Beyond Perception: The Ethics of Contemporary Earth Art

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October, 2006

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of PhD

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-32151-5
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-32151-5

Abstract

This dissertation considers the aesthetic strategies and ethical implications of contemporary earth art. Drawing from feminist and ecological critiques of phenomenology, it posits that an ethical preoccupation with the earth is identifiable in works that stage the artist's inability to condense natural phenomena into an intelligible art object thereby evidencing the earth's excess beyond the field of perception. Contemporary earth art has the paradoxical goal of evoking the sensorial plenitude of the earth without representing it as such. The first chapter analyzes Robert Smithson's monumental sculpture, the *Spiral Jetty* (1970), and suggests that the artist deploys the emblem of the whirlpool to express the artwork's constitutive rupture from the earth, a loss that the artwork subsequently discloses in its textual modes, including an essay and a film that document the construction of the sculpture. Chapter two examines the recurrence of the whirlpool motif and other anagrammatic shapes such as black holes, tornadoes, shells and nests, in earth art from the last three decades. In contemporary practices the whirlpool allegorizes an ethical attentiveness to the earth's alterity; not only does it thematize the artwork's separation from perpetual natural regeneration, it signals the artist's withdrawal from the attempt to construct a totalizing perspective of the site. Chapter three addresses performance and installation works that feature the contact between the artist's body and the earth, and in particular, the body's role in delineating the point of friction between the earth's sensorial plenitude and its resistance to representation. Earth artists thereby assert the body as a surface that separates itself out from the earth and receives sensation of it as other. The conclusion summarizes the main arguments of the previous chapters through a discussion of a three-part installation by Chris Drury entitled *Whorls* (2005).

Acknowledgments

This dissertation was written with the generous support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture, and McGill University. I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Christine Ross, whose advice and feedback were invaluable. Many thanks go to Aron Vinegar, whose insistent belief in the power of imaginative thinking is an inspiration to me, and whose encouragement of this project and critical eye have been indispensable. Thanks also to Alexandra Boutros for her astute comments and recommendations for various parts of this thesis. I am eternally grateful to the many family members and friends who have unfailingly stood by me over the course of the PhD program: my mother, Elisabeth Gedge; my father, Gus Boetzkes and his partner Marian Morry; my grandparents Lloyd and Airini Gedge; Pauline Gedge; Tim, Dayna and Rachel Boetzkes; Deirdre and Malcolm Querney; Wendy London; Roger Harrison; Ami Brodribb; Karine Tsoumis; and Clara Khudaverdian. A special recognition goes to Tant-pis, whose gentle presence at my side every day made me look forward to another day of writing.

Résumé

Cette dissertation analyse les stratégies esthétiques et les implications éthiques du mouvement d'art contemporain « earth art». En s'appuyant sur les critiques féministes et écologiques de la phénoménologie, il y est démontré qu'une préoccupation éthique de la terre peut être identifiée dans le contexte d'œuvres mettant en scène l'incapacité de l'artiste à condenser les phénomènes naturels en objets d'art intelligibles, démontrant ainsi l'excès de la terre hors du champ de perception. Au cœur de l'objectif du « earth art » s'articule un paradoxe: évoquer la plénitude sensorielle de la terre sans toutefois la représenter. Le premier chapitre présente une analyse de la sculpture monumentale *Spiral Jetty* (1970), oeuvre de Robert Smithson. Il est suggéré que l'artiste utilise l'emblème du tourbillon afin d'exprimer la rupture constitutive de l'œuvre d'art par rapport à la terre. Cette perte est révélée dans le cadre des documents textuels accompagnant l'œuvre: un essai et un film documentant la construction de la sculpture. Le second chapitre explore la récurrence du motif du tourbillon et d'autres formes anagrammatiques, comme par exemple le trou noir, la tornade, le coquillage et le nid tels qu'ils apparaissent dans les ouvrages du « earth art » des trente dernières années. En pratiques contemporaines le tourbillon est employé comme allégorie d'une préoccupation éthique pour l'altérité de la terre. Le tourbillon incarne simultanément la séparation de l'œuvre par rapport à la régénération perpétuelle de la nature et le renoncement de l'artiste face à la construction d'une perspective totalisante du site. Le chapitre final se penche sur des performances et des installations présentant un point de contact entre le corps de l'artiste et la terre. Une attention particulière est dirigée vers le rôle du corps dans la démarcation du point de friction entre la plénitude sensorielle de la terre et sa résistance à la représentation. Conséquemment, chaque artiste présente le corps en tant que surface se séparant de la terre et recevant une sensation en tant qu'autre. La conclusion offre un résumé des principaux arguments soulevés à travers une discussion de l'œuvre *Whorls* (2005), une installation en trois parties de l'artiste Chris Drury.

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Introduction - Earth, Art and the Nature of Site

Since the inception of the earth art movement of the late nineteen-sixties, there has been a proliferation of new aesthetic strategies that evidence the earth in terms of its spontaneous changes, its temporality, and the intangible qualities that constitute the environments in which we live. More than just using the land as a sculptural medium, contemporary earth artists question how the elusive presence of nature informs the ways we define ourselves in relation to the planet. Though it would seem that the monumental sculptures that characterize late-sixties earthworks, and the diverse practices of contemporary earth art (including performance, photography and installation) are so different as to warrant separate aesthetic and historic categorizations, these two generations are connected by their elucidation of the earth as an ethical concern. The human relationship to nature as a central problematic of art emerged in early earthworks and has come to its fruition in art of the last twenty-five years. This dissertation does not only seek to explain the diversification of new visual media in the last three decades, it identifies the roots of a particular preoccupation with nature at the origin of the earth art movement, and examines this pivotal time through the lens of environmental ethics in order to cast new light on contemporary earth art. What concerns me is not merely the transition from modernist objects to postmodern practices; it is the question of how the earth prompts this redefinition of art and art historical analysis.

Recent scholarship in art history frames the earth art movement in the rubric of site-specificity. As I will argue, however, while earthworks are indeed often defined by the parameters of their location in time and space, the category 'site-specific' is not precise enough to express the ethical stakes of the artworks. Indeed, the notion of site-specificity is now so ubiquitous to contemporary art as to be only a rudimentary description of earth art's theoretical concerns. Though the discourse of site-specificity has contributed much in terms of evaluating the economic, phenomenological, aesthetic and discursive structures that situate an artwork, or more subtly, the inextricability of the artwork's form from the

paradigm of site it espouses, it often equates the notion of the earth with the most literal interpretation of 'site' – a geographic place or geological foundation. In fact, this simplification of the earth is a new development, for when the earth art movement began, the idea of siting artworks in deserted landscapes was a means of breaking out of the spaces and economy of the gallery system. The limit*less*ness, not the limit*ed*ness, of the earth was the basis of its radicality.

It is paramount that in approaching the question of 'site' we resist the tendency to firstly, understand the earth only in terms of its most base material properties, and secondly, (as is more often the case) avoid the question of nature altogether lest it betray a nostalgic desire to return to an imaginary Eden underpinned by latent conservatism and traditional gender and ethnic identities. This dissertation takes issue with the assumptions that the earth is a stable foundation of banal matter onto which conservative ideology can easily be projected, and that any artistic concern for nature belies the abandonment of a deterritorialized global orientation in favor of a uniform 'local' subjectivity. In order to evaluate the validity of the discourse of site-specificity and ultimately develop it further, I ask how the earth in its sublime complexity feeds into our discursive knowledge, and most importantly given the context of global environmental crisis, how artistic practice elaborates an ethical stance towards the planet.

Earth artists are sometimes misunderstood as romantic or essentialist for taking their encounters with nature as the organizing tenet of their artworks. I would stress, however, that rather than using nature to essentialize humans, they are in fact attempting to complicate simplistic definitions of the earth that are couched in a logic of domination. For example, the recurring thematic in earth art of the point of contact between the artist's body and the land departs from idealistic representations of untouched, 'virgin' nature in the landscape painting tradition. Indeed, earth artists are not "representing" a landscape at all; they are working with the earth, constantly watching and waiting for the perfect moment, seeking in it a poignant metaphor, testing the right action with which to shape the

artwork. The artwork is formed through the friction between the artist's intervention and the natural activity of the place.

This tense encounter is the onset of a dialogue about what the human relationship to nature is and what it can be. Rather than triggering an analysis that would deconstruct the artist's latent desire to feminize and conquer nature through representation, earth art demands an interpretation that accounts for both the tenacious issue of physical contact between the artist and the earth, and for the artist's insistent refusal to represent the earth as such. This, I do through phenomenology, but I insist on the proviso that phenomenology be considered in light of more recent feminist and ecological criticism. My approach is grounded in Luce Irigaray's feminist critique of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which argues against the presumed reversibility of the senses of visuality and tactility. In Merleau-Ponty's work, which was extremely influential in the theorization of early earth art, visuality develops out of our tactile sensations of the world, and in turn vision organizes our bodily sensations into a coherent perception. For Irigaray, by contrast, tactile sensations never totally register into visual perception. Tactility may inform how one sees the world, but this is not to suggest that what one sees is all there is. Through Irigaray, I demonstrate that in foregrounding the physical contact between the artist and nature, earth art consistently signals aspects of nature that exist beyond the limits of coherent perception. Moreover, as I will show, the artwork's approach to the earth as an irreducible sensorial phenomenon grounds its ethical statement.

This is not to suggest that earth art is concerned only with tactile sensation; rather it exposes the divergence of tactile sense from the perceived visual field, and the loss of the former as it registers in the latter. There are therefore two important dimensions to earth art practice, the physical contact between the artist and the site, and the signification of that contact in visual documents. The earth artist's goal is to draw attention to the specific temporality, rhythms and materiality of a site. Often, the result is an ephemeral artwork that requires some form of documentation, be it a narrative, a photograph, a film, or

other textual record. Indeed, the documentation of the artwork is an integral part of earth art practice, and requires a critical approach that does not simply account for the artwork's position within the spatial and temporal limits of the site, but addresses the significance of the artist's attempt to reveal the contact with nature via texts and images. I therefore stress that earth artists expose their inability to condense their contact with natural activity into a visual representation by marking it as an absence of, or obstacle to, sight. I identify the loss of site as the focus of earth artists, insofar as they aim to reveal the way in which the site escapes the parameters of the artwork. More subtly, the artwork expresses the loss of 'site' as the locus of a loss of 'sight'.

My analysis of earth art demonstrates how these losses appear in textual terms. Earth art asserts the discrepancy between vision as sight, pure and simple, and vision as a way of reading perceptual experience. The spectator most often accesses earth art as a form of text: the photographs, films, narratives, or other forms of documentation signify the artwork and are part of it, but do not encompass it in and of themselves. Since the late seventies, various art historians have explored the significance of the textualization of art, as I will explain further on. What is at issue in this dissertation is that although the immediate contact with the site is lost in the process of textualizing the artwork, earth artists nevertheless evidence the evacuation of the site (and hence of sight) as a pervasive subtext. The insistence on the earth's irreducibility surfaces in the troubling of vision in the textualized document. My contribution to the existing discourse on the textualization of art lies in my claim that the lapses in signification in earth art are cues to a practice of ethical withdrawal from the impetus to represent nature.

In this introductory chapter, I will set up my approach to earth art in four ways. First, I will explain how contemporary earth art, although it is often dismissed as simplistic or retrogressive in the discipline of art history, in fact problematizes the theorization of artistic practices in terms of site-specificity. Though throughout this dissertation I continue to use the term 'site', I do so to describe the locus of natural processes that shape the artwork, and return to the

claim that earth art refuses a hyperseparation between the materiality of the artwork's site and its discursive meaning. It is precisely this dichotomy, latent in much scholarship on site-specificity, which limits the interpretation of an artwork in terms of its site. In the first section of this chapter, I assess the literature on site-specificity, and show how earth art challenges the notion that a site-specific practice can be disengaged from materiality. My analysis stresses that the artwork is sited, and garners meaning, precisely through the materialization of its ethical relation with the earth.

Secondly, I raise some examples of the conjoining of ecology and site-specific practices to show how art reconfigures our understanding of discursive sites to include the transient materiality of nature. Within the growing field of ecologically-oriented artworks, the group of artists that I have chosen to examine are only one facet. I will justify my decision to focus on artworks that operate in an expanded field of sculpture, that is, works that combine sculpture with photography, written texts, performance, and installation. But even more than choosing my body of artworks because of a similar approach to revising the medium of sculpture through textual media, I identify a commonality in their approach to the earth. The principle of materializing an ethical relation to the earth, as opposed to restoring the balance of an ecosystem, protesting the colonization of land, or promoting sustainability, entails a specific set of assumptions about what the earth is. I therefore distinguish contemporary earth art from other models of ecological art by defining the main concepts at play in the artworks I will analyze in the following chapters.

Thirdly, I examine the art historical scholarship of early earth art in order to highlight the theoretical precedents for my analysis. The first generation of earth art has been analyzed through phenomenology and the literary concept of allegory. I show how these two theoretical approaches hold the potential to unlock the aesthetic and ethical basis of earth art. I explain why phenomenology impacted the theorization of early earth art, and how it is pertinent to this dissertation. While phenomenological interpretation is threaded through my

analyses, my goal is not to simply champion the bodily experience of nature. As I will show, phenomenology is useful insofar as it opens the possibility of revealing the limits of perception, and how it is precisely in the acknowledgement of these limits, and the disorganized sensations of nature's excess beyond them, that artists forward an ethical attitude towards the earth.

Fourthly, I connect my discussion of phenomenology to the issue of textualization. In particular, I argue that an earthwork's induction into text is a consequence of its attempt to evidence the earth as an irreducible presence. Between the artist's protracted physical engagement with a site and the resulting textual representations, the artwork registers the earth as a loss of sensorial coherence. The theme of art's loss of coherence as it becomes textualized relates directly to the concept of allegory. Allegory entered into art historical discussions of postmodernism in the nineteen-eighties. Here, I revive the term in order to show how allegory brings to light the operation by which earth art indicates its expenditure of natural presence, thereby marking the persistence of its material connection to the site. More than explaining the textualization of art and the melancholic tendency of postmodernism, as art historians have previously, I demonstrate how allegory opens the possibility of earth art's aesthetic and ethical paradigm. Once I have outlined each of these four areas – site-specificity, ecology, phenomenology, and allegory - I will lay out the main arguments of this dissertation and briefly present the following three chapters.

The Limits of Site-Specificity

In an interview with Montreal critic John Grande, the earth artist David Nash explains of his work, " [The notion of] Site appropriates. 'Site-specific' is not a good enough term. It is too loose. The land is absolutely fundamental and has to be in the front. I can't stand sculpture that uses the land as a background. I

find it offensive."[1] Nash's comment raises two important issues regarding the position of earth art in relation to the discourse of site-specificity. Firstly, while earth art may be bound to a site, the mere fact of its locatedness is not the core issue of the work. A sculpture may be instantiated in the land but upstage or intervene on its environment; this kind of artwork may be site-specific but may not necessarily be earth art. Secondly, the term "site-specific" has become so generalized that when applied to earth art, it distracts from the centrality that nature plays in creating the work. In other words, for earth artists, the concepts of 'earth' and 'site' are not interchangeable. The characteristics that define the locus of an earth artwork overlap with those of site-specific art, but it cannot be reduced to them.

The debates surrounding the removal of Richard Serra's public sculpture *Tilted Arc* from the Federal Plaza in New York City in the early nineteen-eighties stimulated an interrogation of the concept of site-specificity. Not only did the Serra controversy foreground the idea first initiated by postminimalism and early earthworks that art responds to and garners meaning from its location, it raised debates about what we consider to define the notion of 'site' in the first place. In his 1987 essay on Serra's public sculpture, for example, Douglas Crimp argues that Serra's work redefines the space of a work of art as the site of political struggle. The artwork reveals the site, he claims, by uncovering its political specificity.[2] The site is not a pre-existing neutral space; it is the locus of a political or historic tension that the artwork exposes and materializes. Likewise, in a rigorous discussion of public art in her book *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (1996), Rosalyn Deutsche describes how art navigates urban spaces and

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[1] David Nash quoted in John Grande, "Real Living Art: A Conversation with David Nash," *Sculpture* 20 no. 10 (Dec. 2001) 30.

[2] Douglas Crimp, "Serra's Public Sculpture: Redefining Site Specificity," *Richard Serra* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988).

the operations of social control.[3] Astutely, Deutsche cautions against a presumed separation of the concepts of space and society, for not only do social relations then appear to be unsituated and to exist apart from material forms, but one risks overlooking how spatial organization is the seat of hegemonic ordering and political strife. In the same way that Deutsche insists that social relations and political struggle take place through the production of space, and that public art stems from and responds to this spatial development, my dissertation emphasizes that the artwork unveils and re-defines the relations that determine a site. What is unique to my analysis, however, is that it understands natural activity as an equally determining force in the production of a site. I maintain that what is at stake in earth art is not exclusively the operations of power that define space but the materialization of the artwork's ethical address to the natural activity of a space.

Earth art shows that not only are social relations materially manifest through the production of space, but space itself is living and terrestrial, or 'of the earth' (a point I will elaborate in the next section). The crux of the artwork's enactment of an ethical relation to the earth, as opposed to a social or political relation, is that the site is considered neither a material by-product nor an empty terrain on which discursive relations materialize; rather, through the artwork's interaction with the natural activity of a place, the specificity of a site comes into being. Earth artists do not just express what qualities, experiences or value-systems humans have bequeathed to a place. They may have an acute awareness of the history of that place, but they access its significance through the action of nature rather than through human activity. While it may appear at first that earth artists are trying to extract a notion of nature that is independent from culture thus reiterating a duality between culture and nature, their work proves that this is not the case. Earth artists do not deny the entanglement of culture, history and nature,

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[3] Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996). See also, "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City," *October* 47 (Winter 1988) 3-52.

but they show that our ties to the earth are not exclusively bound to our historic affiliation with a particular locale; nature is not a tabula rasa onto which human values and events can be projected. To merely represent the site is to apply human signification onto it. To create art that integrates the site as a living system is to allow it to manifest on its own terms. As Alfio Bonanno puts it, "Siting is very important because site is my collaborating partner. When I am successful I accentuate the feeling of a place. The work needs the site to breathe and function."[4]

For earth artists, a site participates in the materialization of the artwork. However, this approach to defining a site runs against what some art historians would identify as a shift towards dematerialized artistic practices. The presumption of the progressive dematerialization of art since the nineteen sixties, a transformation which virtual art is now thought to be a chief symptom, has sparked a rift between those who maintain a concern for the material specificity of sited art and those who would theorize a drive towards defining the site of art as a purely discursive category. I take my cue from Rosalyn Deutsche, here, in pointing out that discursive relations are negotiated materially. I would add further that claims to the dematerialization of art point to the centrality of the conceptual structure of discursive relations in art and art history, but that in fact this shift in emphasis obscures the material contingencies of a discursively sited artwork. The merit of the discursive paradigm is its insistence on destabilizing the propensity to essentialize subject positions based on presumed ties to a geographic location. But, I will maintain throughout this dissertation that the dislocation of site must not be equated with the dematerialization of site-specific art, for to do so is to excoriate the possibility of advancing an ecological ethic through art.

In her book *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2002), Miwon Kwon outlines the genealogy of site-specificity through

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[4] Alfio Bonanno quoted in John Grande, "In Nature's Eyes: A Conversation with Alfio Bonanno," *Sculpture* 20 no.3 (Oct. 2001) 24.

three categories of analysis: phenomenology, social/institutional, and discursive. Though these categories did emerge corresponding to a roughly linear progression of concerns over the last thirty to forty years, they often overlap in artistic practice and are not necessarily chronological.[5] They do, however, provide a nexus of ideas that present the site as the main tenet around which art, the artist, and the spectator are organized. The emphasis on the site of an artwork does not necessarily implicate it in fixed locales. To the contrary, Kwon notes, the growing attention to social and discursive sites in recent decades has stimulated new forms of de-materialized or dislocated artworks. Artworks geared towards raising awareness or subverting the institutions and structures of power that determine particular social groups, be it on the grounds of class, race, gender, or sexuality, have reinvented the definition of site. What we consider to be a site may not originate in a particular place, but might instead be determined by a virtual community of people united by an infinite variety of circumstances; the artwork may gather together a group of people on the basis of their ethnicity, or it may assemble a temporary community to draw attention to a particular social issue.

The notion of a "discursively" determined site stems from a more widespread intellectual movement that began in literary criticism, and took hold in other disciplines largely under the influence of Michel Foucault's work. The principles of discourse emphasize the function of language in being determined and regulated by, but also in determining and regulating, the apparatuses of power that constitute knowledge.[6] Very summarily, "discourse" reveals and perpetuates through language and bodies of intellectual thought, particular configurations of power, knowledge, institutions, the control of populations, and the modern state.[7] Locating art at a discursive site involves exposing and possibly attempting to

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[5] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002).

[6] Paul A. Bové, "Discourse," *Critical Terms for Literary Study, 2nd edition* ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 54.

[7] Bové, 55.

reorganize the structures of power and knowledge that subject us; that is, that which makes us into subjects and that which subjugates us. Not only is discourse intimately tied with subject-formation, it is a constantly shifting conceptual network that is not localizable, and is inextricable from our shared language and knowledge, and thus from linguistic media, such as text.

Kwon hypothesizes that 'site' has been transformed from a grounded physical location to a discursive vector that is virtual. [8] That is to say, the more the concept of site is defined in terms of discursive categories, and particularly as subject-formation becomes the focus of artistic practices, the more art has become dematerialized, appearing no longer as an object rooted in a place, but instead responding to its imagined public, taking a variety of forms from temporary installations, to web-art and public performances. There is an implicit suggestion in Kwon's analysis, however, that fixed locations are antithetical to complex deterritorialized subjectivities. While it may be true that in contemporary art sites have come to be understood as discursively determined, and that art is now interpreted as a mechanism that delineates a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange or cultural debate[9], we must be wary of the potential dualisms that are perpetuated by the drive to unhinge the notion of site entirely from living environments. Does a redefinition of site as a purely discursive formation foreclose ecological imperatives by positioning the earth as retrogressively limited in time and space? Does the drive towards the virtual realm that Kwon diagnoses eject the important work of earth artists from the contemporary scene?

According to Kwon's genealogy, site-specific art originated in nineteen-sixties earth art. What remains understated in her analysis, however, is that from its beginnings, the earth art movement had a mandate to overturn the modernist ideal that the spectator can achieve a centralized and singularly located perspective of an art object. Its goal was thus to upset a pre-established site for art to be experienced. Early earth artists consistently showed that situating an

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[8] Kwon, 29.
[9] Kwon, 28.

artwork in a particular geographic location leads to a displaced spectatorial experience and thus subverts the continuity of one's perception of an artwork. Robert Smithson, whose massive earthwork the *Spiral Jetty* (1970) I will analyze in the next chapter, was perhaps one of the first artists to demonstrate the correlation between the artwork's fixity in a place and its consequent reliance on 'displaced' or discursive media, such as textual narratives, maps, photographs and film. Smithson's work inspired the art historian Craig Owens to relate it to the dizzying experience of decentering that occurred, "at the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse."[10] Indeed, one of the legacies of earth art that has been carried over into new practices is its challenge to the assumption that a fixed location has a predetermined significance or that it could ever be the basis of an essential identity. Smithson's act of siting the artwork in the earth actually gave rise to textual modes of spectatorial encounter. This aspect of early earth art is perhaps overlooked in Kwon's claim that the preoccupation with discourse signals the virtual trajectory of art and will lead to its dematerialization. In fact, it is evident that since early earth art, site-specific works have established a rich dialectic, rather than a dichotomy, between the spatial and temporal parameters of a location and the artwork's inauguration into discursive or virtual media.

