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Science Fictional Transcendentalism in the Work of Robert Smithson

Eric Saxon

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, ericjsaxon@gmail.com

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SCIENCE FICTIONAL TRANSCENDENTALISM IN THE WORK
OF ROBERT SMITHSON

by

Eric Saxon

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SCIENCE FICTIONAL TRANSCENDENTALISM IN THE WORK
OF ROBERT SMITHSON

Eric James Saxon, M.A.

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Advisor: Marissa Vigneault

In studies of American artist Robert Smithson (1938-1973), scholars often set the artist's early abstract expressionist and Christian iconographical paintings apart from the rest of his body of work, characterizing this early phase as a youthful encounter with the enduring legacy of abstract expressionism in the late 1950s to early 1960s as well as a temporary preoccupation with ritualized Catholic imagery. This thesis argues for the inclusion of this early phase into Smithson's career as a foundational period in which he established the set of problems that artistically engaged him throughout his life: issues of temporality, materiality, and universal entropy. Continually addressing these issues from several different directions, Smithson's work developed across the media of sculpture, writing, film, and eventually to the monumental earthworks for which he is most well known, such as *Spiral Jetty* (1970).

After a discussion focusing on the 1967 debate about temporality in art that took place in the journal *Artforum*, which pitted art historian Michael Fried against Smithson and captures an art world in flux between the late modernism espoused by Fried and the developing post-modernism of Smithson, this thesis posits that Smithson employed strategies informed by science fiction, particularly the "New Wave" of science fiction developed in the 1960s by writers such as William S. Burroughs and J.G. Ballard, to express aspects of the sublime in his work. Smithson introduced impressions of

timelessness, infinity, and teleportation to the problems of temporality, materiality, and entropy, creating conceptually multivalent works that simultaneously exist both “here” and “elsewhere.” In his use of science fiction to transcend temporality, as well as his move out of the interior of the gallery to create earthworks in the remote wilderness, the thesis positions Smithson as a unique kind of science fiction-style transcendentalist; unlike the original nineteenth-century Transcendentalists who sought divine connection and truth in nature, however, Smithson pursued what lies beyond the observable to find truths in nullification and antimatter.

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Introduction

In order to fit an artist's body of work within the stylistic and period generalizations required by the vast art historical timeline (30,000+ B.C. - 2013 A.D.), an often complex and diverse body of work is typically reduced to one or a few representative artworks. In the case of American artist Robert Smithson (1938-1973), the signature work in question is the monumental earthwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970) (Fig. 1), a crosier-shaped jetty built up from mud, basalt rocks, and precipitated salt crystals that is usually semi-submerged under the blood-red waters of a remote cove in Utah's Great Salt Lake. Other Smithson works that might be familiar to the student of art are his dramatic statements on entropy, such as gravity-induced "pours" like *Asphalt Rundown* (1969) (Fig. 2) and the artificially accelerated ruin that was *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) (Fig. 3). *Spiral Jetty* analogues *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* (1971) (Fig. 4) and *Amarillo Ramp* (1973) (Fig. 5) complete the group of Smithson's most well-known works composing what is generally recognized in art historical circles as his mature phase.

These examples of land art have been justifiably singled out in Smithson's oeuvre as the culminating statements of an artistic life that, although cut short by a 1973 plane crash while surveying the site for *Amarillo Ramp*, produced a prodigious multi-media output remarkably consistent in its artistic themes and sensibilities. The early phase of Smithson's career, however, when he was a young painter in New York City influenced by a heady mixture of late abstract expressionism, proto-neo-avant-garde, Byzantine icons, and Christian iconography is often missing from the story or treated as an isolated phase.¹

¹ Notable exceptions that include the early works in their retrospectives are Jennifer Roberts's *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), Eugenie Tsai's "Robert

This thesis establishes that the themes and concerns at play in these early paintings and drawings, dating from the 1950s to the early 1960s, continue throughout the various transmutations of Smithson's career, including the prominent earthworks that expanded the definition of the sculptural field in the late 1960s. Furthermore, this thesis addresses what has been the central difficulty of positioning Smithson's early phase as a foundation rather than youthful detour: reconciling the religious character of this art with the fact that Smithson's mature earthworks are not overtly religious and Smithson was by all accounts not a religious practitioner has effectively quarantined his expressionistic early works from consideration with the whole. Moving beyond this understandable impulse to separate the vagaries of religious art and practice from the *prima facie* secularized sphere of modern art, I posit that Smithson was not religious in the traditional church-going sense, but was an art philosopher exploring a version of Transcendentalism that emphasized both the inescapability of natural decay and an alternative "elsewhere" zone that might be called Limbo, Heaven, or Purgatory in religious terms, but that seems

Smithson: Plotting a Line from Passaic, New Jersey, to Amarillo, Texas" in *Robert Smithson* ed. Eugenie Tsai and Cornelia Butler (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004) and Thomas Crow's essay "Cosmic Exile: Prophetic Turns in the Life and Art of Robert Smithson" in *Robert Smithson* ed. Eugenie Tsai and Cornelia Butler (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004). Caroline A. Jones examines how the re-discovery of the early material changes interpretations of Smithson in "Preconscious/Posthumous Smithson: The Ambiguous Status of Art and Artist in the Postmodern Frame." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*. 41 (Spring 2002): pp. 16-37. The early phase is also considered in the Smithson chapters in Susan Boettger's *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) and Caroline A. Jones *The Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Eugenie Tsai's *Robert Smithson Unearthed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) gathered together a great amount of the early work in its pages and was instrumental in introducing this previously largely "buried" phase to the public. Finally, artist Nancy Holt, Smithson's widow, donated a huge amount of Smithson material that encompassed both Smithson and her own life to the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art in 1987 and set off a second wave of Smithson studies. These are now available to researchers as the Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers.

to be equivalent to “oblivion” to the artist himself.² This was a science fictional transcendentalism, achieved through an alienated sublime.

Smithson believed in a sort of circular model of time “where remote futures meet remote pasts.”³ Twisting a nineteenth-century epistemological dichotomy with religion at one end and science at the other into a circular loop, Smithson employed science in a creative way—that is, fictionally, to meet the remote mythic religiosities of the past. This thesis claims that religion and science fiction meet in the “present” of Smithson’s works, which are Janus-faced towards the remote past and remote future, respectively. It is an idea that has heretofore been only hinted at or avoided in Smithson scholarship because of a complex of apparently spiky issues that arises from conflating two seemingly disparate mythopoeic origin points, religion and science. In order to establish an argument for this new prolegomena for Smithson’s works, this thesis divides its discussion into two chapters, one on religion and one on science.

Chapter One, “Modern Art Ecumenical Matters and Robert Smithson’s Early Paintings,” introduces the debate over temporality in art in the late 1960s and early 1970s and presents Smithson and art historian Michael Fried as the representatives for the opposing sides. The issues raised in this debate for artistic practice are then explored through an analysis of Smithson’s early religious paintings from 1960 – 1961. Chapter Two, “Science Fiction Antimatter Strategies in Smithson’s Mature Work,” shows how Smithson borrowed strategies from science fiction to resolve the problems of temporality

² Smithson described the space between his “sites” and “nonsites” as “oblivion” in an interview with William Lipke. “Oblivion to me is a state when you’re not conscious of the time or space you are in. You’re oblivious to its limitations... There’s no order outside the order of the material.” Smithson, “Fragments of a Conversation” in Jack Flam, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 190.

³ Robert Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” *Artforum* (September 1968), reprinted in Flam, 113.

addressed in the first chapter, resulting in work that transitioned from his earlier religious paintings to what would eventually constitute his mature phase of production involving the site/nonsite dialectic and land forms. By “antimatter,” I mean to suggest a term that is more illustrative metaphor than particle physics. “Science fiction antimatter strategies” here are artistic approaches influenced by the science fiction genre—primarily via novels, short stories, and films—which Smithson used to imbue a materialized work with a transcendent element suggesting a cosmic “elsewhere” that occurs beyond the immediately observable.⁴

⁴ Smithson’s own use of the word “antimatter” appears to be limited to one essay he wrote in 1965 for an exhibition catalog about the sculptor Donald Judd. Tellingly, for an artist who was already incorporating mirrored surfaces into his sculptural work, Smithson uses the term “antimatter” in describing the “reversible up and down quality” of Judd’s sculptures. “Ups are downs and downs are ups. An uncanny materiality inherent in the surface engulfs the basic structure. Both surface and structure exist simultaneously in a suspended condition. What is outside vanishes to meet the inside, while what is inside vanishes to meet the outside. The concept of ‘**antimatter**’ overruns, and fills everything, making these very definite works verge on the notion of disappearance... The more one tries to grasp the surface structure, the more baffling it becomes. The work seems to have no natural equivalent to anything physical, yet all it brings to mind is physicality.” emphasis added. Smithson, “Donald Judd,” Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art Catalog, *7 Sculptors* (1965) in Flam, 6.

Chapter 1

Modern Art Ecumenical Matters and Robert Smithson's Early Paintings

***Artforum's* Move to NYC and Robert Smithson's Emergence as a "Conscious Artist"**

The fall of 1967 saw an important shift in critical discourse on contemporary American art; in September, the influential journal *Artforum* moved its headquarters from Los Angeles to New York City—it had started out in San Francisco in 1962. The coastal switch for *Artforum* signified a move from the cool capital of the periphery, Los Angeles, to the center of the art world. New York by then had seen abstract expressionism's reign come to a conclusion and artists and critics were in a transitional period between late modernism and what would come to be known as postmodernism. In the wake of abstract expressionism's decline, competing art movements of the 1960s sprang up in what art historian Arthur Danto refers to as a "paroxysm of styles;" pop art, op art, hard-edged abstraction, neo-avant garde, conceptual art, and others emerged within a larger American culture that was increasingly socially and politically divided by movements to expand civil rights and individual liberties as well as moments of upheaval and schism within and against existing institutions—from the military to the universities to the museum.⁵

It was in this late modernist, post-abstract-expressionist New York milieu that Robert Smithson became an artist. Born and raised in New Jersey, Smithson as a child often visited the New York Museum of Natural History with his family, drawn in particular to the dinosaur exhibits; Smithson's fascination with the remote past was

⁵ Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997) 13.

established early. Contact with the art world began for Smithson when he won a scholarship at age sixteen to the Art Students League of New York. Smithson continued his studies at the Brooklyn Museum School, where he received formal training as a painter and an illustrator while still going to high school in Clifton, New Jersey.⁶ Moving to New York in 1957, Smithson's earliest work reflects the formal appearance of the abstract expressionism that still dominated the city (Fig. 6). The grids and pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb and the gestural brushstrokes of biomorphic, mythological figuration of *Eyes in the Heat*-era Pollock seem particularly close to Smithson as influences at this time.⁷

In an extensive, chronologically comprehensive 1972 interview with Smithson by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, the artist claims to have only emerged as a "conscious artist" in the years 1965-66.⁸ This timeframe dates after he said he abandoned painting in 1963 to "work plastics in a kind of crystalline way."⁹ Smithson states that after around 1964, he arrived at an abstract means of expression "devoid of any kind of mythological content" and he had therefore overcome problems of figuration and a latent anthropomorphism that he saw as a failing of the New York school's brand of abstract expressionism: "I felt that Jackson Pollock never really understood that, and

⁶ Eugenie Tsai, *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawing, Collages, Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 6.

⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁸ "Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art/ Smithsonian Institution" (1972), in Flam, 284. "CUMMINGS: But it's interesting because there is a development away from traditional kinds of imagery and yet an involvement with natural materials...SMITHSON: Well, I would say that begins to surface in 1965-66. That's when I really began to get into that, and when I consider my emergence as a conscious artist. Prior to that my struggle was to get into another realm."

⁹ Ibid.

although I admire him still, I still think that was something that was always eating him up inside.”¹⁰

Smithson’s 1965-66 breakthrough to what he perceived as a purer form of abstraction without abstract expressionism’s mytho-psychological baggage arrived just in time for *Artforum*’s move to his hometown. Today, the issues of *Artforum* from the mid-to-late 1960s to the early 1970s are records of the art world’s flux and an intellectual tug-of-war between a late modernism that was already showing signs of crumbling and an emerging postmodernism that would change everything. Smithson was remarkably suited to be a representative for the later side of this debate because of his immersion into and consequent rejection of abstract expressionism, as well as his intellectual preparedness sharpened by years of autodidactic and boundless study, and he would make significant contributions to the magazine; first in a letter to the editor and later in articles that functioned themselves as works of art.

If Smithson, as he claimed, did indeed become a “conscious artist” in 1965–1966 with his crystallography-inspired sculptures such as 1966’s *Plunge* (Fig. 7), I hold that the thematic issues of the visually and psychologically fraught artwork that he produced previously would not be jettisoned as Smithson and art historians would later claim, although these themes would never appear again so nakedly. They would remain under the surface, perhaps unconsciously. Referring to the “figurative overtone” that brought with it “mythological content” in his early work in the the Cummings interview, the same tendency he had ascribed to Pollock, Smithson states, “I had completely gotten rid of that problem.” This is the terminology of denial. The “problem” of anthropomorphism would merely be transubstantiated from figurative painting to abstract sculpture to earthworks;

¹⁰ Ibid.

the “mythological content” remained, albeit less overtly religious and more part of the realm of science fiction. The next section accordingly discusses how the “conscious artist” that Smithson became used *Artforum* to position himself in an aesthetic discourse that at times resembled a ecumenical debate. It begins with a letter to the editor that was, appropriately enough for the future earth artist, like a line drawn in the sand.

