The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum.
Embedded in the sediment is a text . . .
— "A Sedimentation of Mind: Earth Projects"

Precisely at the center (page 67 of 133) of the first section of this collection of Robert Smithson's writings, we encounter the following words on language, worthy of Borges or Barthes:

In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge . . . but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures . . . at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations.

This passage, the opening of the essay "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art," contains a number of topoi explored in Smithson's art: history, fiction (the fictive explanation of the origin of the Great Salt Lake, from which the form of the Spiral Jetty was derived), architecture (Smithson's obsession with construction), and counter-architecture (or de-architecture, "entropy made visible," as in the Partially Buried Woodshed). Yet here they radiate from a meditation on the labyrinthine, abyssal nature of language, which therefore appears to occupy both

* This word is Smithson's, and it describes the alphabetic chasms at the conclusion of Edgar Allan Poe's Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym: "His descriptions of chasms and holes seem to verge on proposals for 'earthwords.' The shapes of the chasms themselves become 'verbal roots' that spell out the difference between darkness and light. Poe ends his mental maze with the sentence—'I have graven it within the hills and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock.'" (p. 88.)

PERM IN RUSSIA. EVAPORATION CAUSES LAND TO SHRINK. CONTINENTAL DRIFT. A DRAWING OF THE SKULL OF THE REPTILE ELGINIA (RELATED TO ROM PERMIAN SANDSTONE IN ELGIN, N.E. SCOTLAND, DRAWN TO ONE-QUARTER NATURAL SIZE). THROUGH THE EYES OF DIMETRODON, PERMIAN ICE AGE. MOVEMENT OF GLACIERS IS DUE TO THE PROPERTIES OF ICE ITSELF AND IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PERIODIC ACCUMULATION AND REMOVAL OF ELASTIC YSTALLINE AGGREGATE (P.A. SHUMSKI). HOT DESERT CONDITIONS. NOTES REGARDING FORAMINIFERA. REMAINS OF SLOW WADDLING CREATURES FOUND IN AFRICA, SEAS WERE CUT-OFF FROM THE OCEAN, UNTIL THEY BECAME INCREASINGLY SALINE. DRASTIC CHANGES OF THE LANDSCAPE TAKE PLACE. A VOLCANO TON IS A SPIRALE TO A SUBTERRANEAN FURNACE. FANTASTIC IDEAS WERE LATER CAST ASIDE BY THE PLUTONISTS. SOLIDIFIES IN GRANITE. FAUST SAYS, "...THE NEPTUNIAN THEORY. THE SYMMETRY OF THE EARTH WAS THOUGHT TO BE SPOILED. MODERN ORDERS OF INSECTS EMERGE. A SPIRALLY COILED BAND TO HELICOPTER. DWAF FAUNA. ONE SENTENCE DEVOTED TO INSECTS IN A CHAPTER ON THE PERMIAN PERIOD. STEREOSCOPIC VIEWS OF THE GUADALOupe CHANGING LIGHT OVER RECONSTRUCTIONS OF DECIDUOUS TREES. SNAPSHOTS OF POISON GAS. DIORAMA OF ASH HEAPS. DAGO GUERRUTOYPE SHOWING VAST GYPSUM. EQUATOR IN OKLAHOMA. SPOILED PHOTOGRAPHS OF SAND DUNES. PHOTOMICROGRAPHIC STUDIES OF FOSSIL PINE. AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF IGNEOUS MAP OF OIL DEPOSITS. MISPLACED BOUNDARIES. SHIFTS IN POLAR AXIS RECORDED. EVAPORATION OF SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE. MARATHON JOURNALS Devoted to RADIATION DAMAGE. UNDEVELOPED FILM OF DRY LAND MASS. NEGATIVES OF SHELLY ORGANISMS. A BOOK ON EDAPHOSAURUS.

PERMIAN PRAIRIES.


