

Robert Smithson

One may be surprised about what initially drew Smithson to the Great Salt Lake and to the site where he would eventually develop the piece that became *Spiral Jetty*. He was indeed interested in salt lakes due to their existence as “non-sites”, since salt lakes are water basins that are unable to sustain much life. An earlier trip to Mono Lake in 1968 was documented by Nancy Holt and Michael Heizer, and the recently edited film shows them wandering around the lake, disrupting the only life there—a vast swarm of insects at the water’s edge.

However, as his own writing made clear¹, Smithson was specifically drawn to the Great Salt

1. All quotes from Robert Smithson, “The Spiral Jetty,” in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.

Lake because of the color of the water, a flamingo-like red that flared up through desiccation and algae blooms in areas of the lake that had very high salinity. It was not until he discovered the future site of the jetty that he began to further develop his ideas of what the possible final artwork would look like. It was then that he began to imagine the spiral shape that not only would disrupt the tidal flow and allow for water to stagnate and become a deeper red, but would also become an artwork that would talk so eloquently about time.

Likewise, his work on the film itself was a process of discovery. It began as a simple documentation of the construction of the jetty by a LA cameraman, who was sent in by Smithson's gallery. Little flourishes of inspiration burst forth during construction and documentation, like the pun on helix that led to the helicopter shot at the end. This, and the recognition that film is "a spiral made up of frames", led Smithson to begin to think of the film as symbiotically addressing similar issues of scale and time towards which the jetty itself was leading him.

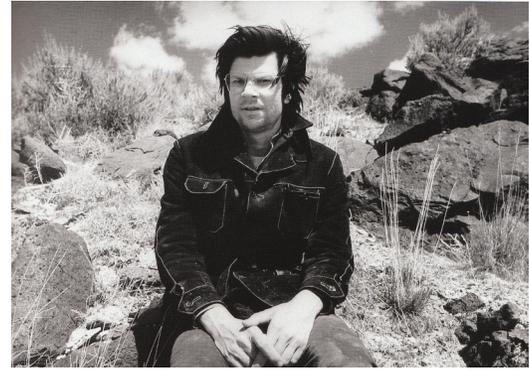


Spiral Jetty

Back in New York, he brought on filmmakers Robert Fiore and Barbara Jarvis to help edit his footage. In retrospect, Smithson spoke of the editing process itself as a type of paleontology, "sorting out glimpses of a world not yet together, a land that has yet to come to completion", where the editing machine becomes "a 'time machine' that transforms trucks into dinosaurs." Surging forward on that trope, Smithson decided to add additional elements to the documentary footage expressly towards opening up the film's sense of time.

With the help of his wife Nancy Holt, who by then had been shooting film and video for a couple of years, Smithson shot sequences that continued his musings on the expanse of time that was opening up before him. One sequence, shot in American Museum of Natural History, explicitly connects the jetty with the Jurassic. Holt turns her camera towards the dinosaurs, using a red filter to both mirror the water of the jetty and open up the visuals to the cosmic. As Smithson points out, “An interior immensity spreads throughout the hall, transforming the lightbulbs into dying suns. The red filter dissolves the floor, ceilings and walls into halations of infinite redness.”

Another linking sequence, a long take of the road leading to the jetty, calls to mind an earlier observation Smithson had about driving towards the never-moving horizon line of the Yucatan peninsula. In that case, the flatness of the landscape caused the distance to be eaten up in a “countless series of standstills”, like single frames. As he writes, “Space can be approached, but time is far away. Time is devoid of objects when one displaces all distances.



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The car kept going on the same horizon.”² In essence, with *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson overcomes the tyranny of this linear displacement, introducing a curve into the path of time.

By using the film to curve this path of time back to the Jurassic era, Smithson posits a higher sense of scale to the jetty itself. As Smithson states, “Size determines an object, but scale determines art... The *Spiral Jetty* could be considered one layer

2. Robert Smithson, “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,” in Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*.



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within the spiraling crystal lattice [of the Great Salt Lake], magnified trillions of times.” Where the sculpture of the jetty magnifies space, the film magnifies time.

All of this leads to the very last shot, the aforementioned helicopter shot. The airborne camera chases Smithson around the spiral before pulling back to reveal the jetty as a whole—as well as the glorious red of the water with the lowering sun glinting off its surface. As the spiral unfolds before us in its eternal rotation, Smithson’s voice on the sound-

track intones the physical make-up of the jetty as observed through each of twenty cardinal directions:

“North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
North by East—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
Northeast by North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
Northeast by East—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water...”
[etc.]

The spiral, a circular form that turns in towards itself indefinitely, is at the same time transected by straight lines, each of which offer a matching pattern. We see it from above as Smithson encounters it from ground level. Thus material and time, in this instance, is both circular and linear—the form, of course, of cinema.

In the end, the film *Spiral Jetty*, becomes a link between the artwork’s own relationship to the passing of geologic time and the cinema’s ability to manifest this passing. Smithson’s discoveries along the way of making a film about this process delivers us a film that is not *just* a documentary of an artwork, but also an important articulation of the state of cinema.

In a way, the spiral creates a vertiginous leap to bring us to that other great film about a jetty and the scale of time. That Smithson's first film can reverberate so well with a classic by Chris Marker (each has its own natural history museum!) speaks to how the history of film can create its own spiral of ever unfolding revelations and how time itself eventually captures the imagination of whoever deems to turn a camera on.

Robert Smithson Filmography

Swamp with Nancy Holt, 1969

Spiral Jetty, 1970

essay by Chris Kennedy

produced on the occasion of

Early Monthly Segments #33: Jack Chambers + Nancy Holt

+ *Robert Smithson* Toronto, November 21, 2011

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