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Framing the Disordered Landscape.
On reading Robert Smithson:
Architecture as Ecological Construction

El Encuadre del Paisaje Desordenado.
Leyendo a Robert Smithson:
Arquitectura como Construcción Ecológica

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Resumen

[...]
*y no hay blancura (perdida) tan blanca como el recuerdo
de la blancura.*
(William Carlos Williams, *El descenso*, 1954)

Este ensayo tiene como objetivo tejer la urdimbre donde podemos asumir la consideración de la arquitectura entendida como “ruina”, con la falta de completud. *Arquitectura como construcción ecológica* nos invita a considerar el espacio ‘en construcción’, una arquitectura abierta más allá de sus límites.

De esta manera, siguiendo a Robert Smithson (1938-1973) en *Landscapes of Loss*, nos permite revertir el sentido de “paisaje”, abierto, en continua construcción, donde se produce un diálogo con el pasado; pero asumiendo que el paisaje (arquitectura) ‘se despliega’ con nuestra *nueva mirada actual* (habitando el espacio), con nuestra intervención aún por venir (poema).

Los recuerdos no son más que números en un mapa, memorias vacías que constelan los terrenos intangibles en proximidades suprimidas. Es la dimensión de la ausencia lo que queda por descubrir. El color borrado lo que queda por ver... El Yucatán se encuentra en otra parte. (Holt 103)

Palabras clave: paisaje, desorden, Robert Smithson, arquitectura, Hotel Palenque.

Abstract

[...]

*and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory
of whiteness*

William Carlos Williams, *The Descent*, 1954

This essay aims to weave the warp where the consideration of architecture understood as a “ruin” can be assumed, but lacking completeness. *Architecture as ecological construction* invites us to consider the space ‘under construction’, an open architecture that is beyond its limits.

In this way, following Robert Smithson (1938-1973) in *Landscapes of Loss*, allows us to reverse the sense of “landscape”, open, always under construction where a dialogue takes place with the past; but accepting that the landscape (architecture) ‘unfolds’ with our *new current perspective* (inhabiting the space), with our involvement yet to come (poem).

*Remembrances are but numbers on a map, vacant memories constellating
the intangible terrains in deleted vicinities. It is the dimension of absence that
remains to be found. The expunged color that remains to be seen... Yucatan is
elsewhere. (Holt 103)*

Key words: landscape, desordered, Robert Smithson, architecture, Hotel Palenque.

1. INTRODUCTION

*Memory is a kind
of accomplishment,
a sort of renewal
even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places
inhabited by hordes
heretofore unrealized,
of new kinds—
since their movements
are towards new objectives
(even though formerly they were abandoned).
(Williams, *The Descent* 28)*

There is a degree of abstraction in what we are going to talk about.¹ Ultimately it would be to have a smaller number of dimensions with respect to reality, and the codification of the

¹ According to R.A.E. (Royal Academy of Spanish Language) To *Abstract*, from the Latin *abstrahere*: ‘to pull/drag away’, ‘set aside, separate’. (1) Separate the quality of an object by means of an

existing relationship in a new system where the subject is absent and of which anyone of us could be a part. Abstraction opens the door to the incomplete, the unfinished and places us in front of the unknown. In other words, trying to find the right words...

Abstraction is linked to the essence as if it were a phenomenon of condensation; and although it changes physically, it contains the distillation material maintaining all its properties. At the same time, the knowledge is linked to the processes of abstraction; searching for its essence or discovering its structure. In a certain way, a system, a constellation.²

And of course, the creative attitude lies in abstract thinking; break, shatter... tear apart. Reconstruct the relationship between the existing fragments, deviate the meaning attributed to an object, generate a relationship between diverse elements, consider the void as an element... And of course, that this is not exclusively an intellectual matter, but it belongs to naturalness, to everyday life, to the complexity of invention,³ the simplicity of discovery.⁴

2. FRAMING THE DISORDERED LANDSCAPE

Robert Smithson (1938-1973) is one of the most relevant artists to make an appropriate approach to the contemporary landscape⁵. He died very young whilst photographing from a plane his latest work *Amarillo Ramp* (Texas, 1973) that he was examining from the air.

intellectual operation to consider them in isolation, or to consider the same object in its pure essence or idea. (2) Alienate oneself from sensible objects, not to deal with them for giving oneself over to the consideration of what one has in their thoughts. *Abstract*, adj. which means quality excluding the subject.