SY SKELETONS. SUBMARINE TROUGHS DEEPEN. STONE LILIES. BRIGHTEST COLLORED POLYP SPREAD. NEW MOUNTAIN RANGES APPEAR. THEIR NAMES ARE DESCRIPTIONS IN A BOOK. THESE SILURIAN TERRAINS EXIST BY CONCEALMENT. NOTHING BUT BLAND REFERENCES TO A VAGUE SET OF GEOLOGIC STRATA DIPS OUT OF SIGHT. ALL THE ACTIVITY IS LOST UNDER THE LIMPID OCEANS. ALL IS SEDIMENTATION AND AIMLESS EFFORT. THE SILURIAN NIGHT AT SEA SCORPIONS INTO THE TOTAL DARKNESS, WHERE THEY LIVED MAINLY IN ESTUARIES AND COASTAL LAGOONS. SILENCE, DARKNESS, AND DISMAL PERFEC-

COVER THIS OCEANIC FEELING IN MYSELF (FRED). MASSIVE HEAPS OF SKELETONS CAPABLE OF WITHSTANDING BUFFETING IN ROUGH WATER. CORAL TING GRAPtoiLITES. MANY SANK TO THE BOTTOM. SHALE. 400 MILLION YEARS AGO. PERIODIC ALTERNATION OF THE LEVEL OF LAND AND SEA. LESS VOLCANIC ERUPTION. PERIODIC INCREASES. UNDERSEA MOUNTAINS, RAVINES AND VALLEYS. CRUSTAL MOVEMENT. TRAVERTINE. SWAMP TREASURE. DRAWINGS OF SINKHOLES AND
the literal and the thematic center of the book.  

"A Museum of Language" is, in fact, a description of what occurs when language comes to occupy the center. This text about language is thus also about the notion of the center, specifically, the dialectical relationship between center and circumference to which Smithson's non-sites were also addressed. In an interview, Smithson described the non-site, which catapults the mind out to "the unfocused fringe" where it "loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades," as the center, and the site itself as the fringe or edge. (p. 176.) Moreover, in a footnote appended to his essay on the Spiral Jetty, he identified the non-site as a "network of signs . . . discovered as you go along" (p. 115.)—that is, as a text. If the non-site is also a text, "A Museum of Language" is also a non-site; it thus propels us outward to the peripheries of Smithson's writings—circumscribed by the 1965 essay on Donald Judd and the essay on Central Park, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," published five months before its author's death in July 1973—and beyond, to his works.

Whenever Smithson invokes the notion of the center, however, it is to describe its loss. The non-site is only a vacant reflection of the site; "A Museum of Language" reveals absence at the center—of Roger Corman's films (his actors reflect the empty center”), Ad Reinhardt's Jokes, suburban sprawl, and finally the dots on Buckminster Fuller's World Energy Map, centers signifying "a concentration or dilation of an infinite expanse of spheres of energy":

Yet the dot evades our capacity to find its center. Where is the central point, axis, pole, dominant interest, fixed position, absolute structure, or decided goal? The mind is always being hurled towards the outer edge into intractable trajectories that lead to vertigo. (p. 78.)

Paradoxically, the concept of a center can occur only within language; at the same time, language, which proposes the potentially infinite substitution of elements at the center, destroys all possibility of securely locating any center whatsoever. Thus what is described by Smithson in this text is that dizzying experience of decentering which occurred "at the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse."  

If this collection of Smithson's writings testifies to anything in our present culture, it is to the eruption of language into the field of the visual arts, and the subsequent decentering of that field—a decentering in which these texts themselves play a crucial part.

All of Smithson's work effected a radical dislocation of art, which was removed from its locus in the museum and gallery to remote, inaccessible

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1. The two sections which follow, the first devoted to interviews, the second to previously unpublished texts, are essentially appendices to the first, devoted to Smithson's published texts, which therefore constitute the book per se.

locations. This displacement is not only geographic, but economic as well: the “value” of the work of art is no longer determined by its status as a portable commodity; it is now the work itself which bestows value (upon the depreciated site where it is installed). Physical decentering is also one theme of his work: the spectator’s experience of the Spiral Jetty, for example, is “one of continually being decentered within the great expanse of lake and sky.” Yet “A Museum of Language” describes what is perhaps the most significant displacement of all—that of art from the visual to the verbal field. For this is in fact a collocation of artists who write: Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt. . .

