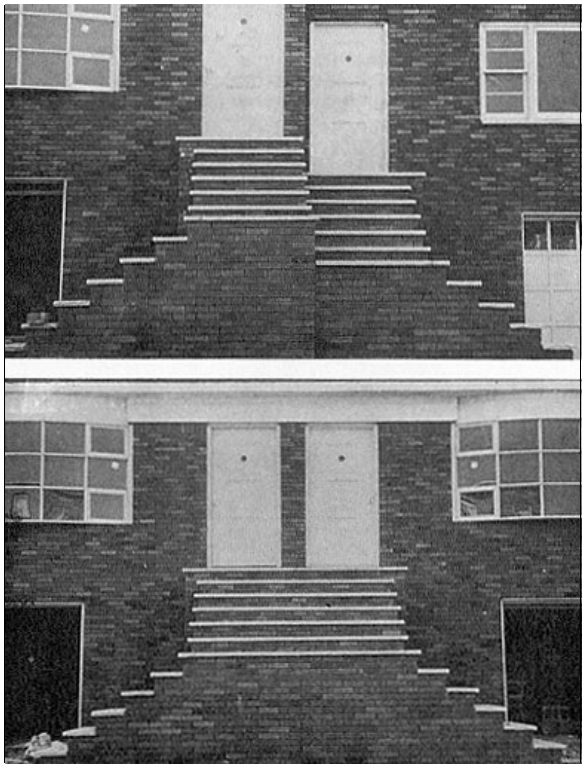
B: Oh, that he was merely *using* photography, heh? But recall how he often assembled the images into montaged arrays akin to Dutch artist Jan Dibbets's panoramas. Later, Los Angeles photographer Robbert Flick's landscape grid arrays seem indebted to Smithson's.

A: Yet Smithson undermined the grid's predictability and regularity by the complete randomness of the imagery within it. Very unlike Flick's grids.

Partially Buried Woodshed (1970) Robert Smithson

B: Nevertheless, in those arrays, Smithson appears to be *working* in the photographic medium. Not simply using it.

A: But Smithson was totally uninterested in the scenic beauty of those places—he would've liked this café—and rejected any craft fetishism in his printing. He uses negative stats—often enhanced with collaged, montaged, or hand-drawn elements—that recall blueprints, industrial diagrams. Objective stuff. Denial of an expressive use of photography.



Homes for America (1966) Dan Graham

B: But not denial of a strategy of textual critique. The collaged/montaged image becomes a signifier remotivated within a new frame of reference. The original referent of the photo and the added collage element undermine the imagery's referentiality.

SV99A/83 (1983) Robbert Flick

A: Akin to Sergei Eisenstein's notion of 'intellectual montage,' huh? Eisenstein saw the intellectual montage as the 'conflict-juxtaposition of accompanying intellectual effects.' Applies too much of Smithson's photo works. *[Returns to a previous point. Raises his voice.]* Concerning Smithson's relationship to photography . . . For godsakes, he initially used a Kodak Instamatic 400 camera! Also, a small correction. Seriality of those grids at times became loosely sequential, as seen in *Site or Nonsite "Line of Wreckage," Bayonne, New Jersey, The Monuments of Passaic* and *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan.* Eventually, Smithson found the grid too constraining for his—borrowing a term from Anton Ehrenzweig—'dedifferentiated' landscapes.

B: Agreed. But I think he saw a different kind of beauty, an *entropic* beauty, in the 'backwater' landscapes he was imaging. Smithson wrote, 'We live in a framework and are surrounded by frames of reference, yet nature dismantles them and returns them to a state

where they no longer have integrity.' And, more succinctly, 'The future is but the obsolete in reverse.' I mean, just look around us here. *[Turns his body around from the waist up.]*

A: Sure. He begins to move toward a photographic form that stressed greater unpredictability and randomness. *[Puts his weight first on one foot, then the other, tired or restless or both.]*

B: I, about the same time, begin to photograph trash bins in the West Valley stuffed full on pick up day and dirt fields—once sweet-smelling orange groves—now strewn with illegal dumping. Ran text beneath the photos that read like Clement Greenberg formalist analyses of modern painting and sculpture. The trash L.A. architecture ironically celebrated by Ruscha in *Real Estate Opportunities* and *Every Building along Sunset Boulevard,* as well as Dan Graham's *Homes for America* series, became the new urban sublime. I remember marveling at the entropic beauty in *Red Desert,* Antonioni's visually seductive film. 'Decadent loveliness' is how one critic described those scenes in that mid-sixties movie.

A: Banality. Trash, slag, waste-management, hazardous material dumps, as you know, it all becomes grist for Don DeLillo in several of his novels.

B: Antonioni, the Bechers, and Smithson were among the first to turn a curious eye to all that stuff.

A: The Bechers' *Anonymous Sculptures and a Typology of Technical Constructions,* published in 1970, was a visual atlas comprised of visually neutral images of blast furnaces, winding and cooling towers, lime kilns, and so forth. In a recent interview, they claim that the serial element of their work indebted to the nineteenth-century photographic atlas, such as Muybridge's *Animal Locomotion*.

B: Yes, a curious eye anchored in a theoretical milieu with a preoccupation for: a) Nietzschean perspectivalism touting the contingency of Becoming over the stasis of Being; b) using language devoid of metaphysical presuppositions; c) describing the role and function of words in relation to objects; d) maintaining a hostility toward Cartesian dualism, hence the interest in Phenomenology; and e) shared, social linguistic activity. In a sixty-seven press release titled "Language to be LOOKED at and/or THINGS to be READ," Smithson wrote: *[He leans over his toast toward his interlocutor with both elbows flung out and up like a delta-winged jet.]* 'Literal usage becomes incantory when all metaphors are suppressed.' What I used to call in my own work, 'the metaphoric level of denotatives.'

A: Sounds like Wittgenstein. *[A slight pause in their conversation. The noise of a chair scudding on the floor; the beefy construction worker is getting up to leave; he talks with the waitress in a voice thick, words overlap themselves, sticking to his tongue. The word 'jetty' or 'Jetta' is overheard. Finally, he finally swaggers out the door like a cowboy. Conversation is renewed.]*

B: Uh. Yes. Ol' Ludwig's writings—early and late—were influential on many conceptually-oriented artists. It was sort of—er—in the air we breathed then.

