

# *The Fall from Grace.* Late Minimalism's Conception of the Intrinsic Time of the Artwork-as-Matter

Hilde Van Gelder

---

In March 1965, Robert Morris performed his last dance composition *Waterman Switch* together with Lucinda Childs and Yvonne Rainer at the "Festival of the Arts Today" in Buffalo, New York.<sup>1</sup> Starting with stones randomly being rolled on stage, the same boulders are used subsequently as pedestals for the three performers to balance on in an utterly unstable stance (Pl. 1). Positioned in one horizontal line, Rainer and Morris—only their naked backs visible to the public—try to move towards the central boulder, on which Childs stands. They strenuously aspire to make the stones roll over with their feet while tearing a rope Childs is holding in the middle. Also, twice during the seventeen-minute long piece, Morris walks at a snail's pace pressed against Rainer along two narrow wooden tracks (Pl. 2). Both bodies thus conceal their nakedness by being pushed tightly against one another. And while hiding their actual nakedness, they find themselves in "that state of aesthetic grace called nudity," Nicolas Calas points out.<sup>2</sup>

## Towards Gravity

Morris and Rainer act here *as if* they were an idealized neoclassical sculpture, such as for example Antonio Canova's *Three Graces*, of 1813 (Pl. 3). In this work, three figures are presented to the viewer in such way that they allow for a synthetic vision of their totality, in one single glance. While looking at them from a fixed point of view, namely frontally, one sees all the perspectives they have to offer at once. They themselves are not really moving. But to the static viewer's eye, they suggest an illusion of dancing around one, single and vertical axis. This can be conceived of as a sort of ideal and absolutely stable center, a transcendent internal core that unifies their three bodies into one.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Morris's and Rainer's clumsily acted efforts on the stones and their final incapacity to reach that supposedly magnetic center where Childs is positioned, appear to be utterly ironic. They deliberately seem to be willing to explore the precariousness of the "surroundings," and to pursue their fascination with the eccentricities instead of the established order and balance of a center.

Also, at first sight, Rainer's and Morris's naked bodies on the tracks seem to fuse into one, static and timeless sculpture, set up on a pedestal. But very soon, one realizes that they in fact are *really* moving, however slowly. Further, they do not turn around some idealized vertical backbone, but instead shove back and forth along a horizontal axis. And, as opposed to neoclassical sculpture, their graceful nudity is not glorified. On the contrary, at every moment of their act they point to its complete and utter precariousness. For, in each instant they entail the danger of falling from the tracks, in which case they would have revealed themselves as human beings of flesh and blood instead of marble, as performers unable to transform their worldly nakedness into idealized nudity. The same is true for the episode of balancing on the

---

<sup>1</sup> It was performed again later that month at the Judson Dance Theater in New York City, where it met with success. In 1993, Babette Mangolte re-recorded its two versions with different actors. They were a constitutive part of an exhibition trilogy on Morris's work at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Lyons, France (1998-2000), where they were on view during the Summer of 1999 in a labyrinth-like installation. A summarized description of this performance is given by K. Paice in *Robert Morris. The Mind/Body Problem*, exhib. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 178.

<sup>2</sup> N. Calas, "Wit and Pedantry of Robert Morris," *Arts Magazine*, 44, 5 (March 1970): 45.

<sup>3</sup> My description of this work recalls Rosalind Krauss's analysis of this work in her *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), esp. pp.18-19.

boulders, described above. Permanently, the threat is there that the actors might fall off, and that one would see their fronts and, with it, their uncovered, worldly nakedness. In that case, the spectators would in retrospect have viewed them as naked *all along*, which in reality they *were*: it was only hidden from the actual view.

That permanent risk of falling is also played with in Morris's delicate act towards the end of the performance, when he pours a small vial of mercury down Rainer's back while continuing to walk on the tracks with her. This silver liquid flowing straight down to the floor, and breaking into small drops, was meant as a symbolic act. Rainer and Morris did not fall off, but the mercury metaphorically ran down to the ground in their place. It thus subtly revealed to the public the message they were communicating: all objects and living beings are subjected to the merciless laws of gravity. Verticality signifies a triumph over horizontality, a triumphal but yet all the more precarious and fleeting state of grace. *Waterman Switch* in its entirety is marked by that hovering dynamic between the vertical and the horizontal: the unstable verticality of the performers contradicts the utmost horizontality of the décor, emblemized by Childs's unwinding of a ball of twine over her shoulder while walking on stage, and thus establishing a labyrinth structure.<sup>4</sup> While balancing on the boulders, one hears Morris's taped voice reciting a fragment of Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks dealing with the erosive effects of rivers on stones, in other words with the entropic condition of all worldly objects and beings.<sup>5</sup> Water, suggested by the colors of the floor and the tracks, erases stability, irreversibly. "With time, everything changes," are the last words Morris pronounces before his voice fades away into the void.

In this act, Morris ironizes and plays with what Michael Fried would come to define two years later, in his landmark text "Art and Objecthood," as a graceful state of Presentness. In that state of aesthetic grace, Fried argues, it is as if "a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it [emphasis in original]."<sup>6</sup> Precisely against this Modernist conviction, namely that a single and infinitely brief, graceful instant were sufficient to understand the full meaning of the work, Morris and Rainer reacted.<sup>7</sup> This idea of a timelessness of perception is a residue of the neo-classical tradition, and, with important nuances, Fried shared it with Clement Greenberg.<sup>8</sup>

Modernism's logic, as it was first defined in Greenberg's substantive critical writings, also championed in visual works of art what Rudolf Arnheim had named

<sup>4</sup> On the significance of the labyrinth to Morris's work, see my *Temporality and the Experience of Time in Art of the 1960s*, doct. diss., KULeuven, 2000, 186-187.

<sup>5</sup> I amply come back on this artistic use of the notion of entropy immediately hereafter, in the context of the work and writings of Robert Smithson.

<sup>6</sup> M. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, V, 10 (June 1967): 22. This text is republished in a slightly revised version in Id., *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1998). The quotation there is on p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> My use of the term Modernism is taken from, among others, Rosalind Krauss's seminal collection of essays *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985). I capitalize the term in order to indicate its distinction from modernism as it came up in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century French painting. Modernism as it was defined in American postwar art until the advent of Minimalism, it is known, is a narrower version of this earlier French conception of modernism. The same is done by Caroline A. Jones in her "The Modernist Paradigm: The Artworld and Thomas Kuhn," *Critical Inquiry*, 26 (Spring 2000): 488-528.

<sup>8</sup> I amply discuss Greenberg and Fried's respective positions on the timeless experience of visual works of art in my *Temporality and the Experience of Time*, 2000, 36-98. In a revised version these chapters are included in my book *Laocoön Reversed. Changing Beliefs on Temporality and the Experience of Time in New York Art of the 1960s*, forthcoming from Leuven University Press in 2005.

the “power of the center.”<sup>9</sup> According to this aesthetic model, visual works of art are conceived by their makers in such way that they attract the eye as fast as possible to a centripetal point. A most perfect and successful example is Kenneth Noland’s *That*, of 1958 (Pl. 4). It is meant for the eye to be immediately drawn to the royal blue, most central concentric circle, which is situated in the exact middle of the square canvas. Again, when remembering the first part of Morris’ and Rainer’s *Waterman Switch*, with the clumsiness and inability of the performers to move towards the central boulder where Childs, dressed in an outsized man’s suit, is “holding the rope,” one cannot but find irony in their act.

What *Waterman Switch* reveals metaphorically, Morris explores literally in his subsequent artistic production. Increasingly, as the 1960s move on, he leaves behind his ironizing of “idealized nudity” and its corresponding, privileged state of aesthetic grace. Instead, he openly exposes the worldly nakedness of his artistic objects and of his own body. Already in 1962, he makes *I-Box*, a closet-like box, whose door is shaped as the letter I (Pl. 5). Against a visibility that only sees what it chooses to see and hides all undesirable elements, the artist confronts the spectator with a complete and unveiled experience of his own naked self. When opening the box, one finds a photograph of a naked Morris with his penis partially erect. Morris’s “I” troubles the voyeuristic eye. For, its glance is made temporal. There is nothing to understand at the first instance, nothing but the confrontation with Morris’s mockery of all attempts to do so.

