

Revisiting Robert Smithson in Ohio: Tacita Dean, Sam Durant and Renee Green.

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In *Art in America* September/October, 1966, there is a portrait of Anthony Caro, with photographs of his sculpture in settings and landscapes that suggest English gardening. One work, *Prima Luce* 1966, painted yellow, matches the yellow daffodils peeking out behind it, and it sits on a well-cut lawn. I know the sculptor prefers his art indoors, but the fact that this work ended up where it did is no excuse for thoughtlessness about installation.[...]

Clement Greenberg's notion of "the landscape" reveals itself with shades of T.S. Eliot in an article, "Poetry of Vision." Here "Anglicized tastes" are evoked in his description of the landscape. "The ruined castles and abbeys," says Greenberg, "that strew the beautiful countryside are grey and dim," shows he takes "pleasure in ruins." At any rate, the "pastoral," it seems, is outmoded. The gardens of history are being replaced by sites of time. -- Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" (1968)(1)

Sometimes cruel, sometimes dry, but always acute: Robert Smithson. As the above passage so adroitly attests to, the guiding principle behind all his output was the workings of time - here wittily played out under the cover of a critique of the preceding generation of artists and critics, the so-called formalists. But where a good formalist artwork suspended time, a piece by Smithson could harbour an almost schizophrenic range of temporal patterns: they were sites of time. The otherwise dissimilar practices of London-based artist Tacita Dean, Los Angeles-based Sam Durant and New York-based Renee Green share a fascination with one of Smithson's principal sites of time, *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970). By focusing on their respective pilgrimages to this particular work, it soon becomes clear how each artist recasts Smithson's own complex sense of temporality. In one instance, this even turns the snowballing Smithson reception topsy-turvy.

Given that both Green and Dean primarily use photography and video to fashion their responses to *Partially Buried Woodshed*, it is necessary to first undertake a brief exegesis on how Smithson's deployment of photography figures in the production of his sites of time. Smithson is perhaps the only figure of the sixties to overcome the ubiquitous hurdle facing artists working within the genre of land art, namely, the inevitable subsumption of the temporal patterns of the site-specific work beneath those inherent to the technological medium.(2) Whether it is photography or film, this holds true. Think of key works by the likes of Richard Long or Ian Hamilton Finlay that deploy these mediums to document earthworks. In each case major problems arise, as the grit of the site is lost to the gloss of the image. By comparison, since his earliest earthworks, Smithson developed a number of infallible strategies to see him neatly over this hurdle: refer to them as his temporal tactics - his way of combating that inevitable tomb, the camera.(3) These tactics are numerous but

each one is predicated on the montage principle and carried through with the greatest aplomb. In no particular order they list: the assemblage of film through the montage technique, the development of the non-site, the use of the negative image in photography and, above all else, the insistence that key works be assembled together from a cacophony of objects, texts and images.

The non-sites are by far Smithson's most incisive reflections on temporality and art. Then, too, they are the only occasions wherein a number of the different mediums mobilised separately in Smithson's most ambitious earthworks come together in one place at one time. Because the non-sites dispense with the notion that there is an original work to deviate from in the first place, the possibility of the earthwork being frozen is eradicated. Instead, different temporal patterns are built into the work from its very inception. Here the montage technique does its most work -- not surprising given that montage is the act of bringing incompatible fragments, each with their own respective temporality, into collision. The non-sites consist of obsidian samples placed in a metal bin (this replaces the earthwork), behind which sit both a map and a series of photographs of the site the obsidian has been removed from. Elsewhere with Smithson, the viewer is constantly reminded that only half of the plot is in front of them at any one time. In such cases, the act of viewing is a peripatetic one -- as a text or film, or whatever it may be, has to be tracked down. The complex temporality at work in the non-sites is key to the three artists discussed here, albeit fed through their respective responses to Partially Buried Woodshed.

