Every Landscape Tells a Story

Essay on Robert Smithson's use of Landscapes by Maria Finn.

Published in Plum Velvet # 4, 2009.

Robert Smithson wrote his essay *A Tour of the Monuments of the Passaic* in 1967, and it was published in *Artforum* the same year. The text describes his trip to Passaic in New Jersey, a suburb in transition. The purpose of Smithson's trip was to make visible, certain conformed and habitual ways of looking at the landscape surrounding us. But at the same time, he also investigates the narrative that a specific landscape expresses, a narrative neglected and overseen, but nevertheless a narrative about society at that particular time. What he also accomplishes is to create a text that documents an event, his trip, which at the same time functions as a form of fiction. Not fiction based on relationships between characters but one that is between the spectator and the landscape surrounding him. Smithson refers in his title to monuments and these are created in his text, as he imagines the architecture of the suburb, bridges, pipes and other industrial remnants, to be monuments of a future, already abandoned.

The essay commences with Smithson describing how he buys a bus ticket to New Jersey at Port Authority in New York City. While still on the bus he notices the first monument, the bridge over the Passaic River. He decides to get off and, equipped with his Instamatic camera, he starts his tour. Already at this stage he is forming a connection with a cinematic experience where he writes:

"When I walked over on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank."

What he is doing is connecting his movement through the landscape with the same movement that you experience in a movie theatre. The story unfolds while you move through the setting, in this case, Passaic, with the story being the relationship between the spectator and the artefacts created by man and placed in this landscape. In his book *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape* (2004) Ron Graziani writes about how Smithson makes the notion of the picturesque visible:

"The modern theory of the picturesque revolves around how a natural setting is 'staged' in artistic terms – that is, the artificial mimicking the natural, yet as if the chosen latter had imitated the former. To experience a physical environment as a picturesque landscape meant, in part objectifying the former as if it were a painting or a drawing, as if already a form of aesthetic experience with prescribed standards."

By choosing Passaic, an undefined area without the usual traits of a picturesque landscape, Smithson questions the aesthetic qualities we usually apply to art experiences. It is not what we look at, but the way in which we look at it that is important. And here it is particularly interesting to note how Smithson develops a kind of fiction out of his experience, enlarging the pipes to monuments and making them worthy of our attention. Smithson continues his walk through Passaic encountering all kinds of monuments to which gives names along the way, the Great Pipe Monument, the Fountain Monument and the Monuments with the Pontoons: The Pumping Derrick which latter he describes as follows: As I walked north along what was left of River Drive, I saw a monument in the middle of the river – it was a pumping derrick with a long pipe attached to it. One could hear the debris rattling in the water that passed through the great pipe." Graziani points out the logic in the chosen monuments: "The internal logic of his chosen monuments maintained a perpetual presentness." This is a reference to time and Smithson points this out himself when he writes about the not-yet-built highway as a ruin-in-reverse, something that doesn't fall into ruins, but rather rises into ruins before being built. Smithson continues: "This anti-romantic *mise-en-scene* suggests the discredited idea of *time* and many other 'out of date' things. But the suburbs exists without a rational past and without the 'big events' in history." Here Smithson's purpose becomes visible, to give this place fiction, a story, that lifts it out of its obscurity, proving that although this place was not built to last forever, for that reason alone it deserves our attention.

At the same time as he wrote this essay, Smithson created his first non-site work. The work was shown in a solo show by Smithson at Virginia Dwan Gallery in New York 1968 called A nonsite (an indoor earthwork). It was later retitled *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey*, probably due to the fact that this was the start of a whole series of works where the museum or gallery space was linked to a

geographical site elsewhere. The work consisted of a sculpture that Suzaan Boettger describes in *Earthworks of the Sixties* (2002) as follows:

"The sculptural elements of this nonsite consists of a horizontally oriented, floorbound hexagonal panel sixty-five and a half inches in diameter. On each of its six triangular wedges, five rows of trapezoidal aluminium bins, painted blue, descend in height from twelve inches at the circumference toward a small hexagonal bin in the center."

In this very formal structure Smithson had placed sand he had collected during a visit to Pine Barrens in New Jersey. Boettger continues: "Visually, the looseness of the beige sand presented a radically different materiality from that of the rigid blue steel boxes that contained it." The sculpture was accompanied by a map on the wall, also hexagonal, showing the actual site where the sand was collected. The map was followed by a short text:

"31 sub-divisions based on a hexagonal "airfield" in the Woodmansie Quadrangle – New Jersey (Topographic) map. Each subdivision of the *Nonsite* contains sand from the site shown on the map. Tour between *Nonsite* and the *site* are possible. The red dot on the map is the place where the sand was collected."