The dualism between nature and culture has long been the target of ecological criticism. According to eco-critics, within a logic of domination what separates humans from nature is the ability to reason and to acquire knowledge independently of our physical circumstances; that is, our transcendence of the natural world is the basis for our dominion over it. As Val Plumwood puts it in her provocative book *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002),

The ecological crisis can be thought of as involving a centric and self-enclosed form of reason that simultaneously relies on and disavows its material base as

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[10] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Craig Owens, "Earthwords," *October* 10 (1979) 122.

'externality', and a similar failure of the rationalised world it has made to acknowledge and to adapt itself adequately to its larger 'body', the material and ecological support base it draws on in the long-denied counter-sphere of 'nature'.[11]

The denial of the material basis of fields of knowledge could easily be the premise for a false understanding of the "virtual vector of discursive sites"[12] as opposite and exclusive to grounded physical locations. Inevitably, this disavowal leads to the hyperseparation of nature and culture whereby nature is construed as being fundamentally detached from the composition of the cultural sphere.[13]

This dissertation posits that earth art has a critical role to play in showing how interactions with and sensations of the earth do enter into the discursive realm of culture. In earth art, 'nature' is not a site already subjected to human signification, it manifests via the initial physical contact with the artist, in its resistance to being subsumed into meaning. More precisely, nature is the agent of an art object's emergence, but it is not contained within that object, and appears as a material, temporal, or sensorial excess. The multiple modes of encountering nature through earth art, from intense phenomenological experiences of environments to 'reading' detached textual objects, demand a more nuanced approach to its site-specificity, particularly one that does not frame the earth's materiality pejoratively, as a restriction to the potential malleability of the (post)modern subject.

In *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (2000) Nick Kaye rightly asserts that sites are rendered specific in how they are practiced, so that a site is actualized in performances of place that trouble the oppositions

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[11] Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 4.
[12] Kwon, 29.
[13] Val Plumwood introduces the term "hyperseparation" in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993). She explains that hyperseparation is one tactic by which the paradigmatic 'master' denies his or her dependency on the 'other' through segregating that other and thus securing his or her identity as self-determined.

between virtual and real spaces.[14] Accordingly, earth art can be seen to perform place by upsetting the hyperseparation of culture (reason) and nature, staging an encounter between what we "know" of the earth and what remains unknown and irreducible about it. What prevents earth artists from overwhelming their chosen sites with the meanings of local places and culture (a potential danger that Kwon identifies with regards to community-based art projects) is their approach to the site as a living system that refuses to be subsumed by the art practice. The founding premises of ecology thus give rise to a multifaceted understanding of the interaction between knowledge and place. It is therefore worth exploring how ecology and site-specific art have defined and challenged one another.

Ecology and Site-Specific Art

Though the systematized exploitation of the earth for its natural resources now seems unstoppable, in the last four decades there has been no lack of artistic vision of new ethical and aesthetic approaches to the environment. A plethora of ecologically-oriented art strategies has surfaced with a view to, in Robert Smithson's now famous phrase, 'mediating between the ecologist and the industrialist'.[15] Smithson's own vision began with a pointed critique of the segregation of the gallery from the larger environment in his dialectical site/nonsite works, and developed into projects in the early seventies that opened up artworks to a more involved relationship with natural activity. I shall return to this point in chapter one, but for now I want to stress that ecological imperatives in art do not just require that the work be 'sited' in a particular place, but rather that it mobilize the biological, political, social and ethical concerns of that site. When activated by the art project, the site shows the interrelationship of human histories and values with its ecological symbiosis.

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[14] Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 215.

[15] Robert Smithson, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979) 22.

Before I narrow the range of artworks I will be drawing from in the following chapters, it is worth examining the diverse approaches towards ecological issues in contemporary art. I will classify the broader field of ecology-based practices into three areas: art centered on restoration and/or ecological care, activist art, and contemporary earth art. By explaining each of these areas, I can better situate the body of artworks in my analysis within the broader field of contemporary art, and also show how they fit with the ethical paradigm that I am advancing. As I have already suggested, the final category, contemporary earth art, will be my area of focus. I will trace its history in greater detail in the next section of this chapter, but first it is important to establish how earth art correlates to other contemporary practices that are related to ecology and environmental crisis. The categories I am outlining are not mutually exclusive, and the art projects often span several of the key aspects of each grouping. My goal in distinguishing each area is to highlight the different ways that joining ecological issues with site-specific practices enriches our understanding of how the condition of the earth informs our discursive knowledge.

The first category that I have identified, art centred on ecological care, emerged almost immediately out of the earth art movement of the late sixties. Land restoration projects, otherwise known as 'reclamation art' endeavoured to revive natural sites that had been exhausted by strip mining, by turning them into artistically relevant earthworks. However, aesthetic restoration does not necessarily suppose a responsiveness to the ecological needs of a place. By the eighties, artists advanced the concept of land restoration by joining forces with scientists, landscape planners, environmental specialists, activists and local communities to create art projects that would overhaul degraded sites and quite literally bring them back to life. Reclamation art is grounded in an applied ethic of ecological care, where the maintenance of the ecosystem is the activity around which human experience is organized. Betty Beaumont stands out as one of the first artists to launch a large-scale reclamation project. Her work *Ocean Landmark* begun in 1978 (Figures 1a and 1b), for example, is an underwater

habitat made out of coal-ash blocks, an industrial by-product. Beaumont worked with scientists who had discovered how to use this material to stabilize the toxicity of water, to regenerate an area of the Atlantic Ocean off the New York Harbour. The work transformed a potential pollutant into an underwater sculpture that generated a flourishing ecosystem teeming with fish. Though Beaumont says underwater photography cannot capture the entire body of the work, she is now working with global positioning satellite technology to create images using remote sensing and side-scan sonar.[16]

The American artist Aviva Rahmani organized a similar reclamation project in which she restored a degraded wetland habitat. Begun in 1991, her artwork "Ghost Nets" (Figure 2) was not simply an exercise in recycling materials, it involved an entire lifestyle change in which the artist took ten years to, as she puts it, weave her life into the local fishing culture and become an activist in the community of Vinalhaven, Maine. Like Beaumont, Rahmani collaborated with bioengineers to arrange the transformation of sixteen tons of granite debris into a viable ecosystem. The artist was concerned with reversing ecological damage, but just as importantly, she crafted the restoration project into a visual and poetic narrative for the community.

The actual restoration took only three months, but Rahmani explains that she wanted to see the degradation of the salt marshes and their rescue anthropomorphically, to show how the project influenced human lives locally and also to make a global statement. The title of the piece "Ghost Nets" refers to the invisible and indestructible monofilament nets used by fisherman, which, when lost overboard, drift into the ocean, trap fish and ultimately strip-mine the area.[17] Rahmani uses the metaphor of 'ghost nets' to corroborate the way familiar habits and routines, when left unchecked, can lead to our own entrapment, and ultimately our peril. Interpreting the restoration project as a microcosm of global change, Rahmani presented "Ghost Nets" in several media including video,

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[16] www.greenmuseum.org/content/artist_index/artist_id-37.html

[17] www.ghostnets.com/ghostnets/state.html

Figure 1a. Betty Beaumont, *Ocean Landmark*, 1978-present. A simulation to-scale of the coal fly-ash blocks used for the armature has become a surrogate for the project. Beaumont writes, "I processed 500 tons of an industrial waste product, laid it on the floor of the Atlantic and created a flourishing environment no one can see."

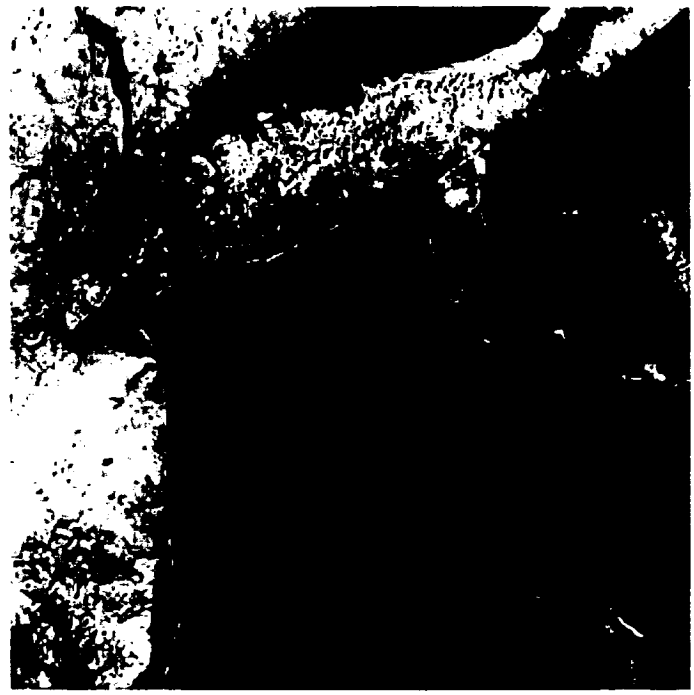

Figure 1b. Betty Beaumont, *Ocean Landmark*, satellite photograph locator of the underwater site off New York Harbor, 1978-present.

Figure 2. Aviva Rahmani, *Ghost Nets* – restored salt marsh, Vinalhaven, Maine, 1991-2001.

photographs, paintings, journaling, writing, and installations. Though this kind of collaboration could be considered an example of a "sited" community art project[18] it is clear that the trajectory of Rahmani's practice of ecological care is larger than the specific site and the local community. She insists, "I have spent ten years trying to see how very small things relate to very big things: for example how what is typically a very small source of forage, spawning and nesting in the fly zone and fish migration avenues, incrementally lost, fits in a pattern of global restoration our lives depend on."[19] The reclamation project is sited, but its ecological consequences, ethical statement, and aesthetic resonance have a far wider reach than the local community.

The interdependency of nature and human societies is the subject of activist art that targets the politics of ecology. This second category of art aims at both consciousness raising about environmental degradation and protest against the institutions that sanction it. Often activist art involves the mobilization of a community around a specific instance of ecological endangerment. Basia Irland's performance, *A Gathering of Waters: Rio Grande, Source to Sea* (1995-2000; Figure 3), united not just a single community but diverse groups of people, including artists, government agencies, Native American leaders, private water users, farmers, and ranchers, all of whom rely on the 1885-mile long Rio Grande/Rio Bravo basin which rises in Colorado, passes through New Mexico, crosses the border, and flows into the Gulf of Mexico.[20] Participants were asked to collect river water samples in a canteen and write their experiences into a logbook. The canteen and logbook were then passed hand to hand, traveling by boat, raft, canoe, hot-air balloon, car, van, horseback, truck, bicycle, mail, and by

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[18] See Kwon's chapter, "From Site to Community," in *One Place After Another.*

[19] www.ghostnets.com/ghostnets/state.html

[20] Sue Spaid, *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies*, Cincinnati Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002, online catalogue www.greenmuseum.org/c/ecovention/sect.2.html.

Figure 3. Basia Irland, *A Gathering of Waters: Rio Grande, Source to Sea*, portable river repository sculpture, 1995-2000.

Figure 4a. Rebecca Belmore, *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-Mowan: Speaking to their Mother*, 1992.

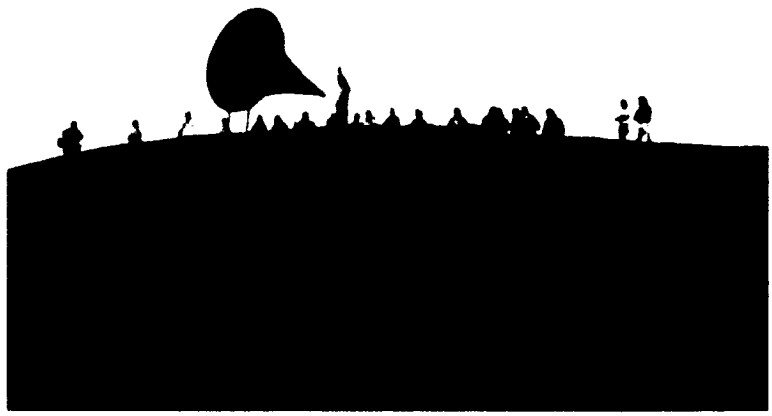

Figure 4b. Rebecca Belmore, *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-Mowan: Speaking to their Mother*, wood megaphone, 1992.

foot[21] joining the range of people in the common project of focusing awareness on the condition of the river and the integral role it plays in the lives of everyone who depends on it. Miwon Kwon would term the resultant grouping of people a temporary invented community - a discursive site that emerges by the design of the art project. However, eco-art activism cannot be understood exclusively for the ephemeral communities that they solicit. The fundamental materiality of ecosystems, the river in this case, is the basis of the "virtual" or invented community that Basia Irland brought together. In this way, activist art unveils new networks of connectedness that are grounded in the natural environment, as opposed to constructing ties solely around a discursive topic.

Political activism in art also comes from communities whose interest in the environmental crisis is inextricable from a larger context of structural oppression. Among them is the wellspring of women's art coalitions that focus on the intersections of ecological care with women's lives and histories. Another critical voice in contemporary art that has consistently drawn attention to the correspondence between colonization and environmental exploitation comes from First Nations artists. At the *Land, Spirit, Power* show at the National Gallery of Canada in 1992, artists exposed the interlocked offences of ethnic and ecological abuse that began during the colonization of North America by Western European countries, and have since been perpetuated by the Canadian government. Along with these critiques of systemic racism and ecological negligence, First Nations artists have coordinated interventions that revitalize their cultural claim to the land. For her performance and sculpture, *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-Mowan: Speaking to their Mother* (1992; Figures 4a and 4b), the Ojibwa artist Rebecca Belmore invited a gathering of leaders, writers, poets and social workers to speak to the land through a giant carved wood megaphone. Among the more interesting and politically charged locations where the artwork toured was a spot near the

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[21] David Williams Bath, "Navigating the Currents, interview with Basia Irland," (2001) in *Ecovention*, 2002.

Canadian Prime Minister's private home.[22] The performance asserted a cultural tie to the land as a political protest to the government. This kind of activist art weaves together the discursive significance of nature, ethnic and cultural heritage with the critique of government policy. Once again, though activist art may be politically charged, it is precisely the inseparability of history from the earth that binds the performance aesthetically. The protest affirms the primacy of the land to the discursive site that the artwork formulates, namely, the assembly of First Nations activists.

Irland and Belmore's works prove that an ecological orientation in art is not founded on an anti-modern nostalgia for a heavily localized identity, but rather it opens new possibilities for social organization on the basis of political and ethical commitments. Miwon Kwon raises a legitimate concern about the fetishization of the local in her critique of Lucy Lippard's book *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society* (1997). Lippard navigates the troubled relationship between a seemingly conservative desire for rootedness and permanence, and the nomadism of the contemporary art world. Her project articulates what Kwon identifies as a reinvestment in connecting with the uniqueness of place.[23] Kwon accuses Lippard of neglecting the importance of a dialectical relationship between place and deterritorialization, yet, in her favor, Lippard is conscious of the interests of non-Western positions that stem from the intimate connections between identity, history and geography. She poses the question of site-specificity not from a definition of art tied to aesthetic appreciation, but from a more general notion of creative production that is integrated into the land, history and culture of a place.[24] Indeed she cites Belmore's work among similar projects, as examples of the challenge that localization wages against contemporary art practices and institutions. Lippard

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[22] Charlotte Townsend Gault, "First Nations Culture: Who Knows What?" *Canadian Journal of Communication* 23 no. 1 (1998).

[23] Kwon, 157.

[24] Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997) 18.

argues that the cosmopolitanism of the art industry demands the homogenization of localized interests and the perpetual production of new art forms that deny a historical link to place. She demands a "place ethic" by which the actual place where artists and viewers find themselves is at stake in art production, rather than the abstracted space of the museum or gallery. Where Kwon sees the potential of virtual media to counter the fetishization of communities as authentic and timeless, Lippard argues that the move towards the virtual disregards the importance of place. Lippard thus posits the local as an anti-institutional and anti-corporate stance. Artists should, she argues "innovate not just for innovation's sake, not just for style's sake, nor to enhance their reputation or ego, but to bring a new degree of coherence and beauty to the lure of the local."[25]

In the midst of this debate between the virtual trajectory of art and the subversive potential of a reinvestment in the local against the damage of global capitalism, a false dichotomy emerges between the particular concerns of local environments and the complex identities that stem from global interconnectivity. Does the cosmopolitanism of the contemporary art world necessarily foreclose the material specificity of place? Is deep local knowledge incommensurate with a global orientation? The proliferation of earth art troubles this opposition between local consciousness and an international vocabulary of art. Contemporary earth art is supported by large-scale art institutions; some of them galleries and museums, others are either government or independently funded bodies developed specifically to provide a public venue for earth art. These institutions invite artists from disparate countries and backgrounds to design works for a specific location and/or occasion: an urban park, a sculpture garden, or an exhibition theme. The artist then researches the site and develops a work that responds to its history and topography but also makes a contemporary aesthetic contribution that reformulates the site for a wider public. The result is a collaboration between a

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[25] Lippard, 292.

local place and the increasingly globalized contemporary art scene, that focuses on the human relationship to nature.

The American artist, Patricia Johanson, has, since the late 1960s completed dozens of artworks in such varied places as San Francisco, Nairobi, Seoul, Salina, and Petaluma. Her projects often double as land restoration sites and as public places that invite visitors to experience the richness of the ecosystem. *Endangered Garden* (1987-1996; Figures 5a and 5b), for example, is a series of sculptural habitats for local wildlife built on top of a thirty-foot wide holding tank and pumping station system for excess water and sewage. The roof of the facility functions as a half-mile long walkway through the habitats that it supports on San Francisco Bay. The baywalk is shaped like a twisting San Francisco Garter Snake that winds through a butterfly garden, birdbaths, tide pools and marshes. As Barbara Matilsky concludes, the work fosters an environmental ethic that regards the value of even the smallest living things by making visible the tiniest animals of the bay.[26] The work thus responds to the specific ecological needs of the place and bridges communication between a particularized knowledge of the environment and the relatively international language of landscape design.

Some organizations and exhibitions have been founded for the express purpose of fostering sculpture-based earth art, and these have been better equipped than galleries, museums, biennales and other traditional institutions of contemporary art to navigate the ties between a local site and a cosmopolitan practice. The Tranekaer International Centre for Art and Nature (TICKON) established by the artist Alfio Bonanno in 1998, in Langeland, Denmark, is a non-profit organization that provides an ideal environment for the production of earth art.[27] The Centre offers sixty acres of forest landscape for the use of invited artists. A similar concept was the premise for The Tree Museum on Ryde Lake in

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[26] Barbara Matilsky, *Fragile Ecologies* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992).

[27] www.sculpture.org/documents/parksdir/p&g/tikon/tikon.htm

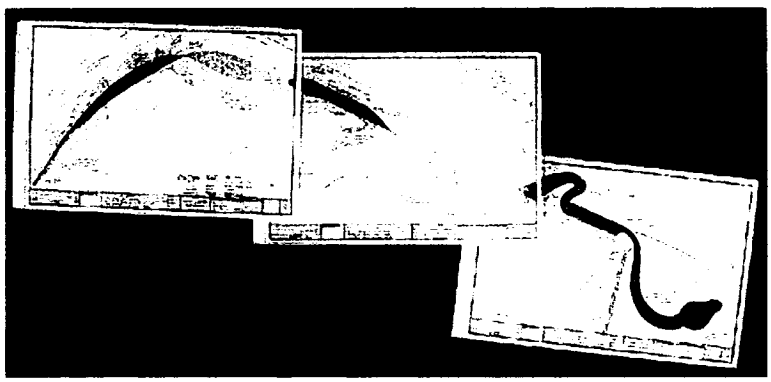

Figure 5a. Patricia Johanson, *Endangered Garden*, San Francisco Bay, plan, 1987-1996

Figure 5b. Patricia Johanson. *Endangered Garden*, San Francisco Bay, 1987-1996.

Figure 6. Richard Serra, *Shift*, cement, six rectilinear sections, each 60"x80", 1970.

Gravenhurst, Ontario, which started exhibiting earth art in 1998.[28] Like TICKON, the mandate of the Tree Museum Collective (the administrative organization responsible for the donated land) is to put their undeveloped grounds at the disposal of earth artists and open the site as a public exhibition.

As well as leading to the innovation of public sculpture parks, contemporary earth art has called traditional galleries to challenge their own limitations. The MacLaren Art Centre of Barrie, Ontario, for example, conceived of an exhibition called *Shore/lines* (2003-2004) in which certain locations in the city of Barrie were designated to fourteen artists from Canada, the US and Europe. Artists were asked to create an original artwork based on the historical and environmental elements of their individual sites.[29] Sculpture parks and temporary environmental art exhibitions examine the relationship between the particular locale, and the community, identity and history that is associated with that place. However, these projects shy away from fetishizing the site (whether by overemphasizing the purity of the landscape or by exaggerating the uniqueness of the community), and instead attempt to make a statement about the entanglement of a communal history with its earthly foundation, in the artist's unique sculptural vocabulary. Artists do not presume a universal moralistic voice but rather, to quote the Maclaren Art Centre, they provide, "...a stimulus for discussing our impact on the environment, and for reconnecting with the natural world around us."[30]

The institutions affiliated with earth art provide a venue for environmental awareness that appeals to an increasingly mobile and diverse audience. Miwon Kwon appropriately points out that unhinging the notion of site from its positivist formulations has resulted in an ambiguous relationship to the nomadism of the profit-driven art market. But though earth artists are unavoidably complicit with the perpetual displacement that their sponsor institutions require (for example,

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[28] www.thetreemuseum.ca

[29] www.maclarenart.com/visit.maclaren-exhibitions.cfm

[30] www.maclarenart.com/visit.maclaren-exhibitions.cfm

most artists must accept commissions away from their own local communities), they are nevertheless devoted to challenging the complete denial of our material and bodily condition, our biological and cultural links to the earth. Many earth artworks are not significant for the literal ecological good that they do (though this kind of functionalism is important to some artists) so much as they hone in on the ethical implications of our encounters with the earth. Otherwise put, earth art does not necessarily reclaim and restore damaged land, nor does it overtly protest ecological degradation, but instead it posits artistic practice and the aesthetic experience as metaphors for possible modes of interacting with the earth. The artistic process thus becomes an exercise in gleaning knowledge of the site derived from its intangible conditions – its dynamic materiality, its diurnal and seasonal changes, the rhythms of its growth and decay.

This dissertation analyzes in more depth the way in which earth art practice thematizes its relationship with the earth as an ethical encounter. For now, suffice it to say that the ambitions of earth artists are not just to translate local knowledge of place into an international art discourse, but to mediate a visceral experience of the earth in order to suggest a way of interacting with it. The artist expresses her or his direct physical contact with the site through objects, images and environments that deliver a rich sensorial experience of nature to a dispersed audience. However, the artwork also discloses the site's resistance to being perceived and known as a totality. Earth art thus navigates dualisms of nature and culture, the material and the discursive, as well as the local and the global. Moreover, the ethical statement of earth art has a distinct rationale from artistic strategies that feature ecological care and/or political protest. It is worth examining some key concepts that underpin each of the three categories of art I have outlined, namely the concepts of "ecosystem", "land" and "earth". Each term has a part to play in upsetting the view of nature as a store of resources for human consumption. However, each also leads to a different paradigm of art making, all equally valuable, but of which I can follow only one in this

dissertation. My reasons for choosing earth art will become clear as I examine some of the principles of each framework.

