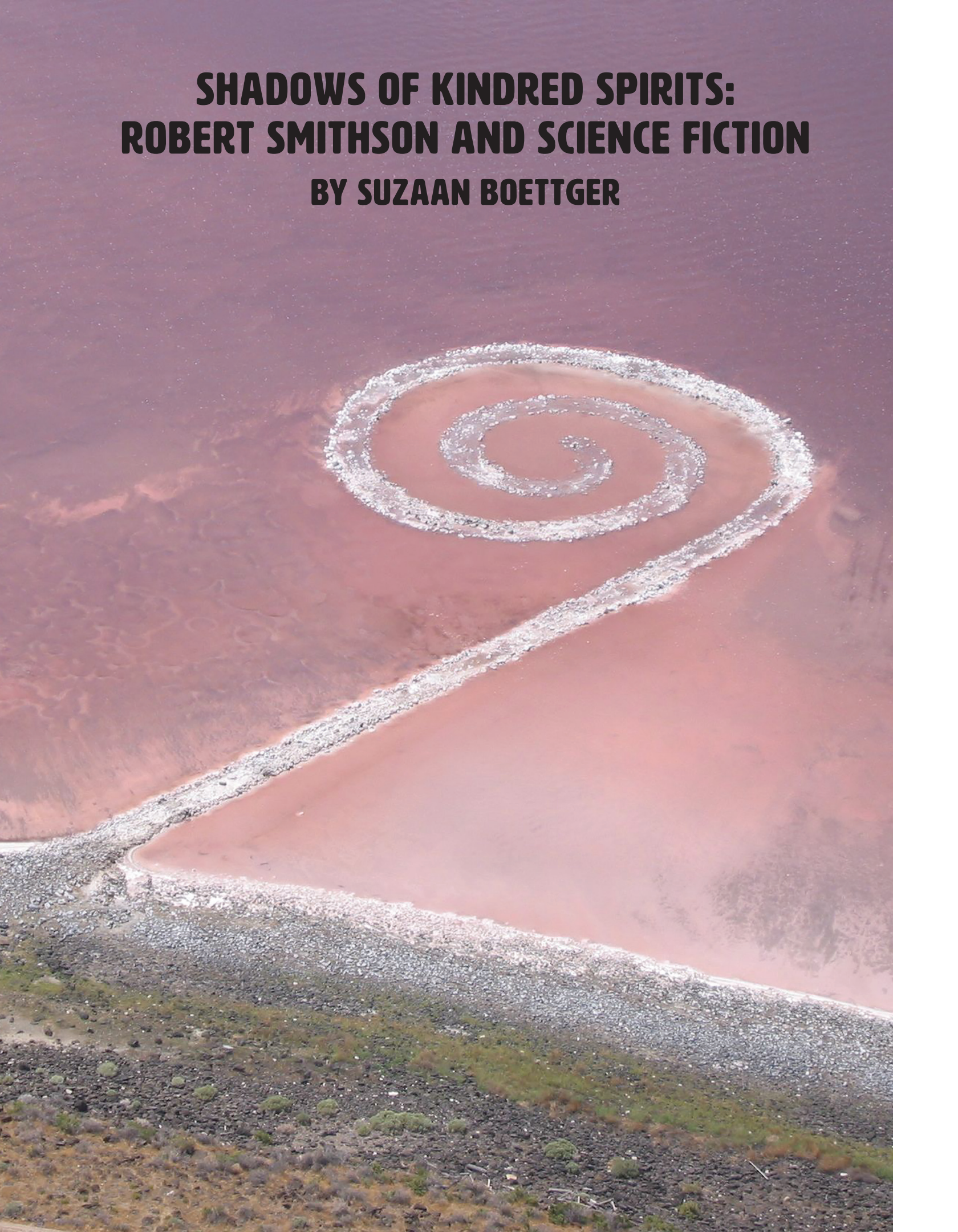


# DEEP ENDS

A BALLARDIAN ANTHOLOGY 2021



**SHADOWS OF KINDRED SPIRITS:  
ROBERT SMITHSON AND SCIENCE FICTION  
BY SUZAN BOETTGER**



*[Smithson's] monuments endure in our minds,  
the ground-plans of heroic psychological edifices  
that will one day erect themselves  
and whose shadows we can already see from  
the corners of our eyes.<sup>1</sup>*

J.G. Ballard

Describing the source of Robert Smithson's attraction to the bizarre magenta hue of the water in the cove of the Great Salt Lake where the sculptor chose to build his magisterial earthen Spiral Jetty, Michael Kimmelman ventured, "Smithson admired the science fiction of J.G. Ballard. The red water vaguely evokes a Martian sea."<sup>2</sup>

The *New York Times* critic's blunt equation demonstrates the extent to which the innovative American earthworker has been associated with science fiction—and particularly that written by one of its most famous ground breakers, Ballard. Yes, in his essays Smithson referred to several Ballard stories, and at his accidental death at 35, in 1973, owned three of Ballard's books among the more than three dozen volumes of sci-fi novels, short stores, and literary criticism and two dozen issues of the genre's magazines.<sup>3</sup> One of his art dealer John Weber's strongest memories of him is that they would "hang out together and go to many, many, many science fiction movies in [the then very very very tawdry] Times Square."<sup>4</sup>

Smithson tacitly promoted his connection to science fiction through quotations prominently placed in epigraphs of articles and in his own commentary published in the then oracle of the art world cognoscenti, *Artforum*. His attraction to what in the 1960s was considered a cheap thrill—tales easily available in racks of slender paperbacks that fit into a purse or the back pocket of jeans—mixed in his essays an *outré* edge of popular diversion with references to literary titans such as T.S. Eliot (of whom he owned thirteen books by or about). Smithson's literary omnivorousness distinguished him among his ambitious art-world-focused peers as an explorer who read not only fiction and science, but science fiction, see-sawing between culture low and high.