A: Kosuth and Bochner often cite the early Wittgenstein. But what about Smithson's influence on photography?

B: What about photography's influence on Smithson?

The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California, No. 39 (1974) Lewis Baltz

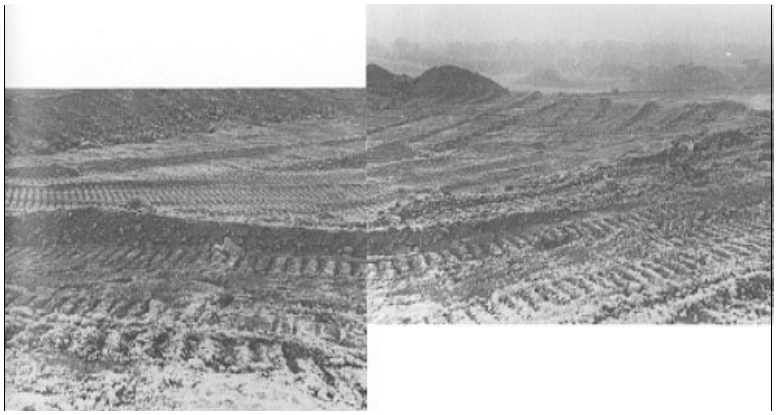
A: I think it minimal.

B: *[Retracts his original question.]* Or—better—how *photorati* (my all-inclusive term for photo critics, historians, and practitioners) retrospectively contain his work within the canon of traditional photography! *[His eyes glimmer. Pauses to take a deep sip of his Zou Zou Bop tea.]* Your buddy Jonathan Green in his *American Photography: A Critical History* constructs Smithson's *A Non Site* from sixty-eight—it exists as only an aerial photograph of Franklin, New Jersey—as *simpàtico* to John Szarkowski's notion of the Street Photographer's act as one of selection, choosing. He writes—if I recall accurately—'the act of choosing and photographing becomes the work itself.' Very deft maneuver! By the eighties, photorati who had originally disparaged conceptual-oriented photo works, were more than eager to bring such work into the fold—to tame it. *[Makes a wigwag motion with his hand over his tea cup.]*

A: *[Ignores the argument, knowing it would take them off on a tangent as sharp as a line drawn along the straight-line portion of a sensitometric characteristic curve plot of high-contrast film. So he repeats his question, all the while cleaning his nails with a toothpick he'd lifted from the little bowl next to the cash register when he first walked into the place.]* But what about the influence of Smithson on photography?

B: Back to Jonathan Green's *Critical History*. He talks about the influence of Conceptual Art on the group of photographers William Jenkins collected under the nineteen seventy-five exhibit titled "New Topographics," but fails to mention Smithson directly; instead he credits Ed Ruscha's photo books as precursors. Why not specifically draw a line from Smithson to the "New Topographics" sensibility? *[Makes a sweeping motion with his right arm, a connecting gesture binding the two types of photographic practice.]* After all, Jenkins included the Bechers' grids of industrial sites and Lewis Baltz's banal industrial parks in his curatorial decision. But he forgoes including Smithson in this show, featuring instead John Schott and Henry Wessel Jr., both of whose works are less topographical and conceptual than any of other photographers in the show. Smithson would've been a natural choice for any curator outside the mind-set of the photorati of that day. Why? Because

Smithson wasn't viewed as a *photographer,* but as an *artist* merely using the medium. *Capisce*?



Nonsite (Slag), Oberhausen, Germany (detail, 1968) Robert Smithson

A: *Capisce*.

B: More recently, the Art Institute of Chicago—whose curators hold to Szarkowskian formalism—hung a show that included work by the Bechers. But rather than feature that work in the usual grid format, they chose to hang single prints.

A: Space considerations, probably. They have hung the Bechers' work in grid array in other shows, I think.

Fault Zone (1979) Joe Deal

B: Still, a misrepresentation of their work which suggests we view them as makers of fine photographic prints; the tactic downplays the systemic, conceptual element in their work. *[The waitress moves in and out of the swinging doors that lead to the kitchen, talking angrily as she emerges, beginning to grouse again even before she reenters. For a while they listen to her argument with the unseen chef.]*

A: Very un-Mormon-like.

B: She's probably not a Mormon.

A: Back to what you just were saying . . . are you suggesting Smithson was influential on those "New Topographics" photographers?

B: Jenkins says their work is 'objective' and focuses upon the 'man-altered landscape.' Could there be a better description of Smithson's concerns at the time? *[Bites skin from his thumb.]* His work was regularly featured in all the art journals of the time. I personally view much of the work in that show as an attempt by *photographers* to build upon the plethora of Minimalist/Conceptualist work produced at that time. But all the while trying to remain within the connoisseurial constraints of fine photographic craft.

A: So, Lewis Baltz's work as a . . .

B: *[Taking the words out of his interlocutor's mouth.]* . . . As a *photographer* aping Minimalism/Conceptualism in a way that would be acceptable within the traditional photo historian's canon of formal innovation. In his "Mirrors and Windows" exhibition from the late-seventies, Szarkowski includes Baltz's work in the "Mirrors" section, the category that he describes as a more subjective approach to subject matter.

A: But another critic, Gus Baisdell, views Baltz's work as a paradoxical synthesis of fact-and-fiction—what Szarkowski earlier terms 'The New Document.' It's an approach which Szarkowski traces back to modernist photographer Robert Frank's ironic, personal documentary style exemplified in *The Americans*. Oddly, Szarkowski's "Mirrors and Windows" show retreats to a reductive separation of what he saw earlier as mutually implicated.

