

HOLT • SMITHSON FOUNDATION INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Robert Smithson Bio

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Born in Passaic in New Jersey, Robert Smithson (January 2, 1938 – July 20, 1973) is an artist who expanded what art could be and where it could be found. For over fifty years his work, writings, and ideas have influenced artists and thinkers, building the ground from which contemporary art has grown.

[An autodidact, Smithson's interests in travel, cartography, geology, architectural ruins, prehistory, philosophy, science fiction, popular culture and language spiral through his work. In his short and prolific life, Smithson produced paintings, drawings, sculptures, architectural schemes, films, photographs, writings, earthworks and all the stops between. From his landmark earthworks to his 'quasi-minimalist' sculptures, Nonsites, writings, proposals, collages, detailed drawings and radical rethinking of landscape, Smithson's ideas are profoundly urgent for our times. By exploring the conceptual and physical boundaries of landscape Smithson raised questions about our place in the world that are profoundly urgent for our times.](#)

In 1954 Smithson received a two-year scholarship to study at the Art Students League in New York City. Post-war Abstract Expressionism influenced the young Smithson, and the late fifties and early sixties found him immersed in the vitality and experimentation of the burgeoning downtown New York art scene. Smithson's first solo exhibition, with emphasis on "expressionistic work," took place in 1957 at Allan Brilliant's gallery in New York. The artist's peripatetic life took him to Rome in 1961, when George Lester offered him his first solo international exhibition at Galleria George Lester, where he explored quasi-religious subject matter. Smithson's early paintings, drawings, and sculptures made between 1961 and 1963 were filled with references to concrete poetry, popular culture, and science fiction. Influenced by minimalism, in 1964 Smithson declared his quasi-minimal sculptures made from industrial materials of metal and mirrored plexiglass as his "mature" works, distancing himself from his early expressionistic paintings and drawings. In 1965 he exhibited these works at the American Express Pavilion, New York World's Fair.

Smithson is best known for his earthworks *Spiral Jetty* (1970 Great Salt Lake, Utah), *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* (1971, Emmen, The Netherlands), and *Amarillo Ramp* (1973, Amarillo, Texas). At age thirty-five, while photographing *Amarillo Ramp*, Smithson died in a small airplane accident, along with pilot Gale Ray Rogers and photographer Robert E. Curtin. Nancy Holt, Richard Serra, and Tony Shafrazi completed *Amarillo Ramp* one month after his passing. Prior to this earthwork trilogy, Smithson created temporal entropic earthworks, made to have a finite life rather than transform over long periods of time. The ephemeral earthworks *Asphalt Rundown* (1969, Rome), *Glue Pour* (1969, Vancouver), *Concrete Pour* (1969, Chicago), and *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970, Kent State) speak poignantly to issues of time and the

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An autodidact, Smithson's interests in travel, cartography, geology, architectural ruins, prehistory, philosophy, science-fiction, popular culture, and language spiral through his work. He was fascinated by concepts of duality, entropy, and questions of how we might find our place in the world. In his short and prolific life, Smithson produced paintings, drawings, sculptures, architectural schemes, films, photographs, writings, earthworks, and all the stops in between. From his landmark earthworks *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), which celebrate their fiftieth anniversary in 2020, to his "quasi-minimalist" sculptures, Nonsites, writings, projects and proposals, collages, detailed drawings, and radical rethinking of landscape, Smithson's ideas are profoundly urgent for our times.¶

human condition. Following the completion of *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill*, his only earthwork outside of the United States, Smithson became increasingly interested in land reclamation projects and working with industry, a topic he first explored in 1966 in a series of unrealized plans for Dallas-Fort Worth Airport.

Smithson's writings on art, western culture, graphic texts, and interviews are published in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, edited by Nancy Holt (1979, New York University Press, with an expanded version edited by Jack Flam published in 1998 by University of California Press).

Smithson's works are held in numerous museum collections, including: Art Institute of Chicago; Dia Art Foundation, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery, Washington DC; National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Recently his work has been presented in solo exhibitions at the following institutions: University of Queensland, Brisbane (2018); Montclair Museum of Art, New Jersey (2014); Dallas Museum of Art, Texas (2013); and Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland (2012). In 2004 an important retrospective opened at Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, traveling to Dallas Museum of Art, Texas and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 2005. [In 2020 the exhibitions *Hypothetical Islands* and *Primordial Beginnings* were presented at Marian Goodman Gallery London and Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris.](#)

From 1973 Nancy Holt cared for the Estate of Robert Smithson, who she married in 1963. In 2014 she willed Holt/Smithson Foundation into being, which continues the creative legacies of both Holt and Smithson.

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