1. J.G. Ballard, "Robert Smithson as Cargo Cultist," in *Robert Smithson, a Collection of Writings on Robert Smithson on the Occasion of the Installation of Dead Tree at Pierogi 2000*, eds. Brian Conley and Joe Amrhein, (New York: Perogi, 1997), 31.

2. Michael Kimmelman, "The Way We Live Now: 10–3–12: Phenomenon; Out of the Deep." *The New York Times Magazine*, October 13, 2002, 42.

3. Smithson owned the story collections *Terminal Beach* (1964), *The Voices of Time* (1962), and the novel *The Drought* (1968). In his writing and interviews he also referred to *Billenium*, *The Crystal World*, *The Drowned World*, *The Overloaded Man*, *The Waiting Grounds*, and *The Wind From Nowhere*. The contents of his library is published in Ann Reynolds, *Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 297–345.

4. Oral history interview with John Weber, 2006, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 17.

But also, No. Readers of this volume will recognize that Kimmelman was muddling sci-fi metaphors; space-age mariners sprang from the futurisms of earlier generations of sci-fabulists such as Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, and before that, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells (all in Smithson's book collection). Not only did Ballard not place any of his stories on Mars or any other planet than Earth, save the planet Murak in "The Waiting Grounds," but forty years before Kimmelman asserted that Ballard had dissed "space fiction": "The biggest developments of the immediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is inner space, not outer, that needs to be explored."<sup>5</sup>

Of course, like any author Ballard's primary material came from plumbing his own subjectivity and identity, as he hinted to cognizant readers by making so many of his early stories' protagonists' physicians. They ministered to deterioration, the symptoms of which they were trained to closely observe, but beneath those useful acts medicine was a discipline Ballard had himself studied before setting it aside mid med school to write, where his identifications of all forms of life are scientifically meticulous.

As for Smithson, after listing "some [film] landmarks of Sci-fic," he observed, "Artists that like Horror tend toward the emotive, while artists who like Sci-fic tend toward the perceptive."<sup>6</sup> That is, while by the mid-1960s the uninhibited brushstrokes of his artist fathers—the Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, et al, a style of painting that until recently he himself had practiced—could be considered akin to the primal screams provoked by tales of horror, sci-fi demanded discernment and deciphering—the conceptualizing skills then in vogue in the art world.

Yet for himself, Smithson wasn't gleaning inspiration from science fiction's landscape sites as much as responding to authors' metaphysical insights—and equally, their mordant sentiments such as Ballard's "...savouring the subtle atmosphere of melancholy that surrounded these last vestiges of a level of civilization now virtually vanished forever" in his *The Drowned World*.<sup>7</sup> Such stories seemed to speak to Smithson, and in drawing his readers' attention to them, spoke through and for him about aspects of himself otherwise unstated.

5. J.G. Ballard, "Which Way to Inner Space?" *A User's Guide to the Millennium*, (New York: Picador, 1996), 195, 197. There is no evidence that Smithson read this essay, but it is interesting to note that when Ballard wrote in it "In the past the scientific bias of s-f has been toward the physical sciences,—rocketry, electronics, cybernetics—and the emphasis should switch to the biological sciences" (197)—it was published in *New Worlds* sci-fi magazine in London, 1962—Smithson was strengthening his relationship with his childhood friend Nancy Holt, whose Tufts University degree in biology corresponded to his own youthful studies in natural science.

6. Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," in *Robert Smithson, The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 17. Originally published in *Artforum*, June, 1966. In quoting Smithson, his idiosyncratic capitalization and spelling will be retained.

7. J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*, New York, London; Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2012, 20. This was first published in 1962. Smithson did not quote from this novel but in "The Arist as Site-Seer, or a Dintorphic Essay")1966–670 named it in an endnote listing books by Ballard.

Just a few months after its construction, large photographs of the *Spiral Jetty* appeared in the Museum of Modern Art's summer show, a survey of conceptual art lamely titled "Information," and by the end of the year his film of it was shown at the prestigious Dwan Gallery, NYC. Soon, the 15-foot wide, 1500-foot long coil of basalt, earth, and encrusted salt crystals became the icon of the earliest type of Land Art, earthworks. Remote from coastal cultural metropolises in the relatively barren "America's Dead Sea," built solely of local geological matter (without the manufactured structural reinforcements of concrete or lumber characteristic of subsequent Land Art), and expansive in both size and their creators' ambition, earthworks display the bold liberatory spirit of the 1960s. Likewise, the *Spiral Jetty* is the work with which Smithson himself has been branded, although insufficiently interpreted.<sup>8</sup>

The spiral, part an of-the-moment movement toward placing or making art in remote non-art public places yet an archaic cross-cultural symbol of psychic and spiritual transition, epitomizes Smithson's famous declaration that present consciousness "must explore the pre- and post-historic mind; it must go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts."<sup>9</sup> Smithson's most direct source of that statement might have been the cult classic among French youth in the 1960s (Smithson owned the 1968 translated paperback) *Morning of the Magicians*. Addressing speculative science, ufology, Nazi occultism, alchemy and spiritual philosophy, the book advocates receptivity to the paranormal to perceive what the authors called fantastic realism, stated rather flatly, "One must be capable of projecting one's intelligence far into the past and far into the future."<sup>10</sup>