### The Visual Work of Art as a Container of its Making Time

On the side of object making, Morris also already made a Duchamp-inspired prefiguration of the same concerns through his *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, as early as 1961 (Pl. 6). The spectator sees a simple wooden box. But out of its depths, a tape recording resonates that has registered all the sounds made during the three and a half hours in which Morris produced it. In this sense, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* is first and foremost an overt and deliberate violation of Modernism’s separation of the genres, by using sound in an aesthetic domain—the visual arts—that traditionally has been condemned to silence.<sup>10</sup> Retrospectively, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* appears as a work that already addresses at an early moment the process-oriented issues Morris would go on to explore in the late 1960s, when he had become overtly disappointed with what he considered as Minimalism’s too static conception of the artistic object. In that respect, he judged Minimalism as a too residually Modernist practice. To an ever-increasing extent, Morris was convinced that Minimalism was marked by a neglect of the “making time” of the work itself. A work of art is made, produced by the artist over time and therefore, one can conceive of it as a container of amassed time.

Instead, according to Greenberg’s Modernist logic, a work of art is static in nature and for that very reason also to be experienced as such, in a purely spatial and therefore timeless way.<sup>11</sup> To an ever-increasing extent, the early Minimalists, and in the first place Donald Judd, came to disagree with these ideas on the experience of visual works of art. Looking for ways to “dynamize” the visual arts, Minimalism’s serial principles set out to stimulate a temporal perception. It was Morris, in the early 1960s adhering to this project with now famous works such as *Untitled (Battered Cubes)* of 1965, who came to realize why early Minimalism did not fully succeed to

<sup>9</sup> Cf. R. Arnheim, *The Power of the Center. A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. also K. Paice, “Box with the sound of its own making,” in *Robert Morris*, 1994, 104.

<sup>11</sup> Although Greenberg rehearses his argument at repeated occasions throughout his critical and aesthetic writings, it is most concisely developed in “The Case for Abstract Art,” first published in the August 1959 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*, and included in *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969*, ed. by J. O’Brian (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 75-84.

that enterprise. For, the Minimalist object, to be encountered as a box-like, geometric shape in a highly similar, box-like space—the white cube—was first and foremost seen as an upright standing, static and silent *Gestalt*. In this respect, as a residually timeless Gestalt, it failed to stimulate unambiguously its temporal experience, he judged. To the Morris of the second half of the 1960s, the minimalist object still acted too much as if it was not inhabited by time, as if it had no dynamic of its own. Therefore, even if this was not the intention, it still somehow equivocally suggested that it *could* be perceived all at once.

This too static effect, Morris set out to eliminate in his work. Transparent materials such as plastics and fiberglass helped him to make the transition towards the creation of more explicitly material works. Objects that seem to be floating in a weightless state of grace while at the same time their shattering seems all the more imminent, such as the 1967 *Untitled (Fiberglass Cloud)* (Pl. 8), or translucent structures such as his aluminum or steel meshes allowed him to find truly effective means to prevent any Gestalt readings of his work.<sup>12</sup> The insubstantiality of the pieces prevents their viewers from discovering in them any pre-established forms. *Quarter-Round Mesh* of 1966 (Pl. 9) is an open-centered work. The middle part being only a gaping hole, the dynamics of the work are deliberately situated eccentrically, on the sides. Against the residual illusionism of the *Battered Cubes*, made only just before, the openness of the mesh introduces complex and shifting relationships, always preventing its spectator from grasping its structure as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

Morris would set out to reveal an inherent, material temporality of the artistic object itself. It can be thought of as a double-faced temporality. On the one hand, it is determined by the object's being a container of its making time—or what Smithson would name the “time of the artist,” discussed hereafter. It is a remnant temporality, recalling its making process, which starts to inhabit the artwork from the moment its maker declares it finished. It is the time of an afterlife, a *Nachleben*. On the other hand, the laws of gravity and of entropy further determine the artwork's intrinsic time.<sup>14</sup> Like all other objects in the world, the work of art, once it exists in the world, is subject to these irreversible physical laws. Morris was convinced that the intrinsic time of the artwork was the determining factor of its experience. That experience he a fortiori also conceived of in temporal instead of timeless terms. His subsequent artistic enterprise would be devoted to find out how time is operative inside of an artwork, even if this is not visible to our bare eye—certainly not a first sight.

### “Anti-Form” or Robert Morris's Move “Beyond Objects”

By the second half of the 1960s, Morris had become overtly interested in “desublimating art,” and it was his explicit intention “to subject the art object to liberating conditions of process and performance.”<sup>15</sup> His search for more literally dynamic forms led him to the discovery of industrial-quality felt as a suitable material to achieve his changed aims. No longer could he be certain beforehand how the pieces would present themselves when displayed in an environment. Their softness and fragility would necessarily make them subject to the changing conditions of time and space. Against the so-called “conceptual” practices whose regularity and systematics addresses issues of the mind rather than of matter itself, and instead of presenting a

<sup>12</sup> For a contemporary concurrent interpretation of the fibreglass and aluminium pieces, cf. G. Battcock, “Robert Morris. New Sculptures at Castelli,” *Arts Magazine*, 42, 7 (May 1968): 30.

<sup>13</sup> For more background information on the mesh pieces (1966-68), cf. the discussion by K. Paice in *Robert Morris*, 1994, 206-211.

<sup>14</sup> I borrow this term from Etienne Souriau's text “Time in the Plastic Arts,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, VII, 4 (June 1949): 294-307. For a more ample discussion of Souriau's essay in relation to the issues discussed here, cf. again my *Temporality and the Experience of Time*, 2000, 21-25, and my above-mentioned forthcoming book.

<sup>15</sup> M. Berger, *Labyrinths. Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989), 67.



certain logic or mathematics, Morris's *Felts*, a group of movable and tactile pieces he made between 1967 and 1983 (Pl. 10), are about the primacy of the experience of materiality itself.<sup>16</sup> They articulate meaning by filtering passage and vision through a constantly shifting set of temporal circumstances. They are not so much predetermined by a priori, Gestaltist knowledge about their form. As such, they cannot immediately be recognized as a stable shape, such as a cube or a rectangle. Instead, they allow for a process reading. What is to know about them, is to be discovered during that experience. And this requires an extended period of time.

Also, attached to the wall around one single hanging point, these pieces literally display their irrevocable fall towards horizontality. Verticality, if still residually an aspect of the work, is only maintained to display its precarious condition. The material no longer seems to aspire to transcend the laws of gravity but instead gives in to them by simply pulling downwards. Sculpture has always dealt with gravity and mass, but, as Morris sharply understood at the time, traditionally in order to fight it and achieve a balanced "state of grace."<sup>17</sup> In fighting gravity, it also had to fight time. When the object explicitly gives in to gravity, it drops that ambition and delivers itself to temporality and process, in other words to the laws of entropy that reside in it. As it has been argued, by the end of the 1960s Morris was fully aware of this. In 1970, he specifies to E.C. Goossen that when he addresses issues of gravity, he does so in order to acknowledge the time of the work: "it [...] seems to have to do with time—with behavior, with action under these conditions and on these materials, and that is sometimes evidenced by acknowledging time in one way or another."<sup>18</sup> Regarding time, he adds: "I can't eliminate [time] from the work. I don't think that it is extraneous or that plastic art has an ideal, sort of Platonic, static form that you can't violate. I think you have to violate it all over the place, and see what happens."

In his influential essay, entitled *Anti-Form*, Morris clarifies the shift in his work away from Minimalism.<sup>19</sup> His main disappointment with Minimal Art, he explains, was the fact that its imposed and static order of multiple but invariable units prevented establishing relationships with the physicality of the units themselves. In other words, one needs to work with permutable and progressive organizations in order to effectively emphasize the materiality of the elements. Only then is one able to integrate process as a part of the final form of the work, which as a consequence is by necessity an ever-changing and dynamic form. For matter, Morris argues, is always developing. In art, it is exactly the "focus on matter and gravity as means" that "results in forms that were not projected in advance (CPAD46)," he writes sharply. Only by actively working with the permutable nature of matter does one succeed in making forms where no previously acquired knowledge is of any relevant help. They do not possess any kind of Platonic shape, and knowledge about their dynamic formal constellation is only obtained while experiencing them over time. Morris therefore leaves behind all considerations of ordering and pre-established geometries, and instead experiments with random piling, loose stacking or hanging, and encourages chance and indeterminacy. That, he is convinced, is the only way to prevent all rigid aestheticization of artistic forms.

<sup>16</sup> When asked by E.C. Goossen how he felt about "conceptual" art, he answered categorically: "I had too much of a Christian Science upbringing to be interested at this point in mind over matter. It's a lot of European idealism all over again as far as I am concerned." E.C. Goossen, "The Artist Speaks: Robert Morris," *Arts in America*, 58, 3 (May-June 1970): 105.

<sup>17</sup> An interesting exhibition catalogue dealing with these issues and the changes of the 1960s, is *Gravity and Grace. The Changing Condition of Sculpture 1965-1975*, exhib. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery & The South Bank Centre, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the above-mentioned interview with E.C. Goossen, "The Artist Speaks," 1970, 106. The following quotation is on the same page.