Consisting of a woodshed with twenty cartloads of earth piled on top of it until the central beam cracked, Partially Buried Woodshed provoked immediate discussion upon its realisation. It was there -- in Kent State University, Ohio -- for anyone to go visit. Ever the incisive thinker, Smithson knew he would be forced into documenting the work for its effective dissemination by the art press. So while taking a number of "straight" shots of the woodshed, he also ordered up a series of negative prints -- something he had taken to doing since the mid-sixties. As before, these prints tended to heat up the image. It was as if the documentary print -- the very thing usually lost to the timelessness of the archive -- had been flung into a furnace.⁽⁴⁾ Rather than freezing the site-specific work, and thus subsuming its own specific temporal patterns under the generic ones of the documentary image, Smithson here created a further work that extended Partially Buried Woodshed. The earthwork could therefore only be successfully translated into the image once a photographic equivalent to entropy was found.

Just months after the work was installed, four people were killed by members of the National Guard during student protests on the campus. One student even turned the woodshed into a memorial of the event by chalking up "May 4, Kent '70" on its facade. Smithson responded by producing an anti-war poster incorporating an image of the work. Both Durant and Green have taken Smithson's response further by dealing with how this tragic event might affect contemporary perceptions of Partially Buried Woodshed. The distance they traverse -- between the late sixties and the late nineties -- begets a number of odd temporal patterns, structuring both their responses. In the drawing, Upside Down Shelter (1998), Durant collages Smithson's work into the political climate of the time, surreptitiously injecting a reference to the Rolling Stones' infamous mishap at Altamonte in 1969, an event that is often taken to mark the end of an epoch.⁽⁵⁾ Its partner drawing, Let it Loose/Woodshed (1998), scatters the titles to a handful of the Stones' songs from their gloriously chaotic album Exile On Main Street (1972) throughout the cartloads of earth that are about to take the woodshed near to breaking point. With their literal play on visual pun, Breaking Down and Let it Loose are the most poignant among them. In both

sixties becomes an enduring nightmare with the turn into the seventies. Durant's *Reflected Upside Down and Backwards* (1999) is premised upon the same cultural shift; on this occasion though, Durant butts together two models of the woodshed. Replete with a CD player and four speakers, the installation blasts out Neil Young's *Ohio*, a song that specifically references the events of May 4, 1970. The contours of the uppermost woodshed are charred to a crisp, and so the building is just about recognisable (surely a nod to the one in Ohio); alternatively, the woodshed underneath remains unscathed. The four speakers surround the work and face inwards, in mimicry of the looped process of referencing it turns on. By carrying over the montage technique into sound as well as the object, Durant cannily updates Smithson's non-sites, especially their staccato sense of temporality, which is played through by incorporating two time periods into a single work.

Green's *Partially Buried* (1996) also brings into play a variety of media, including video. But while Durant's *Reflected Upside Down and Backwards* is melancholic, at times even macabre, Green's *Partially Buried*, a complex of installations, images, texts and videos, is more strident, didactic even, grappling with a number of individuals' specific encounters with *Ohio* in 1970, her own included (she actually grew up there).(6) As a part of the installation, books written about the cataclysmic event are balanced on top of chunks of cement, apparently all that remains of *Partially Buried Woodshed* today. In the video section to the work, Green interviews a number of people from the surrounding area about the event.(7) During her own auto-interview, Green recalls that her mother was attending a workshop at Kent State during the massacre, while she, then only ten years old, watched news coverage of the events to a soundtrack consisting of the Jackson Five and Sly Stone. Punctuating the various interview passages is both a series of textual passages and archive footage of the earthwork from 1970. While the textual passages recount various scraps of information otherwise absent from the contemporary scenes shot by Green, the archive footage shows assistants making the earthwork. Throughout *Partially Buried* Green also highlights the role of African Americans in the events of May, 1970, herewith continuing her critique of the way their presence is often glossed over by white historians. Driven by the participant/observation method, *Partially Buried* presents more of an ethnographic sense of time and place, as telescoped through Smithson's earthwork and the events contemporary with its realisation. Therefore, it is not surprising that Green should reflect ethnography's recent fascination with montage and auto-ethnography.(8)

