5730-RED CLAY FROM HEBRON PLACED AT MT. MORIAH

Art Out of Time

ALEXANDER NAGEL ON THE RELIC AND ROBERT SMITHSON

When, in 1968, Robert Smithson loaded the back of a station wagon with rocks from New Jersey and brought them across the Hudson to New York's Dwan Gallery for one of his non-sites, he was performing a material relocation that would have been familiar to countless medieval pilgrims returning home with relics from holy sites. How can the logic of one such destabilization of place and time elucidate the logic of the other, despite radically disparate circumstances? The seed of this question was planted in 2010 by art historians Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood in their landmark text *Anachronic Renaissance*. Now Nagel brings this inquiry to modernism. Giving *Artforum* readers an exclusive preview of his forthcoming book, *Medieval Modern*, Nagel here examines the spatiotemporal suspensions through which we might see and understand art across a historical distance both remote and surprisingly near.

Opposite page: Robert Smithson, *Red Clay from Hebron Placed at Mt. Moriah*, 1969, poster, 20½ x 20".

Below: Glass floor covering soil said to be brought by Saint Helena from Jerusalem, Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, Rome, 2006. Photo: Holly Hayes.

CHAPELS

It took a little while for the art market and museums to assimilate Minimalism and post-Minimalism, environments, Land art, and installation art. In the meantime, however, a number of collectors and curators looked to the past—to the multiauthored, multimedia, and multitemporal installations of pre-modern art—finding in them inspiring models for displaying site-specific work and restructuring art patronage. Dia Art Foundation, for example, was famously developed in 1974 by Heiner Friedrich and Philippa de Menil in response to the new art, but following encounters with ancient and medieval art on trips to Greece and Italy. Friedrich has avowed that Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel in Padua was an especially powerful inspiration; a traditional commission, it is also a masterwork by the founder of modern European painting and thus a work at the limits of the categories of its time. Contemporaneously with Friedrich, the collector Giuseppe Panza epochally imagined his public installations of Minimalist art to be "taking the place of the cathedral."[1] And a decade earlier, John and Dominique de Menil, parents of Philippa, commissioned Mark Rothko's celebrated chapel in Houston. Unlike most church projects, even those of the twentieth century, that sanctuary's mission was generalized—belonging to no denomination, no single religion—in order to meet the art on its terms.

Collectors and patrons were generally following precedents established by the artists. Throughout twentieth-century experiments in site-specificity, from the Bauhaus to Dia and from Kurt Schwitters to Paul Thek, Ilya Kabakov, and Robert Gober, artists have consistently invoked churches and chapels as models of installation and viewer involvement. A recent revisionist trend has linked such tendencies to spiritual commitments on the part of modern and postmodern artists and their champions, as amply documented throughout the history of the avant-gardes. Yet to reduce the interest in chapels to religious sensibilities is to limit the scope of the question. Forms of art cross the borderlines of belief systems, and medieval chapels have proved compelling to nonreligious artists.

What made medieval chapel spaces so meaningful to twentieth-century practitioners? It was not only, or even primarily, that they were a link to the sacred, but that in performing their religious functions these structures tampered with the spatiotemporal coordinates of lived experience. When it came to chapels, site specificity was only a primary stage in a logic of territorial and temporal destabilization, just as in biblical exegesis the literal reading of scripture as a historical narrative of events was considered only the first step in an interpretation of the sacred text at multiple levels (allegorical, topological, anagogical).

The dislocations set in motion by medieval art's site specificity did not remain limited to its time. They became active again in the past century, especially at those critical moments when the boundaries of art were thrown into question.

