

# Degrees of Disorder

In a previously unpublished interview from 1968, Robert Smithson discusses the ideas and events which led him to carry out his first earthworks and "nonsite" sculptures.

BY SUZAN BOETTGER

In the process of researching the beginnings of 1960s Land Art, I discovered a rare object: a recording of an unpublished interview from 1968 that freelance curator Willoughby Sharp made with artist Robert Smithson. On the reel-to-reel tape, their conversation starts abruptly, as if it had begun on a prior reel. Nevertheless, the recording contains a substantial bank of dialogue, revealing their discussion to be frank, probing and remarkably frank.

To eavesdrop on this extemporaneous exchange between an inventive artist and a bold curator, made on an autumn afternoon 30 years ago, is to be drawn into the dynamic milieu of the late 1960s. The interview that Sharp (b. 1936) conducted with Smithson (1938-1973) served two purposes. That fall Sharp had begun taping the interviews with artists that would be the mainstay of the journal, *Avalanche*, that he was planning with the writer Liza Bear.<sup>1</sup> Sharp was also researching the forthcoming exhibition he was guest-curating for Cornell University, "Earth Art."<sup>2</sup> The 30-year-old Smithson was the perfect source. In September 1968, his essay "Sedimentation of Mind: Earth Projects" introduced this new genre of sculpture in *Artforum*, and in October, "Earthworks," the group exhibition he organized with dealer Virginia Dwan, was on view at the 57th Street gallery.<sup>3</sup> After years of the dominance of industrial steel sculpture, that show highlighted the presence of geological and organic materials in sculptural constructions.

Like everything else in American society in the late 1960s, the art world was in a state of radical flux. The decade had opened with the existential drama of Abstract Expressionism seeming increasingly irrelevant to the upbeat optimism prompted by an expanding economy and the grand proposal of a "New Frontier" by the youngest president ever elected (at age 43), John F. Kennedy. During the '60s, the population bulge of baby boomers entered their teens and early 20s years, producing a demography that led one commentator to proclaim that "society is getting younger—to the extent that, in America, as in a number of European countries, a bit more than 50



Robert Smithson, July 1967.  
Photo Barbara Schwartz.

to be anti-Frank Lloyd Wright. I also saw a lot of possibilities in rather ordinary buildings that were scattered out in the suburbs, things of that sort.

**WS:** What do you mean by possibilities?

**RS:** Well, working with the landscapes or dealing with areas that are not thought of in terms of artistic places. Areas that are not necessarily picturesque or involved in International Style architecture—actually, the suburbs and the postwar complexes that were built up in these outlying areas, penumbral zones that are pretty much out on the fringes of the city.

The idea of the city as an organic structure never appealed to me too much, and Frank Lloyd Wright's metaphors about the city

## Interview by Willoughby Sharp

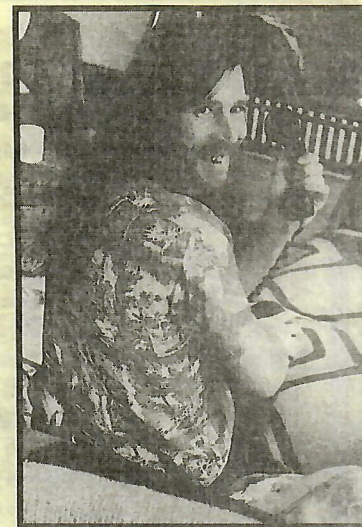
**Robert Smithson<sup>1</sup>:** Actually, it was thinking about the airport as a concept, and trying to work more from the ground up rather than attaching an object of art to the building after it was finished—to get more involved with the process. So I finally came up with a proposal for putting large-scale ground systems out on the fringes of the airport. Grids and other configurations that you could see from aircraft either landing or taking off.

**Willoughby Sharp:** Is that what they wanted you to do?

**RS:** No, that is not what they wanted me to do, that's what I developed. They didn't know what they wanted me to do.

**WS:** How come you got the gig, anyway?

**RS:** Well, I got the job as a result of a talk at a panel at Yale, which was on art in the city.<sup>2</sup> I discussed the city not in terms of an organism but in terms of a crystalline concept. So that my view tended



Willoughby Sharp, spring 1971.  
Photo Jorge Zontal.

being diseased didn't interest me too much. Instead of using a biologic metaphor I used a more physical metaphor, and interpreted the city as a crystal structure.

**WS:** How did you interpret the city as a crystal structure?

**RS:** Well, instead of taking an organic view, my view tended more toward the inorganic. I did take a lot of trips around that time to surrounding areas, going to quarries. I was interested in crystal structure in my earlier serial works. . . . I do think that the tendency toward the inorganic is stronger than [the tendency] toward the organic. The organic seems to be part of an idea of nature. I'm more interested in a kind of denaturalizing, or in things more in terms of artifice, rather than in any kind of naturalism. That's why I insist on the notion of art.

**WS:** Why is that? Because you find the things around you inorganic? Everyday objects? And ideas?

**RS:** Well, my mind can make them over into that state. My perception tends toward an inorganic idea. The systems arise out of this and they tend to follow a kind of crystalline structure rather than a biomorphic structure. It's just the inclination I have. It's not based on any idea of visceral expressiveness.

**WS:** There seems to be a lot of anthropomorphism in the fact that these structures, or these nonsites, are extruded rock existing in a man-built box.