Here Smithson links the work of arts with an actual place outside the gallery space, he also indicates the journey between these spaces by suggesting that tours between the Nonsite and the actual site are possible. What Smithson achieves with this work is to put art into a larger context, emphasizing that a work of art always refers to something outside itself, tradition, society, other artworks. The formal aspects of a work are not enough, the artwork needs to connect in other ways to its surroundings. With this artwork Smithson still acts inside the art institution, although extending it with the outer world by reference to the site, in this case Pine Barren.

Smithson would investigate the site more radically with his work *The Spiral Jetty* from 1970. He chose to investigate Great Salt Lake in Utah because it was red, so the site was not chosen especially because of its geographical location. But when he chose to work in such a remote area, there would not be the possibility for a lot of people to visit the place. Thus the documentation of the work became crucial. In his essay *The Spiral Jetty* (1970) Smithson describes the process of finding the site and building the jetty. When he finally finds the site he wants to use for his work, he describes it as follows:

"As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and nonsite whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other."

The complicated systems Smithson used for the nonsite are here replaced by a work that is completely dependent on its location. It is conceived as a reaction to this landscape and will remain within it. While the construction of the jetty was taking place, a cameraman followed the work. At that point there was no particular plan for using this material, but subsequently Smithson would work out his storyboard for the film about the Spiral Jetty. In the essay *A Cinematic Utopia* published in Artforum 1971 Smithson describes the impact of site in film:

"The sites in films are not to be located or trusted. All is out of proportion. Scale inflates or deflates into uneasy dimensions. We wander between the towering and the bottomless. We are lost between the abyss within us and the boundless horizons outside us."

Here the distinct distance between the nonsite and the site is replaced by an undefined space, hard to grip or systematize. The film shows the dirt road used by trucks for driving material into Great Salt Lake that subsequently develops into the jetty, with material being combined with images representing time in various ways. In this way, Smithson creates a montage combining the footage from the pages torn out of an atlas blowing in the wind, blown-up maps and footage from the dinosaur department at The Museum of Natural History. This material represents time and space in different ways and, by working in film Smithson emphasizes how time is an important part of his concept of the nonsite. The space between the site and the nonsite also implies travelling in time. In the film about the Spiral Jetty the site becomes a film location, and thus the film becomes the nonsite. The presence of the landscape in the film is also a means of preserving time.

At the same time as Smithson went for his walk through Passaic, some English artist made going for walks in the landscape their primary way of working with art. Richard Long and Hamish Fulton both attended St. Martin's school of Art in

London in the mid-sixties and both choose walking as their primary practice as artists. They are close colleagues and there is no rivalry between them. Instead they have gone for a lot of walks together. In 1967 Richard Long created a work called A Line Made by Walking. He simply walked back and forth over a field creating a line in the grass. The work was presented as a photograph but Long considered this to be a new way of working with sculpture. The walk enlarged a space and thereby opened up for a new kind of sculpture, involving time and movement. Long would document his walks with maps, and also make photographic records of areas the he walked through. These photographs sometimes depict an intervention he made in the landscape, a ring or line of stones. The photographs are shown in galleries and museums and the marks he made in the landscape are left there to dissolve naturally. Long also uses sticks and stones that he finds in the landscape to create interventions inside the art institutions, stones are presented in circles, sticks are laid out in intricate patterns. He has also used clay and mud from the landscape to produce wall drawings and patterns in the galley space. In his book *Earthworks and Beyond* (1989) John Beardsley points out the differences between how European and American artists worked in landscapes in the sixties, where the Americans work dealt with a scale to a much higher degree. This was of course due to the fact that America still has enormous, remote, undeveloped areas while everything in Europe has long since been cultivated. Beardsley writes about England: "A land more densely populated that America and without its vast open spaces, England presents fewer opportunities for grand gestures than the United States." This fact illustrates the different circumstances under which American and European art involving land and nature developed. But this was not only a matter of scale, but also tradition. American artists were trying to develop their specific American Art to get away from the dominance of European Art History. And while the Americans tried to make larger works, the European attitude was to make humble marks in the land, or not touching it at all like Fulton. In an interview with Suzaan Boettger from 1966 Richard Long made this statement:

"I never identify myself as a 'land artist'. To me, this was a term coined by American curators or critics to define an American movement which, for me as an English artist in the sixties, I saw as American artists working in their backyards, using their deserts to make monumental work, and only in America. They needed a lot of money to make art, as they had to buy land, or hire bulldozers, so it was about ownership, real estate, machinery, American attitudes. It

was very different philosophy from my own work, which was almost invisible, or made only by walking, or used the land in a free way, without the need for possession and permanence."