The meaning of 'abstract' that interests us refers to that which has been severed from its relationships, and the consideration that space is an 'abstract construction'.

² Walter Benjamin's lucid sentence "In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only flash like. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows" (Benjamin 459), is very close to the artist Wassily Kandinsky's concept about 'composition': a dynamic system of relationships formed by invisible lines between the different elements that are part of the composition.

³ The artist Francesca Woodman published in 1981, days before committing suicide, her personal notebook *Some disordered interior Geometries*. It was created from an old notebook of geometry exercises, where she superimposed photographs, added handwritten notes in pencil, glue stains, drops of white correction liquid, inked diagrams and mathematical formulas.

⁴ Robert Smithson makes, in his writings, various references to Kasimir Malévich, a suprematism artist who, at the beginning of the 20th century, linked new art with sensitivity (the access through art to a 'desert'). Here, 'abstraction' corresponds to pure sensation and non-objective representation (without purpose).

⁵ According to European Landscape Convention (Florence, 2000), *landscape* is understood as "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors", and the field/scope specified "applies to the entire territory of the parties and covers natural, rural, urban and peri-urban areas. It includes land, maritime and marine areas. It concerns landscapes that might be considered outstanding as well as everyday or degraded landscapes".

Smithson and the artist-architect Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978) are two key figures in understanding the 'obsolescence' of architecture and interventions in the landscape, whose intentions were to work on the transformation of given situations; reuse existing buildings, intervene in degraded and abandoned landscapes, etc. At the same time, Smithson's attitude brought him closer to the essence of architecture and landscape, i.e. transformation and continuous change. In other words, architecture and landscape are alive, waiting to be activated and developed dynamically. In his work *Partially Buried Woodshed* (Kent State University, Ohio, 1970), Robert Smithson leaves the intervention just on the verge of its change, the situation on the point of collapsing, passage and change of state.

Robert Smithson was born in Passaic, (New Jersey) and during his childhood he showed a great interest in natural history and art, studying at the Brooklyn Museum School and the Art Students' League in New York. He was fascinated by the exploration and transformations of nature, and made frequent visits to the Museum of Natural History in New York City. His family encouraged his restlessness by nurturing his curiosity; in 1948 they moved from Rutherford to nearby Clifton (New Jersey), where his father built a zoo-museum in the basement of the house for his son's collection of reptiles and fossils. Since childhood, he prepared and organised family vacation trips to natural locations in the United States, such as Yellowstone Park, the Grand Canyon, Mojave Desert, etc. Initially, he planned to be a naturalist or zoologist, as his main interests were geology, natural history, archaeology and travel.

Robert Smithson's life is closely linked to his interventions as an artist, it is a continuous journey and resembles a *road movie*: travel photographs, road maps, travel notes, fragments of rocks, fossils... Between 1956 and 1958 he hitchhiked through United States and Mexico where he met various poets and writers (among them, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg). In 1959 he returned to visit William Carlos Williams in New Jersey (the poet was his paediatrician during his childhood in Rutherford), and in the early 1960s he met various artists: Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Robert Morris. Between 1956 and 1962 he held several exhibitions with his first works: paintings, drawings and collages with anthropomorphic forms, and with mythological content. In 1961 he stayed in Rome where he expanded his references on the importance of history and time in the course of culture, and in 1962 he temporarily withdrew from the art world. A year later he moved permanently to New York (799 Greenwich Street), married Nancy Holt, and began to write and produce his first mature works as an artist, including sculptures and maps that emerged from reflections and interpretations of crystallographic systems and structures.

Starting in 1966, Smithson developed a growing interest in marginal landscapes, making frequent excursions to abandoned and disused places (quarries, mining areas) and as from declining urban sites (on the outskirts). On these trips he was accompanied by Nancy Holt, Michael Heizer and Robert Morris, and they would be the trigger for his works *Non-Sites*⁶ that he began to carry out from this date. In 1966 he gave the conference *Shaping the Environment: The artist and the City* at Yale University School of Arts and Architecture, and was invited to collaborate as artistic advisor to an architecture and engineering firm on the new Dallas-Fort Worth airport project, where he would also develop various ideas for *earthworks*.

