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Robert Smithson’s Many Flights

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Auteur(s) (texte brut)
Guillaume Logé
Chapô
The death of Robert Smithson in a plane crash in 1973, while flying over one of his works in progress, helped forge the mythical aura of this American artist who, at age 35, left behind a literary and artistic legacy that would deeply impact the art world. Smithson’s flight clearly refers to his last, tragic flight, but above all seems an appropriate way of describing both the general attitude of an artist whose thinking developed as a consequence of a life spent in perpetual motion, and the reflections he gained around the airplane, as we will outline in this post.
Présentation longue

In discussing the work of Robert Smithson, it seems important to bear in mind certain key elements of his imaginary: geology and the natural sciences in general, diligent reading of science-fiction novels and religion all greatly influenced his early work, in which futuristic drawings exist alongside paintings of Christ as well as ones in the tradition of abstract expressionism. 1961 marks the beginning of his most well-known period, particularly through his Earthworks, sculptures which used geographical sites as their source material (“sculpture as place[^1]”).

Smithson’s relationship to mobility ranges from fascination to disenchantment. His imagination was fed by it, both through his reading and his artistic practices. As with many of the artists we have considered here movement is, in fact, an act of thinking, an excavation of reality, a settling of perspective.

The somewhat hazy notion of Land Art (of which Smithson is often cited as a founder) is most notably characterized by the rejection of institutionalized, economically-motivated spaces for the showcasing of art. The work of art belongs not to the gallery or museum but to the space, going so far as to become the space itself. Smithson’s

journeys – an integral part of his work – extend their movement by the very forms he uses (vortexes and spirals are perhaps the best example of this.)

Robert Smithson quickly understood the growth and new challenges that technical advances would bring to mobility. As we shall see, he sensed the enormous potential and used it extensively as a poetic process. At the same time, he saw the extent to which it went hand in hand with an economic system that could only lead to chaos (the oil shocks of the 1970s, the acute emergence of sustainable development imperatives in the 1980s and the financial crisis of 2008 unfortunately all proved his foresight).

Mobility and modes of transportation, as they existed in the 1960s, helped Smithson in the questioning of our modes of perception, our approach to reality, our units of time and measure, our sense of history and the future, as well as our ability to use art to create new habitats and a new way of being in the world.

In 1966, Smithson was hired as an artist-consultant by the architectural and civil engineering firm of Tippets, Abbett, McCarthy and Stratton. His mission: to create earthworks for the future Dallas-Fort Worth airport terminal, which would later become one of the largest airports in the world. His ideas – perhaps too radical for the times – in the end were not brought to fruition. As such, it is in their raw, conceptual form that we will discuss them here.

Among the texts his wife, artist Nancy Holt, collected, a 1979-text entitled “Aerial Art” gives us several indications with regard to Smithson’s approach[^2]. For instance, according to him, the airport’s design should not be detached from artistic works scheduled to take place in it. In other words, art should be an inherent part of the construction process. He rejected the idea of works being “parachuted in” once the construction is complete. In this way, he is part of a long-standing tradition in the history of art – especially at a time when the dismantling of the barriers between art and other disciplines was sine qua non. Art is not merely for decorative purposes; it must be fully integrated into concrete project parameters. Likewise, architecture cannot simply be reduced to its functional use, nor to a simple artistic gesture; it is a work in the same way that the works of Land Art artists are works in the landscape - becoming tools for considering and relating to the world - and therefore must be designed in such a way that it can play this role. In some regards, architecture’s potential to express a way of relating to the world - a poetic power, one might say - should not be stifled. On the contrary, an airport must be built so that its very

essence is palpable and effective, thus making active the visible and invisible dimensions that characterize it.

“The future air terminal exists both in terms of mind and thing. It suggests the infinite in a finite way. The straight lines of landing fields and runways bring into existence a perception of “perspective” that evades all our conceptions of nature[^3].”