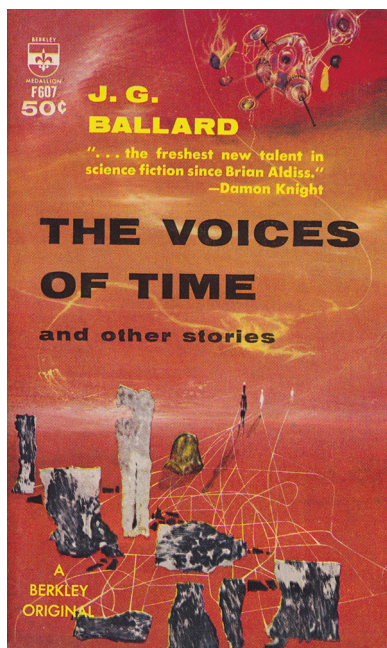
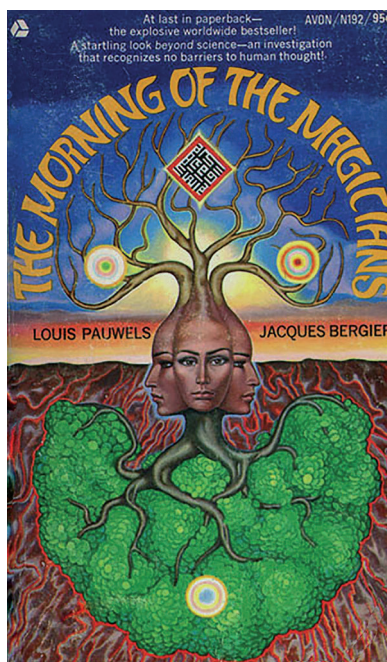
But Smithson's poetic articulation of that idea sounds more like Ballard, who in his story "The Voices of Time" wrote, "The vast age of the landscape, the inaudible chorus of voices resonating from the lake and from the white hills, seemed to carry him back through time, down endless corridors to the first thresholds of the world."<sup>11</sup> Setting it in a research site near dry salt lake beds, Ballard describes a scientist cutting a maze-

like ideogram in the floor of an empty swimming pool. Another character constructs a huge concrete labyrinth formed of a circle overlaid with a cruciform, a quadratic circle like that in the floor pavement of the nave at Chartres Cathedral, a kind of spoked sun wheel seen in imagery of prehistoric and historical religious communities and as old as the spiral.

Ballard and Smithson never met or even personally communicated but in the work of the West Village artist/writer the bard of Shepperton seemed to recognize a kindred spirit. Asked to contribute to a catalogue for a posthumous Smithson exhibition, Ballard addressed Smithson's trademark creation, opening with "What strange caravel could have emerged from the saline mists of this remote lake and chosen to dock at this mysterious harbour?" as if setting the scene for one of his own compelling enigmas. He could have noted how both of them imagined monumental mystical mandalas in desert environments. But also, their mutual fantasies made them something like blood brothers, as he had written nine stories about fading *artistes* languishing in a degenerating resort whose name he took for the title of the collection, *Vermilion Sands*.

Published in 1971, a year after Smithson made the *Spiral Jetty*, Ballard's title coincidentally describes the color of the Jetty's milieu when the water level recedes and its shallow lake bed is an expanse of white salt whose seepage tints it a purplish red, which in turn calls up Ballard's description more than a decade earlier in *The Drowned World*, "The soft beaches would glow invitingly with a glossy carmine sheen."<sup>12</sup> In his own essay on his *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson described his first view of the site, "...the color of red algae circulating in the heart of the lake, pumping into ruby currents, no they were veins and arteries sucking up the obscure sediments. My eyes became combustion chambers churning orbs of blood."<sup>13</sup>

Ballard titled his reflections "Robert Smithson as Cargo Cultist," slyly—or modestly—implying that Smithson's appreciation for Ballard's narrative "cargo" was like South Pacific natives mistakenly worshiping northerners' objects washed ashore. Smithson did have a relevant obsession, but it was of another sort of load—he wrote that "cargos of travail flow through our heart."<sup>14</sup> But Ballard, who favored exhuming the latent over narrating the apparent, insightfully concluded by construing Smithson's earthworks as



8. For that and much more, see my biographical *The Passions of Robert Smithson, Art and Biography*, forthcoming in fall 2022 from the University of Minnesota Press.

9. Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in Flam, 113. Originally published in *Artforum*, September 1968.

10. Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier. *The Morning of the Magicians*. Translated by Rollo Myers. (New York: Avon, 1968), xxiii.

11. J.G. Ballard, "The Voices of Time," *The Voices of Times and Other Stories*, (New York: Berkley Publishing), 1962, 34.

12. Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 100.

13. Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in Flam, 148. This was originally published in Gyorgy Kepes, ed., *Arts of the Environment*, (New York: George Braziller, 1972).

14. Robert Smithson, "From the Broken Ark," Archives of American Art, reel 3834, frame 230.

“psychological edifices that will one day erect themselves”—that is, after his audiences are able to recognize and receive them—“and whose shadows we can already see from the corners of our eyes.”<sup>15</sup> Of course he was both perceiving Smithson and projecting his own orientation, implicitly describing Smithson’s work as his own has been received, as metaphors of a temperament’s inclinations.

Smithson own appropriations of science fiction varied between the explicit, bolstering public appreciation of his sculpture, and the allusive, insinuating private issues. When he noted that “The idea of the ‘megalith’ appears in several of Ballard’s science-fiction stories,” he was embellishing the reductive geometric structures, including his own, then on view in the spring of 1966 in the influential exhibition “Primary Structures” at The Jewish Museum, Manhattan, with an eccentric literary analogy.<sup>16</sup> He referred to Ballard’s story “The Terminal Beach,” (1964) regarding a labyrinth of 2,000 “concrete monsters...each a perfect cube fifteen feet in height, regularly spaced at ten-yard intervals.”<sup>17</sup> Ballard’s description remarkably paralleled the format of arrays of Minimalist cubes that one would walk between and around, experientially comprehending their size and mass in relation to one’s own and the immediate environment.

