In the late 20th Century, writing became, to many artists, a crucial element of the artistic practice. For no one is this truer than for Robert Smithson. However, it is also true that Smithson is one of the more difficult artists to pin down in terms of understanding exactly the relationship between his artwork and his writing. For someone like Donald Judd, the writing (Specific Objects for example) clearly states the values that he is going to uphold in his sculpture, and the sculpture is a follow-through of the critical concepts stated in the writing. There is a 1:1 relationship of writing to artwork in Judd’s work. For a group like Art & Language, on the other hand, the writing is the artwork. There is no separation. We find Smithson somewhere in between, functioning as everything from critic to author to fiction writer and everything in between. His writing is rarely as strictly critical as Judd’s or Art & Language’s, and his visual work is not always as directly linked to his writing as Judd’s is. Smithson’s writing often seems separate from the artwork, yet at the same time it is often very related. How can we understand the purpose of the writing in relation to the artwork? What model was Smithson using to relate his writing to his artwork, and vice-versa?

In important essay to look at in order to understand Smithson’s work is his 1968 essay, A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites¹. In it, he writes:

By drawing a diagram, a ground plan of a house, a street plan to the location of a site, or a topographic map, one draws a "logical two dimensional picture." A "logical picture" differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for. It is a two dimensional analogy or metaphor - A is Z.

The Non-Site (an indoor earthwork)* is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site in N.J. (The Pine Barrens Plains). It is by this dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it - this The Non-Site. To understand this language of sites is to appreciate the metaphor between the syntactical construct and the complex of ideas, letting the former function as a three dimensional picture which doesn't look like a picture.

Here, Smithson states clearly in his writing that the non-site is an indoor earthwork. I would like to suggest, however, that Smithson’s conception of the non-site is a far more overarching concept in his artwork, one that affects every aspect of Smithson’s art, not just his New Jersey non-site earthworks. All of Smithson’s work functions in a site/non-

---

site relationship, a way of working with logical thought and art that has been profoundly influential.

Smithson’s essays and sculptural works have a site/non-site relationship. But which is which? Smithson says that the non-site is a three-dimensional analogy for the thing it stands for. In this way, Smithson’s sculptures all function as non-sites for his ideas, which are given life in his writings (critical essays, less strictly critical works like *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, his writings in his own journal or notebook, etc.). The sculptures give his ideas a concrete, physical, visible place to go, similar to the way that the small non-site earthwork sculptures summarize or symbolize an entire New Jersey landscape within a small corner of a gallery. Smithson writes¹:

Between the *actual site* in the Pine Barrens and *The Non-Site* itself exists a space of metaphoric significance. It could be that "travel" in this space is a vast metaphor. Everything between the two sites could become physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions.

Smithson sees the space generated between the non-site and the site as a space of understanding uninhibited by physical restrictions and real-world problems. The sculptural work (the non-site) brings us into this space, and when the work is coupled with the site (the writing about the ideas present in the sculptural work), we are able to contemplate the ideas at play in an uninhibited and unencumbered way that would not be possible looking at only one of the halves (the writing or the sculpture) individually.

At the same time, the essays function as a non-site for the sculptural work. The sculptural work is a more accessible version of the ideas seen in the essays in the sense that it is visual, and thus more appealing to the majority of viewers. However, to view the sculpture one has to, in the best-case scenario, go to the gallery, and often with Smithson, one has to actually go to exotic desert locations to see the work. The essay is accessible in the sense that anyone can go to a newsstand or bookstore and buy a copy of the publication it is in, and thus own the work and familiarize him or herself with it. Furthermore, unlike work in a gallery, one can do whatever they want with the essay, and they have 24/7 access to it. The essays often also include photographs of the sculptural work, again making the work seen in gallery or desert spaces more accessible to the mass public audience. What we see happening is a mutual symbiotic site/non-site relationship between the sculptural work and written work of Robert Smithson, where both branches of Smithson serve to enhance, support, and to some extent advertise each other, making Smithson body of work more complex, more full of thought and content, and stronger.