The point of studying these conjunctions is not to find medieval sources and inspirations for modern and contemporary art, or to reveal how present conditions cast a light on the past, but rather to make visible a number of constellations, as Walter Benjamin called them, "wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now."[2] In these constellations, medieval is no longer restricted to the *medium aevum*, in the literal sense of "the era in between" antiquity and Renaissance. And modern, more than merely contemporary, is rather "Ultramoderne" in Robert Smithson's sense of the term, which is to say part of a "trans-historical consciousness" marked by "nondurational histories" rather than mere sequences of temporal events.[3] "I am convinced," Smithson wrote in 1967, "that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past."[4] Although he was brought up Christian, as a child attending both the Catholic Church of St. Anthony and the Orthodox Church of St. Michael the Archangel in Passaic, New Jersey, Smithson the artist was drawn to chapels and sacred sites not as a believer but because they troubled both futures and histories.[5]

TOPOGRAPHICAL RELIQUARIES

On June 14, 1968, Smithson, together with fellow artists Nancy Holt and Michael Heizer, took a trip to Franklin, New Jersey, to collect mineral deposits and bring them back to New York. Smithson then displayed them in bins in the now-famous "Earth Works" show at the Dwan Gallery in October 1968.

Taking rocks away as souvenirs and samples of a place is a very old practice, one common among even the earliest Christian pilgrims to biblical holy sites, or *loca sancta*. Some of the most venerated relics in Rome were kept in a chapel in the fourth-century Lateran complex known as the Sancta Sanctorum. Among the treasures was a small box containing rocks and a splinter of wood from the Holy Land, assembled in the sixth century. These stones and the wood bear sixth-century Greek inscriptions directly on their surfaces indicating the locations from which they were taken; the box's lid bears paintings of scenes set in the Holy Land. The piece of wood is labeled "Bethlehem"; the rock just above it comes from Mount of Olives; the rock in the center of the box comes from "the place of the Resurrection," that is, the Holy Sepulchre; and the rock beneath is from "Zion," which may mean Jerusalem as a whole but probably refers to the citadel of Mount Zion, the oldest part of the holy city and site of the Last Supper.
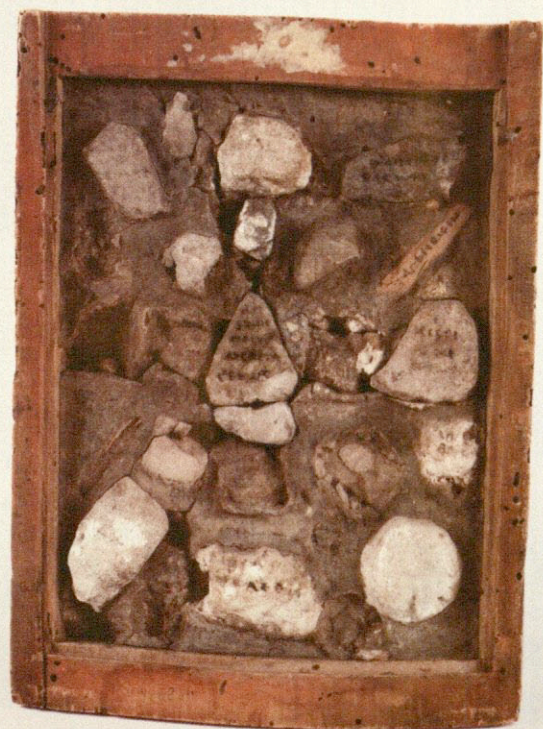
Rocks from other locations, now missing, have left their impresses in the plaster setting.

Such a box is not unique; others like it exist, and still more are documented in texts through the seventeenth century. They are part of the long tradition of the topographical reliquary, which links an object's meaning to the sacred importance of its originating place. But rather than suggest that Smithson's work was influenced or informed by this tradition, the comparison instead presents a challenge to apply one to the other: The logic of the pilgrim's box brings into focus the logic of Smithson's non-site, and the artist's writings on the non-sites help illuminate the function of the reliquary. The lid of the Palestine box carries sixth-century paintings—very early examples of Christian iconography—that are more famous than the box's contents, since Western art historians have traditionally given more importance to artworks than to rocks. From a "Smithsonian" perspective, however, it is not the paintings alone but their relation to the assembled materials beneath that matters.