<sup>19</sup> R. Morris, "Anti Form," *Artforum*, VI, 8 (April 1968): 33-35, reprinted in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT Press, 1993), 41-49. This book is further quoted as CPAD.

In his own sculptural work, he applies these principles concretely in pieces like *Threadwaste* (Pl. 11), a work that demonstrates to the highest literal extent how matter is subject to gravitational processes of falling down and to the deteriorating effects of decay. With this work, Morris has moved “beyond objects,” as he himself points out.<sup>20</sup> But by no means does this move beyond the Minimalist Gestalt entail any transcendent or idealist aspirations. Far on the contrary, Morris’s transgression of the static forms of Minimalism implies an exploration of the dynamics of matter itself. The culminating point of these experiments with the process transformation of matter was the piece of which his collected writings bear the title. During 22 days in March 1969, Morris worked at Leo Castelli’s Warehouse in New York City’s Upper Westside on his *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, an installation that gathered a great range of materials, with which he took up an ongoing dialogue and interaction.<sup>21</sup>

In Minimal Art, indeterminacy of perception only depended on different readings of the “regularized object (CPAD61)” by changing perspectives or points of view. But now, Morris believes, indeterminacy has become a literal aspect of the physical existence of the thing. And therefore it literally displays its inherent material subjectivity to ongoing processes, determined by the laws of physics, and an intrinsic and ongoing temporal rhythm. “Under attack,” he writes, “is the rationalistic notion that art is a form of work that results in a finished product [...] What art now has in its hands is mutable stuff which need not arrive at the point of being finalized with respect to either time or space. The notion that work is an irreversible process ending in a static icon-object no longer has much relevance (CPAD68).”

If the new work moves beyond “objects,” that does not imply it no longer possesses any form. Allan Kaprow heavily criticized the notion of “*antiform*,” for, he objected correctly, literal non-form is simply inconceivable.<sup>22</sup> But that was not what Morris meant to say. A pile of felt or even of shit just as much possesses a certain shape and composition as a series of cubes. And moreover, as long as they are made, presented, and reproduced in rectangular surroundings, they always function in relation to their enframing spaces. What Morris’s post-Minimalist works appear to be explicitly resisting, is hard-edged geometry rather than form itself.<sup>23</sup> A thorough pursuit of process and the indeterminate would at least have to neutralize the traditional gallery space, as Kaprow himself—in vain—had attempted to do in his Happenings, or radically leave it behind and instead explore the dialectics between the gallery and the open air, as Robert Smithson was out to do.

### Entropy and The Intrinsic Time of the Work of Art

Of crucial importance to the changes in Morris’s work was the ongoing dialogue he maintained with Smithson until his untimely death in 1973.<sup>24</sup> In particular, Smith-

<sup>20</sup> R. Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part IV: Beyond Objects,” *Artforum*, VII, 8 (April 1969): 50-54, included in CPAD51-70.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. among others K. Paice’s description of the work in *Robert Morris*, 1994, 234-235.

<sup>22</sup> A. Kaprow, “The Shape of the Art Environment,” *Artforum*, VI, 10 (Summer 1968): 32-33. The essay is included in A. Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. by J. Kelley (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), 90-94. The quotations are respectively on p. 32 of the original, and p. 90 of the reprinted version. The controversial meaning of the term was heavily discussed at the time: cf. also G. Müller, “Robert Morris Presents Anti-Form,” *Arts Magazine*, 43, 4 (February 1969): 29-30.

<sup>23</sup> Morris later specified that Philip Leider, then editor of *Artforum*, had added the title to the essay. He explicitly distanced himself from it in the interview with E.C. Goossen, stating accurately that there is no such thing as “anti-form:” “The Artist Speaks,” 1970, 105.

<sup>24</sup> In an interview with Krauss, Morris speaks of his friendship with Smithson: “We used to meet weekly at a sleazy bar on 42d Street, have a few beers, run down our peers, and slouch off to a Roger Corman movie. I have no fellow anti-humanists to talk to since he has been gone. One of the great artists of our time. Who else had the wit to notice that “The first truly bad body art was the Crucifixion.” Or that Soho on a sunny Saturday afternoon “looked like the *Raft of the Medusa* [emphasis in original]:” R. Krauss, “Robert Morris: Around the Mind /

son's exploration of the functionings of art in outer space, and more precisely his experiments with the work of art's subjectivity to the laws of entropy, not only heavily influenced Morris but an entire generation of artists. In Smithson's work entropy is the central matrix. In an early essay, entitled *Entropy and the New Monuments* (1966), he explains what entropy means to his work: an art that celebrates entropy strives to provide a "visible analogue for the Second Law of Thermodynamics (CW11)."<sup>25</sup> This law maintains, Smithson clarifies further in *Entropy Made Visible* (1973), that any (closed) system is determined by a never-ending and irreversible decrease of organization, which implies a loss of energy and distinctiveness, resulting in a gradual state of nondifferentiation within matter.<sup>26</sup>

In order to make that clear, he suggests trying out an experiment. Picture in your mind's eye, he famously writes in *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967), a sand box divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. A child is asked to run clockwise along the enclosure until the grains get mixed and turn grey. Afterwards, it is told to reverse its steps and to start running anti-clockwise. But that will never result in a restoration of the original division. On the contrary, the entropic movement towards uniformity and greyness will only continue to increase.<sup>27</sup> For art this means concretely that if this law tells us that "energy is more easily lost than obtained, and that in the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing sameness (CW11)," art has to reflect that fact instead of denying it.

Modernism's belief in a static and stable artistic object implies exactly the latter. And on a more general level, Modernism itself can be considered as a "closed system," defending a continued isolation in order to survive but, by that very same fact, wearing itself out. Against such awareness that entropy is a problem to be fought, Smithson displays an art that accepts the laws of decay and which lays bare these ongoing processes. As such, he not only appears as the most radical antagonist of Greenberg's and Fried's convictions, but also of Arnheim's comments. In 1971, the latter published a small study, called *Entropy and Art*. The book is actually a pamphlet encouraging art to take up a stance against the laws of entropy or disorder, and instead to actively strive for order. "Order," Arnheim opens the discussion, "is a necessary condition for anything the human mind is to understand."<sup>28</sup> Any formal arrangement, including a painting or a piece of music, can be called orderly "when an observer or listener can grasp their overall structure (EA1)," he clarifies. This deliberate avoidance of all elements of disorder is linked with matters of survival of the species. To Arnheim, the impulse to produce orderly and homogeneous arrangements is inbred by evolution and progress of the human species. In nature, this striving for such harmonious order is "disturbingly contradicted by [...] the Second Law of Thermodynamics (EA7)," responsible for reprehensible states of disorder and chaos. Order, balance and equilibrium, if "an improbable arrangement of elements (EA15)," nevertheless have to be aspired to, against the course of entropic decay.

---

Body Problem, An Interview," *Art Press*, 193 (July-August 1994): 29-30. Smithson situates their first meeting in 1966, on the occasion of the "10 Show" put up at Dwan Gallery by Ad Reinhardt, which they both helped organize: cf. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. by J. Flam (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 290. This book is further quoted as CW.

<sup>25</sup> The essay was first published as "Entropy and the New Monuments," *Artforum*, IV, 10 (June 1966): 26-31.

<sup>26</sup> The text registers the recording of an interview with Smithson by Alison Sky, which took place about two months before his death. It was first published in *On Site #4* (1973), and is reprinted in CW301-309.

<sup>27</sup> R. Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," *Artforum*, VI, 4 (December 1967): 48-51; reprinted in CW68-74. The discussed passage is on p. 74.

<sup>28</sup> R. Arnheim, *Entropy and Art. An Essay on Disorder and Order* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971), 1. This book is further quoted as EA.

Arnheim's version of Gestalt Psychology actively strives to understand how—against entropy—orderly states can be obtained, and believes in the possibility of stability of such shapes. From this perspective, the simpler and more regular a form is, the better. But, exactly against this, Smithson reacted. To him, entropy, while being inherent to all matter, will always exert its degrading power. As much as to Morris, to Smithson as well the idea of stable forms or Gestalts is an illusion to be shattered. Arnheim instead is not willing to accept that fact. He believes the “triumphant progress (EA38)” of Darwinian Evolution Theory is able to counter the destructive or catabolic tendency of entropy. This is not only the case in nature, but by analogy also in the arts, for they reflect human existence at its highest, he adds. And only then, he concludes, can the universe be worthy of the conception of God.

