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# Nature, Entropy, and Robert Smithson's Utopian Vision of a Culture of Decay

John G. Hatch, Jr, *The University of Western Ontario*

# 10 Nature, Entropy, and Robert Smithson's Utopian Vision of a Culture of Decay

*John G. Hatch*

Robert Smithson is considered by most as the father of land art, producing its most iconic monument, *The Spiral Jetty*, in 1970, located in the Great Salt Lake, in Utah (Figure 10.1). What is commonly known about Smithson is that entropy dominated his thinking, specifically from around 1963 until his death in a plane crash in 1973. Smithson's interest in entropy was first spelled out publicly in his seminal 1966 article "Entropy and the New Monuments," where he contextualizes the work of a number of his contemporaries within an entropic framework. In the most telling passage, Smithson writes:

The works of many of these artists celebrate what [Dan] Flavin calls "inactive history" or what the physicists call "entropy" or "energy-drain." They bring to mind the Ice Age rather than the Golden Age, and would most likely confirm Vladimir Nabokov's observation that, "The future is but the obsolete in reverse." In a rather roundabout way, many of the artists have provided a visible analog for the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which extrapolates the range of entropy by telling us energy is more easily lost than obtained, and that in the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all encompassing sameness.<sup>1</sup>

Although recent studies on Smithson have understandably tended to set entropy aside in order to focus on other interesting dimensions of his work, the entropic always resurfaces because it is such a dominant aspect in Smithson's thinking. But before examining Smithson's use of entropy, I would like to provide a brief answer to the question, what is entropy? This is a question that understandably generates some confusion because it involves a term that has evolved over time, taking on a number of characteristics, both social and scientific, expanding it significantly beyond its original meaning.

Entropy comes from the Second Law of Thermodynamics and is simply the measure of the dispersal of energy defined as heat in a closed system. The more energy is dispersed, the higher the level of entropy. An interesting



Figure 10.1 Robert Smithson, *The Spiral Jetty*, 1970, Rozel Point, Utah. Photograph courtesy of Ray Boren, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2009.

quality of entropy, as formulated by the Second Law, and one of the many reasons Smithson adopted it, is that it is one of the few physical theories that is an asymmetrically time-bound concept (in fact it is the source for the term “time’s arrow”). This is because the Second Law states that once energy has been expended it cannot be re-used, which means that entropy can only increase with time in a closed system. The consequences of this is that the universe will come to an end, in what thinkers at the end of the nineteenth century ominously referred to as “thermal death”—a consequence nicely described by H. G. Wells in *The Time Machine* (1895) in terms of the human race (with the Eloi who are mentally and physically deteriorated and simply serve as cattle for the Morlocks) and the universe as a whole. Entropy is more popularly formulated as the tendency of all systems to break down, to fall into disorder or chaos (which is not strictly correct); or to put it in more colloquial terms, no matter how hard one tries, things just tend to break down. Not surprisingly, Smithson’s interest in entropy occurred at a time when the concept was gaining a great deal of attention from a variety of circles, ranging from science fiction literature to economics and communication theory.<sup>2</sup>

The number of sources Smithson drew upon in developing his entropic vision is astounding. Artists he came to see as intuitively understanding entropy include Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, Jean Dubuffet, and Kazimir Malevich, who I

will be returning to shortly. Smithson was drawn to novelists as well whom he either felt embraced entropy intuitively like James Joyce, Jorge Luis Borges, the Nouveau Roman group, and Samuel Beckett; or authors who were consciously incorporating entropy in their writings such as Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, William S. Burroughs, and New Wave science fiction writers like Brian Aldiss and J. G. Ballard. Smithson also drew heavily on a bevy of social thinkers and theorists, including the art psychologist Anton Ehrenzweig and his notion of “de-differentiation,” and Roland Barthes’ interpretation of *jouissance*; Smithson read as well George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time*, the economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen’s book *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, Claude Levi-Strauss’ *The Savage Mind*, and the communication theorist Norbert Weiner’s *The Human Use of Human Beings*. And he obviously read scientific sources like P.W. Bridgman’s *The Nature of Thermodynamics*.<sup>3</sup>

Smithson was quick to point out and praise, in a moderate way, examples of entropy. These include the various quarries he visited in the state of New Jersey, New Jersey itself, modern architecture (Philip Johnson in particular), muzak, science fiction and horror b-movies, and suburbs.<sup>4</sup> There is something of a kinship here with the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich, whom one can argue also embraced the Second Law of Thermodynamics (Smithson certainly thought so), describing at times his Suprematist colored forms as nodes of energy that break down to form larger concentrations that ultimately arrive at the threshold of the spiritual nirvana, described at one point by Malevich as a desert of nothingness, a favorite metaphor of Smithson’s by the way, as we will see, and portrayed in the *White on White* series.<sup>5</sup> For Malevich, this path was inevitable, and he found evidence of it in various disciplines, ranging from poetry (the French symbolists to the *Zaum* poets), to painting beginning with the work of Cézanne and the Impressionists, and even in terms of social history with Karl Marx announcing the end of history with the end of class struggle.<sup>6</sup> Remarkably Smithson astutely recognized this in Malevich’s work despite a dearth of resources available to him.