Countering Michael Fried: Smithson’s October 1967 Letter to *ARTFORUM*

In October 1967, via a letter to the editor in *Artforum* magazine, Smithson clearly announced his defection from the orthodox version of high modernism exemplified by the writings of critic Clement Greenberg that were subsequently taken on by the critic and art historian Michael Fried. Prior to this, Smithson had expressed his doubts about the modernist emphasis on medium-specific purity by writing art journal essays and articles, as well as creating work that increasingly ran counter to traditional modernist aesthetics and values. One crucial issue where Greenberg, and later his protégé Fried, differed with Smithson was the claim that great art exists as a delimited object, whereas Smithson held that objects do not exist in isolation from other objects; to him, everything in the universe was permanently engaged in an ongoing dialogue with everything else. Smithson’s heightened perception of the complex interrelatedness of things led to a suspicion of the modernist impulse to isolate and categorize art or medium in a search for the pure or truly transcendent artwork.

In Smithson’s letter to *Artforum*, the quest for transcendence through art is a central concern. Smithson, Greenberg, and Fried did not disagree about the importance of transcendence, but remained completely at odds with each other about the means to get there. For Greenberg and Fried, it is a matter based in optical perception; transcendence

through art is achieved by way of the eye. Greenberg wrote in his 1958 essay, “Sculpture in Our Time,” “Rendering substance entirely optical, and form, whether pictorial, sculptural, or architectural, as an integral part of ambient space—this brings anti-illusionism full circle. Instead of the illusion of things, we are now offered the illusion of modalities: namely, that matter is incorporeal, weightless, and exists only optically like a mirage.”¹¹ For Smithson, this reliance on the eye was inadequate because the sensory information that the corporeal eyes gathered was suspect; he even attempted to demonstrate the deficiency of their perceptive capabilities in artworks that created mirages or illusions through mirrors, such as *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1965) (Fig. 8). This work is composed of a steel frame that holds mirrors at oblique angles. When viewers stand between the two mirrors, they do not see their own reflection as they are accustomed to with mirrors, since the mirrors are angled in such a way that they only reflect the opposite mirror. Thus, the viewer “disappears,” as does their sense of self: the eye/I is not where it was expected to be.

Smithson explained *Enantiomorphic Chambers* as a type of negative stereoscope.¹² “The two separate ‘pictures’ that are usually placed in a stereoscope have been replaced by two separate mirrors in my *Enantiomorphic Chambers*—thus excluding any fused image. This negates any central vanishing point, and takes one physically to the other side of the double mirrors. It is as though one were being imprisoned by the actual structure of two alien eyes. It is an illusion without an illusion.”¹³ Relying totally on

¹¹ Clement Greenberg, “Sculpture in Our Time” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 60.

¹² A stereoscope is a device that pairs two images that the physiology of the eye fuses onto each other to make one seamless three-dimensional image.

¹³ Robert Smithson, “Pointless Vanishing Points” (1967) in *Flam*, 359. This unpublished piece ends with the sentence “The double prison of the eyes becomes a fact.”

optical perception does not go far in helping the viewer to appreciate this piece.¹⁴

Because of the eye's inadequacy, the transcendence gained through the act of looking was incomplete for Smithson. Inadequacy of sensual perception is a major issue of disagreement between the two camps made clear in Smithson's October 1967 letter to *Artforum*.

Smithson wrote the letter in response to Fried's June 1967 *Artforum* article "Art and Objecthood." The letter is a chidingly humorous piece of writing that aims to upset the authority of Fried's article while reinforcing Smithson, well-known on the scene as a loquacious and tireless arguer, as a formidable critical voice and the intellectual junkyard dog of a new wave of artists in an important public forum.¹⁵ The record shows that Fried was the initial aggressor: "Art and Objecthood" was an attack on minimalism as "theatricality." Fried refers to minimalism throughout the article as "literalist art" and calls out the style's practitioners Sol Le Witt, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Tony Smith and other figures that Smithson counted as his artistic allies.¹⁶ Thus, Fried's article provided Smithson the opportunity to write a letter that, if published, would publicly fortify solidarity with his successful friends, as well as serve as a platform for his rapidly

¹⁴ *Enantiomorphic Chambers* has also been described as a send-up of Fried's Princeton roommate Frank Stella's well-known aphorism, "What you see is what you see." Crow, "Cosmic Exile," 50.

¹⁵ At times Smithson's predilection for articulate polemics would grate on some of these artists: in a one-sentence letter to the editor in *Arts Magazine* in February 1967 Donald Judd wrote "Smithson isn't my spokesman" in response to a December 1966-January 1967 article in the same magazine that referred to Smithson as "spokesman for the so-called 'minimal sculptors.'" Flavin also replied in the same letter column, referencing a then-popular ventriloquist dummy, "Smithson is not my Mortimer Snerd. Ask him." In a response letter to these responses, Smithson replied "Artists, especially those mentioned above, do not need a 'spokesman.'" Crow, 49.

¹⁶ Smithson himself was included in the article, albeit in a footnote. "⁴ It is theatrically, too, that links all these artists to other figures as disparate as Kaprow, Cornell, Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, Flavin, Smithson, Kienholz, Segal, Samaras, Christo, Kusama...the list could go on indefinitely." Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 172.

evolving ideas about time and art. Thus began one battle of the internecine art wars of the late 1960s.

Fried's closing sentences of "Art and Objecthood" summarize that his motivation him to write was "the desire to distinguish what to me is the authentic art of our time and other work."¹⁷ Somebody from the group practicing "other work" had to respond, and Smithson in 1967 was in a unique position to do so. He had sharpened his philosophical talking points in essays such as "Entropy and the New Monuments" (first published in *Artforum* in June 1966), "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space" (*Arts Magazine*, November 1966), and "Ultramoderne" (*Arts Magazine*, September-October 1967). As part of the philosophical scaffolding of these seminal articles, in which Smithson basically develops the labyrinthine reasoning behind his manifesto for future work, are references to science fiction and an emphasis on entropy as an all-consuming and inexorable force inseparable from time.

One of the main problems that Smithson had with Fried's article concerns Fried's quixotic attempts to overcome and compensate for issues of temporality, with which Smithson had already been wrestling. Fried aimed to continue Clement Greenberg's quest for purity of media and critical exaltation of the artworks that met his standards in an art world that seemed increasingly penetrated by commercialism and kitsch. Greenberg and Fried's modernist requirement for art stipulated that it be autonomous and emanate outwards; there is no need for a viewer or audience to complete it, as it is not "theater"--it is "instantaneous." Fried argued for an art experience where "*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest* ... It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of

¹⁷ Ibid.

instantaneousness.”¹⁸ In other words, the experiencer of art may lose him or herself or be absorbed into a state where time is no longer relevant. In regards to the minimalist work that he criticizes in the article, Fried emphasizes that “the experience in question *persists in time*, and the presentment of endlessness that, I have been claiming, is central to literalist art and theory is a presentment of endless, or indefinite, *duration*.”¹⁹ While observing a work of art Fried does not want to be conscious of the space and time between the piece and himself; this increment of distance for him is theatrical because it involves (self) consciousness/awareness.

In the epigraph of the article, Fried, via the intellectual historian Perry Miller, quotes American colonial theologian Jonathan Edwards, author of the sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God:” “...it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed...we every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first.”²⁰ This sets the tone for Fried’s own homily about the scourge of minimalism and suggests that his faith in the primacy of “instantaneousness” was akin to religious conviction, a call for spiritual delivery through absorption into deep contemplation of Art.²¹ Enter Smithson: by 1967 Smithson had already worked through a period of Christian revelation in his art of the early 60s, which I examine below in more detail in the section “*Christ in Limbo*.” In his October 1967 letter to *Artforum*, Smithson satirizes Fried’s epigraph with his own Jonathan Edwards

¹⁸ Fried, 171.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Fried, 148.

²¹ Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum, 1962-1974*. (New York: Soho Press, 2000), 9, writes about the *Artforum* contributors that “Time and again, in their writings, one confronts the terms ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ in reference to aesthetic choices. Picking up on the tone of religiouslike fervor, [the critic Carter] Ratcliff, in 1973, astutely labeled Michael Fried an ‘ecstatic academic.’”

quote, which he proposes could serve as a “prologue” to an imaginary television show called *The Tribulations of Michael Fried*:

...there will be no end to this exquisite, horrible misery, when you look forward you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts.

Jonathan Edwards²²

Rather than revelation, then, in his minimalist-style art, Smithson had already run up against the counter notions of terrifying endlessness and temporal decay, as well as the problematic distance between an artwork and viewer across an “abyss of time.”²³ The central issues and problems concerning earth’s temporality and the resulting possibility or impossibility of the “instantaneousness” of an artwork’s transmission to the viewer are what led Smithson to employ science fiction themes in his work. Science fiction’s mix of plausibility and sublime mystery concerning alternative worlds and existences creates a heady formula that allowed Smithson to keep grounded in materiality or physical probability while simultaneously suggesting the potential for a transcendent art that included notions of infinite extension and an unfathomable “other.” In art world discourse, combining empirical science with wildly creative fiction also made the prodigiously well-read Smithson the demiurge of every argument, especially against an earnest scholar of orthodox modernism like Fried.²⁴

²² *Artforum* (October 1967), Robert Smithson’s Letter to the Editor. 4.

²³ Smithson, from “Fragments of a Conversation” in *Flam*, 188. Smithson is possibly quoting Scottish scientist John Playfair’s comment about geologic deep time, “the mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far into the abyss of time.” John Playfair, “Hutton’s Unconformity” in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh V* (1805).

²⁴ The vast difference in the two men’s education and background should be noted here. Michael Fried, born and raised in New York City, was educated at Princeton (B.A.), was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, and received his Ph.D. from Harvard (Lee Sorensen, “Fried, Michael.” *Dictionary of Art Historians* [website]. www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/friedm.html). Smithson, however, only reluctantly finished public high school in Clifton, New Jersey (“In a very, very definite way I wanted nothing to do with high school, and I had no intention of going to college.” Interview with Paul Cummings in *Flam*, 272.) and was self-taught in

In “Art and Objecthood,” Fried jumpstarted *Artforum*’s mission to foment debate over what would come to be postmodernism. Wittingly or not, he chose a conceptual territory quite familiar to Smithson.²⁵ Indeed, the vehemence expressed in Smithson’s letter in response may perhaps stem from the sentiment embedded in the expression “familiarity breeds contempt.” The artist derided the critic for sermonizing against the corrupting influence of infinity: “Fried has declared his sacred duty to modernism and will now make combat with what Jorge Luis Borges calls ‘the numerous Hydra.’”²⁶ In his letter Smithson insists that it is Fried’s discomfort with his *own* distance and his own theatrical criticism that is at the center of the article, writing, “Every refutation is a mirror of the thing it refutes—*ad infinitum*. Every war is a battle with reflections. What Michael Fried attacks is what he is.”²⁷

Of course, in this statement there is also a reflection of its author.²⁸ Smithson’s “battle with reflections” was already underway. Mirrors, mirages and other confusions of the corporeal eye, enantiomorphic or reflective processes such as the symmetrical growth of crystals and reciprocal relationships between centers and peripheries preoccupied the artist throughout his career. Smithson ends his October 1967 letter with one of his

the books that were part of Fried’s course of study. That they were brought together, or perhaps thrown together by *Artforum* editor Philip Leider, in the democratic forum of the magazine’s pages is remarkable. Smithson’s auto-didactic nature is also at the center of his multi-media practice in which he mixed elements of high culture with middle and low forms with no compunction, perhaps with even a bit of relish. For an excellent book-length examination of the significance of New Jersey (among other things) in Smithson’s work, see Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003).

²⁵ Much later, Fried continued to hold that he was correct, but grants that Smithson was a worthy opponent. In a comment published in 2000 he said “I still stand with ‘Art and Objecthood’ against what [Smithson] did and wrote,” but Fried cites a later article by Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind” (1968) as “by far the most intelligent and interesting article written against my position.” Newman, 256.

²⁶ Smithson, Letter to the Editor, *Artforum*, 4.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ James Meyer has written that Smithson “Smithsonized” Fried with a “dialectical perversity all his own.” (Review of Pamela Lee’s *Chronophobia* in the *Art Bulletin*, Dec. 2006, p. 783)

favorite conclusions, a reminder that there's no escaping the inexorable grind of entropy. This time, entropy is wheeled out as an inherent element of eternal time: "eternity brings about the dissolution of belief in temporal histories...all becomes ephemeral and in a sense unreal, even the universe loses its reality."²⁹ Smithson extends the time scale of the *Artforum* debate from the biologic to the geologic on the way towards an entropic endpoint of zero energy, past "dissolution" of belief and everything else in the universe, to the very end of time. Smithson wins by termination, employing an evolved form of a child's "plus infinity" argument strategy used to effectively close out a game of escalating insults. Smithson's geologic sensibility combined with an affinity for the infinite to create a conceptual space beyond time's reach, a limbo zone that he would repeatedly use as his trump card and sanctuary throughout his career.

Divergent Gospels, Same Church

It is important to note that despite the differences between Smithson and Fried's ideas, both debate participants share the same concern about the transmission of a work of art through time and space. The aesthetics and dynamics of an artwork's power to transcend this temporal realm is their point of contention. Fried and Smithson are both interested in promoting and experiencing "the eternal" in the art they observe and create, a sort of ever-present revelation brought down to human terms. As Jennifer Roberts observes, Smithson's condescension in the *Artforum* letter might stem from the fact that

²⁹ Smithson, Letter to the Editor, 4. It should be noted that despite the professed futility of doing so, Smithson continued to work tirelessly throughout his life on art that sought to collaborate with the inevitability of entropy instead of working against it. Entropic processes and the concept of a universe ultimately drained of all energy didn't seem to drain Smithson's own energy.

he has already “tried Fried’s eternalizing strategy, has found it wanting, and has developed a better one.”³⁰

One reason that Smithson rejected Fried’s method is because he found it did not evade entropy nor even acknowledge it. For Smithson, entropy was a central issue of life. The strategic recourse that Smithson worked out, announced in the pages of *Artforum* prior to the 1967 letter in his article *Entropy and the New Monuments* (June 1966), was to acknowledge entropy in his work and make it a functional part of the work’s dynamic nature. The article focuses on the works of his contemporaries Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, Peter Hutchison and others, but Smithson is merely using them as his “Mortimer Snerds”(see note fifteen) in order to identify what their work has in common with his own. Therefore, these artists “bring to mind the Ice Age rather than the Golden Age” and their work seems to confirm Vladimir Nabokov’s oft-repeated observation in connection with Smithson, “The future is but the obsolete in reverse.”³¹

³⁰ Jennifer Roberts, *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004) 34.

