

**The following is the text of a commissioned article that will be published in *Ethics in the Visual Arts*, edited by Elaine King and Gail Levin, Allworth Press, forthcoming September 2006.**

**This is the editor's final version, with footnotes (for ease of reference, rather than endnotes) restored by the author (instead of being at the end of the book).**

### ***Chapter 17: Earthworks' Contingencies***

***Suzaan Boettger***

*A sense of the earth as a map undergoing disruption leads the artist to the realization that nothing is certain or formal. —Robert Smithson, 1968<sup>1</sup>*

Earthworks presents an extreme example of the intersection of art and ethics. As a large-scale, exterior outgrowth of interior environmental sculptural installations of the mid-1960s, Earthworks displays that sculptural genre's characteristic of being designed in response to the configuration of a specific site. As such, the works are best comprehended in situ—experientially—the lateral expanse understood in relation to one's own size, and one's movement providing varying perspectives of place and artwork. These two conditional elements physically parallel a view of ethics that acknowledges contingency, for both the design and comprehension of environmental art

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1. Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson, Collected Writing* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 110. This article was originally published in *Artforum*, September 1968.

and the application of a moral law depend upon the particular circumstances, and where one stands in relation to them, a position individually variable and motile.

Yet more particularly, the format of Earthworks is also materially contingent. As the title of the unformalized movement indicates, Earthworks were customarily constructed almost solely of the natural matter of their wilderness locales. Sculptors of the monumental mounds, troughs, and marks on terrain of this earliest form of contemporary Land Art eschewed what those of the successor form incorporated: concrete, steel, or wood support toward stability and structural permanence. So while “sculpture” and “terrain” fused into environmental art, Earthworks, like their host sites and material, were subject to the vicissitudes of climatological change and geological movement. The inevitable morphological degradation alteration of these works prompts consideration of proper stewardship.

But beyond the conditional physical and formal characteristics, and before considering the care of deteriorating land sculptures, looking at Earthworks retrospectively highlights a more idiosyncratic aspect of this genre of environmental art: The practice of not reinforcing the exclusively natural materials used in large environmental constructions—the distinguishing quality of Earthworks—has largely become obsolete. Indeed, the most germane of Earthworks’ multiple contingencies is a social one: Since these works began to be made in the late 1960s, estimations of artists’ manipulations of their medium, nature, in regard to what is ethically just to do on or with the earth has changed.

And a tangential art world issue that also seems to have—at least in practice—altered over recent decades, as evidenced by posthumous treatment of works by Earthworks

artist Robert Smithson, is the determination of a work's authorship.

### **Signs of the Times [A head]**

Every work of art is born of values of its time—while some more than others transcend that into timeless appeal. Yet, the relative recentness of the Earthworks “movement”—1967–1973, during the period that art history still considers “contemporary art”—is contradicted by the strong difference between current values toward nature and those manifested in Earthworks, making them appear to be of a past era. The fruit of a strong postwar economy, social optimism, the baby boom generation's moving into teenage rejection of traditional forms of propriety, Earthworks was one of a number of new genres in the 1960s and 1970s (Happenings, Pop Art, Minimal Art, Conceptual Art, Body Art, Performance, Video Art) that the art world were appreciated for the very boldness of their re-imagining of what art could be. One of the major innovators in a few of these genres, Dennis Oppenheim, recalled, “The feeling was that art is what you don't know. Everything else is art history.”<sup>2</sup>

At the time they were made, the artists' large scale manipulations of terrain were considered both conceptually and physically heroic. Not only the art world, but mass media news and pictorial magazines were inspired by the image of New York artists going into wilderness to move sometimes thousands of tons of earth to create extraordinary sculptural spectacles that few would experience. “‘Things like the Grand Canyon have always frightened artists,’ says Oppenheim. ‘They’ve always seemed like

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2. Dennis Oppenheim Interviewed by Suzaan Boettger,” conducted on July 12, 1995 for the Oral History Program of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 37.

forms that are important but impossible to duplicate. Now artists have to be willing to meet these objects in their own ballpark.”<sup>3</sup> That the mainstream *Newsweek* approvingly quoted this young New Yorker, then recently relocated from northern California, in its eight-page feature titled “The New Art: It’s Way, Way Out,” in the summer of 1968, indicates the times’ confident reception of radical genres.

