

## “Like Two Guys Discovering Neptune”: Transatlantic Dialogues in the Emergence of Land Art

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IN FEBRUARY 1969 THE *EARTH* EXHIBITION AT THE ANDREW DICKSON White Museum, Cornell University, New York, brought together European and American artists for the first time under the aegis of the term *earth art*. The quotation in my title is taken from the comments of one participant in *Earth*, Neil Jenney.

His comments were in response to an audience question about whether the experience of actually digging in the earth is better than seeing the exhibition:

No, man, it'd be a drag! One of the really nice things about this show . . . is that . . . everybody that's in earth is in it. . . . That's like having a show compiled of everybody that was born in the spring. In other words they do have something in common in that they use a similar vehicle. I think our expressions are basically different. I think the main reason this show happened was because people in England and Holland and Germany and different parts of America were doing it at the same time. Like two guys discovering Neptune.<sup>1</sup>

Jenney's comments emphasize both synchronic and more cosmic aspects of earth (or land) art's emergence, and give a sense of its perceived geographic limits at that time. They give cues for the themes of this essay.

The simultaneous, independent discovery of Neptune in 1846 is often cited as an example of some kind of mystical synchronicity, and it may be that this is all Neil Jenney intended by way of analogy. But the story of the discovery of Neptune is also a narrative of intense competition and national chauvinism between England and France, the two homelands of the discoverers of Neptune. By pushing Jenney's analogy a little further one might find parallels with the art world rivalries between Europe and America, in which the emergence of land art is inextricably enmeshed. The two youthful “discoverers” of Neptune—John Couch Adams, a twenty-seven-year-old Englishman, and Urbain Jean Joseph Leverrier, a thirty-five-year-old Frenchman—are reported to have met on friendly terms, despite the intense rivalries between the nations and institutions to which they belonged. Likewise, in 1969 “two guys” met on friendly terms at the *Earth* exhibition at Cornell; their artistic exchange and individual activities

during that year were to give shape, substance, and names to the emergent phenomenon under discussion. Gerry Schum, a German filmmaker, curator, and television pioneer, and the American artist Robert Smithson play important roles in this narrative, but they are by no means the only guys in the story.

This essay attempts to restore the following aspects to their proper centrality in an account of the emergence of land art: the network of actual journeys and artistic encounters between artists on both sides of the Atlantic, through 1969, that contributed to its definition and development; and the importance—imaginatively, collectively—of simultaneous pioneering journeys in outer space. Land art was conceptualized and named in a year when artists crossed frequently between continents and humans traversed the tract of outer space between Earth and its nearest satellite for the first time. It was in 1969 that the first Apollo moon landing was made, and in that same year there was great mobility in the art world, particularly between the United States and Europe.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of the discussion are events, meetings, and journeys that took place between two landmark exhibitions: in the United States, the aforementioned *Earth*, curated by Willoughby Sharp, which opened on February 11, 1969, and in Europe, *When Attitudes Become Form*, inaugurated by Harald Szeemann in Bern and shown in a slightly different configuration in Krefeld, Germany, before reaching its final destination in Britain. This last installation was curated by Charles Harrison at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London, where it opened on August 27, 1969. All but one of the artists included in *Earth* also participated in *When Attitudes Become Form*.

Between these two exhibitions, a third exhibition from 1969 also plays a central role in my narrative. On April 15, 1969, Gerry Schum and Ursula Wevers' *Fernsehgalerie* broadcast the first television exhibition—and the first exhibition with the title *Land Art*—on German national television (fig. 1). All of the artists in Schum's television exhibition *Land Art* were included in *When Attitudes Become Form*. Further, *Land Art*, like the *Earth* exhibition, included German, English, Dutch, and American artists—as delineated by Jenney. Schum

Figure 1

Gerry Schum and Ursula Wevers, title frame from *Land Art*, Fernsehgalerie Gerry Schum, television broadcast, 1969. © Ursula Wevers. Photo: Getty Research Institute



traveled to the *Earth* exhibition in Ithaca with the express purpose of making personal contact with artists he wanted to include in his television exhibition. The artists he met included Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, and Robert Smithson, with whom he went on to film works in March 1969. Within a month, he broadcast the films—a turnaround time that gives some indication of the frenzied speed of activities during that year. Schum shot his film for *Land Art* in the environs of the Cornell campus in March, and in late August both Schum and Smithson were present for the opening of *When Attitudes Become Form* in London, where the film was screened as an integral part of the exhibition.<sup>3</sup>

Schum's *Land Art* envisaged land art as a TV phenomenon in Europe, just before landing on the moon became a global TV phenomenon (fig. 2). *Land Art* was explicitly made for TV and staged for its physical format—as were the Apollo moon landings.<sup>4</sup> The works in *Land Art*, and Jan Dibbets's work in particular, reified the television set as an art object. In Dibbets's film a tractor ploughing a vast trapezium on the beach translates into a neat circumnavigation of the television screen.<sup>5</sup> In 1969 the moon became a TV object, capable of changing human consciousness and in turn capable of being shaped by it. An important German gallerist, Konrad Fischer, was able to perceive this at the time when he remarked in an interview in 1971: "The extension of consciousness can come about through any new object: the moon on television, for example."<sup>6</sup> As was the case with Dibbets's film for *Land Art*, in Fischer's comment the television—both image and apparatus—becomes an object. Fischer's Düsseldorf gallery was the first to give one-person shows to many of the British and European exponents of land and earth art, and to mount the first European shows of many of the Americans, including Smithson.