Smithson was eclectic in his science fiction references. For his epigraph to his essay about works in the “Primary Structures” show, he quoted an evocative scene described by the earlier generation novelist Eric Temple Bell, who under the pen name of John Taine provided another prescient analogy to sculptors’ recondite fabrications:

On rising to my feet, and peering across the green glow of the Desert, I perceived that the monument against which I had slept was but one of thousands. Before me stretched long parallel avenues, clear to the far horizon of similar broad, low pillars.<sup>18</sup>

Smithson’s sculpture in “Primary Structures” was *Cryosphere*, the term designating those portions of earth’s surface where water is in solid form: glaciers, sea ice, ice caps.

15. See note #1. My emphasis.

16. Robert Smithson, “The Artist as Site-seer; Or, a Dintorphic Essay” (1966-67), Flam, 341, not published in his lifetime.

17. J.G. Ballard, “Terminal Beach,” *The Terminal Beach*, (New York: Berkley), 1964, 147.

18. Eric Temple Bell, “The Time Stream,” *The Time Stream, The Greatest Adventure, and The Purple Sapphire: Three Science-Fiction Novels*. (New York: Dover, 1964). 90-91. Smithson owned this. *The Time Stream* was first published in 1931-1932.

Each of its series of six identical hexagonal steel disks hugging the wall is the form of water molecules lined up to form a single crystal of ice. The geometricized circles, fronted with radiating bars, resemble something like hubcap-meets-snowflake.

Concurrent with that show, Smithson shed its sober strictures to publish in *Harpers’s Bazaar*, at the same time borrowing from Ballard to reflect his connection to crystals. The quirky act of publishing in a legacy fashion magazine suggests a desire to play his career both ways: to be one of the guys exhibiting austere constructions—few women did so—and yet to distinguish himself as a writer mixing intellectuality and populism (as would Ballard in his increasingly inventive swerves from the genre he disdained as formulaic space adventures). Adopting a casual voice, Smithson told anecdotally of a trip undertaken with his fellow sculptor Donald Judd and their “wives” to explore a derelict New Jersey quarry, an account presumably appealing to fans of high jinks by emerging artists or *fashionista* rock hounds.

The title of Smithson’s May 1966 *Bazaar* article, “The Crystal Land” tacitly—he did not mention Ballard—adapted the title of the novelist’s recent publication *The Crystal World* (1966). For the few who “got” the connection—Ballard wasn’t yet well-known—he displayed an unconventional taste in literature. For everyone else, altering Ballard’s title to “The Crystal Land” emphasized his professional affiliation with crystals, geology and, as it turned out, fortuitously foreshadowed his future environmental focus with which he would become identified.<sup>19</sup>

Those enticed by Smithson’s reference to read *The Crystal World* will find a physician of unstated nationality specializing in the treatment of leprosy narrating a visit to friends working in a small outpost in the interior of Africa. As the roadways are blocked, he takes a boat up river and discovers strange forest where a leprosy-like virus is progressively crystallizing the entire environment. Flora, fauna, architecture, non-moving humans and objects are immobilized in a parasitic exoskeleton of gloriously

hued prismatic facets.

Smithson’s description of the New Jersey quarry also emphasizes a rich geological apocalypse but his response is less wondrous than dolorous:

Cracked, broken, shattered, the walls [of the quarry] threatened to come crashing down. Fragmentation, corrosion, decomposition, disintegration, rock creep, debris slides, mud flow, avalanche were everywhere in evidence... Fractures and faults



19. For more on that, see my history, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002.

spilled forth sediment, crushed conglomerates, eroded debris and sandstone. It was an arid region, bleached and dry.<sup>20</sup>

The sensory vividness displays Smithson's inspiration by more than Ballard's title, as the British novelist's writing is characteristically crystalline in its literary precision.

As early as 1971, historian Bruce Franklin perceived Ballard as "a poet of death whose most typical fictions are apocalyptic imaginings, beautiful and ghastly visions of decay, death, despair. His early novels... are science fictions of the wasteland."<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Smithson characteristically likened "Primary Structures" sculptures' look of hulking inertness to "what the physicist calls 'entropy' or 'energy drain.'<sup>22</sup> Entropy —physicists'

concept for an object's loss of energy within closed systems—became Smithson's signature intellectual trope. His envisioning arrays of Minimalist boxes as headstones—an "Avant garde of cemeteries," his remark "In regard to the origin of parks in this country it's interesting to note that they really started as graveyards," and declaration "The mind of this death, however, is unrelentingly awake," among many such statements, indicate that they served as intellectualizations for an ongoing affiliation with mortality.<sup>23</sup>

As scholar Haim Finkelstein astutely observed, "Similarly to Smithson, Ballard too conceives the external landscape as a 'mental map' of psychic reality. The mechanism involved is not that of projection but the perception of a quality of the landscape that appears connected with a certain innate quality of his character's

mind."<sup>24</sup> In an epigraph to an unpublished essay, Smithson quoted Ballard's assertion of a unity between geology and psychology: "The system of megaliths now provided a complete substitute for those functions of his mind which gave to it its sense of the sustained rational order of time and space."<sup>25</sup> Then he poetically amplified it for the opening claim in his essay "A Sedimentation of the