Oppenheim’s earthen environments, while large, were often ephemeral: Famous works include his act of hacking rings in the snow on ground that spanned the United States-Canadian border (*Annual Rings*, 1968) and having an X mowed across a Dutch wheat field, followed by withholding the harvest from production (*Cancelled Crop*, 1969). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, several other American, European, and Canadian artists made temporary desert, mountain, or countryside environments out of natural materials or earthen land forms. Two major works are still extant in the United States: Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* (1969-70), northeast of Las Vegas, Nevada, two deep cuts in facing extensions of a mesa, with a 1500-foot chasm between them, and Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a 1,500-foot long, fifteen-foot wide path built in the Great Salt Lake in Utah. In the middle of the Netherlands, outside of the modern suburban town of Emmen, is Smithson’s 1971 *Broken Circle and Spiral Hill*, a commission as part of the “Sonsbeek ’71” exhibition of art around the country. It consists of a solid hemi-circle in a lake with an arcing arm partially enclosing the top edge of the open half of the circle, and a small conical hill above it, and is located on the property of a commercial sand and gravel quarry. It is a more domesticated version of Earthworks. All of their locations in areas remote from urban art centers demands of the viewer

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3. Howard Junker, “The New Art: It’s Way, Way Out,” *Newsweek* 72, no. 5 (July 29, 1968): 61.

considerable travel (and for the *Double Negative* and the *Spiral Jetty*, over unpaved, rocky, unmarked roadways) to be able to view and interact with their environments, a necessity that was justified by artists and critics as part of a work's "content."<sup>4</sup>

The earthwork that more directly went up against the Grand Canyon in the scale of its crevices in its desert locale and its dramatic effect is Heizer's *Double Negative*. To excavate the two fifty-foot deep, thirty-foot wide troughs in the facing sides of the mesa's projecting fingers, Heizer dynamited and then removed by bulldozer 240,000 tons rhyolite and sandstone and pushed them into the chasm between his "cuts," which then contained a huge mound as if generated by an avalanche. The land's ownership jointly by Heizer and his New York art dealer Virginia Dwan, and its isolated locale about ninety minutes' drive northeast of Las Vegas on a barren mesa outside the small town of Overton, evidently provided the artistic license. He didn't need legal permission, as President Nixon signed the National Environmental Policy Act while this work was in process, on January 1, 1970, and the ensuing agency was not established (with the requirement for environmental impact statements in the future) until the following September, after the *Negative*'s completion.

But even in the absence of this institutionalized protection of nature, the art world did not raise questions about the artists' interventions in the landscapes. In what now appears to exude defensive denial, Philip Leider assured *Artforum* readers in 1971, "The [*Double Negative*] is huge, but its scale is not. It took its place in nature in the most modest and unassuming manner—the quiet participation of a man-made shade in a particular

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4. For a detailed art and social history, see Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

configuration of valley, ravine, mesa, and sky. The piece is a new place in nature.”<sup>5</sup>

Characteristic of Europeans’ historical idealization of the American pioneer sensibility, one critic enthused: “It is a rejection of the city and of civilization and a reincarnation of the American frontier spirit in seeking out and grappling with virgin territory on a grandiose scale.”<sup>6</sup> The sexual analogy to fondling a virgin suggests a quality of aggression that has traditionally been coded as masculine.

An earlier work by Oppenheim also has that quality of humans’ right of domain over receptive nature. In 1968 he made a “large spatial collage” by transferring a map’s concentric lines describing a mountain’s topography onto a nearby wetlands through the placement of aluminum filings (curled shavings that are the residue of milling machines). Conceptually, he in effect flattened and dissolved the mountain on the swamp surface. It took three to four months for his metal “drawing,” *Contour Lines Scribed in Swamp Grass*, to disappear. The distribution of this industrial waste was undoubtedly detrimental to the swamp, but that was not addressed in published commentary on Oppenheim’s work, which in *Artforum* praised him for “helping explode through to the landscape’s giant scale.”<sup>7</sup>

**[DESIGNER: insert image ‘Contour Lines Scribed in Swamp Grass’]**

**[DESIGNER: Photo Credit] Dennis Oppenheim [DESIGNER: end Photo Credit]**

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5. Philip Leider, “How I Spent My Summer Vacation or, Art and Politics in Nevada, Berkeley, San Francisco and Utah,” *Artforum* 9, no. 1 (September 1970): 42.