Stephen David Ross makes a valid criticism of some of the foundational principles of the environmental movement. Specifically, Ross argues, the ideas of 'biodiversity' and 'sustainability' privilege the order and boundaries of an ecosystem, and aim to restore the environment to a presumed original state of stability, endurance and reliability.[31] James Lovelock's model of Gaia elaborated in his now renowned book *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* in 1979, for example, frames the planet as a self-regulating living creature whose complex system is analogous to an ordered democracy. Lovelock writes,

> From a Gaian viewpoint, all attempts to rationalize a subjugated biosphere with man in charge are as doomed to failure as the similar concept of benevolent colonialism. They all assume that man is the possessor of this planet; if not the owner, then the tenant...The Gaia hypothesis implies that the stable state of our planet includes man as a part of, or partner in, a very democratic entity.[32]

Though he is rightly critical of the subjugation of the planet, Lovelock counters the ideology of mastery with the logic of an internally regulated system of which humans are only a part. Ross' critique, however, is that nature is wild, excessive and disorderly and that while it may at first appear that the principles of biodiversity and sustainability celebrate nature, in fact they betray a certain conservatism, whereby nature is patterned on human ideals of order.

Restoration art, though it may seem to be the most obviously aligned with environmental ethics, similarly risks limiting rather than opening the possibilities for a deeper understanding of the earth through art. Art centered on revivifying an ecosystem certainly changes the boundaries of what we consider to be an artwork, and raises awareness of very real environmental damage and toxicity. But, in replacing the art object with a living yet stable system that is couched in

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[31] Stephen David Ross, "Biodiversity, Exuberance, and Abundance," *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* ed. Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodeman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) 246.

[32] James Lovelock, quoted in Ross, 246.

the vocabulary of political democracy - or more often for this kind of artwork, the rubric of the science laboratory – reclamation projects harbour a desire to contain nature through art rather than support or express its existence beyond the parameters of human knowledge.

I have been arguing that we must not read the preoccupation with the virtual siting of our discursive realm as confirmation of our separability from the materiality of nature. But, of the same token, we cannot assume that human knowledge and natural processes can be conflated. Ross' critique of the tenets of sustainability convincingly exposes the tendency to merely apply an anthropocentric model onto the earth's activity. The discursive world and the material earth can be understood as intertwined but discrete. Edward Casey summarizes this position, basing his model in phenomenology. Casey outlines three coexisting realms: world, land and earth. [33] The world, he suggests, is the communal, historical, and linguistic domain of human speech and action - not unlike what I have defined here as our discursive field. The earth, by contrast, is the basis-body that subtends all human experience and is that from which organic matter issues. The vast realm of the earth's spontaneous manifestation – in growth, decay, weather, quakes and so forth - is what I call nature or natural activity. The philosopher John Sallis further explains that the earth is a primary elemental, or primordial source. In connection with the fact that it literally supports us, the earth is also withdrawn and closed off.[34] Because it is our essential terrain, the earth is resistant and impenetrable, not just literally, but more profoundly, in the way it withholds itself from being known. Sallis cites Heidegger's observation of a stone, "The stone presses downward and manifests its heaviness. But while this heaviness presses against us, it denies us any penetration into it. If we attempt such a penetration by breaking the rock into

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[33] Edward Casey, "Mapping the Earth in Works of Art," *Rethinking Nature*, 262.
[34] John Sallis, "The Elemental Earth," *Rethinking Nature*, 142-143.

pieces, it still does not display in its pieces anything inward and opened."[35] In this instance, the stone withholds precisely because it is of the earth, and leads Heidegger to conclude, "The earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it."

Land, on the other hand, mediates between the world and the irreducible earth. For Casey, land is more than just the surface of the earth; it is that which brings the earth into visibility. He claims, "Land turns the earth inside out, as it were, putting its material contents on display, setting them out in particular places, so as to become subject to articulation in language and to play a role in the history of those who live on it."[36] Land is precisely what is at stake for activist artists such as Rebecca Belmore and Basia Irland. Belmore's performance with the megaphone, *Speaking to their Mother*, expresses the land as origin of the First Nations people. The artist does not merely assert a claim on territory as such; she stages the intermingling of her peoples' history with the earth. The performance of "speaking" to the land connects it to the particular history and culture for which Belmore is advocating. In Casey's terms, the performance subjects the earth to articulation in language and to a role in the history of the First Nations peoples. The artwork joins the earth with their cultural "world" and thereby makes a statement about the inseparability of the two in the intermediary zone of "land". Similarly, Basia Irland's *A Gathering of Waters* connects people through their shared memories and experiences of the Rio Grande River. The topography of the land mobilizes a cross-section of the population, the river binding together seemingly disparate groups of people.

There has been no shortage of artistic practices that have been classified as "land art". In fact, the late-sixties movement that I see as the precedent of contemporary site-specific practices is popularly known as "land art". Generally, though, this term has been applied either because many see land and earth as synonymous, or because the artworks punctuate the materiality and topographic

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[35] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, ed. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 46.
[36] Casey, 263.

variations of the earth's surface. What many know as land art is usually associated with sculptures that are built into the land. Because the notion of "land art" is still a characterization determined by the use of the intermediary zone between earth and world, these artworks are interpreted in terms of the way they weave discursive meaning across the earth's circumference. Instead, I call the historic movement "earth art" precisely because I have identified a slightly different emphasis (at least for some artists in the late sixties and early seventies) that continues to be taken up in more contemporary artworks.

Instead of seizing the land as a sculptural material, certain artists attempt to reveal the irreducible earth that exists as a hidden depth rather than as an exposed surface. The artists I investigate need not be pitted against "land art", for indeed, many of them do feature the terrestrial surface and its role as a bridge between the earth and the artwork's cultural meaning. To fully appreciate what they are doing, however, we must understand how the artwork expresses or discloses the earth's unknowability. To this end, artists seek to reinvent the aesthetic dimension of the artistic practice, not as an avenue to knowledge but as an avenue into sensing the earth's wildness. Earth, then, and not land, is the focus of these artworks and of my interpretation of them. Immediately, the goals of earth art raise the questions, how is it possible to represent the unrepresentable? How can art disclose a sense of the unknowable? The severing of sensation from totalized perception is an important thread that runs through the history of earth art. It is worthwhile to examine how this rupture took place, and how it has been analyzed in art history in phenomenological and semiotic terms. This done, I can then clarify the relationship between the aesthetic strategies of earth art and its ethical statement in mobilizing the earth as a presence of alterity.

Phenomenology and the Excess of the Earth

Earth art is related to the environmental movement insofar as it addresses human relationships to nature. My reason for discussing earth art in relation to other ecologically oriented artistic practices is to recognize the broader

contemporary context of which earth art is a part, and to show how concepts that are raised by ecology theory and environmental philosophy inform my analysis. It is also important, however, to show how contemporary earth art developed out of the first generation of earthworks in the nineteen sixties, and how it has developed in new directions. Many of the art works that I analyze in this dissertation are sculpture-based, yet they also have components of photography, performance, body art and installation. I will treat earth art as a practice that firstly, expresses the artist's phenomenological encounter with the earth; and secondly, that thematizes the artist's inability to subsume the earth into a single art object through its integration of media as a means of proposing an ethical relationship to it.

When Miwon Kwon calls for a revision of positivist notions of "site", she is not simply referring to the definition of site as an actual place, she is contesting the use of actual places as a way of essentializing the identities and communities that are associated with that site. At times however, as I have suggested, her support of a redefinition of site in terms of a supposedly "ungrounded" discursivity ultimately leads her to pit the virtual against the actual, and to trivialize the importance of understanding ourselves through an attentiveness to our environments. In fact, the actual sites of the earth and the virtual sites of knowledge are only ever disconnected under a positivist assumption that the earth is merely a groundwork of divisible and manipulable matter from which knowledge and language are entirely abstracted, a view which, Carolyn Merchant convincingly argues in her seminal ecofeminist book *The Death of Nature* (1980), underlies the systematic control and exploitation of nature.[37] My introduction to earth art through debates about site-specificity responds to the risk of reiterating a binary between the actual and the virtual – between earth and world – at a time when historians of contemporary art are accounting for the global mobility of ideas and the deterritorialization of subject positions. What now needs to be

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[37] Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (London: Wildwood House, 1980).

established is that historically, an insistence on the materiality of the discursive sphere in art was the basis of a rejection of positivist definitions of both site and subjectivity. By taking a detour into phenomenology at this point, and seeing it as a thread that runs through late-sixties earth art into contemporary practice, I am stressing that the enactment of phenomenological scenarios in art provides an opportunity not only for the spectator to become acutely aware of the machinations of her or his own perception of space, but to consider how and to what extent others – other people, things, or in this case earthly manifestations – register as part of our sensorial field. This awareness, I will show, is crucial to the ethical paradigm of contemporary earth art.

Early earth artists lodged a critique of the modernist ideal that the artwork should transcend its literal environment. The first earthworks called upon the seemingly limitless horizon of the earth's topographic and temporal conditions in order to infiltrate the spectator's aesthetic engagement with the artwork. My claim in this dissertation is that in turning to the phenomenological experience of art, earth artists in the sixties and early seventies opened the possibility of considering the earth itself not merely as an encasing for the art object but as an active component of it, and more strongly, as a living presence that poses a dilemma to the self-enclosure of the modernist art object and analogously to the self-enclosure of the spectator's field of perception. In the following chapters I argue that earth art's break with modernism in the late sixties, which is often described as a shift in focus from the art object to the space of art, or the merging of the artwork into its surrounding space, opened the door for the art historical interpretation I am developing in terms of the artist's ethical confrontation with the earth. It would be useful, then, to return to the art historical scholarship that secured an opposition between the scenarios of early earth art, and the purportedly transcendent (and specifically disembodied) experience of modern art in the neutral space of the gallery.

In his 1967 essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic," Robert Smithson used the term 'earthworks' to draw a parallel between the industrial

debris of Passaic, the New Jersey suburb, and the ruinous landscape of the 1965 dystopian novel *Earthworks* by Brian Aldiss.[38] Not long after, 'earthworks' was commonly used to describe an entire genre of immense sculptural objects built out of and into the land. Artists such as Smithson, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt, Walter De Maria, James Turrell, and Richard Serra among others expanded the scale of minimalist sculpture, and most significantly, situated their works in obscure, deserted landscapes. Because they were inaccessible to the museum space by design, the first earth art projects refused a straightforward categorization according to medium – the term earthwork was more suitable, or at least more descriptive than sculpture, architecture, or monument. The artists' evasion of traditional media and institutions demanded a theorization that would give precedence to new spaces of experience in lieu of a formal analysis of the artists' mastery of a particular medium.

The art historian Rosalind Krauss advanced such a theorization, examining the works of Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer in her book *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977). Krauss reads earthworks as a continuation of minimalism's break away from the Kantian paradigm of reflective judgment that had been, during the prime of abstract expressionism, the philosophical foundation of modernism's valorization of the purity of medium and the distinctiveness of vision from the other senses. She discusses how minimalist sculpture consistently propelled meaning to the surface of the artwork rather than cultivating significance from within. Minimalism, she argues, rejected the easy association between the meaning of an artwork and the interior life of the artist. A key aspect of Krauss' project was to sever a patrilineal history of art indebted to the mythology of the abstract expressionist's "inner, inviolable self". In denying the private life of the artist, the minimalist art object reveals meaning as

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[38] Ron Graziani, *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 188.

originating from a public audience.[39] This conclusion led Krauss to borrow from two theoretical frameworks in her later interpretations of earth art as a postminimalist movement. Firstly, she draws from phenomenology, since in the excision of interiority and the embrace of surface, minimalist and postminimalist art invites a direct relationship to the viewer's body and to the surrounding space. Secondly, she views the proliferation of new hybrid forms of art-making in semiotic terms. The external structure of a term - what in semiotics is the word, in Krauss' analysis is the art object - garners meaning only in its differentiation from other media. The art object ultimately exceeds its self-enclosed confines and defines itself in opposition to other terms. I will discuss the pertinence of Krauss' theoretical roots to my dissertation, first by showing how the influence of phenomenology in art and art history connects to Nick Kaye's notion of site-specific works enacting a performance of place, and then by elaborating more fully on the subject of the textualization of art.

Phenomenology inspired artists and art historians to view artworks in terms of their contingency on the body and the surrounding space of exhibition. The staging of aesthetic experience bound to the bodily perception of space was central to earth art's critique of modernism. The beginnings of earth art can be understood as a continuance of minimalism's preoccupation with the art object's physical relationship to the spectator and its surrounding space. The minimalist style, according to Krauss, assimilated the principles of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), so that artists no longer modeled sculpture on the privacy of interior psychological space, but rather revealed what sculpture had previously hidden - that the perceived invariability of a sculpture happens not in spite of the variability of the spectator's perspective but precisely though that variability.[40] Minimalist sculpture, for Krauss, foregrounds the idea that

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[39] Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977) 262.

[40] Rosalind Krauss, "Richard Serra: Sculpture, " *Richard Serra* eds. Hal Foster and Gordon Hughes (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000) 130.

apprehending an object is synonymous with inhabiting the entire space around it, so that the object is perceived as thoroughly instantiated in that space. Minimalism's project was therefore to divest the object of interiority and to see it in relation to the space that it occupies.[41]

In the late nineteen sixties, earth art equally collapsed the boundaries between the object and space but did so by producing works that would break out of the limited space of the museum or gallery. Instead of producing a discrete object designed for visual apprehension, earth artists created works that could be described as sculptured spaces in the land, thus designing art to foreground the relation between the spectator and the unending vastness of the landscape. Earth artists fabricated works that required the spectator to be fully immersed in them in order to perceive their dimensions, thereby exacting Merleau-Ponty's argument that vision and orientation are rooted in the tactile sensation of being immersed in that which one sees. In expanding the boundaries of the art object into the broader space of bodily experience, and changing the conditions of that experience from the museum to the infinite horizon of the desert panorama, earth art finalized minimalism's departure from the disembodied visual mode of Kantian transcendentalism.

For Merleau-Ponty, embodied sight entails a reciprocal relation between oneself and the object or person in the visual field in constituting the perceptual experience. He explains,

> The perceived world is not only *my* world, but the one in which I see the behaviour of other people take shape, for their behaviour equally aims at this world, which is the correlative not only of my consciousness, but of any consciousness *which I can possibly encounter*...It is true that I see what I do see only from a certain angle, and I concede that a spectator differently placed sees what I can only conjecture. But these other spectacles are implied in mine at this moment...[42]

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[41] Rosalind Krauss, *Passages*, 270.

[42] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) trans. by Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002) 394.

Earth art demonstrates two essential aspects of perception as explained by phenomenology: that a visual field is informed by the tactile sensation of being surrounded in a space; and that one is equally constituted within that visual field from other perspectives that inform one's own perceptual experience. To enact a Merleau-Pontian model meant that earth artists had to simultaneously locate the spectator in a space, and arrange her or his visual field in relation to that space, which resulted in a decentered spectatorial experience.

Richard Serra choreographed a performance-sculpture that enacted this kind of sited vision, staging perspective as the interlocking of looks between two people as they moved across the land. In *Shift* (1970; Figure 6) Serra and artist Joan Jonas positioned themselves on either end of a three hundred yard field and walked across the land on opposite ends, always keeping each other in view despite upsets in the topography, from swamps to hills and trees. As Serra explains, "The boundaries of the work became the maximum distance two people could occupy and still keep each other in view...What I wanted was a dialectic between one's perception of the place in totality and one's relation to the field as walked."[43] Short concrete walls were placed at the points where the artists' eye-levels were aligned, functioning like orthogonals towards a horizon. However, in contrast to the fixed orthogonal of a centralized Renaissance perspective, these stepped elevations reveal that one's horizon is continually shifting, or in Serra's words, "...they are totally transitive: elevating, lowering, extending, foreshortening, contracting, compressing, and turning."[44] Serra and Jonas show that one is forever experiencing the world from within the particularities of one's physical surroundings. The variations in the topography of the land generate a continually moving horizon. The boundaries of the artwork are produced from the contingency between the transience of the environment and the subsequently changing horizons. By introducing a scenario dependent on the spectator's movement through space, and the reciprocal gaze of another person, *Shift* breaks

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[43] Richard Serra quoted in Krauss, *Richard Serra*, 128.

[44] Richard Serra quoted in Krauss, *Richard Serra*, 129.

with the stable environment of the museum that encouraged only a singular, centered orientation towards an art object.

It is important to recognize, however, that Merleau-Ponty's question is, why do we experience the world as unified and consistent in spite of constant changes in our body's orientation? His project is not to break with Kant in the sense that he aims to show how bodily perception results in disorientation and a fractured knowledge of the world, but rather to show that the bodily experience is precisely that which gives us our orientation and knowledge of the world. As Yve-Alain Bois explains in his discussion of the picturesque sublime (a concept I return to in chapter two), Serra's work eliminates the presumption of a Gestalt, and recalls to the spectator's body its indolence, weight and material existence.[45] Accordingly, *Shift* does not abandon all parameters of the art object; rather its parameters are determined by the bodily experience of space. The artwork's frame emerges from the relation between oneself, the other and the topographic specificities of the external space. *Shift* clearly speaks to Merleau-Ponty's response to Kant in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that, "In so far...as I know the relation of appearances to the kinaesthetic situation, this is not in virtue of any law or in terms of any formula, but to the extent that I have a body, and that through that body I am at grips with the world."[46]

Serra's *Shift* points to another important branch of earth art that took root in the 1970s: performances in the landscape. Artists such as Ana Mendieta, Dennis Oppenheim, Jan Dibbets, Richard Long and Hamish Fulton were not simply preoccupied with exposing the fallacy of the central orientation of the spectator. Instead, they were forwarding another agenda that would, like earthworks, foreclose the gallery system, but through the staging of transient interventions rather than monumental sculptures. Earth performances were ephemeral, small-scale gestures that caused negligible disruptions to the land and usually involved some form of documentation, usually a written journal, a

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[45] Yve-Alain Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll Around Clara-Clara," *Richard Serra*, 46.
[46] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 352-353.

photograph or a film. In these performances the earth registers more definitively as a living, changing environment and less as a host for a massive art object. Moreover, as Nick Kaye argues, what made the chosen sites in the landscape significant and meaningful was defined by the physical action of the artist on the earth. This is an important point to bear in mind, for as I suggested earlier, contemporary earth artists are not so much concerned with promoting a heightened perception of nature, they are in fact enacting an ethical relation with it. Phenomenology attuned art and art history towards the experience of the artwork in space, as opposed to the object in and of itself. Performance art, which I will now briefly discuss, further advanced a focus on how perception is constituted relationally. I will maintain in this dissertation, however, that it is only recently in the domain of earth art that nature has been understood to participate actively in the formulation of this kind of relational perception.

Kaye explains that minimalism had initiated a performative mode in visual art. In his now notorious essay, *Art and Objecthood* (1967), Michael Fried identified minimalist art (pejoratively) with theatricality on the grounds that it continually returned attention to its particular situation and its position in relationship to the viewer. Kaye points out that site-specificity began in minimalist sculpture, yet revealed itself more fully in performance, a genre that more acutely calls the object's formal and spatial location into question.[47] Earth performances and body art took their cue from this merging of the artwork and the site, and developed it further in the act of inscribing the artist's bodily presence onto the site, thereby affording meaning to the site through an action rather than an object. But for its documentation, many of these performances left little to no trace of the intervention - a significant difference from most nineteen-sixties earth art.

Although it is tempting to see some of these performances as overtly making a statement about the earth's participation in the creation of art (a

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[47] Kaye, 3.

characterization that applies to more recent earth practices), Kaye points out that earth performance and body art do not simply position the artist in relation to a specific place, the artist's body actually becomes the site of the artwork, and the performance is what makes the place specific. This is not to say that the materiality of the land did not inform these performances, only that whatever meaning or form the earth might feed into the performance was mediated through the action of the artist's body. In an earth performance, the artist's body becomes, by Dennis Oppenheim's description, the "material...the sole vehicle of the art, the distributor, initiator and receiver simultaneously."[48] Oppenheim's series of filmed performances, like *Land Incision* (1969) for example, equate the surface of the land to the artist's own skin. He opens contact with the earth, but ultimately returns the focal action and meaning of the artwork to his own body. Enacting a physical exchange that would result in the scarring or marking of his body, Oppenheim would, "...correlate an incision in my wrist and the slow healing process with a large ditch in the terrain." "When my body met the land," he explains, "the scar which was formed became a permanent record of the transaction."[49] Kaye summarizes that in performances like Oppenheim's, by making the body the site of art, the artist uses the body's instability and ever-changing surface to exceed narrow definitions of art according to its objecthood or materiality.

It is important for my purposes to make clear that siting the artwork on the body does not necessarily secure a focus on the earth itself. Earth art continuing into the late seventies onward is derived from early performances such as Oppenheim's in the sense that they are concerned with the artist's physical intervention, but later artists are oriented towards the effects - the forms, marks or transformations - that they produce on the earth, not only on the body. Often, in contemporary earth practice, the artist thematizes her of his physical absence by making an indexical mark on the land. In the act of marking, the artist determines

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[48] Dennis Oppenheim, cited in Kaye, 159.
[49] Dennis Oppenheim, cited in Kaye, 157.

the site of the artwork as mutually constituted between the artist's body and the earth. The natural activity that interacts with that mark challenges narrow definitions of art according to its objecthood; indeed it subverts the very notion of materiality as a fixed condition.

Ana Mendieta's earth-body sculptures of the late seventies and early eighties, for example, site the work of art through the enactment of a relation between the body and the earth (Figures 38-40). Her *Silueta Series* (which I will discuss in more detail in chapter three), however, could be seen as the inverse of what Oppenheim was trying to accomplish by marking his body in accordance with the topography of the land. Rather than using her body as the locus of the performance, Mendieta imprinted her body on the land and then photographed the *silueta's* transformation as it melted, burned, filled with water or blew away. The land is the final receiver of the performative action, and the imprint an ephemeral mark of that contact. I am stressing, though, that the contact between the body and the land in performances like Mendieta's *Silueta Series*, stimulates an appearance of the earth, rather than merely drawing an analogy between the body's surface and the earth's surface. The performance opens a threshold for the earth to be witnessed in its transient state.

Mendieta's performances have sometimes been misunderstood as essentialist gestures that reproduce the patriarchal association of women with nature and reproduction. However, it is now generally accepted that the figure of the *silueta* problematizes the coherence of the female body as 'natural'. In her book, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998) Amelia Jones suggests that the interplay between the body and its absence expresses the coding of the female body as loss within patriarchal artistic practice.[50] Where in the masculinist paradigm of modernism, the object of art is coded as solid, universal, permanent and closed, the artist's body and actions are coded as fluid, particular, interactive and transient. Jones' reading of performance as an alternative and feminized

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[50] Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 27.

history of art opens the possibility of analyzing bodily actions as ways of problematizing biological determinism through intersubjective engagement. In her analysis of Mendieta's work, however, Jones does not question the essentializing function of the earth (indeed she emphasizes that the artist viewed the earth as a maternal body but that the performance ultimately overrides this association). Nor does she suggest the possibility that Mendieta's performance is an intersubjective engagement with the earth rather than exclusively with the spectator. In chapter three, I develop Jones' claim that Mendieta refutes biological essentialism by adding that the driving force of the artist's statement on the unstable signification of the body is achieved because the earth washes over, grows through, or otherwise disrupts the *silueta.* My point here is that the chiasmic tie which decenters the "Cartesian subject of modernism" in performance art, not only exists between the artist and the spectator; in the case of Mendieta and other earth artists, it is forged between the artist's body and the earth.

