Robert Smithson removed from the source

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In Robert Smithson's 1973 essay on Frederick Law Olmsted we find an excellent summary and critique of the early theories of Wilhelm Worringer, the German historian of medieval art who exerted a powerful influence on artists of the early twentieth century:

> In Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), we are told that Byzantine and Egyptian art were created out of a psychological need to escape nature, and that since the Renaissance our understanding of such art has been clouded by an undue confidence in nature. Worringer locates *his* "concept" of abstraction outside the sensuous anthropomorphic pantheism of Renaissance humanism. "The primal artistic impulse," says Worringer, "has nothing to do with the renderings of nature." Yet, throughout his book he refers to "crystalline forms of inanimate matter." Geometry strikes me as a "rendering" of inanimate matter. What are the lattices and grids of pure abstraction, if not renderings and representations of a reduced order of nature? Abstraction is a representation of nature devoid of "realism" based on mental or conceptual reduction. There is no escaping nature through abstract representation; abstraction brings one closer to physical structures within nature itself. But this does not mean a renewed confidence in nature, it simply means that abstraction is no cause for faith.[1]

This polemic about the true sources of abstraction had been important to Smithson from his earliest writings. The argument was that: 1. True abstraction was connected to a source in nature but at a level far removed, far below, the forms of a humanist conception of organic form and personal expression; 2. Much modernist abstraction is mired in the old organicism and anthropomorphism. In 1966, Smithson penned several anti-humanist polemics in language not far from the writings of Donald Judd and Alain Robbe-Grillet: "If we can do without God, then the artist can do without 'life' and 'death,' and all the other self-indulgent myths"; "Abstract art is not a self-projection, it is indifferent to the self."[2] It was a position in line with the post-humanism of Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* of 1966, which was translated into English in 1970 as *The Order of Things*. In his copy of that book Smithson underlined a relevant passage from the Introduction:[3]

> 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.

Smithson saw a way out of anthropocentrism in the recuperation of inanimate and inhuman abstract form, which is to say geometry. In a March 20, 1968, interview, published for the first time in this issue of *RES*, he stated:

> Practically the whole history of modernism seems to be full of these kidney and organic writhing shapes. Actually I think there are very few modern artists that are really interesting; even the cubists had a kind of stunted idea of geometry. I think that we have to go outside of modernism to find our coordinates, our language, which is more in the area of geometry.[4]

"Outside of modernism" might have meant the abstraction Worringer celebrated in northern European medieval art, or it might have meant the abstract, supra-human forms of Byzantine art celebrated by T. E. Hulme, an early champion of Worringer's and also a hero of Smithson's.[5] But although he was an admirer of what he called "pre-Renaissance" art, Smithson found his primary alternative source in mannerism. Less remote than Worringer's Gothic ornament forests or Hulme's

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1. R. Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," in *The Collected Writings,* ed. J. Flam (Berkeley, 1996), p. 162. (Worringer's text was actually published in 1907.)

2. Smithson's instances of anti-humanist language are from "A Refutation of Historical Humanism" (see note 1), p. 337, and "The Pathetic Fallacy in Esthetics" (see note 1), p. 338.

3. All underlinings and annotations in Smithson's books are to be found in the boxed contents of his library now at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (over eighty boxes, as yet uncatalogued). Documents from the Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt papers in the Archives of American Art are cited as AAA, RSNHP, together with the microfilm and frame number.

4. See the interview published below.

5. On Hulme's medievalism, see his *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art,* ed. H. Read (New York, 1924). The first and last essays, "Humanism and the Religious Attitude" and "Cinders," received underlinings by Smithson in his copy of the book. More recently, see the essays in *T. E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism,* ed. E. P. Comentale and A. Gasiorek (London, 2006).

hieratic mosaics, mannerism comes as a wrinkle in time—a mirror displacement of sorts—on *this* side of Renaissance humanism. Even as early as his 1961 trip to Italy, Smithson chose to include with a letter to his soon-to-be wife Nancy Holt a postcard of a painting by the mannerist painter Sodoma (very probably the *Deposition*) that he had seen in the Siena picture gallery. In 1963, he produced drawing collages such as *Untitled (Hexagonal Center)*, where a dizzying abyss of geometric frames centers on a detail from a mannerist Fontainebleau School painting.[6] In a 1972 interview he described this as a phase where he was trying to "overcome [a] lurking pagan religious anthropomorphism" through an exploration of "crystalline structures."[7]