Arnheim links a religious and idealist vision on life, a “genuine, true view of life (EA56)” with the way art should develop.<sup>29</sup> But by the end of the 1960s, in the light of the changes in society and of industrial decay at that time, such optimistic stances appeared illusory and naive, and to some even oppressive. Although Smithson does not explicitly mention Arnheim's book in his writings, he was certainly aware of its contents.<sup>30</sup> Arnheim on the other hand does explicitly mock Smithson's ambition to provide a visible analogue for the Second Law of Thermodynamics, and describes it as a “popular use of the notion of entropy (EA11).” No longer does the degradation of culture have to be deplored; in such works as Smithson's it “now provides a positive rationale for “minimal” art and the pleasures of chaos (EA12),” he adds rather disparagingly.

In retrospect, it seems fair to say that Smithson's entire artistic project can be considered as an implicit but therefore no less violent attack on Arnheim's sayings. To him, trying to overcome the inherent entropic condition of matter, and *a fortiori* of art-as-matter, easily gives rise to illusions of purity, stability and ideality. Smithson would deliberately strive to shatter that kind of ambitions. Accepting entropy as inherently belonging to all worldly objects means to understand how its dynamic and rhythmical processes operate and subsequently see what this means for our experience of them. Smithson was critical of what he saw happening in the world around him. To him, as a perfect incarnation of the 1968 radically engaged artistic mentality, it wasn't a solution for art to offer solace from worldly worries by stimulating an immediate experience of “order.” For by doing that, art can make us dream of the existence of an outer worldly realm where all would be perfect. To Smithson, art had in the first place as its task to make a difference in this world, in real life. He wanted to believe that art could intervene. By showing contemporary society from a different, artistic perspective, he wished to sensitize the spectators of his pieces about the society they lived in. In his works, there is always a tension between his fascination for industrial decay and at the same time an implicit criticism of what industrial development has done to our world.

The photographs Smithson realized during his *Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967) fully display how he understands the influences of entropic processes on matter. He came to see several sites spread over the city of Passaic as monuments to contemporary society. *The Fountain Monument* (Pl. 12) is a fine example of how Smithson understands these monuments as “ruins in reverse (CW72),” or

<sup>29</sup> Yve-Alain Bois heavily criticizes Arnheim's booklet for this very ideological reason. Invoking the passage where Arnheim praises Jean Arp's return to order and harmony in his art as “necessary to save the world from endless bedlam,” Bois instead deplores Arp's turning away from an entropic way of making art: Y.-A. Bois, “Water Closet,” in Y.-A. Bois and R. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 208. In *Entropy and Art*, the passage discussed is on p. 53-54.

<sup>30</sup> *Entropy and Art* was part of his library: cf. V. Tatransky, “Bibliothèque de Robert Smithson. Livres, revues, disques,” in *Robert Smithson. Une rétrospective. Le paysage entropique 1960-1973*, exhib. cat. (Marseille, MAC Musées de Marseille: 1993), 256. In the inventory of Smithson's library, the book is included in the philosophy section.



constructions that do not fall into ruin after they have been built, but rise into ruin before they have even been realized. Such landscapes emblemize time in an allegorical way: they contain traces of the past and reveal the future.<sup>31</sup> They are, in their compression of ages of time, a mirror of eternity, as Smithson writes. By this, he means a mundane eternity, a horizontal eternity, always present somewhere on the “strip” or the horizon of this world and not in an imagined elsewhere. He wonders if Passaic has now joined Rome in the line of Eternal Cities, and decides in the positive: the eternal is always present, it can be anywhere since it is nowhere in particular.

As if ironically, he decided to really make a work of art that would be a tribute to that fact. In October 1969, he traveled to Rome where he realized *Asphalt Rundown* (Pl. 13). The work consisted of a dump truck releasing a load of asphalt down an eroded hillside in an abandoned section of a gravel and dirt quarry on the outskirts of Rome.<sup>32</sup> As the asphalt intermingled with the earth and dried out, it sort of cast the eroding and entropic processes that had naturally lined out the hillside. At the same time, the flow had succumbed to gravity and displayed that fact. The work is far removed from the heroism of traditional monuments, rising vertically and dominating their surroundings. *Asphalt Rundown* is a monument to entropy, to the mesmerizing force of time.<sup>33</sup>

### Robert Smithson’s “Images of Contracted Time”

It is crucial to understand that entropy is inherently related to time and processes that happen over time. The laws of entropy, it is known, are the ultimate proof for the irreversibility of time. Smithson is convinced that time is an inherent, undeniable part of the material itself. If his pieces are concerned with time, it is because he believes that temporality intrinsically belongs to the ever-changing processes of matter, and not because time is taken as their subject matter, as many contemporary conceptual pieces would do.<sup>34</sup> Entropy also has its spatial and temporal implications. One can conceive of entropy as a spatial movement only, that is as establishing a uniform, extended visual field of decadence into which one would only have access through the eyes, and not physically with the body. In an essay on the notion of entropy, Rosalind Krauss links this purely spatial conception of entropy to the ambition inherent to “high modernism.”<sup>35</sup> In that case, one only takes into consideration a spatial field that establishes a purely *optical* movement, she argues. But when the dynamics of entropy are conceived not only in spatial but also in temporal terms, then it is far less a visual but rather a tactile matter. Most often the material process operates so slowly that it is invisible to the bare eye.

Smithson’s art plays with that literal invisibility and makes it palpable through an embodied and tactile experience. The entropic workings of matter have been go-

<sup>31</sup> On the fundamentally allegorical nature of Smithson’s activities, in the sense Walter Benjamin accorded to the notion, cf. especially C. Owens, “Earthwords,” *October*, 10 (Fall 1979): 120-130. The text has been republished in Id., *Beyond Recognition. Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1992), 40-51.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. also the discussion of this piece by R. Hobbs, in Id., *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 174-177.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. also Jennifer Roberts’s recent insistence on Smithson’s use of asphalt in this context as “a material that automatically “runs down,” performing its own entropic immobilization.” J.L. Roberts, *Mirror-Travels. Robert Smithson and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 81.

<sup>34</sup> Smithson explicitly distinguishes himself from Conceptual Art, which he sees as a neo-Platonic project, a “neo-idealism,” or “an escape from physicality.” “Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson (1969-1970),” ed. and annot. by E. Schmidt; included in CW208. On his differences with Joseph Kosuth’s dematerialized and tautological opinions on “Art as Idea as Idea,” cf. the discussion in E. Tsai, *Reconstructing Robert Smithson*, unpublished doct. diss. (New York: Columbia University, 1995), 128-130.

<sup>35</sup> R. Krauss, “Entropy,” in *Formless*, 75.

ing on since the prehistorical past, come to us in the present and prefigure an unforeseeable future, which to Smithson—recalling Nabokov in *Entropy and the New Monuments*—is but “the obsolete in reverse (CW11).” It is in this sense that a piece like *Spiral Jetty* (Pl. 14) constitutes an “image of contracted time,” as Robert Hobbs has argued.<sup>36</sup> The *Spiral Jetty* is a container of time. Its spiral form refers to the salt crystals that periodically encrust the lake’s banks, and more in general to the spiral as a possible clue to the origins of life. The spiral, extending horizontally into the lake, also symbolizes open-endedness. The curved path of the counterclockwise spiral undoes the rationalist order of the Modernist framework, epitomized by the grid.<sup>37</sup> Modernism’s ideal of stability and logical purity, Smithson writes in his own comments on the *Spiral Jetty*, is undermined by the “alogos (CW147),” or the unpredictable and impure. “Purity,” he states in a defense of an *Aesthetics of Disappointment* (c. 1966), “is a desperate nostalgia, that exfoliates like a hideous need. Purity also suggests a need for the absolute with all its perpetual traps (CW334).” Instead, Smithson pleads for the precariousness and transience of impurity. “Futility, one of the more durable things of this world, is nearer to the artistic experience than excitement (CW335),” he concludes.

In *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects* (1968), he employs Freud’s notion of the “oceanic (CW103)” in order to explain how he conceives of the aesthetic experience of his works.<sup>38</sup> One makes primary contact with matter as a fragmented, oceanic and thus horizontal field determined by a process of entropy or “dedifferentiation (CW103),” he argues. He takes that notion from Anton Ehrenzweig’s extremely influential book on his generation of artists, *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967).<sup>39</sup> He uses it in order to defend his viewpoints on an experience of art as raw, fragmented matter, in terms of a suspension of boundaries as they were artificially installed by the Modernist discourse. Describing a visit to a slate quarry in Pennsylvania a little earlier that year, Smithson relates how in front of the banks of suspended slate above a greenish-blue pond “all boundaries and distinctions lost their meaning in this ocean of slate and collapsed all notions of Gestalt unity (CW110).”<sup>40</sup>

The early *Alogon* pieces were the first translations of that feeling into art.<sup>41</sup> In *Alogon* #2 of 1966 (Pl. 15), an ongoing tension exists between the static appearance of the individual shapes, and the dynamism of the entire sequence.<sup>42</sup> Unlike a contemporary serial piece by Donald Judd that simply repeats the same regular units, Smithson’s *Alogons* permute their structure and become smaller. The formal sameness of the individual parts thus contradicts the changing nature of their size. As

<sup>36</sup> R. Hobbs, “Spiral Jetty,” in Id., *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 1981, 193.