The concept of perspective is obviously central in the history of art. It is around this concept (and its many variations) that our relationship to the world has developed over the centuries. During the Renaissance perspective was structured around the notions of subjectivity and geometry— that is until the Romantic movement shattered this conception - rendering it infinite - and the development of non-Euclidian mathematics at the end of the 19th century multiplied it through Cubism. By using the term “perspective,” Robert Smithson not only positioned himself with regard to these periods in art history but – and more importantly - targeted our perception of reality.

Our perception of space as viewed from above (via aerial photography or from the window of a plane) offers us another perspective— that of a reality hitherto unknown to us; spaces as seen from the ground confer a partial perception at best. Smithson created the term “aerial art” to describe art that incorporates altitude and mobility – the same mobility undoubtedly employed earlier, in cubism and futurism, but used in this case on an increasingly reduced scale, to the point of becoming invisible.

"*The entire air terminal may be considered conceptually as an artificial universe, and as everyone knows everything in the known universe isn’t entirely visible[^4].*"

Using this same logic for the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, Robert Smithson went so far as to propose certain artistic interventions designed to be invisible.

Our perception is stunted by the fixed perspectives we adopt. Aerial art is based on a mobile perception. Mobility becomes a requirement for perception and, at the same time, introduces the notion of immutable invisibility. When we move, we acquire perspective that is much closer to the reality of the universe, and thus a little closer to the real and to God’s perception, in some ways. But the universe is infinite, making it impossible to complete this approach and, hence, impossible to gain a perfect understanding of reality. Human and technical limitations only condition our perception of a certain state of reality at a certain moment. Mobility would like us to

believe that, through it, we can decipher reality. This, according to Smithson, is a purely utopic idea. The quest is vain, thwarted by infinity. Could art serve this purpose? Is it a perfect symbiosis between science and science fiction, between the natural sciences and the imaginary? Does not this paradigm represent the underlying basis for all of Robert Smithson's artistic experiments? It would not be absurd to think that, in this airport construction project, the artist saw yet another opportunity to test that idea.

The airport is a measuring tool, a device that does not obey fixed laws, but rather those that favor technological progress and the role given to art at the time of its conception— at once physical and imaginary, with measurements that express reality (providing an equilibrium that science that needs in order to advance…) through metaphor. The airplane, in this respect, is a poetic tool, a system of versification that has known as many upheavals and revolutions as written poetry can know.

"[The focus of aerial art] on "non-visual" space and time begins to shape an esthetic based on the airport as an idea, and not simply a mode of transportation[^5]."

Robert Smithson's approach to mobility plays on the boundaries between science and the imaginary (do these frontiers really exist for that matter, he seems to ask us?).

In another article entitled "Towards the Development of An Air Terminal Site[^6]" he elaborates in greater detail on the construction of the Dallas-Fort Worth airport.

"The actual meaning of an air terminal and how it relates to aircraft is one such problem. As the aircraft ascends into higher and higher altitudes and flies at faster speeds, its meaning as an object changes – one could even say reverses…Our whole notion of airflight is casting off the old meaning of speed through space, and developing a new meaning based on instantaneous time…The meaning of airflight has for the most part been conditioned by a rationalism that supposes truths – such as nature, progress, and speed. Such meanings are merely "categorical" and have no basis in actual fact. The same condition exists in art, if one sees the art through the rational categories of "painting, sculpture and architecture". The rationalist sees only the details and never the whole. The categories that proceed from rational logic inflates a linguistic detail into a dated system of meaning, so that we cannot see the aircraft through the "speed". Language problems are often at the bottom of most rationalistic "objectivity". One must be conscious of the changes in language, before one attempts to discover the form of an object of fact[^7]."

Smithson is certainly not the first to say that we must move away from categories of language that imprison our perceptions and limit our thought structures with regard to space, speed and movement. The work of art such as he interprets it, insofar as it exposes the places themselves, linking them, helping us to overcome language barriers. In this respect, mobility can be seen as a struggle against fixed, immutable language. Mobility requires a new vocabulary because it shows us space and time in different ways. And it is art that can provide us with this vocabulary, or at the very least help us to devise it).