In the transcript of a talk, published in *Interfunktionen* magazine in 1971, Buckminster Fuller says: "Never mind that space stuff, let's get back on earth, let's be practical, let's be blasé about the moon shoot."<sup>7</sup> It is intriguing that Fuller's assertion—the need to get back on earth—is precisely what one might see at stake in the emergence of earth art. A return to earth was part of the common cultural environment in which land art emerged, even if reactions

Figure 2

K. J. Sleeman, *First Man on the Moon at 3:56 am, 21 July 1969*. 35 mm slide. © K. J. Sleeman. Photo courtesy of the artist



Sleeman, "Like Two Guys Discovering Neptune,"  
Anglo-American Exchange in Postwar Sculpture, 1945–1975 (Getty, 2011)

to what they returned to varied widely. Moreover, the transcript of Fuller's talk was published alongside documentation of land- and earthworks in the Cologne-based magazine *Interfunktionen*, further suggesting connections between the earth in space (Fuller's "Spaceship Earth") and the earth in land art.<sup>8</sup> This connection was reaffirmed more recently in a 2004 monograph about *Interfunktionen* magazine (where events in the USA-USSR space race feature prominently in a chronology that runs alongside an account of the magazine's history).<sup>9</sup>

Although it has lived on in popular culture and the imagination, the Apollo project's manned missions to the moon proved to be a phenomenon with a brief life. They were eschewed by the intelligentsia at the time and heavily critiqued by a growing politically engaged counterculture. Once actualized as science fact rather than science fiction, moon exploration was popularly denounced as banal, ordinary, and a waste of funds. Apollo 17 made the last manned moon landing in December 1972, with further planned missions cancelled.<sup>10</sup> No human has set foot on the moon since.

By the end of 1973, fewer than five years after *Land Art* emerged as a term in art discourse, two figures central to its early articulation were dead. Smithson famously died in a plane crash at the age of thirty-five while surveying the site of his last major earthwork—or first posthumously completed earthwork—on July 20, 1973, four years to the day after the moon landing. Gerry Schum died when he was thirty-four years old, by his own hand, on March 23, 1973, his body undiscovered in his mobile home for several days.

Both men played definitive and fervently proselytizing roles in relation to their creations. Both inaugurated their personal vision of the land art phenomenon in exhibition form and gave names to its early manifestations. Smithson had introduced the idea of Earthworks in his writing and curating—in articles in *Artforum* magazine and in the *Earthworks* exhibition at the Dwan gallery in New York in October 1968. At the time of his death, an obituary notes, "Gerry Schum's name was already recorded in the *Neue Brockhaus*, the leading German encyclopedia, under the heading 'Land-Art.'<sup>11</sup> Their personal presence was a key factor in both men's strategies, whether it was Smithson holding forth in the bar or Schum requesting to travel with his film to present it in person—as he did for the showing of *When Attitudes Become Form* in London.<sup>12</sup>

By 1973, we see the bathetic end of Apollo, the tragic end of both Smithson's Earthworks and Schum's version of land art as represented via his TV and video galleries, and the beginning of land art's historiography. Each of these dramatically interrupted or prematurely terminated histories left a compelling ellipsis in history—one that would be taken up by new interlocutors, but with varying periods of delay in different countries. Land art's place in the art historical canon was by no means assured at the time of both men's deaths.<sup>13</sup>

Land art's inclusion in *When Attitudes Become Form* is typical of its position in 1969; it was a part or fragment of other categories, including arte povera, conceptual art, environments, and happenings. In these early years even the names by which land art became more widely known were subject to intense critical disagreement.

Wrangles over terminology, including those of the curators of *Earth* and *When Attitudes Become Form*, are evidenced in Harald Szeemann's essay "How does an exhibition come into being?"—a diaristic account of organizing the *Attitudes* exhibition. In his entry for December 15, 1968, Szeemann records: "4:00pm With Dennis Oppenheim I visit Willoughby Sharp, who is now

working through each of the four elements in exhibitions. This is a misunderstanding. Earth is a bunch of nonsense.”<sup>14</sup> Sharp is hardly less dismissive of his own term than Szeemann, writing in the catalogue to the *Earth* exhibition: “There is no earth art, there are just a number of earthworks, an important body of work categorized under a catchy heading.”<sup>15</sup> In retrospect, in 1998, Brian Wallis asserts that “The whole land art movement was, according to early accounts, a scrappy and faddish set of pranks carried out by a small group of self-described nature nuts.”<sup>16</sup> Conversely, and more typically of recent reassessments of the period, Alison Green writes in a footnote in her 2004 essay on *When Attitudes Become Form*: “Lucy Lippard, who was involved in many of the early Conceptual art projects, argues in *Overlay* that land art is the umbrella concern of the period.”<sup>17</sup>

These contrasting assessments of the internal coherence and wider importance of land art show a sharp distinction between how land art was perceived during the lifetimes of Schum and Smithson and how it was perceived in accounts written subsequently, particularly those published a decade or so after their untimely deaths. In accounts written in the 1980s land art was taken more seriously, art historically, but connections between land art and the space race became less prominent, relegated to brief mentions as contextual detail, as for example in John Beardsley’s 1984 book, *Earthworks and Beyond*.<sup>18</sup> According to Beardsley the moon landing is just one of the events in the complex historical moment summarized in a few sentences as “an era of space exploration, and of social unrest caused by an unpopular war and racial antagonisms.”<sup>19</sup> The role of individuals who forged and sustained artistic dialogues across the Atlantic—such as Schum, Smithson, or Jan Dibbets—is similarly downplayed in Beardsley’s account of land art. Intimate connections across geographical distances are overlooked in favor of theoretical ones with a longer historical pedigree, and actual interpersonal connections between European and American artists are thwarted by an account that separates American and British variants of earthworks into separate chapters. Schum does not appear at all in Beardsley’s account, and Dibbets merits a single-line mention. The interpersonal connections and earth-moon communications that were important factors in the emergence of land art have only recently returned to prominence in accounts that are often informed by the reemergence of contemporary dialogues.