Jones' stance on the potential of body art to trouble the self-containment of the art object is in part inspired by her reading of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964). In this unfinished manuscript, Merleau-Ponty counters definitions of the body as an object pure and simple with his model of the chiasm. He maintains that the body is both object to others and a lived reality for the subject and is defined by its relations with other beings and with the world itself. The body is seen as active because it gives form and sense to its own component parts and provides structure, organization and ground within which objects are to be situated and against which subjectivity is positioned.[51] For Merleau Ponty what we know of ourselves and others is created by a sense of the body's flesh as intertwined with the 'flesh of the world': "...the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh, that I am of the world and that I am not

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[51] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 87.

it..."[52] The chiasm is an intercorporeal sense of being, where the contact of flesh folded back upon itself characterizes the interaction between the seer and the visible, between the subject and object, between oneself and the other.

Art historians such as Jones see the potential of Merleau Ponty's phenomenology to challenge essentialist categorizations of the body by theorizing it as constituted in intersubjective exchanges. In relation to this, there are two aspects of phenomenology that I will pursue in my analysis of earth art. First, though Merleau-Ponty's work has been raised in feminist art history as a means to dismantle logocentrism and phallocentrism, the possibility of an eco-phenomenology that would take up the relationship between the body and the earth in art has not yet entered the purview of the discipline. Earth art is open to just this kind of analysis, however it should not be done without being informed by scholars who have weighed the ethical relevance of phenomenology. The second facet of my analysis, then, involves connecting the physical interaction between the artist and the earth to an ethical mode of interaction. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984) Luce Irigaray criticizes the dormant feminization of the earth and the body in Merleau-Ponty's metaphorics of fluidity and maternity. However, she harnesses the potential of the model of the chiasm to forward an ethics of sexual difference. Irigaray argues that perceiving the invisibility of the other, the acknowledgement of otherness, is a fundamental aspect of ethical encounter. In her view, wonder at difference is what permits a passion for the other and thereby prevents us from reducing the other to oneself and to sameness.[53] The other's excess resists assimilation into a totalized perception, and the sensation of this excess is a primary condition for an ethical attitude.

For the philosopher Mick Smith, Irigaray's outline of an ethics of sexual difference is equally pertinent to cultivating an ethical relationship to the earth

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[52]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) 130.

[53] Mick Smith, *An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity, and Social Theory* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001) 183.

that recognizes the historic duality between humans and nature, and that takes seriously our responsibility to remedy that situation. As Smith elaborates in his book *An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity and Social Theory* (2001), an ethical feeling for the earth counters the instrumental view of the world as a fixed and inert storehouse of materials awaiting manipulation. Global modernity abstracts the particularities and vitality of our geophysical environment, degrading our relationship to localities and histories by replacing them with an economy of sameness - a universal space devoid of the earth's irregular intrusions.[54] An ethics of place is an explicit disruption of the homogenizing force of modernity which would mechanize all natural activity for human purposes, because the power of ethical feeling lies in the excess that transcends self-interest and refuses to force nature to fit into the categories of one's own symbolic order.[55]

Smith's radical ecology differs from other ecological theories – social or deep ecology, for example - in that it posits a constitutive relation to the earth. Smith takes the view that our ethical tie to the earth precedes the ontology of the modern subject. His position stems from the work of theorists such as Irigaray, as well as Emmanuel Levinas and Judith Butler, who argue that the subject is constituted in and through its relation to the other, in this case, the earth. For Levinas, the realization of the other's alterity is the initial moment of recognition of one's own subjectivity.[56] This awareness is preceded by the other's call to responsibility; subjectivity is a consequence of the other's challenge or command to respond to its needs. Where Merleau-Ponty positions the self and the other in a precognitive and reciprocal chiasmic tie, Levinas founds the emergence of the subject on ethical responsibility to the other. Because the ethical feeling precedes the ontology of the subject, ethics exceeds the discursive world into which the

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[54] Smith, *An Ethics of Place*, 209.
[55] Smith, *An Ethics of Place*, 173.
[56] Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 222.

subject is subsequently initiated. As Smith explains, the ethical is not an alien infringement on the autonomy of a separable and pre-given self, but a constituent and primary passion at the heart of a relational self.[57] Levinas' paradigm of the 'face-to-face' encounter with the other (which I will discuss in chapter three) inflects many aspects of Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference, though she critiques Levinas for abstracting sexual difference into a nonexistent reality. Nevertheless, Irigaray draws from Levinas' work in her insistence on thinking the irreducibility of the other, and especially her consideration of how to relate to otherness without submitting it to the demands of logic.[58] For Irigaray, ethics caresses and embraces the other, but never envelops; it is, by Smith's description, an eddy in the matrix of difference.[59]

Smith demands an approach to the earth as a category of alterity, as an other to which humans are ethically bound at the foundation of subjectivity. His description of an ethics of place is not just pertinent to envisioning a new relationship to nature, it is strikingly resonant to earth art's critique of modernism. Though there have been few significant analyses of earth art in terms of its ecological critique, it is no coincidence that artists appealed to the earth in order to protest the limitations of the modernist white cube. While the first generation of earth artists may not have articulated their reasons for incorporating the earth as an environmentalist statement (in fact they often made efforts to distinguish themselves from 'green' activists), there is an interesting correlation between their attraction to the outstretched horizon of desert landscapes and Irigaray's description of the sensation of wonder at the other which supports an ethical feeling: "...the object of wonder or attraction remains impossible to delimit, impose, identify (which is not to say lacking identity or borders): the atmosphere, the sky, the sea, the sun."[60]

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[57] Smith, *An Ethics of Place*, 181.
[58] Chanter, 221.
[59] Smith, *An Ethics of Place*, 184.
[60] Luce Irigaray, quoted in Smith, 184.

It is also important not to overlook Smith's emphasis on the fluidity of the ethical. It appears, he says, as a surprising flow of emotion in contrast to the solidity of reason's instrumental principles. The ethical is a, " 'never-surfeited sea' that tends toward *infinity* rather than *totality*, it cannot be fixed, frozen or fully accounted for."[61] The elaboration of ethics itself as fluid and as an excess is what links it to the statement earth artists make by reinventing earth art in transient interventions. For both Amelia Jones and Nick Kaye, the criticality of performance is founded on the way it attends to the artist's relational identity, which for Jones codes the artistic practice as fluid and interactive, and for Kaye, locates the site of art as always in excess of the objects by which it is seen. Precisely because it is interrelated with the earth, the artwork becomes volatile, demanding a host of textual paraphernalia to supplement it. Indeed, the attempt to represent the variability of the earth leads to textualized artworks, and thus to discursive modes of circulation and interpretation. But, as I will explain in my discussion of allegory, through textualization earth art betrays the loss of that which it attempts to represent. It therefore surfaces the point at which the artwork fails to subsume the earth, opening a threshold to a sensation of its excess.

Text, Allegory and the Nature of Discursive Sites

Rosalind Krauss' essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," (1977) was one the most influential treatments of late sixties earth art.[62] Krauss outlined the flowering of hybrid forms of artistic practice, which she called 'the expanded field of sculpture' according to a semiotic diagram called a Klein group. Her essay maps out the oppositions and mutual implications of landscape, architecture and sculpture to explain the production of artworks that escape categorization according to a single medium. Krauss proposes three new terms to advance the classification of site-specific works that appear at the periphery of the categories

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[61] Smith, *An Ethics of Place*, 184.

[62] Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *Theories of Contemporary Art*, ed. Richard Hertz (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc, 1985).

of landscape, architecture or sculpture; namely, site constructions, marked sites and axiomatic structures. Understood semiotically, the conditions for a redefinition of artistic practice in the postmodern era are set by the way an artwork exceeds, combines, and re-differentiates the parameters of media in the same way that in language, meaning exceeds the terms which hold it together and is actually expressed through the relationship between words.

Krauss' work stimulated a considerable academic collaboration equally inspired by semiotics. Craig Owens launched a theory about the increased textualization of art. In his 1979-essay "Earthwords," Owens argues that Robert Smithson's works are symptomatic of an eruption of language into the visual arts, by which language has become a material entity and art has become interchangeable with writing.[63] Much of Owens' theorization can be attributed to the increased use of documentary or textual media in contemporary art. For example, in Smithson's site/non-site works of 1968 (which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter), the artist exhibited photographs, aerials and maps of an area, usually in a remote landscape, alongside piles of rock and sediment taken from the site. The artist deemed these traces of the site as "non-sites", highlighting the absence of the place from which the material and images were extracted. The exhibition of non-sites was exactly what drew attention to the site as a distinct place, and equally, the non-site could not exist without being defined in virtue of the absent "site". Smithson's site/non-site dialectic enacts a congruence between language and visual art; like a word which substitutes the object it signifies and consequently decenters that object, by intertwining the work of art with the site, Smithson displaced the art object from the site of its original meaning. The non-sites in the exhibition space have a textual function: they are signifiers that stand in place of the absent site and reconstruct it in their relationship between one another.

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[63] Craig Owens, "Earthwords," 122.

Owens developed his ideas about the merging of language and visual art into a theory of postmodernism read through the concept of allegory. He published two essays on the topic, both entitled "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" published in *October* in 1980.[64] Owens' discussion of allegory was bolstered by Joel Fineman's essay, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire,"[65] published in the same issue, and further considered in Stephen Melville's 1981-essay, "Notes on the Re-emergence of Allegory."[66] The concept of allegory, in Owens' view, explains the decentering characteristics of site-specific art, namely, the artwork's fragmentation into multiple texts, and correspondingly, its aesthetic of ruination. Extrapolating his argument from Walter Benjamin's discussion of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Owens lays out several key tendencies that relate site-specific art to allegory, two of which are especially important for earth art; specifically, its textualization and its affiliation to ruins.

Generally speaking, allegory is a literary device, used when a text invokes the implicit commentary of a metatext, which then prescribes the direction of the primary text. In art, allegory appears in genres such as history painting, in which the artist revives a historic scene or event and embodies it in a single emblem. In Eugène Délacroix' painting of the July Revolution, *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), for example, Marianne is a symbol of liberty but an allegory of the French Revolution. The figure of Marianne layers the painting's documentation of the July Revolution with the historic importance of the French Revolution, sewing the two events together to create historical continuity. The coalescence of the present and the past in a single emblem is central to Walter Benjamin's discussion of allegory. For Benjamin, history is continually lost to the impermanence of time,

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[64] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (Spring 1980) and *October* 13 (Summer 1980).

[65] Joel Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," *October* 12 (Spring, 1980): 47-66.

[66] Stephen Melville, "Notes on the Re-emergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism," *October* 19 (Winter 1981): 55-92.

and can only be revived in the present as fragments. Moreover, Owens explains that for Benjamin, the ruin is the allegorical emblem par excellence since ruins stand for the reabsorption of human civilization into the landscape, thereby epitomizing the irreversible process of history's decay, and our progressive distancing from an origin.[67] History only exists in the fragments that the allegorist retrieves, so that while an allegorical emblem appears to uphold an implicit connection to the past, in fact, meaning is applied to the fragment in its contextualization in the present; or more aptly, meaning comes not from an origin in the past but from the very act of reviving the fragment in the present. The fragment is suspended between its material roots and its supplemented meaning in the present. Allegory thus blurs aesthetic forms, securing its authenticity through metonymy, a material connection to the past, and through metaphor, the discursive meaning that is applied to it in the present.

Owens reads Robert Smithson's works for their allegorical impulse, in part because his site/non-site dialectic disrupted the wholeness and coherence of the art object, substituting it with a set of textual fragments that reconstitute the site. But allegory is best seen at play in Smithson's later works such as the *Spiral Jetty*, which were not just preoccupied with the fragmentation of the art object, but also with staging its ruination and evidencing the temporal rupture of reviving history by emblematizing it. The *Spiral Jetty* aspired to no less than prehistoric monumentality, appearing as both a fossil from the past and a ruin from the future. The artwork's shape was inspired by a mythological whirlpool that was said to exist at the bottom of the Great Salt Lake where the *Spiral Jetty* was constructed. Thus, Owens explains, Smithson engages the site in terms of its topographical specifics as well as its psychological resonances.[68] The work of art is entrenched in the site, and the site is elaborated by the artwork's allegorization of it.

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[67] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 70.
[68] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 71.

The key to understanding the interaction between the site and the artwork, according to Owens' analysis, is the awareness that the artwork is in the process of being absorbed by the site (this, however, is an interpretation that I will challenge and develop further in chapter one). The *Spiral Jetty*'s submersion into the Great Salt Lake is the mechanism that activates the concept of allegory as Benjamin would have it: once the artwork is abandoned to natural forces, it becomes a ruin, or, as Owens notes, it can only be experienced through textual documents, such as photographs, maps, films or written narratives. In this sense, though an art object may be integrated into a site, when read in relation to the variety of modes of representation the artwork as a whole relies on, it can be seen to dislocate the earth and defer contact with it, positioning it as always already in the past, or as always already lost, existing to the spectator only in textual traces.

The convergence of text-based practices and earth art, not only in Robert Smithson's artworks but in later generations of earth art as well, initiates a recurrent theme in this dissertation; specifically, the tension between the pursuit of physical sensations of the earth and a loss of its coherence as it enters into signification as a textual artwork. Smithson's works point towards the dilemma between the artist's phenomenological engagement with a site and the representation of that engagement in the form of an artwork, be it a sculpture, a photographic image, a film, or a narrative. For Owens, site-specific art is always in some sense textual: the artwork either emblematizes the site allegorically (which by definition is a literary operation of overwriting meaning) or it represents the intervention as a supplementary document, a signifier that stands in for the 'real' art object and betrays its loss of inherent meaning.

Insofar as textual artworks disclose a loss of meaning, however, they implicitly raise the question of what has been lost. Earth art must not be understood only in relation to the fact that it is generally experienced by the spectator in sets of textual representations, but rather must be understood to be posing the question of what is lost in the sculpting, imaging and writing of the earth. While textual representation may seem antithetical to the intensified

contact that artists initiate with the earth – particularly the touching and manipulating of a site's materials – in fact it is precisely because textual representation is underpinned by a loss of meaning that the work coincides with the artist's ethical goal of evidencing the earth while sustaining it as an unknowable presence. Thus the phenomenological scenario which the artist frames in terms of the earth's excess beyond one's field of perception, registers in the textual document as an obstacle to meaning, a loss of visual coherence and ultimately, a question of the earth's otherness which has escaped being signified and known. Sensation of the site and intelligibility are thereby severed, and reconstituted in the textualized artwork as this very question of the earth's alterity.

Earth Art – Representing the Unrepresentable

In chapter one, I lay out the main issues at stake in earth art through an analysis of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and Craig Owens' theorization of it in terms of allegory. This artwork is my starting point for a number of reasons; firstly, not only is it an artwork that is split into several different media, including a sculpture, an essay and a film, it actually thematizes its own inability to represent the site. My analysis emphasizes the ways in which the artist encodes his representation of the site with lapses in signification in each of the different modes of the artwork. Secondly, although Smithson expresses the loss of the site that results from his representation of it, he nevertheless gives evidence of the text's persistent material connection to the site. At different points, the site appears to surge up within the text as an amniotic fluid, stimulating in the artist an imagined descent into primordial amorphousness. Smithson therefore reinforces that the texts harbor an indexical relation to the site, and are inevitably oriented towards the loss of their original connection to it. Thirdly, I will argue that the allegorical mode initiates a temporal upset in the artwork, in which the site is positioned as the artwork's lost material and historical origin, to which the work perpetually seeks return. The *Spiral Jetty* is not merely symptomatic of an allegorical impulse, whereby the artwork emblematizes the site; the emblem of

the whirlpool is, more precisely, an allegory of the *loss* of the site. In allegorizing the site as loss, Smithson paradoxically refuses to sever the connection between the artwork and the site. Each of these three issues, the splitting of the artwork into a multimedia practice, the assertion of the artist's phenomenological connection to the site, and the artwork's thematization of the loss of that connection, are key points that I will discuss further in the second and third chapters.

In chapter two, I analyze the works of five contemporary earth artists: Andy Goldsworthy, Chris Drury, Patrick Dougherty, Alfio Bonanno and Nils-Udo. I discuss artworks that, like the *Spiral Jetty* are born of the artist's physical interaction with the site but which register that contact in the artwork as a loss – usually as a black hole or other form of conspicuous absence. Consequently, the contemporary artworks all develop the thematic of the whirlpool as an emblem of the loss of site, which Smithson initiated in the *Spiral Jetty*. I argue that the black hole or absence in the artwork marks a particularly ethical approach to the earth; specifically, it is the locus of the artist's withdrawal from the attempt to construct a totalizing perspective of the site. In contrast to Smithson's enactment of his physical merging with the site, which he positions as a primordial source, contemporary earth art does not seek utter immersion or regression into the site. Instead, the artwork is born of two trajectories in the artist's physical contact with the earth: a gravitation into and a retraction from it. Through Luce Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology, I will theorize the phenomenological positioning of the artwork as interconnected but separate from the site in terms of ethical distance. The artist's retraction opens a space within the artwork for the site to remain unseen and unknown. The locus of the site's absence acts as a rupture between the immediacy of the artist's touch and the spectator's perception of the site through objects, images and texts. Because the work indexes the site but never fully grasps its lively natural activity, earth art elaborates the site through both sensorial plenitude and conceptual denial.

Insofar as earth art foregrounds the sensation, but not necessarily a unified perspective of the site, it is founded on a distinct mode of perception. Chapter three addresses artworks that feature the contact between the body and the earth in order to demonstrate both the earth's resistance to being subsumed into a coherent representation, and the body's role in generating and supporting the friction between sensing and knowing the earth. Where in chapter two, the figure of the whirlpool expresses the artwork's operation of harnessing and releasing the site's dynamic energies, in chapter three the site of the artwork is the human body (or alternatively, specific body parts). The artists Ana Mendieta, Susan Derges, Jackie Brookner and Ichi Ikeda demonstrate the intermingling of the body and the earth, but most importantly, they perform the body as a surface that separates itself out from the earth and receives sensation of it as other. There is a similar operation between the earth art practices in chapters two and three, insofar as both groups locate the artwork as originally bound up in the earth, and thematize its emergence as separate from that elemental base. The difference in chapter three is that upon dividing itself from the earth, the body (as opposed to the sculpture or text in chapter two) provides a surface on which the site appears in arrays of sensible qualities that remain incomprehensible. That is to say, the earth manifests in various forms on the body, whether as an influx of activity, a sudden spectral shape, a flourish of growth or a flood of water and reflections. These manifestations are sensorially abundant, but in no way coherent as defined images. Following the recurrent figure of 'the face' in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, Luce Irigaray, Alphonso Lingis and John Sallis, I define these appearances of the earth on the surface of the body as the face of the site. I argue that the artwork performs the body as a surface of exposure to the earth's irreducible otherness. My concluding chapter discusses a three-part artwork by Chris Drury entitled *Whorls*, which summarizes the aesthetic and ethical framework of my analysis of contemporary earth art.

What has sometimes been distinguished as two divergent approaches to site-specific art – the phenomenological and the discursive paradigms – are

mutually enriching to the analysis of contemporary earth art. We cannot assume that due to the proliferation of discursive, and specifically, textual modes of spectatorship, that site-specific art is no longer concerned with bodily perception and materiality, or that it has abandoned the terrestrial sphere in favor of a purely virtual trajectory. Rather, earth art consistently reveals the phenomenological encounter with the earth as an elusive, but nonetheless persistent subtext of representation. I now turn to Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, to show how the surfacing of the earth's materiality plays a significant role in defining earth art practice.

Chapter 1 -The Spiral Jetty: Allegory and the Loss of Site

In the last chapter, I argued that Miwon Kwon's geneology of site-specificity risks creating a false dichotomy between actual sites and discursive sites because it positions fixed geographic locations as stable and antithetical to the malleability of discursive knowledge. By this logic, the virtual trajectory of site-specific art is understood as a departure from the tendency to essentialize identities and communities on the basis of their physical environment. To counter the dormant polarity of Kwon's diagnosis of site-specificity, I showed how recent site-specific works geared towards an ecological awareness upset essential self-enclosed identities precisely because they complicate the assumption that the earth is an easily delimited and unchanging foundation. I traced the lineage of contemporary earth art to postminimalist earth art and body art from the early seventies. I identified two theoretical paradigms, phenomenology and allegory through which artists critiqued the modernist paradigm of spectatorship. In particular, they ejected art from the gallery and relocated it in the more expansive temporal and spatial context of the landscape as a means to trouble the uniformity and centrality of the spectator's perspective.

I referred to the importance of phenomenology in early earth art's challenge to the model of disembodied contemplation associated with Greenbergian modernism. Under the influence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's model of bodily perception, earth artists enacted the contingency of the land and the spectator's continuously shifting perception as a means to disrupt modernism's presumption of a self-enclosed transcendental aesthetic experience. I also noted that where earth art used the landscape to counter centralized perspectives, artists such as Dennis Oppenheim focused on the physical contact between the body's surface and the land. Rather than relying on a material object in which to locate their art, works such as Oppenheim's *Land Incision* present the focal action and meaning of the work on the artist's body, making use of its instability to challenge narrow definitions of art according to traditional media.

Because body and performance artists inscribed art on an unstable site, moreover, they advanced a paradigm in which the work exists in excess of the visual documents by which it is witnessed by viewers. Body art in the landscape displaced the spectator from the time and space of the artistic practice, giving access to it only through textual records (photographs, films, essays).

Not only did artworks influenced by phenomenology draw attention to the contingency between the spectator and the art object, they contributed to the redefinition of art according to its site. In my discussion of site-specificity, I remarked that insofar as land and body art evacuated artistic statements from traditional media and institutions, and denied the spectator immediate access to their projects, it instigated a proliferation of supplementary texts. The extreme break with modernism waged by early site-specific works was characterized in semiotic terms not simply because of the heightened presence of text, but because in their fundamental displacement from the gallery the artworks exceeded their own representation. In the same way that in language, meaning exceeds the specific words that hold it together, and is expressed through the relationship between those words and the context of their usage, the artistic meaning of a sited artwork is not inherent to an object and is instead reconstructed through a combination of documenting texts.

I also raised Craig Owens' theorization of postmodern art according to Walter Benjamin's notion of allegory, by which he elaborates the congruence of language and visual art. For Owens, the textualization of the artwork is the primary indicator of postmodern art's divergence from modernism. Before I discuss contemporary earth art in the following chapters, it is important to expand on Owens' theory of postmodernism's allegorical impulse. Specifically, I will consider his interpretation of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, one of the most resonant works for contemporary earth artists. Owens' essay underscores the fact that although the discursive sites and actual sites of art were, from the very beginning of site-specific practices, identified as distinct spheres, they were by no means mutually exclusive. Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* demonstrates both the

continual transformation of an actual site, and how geological instability instigates the discursive malleability of an artwork. By examining two of Owens' essays, "Earthwords," written in 1979, and "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," written in 1980, I will return to what I see as a pivotal moment in art history when the complex synthesis of art and earth, text and matter, revolutionized artistic practice. Owens recognized that not only did artists deploy the earth's temporality as a strategy to detach from modernist doctrine, but also that the critical thrust of site-specific art lay in the dialectical exchange between the discursive site of art, where a work's meaning is established for the spectator through text, and the actual site of art, where the work is located in a particular time and space. I am highlighting the fact that for Owens, it is precisely because Smithson presumes that the earth is a fluctuating foundation that the artwork becomes uprooted from a specific place and circulated as discourse.