Art made along these lines had little to do with classical humanist conceptions of organic unity. In Arnold Hauser's *Mannerism*, published in English in 1965, Smithson underlined a passage where Hauser presents mannerist anti-classicism as a rejection of "the fiction that a work of art is an organic, indivisible, and unalterable whole, made all of a piece."[8] This idea of the unified artwork was foreign, Hauser says, to the work of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Brueghel. The paragraph's concluding sentence is underlined only in part, as follows:

> Indeed, in the history of art the "inorganic" structure characteristic of mannerist works seems to be the rule rather than the exception, and the few typical creations of classicism provide no justification for concluding that the essential aim of art is to abolish the luxuriant creativity and the unrestrained anarchy of life.[9]

Smithson's pencil lifts as the last part of the sentence veers into dubious territory. The "inorganic structure" of art can do just fine without any help from life's "luxuriant creativity" and "unrestrained anarchy."

Lack of organic unity was not far, in Smithson's thinking, from the alienation effect, or "a-effect," of Bertolt Brecht, and the connection came through Brueghel, an artist Smithson classed among the mannerists. Brecht elaborated the principle of the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) in his writings on theater, where he taught that bourgeois theater, or what

he sometimes called Aristotelian theater, was based on the idea that the story should be presented in such a way as to encourage the empathy of the beholder, who becomes absorbed in the fiction, experiencing it and becoming emotionally invested in it. The alienation effect of Brecht's "epic theater" was meant to disrupt that involvement, which is a form of false consciousness, insisting instead on the artifice by which the production is made available to the spectator. The viewer who remains aware that it is Charles Laughton playing Galileo will be more able to see the contructedness of the wider social relations normally taken for granted under the effects of capitalist mystification. Brecht found anticipations of the *Verfremdungseffekt* in the work of Brueghel, where, unlike what we find in the tidily framed narratives of traditional salon painting, there are unresolved contradictions and the simultaneous presence of unintegrated modes. "Such pictures don't just give off an atmosphere but a variety of atmospheres."[10]

Smithson gave Brecht's brief notes on Brueghel some heavy underlining in his copy of *Brecht on Theater*. In an essay of 1967 not published in his lifetime, entitled "From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman, or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema," Smithson quotes Brecht on Brueghel's *Tower of Babel*, a monument to miscommunication and imperfect execution and thus a primary theater of the alienation effect. Brecht did not merely recognize Brueghel as a precursor but, Smithson asserts, actually "derived" his conception of the alienation effect from the old master's paintings. Visual art, and particularly mannerist art, becomes the true birthplace of an art of irony and detachment. What is true of Brueghel, Smithson points out, is true of many mannerist pictures: "everything turns away from the center of interest. This turning away from what is thought to be 'important' is at the bottom of the a-effect."[11]

An art limited to human concerns and human history was merely secular—secular in the sense of being time-bound, bourgeois in its limitations and cultural specificity. It was a pathetic reduction of the purpose of art—pathetic in the sense of the fallacy that art is an expression of the feelings of its maker, taken up

6. On Untitled (Hexagonal Center) and related works, and for a series of important reflections on the various constructions of the artist, see C. A. Jones, "Preconscious/posthumous Smithson: The ambiguous status of art and artist in the postmodern frame," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 41 (2002): 16–37.

7. Interview with Paul Cummings (see note 1), p. 283.

8. A. Hauser, *Mannerism: The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art,* vol. 1 (New York, 1965), p. 24.

9. Ibid.

10. The essay by Bertolt Brecht that mattered most to Smithson was "Alienation Effects in the Narrative Pictures of the Elder Brueghel," in *Brecht on Theater,* ed. J. Willett (New York, 1964), pp. 157–159 (above quote on p. 157).