6. Bette Vinklers, “New York,” *Art International* XIV, no. 3 (March 1970): 91.

7. Jean-Louis, Bourgeois, “Dennis Oppenheim: A Presence in the Countryside,” *Artforum* 8, no. 2 (October 1969): 35.

**[DESIGNER: begin caption]** *Contour Lines Scribed in Swamp Grass*, 1968. Contour lines from a nearby mountain scribed into swamp grass, using sickle mower. Complete project is submerged in water at noon (high tide). New Haven, Connecticut. Swamp grass and aluminum filings, 150' x 200' **[DESIGNER: end caption]**

An opposition of active human and passive nature also appears in Leider's account of visiting Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. "In a free society artists get to rearrange nature just like everyone else, lumber kings, mining czars, oil barons; nature, a kind of huge, placid Schmoo [a rotund comic strip figure and inflated toy] just lays there, aching with pleasure."<sup>8</sup> But this act, calling up an image of tickling a recumbent figure, called for rearranging 6,650 tons of rock and dirt, which Smithson had moved from the base of hills along the shoreline to a shallow bay on the Great Salt Lake. This act—and even Heizer's gigantic earth moving—probably did no ecological damage. But their right to such aggressive acts no longer seems that it would be so easily given—at least not without prior research into the potential environmental impact. Another characteristic of a free society is the recognition that no one has the right to radically alter the public heritage of nature without substantial public benefit. In the 1960s, the creation of these bold forms was seen as a demonstration of our country's promotion of personal freedom and innovative creativity. That Heizer and Smithson both made their works in desolate areas in the western United States, and were each photographed wearing cowboy hats and boots, suggests that another source of their huge terrestrial sculptures is the bravado aggression of a maverick pioneer.

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8. Leider, "How I Spent..." 48.

Furthermore, artists could take this position of aggressor in relation to the earth because there seemed to be little sense of the continuity between natural and living things, animate or not. In the early years of Earthworks, Smithson was described as being “far from a nature freak. ‘There’s no reason to accept the earth as nature,’ he declares in deadly seriousness. ‘I conceive of the outdoors as a museum—the sub-stratum of the earth is like a buried museum.’”<sup>9</sup> He stated, “I think we all see the landscape as coextensive with the gallery. I don’t think we’re dealing with matter in terms of a back-to-nature movement. For me the world is a museum.”<sup>10</sup>

Earthworks’ founding was concurrent with, and tangentially inspired by, the incipient awareness of the environmental hazards of pollution and pesticides. The years of Earthworks coincided with the social evolution from genteel conservation to early activist environmentalism, and interest in them both from within and without the art world was stimulated by the presumption that these artists, as part of progressive culture, were encouraging sympathy with nature. Thus, the fact that these works were located in forbiddingly wild terrains, and often involved massive rearrangements of earth, was overlooked.

The only time the criticism of the earthwork artists’ alteration of natural environments entered their contemporary art world was when Smithson introduced it into the dialogue to refute it. In what would be his final *Artforum* article before his death in 1973, Smithson quoted a *New York Times* article on painter Alan Gussow, the author of *A Sense of Place: Artists and the American Land* (Sierra Club, 1972), “Gussow advocates

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9. Junker, “Nitty Gritty,” 46.

10. Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, “Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson,” in Flam, op. cit., 246.



that artists ‘make these places visible, communicate their spirit—not like the earth work artists who cut and gouge the land like Army engineers.’” Smithson retorted that Gussow “fails to recognize the possibility of a direct organic manipulation of the land devoid of violence and macho aggressiveness.” Smithson, who was struggling to get contracts to reclaim mining sites through the construction of Earthworks, wrote, “If strip miners were less alienated from the nature in themselves and free of sexual aggression, cultivation would take place.”<sup>11</sup>

Smithson’s changing consciousness followed that of society. In May 1971, Congress stopped, on environmental grounds, the development of supersonic air transport. And Nixon’s vetoing of the so-called budget-wrecking Water Pollution Control Act in October 1972 was swiftly followed the next day—the last of the session—by Congress gathering the necessary votes to override it.<sup>12</sup>