**RS:** But the box doesn't look like a man!

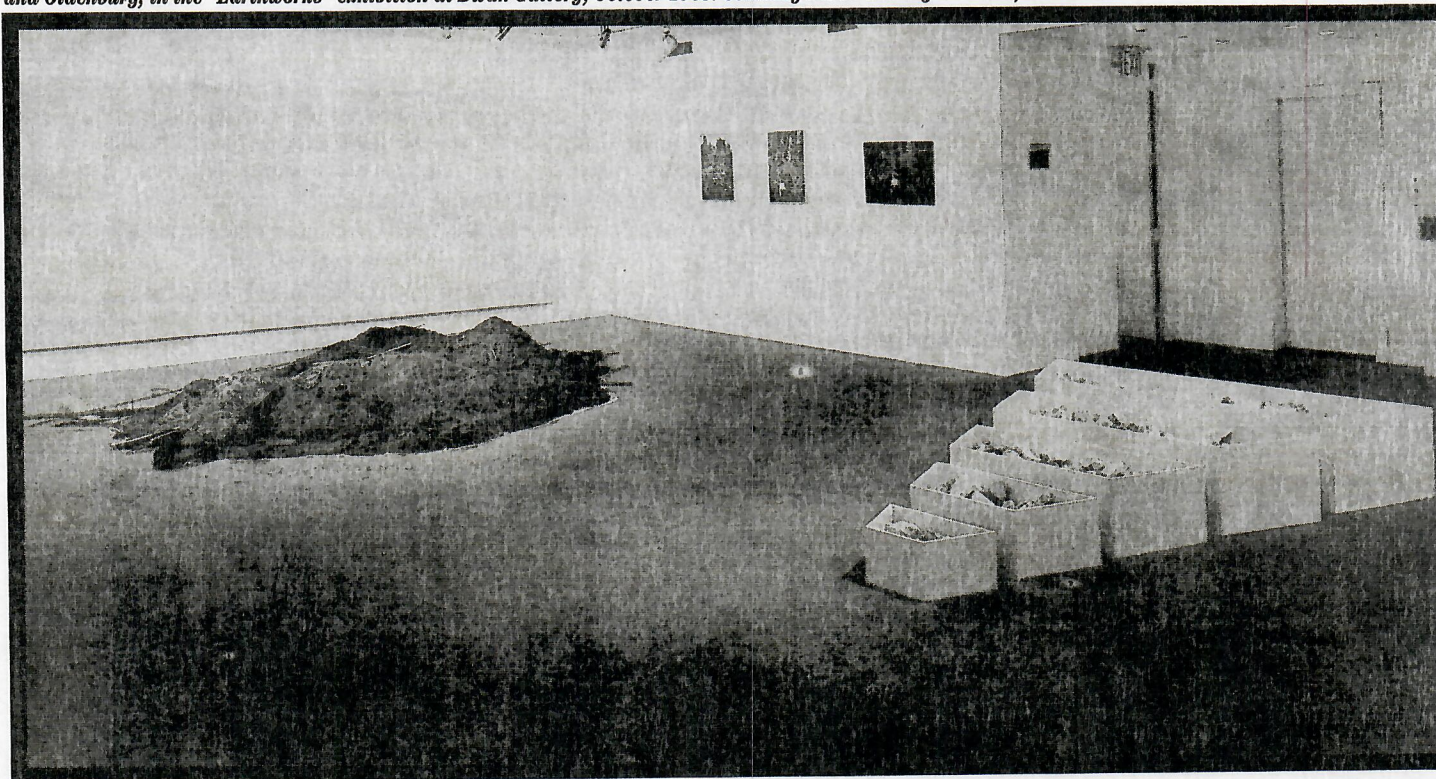
**WS:** The issue of anthropomorphism is really central to contemporary art.

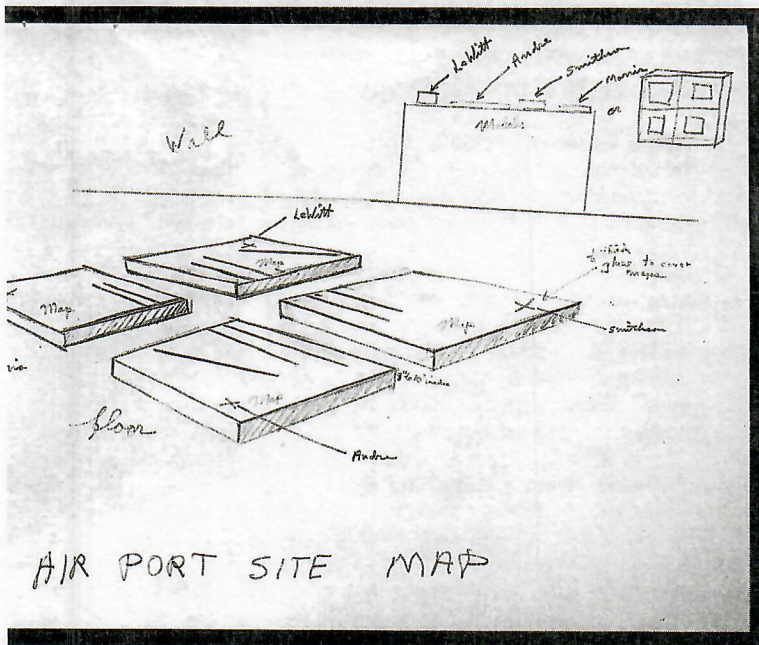
**RS:** That goes back to the Greek idea, which I don't think we've gotten over yet. There is still this



*Above, Robert Smithson: Closed Mirror Square (foreground), Rock Salt and Mirror Square (background) and Eight-Part Piece (Cayuga Salt Mines Project), all 1969; at that year's "Earth Art" exhibition, Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University. Courtesy Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca.*

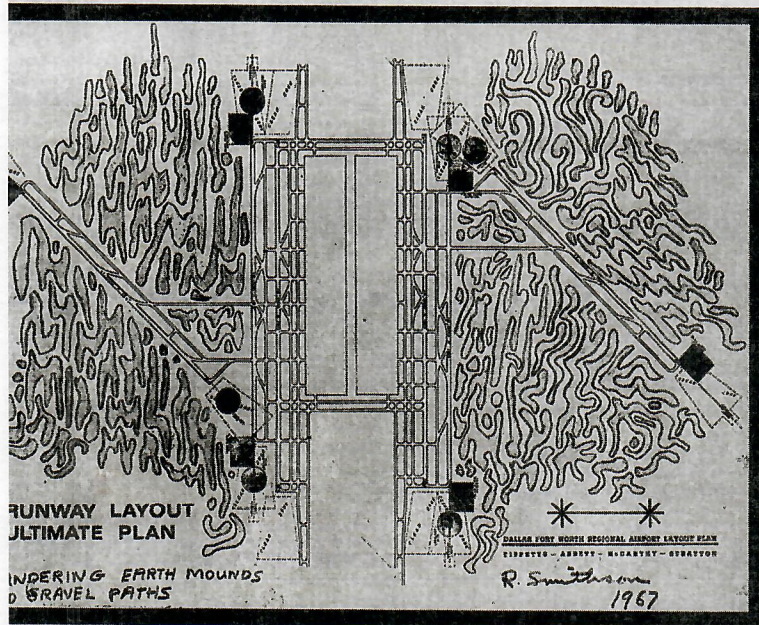
*Below, A Nonsite, Franklin, New Jersey (right foreground); as first shown among works by (left to right) De Maria, Morris, Andre, Bayer and Oldenburg; in the "Earthworks" exhibition at Dwan Gallery, October 1968. Courtesy Dwan Gallery Archives, New York.*





Airport Site Map, 1967, pencil on paper, 19 by 24 inches. Estate of Robert Smithson. Photos this page courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York.