Smithson shows curiosity about the major engineering interventions, and the infrastructures that transform the landscape (jetties, creation of artificial land, etc.). And at the same time, he focuses his attention on the evolution of construction processes and the different phases that make up the intervention of a dynamic art work, and even the transitory states of construction that disappear over time. This way of understanding the temporary process allows him to understand the transformation of the territory, and the gestation and maturation time of a work *in progress*, where an intermediate phase transmits continuity over time, and its unfolding. In an interview with Paul Cummings for the *Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institute* in 1972, Smithson acknowledges “But I became less and less interested in the actual structure of the building and more interested in the processes of the building and all the different preliminary engineering things” (Holt 152).

The scale of the territory increased for Smithson from the un-built project of the Texas airport, where the importance of viewing from the air was taken into consideration after a flying experience. Geological maps where one could read history over time, topographic maps where it was possible to verify the transformation of its relief, samples from inaccessible explorations, aerial photographs, etc. His way of understanding *earthworks*, entailed the perception of the works in relation to terrain, establishing a network of continuity between places and people. Feeling and understanding the place, implied

⁶ From 1966, the excursions to abandoned places, mines, deserts, would lead to the *Non-Sites*. In these works, the relational acquires a special relevance (a multiplicity of relations), and it produces dialectic between *Site* and *Non-Site*; between the exposed fragments and the geological landscape to which they refer.

Site is a physical place inseparable from the context (located in the place).

Non-Site consists mainly in the conceptual representation of a place in an exhibiting space (spatial displacement, taken from the place). They are works ‘extracted from their context’ and together, they were composed in several parts: documents (a cutout plan, partial photos of the place, etc.) and geological fragments (rocks, sand...) arranged in a conceptual layout (a designed compartment whose concept relates to the place).

‘entering the circle of space transformation’. According to Smithson, “The process behind the making of a storage facility may be viewed in stages, thus constituting a whole ‘series’ of works of art from the ground up. Land surveying and preliminary building, if isolated into discrete stages, may be viewed as an array of art works that *vanish* as they develop” (Holt 46).

From 1966 Smithson was linked with the Dwan Gallery in New York, and began to collaborate with Artforum where he would publish his most relevant initial writings: *Entropy and the New Monuments* (1966), *Towards the Development of An Air Terminal Site*, and *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967). His *Non-Sites*⁷ works evolved conceptually towards a complexity that incorporated the abstraction considered mainly as ‘abstract representation’. It showed stratifications and superimposed layers of data which, at the same time, were organized according to the geometry of crystal formations, trying to find a dialectical relationship between *site* and *non-site*, from the binomial organic/crystalline.

Throughout 1968 Smithson travelled through the deserts of California, Nevada and Utah with Michael Heizer and Nancy Holt, locating sites for new works and collecting rocks and materials for his work. He also visited the slate quarries in Pennsylvania and the Pine Barrens landscape in New Jersey, and travelled to Europe to participate in various collective art exhibitions, touring the Ruhr region alongside photographers Bernd & Hilla Becher.

In 1969, he created *Mirror Displacement* in various locations (Cayuga, New Jersey, etc.), and specifically in *Ithaca Mirror Trail* for the *Earth Art* exhibition at the Cornell University, where he would participate together with Dennis Oppenheim, and Richard Long (Gordon Matta-Clark collaborated with them in the exhibition). In these *Land Art* interventions they interacted with nature as a basis for their works of art, as well as questioning the physical and conceptual limits of the works of art. Many of the interventions were ephemeral in nature and became a contextual reference experience with the place. Smithson then visited Stonehenge in England and other prehistoric places, and completed various interventions such as *Asphalt Rundown* in a quarry on the outskirts of Rome.

He also carried out various works such as *Map of Glass (Atlantis)*, *Island of Salt Crystals*, *Glass Strata* in Vancouver, and executed his best-known intervention: *Spiral Jetty* in the

⁷ The *Non-Sites* are the result of conceptual thinking to represent *earthworks* on an exhibiting scale (a construction and production of three dimensional logical images), to find a way to transmit them. At the same time, they need the spectator’s gaze to give them meaning. Although the *Non-sites* could be considered conceptual works, some of them actually become formalist works, by simply ‘representing’ the place by means of an object (exhibiting agent). As a last resort, the *Non-Sites* would be spaces (open rooms) within the exhibiting spaces.