When mute stones are displaced and made to function as signs, they require an extra apparatus of function and images. In 1968, Smithson appended photo-text and images. graphs and maps. In the sixth century, the preferred means were inscription and also paint, used to represent scenes set in important Holy Land sites—memory images of sorts. At the bottom left of our box lid is the nativity of Christ, which occurred in Bethlehem; to the right the baptism in the River Jordan; in the center the Crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem; and in the upper left the nearby tomb. Christ's final ascension to heaven, not far from Jerusalem, is seen in the upper right. The shape of the lid and its slotted structure reveal that it was designed to fit into the box with the paintings facing down,

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almost touching the stones. (This would explain why the paintings survive in such fine condition.) There is some debate as to whether this is the original placement of the stones; certainly there is no one-to-one correlation between the provenance of the stones and the locations of the narrative scenes. Nonetheless, it is as if the images, pressed to the samples, have imprinted them with their Holy Land designations.[6]

Within this container, the stones are displaced to a new site, but the connection to their original site is proclaimed by a system of inscriptions and pictures—thus, one site exists in two locations. Here, Smithson's terminology proves useful. He describes the effect of topographical destabilization as one of metaphor (which Smithson takes in its literal Greek meaning as a transfer, a carrying elsewhere):

> Between the *actual site* in the Pine Barrens and *The Non-Site* itself exists a space of metaphoric significance. It could be that "travel" in this space is a vast metaphor. . . . Let us say that one goes on a fictitious trip if one decides to go to the site of the *Non-Site*. The "trip" becomes invented, devised, artificial; therefore, one might call it a non-trip to a site from a Non-site.[7]

In the non-sites, the work of art is an occasion for displacement—a displacement of the artwork itself, which is both here and elsewhere, and a displacement of the viewer, who is here but confronted with an elsewhere, accessible by a form of implied travel (or fictitious travel, or anti-travel,[8] as Smithson also called it) that is built into the work. Smithson confronted visitors with the very question posed by the comic troupe the Firesign Theatre in the title of their 1969 record (an album the artist owned) *How Can You Be in Two Places at Once When You're Not Anywhere at All?*[9] For Smithson, the art gallery was quintessentially "not anywhere at all." And rather than try to make it a somewhere, he let the gallery space become a place for thinking about displacement as such. The artwork happens in the anti-travel between a "here" that is present but somehow unreal—the placeholder rather than the place—and a "there" that exists in dispersed form but is now constituted as a destination due to the geologic samples and the geographic indicators of photos and maps on view.

Smithson's language applies to more than the Palestine box. Throughout the Middle Ages there was a site that was popularly known as Jerusalem

Below: Foundation Rock of Mount Moriah in the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, ca. 1910.

