REVISITING HOURS : ROBERT SMITHSON'S PASSAIC

"How we see things and places is not a secondary
concern, but primary."
-Robert Smithson

FRAME OF MIND

In February 1967, Artforum magazine published an article entitled, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, N.J." by the artist Robert Smithson. In the following article, I walk Smithson's tour of Passaic as well as revisit the ideological landscape cultivated in his work.

Smithson died at thirty-five in a 1973 plane crash while viewing an earthwork in Amarillo, Texas. He was the most intriguing and iconoclastic artist in the earth art / process art movement. Notable works from this movement include Smithson's Spiral Jetty (1970) and Michael Heizer's Double Negative (1969-1970). These pieces were monumental in size, with thousands of tons of earth and rock moved in their creation.

The earthworks of Smithson and Heizer liberated art from the New York-centric cycle of galleries and commodification and revived the landscape as a potent subject matter for artists; but as Robert Hobbs notes, "Smithson was realistic-he wanted to make and sell art. He accepted the gallery as a necessity, but chose to allocate to it the residue of the art process which it was capable of containing." These earthworks, constructed with site materials, toppled the Henry Moore conception of artwork in the environment: a sculpture and its qualifying pedestal moved from the inside to the outside of a museum. Smithson saw his focus on the site as a "dematerialization" of the art object. For Smithson, sites were inherently about process and change, not formal resolution. Smithson wrote, "(t)he authentic artist cannot turn his back on the contradictions that inhabit our landscapes.

Through his earthworks, proposals, Sites/Nonsites sculptures and writings, Smithson pushed the landscape beyond that of painterly motif, drawing out dialectical anomalies embedded in such harsh places as quarries, deserts, strip-mines and cities like

Passaic, NJ. Although Smithson and other artists chose the monumentally minimal and inexpensive landscapes of the American South West as sites for innumerable works, for Smithson it was in the postindustrial landscape that our role in the environment was most problematic and revealing.

Smithson was intrigued with the monumental, but his signature piece, Spiral Jetty, can be misleading in size (6,650 tons of earth and rock were moved in the construction of Spiral Jetty, creating a 1500' long by 15' wide coil). Smithson was more interested in monumental time scale rather than monumental size. Most historians inflate history with human minutiae. Smithson collapsed human history under the weight of the geologic column. This geologic perspective gave Smithson, to quote Lucy Lippard, "a rhetorical freedom" and allowed him to ask such irreverent questions as whether Passaic and its industrial ruins had replaced Rome as the Eternal City. Smithson's artistic passion was more akin to a geologist's zeal than a temperamental, self obsessed artist's melancholia. Smithson once noted that self-reflecting art is "pathetic."

Smithson was fascinated with the industrialized landscape because he saw in it a dialectical relationship between nature and human intervention. While some artists were busy trying to purify and transcend nature with "impressionistic" paintings, quasi rituals and solstice observatories, Smithson was committed to explaining and preserving the postindustrial landscape as part of natural history. Smithson equated our industrial destructive capacities with that of volcanoes, earthquakes and the full range of natural disasters. Smithson wrote, "(t)he farmer's, miner's, or the artist's treatment of the land depends on how aware he is of himself as nature..." Smithson disliked artists "who would rather retreat to scenic beauty spots than to try to make a concrete dialectic between nature and people." It was this sense of "pseudo innocence" which Smithson believed led to "pseudo spirituality" and in turn, "pseudo art."

Near the end of Smithson's career he realized art could mediate between industry and ecology. Industrial process and natural process could be contextualized by the artist. However, the role of the artist as a mediator between industry and ecology runs close to artist acting as a pawn for industry. Robert Morris states the problem well:

(t)he most significant implication of art as land reclamation is that art can and should be used to wipe away technical guilt. Will it be a little easier in the future to rip up the landscape for one last shovelful of a nonrenewable energy source if an artist can be found-cheap mind you - to transform the devastation into an inspiring and modern work of art.