Assiduous readers of the first edition of the writings of Robert Smithson, published in 1979, would have found a few explicit references to space travel and the moon landing.<sup>20</sup> Rather more references emerged in subsequent publications, namely in Eugenie Tsai’s *Robert Smithson Unearthed* in 1991, and in the revised edition of Smithson’s writings edited by Jack Flam in 1996. Both books included essays which were being published for the first time.<sup>21</sup> Many of these references by Smithson are in interviews, conversations, cowritten articles, or correspondence—in short, in dialogue. The evidence that has allowed more recent accounts to make a direct connection between Smithson’s work and the Apollo moon landing has derived from Smithson’s personal correspondence and private papers,<sup>22</sup> and from anecdotal or oral testimony, most particularly from Smithson’s widow, artist Nancy Holt.<sup>23</sup> For example, Ann Reynolds’s compelling account comparing Smithson’s “Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan” in *Artforum* magazine with NASA’s photo documentation of the moon landing in *Life* magazine<sup>24</sup> is only made possible with access to Smithson’s archive and through Reynolds’s methodological decision to give

"equal consideration" to all the material in the archive, including "a large variety of magazines, tourist pamphlets, postcards, books, and records."<sup>25</sup>

Calvin Tomkins wrote in the *New Yorker* in 1972: "In the light of space exploration and the ecology movement" earthworks may "strike future art scholars as historically inevitable."<sup>26</sup> Tomkins goes on to quote Smithson discussing the making of his "nonsites": "Smithson sees a somewhat ironic parallel between this activity and the Apollo missions to the moon. 'The moon shots are like very expensive nonsites,' he says."<sup>27</sup> It is much later, in the reminiscences of Smithson's widow, that this statement is linked to a call from *The New York Times* to ask Smithson "about what his thoughts were about the moon shot."<sup>28</sup> Smithson's response was not published at the time. Perhaps this is not surprising when one considers how oppositional Smithson's views seem to the vision of world peace presented in the editorial of that very newspaper at the time of the first Apollo lunar orbit. In an article titled "Riders on the Earth," Archibald MacLeish wrote: "To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence in which it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers in that bright loveliness in the eternal cold—brothers who know now that they are truly brothers."<sup>29</sup> Whereas this contemporary commentator saw Apollo's images of the earth heralding a new era of peace and unity, Smithson perceived only limits: a vision of future frenzy over the earth's finite space and resources. He wrote: "Perhaps the moon landing was one of the most demoralizing events in history, in that the media revealed the planet Earth to be a limited closed system, not unlike the island in *Lord of the Flies*."<sup>30</sup>

In his 2004 book, *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape*, Ron Graziani uses Smithson's analogy between his work and the Apollo moon landing to connect and contrast Smithson's activities beneath the earth in 1969 and the Apollo astronauts in outer space: "Although the artist was underground at the Cayuga mines, 1969 would also be the year the scientific community reached a milestone in its quest for a new future in space. NASA had planned the first US walk on the moon for the middle of that year. And on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong indeed successfully accomplished what Smithson would describe as 'a very expensive nonsite.'"<sup>31</sup>

The neat synchronicity of Graziani's contrast between Smithson's chthonic and NASA's cosmic enterprises is only possible with the elision of time between February and July. It is Schum's *Land Art* film—made with Smithson in the Cayuga mines and broadcast on television in April—that mediates the distance, both temporal and geographic, between the mines in New York state and Apollo on the moon in July. In fact, as Holt affirms, Smithson watched the Apollo 11 moon landing with Holt and Joan Jonas at the studio of Charles Ross—in the company of other artists but witnessed, as for most people in 1969, live on TV.<sup>32</sup> In between February and July, Smithson famously traveled to the Yucatan, a journey recounted in his article for *Artforum*.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps serendipitously, Smithson departed for his journey to the Yucatan on the very day Schum's *Land Art* was broadcast on German television: April 15. If Smithson's magazine article invented a past and showed the readers of *Artforum* what it looked like, it was Schum's *Land Art* exhibition that presaged how millions would see the moon landing—mediated by television.

Two of the archetypal landscapes that feature in early works of land art also served as earth equivalents for the moonscape in moon-landing rehearsals, reenactments, and filmic re-creations: the beach and the desert. Two of the

American works for Schum's *Land Art*, by de Maria and Heizer, were made in the desert. With one exception (Richard Long's sculpture, made on the inhospitable Dartmoor in England), all of the European works for Schum's *Land Art* were made on beaches. Both Flanagan's "Hole in the Sea" and Dibbets's work were made on the North Sea coast of the Netherlands.

On his way to the Yucatan and shortly after his return, Smithson made works in one of those quintessential early land art environments—the beach. Before traveling to the Yucatan, Smithson and Holt stopped off at Robert Rauschenberg's home in Florida. Smithson made an "upside down tree" work on Captiva Island. There is a photograph of him and Rauschenberg rolling the tree stump onto the beach in Robert Hobbs's book *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*.<sup>34</sup> Following his return to New York Smithson participated in an exhibition called *Letters on, or perhaps at, a beach*—Long Beach, New Jersey—with a work called *Urination Map of the Constellation Hydra*. Making connections to both cosmological and geological mapping, the *Urination Map* is aligned with the stars and with the geological history of the earth and involved urinating at a series of five points, predetermined by drawing an approximation of a map of the constellation Hydra onto a map of the New Jersey coastline.