The *Spiral Jetty* (Figure 7), begun in 1970 in Utah's Great Salt Lake, stands out as one of the earliest examples of an earthwork that is not defined solely by its oppositional stance towards the museum or the gallery (that is, in terms of its inaccessibility to spectators and its unavailability to the art market), but which pointedly elaborates the theme of dislocation through the historic and geological particularities of the site. With a team of construction workers, Smithson manufactured the *Spiral Jetty* out of black rock and basalt soil. The sculpture is a 1500-foot long and 15-foot wide coil that extends from the shoreline at Rozel Point into the lake. The spiral shape alludes to the site in two ways: it symbolizes a historic myth about the lake and it emblematizes the salinity of the water. Firstly, the spiral references a mythological whirlpool that, according to local folklore, was said to exist at the bottom of the Great Salt Lake and be a bridge to the Pacific Ocean.[1] Smithson was also piqued by the mythology because the whirlpool connotes a disruption in the continuity of time and space, for it has no unifying centre and instead spins around a hollow core with no beginning or

[1] Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 203.

end. Secondly, and perhaps the most important for Smithson, the *Spiral Jetty* is a macrocosm of the molecular structure of a salt crystal. Smithson observed that because the lake is a body of saline water, its shore is encrusted with salt crystal deposits. This detail about the site triggered the artists' knowledge of crystallography. In particular, Smithson noted a parallel between the irregular structure of a salt molecule, which grows in the shape of a screw around a fissure on a surface, and the whirlpool that orbits around an empty centre. The spiral was an ideal shape to advance Smithson's project of creating an artwork that would respond to the conditions of the site and also disrupt the central orientation associated with the modernist paradigm of spectatorship. Not only was the art object in so remote a location as to be virtually inaccessible but also, because it was a sculpture with no center, Smithson's jetty epitomized a dislocated spectatorial experience. Weaving together its allusions to local mythology and to the salt crystals that accumulated on it, the work internalized the historic and geological resonances of the site into its aesthetic critique.

It is important to note, however, that Smithson did not build the *Spiral Jetty* as a discrete object, but rather, executed it in at least three mediums - a sculpture, an essay and a film.[2] Each medium plays a part in articulating the dislocation of the work as a consequence of the fluid dynamism of the site in which it is entrenched. That is to say, the meaning of the work is produced through the correspondences *between* the sculpture, the essay and the film. The *Spiral Jetty* has no stable foundation but is located in the interaction of the sculpture with its textual representations. I will argue, however, that the texts do not substitute for the sculpture; rather, they are integral parts of the work and must be understood as material objects that index the persistence of their connection to the site.

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[2] There are of course photographs, maps and other paraphernalia that accompany the work, but the sculpture, film and essay are generally considered the essential corpus of the work. See the prologue of Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

The *Spiral Jetty*'s reliance on multiple textual media inspired Owens' interpretation of it via the literary concept of allegory. In discussing Owens' essay, I do not want to simply repeat his reading of the *Spiral Jetty*. Rather, I will draw out some of his basic assumptions about Smithson's positioning of the earth and of text as correlated sites of art, and contrast his argument to what I see as a general trend in the discipline to disavow the importance of the earth in defining and interpreting discursive sites of art. I will begin my analysis by explaining how the heightened presence of text in art defined the concept of site-specificity, and how it informed Robert Smithson's artistic practice in the late nineteen-sixties. I will then address three salient aspects of Craig Owens' interpretation of the *Spiral Jetty* through allegory. First, I will explain his characterization of the work as initiating a chain of textual signifiers that refer to one another with no center of meaning. I will show how each of the modes of the work elaborate the theme of dislocation, and how the essay and the film in particular are organized around an empty centre that marks the absence of the site. I argue further, however, that this empty centre in fact has a material and distinctly fluid quality that both locates the site as a primordial origin and expresses it as a temporal flow. Secondly, I will examine the connection Owens draws between Smithson's preoccupation with entropy and allegory's proclivity for ruins. Based on this affiliation, Owens emphasizes the sculpture's absorption into the natural landscape. The third point to be made, which relates to the first two, is Owens' association of the work's entropic drive with Walter Benjamin's characterization of allegory as melancholic. In Owens' estimation, Smithson located the artwork in the landscape so that nature's transient materiality could activate an irreversible process of decay within the art object. Swallowed by the flow of natural time, the artwork could only be accessed by its textual records. For Owens, the *Spiral Jetty* exemplifies the allegorical impulse of postmodern art partly because it is fraught

with a sense of loss over the process of a progressive distancing between the texts and the site they represent.[3]

Though Owens' analysis of the *Spiral Jetty* is important to my discussion of more recent earth art that is equally born of the temporal fluxes of nature and relies on various forms of textual documentation, I bring up his essay to highlight certain ambiguities about the *Spiral Jetty*'s relationship to its site and to suggest an alternative interpretation of the sense of loss that it enacts. I will propose that Smithson did not intend for the art object to be absorbed by the site, but rather that he designed the sculpture to be a persistent residue that would reference the temporal volatility of the site as a past event. I will interpret the sense of loss that Owens attributes to the semiotic distance between the text and the site, not just as a device to dislocate the spectator from the site of the artwork, but the means by which the site's unrepresentability becomes the subject of the artwork itself. The many empty centers - or 'dislocation points' as Smithson would call them - that repeatedly arise in the essay and the film, do not reveal an abstract space between the site and the texts of the work. Rather, these voids glean a visceral quality, as though the absent site had surged up within the material fabric of the text.

In my discussion of Owens' interpretation of the *Spiral Jetty*'s allegorical impulse, I will therefore redirect the recurrent theme of the empty centre towards what I see as an important commentary on the way in which the discursive trajectory of an artwork is generated by the earth's dynamism. I will argue that the site's fluctuating geological conditions are evidenced in the tangible quality of the various gaps in signification around which the artwork pivots. Indeed, Smithson repeatedly describes the precise locus of the site's absence in the text as a fall into amorphous substance, or as a palpable hole that is replete with fluid. Each mode of the work is thus shaped and textured by the loss of its earthly roots. The texts do not represent the site in motion; they are imprinted by the site's volatile materiality. I will suggest ultimately that the emblem of the whirlpool allows

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[3] For the purposes of clarity, I will refer to the actual site at the Great Salt Lake simply as 'the site', and to the discursive sites as texts.

Smithson to reveal the site as a simultaneous presence and absence – as a current that flows into the text and that is subsequently evacuated from it. The empty centre of the whirlpool shows how, because of its transience, the site escapes representation. By leaving a hole, the site marks its unrepresentability as integral to the textualization of the artwork. The artwork is tethered to the site by a lapse in representation. Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* demonstrates that the meaning of an artwork cannot be produced in isolation from its material base. Though the work is textualized, each text references its connection to the Great Salt Lake through the material quality of the site's absence.

The Textualization of Art

Before outlining Craig Owens' theory of the allegorical impulse, I will first clarify the relationship between Smithson's artistic practice and what Owens diagnoses as the "eruption of language into the field of visual arts".[4] In particular, I will show the parallel in Smithson's works between the experience of being decentered by the landscape, and the way in which the heightened presence of text at this time decentered visual art by launching a challenge to "the purity and self-sufficiency of the work of art."[5] Art historians (particularly those affiliated with the journal *October)* who analyzed the emergence of postmodern art in relation to semiotics were considerably influenced by Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author," in which he considers how the meaning of a text is not produced by the author but by the reader. "...Writing," Barthes says, "is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing."[6] Where a text for Barthes does not originate in its writer, its unity lies in its destination - the reader: "...The reader ...is simply that *someone* who holds

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[4] Craig Owens, "Earthwords, " *October* 10 (Fall 1979) 122.
[5] Owens, "Earthwords,"127.
[6] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image/Music/Text* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977) 142.

together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted."[7] The idea of a "death of the author" in visual art underpins much of the theorization of postmodernism as a rejection of the modernist valorization of the heroic male artist and its idealization of the unity of meaning and matter in the art object. The spectator of postmodern art, like the reader, "is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed."[8] Like their espousal of phenomenology in the nineteen-sixties, artists' explicit use of text inspired a significant shift in emphasis from the inherent meaning of an artwork to the way meaning is produced through the spectator's experience of the artwork.

In my introduction, I discussed the minimalist movement in terms of its relationship to phenomenology. Following Rosalind Krauss, I noted that minimalist sculpture foregrounds the idea that apprehending an object is synonymous with inhabiting the entire space that the object occupies. I explained that because minimalist sculpture continually returns attention to its position in relation to the spectator, the critic and art historian Michael Fried identified the movement with theatricality. According to Fried, by hinging the quality and value of the art object on its context rather than on its inherent meaning, minimalists resorted to the condition of theatre, "*The concepts of quality and value...are meaningful* or wholly meaningful *only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theatre.*"[9] As art historian Nick Kaye points out, by emphasizing the transitory and ephemeral act of viewing, minimalism's site-specificity led it into a theatrical or performative mode.[10] That is to say, minimalism initiated a focus on how the artwork lends meaning to, and garners meaning from, the site in which it is instantiated.

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[7] Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 148.
[8] Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 148.
[9] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood (1967)," *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 164.
[10] Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000) 3.

Postminimalist practices such as Robert Smithson's earthworks, followed this shift into a performative mode, equally rejecting the concept of tying an inherent meaning to an art object and instead considering the constitution of meaning between the artwork, the spectator and the site of art. For Smithson and other earth artists, the siting of art in the landscape was both a definitive rejection of the gallery space and a way to extricate art from the presumption that it possesses a meaning autonomous from the particularities of its location. More importantly, however, Smithson did not just seek the earth as an idealized or implicitly meaningful site in which to locate an art object, he assumed that his chosen site was an ever-changing geographic locale that the artwork could define and make coherent just as the site would, in turn, structure and incorporate the artwork. In this way, a work like the *Spiral Jetty* is the perfect example of how, as Kaye argues, site-specific art troubles the opposition between the site and the work.[11] The site is rendered meaningful by the way it is incorporated into the artistic practice.

Kaye takes the operation of language as a model with which to develop his understanding of site-specific art as a performance of place. The semiotic model exemplifies the way the meaning of a site is produced through the interaction between the artwork and the spectator. The semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure made a key distinction between the *langue*, the rules and conventions of a language, and the *parole*, the practice of speech in which these rules are given expression. Where de Saussure emphasizes that meaning exists as a function of the interrelationships of signs within a structure of language, Charles S. Peirce outlines a semiotic model in which language is constituted in an expanding domain of meaning-production, where in the varying contexts of speech, signs prompt new interpretations from the 'second-person', the reader or the person

[11] Kaye, 11.

who is receiving communication.[12] In the same way that Peirce develops the argument that the meaning of signs shifts through dynamic movement inducted from a variable 'ground' of interpretation, so does Michel de Certeau propose that spaces are oriented and layered with meaning through shifting contexts of social practice. That is to say, a space is ordered by the activities of those who occupy it, whether they are walking, reading, listening or viewing.[13]

Site-specific art takes as a fundamental tenet that places are performed, that is, that spaces are defined through the activities of those who occupy them. In structuring the practices of a place and the contexts of meaning-production, site-specific art connects the two theoretical trajectories of semiotics and phenomenology. For both semiotics and phenomenology meaning is not abstract but rather is always generated through practice: in the case of semiotics meaning is produced through the practices of speech and reading[14], and in phenomenology it is generated through bodily interaction with others and with the world. A site is not an objectively locatable area but a place that is defined and made meaningful by the practices that define it. A site-specific artwork, then, evokes or enacts practices that delineate a site through the deformation and reformation of its boundaries.

Insofar as a site is defined through practice, it is always subject to an infinite number of conditions, some of which may cause conflicting or opposite meanings within the same place. It is precisely the co-existence of two mutually exclusive concepts within the same artistic practice that concerned Robert Smithson's site/non-site works of the late sixties. Smithson's site/non-site dialectic demonstrates that not only are sites defined through artistic practice, but when a site is implicitly detached from the discursive meaning that the artwork

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[12] See Mieke Bal's discussion of Peirce's semiotic model in relation to the interpretation of art in *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 90.

[13] Kaye, 4 -5.

[14] More precisely, for Peirce meaning is interpellated in the context of speech, for Barthes it is produced in the act of reading.

would affix to it, both the site and the artwork are defined through mutual exclusion. Smithson identified a fissure between a site that he would visit - usually an abandoned area on the periphery of an urban center or an otherwise deserted landscape - and a non-site, the maps, aerials, photographs, piles of rock extracted from the site, and other textual documents that represented it in the gallery. *Non-Site, Franklin, New Jersey* from 1968 (Figure 8), for example, presents the spectator with a series of trapezoidal wood bins filled with ore from the site, each of which corresponds to sections of an aerial photo-map of the area that are likewise cut into trapezoids. By matching the trapezoid objects with the trapezoid aerial photos, Smithson makes an analogy between his delimitation of the area of the site, which he depicts on the map, and the ore containers. The artist shows how it is precisely his intervention in making the non-sites that defines the site as such. The photo-maps carve out the limits of the site and the ore affirms its materiality. But ironically, the non-sites deny the site to the spectator as a presence. Despite their imposing density, Smithson empties the ore containers of any implicit significance by declaring them non-sites, recognizing that to bring the site to the spectator in the gallery is to split it apart as a totality. Thus, the objects in the gallery do not encompass the site; they are only the sum of its parts. The site is pictured and is physically tangible through the non-sites, yet it exists to the spectator only as disjointed fragments. The wholeness of the site is foreclosed from the gallery by the very objects that constitute it.

Though the non-sites represent the site to the spectator, the artist deprives them of the modernist ideal of an inherently meaningful object, and instead uses them to orient the spectator elsewhere, away from the objects and from the gallery. The non-sites point to, but are polarized from the site. Smithson thus decenters the artwork and locates it on a dialectical fracture rather than embodying it in a unified object. Moreover, insofar as the non-site represents the site as an absence - it encompasses that which the site is not - it functions as a signifier, replacing the object that it signifies. As the critic Lawrence Alloway argues, the relation of the non-site to the site is, "like that of language to the

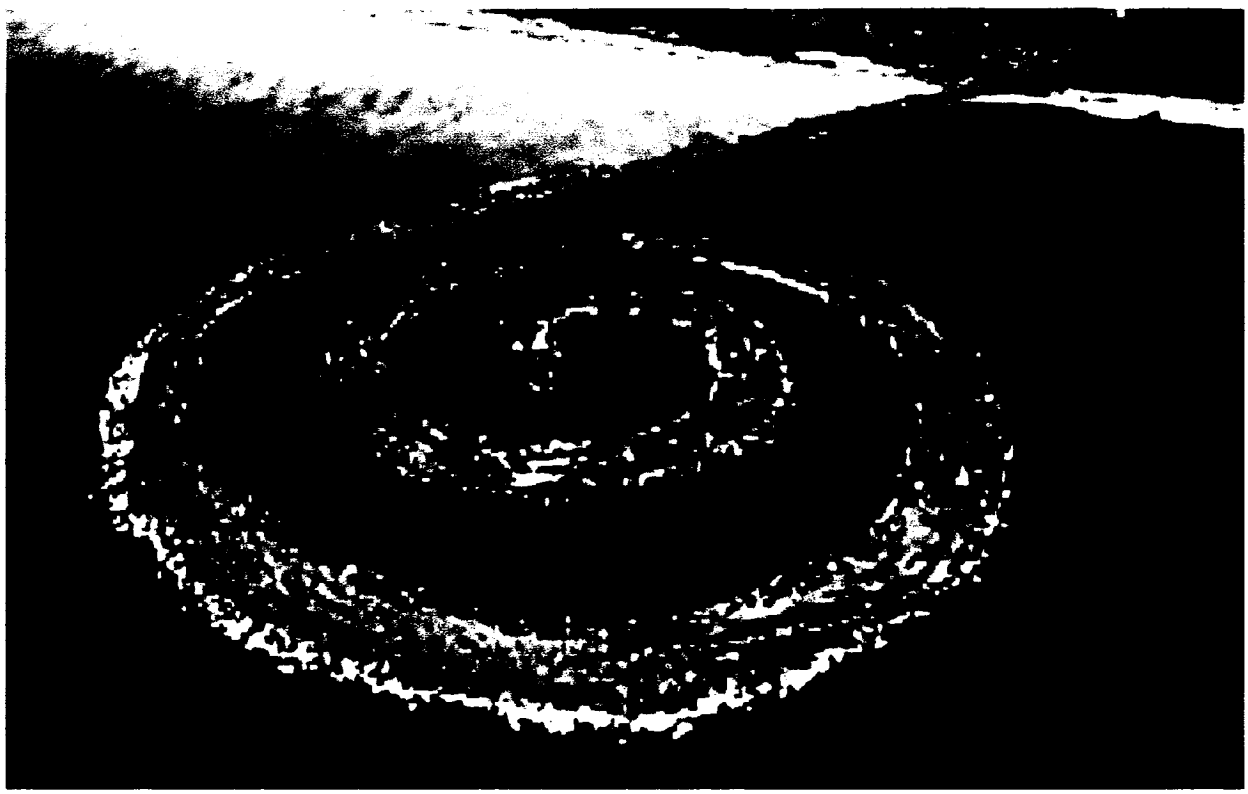

Figure 7. Robert Smithson, *The Spiral Jetty*, rock, earth, salt and water, Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah. 1970.

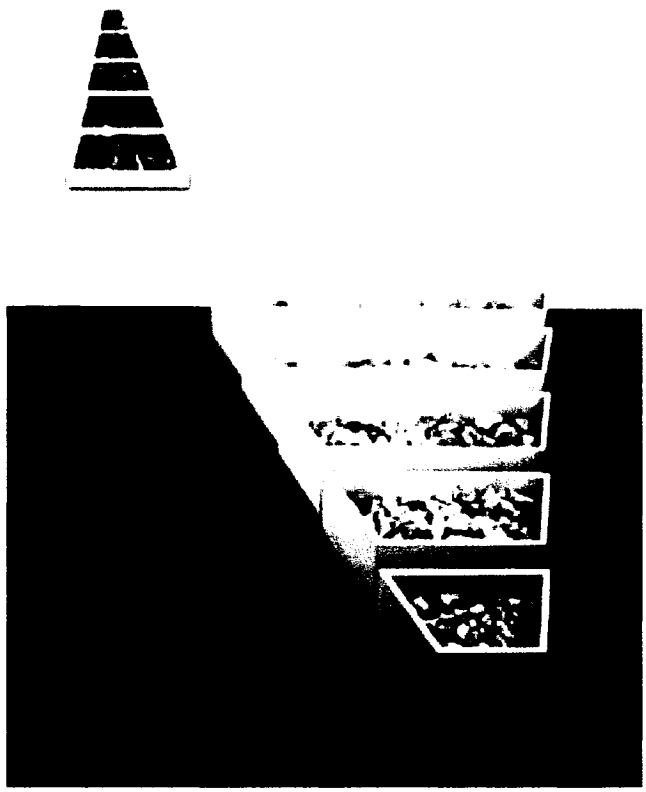

Figure 8. Robert Smithson, *Non-site, Franklin, New Jersey*, photo-maps, trapezoid wood containers filled with ore, 1968.

world: it is a signifier and the Site is that which is signified. It is not the referent but the language system which is in the foreground."[15] The presence of the non-site thus propels the site to the periphery; only a supplementary text is in the foreground of the gallery and at the centre of the spectator's focus. As Craig Owens explains, whenever Smithson invokes the notion of the center, it is to describe its loss. Similarly, language, "which proposes the potentially infinite substitution of elements *at the centre*, destroys all possibility of securely locating any centre whatsoever."[16]

Through the site/non-site dialectic, Smithson exemplifies the upsurge of language into visual art, and its consequent effect of dislocating the artwork, thereby using the semiotic model to make the limits of the gallery apparent. But, I would emphasize that Smithson's choice of the deserted landscapes as the sites with which to distinguish the gallery as a non-site or art is not coincidental. In positioning the earth as the site of art, Smithson summons an equally persistent tension between nature and culture. Nature for Smithson, however, is not an idealized, pastoral scene; it manifests in the infinitely volatile geology of a location. Smithson's sites are thus the antithesis of the abstract space of the gallery, long upheld as the ideal environment for spectatorship. The chaos of the site enters into the gallery by being represented as that which it is not. The artist chose his site in Franklin, New Jersey, for example, because it was replete with discarded and unusable industrial materials such as ore. The sediment of refining processes, materials such as ore and slag, connote the fracture of the earth's foundation, which Smithson opposes to the wholeness of the art object. He writes, "The breakup or fragmentation of matter makes one aware of the sub-strata of the Earth before it is overly refined by industry..."[17] By pairing the unwieldy 'geologic chaos' with the modernist ideal of an object unified by form

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[15] Lawrence Alloway, quoted in Kaye, 94.
[16] Owens, "Earthwords," 122.
[17] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 106.

and material, Smithson upsets art from within. He explains of his art objects, "Solids are particles built up around flux... All chaos is put into the dark inside of the art."[18] Although objects such as *Non-Site, Franklin, New Jersey,* are characterized by seemingly inert material, careful delimitations, symmetry and stillness, Smithson secures a dialectical tie to the site by implanting the non-sites with the site's disarray. Paradoxically, though it is absent, the site's corrosive potential nevertheless breaks apart the apparent order of the non-site object.

The site is not available as an object, for it is not static; only through the dialectical movement that the non-site prompts, can Smithson show that the site is always in the process of appearing and disappearing.[19] The site becomes legible as a non-site, the index that mediates its appearance, but betrays its disappearance, in the gallery. For Smithson, the artwork cannot be stabilized in a single location for it is always moving between the site and the non-site. In its dialectical movement, the work's centre is lost. The apparent solidity of the non-site does not deliver the site as a meaningful object; quite the opposite, the dormant chaos of the non-site's materiality demonstrates that the site's discursive meaning is subject to upheaval. Smithson articulates the site in its evasive movement away from the texts that attempt to represent it by binding it together as an image or object. The unavailability of the site inspires a fractured artwork that acquires significance through the spectator's ever-shifting orientation.

Craig Owens attributes the impasse of the artwork between the site and the non-site to the textualization of visual art - not just to the replacement of the art object with a text, but more strongly, to the instability of language itself. This is not to suggest that because it has lost its center that the artwork was necessarily dematerialized. Though, as Kaye argues, the concept of a site-specific artwork manifests through the performance of a place, not all site-specific works are necessarily performance art. Rather, the idea of performing the site, of defining the site through an artistic practice marks a shift in emphasis from the presence of

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[18] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind," 107.
[19] Kaye, 96.

the artwork as an object, to the movement that the work elicits. The site/non-site artwork provokes a conceptual movement between dialectical poles, and this in turn draws attention to the physical limitations of the gallery space: the site is unavailable to the spectator because it is always located somewhere else. Yet, the artwork is both visually and materially manifest for the spectator.

In the same way that meaning shifts and changes through the use of the word and cannot be reduced to the word itself, the site cannot be reduced to the non-sites that stand in for it in the gallery. For Smithson, a work of art emerges precisely out of that fracture between meaning and word, site and non-site. Where in a modernist paradigm, the artwork unites object and meaning so that the work's significance can be read through the object's form and materiality, Smithson pries meaning and matter apart and locates meaning elsewhere, at the site, leaving only empty form and fractured matter: the non-site. The artwork performs the site, as Kaye explains, in a "bipolar rhythm between mind and matter."[20] The artwork elaborates the instability of language as a material brittleness; words are substantial but are tenuously held together and likely to break into fragments. Indeed Smithson likens text to geological strata or layers of verbal sediment. He remarks, "The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures."[21]

Smithson's site/non-site works illustrate the loss of meaning through these ruptures in the material host of representation, leaving the word or textual artwork as a vacant husk. The word, as a material fragment devoid of meaning, is thus vulnerable to being appropriated and rewritten by new meaning. Despite Miwon Kwon's claim that the definition of site has been transformed over the last thirty years from a fixed physical location to a discursive vector that is ungrounded,

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[20] Robert Smithson, "Earth: Symposium at White Museum, Cornell University," *Robert Smithson*, 187.