Wandering Earth Mounds and Gravel Paths, 1967, blueprint, collage, pencil, 11 by 15 1/2 inches. Collection Nancy Holt.



clinging to the Platonic ideal, and actually I prefer the pre-Platonic view, which seems to be more primitive. It has less to do with an idea of a peopled cosmos. The mechanical and technological structures that we've built up around ourselves have kept us from seeing a more fundamental order.

**WS:** Would that be a more organic order?

**RS:** No, it wouldn't be organic, because the earth isn't organic. It's norganic mineral or sediment or strata.

Americans are basically idealistic because they put so much faith in machinery and technology. If anything, my art is more preoccupied with something that isn't clouded over by all these technological devices and machines, so that in a sense it's probing the phantom nature of matter itself, and it's not really involved in creating distractions. As fine and great as all technology is, you can get hung up on the shenanigans that come from it.

**WS:** Why do you think that Americans have a need to believe

in technology?

**RS:** Because they're still basing their lives on Greek idealism. That's why I can't really conceive of politics, because politics is based on the same kind of ideal state. I see eventually a depoliticizing taking place.<sup>3</sup> The city, as a polis, really isn't as orderly as we would like to think. It's a closed system and within that system you have all different degrees of disorder, randomness, anarchy.

**WS:** But don't you realize there's a whole branch of non-electoral politics which is founded on the idea that anarchy is the most desirable state?

**RS:** Anarchy is what we have now! Except we continue with our idealist, rational politics. And it will always be that way.

**WS:** How is that so? I think the system we have today is very controlled, very structured.

**RS:** Oh no, not really. They're all systems, and they are all hopelessly losing themselves. I don't see any other alternative. What we have to do is recognize the way it is. Maybe that's not possible. Maybe people need the illusion that things are better or worse. For me, there's a constant state of uncertainty, and disorder, and instability.

**WS:** There's no difference between Humphrey and Nixon?

**RS:** There's no difference. Because immediately you're putting your hopes on some kind of person.<sup>4</sup>

**WS:** OK. But we're talking about electoral politics. In nonelectoral politics I was on the steering committee of the Yuppies.<sup>5</sup>

And within that kind of political configuration, there was really a desire to have no leaders. Of course there were leaders, because there were some people who were more articulate than others. But there was a real involvement in just destroying the situation . . .

**RS:** You don't have to, because it is already destroyed. Every system has, it seems to me, enormous amounts of disorder within it. In other words, it's

always breaking down. Yet the illusion is that somehow this is meaningful.

The whole tendency of the Greek classical political scene is to strive toward some kind of ideal. Whereas I think that if you strive towards some kind of ideal you'll inevitably end up in a terrible mess. And other messes will be developing right along. What I say is that all one can do, unfortunately, is perceive these messes as they take place.

**WS:** Does that mean you are satisfied with that situation as it is?

**RS:** I'm not satisfied. It's a kind of mystery to me.

**WS:** And your involvement is to try to understand it.

**RS:** I'm trying to understand it at a more fundamental level.

**WS:** What is that more fundamental level?

**RS:** That gets into these unpleasant areas.

**WS:** Like what?

**RS:** Dread.

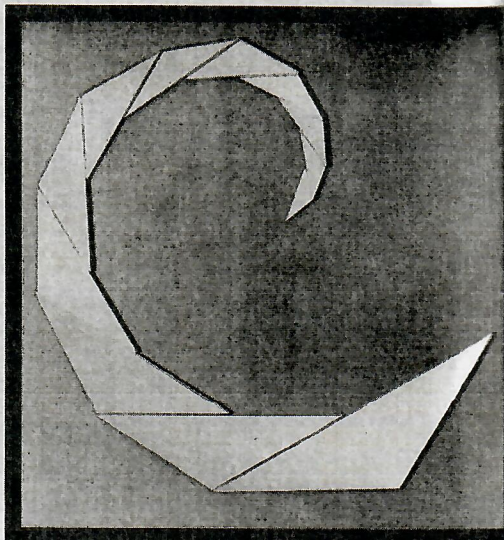
**WS:** Dread?

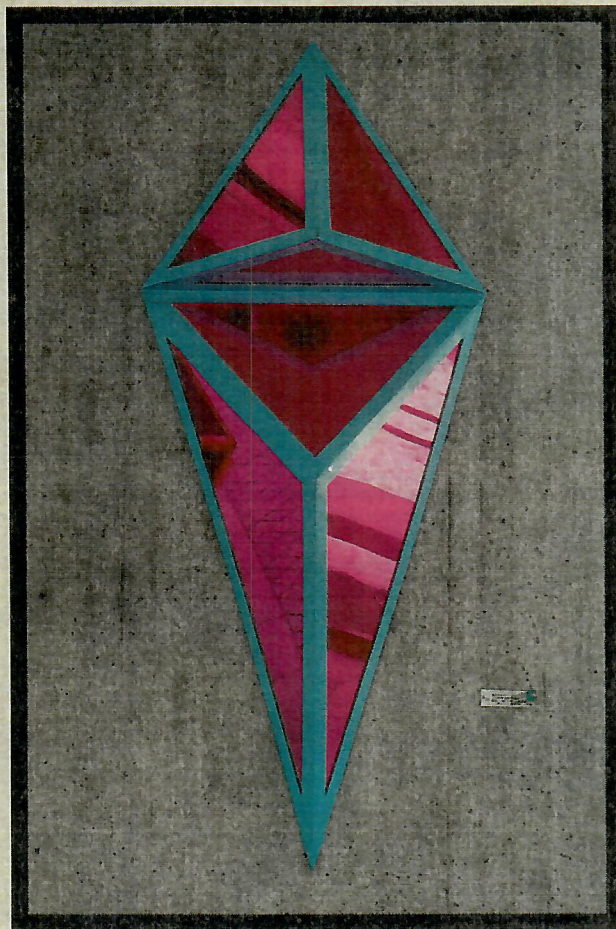
**RS:** Yeah. Or chaos. All the ideals seem to collapse. When I say dread, I want to distinguish it from fear. Fear is more a bourgeois sensibility. Dread actually can be almost an ecstatic state. This ecstasy is in terms of a very, very vast sense of physicality—so that also our sense of history must go. Why talk about the last 2,000 years when you can talk about the last 200 million years?

**WS:** The reason one talks about that is that people believe that there is a difference between Nixon and Humphrey.

**RS:** I can't even . . . I mean, Nixon and Humphrey? In terms of 200

Aerial Map—Proposal for Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport, 1967, mirrors, 50 inches wide.