³¹ Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” *Artforum*, (June 1966) in Flam, 10. This quote by Nabokov in conjunction with Smithson is often quoted but rarely explained, as if it is self-evident. It often appears at the end of a paragraph, like it does here. In relation to Smithson’s work and outlook, it seems to be a statement about the perspective of the present while looking backward and forward into time. The past was once the future, and the future will be the past, so all of the future’s surprises and technological developments will one day be obsolete. It is easier to imagine a building of the present, which we can see, as ruins in the future, the time when those buildings become part of the past. It’s only one more level of imaginary projection to conceptualize that the things of the future that have not yet materialized will also be obsolete ruins once they are relegated to the past. Nabokov’s quote illustrates the all-encompassing nature of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, of entropy, that operates on the earth. For those that see Smithson’s entropic worldview as fatalistic and detect an air of cold doom about much of his artwork, it is interesting that in “Entropy and the New Monuments,” after Smithson defines the Second Law of Thermodynamics as “energy is more easily lost than obtained” and projects an “ultimate future” where the “whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing sameness,” he notes that “The ‘blackout’ that covered the Northeastern states recently, may be seen as a preview of such a future. Far from creating a mood of dread, the power failure created a mood of euphoria. An almost cosmic joy swept over all the darkened cities. Why people felt that way may never be answered.” (Ibid.)

Examples of Smithson's mature works that most clearly display entropy as a prominent theme are today, appropriately enough, mostly eroded. They include his "earthworks" that were built and then left to the elements, such as *Spiral Jetty* (1970) (Fig. 1), *Asphalt Rundown* (1969) (Fig. 2), *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) (Fig. 3), *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* (1971) (Fig. 4) and *Amarillo Ramp* (1973) (Fig. 5). These works embrace the process of entropy by moving out of the relatively protective space of the gallery into untended outdoor spaces and they counter the a priori positioning of the eye that Greenberg and Fried insisted upon. What erodes away can no longer be seen by the eye.

In a reductive simplification that is nevertheless effective in understanding the depth of Smithson's radical anti-modernism, Smithson's and other land artists' shift of their artworks from the gallery to outdoors in the late 1960s and early 1970s was akin to the Transcendentalists breaking with the teachings of the Unitarian church at Harvard Divinity School. As the Transcendentalists intentionally de-centered the authority of the church as the physical place of worship in favor of direct experience of the divine through nature, land artists undermined the primacy of the gallery in favor of a relationship more integrated with the world outside of the gallery or museum. In Smithson's case, he would never completely leave the gallery, but the works he ensconced there served as reminders of its inadequacy.

Smithson's Transcendentalist Split with Modernism

Fried's insistence on valuing "instantaneousness" required a difficult-to-achieve suspension of history and subjectivity's hold on a work; the distance he abhors always

reasserts itself after a “flash” of revelation because the viewer is always physically separate from the artwork. As Jennifer Roberts points out, Smithson believed “it was better to adopt a strategy of infinite skepticism, infinite fragmentation, infinite duration, in order to arrive at eternal time. Smithson’s historical transcendence was inclusionary while Fried’s was exclusionary, but it was a brand of transcendence nonetheless.”³² Studies of Smithson often miss his transcendental streak and apply an analysis that proceeds only as far as identifying his pervasive emphasis on entropy and the Second Law of Thermodynamics as the prime mover of his oeuvre.³³ However, underneath the pronounced entropic expressions of erosion and system breakdown of which Smithson was so acutely aware, there is also a detectable search by the artist for a resolution to these problems.³⁴

In a 1973 interview with Alison Sky titled “Entropy Made Visible” published in the journal *On Site*, Smithson wanders unprompted into the transcendental question: “There’s this need to try to transcend one’s condition. I’m not a transcendentalist, so I just see things going towards a... well it’s very hard to predict anything; anyway all predictions tend to be wrong. I mean even planning. I mean planning and chance almost seem to be the same thing.”³⁵ For an artist who was usually quite clear on what he meant

³² Ibid.

³³ Perhaps one reason why so few studies mention any Transcendentalist qualities is because, unlike his many other concepts, he so rarely wrote about them. In *Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape* (1973) Smithson does mention “the spiritualism of Thoreauian transcendentalism” and its “present day offspring of ‘modernist formalism’ rooted in Kant, Hegel, and Fichte,” but Smithson’s transcendentalism is unique to his artistic practice and it is not the Thoreauian variety. Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,” *Artforum* (1973) in Flam, 160.

³⁴ Two studies that do directly address Smithson’s Transcendentalist aspects are Jennifer Roberts account in the Introduction to *Mirror Travels* and Gregory Volk’s “An Aptitude for Vastness: Robert Smithson and Transcendentalism” in Brian Conley and Joe Arnheim, eds. *Robert Smithson* (Brooklyn, New York: Pierogi, 2000, 1997) 39.

³⁵ Smithson, “Entropy Made Visible” Interview with Alison Sky, *On Site #4* (1973) in Flam, 303-304.

to say, this statement demonstrates a marked ambivalence towards transcendence and free will regarding one's entropic fate.

There's this need to try to transcend one's condition, "one's condition" being to Smithson one's existence as a material being in an entropic world. Entropy was a problem that Smithson identified consistently and sought to come to terms with in his art in part through the concept of transcendence. In addition to allowing varying degrees of entropy to make their mark in his work, Smithson also maintained a conceptual sphere for his artwork that was free from the ravages of temporality, a notional space that existed outside of time.³⁶ One of the ways Smithson obtained access to this transcendent sphere was via the adaptation of the *topos*, gimmicks, clichés, attitudes, and fantastic ideas of science fiction for his art practice. The at-least-conceivably-plausible yet still decidedly alternate realities of the science fiction that influenced him offered a way for Smithson to step sideways and out rather than forward and backward in the narrative conveyor belt of the temporal world.

Smithson concludes the 1967 letter to *Artforum* with a science fiction twist ending, invoking the idea of parallel universes governed by different laws of time: "Could it be that there is a double Michael Fried—the atemporal Fried and the temporal Fried? Consider a subdivided progression of 'Frieds' on millions of stages."³⁷ On one level, this statement counts as one last jab at Fried's reflected theatricality by directing

³⁶ One aspect that Smithson shares with the original Transcendentalists at a basic level is the blend of the sublime with the earthly. "Yet by far the strongest emotional impetus behind [Emerson's] desire to make the word over the thing was his perpetually fresh experience of the sublime in the commonplace. He wrote in his journal for 1831: 'When I stamp through the mud in dirty boots, I hug myself with the feeling of my immortality.' ...[it was] his conviction that great art must unite the solid with the ethereal." F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1941) 39-40.

³⁷ Smithson, Letter to the Editor, *Artforum*, 4.

the reader to imagine the cacophony from an infinite critical babble of infinite parallel universes. For the purposes of this discussion, it is also a brief demonstration of the tendency in Smithson to use a science fiction trope—in this case, parallel universes—to introduce an element of atemporality, or the sublime, into much of his work. Temporality and atemporality are an enantiomorphic pair spiraling through the oeuvre of Smithson, evident even in his work as a young artist.

Christ in Limbo: Smithson's Geologic-Religious Vision and his 1960-1961 Paintings

One of the aspects of Michael Fried's article that Smithson most strongly attacked is the implied spiritualism Fried brought to his criticism of minimalism. Fried's invocation of the sermons of Jonathan Edwards must have raised the suspicions of more readers than just Smithson. Jonathan Edwards's "God" is the terrifying and vengeful figure of the Old Testament. In his 1967 *Artforum* letter Smithson parodied Fried's words as the hysterics of a fire-and-brimstone preacher projecting his own fears into his sermon about an impending "fall" from grace in painting and sculpture that he can do nothing to stop, writing, "The terrors of infinity are taking over the mind of Michael Fried...Non-durational labyrinths of time are infecting his brain with eternity."³⁸ Despite belittling Fried's imported spiritualism, Smithson was able to readily recognize Fried's concern because he had already confronted similar temporal challenges years before, in his paintings with Christian iconography that he created in 1960-1961 (Figs. 9 and 10) in preparation for a show at the Galeria George Lester in Rome.³⁹ Smithson spent three

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Katy Siegel, Exhibition Brochure for *Robert Smithson: IKONS* at Art Basel 41, James Cohan Gallery, 2010.

months in Rome, attempting to artistically engage with the city's treasure trove of ancient and religious art.⁴⁰

Even the briefest perusal of these 1960-1961 raises the question of the extent that religion, specifically Catholicism, played in Smithson's life. The "Chronology" of the artist in Robert Hobbs's *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* states that Smithson's father was Protestant and his mother was Catholic and that "Smithson became a Catholic."⁴¹ However, in the comprehensive 1972 interview with Paul Cummings for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Smithson states that he did not have a religious upbringing and in fact in high school he was a Communist and an atheist.⁴² It is quite clear, however, that Catholicism became a preoccupation of Smithson as a young artist attempting to confront the corpus of western art: "I guess I was always interested in origins and primordial beginnings...the archetypal nature of things. And I guess this was always haunting me all the way until about 1959 and 1960 when I got interested in Catholicism through T.S. Eliot and through that range of thinking."⁴³ Smithson goes on to say in the

⁴⁰ In the 1973 interview with Alison Sky, Smithson refers to Rome as "like a big scrap heap of antiquities."

⁴¹ The chronology was originally compiled by Alan Moore in 1974 and later revised by Peter Chametzky, Robert Hobbs, and Nancy Holt in 1981. "Chronology," *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) 231.

⁴² Like the earlier comment about "completely" overcoming the problem of figuration and mythology in the same interview, Smithson here seems perhaps overly adamant about what little impact Catholicism had in his life and work. Unfortunately, it appears no interviewer truly nailed down what role Catholicism played, but we do have the heavily iconographical early works and some isolated, illuminating comments such as those assembled in Caroline A. Jones's *Machine in the Studio*: "Friends described him after his death in ways he never described himself. 'Catholic and perverse,' one acquaintance put it; Carl Andre [a close artist friend; the Smithson-Holt papers contain years of handwritten correspondence between Smithson, Andre, and Holt] commented that 'Bob's spirit was aesthetically Catholic and Transylvanian,' and another friend spoke of his exposure to a 'poisonous' 50s Catholicism." Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) 280-281.

⁴³ Interview with Paul Cummings in Flam, 286. In her book, while trying to ascertain how Catholicism figured in his life, Caroline Jones also includes this quote and adds emphasis to "*haunted*."

same interview “I wanted to understand the roots of—I guess you could call it Western civilization really, and how religion had influenced art.”⁴⁴

Thus, through a combination of childhood engagement with Catholicism and his own investigations into the origins of civilization, Smithson was aware of the significance for human “eternal” salvation of the suffering of Christ and from an early age contrasted the temporal arena of the body with an alternate, atemporal dimension of existence: the spirit life of the soul. The figure of Christ functions both historically as a one-time human participant in this ongoing linear temporality and as an eternal being who exists atemporally in a conceptual realm beyond the historical record. Smithson’s paintings of 1960-1961 explore Christian issues of suffering in the material realm by depicting the figure of Christ locked in varying degrees of profane matter.

In *Christ Series: Christ in Limbo* (1961) (Fig. 9), this matter resembles both organic and mechanical layers. Jesus assumes the posture of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*, his canon of proportions expressed within the square of the earthly and the circle of the spiritual.⁴⁵ Enlarged ciliated microorganisms, louse-like arthropods, spiral nautilus, tapeworms and silverfish, all of Smithson’s own invention, have penetrated into both the profane and the sacred geometries that separated him from the teeming organic life that operates outside along a network of belts, pulleys, wheels, and spiral cogs. In the top right corner the picture’s surface seems to rip open along a zipper, revealing blood red material below. Christ displays his schematic circle + dot wounds to the viewer on his hands and feet, and on his crown of thorns there appears to be an

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ During a conversation with Dr. Marissa Vigneault about the painting, it was Dr. Vigneault who discerned the Vitruvian Man.

impaled supine crustacean with an extended tapeworm tail, an eyeball woven into one of its segments. This is a scene where it is not easy to recognize anything sacred, although the various Cenozoic-era insects are still not upon Christ's body. Smithson depicts nature as mechanical. The numerous eyeballs in the painting are mostly singles, unable to achieve depth of perception, or they exist in mismatched multiples that confound optical sense.

Christ descending to Hell, or the edge of Hell, also known as Limbo, is a common subject of Christian iconography. According to Christian teachings, after the Crucifixion but before the Resurrection Christ descended into Limbo to bring salvation to the righteous who were not baptized or otherwise marked with the grace of God but were not among the damned. In a version by a follower of Hieronymous Bosch (Fig. 11), possibly based on a lost original by Bosch, Christ appears as a superhero bringing salvation (Fig 12). Contrast this with Smithson's *Christ in Limbo*, and it would seem that Smithson's Christ arrived in the wrong place and is not in keeping with the iconographic tradition. However, given Smithson's sensibilities regarding deep or geologic time, one need only imagine that the humans and humanoids gathering around Christ in the Bosch painting have been substituted with earlier, simpler life forms, and an eternally recurring Christ has arrived to offer them salvation too.

