In 1962 Robert Smithson made a series of drawings in ink on big sheets of paper 18 inches high by 24 inches wide. In those days, surfaces of that size counted as fairly large. The previous year, Andy Warhol had launched a series of 32 Campbell's Soup cans on somewhat smaller canvases (20x16 in.). Clearly, Smithson wanted to provide himself with ample space, though he didn't fill it in the manner of a Pop artist. Both Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein tended, in those days, to occupy an entire field with a single, hence monumental, image. In James Rosenquist's paintings, large fragments of even larger images jostle for control of the surface. Smithson's 1962 drawings, also made from fragments, swarm with allusions to the urban landscape and Pop culture, yet his imagery is small, sometimes minute. It commands the surface through repetition, not monumentality, and wide stretches of white remain blank.

Working with a fine - tip pen, Smithson would inscribe a word at the edge of his paper - "SAYONARA," for example, or "CANDY." Sometimes there¹s a short phrase - "PROOF POSITIVE" - or a string of words almost long enough to count as a sentence: "the Reno Arch and Famous Virginia Street, a blaze of lights from the center of the night club and casino district." Never, though, does a complete sentence appear. Wholeness emerges from bits and pieces of language and form as they spread across the page, mapping the emptiness.

Having written "SAYONARA" once, Smithson wrote it eight more times, forming a stack of words that would be neatly rectangular if he hadn't carefully overwritten the word again and again so that it was out of alignment with those beneath. Yet, everywhere in these drawings, one feels the imperative of the grid. Above the repetitions of "SAYONARA," he placed an orderly row of four nude male figures and, above them, another row of four, upside down - though a gridded pattern of this sort has no up or down, and there are signs that Smithson worked on these drawings from every side, like Jackson Pollock dripping paint from all four edges of his canvas.

Even in abstract images, one usually intuits the pull of gravity, and that almost bodily sensation brings with it the implication of a horizon. This is not always the case in Smithson's drawings. Things tend to float free, even large chunks of architectonic form. Up and down are established by the orientation of words, as on a page - not by the persistence of landscape in composition, as in a painting by Piet Mondrian or Franz Kline. With these drawings, Smithson escapes almost entirely from the usual kinds of pictorial space. The point of his rows, blocks, and stacks of words and other forms is to displace his art - its space - to the gridded surfaces of charts and maps. Looking for pictorial order uninflected by the thrusts and counter - thrusts, the harmonious balance of traditional composition, he finds it - and is only

partly happy with his discovery.

Symmetry and repetition attract Smithson, yet they leave him impatient. Even as he establishes a patch of gridded, modular order, he disrupts it. His most reliable irregularities are the quirks of his handwriting, which provided the basis for his style in 1962. Smithson's hand is fluent but not notably elegant, and occasionally he seems to have made an effort to give his words an awkward, spiky look - in the sentence fragment about Reno, for instance.

In these drawings, the meaning of a word rarely has any connection to the mood of the line in which it appears. In a frenetic drawing called*Untitled (Hollywood Cotillion)*, two unsteady columns are built from the repetition of the words "Anti-Freeze" and "SUNSET." "Anti-Freeze" is particularly agitated, while "SUNSET" is calmer, but one realizes that the two types of writing could easily have been interchanged. There is no necessary relationship between the word¹s content and its rendering. In another drawing, one could say that it was proper for the artist to write "PROOF POSITIVE" in clear, regular capital letters. But then why, as he repeats the phrase, do the letters "I" and "O" multiply so vigorously, turning sensible words into inarticulate shouts or sighs? And, in yet another drawing, what logic of form and reference joins the wobbly scrawl of Smithson's "SATURN" to the word itself, this double allusion to both a planet and a pre-Olympian god?

Smithson's hand is willful, refusing to take dictation from the sense of words or the rules of syntax. At his most impatient, he lets the forms of handwritten letters disintegrate into jittery squiggles. Clustered, these lines become passages of decoration-flurries of rough graphic energy that sometimes fill a corner of a drawing. Chasing language beyond its meanings, images beyond coherence, Smithson sometimes hounds his line into an elemental state, then coaxes it into attractive patterns. On occasion, his nested zigzags and curlicues look almost pretty, and when he elaborates them into reminiscences of Baroque arches and domes, they acquire a surprising grandeur. However, his line is at its most elegant when he uses it to render the nude figures that inhabit nearly all the drawings from 1962.

Though these figures float in defiance of gravity, only some have wings. More often, appendages are merely feathery. Now and then they bear words - for example, "very," repeated six times above "snow," similarly repeated. The "IRON" of Untitled (Iron) appears on the right wing of a male figure who drifts up toward the encrusted ruins of what may have once been a temple. Sharing the air with him, and clinging to the architectural surfaces nearby, are cartoonlike renderings of primitive life forms - amoebic creatures with a hilarious variety of tendrils and pseudopods. At one end of the scale, an angelic presence, at the other, the sort of thing one might see through a microscope in biology class - or in the notebook of a student whiling away the time with weird pictures. With these images, Smithson marks off the extremes between which our familiar humanity might make its appearance in these drawings, but never does.