<sup>37</sup> Regarding the mythical status of the Modernist grid, the landmark texts are of course R. Krauss’s “Grids” (1979) and “The Originality of the Avant-Garde” (1981), first published in *October* and included in her *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 1985, 8-22 and 151-170.

<sup>38</sup> R. Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” *Artforum*, VII, 1 (September 1968): 44-50; reprinted in CW100-113.

<sup>39</sup> Smithson lent his copy of the book to Robert Morris, who used it for his article “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects,” cf. “Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson (1969-1970),” in CW207 and 232 n. 17. In the essay, Morris quotes Ehrenzweig on several occasions and uses his notion of dedifferentiation in order to describe a mode of vision that uses scanning, indeterminacy and therefore temporality as its main principles: cf. CPAD51-70, especially p. 61.

<sup>40</sup> On Smithson’s early interest in “collapsing systems,” cf. also L. Alloway, “Robert Smithson’s Development,” *Artforum*, XI, 3 (November 1972): 53-61. The quotation is on p. 54.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Smithson describing the pieces in these terms, in “Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson (1969-1970),” in CW199.

<sup>42</sup> For a recent, very thorough analysis of the *Alogons* in this respect, cf. A. Reynolds, *Robert Smithson. Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 15-31.

such, Smithson's deliberate "misalliance" of two different logical systems disturbs any possibility of logically combining the whole, and creates an illogical situation.<sup>43</sup> *Alogos* is what undermines a predetermined rational order, what disturbs and upsets pre-established certainties. The static order of logical constructions is always precarious, and undermined by illogical, perturbing elements that disrupt the continuity of momentary stability.

Ehrenzweig's analysis of a dualist and ongoing pulse inside of matter itself in terms of scattering and containment, had greatly impressed Smithson, especially the important chapter entitled *The Scattered and Buried God*. There, Ehrenzweig explains in psychoanalytical terms how dedifferentiation is responsible for breaking down the barrier or the "differentiation" between the conscious and the unconscious, and by consequence makes conscious Gestalt perception impossible. When the repressive mechanism that upholds the tension between the conscious and unconscious is neutralized, the "contained" breaks up and is dedifferentiated into scattered fragments. With this process of dedifferentiation, Ehrenzweig claims, time returns. For scattering entails death, birth and love, and these activities are always "extended over time."<sup>44</sup> If life is the factor that establishes differentiation, death tends towards entropy and dedifferentiation. To Smithson, "fascinating art (CW199)" has to account for both of these forces, and reveals the tension between these forces. It does not deny the continuous time of the death principle and defend a split-second aesthetic experience that, however briefly, "satisfies," as Greenbergian-Friedman Modernism did. If the "undifferentiated" means total stasis, differentiation accounts for "pure concept, ideal postulates or tautologies (CW207)." Only dedifferentiation is able to show that if stasis is perfectly possible, it can only exist as a transitive state that forms part of a flux, as fully incorporated into a temporal dynamic that has to be taken into account.

Further efforts to incorporate these insights into his artwork resulted in the creation of what Smithson named *Non-Sites* (Pl. 16 and 17). The Non-Site as a container or a "fragment of a greater fragmentation (CW111)," is a map reflecting the site it mirrors. The Non-Site serves as a means to artistically contain the disruption of an "oceanic site (CW111)" such as the slate quarry described above. As an entropic fragment instead of a well-shaped object, it contains time past, future and present and cannot be taken in as a whole at first glance, for its largest part is to be found elsewhere. In its evocation of a site outside of the gallery space, it simply excludes all possibilities of immediate grasping and understanding. The Non-Site forms a deliberate part of a process of deferring and delaying meanings, and suggests what cannot be seen at a first glance. It no longer makes any sense trying to grasp the work of art as fragment or Non-Site immediately, in its entirety. These works are Smithson's way to reject the Modernist conviction that art can be apprehended in an instant of grace.<sup>45</sup> Smithson specifies of his new monuments: "there are no mysteries in these vestiges, no traces of an end or a beginning (CW111)." Time is just there, all the time, it continually houses in the objects and transforms them.

### The Time of the Artist

In his 1968 essay *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*, Smithson states that in order to properly understand the intrinsic temporality of the work of art as matter, one needs to acknowledge what he calls the time of the artist making the work. In a paragraph entitled "The Value of Time," he explains what he understands by that. One can only conceive of a static or "timeless" work of art when the mental and tem-

<sup>43</sup> R. Hobbs, "Alogon #2," in Id., *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 1981, 66.

<sup>44</sup> A. Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art. A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), 214.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. also W.S. Wilson's discussion of the Non-Sites in similar terms, in Id., "Robert Smithson: Non-Reconciliations," *Arts Magazine*, 52, 9 (May 1978): 105. The pages 96-144 form a special issue devoted to Smithson's work.

poral process the artist needs to actually make the work is ignored. The traditional conception that holds that the artist's work can be reduced to merely copying pre-conceived ideal models, such as Plato proposes in his *Timaeus*, is no longer valid. Such an attitude, which conforms to the ideal of art as *mimesis*, also implies that art is considered to be an object belonging to a sphere independent of the artist's efforts. "Art, in this sense," Smithson writes, "is considered "timeless" or a product of "no time at all (CW111-112)." But, he insists, the artist has the right to insist on the temporal processes that were needed to make the work. "The arguments for the contention that time is unreal is a fiction of language," it is dependent on what Smithson describes as "rational illusions," which belong "to a society that values only commodity type art separated from the artist's mind (CW112)."

All objects, including works of art, and all humans are subject to the ruthless law of entropic decay. Although he mentions no names, when Smithson sneers a little further at critics "who devalue the *time* of the artist" as enemies of art and the artist, it is obvious that he has Clement Greenberg and even more Michael Fried in mind. Against Modernism's exclusion of the temporality of the artistic object, Smithson argues that the work of art, as a worldly object, *contains* its making time. It is a trace of its making process, or an *index* of its own production. This bearing witness of its making time is part of the work's inherent temporal dynamic. It is not evident to take this intrinsic temporality into account. For, since several objects *appear* static, recognizing the work's inherent temporal dimension, "depends on the viewer," Smithson remarks. And he concludes in a pessimistic way, for he believes that only artists are capable of doing this. "Only an artist viewing art knows the ecstasy or dread, and this viewing takes place in time (CW112)." Doubtlessly Smithson was highly disappointed in contemporary art criticism, especially the Modernist position. His conclusion that only his peers, artists, are able to treat art in a proper way therefore does not come as a surprise. In order to avoid falling into the Modernist pitfall, Smithson recommends the artist to "remain close to the temporal surfaces (CW113)." For an art or criticism that is unable to deal with time, conceals the "death principle (CW113)," he states.

Accepting the fact that everything dies, that all matter is subject to irreversible decay, is the only way to prevent art from being totally alienated from the artist and, subsequently, commodified. That was Smithson's deep conviction. His personal way of doing this would be to let art "explore the pre- and post-historic mind; it must go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts (CW113)." Working with the gallery space would always imply at the same time questioning it. And making objects would mean at least questioning their commodity status. Nowhere in his work would he succeed more in this critical attitude towards art's commodification than in the photographic pieces. Thinking back to his *Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, one realizes that the interaction between the chosen images and the accompanying text is highly complex, and that no univocal meanings can be constructed. Photographic material and text go together, and yet they never coincide. In its specific way of confronting us with what Smithson describes as the death principle, the photograph appears as the medium *par excellence* to save the artist from making his work subject to reification processes.<sup>46</sup>

If Smithson's use of the photograph can easily be described as formative of critical interventions, he never includes explicitly political issues. Contrary to other artists of his generation or a little younger than him, his interest remains first and foremost in exploring the work's material processes themselves. On several occasions in his writings, Smithson makes that clear. And recognizing the importance of the time of the artist as contained into the temporality of the work of art is a first step in

<sup>46</sup> A good introduction to the importance of photography in Smithson's work is offered in R.A. Sobieszek, *Robert Smithson: Photo Works*, exhib. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1993).



acknowledging its worldly and material existence.<sup>47</sup> If the artist is alienated from his time, as a chain reaction so will the art work itself and its spectator. Modernism exactly defended just that, and Smithson was out to shatter it. The only way to do so, he explains, is to confront the spectator with the “physicality of the here and now (CW187).” In a 1969 interview with Anthony Robbin for *Art News*, he also points that out: “people who defend the labels of painting and sculpture say what they do is timeless, created outside of time; therefore the object transcends the artist himself. But I think that the artist is important, too, and what he does, the way he thinks, is valuable, whether or not there is any tangible result. You may follow a lot of blind alleys, but these blind alleys are interesting (CW175).”