Robert Hobbs holds a different view writing, "Smithson did not, however, view art as a new means for land improvement. He used the term 'reclaim' but was actually referring to the symbolic potentialities of art, to its way of turning devastation and

reclamation into signs of the precarious balance between man and nature." Ultimately, it is this unresolvable morass of criticism that Smithson inspired.

LANDSCAPE PATHOLOGY

As an artist and visionary investing himself in the landscape, Robert Smithson left behind more than drying paint on a canvas. His radical influence on twentieth-century art set an environmental and artistic agenda still unmet. Smithson didn't create postindustrial Passaic, N.J., but Smithson evoked its greater meanings. Passaic, like Thoreau's Walden, Joyce's Dublin or William Carlos Williams' Paterson, became Smithson's medium, his voice, and to this day perpetuates, if not his acute sensibility, at least his wry sense of humor.

I arrived in Passaic to revisit and photograph the industrial structures Smithson delineated in his Artforum article, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, N.J." Smithson's article contains such specific detail on his Passaic itinerary that it reads as a sardonic Baedeker's guide to this place.

Passaic represented for Smithson a landscape of industry, decay, thoughtless development and layers of lost meanings. By touring Passaic, Smithson was able to make a map of what he found intriguing and ironic with postmodern geography. An atlas bought in Passaic provides a good description of the area:

Passaic County is located in northern New Jersey, within the New York-New Jersey Metropolitan Region. The three largest cities of Paterson, Clifton and Passaic contain 270,012 people, more than half of the county population. Passaic City has a Population of roughly 54,061 residents. Passaic is an industrial county with over 1440 manufacturing establishments employing over 67,000 people. The largest industry in the county is the textile and related industries. Other manufacturing industries are chemicals, machinery, rubber and plastics and fabricated metals. Paterson, (A few miles north of Passaic City on the Passaic River) the county's largest city is often referred to as the CRADLE of AMERICAN INDUSTRY. There are over 230 miles of county roads in Passaic County. It is served by US Route 46 and State Routes 3, 20, 21 and 23, and Interstate Route 80, which connects the county with the rest of the interstate system. Passaic County has a large number of popular attractions including the Great Falls National Historic District. The Great Falls at Paterson is a 77-foot high, 280-foot
wide waterfall created where the Passaic River drops over a vertical rock shelf into the deep chasm below. These falls convinced Alexander Hamilton that this was the ideal site to implement the first planned industrial center in the nation.

Although Passaic was Smithson's birthplace, he didn't approach his tour of monuments in a sentimental manner. Smithson is not identified with mawkish behavior or sentimental longing for a pristine environment. "He had the ability," writes John Coplans, "to accept anything, including ugliness and the pathology of decay, and to make a virtue of these qualities. Impurity, degeneration and collapse were central to his view of the dialectics of entropic change." Smithson saw in the postindustrial a return to the primordial. Whereas some artists of Smithson's generation were rubbing sticks together in quasi-rituals to mourn the fall of mother nature, Smithson entered the Passaic landscape and saw construction equipment "to resemble prehistoric creatures trapped in mud, or, better, extinct machines-mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their skin." He called this the "prehistoric Machine Age" and declared that our "future tends to be prehistoric.
Smithson's tour drastically updated the landscape and ruins romanticism of Poussin by affirming "Et in Passaic ego." Although Smithson emulates 19th century styled ruin worship in his tour, he manages to avoid becoming a bourgeois spectator because of his clinical use of language and his ability to distance himself from the nostalgia typically surrounding the worship of ruins, monuments and nature. Smithson was well aware of the complicated relationships artists have created with the landscape throughout time, particularly such 19th century American landscape painters as Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt.

Smithson's work, especially his tour of Passaic, is part of a well-documented history of American artists leading and defining national environmental values. For instance, Bierstadt's paintings had great influence on the movement to establish National Parks in order to protect our sublime natural/national resources in the West. Smithson's interest in industrial and polluted environments foreshadowed the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Superfund program. Smithson did for Superfund sites and the landscape of degradation what Ansel Adams did for Yosemite and other natural wonders. Like Adams, Smithson instilled a sense of awe and the picturesque in his subject matter.