[21] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Robert Smithson*, 107.

fluid and virtual[22], Smithson's early site-specific practices show that the physical site was never understood to be fixed in the first place. The chaotic nature of the earth empties the art object, provokes the unrest of the spectator's dialectical movement, and thus renders the artwork as a discursive volatility. The materiality of the site causes the instability of the site's discursive significance; meaning is precariously strung together in a 'syntax of splits and ruptures' that threaten to collapse. Smithson advises, "Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void."[23] For Craig Owens, moreover, the material fragmentation that the artist describes, secures a kinship between Smithson's amalgamation of text and art object, and the concept of allegory.

Allegory and the Textualization of the Spiral Jetty

In the last chapter, I briefly summarized the way site-specific art implicates the notion of allegory. Specifically, I noted the use of ruins and fragments as cues to site-specificity's allegorical impulse. I will return to the link between allegory and ruins in my discussion of entropy, but first I want to expand on Craig Owens' explanation of the allegorical impulse of postmodern art, and then show how Smithson's use of text as a material entity relates to the allegorical fragment. I will then discuss how in the *Spiral Jetty*, the artist emblematizes the site's loss of meaning through the image of the whirlpool. Enacting a spiraling orbit around a void, the sculpture, essay and the film of the *Spiral Jetty* are each shaped like a whirlpool. In their respective ways, each mode of the work thus betrays its dislocation from the site and its status within a set of material fragments. However, I will suggest that the textual media (I will focus on the essay and the film) disclose a persistent and distinctly fluid attachment to the site that Owens does not account for in his analysis of the work through allegory.

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[22] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002) 95.

[23] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind," *Robert Smithson,* 107.

Though they are prone to fracture and relate to one another as a 'terrain of particles each carrying its own void', the textual documents of the *Spiral Jetty* reveal that their voids in signification are not purely empty, but in fact are replete with visceral liquid.

A general definition of allegory in literary terms would be the use of a metanarrative in order to prescribe the direction of a primary narrative. In art, allegory frequently appeared in the domain of history painting, when an artist depicted a tale from antiquity or another historic event in order to comment on a parallel situation in contemporary life. Earlier, I used the example of Délacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* to illustrate the way allegory revives the French Revolution in the allegorical emblem of Marianne, and overlays the historic event with the context to the July Revolution. Allegory retrieves the past as a fragment, an emblem or an image, but rather than the past interjecting meaning on the present, the allegorical image infuses the past with a significance that is particular to its contemporary setting. The fragment of the past is thus decontextualized; it loses its original meaning, and meaning is affixed to it through the act of retrieval. Owens closely follows Walter Benjamin's exposition of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), seeing in it a common element with Smithson's conception of text as geological sediment. In allegory, Owens explains, language is "broken up, dispersed, in order to acquire a new and intensified meaning in its fragmentation."[24] Because the allegorical emblem overwrites the fragment from the past, it condenses the fragment into a single image, but deploys that image as written text. On this point, Owens cites Benjamin who observes that allegory, "opens up a gulf in the solid massif of verbal meaning and forces the gaze into the depths of language...at one stroke... [allegory] transforms things and works into stirring writing."[25] Allegory thus embeds writing in an object. The task of the allegorist, Owens explains accordingly, is to acquire and assemble fragments; the

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[24] Owens, "Earthwords," 124.
[25] Walter Benjamin cited in Owens, "Earthwords," 124.

allegorical work is, "the calculable result of the process of accumulation."[26] Owens' description recalls Smithson's boxes of accumulated ore, and the carefully arranged trapezoid photo-maps in *Non-Site, Franklin, New Jersey.* The reasoning behind Owens' reading of Smithson's works as allegorical is clear; his artworks acquire meaning through the accumulation and arrangement of fragments, or more precisely, they surface the rupturing of meaning implicit in the allegorical practice.

The resurgence of allegory in visual art was enough of a significant break from modernism to warrant Owens' identification of it as the most definitive characteristic of 'postmodern' art. Outlining the structuralist definitions of allegory and its history in the eighteenth century, Owens details the reasons why allegory transgressed modernism's aesthetic and disciplinary boundaries. For the semiotician Roman Jakobson the linguistic formula of allegory is the projection of metaphor, the static axis of language, onto metonym, the temporal dimension of language.[27] Joel Fineman relates the differences between the metaphoric and metonymic dimensions of language to the distinction de Saussure makes between *langue* and *parole.* Metaphor is the "synchronic system of differences that constitutes the order of language (*langue*)," whereas metonym is the diachronic principle of combination and connection by means of which structure is actualized in time in speech (*parole*).[28] That is to say, metaphor is the static, abstract structure of language, while metonym is the particularization of language through its expression in time. In addition, Jakobson associates metaphor with verse and romanticism, whereas he identifies metonymy with realism and prose. Allegories, however, combine these divisions; they "cut across and subtend all such stylistic categorizations, being equally possible in either verse or prose."[29]

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[26] Benjamin cited in Owens, "Earthwords," 124.
[27] Owens, "Earthwords," 129.
[28] Joel Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," *October* 12 (Spring, 1980) 50.
[29] Fineman, 51.

In the division of the spatial and temporal orders of language (metaphor and metonym respectively), Owens recognizes a corresponding polarization of the visual and discursive arts, which, he argues, began in the late eighteenth century with the French Revolution and was inherited uncritically by modernists. In order to distinguish the relative merits of the two disciplines, Diderot defined them according to their temporality.[30] He located poetry and all the discursive arts along a dynamic axis of temporal succession - a work of literature, for example, unfolds over time. Visual arts, on the other hand, were identified with the axis of spatial simultaneity. The visual arts, like metaphor, had to be static and immediate, whereas the discursive arts, like metonym, develop in temporal succession. These categories were strictly adhered to such that the visual arts were, in Owens words, "denied access to discourse," with the sole exception of a literary text that might accompany a work but never be incorporated into it. The appearance of allegory in art in the sixties thus marks a rejection of the long tradition of separating the discursive arts from the visual arts. In its combination of the art object and text, allegory creates hybrid forms of spatial simultaneity and temporal succession.

As Owens recounts, history painting was the last genre to use allegory before it was outmoded, and actually suppressed in art. Allegory's association with history was violently opposed by artists who were trying to formulate an artform that was concerned with the modern. As the nineteenth century progressed, allegory was condemned as antithetical to Baudelaire's modernist credo, '*Il faut être de son temps*'.[31] Allegory, it was reasoned, always looked backward in time, conceiving of the present with respect to the past and veiling the contemporary situation in historic references. In its very theoretical origins, modernism distinguished itself against historicism and tradition. Thus, allegory, as the prime vehicle of the historic in art, had to be ejected from the modernist

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[30] Owens, "Earthwords," 126.

[31] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October*12 (Spring, 1980) 77.

project. Owens describes at length how allegory was never completely abandoned by modernists, but merely repressed until its uprising in the sixties. The crux of his argument is that allegory's combination of the visual and verbal, spatial simultaneity and temporal contingency, is symptomatic of its hopeless confusion of all aesthetic categories.[32] New artistic strategies such as appropriation, performance, body art, textualization, and most importantly for my purposes, site-specificity, imply a cross-fertilization of disciplines and media that had formerly been segregated.

The challenge that Robert Smithson waged against modernism with his site/non-site works, then, was not just geared towards the limits of the gallery space, it was also a confrontation with modernism's strict adherence to the aesthetic categories of painting and sculpture and its denial of the relationship between visual art and discursive practices. Smithson exhibited the non-sites as his art objects, but voided those objects of presence and content. He pried apart that which represents from that which is represented, yet showed how each defined the other. More importantly, he positioned the object component of art (the non-sites) as descriptions, texts, or signifiers voided of a signified. The non-sites were pictorial but were not painting, as in the case of the photo-maps in *Non-Site, Franklin, New Jersey*. Others, such as the trapezoid boxes of ore, were three-dimensional objects but were not sculpture. And most scandalously from a modernist perspective, the three-dimensional objects and the pictorial representations were inextricably linked as parts of a whole and as descriptions of that whole, but they denied the spectator a unified artwork. Smithson's non-sites were better understood as words or empty signifiers, rather than artworks. Owens mobilizes this challenge as an allegorical impulse, for allegory upsets the theoretical principle in visual art of the unity of form and content. Insofar as allegory recuperates a fragment from the past and overwrites it with new

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[32] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 75.

meaning, it reveals the content of an object to be superadded or detachable.[33] By dislocating the site of art with the non-site that supplements it, Smithson broke apart content and form, and rejoined them dialectically, thus making their rupture transparent.

For the modernist, Michael Fried, when the unity of form and content is achieved the artwork suspends its own objecthood. In his essay "Art and Objecthood" (1967) Fried launched a now notoriously scathing attack on minimalist art (which he called 'literalist'), saying,

> ...modernist painting has come to find it imperative that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood, and that the crucial factor in this undertaking is shape, but shape that must belong to *painting* - it must be pictorial, not merely literal...What is it about objecthood as projected and hypostatized by the literalists that makes it, if only from the perspective of recent modernist painting, antithetical to art?...the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing more than a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is the negation of art.[34]

In Fried's view, art could be achieved only by overcoming the fact that it is an object. Its content, the pictorial shape, must successfully and seamlessly cover and embody its form, the canvas. In calling minimalism "literalist", Fried exposes not only the fact that the minimalist work is just an object and not art (for the high modernist), but that it has not overcome the break between what the object is and the shape that it pictures. Consequently, Fried suggests, the minimalist object carries no significance except its physical circumstance.

Where minimalist art divested the object of implicit content, pushing attention to the physical space it inhabited[35], Smithson reintroduces the expectation of the artwork's content, but he ties content to the artwork's location, which is always in another time and place from the object in the gallery. His project was not merely to exhibit an object, but to reference its content as absent. The polarization of form and content, the break from the spatial simultaneity of

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[33] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 83.
[34] Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 151-153.
[35] Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977) 270.

the modernist painting towards a dialectical movement between the site and the non-site, and the mobilization of the non-site as a materialized text - each of these shifts in artistic practice exposes the allegorical impulse of Smithson's work.

Owens account of the *Spiral Jetty* through the concept of allegory diverges with Rosalind Krauss's interpretation of the phenomenological significance of the work. In her book, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Krauss discusses the jetty in terms of how it physically disorients the spectator. Not only is the work situated in an isolated and surreal landscape on the north end of the Great Salt Lake, several miles away from the closest reference point, the Golden Spike Monument, but in addition the shape of the work leads the viewer around in circles. The experience of the *Spiral Jetty*, Krauss describes, is "one of continually being decentered within the great expanse of lake and sky."[36] Smithson conveys this sensation in his essay, listing the view in each direction from the heart of the sculpture: "North - Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water; North by East - Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water; Northeast by North - Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water; Northeast by East - Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water..."[37] No sense of direction can be discerned from the center of the work, every view looks exactly the same. The *Spiral Jetty* envelops the spectator and forbids the possibility of making the landscape coherent from any single perspective.

The rubric of disorientation that the sculpture elicits can also be attributed to the properties of the lake itself. As Ric Collier and Jim Edwards describe, the Great Salt Lake epitomizes change and unpredictability.[38] Like the Dead Sea, the lake is buoyant due to its high percentage of salinity. Because of its salt content, it has been called, "the Lake of Paradoxes...an ironic joke of nature - water that is itself more desert than a desert."[39] The fluctuating water levels continually change the contours of the lake by hundreds of square miles across its surface

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[36] Krauss, 280-282.
[37] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty (1972)," *Robert Smithson*, 149.
[38] Ric Collier and Jim Edwards, "The Spiral Jetty Re-emergence," *Sculpture* 6 (July-August 2004) 29.
[39] Dale L. Morgan quoted in Collier and Edwards, 29.

area.[40] Among the most distinctive features of the lake, however, is its changing color, which ranges from red, when there is a high growth of bacteria, brine shrimp and algae, to bright turquoise, coppery brown or green.[41] Getting to the *Spiral Jetty* involves an elaborate pilgrimage to the remote site, and each visit is a new visual experience for the lake is never still.

By contrast to the changing lake, the *Spiral Jetty* is built out of solid rock and earth. As I suggested earlier, the shape of the sculpture originates in both the mythology and the material particularity of the site. Because the sculpture allegorizes the site in the motif of the whirlpool, it seems logical that Owens would analyze the work in terms of allegory. Smithson encapsulates the distinguishing characteristics of the lake's salinity and the mythical whirlpool in the Great Salt Lake and materializes the allegorical image with the spiral sculpture, designing the work to express the site and dislocate the spectator from it. More than a phenomenological situation, then, the *Spiral Jetty* overwrites the site with multiple layers of meaning. Smithson harnesses the experience of being decentered as part of the work's allegorization of the site.

Owens reads the sculpture as a textual inscription. In allegory, he qualifies, the image is like a pictogram, a hieroglyph, or any writing composed of concrete images.[42] The *Spiral Jetty* synthesizes the significance of the site by affixing the emblem directly onto it. Owens comments that the sculpture is itself a graphic document inscribed on the surface of the Great Salt Lake.[43] But the textualization of the site does not end with the sculpture. Smithson recorded the construction of the jetty with a film and an essay each of which elaborates the many levels of signification that the work applies to the site. The sculpture, like the non-site, "is not a discrete work but one link in a chain of signifiers which

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[40] LaVan Martineau, cited in Collier and Edwards, 29.
[41] Collier and Edwards, 29.
[42] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 74.
[43] Owens, "Earthwords," 128.

summon and refer to one another in a dizzying spiral."[44] The layering of meaning from one signifier to the next demonstrates the way allegory reads one text through another. Owens clarifies that allegory does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost; it adds another meaning supplanting an antecedent one.[45] The site is allegorized by the sculptural inscription that is applied to it, and in turn the sculpture is covered over by the texts that bring it into view. The textualized artwork masks the site, even as it tries to reveal it to the spectator. Owens describes,

> Unintelligible at close range, the spiral form of the *Jetty* is completely intuitable only from a distance, and that distance is most often achieved by imposing a *text* between viewer and work. Smithson thus accomplishes a radical dislocation of the notion of a point-of-view, which is no longer a function of physical location, but of the *mode* (photographic, cinematic, textual) of confrontation of the work of art. The work is henceforth defined by the position it occupies in an infinite chain extending from the site itself...[46]

The sculpture inscribes the site with the shape of the whirlpool, and is subsequently overwritten by the texts that represent it. Moreover, the texts cover over the original references to the mythological whirlpool or to the salt crystals with a self-referential allusion to the work's allegorical function. The work is layered with the texts that are voided of a reference point and possess no core meaning. The texts stand between the sculpture and the viewer, concealing the significance of the spiral shape in relation to the site and instead occupying that shape to disclose their own emptiness. None of the texts hold any meaning in and of themselves, but assemble meaning through their successive relationship to one another. The artwork seizes the shape of the whirlpool as a paradigmatic emblem of its loss of original connection to the site and figures this loss as the site's break-up and dispersal into textual fragments.

Walter Benjamin invokes the whirlpool as a metaphor for the loss of origin in his discussion of the Baroque *Trauerspiel* in *The Origin of German*

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[44] Owens, "Earthwords," 128.
[45] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 69.
[46] Owens "Earthwords," 128.

Tragic Drama. Georges Didi-Huberman points out that the image of the whirlpool anchors the development of Benjamin's theory of materialist historicism.[47] For Benjamin, in recovering and accumulating fragments from history, the allegorical image conjoins the past to the present just as two currents of water spin into a single whirlpool with no centre or source, no beginning or end. The term origin, he says,

> ... is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and re-establishment, but on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something perfect and incomplete.[48]

As the *Spiral Jetty* layers text onto the Great Salt Lake, it presents the site in the rhythm of becoming and disappearance that Benjamin describes. The spectator cannot witness the presence of the site in all its magnitude and complexity; instead the site is mediated by that artwork inscribed onto it. By Owens' logic, even the physical experience of walking over the sculpture is largely prevented because of the location's inaccessibility. The site decenters the artwork from the gallery, and because it grounds the work in a largely unattainable location, the site initiates and is in fact the justification for the entire chain of textual signifiers that define the work as an absence in the gallery. The texts thus intercede on the spectator's contact with the sited sculpture. The site and the artwork are imbricated yet they displace one another; they are connected by the Benjaminian 'dual insight' without a central point of origin or orientation. This is why, as Stephen Melville clarifies, allegory divides itself into moments of

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[47] Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Empreinte* (Paris: Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997) 19.

[48] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: New Left Books, 1977) 45.

concealing and revealing, covering over and bodying forth.[49] Smithson inscribes the artwork onto the Great Salt Lake, revealing the site only by interjecting a new meaning onto it. By marking the site he frames it and makes it visually available, but only through representations that belie the loss of the site's presence. The artwork and the site are literally and metaphorically bound together in the allegorical emblem of the whirlpool, all the modes of confrontation of the work suspend one another over the void they create by displacing the site.

Craig Owens' conclusion that the *Spiral Jetty* enacts a radical dislocation of a point of view is a function of the mode of confrontation through text and not simply through the physical experience of decentering that the work enacts. He thus breaks with a purely phenomenological analysis of the work. Yet, Smithson's concern with the respective material compositions of the site and the texts, and their impact on the spectator's perception of the artwork is unmistakable. As I proceed with my analysis of the essay and the film of the *Spiral Jetty*, I will pay close attention to the ways in which the artwork acknowledges the site as its lost origin, and is encoded as a fluid material that interrupts the text's substance. By contrast to the site, Smithson describes the texts themselves as rigid, fossilized objects. Though Owens rightly foregrounds the importance of textuality, this does not necessarily preclude a phenomenological understanding of the work. Indeed, the points at which the texts expose their disconnect from the site are precisely those in which Smithson expresses his physical experience of being overwhelmed by the site. In the same way a whirlpool orbits around a void, the texts are oriented by the site's absence and the abundant sensations evoked at the locus of its evacuation. The artist expands his previous definition of the site and the non-site as mutually exclusive, and distinguishes them through their contrasting materialities. The text is visibly present, yet solid and hardened whereas the site is absent, but periodically returns as a vital fluid.

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[49] Stephen Melville, "Notes on the Re-emergence of Allegory," *October* 19 (Winter 1981) 83.

Through his site/non-site works Smithson shows how the art object makes the site visible to the spectator yet simultaneously effaces it by making it unavailable. The non-site, or text is an inscription that 'contains its own void' and thus empties the site of stable signification. Yet, when it came to installing large structures in the land, earthworks as opposed to site/non-site projects, Smithson explains the artwork as an explicitly physical practice of absenting the site. As a consultant for a new air terminal in Texas, for example, the artist discusses the way in which the project bores a hole into the site. "Boring," he says, "if seen as a discrete step in the development of an entire site, has an esthetic value. It is an invisible hole. It could be defined by Carl Andre's motto - 'a thing is a hole in the thing it is not."[50] We can detect here a subtle shift from the movement of dialectical polarity between the site and the non-site, to the artwork's effect of literally boring a hole into the land. By summoning the phrase 'a thing is a hole in the thing it is not' Smithson concedes not just the logical incompatibility of the artwork and the site but the way they eclipse one another's material composition. In relation to this, Smithson's conceptualization of the *Spiral Jetty* merges the site and the text and circles them around a hole in the middle of the work that correlates to both a physical and a discursive loss. Where the site/non-site works position art on a split between place and representation, the *Spiral Jetty* reconfigures this fracture into the empty centre of a whirlpool.

In the *Spiral Jetty*, the site and the non-site combine in the allegorical emblem and orbit around the void they create in their mutual displacement of one another. More precisely though, the site does not just preclude its own signification because it is displaced by the non-site, rather the raw dynamism of the site threatens logical sense altogether. In his description of his first visit the site at Rozel Point, Smithson writes,

As I looked out at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake...From the gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No

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[50] Smithson, "A Thing is a Hole in the Thing it is Not," *Robert Smithson*, 95.

ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and nonsite whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other...No sense wondering about classifications and categories, there were none.[51]

In this dramatic account of his experience, the magnitude and sheer power of the site rebuffs any possibility of being articulated through language, thought, art object, or representation: no abstractions can withstand 'the actuality of that evidence'. In pitting discursive formulations against the gyrating site, Smithson recalls the bipolar rhythm between mind and matter of his site/non-sites. But here, the force of the site arrests all thought, even dialectical movement, and instead the 'immobile cyclone' collapses all concepts that differentiate one another. Site and non-site whirl together like solid and liquid lost in each other. The allusion to the sculpture at this point is clear, for he constructed the work out of earth and solid rock which coil into the water of the lake.

Smithson weaves together two threads throughout the making of the *Spiral Jetty*. Firstly, he continually returns to the theme of the whirlpool's empty center, which he uses to evoke the corresponding ideas that the site inhibits its own articulation as a text and that the solid materiality of the text is precarious. This empty center takes the form of blindspots, voids or holes in the work. The second thread, as I have already suggested, is the tension between solidity and fluidity, which Smithson uses to recast the dialectical relationship between the non-site and the site onto a shared space that does not assume a straightforward split between the site and its representation as text. Though the site and the text are still, in a sense, dialectical opposites, Smithson complicates their polarity. He lends a fluid quality to the empty center that the site leaves within the fabric of the text. The site's absence to the text thus manifests as a subterranean liquid that surges up in the many lapses in visual representation. Smithson evidences the site

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[51] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 146.

as an amorphous substance that underlies the surface of logical meaning and breaks apart the solidity of the text.

In the *Spiral Jetty* the site and the text are fused together yet they are the material inverse of one another; the site's dynamism escapes being concretized into text, and the text is broken apart by the coursing liquid of the site. The blindspots, holes and voids that pepper the texts are thus cues to a residue from the fracture between the site and the non-site. The rupture between the site and the text does not lead to abstract space but to a primordial substance that persistently evokes a phenomenological encounter with the site. The textualization of the *Spiral Jetty*, then, does not necessarily require a theoretical departure from the perceptual experience of being decentered in the landscape; rather it demands a discursive extension of phenomenological interpretation. The physical experience of the site and the mental experience of the textual artwork are two sides of the same coin. Smithson confirms this writing,

> Both sides are present and absent at the same time. The land or ground of the Site is placed *in* the art (Nonsite) rather than the art placed *on* the ground...Is the Site a reflection of the Nonsite (mirror) or is it the other way around? The rules of this network of signs are discovered as you go along uncertain trails both mental and physical.[52]

I said earlier that the metaphor of the whirlpool in the *Spiral Jetty* operates at several levels, from the atomic make-up of the salt-crystal, to the myth of the whirlpool at the Great Salt Lake, to its own allegorical practice of evacuating the original meaning from the site. Smithson inflects the image of the whirlpool even more subtly into his essay. After a narrative in which he describes his search for the site, the construction of the jetty, walking over the sculpture, and viewing it from a helicopter, Smithson lists a 'scale of centers' around which the artwork circumnavigates. The items on his list are all examples of forms that, like a spiral, surround an empty center. He parallels these items to instances in his essay when he describes his loss of orientation at the site.

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[52] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 153.

Among the phenomena on his list is an ion in a cyclotron, by which Smithson refers to the irregular structure of a salt crystal called a 'screw dislocation'. The second item is a nucleus, which he mentions in the essay as the unattainable core at the end of the sculpture. The artist's pursuit of the nucleus causes him to, "slip outside himself and dissolve into a unicellular beginning."[53] Next, Smithson mentions a dislocation point and a wooden stake in the mud, in reference to the process of mapping out the site by marking certain points where the jetty would be built. In the essay, though, the stake, "leads to a meandering zone," and though the trucks attempt to fill in the area marked by the stakes with rock and earth, their wheels sink, "into a quagmire of sticky gumbo mud."[54] The stake in the mud is a precarious centre, set in a sticky foundation and then covered over with hard earth. The artist also lists the axis of the helicopter propeller, the point that lines up the two blades. He is quick to point out the origin of the word helicopter, "from the Greek *helix, helikos* meaning spiral."[55] The spiral has no central source; it emerges around emptiness. Smithson itemizes yet another spiral shape, James Joyce's ear channel, with reference to Brancusi's sketch portrait of James Joyce as a spiral ear. Smithson then lists the sun, which may appear to be an enclosed center, but as the artists explains elsewhere, "the secret to the Sun is that it is not one star but millions, it's really a 'spiral nebula'."[56] And finally, the last item on the scale of centers is the hole in a film reel, a vacancy around which the film revolves.

