



We probably all have had the experience of walking along an empty beach and coming upon a collection of seashells arranged in a circle or even a small heap of rocks of similar size and shape. At once we recognise an order different from that of the natural world around us; we recognise the work of the human hand, and if we were on a desert island we would know without doubt that it was inhabited. For in nature, rocks and seashells are scattered randomly on a beach, not assembled into groups or shaped into patterns. And the circle of seashells soon will be returned to this state by the action of the wind and waves.

This change from order to disorder, or from structure to ruins, is an aspect of what we call entropy, a fundamental principle of physics and cosmology. The sun, we are told, is slowly running down as it gives off energy; the universe itself is said to have come into being in a quasi-theological event called the big bang — which may satisfy theoretical physicists but leaves fundamental philosophical questions unanswered — and has been expanding and slowly running down ever since. Somehow, cosmos arose from chaos and is slowly winding down to a chaotic state once more.

But nature is not all a matter of entropy: life itself, especially as conceived since the theory of evolution, is a counter-entropic process of developing complexity from protozoa to humanity, although the whole process feeds parasitically on the energy shed by the sun in the course of its own inconceivably long self-consumption. Individual life forms are still subject to entropy, although even they grow from conception to maturity before they begin the decline of ageing and eventual death: like a dancer leaping into the air before the force of gravity reasserts itself and they come back to earth.

Life is the most obvious example of a counter-entropic movement within nature, and that is ultimately why we are so moved by natural environments, by flowers and trees, and by the living energy of animals, for they all express growth and the spontaneous joy of living things, analogies of our own vital force. But the inanimate parts of nature, such as rocks, mountains, the sea and the sky,



also have a powerful effect on our imagination, and that is probably because of much less apparent and less comprehensible forms of inorganic structuring that take place in these forms of matter as well.

The structures of crystals are a particularly fascinating example of a kind of inorganic growth: not just a slow and inevitable breakdown of order into disorder but the self-structuring of ordered systems of

matter. And these are the natural forms that particularly attracted Robert Smithson (1938-73), as we see in the first rooms of this exhibition. Smithson was not interested in living things or in human beings as subjects of his art but in the fathomless depths of geological time, which is measured in hundreds of millions of years, dwarfing the 2500 years or so of humanity's written history and a few more millennia of civilisation.

Notes and charts and maps reconstruct the shape of Earth and the structures of geological formations in ages unimaginably long before any sort of consciousness: a world that existed harshly and mutely but with no one to know it. When, in an article on "Entropy and the New Monuments", he discusses contemporary trends in sculpture — with artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Dan Flavin — Smithson observes that their work recalls "the Ice Age rather than the Golden Age", he is referring to a comparatively recent period. He goes on to quote Vladimir Nabokov's - remark that "the future is but the obsolete in reverse"; like some mystics, he seems to see all time as already past, already consumed by the chasm of eternity.

The works in the early part of the exhibition are extrapolations from crystalline structures, such as a quarter pyramid made by cutting pieces of mirror glass: from above it is all silver but from the side we can see into its green, watery depth. Mounted on the wall are two pieces based on mirrors as well, paradoxical plays of reflection that disorient our sense of volume and make solid surfaces appear to be transparent. In the middle of the room is the most striking work in the exhibition, also conceived as a kind of poetic puzzle. The eye — or the mind — wants to see it as a low table-like structure of mirrored surfaces, surrounded by fragments of broken rock. But this is impossible because we seem to be simultaneously seeing through it as though it were transparent. In fact, it is a low box, open at the top, composed of mirrored surfaces inside and out, and with broken stones around the inner and outer surfaces. The effect continues to be disturbing yet mesmerising even after we have seen, by an effort of attention, how the piece actually works.

These motifs, forms and subjects clearly fascinated Smithson, and the exhibition includes many books that once belonged to him on the scientific structure of crystals, geology, the chronology of Earth, concepts of cosmology and entropy, and so forth. It is not surprising either to find that he was a reader of science fiction, which so often — perhaps partly in the spirit of Nabokov — sets futuristic scenarios in settings that recall the antique or the primitive, and which of course constantly evokes cosmological themes. The attraction of these subjects was visceral and not fully understood by the artist, as we can sense in many of his writings displayed here, but particularly in a notebook open at the beginning of the exhibition.