Recent Terrains #1 (1991) Laurie Brown

B: Then there's Joe Deal's work, particularly his "Fault Zone" series from the early eighties. Every time I see work from that series, I recall Smithson's *Nonsite (Slag), Oberhausen, Germany* from sixty-eight. I can't recall any critic drawing a comparison at the time. Now Jonathan Green's critical history labels work—exemplified by artist Sol Lewitt and photographer Reed Estabrook—as 'Scientific Realism.' Such work, he claims, was primarily about 'objective measurement, scientific procedure and technological method.' Curiously, no mention of Smithson in that chapter!

A: Okay, so Smithson was often written out of the range of influences on photographers. Sobieszek's show at I.C.P in New York and the accompanying catalogue comes along as a corrective to that. Therein, he does note similarities between Smithson's *400 Seattle Horizons* from sixty-nine and Robbert Flick's gridded images of sea and landscape horizons from the early eighties.

B: Yes. But recall that Sobieszek is at pains to remind us that 'The camera was simply another tool for him [Smithson], but one that integrated with every other facet of his art ...'

A: But to Sobieszek's credit he reproduces imagery akin to Smithson that photorati —to use your term—include in the canon of photography; for instance, Lewis Baltz's and his *San*

Quentin Point Number Eight from eighty-six and Laurie Brown's *Recent Terrains Number One* from ninety-one.

B: He could just as easily selected an earlier work by Baltz: *Park City, Utah:Between Sidewinder Drive and State Highway 248, Looking North* from nineteen eighty, where the photographer records a dumping of fence wire and other trash.

Park City, Utah: Between West Sidewinder Drive and State Highway 248, Looking North (1980) Lewis Baltz

A: Agreed. On a two-page spread in Sobieszek's essay we see an aerial photo by Smithson of his *Spiral Jetty* compared to other aerial images, such as Emment Gowin's *Copper Ore Tailing, Globe, Arizona* from the late-eighties and David T. Hanson's *Excavation Deforestation, and Waste Ponds: June eighty-four*.

Excavation, Deforestation, and Waste Ponds, June 1984 (June 1984) David T. Hanson

B: Hanson's work is a particularly significant extension of Smithson's work, I think. Both engaged a sort of critique of the damaged landscape, but Hanson's social commentary is more focused. Hanson's photo book, *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape,* features a large body of his formally astute, mainly aerial, color photographs of mined and maimed earth, hazardous waste sites, military installations, and power plants that bespeak of the pervasive presence of the machine in the garden.

A: Hanson's images of industrial rape of our lands depicts the machine as having wholly ruined the garden. By the way —I've always wanted to ask—why is ecology so boring to read about?

Trojan Nuclear Power Plant, Columbia River, Oregon (1982) John Pfahl

B: For the same reason destruction is such fun!

A: Ahhhhhhh! Killer idea. Heavier than cotton candy.

B: Wise ass. *[He sniffles, managing to invest that simple act with an element of dis-approval.]* Hanson knowingly anchors his images within maps and textual support that goes far to overcome the dilemma of having to produce *either* beauty *or* a social critique, and does so without the ethical ambiguity of John Pfahl's color prints of powerplants.

A: The often touted irony and ambiguity in John Pfahl's *Powerplaces*?

B: Yes. Those color images of conventional and nuclear powerplants could easily grace a corporate calendar for that company. In contrast, Hanson's book sustains more of an activist sensibility. Moreover, filled with text, maps, and photographic mappings of topology, it breaks down firm differences between the map and the territory, between sign and referent, between documentary and art.

A: A textual strategy that photo critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau called 'New Documentary.'

B: Yeah. And Wendell Berry's Preface to Hanson's book theorizes how that photographer's imagery should be read.

A: How so?

B: Berry at first mentions the traditional photographic dilemma of *art* versus *document*, which privileges the former. He admits some may still view Hanson's images as merely 'abstract art' or 'beautiful shapes.' But he attributes this to the fact that the lands were so ill-used by the abstract forces of technology that 'nobody foresaw, because nobody cared, what they would look like.'

A: Oh, so they became visually interesting, defamiliarized scenes, precisely due to their vandalized status by uncaring corporate interests?

B: Yes. Berry then goes on to suggest two opposing correctives, each grappling with one horn of the *art/document* and *beauty/social critique* dilemma. One, *the corrective of metaphor*: that we see these beautiful images as 'representations of bad art—if by art we mean the ways and products of human work' which are 'symbolic of what we cannot see,' the horrible seeping pollution. And two, *the corrective of metonymy*: that we attend to the images' referents, to 'the things that are readily identifiable (trees, buildings, roads, vehicles, etc.') so as to go beyond the abstraction and see 'that their common subject is a monstrous ugliness.' The static binary, *either* beauty *or* social critique, is refashioned by Berry as a dialectical flux between present and absent appearances in Hanson's imagery, that is, between *what easily appears* (formally seductive abstraction, a sign rooted in land abuse) and *what doesn't appear* (ugliness, only envisioned by mental effort when one attends to the

signs' referents). Ergo, Hanson's superb book reflects *both* a commitment to artful seeing *and* hardhitting social comment.

Untitled (Spaceman Shooting , c. 1961-63) Robert Smithson

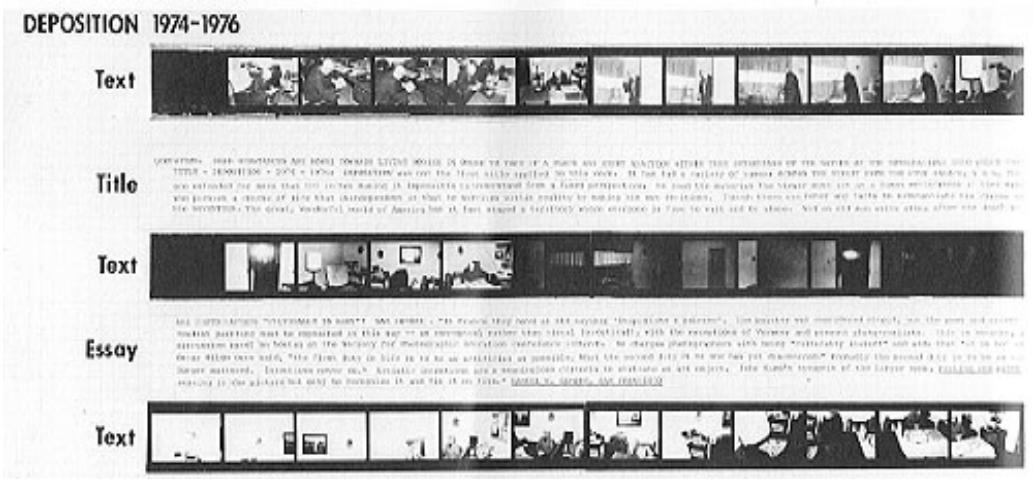
A: Very interesting. Astute even. *[His esteem for his interlocutor grows.]* You may not be familiar with it, but in nineteen seventy-seven, Nathan Lyons curated a crucial exhibition, *The Extended Frame,* wherein he described a new modality of landscape photography in which series and sequence could offer, as he put it, 'an extended experiential display.' He even mentions photography increasingly becoming blended with other visual media and text. So, only a year after Smithson's death, that noted photographer/curator adumbrates the influence of conceptual work such as Smithson's on a new approach to landscape photography.