When the "conscious artist" Smithson in 1967 reacts so strongly against Fried's Jonathan Edwards epigraph, "it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed," it is with the same sensibility he expresses in 1961 when he places Christ in Limbo within the primordial soup, a pronounced awareness that life on Earth is a process

of slow continuity and entropy. However, it is the suffering and decay of this time-space continuum and not transcendence that is more pronounced in this earlier work as conveyed in *Fallen Christ* (1961) (Fig. 10). This is Christ at his most burdened and oppressed by the duration between geologic eras, exhausted. Smithson's 1960–1961 iconographic works take a hard look at the problems of temporality, problems that Fried is also becoming acutely aware of and devising art criticism strategies against in the later "Art and Objecthood." In the same *Artforum* pages and in other art journals where his writing appeared, Smithson elucidated his own art strategies that explored the outer limits of time and the sublimity he perceived in its blurred boundaries. By the 1967 Smithson-Fried *Artforum* debate about temporality in art, Smithson had already decamped from the late modernism Fried still subscribed to, increasingly disappearing into dedifferentiated conceptual zones that, in hindsight, seem like black holes opening up in art historical discourse within which new deconstructive and postmodern understandings of art would develop.

Up from *Purgatory*

Purgatory (1959) (Fig. 6) is the chronological starting point for Smithson's body of work through the materiality/transcendence double lens that I propose remains a consistent dichotomy-dynamic throughout his important works and links his mature output with his earliest non-student works. In 1959's *Purgatory* the problems of temporality on the material plane are expressed in a dense impasto of bluish gray, white, and black rectangular outlines that in places bleed with red. The overall composition is locked in a crowded grid that suggests the blocks of skyscrapers amongst smaller

buildings, fire escape ladders, and traffic jams of its bustling place of creative origin, Manhattan.⁴⁶ The scattered eyesigns and teeth clenched within *Purgatory*'s urban jungle reveal the prevailing abstract expressionist influence of the New York school in 1959. One can detect the gestural traces of Willem de Kooning, Jean Dubuffet, Lee Krasner, and Adolph Gottlieb here, suggesting Smithson is still interested in the idea of expressing the unconscious. Other paintings from the same 1959 cycle, with titles such as *Walls of Dis* and *Flesh Eater*, display similar compaction of figurative forms that resemble a layer of mass extinction frozen in death throes underneath the crush of geologic strata. Smithson at this time was also writing miserablism poetry inspired by Dante that may be read as a literary companion to his paintings, demonstrating an anguished sensibility that is a far cry from the cool stance of his later work:

...
 Crushed under infernal
 Rocks.
 Eye in the crack of doom.
 Ear in the crack of doom.
 Mouth in the crack of doom.
 Eye staring without a face.
 Ear hearing without a face.
 Mouth shouting without a face.
 Thick despair.
 Boiling, Boiling, pus.
 No hope for us,
 Thick despair
 Support these walls of torture;
 Shape-less bodies
 Hold the dung of Satan;...⁴⁷

⁴⁶ With the exception of a period when he was hitchhiking through the United States in 1958, Smithson lived from 1957-1960 first on Park Avenue between 97th and 98th streets with poet Allan Brilliant and later in a loft above a synagogue at 27 Montgomery Street with Phil Israel, a city planner. Hobbs, *Chronology*, 232.

⁴⁷ Tsai, *Smithson Unearthed*, 12-13.

Following from Dante's *Inferno*, Smithson's artistic and poetic journey may be interpreted as a travelogue through different levels of material existence, from the remote past to the remote future, and, if one includes his philosophical overlay of circular time, back again. What differentiates the artist's "mature" work from this early work is the element of transcendent exploration that installs an "elsewhere" into its conceptual framework; it allows travel. The paintings and drawings with Christian iconography and references like *Purgatory* are airtight in their materialist perspective; there is precious little redemption even from Christ, who is presented as either suffering here in this "crack of doom," as in *Fallen Christ*, or depicted as crowded by the materiality expressed in *Purgatory* and set upon by lower animals and profane agents of decay, as in *Christ in Limbo*.

In his early work, Smithson introduced the temporal world as he sees it, a plane of suffering woven from the interconnected machinery of relentless biological and geological cycles and systemic breakdowns, a place fully in the shadow of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Not even Christ is able to lend a helping hand; even he seems on the verge of systemic collapse. This phase of work was influenced by his 1961 trip to Rome and stimulated by the artistic ambition of reckoning religious art's central role in civilization, but Smithson's engagement with these themes ran deeper than that, originating in an exposure to Catholicism in childhood that commingled with an interest in geology and natural history. This chapter has established the "here" of Smithson's Earth. In his mature work, Smithson sets the dialectic between "here" and "there" in motion.

Chapter 2

Science Fiction Antimatter Strategies in Smithson's Mature Work

1961–1963: Science Fiction and a Shift in Attitude, or Christ as Astronaut

In the early 1960s, Smithson began to mix the “high” culture of the modern art world with the “low” entertainments of science fiction and ephemeral popular media, lending a pop sensibility to his work that injected new levity and variety into his relentlessly entropic worldview. 1961 was when Smithson incorporated the most Christian iconography into his artistic process, but it is also the first year that he moved towards incorporating cosmic science fiction themes in his work and his writing. Smithson enjoyed watching monster movies and reading pulp science fiction throughout his life, as an array of sci-fi journals and paperbacks from his personal library makes evident (Fig. 13).⁴⁸ The sensibility of these materials began to seep into Smithson's art practice. Smithson's methods of expressing the sublime in art moved in the years 1959–1963 from the high modernism of the abstract expressionists, to Christian iconography and the Byzantine, to science fiction.⁴⁹

There is a distinction that should be noted here between the different types of science fiction and the variety that most influenced Smithson. His engagement with

⁴⁸ The illustration shows only a small sampling of the science fictional printed matter in Smithson's expansive library, which is now stored in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. A complete listing of the library's contents compiled by Valentin Tatransky may be found on pages 249-263 of *Robert Smithson* ed. Eugenie Tsai and Cornelia Butler (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004).

⁴⁹ In the 1972 interview with Paul Cummings, Smithson discusses his interest in the Byzantine: “[English critic and poet] T.E. Hulme sort of led me to an interest in the Byzantine and in notions of abstraction as a kind of counterpoint to the Humanism of the late Renaissance. I was interested I guess in a kind of iconic imagery that I felt was lurking or buried under a lot of abstractions at the time. CUMMINGS: In Pollock. SMITHSON: Yes. Buried in Pollock and in de Kooning and in Newman, and to that extent still is.” Interview with Paul Cummings in Flam, 286.

science fiction began early; one of the few positive memories of his high school days in Clifton included giving a talk as a sophomore on H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*.⁵⁰ Smithson read voluminously across the entirety of the science fiction genre, and direct as well as oblique sci-fi references abound throughout his work. Quotes from Edgar Allan Poe's proto-science fiction prose-poem *Eureka* (1848), contemporary French science fiction, and Michael Shaara's "Orphans of the Void" (1952) appear in one essay alone, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," published originally in *Arts Magazine* in 1966.⁵¹

In the same essay there are also references to the science fiction literature of J.G. Ballard, William S. Burroughs, and Jorge Luis Borges. It is the science fiction heritage associated with these authors, the "New Wave" of Science Fiction that emerged in the 1960s, that was most influential to Smithson's work. The term "New Wave SF" is problematic because science fiction scholars disagree when it began and who its members were, but in general it describes a loose affiliation of writers working in the science fiction genre who produced work in the 1960s that broke from the "golden age" of science fiction.⁵² Although examples exist before 1964, author Michael Moorcock's editorship of the British Sci-Fi magazine *New Worlds* from 1964-1971 is widely regarded

⁵⁰ Smithson also mentions giving a second talk in high school on the proposed Guggenheim museum. Flam, 272.

⁵¹ Smithson, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," *Arts Magazine*, (November 1966) in Flam, 34.

⁵² Science fiction scholars might take umbrage at the inclusion of William S. Burroughs and especially Jorge Luis Borges, but Burroughs's influence on New Wave SF is widely documented and the magical realism of Borges, with its often science fiction themes, is slowly gaining acceptance as a contributor to the loosely categorized "New Wave." Both authors were extremely influential on Smithson. Smithson carried a copy of *Naked Lunch* with him during his trip to Rome (Cumings interview in Flam, 287) and Borges's labyrinthine mirror worlds made a great impact on the artist (Borges is quoted in Smithson's *Artforum* letter to the editor discussed in Chapter One). Smithson's library contains six books by Borges, including *Ficciones*, and the timing of Borges translations into English was fortuitous. "The work of the internationally famous Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges, part of which is science fiction and fantasy, began to be published in English translations with *Ficciones* in 1962." James E. Gunn, *Inside Science Fiction*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006) 114.

as the New Wave's subgenre-defining epoch; it developed and truly arrived at just the right time to offer an alternative to late modernism.⁵³ The author Brian Aldiss, whose science fiction novel *Earthworks* (1965) is often cited as the source for the term "earthworks" used in the land art movement, is also included in New Wave SF.⁵⁴

Science fiction in the 60s was undergoing a major shift similar to what was happening in the art world. The "New Wave" broke with the more conventional science fiction practiced by authors such as Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein by emphasizing ordinary people and antiheroes in surrealistic, entropic environments instead of action, science, and galactic wars. Part of this shift can be attributed to the advancement of the ongoing space race. Science fiction historian Adam Roberts writes "In the late 1950s, and especially with the manned orbital missions and the NASA Apollo mission to the moon in 1969, there was enormous excitement and hope; many people, particularly in the SF community, nurtured on the expansive dreams of Golden Age Fantasy, did believe the future was coming true. But it did not...Reality let SF down."⁵⁵ With its litany of televised horrors such as political assassinations and dispatches from the Vietnam War, the 1960s brought a commensurate deflation of wonder that occurred in all cultural zones, and in this environment the pessimistic New Wave SF grew. About the changed attitudes regarding space travel, A. Roberts writes, "No amount of political barnstorming...can recapture that initial transcendent excitement."

⁵³ In a 1961 letter to George Lester, Smithson wrote, "I am a Modern artist dying of Modernism." Crow, "Cosmic Exile," in *Robert Smithson* ed. Eugenie Tsai and Cornelia Butler, 37.

⁵⁴ Smithson mentions carrying a copy of *Earthworks* with him in the quasi-travelogue "The Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," *Artforum*, (December 1967) in Flam, 68.

⁵⁵ Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, (Basingstoke [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 230.

Although Smithson enjoyed the “Golden Age” science fiction as he was growing up, it was New Wave SF that was contemporaneous to him as an artist, and in time, as its categorical boundaries expand, perhaps Smithson will be regarded as a fine arts ancillary of New Wave SF.⁵⁶ His work enfolds particularly New Wave SF concerns within it: two minor works from 1961, *Space Man #2* (Fig. 14a) and *Dull Space Rises* (Fig. 14b) demonstrate the transition from the Italo-Byzantine iconography to that of the ongoing space race that consumed the national imagination throughout the 1960s. The appearance of these spacemen displays the influence on Smithson of the religious signboards of Byzantine art, as halos create radiant circumferences directly behind their helmeted heads. The depth of visual perspective is shallow; their articulated figures push up flat against the picture plane. Each of these spacemen wears a protective suit made up of geometric patterns and both appear submerged in some miasma, perhaps water or noxious slices of a thick alien atmosphere.

The title *Dull Space Rises* was never explained by the artist, but perhaps it suggests that Smithson did not share the same enthusiasm for space exploration as his countrymen, even at its heights in the 1960s. Statements Smithson made later about being unimpressed by the spectacular technological achievements of the space race would seem to substantiate that the title *Dull Space Rises* signifies that Smithson is here extending the temporal, earthly situation to outer space. While the first moon landing was airing on

⁵⁶ Although the references to science fiction in his work are clear, Smithson himself never presented himself self-consciously as a science fiction artist. Even though he voraciously read through sci-fi as entertainment and for its wealth of ideas and it eventually became rich fodder for his work, it was still regarded during his time, as it is to a lesser extent today, as a lowbrow genre. Of his friend and fellow land artist Peter Hutchinson, Smithson applies the “Smithsonizer” when he writes, “...His language usage deliberately mocks his own meaning, so that nothing is left but a gratuitous syntactical *device*. His writing is marvelously ‘inauthentic.’ The complexity and richness of Hutchinson’s method starts with science fiction clichés, and scientific conservations and ends in an extraordinary esthetic structure.” “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,” *Arts International*, March 1968 in Flam, 81.

national television in 1969, an interviewer from *The New York Times* called Smithson for his reaction. Smithson described what he referred to as the “moon shot” as a “very expensive nonsite.”⁵⁷ Returning to the subject of the moon landing in a 1972 *Arts Magazine* interview with Bruce Kurtz, Smithson commented, “To an extent I thought that after they got to the moon there was a strange demoralization that set in that they didn’t discover little green men, or something.”⁵⁸ Smithson here exhibits the New Wave SF extension of the everyday into outer space, which, before it had been penetrated and demystified, was the wondrous imaginary domain of golden age science fiction and its “little green men.”

In the time between the 1961 paintings, which Smithson described as a “very confused period,” and 1963, Smithson experienced a shift in attitude and gained an ironic distance from his material.⁵⁹ This could be attributed to a variety of reasons, for both Smithson and the culture around him (including the “paroxysm of styles” of the 1960s) were changing. Smithson’s 1961 show at the George Lester Gallery in Rome coincided with what the chronology in the back of *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* describes as an “introspective period during which Smithson [read] books on psychology and religion.”⁶⁰ In 1962, according to the same influential and generally accepted chronology, Smithson “partially withdraws from the art world, draws and reads voluminously.” However, this is the year of two very different exhibitions at Richard Castellane Gallery: “Exhibition of

⁵⁷ Newman, *Challenging Art*, 251. Nancy Holt recalls Smithson’s response as “They fly up to the moon, they collect some rocks, they fly back and display them.”

⁵⁸ Interview with Paul Cummings in Flam, 268.

⁵⁹ “But it was a very confused period around 1961 or so.” Interview with Paul Cummings in Flam, 289.

⁶⁰ Hobbs, *Chronology*, 232.