Untitled, ca. 1963-64, steel frame, Plexi-mirrors, 81 by 35 by 10 inches. Collection Mr. & Mrs. Melvyn Estrin. Photo Jon Reis.

million geologic years?

**WS:** Most people are not looking at the world on that scale.

**RS:** But that's the way I look at it!

**WS:** Well, that's very interesting. And how does your own endeavor relate to that kind of time scale?

**RS:** Well, I think that's the preoccupation with the earth . . . built-up areas of time, vanished areas of time. There's a sensation that somehow lifts you out of the momentary attachment to people, places and things. You're sort of faced with a loss not only of self but also of place, which I think makes you more primitive. They say that primitives don't have much of an ego built up. . . . I think that's what interests me.

**WS:** How does your work relate to that? There's a sense of time implicit, because you're so involved intellectually with larger time sequences. So that the rock that is extruded and placed in these containers speaks of time. Not very many people are really aware of that.

**RS:** In terms of one's perception of

the work, you always have to be a viewer. Each viewer is different and is going to bring different experience to the work. I see myself in a sense dealing with limitations and trying to somehow give an indication that isn't dependent upon, oh, some kind of idealism. The nonsite was developed gradually.

**WS:** You became aware of the possibilities of the nonsite.

**RS:** My first interest in earthworks came about by going out into large areas and developing large-scale ground systems, which I called "Aerial Art." I have a paper on it.<sup>6</sup> Then I decided that instead of making a piece of art and putting it on a piece of land, I would bring the land back to the piece, so to speak.

**WS:** But you're just making the piece out of earth. Right?

**RS:** Yeah, I'm making the piece out of earth but the place itself is being brought into it.

**WS:** The material is specific to the place that it's from, rather than importing the material to the

**"I proposed putting large-scale ground systems on the fringes of the airport. Grids and other configurations that you could see from aircraft."**

percent of the population is under 25 years of age.<sup>4</sup> Such factors generated a tremendous receptivity to the new. In rapid succession, the ambivalent wit of Pop art, the innocuous perceptualism of Op art and the cool formality of Minimal sculpture won both art-world and mass-media attention. It was *Newsweek* that first widely reported the new genre of earthen environments, in an eight-page feature in the summer of 1968 headlined "The New Art: It's Way Way Out."<sup>5</sup>

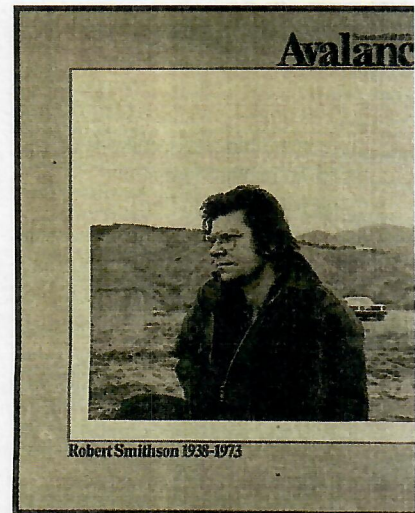
Yet already in 1967, with the deepening of the Vietnam War, the country's mood had begun to darken. The notorious year of 1968 began with the Viet Cong's devastating Tet Offensive, revealing the hollowness of the U.S. government's claim that the war would soon be won. The American antiwar movement swelled. The art world was slouching toward Postminimalism; one early discussion of this direction was Robert Morris's advocacy of Process art in the April 1968 *Artforum*. Editor Philip Leider chose to title that essay "Anti Form," a term that perfectly captured the pervasive sense of disorder in a month that witnessed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Columbia University student strike, a national student strike of up to a million college and high-school students, and an antiwar rally by 10,000 people in New York's Central Park. Within a few

months, Robert F. Kennedy had been assassinated and televised violence in the streets of Chicago overshadowed the Democratic national convention. No wonder that in this interview, Smithson insists that "anarchy is what we have now!"

Sharp's "Earth Art" exhibition reflected a direction in post-studio sculpture that he called "elementalism"; the show was part of a projected series of exhibitions which would have encompassed the ancient notion of the four elements. "Air Art," which included Morris's *Steam* and Warhol's floating mylar pillows, toured five venues in North America beginning in March 1968; "Fire" and "Water" never materialized. Opening in February 1969, the Cornell "Earth Art" show was the first museum exhibition of the new genre of environmental sculpture made of earthen materials, and employing the very new procedure of having the artists make all the works on site.

By the fall of 1968, Smithson had been exhibiting in Manhattan for more than a decade, first as a painter and collagist, since 1965 as a sculptor. Recalling the artist, Sharp has recently remarked,

He was obviously someone you didn't take lightly. Smithson was very tall, six-foot-two, and looked taller. Very thin, with a pocked face, heavy, kitschy dark-framed glasses which he later exchanged for gold aviator glasses, and rough clothes. Definitely not chic, definitely no suit, tie, definitely not a businessman, collector, establishment. . . . And he was rough and ready

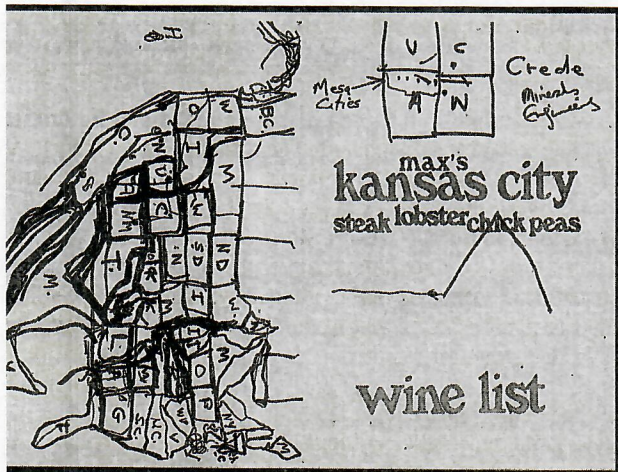


Smithson on the cover of *Avalanche*, Summer/Fall 1973. Portrait photo by Nancy Holt.