However, unlike Malevich, there was no spiritual dimension to Smithson’s adoption of the forces of nature, no participating or being part of the cosmos as a microcosm of the macrocosm where one can somehow live in a benevolent universe that will nurture us if we are willing to embrace it. Smithson had no need for any of that, at least not the spiritualist reading. For Smithson entropy was a natural law that has no conscience, no moral imperatives; it is a natural law that is completely indifferent to humanity—in other words, it just doesn’t care. As such it was the perfect tool for challenging our patterns of thought, our conventions, ideals, absolutes, or to use Smithson’s word, our “fictions” (which included nature for Smithson).<sup>7</sup>

Smithson did not challenge our beliefs by kicking and screaming like the Futurists or the Dadas, rather he tackled them by playing the role of the penultimate entropic author in most of his production after 1964. Entropy

was an ideal device for upsetting, destabilizing, or decentering our systems of thought; it became Smithson's "surd," a term he borrowed from Samuel Beckett, or his "alogon," the term used by Pythagoreans to describe irrational numbers.<sup>8</sup> The latter Smithson used as the title for a series of works in 1966–1967. The *Alogons* (Figure 10.2) are "Minimalist" pieces that challenge the Italian Renaissance, an art historical period Smithson was not a big fan of largely because it provided the template for the ideology of the art museum, redefined art along linguistic lines, and introduced linear perspective, which for Smithson mediated and distorted our understanding of nature.<sup>9</sup> The *Alogons* disrupt linear perspective by highlighting the fact that it is a visual convention. They do so because they employ in a clever way the rules of linear perspective, which plainly do not work when applied to three-dimensional objects because linear perspective is, ironically, a language for two dimensions.

I should stress at this juncture that Smithson had nothing against conventions or "fictions" *per se*. They have their use and their place, but there comes a time when they can no longer fill the purpose they had originally served and, as such, should be abandoned, or in more entropic terms, laid to waste. What Smithson objected to was the holding onto such fictions as "truths," thus presenting themselves as timeless, and subsequently being defended vigorously as unassailable absolutes.<sup>10</sup> This was partly Smithson's response to formalism and Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood." In his reply to Fried's defense of Modernism, Smithson indicated that he had

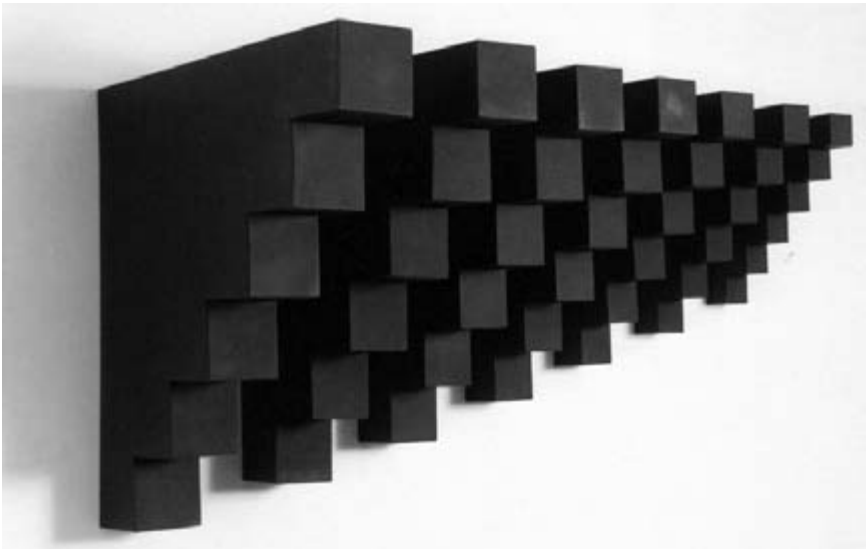


Figure 10.2 Robert Smithson, *Alogon #1*, 1966, Whitney Museum, New York. © Estate of Robert Smithson / SODRAC, Montreal / VAGA, New York (2012).

no problems with a return to the garden of Eden, in other words, embracing the aesthetic ideals Fried tried to defend, but he warned that “the certainty of the absolute garden will never be regained.”<sup>11</sup> It is at this juncture that one can see why Smithson liked the fact that entropy was an asymmetrically time-bound concept—entropy only goes forward, never backwards, as Smithson felt Fried was trying to do.