That all of these artists are minimalists is a point to which we must return, since the proliferation of artists’ writings in the 1960s is clearly to be connected with minimalism. For the moment, however, I want to concentrate on the fact that all are sculptors (despite the extremely incisive argument which questions the degree to which their production can be assimilated to the rational category “sculpture”). Painting and writing share a common origin in inscription; sculpture, however, involved as it is in the experience of three-dimensional space, could not seem more distant from language—linear, two-dimensional, located at the intersection of two axes (of selection and combination) which describe a plane. Yet Smithson regards language as something solid and obdurate, a three-dimensional projection: “My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas.” (p. 104.) Aping Pascal, he writes: “Language becomes an infinite museum whose center is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere.” (p. 67.) Not only does this metaphorize spatialize language by substituting it for a geometric solid, Pascal’s infinite sphere; it also mirrors the eclipse of Nature by language which lies at the root of our modernity (Pascal: “Nature is an infinite sphere. . .”).

Smithson’s perception of language as substantial characterizes his manipulation of its signifiers—what some might call his literary “style.” He frequently employs language as purely visual material, as in a pencil drawing of, literally, A Heap of Language, in which synonyms for language are piled up like rubble, thus destroying their signifying function. In this collection of writings, A Heap of Language is used to illustrate a press release for the 1967 exhibition Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read, a title which suggests the reciprocal translatability of verbal and visual phenomena. In the text “Strata,” Smithson’s “geophotographic fiction,” blocks of text are presented as geological deposits on the page; lines of print read as stratified layers of verbal sediment. At the same time, the accompanying photographs—of fossils—disintegrate, due to overenlargement, into the photomechanical “language” of the half-tone screen.

5. “The threshold between Classicism and modernity . . . had been definitively crossed when words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things. Once detached from representation, language has existed, right up to our own day, only in a dispersed way.” (Michel Foucault, The Order of Things, New York, Vintage, 1973, p. 304).
Smithson's words are thus offered to vision, and not to audition; it is this attention to the visual aspects of language that identifies him as a writer, and reveals the reciprocity of his visual and verbal practices: "I thought of writing more as material to sort of put together than as a kind of analytic searchlight. . . . I would construct my articles in the way I would construct a work." (p. 154.) Here Smithson may appear to echo the poet, who is also engaged in the manipulation of purely linguistic substance. Yet for Smithson poetry represented the desire for totalization, the idealization of language; to it he opposed an allegorical "language of fragmentation" in which words occur as graphic, as opposed to sonorous and therefore poetic, facts:

The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. (p. 87.)

What the fissures in Smithson's "earthwords" disclose is the disjunctive, atomizing principle which, according to Walter Benjamin, defines allegory. In allegory, language is broken up, dispersed, in order to acquire a new and intensified meaning in its fragmentation. But if allegory "opens up a gulf in the solid massif of verbal meaning and forces the gaze into the depths of language," it is because it is in essence a form of writing; allegory "at one stroke . . . transforms things and works into stirring writing" and, conversely, writing into an object: in allegory, "the written word also tends toward the visual." For Smithson the appeal of the allegorical lay not only in this reciprocity of verbal and visual, but also in the fact that it offers an antidote to the totalizing impulses of art: "It is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite to the artistic symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality, than this amorphous fragment which is seen in the form of allegorical script."8

Smithson's admission that both his articles and his works were the result of a process of accumulation of material reveals the fundamentally allegorical nature of his aesthetic activity, whether visual or verbal. For it is the allegorist who "pile[s] up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal." The allegorical work is therefore "the calculable result of the process of accumulation. . . . The writer must not conceal the fact that his activity is one of arranging."9 But Smithson's view of language as material also discloses the absolute congruence, and hence interchangeability, of writing and sculpture.