Newly arrived on what was to be a momentous first journey to the United States, the British artist Hamish Fulton also participated in the *Letters* exhibition, which opened on July 5, 1969, and also included artists Keith Sonnier, Richard Serra, Philip Glass, and others.<sup>35</sup> These were important artists, encountered at a significant moment in Fulton's career, but of greater significance according to the artist was his encounter with the American landscape. Summer 1969 found him visiting sites important to the battles between Native Americans and European settlers. It was here that Fulton experienced an epiphany: "Instead of beginning my work gradually in England, I started almost suddenly in South Dakota, Wyoming, Utah, and Montana."<sup>36</sup>

Fulton's response upon his return to Britain was to reenvision his own familiar landscape. Perhaps this was the equivalent of Fulton's return to earth? In 1970 Fulton moved permanently to Kent, England, and in 1971 began making road walks. *Hollow Lane*, an artist's book consisting mainly of photographs with accompanying text, was published in 1971. It juxtaposes images from quintessentially British landscapes—notably the titular "hollow lane," a photograph taken on a 165-mile walk in April 1971 from Winchester Cathedral to Canterbury Cathedral along the route of the Pilgrims Way, "the main prehistoric thoroughfare in South-East England"—with images from walks in Iceland, Canada, and the United States. Near the end of the book is a narrative titled "The naming of an Arapahoe," which recounts a tale of how an American Indian called Crane became known as "Six Feathers" after an encounter with the healing powers of an eagle when injured in the landscape.<sup>37</sup>

Fulton was perhaps the first to draw a direct connection between Long's work and the moon landing in a text published in 1991. He does so with reference to perhaps the most iconic of Long's works: "'A LINE MADE BY WALKING ENGLAND 1967.' (fig. 3) First moon walk 1969".<sup>38</sup> Later in the text Fulton comments: "A line (made by) walking. In time, the sculpture will have disappeared, long before the commercialization of the word 'green' . . . and those footsteps on the moon."<sup>39</sup>

Fulton's text takes the form of an informal exchange, part of an ongoing dialogue—perhaps in imitation of the banter exchanged between walking

Figure 3  
 Richard Long (British, b. 1945), *A Line Made by Walking England* 1967. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS London. Photo courtesy of Haunch of Venison, London



partners, for Long and Fulton have made a number of walks together since their student days. In Fulton’s typically understated way, Long’s footsteps are made to anticipate the footsteps on the moon.

Walking on the moon was a distinctive and significant aspect of the Apollo project, and of Apollo 11 in particular. By the early 1970s the walk as an integer of land art had become emphatic. That this was felt more broadly in British art at the time is evidenced in Fulton’s commitment to being a “walking artist,” adopting, from 1973, the mantra “no walk, no work.”<sup>40</sup> But the idea of the walk as art in Britain is most directly linked to Long, and it was Long’s work that was referenced in works made at the very beginning of the 1970s by two of Long’s contemporaries from his time as a student in the sculpture department at St. Martin’s School of Art in London: Bruce McLean and John Hilliard.

Long as the walking artist was institutionalized enough to be subject to a characteristic spoof or homage by Bruce McLean. In 1970 he made the film *The Elusive Sculptor, Richard Long* by stalking Long, and including a sequence asking passers-by in a London park if they’d seen this mysterious walking artist.<sup>41</sup> In 1971 in another London Park, unbeknownst to either artist at the time, John Hilliard made *A Walk across the Park* on Hampstead Heath in London. Hilliard places the walking figure as the central motif of a work in



which a single photograph is cropped in four different ways to create a sequence of narratives.

The sculpture department at St. Martin's was a formative location in the emergence of land art in Britain, both through the influential reputation and innovative pedagogy of its teaching staff and the dynamics of peer group interaction among the student body. Three out of the four European artists in Schum's television exhibition, *Land Art*—Dibbets, Flanagan, and Long—had a St. Martin's connection.<sup>42</sup> Dibbets and Long were the only Europeans to be included in all three of the related exhibitions: *Earth* at Cornell, *Land Art*, and *When Attitudes Become Form*. Indeed, Szeemann credits Dibbets with the gesture that inaugurated his exhibition concept.<sup>43</sup> Dibbets is a crucial figure in the development of land art as both maker of work and facilitator of connections between people. He spent only a term at St. Martin's and suggested that it was not so much the studios and atmosphere of the school that made an impact on him as the "walk through the park" to get to the school. His first encounter with Long was similarly indirect, seeing a photograph of one of Long's works made by walking and recognizing in it an artistic fellow traveler. Dibbets was one of a large number of international students who were already well-established artists before they came to study at St. Martin's during the 1960s.<sup>44</sup> Although he was there for a very short time, its impact on him—and his on the fellow students he met, albeit fleetingly—was crucial. Dibbets was a crucial conduit between Long and the wider European and international art scene. In foregrounding artistic dialogue in the history of land art's emergence, his work and presence assume a far more central role.

One of the many international students who came to the school, and then stayed on to teach, was the South African sculptor Roelof Louw, who studied at St. Martin's from 1961 to 1964 and taught there from 1966 until the early 1970s. Louw is an intriguing sculptor because the development of his work spans both the abstract, constructed type of object sculpture being made at St. Martin's in the early 1960s and the more conceptual and site-specific practices. Looking at the work of students in the early to mid-1960s, one sees a similar transition from the constructed object to something less formally bounded and in direct dialogue with its environment. It is evident in the student work of Barry Flanagan, Fulton, Hilliard, McLean, and even George (Passmore, of the sculptors Gilbert & George).

Louw's usefulness as a transitional figure in this way is demonstrated in Charles Harrison's essay "Some Recent Sculpture in Britain," published in *Studio International* in January 1969; the essay focuses on developments at St. Martin's in the mid- to late 1960s.<sup>45</sup> The year 1969 found Louw making some decidedly land art-oriented works, and although he wasn't included in the exhibitions that defined earthworks—*Earth* and *Land Art*—his works for the London showing of *When Attitudes Become Form* articulate the earth in a comparable manner (fig. 4).