Figuratively speaking, Smithson's work established Superfund landscapes as our postindustrial National Parks. Superfund sites are a reflection of postmodern definitions of nature in the way National Parks reflected modern definitions of the natural. Nature was once conceived as land untouched by humans. It is part of the postmodern agenda to reveal flows and dialectics between not only cultures, but also the traditional binary opposites of nature and culture. If the early National Parks were established in part to protect pristine environments from Manifest Destiny, then Smithson, acting as a kind of landscape pathologist, dissected and preserved Passaic and other industrialized landscapes as the residues and backwaters of Manifest Destiny.

I began my tour of Passaic where Smithson began, but this is a little like saying I entered Dublin where Joyce began or entered Paterson, N.J. where William Carlos Williams began. And even though I carried only my camera and Robert Smithson's Collected Writings, I arrived in Passaic bearing two of 20th century art's most prized possessions: the camera and Robert Smithson's Collected Writings. By visiting Passaic , I was paying homage to Smithson and pursuing my own geographically related artwork. I originally imagined as a few hours of taking photos. The trek became two days of tracing Smithson's route, researching the town archives and speaking with historians, pedestrians and municipal employees. No one was familiar with Smithson's work.

Smithson's first stop on his tour was the Union Avenue Bridge, which spans the Passaic River, connecting the cities of Passaic and Rutherford and the Counties of Passaic and Bergen. Loca-ting this first landmark was much easier than locating the City of Passaic, which is entwined in a web of highways.

I attempted to capture the ghost of this bridge. I located the exact image Smithson photographed and documented this once again with my camera. I was photographing a photograph. Ironically, Smithson experienced this bridge before me in more than one way. Smithson writes, (n)oon 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...When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph... Smithson continues, "(a) rusty sign glared in the sharp atmosphere making it hard to read. A date flashed in the sunshine...1899...No...1896.... maybe (at the bottom of the rust and glare was the name Dean and Westbrook Contractors, N.Y.") Locating the Union Avenue Bridge and its plaque compressed time and brought 1991 closer to 1967 and 1967 nearer to 1896. Smithson's text was no longer a rope running through my hands, but became a knot for gripping the Passaic River, walking along River Drive, which was, then under demolition for the construction of the extant Route 21. Many of the monuments Smithson visited on his tour were devices used in the construction of Route 21. Route 21 is a six-lane highway running nine miles north from Newark along the Passaic River to the city of Passaic. Looking at a map of this region, it's easy to see the logic of Route 21's course because it parallels the Passaic River.

THE HIGHWAY AND THE CITY

In revisiting Passaic, Route 21 plays an integral part in explaining the mysteries of Smithson's landscape. For me, Route 21 is a missing link, regional planning flinch and transportation blitzkrieg. Construction of Route 21 included many controversies such as the eradication of part of a Civil War cemetery and the altering of the Big Bend on the Passaic River, a Duchampian act of civil engineering. The history of Route 21

provides a fascinating commentary on modern city planning and transportation engineering.
The most radical change brought to the Passaic landscape during the construction of Route 21 was the altering of the Big Bend in the Passaic River, allowing Route 21 to snake its way along the bed of the old tailrace between Speer Village and a factory. It was during the construction of this portion of Route 21 that the Passaic Armory, a large section of Washington Park and the remains of a Civil War Cemetery were destroyed. An article from the Thursday, January 18, 1973 issue of the Herald News reports:

(t)he new section of asphalt knocked out several historic Passaic monuments and buildings. The old Passaic Armory, built over a Civil War Graveyard and surrounded by grave markers and monuments, fell before the bulldozers. Only a trace of once scenic Washington Park remains. At the other end of the new section, Woodrow Wilson Junior High School on Lydia Street had to be razed. It brought an out of court condemnation award to $1,555,000 to the Passaic Board of Education and caused pupil relocation problems.

And according to the June 17, 1989 issue of the North Jersey Herald News, the city of Passaic "lost 358 parcels and more than $68 million in ratables to property taken for the highway. The city lost 10 industries, 44 apartments, 11 commercial properties, three city owned lots totaling about 8 acres, a school (No. 12) and 310 multi family homes.