Completed three years later, Tacita Dean's video work, *From Columbus, Ohio to the Partially Buried Woodshed* (1999), also privileges the technique of the fragment.(9) Now the cut-up technique is pressed into service towards a different end. Dean commingles the very same rough archive footage of the production of Smithson's earthwork already used by Green along with shaky contemporary shots of both herself and a colleague searching for the exact location of the shed. *From Columbus, Ohio to the Partially Buried Woodshed* begins with a successful attempt to find the University campus. Then, following more desultory map reading, the approximate site of the earthwork is located. What follows is a hilarious fumble to identify the precise location of Smithson's earthwork. At one point, Dean even enlists the guidance of a local student. Sprawled out on the grass, the student sluggishly conjectures that the woodshed is "that-a-away" (he points to somewhere off screen); when, according to Dean's hand-written instructions it is, rather, in precisely the opposite direction. Eventually something like the concrete foundations of a small building are found and investigated. But given that Green removed a number of these concrete blocks for her installation three years earlier, hardly anything remains! So, their search ends abruptly. Both Dean -- and by extension the viewer -- are not quite sure as to whether this is the actual site of *Partially Buried Woodshed*. Either way, the video wraps up with Dean

the distance, in a scene akin to something from Truman Capote's novella *The Grass Harp*.⁽¹⁰⁾ In Dean's video, the political implications of the landscape highlighted by Durant and Green's visits are eased out of the spotlight. As a result, the video shuttles between Smithson's and Caro's very different takes on the landscape. In point of fact, such is the antinomy at play in *From Columbus, Ohio to the Partially Buried Woodshed*, that Dean, contra-both Smithson and Caro, produces a pastoral site of time.

By premising her work on this antinomy, Dean introduces a riff between her response to Smithson's earthwork and Green and Durant's. Due to the nature of this riff, her work constitutes a provocative anomaly within the reception of Smithson. Indeed, rather than simply following the now sacrosanct Smithson, Dean moves against him: both freezing time with pastoral images of the Ohio campus while simultaneously disrupting it with flashbacks to the campus' tumultuous history. To end on Dean, then, means to scramble Smithson's concepts put forward in the opening quote: for in *From Columbus, Ohio to the Partially Buried Woodshed*, "sites of time" are inseparable from "the gardens of history." In this sense, perhaps the pastoral flourishes of Caro's sculptures so loathed by Smithson are, ironically, key to any future reworking of his earthworks.

NOTES

(1.) Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, California: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 104-105.

(2.) A recent essay by Michael Newman deals with the role of medium in Dean's work ("Medium and Event in the Work of Tacita Dean," Tacita Dean, ed. Clarrie Wallis, London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000.) Here, however, it is the role of video that is of interest, hence the notion of the medium and its apparatus are not relevant. An interpretation of Smithson and Dean could be established along these lines, but instead the trajectory would commence with Smithson's film, *Spiral Jetty*.

(3.) See Smithson, "Art Through the Camera's Eye," in *The Collected Writings*, op. cit.

(4.) James Lingwood was the first to analyse these photographs in "The Entropologist," Robert Smithson: *Le Paysage entropique*, Marseille: Musees de Marseille, Reunion des musees nationaux, 1993.

(5.) For an extended discussion of this particular work see James Meyer, "Impure Thoughts: The Art of Sam Durant," *Artforum*, April 2000.

(6.) For a transcript of some of these interviews see the catalogue *Renee Green: Shadows and Signals*, Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 2000.

(7.) Brian Wallis provides an extended commentary on the political implications of this work in "Excavating the 70s," *Art in America*, September, 1997.

(8.) See George E. Marcus, "The Modernist Sensibility in Recent Ethnographic Writing and the Cinematic Metaphor of Montage," in *Visualizing Theory*, ed. Lucien Taylor, London: Routledge, 1994. See, too, Green's ethnographic diary in *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn, de-, dis-, ex-*. Vol. 4, ed. Alex Coles, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000.

(9.) The first substantial reading of Dean was undertaken by Barry Schwabsky in "The Art of Tacita Dean," Artforum, March 1999.