B: I'd overlooked that. *[Slightly embarrassed. Changes the topic]* In Sobieszek's essay, except for the reference to Robert Heinecken's magazine page over-printing, the connections between Smithson's earlier negative photo-stats and photo collages on Synthetic or Manipulated photography of mid-sixties to late-seventies remain unexplored.

A: I'm not sure how much exposure Smithson's work from the early sixties got at the time. Most photographers would probably have been oblivious to it. We photo historians usually see more connection between Pictorialist work from the late nineteen century—the use of all those so called 'ennobling processes' of cyanotype, bromoil, photogravure, and so forth —and the contemporary renewed interest in alternative processes and hand-manipulation. More germane here would be to trace Smithson's influence on the work of Lew Thomas.

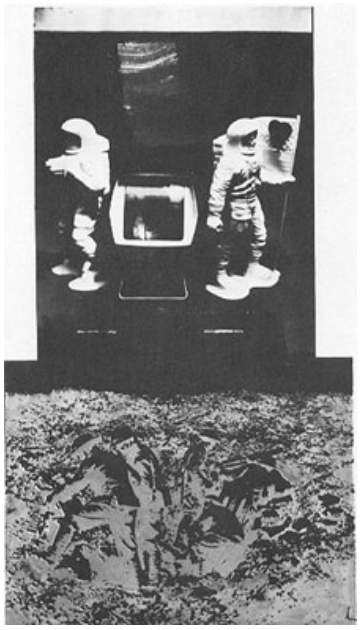
B: Ah, I see your point. Particularly apropos here is Thomas's series of works titled *Format/Field: Regular.* If my memory serves me well, his reproductions of these works —photo-grids of thirty-six images of various topologies: sand, sky, and grass—in his book *Structural(ism) and Photography* is introduced by a quotation from Robert Morris which begins, 'Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience.'

A: Then there's a dense, arcane piece of Thomas's titled *Deposition: Nineteen seventy-four to nineteen seventy-six* reproduced in the same book. A sort of paper-movie demanding viewers sustain their attention. I first saw it as a museum wall installation. Quite large. Covered the wall.



Deposition 1974-1976 (detail, 1982) Lew Thomas

B: Yes, wherein long contact sheet strips alternate with strips of text, originally running across a gallery wall papered with newspaper ads.


Astronaut and World War I Soldiers (1970) Robert Fichter

A: There, Thomas comes the closest, I think, to Smithson's photo documentation for *Nonsite "Line of Wreckage," Bayonne, New Jersey* from sixty-eight. *[Stretches his back. The diner's seats are ergonomically designed to discourage lingerers.]*

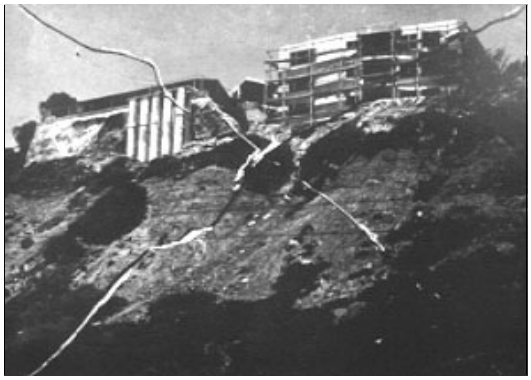
B: I can't help feel a connection in general sensibility between Smithson's combination of photomechanical illustrations and his use of pigment, crayon, and so forth and the synthetic photography from the early sixties. For instance, Florida photo-manipulator Robert Fichter's similar hybridization of media. Even the sci-fi con-tent can be found as in *Astronauts and World War I Soldiers* and *Negative Figure and Moonscape* both from the early seventies. Moreover, in a nineteen eighty-one series on the destruction of trees in the environs of Tallahassee, Fichter records an entropic landscape that has much in common with the various industrial wastelands Smithson was so drawn to.

A: I once had an interesting E-mail exchange with Fichter. He mentioned the pervasive influence on him, Heinecken, and others by the work of L.A. artist Wallace Berman; especially, a multiple-image print of a hand holding a transistor radio that appeared on the cover of *Artforum*. He said not many people in photographic circles were cognizant of Smithson's photo works.

Untitled (30 image verifax collage on wood panel, n.d.) Wallace Berman

B: But, you know, I was chatting with New Mexico-based photographer Thomas Barrow once and he said that many young photographers associated with The George Eastman House in Rochester, New York back then—that would include Fichter—*did* talk a lot about an *Artforum* article on Smithson's *Monuments of Passaic.* Smithson was getting a lot of play in the major art publications at that time. Maybe what he meant was that photographers were blind to Smithson's work *as* photographic practice.