Smithson acknowledges this list as an "uncertain scale of centers" which corresponds to "an equally uncertain 'scale of edges'." It is significant that the items of Smithson's scale of edges are malleable and elusive: particles, protoplasmic solutions, dizziness, ripples, flashes of light, sections, foot steps, pink water. The edges of the work overwhelm its centralized orientation; the

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[53] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 149.
[54] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 146.
[55] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 148.
[56] Smithson quoted in Shapiro, 17.

work is surrounded by the uncontained movement of the site (particles, protoplasm, ripples, pink water) and the physical sensations (dizziness, flashes of light) that disrupt any assessment of the work as a knowable whole. Even the mention of sections and footsteps, which seem at first to be concrete, prove to be markers of the disassembly of a stable division between the center and the periphery of the work. With respect to the sectioning of the *Spiral Jetty* into measured lengths, Smithson comments, "in the Spiral Jetty the surd takes over and leads one into a world that cannot be expressed by number or rationality."[57] Sections are only an illusion, a reference point that is about to be dissolved. Likewise the footsteps mark a descent into a state of irrationality, "After a point, measurable steps...descend from logic to the 'surd state'."[58] Where Smithson had previously established a dialectical fracture of center and periphery in his site/non-sites, here he blends the two together, by making the center an empty receptacle that is filled with the expanding flow of uncontrollable activity from the periphery.

As Smithson charts his experience of making of the jetty in his essay, he exposes several lags in his ability to describe the site, and is forced to express only raw physical sensation. Most often, these lapses are blindspots, situated at the point where the artist is incapable of seeing the site in fullness and clarity: "On the slopes of Rozel Point I closed my eyes, and the sun burned crimson through the lids;" "My sight was saturated by the color of red algae circulating in the heart of the lake, pumping in ruby currents;" "My eyes became combustion chambers churning orbs of blood blazing by the light of the sun;" "Rays of glare hit my eyes with the frequency of a Geiger counter."[59] The artist's vision is affronted by the elemental potency of the location. He closes his eyes and the sun burns through them, his sight is saturated by the red color of the lake, the blood in

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[57] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 147.
[58] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 147.
[59] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 148.

his eyes is blazed with light. Smithson's lapses in sight are immediately flooded with the visceral fluids that permeate the site.

The artist cannot gather the site into a reasonable description because its thick substance overcomes any meaning that he tries to affix to it. "Logical purity," he says, "suddenly finds itself in a bog...the *alogos* undermines the *logos*."[60] Unable to sustain a correspondence between the site's viscosity and his description of it, the site leads Smithson to a primordial state of being, "...the tail leads into an undifferentiated state of matter"; "Following the spiral steps we return to our origins, back to some pulpy protoplasm, a floating eye adrift in an antediluvian ocean;" "I was slipping out of myself again, dissolving into a unicellular beginning."[61] Smithson's blindspots, which join the artist's bodily fluids to the streaming elements of the site - merging his blood into the rays of light and salty red water - reveal themselves as the whirlpool's magnetic pull downward into an undifferentiated state, an 'antediluvian ocean'. The reader/spectator is led vicariously downward to an earthly origin, but this origin is the antithesis of a definitive point of differentiation; it is 'pulpy protoplasm'.

The artist shows the lapses in his narrative description to be symptoms of an amorphous condition beneath the facade of meaning. Though he conceives of language as a 'terrain of particles, each containing its own void', drawing a comparison between words and minerals, texts and hard geological sediment, the voids in his essay trigger a wellspring of elemental fluid. Confirming the essay's vulnerability to being pulled downward by the centripetal force of the site Smithson writes, "The equation of my language remains unstable...an arrangement of variables spilling into surds. My equation is as clear as mud - a muddy spiral."[62] His essay, like the sculpture, is an inscription set in the unsteady foundation of the site. The material base of the text upsets the meaning it holds; Smithson's language is, absurdly, 'clear as mud'. Sight fills with blood, logic

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[60] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 147.
[61] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 147-149.
[62] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 150.

sinks into a bog, language is muddied. The artist thus combines the site with the text, using the essay itself to induce a phenomenological experience. There is a primacy to the site that cannot be denied because it is the nebulous underpinning of the text. As Smithson explains, "The rationality of a grid on a map sinks into what it is supposed to define."[63]

Likewise, the artist evidences the fragility of textual meaning by evoking the site through sensorial disruptions in his film. The 35-minute, 16mm film splices together disjointed images alongside Smithson's documentation of the construction of the jetty (Figure 9). Alternating between shots of the road to Rozel Point, an arduous sequence of trucks backing into the lake and dumping heaps of rock and earth, and a blinding telescopic shot of the sun, Smithson includes views of a quarry in Great Notch, New Jersey, maps of the prehistoric world, and the 'Hall of the Late Dinosaurs' in the American Museum of Natural History. The film imparts this intercutting with a rhythm between the site under construction in the present, and its resonance with the primordial past. Smithson creates the film as though making, in his words, "a map that would show the prehistoric world as coextensive with the world I existed in."[64] Like the essay, however, the text recalls the prehistoric world by connecting it to bodily fluids. The scenes of the Museum of Natural History are filmed through a red filter, summoning a physiological bond between the spectator, the site, and the texture of the image. The red filter of the film recalls the color of blood and of the lake. Between the essay and the film, Smithson draws the spectator and the site together into a shared corporeality in a prehistoric past. He states that, "Chemically speaking, our blood is analogous in composition to the primordial seas."[65]

Not only does the artist evoke blood and liken it to the lake water, the progression of the film is a descent into the elemental liquid of the whirlpool.

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[63] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 147.
[64] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 151.
[65] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 148.

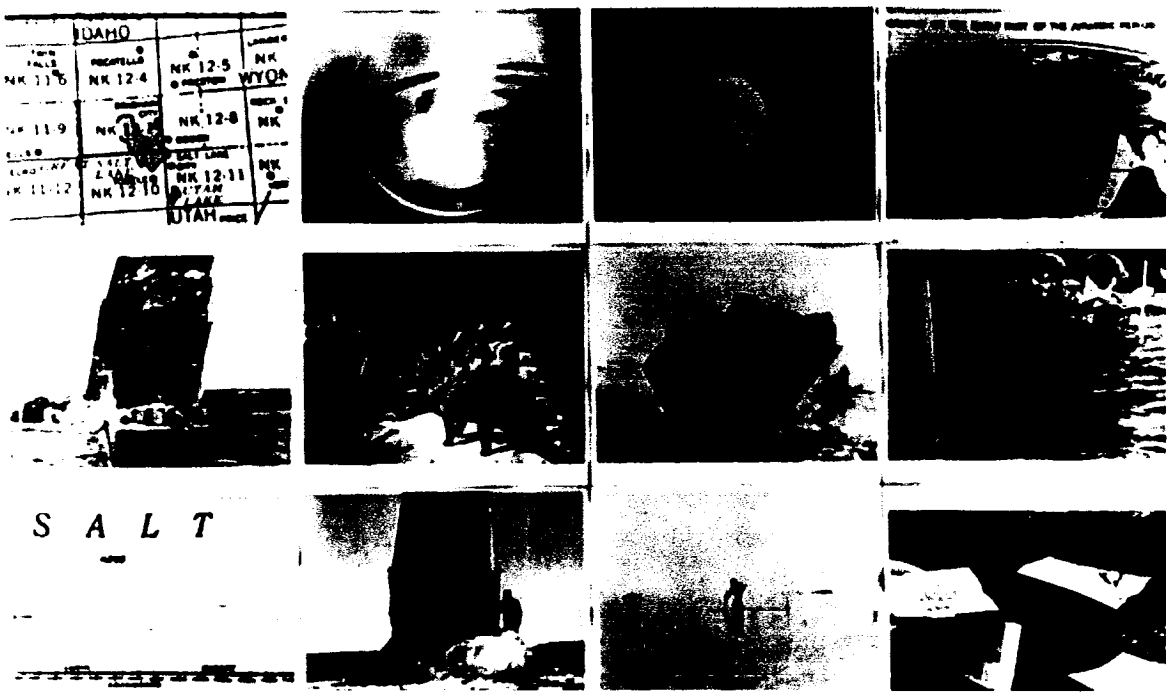

Figure 9. Robert Smithson, *The Spiral Jetty* – film stills. 1970.

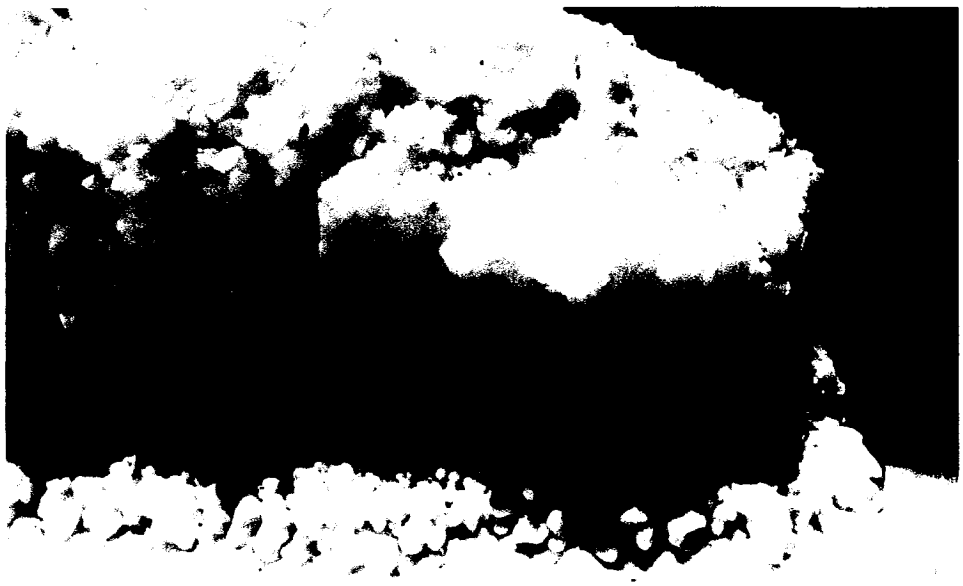

Figure 10. Robert Smithson, *The Spiral Jetty*, salt encrusted on sculpture.

From this journey the artist revives a sense of the site's immediacy, though the film is only a text, Smithson is conscious of filming as a process of fossilizing organic life. He describes film as inert matter in which the life of a site has been ensnared. The film is, "a bramble of stabilized fragments taken from things obscure and fluid, ingredients trapped in a succession of frames, a stream of viscosities both still and moving." And more strikingly, the film is made of "...masses of impenetrable material. The sun, the spiral, the salt buried in lengths of footage."[66] The dense substance of the film is not to be confused with the 'fluid' and 'viscous' life of the site that it depicts. But nor does the film mask the site entirely; rather it pivots around the site attempting to take the viewer deeper as it circles around the jetty, allowing the lake to penetrate the density of its medium by imprinting the footage with visual sensations that evoke a tangible connection to the site.

Just as the essay follows the gravitational pull of the whirlpool, forcing a descent into an undifferentiated state, Smithson initiates the motion of the spiral by having himself filmed from a helicopter, running the course of the jetty in anticlockwise circles from the shore to its middle. As the helicopter loops around the sculpture, all sense of direction is lost; there is no horizon or vantage point to reinstate a centralized perspective. Indeed, the medium of film is essentially disorienting, for as Smithson confirms, "...a film is a spiral made up of frames."[67] The last sequence, shot from the sky looking down, follows Smithson's erratic gait. Animated by the contrast between the solid rock of the sculpture and the rays of light reflected off the lake, the surface of the filmstrip is textured by water and overturned earth. The tension of the film mounts as the circling intensifies a sense of dizziness. The desired effect, Smithson explains, is a sense of impending collapse, "My movie would end in sunstroke."[68] The climax of the film is reached as Smithson runs up to the edge of the sculpture, and looks out over it into the

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[66] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 150.
[67] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 131.
[68] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 148.

water. The spiral brings the film to an end that is as Smithson describes, a dematerialization: a physical rupture within, and a dissolution of, the filmic image: "Between heat lightning and heat exhaustion, the spiral curled into vaporization."[69]

The chain of textual signifiers does not, as Owens' seems to suggest, entirely foreclose a physical experience of the site though they mediate it for the spectator. Instead the essay and the film undertake a metaphorical descent into the whirlpool, and in the empty center that marks the site's absence and which manifests lapses of representation and logic, Smithson impresses them with a fluid quality. Though the allegorical emblem of the whirlpool divulges the artwork's loss of an origin - a loss of the primary experience of the site and of its original meaning - there is a purpose to Smithson's gravitation to the loci of the site's absence. In bringing the loss of the site into the spectator's trajectory, he calls forth bodily perception while acknowledging the inability to encapsulate the site as a textual representation. "The disjunction between reality and film drives one into a sense of cosmic rupture," Smithson tells, " Adrift amid scraps of film, one is unable to infuse into them any meaning, they seem worn-out, ossified views, degraded and pointless, yet they are powerful enough to hurl one into a lucid vertigo."[70] The film itself is dead matter, an ossified and degraded text unable to carry any inherent meaning. Yet it has one redeeming feature: it can bring on a lucid vertigo. The site cannot be represented but its loss can, and this absence communicates a vitality that the text, in its exhausted state is incapable of. Out of the rupture between reality and film, site and text, a phenomenological experience appears, synthesizing the site and the artist's body in a common physiology.

In the previous chapter, I noted the influence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's model of the chiasm in the analysis of body art. Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology, I explained, presumes that our knowledge of the world and ourselves is informed

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[69] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 148.
[70] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 152.

by our pre-cognitive bodily experience, and that our perception is situated in an intercorporeal sense of being. That is to say, the body's flesh is instantiated in the 'flesh of the world', and our perception emerges out of the contact of that flesh folded back on itself. Merleau-Ponty uses the image of infolded flesh to explain the gap between thought and perception, between mind and body. It is this gap that concerns me here, for as I have shown, Smithson evokes bodily conditions and sensations at precisely the lapses in textual representation and meaning. Luce Irigaray raises an important point about Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology that is equally pertinent to the bodily experience that Smithson elucidates in the *Spiral Jetty*. To develop his model of the chiasm, Irigaray argues, Merleau-Ponty relies on a metaphorics of fluidity that is distinctly feminine and maternal. In the idea that one perceives by inhabiting that which is perceived, the seer enters into an intimate connection with the visible world, in which 'he' resides within it in an indeterminate state - 'the sea or the strand' - suggestive of the intrauterine state of the child surrounded by amniotic fluid.[71] The gap between the mind and the body, the visible and the invisible, by which all knowledge of the world is amalgamated into a coherent whole, begins for Irigaray in this physical relationship to the mother. Elizabeth Grosz further explains that in the nocturnal state of the womb there is only tactile sensation, and that its darkness makes vision possible.[72]

For Merleau-Ponty, the invisible world of tactility precedes and ultimately formulates and orients vision. He clarifies, "There is a strict ideality in experiences that are experiences of the flesh: the moments of the sonata, the fragments of the luminous field, adhere to one another with a cohesion without concept which is of the same type as the cohesion of the parts of my body, or the cohesion of my body with the world."[73] The perception of the world coheres without concept; it is a knowledge that is as harmonious as the coordination of

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[71] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 104.
[72] Grosz, 104.
[73] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) 152.

body parts and of the body's movement in the world. It is not surprising then, that Smithson suggests the physical experience of the *Spiral Jetty* in precisely the places where sight fails. The lapses of representation and meaning that appear in the textual modes of the work are often preceded by references to his inability to see, the 'churning orbs of blood' or the rays of light that 'hit my eyes with the frequency of a Geiger counter,' for example. Yet, Smithson recognizes that these lapses are intertwined with a desire for coherence. There is a correlation between being overwhelmed by tactile sensation, a consequent failure to see, and the attempt to clearly articulate this phenomenal engagement. He writes, "Eyesight is often slaughtered by the other senses, and when that happens it becomes necessary to seek out dispassionate abstractions."[74]

Irigaray makes another pertinent point about Merleau-Ponty's model; despite our attempts to abstract our tactile connection with the world, the gap between tactility and vision can be bridged. Tactility is never entirely obscured by vision but intercedes in the confrontation with color which functions as a fluid. Color, she explains, pours itself out and, "imposes itself upon me as a recall of what is most archaic in me, the fluid."[75] Equally, Smithson bridges his textual representations of the site with his bodily experience of it, coding the moments of pure physicality with fluid metaphors. In drawing a parallel between the coursing liquids of the body, the saline water of the lake and the blazing light of the sun, Smithson merges his body with the site. Moreover, he links this state to a 'primordial sea' and an 'antediluvian ocean', positioning the site as a geological womb. The color red bolsters his vibrant imagery, particularly in the frequent references to blood, the sun which "burned crimson through my lids", and in the use of the red filter through which he films the Hall of Late Dinosaurs. The process of representation is enveloped in vital fluids that stream through the site, the artist's body, and in the periodic eruptions in the texts.

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[74] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," *Robert Smithson*, 148.
[75] Luce Irigaray, quoted in Grosz, 104.

In the essay and the film of the *Spiral Jetty*, the allegorical emblem of the whirlpool leads the artist and the spectator to a gap in signification, and from that a pre-cognitive sensorial condition ensues. The whirlpool emblematizes the site as the artwork's lost origin, but though the site is allegorized and thus evacuated of its implicit significance, it inserts itself in the ruptures that the text inevitably betrays. The motif of the whirlpool thus turns attention to how the meaning of the artwork is created between textual signifiers, precisely because of the lapses between them and the site. Beneath the veneer of representation, the undifferentiated primordial substance becomes apparent as a tangible sign of the site's absence. From the cracks in the brittle materiality of the texts, the site burgeons forth as an elemental fluid, arresting the text's visibility and upsetting the coherence of representation. In Smithson's references to an intercorporeal experience between his body and the site, there is a phenomenological connection to the site that overcomes the text's attempt to cover it. Despite the fact that the artwork performs the site in the allegorical rhythm of concealing and revealing, of making the site visible but only through a fragmented representation, the site exceeds the meaning the artwork would apply to it. The *Spiral Jetty* does not perform the site in a dialectical movement between mind and matter. More accurately, the artwork performs the site as the locus of a loss of original meaning, and mediates the desire to recover that loss. The site's absence is palpably evident as an unconstituted material that binds the fragmentary artwork and points to its inability to signify the site as a unified image.

Entropy and the Temporal Loss of Site

Up until this point, I have focused on Owens' theory of the allegorical impulse to illuminate the tension between the site and the texts in the *Spiral Jetty*. I have argued that the artwork performs the site as a loss of meaning that interrupts the text's attempts to signify the site. The manifestation of this loss as a fluid trace exposes the allegorical mechanism of the text to cover the site and emblematize it by overwriting new meaning. The text's representation of the site

is always incomplete and this is why Owens remarks that allegory tends towards the fragmentary. Yet, in the *Spiral Jetty*, it is not merely the case that the site is fragmented into representations, but also that the texts are oriented towards the loss of the site, and the sensations associated with it. The conspicuous and yet incoherent presence of the site's absence ruptures the essay and the film so that they deny a unified perspective of the site. Smithson thus made a powerful statement against modernism's valorization of a singular central perspective. Owens is correct in arguing that the work must be read through the relationship between the texts (the sculpture, the essay, and the film), but what he does not acknowledge is that Smithson retrieves the site by materializing the distance between them in the form of dynamic fluid. The residual substance of the absent site thus plays an integral role in activating the continual upheaval of meaning that the textualization of art and the materialization of text signals. Positioning the site as a forgotten primordial past, Smithson joins it to the essay and the film as the focus of their circumambulation, the eye of his 'immobile cyclone'. Paradoxically, the site's loss binds and separates the texts from one another.

I would now like to return to Owens' discussion of allegory and its relevance to Smithson's notorious preoccupation with entropy. I have suggested that the site makes itself evident as an absence in the text, and specifically, this absence recalls a primordial past. Already then, I have characterized the relationship between the site and the text as a temporal disjunction; the site is the prehistory of the artwork. I would like to pursue the issue of the *Spiral Jetty's* temporality, yet I would further distinguish my argument from Owens' in the following way. Where Owens anticipates that the sited sculpture is abandoned to the Great Salt Lake thereby dispersing the locus of the artwork into its textual forms, I am suggesting that Smithson did not intend his sculpture to be progressively absorbed by the site. To the contrary, his strategy of affixing a sculpture to the earth was a way to introduce a sense of duration to the artwork without dematerializing his intervention. Although the concept of entropy that Smithson developed is certainly related to allegory's aesthetic of ruination, the

Spiral Jetty was not bound for a straightforward dematerialization, as Owens assumes. Where in the previous section I focused on the location of the artwork in relation to the spectator's mode of confrontation, and diverged from Owens by arguing that the site is never entirely textualized because it leaves fluid traces of its absence, I will now examine how the specific temporality of the artwork complicates the siting of the artwork at the Great Salt Lake. The concept of entropy for Smithson did not refer to the linear degeneration of matter, but rather to a temporal circuit of progress and regress. Smithson did not deploy the lake to permanently engulf the sculpture, then, but rather to suspend the artwork in its cycle of swelling and receding. The sculpture persists as the sediment of the site's perpetual rhythm; it emblematizes and is the repository for residual salt crystals. Because it allegorizes the lake, by indexing its temporal flow, the sculpture is actually thickened by the passage of time as salt crystals accumulate on its surface. Curiously, temporality bolsters the materiality of the sculpture and at the same time returns attention to the primacy of the site's temporal flow.

In the previous section, I showed how the artwork as a chain of texts discloses the site as a fluid absence; the centrality of its loss is what binds the texts together. I will now show how the sculpture persists in the site for precisely the reason the site persists in the texts – because the artwork positions the site as its primordial past, and it is perpetually oriented towards the loss of that past. Central to the allegorical impulse of the artwork is its drive to turn back in time, which results in the accumulation, densification and solidification of matter. I will thus reiterate the point that the artwork performs the site in its disjunction from it, this time by showing how the sculpture exists in a different temporal mode from that of the site. The point to be emphasized here, as in the previous section, is that in drawing a parallel between the textualized artwork and the sedimentation of matter over time, Smithson affirms the *Spiral Jetty*'s material connection to the site by focusing on its loss. Once again, the artwork does not evidence the site as a tenable representation, but instead codes the site as a fluid absence, in this case as the unabated flow of time.

I explained earlier how allegory emblematizes the past through the appropriation of historic fragments. In Owens' reading of allegory through Walter Benjamin, the ruin is the penultimate allegorical fragment; it stands for the irreversible process of history's decay and the progressive distancing from a point of origin as time passes.[76] The ruin signals the integration of history by the natural landscape; the fragments of human civilizations become absorbed by their setting. Indeed, there is a nuance of nature's antagonism towards human history in Benjamin's understanding of the ruin as having an 'allegorical physiognomy'. Allegory, he writes, "is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious..."[77] Like the ruin, allegory encompasses the dissolution of history and is underscored by the process of material degradation. Owens associates this allegorical cult of the ruin with site-specific art, for the first generation of earth artists embedded their works in natural settings with the explicit goal of creating an ethos of prehistory. The kinship of site-specific sculptures to prehistoric monuments links them to the "petrified, primordial landscape" of history seen in allegorical ruins.

