



Robert Smithson. *Spiral Jetty*, Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970, earthwork

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1) Stokstad, Marilyn and Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Pearson, 2014. p. 1102

Robert Smithson (1938-1973) sought to illustrate what he called the “ongoing dialectic” in nature between the constructive forces that build and shape form, and the destructive forces that destroy it. *Spiral Jetty* of 1970, a 1,500-foot stone and earth platform spiraling into the Great Salt Lake in Utah, reflects these ideas. To Smithson, the salty water and algae of the lake suggested both the primordial ocean where life began and a dead sea that killed it.

2) Stokstad, Marilyn and Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Pearson, 2014. p. 1102

The abandoned oil rigs dotting the lake’s shore brought to mind dinosaur skeletons and the remains of vanished civilizations. Smithson used the spiral because it is an archetypal shape that appears in nature- from galaxies to seashells- and has been used in human art for millennia.

Unlike Modernist squares and circles, it is a “dialectical” shape, that opens and closes, curls and uncurls endlessly, suggesting growth and decay, creation and destruction, or in Smithson’s words, the perpetual “coming and going of things.” He ordered that no maintenance be done on *Spiral Jetty* so that the work would be governed by the natural elements over time. It is now covered with crystallized salt but remains visible, as can be seen on Google Earth.

3) Phillips, Lisa. *The American Century: Art and Culture 1950 to 2000*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1999. p. 202

Robert Smithson called his new form of art “Earthworks,” a name taken from Brian Aldiss’ novel *Earthworks*, which tells of a world destroyed by a man-made ecological catastrophe. In 1968, Smithson organized an exhibition entitled “Earthworks” at the Dwan Gallery in New York, and a new movement was born (also known as Land, or Earth, art).

4) Phillips, Lisa. *The American Century: Art and Culture 1950 to 2000*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1999. pp. 202, 205

Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*- a giant spiral of black basalt rock and earth in the Great Salt Lake, in Utah- was inspired by mythology: the lake had come into existence, it was believed, from a whirlpool fed by a direct water link to the Pacific Ocean. Smithson's 6,000-ton spiral of earth referred to prehistoric mounds, ancient configurations found primarily in the Mississippi and Ohio valleys, of which the most famous is the Serpent Mound in southern Ohio.

But *Spiral Jetty* also reflected the forces of entropy that fascinated Smithson. In time, nature reclaimed the jetty- the red lake waters rose, covering the work, then receded to reveal white salt crystals, and then rose again, so that the work was invisible for a number of years. Recently, the waters have receded again and the outlines of the jetty can be seen once more.

5) Hughes, Robert. *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. p. 572

Up to the time he began to work on it, in 1969, Smithson had been preoccupied with entropy: "evolution in reverse," the decline of systems, enforced by the second law of thermodynamics, under which energy dissipates and all distinct form blurs and disintegrates across the span of geologic time. He made rather opaque and theoretical indoor works to illustrate this point, but his great success was a work which virtually no one in the art world ever saw except in the art magazines.

This was the *Spiral Jetty*. In 1969 Smithson took out a twenty-year lease on an abandoned lakeside industrial site. The water was red from saline algae and fouled with chemicals and tailings; the shore, littered with obsolete machinery. The whole place looked like a ruined moonscape, which suited him perfectly, since Smithson's imagination had a strong component of the higher sort of science fiction, such as the apocalyptic, time-drenched landscapes of J.G. Ballard, whom the artist read avidly and admired.

6) Hughes, Robert. *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. pp. 572-3

Into the water Smithson dumped some seven thousand tons of rock, to make his *Spiral Jetty*: a counterclockwise coil fifteen hundred feet long and fifteen wide, built with aged Caterpillars and dump trucks. The spiral form, of course, was so organic and archaic that it could have been associated with almost anything, and was: from viruses and spiral salt-crystal deposits, to legends about mysterious whirlpools forming and vanishing in the Great Salt Lake, to archetypal serpents and snail shells, scrolls and – seen from the air- nebulae in outer space.

That is could attract such a traffic jam of symbolic references was, of course, part of Smithson's design. The *Spiral Jetty* remained visible for two years, until the waters of the lake rose and covered it.

7) Fiero, Gloria. *The Humanistic Tradition, Vol. 6: Modernism, Globalism and the Information Age*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002. pp. 155-6

Perhaps the most monumental type of total art is earth sculpture, a kind of sculpture that takes the natural landscape as both its medium and its subject. Earth sculptures are usually colossal, heroic, and temporary. Smithson's spiral- the snail-like symbol of eternity in ancient art- was 1,500 feet

wide and consisted of over 6,000 tons of black basalt, limestone, and earth- materials which are virtually identical to the surrounding area. A conscious reference to ancient earthworks, such as those found among the Native American cultures of South America, Smithson's project brought attention to the role of the artist in reconstructing the environment and its ecology.

8) Fiero, Gloria. *The Humanistic Tradition, Vol. 6: Modernism, Globalism and the Information Age*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002. pp. 155-6

Earthworks like *Spiral Jetty*, however, which moved art out of the gallery and into nature, were often best appreciated from the air. Tragically, it was in the crash of a plane surveying one such sculpture that Smithson was killed. Smithson's heroic earthwork also disappeared; a part of nature, it fell subject to processes of dissolution and submersion beneath the waters of the Great Salt Lake. But Smithson's documentary drawings, photographs, and films of this and other earthworks have heightened public awareness of the fragile ecological balance between culture and nature.

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