A: Hmmm. Very possible. *[Gradually becoming convinced.]*



Cancellations/San Clemente Bluff (1975) Thomas Barrow

Scrim-Work #10 (1978) Michael Levine

B: I also think of a body of work from the late seventies which Green terms in his text 'the altered landscape.' *[Downs the last of his scorched toast.]*

A: Not John Pfahl, certainly! *[Finishes off his ice coffee.]*

B: I'm thinking more of the former students of Pfahl. Michael Levine comes to mind. His "Scrimwork" series, segments of entropic L.A. landscape—Type C prints—enhanced with a colorful gridded scrim placed behind the subject. A grid

Asphalt Rundown, Rome, Italy (1969) *Robert Smithson*

within the landscape. Nice twist on Smithson's arrays, I think. Then there was Grey Crawford's images in his artist book wherein large sheets of glass are arrayed supporting each other in a desert landscape, the glass alternately reflecting or becoming transparent depending upon the angle of incidence. Smithson's *Mirror Displacements* seem influential here; those mirrors introduced into the landscape. You might also include Thomas Barrow's "Cancellation Series" from the mid-seventies too. His *Cancellations/San Clemente Bluff* brings to mind one of Smithson's photographs of one of his *Pours* from sixty-nine where we see a substance (concrete or asphalt, I forget which) being poured down a slope. *[Watches the waitress pour sugar into a glass dispenser at the table next to theirs.]*

Crossroads Ballfield, Glenfield, North Dakota (1981) Jim Dow

A: Probably his *Asphalt Rundown, Rome, Italy*.

B: Could be. Anyway, that photo of Barrow's has similarly banal imagery taken from a low viewpoint. *[Angles his hand, palm down to indicate the worm's-eye perspective of the image he's discussing.]* In their *Landscape as Photograph,* Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock mention Barrow's work as a 'typical example' of the new modality of conceptual landscape within the context of a discussion of Lyons's aforementioned show. In relationship to landscape photography, they also mention the demise—under the influence of semiotics and structural analysis—of concepts such as 'ideal and universal beauty,' as well as noting the traditional photographic community's aversion to mixing image and text or substituting text for image.

A: Like the Conceptualists did.

B: Yes. Traditional photographers were, the authors say, 'loath to substitute words for pictures, to dematerialize not only nature, but the image of nature.'

A: Okay. But I think you're off base concerning Barrow. That *Cancellation Series* was more a response to Ansel Adams's scoring his negatives used in a portfolio—you know—to up the price of the edition. It's also an ironic response to the banality of the New Topographics sensibility—canceling, nixing, their banal compositions. Moreover, that specific image you mentioned . . .

B: The San Clemente Bluff image?

A: Yes. That scene crossed out in the image is only two miles south of where Dick Nixon's home was.

Tucson Gardens (1980) William Larson

B: Tricky Dick, the guy who tried the ultimate bluff, huh?

A: If you want to connect Barrow to Smithson, even more apropos is Barrow's *Cancellation (brown) SLAB, Pasadena* from seventy-four. The landscape Barrow cancels is as wasted as any Smithson records. You'll find it on the cover of *The Extended Document*, a catalogue for a nineteen seventy-five exhibition at the George Eastman House. Therein, curator William Jenkins views Barrow's physical scratches on his negatives as foregrounding the photograph's materiality, that we are looking at photographs and not at transparent windows onto reality. By the way, that show included a good dose of conceptual photography, undermining your belief that your so-called photorati were ignoring conceptual . . .

B: Ah. Okay. Agreed. I do recall that Lyons himself did work that could be connected to Smithson. There is his "Strata Series," part of an intended sequence of more than three hundred images wherein Lyons records the changing relationship of the foreground shadow to the enclosed vein of rock, alluding to past (the vein) and the present (changing light).

A: Oh yeah. Then you've got to include his funny *Dinosaur Sat Down*, another photo sequence contrasting distant past and its evidence in the present.

B: A sensibility akin to Smithson's space-age meets stone-age?

A: Uh-huh. *[Long pause; neither talk.]* You know of Jim Dow's "Stadium Panoramas?"

B: No.

A: Dow, a real sports fan, began in the early eighties to photographically map a variety of baseball stadia.

B: Stadia? Kind of pretentious!

A: Stadiums, then. Records the stadiums with an eight-by-ten inch view camera as multi-image panoramas using anywhere from two to five shots to do so. His *Crossroads Ballfield, Glenfield, North Dakota* depicts a minimally interesting outdoor sandlot in two frames with an eye to the banal that recalls Joe Deal's and Baltz's work in "New Topographics."

B: Okay. Then we might just as well include John Gossage's mishmash of flora in his oddly viewed gardens and the funky foliage recorded William Larson's humorous "Tucson Gardens" series.

A: Well . . . one might have to mention the precedent of William Eggleston's work along similar lines. Nonhierarchical compositions, banal subject matter, a detached manner of recording, and . . .

B: *[Interrupts*.] The result is a shift in compositional principles from molar aggregates (the visual dance between dominant and subordinate forms) to a molecular level of compositional force fields that articulate a micro-level of expressivity of flows. This is a shift in aesthetics in which those 'dedifferentiated landscapes' preferred by Smithson can be seen as *paysages trouvez,* found landscapes, that manifest these new aesthetic qualities. Visually sophisticated photographers later began to deftly exploit the visual lessons learned by seeing such landscapes as recorded by Smithson, et al.

A: *[Not wanting to continue this line of thought.]* Hey, let's blow this popsicle stand. *[Crumples his paper napkin and tosses it in the tea cup. Motions for their waitress, asks for the check.]* Chow's on me.

B: Thanks.

A: But where do we go next?

B: Back to my motel nearby. Got a bottle of single malt Scotch . . . *[Said temptingly.]*

A: *[Putting back on his sunglasses with an air of military authority.]* Affirmative. Make fly over broad waters to land of Mamu the bear. *[Wavy motions with his hand.]*

B: Huh? *[The waitress comes with the check; it's paid; they walk out into the dimming late afternoon light. Driving back to their Inn, it was dark, no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark road moving through the landscape of the flats, trimmed by hills in the distance; the experience was something mapped out but not socially recognized.]*

* * *

Scene III: The Bridger Inn. A large sign with a mountain man logo; underneath runs their slogan: 'There is a motel in the heart of every man.' Despite its large size, this motel seems temporary—no one lives here for more than two days in a row, many stay only an hour. Nowhere is there a sign of a human on foot. Broken glass shines like white mica in the vacant lot across the street. The place seems to be built solely of bathroom tile. B finds the bed sheets chilly and faintly damp. There are too many hangers in the closet. A and B's dusty SUVs drive into the large freshly paved parking lot. Heat rises in distorting waves from the asphalt. Tired, A and B walk across the parking lot with a sort of lazy prowl. Up the external metal stairway to the second floor, down the walkway to room 206, beige door. B inserts the key, opens the door. A faint, sour odor, like stale cigarette smoke expertly mixed with dirty laundry, confronts them. A small bedroom looks out on that vacant lot; it could easily be a Zen garden of rubbish dear to Smithson's eye. One wall near the bathroom has huge stains indicating past leaks in the plumbing.