Great Salt Lake (Utah, 1970). In many of these works he used photography as a means of experimentation, as part of the work itself, including using formats that captured the movement and the construction process of the intervention (8/16 mm films formats edited according to storyboard scripts that were part of the work and extended the limits of the story).

Between 1971 and 1973 Smithson focused his attention on various projects and proposals for the recycling and recovery of sites exploited by industries (quarries, mines, wastelands) through artistic interventions; but he was unable to carry out any of these proposals where he sought to involve and link mining companies through art.

In his approach to the territory a double situation occurs: on the one hand, he captures a fragment of the landscape, suspending it in time and space, where that fragment condensed a memory, shows scars and reveals what was lacking; on the other hand, he feels the urge to intervene in the place and build an artistic work. This could explain the temporary difficulty of achieving the materialisation of a work integrated into the landscape, as well as the possible uncertainty about the intervention that 'seals' the place.

Actually, in Robert Smithson's career, the fundamental importance lies in the way he 'looks at the landscape', and to a lesser extent on his works in particular. Fixing the gaze is 'framing a fragment' that would establish the moment of the fixation of reality; delimiting the void, capturing the absence, leaving the landscape just before the solution overflows. The project is there, in the 'stadium' that allows us to link the past (pre-existing landscape) with the future (development over time). Therefore, it would never be a completed work, but "a work in progress", unfinished, in which time, the perception of others, and even the superimposition of new uses and new projects would act in a significant way.

The fragment contains the totality, it represents the whole. In an abstract way, it allows us to reconstruct the absent, or to imagine-project "the new" that completes it. The space emerges by fragmenting, when looking at the landscape. At the same time, it enables the juxtaposition of projects, or generates a situation to be discovered; that is, to enhance the reading of the initial situation, and enrich it with a new layer of meaning. Smithson's work is a reflection on time and entropy,⁸ on moving from one state to another and the transition between the phases of a system. There is a constant rationale that is essentially

⁸ Entropy (transformation, change) as a measure of disorder refers to the second law of Thermodynamics: the irreversibility of the transformation and the evolution process. An orderly system that will become random over time; disorder always emerges from order. Entropy always increases in a system that is not in equilibrium: as entropy increases, the energy decreases.

condensed in his work: the “spiral”,⁹ which to a certain extent we can consider conceptual: centrifugal-centripetal energy, continuity of movement, and the relationship between things.

Many of the concepts he raises come from science fiction, as a journey from the present to the future, or from the future to the past. Smithson experiments with reversals and changes in the direction of time: with an absence or dislocation of time. In addition, he develops the photographs in black and white, making direct copies on a photostat machine. In the film *The Spiral Jetty* (1970), Smithson narrates a situation or an event from close-ups to distant views, linking the different approaches: the salt crystals, the sheets of water, the moving views from the helicopter, etc. The narration moves dynamically backwards and forwards. If these images of 'landscape ruins', abandoned landscapes and residual spaces, with Smithson's gaze become future spaces, this would be similar to the 'change and transformation' that Gordon Matta-Clark proposes for architecture that has lost its initial function and to which we can give and discover a new meaning.

We begin to have 'a place' at the moment in which “we see what is there with a new vision”. Our new perspective is the one that can encounter the possibilities for transformation and change of a place. Therefore, an abandoned or residual place becomes a "new place" when a new architecture comes into being.

⁹ The work *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lake (Utah, 1970), is subject to the cycle and rise and fall of the lake's water level, flooding and disappearing, or the emergence of water during different climatic conditions and at different times. Smithson draws the map-diagram *A Surd View for an Afternoon* (1970) where the spiral extends-contracts in the straight-curve line 'abstract concepts / impending entropy', and the sketch diagram 'edge / margin' all of which are very close to Michel Foucault's thoughts on the conceptualisation of the *outside*.



Figure 1. Location: A_*New York*, B_*Rutherford*, C_*Passaic* and D_*Paterson*
[Superimposed 'Letraset' + image taken from Google Earth]



Figure 2. Aerial view of *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lake, Utah [Google Earth]

3. FRAGMENT Nº 1: *PASSAIC*

Robert Smithson combined the development of the artistic works, with his hobby of strolling along the outskirts of New Jersey with Nancy Holt. The attraction for abandoned places and broken landscapes, led him to distance himself from galleries and museums.