Smithson was aware of his criticism and in 1973 he published an essay in Artforum called *Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectic Landscape*. Here he wishes to establish an American way of looking at, and treating the landscape, and he uses the creator of Central Park in New York City, Frederick Law Olmsted as an example. Smithson starts with the historical aspects of the site for Central Park, how it a million years ago was covered by a glacier and how this marked the land underneath: "Alone on the vast glacier, you would not sense its slow crushing, scraping, ripping movement as it advanced south, leaving great masses of rock debris in its wake". In the 1850s would Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux consider what to do with that glacial aftermath, and their proposal was called "Greensward". Smithson expresses what he considers they are about to do: "In Greensward *Presentation Sketch No. 5* we see a 'before' photograph of the site they would remake in terms of earth sculpture." It here becomes visible that the essay is an attempt to see Central Park as an earth sculpture, and Olmsted as the first "earthwork artist" in America. Smithson mentions that Olmsted was inspired by theories on landscape developed in 18th century England, Uvedale Price and William Gulpin. They had developed theories about the picturesque landscape, and were concerned with ways to include temporal aspects. To develop a more physical sense of the temporal landscape could involve letting visible marks made on the land, a tree struck by lightning or a flooded field, slowly become smothered by time. These marks would be converted into picturesqueness, traces only slightly visible, but enough to tell a story about the land's development. Smithson writes:

"The picturesque, far from being an inner movement of the mind, is based on real land; it precedes the mind in its material existence. We cannot take a one-sided view of the landscape within this dialectic. A park can no longer be seen as 'a thing-in-itself', but rather as a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region – the park becomes a 'thing-for-us."

This is a remark that is interesting since it implicitly refers to Smithson's own work, by making a mark in the land you are starting to make endless connections. By making earthworks the artist avoided the neutral space of the art institution and thereby their works also reached out to the surrounding world to a much higher degree. But there is a big difference between what surrounds the Spiral Jetty and what

surrounds Central Park. this makes Smithson's attempt to see Olmsted as an earth artist limiting since the social aspect played such a big role in Olmsted's work. The park had to fulfil many more functions than a work of art has to do. While the Spiral Jetty exists in a remote part of America, Central Park exists in its very urban heart. And this is an aspect that Smithson does not explicitly deal with but which comes to the surface when he describes his walk through the park. He starts his walk on the west side, entering the park at 96th Street and central park west and describes how Olmsted had planned this area to be "bold and sweeping", open for horizontal views. He continues and enters the Ramble that he describes as follows:

"For what really is a Ramble, but a place to walk aimlessly and idly – it is a maze that spreads in all directions. Now the Ramble has grown up into an urban jungle, and lurking in its thickets are 'hoods, hobos, hustlers, homosexuals', and other estranged creatures in the city (see John Rechy, The City of Night). Here the people using the park becomes visible and the social functions it fulfills."

He continues his walk and describes another section like this:

"Passing under Glade Arch and into the Glade, I came to the Conservatory Water Pool; the overall shape of its concrete banks being an interplay of curves and right angles. The Pool had been drained, and this provided one with a vista of graceful desolation – sea of autumn leaves. The bare trees that surround the Pool rose from the ground like so much smoky lace. Here and there people sauntered in and out of the haze and sunlight, turning the area into a phantom world."

This is prose that is very far from the ironic fiction of Smithson's tour to see the monuments of the Passaic. Here Smithson is more humble, less in control. So if we see the park as a kind of fiction, the story told of Central Park is definitely different from that of Passaic. The park is a carefully arranged landscape, designed to produce sensations that evoke emotions in its visitors. In this sense it has a cinematic quality since its fiction depends on movement. Smithson set out to find the father of earthwork and while doing so he told some of the stories that the walk through the park had evoked, planted there by Olmsted.

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