Right: Robert Smithson, *Untitled (Drawing for Nonsite #2)*, 1968, graphite on paper, 11 x 8½".
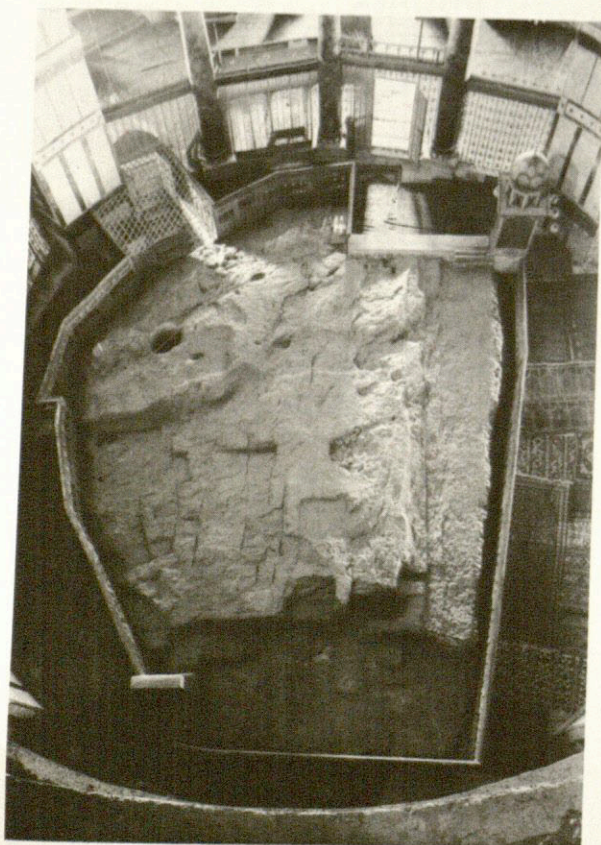
despite its location in Rome, consisting of a chapel in the Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. Legend has it that this was the room where Saint Helena (ca. 246–330) placed the relics she had brought back from the Holy Land, including a generous sample of soil from the site of the Crucifixion "soaked with the blood of Christ," which she laid into the floor of her chapel and with which she may also have lined its walls.[10] This site was a piece of transplanted territory, an ancient Earthworks project. The room with its sacred contents motivated the building of the church, which grew up around it and over it. To reach the ancient chapel the pilgrim must walk down a ramp, performing an archaeological descent through time but also into a topographical/topological fold, as one steps from Rome into Jerusalem. And while the chapel is unusual, it conforms to a more general logic found across the "Christian diaspora" of the Middle Ages. For instance, in the twelfth century, Archbishop Ubaldo Lanfranchi brought several shiploads of earth from the site of the Crucifixion to Pisa. The newly laid-in soil, called the Camposanto, or Holy Field, was used as a cemetery for illustrious Pisan citizens up to 1779. Another well-known example is the town of Borgo San Sepolcro in Italy, which according to legend grew from the germ of a stone from the Holy Sepulchre transported there by two pilgrims around the year 1000.

DEAD LETTERS

When, in 1969, the Jewish Museum in New York commissioned Smithson to make a New Year's poster, he responded by applying the logic of the non-site to the Holy Land. In Smithson's design, a photograph shows that date, [5]730, written in Hebrew letters in red earth on a chalky ground. (The 5 is not actually there but is often left implicit in Hebrew dating.) The legend below—5730-RED CLAY FROM HEBRON PLACED AT MT. MORIAH—makes it clear that this is a non-site: Hebron is a city some nineteen miles south of Jerusalem, and Mount Moriah is the Temple Mount, a site sacred to the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths. Both Hebron and the Temple Mount were hotly contested sites in the aftermath of the Six-Day War of 1967.

A memorandum of March 13, 1969, from Jewish Museum director Karl Katz to the curatorial staff and the philanthropist Vera List (the poster's funder), sets out the thinking that went into the work. It records a conversation with Smithson in which "the following idea of his was discussed":

