

uncoiling the spiral jetty

by *Frank McEntire*



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*This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness.
From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty.*

~ Robert Smithson

Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) is located near the Golden Spike National Historical Site on the western shore of Great Salt Lake's Promontory Point in northern Utah. It is a 1,500-foot-long, 15-footwide dead end rural road in the shape of a left-curling coil. It took more than 6,650 tons of locally extracted black basalt and earth and 625 man-hours to build. The famous hybrid harbor protruding from Rozel Point was originally built just above shoreline. It has been submerged in brine- and algae filled salt water as well as left totally desiccated of its salty liquid covering in times of drought –environmental art, but not necessarily environmentally friendly, according to early critics.

By the time Smithson was 32, he had begun to blast his way into art history books with bulldozers, dynamite, and a recusant concept about art. His methods of reshaping the environment contrasted starkly with traditional, pedestal-bound sculpture at the time and especially with the natural processes of land thrusts and erosion that sculpted such famous landmarks like southern Utah's Delicate Arch. Both landforms resulted from extreme manipulations of the earth and evoke awe of nature and the power of human creation. Since its emergence as an art movement in the 60s, exploiting the earth's crust to make what became known as "Land Art" has been a target of cultural and environmental criticism. "It is often said that Land Art," according to Jeffrey Kastner in *Land and Environmental Art*, is "the most macho of post-war art programmes. In its first manifestations, the genre was one of diesel and dust, populated by hard-hat-minded men, finding their identities away from the comforts of the cultural centre, digging holes and blasting cuts through cliff sides, recasting the land with 'masculine' disregard for the longer term."

Although the first generation of Land Artists were attacked for their invasive approach to the environment, Smithson's "politically incorrect" jetty work is actually but a thin protrusion into the Great Salt Lake's vast 2,000-square-mile surface. *Spiral Jetty* is not nearly as brutal an intrusion into the area's delicate biosphere as another nearby earthwork – the Union Pacific's 21-mile-long rock-berm causeway that runs from east to west across the entire lake, a transcontinental railroad shortcut that has significantly, if not permanently, altered the ancient waterway.

In contrast to many monumental man-made commercial projects, *Spiral Jetty* is a small poetic gesture, barely visible from the air and almost impossible to find on the ground because the fluctuating levels of the lake conceals it from view most of the time. Its enduring appeal, intended by the artist, is in its mystery as a hidden treasure that sometimes surfaces – laden with glistening white salt crystals on black stones themselves hidden under the layers of salt set in shallow pools of a red wine-colored eddy in a dead sea – to give warning of approaching drought. Such a warning recently has been fulfilled with a drought approaching seven years, which has left the *Spiral Jetty* completely dry, allowing visitors (pilgrims, in some cases) to do what even Smithson was unable to do, walk dry-footed in the negative space between the stony causeway.

This ephemeral, even mystical, aspect of the *Spiral Jetty* would be lost if its present stewards, the Dia Foundation for the Arts, were to raise it permanently above water level as intimated in its 17 September 1999 press release after acquiring the piece: "Today *Spiral Jetty* is submerged as it has been for most of its existence. Realizing, after its completion, that he had built it at a time when the level of the lake was unnaturally low [at least for modern times], Smithson considered adding further material to ensure that his artwork would be visible more often. *As yet* [italics added] this has not been done."

Smithson's work, including his *Spiral Jetty* and his follow-up 1971 *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* (a stone quarry in Holland where he used art as a means of environmental reclamation), emerged from a 60s sense of anti-institutional activism that included bureaucratic museum and object-oriented gallery structures. Smithson's work and writings (sometimes indistinguishable) foreshadowed today's lively environmental movement. "When the miner or builder loses sight of what he is doing through the abstractions of technology," Smithson wrote, "he cannot practically cope with necessity." Smithson was more pragmatist than revolutionary, continuing:

“The world needs coal and highways, but we do not need the results of stripmining or highway thrusts. Economics, when abstracted from the world, is blind to natural processes. Art can become a resource that mediates between the ecologist and the industrialist. Ecology and industry are not one-way streets, rather they should be crossroads. Art can help to provide the needed dialectic between them.”

Smithson was one of the foremost exponents of Land Art, characterized by large-scale outdoor projects and overwrought media hype. His ambitious excursion into jetty building as art form was like a blast from a ceremonial conch shell, calling subsequent generations of environmental and ecological artists to action. In an essay about Smithson, Brian Wallis claimed, “he often spoke of *Spiral Jetty* as an ecological work of reclamation, and he envisioned a wide-spread movement to involve artists in the reclamation and improvement of devastated industrial sites.”

On July 20, 1973, just as the 35-year-old Smithson’s intellectual powers were refining an emerging earthworks – and postmodern – aesthetic theory, he, and all on board a small airplane, died in a crash near Amarillo, Texas, while taking aerial photographs in final preparation for construction of Amarillo Ramp. His wife, sculptor Nancy Holt, and friends Richard Serra and Tony Shafrazi completed the project. His tragic on-the-job death and controversial land works have contributed to Smithson’s heroic image in the art world: ARTnews (May 1999), for example, considers him to be one of the 25 “most influential artists” of the past 100 years.

