

IMAGINATIONS

REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE ■ JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES



IMAGINATIONS

JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imagination.yorku.ca>

The Mise-en-scène of a Decade: Visualizing the 70s

October 29, 2018

To cite this article:

Pomerantz, Kaitlin. "Image and Discursive Landscape: Roaming the Land Art of the American Southwest." *Imaginations*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2018: Web (date accessed), pp. 109-113. DOI 10.17742/IMAGE.p70s.9.1.8.

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.p70s.9.1.8>



The copyright for each article belongs to the author and has been published in this journal under a [Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial NoDerivatives 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/) license that allows others to share for non-commercial purposes the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal. The content of this article represents the author's original work and any third-party content, either image or text, has been included under the Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act, or the author has provided the required publication permissions.



Doubles diptych (*Spiral Jetty*; *Double Negative*) 2016

IMAGE AND DISCURSIVE LANDSCAPE: REFLECTIONS ON ICONIC LAND ART OF THE AMERICAN WEST

KAITLIN POMERANTZ

Abstract | *The writer, a interdisciplinary visual artist focusing on landscape and land use, took a trip in the fall of 2016 through various iconic land art sites with Texas Tech University's Land Arts of the American West program. Immersive engagement with sites such as Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty (1968) and Michael Heizer's Double Negative (1969-70) offered the opportunity to reflect—critically and experientially—on the ways that the land artists' speculations on natural history and humanity's experience of landscape resonate both with the planned degradation of the sites, and our new, more fraught relationship to environmental change.*

Résumé | *L'auteur, artiste visuel interdisciplinaire se concentrant sur le paysage et l'utilisation du terrain, a effectué un voyage à travers divers sites artistiques iconiques dans le cadre du program Texas Tech University's Land Arts of the American West. Un travail d'immersion dans des sites tels que la Spiral Jetty de Robert Smithson (1968) et le Double Negative (1969-70) de Michael Heizer lui ont offert la possibilité de réfléchir—de façon critique et expérimentale—à la façon dont les spéculations sur l'histoire naturelle et les expériences humaines sur le paysage chez les artistes du paysage se font l'écho de la dégradation planifiée des sites et de notre nouvelle relation tendue avec le changement environnemental.*

Two Photographs

This writing unpacks two photographs that I made while traveling through the American Southwest in fall 2016, just prior to the nation's presidential election. The photographs feature iconic representations of Robert Smithson's 1968 *Spiral Jetty* and Michael Heizer's 1969-70 *Double Negative*—the images by which I first came to know these artworks—projected onto our van, alongside the two sites as they currently exist. In these deliberately composed images, I sought to juxtapose the static view of these documents with the view offered by my experience in the moment. I also meant to highlight the physical degradation and transformation of the works over the decades since their making: in the case of Smithson's, that there was, in that moment, no water surrounding the jetty; and with Heizer, the complete erosion of the walls of the *Negative's* gashes. In considering these iconic images alongside the real artworks and landscapes that they represent, I wanted to bridge some kind of gap in the way that we learn about art and the actual experience of art—the pilgrimage to seek it, the trekking and sweating within it—and to reflect on the role of the image as both invitation and possible red herring to a landscape's greater complexity. I also seek to open questions about the relevance and legacy of these works today, not only in light of the physical landscapes around them that have shifted, but also the political.

Image as Invitation to Artwork

I encountered the canonical works of Land Art, as most do, through images. This was some time in my early 20s as an art history student at the University of Chicago, as I discovered Lucy

Lippard and expanded ideas of where art can be and who can make it. Images of the works—a spiral made of rocks, gashes in the earth, and others—acted as postcards, deliberately composed pieces of landscapes meant not just to be seen through the plane of photography but visited in the round of sculpture and inhabited as landscape. The origin stories of these works, in a different way than sites built by druids or other bygone communities or civilizations, left me with a complicated curiosity. The works were created by individuals: white male modernists making monumental marks in the landscape, made possible by the funding of a female heiress of industry. Witnessing the works firsthand seemed like a necessary step towards grasping the meaning and effect of these projects.