In 1970, Smithson had derided the new interest in ecology as a naive “media issue, like [President Lyndon Johnson’s] War on Poverty....There is no going back to Paradise or nineteenth-century landscape which is basically what the conservationist attitude is....The early view of Paradise is a nostalgia for the enclosed garden.”<sup>13</sup> But he found a way to respond to the increasing public concern for industry’s abuse of natural environments while imagining works that incorporated the appeal for him of the condition of entropy, of loss of energy in a system and deteriorated states of being. In 1971, Smithson began to devise sculptural environments that would ecologically reclaim areas devastated by mining operations by incorporating tailings (sludge residue from the refinement of the ore) in arresting sculptural designs for places that would function as sites of both environmental sculpture and recreation. These were intended to be funded

by corporations as part of government-mandated restitution of their sites. A 1972 letter seeking endorsement of this project from the president of the American Mining Congress, states, “I am developing an art consciousness for today free from nostalgia and rooted in the processes of actual production and reclamation....A dialogue between earth art and mining operations could lead to a whole new consciousness.”<sup>14</sup> Before any such proposals were funded, in July 1973, Smithson died in a crash of the small plane from which he was viewing the preliminary form of what posthumously became *The Amarillo Ramp*.

It would be a decade later, and by humanities scholars outside the disciplines of art history, less enamored of heroic formalist innovation and unfamiliar with the art world practice of continually embracing expanding conceptions of the identity of art, who would challenge what a 1985 article titled “The Ethics of Earthworks.” Philosopher Peter Humphrey stated, “Whether or not moral criticisms can be made of works of art, such criticism can be made of environmental marks....A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” He finds Earthworks “intrusions into the environment” to be “unnecessary (and unethical).”<sup>15</sup> Unethical doesn’t necessarily follow from unnecessary (a nebulous quality when applied to works of art), and it has not been shown that any Earthworks actually harmed the “biotic community.” The following year, Allen Carlson argued in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* that “the similarity of appearance of [Earthworks] to the eyesores produced by industry, mining, and construction is not accidental,” and that “these works constitute something like aesthetic indignities to nature.”<sup>16</sup>

The lack of references to these articles in art publications suggest that these sentiments had no impact in the art world. And neither did anyone within the art world denounce Earthworks as having harmed ecological environments. Nevertheless, concurrent with Smithson's 1973 death, the non-movement quietly ceased, evolving into Land Art. Smithson's major patron, Dwan, had closed her gallery in 1971 and was very selectively funding projects. Robert Scull, patron of Earthworks by Heizer and Walter De Maria, had moved on to other interests. Private and public funding was constrained by the sharp economic recession underway due to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) dramatic increase in the world price of petroleum and the United States' phased withdrawal from Vietnam. The major works of the early 1970s, De Maria's *Lightning Field*, in New Mexico, Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, Robert Morris's *Observatory* near Amsterdam, and James Turrell's ongoing *Roden Crater* outside of Flagstaff, Arizona, are far less intrusive constructions on the land, characteristic of Land Art. Artists took up other areas of investigation, or they and emerging environmental sculptors (prominently, women such as Alice Aycock and Mary Miss) made works out of materials that sustained their permanence and that were largely funded by institutions, and/or were located in countryside areas closer to cities. The fact that such large-scale movements of earth were rarely done after the early 1970s cannot be attributed solely to lack of funding (in the past thirty years Turrell has received numerous substantial grants from private and public institutions for his endlessly unfinished *Roden Crater* observatory). It also suggests a consensual lack of interest since then in making such aggressive reformations of landscape and reflects increasing general concern for environmental deterioration caused by technology under human control.

## **Preservation [A head]**

A more recent and unresolved ethical issue is Earthworks' institutional owners' responsibility toward these works, which, being unreinforced and untended degrade due to the forces of nature. The devolution is strikingly evident at the *Double Negative* because its design centered on crisply cut geometric walls whose form strongly contrast to the organic irregularities of nature. Large boulders from the top of the mesa and the walls have fallen onto the ramps, presenting a jumbled pile between pocked walls. Photographs by Mark Ruwedel convey a dramatic ruin.<sup>17</sup> The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, its owner since receiving it as a gift from Dwan in 1985, illustrates it as part of its permanent collection on its Web site in its deteriorated state, and there has been no public announcement or discussion of restoring it. This laissez faire position seems consistent with the artist's intention, as his *Double Negative* was not reinforced at the time it was made to prevent this inevitable decay.