A piece of interesting land on the site of Mt. Moriah (the navel of the world—the site where tradition has it God created Man) will be the ground for one set of numbers 5730 and the Hebrew equivalent letters.
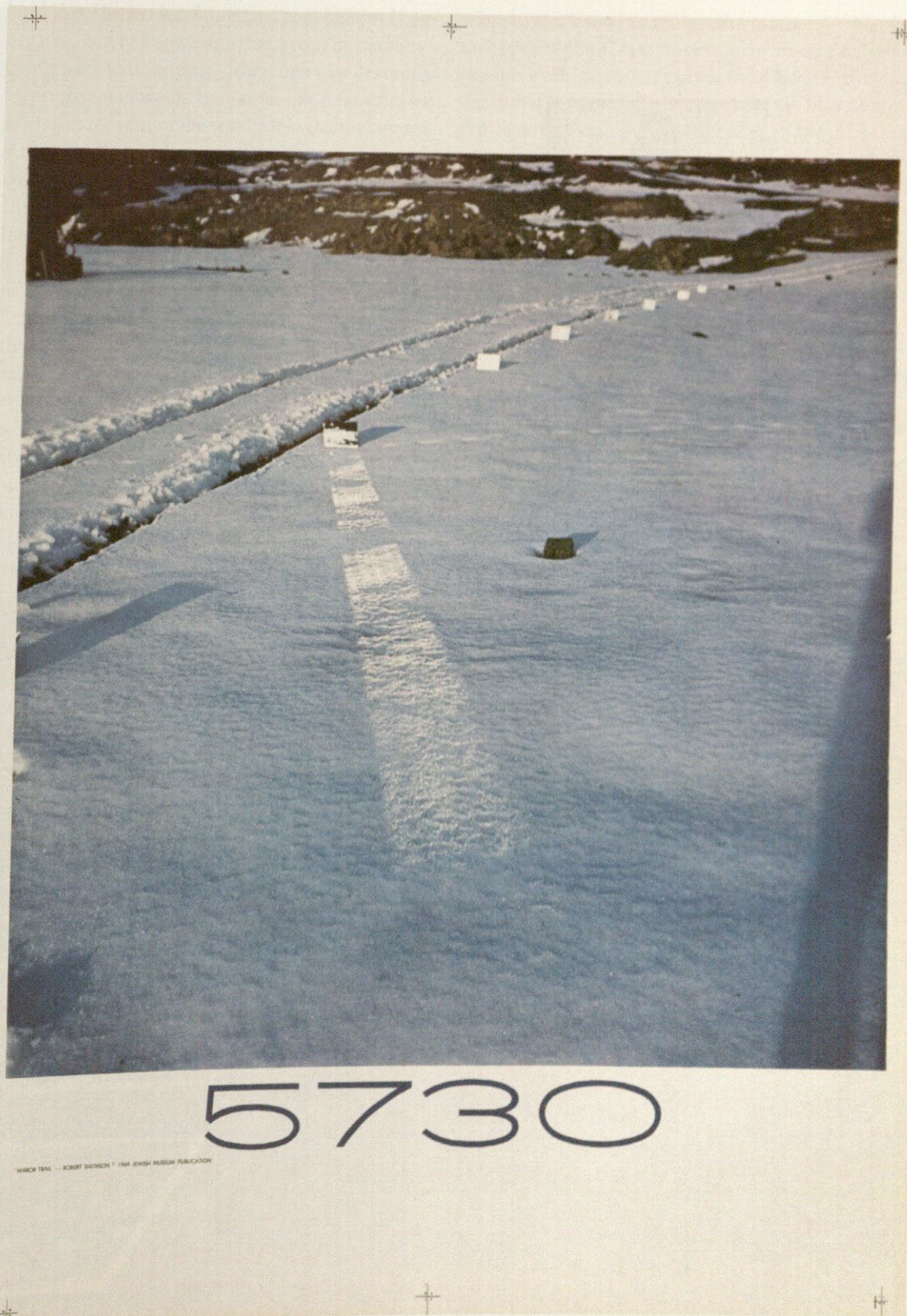
Robert Smithson, *Mirror Trail*, 1969, poster, 25 ¾ x 20".