Paintings and Drawings for Lent” (March 14 – April 6, 1962) and “Harmless Horror” (November 1–23, 1962).⁶¹

The fact that 1962 is often viewed as an “off” year for Smithson might be because comparatively little available evidence of these two exhibitions exists, aside from a few photographs. The works in “Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings for Lent” have been described as “quasi-religious and mythological grotesqueries” that were “rendered in...obsessional pen and ink,” while the pieces in the “Harmless Horror” consisted of “specimen jars” and “bottles of pseudochemicals.”⁶² Smithson’s 1962 may have received scant attention from most art historians over time, but as a crossover from religion to scientific themes in Smithson’s work it was an important year.⁶³ In a *Village Voice* article from November 1962, Smithson differentiated between his religious period and his new, science-influenced work: “I’m trying to achieve a sublime nausea by using the debris of science and making it superstitious,...Religion is getting so rational that I moved into science because it seems to be the only thing left that’s superstitious. It’s not that I’m for science...or anything like that. I just want to be uninvolved.”⁶⁴ Smithson sounds like he is channeling the quotable Andy Warhol here, in his surprise juxtapositions of conventional opposites—empirical science matched with superstition and faith-based religion linked with rationality—and also his desire to not be involved, to be a machine. Whatever his intention, it is clear that Smithson was cross-multiplying his terms of “religion” and

⁶¹ These were, however, the only two exhibitions Smithson participated in during this year. Jones, 304-305.

⁶² Jones, 305.

⁶³ Caroline Jones states that “The portrayal of Smithson as ‘withdrawn’ from the art world during this period is inaccurate. His conversions oscillated and overlapped, not just as private drawings versus public canvases (as scholars such as Tsai maintain), but in public presentations that were apparently on view in Manhattan galleries during the same calendar year.” Jones, 305.

⁶⁴ Smithson quoted in Fred W. McDarragh, “Harmless Horror,” *Village Voice*, November 1, 1962. 17. Referenced here from Jones, 305.

“science.” His attempt to make a “sublime nausea” out of the disparate parts of science is a creative, synthetic act; here he was in the early process of fictionalizing science and imbuing it with the mythological aspects of religion.

Therefore, even though it did not result in the most collectible works of Smithson’s career, the 1961–1963 “gap” is not so uneventful when considering the plate tectonics of his overall artistic development, for in this period Smithson’s science and religion overlapped.⁶⁵ A 1963 drawing, *Dead Christ Supported By Angels* (Fig. 15), is representative of the beginning of the transition from his early work to his mature work. This is a drawing Smithson based on the Giovanni Bellini painting, *Dead Christ Supported by Angels* (1474) (Fig. 16).⁶⁶

In Smithson’s *Dead Christ Supported By Angels*, the angry young artist of *Purgatory* and the 1961 iconographic paintings has somewhat mellowed. The surface does not writhe with portentous life as in *Christ in Limbo*; that artist suffered along with his subject; he was certainly not “uninvolved.” In *Bellini Dead Christ Supported by Angels*, the corresponding modeling of the hands and the placement of their stigmata, as

⁶⁵ Another momentous event for Smithson during this period is his marriage to Nancy Holt in 1963. Hobbs, *Chronology*, 232.

⁶⁶ It is unclear in what circumstances Smithson saw the Bellini painting and whether he observed the original as part of a touring exhibition or through a reproduction. The original is located in Rimini, Italy at the Pinacoteca Comunale, and Smithson’s 1961 visit to Italy was confined to Rome and a short visit to Siena. In trying to determine why Smithson chose this particular Bellini painting to rework, it is interesting to note that it places Christ between two major iconographical themes, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection (is this after the Deposition? Are the angels preparing Christ for the Resurrection?), and this is the time when the dead Christ’s soul descends into Hell and/or Limbo to triumphantly bring salvation to the souls held captive there since the beginning of the world. So, Christ’s now-deceased, inert body was on Earth while his soul was busy in Hell. The simultaneity of Christ’s body on Earth and his soul working in Hell adds a level of significance to the relationship between Smithson’s *Bellini Dead Christ Supported By Angels* and 1961’s *Christ in Limbo*. In a sense, Christ’s earthly body is a materialized symbol for what is happening elsewhere. The concept of the incarnated Christ has always been understood to be partly on Earth and partly in the spirit realm. Smithson explores ideas of teleportation and conceptual projection in his “sites/nonsites” starting in 1968, which will be discussed in the next section, “Infinity and Teleportation in Smithson’s Sites/Nonsites.” Information about Christ’s descent into Hell is referenced from K.M. Warren, “Harrowing of Hell,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1914 (San Diego: Catholic Answers, 2007) Online.

well as the position of the attendant angel's arms upon the inert Christ in repose, both in the flesh and astronaut version, suggest that this is a direct copy of the Bellini. However, unlike the Bellini painting, the viewer is denied the full expression of Christ's suffering; Christ is covered with a full, heavy space suit including a sizable helmet with a black screen that hides his face. The mixture of the sacred and profane of Smithson's *Christ in Limbo* is also evident in the *Dead Christ* drawing, but instead of the graphically fraught approach to the suffering of Christ there is a cool, grim irony. The carefully inked delineations of *Christ in Limbo* and *Fallen Christ* (Fig. 11) have unclenched and given way to a relaxed sketch with a pencil.

In Bellini's time, reaching the moon was unimaginable: the heavens beyond the firmament were celestial, God's territory. Comparatively, in Smithson's time, due to technological advances that provided empirical answers in place of fantastic speculation, outer space became increasingly irrelevant and the reservoirs of wonder evaporated. So too did religion and the conception of Heaven become decentralized in the human imagination as mystical phenomenon were one by one explained away by science. The artist accordingly placed Jesus in an astronaut's suit, seemingly suggesting that the plane of Christ's suffering—our material realm—merely extends through the universe as humans advance into space to look for more time and to unlock the universe's mysteries. Just as Smithson once poised Christ on the edge of the primordial sea in *Christ in Limbo*, here he placed the figure into what in 1963 was still the future, a landing on the moon or the surface of another planet. Dull space rises.⁶⁷ The visible universe, even through the most powerful telescope, still operated under the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Still,

⁶⁷ In 1961, Smithson was ahead of his time with his disaffection. "By the 1970s it had become clear that space travel was (whisper it) a bit dull." Adam Roberts, 230.

as Smithson said, “there's this need to try to transcend one's condition.” In order to restore “fantastic speculation” into his art and his world, Smithson increasingly turned to ideas culled from science fiction.

Infinity and Teleportation in Smithson's Sites/Nonsites

Site Selection

I'm interested in making a point in a designated area. That's the focal point. You then have a dialectic between the point and the edge: within a single focus, a kind of Pascalian calculus between the edge and the middle or the fringe and the center operating within a designated area. ... The randomness to me is always very precise, a kind of zeroing in. But there is a random element: the choice is never abolished.

I would say the designation is what I call an open limit as opposed to a closed limit which is a nonsite usually in an interior space. The open limit is a designation that I walk through in a kind of network looking for a site. And then I select the site. There's no criteria; just how the material hits my psyche when I'm scanning it. But it's a kind of low level scanning, almost unconscious. When you select, it's fixed so that randomness is then determined. It's determined in uncertainty. At the same time, the fringes or boundaries of the designation are always open. They're only closed on the map, and the map serves as the designation. The map is like a key to where the site is and then you can operate within that sector.⁶⁸

At its most basic, Smithson's concept of the site/nonsite is the sculptural equivalent of a synecdoche; the part displayed in the museum or gallery is meant to represent the entire actual site that exists in the wilderness outside the white cube. Like the Transcendentalists finding their “there” in the natural environment outside of the church and under open sky, Smithson's site/nonsite dialectic displaces the authority of the space of the museum by placing a representative artifact within it that suggests that the real site exists elsewhere. In an interview with William Lipke in 1969, Smithson explained one definition of site/nonsite: “I would say the designation is what I call an open limit as opposed to a closed limit which is a nonsite usually in an interior space”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Smithson, “Fragments of a Conversation” in Flam, 188.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Smithson thus defines the *site* as limitless or “open limit” and the *nonsite* as a confined, limited space, often cropped within a rectangle in a gallery within a frame, or in a natural history museum within a specimen/sample box. The nonsite functions as a *limited* reference to an “open limit.” The nonsite, therefore, is a chip off the old infinity.

Although much of the site/nonsite dialectic exists in the conceptual realm of the theoretical, it is useful to consult an example that exists in time and space. Smithson’s first nonsite is *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens* from 1968 (Fig. 17) in which he typed the following below a map placed on the wall of the gallery: “A NONSITE (an indoor earthwork)...31 sub-divisions based on a hexagonal ‘airfield’ in the Woodmansie Quadrangle—New Jersey (Topographic) map. Each sub-division of the *Nonsite* contains sand from the *site* shown on the map. Tours between the *Nonsite* and the *site* are possible. The red dot on the map is the place where the sand was collected.”⁷⁰ Because he decided that the “site” would be the Pine Barrens in New Jersey, Smithson made a selection from the vast universe of choices, therefore imposing his limitations on the natural environment. He proceeded to further confine the site into a nonsite by driving out to the area indicated on the map to transport soil and sand that would be placed in crates in his car and would eventually be placed into the subdivisions of the hexagonal sculpture that he displayed in the gallery. But on the edge of the site, “the fringes or boundaries are always open.”⁷¹ This is because one cannot see, smell, hear, touch, or taste those boundaries; they are somewhere out there beyond one’s senses. It is impossible to say for certain what is out there. Even if Smithson bought several surveillance cameras for that boundary area of his site in the Pine Barrens, there would still be a blind spot or a place

⁷⁰ Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 104.

⁷¹ Smithson, “Fragments of a Conversation” in Flam, 188.

where the cameras could not follow, another horizon beyond their magnified field of vision that was beyond their focus.

So, at its *edges*, the site is ultimately unknowable and therefore incorruptible, and it might as well be another dimension: what is beyond perception could be anything, even something outside the limits of imagination or description; sublime. In this dialectic, Smithson preserved something from corruption and entropy, but it is unknown what that is. To Smithson, whose radical views of entropy included the sedimentation of ideas that began as soon as they were conceived of by the mind, an inconceivable unknown is safe from attrition and therefore bears the promise of transcendence. The site/nonsite dialectic may be understood as synonymous with the following dichotomies: limit/limitless, finite/infinite, and by extension, material/spirit, corruptible/incorruptible, profane/sacred, known/unknown, codified/unsystematized. The site/nonsite approach made it possible for Smithson to make a statement on the vastness of infinity and the slippages in framing devices. With the conceptual “travel” that the viewer undertakes when contemplating the actual site represented on the map, sites/nonsites also suggest teleportation.

Circular Time: Where Remote Futures and the Remote Past Meet

Circular time is another brain-teasing notion in Smithson’s mature work that was influenced by science fiction. The blurry edge of the nonsite evokes a theoretical slip away from the past-future timeline to a timeless, still realm where past and future meet in the “present” of the art object.⁷² As an epigraph for “Entropy and the New Monuments,”

⁷² “Stillness” is often a word used to describe Smithson’s mature works. Amanda Boetzke, *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2010) 73, notices the mixture of stillness and movement within Smithson’s “nonsites.” “Although objects such as *A Nonsite, Franklin, New Jersey*, are characterized by seemingly inert material, careful delimitations, symmetry, and stillness, Smithson secures a dialectical tie to the site by implanting the nonsites with the earth’s tendency toward disarray.” I hold that

Smithson uses a quote from the science fiction novel *The Time Stream* (1946, first published in serial form in *Wonder Magazine* in 1931) by John Taine (pseudonym of mathematician Eric Temple Bell) that seems to predict Donald Judd's large-scale installations of cube iterations at the Chinati Foundation (*100 untitled works in mill aluminum*, 1982-1986) or Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977): "On rising to my feet, and peering across the green glow of the Desert, I perceived that the monument against I had slept was but one of thousands. Before me stretched long parallel avenues, clear to the far horizon of similar broad, low pillars."⁷³ *The Time Stream* is a significant choice of quote material because of the model of circular time that it presents in its story. In *The Time Stream*, Bell's characters wonder about a symbol they find on the ceiling of an important building, a snake curled into a circle with its tail in its mouth, or *ouroboros*. As philosopher Gary Shapiro explains the plot in his Smithson study *Earthwards*, he writes, "They gradually come to see that the symbol and its motto 'The whole is one' refer to the cyclical structure of time."⁷⁴

The notion of circular time must have appealed to Smithson's anti-modernist viewpoint, for it offered a "radical alternative to evolutionary and progressive temporality, whether that temporality is deployed in biology or in art history's

the perceptible "disarray" is the acknowledgement and "implanting" of the temporal into the object that also exhibits the impression of "stillness," or an atemporal timelessness.

⁷³ John Taine (Eric Temple Bell), *The Time Stream* (Providence: Buffalo Book Company, 1946) quoted by Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments" in Flam, 10. In the copy of J.G. Ballard's SF novel *Terminal Beach* stored in the Smithson library is underlined, "Approximately twenty of the blocks, those immediately below ground zero, were solid: the walls of the remainder were of varying thicknesses. From the outside they appeared to be of uniform solidity." This passage also seems to describe minimalist sculpture. J.G. Ballard, *Terminal Beach*, (New York: Berkley Books, 1964) 148., in Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers.