7. Ibid., p. 201.
8. Ibid., p. 176.
9. Ibid., p. 179.
This is the recurrent theme of "A Museum of Language." Carl Andre, for example, is shown to be involved in a similarly allegorical pulverization of language which parallels his sculptural practice: "Thoughts are crushed into a rubble of syncopated syllables. Reason becomes a powder of vowels and consonants. His words hold together without any sonority. . . . The apparent sameness and toneless ordering of Andre's poems conceals a radical disorientation of grammar." (p. 67.) Not only does the observation that the poet's "words hold together without any sonority" align his activity with writing and not speech; it also reflects the sculptor's refusal to affix to one another in any way the separate integers of his work. Likewise, the lack of inflection in the poems mirrors the paratactic nature of the work, and the disorientation of the grammar of sculpture which results. In demonstrating that Andre deploys linguistic signifiers as he would the cinderblocks, logs, or metal plates of his sculpture, writing and work are made to confront each other like parallel mirrors mounted in series, opening onto an infinite play of reflections in which the distinctions between writing and sculpture are, in effect, dissolved.

Smithson's description of Andre's writings—or Flavin's ("a pure spectacle of attenuation"), Judd's ("a brooding depth of gleaming surfaces—placid but dismal"), for that matter, his own ("material to sort of put together")—indicates that their texts are not illuminations, explanations, or even extensions of their work, or vice versa. Their writings do not stand, despite all assertions to the contrary, in a complementary relation to their work, mutually supplying each other's lack. It is frequently maintained that it was the highly elliptical nature of minimalist production that propelled these artists toward language, which was either incorporated into the work itself, or deployed in explanation of it, in response to an absence at its heart.10 According to this argument, Yvonne Rainer, for example, would have both written about and introduced spoken and written texts into her performances because the pared-down dance vocabulary she developed in the 1960s severely limited the possibility of expression, communication. Language, and writing in particular, is thus assigned a compensatory role; it restores to the work everything that has been eliminated from it. The artist/writer's desire would thus be the desire for content, which the reductivist tendencies of sixties production appear to preclude.

But as Rainer herself wrote, in the Introduction to her Work 1961-73, "Let it be said simply 'She usually makes performances and has also made a book.'"

The argument which reduces these artists' writings to a secondary, derived position vis a vis their work might be diagnosed as one symptom of a modernist aesthetic, specifically, of its desire to confine the artist within the sharply delineated boundaries of a single aesthetic discipline. This desire is sanctioned by an unquestioned belief in the absolute difference of verbal and visual art. The

10. In Smithson's case, this absence might be construed as the physical inaccessibility of most of the work.
genealogy of modernist theory, especially of its assumption that each of the arts occupies a specific area of competence, may be traced to that moment in the eighteenth century when it appeared necessary, for complex, but always ethical, reasons, to distinguish poetry from painting and sculpture. For strategic reasons that distinction was made according to time: in Germany, Lessing, and in France, Diderot, located poetry and all the discursive arts along a dynamic axis of temporal succession, and painting and sculpture along a static axis of spatial simultaneity. Consequently the visual arts were denied access to discourse, which unfolds in time, except in the form of a literary text which, both exterior and anterior to the work, might supplement it.

Although such distinctions were made in the name of establishing the relative merits of each of the arts, and while there may have been differences concerning the superiority of either the visual or the verbal arts, the aesthetic hierarchies which followed were without exception based upon this verbal/visual polarity, and thus upon an ultimately linguistic criterion. It is not difficult to recognize in the temporal axis which defines poetry and in the spatial axis which defines painting and sculpture what Roman Jakobson would later distinguish as the metaphoric and metonymic poles of language. However, the linguistic origin of the principle which made distinctions between the arts, and thus modernism, possible had to remain unconscious; were the subordination of all the arts to language exposed, the visual arts would effectively be denied a proper territory, and the thesis that the arts are rigorously isolable and definable would be challenged. Thus repressed, language became an invisible reserve which constituted, in the visual arts at least, modernism’s unconscious. And the eruption of language into the aesthetic field in the 1960s would occur with all the force of the return of the repressed.