Artists who desire a more socially responsible and ecologically stable world largely make contemporary land and environmental art. They acknowledge that such a vision comes with a personal price; one shaped through participation in cumbersome, often expensive, and emotionally charged political and economic processes. “The artist must come out of the isolation of galleries and museums and provide a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists,” wrote Smithson in a proposal to a mining company in Ohio. “The artist must accept and enter into all of the real problems that confront the ecologist and industrialist.”

Many of Smithson’s aging contemporaries and younger ecologically minded artists reflect his political posture, focusing their attention on mitigating the consequences of decades of problems associated with industrialization, such as the tear in the earth’s protective ozone layer, pollution, strip mining, deforestation, and the extinction of plant, animal, and insect species. Art critic and photographer, John

Coplans, writing about the Amarillo Ramp, stated “Smithson’s overriding concern, especially in the last two years of his life, was to propagate his art as ‘a resource that mediates between ecology and industry.’” He points out that at the time of his death; Smithson was negotiating with strip-mining companies “for earthworks which he argued would be ways of reclaiming the land in terms of art.”

The Kennecott Utah Copper Corporation, with its century-old and still expanding open-pit mine on the outskirts of Salt Lake City that is now almost three miles wide and over a half mile deep (the Chicago Sears Tower would not rise to half its height), was on Smithson’s list of potential Land Art sites. If he had lived longer, and succeeded as a salesman for reclaiming the land through art, Utah might have been the host of two Smithson earthworks.

Thirty years after the artist’s Kennecott overture, restoration of the site is not a potboiler issue of business or politics, although somewhat stricter environmental protection laws are now in place. A larger threat to the land and its inhabitants than strip mining, or even the damaged ozone layer, would be a tear in our ability to imagine ways to maintain a workable coexistence with each other and to restore the planet’s delicate ecological balance. Perhaps Nancy Holt could again visit the Kennecott Copper Mine and try to convert the extraction industry mavens to her views on “functional or necessary aesthetics, not art cut off from society, but rather an integral part of it.”

A posthumous Smithson/Holt earthwork collaboration would demonstrate the integration of art and industry on a grand scale. Utah would then have two Nancy Holt earthworks, including her solstice-marking *Sun Tunnels* located on her forty-acre site in the middle of the state’s northern Great Basin Desert, near Lucin.

In Smithson’s model entropic world, *Spiral Jetty* will eventually return to an amorphous bed of oily earth and volcanic stone that helps hold up the heavy Great Salt Lake and the spiral-shaped Kennecott mine will someday return to a forested Oquirrah Mountains wildlife habitat. Unfortunately, there is as much chance of the mine returning to its natural, pre-pioneer prospector state as *Spiral Jetty* uncoiling itself.

PHOTO CREDIT (for the 2004 publication by Sundance) *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, by Robert Smithson. (c) Estate of Robert Smithson/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo by and courtesy of Hikmet Loe.

NOTES

1. Smithson, Robert, 'The *Spiral Jetty*,' The Writings of Robert Smithson, ed. Nancy Holt, New York University Press, New York, 1979, p. 111.
2. Kastner, Jeffrey, 'Preface,' Land and Environmental Art, ed. Jeffrey Kastner, Phaidon Press Limited, 1998, p.15.
3. This ephemeral, even mystical, aspect of the *Spiral Jetty* would be lost if its present stewards, the Dia Foundation for the Arts, were to raise it permanently above water level as intimated in its 17 September 1999 press release after acquiring the piece: "Today *Spiral Jetty* is submerged as it has been for most of its existence. Realizing, after its completion, that he had built it at a time when the level of the lake was unnaturally low [at least for modern times], Smithson considered adding further material to ensure that his artwork would be visible more often. *As yet* (ital added) this has not been done."
4. Smithson, Robert, 'Untitled, 1971,' The Writings of Robert Smithson, ed. Nancy Holt, New York University Press, New York, 1979, p. 220.
5. Wallis, Brian, 'Survey,' Land and Environmental Art, ed. Jeffrey Kastner, Phaidon Press Limited, 1998, p. 32.
6. Smithson, Robert, 'Proposal, 1972,' The Writings of Robert Smithson, ed. Nancy Holt, New York University Press, New York, 1979, p. 221.
7. Contemporaries: Americans Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, Robert Morris, and Dennis Oppenheim, and Europeans Jan Dibbets, Hans Haacke, Richard Long, and Günther Uecker. Younger generation: Alice Aycock, Andy Goldsworthy, Helen Harrison, Lynne Hull, and Aviva Rahmani.
8. Coplans, John, 'The Amarillo Ramp, 1974,' Land and Environmental Art, ed. Jeffrey Kastner, Phaidon Press Limited, 1998, p. 218.
9. Wallis, Brian, 'Survey,' Land and Environmental Art, ed. Jeffrey Kastner, Phaidon Press Limited, 1998, p. 33.

Frank McEntire, born 1946 in Wichita Falls, Texas, is well known as a sculptor and independent curator, arts administrator, and writer, including exhibition catalogs and regular reviews as the former art critic of *The Salt Lake Tribune* and *Salt Lake Magazine*. His sculptural works have been featured in several publications and shown in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah. As a curator, McEntire has organized exhibitions for Sundance, Nora Eccles Harrison Museum, Springville Museum of Art, Access/VSA Utah, Salt Lake Art Center, and the Utah Capitol Rotunda. He has served in many leadership capacities, such as the former executive director of the Utah Arts Council. For more information, go to: www.frankmcentire.com