In 1967 he created the photo-essay *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* in the form of a suburban walk through the post-industrial "great monuments": residual spaces of the capitalist system that were found on the outskirts of the city. It dealt with the deteriorated landscape of the banks of the Passaic River, its bridge, the construction works for the new road, pumping platforms, industrial pipelines, etc.

That zero panorama seemed to contain "ruins in reverse", that is—all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built.

[...]

Passaic seems full of "holes" compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures.

[...]

I walked down a parking lot that covered the old railroad tracks which at one time ran through the middle of Passaic. That monumental parking lot divided the city in half, turning it into a mirror and a reflection—but the mirror kept changing places with the reflection [...] If the future is "out of date" and "old fashioned", then I had been in the future.

[...]

I am convinced that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past. [...] (Holt 54-56)

Smithson's gaze rested on 'fragments' of the New Jersey suburbs, located on a boundary that revealed an apparent destruction of the landscape; but at the same time, the resulting

debris and fragments made up a 'ruined landscape'. The search for quarries and degraded landscapes came again from that landscape that 'had no value', that was degraded and ruined but that contained a dormant potential, so that we could turn it into a 'new landscape'. Smithson was convinced that the most interesting places to take part in were those that had been altered by industry or devastated by nature.

With the help of a *map of Passaic*, and an *Instamatic* camera, Smithson began the tour-journey through this transforming landscape. His aim was to draw a cartography-map that allowed him to approach the landscape and understand its essence. Passaic's images were 'fragments of the landscape' detained in time. With respect to this he said: "In a way, this article that I wrote on Passaic could be conceived of a kind of appendix to William Carlos Williams' poem 'Paterson'" (Holt 187).

4. FRAGMENT Nº 2: *PATERSON*

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) was born and lived in Rutherford (9 Ridge Road), the small town where he worked as a paediatrician and gynaecologist and who, at the same time became a poet. Throughout his life he would write the poem *Paterson*, which he would publish in five volumes between 1946 and 1958. Williams found in this atypical poem a voice of his own based on experience, and he arrived at an objective language, which he achieved, by the natural description of things, discovering the appropriate language. To be coherent, he relied on the relationship of fragments from everyday life. He alternated fragments of prose and poems (letters, events, descriptions, etc.) using a 'new' structure. It was a construction made from random situations and fleeting events, which he described as if they were instant photographs that captured reality.

Paterson uses a variable structure in which prose and verses are interspersed at a slower and more leisurely pace with more fluid fragments that adjust themselves as if they were breathing whilst ascending/descending a mountain. It is in a certain way, a set of poems linked by paths, by way of invisible lines.

Everything takes place in the city of Paterson, with the construction of a narrative based on fragmentation, by way of the narration of specific events of a transitory nature and anecdotes of anonymous or unknown people. Isolated fragments, memories linked to places, memory linked to a discovery. The work tries to 'find the right way' to present the facts, 'discover' the continuity of the story, and in a certain way, leave the work incomplete and 'open', to the movement and progress of the reader.

The first idea centering upon the poem, Paterson, came alive early: to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me. The longer I lived in my place, among the details of my life, I realized that these isolated observations and experiences needed pulling together to gain "profundity."

[...]

I took the city as my "case" to work up, really to work it up. It called for poetry such as I did not know, it was my duty to discover or make such a context on the "thought." To make a poem, fulfilling the requirements of the art, and yet new, in the sense that in the very lay of the syllables Paterson as Paterson would be discovered, perfect, perfect in the special sense of the poem. (Williams 391-392)

The features of the place define the landscape: the city, the river, the mountains, and the waterfalls. It deals with the story of a landscape where the events that take place are visually recorded. The poem tries to place itself in the present: *to start again*. Isolated observations and experiences are shown as if they occurred for the 'first time'; situations are repeated with variations that create a natural rhythm, whilst on other occasions they remain as an insinuation to remember again, to narrate 'again', to live again, to live anew. Paterson's landscape is an open space that 'unfolds', requiring and inviting the reader to become part of it with the aim of continuing the work. By focusing on 'chosen fragments', Williams concentrates every moment on the construction of a scene with an image that he captures and leaves suspended in time. It is a construction of the space 'formed by fragments' that are overlapping.