Louw's work was clearly considered in the context of land art at the time, as Charles Harrison's article "Roelof Louw's sculpture" makes clear. He describes a work by Louw as "iron poles placed around a hill, Hampstead Heath 1968"; later he states that "Art manifests itself primarily through our recognition of its human origin in relationship to its lack of function. Maiden Castle is history, archaeology, picturesque; 'fairy rings' in the grass are natural, curious, picturesque; iron poles placed around the base of a hill on Hampstead



**Figure 4**  
 Roelof Louw (South African, b. 1936),  
*Hampstead Heath* 1968. © Roelof Louw.  
 Photo courtesy of the artist

Heath are altogether different.”<sup>46</sup> Harrison’s footnote informs us at this point that “of course not all those who call themselves sculptors and operate in the landscape are in fact producing sculpture. Many of them are merely indulging a taste for the egocentric picturesque, the grandiose or even the Gothick. See Sidney Tillim’s irritating but provoking article ‘Earthworks and the new Picturesque’ in *Artforum*, December 1968.”<sup>47</sup> Tillim’s article was a review of Smithson’s *Earthworks* exhibition at the Dwan Gallery, and thus Harrison not only makes connections between contemporary works in Britain and the United States but is revealing of some British attitudes toward the American work at that crucial early moment.

In 1969 Smithson arrived in Britain in all his guises at once. In short succession, between April and August 1969, British audiences saw Smithson the minimalist sculptor in *Art of the Real* at the Tate Gallery (April 24–June 1); Smithson the writer when “Aerial Art” was published in *Studio International* in April 1969;<sup>48</sup> and Smithson the earth artist—in actual work and in person in the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* at the ICA. He received a somewhat lukewarm reception in certain quarters of the London art world. Barbara Reise, an American critic based in London, wrote: “Smithson’s ‘Non-Sites’ of photographs and material extractions from real-life rock-quarries are consistently less interesting than rock-quarries themselves”;<sup>49</sup> in private correspondence, she wrote: “Robert Smithson was here, hostile towards me (a British understatement) and talking up a storm.”<sup>50</sup> Some in Britain would already have been familiar with Smithson’s work from the pages of *Artforum* magazine (it was in the library at St. Martin’s, for example, from 1966 on), but few had the opportunity to see his work in actuality. Smithson continued to be poorly represented in public collections in Britain.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps some of the most intriguing responses to his work are from sculptors working in Britain, such as Louw.

If Louw’s work emerged out of a productive dialogue between the constructed and more environmentally oriented sculptural practices at St. Martin’s in the 1960s, in the 1970s his work and writing engaged in a productive dialogue with the work of Smithson—albeit posthumously. And in fact the unfinished nature of Smithson’s earthworks—the ellipsis they opened up in sculpture discourse—is precisely Louw’s point of departure. In his essay “Sites/Non-Sites: Smithson’s Influence on Recent Landscape Projects,” published in 1977, Louw

entreats his readers to join him on an imagined journey to the site of an unrealized Smithson site work. Louw writes:

Smithson's site works, it might be said, bind a style of physical action to geological circumstances. What then happens? Consider how the journey directed by Smithson's proposed project for Sprawling Mounds might operate. (While this massive labyrinth for strip mine tailings is unrealized, it might readily be re-enacted as an experience by visiting strip mine tailings and by wandering through mine dumps.) . . . The decision to travel to the site of this project is like setting out on an extraordinary pilgrimage to a wasteland. . . . Shortly the enormous white mounds come into sight. Their eroded, misshapen surfaces of whitish rubble and gravel affront one; they loom ahead like an abominable mess.<sup>52</sup>

Quarries might be pretty much the same wherever they are—hence Louw's suggestion that Smithson's work can be imaginatively reenacted in any similar landscape. But the reference to “whitish rubble and gravel” evokes the very particular quarry site and material chosen by Smithson for his work for the London showing of *When Attitudes Become Form*.

The geological circumstances of Smithson's work then are very specific. Smithson's work is made of chalk, a material that forms some of the most distinctive and archetypal landscapes of Britain—including that icon of Britishness, the White Cliffs of Dover. Formally, the quest for white fits with his search for particular colors in the landscape; the choice of chalk also has significance for Smithson's interest in geological time and in the concept of a dynamic earth of moving tectonic plates, explored in his work through the superimposition of different temporal mappings onto the contemporary landscape.

Smithson's work *Chalk-Mirror Displacement* (1969), made from mirrors radiating from a central axis and chalk fragments, existed simultaneously in the gallery at the ICA and in the landscape at Oxted Quarry (fig. 5). The location of the quarry is sometimes given in publications as Oxted, York, and it is possible that Smithson could have found a chalk quarry as far north in Britain as York, given that the chalk deposits in Britain extend as far northward as Flamborough Head on the North Yorkshire Coast. In the south and east of England chalk forms distinctive tracts of higher ground—the North and South Downs that meet the sea on the south coast. North of London the chalk extends through the Chilterns to the Wash, and then northward along the east coast to North Yorkshire. Given its proximity to London and other factors revealed in a site visit I made in 2008, it seems likely that the actual location was Oxted quarry in Kent.