When late in that decade it was recognized that a break with modernist practice had taken place, the late modernist critic Michael Fried diagnosed it as the invasion of the static art of sculpture by duration, temporality. What his post-mortem actually discloses, however, is the emergence of discourse: after all, the pretext for Fried’s violent reaction against minimalism was an artist’s text (Tony Smith’s infamous narrative of a ride on an unfinished extension to the New Jersey Turnpike.) What I am proposing, then, is that the eruption of language into the aesthetic field—an eruption signalled by, but by no means limited to, the writings of Smithson, Morris, Andre, Judd, Flavin, Rainer, LeWitt—is coincident with, if not the definitive index of, the emergence of postmodernism. This “catastrophe” disrupted the stability of a modernist partitioning of the aesthetic field into discrete areas of specific competence; one of its most deeply felt shocks disloged literary activity from the enclaves into which it had settled only to stagnate—poetry, the novel, the essay...—and dispersed it across the entire spectrum of

11. However, the almost universal ranking of poetry as the supreme art reveals, albeit in a displaced way, the priority of language in every hierarchy of the arts.
aesthetic activity. Visual artists thus acquired a mine of new material, and the responses ranged from Morris's language File and the linguistic conceits of Art & Language and conceptual art, to the autobiographical perambulations of narrative or "story" art and the fundamentally linguistic concerns of performance art, such as that of Laurie Anderson (also an artist who writes). And it is within this massive return of language that Smithson's writings—and his art—are to be located.

It might be objected that artists, and modernist artists in particular, have always written, produced texts which explain their work, expound theoretical positions, engage in discussion or debate with other artists. And that, especially within modernist quarantine, these texts are indeed secondary, appended to and dependent upon visual production. The texts of modernist artists do read more often than not as responses to what had been eliminated from visual practice. They testify to a mounting sense of loss; as painting became more "pure," the desire for a supplement increased. For the modernist artist, however, writing was not an alternative medium for aesthetic practice; through it, work might be explained, but never produced. So that even if we maintain that these complements to work are essential to its understanding, Malevich's The Non-Objective World, Mondrian's Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art, Kandinsky's Concerning the Spiritual in Art. . . , remain statements and not texts: "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God), but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and crash."12

Smithson's writings, on the other hand, are indeed texts, dazzling orchestrations of multiple, overlapping voices; as such, they participate in that displacement of literature by the activity of writing which also occurs with Barthes, Derrida, Lacan. . . . This is not, however, the only value of these texts, for they also reveal the degree to which strategies which must be described as textual have infiltrated every aspect of contemporary aesthetic production. In his 1973 review of a Frederick Law Olmsted exhibition at the Whitney Museum, Smithson observes that "the maps, photographs, and documents in catalogue form . . . are as much a part of Olmsted's art as the art itself" (p. 119.)—which might be applied with equal validity to Smithson's art. I have already mentioned that the non-site, a "course of hazards, a double path made up of signs, photographs, and maps," is a text. Not only does this complex web of heterogenous information—part visual, part verbal—challenge the purity and self-sufficiency of the work of art; it also upsets the hierarchy between object and representation: "Is the Site a reflection of the Nonsite (mirror), or is it the other way around?"

Significantly, these remarks, which reveal the textuality of the non-site, occur in a footnote appended to Smithson's text on the Spiral Jetty, itself a graphic

document inscribed on the surface of the Great Salt Lake. Like the non-site, the Jetty is not a discrete work, but one link in a chain of signifiers which summon and refer to one another in a dizzying spiral. For where else does the Jetty exist except in the film which Smithson made, the narrative he published, the photographs which accompany that narrative, and the various maps, diagrams, drawings, etc., he made about it? Unintelligible at close range, the spiral form of the Jetty is completely intuitable only from a distance, and that distance is most often achieved by imposing a text between viewer and work. Smithson thus accomplishes a radical dislocation of the notion of point-of-view, which is no longer a function of physical position, but of the mode (photographic, cinematic, textual) of confrontation with the work of art. The work is henceforth defined by the position it occupies in a potentially infinite chain extending from the site itself and the associations it provokes—"in the end I would let the site determine what I would build" (p. 111.)—to quotations of the work in other works.