⁷⁴ "It was Nietzsche, of course, who announced the thought of eternal recurrence and who was being fervently read and reinterpreted in the 1960s by European philosophers seeking a counterbalance to modernity and especially to Hegelian conceptions of time and history." Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 27.

construction of a canonical succession of styles proceeding meaningfully out of one another.”⁷⁵ Just like the world appears flat, it is actually round. Similarly, at any one point on the circular timeline, the model of time appears to proceed from the past and towards the future in a straight line. Therefore, employing this science-fictional strategy in his work, Smithson may cut from a focus on the entropic temporal to a cosmic zoom-out of circular time, from human to universal scale.⁷⁶

In an unpublished piece of writing entitled “Interstellar Flit,” Smithson writes, “Space Age and Stone Age attitudes overlap to form the Zero-Zero wherein [sic] the spaceman meets the brontosaurus in a Jurassic swamp on Mars.”⁷⁷ The “Zero-Zero” could represent the sign for infinity, two zeroes in a loop with each other. Perhaps an even more apt mathematical model might be the Möbius strip, a single-sided shape where the top is the same as the bottom because of a twist in its continuum.⁷⁸ Clockwise is counterclockwise, the future is the past, and vice-versa. The twist, near-overlap, or crash between the past and the future is one of Smithson’s most consistent preoccupations.

⁷⁵ Shapiro, 27-28.

⁷⁶ One might not want to mix too many conceptual terms, but perhaps in the time models functioning in Smithson’s work, the entropic temporal is the “nonsite” and circular time is the “nonsite,” the everyday intersected with the sublime at one point, the work. At any rate, Gary Shapiro also recognizes two time models: “We have here already, then, two conceptions of time in Smithson and his sources: that of eternal recurrence (in the background) and the theory of entropy.” Shapiro, 28.

⁷⁷ Smithson, “Interstellar Flit,” undated writing [ca. 1961-1966], Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers, 1905-1987, reel 3834, frame 645. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁷⁸ Dr. Vigneault suggested the Möbius strip as an additional mathematical model. In a phenomenon which is beyond this thesis but still related to its themes, Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* and *Amarillo Ramp* require a traveller intent on walking their paths to go counterclockwise and clockwise, respectively, and then clockwise and counterclockwise to return. They are of course not nearly mirror-images of each other and can not be considered truly “enantiomorphic,” or “chiral,” to borrow terms that describe the growth of some crystals (Smithson incorporated ideas from crystallography books into his work. See Jennifer Roberts’s chapter “The Deposition of Time” in *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, pp. 36-59) but it is interesting to note that the two works form at least the impression of a Möbius strip with each other and a clock metaphor of circular time, with the “twist” perhaps located at the motionless beginning of both earthworks’ pathways.

Smithson's anti-modernist stance made him pessimistic about the progress of humankind, and he often conflated earliest man with future man in his writings and interviews. In 1966's "Entropy and the New Monuments," he writes, "This sense of extreme past and future has its partial origin with the Museum of Natural History; there the 'cave-man' and the 'space-man' may be seen under one roof. In this museum all 'nature' is stuffed and interchangeable."⁷⁹ The cave-man space-man motif was a popular one in science fiction movies and stories, and similar sci-fi *topos* appear in the *The Planet of the Apes* series of movies, first released in 1968.

Orbiting the *Spiral Jetty*

Spiral Jetty exerts its own gravitational pull within Smithson studies. That is because it is truly Smithson's masterpiece, addressing all themes of his body of work in one all-encompassing yet economically elegant statement. The present study is no exception. It is useful to conclude with a discussion of *Spiral Jetty* in this thesis because it displays the continuity of Smithson's themes from his early paintings onwards, and demonstrates the science fictional influence in imparting those themes with an expansion into the sublime that is the mark of transcendent art.

All of the ideas that emerge from this thesis may find their expression in some way within the whirl of the *Spiral Jetty*. The shift from late modernism towards postmodernism, away from a purely optical valuation of art to one that includes the phenomenological experience of a pilgrimage to a remote site where a sculpture is located, may be dramatized by an in-person encounter with the geographically isolated

⁷⁹ Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," 1966, in Flam, 15.

Spiral Jetty. The earthwork's tendency to disappear under the waters of the Great Salt Lake only to reappear when the water level lowers again, sometimes with a magnificent frost of precipitated salt crystals, proves the same unreliability of the corporeal eye that *Enantiomorphic Chambers* makes evident by foiling the optical expectations of the viewer. The precipitated salt crystals on *Spiral Jetty* are the authentic product that Smithson's post-minimalist crystallography-inspired sculptures such as *Plunge* duplicated with manmade materials. The photographs, drawings, plans, films, and writings that Smithson produced about *Spiral Jetty* function as "nonsites" to the "site" at Rozel Point in the Great Salt Lake of Utah.

The temporality, materiality, and universal entropy illustrated in *Purgatory*, *Christ in Limbo*, and *Fallen Christ* is also encapsulated within *Spiral Jetty*'s exposed form as it continuously succumbs to the elements ever so gradually, allowing entropy to contribute to its changing dynamic. Even formal elements of the earlier paintings appear again in *Spiral Jetty*. The blood red evident under the unzipped and pulled apart top right corner of *Christ in Limbo* is the same color of the water at Rozel Point, and the cluster of bugs gathering around the figure of Christ resembles the brine flies and other small insects that swarm in multitudes on and around the earthwork. The red contours that emanate around the solidity of the cross in *Fallen Christ* look like the waves of the Great Salt Lake's current that part around the *Spiral Jetty* to slosh upon the shore, and the quartets of dark red or brown irregular squares in the painting as well as the other regularly spaced dots and circular forms situated around the cross and the figure of Christ bring to mind the basalt rocks that make up the jetty. If a microscopic slide of the water around *Spiral Jetty* were to be magnified, it would reveal living counterparts to the

flagellated, biomorphic forms extant in the early paintings. *Spiral Jetty* thus establishes much continuity with the early phase of Smithson's art practice.⁸⁰

The influence from science fiction, particularly the New Wave, is also detectable in *Spiral Jetty*. In his copy of William S. Burroughs's *The Soft Machine* (1966) stored at the Archives of American Art, Smithson underlined the following: "Inactive oil wells and mine shafts, strata of abandoned machinery and gutted boats, garbage of stranded operations and expeditions that died at this point of dead land where sting rays bask in brown water and grey crabs walk the mud flats on brittle stilt legs."⁸¹ Whether Smithson underlined this before or after the construction of the *Jetty* will remain unclear, but its underlined emphasis does imply that this work of science fiction, and specifically this passage which describes an entropic landscape, had something to do with the sensibility behind the "siting" of *Spiral Jetty*. The site at Rozel Point has been substantially cleaned up now, but in 1970 the road to the *Jetty* was littered with industrial wreckage.⁸²

There are also noteworthy similarities between *Spiral Jetty* and elements in J.G. Ballard's short story "The Voices of Time," (Fig. 18) also in Smithson's library. In the story a neurologist protagonist is inexplicably driven to build a huge mandala-like cipher in the desert that the narrator describes as a "cosmic clock." The neurologist is dying and his body and mind are succumbing increasingly to an accelerating entropy that he keeps track of in a journal. After completing the construction of the mandala, he proceeds to the inner circle in the center to meet his apotheosis:

⁸⁰ "...But the emphatic consistencies between the earliest and his latest work argue that, far from abandoning his earliest preoccupations, he was instead departing on a quest to find his way back to them." Crow, "Cosmic Exile," 40

⁸¹ William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (New York: Grove Press, 1966) 111. Smithson's copy located in Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁸² There are still the ruins of an abandoned oil rig operation in Rozel Point, including a straight jetty surrendered to the elements.

He climbed on to the platform, raised his eyes to the darkened sky, moving through the constellations to the galaxies beyond them, hearing the thin archaic voices reaching to him across the millennia...Like an endless river, so broad that its banks were below the horizons, it flowed steadily towards him, a vast course of time to fill the sky and the universe, enveloping everything within them...Around him the outlines of the hills and the lake had faded, but the image of the mandala, like a cosmic clock, remained fixed before his eyes, illuminating the broad surface of the stream.⁸³

This description of a cypher built in the wilderness recalls the earthwork *Spiral Jetty*.

Smithson's own narration of the film that he made about his earthwork, also named *Spiral Jetty* (and also dating from 1970) strikes a corresponding spaced-out monotone of the earthly combining with the cosmic beyond.⁸⁴ Near the film's conclusion Smithson's voice emanates over vertiginous shots of the jetty taken from a helicopter at sundown, the reflection of the sun flaring into the camera and rendering the earthwork into a vision or a mirage.⁸⁵ This dedifferentiation recalls Ballard's description of his protagonist dissipating into his apotheosis:

Watching it constantly, he felt his body gradually dissolving, its physical dimensions melting into the vast continuum of the current, which bore him out into the centre of the great channel, sweeping him onward, beyond hope but at last at rest, down the broadening reaches of the river of eternity.⁸⁶

Thus, curiously, the atemporal is achieved by surrendering to the temporal, the time stream, as if there were a whirlpool of transport there on the blurry edge of the "site."

In 1997 Ballard wrote about Smithson's mature works, "I see Smithson's monuments [as]...artifacts intended to serve as machines that will suddenly switch

⁸³ J.G. Ballard. *The Voices of Time*. First published as *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare*. Ballard, J.G. *The Voices of Time*. (New York: Berkley Books, 1962) 39.

⁸⁴ See the conclusion of the film at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCfm95GyZt4>

⁸⁵ A portion of the script from this part of the film is quoted from John Taine's *The Time Stream* (1946): "Gazing intently at the gigantic sun, we at last deciphered the riddle of its unfamiliar aspect. It was not a single flaming star, but millions upon millions of them, all clustering thickly together, like bees in a swarm, their packed density made up the deceptive appearance of solid impenetrable flame. It was, in fact, a vast spiral nebula of innumerable suns." and "He leads us to the steps of the jail's main entrance, pivots and again locks his gaze into the sun. 'Spirals,' he whispers. 'Spirals coming away...circles curling out of the sun.'"

⁸⁶ Ibid.

themselves on and begin to generate a more complex time and space. All his structures seem to be analogues of advanced neurological processes that have yet to articulate themselves.”⁸⁷ Remarkably, the following passage is underlined in Smithson’s copy of another Ballard book, *The Terminal Beach*: “The system of megaliths now provided a complete substitute for those functions of his mind which gave to it its sense of the sustained rational order of time and space. Without them, his awareness of reality shrank to little more than the few square inches of sand beneath his feet.”⁸⁸ Smithson was engaging these science fictional ideas directly in his art; the transcendence available in his mature works is specifically a science fictional transcendence, borne by a sublime that expresses the edge of human conceptual powers.

⁸⁷ J.G. Ballard, “Robert Smithson as Cargo Cultist” in Conley, 31.

⁸⁸ J.G. Ballard, *The Terminal Beach* (New York: Berkley Books, 1964) 150. Smithson’s copy located in Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Conclusion

The mature works and writings of Robert Smithson are, like his nonsites to his sites, parts of a whole. A writing or work by Smithson is only partly there: the other part exists elsewhere, in some other conceptual space more expansive than the model before the viewer. After establishing the problems of temporality such as entropy and decay in his early paintings, Smithson sought a means to travel from that fate. He rejected the modernist notion of the autonomous object, the primacy of which Smithson argued against with Michael Fried in the pages of *Artforum* during the intensely active art discourse of the late 1960s. Pessimistic and suspicious regarding closed systems, both theoretical and material, he piled on printed matter or earth until their frames cracked and the outside sluiced through. It is said that an artist helps us to see anew, through their eyes, and Smithson's body of art consistently presented his perspective.

This thesis argues that Smithson's early works focusing on religious subject matter and entropic materiality set the groundwork for Smithson's subsequent development of science fiction themes of timelessness, infinity, circular time, and teleportation in his work. In Smithson's concept of the "nonsite," in his use of mirrors to suggest appearance/disappearance as well as infinite extension, and through the monumental spiraling earthworks that allegorize states of timelessness, Smithson's work proposes a conceptual space that extends beyond the spatiotemporal position of the viewer before the artwork. The works discussed in the essay, my thesis argues, are most completely understood as materialized parts of a symbolic whole, simultaneously existing both in the material realm of the viewer and in a conceptual space that transcends its physical state.

Illustrations



Figure 1.
Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970.
Mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, and water.
Great Salt Lake, Utah.



Figure 2.
Robert Smithson, Asphalt Rundown, 1969.
Asphalt on eroded hillside.
Rome, Italy.



Figure 3.
Robert Smithson, Partially Buried Woodshed, 1970,
Woodshed and twenty truckloads of earth.
Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.



Figure 4.
Robert Smithson, Broken Circle/Spiral Hill.
Broken Circle: Green water, white and yellow sand flats.
Spiral Hill: earth, black topsoil, white sand.
Emmen, Holland.