**“I’m interested in showing, with seemingly very stable things, the instability, the elusiveness, the mental disasters that can take place.”**

around town at the watering holes that counted at that particular time, the most important of which, in hindsight, was Max’s Kansas City. And he would drink beer, often out of the bottle, and talk with anyone. . . . Even at 30, he was the *éminence grise* of the young, up-and-coming people. He was imposing, argumentative. He would get on your case . . . [and] had vehement opinions.<sup>6</sup>

In the interview, Smithson describes his participation in a panel discussion that took place at Yale in June 1966. In the audience was Yale architecture school alumnus Walther Prokosch of the New York firm Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton, which subsequently hired Smithson as a consultant on their proposed design for the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. Smithson had already conceived of a large outdoor environment, *Tar Pool and Gravel Pit*, proposed for an urban public-art project. His interest in geology, his writing about art and the city in *Artforum*, his appreciation for science fiction—and his ability to imagine wide-ranging connections between all these topics—made him a promising contributor to the airport-design project. If, according to Smithson, the architects were unsure how he would participate, they knew exactly why he appealed to them: his idea of the “crys-



*“Four Corners” map drawing on a Max’s Kansas City wine list; used on the back cover of *Avalanche*, Summer/Fall 1973. Courtesy *Avalanche* Archives.*

alline city” corresponded to the design which T.A.M.S. was developing for an airport made of modular segments which could be duplicated and added onto, akin to a Tinkertoy set.<sup>7</sup>

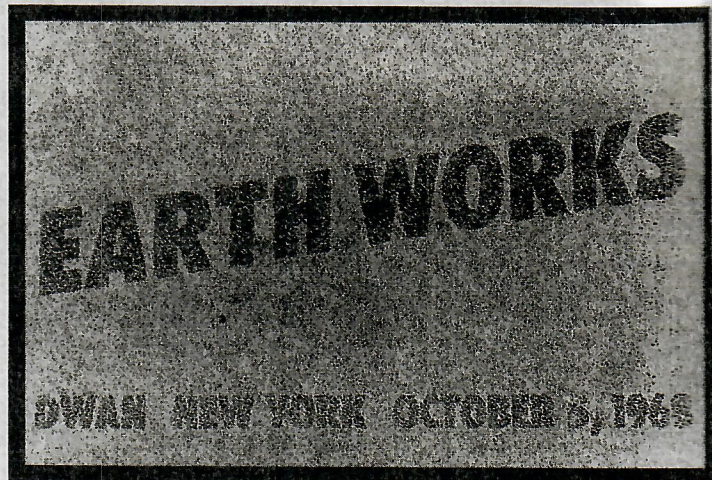
Catalyzed by his work with T.A.M.S., Smithson began thinking of placing works of art between the airport runways at ground level, set directly in the earth. When his relationship with the firm ended, Smithson began looking in southern New Jersey for undeveloped land in which to construct such works. He was supported in this effort by Dwan, his wife, Nancy Holt, and his friends Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris, among others, and stimulated by conversations with Michael Heizer. In his solo shows at Dwan Gallery, Smithson’s arrays of intricate boxes evolved into multipart bins containing geological matter; he called these works “nonsites.” They were accompanied by photographs, maps and descriptions of the site from which the sand, rocks or minerals had been taken.

This interview took place at Smithson’s West Village loft on the



*Virginia Dwan and Robert Smithson on the roof of the Dakota apartment building, 1968. Courtesy Dwan Gallery Archives. Photo Roger Prigent.*

*Announcement for opening of “Earthworks” at Dwan Gallery, 1968. Courtesy Dwan Gallery Archives.*



place. . . . There is a specific relationship between what’s there and what’s done there.

**RS:** That’s right. In other words, I don’t make a piece here and have it end up on somebody’s lawn.<sup>7</sup>

If you go to the site, you’ll see all this material that’s in a state of dispersal. My idea is to build a closed system and then bring the material back from the outside into the inside, so it’s kind of a reversal. Instead of taking the art outside I’m bringing it back inside. . . .

You have to realize that the art is really against you. The art is setting out to annihilate your very moorings, it has a way of pulling the ground out from under you, so to speak. Most artists will build something up in order to create a certainty. Most people respond to art that way: they’ll see an object and they can cling to it. They’re not too interested in discovery. This gets them through, this gives

them a certain pleasure, a certain kind of security, stability. I’m more interested in showing, with seemingly very stable things, the instability, the elusiveness, the sort of mental disasters that can take place within this whole complex.

**WS:** The earth isn’t necessarily any better material than anything else?

**RS:** If I said, “I’m for earth,” that would immediately be my ruination. Any time you assert something, you’re always in the position that you’ll completely be undermined.

**WS:** But you have chosen at this particular time to concentrate your artistic energies in the direction of using earth as an artistic material. Why is that?

**RS:** I guess it is because it hasn’t been overly processed. I’m not interested in paint because paint is manufactured. . . . I’m not interested in new materials. What’s so good about taking something refined? I’m interested in some-

thing that isn't so refined. I wanted to take things down to the raw level, to get down to the state before the iron is smelted and made into cold rolled steel.

I am using steel [to construct the containers that hold the non-site works] . . . and the contents are the raw materials. In each unit you have this dialectic between the artificiality of the container, where there's no truth to materials at all, and the rawness of the matter or the ore. And these two things set up this ambiance, this dual state. . . .

I see no reason for viewing the landscape as something natural. It could be conceived in terms of an abstract system . . . . It doesn't necessarily have to be conceived

of as an environment. The natural environment to me doesn't exist. I mean the landscape is coextensive with my mind. And each site that I select becomes in a sense an extension of the abstract faculties of my mind, and this is translated into a three-dimensional system . . .

**WS:** . . . which is the work.

**RS:** Which is the work. The work is in a sense logical. If you made a graph, let's say, of the population, the graph wouldn't necessarily look like the population, but in a sense it represents the population. So the work is abstract in that sense.

**WS:** People tend to criticize you not for the quality of magic in [your work] but for the fact that you've

really done nothing except transport a bulk of rocks from one place to another and into a container.

**RS:** Well, most people are involved in building up things. Take the classical idea of making a piece of sculpture. The idea is to take a block of marble and then chip away until you find this form or structure within there. I'm more interested in the chips, the things that are disposed of.

**WS:** Why? Are they more real?

**RS:** In a sense they correspond more to our constant state of disintegration, which I think is more fundamental than any attempt to build up some kind of object.

**WS:** So that relates to your whole theory of the entropy and the mitigation of energy systems.

**RS:** It's really a recovery of lost energy. In other words, the energy that went into the grinding of these stones or the breaking of these stones . . .

**WS:** . . . is manifest in the work?

**RS:** That's in a sense manifest in the work. Also, the idea that there's a point on that horizon from where those rocks were taken. Once they're put into this structure that point spreads out to the whole size of the container, so there's a kind of equilibrium.

