

Robert Smithson *Spiral Jetty*, 1970

Beginning in the 1960s, a number of American artists, including Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt, and Robert Smithson, chose to depart from the confines of gallery and museum spaces to create artworks directly in the landscape. Drawn to desolate and remote locations, from abandoned industrial sites to uncultivated deserts and mountains, these artists created often colossal sculptural interventions in nature, inaugurating the movement of Land art.

One of the most remarkable examples is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, located at Rozel Point peninsula on the northeastern shore of Great Salt Lake. With the assistance of a team operating dump trucks, a tractor, and a front loader, Smithson created the sculpture in three weeks in April 1970. Over six thousand tons of black basalt rocks and earth were formed into a coil 1,500 feet long and fifteen feet wide that winds counterclockwise off the shore into the water. In 1999, through the generosity of the artist Nancy Holt, Smithson's widow, and the Estate of Robert Smithson, the artwork was donated to Dia Art Foundation.

Before creating *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson had established a remarkably diverse artistic practice. He began his career as a painter but in the mid-1960s started to experiment in different media, including sculpture, writing, drawing, film, and eventually, earthworks. Deeply informed by his interest in geology, crystallography, and science in its popularized forms (such as science fiction literature and cinema, encyclopedic collections, even natural history museums), Smithson's practice focused on processes of accumulation and displacement in order to reveal the contradictions in our visible world. In the late 1960s, his work increasingly revolved around the relationship between art and place. Smithson's *Leaning Mirror* (1969), for instance, is a seminal indoor earthwork that consists of two six-foot-square mirrors embedded at a precise angle in a mound of reddish sand from an outdoor site. In other instances, Smithson worked directly in the peripheral spaces that inspired him. Sometimes the results were fleeting documentations, as with the illustrated travel-essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967); other times permanent, large-scale sculptural interventions, as in the case of *Spiral Jetty*.

"I like landscapes that suggest prehistory," said Smithson.¹ The artist chose to create *Spiral Jetty* in Great Salt Lake due in part to the lake's unusual physical qualities, including the reddish coloration of the water caused by microbes, as

well as how salt deposits crystallized on the black basalt rocks, formed from molten lava of nearby extinct volcanoes, that were scattered along the peninsula. The fractured rocky landscape and fluctuating water levels of Great Salt Lake also appealed to the artist's long-standing preoccupation with entropy. Smithson's distinct definition of entropy, drawn from popular science and science fiction alike, fixated on the chance operations of nature that lead to a state of transformation. Created at a time when water levels were particularly low, the artwork was submerged from 1972 onward, and was only known through documentation. However, regional droughts thirty years later caused the lake to recede such that by 2002, a salt-encrusted *Spiral Jetty* reappeared for the first prolonged period in its history.

Smithson often asserted that by responding to the landscape, rather than imposing itself upon it, *Spiral Jetty* is a site to actively walk on rather than a sculpture to behold. The act of traversing the artwork was enacted in Smithson's 1970 film of the same title, which was made in the months following the completion of the sculpture. Alongside aerial footage of *Spiral Jetty* is a poetic sequence of the artist running along the spiral to rest at its innermost coil. In an interview from 1971, Smithson explained how the visitor's experience of space shifts as one walks through the work: a "constriction or concentration exists within the inner coils . . . whereas on the outer edge you're kind of thrown out, you're aware of the horizons and how they echo through the Jetty."²

Immediately following its completion, *Spiral Jetty* was deemed a momentous achievement in specialized art magazines, the popular press, as well as among Smithson's peers, and more than forty years later, it continues to be recognized as an iconic artwork. Disappearing and reemerging, bound to site and circulated in documentation, the work exists in a state of permanent flux. "One apprehends what is around one's eyes and ears," wrote Smithson, "no matter how unstable or fugitive."³

notes

- 1 Robert Smithson, "Conversation in Salt Lake City (1972)," in *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 298.
- 2 Kenneth Baker, "Talking with Robert Smithson," in *Robert Smithson: Spiral Jetty*, ed. Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press; New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2005), p. 158.
- 3 Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in *Robert Smithson: Spiral Jetty*, p. 9.



Robert Smithson, 1970. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni.

Robert Smithson was born in Passaic, New Jersey, on January 2, 1938. In 1953, as a high-school student, he won a scholarship to the Art Students League of New York, where he studied in the evenings for the next two years, also taking classes at the Brooklyn Museum Art School in 1956. Smithson's first solo exhibition was in 1959, at the Artists Gallery, New York. In 1964, he began to produce what he considered his first mature works of writing and sculpture. In 1973, Smithson died in a plane crash in Amarillo, Texas, while working on the earthwork *Amarillo Ramp*. Major retrospectives of his work have been organized by the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York (1980); the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo (1999); and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2004). Recent solo exhibitions on his work include *Robert Smithson in Texas* at the Dallas Museum of Art (2013–14) and *Robert Smithson: New Jersey Earthworks* at the Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey (2014).

bibliography

Robert Smithson: Sculpture. Exh. cat. Edited by Robert Hobbs. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981.

Smithson, Robert. *The Collected Writings*. Edited by Jack Flam. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

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Roberts, Jennifer. *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

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Robert Smithson *Spiral Jetty*, 1970

Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah

Black basalt rock, salt crystals, earth, water

Coil 1500 feet long and approximately 15 feet wide

Dia Art Foundation

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Dia Art Foundation is the owner and custodian of *Spiral Jetty*. Dia was founded in 1974 to help artists achieve visionary projects that might not otherwise be realized because of scale or scope. Today, Dia is a constellation of sites, from site-specific artworks and installations in New York, the American West, and Germany to the galleries of Dia:Beacon in Beacon, New York.

PARTNERSHIPS

Dia collaborates with two organizations in Utah, the Great Salt Lake Institute at Westminster College (GSLI) and the Utah Museum of Fine Arts (UMFA) at the University of Utah, who have been deeply involved in the advocacy of *Spiral Jetty* over the years. Through the partners' respective missions and expertise, they collectively assist Dia in preserving and maintaining the artwork, as well as building local awareness and sustaining the integrity of the artwork.

Great Salt Lake Institute, Westminster College

Great Salt Lake Institute at Westminster College works with Dia on environmental issues, site maintenance, and accessibility pertaining to *Spiral Jetty*.
www.greatsaltlakeinstitute.org

Utah Museum of Fine Arts, University of Utah

The Utah Museum of Fine Arts works with Dia to ensure that *Spiral Jetty's* cultural reputation is upheld locally and to promote the exceptional significance of the artwork within Utah. www.umfa.utah.edu

AFFILIATION

Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands

The State of Utah owns the bed of Great Salt Lake where *Spiral Jetty* is located. The land is leased to Dia Art Foundation by the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands (FFSL). FFSL recognizes *Spiral Jetty* as an important state resource.
www.ffsl.utah.gov