So what conventions did entropy help Smithson destabilize, in addition to the ones I’ve already mentioned or alluded to? There are many, but some key ones return again and again under various guises. To begin with, Smithson adamantly wanted to do away with anthropomorphism, a position that sets up the necessary conditions for an arrogant belief in the supremacy of human thought over all other things in the natural world.<sup>12</sup> Entropy would be a wonderful leveler of anthropomorphism, complemented nicely by Smithson’s embrace of geology, in other words the inorganic, as well as geology’s timeframe, which itself underscores the relative insignificance of our presence on this planet. Smithson’s *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1965) is very much an anti-anthropomorphic work. The viewer moves between the two mirrored chambers with the possible expectation of vainly being reflected, but when situated between them, the viewer disappears completely through a clever manipulation of the mirrors that end up just reflecting each other endlessly. This work provides some affective sense to the French philosopher Pascal’s thought: “Man is equally incapable of seeing the nothingness from which he emerges and the infinity in which he is engulfed.” Pascal was one of Smithson’s favorite thinkers whom he references a number of times in his writings and interviews.<sup>13</sup>

With the disappearance of the spectator comes, as one should expect, the disappearance of the author. The *Chambers* is a work that does not beg knowledge of its maker, nor do the *Alogons*. In fact, most of Smithson’s pieces barely make it out of the shadow of authorial anonymity—they bear very few of the traditional hallmarks of authorship. Inspired by some of the artists and writers mentioned earlier, even Yves Klein, Smithson’s presence as maker is minimized either by simply acting as the precipitator of natural forces, as in the *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) or his various poured works, or by involving groups of individuals in the making of a piece (including getting Lucy Lippard to produce a piece on his behalf), or lastly by eliminating completely the craft component, something he adopts from Minimalism.<sup>14</sup> Even in many of his writings, Smithson’s voice tends to be distant, nonchalant, losing itself in boring passages such as his listing of the fifty or so different minerals found in a New Jersey quarry in “The Crystal Land” of 1966, a text Ron Graziani qualifies as practically devoid of any “depth analysis.”<sup>15</sup>

The absence of the authorial voice is expressed textually in a slightly different way in “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space” of 1966 (Figure 10.3) which presents a curious collection of quotes and images.<sup>16</sup> Then you have the “Domain of the Great Bear,” which is an intriguing description of a tour of the Hayden planetarium in New York co-written with Mel

Bochner, but involving a cutting and pasting of the Hayden's promotional literature and signage.<sup>17</sup> It is worth mentioning at this juncture that Roland Barthes' famous essay "The Death of the Author" was first published in English in 1967 and then in French in 1968 and, given the American artist's keen interest in Barthes work, this essay would not have escaped Smithson's attention (Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" was only translated into English in 1977).

Smithson's "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967) is indebted to the American poet William Carlos Williams, who was Smithson's pediatrician, and specifically William's epic poem about Paterson, New Jersey (*Paterson*, 1946–1958). Smithson's text however bears no traces of Williams' exuberance and enthusiasm. In fact, the style of Smithson's account is drawn from the writings of the Nouveau Roman writers Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor, the latter who is actually quoted in the "Tour," as well as many of the other authors cited or mentioned in the Smithson's text.<sup>18</sup> His account opens in a rather matter-of-fact, dispassionate manner:

## Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space

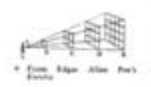
For many artists the universe is expanding; for some it is contracting.

By  
ROBERT SMITHSON

"Without a time when something was a physical or material reality." Robert, The Unfinished Man.



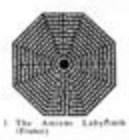
10 Ad Reinhardt, installation (March 1967) Arts Pavilion, Gallery



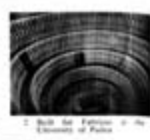
9 From Shape into Form, 1967



8 A. Plummer, Shape without Volume by Dan Graham



1 The Ancient Labyrinth (France)



2 Well for Paterson in the University of Paris

A ROUND FOUR BLOCKS of paper I shall partition into ultramundane images that shall contain in themselves information as well as reproduced reproductions. The first objects shall be a labyrinth, through which the mind will pass in an instant, thus circumventing the spatial problem. The next encounter is an optical anomaly chosen: "Quickly the mind will pass over this dizzying height. Here the pages of time are paper thin, even when it comes to a pyramid". The center of this pyramid is everywhere and nowhere. From this center one may see the Tower of Babel, Raphael's sentence, or a building by the architect LeDoux". To formulate a general theory of this inaccessible system would not solve its symmetrical perplexities. Ready to trap the mind is one of an infinite number of "sites of the future": "Infinite circles" and "interrogative repetitions" acknowledge the "absolute" absence: "One becomes aware of what T. E. Hulme called "the fringe... the cold walls... that had nowhere."