Geologically, the landscape around Oxted quarry was formed by earth movements around sixty million years ago that folded the chalk—formed from the sea creatures and plants of an ancient ocean—and the underlying sand and clay into a dome. The high central part later eroded, exposing the older clay and sand beneath. Oxted Quarry is located on the northern ridge of the Downs. Immediately to the south, in the exposed clay and sand area of the Weald, is Saint Leonards and Tilgate Forest, where, in the early nineteenth century, the wife of doctor and geologist Gideon Mantell discovered the remains of a dinosaur, a tooth shaped like an enormous version of an Iguana's tooth—and the fossil that gave us the name *dinosaur*, meaning literally “terrible lizard.”<sup>53</sup> This

**Figure 5**  
 Robert Smithson (American, 1938–1973),  
*Chalk-Mirror Displacement* (Oxted Quarry),  
 Yorkshire, England, 1969. © Estate of Robert  
 Smithson/Licensed by VAGA, New York,  
 NY. Photo courtesy of James Cohan Gallery,  
 New York



term for dinosaurs was used by Smithson in his article “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,”<sup>54</sup> and it is perhaps fortuitous, but nonetheless significant, that in late summer 1969 Smithson’s travels in England led him to make art close to the site where a discovery in the British landscape inaugurated a new term in language.

As is typical in Smithson’s work, this quarry is in the near environs of a large city—in this case London—and in a landscape made by dramatic geological earth shifting and with a rich fossil record. Smithson’s preference for “backwater sites”<sup>55</sup> and “landscapes that suggest prehistory,”<sup>56</sup> as well as for particular geological formations, the detritus of millennia, and of more recent excavation, resonates with the choice of Oxted Quarry.

On a road map contemporary with Smithson’s visit one can see that the location of the quarry site is just off a main route out of London, near Gatwick Airport and on the edge of the North Downs. It is on the route of the ancient Pilgrims Way and adjacent to the route of a Roman road; indeed quarrying in this area dates back to Roman times. Visiting the area today one could argue that the history of this site continued to mirror aspects of Smithson’s work long after his actual mirror work departed. Disruption of the landscape continued with major road construction in the mid-1970s; now running parallel to the ancient pilgrims’ road is the M25, London’s orbital motorway, making the dialogue between human and geological time scales now even more visible and emphatic.

The Downs is also the very landscape Fulton made his own when he moved to Kent in 1970. Near the quarry site at Oxted one encounters scenes

reminiscent of Fulton's photographic work, made on this route in 1971, just a couple of years after Smithson's visit to Britain. While Smithson was working in Britain in the summer of 1969, Fulton was almost simultaneously exploring sites of profound historical significance in the development of America's identity. Both British and US sites were united in Fulton's *Hollow Lane* publication in 1971. A cultural exchange appears to be taking place. But if Fulton's encounter with the American landscape was acknowledged by the artist as an artistic epiphany, Smithson's encounter with the British landscape was very much played down in the first systematic study of his sculpture by Robert Hobbs. There is a vagueness about Smithson's trip in Hobbs's account. Hobbs records that "he [Smithson] and Holt visited Devonshire where they walked to little-known sites; they also travelled to Stonehenge, Weir's Wood, and Tintern Abbey. Smithson was as taken by ancient and medieval ruins as he was by depressed coal-mining districts and industrial sites."<sup>57</sup> Of the places named, some are specific, others are *types* of locations; some are famous sites, and one, "Weir's Wood," is not easy to find on a conventional road or tourist map.

The ambiguity in published accounts of the location of Smithson's *Chalk-Mirror Displacement* supports Louw's assertion—and indeed the evidence of Smithson's many unrealized projects for mine and quarry site reclamations—that Smithson's preferred sites were typical and generic types rather than specific locations. Yet in exploring Anglo-American dialogues in the emergence of land art, a reinvestigation of the particularities of Smithson's engagement with the British landscape on his visit in 1969 deserves some closer attention, and is I believe revealing, not only of the direction of Smithson's work at that juncture but of its dialogue with British landscape art generally and with the work of his British contemporaries in particular.

Rather than a neat set of cultural exchanges we have a complex array of intersecting journeys, anticipations, and real connections. Land art coalesced around a series of intense transatlantic exchanges and encounters with landscapes on earth in the year that humans first walked on the moon. Those exchanges and encounters, embedded in the deep structure of land art, continue to shape its topography. Land art is an artistic enterprise that began in the 1960s, was interrupted by tragedy among its earliest protagonists, and was reconfigured art historically in the 1980s, an era with strikingly different attitudes to landscape environments and lunar exploration than those that prevailed in the first decade of land art's emergence. An account that gives greater emphasis to transatlantic exchange, to the importance of British artists—and British landscapes—and that locates more centrally the importance of simultaneous extraterrestrial explorations, would begin to effect a realignment of the international history of land art. This is one small step in that larger project.

The research for this paper was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The author would like to thank Nicholas Alfrey, Stephen Bann, and Lynda Morris for their comments and suggestions on the paper.

## Notes

1 Neil Jenny in Robert Smithson, *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), pp. 163–64.

2 Carel Blotkamp described it as a "magical year" in the recent history of art, see "1969," in *Conceptual Art in The Netherlands and Belgium, 1965-1975*, eds. S. Heman, J. Poot, and H. Visser

(Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum and Rotterdam; NAi Uitgevers, 2002), p. 22. Dennis Oppenheim, who participated in both exhibitions, commented in retrospect: "If you read resumes you'll see that there was a lot of activity, a lot of important shows in 1969. Almost everyone was beginning to show in Europe for the first time. The *Land Art* show was one of a number of things that facilitated this exposure. Because remember, one is coming from absolute darkness into a public view. Almost all of the artists involved were unknown the year before." "Interview with Dennis Oppenheim by Barbara Hess," in *Ready to Shoot: Fernsehalerie Gerry Schum, Videogalerie Schum* (Düsseldorf: Snoeck, 2003), p. 86.

**3** Charles Harrison, "Grounds for Optimism: The Work of Gerry Schum," in *Ready to Shoot*, pp. 46–54.

**4** "The entire project, although by no means uncontested at the time, was a highly choreographed affair in which the rhetorics of scientific exploration and human endeavor coincided as neatly with its role as spectacular public entertainment as they had in the earlier expeditions of Cook, Livingstone, Stanley, and Peary. Live television transmissions, globalized through new satellite technology, connected the astronauts directly to a mass audience; night launches increased the drama of a burning inferno from which the elegant rocket escaped into pure, ethereal space; and the dates of missions were linked to public holidays, when mass audiences were better guaranteed." Dennis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 256.