On the left-hand page of the book he has written: “If I knew the meaning of a work of art before I created it ...”, then the text breaks off. On the opposite page he starts again: “My art is incomprehensible to me, I wish somebody would tell me what it is all about ...”, although this time he pursues with various reflections on his work. Indeed Smithson wrote abundantly, in a distinctive manner: he is articulate and literate, but precisely because he does not know in any straightforward way what his art is about, he allows ideas to flow in a seemingly unedited stream of consciousness, which alternates between perceptiveness, sometimes brilliance, and almost nonsense.



One of the most interesting pieces in the exhibition is, perhaps unpromisingly, a slide projection with a recording of Smithson’s voice commenting on the images to a lecture audience. At first sight the slides appear to be unremarkable, of indifferent quality as photographic images and of subject matter that teeters on the brink between mildly picturesque and desperately banal. And the commentary is improvised and rambling, gradually running out of things to say about each picture before moving on to the following one.

But the work becomes oddly absorbing as you realise he is talking about ruined or unfinished sections of an eccentric hotel in which he had stayed in Mexico. He is drawn to the way that structures have lost their function or have never been properly completed so as to make their function clear; he is deeply attracted, almost with a child’s capacity for imaginative response, to the strangeness of unroofed rooms, or the potential and the menace of dark doorways in a dilapidated wing.

And it is particularly interesting to see what Smithson writes about this place: “The Hotel Palenque could have been built to conform to the ancient Mexican gods that haunt the nearby ruins ... For it is being simultaneously built and torn down at the same time.” In other words, the Hotel Palenque, in almost Borgesian fashion, is an allegory for the world of nature, the order of life itself, in which things are constantly growing, defying entropy for a time, then in turn succumbing to the laws of physics and gradually perishing.

But the work for which Smithson is best known — and it is only for substantial and finished work that an artist can be remembered, not for speculations and musings — is *Spiral Jetty*, represented here by a documentary film made at the time of its construction in 1970. This is not really a jetty but a low earthwork like a causeway or breakwater, built out into shallow water with bulldozers, as we can see in the film. There is something unexpectedly evocative about the footage of the bulldozer pushing earth and rocks into the water: the film is slowed down, and this brings out the elemental contrast of rock and water, but also the pathos of human power disturbing earth and rocks that have lain undisturbed for millions of years. It is almost as though Smithson wanted to draw our attention to the violence done to nature in the making of art.





For all that, nature will reclaim this structure like all others in time. If it had been set in a tidal bay, even in a protected coastal location, *Spiral Jetty* would have disappeared long ago; as it is, though built in the shallow waters on the edge of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, a relatively stable environment, the work was covered for decades when the water level rose, and has become visible again in recent years only because of drought conditions. The submerged structure reappeared encrusted with salt crystals, which is poetically appropriate since the location was chosen for its inorganic salinity, and the spiral shape itself was inspired by characteristic crystalline formations.

Like all earth art, Smithson's is meant to be ultimately ephemeral, and belongs broadly to that movement of revulsion against the commodification of art and its use as investment asset or symbol of power and cultural status — both in reality far more

extreme today than they were 50 years ago — that also gave rise to conceptualism, performance art and other practices that in principle were not able to be packaged and sold as products. And it belongs to a period that rediscovered the world of nature and a respect for natural processes and cycles that tended to be depreciated in the modernist enthusiasm for science and technology.

But Smithson's work, as we sense throughout this exhibition, is more intuitive than programmatic. He read a lot, and wrote and spoke a lot too, but ultimately he was following an instinct in making his most memorable work. It was a playful instinct, too, as we see from the helicopter footage of the artist running like a child along his newly created spiral: running towards the centre, as in a labyrinth. *Spiral Jetty* is an ultimately temporary, if relatively durable, act of human pattern-making within the order of nature: the artist's own circle of seashells on a monumental scale.

### Robert Smithson

University of Queensland Art Museum, St Lucia, Brisbane, to July 8