A: That sign out front. That slogan.

B: Funny, huh?

A: Their motel slogan—copped from DeLillo's novel *Americana.*

B: Seems that we do have here a real authentic slice of Americana. *[Tosses his arms skyward, palms up.]* Appropriate appropriation. *[Smiles at his own cleverness.]*

A: *[Not impressed.]* Where's the booze?

B: *[Rummages through his suitcase.]* Here y'ar laddie. *[Hands over a bottle of Lagavulin, thumbnail nicking the label, hands him a plastic cup.]* Hearty stuff. *[Sits on the bed, facing the window.]*

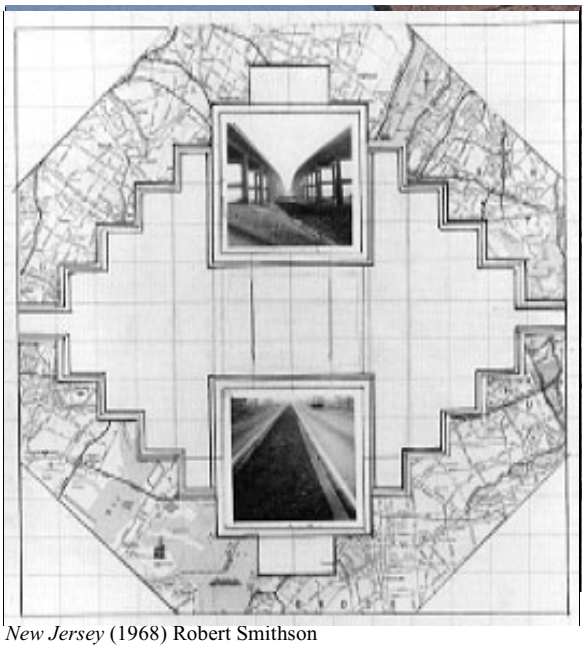
A: *[Takes a seat in a chair. Pours a wee bit in the cup, sips.]* Aye, from the south coast of the island of Islay. Ah, peaty, distinctive, robust. Aged, what, twelve years?

B: Nay. Sixteen years, laddie!

A: Ah. Nothing quite like it. *[Sipping, he glances about; notices several items: a worn* Gideon Bible (something rarer here in Utah than a pair of blue suede shoes in Tierra del Fuego)*, a spanking new* Book of Mormon (to be expected), *a hardcover book titled* Extra-terrestrial Sex Positions (probably left by the last resident of the room), *and a large framed black-and-white poster on the wall of Ansel Adams's famous* Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941.*]*

B: You know your Scotch.

A: Too tasteful for a motel, the poster that is. *[Points at the Adams image, takes another long, slow sip of Scotch.]*


New Jersey (1968) Robert Smithson

B: Oh, uh-huh. *[Looks over his shoulder at the reproduction; notices a Sierra Club logo in the lower left corner.]* Owners are probably environmentally-conscious. *[Sees A's pant leg has crept up, revealing a boot knife with an ivory handle.]* An Arkansas toothpick? *[Points to the knife.]*

A: Oh that.

B: That. *[A little nervous.]*

A: I slash mattresses with it when I'm depressed. *[Takes it out, cleans under his fingernails.]* Actually, I got it in an Army surplus store; same place I got these sunglasses. The knife is standard issue for the Algerian *moussebelines,* death commandos. Roaming the Algerian landscape with eyes of cold steel, bandoliers across their chests. *[Abruptly diverts back to their earlier topic.]* Speaking of landscapes . . . You know, Smithson, in sixty-eight, did what he called 'photo markers,' a reversal of the nonsites. Therein, thirty-by-thirty inch black-and-white photos made from negatives shot at various locales were later returned into the original landscape and rephotographed in color. A time thing: an image taken in the past reenter into the present continuum, only to be put into the past tense by snap of the shutter. Theoretically, the process could be continued *ad infinitum.*

B: Oh yeah, a cursory glance might suggest mirrors placed in the landscape.

A: But very odd mirrors, indeed, to reflect in monochrome!

B: Weren't they part of a piece called *Six Stops on a Section*?

A: Yes. Of course, what we have here is a photograph-within-a-photograph, *not* a mirror displacement.

B: Ye ol' *mise-en-abyme* of postmodern theory! Like this . . . *[Runs to the bathroom, puts his head in between the two mirrors on either side of the main mirror, turns and sees an infinite number of reflections of himself.]*

A:*[Halfheartedly follows him into the bathroom, watches B's performance.]* Yep, the scene of the abyss all right. *[Chuckles softly.]* The play of the signifier. Now there's grist for your research!

B: *[Goes back to the bed, A sits sideways in his chair, left arm extended, resting on a table, his right arm hanging over the back of the chair.]* What immediately comes to mind are many images by Chicago photographer Ken Josephson. His *Acropolis* from the early seventies being a case in point. By the way, he roomed with me for a while during his stint as a visiting prof as UCLA in the early eighties. A photographer-within-a-photographer's apartment.

A: *[Wants to snidely snap 'Whoop-de-doo!' But refrains.]* I think I know the image; the one with the Acropolis in the background, the sailors in the middle distance, and a large camera on a tripod with small images of the famed ruin pinned to its side?

