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cultural geographies in practice

Time lapses: Robert Smithson's mobile landscapes

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Imagine yourself in Central Park one million years ago. You would be standing on a vast ice sheet, a 4,000-mile glacial wall, as much as 2,000 feet thick. Alone on the vast glacier, you would not sense its slow crushing, scraping, ripping movement as it advanced south, leaving great masses of rock debris in its wake. Under the frozen depths, where the carousel now stands, you would notice the effect on the bedrock as the glacier dragged itself along.¹

Floating islands, restless geographies

In 1970 the artist Robert Smithson proposed a *Floating island to travel around Manhattan island*. Composed of a tug boat and barge planted with trees and rocks, the small pastoral island would form a displaced geography against the looming skyline of that other urban island. While this project was never realized during Smithson's lifetime (1938–73), the island recently materialized for the week of 17–25 September 2005. Developed by Minetta Brook (a New York arts organization), and in conjunction with a retrospective of Smithson's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art, *Floating island* is constructed from 'a 30 × 90 foot barge, landscaped with earth, rocks, and native trees and shrubs'. While the Whitney exhibition (originally shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) focuses primarily on Smithson's earthworks designed for display in galleries, it also includes many of his speculative drawings, writings and films, which mark an engagement with geographical thought. An important and influential American land artist during the 1960s and 1970s, Smithson has continued to be a reference point for many of the most 'geographical' artists working today. Moreover, his impact extends well beyond the context of art. While he is known for his large earthworks that locate beyond the gallery walls, his speculative projects disclose the conceptual terrain through which landscape circulates. His projects are informed by an understanding of restless geographies, which move across

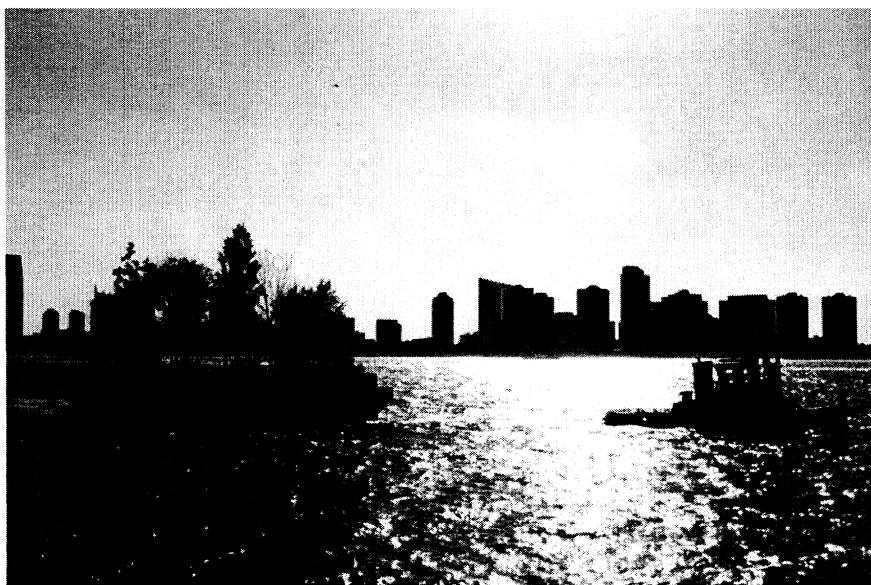


FIGURE 1 *Floating island to travel around Manhattan island*. (Photograph by Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys.)

orders of time and space, from the continental, prehistoric, future, ruined and crystalline to the entropic. While we may imagine movement occurs across stable sites, these sites are themselves subject to material and temporal shifts, lapsing from the instant to the epic. It is this shift that Smithson's work reveals.

