

ROBERT SMITHSON

edited by Eugenie Tsai. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, U.S.A., 2004. 280 pp., illus. Paper. ISBN: 0-520-24409-5.

ROBERT SMITHSON: LEARNING FROM NEW JERSEY AND ELSEWHERE

by Ann Reynolds. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2005. 384 pp., illus. Paper. ISBN: 0-262-68155-2.

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Jorge Luis Borges, one of the most celebrated authors of the 20th century, once penned a series of book reviews critiquing books that had never been written. In true Borgesian fashion, he explained that since people seemed more inclined to read the reviews, sometimes not finding time for the book itself, it seemed that producing only the critique was a better approach. His caricature of reading habits in our fast-paced lives came to mind as I wondered how I might enthusiastically encourage others to read *Robert Smithson* and *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*, the two books that are the subject of this review. Neither of these full-bodied volumes can be captured in this short piece. Given this, let me begin by saying that all who have an interest in Robert Smithson's impact on contemporary art should put this review aside and turn to the books directly.

Robert Smithson, fully illustrated and augmented by writings by Eugenie Tsai, Alexander Alberro, Suzaan Boettger, Mark Linder, Ann Reynolds, Jennifer L. Roberts, Richard Sieburth, Robert A. Sobieszek, Moira Roth, Robert Smithson, Cornelia H. Butler and Thomas E. Crow, was conceived for the comprehensive American retrospective of Smithson's work, opening at the Whitney Museum in June. (It began at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and recently closed at the Dallas Museum of Art.) Smithson's knack for bridging incongruent perspectives comes across well in this oversized volume, as does his multi-layered legacy. Well-chosen photographs of his works (drawings, sculptures, nonsites, etc.) are mixed with cultural images as well as photographs of his excursions,

giving this artist a dynamic presence despite being confined to the staid pages of the book. As one would expect of a catalogue, this publication offers many topical essays on the artist's complex and highly influential career as well as an overview of his short life. Born in 1938, Smithson died prematurely in 1973 when the plane he was using to survey a site crashed. Yet, as the catalogue details, the reach of his work is extraordinary.

What I liked most about the presentation was the way his drawing, "A Surd View for an Afternoon, 1970," used on the cover, captured his coarseness, complex mind and range of thought. A surd is defined as something that is irrational and voiceless. Sketched during an interview conducted in 1969, and signed in 1970, Smithson's surd map spins us around the time and space he develops, deploys and reconfigures in his projects. The scratchy composite, on a piece of graph paper, offers a glimpse of the gyrations of his mind. Composed of diagrammatic markings, explanatory words, directions and several of his signature motifs (the spiral, a map of New Jersey, and words we tend to find in discussions of his work such as "perception," "nonsite" and "entropy"), it is a map, a mirror and a plan. Its vertiginous quality is explained to some degree in the book's foreword, written by Jeremy Stick. Stick tells the reader that the difficulty in coming to grips with this far-reaching and paradoxical artist is due to the way Smithson extended the scope of his work outward to more and more distant locations. Yet, at the same time, he continued to integrate an awareness of the museum, gallery and art world in general in his projects. How this worked within his practice is unpacked by Thomas Crow to some degree when he speaks of Smithson's pursuit of the spiral. Homing in on this one motif, Crow illustrates this artist's remarkable intellectual reach. Similarly, the interview with Moira Roth, taped in 1973, allows us to see him through his own words. For example, although he is frequently coupled with Marcel Duchamp in discussions about the evolution of art in the 20th century, it is intriguing to find that Smithson expressed some negativity toward Duchamp during the interview with Roth. Also of note are the essays by Suzaan Boettger and Ann Reynolds. Both offer unique and insightful views of Smithson's mind and practice.