(10.) Of course, such difficulties in locating Partially Buried Woodshed arise because the work had been bulldozed in 1984 by order of the campus authorities, despite Smithson's stipulation it be left to fall into ruin.

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Excavating the 1970s - installation art, Renee Green, travelling exhibition

Art in America, Sept, 1997 by Brian Wallis

"History," wrote Robert Smithson in 1967, "is a facsimile of events held together by flimsy biographical information" -- which is another way of saying that we understand history not merely through representations and narrative, but through tangible artifacts and concrete human experience. When Renee Green began a quixotic search to find Smithson's lost 1970 earthwork *Partially Buried Woodshed* at Kent State University, her goal was in part to reclaim a segment of the past and to locate within it aspects of her own identity. This quest was documented in her recent installation "*Partially Buried*" at the Pat Hearn Gallery in New York.

On a small modernist table near the entrance to "*Partially Buried*" Green displayed a curious still life, consisting of a box of paperback books by James Michener, a black-and-white aerial photograph, and several palm-sized slabs of concrete. As it turns out, the fragments of concrete are about all that remains of Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, a metaphorical anti-monument in which earth was piled on the roof of an abandoned woodshed until its main roof beam cracked. But all the objects on the table, including the concrete fragments, refer in different ways to the event for which Kent State is most famous: the National Guard massacre of four student protesters in May 1970. Smithson's earthwork, erected just months before the Kent State shootings, became associated with that event as a kind of inadvertent memorial. (Smithson subsequently made an antiwar poster incorporating an image of this work.) The Michener books include, among his famous historical sagas, a bland nonfiction account of the killings that he wrote in 1971 for the *Reader's Digest* Press (and which includes the warning, "This could be your university. The students ... could be ... your sons and daughters. This could be your community."). And the aerial photograph maps the site on the campus where the shootings occurred.

VISUAL ART: Can you tell what it is yet? No? Good
Independent on Sunday, The, May 9, 2004 by Charles Darwent

As Mike Nelson's pieces go, Triple Bluff Canyon is, as the artist himself puts it, "low on doors". Doors have been big in Nelson's work until now, punctuation marks to his spatial grammar. Visitors to *The Deliverance* and *The Patience*, his installation at the 2001 Venice Biennale, were faced with a pair of them in each room. Choose one door and you found yourself in a minicab office or an Islamic prayer hall. Choose the other and you were in a corridor, or a telephone booth, or in the dingy bedroom of a cheap motel.

As always in Nelson's work, the way you moved through the space was itself charged with meaning. Politically, visitors were faced with the depressing realisation that choice was an illusion. All doors were unmarked and what lay beyond one was as dreary as what lay beyond another: a brief (but disturbing) glimpse of the lives led by the economic migrants who lived in Nelson's fictive structure.

In formal terms, the lack of in-between spaces - doors opened straight from one room into another - made your progress cinematic, as though you were proceeding by jump-cuts. This, in turn, made the experience of *The Deliverance* and *The Patience* hard to pin down. Instead of being armed with the comforting knowledge that you were here and the art was over there - on a wall or a plinth or whatever - you were the art: an actor in a drama that became both public and personal.
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So the lack of doors in Nelson's new Oxford installation might seem a little risky, given that he does them so well. Indeed, doorlessness seems to be part of the point of Triple Bluff Canyon. Walk through the only doors in the show - two pairs of 1920s numbers in the mocked-up cinema foyer Nelson has built as its entrance - and you're quickly aware that things have changed.

These doors lead nowhere in particular, and you go through them to find yourself looking at the back of what is obviously a stage set. Instead of immersing you in an alternative reality, Nelson's new doors warn you that you're going to be on the outside looking in; which is a more usual way of seeing art, though it seems likely to weaken Nelson's hand. Actually, it doesn't. I can't think of an artist who knows more about looking - the political and formal charge of how we're made to see - and that, at least, hasn't changed.