The most intriguing element in the shifting of the Passaic River was the enigmatic play with boundaries. The Passaic River defines the border between Passaic and Wallington in this area. Prior to the shifting of the Big Bend, a pump house was located on the east side of the river, clearly in Wallington. The pump house is still standing in the original location, but the river was diverted, leaving the pump house on the west side of the Passaic River. Ironically, the pump house is still considered part of Wallington although it appears to be in Passaic. Here not only has nature been manipulated in the adjustment of the river, but human made boundaries have been twisted in a cartographic parody. The pump house stands today as a silent piece of architecture, providing no hint of its role in local geographic history.

The pump house, along with the entire stretch of Route 21 running through Passaic, is one enormous monument. This complicated monument of anonymous architectural and transportation engineering is functionally obvious, yet historically disassociated. This "monument" has a very different relationship to the landscape compared to the destroyed Civil War Cemetery. The Civil War Cemetery was a recognizable landscape icon. Its cultural and historic meanings were apparent. The Civil War Cemetery was a local landmark with obvious associations to a national crisis. As J.B. Jackson writes:

(n)o sooner was the Civil War at an end than there was a widespread desire to declare the Gettysburg battlefield a monument. This was something unheard of: an immense, populated landscape of thousands of acres of fields and roads and farmhouses becoming a monument to an event, which had taken place there. It was in effect a reconstruction of the environment. It was no longer a reminder, it no longer told us what to do; it simply explained the battle.

The Civil War Cemetery in Passaic was part of this national explanation, whereas, Route 21 and the pump house are a monument to urban design and transportation planning. Route 21 devoured the Civil War Cemetery and Washington Park, erasing a previously legible landscape of important cultural associations in order to create historic silence.
The construction of Route 21 began in 1948 when Governor Alfred E Driscall signed a bill to authorize the Newark to Paterson expressway. The 8.3-mile section beginning at the Clay Street Bridge in Newark and ending approximately at the Union Avenue Bridge in Passaic took ten years to complete at a cost of 33 million dollars. This section was completed in 1968, one year after Smithson wrote his article on Passaic. The 1.2-mile section running from the Union Avenue Bridge to Monroe Street in Passaic, where it dead-ended in 1973 cost a total of 17 million dollars.

Route 21 currently fizzles out to ragweed near Monroe Street in Passaic. In 1973, the completion of the remaining 3.5 miles to Paterson was expected to take ten years at a cost of ten million dollars. This part of Passaic is currently composed of fields with homeless encampments, towering industrial complexes and apartment buildings that stand in the expected path of Route 21. The Monroe Street terminus of Route 21 dangles like an unfinished sentence in the Passaic landscape. The current ending to Route 21 resembles ruins. Unused off ramps are cracked and covered with weeds. This temporary ending to Route 21 remains suspended between a state of ruin and an abandoned structure on hold until funds are appropriated to finish the remaining stretch to Paterson. Smithson writes concerning the construction of Route 21, "(t)hat 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.
What the engineers would call a delay in funding created a section of Passaic which has remained suspended in time since 1973. The current ending to Route 21 is amonument to an unfinished process, a symbol not only referring to what happened, but to what will happen. Route 21 is a monument looming over the structures in its proposed path to Paterson. This unfinished monument is a constant reminder of the future destruction of this area. All monuments should be so prophetic.

On November 27, 1991, two days before I arrived in Passaic and eighteen years after Route 21 ground to a halt, highway funds were finally approved to finish the remaining

3.5 miles of Route 21 to Paterson. The 98.8 million dollars approved to finish Route 21 is part of a 151 billion dollar Surface Transportation Bill that was passed by the United States Congress on November 27, 1991. 13.9 million dollars has also been approved to widen a section of Route 21 in Newark. The total expected cost of the Newark to Paterson route can now be estimated at 162.7 million dollars, not including maintenance expenses.