This idea can be seen functioning in different ways in different Smithson works. In his 1969 work, *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1–9)*, Smithson traveled a trail of the Yucatan in Mexico, and along the way created small, site-and-moment-specific sculptures, which he then documented with photographs. After the trip was done, Smithson wrote an essay called *Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan* (1969), which was published in *Artforum* and included photographs of the mirror displacements. In this

---

case, the sculptures only exist in the real world for a short period of time, a moment experienced only by Smithson. The viewer comes into the work only through the reproductions, which are understood equally through the writing and the photographs. The work is meant to exist only as a reproduction, not as an original; in this we see a very democratic kind of work, that can be owned by institutions and ordinary people for the same exact price (the price of the issue of the publication). The photographs tell the tale of the moment. They show the reflection of the mirrors from one perspective, when in reality the reflection on the mirrors was constantly changing, both due to the movement of nature (clouds, etc.) and the shifting viewpoint of a living and moving viewer (Smithson). They show the short period in which the sculptures actually existed. They are documentation of the lifespan of the sculptural work. What the text in this case does is show the life of the pieces before and after the moments when they were realized as complete sculptures. In the writing we see the Mexican traditions that Smithson was thinking about while making these earthworks, and we learn about the history of the land that the temporary mirror pieces are interacting with. The photographs focus primarily on the mirror pieces themselves, while the text spends most of its time talking about Mexico and Mexican history, with the mirror pieces usually brought in to show how they interact with this history. The photographs show a moment in history that we know to be passed, and thus imply momentariness and temporariness. The text on the other hand, with its numerous references to history, and also to the unending nature of time (the way the abstractions seen in the mirrors never end as time marches on, the way that the history of the land comes into play with the very current existence of the mirrors as past meets present), makes us expand our understanding of the work as simply an element of the larger scheme of nature. The work exists only to highlight Smithson’s ideas about nature and time, something that is not necessarily clear when presented with photographs alone. The text adds expansive levels of complexity to the work, and gives the work a context. Another particularly interesting work to look at in terms of site and non-site is Smithson’s most well known work, Spiral Jetty (1970). Spiral Jetty is a site-specific earthwork located in the Great Salt Lake, Utah. The work is based around an American myth that there is a whirlpool at the center of the lake that connects it to the ocean. The spiraling form of the jetty is supposed to recall this whirlpool, but also is meant to be very static, unlike the whirlpool, implying more of a constant and impending natural force than the temporary natural phenomenon that we usually think of whirlpools as. Since this is a mythic, legendary whirlpool, the monumental consistency of the work suits the myth much better than something dynamic would. The spiral jetty is a non-site for the site of the lake, and for the myth and cultural history of the Great Salt Lake. The gestalt of this non-site is understood from far away, or from images of the jetty taken from a helicopter. The non-site and the site (since the surrounding landscape is what you see when standing on the jetty) are understood on another level when you walk on the jetty itself. However, this is only possible in certain years when the water level of the lake is low enough that the jetty is exposed and walkable. Furthermore, like the Yucatan Mirror Displacements before it, the Spiral Jetty exists to most people as photographs or film footage (although the jetty is permanent, unlike the Yucatan Mirror Displacements, it requires both significant time and funds to actually go visit, which is impractical or impossible for the majority of viewers). Also like in the case of the Yucatan Mirror Displacements, Smithson’s interest in the understanding of time are exposed through his site / non-site
dialectic, specifically through the relationship of sculpture to literary work, however in this case the literature is American mythology instead of Smithson’s own essay work. The sculpture is meant to display consistency, yet sculpture, especially work that exists only (to most people) in photographs. This understanding of consistency, as stated before, does not come explicitly from the sculpture, but instead from the knowledge of the myth of the Great Salt Lake, which would in this case be the site that the jetty itself, the non-site, activates. The site / non-site dialectic enhances the earthwork, and at the same time the relationship of the earthwork to the myth enhances the way one thinks of the myth. Both the site and the non-site are fueled by each other, and the work on a whole benefits immensely from this way of looking at it.

This interrelationality between such different facets of work as visual art and written essays, used to provide levels of depth to the work, has been revolutionary. It is an element of mixed media and interdisciplinary work that has not been discussed much: that the use of multiple mediums, multiple approaches, gives your work a conceptual depth often that it would otherwise lack. There are more sources for answers to the questions that viewers might have. This use of multiple different venues to get at the same ideas gives the viewer many different options and sources from which to come at the idea and understand it. This is the idea we see in Smithson’s literal non-site sculptures: a non-site gives you a partial understanding of a complex system, which leads you into the site, where you continue your journey into a full understanding of the issues at hand. The site / non-site dialectic has become on the most important legacies of Smithson, and is certainly crucial to understanding his work.
Robert Smithson, *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1 – 9)*, 1969