That Smithson thus transformed the visual field into a textual one represents one of the most significant aesthetic "events" of our decade; and the publication of his collected writings constitutes a challenge to criticism to come to terms with the textual nature of his work, and of postmodernism in general. That challenge is formidable, since it requires the jettisoning of most of our received notions about art; it can only be acknowledged here. I would however in conclusion like to sketch briefly the critical significance of one issue raised by Smithson's texts, and his work, and that is the allegorical impulse which shapes both. Smithson was not unaware of this impulse. His allegorical reading of the suburban New Jersey industrial landscape begins with a visual epigraph, Samuel Morse's Allegorical Landscape. In a previously unpublished text, "From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman, or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema," Smithson acknowledged this impulse, as well as its heretical nature:

The very word allegory is enough to strike terror into the hearts of the expressive artist; there is perhaps no device as exhausted as allegory. But strangely enough Alan Kaprow has shown interest in that worn-out device. Jorge Luis Borges begins his From Allegories to Novels by saying, "For all of us, the allegory is an aesthetic error." (p. 214.)

It was, however, from its exhaustion, its "erroneous" status, that allegory, for Smithson, derived its aesthetic potential.

I have already described the way in which allegory motivates Smithson's perception of language as material. But it is also manifest in his involvement with history as an irreversible process of dissolution and decay—his fascination with entropy and entropic systems; his attraction to both prehistoric and postindustrial ruins; his recognition of the forces which erode and eventually reclaim the work of

art, for which the rust on Smith’s and Caro’s steel sculpture and the disorder of Central Park were taken as emblems. As Benjamin writes:

The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history . . . is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things . . . In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting.14

Thus Smithson’s desire to lodge his work in a specific site, to make it appear to be rooted there, is an allegorical desire, the desire for allegory. All of Smithson’s work acknowledges as part of the work the natural forces through which it is reabsorbed into its setting. When the Great Salt Lake rose and submerged the Spiral Jetty, the salt deposits left on its surface became yet another link in the chain of crystalline forms which makes possible the description of the Jetty as a text.

This desire to embed a work in its context characterizes postmodernism in general and is not only a response to the “homelessness” of modernist sculpture;15 it also represents and explains the strategic importance of allegory at this moment in history. For in the arts allegory has always been acknowledged as “‘a crossing of the borders of a different mode,’ an advance of the plastic arts into the territory of the rhetorical arts . . . Its intrusion could therefore be described as a harsh disturbance of the peace and a disruption of law and order in the arts.”16 Thus allegory marks the dissolution of the boundaries between the arts; by proposing the interchangeability of the verbal and the visual, the integrity of both is compromised. This is why it is an aesthetic “error,” but also why it appears, at present, as the organizing principle of advanced aesthetic practice.

This is not simply a claim that may be made for allegory, but a structural fact. Allegory is traditionally defined, following Quintillian, as a symbol introduced in continuous series, the temporal extension of metaphor. It is useful to recast this definition in structuralist terms, for then allegory is revealed as the projection of the metaphoric, or static, axis of language onto its metonymic, or temporal, dimension. Although Roman Jakobson defined this projection of metaphor (the synchronic system of differences that defines the structure of a language) onto metonymy (the activity of combination in which structure is actualized in time), as the poetic principle,

. . . and while Jakobson goes on to associate metaphor with verse and romanticism, as opposed to metonymy which he identifies with realism

and prose, allegory would cut across and subtend all such stylistic categorizations, being equally possible in either verse or prose, and quite capable of transforming the most objective naturalism into the most subjective expressionism, or the most determined realism into the most surrealistically ornamental baroque.¹⁷

Yet this capacity to “cut across and subtend,” all aesthetic categories is due to the fact that allegory implicates the two poles, spatial and temporal, according to which the arts were distinguished at the advent of modernism.

Following the logic of allegory, then, Smithson’s work stands as an investigation into what occurs when structure is actualized in time: the Spiral Jetty, for example, takes a particular mythic structure—the fiction of an enormous whirlpool at the Lake’s center—and projects it as a temporal experience. This aspect of his practice coincides with the techniques of poststructuralist theory—Derrida’s deconstructive reading, for example, or Foucault’s archaeology. This correspondence is not simply the result of contemporaneity, for Smithson’s activity was a thoroughly critical one, engaged in the deconstruction of an inherited metaphysical tradition, which he perceived as more or less ruined. And the success of his enterprise may be measured by the critical rigor with which his relation to inherited concepts is thought in these texts. Yet the failure of contemporary theory, which too often operates in a vacuum, to see its own realization in Smithson’s practice is, and remains, a scandal.