5. FRAGMENT N° 3: HOTEL PALENQUE

Hotel Palenque is at the same time a contemporary ruin and a construction site. In the conference given by Robert Smithson to architecture students at the University of Utah in 1972, the artist comments on the images of 31 slides taken on the trip to southeastern Mexico with Nancy Holt and gallery owner Virginia Dwan in 1969.

Robert Smithson draws the plan of the hotel Palenque, noting what he finds, provisionally naming spaces, and drawing the 'fragments' of spaces built in coexistence with nature's vegetation and the remains of materials stored in the central courtyard. Almost in a similar way to the guide through *Passaic monuments*, Smithson makes a tour of the architecture: in this case, a freehand sketch-plan, some images, and his account of that experience (that place, those spaces) in the conference. A ruin that is unfinished, open.

The artist carefully photographs the 'fragments' of the hotel. They all represent a presence, and at the same time an absence, and as Smithson describes, "they intertwine like a snake":

- A fragment of one of the building's facades, where broken cantilevers and bare steel bars are exposed: the image of a partially built structure. The image has a mirror effect; it shows architecture under construction that has been detained in time without being completed, and in the same way, it shows a 'de-architecture', which has been partially demolished and is incomplete.
- The central space of the hotel is an 'abandoned' courtyard where the vegetation overgrows is used as a temporary warehouse that ends up being permanent. Robert Smithson constantly asks himself about objects he finds in the space (a door, an isolated column...) and compares them to a 'man-made' geological space.
- A few rooms without a roof, where you can see modifications made to the walls, changes of slope, overlapping facades, etc. The image is taken from a balcony from where one builds a visual relationship. On the other side of the balcony, an unfinished room.
- An opening in an exterior wall that frames the landscape. At the same time, he describes the spatial field of the open air room.
- An empty pool unfinished, or dismantled... A small bar and a dance hall... It seems that the structure of the hotel has been superimposed on another structure, extension or a previously existing one. The modern part suggests it was abandoned during construction as it has scaffolding, ramps and props: provisional communications, overlapping facades, starter bars for columns, repaired cracks, collapsed stairs, half demolished rooms, etc.
- An unfinished roof awaiting its completion allows us to imagine the final construction of the space.

One of the issues that Robert Smithson insists upon is the uncertainty of the state of the architecture as an incomplete construction, also like a 'ruin in reverse'. Regarding *Hotel Palenque* he affirms, "[...] This is really the old hotel and you can see that instead of just tearing it down at once they tear it down partially so that you are not deprived of the complete wreckage situation [...] buildings being both ripped down and built up at the same time."¹⁰ The photograph as a fragment –remaining/reflection of the work–, evoking an absence but also a permanence.

¹⁰ Excerpt of the conference given by Robert Smithson: "Hotel Palenque" in the University of Utah, 1972. Written reproduction: Ortega, Damián, ed. *Robert Smithson. Hotel Palenque: 1969-1972*. Alias, 2011, p. 16.



Figure 3. Reactive strip "Architecture as eological construction" (2020) created from a 'folded' map found inside the publication: Ortega, Damián, ed. *Robert Smithson. Hotel Palenque: 1969-1972*. Alias, 2011.

6. ON READING ROBERT SMITHSON: ARCHITECTURE AS EOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION

This is sort of the door. At first you notice right at the back that it's green, right? There's not really much you can say about it, I mean it's just a green door. We've all seen green doors at one time in our lives. It gives out a sense of universality that way, a sense of kind of global cohesion. The door probably opens to nowhere and closes on nowhere so that we leave the Hotel Palenque with this closed door and return to the University of Utah. (Ortega, Robert Smithson. Hotel Palenque 66)

Passaic, Paterson, Hotel Palenque... are 'passages' that bring us closer to loss, to the deterioration; they place us in the present, they confront us with bewilderment and astonishment, with an instant where time stops. A ruin of the future, a space under construction, a continuity of the narrative of the place. Above all, *Hotel Palenque* would be most emphatically 'architecture as a ruin': it refers us to a pre-existence, and at the same time, it is an interrupted, frozen, unfinished construction where we can sense that the 'architecture' is considered as a 'ruin under construction'. It is an incomplete and unfinished space where the 'void' is waiting to become space, filling the void, unfolding the space. Smithson states,