Tectonic mobility

As with many of Smithson's 'island' projects,² the proposal for *Floating island* suggests hypothetical continents, a rift of land that has separated to re-emerge as a strangely idyllic rupture. Escaping its bounded location and continental attachments, the island drifts through the metallic waters of the Hudson and East Rivers. Smithson's *Floating island* pays tribute to Frederick Law Olmsted's design of Central Park, another island of green surrounded by a grid of city streets and buildings. The trees for *Floating island*, Smithson proposed, should be removed from Central Park and transferred to the barge. His proposal offers a reversal of the island garden in the city, which moves to encircle the city. Proposed in the same year as his best-known work, *Spiral jetty* (1970), which disappeared and reappeared with the ebb and flow of water levels in Great Salt Lake, the island similarly performs tectonic movement on a diminished scale. A slow-moving satellite, a fragment of rocks and trees, the island orbits in tension with the islands of Central Park and Manhattan. *Floating island* and Central Park reference each other across scales, from fragment to expanded terrain. If we follow this dialectic, there is an

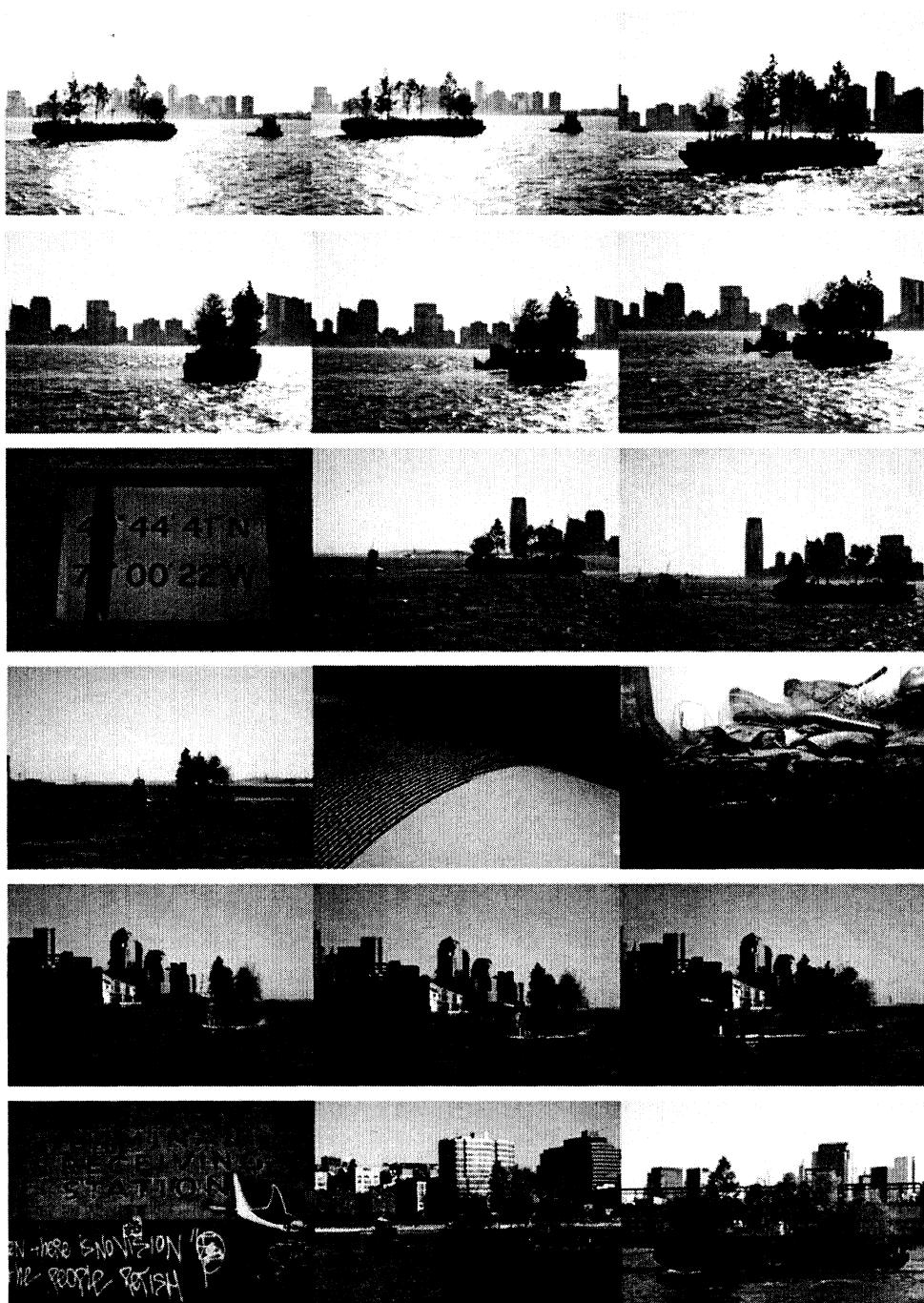


FIGURE 2 Detail views of *Floating island* and Manhattan Island. (Photographs by Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys).