The 98.8 million dollars earmarked for the completion of Route 21 will not only create a direct link between Passaic and Paterson, but it will also create a link between the work of Robert Smithson and the poet William Carlos Williams. Williams is well known for the chronicling Paterson, N.J. in his epic poem, Paterson. Williams was born and raised in the Paterson area and returned there to practice medicine. As both a poet and doctor, he was able to develop a complex and permanent bond with this landscape. Williams writes concerning his choice to choose Paterson as his subject matter:

(t)he 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 already had the river... I thought of other places upon the Passaic River, but, in the end, the city, Paterson, with its rich colonial history, upstream, where the water was less heavily polluted, won out...Even today a fruitful locale for study.

William Carlos Williams' assistant was the delivering doctor at Smithson's birth, and Williams himself was Smithson's pediatrician. Williams died in 1973, the year of Smithson's death. The two not only shared the coincidences of birth, childhood and death, but also shared an interest in explaining human experience in what normally would have been overlooked as a meaningless landscape.

Smithson on a less grand scale did for Passaic what William Carlos Williams did for Paterson. Smithson doesn't anthropomorphize the landscape as William Carlos Williams does when writing, "Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls / its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He / lies on his right side, head near the thunder / of the waters filling his dreams! Eternally asleep, / his dreams walk about the city where he persists / incognito." Smithson was more skeptical of Passaic than Williams, but Smithson did take Passaic as his subject matter and he utilized a postmodern/postindustrial poetics to explain the irony and symbolism of the landscape.

BACK ON THE TRAIL

As far as I have been able to deduce, Smithson's "Great Pipes Monument, "The Fountain Monument," and "The Monument with Pontoons: The Pumping Derrick" which were located along the Passaic River just north of the Union Avenue Bridge, all existed as part of the construction of Route 21. Smithson's monuments have long been removed and this stretch of Route 21 was resurfaced, while the banks of the river

have become clogged with trees, thickets and illegal dumpings. I searched vainly in this area for signs of Smithson's monuments. I did, however, find an assortment of new monuments in this area. One of these was the remains of a flattened turtle on the shoulder of Route 21, just yards from its river home. This small, primordial creature, sacrificed for progress, reminded me of the construction equipment Smithson imagined to be mechanical dinosaurs mired in a primordial ooze. I also stumbled across an enormous arch, which seemed to serve no purpose, yet resembled Saarinen's Arch in St. Louis. A sign warned of high voltage, but its function remained a mystery. It is a discreet monument. I also noticed a facility, which produced 'artistic fences.'

Smithson continued north along the Passaic River and River Drive until he reached the beginning of Passaic's commercial district. He arrived first at the Passaic Concrete Plant at 253 River Drive. I could not locate the Passaic Concrete Plant and the last street number is now a Honda Dealership at 225 River Drive. To my amazement, I did locate City Motors, which Smithson said is part of a future found in grade B Utopian films, and then imitated by the suburbanite. The windows of City Motors auto sales proclaim the existence of Utopia through 1968 WIDE TRACK PONTIACS-Executive, Bonneville, Tempest, Grand Prix, Firebirds, GTO, Catalina, and Lemans-that visual incantation marked the end of the highway construction.

I entered City Motors and was fortunate to meet the manager, Mr. Kalb, whose family has owned City Motors since 1936. Mr. Kalb was not familiar with Smithson's article, but he was quite pleased to see his enterprise in print and called for his salesman to take a look. Mr. Kalb took me to his office and showed me some old photos of the area, including an aerial photograph, which explained the missing Passaic Concrete Plant. Some years back Mr. Kalb had purchased the Passaic Concrete Plant in order to expand his car dealership.