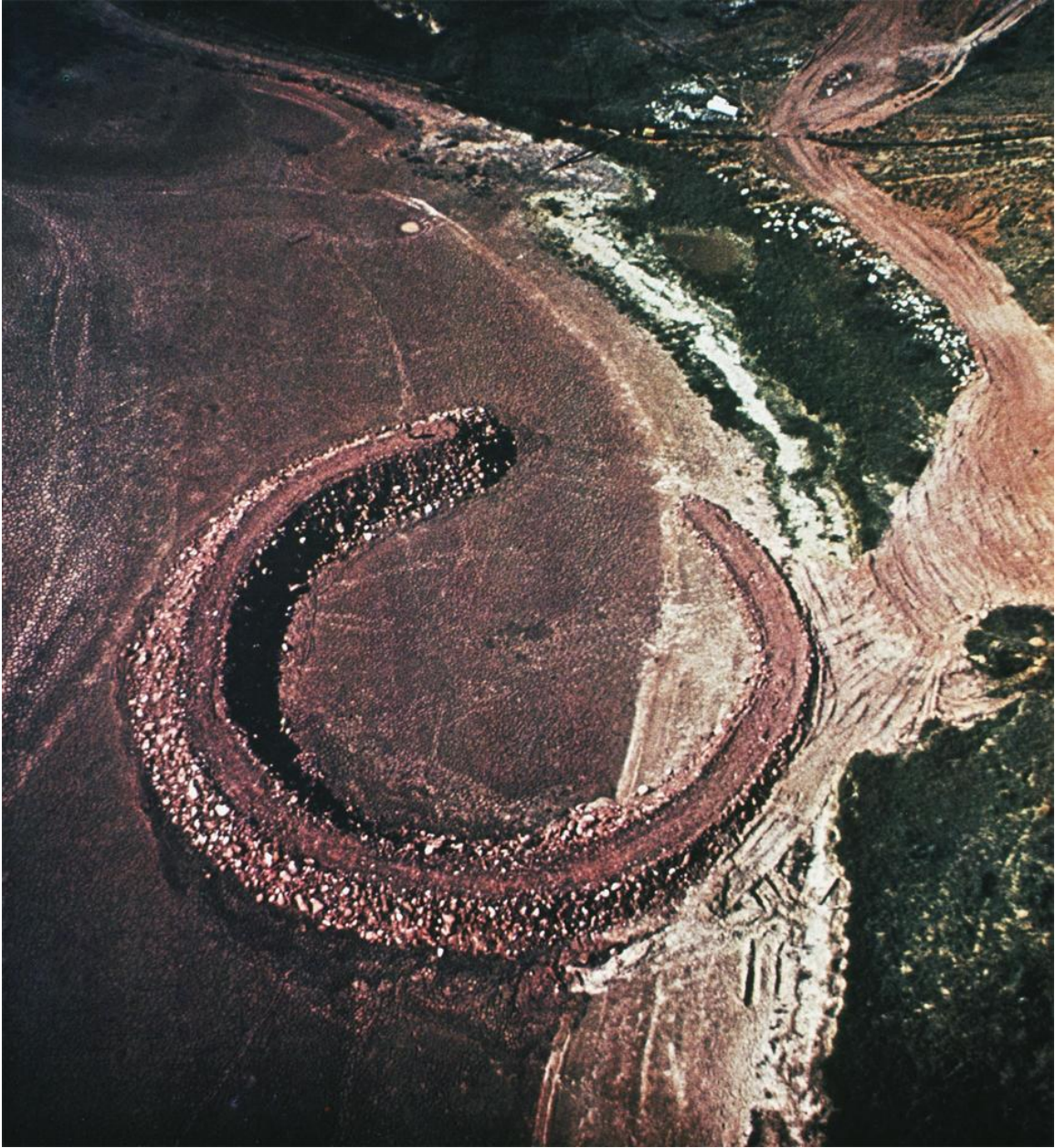


Figure 5.
Robert Smithson, *Amarillo Ramp*, 1973.
Rocks and dirt in dry lake bed.
Tecovas Lake, Texas.

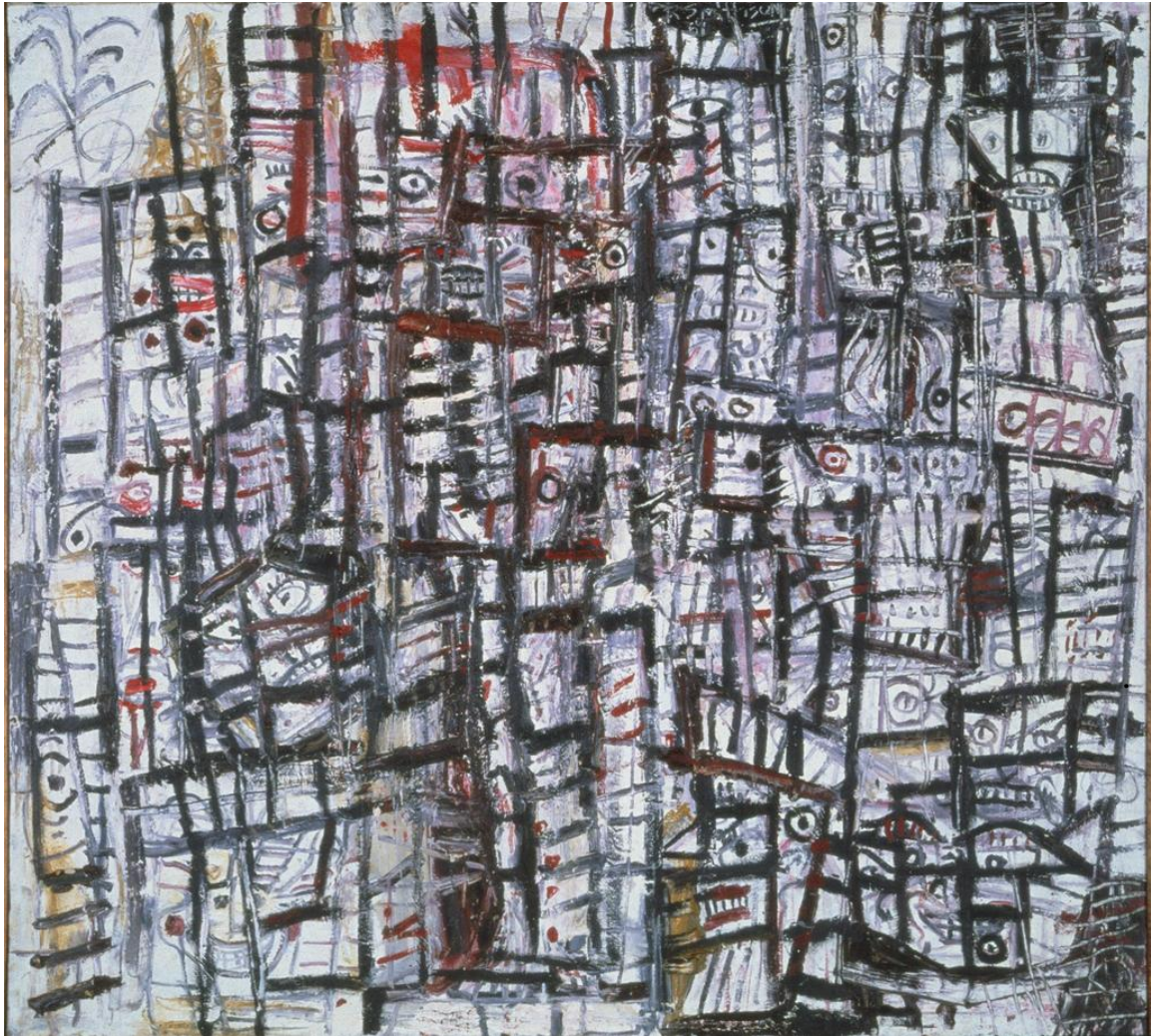


Figure 6.
Robert Smithson, *Purgatory*, 1959.
Oil on canvas, 63 x 67 in.
Collection of Chase Manhattan Bank.

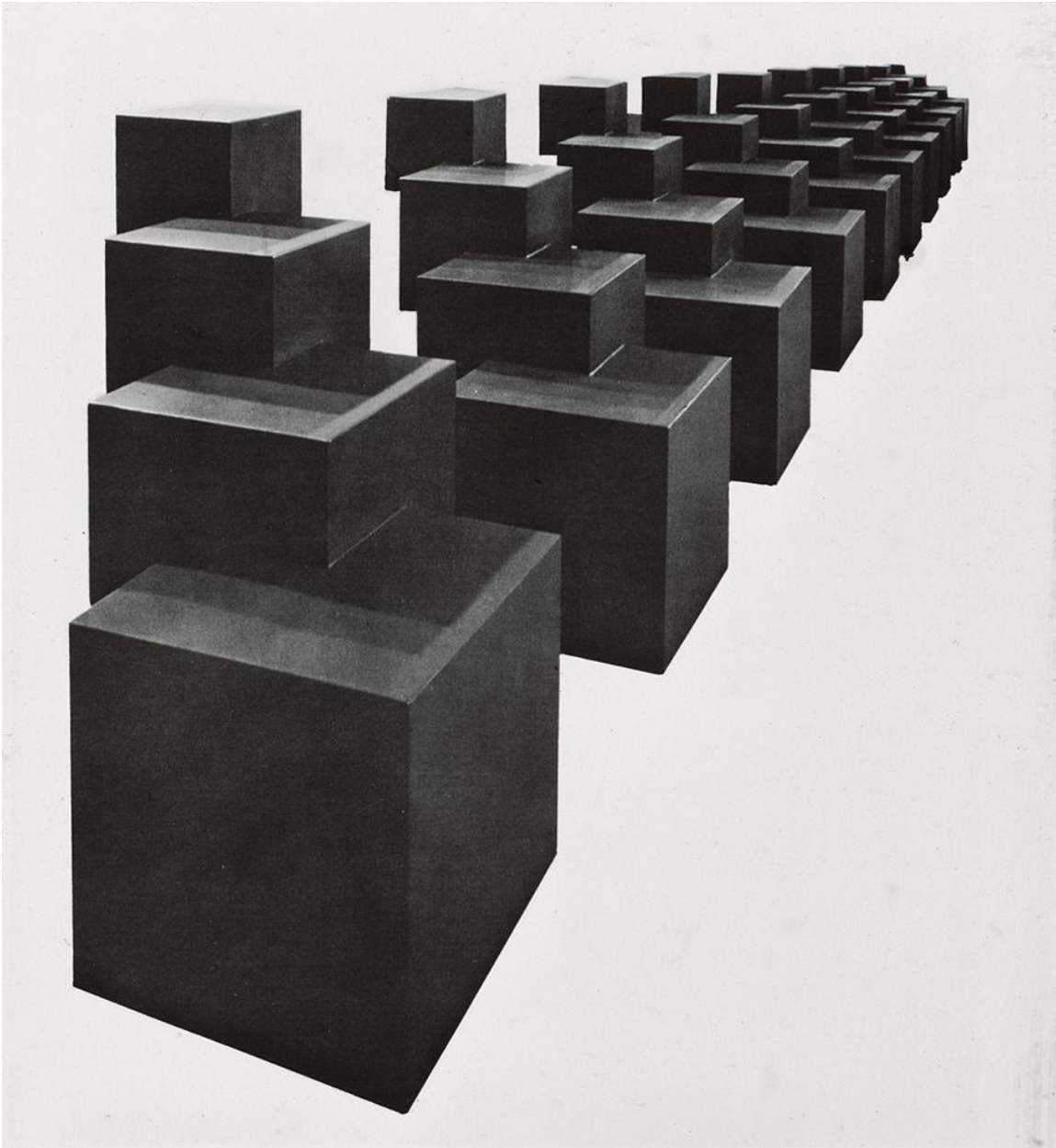


Figure 7.
Robert Smithson, *Plunge*, 1966.
Ten aluminum units.
28 feet long.
Denver Art Museum



Figure 8.
Robert Smithson, Enantiomorphic Chambers, 1965.
Steel, mirrors.
Two chambers, each 34 square inches.
Location unknown.

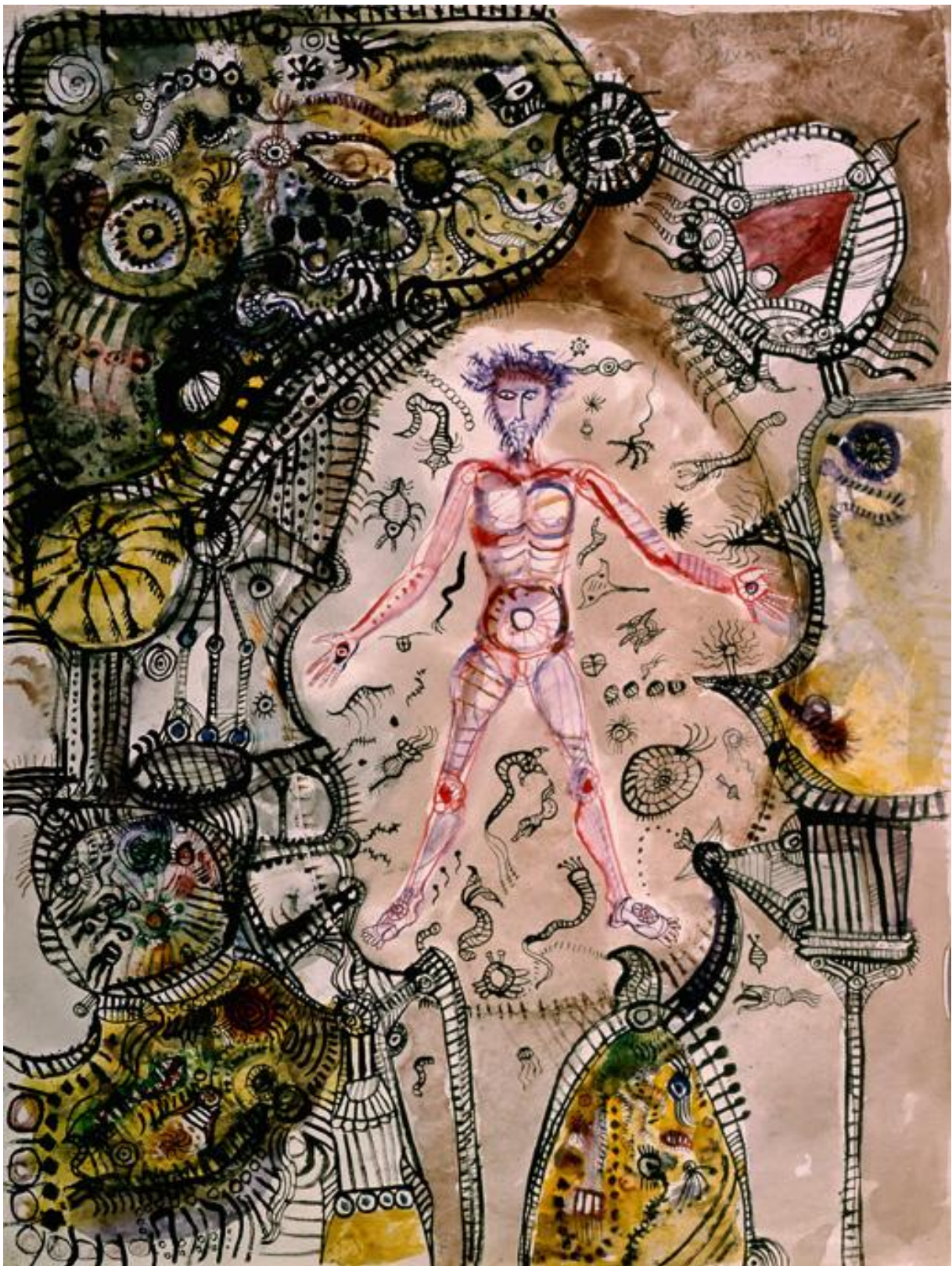


Figure 9.
Robert Smithson, *Christ Series: Christ in Limbo*, 1961.
Ink and gouache, 24 x 18 in.
Estate of Robert Smithson, James Cohan Gallery, New York.