B: Ah, the very one. In other instances—like *Chicago* from seventy-six—Josephson overlays the photo into the original scene or surface so that image and reality match up; only the curl of the print reveals the trick. Jerry McMillan, an L.A. artist who taught me at Cal State University, Northridge in the early seventies, constructed similar *trompe l'oeil* scenarios. Remember Josephson's series in which an archaeological meter stick used to show scale at digs was introduced as an element in his scenes? *Wisconsin* from nineteen eighty, for instance.

A: Yes. Introduced as a formal element and a conceptual device to hint at topographic measurement, objectivity. But my fav is the photograph of the Grand Tetons, Josephson holding a foot ruler up as if to measure them; the ruler's shadow falling on a schematic of the mountain in view. A delightful play upon demotic photography: the tourist image and the photo document.

Wisconsin (1980) Kenneth Josephson

B: A new pseudo-analytical way of looking at the landscape. Smithson viewed the landscape photograph as a kind of map. So in both Smithson and Josephson, out the door with all that symbolism and idealism of traditional landscape with its personifications: 'angry skies,' 'calm rivers,' etcetera. That latter image of Josephson's, *Wyoming*, was done in seventy-one; right in the midst of Smithson's and other conceptualists' more topographic approach to landscape. The *representation* of the landscape—its mapping—not the land-

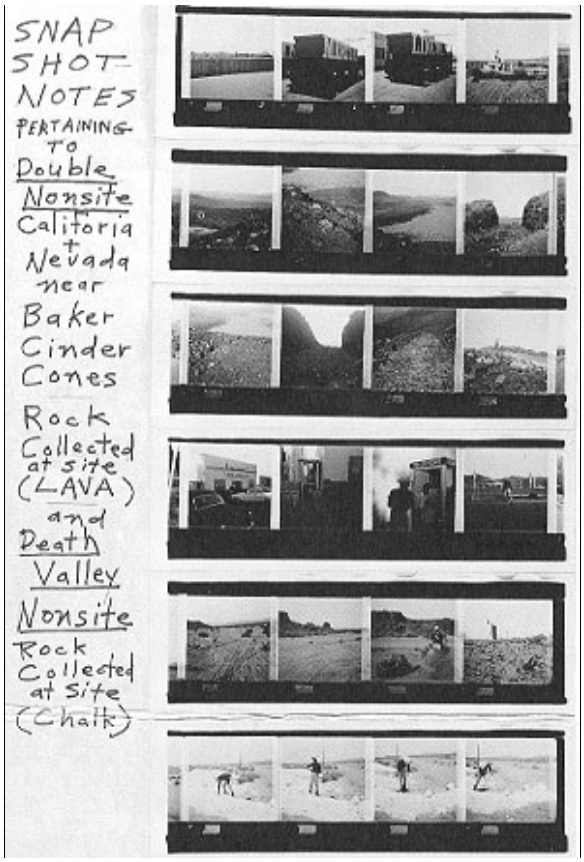
scape as referring to a set of subjective issues becomes the issue. Agreed? *[Feeling a sneeze coming on, B gets up, whips a towel out of the bathroom, getting it to his nose just it time.]* Excuse me.

A: *[Ignoring the sneeze.]* Agreed. But to what extent was this more objective attitude 'just in the air,' and *not* the direct influence of Smithson and other conceptualists' work? I think most influences on traditional photography prior to seventy-seven stemmed from the rebellious younger photographers who were attempting to push the boundaries of the medium beyond Szarkowskian strictures. Many photographers weren't very aware of Smithson's photo works . . .

B: As significant photography.

A: Ya, as significant photography. Until, that is, Sobieszek's exhibition catalogue framed that imagery as worthy of connoisseurial notice by the photographic community.

B: I personally don't think they were as unaware of Smithson you say. I think photorati then sensed that for Smithson *language* came to play a central role in his work. As photographic modernists, any taint of language—photography as *text* rather than as a *work*—threatened photography's purity and, as such, was anathema.

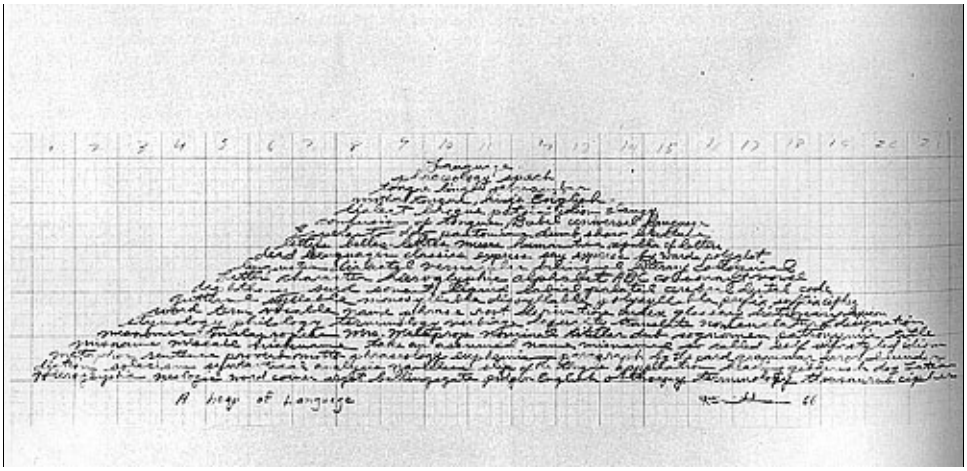


Snap Shot Notes—Pertaining to "Double Nonsite" (1968) Robert Smithson

A: Still, a tough call.

B: You know, from what I've seen in my New Forms and Concepts classes, the students these days don't draw the kinds of distinctions once made between *using* and *working* in the medium. The photograph understood as text erases such distinctions. They accept the more conceptual employment of the photographic medium as a given. Language takes on qualities of an object—Smithson frequently employs language as purely visual material, like in his nineteen sixty-six pencil drawing *A Heap of Language*—and images take on qualities of language. In "Earthwords," Craig Owens notes the eruption of language into the aesthetic field in the nineteen sixties as occurring with all the force of the

return of what was repressed during modernism's heyday. The fashion now is the post-modern allegorical mode.