**WS:** How is the work then a metaphor for all of these elements—the time element, the process situation?

**RS:** The container can't really contain those aspects because they're always evading you or getting away from you. In a sense, if you went out to the site itself you wouldn't find anything there. I mean there's no indication that I've even been there, but that's the work too. It does a vanishing act. I'm not going and plunking an object there.

**WS:** So you don't impose your will on it. It's very anonymous. And that's very appealing.

**RS:** Yeah, I'm more in contact I think with [the point] where everything collapses, finally, all your notions of built ideals just sort of break apart. I'd like to be precise about that breaking apart, rather than in building up things. I'm interested in observing the cindery aspect of the world.

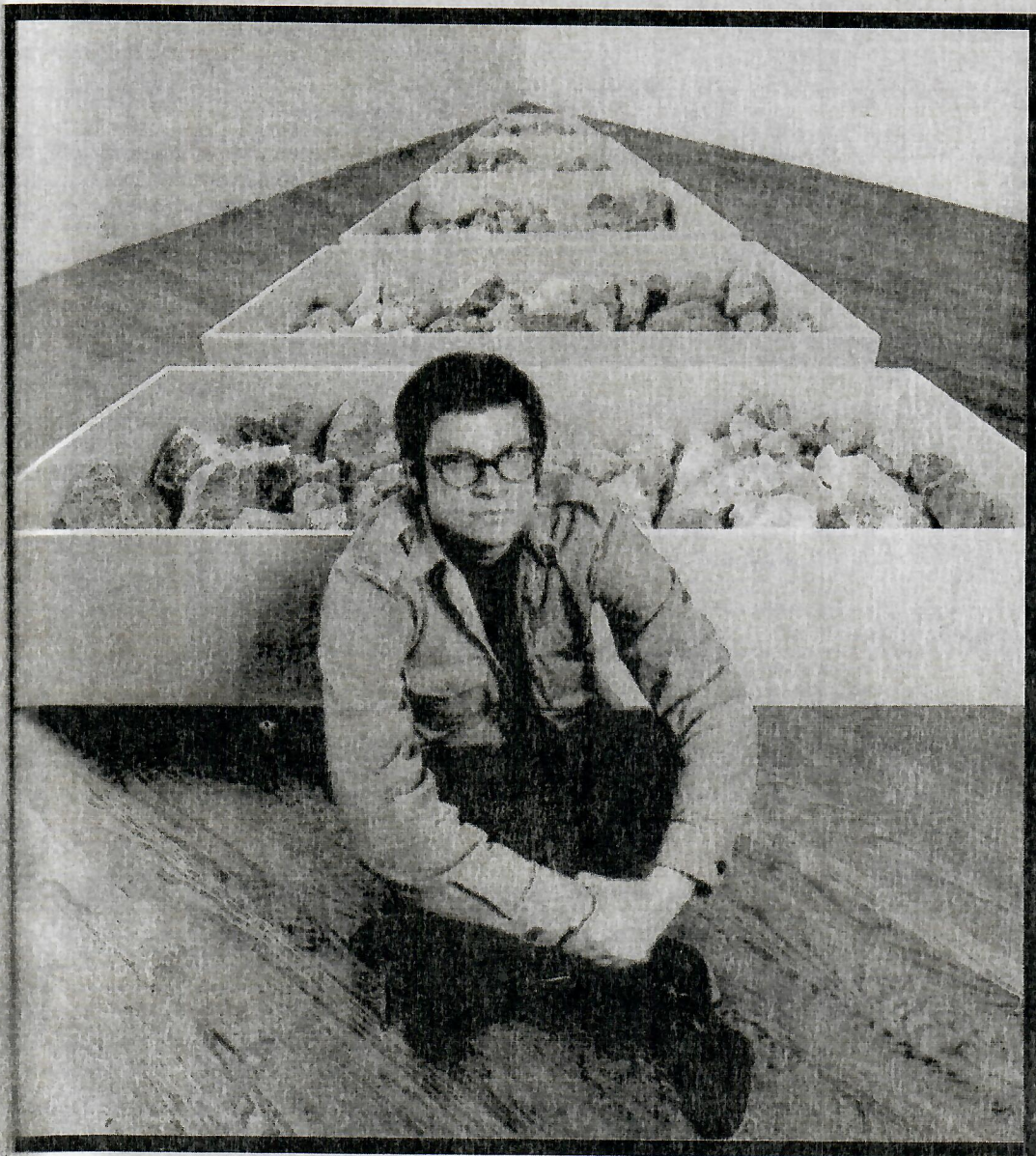
**WS:** How would you then categorize the difference between the egoistic artistic involvement of someone who would like to discover something in chipping away rock, and your own involvement, which is to merely present the rock? Why would this be less egocentric?

**RS:** If you just presented the rock, that would be an attempt to simulate some idea of freedom. And I want to be free from freedom, to get back to the limitation. The limitation is the art.

**WS:** How's that?

**RS:** Every rock in a sense has limits. It is what it is. But I'm interested in what it is not. There's a metamorphosis that takes place. I'm not interested in presenting, let's say, a handful of rocks and saying, "Here, they are what they are." I'm interested in carrying out a transformation that goes from, in a sense, an object to a nonobject.

*Smithson with A Nonsite, Franklin, New Jersey, 1968; at Dwan Gallery. Courtesy Nancy Holt.*





Tom Leavitt (director of the Andrew Dickson White Museum), standing, and "Earth Art" exhibition participants: (left to right) Neil Jenney, Dennis Oppenheim, Günther Uecker, Jan Dibbets, Richard Long, Robert Smithson.

process," the process will ultimately unwind him and completely do him in.

**WS:** Why is that?

**RS:** Well, all assertions eventually crush the person who is making the assertion or the declaration. You start from being crushed. It's a game of "how to be crushed."

**WS:** If you declare that "grass grows," and say nothing more than that, how does that destroy you?

**RS:** Because people eventually lose interest in that.

**WS:** But that's their problem, not yours as an artist.

**RS:** But how long can you go around declaring that before you

yourself get somewhat bored with it? It seems to me like a kind of lyrical thing to do; it's all right. I have no grievance against somebody presenting a piece of something and saying, "Isn't this great!" It's not very compelling. It's not very engaging. And . . .

**WS:** . . . it isn't dialectical enough.

**RS:** No, it isn't dialectical. It doesn't have any kind of theoretical basis. It's some kind of poetic statement. I think good poetry is always grounded in very rigorous concepts. And when you just sort of express something—"This is a piece of grass"—well, you're smothered with expressions like that day after day. ■

**WS:** It's not an object, it's a situation.

**RS:** It's a situation. There's a whole set of factors that develop, both mental and physical. And there's a constant interplay between these two things. It's almost like a game. And this game you can only lose.