In drawings from 1963, Smithson's imaginary nudes became more frankly sexual. Untitled (Pink Linoleum Center) features a full-frontal image of a man naked except for leather boots and a motorcycle cap. In the lower left-hand corner of this drawing, a woman sits on a horse wearing nothing but a cowboy hat. In Untitled (Second Stage Injector), a reclining nude displays male genitals and female breasts. The sexuality of the previous year's figures seems, at first glance, more discreetly veiled. Yet the genitalia of these earlier nudes are visible, and, embracing on occasion, the figures are far from chaste. Nonetheless, they are not as single - mindedly sexual as they would soon become. In 1963, Smithson rendered anatomical details with a laborious precision that recalls Tom of Finland. The year before, his line was quick and lithe. The body was a stylized hieroglyph, and sexuality stood for every kind of yearning, including the aesthetic. In Smithson's drawings from 1962 one senses, for the first time, the intensity of his ambition.

These 1962 images employ fragmentation and subtle slippages of meaning to invoke an extraordinarily wide range of experience. The word columns mix language with allusions to architectural structure. Architectural detail comes into focus, and Smithson nearly smothers it with organic shapes. Thus the artist mingles "nature" and human artifice. And with the nude figures he shows us how thoroughly images of the body are permeated by cultural memory, both long - and short - term. For these long - limbed figures, with their schematic musculature, are only marginally correct. Heavily stylized, they recall the eccentric neoclassicism of Henry Fuseli and his associates, who flourished in London and Rome toward the end of the 18th century; and, like art by the Fuseli circle, they evoke Michelangelo's grand manner. Especially to the point are the nude figures of William Blake, marginally a member of Fuseli's group. Like Smithson¹s, Blake's figures seem unaffected by gravity and, more often than not, appear to float amid the dense blocks of handwritten text.

Yet one need not look so far into the past for sources behind Smithson's figures: a more timely influence can be found in the superheroes of action comic books. Hardly generic ideals, Smithson's figures embody a paradox of stylistic provenance, which creates more puzzles than it solves. What are we to make of figures that count Michelangelo's nudes among their distant ancestors, and the likes of Batman and Wonder Woman among their more recent ones?

Extracting art from such clashes of style and provenance, Smithson never tidied up the aftermath: he loved conflicts of style, form, and meaning - the more flagrantly unresolvable, the better. This same delectation of disorder shows in the patterns he made from words - his never-quite-stable blocks and towers of language. To account for these devices, it is usual to talk of concrete poetry, which generates meaning from the interplay of words and their arrangement on the page - as in Guillaume Apollinaire's Calligrammes from 1918. Apollinaire's works, in turn, may owe something to the poet's memory of late works by Stéphane Mallarmé, which send words unfurling slowly from left to right, to be inflected by all the whiteness they leave undisturbed. It is certain, too, that Apollinaire was excited by the flicker of words in Cubist collage. In response, he bent the lines of his Calligrammes into nervous hieroglyphs.

Poets among the Italian Futurists followed suit, and soon the liberation of language from standard typography had been declared by Constructivist utopians, form-masters at the Bauhaus, and the various factions of Dada. From these inventions came the tradition of concrete poetry that Smithson took up in the early 1960s. Of course, most concrete poetry is staidly respectable. Smithson's, by contrast, conjures up the sublime seediness of the Las Vegas strip. By the early 1960s, he was making art from disjunction and disparity. He liked to shock his audience, as the Dadaists shocked theirs.

Smithson's arrays of words and forms can also be seen as reflections of the commercial landscape, with its flashing signs and endlessly repeated logos. This is especially clear in No Vacancy (1962), which spreads the title phrase from one side of the sheet to the other, like neon filling the window of a motel office. The surface above contains six stacks of the word "VASELINE." Below, rows of stars fill the emptiness - or, with their mute reiteration, create a nocturnal emptiness of their own. The bottom third of the drawing is occupied by five female nudes or one female nude five times repeated. Amid the drifting clutter of words - "PRICE WARS," for instance, or "Last Day" - the question of individuality is endlessly vexed.

At a time when Pop artists, color-field painters, and Minimalists were offering competing visions of absolute unity, Smithson mocked the very idea of it. He had a larger purpose, as one gathers from his responses to a questionnaire circulated in 1966 by Irving Sandler and Barbara Rose. "Is there a sensibility of the 1960s?" they wondered. "Is there an avant-garde?" Naturally, Sandler and Rose expected a single answer to each question. Smithson gave ten. After listing ten sensibilities of the 1960s - ranging from "The sensibility of momentary paralysis" to "The sensibility of stale thoughts" - he listed ten avant-gardes and ten academies into which the avant-garde had hardened. To the question, "Is there a split between the avant-garde and the public as formerly?" he replied with a list that began with "The split between the eyes" and ended with "The split between the warm and cool" and "The split between the splits."

Talking to Paul Cummings in 1972, Smithson said, "I began to function as a conscious artist around 1964-65." What he meant, perhaps, is that he did not, until then, see the importance of Minimalism. Not having seen that, he couldn't subject Minimalist order to the doubts that led him to the great theme of his major work - namely, entropy, which physicists define as the tendency toward disorder built into the structure of matter. Yet his drawings of 1962 are hardly the work of an unconscious artist. Their incipient griddedness shows that Smithson was primed to respond to Minimalism. And the clashes of style and meaning in these early works suggest that he would never be satisfied by Minimalist clarity, no matter how much he admired the crystalline blankness of Minimalist form. As the 60s ended and Smithson's art moved out of the gallery and into the landscape, his vision appeared at full scale in all its disconcerting grandeur. Shaped by his enchantment with entropy, Smithson's earthworks and later writings argued that meaning emerges from the disintegration of meaning. In 1962, that argument flowed from the restless ironies of his hand.