Mr. Kalb talked briefly about the changes the construction of Route 21 brought to the area and recalled how the business community was worried that business might be affected during the demolition of River Drive. Later, while researching in the town archives, I came across an article entitled, "Passaic Won't Allow River Drive Closing" from the November 10, 1970 copy of the Passaic Herald News. The article reports "(t)welve persons attended the hour long conference at City Hall yesterday. Among those present were City Manager Paul McCaulan, Assistant City Engineer Stanley Wozny, and two business men, Harold Perl and Dore Orenstein" These men effectively argued that River Drive should remain open and told construction engineers "to build a suitable detour first, especially with the peak holiday shopping season about to begin. As I continued to revisit Passaic, my map of the places Smithson chronicled became peopled with the likes of Mr. Kalb and the twelve-person committee fighting to maintain convenient access to Passaic's commercial district. It is easy to deride these men and their landscape and Smithson does so with his acerbic narrative, calling the

suburbs "(a) Utopia minus a bottom, a place where machines are idle, and the sun has turned to glass, and a place where the Passaic Concrete Plant (Formerly 253 River Drive) does a good business in STONE, BITUMINOUS, SAND, and CEMENT." This is a classic example of Smithson's ability to combine B-movie narrative meanderings with insightful analysis.

After meeting and photographing Mr. Kalb I once again picked up Smithson's trail. At this point Smithson headed to Passaic center to buy more film for his Instamatic 400 and eat lunch. Smithson writes, "Passaic center was no center- it was instead a typical abyss or an ordinary void. What a great place for a gallery or maybe an 'outdoor sculpture show' would pep that place up." Running throughout the entire stretch of Main Street are now a series of outdoor sculptures.

Smithson proceeded to walk the length of Main Street in Passaic and stopped for lunch at the Golden Coach Diner at eleven Central Avenue. I searched up and down Central Avenue but couldn't find the Golden Coach Diner nor number eleven Central Avenue. On a hunch, I stopped into a deli and asked the owner if he knew where I could find the Golden Coach Diner. He confirmed my hunch by pointing across the street to a Dunkin Donuts and a McDonalds. After eating lunch and loading his camera, Smithson proceeded to rewalk the length of Main Street.

I walked down a parking lot that covered the old railroad tracks, which at one time ran through the center of Passaic. That monumental parking lot divided the city in half, turning it into a mirror and reflection-but the mirror kept changing places with the reflection. There was nothing interesting or even strange about that flat monument, yet it echoed a kind of cliché idea of infinity; perhaps the "secrets of the universe" are just as pedestrian- not to say dreary.

On the day I visited Passaic, rows of cars filled this flat monument, parked in reflection to each other. Mixed in with these dreary auto reflections were the series of colorful sculptures. I stood still in this scene and it was easy to imagine this auto-scape as the very same before Smithson. Before me was the history of modern transportation: a parking lot spread over an old rail yard just minutes away from a river that once carried barge traffic, and now carries suspended sediment south to Newark.

This ubiquitous landscape can be found throughout industrialized nations and is documented in Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographic studies of blast furnaces, water towers and mining constructions. These photographs make monuments of industrial architecture, which was in part the intention of Smithson's Passaic Tour, but also stress how industrial typologies have made places on different continents hauntingly similar. The creation of universal and generic industrialized landscapes has metaphorically linked the continents back together. Main Street Passaic's generic

quality is heightened by the McDonalds and the Dunkin Donuts located at the convergence of this one point perspective.

Smithson left the parking lot and moved on to the final monument of the day. Smithson writes, "(t)he last monument was a sandbox or a model desert. Under the dead light of the Passaic afternoon the desert became a map of infinite disintegration and forgetfulness." I could not locate the exact sandbox Smithson photographed, but I did find a sandbox nearby which had an industrial twist Smithson would have appreciated. The large industrial sized tires sunk into the sandbox are reminiscent of the construction equipment along Route 21, which Smithson described as prehistoric creatures trapped in a swamp. The fact that these industrial artifacts are incorporated into a playground also reminded me of Richard Haag's Gas Works Park on Lake Union in Seattle, WA. In Landscape Architect Leslie Olin's perceptive description of the Gasworks Park, one can imagine that he is also commenting on the nature of Smithson's tour of Passaic. Olin writes:

Haag, too, has plumbed the depths of our urban and rural psyches, maneuvering the City of Seattle into leaving the monstrous heart of the gas refinery as a colossal memento-mori in the center of the park on lake union. Despite a citizenry that wanted to build a psuedo-sylvan realm, Haag subverted the plan into an archaeological playground of genuine meaning and poetry. This park now exists and may come to be a fine one, in a conventional sense, in terms of its verdure and its facilities. But it also has a sculpture many times more powerful than all the site artists in America could make, one which speaks to us about our past in ways that only broken aqueducts and fallen columns of ruined temples can. There is no foolishness, no sentiment, no false not.