11. R. Smithson, "From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman, or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema" (see note 1), p. 350.

empathetically by a viewer/reader. To embrace entropy was to open oneself to temporal and physical processes that far exceeded the scope of human efforts to impose order on time and space. To embrace the crystalline as opposed to the forms of organic life recognizable to an anthropocentric gaze—those "kidney and organic writing shapes"—was not, in fact, to reject the organic and the natural but only prevailing and limited conceptions of them. To focus on the geometry of crystals instead "brings one closer to physical structures within nature itself," as he said in his summary of Worringer quoted at the beginning of this article. These physical structures are embedded in nature at a deep level, well beneath its apparent curves. *Spiral Jetty*, which was inspired at least in part by irregular crystals that grew in a rotational formation, was a major demonstration that there was no contradiction between crystalline geometry and curving form.[12]

Beyond the rigid, "absolute" structure of Byzantine art celebrated by T. E. Hulme, Smithson found in mannerist art a crystalline perception combined with bodily figurations, a provocative paradox. Focused on human form—nothing but twisting bodies, really—it yet remains an art astonishingly devoid of anthropomorphism; movement does not yield action, and human form organizes itself into patterns that break with the temporal scale of lived experience. In his 1966 essay "Entropy and the New Monuments," Smithson compared minimalist sculpture to mannerist art, in particular Parmigianino, approvingly quoting the art historian Sydney Freedberg's assessment that "Parmigianino's figures are an assemblage of surfaces; nothing is contained within these surfaces." This was an art more in tune with the real, dynamic nature of the crystalline.[13]

"Dry" art was very much in fashion in the 1960s. Pop, minimalism, and conceptual art advertised alienation from origins, whether those origins were understood to lie within "man," in the European tradition, in nature, or in God. Certainly Smithson offered a version of "dry" in his concern with the inorganic, the fragmentary,

and the alienation effect. And yet there is a persistent suggestion that removing anthropomorphism is a way to get to something really primordial. The question is whether something on this order—the geometrical, the crystalline, the non-human—is ever recoverable as a source, whether it is offering itself as a source or origin at all. Were these structures and fragments as close to "wet" as one could get in a religionless age, or were they really just "dry"? In fact, this question itself, not any answer to it, motivates much of the later works, which ask it over and over again. Smithson's Non-sites, a body of work initiated in 1968 and a dominant logical model for his thinking about art from that point onward, were a way of structuring questions about traces and origins.

In the Non-sites, the artwork does not have an immediate and "fulfilled" relation to the display in the gallery. Instead, the bin filled with rocks in the gallery and its pictographic framework are understood as relays, sending the gallery visitor somewhere else. The Non-sites offer a displacement—a displacement of the artwork, which is both here and elsewhere, but also a displacement of the viewer. The viewer is present but confronted with an elsewhere, and with the fact that implied or fictitious travel—or as Smithson also called it, anti-travel—to that other place is built into the work. The Non-site is thus a means of thinking through the strange "extraterritorial" status of the white cube. The artwork happens in the anti-travel between a "here" that is present but somehow unreal, displaced, and a "there" that exists in undifferentiated form but is now constituted as a target by the samples and indications offered in this strange, displaced "here."[14]

This all sounds rather dry. But is it? In an unpublished interview with Tony Robbin conducted in 1968, he explained the logic of the Non-sites in more expansive terms:

> I'm interested in expanding the limits beyond the interior of a room so that one can experience a greater scale in terms of a work of art [. . .] . As I say our usual idea of looking at art as an object in a room without any kind of other references seems to be a product of reductive formalism, which just gives you one object. My method operates more in a dualistic frame of reference that gives rise to an infinite number of possibilities. It sort of bifurcates, so that the work

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12. On rotational crystal formation and *Spiral Jetty,* see J. Roberts, *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History* (New Haven, 2004), esp. ch. 2.

13. S. J. Freedberg, *Parmigianino: His Works in Painting* (Cambridge, MA, 1950), p. 14; Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments" (see note 1), p. 20 (Smithson changed "assemblage" to "assembly"). Roberts (see note 12), pp. 36–39, offers a highly suggestive reading of Pontormo's 1526 *Deposition* in the church of Santa Felicita in Florence in relation to Smithson's interest in rotating crystal formations, a connection corroborated by the materials brought together here.

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14. R. Smithson, "A Provisional Theory of Non-sites" (1968) (see note 1), p. 364. See the drafts for this piece in AAA, RSNHP, reel 3834, frames 405 and 407, which include the statements: "If one visits the site, he will see nothing resembling a 'pure object'"; and "both sides are present and absent at the same time." For the term "anti-travel," see Appendix B to the interview published below.

of art doesn't exist merely as one object [. . .] . The site and the Non-site become like interactive reflections.[15]