The steady hiss of the air-conditioner in the rented Dodge Dart might have seen the voice of Eecath—the god of thought and wind. Wayward thoughts blew around the car; wind blew over the scrub bushes outside. [...]. In the rear-view mirror appeared Tezcatlipoca—dimurge of the 'smoking-mirror'. "All those guide books are of no use," said Tezcatlipoca, "You must travel at random, like the first Mayans, you risk getting lost in the thickets, but that is the only way to make art".¹¹ (Holt 94)

All those 'mirror displacements' that Robert Smithson carried out in 1969, *Mirror Trail* (Cayuga Salt), *Mirror Trail in New Jersey*, *Ithaca Mirror Trail*, and *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan*, are related to the layout of the place, leaving traces, marking the landscape. With the intention of interacting with the landscape, the artist experimented with lines of light, and footprints that came into being with the intervention. Smithson therefore intended to build a path and an evanescent space, inhabiting a space defined by reflections of light. In short, to create maps that gathered imprints on the landscape, sketches of the paths.

In *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects* (1968), Smithson affirmed,

¹¹ Robert Smithson deduces in 'A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects' (Artforum, 1968) a relevant reference: "At this point I must return to what I think is an important issue, namely Tony Smith's 'car ride' on the 'unfinished turnpike'. *This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art.*' (Talking with Tony Smith by Samuel Wagstaff Jr., *Artforum*, December 1966). He is talking about a sensation, not the finished work of art, this doesn't imply that he is anti-art." (Holt 84)

Geometrical trenches could be dug with the help of the 'ripper'—steel toothed rakes mounted on tractors. With such equipment construction takes on the look of destruction; perhaps that's why certain architects hate bulldozers and steam shovels. They seem to turn the terrain into unfinished cities of organized wreckage. [...] These processes of heavy construction have a devastating kind of primordial grandeur, and are in many ways more astonishing than the finished project—be it a road or a building. The actual disruption of the earth's crust is at times very compelling, and seems to confirm Heraclitus's Fragment 124, "The most beautiful world is like a heap of rubble tossed down in confusion".

[...]

Words and rocks contain a language that follows syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void.

[...]

It was as though one was at the bottom of a petrified sea and gazing on countless stratigraphic horizons that had fallen into endless directions of steepness. Syncline (downward) and anticline (upward) outcroppings and the asymmetrical cave-ins caused minor swoons and vertigos. The brittleness of the site seemed to swarm around one, causing a sense of displacement. (Holt 83-90)

A map, a sequence of images, a description of the place. Continuity is always there; each fragment is part of a whole in space and time. Each image is a fragment of space, and at the same time, of time.

And when we see that 'map, those images, the description of the place' –always from the fragment, the series of fragments–, we are all involved, the way we look at the landscape, our experience with space in architecture, our smooth slide in the description of the place; our thoughts are projected onto the territory, setting the place. The void left after an extraction shows us how space is a construction of air: the story of the empty space invites us to its deconstruction, to rebuild again. And the same happens with the fragment extracted from a landscape architecture: the fragment-image invites us to its reconstruction. In *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*, Smithson says "The abstract grids containing the raw matter are observed as something incomplete, broken and shattered" (Holt 89).

To be precise, one of the interventions that best reflects this architecture 'as a ruin' is *Mica Spread* (Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970). *Untitled (Mica Spread)* are some photographs taken by Nancy Holt on the edge of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. They seem to have been produced like discovery, an encounter on the pathway, as if we were to find a forgotten *Land Art* intervention in the landscape.

The images are fragments of the place, where at the same time you appreciate fragments, pieces, remains and objects... In the main images, the foundation of a construction is

shown but its extent is not clear. This surface is level with respect to the ground, and fits into the topography that slopes gently down towards the lake, almost flush with the ground at its upper part, at the same time generating an unevenness on the opposite side. In the middle part, there is a wooden framework arranged in the form of steps, and at the end a provisional ramp.