Over a decade after I first took interest in the work and went on to become an artist exploring issues of land and landscape myself, I finally made the trek. I joined a group of artists, architects, and students on a program called Land Arts of the American West based out of Texas Tech University—a rambling journey to major earthworks, ancient ruins, Indigenous structures, uranium mines, missile test sites, and more. Our visits to these sites were multiday camping excursions within and among them. This is how I found myself, at the sites of *Spiral Jetty* and then *Double Negative*, waking before dawn to fumble around in the dust and wind with equipment and a rental van to stage the two photographs that would allow me to more pointedly consider the entanglement of image and real-life experience, and the ensuing intellectual and experiential negotiations of intersections of these two modes.

Spiral Jetty

Arriving at Spiral Jetty, my focus was immediately drawn to all that surrounds the jetty. After noting its surprisingly diminutive size and taking the obligatory walk-run to its end,¹ my senses extended outwards. It was the walk itself, directed by the spiral form of the work, that encouraged this extension of the senses—a concentric 360-degree orientation and walking meditation. After that initial sojourn, I barely paid the spiral itself much mind, focusing instead on what lay beyond the spiral: entropic forces that I had understood as a sort of poetic conceit in Smithson's work, writ large in different elements of the landscape. Entropy was visible in everything: the atmospheric conditions (gale-force winds), the bright pink halophytic Great Salt lake (undrinkable, barely touchable, terminal), the wildlife (teeming flies, glimmering salt-encrusted pelicans who had touched down in the waters of the lake only to be consumed by those waters and rendered flightless), the relics of tourism (toilet-paper bits jumping through the sagebrush), and the relics of industry (the looming factory buildings of the defunct MagCorps plant, visible from the end of the jetty across the lake).² So entrancing was this moribund whorl of conditions that the spiral itself became a mere sign pointing outwards in all directions, deflecting attention from itself to say, *look there, and there, and there*. The *pièce-de-résistance*, entropically speaking, was a second jetty, a dark twin, which lay just a short distance from Spiral Jetty. At this site, oil pilings and derrick pieces stood erect, each like its own Ozymandias. I observed in my notebook, "the most alive thing we saw was a half-dead sparrow stuck in fresh black tar bubbling up from the earth." Oil Jetty, as this second jetty is called, was a former drilling site that never proved financially viable, and was mentioned, albeit briefly, in Smithson's

writings. This veritable junkyard of abandoned dreams and schemes recalls Smithson's passage from *The Monuments of Passaic*, "Passaic seems full of holes compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures" (52).

At Spiral Jetty, the images through which I had come to know this work were mere invitations to the work itself, which was, in itself, an invitation into a complex and unique landscape functioning as a sort of microcosm for Smithson's greater artistic, philosophical, and metaphysical concerns. As Francesco Gagliardi articulates in *Performance, Land Art and Photography*, "It is the nature of photography to be selective, to offer only partial views of a reality that extends, both temporally and spatially, beyond the instant captured by the camera." Following this, Smithson thus made the work—and its documents—into a kind of semiotic. Spiral Jetty, in its documents and even more so in the flesh, exists as a drawing and as a sign. As such, it is less a focal point than a starting point, one that accepts the constant flux around it, asking us to monitor and observe.

Double Negative

If entropy could be said to be the experiential leitmotif of Spiral Jetty, *edge*—that liminal shift in surface—could be said to define my experience at Double Negative. Morman Mesa, on which the work is situated, into which it is carved, is a flat expanse of harsh desert terrain, disrupted only where the mesa ends and overlooks a lush valley, and by the two trenches of the sculpture, which function as ersatz ridges

into a shallower abyss.³ Upon arriving at Double Negative, also during gale-force winds, I shoved my way against the air first toward the edge of the sculpture, and then towards the edge of the mesa. Like a dog ascertaining the layout and limits of a room, I needed to know where things began and ended. Without these vertical drop offs, the space seemed dizzily planar and endless.