By contrast, the *Spiral Jetty* has experienced much more extreme changes in its immediate environment but has deteriorated less. Due to the long, several-years' cycles of the rising and falling of the Great Salt Lake's water table, the *Jetty* has been submerged for extended periods. More recently, as the result of a several-years' drought, the water level in its shallow Rozel Point Bay receded to out beyond it, and the *Jetty* was dry and landlocked for a couple of years—a white coil with protruding black rocks on a white salt bed with pink water breaking through in places.

**[DESIGNER: insert image 'Spiral Jetty']**

**[DESIGNER: Photo Credit]** Elaine A. King **[DESIGNER: end Photo Credit]**

**[DESIGNER: begin caption]** Documentation of students exploring the *Spiral Jetty* on May 26, 2005, in Great Salt Lake, Utah—Carnegie Mellon University professors Elaine A. King and Ruth Stanford organized a special summer course titled: *Earthworks and Sacred Sites*. **[DESIGNER: end caption]**

In early 2006, it is in low water. Its fifteen-foot wide, 1,500-foot long path has not altered in shape—probably due to its strong basalt rock edging. The salt water covering did exaggerate the effect that Smithson anticipated solely along the path's edges when he designed the work and sought legal right to lease the land it is on, that salt crystals from the saline water would form white incrustations that would contrast with the water's red color. (The name "Rozel" Point refers to the roseate hue of the water due to the site's interaction of algae, bacteria, and saline water, enhanced by the regular molting of reddish brine shrimp.) Instead of being a black basalt path edged with white frosting, the entire surface of the *Jetty* accrued a glistening white crust. This actually increases its contrast to the red sea in which it sits, contradicting the thrust of entropy toward structural simplification.

The Dia Art Foundation, which acquired Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in 1999 as a gift from the Smithson estate, believes otherwise. "The spiral is not as dramatic as when it was first built," stated Michael Govan, the then-director of the Dia Art Foundation in New York City, "The *Jetty* is being submerged in a sea of salt." This quotation is part of a news article by *Salt Lake City Tribune* journalist Melissa Sanford that is posted on the Web site hosted by the Smithson estate. Sanford further notes that the Dia Foundation

has surveyed the land area and discussed “raising it by adding more rocks. Dia is also studying whether nature will restore the contrast the *Jetty* originally had with its surroundings by dissolving some of the salt crystals when the lake’s waters rise, or whether the foundation needs to do something more.”<sup>18</sup>

Add black rocks atop the white? Scrub the encrusted rocks? Either act would be contrary to Smithson’s intentions as articulated in his own writing to his letter requesting the lease of the land: “The purpose of placing the rock on the mud flat area will be to induce salt crystals on the rock and gravel as incrustations that will develop over a period of time. These will contrast with the red color of the water. Its purpose is purely aesthetic.”<sup>19</sup>

Art historian Robert Hobbs reported, as per information from Holt, that “after 1972, when the *Jetty* was under water, [Smithson] in fact planned to build it higher if the water level of the lake did not recede.”<sup>20</sup> But since he didn’t, should it be done on behalf of the artist, to ensure the *Jetty* accessibility to future generations? There seem to be three reasons militating against that admirable goal. First, its present, salt-covered state does actualize the artist’s written intentions as quoted above, and the curving pathway has not deteriorated. Second, Smithson was intellectually and emotionally engaged by the debilitated rather than the edenic, paradisaical state of nature. To explain this proclivity, he described “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. Well I’m more interested in the chips, the things that are disposed of.” Asked to explain, he said, “I think [the chips] correspond more to our constant state of disintegration, which I think is more fundamental than any attempt to build up some kind of object.”<sup>21</sup>

Statements by critics on this issue agree that the *Jetty* should not be bolstered. In *Artforum* in 1994, Jean-Pierre Criqui stated flatly, “The jetty’s vicissitudes, then—disappearance, reappearance, transformation—are clearly relevant to the nature of the work as it was conceived by its author. Any attempt to restore or to reconstruct it would run counter to its concept.”<sup>22</sup> A decade later, in Sanford’s *Tribune* article quoted above, Robert Storr asserted, “Earthworks were not made to last forever. There is a danger when restoring them to make a more perfect thing than was originally done.” The Summer 2005 issue of *Artforum* noted in passing the issue of “potentially raising the level” of the *Jetty*, suggesting that it is still under discussion, but the Dia Foundation says only that the situation is being monitored and is under discussion.<sup>23</sup>