Smithson’s statement appears as the perfect prescription for what Robert Morris would subsequently explore in the several series of *Blind Time Drawings* he has been executing since 1973 (Pl. 18).<sup>48</sup> In these works, Morris shuts his eyes and draws during a preset estimated amount of time with a graphite pencil on a paper. Through this literal exploration of the time of the artist, Morris strives to explore further what is learned in experience, this time the artist’s private or inner experience of making his work. The final outcome is a piece of paper whose patterns serve as an indexical sign of these drawing activities over time. The formal result is reduced to a minimum. What matters is how the paper drawn on contains time, the temporal process of its execution.<sup>49</sup>

Drawings can be seen as the most literal registrations of the artist’s time, of the durational processes it takes to execute a work of art. In a study on the use and importance of drawings in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Pamela Lee convincingly argues that the drawings of artists as Sol LeWitt, Smithson, and Morris in a most privileged way contain that temporality of their making process. And it is that temporality, which inhabits the work that configures its materials, or volatilizes them.<sup>50</sup> It is the work’s intrinsic time that is responsible for the fact that its matter and form cannot be separated from one another. Both are intrinsically linked: temporality is the underlying, driving, operational, formative and deforming force of matter. The

<sup>47</sup> On the occasion of a symposium on Earth Art at White Museum, Cornell University on February 6, 1969, where he was a participant together with Dennis Oppenheim, Neil Jenney, Gunther Uecker, Hans Haacke, and Richard Long, Smithson contended: “I think we’ve come to the point where the artist’s time is also valuable in terms of process. In other words there always has been the idea that there is a class of people who are going to value certain objects and sort of wrest them from the life of the artist. Now the process that the artist goes through is very valuable, just like anybody else—most people’s time is considered valuable—so that the usual way out was to say that art is timeless, and therefore the artist is left alienated from his own time. So for the artist in this kind of art there is a positive step towards an integration of the artist with his own time. The trouble with the way the whole art system is set up now is that it exploits the artist out of his right to his art; his time is taken away from him under the pretext that his work is eternal. But eternities are all artificial or they are fictions in a sense (CW187).”

<sup>48</sup> The second series was realized in collaboration with a blind woman in 1976, the third in 1985, and a fourth one in 1991. This last set was made in direct interaction with the American philosopher Donald Davidson. Cf. on that topic the discussion of these drawings in *Robert Morris*, 1994, 296–301. See also Davidson’s essay “The Third Man,” *Critical Inquiry*, 19 (Summer 1993): 607–615, and Morris’s text in that same issue “Writing with Davidson: Some Afterthoughts after Doing *Blind Time IV: Drawing with Davidson*” (pp. 617–627).

<sup>49</sup> Of the drawings, Morris says: “I [...] tried to estimate the time; time is always something that has run through my work,” in J. Fineberg, “Robert Morris Looking Back: An Interview,” *Arts Magazine*, 55, 1 (September 1980): 114.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. P.M. Lee, “Some Kinds of Duration: The Temporality of Drawing as Process Art,” in *Afterimage: Drawing Through Process*, exhib. cat. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 25–48. Lee uses the term “volatize,” which she borrows from Henri Focillon’s study *La vie des Formes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1934), transl. by Ch. Hogan and G. Kubler as *The Life of Forms in Art* (New York: Zone Books, 1989). The quotation there is on p. 100 and reads “volatilize.” The French original reads “volatilise:” cf. p. 55.

temporal processes matter is subject to, starting with the artist's constructive intervention in it, configure the form of the artwork. Entropy and gravity's deforming force on the other hand appears as the latest transformational stage.<sup>51</sup>

Smithson's interests in the time of the artist and entropy combine both beginning and ending processes of the work's making. In the above-mentioned interview with Anthony Robbin, he specifies that the artist can show others how to deal with chaos, and how to manipulate it in a constructive way. To Smithson, the artist can demonstrate "that he is living with it without getting hysterical, and making some ideal system which distorts (CW175)." Only then, the artist is able to "de-mythify things," he insists. Robbin, who tries to follow his way of thinking, finally appears convinced when he answers to Smithson: "People will be frustrated in their desire for certainty, but maybe they will get something more after that frustration passes (CW175)."

Once the Modernist belief in the purely static and timeless nature of the visual work of art is dropped, stability is put at risk. Instead of the conviction about a lost or coming order of timeless eternity where all would be better and perfect, one is left with a mundane temporality that in its vertiginous nature is permanently subject to changes. Neither Smithson nor Morris was afraid of it. They dedicated their life and their art to discharging Minimalism from its residually Modernist conceptions. By radically assuming the intrinsic time of the artwork, as an uploaded container of its making time and as inhabited by the dynamics of matter itself, they liberated the path for an effectively temporal, durational experience of visual artworks and set the tone for a generation to come.

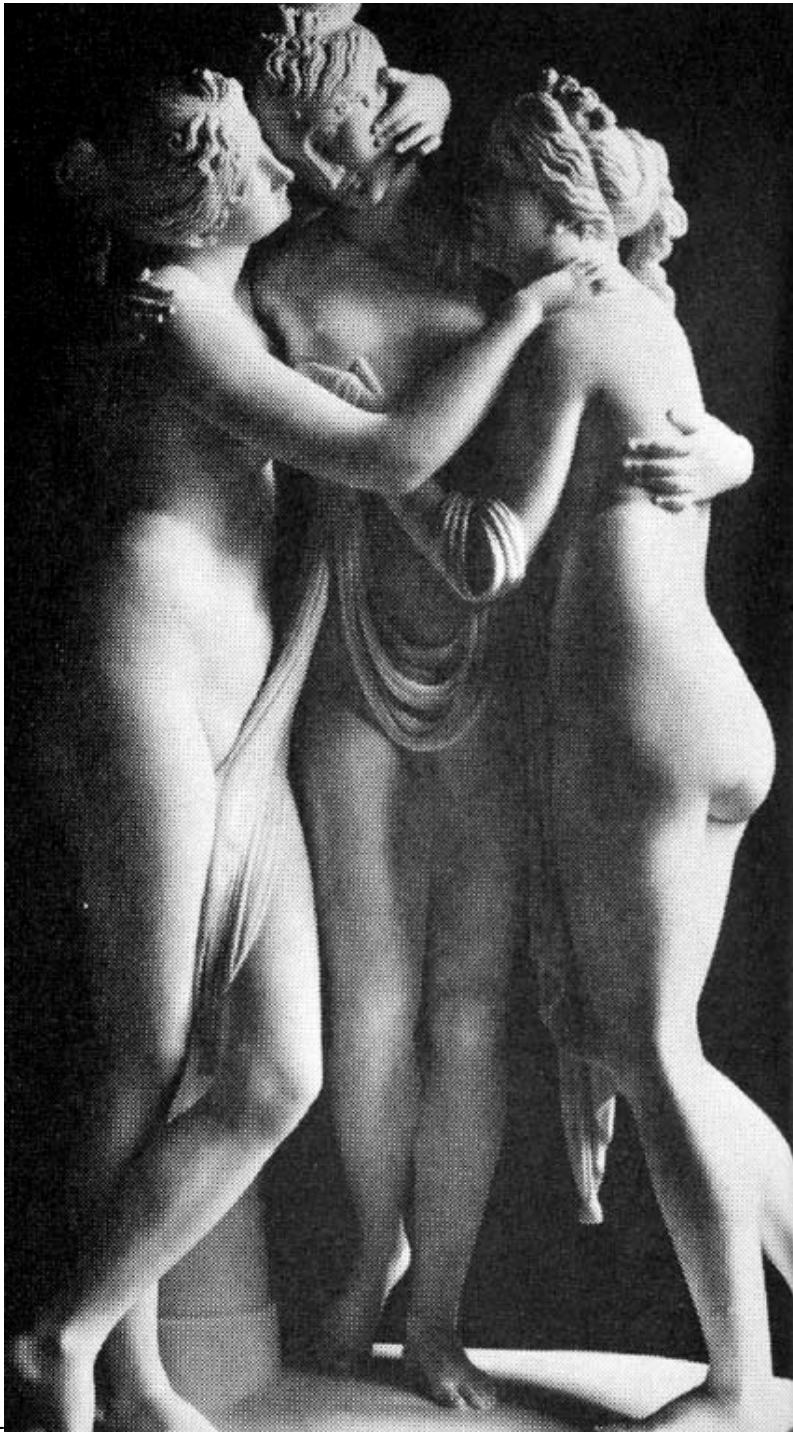
## Images

- 1.- Robert Morris, *Waterman Switch*, 1965, dance performance with Lucinda Childs and Yvonne Rainer, Festival of the Arts Today, Buffalo, New York. Still of the projection of Babette Mangolte's 1993 version of the performance with different actors at the Robert Morris exhibition in the Lyons Musée d'Art Contemporain, Summer 1999. Available from the Lyons Museum.