endless possibility of telescoping back and forth to the scale of wilderness, continents and down to microbes – one floating island after another. As Smithson says, ‘Although you are conscious of the scale, it’s how your consciousness focuses. This island might appear big, but in fact it’s very tiny, so that you have this telescoping back and forth from both ends of the telescope.’³ The island also calls forth J.G. Ballard’s *The drought* (a novel which Smithson had read), where, in the face of massive environmental change, the protagonist Ransom retreats to his landlocked barge to preserve a fragment of his world. Moving across scales, through orders of time and against geological strata, the island project suggests a tectonic mobility, where the ‘cardboard ground’ shifts beneath our feet. What we take for solid rock and hard ground, the supposed permanence of site, is no more than papier mâché in the scale of geological time. These migrations – the ‘restless process’ of landscape, its physical and conceptual mobility – are underscored by Smithson’s *Floating island*.

Entropic mobility

Fleets of barges make their workaday course up and down the rivers of New York City. Most of these vehicles are loaded, if not with goods then with heaps of garbage. This geology of consumption would not have escaped Smithson, given his preoccupation with entropy and the ‘disintegration’ of materials and landscapes. We use up the material fabric of our landscapes; they are excavated and relocated to other spaces. To displace a miniature version of Central Park to a floating barge is to suggest the eventual slump of that park, and its possible disposability. Here, the mobilization of matter involves its inevitable decay. Smithson objects to the idea that matter is completely solid, and instead suggests that ‘solids are particles built up around flux, they are objective illusions supporting grit, a collection of surfaces ready to be cracked’.⁴ Even the most inert objects are made up of the spin of microscopic particles, which will eventually split, decay and transform. From steel to rust, from machine to grit, Smithson mobilizes matter toward collapse. For him, disintegration becomes a way to access ‘the rush of time’.⁵ In this sense, the future, that site of progressive mobility, becomes a ‘ruin in reverse’, a landscape of decay. Far from simply articulating a dystopic time yet to come, however, Smithson locates and maps the inertia within this insistent mobility toward the future. Standing still and running in place, we navigate the same stretch of ground. Is the future just a muddier furrow within this traversal?

Cartographic mobility

Another type of grit emerges in Smithson’s work, what he calls ‘the refuse between mind and matter’, and which he considers to be a ‘mine of information’.⁶ The orders of mobility in his work move from the geological to the conceptual, by which he meant to signal and account for the deep orders of time that erode the possibilities of the permanence of site, and also the metaphoric qualities of how matter works on mind.

Smithson saw no separation between the cultural and physical movement of materials and time. Like Borges and Ballard he was interested in fantastical geographies and archaeologies of future time (as Ballard referred to them) that could be inflected into each other. Smithson privileges neither mind nor matter; instead he wrestles with these interactions to accentuate the context and displacement of scale and time, without attempting to finalize these into a static concept. Why does this matter to geographical thought? As Smithson argues,

It's admitting that most of our abstractions are hypothetical. Our map making is hypothetical, because we have to make an outline. We have to outline the continents, the landmasses, and yet when you get into the actual landmasses, then you find where is the edge of this [sic] ... and there's always the temptation to want to simplify this.⁷

The map is an abstraction. Smithson's maps (*A line of wreckage*, 1968, *Mirror travels in the Yucatan*, 1969, *A surd view for an afternoon*, 1969) extend this abstraction, telescoping the points of map through matter (rocks and mirrors), rearranging the points of conversion, putting information in jeopardy as it collides with the material it traverses. Smithson saw no differentiation between the various grids over the world – the lines of longitude and latitude that criss-cross the globe – and those of an ice crystal lattice under magnification.