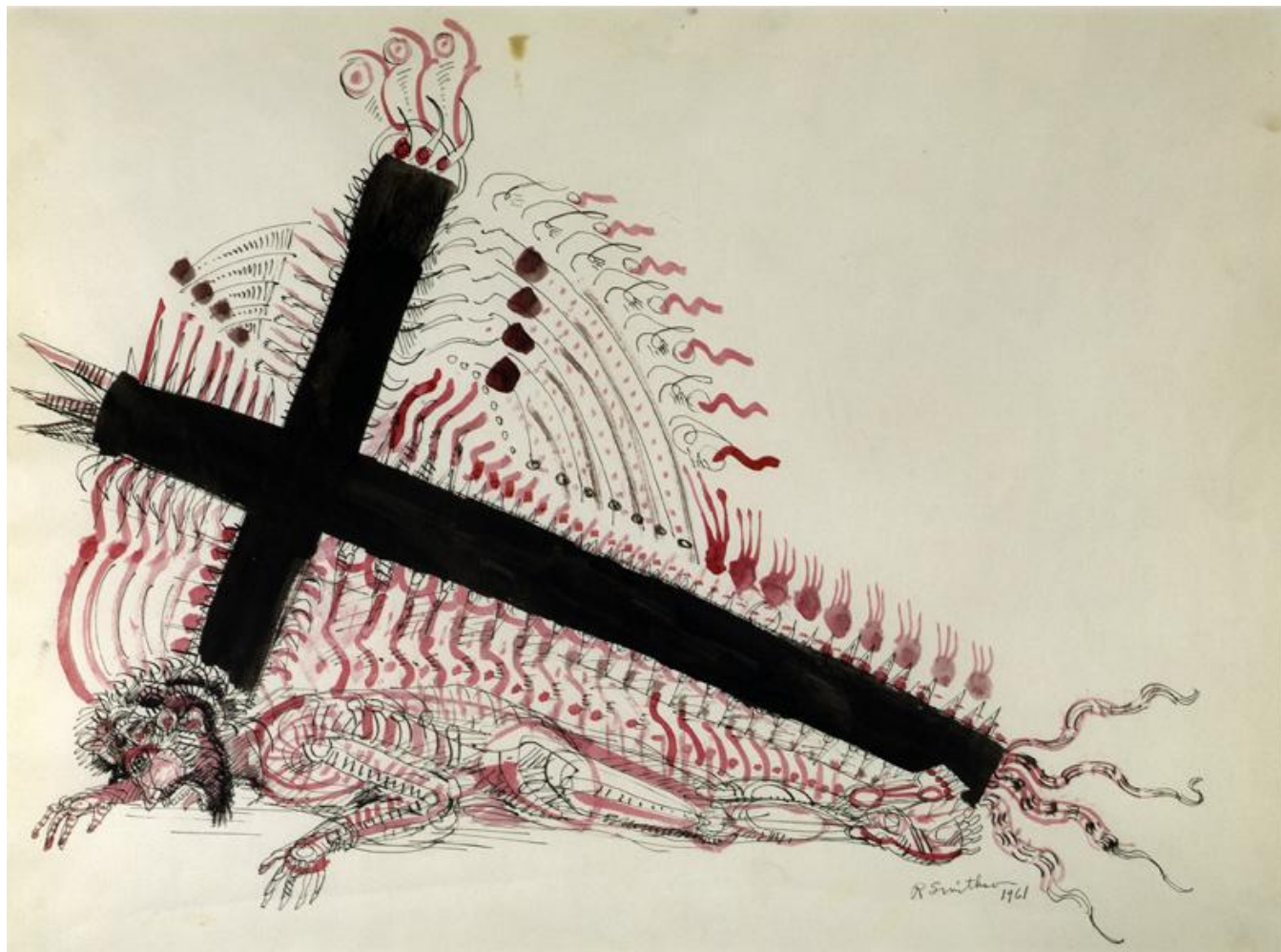


Figure 10.
Robert Smithson, *Fallen Christ*, 1961.
Ink and gouache on paper, 18 x 24 in.
Estate of Robert Smithson, James Cohan Gallery, New York.



Figure 11.
Follower of Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ in Limbo*, ca 1575.
Oil on wood, 22 7/8 x 28 3/8 in.
Indianapolis Museum of Art.



Figure 12.
Detail, *Christ in Limbo*, Follower of Hieronymus Bosch, ca. 1575.
Indianapolis Museum of Art.



Figure 13. A sample of science fiction journals and paperbacks from Robert Smithson's library that date from 1962-1967. Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers, 1905-1987. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



Figure 14a.
Robert Smithson, *The Space Man #2*, 1961.
Acrylic and graphite on paper with collage.
50 x 18 in.
Private collection.



Figure 14b.
Robert Smithson, *Dull Space Rises*, 1961.
Oil on canvas, 49 1/4 x 23 in.
Estate of George B. Lester.



Figure 8.
Robert Smithson, *Bellini Dead Christ Supported by Angels*, 1963.
Pencil on paper, 19 1/2 x 17 3/4 in.
Estate of Robert Smithson, James Cohan Gallery, New York.



Figure 16.
Giovanni Bellini, *Dead Christ Supported by Angels*, ca. 1474.
Tempera on panel, 35.8 x 51.6 in.
Pinacoteca Comunale, Rimini, Italy.

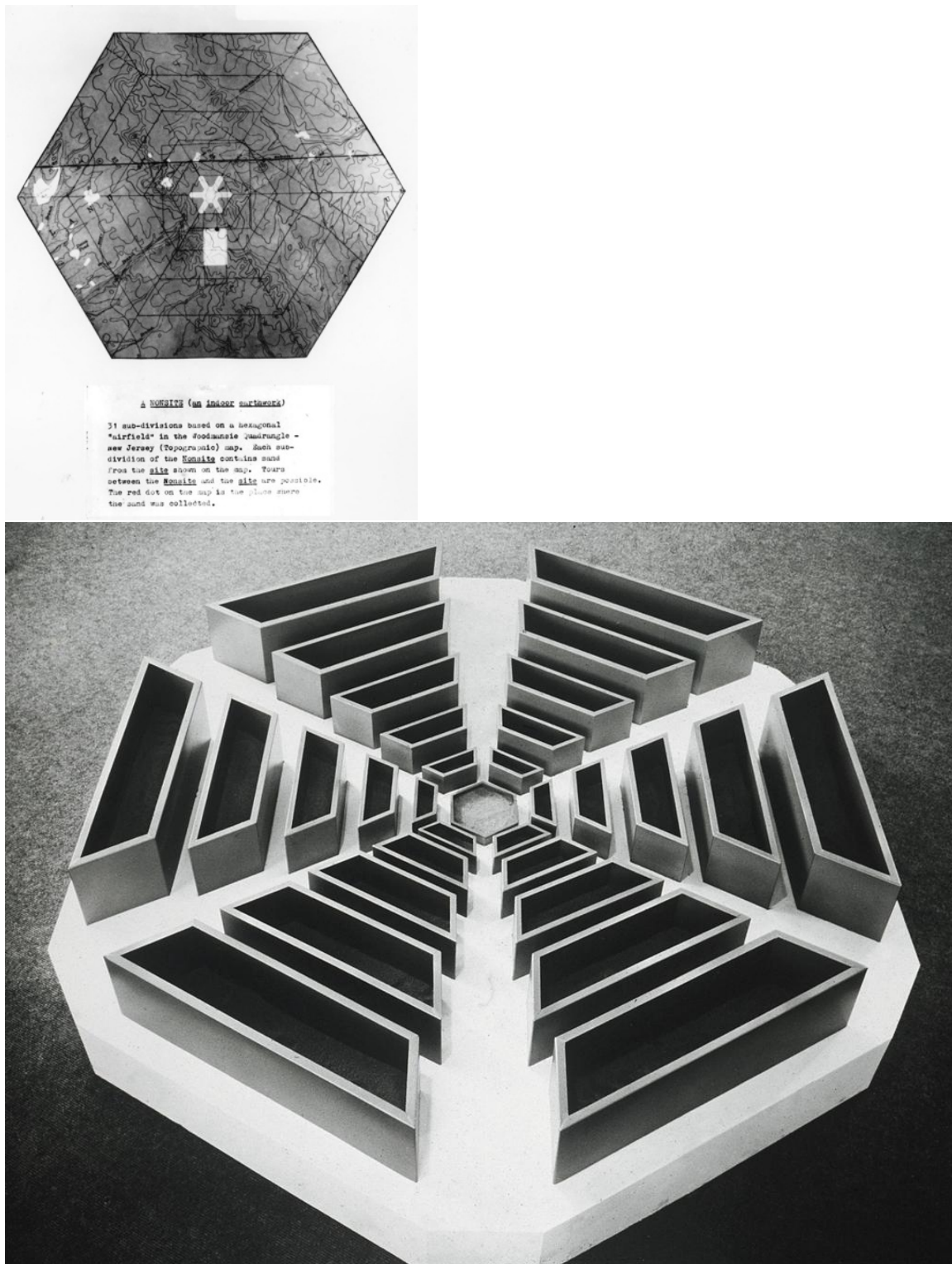


Figure 9.
 Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey*, 1968.
 Aluminum with sand, aerial photograph/map; 12 x 65.5 x 65.5.

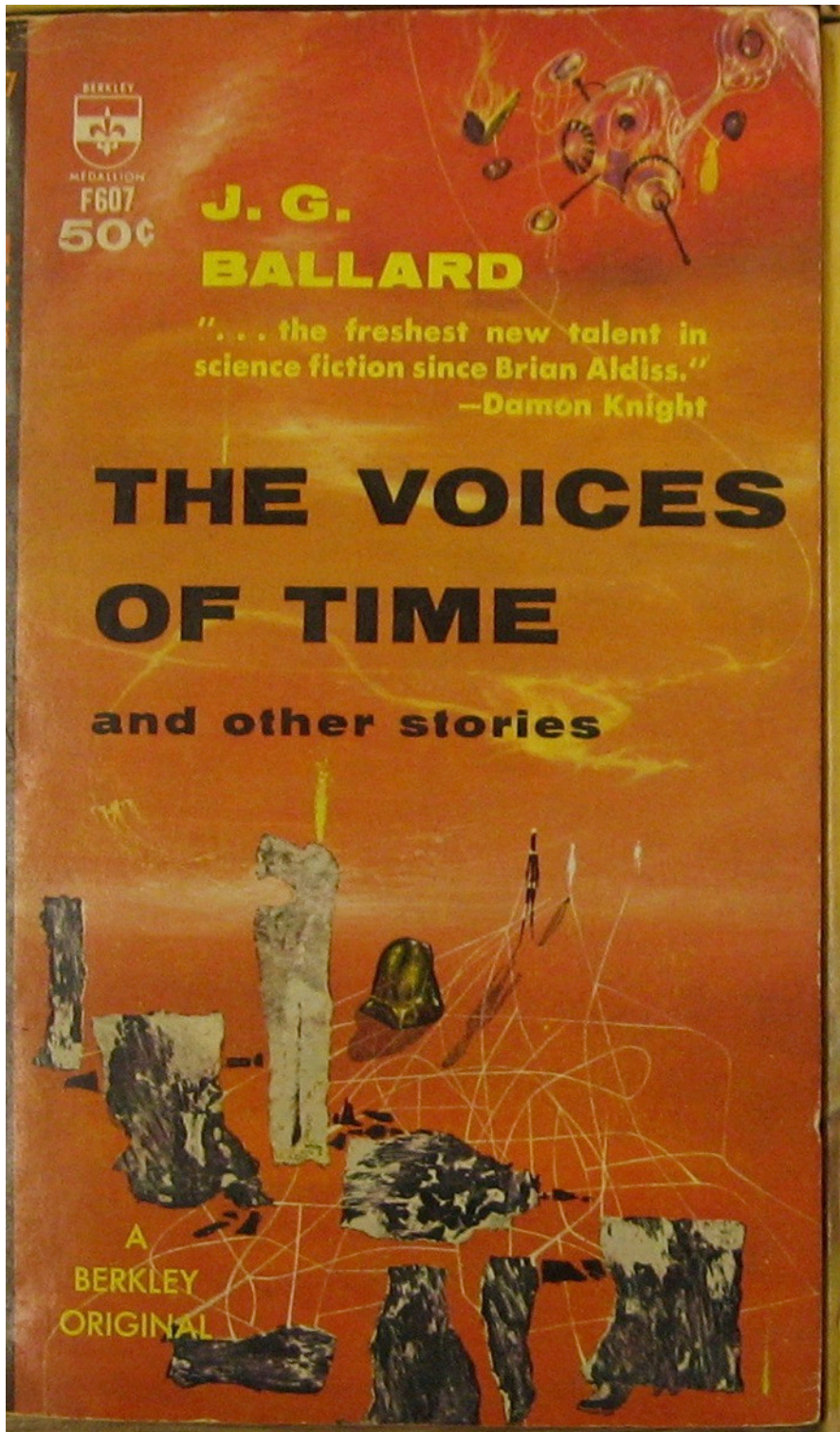


Figure 10. J.G. Ballard's *The Voices of Time*, 1962. Same edition that is in Smithson's library

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