A Heap of Language (pencil, 1966) Robert Smithson

A: Sure. I think Smithson writes that 'My sense of language is that is is matter and not ideas, and that 'Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures.' Okay. So maybe that's the *real* influence of Smithson and similar artists from the sixties and seventies. They opened up photography to a more demotic, semiotic-oriented practice.

B: There is even a sense of Smithson's influence in the recent work of Mark Dion, his various "Digs," where detritus and ephemera are dug up and catalogued in the same gallery space where they were eventually displayed. The visual field becomes a textual one.

A: Shades of Smithson's *Sites/Nonsites.* Same kind of breakdown of boundaries between the gallery and its surrounding context.

B: I would go on to say Smithson's work opened photographic practice to a 'new mimesis' in which the text-image *mimes* the object of study—the landscape-text—of those banal industrialscapes. *[Beams, as he always does when he lapses into jargon.]*

A: *[Attempts to clarify the issue.]* You mean, those industrialscapes are *already* texts, having been worked by techno-cultural forces; that Smithson's *working* of those sites in various ways, from Earthworks to photo works, mimics what had already been done to them? A sort of superimposing of Smithson's text upon the already-written-landscape? *[Finishes his Scotch, leans forward to refill his drink; B obliges.]*

B: Smithson's text-images are parasitic upon the host text, the man-altered landscape. So I guess what you said gets to the crux of matter. Smithson's works perform a 'decon-struction' accomplished by borrowing the aspects of those 'host' industrialscapes. A

destroyed landscape becomes a site for an Earthwork, a Nonsite, or Mirror Displacement, each strategy revitalizes the site—even as it problematizes reference—but without simply erasing its history, its textuality.

A: *[An element of alertness in his features.]* Like in Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* at Kent State?

B: What Smithson thought of as 'counter-architecture,' as 'entropy made visible.'

A: Yes. He had dirt loaded onto the structure *only* up until the ceiling beams started to crack. Significant. The textuality of the place's past, the old shed, was superimposed upon by the bulldozed earth, which didn't cover it completely. A palimpsest with past and present coexisting.

B: *[Excitement in his voice; stands up, clapping his hands together.]* Bingo! Now you've got it! Like that 'collapsed time' of space-age/stone-age of which Smithson was so fond.

A: I grok, then? *[His eyes twinkling.]*

B: You grok! The all-pervasive postmodernist 'internal critique' of representation was adumbrated by Smithson and similar practitioners back then. The traditional photography curators were just not up to 'getting it' until much later. Recall that Peter Bunnell . . .

A: McAlpin Professor of the History of Photography and Modern Art at Princeton.

B: Quite a mouthful, ya. He once said about Cindy Sherman's work that he finds it interesting as art, but uninteresting as photography. *[Folds arms across his chest, stuffing hands into his armpits.]* In general, younger photorati wouldn't be caught dead making such a statement now. *[Pauses.]* An indication of how far photography has come from the earlier attitude, note similarities between, say, Smithson's *Tor Photograph from the Second Stop (Rubble), Second Mountain of Six Stops on a Section* from nineteen seventy to Mike and Doug Starns's reassembled print.

Torn Photograph from the Second Stop (Rubble) Second Mountain of 6 Stops on a Section (1970) Robert Smithson

A: Ya, like *Lake Michigan Steps* from eighty-seven.

B: Say, look out the window. Evening's coming on. *[A silence falls between them. They watch a glow appear behind a mountain, a shower of light, brick orange, climbing.]*

A: A sunset is the story of a world's day. *[Waves his hand before the window. Then presses his nose against the glass, looking intently outside. He mentally recalls Southern California photographer John Divola's "Zuma Series," a photograph of the interior of a burnt out, graffiti-laden beach house, sun setting through the glassless windows.]*

B: How poetic! *[In a voice that might mean it* isn't *poetic. Takes the remainder of his drink in one gulp.]*

A: No. How postmodern. Copped the phrase from Don DeLillo—from *Players*, I think.

B: Of course. Of course. *[Nods.]* You talk like the 'post-criticism' I write.

Lake Michigan (1987) Starn Twins

A: Post-criticism? Gregory Ulmer?

B: Yes. In his essay "The Object of Post-Criticism," anthologized in Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic,* he urges new critics to adopt the Derridean methodology of writing with the discourse of others—the already-written. You know, the way Sherrie Levine 'takes' photographs. A method akin to what, in a utopian novel I wrote, the inhabitants of Arboretum call 'playing jarism,' that is, they pepper their speech with quotations from already-existing texts.

A: *[Rhetorical question.]* Levine's rephotography of prints by Weston and so forth? *[Stands up, puts on his sunglasses.]* Now *there's* a topic for another day's discussion. Copyright violation. Blatant plagiarism. No, no, not now. Don't want to open that can of worms again. Fisticuffs broke out between 'posties' and 'anti-posties' in one of my seminars several years ago over that issue. It's one thing to pepper your speech with citations, another to market work like that. *[Knowing this topic could be inflammatory he abruptly wraps up.]* Got to leave now. Red-eye flight out in a few hours and it is a long drive back on bad roads. Tasteless TV dinner on the plane with a movie I've seen three times and at least one screaming child.

B: Shades of Heinecken's witty nineteen seventy-one visual comment on our fast food, *TV Dinner/Shrimp.*

A: *[Laughs. Shakes hands with B.]* Gotcha. Stimulating chat.

B: Have a pleasant flight back. Don't die from the airline food. *[Laughs.]*

A: Don't laugh. I *might* die *with* the airline food—and everyone else on board.

B: Like Smithson. *[Makes the Sign of the Cross in the Russian manner, right shoulder first.]*

A: I'll maintain.

B: *[Said in a voice that says, 'I'm quoting.']* You maintain, others will initiate.

A: DeLillo?

B: Baba. Baba.

A: Baba ghanouj?

B: Whatever gets you through the day.

TV Dinner/Shrimp (1971) Robert Heinecken

--End--

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Acknowledgments: I wish to thank David Raskin and James Elkins (colleagues of mine at SAIC), as well as Robert Fichter and Harold Jones for their critical reading and input to this text.

Spiral Jetty, Great Salt Lake, Utah