The third reason not to posthumously alter the *Jetty* is that one may violate what the artist would have wanted. “Smithson had something to do with every rock out there,” declared Bob Phillips, the contractor Smithson hired to work with him to build the *Jetty*. “It would not be the same thing if somebody else monkeyed around with it. It would no longer be Smithson’s work.”<sup>24</sup>

That is what happened with Smithson’s *Broken Circle*, which the Dutch government restored and reinforced by applying a wood framework along its edges to stabilize and protect it from deterioration in the commercial sand quarry’s pond. In contrast to its original state, the rigidity of the wood channel that the earth is within looks distinctly artificial and unlike Smithson’s organic integration of rock and water. The separation presents a purity contrary to Smithson’s view of nature, for he wrote, “The image of the lost paradise garden leaves one without a solid dialectic, and causes one to suffer an ecological despair. Nature, like a person, is not one-sided.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Posthumous Smithsons [A head]**

And yet another ethical issue that pertains exclusively to works by Smithson, but goes beyond their identity as Earthworks, is that of the Smithson estate's posthumous creation of two works by the artist. Reports of his death in July 1973 indicate that the work that became titled *The Amarillo Ramp* had been staked out in a shallow lake when the small plane from which he and a photographer were viewing it crashed into an adjacent hillock, killing them and the pilot (everyone aboard). The work was completed by his widow, the artist Nancy Holt, along with Tony Shafrazi, then an artist (subsequently a major art dealer), who had brought Smithson and Holt along on his own planned visit to his potential patron Stanley Marsh outside of Amarillo, Texas (after they encountered each other at the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program, held that year in Albuquerque, New Mexico) and by sculptor Richard Serra. While staying at Marsh's house, Holt and Shafrazi had had several days' conversation with Smithson about the Amarillo work's design and had been up in the plane previously to observe its progress, and Serra had visited Smithson and Holt at the site of the *Spiral Jetty* when that was in process.

Nevertheless, being only staked out in water, Smithson's environmental sculpture was in a very rudimentary stage when after his funeral Holt, Shafrazi, and Serra took up working on it. The water level had risen, making the posts unstable and construction difficult, and it was necessary to drain the artificial lake by cutting open a dike. They then built the work on the dry lakebed. Its form arcs into an almost-complete circle, and the path increased in width to ultimately about ten feet across as its elevation rose from



ground level at the end nearest the shore to a height of twelve feet at its crest, at the head of the arc in the lake bed. When complete, it was photographed with the lakebed dry, and that is how it became known, rather than as a work emerging upwards from the water as Smithson imagined it. And given that he was planning for it to rise out of the water, he probably had not determined in advance of its construction the angle of the sweep upward or the ramp's culminating height. Two published drawings of the *Amarillo Ramp* show a much longer, thinner form than the one photographed soon after it was made.<sup>26</sup> The extent to which Holt, Shafrazi, and Serra made structural decisions in the creative process of this work's constructions suggests that their work can accurately be described as more an act of creation than of simply technical enactment or completion of another's articulated design and plans. As this work is on private land, cannot be sold, and is not open to the general public, the benefit of designating this work a "Smithson" rather than a "Smithson, Holt, Shafrazi, and Serra" was not economic. It must have been more one of prestige, both to the landowner and even more to the reputation of the artist. Since then, each of Smithson's posthumous collaborators has become well-accomplished and known, actually adding aesthetic value to the *Amarillo Ramp*. It is presently in a fairly degraded state, losing height, flattening out, and with irregular plant covering.

In literature on Smithson, the authorship of the *Amarillo Ramp* is identified as solely Smithson. For historical parallels, when a collaborative process is substantiated regarding paintings produced by dual artists or an artist's assistants, or the artist's own hand is not substantiated, the work is attributed to those who actually engaged in the process of making it, or more generically the attribution is to the artist's "workshop." Yet no one has challenged the proper "authorship" of *Amarillo Ramp*. It now seems surprising, but

even I did not originally question the authenticity of work created on the basis of an artist's few sketches, conversations, and trial layout by three other artists who each had their own strong identities and who were collectively serving as artistic ventriloquists for Smithson.