- 2.- Robert Morris, *Waterman Switch*, 1965, dance performance with Lucinda Childs and Yvonne Rainer, Festival of the Arts Today, Buffalo, New York. Photo credit: Peter Moore. Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York [gift to the author from the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyons]

<sup>51</sup> Lee distinguishes three temporal operations of matter that directly determine its formal result: the entropic, the transitive and the contingent: P.M. Lee, "Some Kinds of Duration," 1999, 48. Whereas Smithson's work appears to be the perfect example for the first, Morris's pieces are to be situated in the third category. An example of the second kind is Richard Serra's work. See also in this respect my *Temporality and the Experience of Time*, 2000, 178-188.

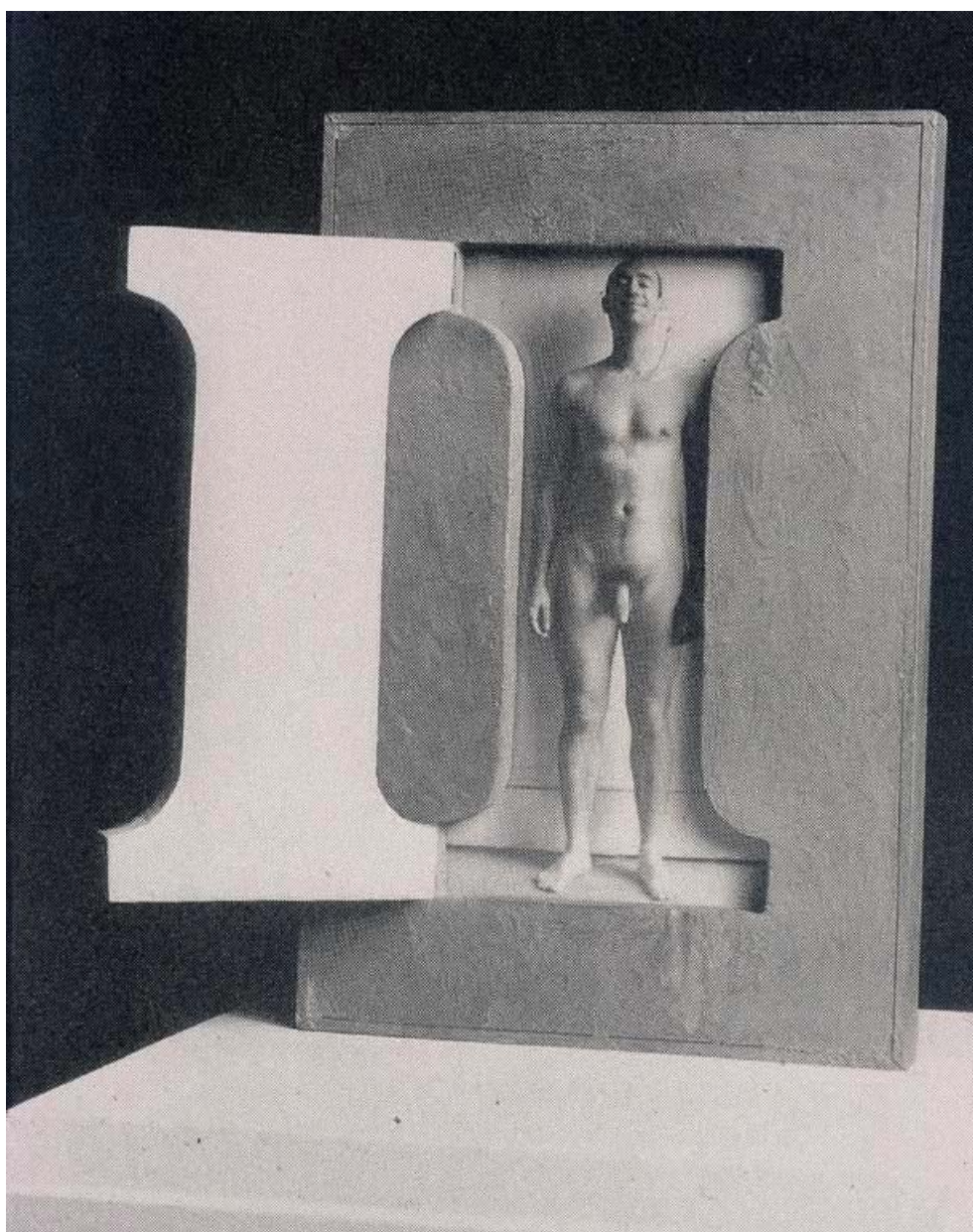


3.-  
Antonio Canova, *The Three Graces*, 1813, marble. Leningrad, Hermitage.  
[photocredit belongs to Alinari, Florence]





4.-  
Kenneth Noland, *That*, 1958-59, acrylic resin on canvas, 207 x 207 cm. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. David Mirvish, Toronto  
[M. Fried, *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews*, (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pl. 7]

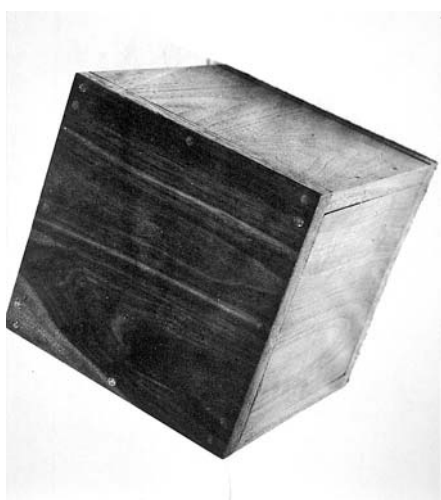


5.- Robert Morris, *I-Box* (open view), 1962, painted plywood cabinet covered with sculptural metal, containing photograph, 48 x 32 x



3,5 cm. Collection Estate of Leo Castelli [*Robert Morris. The Mind/Body Problem*, exhib. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 125]

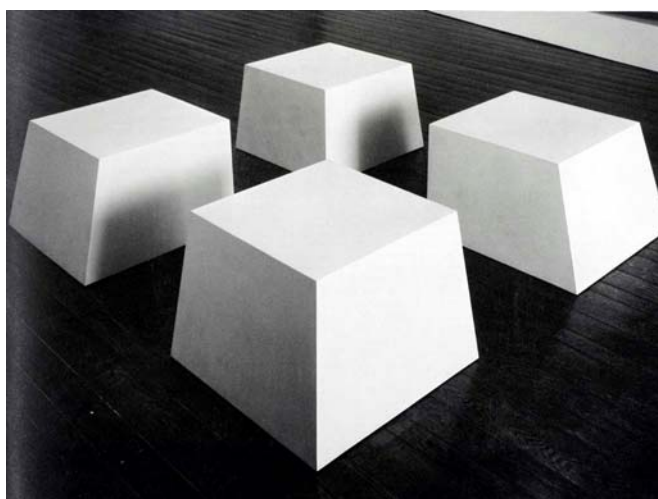
---



6.-

Robert Morris, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961, walnut box, speaker, and three-and-one-half-hour recorded tape, 25 x 25 x 25 cm. Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Bagley and Virginia Wright [*Robert Morris. The Mind/Body Problem*, exhib. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 105, pl. 11]