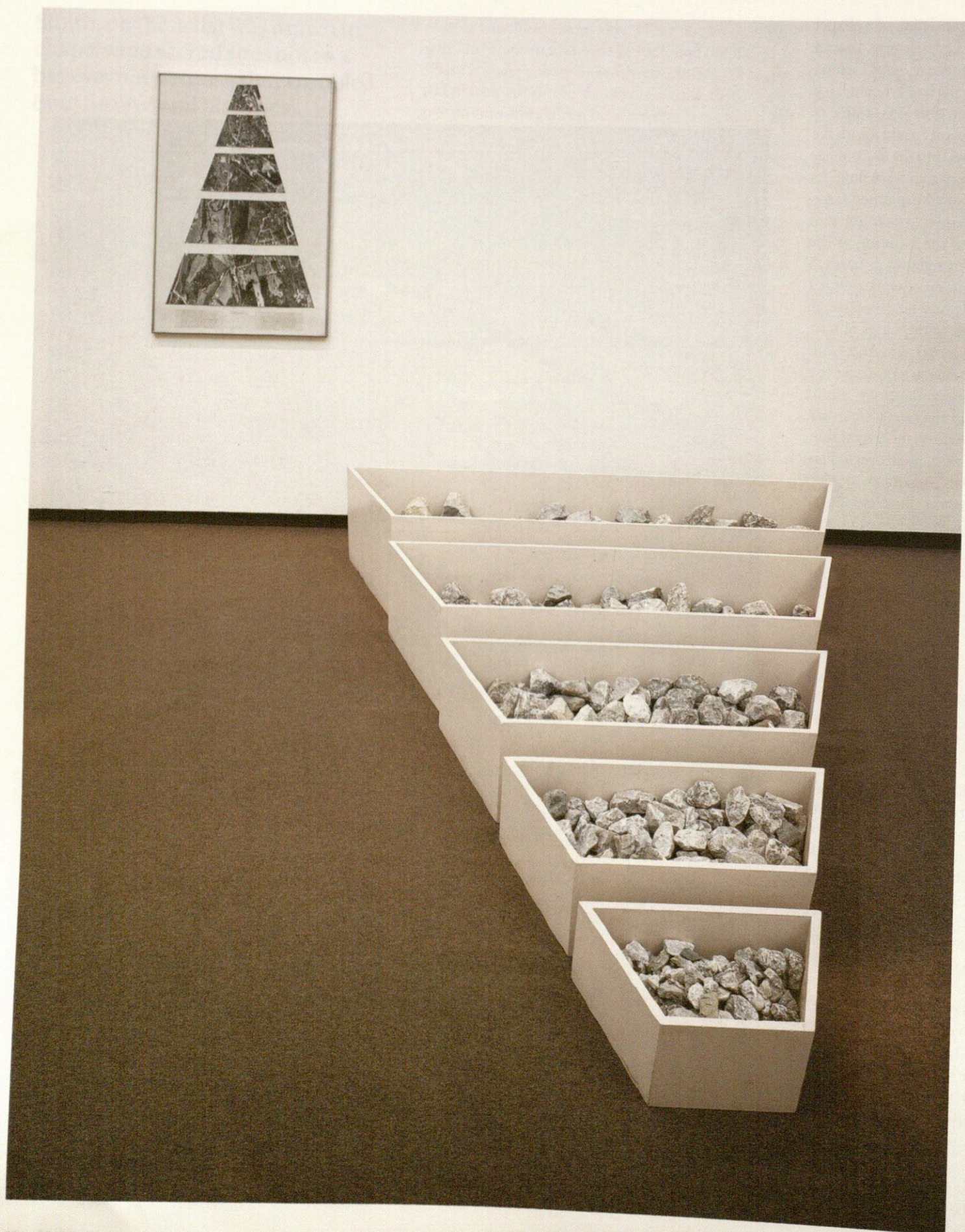
Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite (Franklin, New Jersey)*, 1968, painted wooden bins, limestone, silver gelatin prints and typescript on paper with graphite and transfer letters, mat board, dimensions variable.