**5** A video clip from the film can be viewed at <http://www.ursula-wevers.de>.

**6** Konrad Fischer interviewed by Georg Jappe, *Studio International* 181, no. 930 (February 1971), p. 71.

**7** *Interfunktionen*, no. 7 (September 1971), p. 62.

**8** This was the second issue of this Cologne based magazine to publish extensive documentation of such works in its pages: both issues 3 (1969) and 7 (1971) contained extensive photographic and textual documentation of earth and land art, under the title "land art / earth works."

**9** Gloria Moure, "Behind the Facts. *Interfunktionen*, 1968–1975," with "Chronology 1968–1975" by Dawn Leach, in *Behind the Facts: Interfunktionen, 1968–1975*, ed. G. Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2004), pp. 24–47.

**10** "After the last Apollo mission to the moon in 1972 and the Skylab missions in 1973, the American space program entered a quiet period. Except for the joint Apollo-Soyuz flight in 1975, no manned American spacecraft left Earth from late 1973 until April 1981, when the first Space Shuttle was launched." Frank White, *The Overview Effect* (Reston, Va.: American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 1998), p. 43. The "Laser Ranging Reflector" is the one surviving element of the Apollo project, still returning data from the moon to the McDonald Observatory in Texas, studying the rate at which the moon is receding from the earth (currently 3.8 cm per year). [http://www.lpi.usra.edu/lunar/missions/apollo/apollo\\_11/experiments/lrr/](http://www.lpi.usra.edu/lunar/missions/apollo/apollo_11/experiments/lrr/).

**11** Georg Jappe, "Gerry Schum," *Studio International* 185, no. 955 (May 1973), p. 236.

**12** Letter from Schum to Ann Lauterbach, July 30, 1969, Tate archive, London, 955/7/2/11 (ICA papers).

**13** There is considerably uneven development in land art's historiography with differing periods of delay in taking up and reintegrating these elements of discourse, marking distinct differences between the most compelling overviews of the phenomenon as articulated today compared to those that appeared to make sense to contemporary observers. There are also marked national differences. While this paper deals primarily with Anglo-American dialogues in English, the space travel connection seems to have played a more central interpretative role in German language publications. A chapter in Anne Hoorman's (posthumously published) book from 2007, "Die Künstlerische Erforschung der Amerikanischen Landschaft," explores the theme with reference to American land artists and refers to publications linking space exploration and land art by Thomas Kellein dating back to 1986. See Hoormann, *Medium und Material* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2007), p. 87, n. 4. The first comprehensive academic treatment of Schum's work—Christiane Fricke's (1995) Ph.D. thesis—was published by Peter Lang, in German, in 1996. There was no equivalent overview in English until the book that accompanied the exhibition *Ready to Shoot* in 2003, followed by a rapid assimilation of Schum into subsequent accounts.

**14** Harald Szeemann, "How Does an Exhibition Come into Being?" trans. Gerard Goodman, in *Painting Object Film Concept: Works from the Herbig Collection* (London: Christies, 1998), p. 41.

**15** Willoughby Sharp, "Notes toward an Understanding of Earth Art," in *Earth*, exh. cat. (Ithaca: Andrew Dixon White Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1970), unpaginated.

**16** Brian Wallis, "Survey," in J. Kastner and B. Wallis, *Land and Environmental Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 23.

**17** Alison M. Green, "When Attitudes Become Form and the Contest over Conceptual Art's History," in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, ed. Michael Corris (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 140, n. 18. I can't find this stated so explicitly in Lippard's book though it is certainly implied. L. Lippard, *Overlay* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).

**18** John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond* (New York: Abbeville, 1989), p. 7 (first published 1984).

19 Ibid., p. 13.

20 For example: Mel Bochner and Robert Smithson, “The Domain of the Great Bear” (*Art Voices*, Fall 1966); “What is a Museum?: A Dialogue between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson” (*Arts Yearbook*, 1967); Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, “Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson” (*Avalanche*, no. 1 [Fall 1970]); Smithson’s comments in “The Artist and Politics: A Symposium” (*Artforum*, September 1970) and Bruce Kurtz, “Conversation with Robert Smithson” (1972; first published in *The Fox 2* [1975]).

21 For example in Smithson’s letter to Gyorgy Kepes (1969) and in “Four Conversations between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson” (1969-70), edited by Eva Schmidt; first published in E. Tsai, *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), and subsequently reprinted in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996).

22 In the Holt/Smithson archive donated by Holt to the Archives of American Art in 1987.

23 For example: from Ann Reynolds’s interview with Holt (1997) about Smithson’s comments in response to the moon landing to *The New York Times*, see A. Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 282–83, n. 131; and about the impact of the moon landing on earthworks more generally, in conversations with Holt published in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum* (New York: Soho Press, 2000), p. 251: “The moon shot in ’69 was important, because it was the first time that we saw the earth as a finite entity. Earth art, of course, had already begun before the moon shot but the big sculptures, Bob’s *Spiral Jetty* and Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* weren’t done until *after* the moon shot. The nation was *ready* for something.”

24 Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey*, pp. 163–72.

25 Ibid., p. XIII.

26 Calvin Tomkins, “Maybe a Quantum Leap,” in *The Scene: Reports on Post-Modern Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), p. 129. First published in *The New Yorker*, February 5, 1972. My thanks to Lynda Morris for alerting me to this important source.

27 Ibid., p. 143.

28 Newman, *Challenging Art*, p. 251.

29 Editorial, *The New York Times*, December 25, 1968, cited in Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye*, p. 259.