Consideration of the issue of authorship regarding the posthumous creation of works attributed to Smithson was prompted by the more recent act by the estate of creating a work attributed to Smithson that had even greater distance from the participation of the artist. In conjunction with a large survey of Smithson's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the estate recently built a "Smithson" by extrapolating from his drawing *A Floating Island to Travel Around Manhattan Island* (1970). Holt and the Smithson estate (administered by the James Cohan Gallery in New York City) worked with the nonprofit organization supporting environmental art, Minetta Brook. The wooded landscape he sketched was created on a rented barge that was given new, artificially aged, steel siding. Diane Shamash of Minetta Brook selected borrowed selected boulders from Central Park and chose trees of species identified in the drawing and additional others. Nancy Holt worked with her directing the design of the plantings and arrangement of the rocks and had the blue tugboat hired to pull it painted red.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that the graphite drawing is without color is just a minor but telling detail indicating the extent that this transformation of a two dimensional drawing into a environmental boat was an act of creation rather than actualization of the artist's ideas. The many preparatory drawings preceding the creation of the *Jetty* demonstrate the artist's evolving conceptualization from thinking of this work as a long arm with a short arc at the end, to one with a spiral of several turns. Several drawings preceded his large

scale asphalt and glue pours and his *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* duo. The *Floating Island* did not spring from the artist's creative process and as such lacked authenticity.

This work's sweetly whimsical contradictions of "floating," "island," and "forest" seem alienated from Smithson's own deadpan, even dark, demeanor, manifested in the drawing by his designation of a "Weeping Willow" tree to be on his "island." And apparently no one recognized the parallel of his idea of a barge of forested earth to the ship carrying sand to desiccated continents that is the protagonist's base in Brian Aldiss's novel *Earthworks*, which Smithson wrote about purchasing before embarking on his tour of the "monuments" of Passaic.<sup>28</sup> Again, the estate garnered no direct financial benefit from creating this work as it was dismantled after the few weeks that it circled Manhattan Island and its natural/organic matter was donated to New York City's Central Park. Instead, the creation of this "Smithson" by others, and the many lively receptions encouraging its viewing, suggested a vulgarization of his ideas into a pseudo-Smithson that served a publicity stunt to garner attention for the Whitney's exhibition and Smithson's oeuvre as a whole.

The history of *Earthworks* provides an art world correlate to what philosophers call "fallibilism—the sense that our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, and subject to revision in the face of new evidence."<sup>29</sup> Knowledge that we didn't have in the late 1960s about large-scale earth-moving's potential hazards to ecosystems parallels a shift in values toward less invasive procedures in nature (considered in the widest sense). Still appreciated for the boldness of artists' visions—*The Spiral Jetty* continues to be a pilgrimage site for international connoisseurs of contemporary art—the confident yet

narrow perspective that produced such work in the late 1960s now seems as if from a bygone era of simpler certainties.

A rare, recent earthwork illustrates the altered ethics toward massively rearranged earth. The series of seven huge pyramidal flanges, 36 feet high and 145 feet wide, of Scottish artist (and New York City resident) Patricia Leighton's 1991–1993 *Sawtooth Ramps* were built from soil excavated on site for construction of a corporate facility for Motorola, the commissioner of the piece. This sculptured environment has the characteristics of post-Earthworks Land Art in that it is located not in wilderness but near urbanization—along the highway connecting Glasgow and Edinburgh, Scotland—and its patron is institutional rather than private. The geometric forms are contained by layers of geotech reinforcement fabric throughout the compacted soil, which is covered by tightly sodded grass and kept closely trimmed by grazing sheep. The very mixture of aesthetic and ecological benefits of this sculptural environment shows much more social responsibility than the earlier “contemporary” earthworks.

Whether it is a style with nothing left to explore, or it is not fundable or ethical, the potential benefits of experiencing such Earthworks' massive earth sculpturing in the wilderness no longer attracts artists or supporters. Retrospective analyses of sculptors' engagement with earth, and the earthworks representatives' relation to these works, demonstrate changing views of appropriate ethics in regard to art, authorship, and the social identity of nature.