It is in this way that he introduced the notion of “instantaneity,” and, later, a kind of a crystalline measurement of space. The higher planes (or satellites) fly or orbit, the more fixed they seem relative to space (in fact, their speed relative to the earth is increasingly difficult to gauge: at a precise moment, the ground below the airplane or satellite seems frozen). Based on this observation, Smithson’s passion for crystals led him to develop a new way of thinking about the segmentation of space using purely esthetic intuition, based on a comparison he makes with the archetypal structure of the crystal.

“The stream-lines of space are replaced by a crystalline structure of time[^8].”
“The site [is] joined to the sky in a structural equation[^9].”

If one imagines the archetypal form of a crystal (for instance, that of a snow crystal[^10]), we see that at a precise moment, its apex (i.e. the airplane or satellite) brings together an entire, three-dimensional branch structure. Smithson thus contrasts our normal way of representing space as a four-sided map with a spatial and temporal reality that, one might say, requires us to conceive space based on the shape of a crystal. The technical “perfectioning” of mobility requires us to create new scales of measurement, new relationships to space and time, and new linguistic links. For instance, the space between two poles (or points) can be considered as an element of a single crystalline unit. The time between these two poles is eliminated, from a satellite’s perspective. A work of art can similarly serve as a unit of measure. “Remote places such as the Pine Barrens of New Jersey and the frozen wastes of the North and South Poles could be coordinated by art forms that would use the actual land as a medium[^11].”

Finally, mobility creates an almost metaphysical discomfort in Smithson: it teaches us that all perception is an illusion that only exists in anticipation of a greater conquest of space and time that ultimately will challenge it. Mobility is not solely a source of

pleasure and wonder that, for example, allows us to observe a work of Aerial Art or one of his Earthworks; it is also disruptive, undermining our convictions and preconceived ideas, and providing perspective - both physical and historical - and depth hitherto unexpected.

Mobility also questions language by necessitating the invention of new terminology to suit the new realities it creates. Robert Smithson seems to tell us in what ways art can help in this process - for example, by providing novel bases of comparison and inspiration, like the purely esthetic comparison that led him to propose a unit of scientific measure that echoes the image of a crystal. Science and technology cannot advance alone. That is what “artist-consultant” Robert Smithson tells us. The work (indeed the responsibility) of the artist is also to build the real world in collaboration with engineers.

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[^1]: Robert Smithson, cited by Maggie Gilchrist, Ruine des anciennes frontières, in Robert Smithson, Une rétrospective, Le paysage entropique 1960 – 1973, exhibition catalogue, Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1994, Marseille, MAC, galeries contemporaines des Musées de Marseille, 1994, Musées de Marseille – RMN éditions, 1994, p. 19. [^2]: Robert Smithson, “Aerial Art,” in The Writings of Robert Smithson, Essays with illustrations, edited by Nancy Holt, designed by Sol LeWitt, New York University Press, New York, 1979, p. 92. [^3]: *Ibid*., p. 92. [^4]: *Ibid*., p.92. [^5]: *Ibid*., p. 92. [^6]: Robert Smithson, “Towards the Development of An Air Terminal Site,” in The Writings of Robert Smithson, Essays with illustrations, edited by Nancy Holt, designed by Sol LeWitt, New York University Press, New York, 1979, p. 41. [^7]: *Ibid*., p. 41. [^8]: *Ibid*., p.42. [^9]: *Ibid*., p. 44. [^10]: It seems obvious that Robert Smithson’s passion for crystallography acquainted him with such celebrated works a: Snow Crystals (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1931), by American photographer Wilson Alwyn Bentley. [^11]: *Ibid*., p. 44.

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Auteur(s)
Guillaume Logé (Researcher in Art History and Environmental Sciences)
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