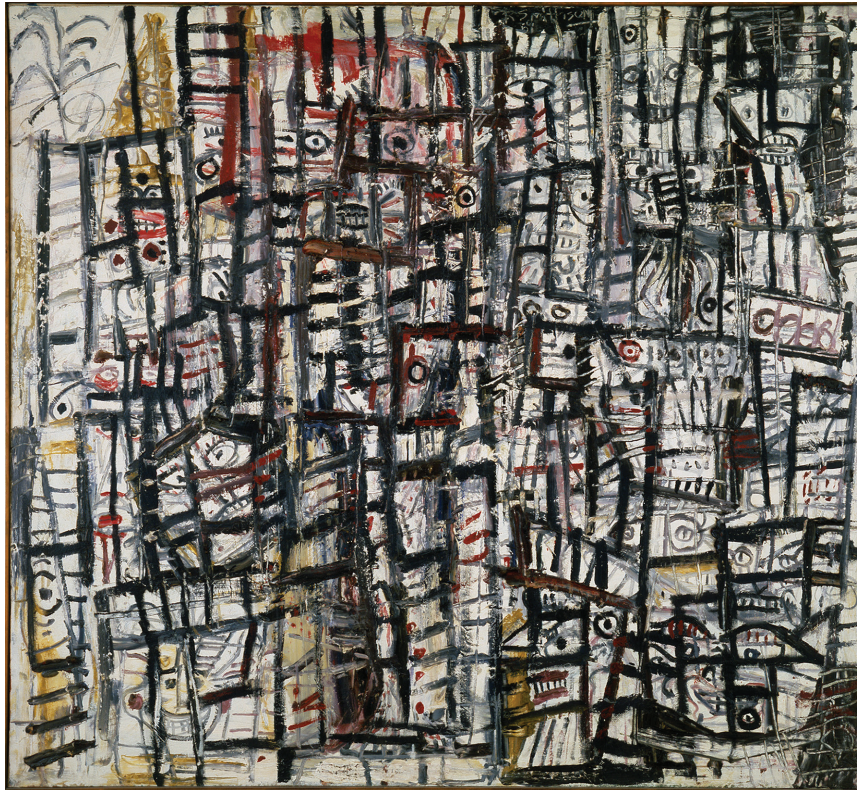
Mind, Earth Projects," strongly asserting that duality, "The earth's surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art."<sup>26</sup>

Ballard described *The Crystal World's* town as having "more than a passing resemblance to purgatory," the zone of tormented atonement that Smithson pictured in his 1959 painting *Purgatory* and which also sounds like the "typical abysses" and "abandoned set of futures" that in a few years in his famous tour of his hometown he will attribute to the run-down "slurb" of Passaic, New Jersey.<sup>27</sup> Both Ballard

and Smithson channeled the Romantics' attraction to ruins as powerful inducements to melancholic reverie. Beneath their congruence in subject matter and style their identification with geological and environmental degradation masked attunements to brokenness, that is, to loss. In *The Crystal World* the "spectacle" of terrestrial fragmentation

turned the keys of memory, and a thousand images of childhood, forgotten for nearly forty years, filled his mind, recalling the paradisaical world when everything seemed illuminated by that prismatic light described so exactly by Wordsworth in his recollections of childhood. The magical shore in front of him seemed to glow like that brief spring."<sup>28</sup>

And in a private essay "The Iconography of Desolation" Smithson lamented, "A terrible yearning for Innocence stares back over Original Sin into some impossible paradise."<sup>29</sup>



Robert Smithson, *Purgatory*, oil/canvas, 61 -5/8 x 67-5/16 inches (156.5 x 171 cm)  
© Holt/Smithson Foundation / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

20. Robert Smithson, "The Crystal Land," Flam 7. Originally published in *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1966

21. Bruce Franklin, "Foreword to J.G. Ballard's 'The Subliminal Man,'" in, *SF: The Other Side of Realism*, ed. Thomas D. Clareson, (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press), 1971, 200.

22. Robert Smithson, "Entropy," Flam 11.

23. Robert Smithson, "Responses to a Questionnaire from Irving Sandler (1966)," Flam, 329; Allison Sky, "Entropy Made Visible, Interview with Robert Smithson," Flam, 309. Originally published in *On Site* #4, 1973; Robert Smithson, "Language to be Looked and/or Things to be Read," Flam, 61. Dwan Gallery press release, June 1967.

24. Haim Finkelstein, "Deserts of Vast Eternity": J.G. Ballard and Robert Smithson," *Foundation* 39 (Spring 1987), 55.

25. Smithson, "Site-seer" Flam, 340.

26. Smithson, "Sedimentation," Flam, 100.

27. Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic," Flam, 72. Originally published in *Artforum*, December, 1967.

28. Ballard, *Crystal*, 77.

29. Smithson, "The Iconography of Desolation," Flam, 322. Not published in his lifetime.

Smithson's adaptation of Ballard's *Crystal World* title worked for him, but he had already applied the metaphor of the crystal when writing about Judd's work the prior year, before the novel was published. So it is likely that his crystal reference originated in a story Ballard published two years earlier that Ballard had elaborated into *Crystal World* by adding a few tangential characters, a couple of romantic liaisons, more scientific/mystical description, relocating it to the African jungle, and a slightly different ending. Otherwise, the plot and many descriptions are quite similar: in the earlier, investigating a phantasmagoric mutation sweeping over the Florida Everglades, the narrator found shards of crystalline glass accruing to roadways, cars and houses, entombing every non-moving object into chromoluminescent stasis. He "entered an enchanted world, the Spanish moss investing the great oaks with brilliant jeweled trellises" and encountered—and became the story title's "Illuminated Man."<sup>30</sup>

Smithson's prior analogy between Judd's angular sculptures and crystallization had been clever if imprecise. Ballard's account of immobilization by crystallization applies more directly to Smithson's own containment of his early paintings' loosely-brushed expressionist fervor in favor of his more current faceted wall reliefs and constructions. Smithson wanted to align himself with the purity and planarity of crystals; the next year he would quote Taine/Bell, who wrote in his *The Purple Sapphire*.