**WS:** You have to lose all games.

**RS:** Yeah.

**WS:** So that relates to entropy because you lose energy as you play the game. Everyone, the winner and the loser, always loses the game.

**RS:** Yeah.

**WS:** I dig that. So you're a fool even to engage in games—though we always do.

**RS:** Yeah. In spite of ourselves, we have to do it.

**WS:** How does your work relate to a game, then? You're accepting your own dialectic. You're playing your own game. And that's both good and bad. I want to know what the benefits are of playing your own game. Because everyone else is going to say what the nonbenefits are.

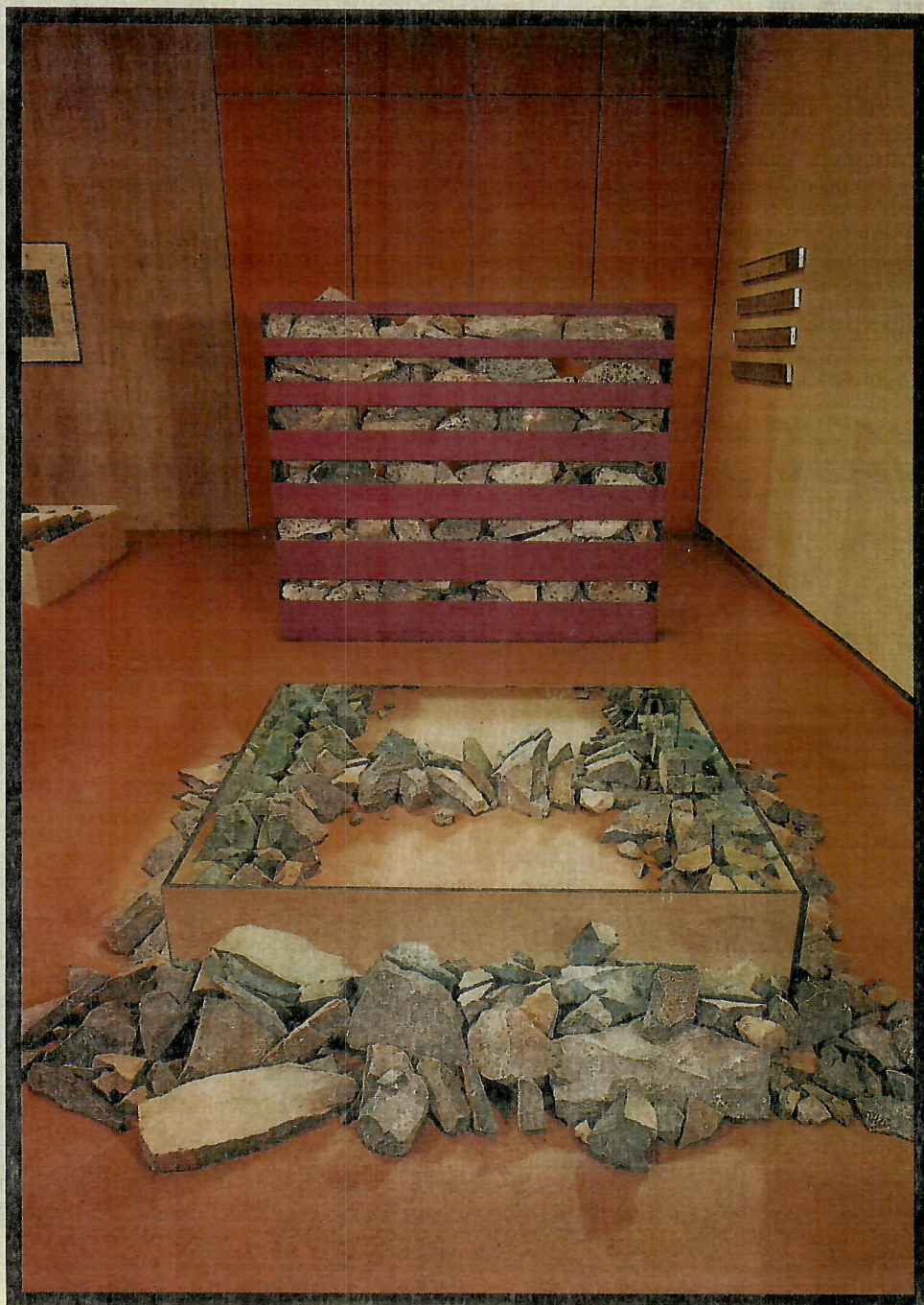
**RS:** For one thing, it brings on a consciousness of being in the world, too. And at the same time, of nonbeing as well. There are those moments when you lapse from your being.

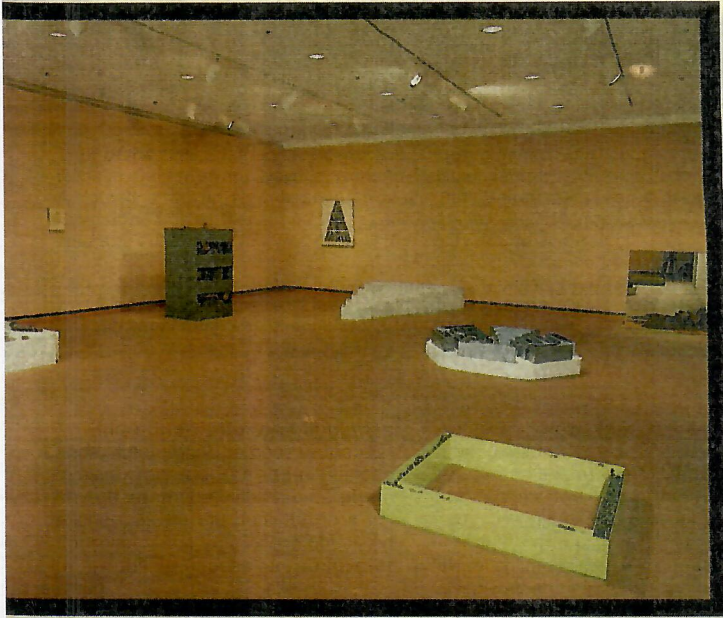
**WS:** Because of the abstract quality of the work?

**RS:** Yeah.

**WS:** And that differentiates it to a certain extent from some of the other people who are using earth as process and as nature.