Smithson's 1969 poster is as close as he ever got to producing a non-site of the premodern sort. Was it too close to becoming religious art in its own right?

The numbers and letters will be made of the red earth selected from near Hebron (where tradition has it God found the earth to make Man). These numbers and letters on the ground will be photographed from above and the photo will be reproduced as a poster, reduced as the greeting card and postcard for the new Jewish year. The text will be simple and on the face of the poster. The text by Smithson will elucidate the image.[11]

The figure 5730 marks the number of revolutions of the earth that had occurred since the purported moment of creation. The Babylonian Talmud states that the world was created from the Foundation Rock of Mount Moriah; God took soil from Hebron and used it to create the first human at the origin site of earth itself, i.e., the Foundation Rock. The displacement of earth captured in the poster's image is thus a recapitulation of the original displacement that occurred during the creation of man, a reframing of religious legend in geologic terms. God's sculptural act was not only the first work of art but also the first non-site. (The name Adam in Hebrew means "earth," and most etymologies see a connection between the Latin *homo*, man, and *humus*, earth.) For Smithson to recapitulate this gesture some 5,730 years later traces the human arc of history but also its insignificance from a geologic perspective. This Hebron earth is pretty much as it was before humans existed and as it will continue to be after humans cease to exist—a pre- and posthumous earth. And so this non-site is also a non-time, folding this bit of displaced earth back into the earth's navel and reversing the unfolding of the earth's creation in the process.

"As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end." So Michel Foucault brings his 1966

book *Les Mots et les choses* to a conclusion: If the organization of knowledge that brought man into being were to disappear, "then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."[12] If Foucault circumscribes the "human" as a category of human knowledge, Smithson's *Earthword* (so the documents title the work)[13] uses the humous earth of Hebron to mark out the duration of human existence as such. The poster is a fragile bit of human timekeeping made possible because the Foundation Rock, and the Temple Mount as a whole, had just been retaken in the latest of the wars carried out by humans in the name of scripture-based land claims. Just as those human strivings will all eventually pass away, entropy will ensure that this figure made of sand will blow away, returning to its former condition as mere earth but now mingled with the earth of another place. The message survives only because it has been captured in a photograph that will convey this less than cheery New Year's greeting to the various patrons of the Jewish Museum.

Or it would have, had the poster been sent out. The print illustrated here is only a proof; at the last minute, Smithson threw out this idea and replaced it with a *Mirror Trail*, a series of mirrors implanted in a snow-crusted New Jersey field, with the date 5730 inscribed below. "Bob decided against the poster after it was printed, and after he had reluctantly and doubtfully proceeded with it"—that is the summary offered by his wife, Nancy Holt.[14] Yet a number of prints of the rejected poster were made, providing suitable conditions, now, for an almost-forgotten project to speak to those unintended recipients, such as ourselves, who might take an interest in reading dead letters.

NONARRIVAL

This work is as close as Smithson ever got to producing a non-site of the premodern sort. Was it too close to becoming religious art in its own right? In Smithson's other non-sites, even if their structural model may well be the topographical reliquary of the holy site, there is no grounding in Mount Moriah. The logic of the topographical reliquary could be applied even as the holy sites were dispensed with. (Likewise, Smithson applied the methods of exegetical reading, which finds dizzying layers of meaning in apparently prosaic things, to the wastes of Passaic in *Hotel Palenque*, plainly unholy sites. or the ruins of *Hotel Palenque*, plainly unholy sites. "Has Passaic replaced Rome as the Eternal City?" he asks.) In a 1972 interview, Smithson casually credited the writer Jorge Luis Borges, a personal favorite, for having developed this approach: "The way he would use leftover remnants of philosophy. . . . That kind of taking of a discarded system and

using it, you know, as a kind of armature."[15] Neither the topographical reliquary nor the exegetical reading has ever, of course, gone into disuse; they are discarded systems only from within the bias of modern rationalism, in the same way that Christians considered paganism superseded despite clear evidence of its survival, which was then duly branded "superstition"—literally, that which persists past its time. For Smithson, who had ceased to be a practicing Christian, those who remained actively religious were now, like him, working within a discarded system. The difference is that he was adopting the system strategically, *as* a discarded one, rather than simply continuing to inhabit it. Or so he coolly suggests.