"The floor of the hollow was a level circular expanse of pure crystal; the gentle sloping sides were lead-lined rock. directly above the crystal floor, and sheer up to the limit of vision, the atmosphere exhibited a distant brilliance, like the beam of a searchlight passing vertically up through the clear, sunlit air."<sup>31</sup>

Some of the angular planes of Smithson's constructions made around 1965 are brightly reflective, or literally are mirrors, akin to Ballard's prismatic light. But additional notable correspondences appear between Ballard's "Illuminat-

30. J.G. Ballard, "The Illuminated Man," *The Complete Stories of J.G. Ballard*. New York and London: W.W. Norton + Co., 2009, 609-610. Quotations from it not specifically cited are from this source, 605-627. "The Illuminated Man" appeared in the popular and widely distributed magazine *Fantasy and Science Fiction* in May 1964. It was then in a Ballard collection, *Terminal Beach*, published in London, 1964. It is the first version of the story that was almost immediately rewritten as "Equinox" and published in *New Worlds* in May/June and July/August 1964, and then as the novel *The Crystal World* in 1966. This chronology was provided by Rick McGrath. The US edition of *Terminal Beach*, which Smithson owned, does not include "The Illuminated Man." He could have read it in the magazine.

31. Eric Temple Bell, "The Purple Sapphire," *The Time Stream, The Greatest Adventure, and The Purple Sapphire: Three Science-Fiction Novels*. (New York: Dover, 1964). 514. *The Purple Sapphire* was first published in 1924. Quoted in Robert Smithson, "Ultramoderne," Flam, 63. Originally published in *Arts*, September/October 1967.

ed Man" and Smithson's sculpture and writing about it:

- The story's references to the "Andromeda spiral," a body of water's "curious roseate sheen," and "bars of livid yellow and carmine light... bled away across the surface of the water" prefigure Smithson's siting of the Jetty at roseate bay below Rozel Point.
- Ballard's "a brilliant glow of light poured down upon the altar" would be adapted in Smithson's account of the site of his Spiral Jetty as "the sun poured down its crushing light."
- Ballard's "hanging mirrors of the Spanish moss" precede the mirrors Smithson hung between boughs of his *Dead Tree* for the exhibition "Prospect '69" at the Dusseldorf Kunsthalle, the work that was re-created for the show to which Ballard contributed an essay, completing a creative circle.

Beyond the parallels between "The Illuminated Man" and Smithson's imagery, the more significant resounding between them is the implications of "the organ reverberating among the trees." Lost in the bewitched forest, the protagonist found his way out after entering:

a small church in a clearing, its gilt spire fused to the surrounding trees... above me, refracted by the stained glass windows, a brilliant glow of light poured down upon the altar... Prismatic colors pouring through the stained glass windows whose original scriptural scenes had been transformed into painting of bewildering abstract beauty. ... [The priest stated] "The body of Christ is with us everywhere here—in each prism and rainbow, in the ten thousand faces of the sun... So you see, I fear that the church, like its symbol—here he pointed to the cross—'may have outlived its function.'<sup>32</sup>

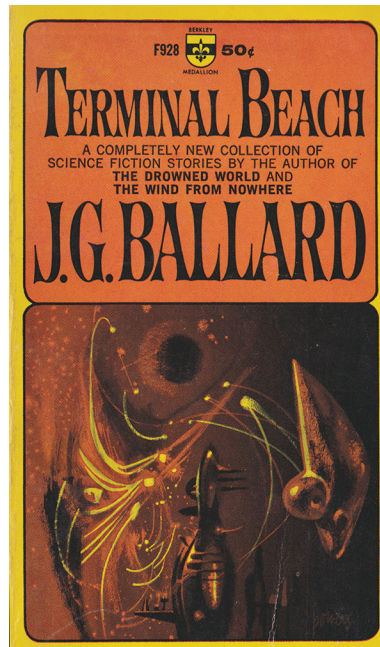
His assessment could apply to Smithson, who just a few years earlier had painted numerous bloody renderings of Christ's crucifixion, but by 1962 he recognized that that that subject, personally resonant, had "outlived" its potential to get him art world traction. Within a few years he turned to the dominant format of the day, secular abstract sculpture. Associating the geometric format with the crystalline became his bridge to move forward professionally. In his Archives of American Art interview years later, Smithson described that process as "The real breakthrough came once I was able to overcome, I would say, this lurking pagan religious anthropomorphism," continuing, "I was able to get into crystalline structures in terms of structures of matter and that sort of thing."<sup>33</sup> For Smithson, religion went underground until it erupted in the mysticism associated with his monumental spiral embedded in salt crystals.

In his film, he ran its leftward arcs—backward—while he was "slipping out of myself again, dissolving into a unicellular beginning, trying to locate the nucleus at the end of the spiral."<sup>34</sup>

32. Ballard, "Illuminated," 624-625

33. Oral history interview with Robert Smithson, 1972 July 14-19. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 17.

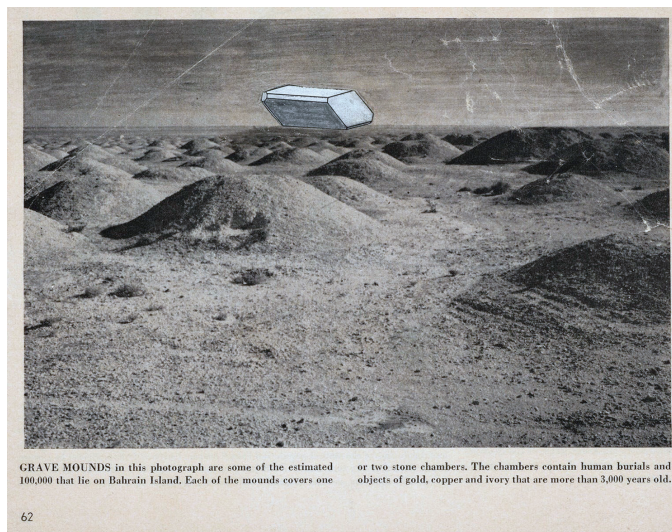
34. Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," Flam, 149.