**RS:** Yeah. I'm interested in process, too, but the process to me is always defeating. If the artist says, "I'm interested in





View of the 1980 Smithson retrospective, showing (left to right) Double Nonsite, California and Nevada; Nonsite (Palisades-Edgewater, New Jersey); A Nonsite, Franklin, New Jersey; A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey; Red Sandstone Corner Piece; and Mono Lake Nonsite, all works from 1968, at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University. Photo Jon Reis.

Left, Rock and Mirror Square II (foreground), 1971, basalt, mirrors, 14 by 60 by 60 inches, and Nonsite, "Line of Wreckage," Bayonne, New Jersey, 1968, painted aluminum, broken concrete, 59 by 70 by 12 1/2 inches; at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum. Photo Jon Reis.

1. This edited interview includes approximately 80 percent of the discussion recorded on tape. Elisions have been made within some of the exchanges. In the near future a full transcript of the tape will be deposited in a publicly accessible archive or library.

2. The panel discussion, on the topic "Shaping the Environment: The Artist and the City," took place on June 17, 1966, as part of a symposium held during Yale University's School of Art and Architecture Alumni Day Convocation. It was organized and moderated by Brian O'Doherty; other participants were John Hightower, then executive director of the New York State Council on the Arts, and Yale philosophy professor Paul Weiss.

3. Here Smithson seems to be rhetorically exaggerating a sense of detachment from contemporary politics. This is a realm in which, Nancy Holt recalls, he had an active interest. His feigned position of disinterest would have sparked fireworks with Sharp, whom Smithson knew to be engaged in radical politics.

4. This ambivalence reflected the national sentiment after a dramatically close presidential election, three weeks before, between Republican candidate Richard Nixon and the incumbent Democratic vice president, Hubert Humphrey. As historian David Farber put it, "Nixon won by just half a million votes, and in winning captured fewer votes than he had in losing to John F. Kennedy [in 1960]. Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in*

*the 1960s*, New York, Hill & Wang, 1994, p. 226.

5. Formed by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, the Youth International Party, or Yippies, was a small, loosely organized group that hoped to turn flower children into political activists. Given to theatricalized forms of political protest, its members played a prominent role in the August 1968 demonstrations at the Democratic national convention in Chicago.

6. "Aerial Art" was Smithson's original term for the proposed works that he—along with the artists he invited to participate in the project, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris—was designing for the earth between the runways at the future Dallas-Fort Worth airport. Smithson's article about these proposals, "Aerial Art," was published in *Studio International*, February-April 1969.

7. Although he was intrigued by suburbia, Smithson seemed to have a special antipathy for sculpture domesticated in pseudo-pastoral settings. In his "Sedimentation" essay, he referred to an article on Anthony Caro in the September-October 1966 issue of *Art in America* and ridiculed the installation of "one work, *Prima Luce 1966*, painted yellow, [which] matches the yellow daffodils peeking out behind it, and it sits on a well cut lawn."

Editorial notes: Suzaan Boettger

Author: Willoughby Sharp founded and published *Avalanche*, a quarterly which appeared from 1970 to 1973.

**"Each site that I select becomes in a sense an extension of the abstract faculties of my mind, translated into a three-dimensional system."**

afternoon of Tuesday, Nov. 26, 1968.<sup>8</sup> They had been acquainted for years. Although Smithson was better known, Sharp was not an obsequious interviewer. He varies the deferential position of a journalist with the challenges of a fellow intellectual. He brings up Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon, the candidates in the presidential election held exactly three weeks earlier, in which Humphrey had lost a tough, divisive race by just half a million votes. Sharp and Smithson also discuss Americans' attraction to technology. The day after this interview took place, the splashy exhibition "The Machine—As Seen at the End of the Industrial Age" opened at the Museum of Modern Art. But even that show's subtitle reflects the moment's pervasive "sense of an ending." It exemplifies the erosion of confidence in continuous technological expansion, in America's ability to open "new frontiers"—indeed, an erosion of confidence in the idea of progress itself and in the authority figures who represented it. Smithson also makes remarkably prescient remarks about the "distractions" produced by technology's "shenanigans."

In this year of the 30th anniversary of Dwan Gallery's "Earthworks" exhibition and the 25th anniversary of Smithson's death, the interview shows how the artist's work with T.A.M.S. led him to earthen environments and confirmed his fundamental preference for sites in fringe landscapes rather than city centers. But its most remarkable aspect is its demonstration of Smithson's psychological motivation, nowhere else stated so directly. His outlook was inevitably saturnine—as he noted, he identified not with the sculptor's block of marble but with the resulting chips and the state of disintegration. In revealing his intimate connection to the experience of dread, he attempts to idealize it as a "condition of ecstasy, almost." He suggests the compensations offered by working with age-old geologic matter and the respite that it provided from the vicissitudes of the here and now. But even this attitude is tempered by the fatalistic belief that art "is setting out to annihilate your very moorings."

While these attitudes were idiosyncratic, they paralleled the public's apocalyptic mood of the late 1960s. This affinity for what he calls "instability" and "mental disasters" may be part of the appeal of Smithson's work. □

1. The first issue of *Avalanche*, devoted to Earth Art, was published in 1970, the year that Smithson went to Utah's Great Salt Lake to build his massive, emblematic *Spiral Jetty*. Only two separate sentences from this taped interview appear in "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," *Avalanche*, no. 1, Fall 1970.

2. Organized at the invitation of Thomas Leavitt, the adventuresome new director of Cornell University's Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, "Earth Art" was presented from Feb. 11 to March 16, 1969. The participating artists were Jan Dibbets, Hans Haacke, Neil Jenney, Richard Long, David Medalla, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson and Günther Uecker. Carl Andre, Walter De Maria and Michael Heizer were also mentioned in the show's press release, but either dropped out (Andre) or withdrew within a week of the opening (De Maria, Heizer).

3. On view Oct. 5-30, 1968, "Earthworks" included works by Andre, Herbert Bayer, De Maria, Heizer, Stephen Kaltenbach, Sol LeWitt, Morris, Claes Oldenburg, Oppenheim and Smithson.

4. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday & Company, 1968, p. 27.

5. Howard Junker, "The New Art: It's Way Way Out," *Newsweek*, July 29, 1968, pp. 55-62.

6. Author's conversation with Willoughby Sharp, Apr. 28, 1995.

7. Author's conversation with Ernst Schwiebert, former architect with T.A.M.S., Mar. 15, 1998.

8. Although the tape is undated, Smithson's references in his 1968 datebook indicate this date. Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt Papers, Archives of American Art, reel 3832.

Author: Suzaan Boettger is writing a history of earthworks. She teaches art history and theory at the City College of New York and at the School of Visual Arts.