The interaction between mind and matter – how mind and matter map back onto one another, always transforming and working upon each other – charts an active relationship with landscape. In a corrosive tension landscapes look and act back, eroding the mind's attempt to order these 'deposits of gritty reason'. So with Smithson's *Mirror displacements*⁸ there is a dialectical landscape, where mirrors reflect the landscape as an incommensurable image. The mirror will always obscure the landscape as much as it produces its perfect replication. This ensures that the correspondences or relationships between things are always open-ended. This order of mobility is a moving toward and never arriving. Such a dialectical approach to landscape was perhaps best conveyed in Smithson's delineation of 'Sites and non-sites'.⁹ By this he meant to set up a dialogue between physical sites and their representation and containment in the dislocated space of the gallery. Photographs, maps and rocks extracted from sites were organized in the gallery so as to point to their fragmented state while simultaneously conjuring up the *absence* of the site from which they came (*Non-Site, Franklin, New Jersey*, 1968). Confronting the slippage between mind and matter, and site and non-site, Smithson advocated what he called a 'surd' area – a zone where logic is suspended, an irrational area that is often the product of a different sense of time or place. Smithson alerts us to what he called a 'course of hazards',¹⁰ where landscapes circulate in a zone from site to non-site, from fragment to whole, and from closed to open limits.

Medium mobility

Just as he made 'maps not of paper but of materials',¹¹ Smithson conceives of words as geological formations. What might be taken for the usual mobility of language, in the

sense of communication, is displaced to the physical characteristics of words. The forces of erosion and fragmentation do not spare the supposed solidity of language. Words, like rocks, are physical structures that succumb to the same dynamic play of tectonic plates. As Smithson writes, ‘words and rocks contain a language that follows a 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’.¹² Language tends toward fragmentation, and ‘offers no easy gestalt solution’. It demarcates a vague terrain, where ‘the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle.’ With these ‘raw materials of communication’ one does not write, but ‘builds’ language with ‘linguistic sense-data, not rational categories’.¹³ As his project *a heap of language* (1966) demonstrates, words can stack up like earthworks, thereby breaking both with meaning and with clear transmission to become a base medium, a sort of dirt.

In his discussion of language, Smithson further insists, ‘usage precedes meaning’. For him, the displacement of *meaning* renders the *matter* of language more apparent. To this end, he took an interest in the ‘telephone language’ of Alexander Graham Bell, who in the process of developing his telephone inventions performed language experiments with kites in order to study the effect of airborne communication. These experiments, Smithson suggests, were concerned not with words as units of meaning but rather with matter in motion. Words, by entering orders of mobility, reveal characteristics that wholly invert their usual deployment. But in the outer orbits, mobility turns back to immobility. A broadcasting satellite appears to be an immobile planet, a ‘crystalline structure of time’, from an earthbound view. These landscapes and media require an attention to scale, and to the mobilization of sites across scales. As Smithson suggests, ‘the power of a word lies in the very inadequacy of the context in which it is placed, in the unresolved or partially resolved tension of disparities’.¹⁴ For Smithson, writing no less than artwork constitutes a shifting geographical terrain. With his essay, ‘A tour of the monuments of Passaic, New Jersey’ (1967), he builds up – as an earthwork – a verbal and photographic tour of an industrial landscape steeped in an entropic future. In this sense, his geographical exploration extends to the spiralling of jetties through cinematic and geological space, the floating of island fragments, the material formation of maps and the sedimentation of words and ideas. From airborne words to floating islands, Smithson mobilizes mind and matter until they lapse into other geographies, shift and move *out of place*.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- ¹ R. Smithson, 'Frederick Law Olmsted and the dialectic landscape', *Artforum* (Feb. 1973).
- ² Smithson's other proposals for islands included *The hypothetical continent in stone* (1969), *Lemuria* (1969), *Cathaysia* (1969), *Island of broken sea shells* (1969), *Map of broken glass* (1969) and *Gondwanaland ice cap* (1969).
- ³ 'Four conversations between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson (1969–70)', in J. Flam, ed., *The collected writings of Robert Smithson* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996), p. 203.
- ⁴ R. Smithson, 'A sedimentation of the mind: earth projects', in Flam, *Collected writings*, p. 107.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- ⁷ 'Four conversations between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson (1969–70)', p. 203.
- ⁸ See R. Smithson, *Slideworks* (Milan, Frua, 1997).
- ⁹ R. Smithson, 'The spiral jetty', in Flam, *Collected writings*, p. 152–153.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- ¹¹ 'Four conversations between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson (1969–70)', p. 200.
- ¹² 'A sedimentation of the mind', p. 108.
- ¹³ R. Smithson, 'Towards the development of an air terminal site,' in Flam, *Collected writings*, p. 55.
- ¹⁴ R. Smithson, 'Language to be Looked at and/or things to be read,' in Flam, *Collected writings*, p. 61.