In Ad Reinhardt's "Twelve Rules for a New Realism" we find the statement, "The present is the focus of the eye, and the past of the future." The flat surface within the condition of Reinhardt's standard 100" x 100" paintings" disclose faint aspects of time. Time, as a physical interaction, is absorbed almost imperceptibly into one's consciousness. Each passing is so close both necessary and forgetfulness, a paradox of darkening time. The time of his grids are barely visible, they waver between the future and the past.

George Kubler, like Ad Reinhardt, seems concerned with "weak signals" from "the void." Beginnings and endings are proposed into the present as bare planes of "actuality." In *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, Kubler says, "Actuality is . . . the intercurrent space where nothing is happening. It is the void between events." Reinhardt seems obsessed by this "void," so much that he has attempted to give it a concrete shape that evades death. From one kind of illusion to "duration," but an interval without any suggestion of "life or death." This is a sublime period of a hidden infinity. The future encompasses the past as an unobtainable present. Time vanishes into a perpetual moment.

Most notions of time (Progress, Evolution, Atomic growth) are put in terms of biology. Analogies are drawn between organic biology and technology; the nervous system is extended into electronics, and the muscular



6. Network based on The Air Stage of Robert Lull



1 The Pyramid of Moscow



4 The Tower of Babel



3 Raphael's model of the universe



5 Claude Lorraine, Lullor (1776-1800)



7 'City of the Future'

Arts Magazine, November 1966

Figure 10.3 Robert Smithson, page from "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," Arts Magazine, 41, no. 1 (November 1966): 28.

On Saturday, September 20, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue. I bought a copy of the New York Times and a Signet paperback called *Earthworks* by Brian W. Aldiss. Next I went to ticket booth 21 and purchased a one-way ticket to Passaic. After that I went up to the upper bus level (platform 173) and boarded the number 30 bus of the Inter-City Transportation Co.<sup>19</sup>

Smithson's description of Passaic is void of people, a fact punctuated by the accompanying photographs, with the exception of some children playing on a shoreline in one photo. The text and images together convey a desolate landscape meant to compete, as Smithson famously put it, with the "heap of ruins" that is the eternal city of Rome.<sup>20</sup>

Smithson's tour ends at a playground sandbox that recalls the state of the world presented in Aldiss' book, as well as the realm of the immortals in Borges well-known story "The Immortal" (1949):

The last monument was a sand box or a desert. Under the dead light of the Passaic afternoon the desert became a map of infinite disintegration and forgetfulness. This monument of minute particles blazed under a bleakly glowing sun, and suggested the sullen dissolution of entire continents, the drying up of oceans—no longer were there green forests and mountains—all that existed were millions of grains of sand, a vast deposit of bones and stones pulverized into dust. Every grain of sand was a dead metaphor that equaled timelessness, and to decipher such metaphors would take one through the false mirror of eternity. This sand box somehow doubled as an open grave—a grave that children cheerfully play in.

Smithson then concludes his discussion around the sandbox by using it to illustrate entropy:

I should now like to prove the irreversibility of eternity by using a *jejune* experiment for proving entropy. Picture in your mind's eye the sand box divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy.<sup>21</sup>

Smithson's journey through Passaic would be re-enacted of sorts in the account of his travels through the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico in 1969.

Smithson's "Incidents of a Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan" is inspired by the 1843 travelogue of the American explorer John Lloyd Stephens, entitled *Incidents of Travel in the Yucatan*. Smithson wanted to turn Stephens'



account on its head (or mirror it rather). Stephens, who, by the way, was, like Smithson, born in New Jersey, characterized the indigenous population of the Yucatan as lazy and having no interest in the past; the former seemed to be confirmed for Stephens by the high incidence of a medical condition called “lazy eye,” and the latter by the neglected Mayan monuments Stephens had set out to discover. Smithson however praises these qualities as exemplary of a population that is in tune with the entropic forces of the physical world. To punctuate this view, Smithson took a number of photographs, but not of Mayan ruins, of which he saw plenty, but rather a rundown hotel, which he presented as part of a talk about his trip to an audience expecting a discussion of the famous Mayan ruins of the region. Smithson also produced a series of works entitled “Mirror-Displacements” (Figure 10.4). These served to further punctuate the entropic by fragmenting the landscape through mirror reflections.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 10.4 Robert Smithson, *Nine Mirror Displacements*, *Artforum*, September, 1969. © Estate of Robert Smithson / SODRAC, Montreal / VAGA, New York (2012).