Ann Reynolds's own, quite different

volume, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*, is a wonderful companion to the catalogue. She effectively situates Smithson in terms of both contemporary art and history. In doing so, she demonstrates how deeply she has thought about his work and why it continues to feel contemporary even as our relation to its historical moment fades. Her decision to open a dialogue with earlier Smithson scholars adds to the book's readability. When this author stakes out her space and places herself in terms of earlier scholars (e.g. Craig Owens), she adds her voice in a way that encourages the reader to want to closely read her research. We are rewarded by her ability to express Smithson's practice and to explain how it was informed by his interest in repetition, as well as her grasp of much that went beyond his earthworks and the construction of the Spiral Jetty. Some projects, for example his *Untitled (Map on Mirror-Passaic, New Jersey)* (1967), establish Smithson's uncanny ability to simplify a complexity of threads into a coherent work. In this case, the work consists of seven square pieces of stacked glass of incrementally decreasing sizes. The artist mounted a black-and-white photocopy of a square section of the Weehawken, New Jersey, quadrangle on each stacked glass piece. The completed object thus creates a tension between the 2D map and the 3D work, while also commenting on Smithson's New Jersey. (How effectively Reynolds takes us into the mind of the artist is perhaps clearer when one turns to her very short contribution to the *Robert Smithson* catalogue.)

Overall Reynolds grapples with the blindspots at the center of established ways of seeing and thinking, conveying Smithson in a sympathetic way throughout. She introduces us to his background and, in doing so, brings to life the way Smithson saw his home state of New Jersey as such a blind spot. Her inclusion of small details further humanizes his life. For example, she mentions that the poet William Carlos Williams was Smithson's pediatrician and describes the impact his poetry had on this boy from New Jersey. A key to her success is her lengthy discussion of Smithson's early sculpture (1963–1967), which aids in exposing his early perceptual experiments. This, in turn, supports her claims that Smithson passionately embraced questions related to how we perceive the world during this period and that Smithson's rejection from the exhibition *The*

Responsive Eye at the Museum of Modern Art in 1965 had an impact on his later work. Smithson's submission for this legendary show (which brought together many "optical artists," such as Victor Vasarely, Bridget Riley and Frank Stella) was rejected by the curator, William Seitz, who wrote that "although interesting and relevant to the scope of the exhibition," the work did not "have an individuality that other artists on our list have expressed" [1]. Reynolds proposes that this dismissal propelled Smithson toward sculpture and 3D work. Within months he turned to free-standing enantiomorphic experiments in distortion of familiar objects, which allowed him to more fully experiment with the processes of perception and the interplay between art and culture.

Given my lifelong passion for works on paper, the reproductions of Smithson's drawings and diagrams in the Reynolds book particularly fascinated me. This aspect of his legacy is often given less attention, so finding so many reproductions was a real treat. Studying them raised many questions; however, I was surprised to find that much of his graphic work brought Paul Klee to mind. The catalogues of his library (which differed in the two books discussed in this review) included no books by Klee. While this might suggest that Smithson did not closely examine Klee's graphic experiments and that the similarities were coincidental, I do not feel comfortable drawing this conclusion. He surely must have come across Klee's work in his travels. What I did find interesting, when I perused the two lists detailing his massive cross-disciplinary book collection to see if he knew Klee's work, was that Smithson collected fewer books about artists and art history than volumes catalogued in other subject areas (fiction, philosophy, science, etc.). Moreover, the volumes listed under art leaned toward theory and criticism rather than studies of individual artists. In other words, scanning his library provided the best evidence of how this ground-breaking artist and autodidact reached far beyond art practice and the art world in formulating the ideas that are so intertwined with his legacy.

When the catalogue is juxtaposed with the Reynolds publication, it is clear that they offer complementary perspectives. Even the covers point toward this conclusion. Both were designed with the titles superimposed over a Smithson image. The Reynolds image, a 1967 photograph, *The Bridge*

Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks, is not a picture reminiscent of Smithson ruminating so much as an illustration that demonstrates his early perceptual experiments. Looking at it we see that he chose an angle that could present the two sides of the bridge walkway converging toward a vanishing point. This quite standard perspectival choice brings to mind that Smithson's relationship with perceptual views evolved over the course of his career. While it is generally recalled that in his last years he voiced some skepticism toward art's fixation on sensory perception, much of his early work shows he participated in sensory investigation as well. Indeed, the most accurate way of summing this up would be to say that his fascination with how we perceive was a defining tension throughout his life, and one that his work reveals he viewed from several vantage points.

In summary, both books convey that Robert Smithson was among the artists who pushed the boundaries of art in the 1960s and 1970s. Both also contextualize his historical position and offer a wealth of delicious details. The complementary perspectives they offer greatly enhance our knowledge of this well-regarded artist and give us a genuine feel for how he combined art and culture in the eclectic projects that his fertile, creative mind brought into being.

Reference

1. William Seitz, *The Responsive Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965) p. 57.

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