In an earlier conversation, Haag told me that the earth art/environmental artists in the early 1970's had a hard time seeing their work as part of the landscape architecture tradition. Haag remembers asking these New York City based earth artists to look at Frederick Law Olmsted's Central Park as an example of earth art in their own backyards. The potential similarities between landscape architecture and earth art became more apparent after Smithson published his article, " Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape" in the February 1973, issue of Artforum. In this article, Smithson not only traces Olmsted's influences, but also finds in eighteenth century England, a tradition of landscape theory which related to his own developing ideas. Smithson writes:

(t)he origins of Olmsted's view of the landscape are to be found in the theories of Uvedale Price and William Gilpin. Price extended Edmund Burke's Inquiry into the Origin of our ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757) to a point that tried to free landscaping from the 'picture' gardens of Italy into a more physical sense of the temporal landscape. A tree, for example, struck by lighting was something other than merely beautiful or sublime-it was 'picturesque.' This word in its own way has been

struck by lightning over the centuries. Words, like trees can be suddenly deformed or wrecked, but such deformation or wreckage cannot be dismissed by timid academics. Price seems to have accepted a side of nature that the 'formalists' of his times would rather have excluded.
Here Smithson is equating picturesque landscapes with process, change and dialectics, what today is understood as an ecological model of the environment. Smithson continues, directly quoting Price, suggesting how the processes inherent in picturesque landscapes might be utilized in reconcilliations between nature and industry.
The side of the smooth green hill, torn by floods, may at first very properly be called deformed; and on the same principle, though not with the same impression, as a gash on a living animal. When a rawness of such a gash in the ground is softened, and in part concealed and ornamented by the effects of time, and the progress of vegetation, deformity by this usual process, is converted into picturesque ness; and this is the case with quarries, gravel pits, etc., which at first are deformities, and which in their most picturesque state, are often considered as such by a leveling improver.

What is important in Smithson's recognition of Olmsted's genius is that at this point in Smithson's artistic career he was searching for new inspirations, which would inform his work and fuel his investigations of the landscape. Smithson always looked outside the fine arts for sources of inspiration, turning to geology, cartography and the study of crystals as a way of feeding and defining his artwork. By recognizing Frederick Law Olmsted, a landscape architect, as a great artist, Smithson was not only identifying a personal influence, but also creating yet another dialectic between the contemporary arts and an outside discipline.

VIVA ENTROPY

Smithson's career started with his seldom seen paintings and drawings, which are rooted in the tradition of the fine arts. But as Smithson's career progressed through such site works as the Spiral Jetty and the Amarillo Ramp, his writings and Sites/Nonsites installations, he developed an increasingly complex relationship with his mediums, subject matter and audience. As Smithson stretched the limits and dialectical geographies of his work, he recognized new purposes for his art. Near the end of Smithson's career he envisioned his art mediating between ecology and industry. This was a great expectation, but no more ambitious than Olmsted's belief that his parks would mediate between the North and the South following the Civil War. By creating public landscapes where all races and classes could mix, Olmsted set an example for the South to follow. This concept of the park as a site of mediation or reconciliation has resurfaced in postmodernism with what are called multi cultural parks and with land reclamation and restoration projects.

Unlike Olmsted, Smithson's ideal of mediation was not manifest in built works.

Smithson's understanding of the relationship between art, ecology and industry is now realized in a range of landscape projects and technologies reclaiming damaged lands and communities. Many of these environmental artists use the rhetoric of healing and the return to prelapsarian conditions to their own detriment. Smithson avoided moral rhetoric. The 20th anniversary of Smithson's death passed in 1993. It is vital that we revisit Smithson and places like Passaic in the context of turn of the century environmentalism.

Mitchell Rasor

Note: An earlier version with photographs appeared in Isthmus Journal in 1994. Photographs available upon request.