

Robert Smithson: He Made Fantasies as Real as Mountains

By PETER SCHJELDABL

WHEN a culturally significant person dies, there may occur for the living a moment of illumination, not only of one career but of a whole nexus of events and meanings into which that career was woven. The death of Picasso, for instance, inspired a period of rich reflection on our century that, or many, is still continuing. But when such a person dies tragically and young, the illumination is more in the nature of light from a flashlight, a harsh glare that catches a history in a "candid," awkward pose. The case of sculptor and earth-artist Robert Smithson, who died July 20 at the age of 35, meets his latter description.

Smithson was killed, along with a photographer and the pilot, in the crash of a light plane on a ranch near Amarillo, Tex., while he was inspecting the progress of his latest earth sculpture. The plane failed to clear a near-by mesa that Smithson reportedly envisioned as the ideal promontory for viewing his new work, "Amarillo Ramp," a huge, curling incline of red shale partly on land and partly in the waters of a small desert lake. The sculptor Richard Serra and Smithson's widow, artist Nancy Holt,

plan to see the project through to completion.

Smithson was a quietistic figure in the rather hermetic world of the New York avant-garde, a man with the shy, vulnerable air of an adolescent and a mind brimming with arcane information and poetic notions. He was born in Passaic, N.J., and studied at the Art Students League and the Brooklyn Museum School. He never attended college. A painter into the early sixties, he switched to sculpture and became an important artist and enthusiastic writer of philosophical and polemical essays in the Minimalist movement. He was the acknowledged founder of Earthworks and, with Michael Heizer, probably one of the two most spectacular practitioners of that strange manner of contemporary monument making.

Smithson cannot be said to have reached a wide audience while he lived. To understand why not, it is necessary to understand a little about the avant-garde milieu with which he shared ambivalent attitudes toward success. Minimalism came into existence in the mid-sixties not only as an aesthetic program, but also, for its more alert proponents, as a kind

of ethical criticism of the exposed, monied situation of Pop, Color Field and other modernist art. For the pleasure principle of its rival movements, it substituted a didactic mode in which the intellectual basis of the artwork—the "idea" of such-and-such an object or experience—would be rigorously observed in its execution, with such uncontrollable variables as color utterly expunged.

This almost grimly defiant response to the usual expectations of an art viewer is apparent in much of Smithson's work, though from the start it seemed to be at war in him with a secretly romantic and effusive nature. If his work for gallery shows rarely seemed completely successful, it was because the spare, measured, nonsensuous style of his sculptures struck one as arbitrary in face of the richness and quirky poetry of his ideas. When he dumped some rocks into an immaculately crafted metal bin, mounted a precisely detailed map of where the rocks came from on the wall and called the resulting display a "Nonsite," the fancifulness of the idea was painfully at odds with the unambiguous physical presence of the work.

Smithson conceived Earthworks, which were finally to liberate his sensibility, while serving as an "artist consultant" for a firm of architects and engineers in 1968. The project at hand was a new airport in Texas, and Smithson proposed a series of mammoth works of "Aerial Art"—meant to be viewed from above—at the airport's edges. Nothing came of the plan, but it was widely publicized, and the idea caught fire. In the next few years, Smithson made commissioned Earthworks in Rome, Emmen in the Netherlands and Kent, Ohio, plus numerous small-scale pieces on his own in places like Passaic, the Yucatan and the Florida Keys.

His grandest work was "The Spiral Jetty," a vast spiral of raw rock and earth extending into the water at a remote location in the Great Salt Lake, executed in 1970. Probably his finest and most revealing work is a 35-minute 16-mm film partly documenting the construction of the jetty and partly setting forth, in evocative words and images, his obsessive fascinations with time, place, geology and what he was pleased to call "entropy," an elusive concept bearing on the extinction of matter and energy

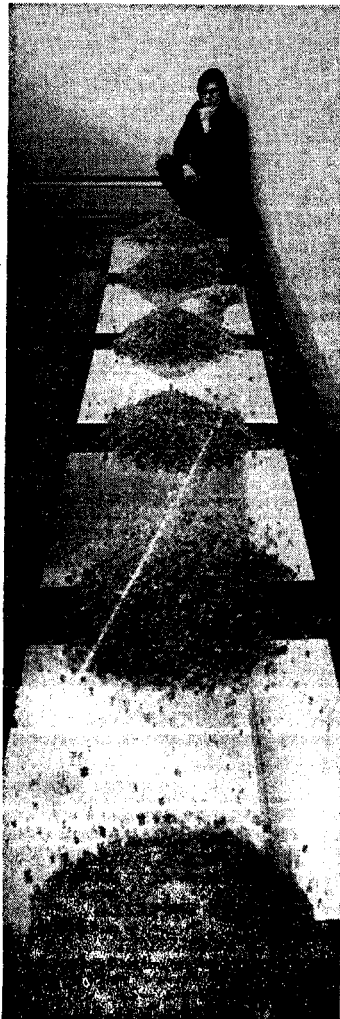
that had, for his mind, an almost mystical attraction. In the film, Smithson managed to infuse his physical jetty with the teeming stuff of his imagination, thereby giving birth to a unique and permanent symbol.

Smithson's genuine passion for dry, dead, "entropic" things and processes reminds me of W. H. Auden, who began a description of his own personal Eden this way: "Limestone uplands . . . plus a small region of igneous rocks with at least one extinct volcano." Whereas the poet is obliged to create the world of his dreams in imagination, however, it was Smithson's genius and good fortune to be able to work his will directly on the landscape, making fantasies as real as mountains. Thus the Spiral Jetty: a great, blank presence that is indifferent to the waters that sometimes cover it, to the salt crystals that sometimes form on it and to the people who may or may not view it—and that will stay where it is more or less unchanged, more or less forever.

In his polemical writings, Smithson railed at the world of museums and galleries and "portable" art that he, with his Earthworks, had managed to escape. There is some-

thing ad hoc and self-serving about these writings, as there is about most art polemics. One might conclude that he was writing mainly to bolster his own morale, which suffered under the incessant difficulties of arranging support and logistics for his projects. But he was also touching on an open wound in the present cultural situation, the widespread alienation from traditions and institutions that it was his lot to feel acutely, as a personal rupture. He asserted the authority of his own subjective experience, versus a projected Establishment, in order simply to survive.

This is the tortured, incomplete aspect our history presents in the first moment of Smithson's absence. It seems possible in this moment that the alienation that has just about decapitated our society was finding expression in his ostensibly bizarre and grandiose undertakings, and that perhaps these undertakings, with the understandings that would follow them, were pointing the way to new forms of relatedness. If this is true, and if an appreciation of the fact can grow in the wake of Smithson's death, then some good may come of the awful event.



JONAS MEYER

The late Robert Smithson with a minor and rock-salt piece. "He was able to work his will directly on the landscape"

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