Triple Bluff Canyon's historicised way of seeing tells us that we're dealing with history. In one of the installation's upstairs rooms is a two-thirds-lifesize reconstruction of Robert Smithson's 1970 *Partially Buried Woodshed*: a work in which the land artist buried a shed under soil at Kent State University until it cracked. Nelson has re-buried Smithson's long-destroyed structure, so that our looking involves a double excavation: of our own memories of the earlier work, and of the thing that now lies under Nelson's 20 tons of sand. And the way we see the piece - the hut's raked perspective, the stillness of it all - seems painterly; so that the history isn't just in what we see, but in how we see it.

Another gallery holds an exact replica of the front room of Nelson's South London house; a messy take on Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost* with attendant demons. At the centre of this is a video by an American conspiracy theorist who finds masonic plots in corporate logos, projected off a convex mirror on Nelson's desk and onto the wall of the space in which his

the room is itself the re-working of another Nelson piece - and that that piece was based on Durer's woodblock, St Jerome in his Study - and you'll see that this new installation is modest in calling itself Triple Bluff Canyon. There are more bluffs in this work, more histories and more ways of reading them, than it is possible to count; which tells us something about historical certainty, though it's hard to be certain of what.

What this show does confirm is that Nelson's brilliance isn't in his literary cleverness so much as in his understanding of sight. You can, if you like, read his new work as political in the same way that Smithson's was. Smithson's buried shed suggested the repressiveness of the Nixon regime. Nelson's shed - it's filled with oil drums and set in an Iraqi-ish desert - suggests the corruption of Bush's. But this history is only one way of reading the piece, and even then is made up of all the ways that we - and Nelson - see it. Which makes Triple Bluff Canyon a vastly complex work, and also, in these dark days, a profoundly moral one.

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Mike Nelson at the Modern Art Museum Art in America, Nov, 2004 by Ossian Ward

British artist Mike Nelson has made his name as the king of salvage installation. This magpie frequenter of flea markets and thrift stores utilizes everything from reclaimed doors to discarded telephones and broken toys to create his disorienting, space-devouring works. Unlike previous Nelson adventures, notably in the Venice Biennale and Turner Prize exhibitions of 2001, his latest show was not one all-encompassing environment but a show in three acts, hence the (punning) title, "Triple Bluff Canyon."

First came a disheveled cinema foyer with boarded-up box office and dog-eared posters for *Alien*, an inauspicious no-man's-land of a beginning with three numbered doors urging the visitor to choose his or her own multiplex destiny. Just one of the exits worked, but only to reveal the unpainted wooden structure of the false lobby, Nelson's first "bluff" being a film set of a cinema.

Further on, the next space again took us behind the scenes, this time to the artist's front-room-cum-studio in South London, which he re-created right up to the ceiling rose. This was not the first time Nelson displayed his studio as a set within an exhibition, but here one was not granted entrance and could merely peer into the installation through the glassless window bays. This shift from total immersion to theatrical distance suggests Nelson wants the act of viewing to be as important as any phenomenological concerns. A projector on a table in the room bounced a film off a convex mirror and back to the gallery wall, but this was no cinematic experience. Instead, a little-known U.S. conspiracy theorist named Jordan Maxwell ranted on about the Knights Templar and the Illuminati, claiming that these groups had been plotting a New World Order with roots in ancient Egypt.

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As if on cue, the next installation offered a giant pyramidal sand dune. A rickety, narrowing wooden corridor that resembled a disused mineshaft seemed to offer a passage through the tons of sand but culminated in a Nelson trademark: a dead end lit by a naked lightbulb. With no way through, the viewer was forced to retrace the path back to the ground-floor information desk and up a flight of stairs to the museum's first floor, where the partially submerged wooden structure was visible in a sea of sand. The image paid homage to Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), built at Kent State University, in which earth was piled onto an existing structure until the central beam cracked. The exhibition catalogue highlights the connection between Smithson's work, which was politicized after student demonstrators were killed on campus months later, and Nelson's desert remake, which included discarded oil drums referencing the Iraq war and occupation. However, there is another link between the two artists. Smithson lamented the stale atmosphere of the gallery ("museums are tombs," he once wrote) and so took his work outside, while Nelson goes some way to reinvigorating the museum with works of art that suggestively transport the outside world into the white cube.