The hallucinatory experience recall's Ballard's description of "mov[ing] back through geophysical time so we re-enter the amniotic corridor..." "Beating within him like his own pulse [he] stepped out into the lake, whose waters now seemed an extension of his own bloodstream. As the dull pounding rose...he felt the barriers which divided his own cells from the surrounding medium dissolving, and he swam forwards, spreading outwards against the black thudding water."<sup>35</sup>

The opposition between religion and crystalline structures does not actually pertain to Smithson's works' evolution, and neither is it in Ballard's "Illuminated Man." The priest does not declare an abandonment of a sense of the sacred, but expresses doubt that the cross can symbolize it. Instead, reverence is displaced onto nature. The crystal world remains a Christological universe; the forest church is the source of the narrator's salvation. In *The Crystal World* the protagonist, clutching its altar's heavily jeweled cross that the priest had "pressed" into his arms, ventured forth to find his way out of the forest. As he leaned toward the "gold cross set with rubies and emeralds, immediately the sheath [of crystals constricting his body] slipped and dissolved like a melting sleeve of ice."<sup>36</sup> (In both stories, gem stones, described as made of extreme concentrations of light, serve to "deliquesce," that is, to liquify crystallization.) By this, he was released from the carapace of rationality into a mystical radiance.

The revelation was compensation, as the "Illuminated Man" divulges, "Since the death of my wife and three-year-old daughter in a car accident ten years earlier I had deliberately repressed such feelings, and the vivid magical shore before us seemed to glow like the brief spring in my marriage."<sup>37</sup> In his own life, during a family vacation in southern Spain, Ballard's wife had abruptly died of pneumonia. Later, Ballard reflected, "I enjoyed being married, the first real security I had ever known."<sup>38</sup> One can hardly imagine the devastation of the trip home without her, and the strain of devising a new life as a single parent of three children. But in a sense, we don't have to, because his early stories work through loss. In "Terminal Beach" a bereaved protagonist, alone on an atoll, recurrently sees "the spectres of his wife and [six year old] son [who had both been killed in a motor accident] standing on the opposite bank [and. . .] was sure they were beckoning to him." He finds a photograph of an unknown six-year old girl (an amalgam of the two) and "pinned the page to the wall and for days gazed



GRAVE MOUNDS in this photograph are some of the estimated 100,000 that lie on Bahrain Island. Each of the mounds covers one or two stone chambers. The chambers contain human burials and objects of gold, copper and ivory that are more than 3,000 years old.

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Robert Smithson, *Grave Mounds with Object*, 1966. Magazine photo collage, 6 x 7 5/8 in. (15.2 x 19.4 cm) © Holt/Smithson Foundation / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

at it through his reveries."<sup>39</sup> Later, he discovers a corpse who states, "That son you mourn... Every parent in the world mourns the lost sons and daughters of their past childhoods... your son and my nieces are fixed in our minds forever, their identities as certain as the stars."<sup>40</sup> "Terminal Beach" has been lauded as one of Ballard's early "masterpieces of desolation and melancholy," a designation that calls up the title and musing in Smithson's own early (1961-62) essay "Iconography of Desolation" and his ownership of a 1955 edition of Robert Burton's thick 17th century essayistic medi-

cal textbook, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.<sup>41</sup>

In *Crystal World*, the protagonist, on his way to finding safe haven, held the bejeweled cross over a crystallized child, bringing it back to life. That's displaced wish fulfillment! If only Smithson's crystalline constructions could do that for him. He was clearly drawn to Ballard's landscapes of loss because he himself was obsessed with death. It was about the brother he never knew, his parents' prior only-child whose horrific demise at the age of nine was the cause a year later of his own conception. The fatality was by leukemia, then without treatment or amelioration, explosively hemorrhagic and wasting. The relationship between a child's death and a successor deliberately conceived soon thereafter is the psychological family configuration of a "replacement child." The existential troika of bereft parents + memory of dead child + presence of next child makes for complex circumstances in which each is awash in ambivalent regard for themselves and each other. Conceived as a substitute, the successor discovers that the lost predecessor is actually revered as a prototype, with whom he is both confused and driven, unconsciously, by his parents, and deliberately by himself, to exceed.

The impact of this experience contextualizes his few images that align with science fiction subjects or moods. Among them are *Dull Space Rises* (1961), a murky gray picture of a male in a space suit and helmet in a rigid frontal stance as if petrified midst rising water or gas. A drawing from 1963 depicts a female angel supporting a sluggish space-suited bulky male leaning against a rock. Smithson scrawled the historical source of the composition he altered, Bellini's *Dead Christ Supported by Angels*. In *Grave Mounds with Object* (1966) on a newspaper photograph he drew a boxy parallelepiped (that is, a three-dimensional parallelogram) as if an alien vehicle hovering over the undulating (and distinctly not "avant garde") cemetery. For those paying attention, Smithson illustrated his own

35. Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 57, 86.

36. Ballard, *Crystal*, 190.

37. Ballard, "Illuminated," 610

38. J.G. Ballard, J.G., *Miracles of Life, Shanghai to Shepperton, an Autobiography*, (New York, London, Liveright Publishing Corporation), 2008, 179.

39. Ballard. "Terminal," 146, 145.

40. Ballard, "Terminal," 158.

41. David Pringle and John Clute. "Ballard, J.G." *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, eds. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight. London: Gollancz, 2021. Accessed 2 May 2021. <[http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/ballard\\_j\\_g](http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/ballard_j_g)>.