30 Smithson, “The Artist and Politics: A Symposium,” *Artforum*, September 1970, reprinted in *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, pp. 134–35.

31 Ron Graziani, *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 90. Two sources for Smithson’s “very expensive non-site” comment were published in the 1970s. It appears in Calvin Tomkins, “Maybe a Quantum Leap”; the other is in the interview with Bruce Kurtz “Conversation with Robert Smithson” (1972; first published in *The Fox 2* [1975]). Tomkins reports a slightly more extended version of Smithson’s comparison, with more detail about other aspects of the Apollo mission that interest Smithson in relation to his investigations.

32 “I remember Bob and I went to see the moon shot on television at Chuck Ross’s studio and Joan Jonas was there, they were together then. And there was all this ho-hum business, there was this *attitude* like, ‘Oh, it’s nothing.’ But there was a *thrill* to it. And I thought it was so weird that everyone was putting it down.” Holt in Newman, *Challenging Art*, p. 251.

33 Smithson, “Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan,” *Artforum*, September 1969, reprinted in *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, pp. 119–33.

34 Photograph by Nancy Holt in Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 149.

35 The full list of artists participating in this exhibition is in the entry in L. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 106. The chronology in the catalogue to Fulton’s exhibition at Tate Britain in records for 1969: “Visits New York and meets Smithson, Nancy Holt, Richard Serra, and Keith Sonnier.” (“Chronology,” compiled by Ben Tufnell and Louise Hayward, in Ben Tufnell and Andrew Wilson, *Hamish Fulton: Walking Journey* [London: Tate, 2002], p. 114.)

36 Hamish Fulton, “Specific Places and Particular Events,” Hamish Fulton interviewed by Ben Tufnell, in Tufnell and Wilson, *Hamish Fulton: Walking Journey*, p. 106.

37 Hamish Fulton, *Hollow Lane* (London: Situation Publications, 1971).

38 These are two of four events at the beginning of Fulton’s text, the other two events are: “Roll over Beethoven 1956” and “North Face Eiger Direct 1966.” Hamish Fulton, “Old Muddy,” in *Richard Long: Walking in Circles* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1991), p. 241.

39 Fulton, “Old Muddy,” p. 245.

40 David Reason, “Tracking Fulton,” in *Hamish Fulton: Selected Walks, 1969–1989* (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1990), p. 7.

41 The film is listed in McLean’s section in the Whitechapel Art Gallery’s exhibition, *Live in Your Head* (London, 2000), under “Selected Solo Exhibitions, Films and Performances”: “1970 video, b/w, 10 min.”

- 42 Had the filming with Dutch/English collective "Eventstructure Research Group" worked out as proposed in an early prospectus for the exhibition, there would have been another artist with a St. Martin's affiliation in Schum's *Land Art*—the London-based Australian-born sculptor, Jeffrey Shaw. ERG's contribution would also have been located on a beach: "Waterwood Sandquake," Mittelmeer. See the "In Preparation" section in *When Attitudes Become Form*, exh. cat. (Bern, 1969), and, for why it didn't work out, see Ursula Wevers "Love Work Television Gallery," in *Ready to Shoot* (Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 2003), pp. 24–26.
- 43 "In the beginning was Dibbets's gesture to water a lawn on a table. But you cannot exhibit gestures." Szeemann, visiting Lucassen, in Szeemann, "How Does an Exhibition Come into Being?" in *Painting Object Film Concept*, entry for July 22 1968, p. 37.
- 44 Frank Martin referred to this when interviewed in 1997 for the *National Life Stories: Artists' Lives*, collection C466/58/01-07, tape 4 (F5907), side A, and tape 7 (F5910), side B, British Library, London (this copy consulted at the Henry Moore Institute library, Leeds), and there is evidence in the material in Martin's archive, now at Tate, of the nationalities of many of the students, with their countries of origin written onto sheets of student identity photographs.
- 45 Charles Harrison, "Some Recent Sculpture in Britain," *Studio International* 177, no. 907 (January 1969), pp. 25–33.
- 46 Charles Harrison, "Roelof Louw's sculpture," *Studio International* 178, no. 915 (October 1969), pp. 126–27.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 129, n. 4.
- 48 Smithson, "Aerial Art," *Studio International* 177, no. 910 (April 1969), pp. 180–81; an article that explored Smithson's project for the Dallas-Fort Worth regional airport, formative on the thinking behind his *Earthworks* exhibition in 1969.
- 49 Barbara Reise, "'Untitled 1969': A Footnote on Art and Minimalstylehood," *Studio International* 177, no. 910 (April 1969), p. 172.
- 50 Reise in a letter written to Dan Flavin, this section dated September 6, 1969, Tate archive, London, TGA 786/4/3 (Barbara Reise correspondence to and from family and friends, 1968–69).
- 51 For example, Tate did not acquire a work by Smithson until 2002 (*Ithaca Mirror Trail*, *Ithaca*, New York, 1969).
- 52 Roelof Louw, "'Sites/Non-Sites': Smithson's Influence on Recent Landscape Projects," *Tracks, a Journal of Artists' Writings* 3, nos. 1–2 (Spring 1977), pp. 7–8.
- 53 The Historic Map of Gideon Mantel is featured on the website *Geology of Great Britain*, © Ian West and Tonya West, [www.soton.ac.uk/~imw/Geology-Britain.htm](http://www.soton.ac.uk/~imw/Geology-Britain.htm).
- 54 Robert Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" (1968), in *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, p. 87.
- 55 Smithson in "Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art / Smithsonian Institution" (1972), in *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, p. 295.
- 56 Smithson, "Conversation in Salt Lake City" (1972), in *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, p. 298.
- 57 Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 171.