The “Mirror-Displacements” engage another convention that Smithson sought to undermine by embracing entropy, namely that of the fetishization and integrity of the art object. An earlier piece, *The Eliminator* (1964) spells out this theme in its title, obviously, and its appearance. What one sees when looking at this work are mirrors that frame a flashing neon red light, which is almost blinding when it goes off; the light itself is highly immaterial, and its dispersal magnifies that quality, as well as disorienting the viewer. The Yucatan “Mirror-Displacements” add a few more wrinkles to the destabilizing of the art object in that they are site-specific pieces, which Smithson photographed and then dismantled immediately after. These works were never made available to an audience. Their only appearance would be in the form of photographs that accompanied his Yucatan account published in *Artforum* in 1969. Where most photographs of site-specific works are meant to generate a longing to see the original, such a longing cannot be fulfilled here. But then maybe the photographs are the work, or are they simply documentation for the text? As such, the mirror-displacements question a number of our assumptions about the art object, and even with works that are relatively new as a genre, in this case site-specific installations. But the Yucatan pieces offer another possibility, and an entropic one at that. To my mind they should not be conceived of as discrete works, but rather as a totality, and a fluctuating one at that. What I mean is that the Yucatan work is the text, the mirror displacements, the photographs, etc. They are not isolated performances, but rather accumulating and transformational. In an interview with Paul Cummings, Smithson is asked about his writing and how it relates to his work:

**PAUL CUMMINGS:** Did you find it augments your work? Or is it separate from?

**ROBERT SMITHSON:** Well, it comes out of my sensibility. I mean it comes out of my own observation. I mean it sort of parallels my actual art involvement. In other words, the two coincide; one informs the other.

In a curiously roundabout, but not atypical way, Smithson arrives at an answer which clearly suggests that all that is produced around a work becomes part of its reading/interpretation.<sup>23</sup>

This is especially the case of the *Spiral Jetty*, which frustratingly gets reproduced photographically as a discrete object, and yet the landscape is a key component of the work, a fact that rarely if ever gets photographically acknowledged in textbooks. Then there is Smithson’s writing about the piece, the photographs, the fate of the piece itself, Smithson’s desire (ironic probably) to add to it when it first disappeared under the rising water level of the Great Salt Lake, and then the film Smithson made which introduces layer upon layer upon layer of readings, interpretations, images, etc., to the *Spiral Jetty*, ranging from references to spiral galaxies, quotes from

Beckett's *The Unnamable*, legends of the lake, dinosaurs, and James Joyce's ear. All of these transform the work, and the implication is that everything else that is written and said about the piece gets incorporated into its meaning, despite the author's original intentions, which ironically appears to be what Smithson intended, but under the banner of entropy.

For Smithson, entropy was an important leveler on a number of different levels and this essay has only scratched the surface. There is a nagging question. How does Smithson feel about a society that is driven to embrace entropy, is it a good thing or a bad one? The ideal answer, and one Smithson adopts frequently, is that how one feels about it is unimportant, it will simply happen. However, there are a few brief moments where he "takes sides." In the passage from "Entropy and the New Monuments" cited at the beginning of this text that ends with Smithson stating "in the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all encompassing sameness", he follows this with a curious and revealing anecdote:

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.

Why Smithson himself felt that way may never be answered either.

## NOTES

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3. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 282–287; Eugenie Tsai, *Robert Smithson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 249–263.
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8. Ron Graziani, "Robert Smithson's Picturable Situation: Blasted Landscapes From the 1960s," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 3 (1994): 447; Donald Kuspit, "The Pascalian Spiral: Robert Smithson's Drunken Boat," *Arts Magazine* 56, no. 2 (1981): 85; Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art After Babel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 114–115.

9. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 84–85.
10. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 83–84.
11. Graziani, “Robert Smithson’s Picturable Situation,” 430.
12. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 283–284.
13. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 78 and 88.
14. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 110.
15. Graziani, “Robert Smithson’s Picturable Situation,” 434.
16. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 34–37.
17. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 26–33.
18. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 74.
19. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 68.
20. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 74.
21. Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson*, 74.
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