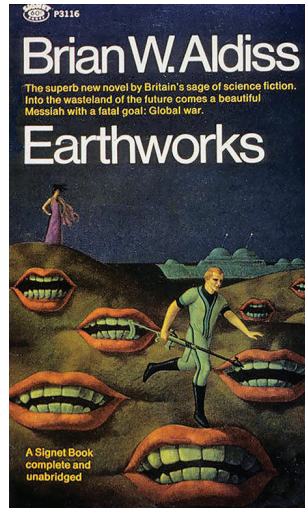


lament (above) that “The mind of this death is unrelentingly awake.”

He divulged to an interviewer, “The word entropy...is a mask for a lot of other issues... a mask that conceals a whole set of complete breakdowns and fractures.”<sup>42</sup> (Alas, if the poet/critic speaking with him asked for elaboration—he probably took it as public unrest around the Vietnam War, with which Smithson displayed no engagement—he didn’t report it.) But in the literature of science fiction Smithson found several other correlates. In Taine/Bell’s “Time Stream,” the son of a character was born following the first child’s absorption into the time stream without return, becoming a successor as was Smithson himself.

In Smithson’s recounting in *Artforum* of his tour of his hometown, when his bus turned off the highway into the town of Rutherford where his family had lived between his ages of two and ten, he quoted the first sentence of Brian Aldiss’ science fiction novel *Earthworks* that he had ostensibly purchased just before embarking, “The dead man drifts along in the breeze.” The figure, clearly not “put to rest” following the survivors’ resolution of grieving, shadowed alongside the tanker that endlessly crossed seas gathering sand from abandoned “dumps like the Skeleton Coast” and transporting it to remaining northern ports where it was turned into semi-arable soil.<sup>43</sup> Aldiss also knew that experience of living with family memory of a lost prior child because he himself had been born as a replacement; his *Earthworks*’ opening evokes the enduring presence of the phantom sibling who continued to “drift along” in the replacement person’s consciousness. Aldiss described being “constantly compared with an idolized older sister whom his mother said had died when she was six months old but who, he later learned, had been stillborn.”<sup>44</sup> Smithson did not know this about Aldiss; just as he did not know about Ballard’s wife’s death—but the biographical particulars were unnecessary, they all had expansive imaginations that operated on an alternating current between the fantastical and the mournful.

And one more: an epigraph in Smithson’s *Passaic* account is an excerpt from the science fiction story “Jesting Pilot” by Lewis Padgett, but Smithson cited not the name by which the author published the book but the author’s birth name, Henry Kuttner,



Robert Smithson,  
detail of *Purgatory*, 1959.  
Photograph @Suzaan Boettger  
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VAGA at Artists Rights Society  
(ARS), NY

as if exposing doubleness—an issue intimate to him—or preferring the authentic. The epigraph: “He laughed softly. I know. There’s no way out. Not through the Barrier... the whole site... makes me feel haywire. Then I get these flashes.” The story, located in an isolated self-sustained city enclosed by a dome, describes a man, Bill Norman (suggesting William or “Will” to be “Normal”) who is having disturbing flashes of “rationality” that break through his hypnotized state universal among the citizens. Going to Padgett’s story, its own epigraph or teaser is:

They were in the City, behind the Barrier. [Smithson had painted exactly such imprisoned figures in his 1959 *Purgatory*, where the open red mouths anteceded those on Aldiss’ *Earthworks*.] They had been specially conditioned from birth. None of them had ever known normal existence.

That had been Smithson’s experience, part of an existential double, a (br)other who was present in the family history, if not his own direct experience, who was evidently an ongoing shadowy presence.<sup>45</sup>

In Padgett/Kuttner’s narrative, Norman exclaims, “I know what I want. Out!” A Controller explains, “The idea is to trace the problems back to their psychological roots, and then get rid of the frustration somehow.”<sup>46</sup> Hmm. Sounds like the process of self-examination in psychoanalysis. With help from science fiction and art. The number of Smithson’s science fiction references in his writing to mortality and

woundedness suggests that the stories served an desire not just to draw comfort from vicariously experiencing affinities but an urge, however covert, to communicate to those drawn to him a an intimate awareness of himself.

The stories Smithson pointed to were by were mavericks attracted to paradox. In them, Smithson found both uncanny affinities to contemporary Minimalist sculpture and evocations of an absent deceased that paralleled his own. Particularly akin to Ballard, drawn to “auroral gloom” and “mournful wrecks,” Smithson believed “Wreckage is often more interesting than structure.”<sup>47</sup> They made it so.

42. John Perreault, “Nonsites in the News,” *New York*, 2, no. 8, (February 24, 1969): 44.

43. Brian Aldiss. *Earthworks*. (New York: Signet, 1967), 1, 12. See also Suzaan Boettger, “Digging into Aldiss’ *Earthworks* and Smithson’s ‘*Earthworks*,’” *Art Journal OPEN*, College Art Association <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p> accessed June 7, 2018.

44. Exaggerating the length of her first child’s life, Aldiss’ mother had aggrandized her own loss and in her mind kept the daughter alive longer. Sam Roberts, “Brian Aldiss, Prolific Author of Sci-Fi and More, Dies at 92,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/books/brian-aldiss-author-of-science-fiction-and-much-more-dies-at-92.html> accessed August 27, 2017.

45. That secret biographical link may have been what Smithson was alluding to when he referred to a description of Padgett as writing in a “secret language of the future.” Smithson, “Entropy,” 21.

46. Lewis Padgett, “Jesting Pilot,” in Joan Kahn, Editor, *Skeleton Keys, Tales from The Edge of the Chair*, (New York: Dell, 1967). 250, 246. The magazine *Edge of the Chair* published suspense.

47. Ballard. “Crystal,” 3, 60. Robert Smithson, in Gregoire Muller interview, “...The Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, is a Cruel Master” 1971, Flam, 257. This interview was originally published in *Arts Magazine*, September 1971.