The non-sites exist, then, in a non-site relation to the category of the topographical reliquary. They are part of that modality and yet disconnected from it, pointing to it and yet displacing it. In fact, Smithson developed a fairly dramatic iconography of the cutoff, as if to insist on this relation/nonrelation. In his 1968 essay "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," he described the containers of his non-sites as "a three-dimensional *perspective* that has broken away from the whole, while containing the lack of its own containment. There are no mysteries in these vestiges, no traces of an end or a beginning."[16] The converging bins of the Franklin, New Jersey, non-site look like segments of a blunted perspectival recession, dramatizing the idea of nonconclusion and nonarrival. The reference to the site remains "pointless" in the sense of Smithson's *Pointless Vanishing Point*, also 1968, in which a three-dimensional structure is organized as if by perspectival construction but truncated just as it might reach its origin or end point. In contrast to these other non-sites, the original Jewish Museum poster reintegrated the beginning and the end through its reference to the Holy Land. "After he had reluctantly and doubtfully proceeded with it," Smithson resorted to another form of cutoff, stopping the presses before it became an edition.

Ends and beginnings are features of eschatological thinking, which allows for folds in time and space (the Crucifixion occurring on the site of Adam's tomb) and singularities that multiply (the potential for multiple sites of Jerusalem) through the application of a highly flexible modeling logic (earthly cities as reflections of the heavenly Jerusalem, which is visible at the end of time but organizes earth's history from the start). The topographical destabilization and much of the modeling inherent in medieval practice remain in Smithson's non-sites, but cut free from any eschatology. And yet that unmooring, too, is part of them. □

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NOTES

1. Giuseppe Panza, "The Panza Collection and Art in Los Angeles," in *Panza: The Legacy of a Collector* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 15; cited by Anna Chave in "Revaluing Minimalism: Patronage, Aura, and Place," *Art Bulletin* 90 (2008): 467.

2. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 463.

3. Robert Smithson, "Ultramoderne" (1967), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 62–65.

4. Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," (1967), in *The Collected Writings*, 74. Originally published in *Artforum* 6, no. 4 (December 1967): 48–51.

5. I was informed about the churches Smithson attended as a child via a personal communication from his wife, Nancy Holt, November 1, 2011.

6. On the Palestine box, see Cristina Pantanella, "Reliquary Box with Stones from the Holy Land," in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson (New Haven: Walters Art Museum, 2010), 36. In a paper given at a 2011 symposium held at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC, on the occasion of the "Treasures of Heaven" exhibition, Derek Krueger noted that in their present arrangement the rocks would prevent the lid from sliding in over them, and suggested that the plaster in which they are currently embedded belongs to later centuries. He proposed that the rocks originally would have been placed inside a sack in the box.

7. Robert Smithson, "A Provisional Theory of Non-sites" (1968), in *The Collected Writings*, 364.

8. Unpublished Milwaukee Museum questionnaire, 1968, Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt papers, microfilm 3835, frame 528, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

9. Smithson's copy of the album is kept at the Archives of American Art.

10. For the chapel and further literature, see chapter 19 in Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone, 2010), 193–94 and 321–22.

11. Mr. and Mrs. Albert A. List New Year's Graphic Archive, Jewish Museum, New York.

12. In his copy of the English translation of the book, now at the Archives of American Art, Smithson underlined a relevant passage from the introduction (*The Order of Things* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1970], xxiii): "Strangely enough, man—the study of whom is supposed by the naïve to be the oldest investigation since Socrates—is probably no more than a kind of rift in the order of things, or, in any case, a configuration whose outlines are determined by the new position he has so recently taken up in the field of knowledge. Whence all the chimeras of the new humanisms, all the facile solutions of an 'anthropology' understood as a universal reflection on man, half-empirical, half-philosophical."

13. Memorandum dated June 18, 1969, in the Mr. and Mrs. Albert A. List New Year's Graphic Archive.

14. Personal communication to the author, May 20, 2011. I am grateful to Nancy Holt for having alerted me to the existence of this abortive work.

15. Robert Smithson, interview by Paul Cummings, July 19, 1972, in *The Collected Writings*, 294.

16. Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in *The Collected Writings*, 111. Originally published in *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (September 1968): 44–50.