Suddenly we are in the vicinity of the language of medieval theologians. The idea of expansion and multiplication, those "interactive reflections," resonate strongly with medieval modalities for thinking about holy places and their representations as both site-specific and not, as both of their time and not. In the twelfth century, Archbishop Ubaldo Lanfranchi brought several shiploads of earth from the site of Christ's Crucifixion to Pisa. The newly laid-in soil was used as a cemetery for illustrious Pisan citizens who found consolation in the idea that they would lie in the earth that had been drenched with Christ's blood. It was called the Camposanto, the Holy Field, holy because it is in fact a piece of Jerusalem in Pisa, a Non-site. The Camposanto was in many ways unique but its basic logic was extremely well-known and widespread. A chapel in the church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome received loads of earth from Golgotha long before Pisa did, and accordingly this space was known as Chapel Jerusalem. Stones from holy sites have been collected in topographical reliquaries—Non-site bins of sorts—from the time of the earliest pilgrims to the Holy Land all the way down to the present day. The town of Borgo San Sepolcro in Italy grew, according to legend, from the germ of a stone from the Holy Sepulcher transported there by two pilgrims in the tenth century.[16]

It is sometimes said that in the Smithson Non-sites the original site or the exact location of the site were in themselves not important—that they were chosen at random and only acquired meaning once they were put into dialectical relation with the art installation. But that is not exactly true. As has often been pointed out, the

New Jersey places mattered to Smithson, a New Jersey native. The Franklin minerals had special properties much appreciated by amateur geologists, such as the fact that they fluoresce spectacularly under black light.[17] But the relevance of the site goes beyond the places that were important to Smithson's biography. Smithson was well aware of the Holy Land and its various displacements, as is clear from a poster he designed for the New York Jewish Museum in 1969 but never published. It carried a photograph documenting a Non-site: red earth from Hebron displaced onto the site of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in such a way as to spell the date "1969" in Hebrew.[18]

At an unknown date Smithson extracted a few lines from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, setting them out alone on a loose sheet of paper. A textual Non-site, it frames off the only place in Beckett's modern gospel of non-arrival where a trip elsewhere is imagined (or rather mapped, projected, and then remembered only as projected):

> Vladimir: Do you remember the Gospels?
> Estragon: I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy.[19]

15. Audio recording of interview with Tony Robbin, 1968, AAA, RSNHP. The quoted statements are made between minute 5:20 and minute 7:50.

16. On the Camposanto, see D. C. Ahl, "Camposanto, *Terra santa*: Picturing the Holy Land in Pisa," *Artibus et Historiae* 24 (2003): 95–122. For an introduction to the chapel in Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, with further references, see A. Nagel and C. S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York, 2010), pp. 193–194 and 321–322. The most famous topographical reliquary is the so-called Palestine box of the sixth century now in the Vatican. See C. Pantanella, "Reliquary Box with Stones from the Holy Land," cat. no. 13 in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe,* eds. M. Bagnoli, H. A. Klein, C. G. Mann, and J. Robinson (New Haven, 2010), p. 36. On legends surrounding the town of Borgo San Sepolcro: C. Gardner von Teuffel, "Niccolò di Segna, Sassetta, Piero della Francesca and Perugino: Cult and Continuity at Sansepolcro," *Städel-Jahrbuch* 17 (1999): 163–208.

17. Special properties of the Franklin rocks: AAA, RBNHP, reel 3834, frame 176: "The only other site in 'the mineral world' that equals Franklin is a site in Sweden. In Franklin one may find an excess of 194 different types of minerals, 26 of these are found nowhere else in the world. Its most common metals are zinc, manganese, and iron. On June 14, 1968, my wife, Nancy, Michael Heizer, and I took a trip to Franklin to collect mineral fragments for the containers. Near the Buckwheat Dump is the Franklin Mineral Museum which is connected to a 'Mine Replica' and 'Fluorescent Display Room.' A false cave simulating a mine shaft lead [sic] to the 'black-lit display.'" Nancy Holt elaborated on the qualities of the Franklin minerals in a personal communication to the author, April 17, 2011: "The Franklin Non-Site rocks are very special since they glow bright fluorescent colors under black light. Quite amazingly I happened upon a display of these rocks at the Meadowlands Museum, which strangely is in a house once owned by Charles Smithson, RS's great grandfather (see attachment). In what might have been his grandfather Samuel's bedroom is a large, rock display with a black light."

18. For the poster, see A. Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time* (London, 2012), ch. 11.

19. Smithson transcribes Beckett: AAA, RSNHP, reel 3834, frame 165.