Photographs I had seen of Double Negative did not give much of a sense of the relationship between Heizer's trenches and those of the mesa itself, this elegant echo. Unlike Smithson, who employed auxiliary media such as photography, film, and writing to amplify his projects,⁴ Heizer has promoted a view that Double Negative can only be experienced physically, firsthand, and has never officially supported any photography or other related documents. About this work, Heizer asserts, "There is nothing there, yet it is still a sculpture," emphasizing his interest in locating the merit of this work in its form as a sculpture comprised of negative space, created through a process of removal. This statement also downplays much of the beauty of the work, which is that there is *everything there*: rocks, earth, plants, scorpions, wind; mesa ridges that echo the ridges of his sculpture; and the harsh desert forces that bleach bones, which have also eroded his massive gashes. The collective Post Commodity's conceptual/sound artist Raven Chacon's recent words about the land artists of the 1960s come to mind: "they just continued the destruction of the earth, and continued to go and colonize different places that they thought were theirs" (*Through the Repellent Fence*). Indeed, Heizer's gestures seem to be more about marking territory, about claiming of space, than about inviting a kind of engagement with it. Ironically, this creation (or destruction) here has come to be in a state of total reclamation by the

persistent earth. Whether Heizer articulates it or not, the work directs us toward the land from whence it came, the earth which it displaced and which is gradually filling it back up, consuming it. It is this consumption, of the work by the land which it attempts to mar, that I view as the interesting aspect of the work: the kind of withering monumentality of man's colonial ambitions. Returning to Ozymandias, it is the toppled and decayed being—and not the once-erect, colossal status—that makes the poem.

Artwork as an Invitation to Landscape

Spiral Jetty and Double Negative are both, due to respective sets of ecological conditions, in states of decomposition. Spiral Jetty, which once peeked out of the water of the Great Salt Lake and then for several years was completely submerged, is now completely dry and at risk of being buried in salt particulate. Double Negative is crumbling, and as Heizer explains, will continue to do so unimpeded. The works have become, and perhaps always were, barometers for ecological change. In the same way, these works have also functioned as measures of what was considered appropriate or possible regarding the relationship between artist and land. When tracked upon each other—the ecological and the social—these works can be seen as shifting, if vanishing, monuments of the anthropocene that point at possibility, power, and loss of control.

My photographs pluck a moment from my experience of relating image to reality. Like a fly in a vanitas painting, or Zoe Leonard's sun photographs, they hover in a space of bardo—futile testimony to a present that is already past, a firsthand personal experience that through documentation becomes democratic and loric, and a visual discourse on discourse itself.

Discursive Landscape

If the landscape consumes the works, these early images become records, the works become images, and the earth continues on, as it were.

Works Cited

Gagliardi, Francesco. "Performance, Land Art and Photography." *MAP Magazine*, no. 23, August-September 2010.

"MagCorp Magnesium Chloride Plant, Utah." *Center for Land Use Interpretation*, <http://clui.org/ludb/site/magcorp-magnesium-chloride-plant>. Accessed 16 July 2018.

Smithson, Robert. "Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey." *Artforum*, vol. 6, no. 4, December 1967, pp. 52-57.

Through the Repellent Fence. Directed by Sam Wainwright Douglass. America Reframed, 2017.

Notes

1 This is the same walk-run that Smithson does in his 1970 film *Spiral Jetty* (produced by Robert Smithson, with the assistance of Virginia Dwan, Dwan Gallery, and Douglas Christmas, Ace Gallery director).

2 From The Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Land Use Database*: "This remote plant employs a few hundred people in an intensely industrialized site on the edge of the Great Salt Lake. It produces all the magnesium metal made in the United States, a material used mostly in metals. For many years, according to the EPA, this plant was the nation's worst air polluter, releasing hundreds of tons of chlorine per day from its stack, which was around 90% of the chlorine emitted into the atmosphere from all sources nationwide. After a federal lawsuit was filed against the company in the late 1990's, claiming nearly \$1 billion for

environmental infractions, the company that owned the plant, MagCorp, filed for bankruptcy protection. A new company, called U.S. Magnesium, now operates the plant, and has cleaned up much of its emissions, releasing a few tons of chlorine per day, as opposed to a few hundred tons, as it did in the 1980s." [<http://clui.org/ludb/site/magcorp-magnesium-chloride-plant>]

3 This abyss grows ever shallower as the walls of the pieces crumble inward.

4 Surrounding *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson produced a film *Spiral Jetty* (1970), published writings ("The Spiral Jetty", 1970, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Nancy Holt, New York University Press), and authorized photographs by photographer Gianfranco Gorgoni.