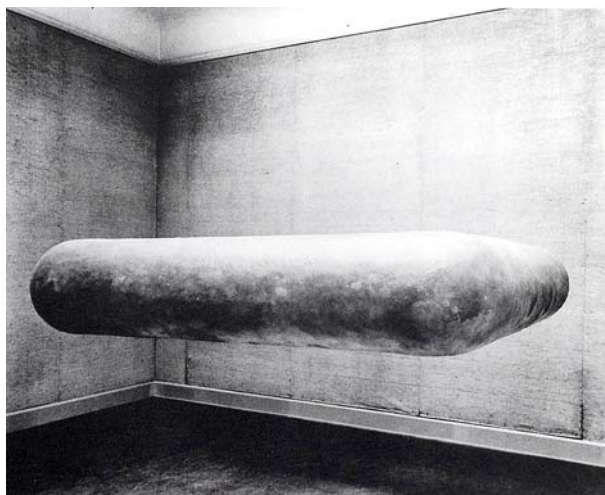
---



7.-

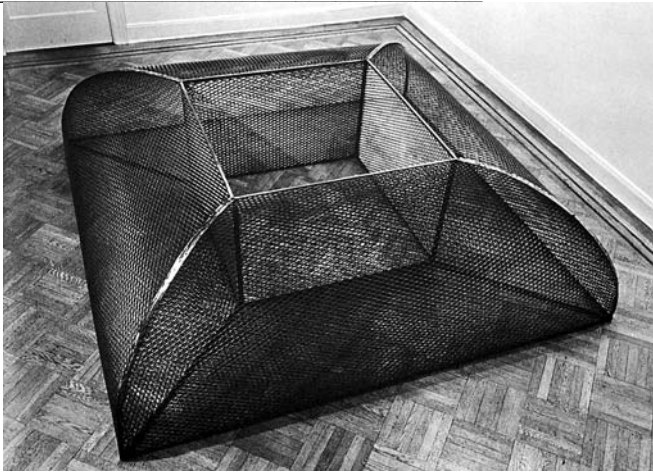
Robert Morris, *Untitled (Battered Cubes)*, 1965, painted plywood, four units, each 61 x 91,4 x 91,4 cm. Unknown location [*Robert Morris. The Mind/Body Problem*, exhib. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 175, pl. 67]

---



8.-

Robert Morris, *Untitled (Fiberglass Cloud)*, 1967, translucent fiberglass and nylon threads, 46 x 244 x 244 cm. Tate Gallery, London [Robert Morris. *The Mind/Body Problem*, exhib. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 111, pl. 17]



9.-  
Robert Morris, *Untitled (Quarter-Round Mesh)*, 1966, steel mesh, 79 x 277 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Panza Collection  
[Robert Morris. *The Mind/Body Problem*, exhib. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 207, pl. 89]



10.-  
Robert Morris, *Untitled (Tangle)*, 1967, felt, 2,5 cm thick, overall dimensions variable. Collection Philip Johnson  
[Robert Morris. *The Mind/Body Problem*, exhib. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 214, pl. 93]



11.-  
Robert Morris, *Untitled (Threadwaste)*, 1968, threadwaste, asphalt, mirrors, copper tubing, and felt, overall dimensions variable. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson

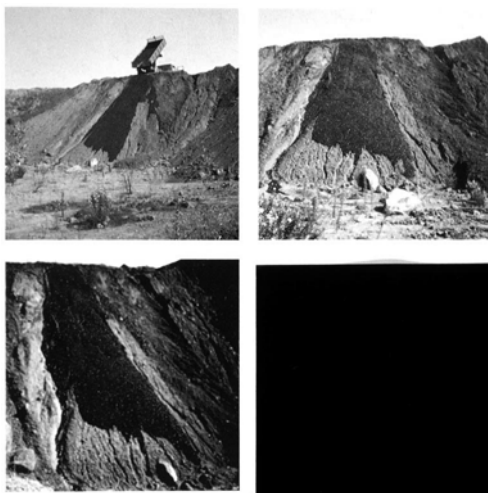
[Robert Morris. *The Mind/Body Problem*, exhib. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 228-229, pl. 104]



12.-

Robert Smithson, *The Fountain Monument—Side View*, black-and-white photograph made by the artist, reproduced in R. Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," *Artforum* (December 1967)

[*Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. by J. Flam (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 71]



13.-

Robert Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown*, 1969, Rome, Italy. Photograph by Robert Smithson

[*Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. by J. Flam (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 306]

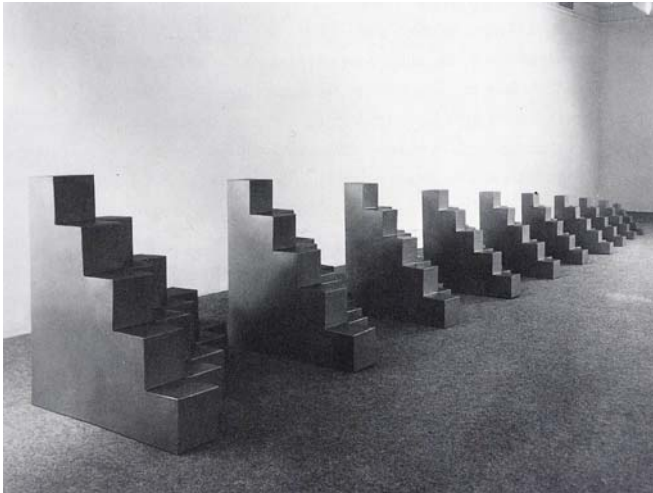


14.-

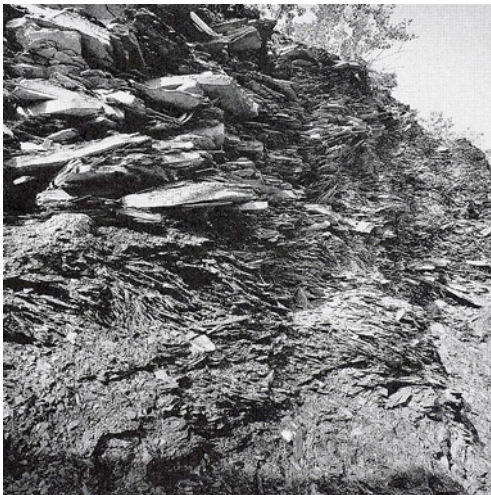
Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, Great Salt Lake, Utah. Coil 45750 cm long and approximately 458 cm wide. Black rock, salt crystals, earth, red water (algae). Photograph by Gianfranco Gorgoni



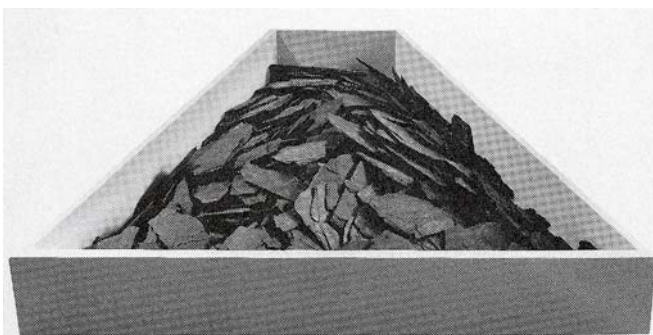
[*Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. by J. Flam (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 143]



15.-  
Robert Smithson, *Alogon #2*, 1966, painted steel, ten units of cubes, heights 32 x 38 x 44 x 51 x 57 x 63,5 x 70 x 76 x 83 x 89 cm. Collection Virginia Dwan, New York  
[R. Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 66]

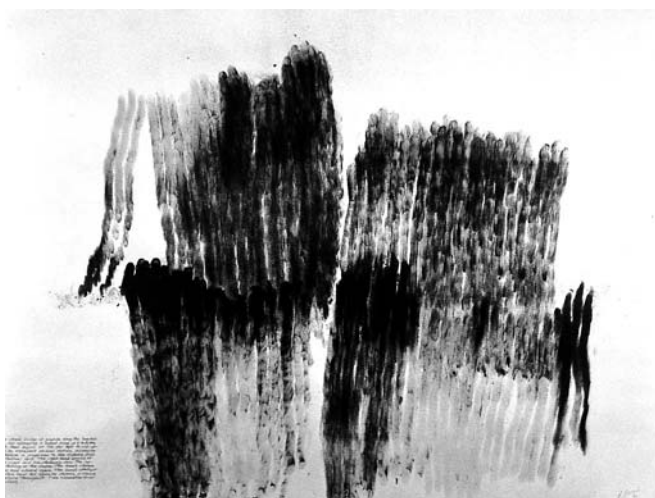


16.-  
Robert Smithson, *The Bangor Quarry*. Slate site in an uncontained condition before being contained in a *Non-Site* by Robert Smithson. Black-and-white photograph by Virginia Dwan, first published in *Artforum* (September 1968) [*Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. by J. Flam (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 100]



17.-  
Robert Smithson, *Non-Site (Slate from Bangor, Pa.)*, summer/fall 1968, wood, slate, 15 x 102 x 81 cm. Collection Dwan Gallery, Inc.  
[*Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. by J. Flam (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 100]





18.-

Robert Morris, *Blind Time*, 1973, powdered graphite and pencil on paper, 89 x 117 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, Gift of the Walter Foundation and Anonymous Donors  
[Robert Morris. *The Mind/Body Problem*, exhib. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 247, pl. 116]