If we follow the edges of the various images, we will discover shadows cast from a very vertical light, there seems to be a wooden building. Also you can see a small construction located at a certain distance and half buried in the ground... Stones emerging from the ground, vegetation scorched by the intense sun, mica flakes... They are photographs with hardly any colour, almost bleached by the sun, and the surface is covered with salt flakes. In *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* (1969), Smithson reflects:

Glutinous light submerged vision under a wilderness of unassimilated seeing. Scraps of sight accumulated until the eyes were engulfed by scrambled reflections. What was seen reeled off into indecisive zones. The eyes seemed to look. Were they looking? Perhaps. Other eyes were looking. A Mexican gave the displacement a long, imploring gaze. Even if you cannot look, others will look for you. Art brings sight to a halt, but that halt has a way of unravelling itself. All the reflections expired into the thickets of Yaxchilan. One must remember that writing on art replaces presence by absence by substituting the abstraction of language for the real thing. There was a friction between language and memory. A memory of reflections becomes an absence of absences. (Holt 100)

The attempt to understand the work *Untitled (Mica Spread)* leads us back to the fragments of *Hotel Palenque*. Whilst working Smithson discovers the 'transition' of an image. When photographing a fragment, he photographs the space in between events: *the space between*. He does not photograph the reality but the void, the transition. This is achieved with the 'fragment' making the 'object' disappear. By framing the fragment, he manages to abstract the 'transitional passage' from the reality, and captures the movement of space-time.

The image becomes a *poem*. It determines reality by choosing a fragment of the place (passage in time). The reversibility of a photograph shows the unidirectional continuity of time, and the continuous and constant construction. The photograph shows the reversibility, the continuous process of order/disorder, that is to say, that a system evolves towards disorder, and the 'fragmentation' reintroduces an order: it presents what

is lacking.¹² By fragmenting, the framing is activated, the *void appears, and the space unfolds*.

Noon-day sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-exposed picture. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of 'stills' through my Instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank. (Holt 52-53)

The concept of 'Architecture as eological construction' is a clear allusion to Robert Smithson's interest in geology, and at the same time to his fixation of time (the place, by the traces of the routes, the reflections of light). Architecture as "eological" construction escapes from the concept that architecture is 'petrified', static and unmovable. Rather it understands architecture as an incomplete, unfinished ruin: an open void, *a fragment of space*. Eological construction responds to the encounter with the 'essence of space': the continuous transformation, the constant reconstruction, fluctuating with the current conditions, adapting to the changing situations...

That architecture is a ruin, signifies that even though it is physically completed, the 'architectural space' is open to its constant construction; to the interior layout, the way the space is occupied, the relationship it establishes with the exterior.

All this refers to the 'experience' of the space, and not only to that which is built, but to the need for 'building a new space'. To rebuild the space is to consider that architecture is 'to inhabit the fragment, and to unfold the space, continuing the traces and marks of that fold –of the memory–, or tracing with a new extension that builds the space yet to be imagined, yet to live (anew each time)'.

And finally, we can stop for a few moments with a couple of poems by William Carlos Williams, which revolve around the extraordinary and simple description of a 'fragment' of New Jersey, and the suggestive spatial story from a painting by Peter Brueghel the Elder, who invites us to 'to inhabit a fragment'... unfolding the space (building the space). Below fragments from two of his poems "Jersey Lyric" and "The hunters in the snow":

*View of the winter trees
in front of
a tree*

¹² Order arises by fragmenting the disordered system, by framing the landscape, like a fluctuation, like a new relationship. By fragmenting, the lack of an 'outside', is evident. And so there is a movement to restore the *loss* that is related to the story of the place (new, of what's to come).

*in the foreground
where
by fresh-fallen*

*snow
lie 6 woodchunks ready
for the fire.*
(Collected Poems, "Jersey Lyric" 531)

*The over-all picture is winter
icy mountains
in the background the return*

*from the hunt it is toward evening
from the left
sturdy hunters lead in*

*their pack the inn-sign
hanging from a
broken hinge is a stag a crucifix
between his antlers the cold
inn yard is
deserted but for a huge bonfire*

*that flares wind-driven tended by
women who cluster
about it to the right beyond*

*the hill is a pattern of skaters
Brueghel the painter
concerned with it all has chosen*

*a winter-struck bush for his
foreground to
complete the picture*
(Collected Poems, "The Hunters in the Snow", 502)

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