Implicit in Owens' analysis of the *Spiral Jetty*, then, is his assumption that like other site-specific works, it was intended to be ephemeral: "Site-specific works are impermanent, installed in particular locations for a limited duration, their impermanence providing the measure of their circumstantiality. Yet they are rarely dismantled but simply abandoned to nature... In this, the site-specific work becomes an emblem of transience..."[78] Owens secures a relationship between the work's supposed impermanence and its dispersal into fragments of text. The textualized artwork is allegorical in that it attempts to fix into representation that which is transitory, and consequently offers only an assembly of fragments that affirm their own contingency to one another.[79] By this logic, Smithson's works

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[76] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 70.
[77] Benjamin quoted in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 71.
[78] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 71.
[79] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 71.

are the prime example of the allegorical tendency to fragment the art object by submitting it to the degrading forces of the earth. Owens theorizes that the artist's interest in entropy reveals his recognition of the forces that erode and reclaim the work of art for nature.

The significance of the *Spiral Jetty* for Owens is the position it occupies as a chain of signifiers. "When the Great Salt Lake rose and submerged the *Spiral Jetty*," he argues, "the salt deposits left on its surface became yet another link in the chain of crystalline forms which makes possible the description of the *Jetty* as a text."[80] There is a certain ambiguity to this statement, however, for while it is certainly true that the lake submerges the jetty and then subsides leaving it encrusted with salt crystals, by connecting the immersion of the work and its textualization to the process of decay in allegory, Owens inadvertently implies that the sculpture is on a linear temporal course and is destined to be degenerated by the site. Indeed, the association of the earthwork with ruins perpetuated several subsequent interpretations underpinned by the expectation that the lake was destroying the jetty. In an essay written in 1988, for example, Ann Reynolds reiterates a causal connection between the decay of the *Spiral Jetty* and a textual mode of confrontation saying, "...because of its location and physical fragility, few of us have actually experienced it in this way. Instead we see it neatly framed in a photographic image that is endlessly reproduced..."[81] Similarly, in her more recent analysis of the film of the *Spiral Jetty*, Reynolds describes the interplay between the sounds of the heavy machinery as the sculpture is being built, and the sound of lapping water. This rhythm, she argues, corresponds with the building of the jetty and the forces of its "slow, imperceptible but inevitable dissolution."[82]

Reynolds' characterization of the *Spiral Jetty* as 'physically fragile' and the projection of its 'inevitable dissolution', reiterates Owens' presumption that

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[80] Owens, "Earthwords," 129.

[81] Ann Reynolds, "Reproducing Nature: The Museum of Natural History as Nonsite," *October* 45 (Summer 1988) 109.

[82] Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning From New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003) 225.

Smithson built the work with the intention of having the site reabsorb it, thereby securing its induction into text. This kind of analysis frames the lake's activity as a destructive force pitted against the art object; the splitting of the work into uprooted textual fragments is a function of the sculpture's disassembly. As Ron Graziani observes, since the *Spiral Jetty*'s original submergence, an anthropocentric art historical perspective has continued to celebrate the work's below-water-level condition within the postsublime aesthetics of displacement, transience, and impermanence.[83] But, he adds, those aspects were only one part of the jetty's design for Smithson constructed the work to be "physical enough to be able to withstand all the climate changes, yet [be] intimately involved with those...natural disturbances."[84]

I have noted that modernism's insistent segregation of the visual arts from the discursive arts was founded on a temporal distinction: discursive arts appeared in temporal succession while the visual arts were elaborated in spatial simultaneity. The problem with modern art, according to Smithson, was that it was a closed system professing to be without time. He criticizes modernism's drive to transcend the material world saying, "...pure art tends to view abstraction as independent of nature, there's no accounting for change or the temporality of the mundane world. *Abstraction rules in a void, pretending to be free of time.*"[85] Not only was the artist well aware of modernism's denial of temporality, he recognized that introducing a sense of duration to the artwork was indeed concomitant with its textualization. His association of words and grammar with stratas of rock deposits in the Earth's crust affirms the materiality of language, but it also foregrounds a temporal awareness that redefined the textual artwork in terms of what he called 'geological time'. He observes,

The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social

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[83] Ron Graziani, *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 112.

[84] Smithson, "Conversation in Salt Lake," by Gianni Pettena quoted in Graziani, 118.

[85] Smithson, "Entropy Made Visible, Interview with Alison Sky," *Robert Smithson*, 302.

structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth's crust. [86]

Moreover, duration fragments the art object; the testament to an authentic artwork by Smithson's definition, is the fracture left by its temporal unfolding. He explains,

When a *thing* is seen through the consciousness of temporality, it is changed into something that is nothing. This all-engulfing sense provides the mental ground for the object, so that it ceases being a mere object and becomes art. The object gets to be less and less but exists as something clearer. Every object, if it is art, is charged with the rush of time... [87]

Temporality has a paradoxical relationship to the artwork; it causes the object to fragment yet it is the mechanism or 'mental ground' by which it emerges as art. Smithson's statement that the consciousness of temporality changes the object from something into nothing is not as literal as it appears. Smithson does not mean that time makes the object disappear, but rather that time instigates a break between the object and art, and discards the object as merely a thing; a thing that is 'no-thing' as far as art is concerned, in the same way that the non-site is a material object but is nevertheless not the site of art. This idea recalls the passage at the end of his essay on the *Spiral Jetty* in which he describes the scraps of film as 'ossified remains' that are 'degraded and pointless'; they hold no meaning in and of themselves but they hurl the viewer into a 'lucid vertigo'. What makes an object art is its suggestion of a rush of time not just its material composition. Smithson hinges art to time, yet time does not rest within the object, it propels that which constitutes art into oblivion and leaves the object in a state of exhausted equilibrium. In this sense, Smithson engages the idea of the artwork as a ruin; the textualized art object is composed of inert matter, and thus evokes the effects of progressive geological time. It might, however, be more accurate to say that the textualized art object is a consequence and a symptom of temporal

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[86] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Robert Smithson*, 107.
[87] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind," 113.

progression, but that it is no longer subject to time. This very idea is latent in Owens' essay when he writes that the earthwork is an emblem of transience; that is, it is an *emblem* of transience, but is not itself transient. I thus concur with Pamela Lee that the *Spiral Jetty* illustrates the aesthetic fatigue associated with the drive in the nineteen-sixties towards noncontemporaneity, or a striving to be extricated from time.[88] I will return to the relationship between allegory and time, but first it is worth examining Smithson's understanding of the concept of entropy and how it opened up an avenue into reinventing art in terms of temporality without dematerializing the object. I will then go on to show how entropy is the basis of the temporal structure of allegory, and leads to the persistence of a material object that evidences the site in its absence.

To what extent can we say that Smithson's interest in entropy and his use of the earth implicated the *Spiral Jetty* in a process of decay? To the artist's mind, entropy was indeed a process of deterioration over time, but it was also inherently finite. More accurately, it led to an irreversible state of fragmentation. Entropy exemplifies both fracture and stability, "...it's a condition that's moving towards a gradual equilibrium...You have a closed system which eventually deteriorates and starts to break apart and there's no way you can really piece it back together again."[89] These two tenets of entropy, fragmentation and equilibrium, were instrumental to Smithson's conception of the *Spiral Jetty*. By lodging a sculpture in the earth, Smithson leads us to read the artwork not as an object in the process of decay, but as an index of time having passed. The sculpture, and indeed the other texts, are all effectively shaped by temporal flow, but are not undone by it.

The periodic re-emergence of the *Spiral Jetty* over the last thirty-five years poses a problem to claims that the work's decay is a condition of its textualization. Almost as soon as it was built, the jetty disappeared into the lake

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[88] Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004) 223.

[89] Smithson, "Entropy Made Visible, Interview with Alison Sky," *Robert Smithson*, 301.

for two months in the summer of 1971, but it reappeared covered with salt crystals. Since that time, the sculpture has had a relatively regular cycle of being immersed for most of the year, and then rising up above or just under the water in the early fall.[90] But the sculpture has never decayed. In fact, the continuance of the jetty has inspired more recent attempts to reconcile the differential between the concept of entropy and the work's refusal to be absorbed by the lake. Gary Shapiro notes that Smithson never wanted to let the sculpture disappear, and that in 1972, shortly before the artist died, he expressed an interest in building it up above the water level if the lake did not recede.[91] Suzaan Boettger confirms this information, arguing further that the sculpture's submergence into the water is not a good example of entropy because the lake does not bring the sculpture to a simpler organization.[92] Moreover, she remarks that allowing the jetty to deteriorate would thwart Smithson's basic intention to facilitate the salt encrustation that would contrast it to the water. Rather than take the position that the *Spiral Jetty* is unrelated to entropy, or that Smithson was only interested in the sculpture's aesthetic contrast with the lake, I would take the stance that entropy need not always be equated with the progressive decay of the art object. Instead, entropy positions the *Spiral Jetty* as a deposit at the end-point of duration: an object through which time has already passed.

Jennifer Roberts argues that at the beginning of his career in the early sixties, Smithson critiqued the wave of performance art that was gaining popularity in the sixties, for precisely the reason that to dematerialize art was to engender textual by-products which he thought of as dead matter.[93] His criticism of Happenings was akin to his rejection of action painting in the style of the abstract expressionists; if art was grounded in action and not in an object, in his opinion, it was doomed: "All modern schools of art, that are infused with action,

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[90] Boettger, 204.
[91] Shapiro, 196.
[92] Boettger, 205.
[93] Jennifer L. Roberts, *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

ultimately 'despair and die'." Smithson concludes, "Action leads to dead matter while passion leads to spirit life."[94] Roberts connects the artist's violent reaction to action-based practices to his religious crisis, during which he was tormented by the apparent opposition between the transcendent realm of spirituality, and the transient, mundane world of matter. She explains, however, that Smithson emerged from this tumultuous period determined to reconcile these polarities by producing artworks that were bound to materiality, and thus subject to temporal flow, yet which transcended or overcame time.

Crystallography was an avenue into this compromise for Smithson, because in the crystal, the passage of time is marked as molecules amass and take shape. The artist honed in on certain crucial aspects of the growth of the crystal. Firstly, the crystal demonstrates that time is not an empty container, but rather it is replete with matter, which it deposes in fully formed units, namely, the molecules that accumulate around a slip or imperfection on a surface.[95] Secondly, Smithson was attracted to the paradox that the crystal, because it accumulates around an irregularity on a surface (for example, salt crystallizes on the cracks of a rock-face) it is held together and separated by a fracture. For Smithson, Roberts argues, entropy, like the growth of a crystal, conditions matter to be simultaneously unified and fragmented. In the operations of both entropy and crystallization, time deposits matter in a static yet irredeemably divided state, around a fissure or split which is never covered over.[96] Smithson states that the crystal is, "The configuration of maximum wholeness [and] at the same time that of maximum division or entropy."[97]

I noted earlier that the *Spiral Jetty* is a macrocosm of the spiral shape of the salt crystals that accumulate on it and along the shore. Whether we understand the sculpture as emblematizing the crystal, or as a repository of the multitudes of

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[94] Roberts, 18-19.
[95] Roberts, 44.
[96] Roberts, 45.
[97] Roberts, 45.

crystals attached to it, the sculpture is a testament to the operation of entropy. But Smithson dislocates the sculpture from the perpetuity of the site's temporality because he associated entropy with sedimented matter; the jetty is not bound to organic growth but rather to the layering of material after time has passed. The emphasis is that in the object, temporality is always already finished; Smithson positions the artwork as having been shaped by temporal flux while no longer being imbricated with that flux. The artist thus identifies two temporal trajectories which he explains saying, "The Natural world is ruled by temporal (dynamic history), whereas the crystalline world is ruled by the atemporal (non-dynamic time)."[98] The site, as part of the natural world is continually shifting, but the artwork, Smithson shows us, is part of the crystalline world and is therefore atemporal. Because he prefigures the sculpture as crystalline, Smithson demonstrates that the lake is not an antagonistic force that destroys the work. The sculpture is a vestige, matter discarded by time. Smithson subtly ejects the art object outside of the lake's ongoing process of rising and falling water levels, while acknowledging that activity as the work's premise and thus weaving together the site and the artwork across their temporal disarticulation. The expenditure of time gives the work maximum wholeness – the spiral shape emblematizes the passage of time as a salt crystal - but also maximum division. The artwork is fragmented into texts and therefore severed from the site with no possibility of a reintegration into the vital activity of natural time. The sculpture thus reveals the site's temporality as a past duration, as time lost.

Yet it is not enough to say that the sculpture stands as a *fait accompli*, for as I've suggested, what is most interesting about the work is how it continues to behave with the site's continual changes without being undone by them. With each seasonal emergence, the lake reconstitutes the sculpture, crystallizing rather than deteriorating the work (Figure 10). The *Spiral Jetty*'s opposing temporalities are thus evident in the sculpture's cycle of rising up thick with salt crystals and

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[98] Smithson quoted in Roberts, 40.

falling back into the lake. In an interview with Gregoire Müller, Smithson discusses at length the transformations of the jetty when it appeared at the end of the summer of 1971 after two months of being submerged in the lake, "...the *Jetty* was almost entirely surfaced and almost entirely encrusted with salt crystals. There were various types of salt crystal growth - sometimes the crystals take the form of a perfect square. Then at other times, there is a different kind of mineral that looks like wax dripping on the rocks."[99]

Even more significant than his observations of the sculpture's changing surface is his identification of its durable foundation, which stands in tension with the natural activity of the site, "...The day after I visited the *Jetty* some huge thunderstorms came in and completely dissolved all the crystals and turned the *Jetty* back to naked rock. Its mass was intact because it's almost 80% solid rock, so that it held its shape. Yet at the same time it was affected by the contingencies of nature."[100] As Smithson describes it, the sculpture acts as a kind of yardstick for the passing weather systems, varying water levels, and fluctuating elements. It retains its shape though it is embedded in the site. There is an unusual correlation between the positioning of the site's activity as an expenditure of time, and the consequent cycle of the sculpture's thickening and thinning. The variations on the sculpture's surface continually reformulate its relationship to the site in time. Given Smithson's correlation of entropy and crystallography, where he conceived of entropy as leading to a stable condition at the end of temporal flow, the periodic thickening and stripping down of the sculpture, as well as the work's rise out of and fall back into the lake, points towards a more complex interaction between the two realms of dynamic nature and the atemporal artwork.

Pamela Lee suggests that there is a correspondence between Smithson's ideas on entropy and the architectural historian George Kubler's notions of

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[99] Smithson, "...the Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, is a Cruel Master," interview with Gregoire Müller," *Robert Smithson*, 259.
[100] Smithson, "...The Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, is a Cruel Master," *Robert Smithson*, 261

multidirectional time in his 1962 book, *The Shape of Time*. Clearly influenced by Kubler's writings, Smithson rejected principles of progressive time and embraced the idea that history is disjunctive. Kubler advanced a historical framework that emphasized artistic production as intermittent and variable rather than continuous and developing. Most importantly for Lee's analysis of Smithson's writings, Kubler's model of history resonates with certain aspects of Norbert Wiener's cybernetics; specifically, that time is like an electrical circuit that feeds back on itself, producing a system of circular causality.[101] For Kubler, Lee explains, an artistic event enacts a kind of communicative recurrence: it shapes our understanding of the past and transmits that shape into the future. Or more problematically, art is a signal that repeats and changes past signals such that time is deformed as it progresses. Kubler writes, " Our lines of communication with the past therefore originated as signals which become commotions emitting further signals in an unbroken alternating sequence of event, signal, recreated event, renewed signal etc..."[102] Thus, Lee summarizes, as time progresses history is endlessly deforming.

Lee associates Kubler's historiography with the concept of entropy: both are systems that challenge the notion of progress over time. The principle of entropy elaborates the push of time forward and the consequent pull of order into disorder and matter into chaos. This appealed to Smithson's rejection of the modernist ideal that art transcends time altogether, and its latent ideology that artistic practice is continually evolving. Certainly Smithson's works such as *Asphalt Rundown* (1969; Figure 11) stage a more literal interpretation of entropy: in this work, Smithson poured asphalt down the hillside of an abandoned industrial site. As the substance flowed and spread down the hill, the pull of gravity enacted the degenerative force of entropy. But entropy understood only as the will to disorder as Lee characterizes it, does not entirely explain the *Spiral Jetty*'s material relationship to the site's temporality. If Smithson had been solely

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[101] Lee, 243.

[102] George Kubler quoted in Lee, 246.

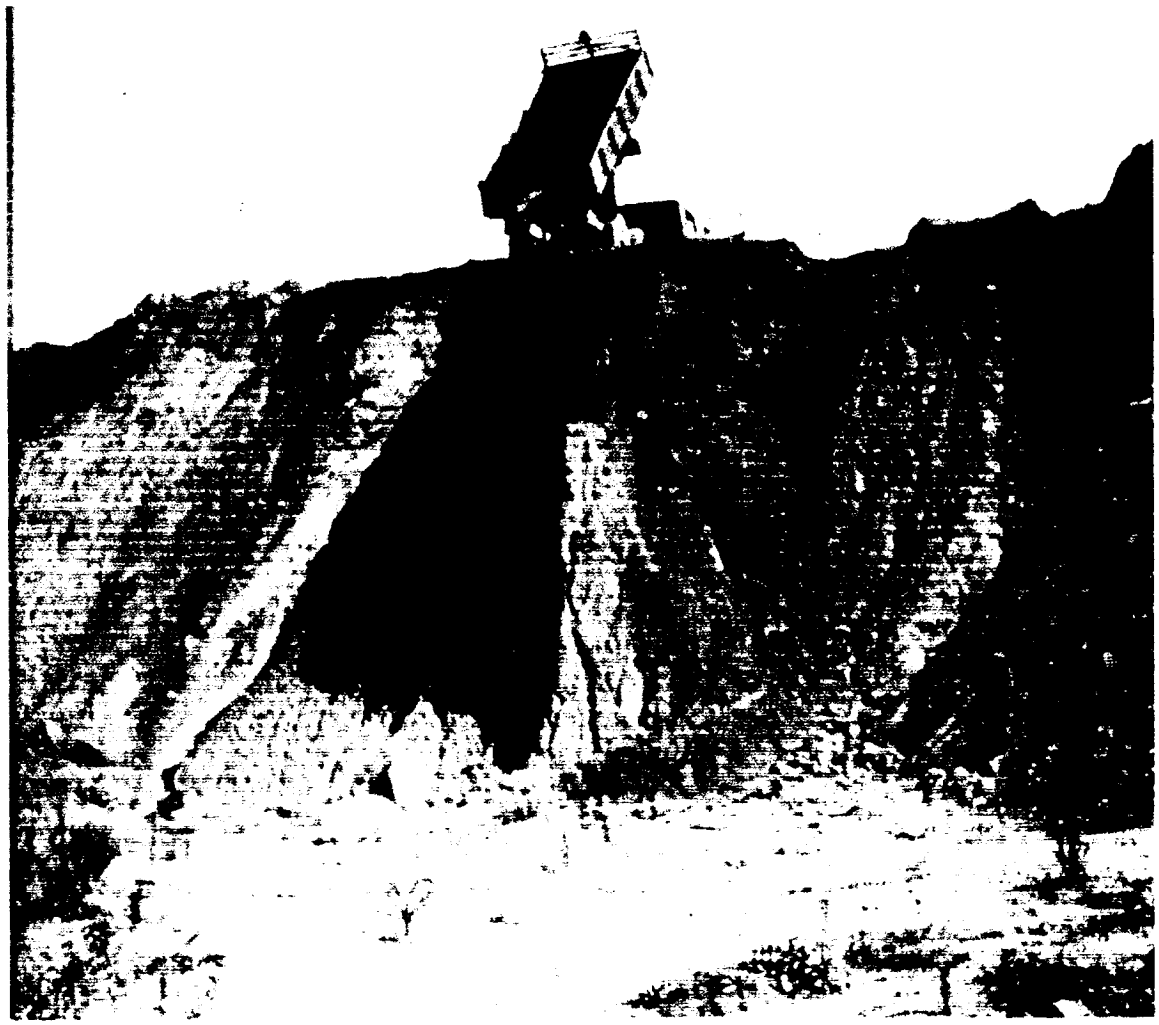

Figure 11. Robert Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown*, 1969.

operating by a logic of a continuously deforming future, the question at hand would be why the *Spiral Jetty* does not progressively saturate the lake, turning it into homogenous mud that eventually hardens and dries.

Evidently, as I have been arguing, Smithson planned the sculpture not only to persist materially, but also to retain its shape while continuing to interact with the site, and indeed to reveal the rhythm of the lake's rise and fall in accord with its own cycle of returning to the water and then emerging from it even more edified. In this case, entropy's influence on the art object did not preclude dense matter or a discernable shape. Certainly, Smithson was concerned with how entropy ruptured the flow of time, and particularly how any temporal advancement of the art object over time effected its fossilization, thus projecting it into a future where the present has become historicized. But, the artist did not need to stage the object's disassembly to convey entropy. Rather, Smithson's goal was to use the artwork as a bridge between prehistory and posthistory. The *Spiral Jetty*'s connection to Kubler's model of history, then, is better summarized in the scholar's statement that "The fullness of history is forever indigestible."[103] For not only does the jetty join the atemporal future of the crystal with the dynamic temporality of the site, it evidences time as a loss within itself. Entropy, for Smithson, does not lead to an absolute exhaustion of matter, for the fabric of history that has been swallowed by the flow of time is never entirely accessible. The artwork does not fully merge with the site, appropriating it into a statement about the inevitable homogeneity of all matter. Because it evidences the loss of time and its own origination as an act of 'swallowing its material of genesis', to use Benjamin's phrase, the artwork never attains chaos but is suspended between an entropic drive forward and a melancholic turn back. The artwork persists because it is fragmented by its own loss of time.

Though Smithson elaborates the artwork (including the texts) as a set of ossified remains that situate it in the future, he nevertheless betrays its backward

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[103] Kubler, quoted in Lee, 253.

orientation, toward its prehistory in the site's fluid substance. The progression into the future and regression into the past take place through Smithson's mobilization of the essay and the film as textual fragments that orbit around the fluid traces of the site's loss, and through the artist's imaginative return into physical unity with an antediluvian ocean. Likewise, the interaction between the sculpture and the lake express an advancement of time resulting in an entropic state of inert - though hard and fractured – matter, while at the same time, the sculpture is submerged by the lake, thus enacting its turn back in (and into) time. Although the *Spiral Jetty* locates itself at the end of entropy, as hard sediment deposited by the flow of time, its allegorical structure instigates a turn back towards its absent origin in dynamic time. The artwork situates the Great Salt Lake as a past from which it emerges and into which it seeks return.

The Spiral Jetty as an Allegory of Loss

In my discussion of the texts of the *Spiral Jetty*, I argued that Smithson shows how the site resists signification by situating it in the primordial past. I said that the different modes of the work are all formally structured like a whirlpool in that they circle around an empty core, which I identified as the absence left by the site, and that at different points in the texts, the artist's perspective is pulled into the breaks in signification. The artist characterizes these voids as replete with fluid, and as passages that lead to an originary amorphous state in which the artist merges with the earth. The texts, I said, perform the site as a primordial past that leaves its trace as a fluid absence. It is important to realize that the temporal dislocation between the sculpture and the site is inextricable from the mechanism of allegory. Moreover, Smithson makes this connection explicit not just by allegorizing the site, but more precisely in deploying the artwork to allegorize the loss of site in and of itself.

When I analyzed the *Spiral Jetty* in terms of its textual modes, I raised Walter Benjamin's use of the whirlpool as a metaphor for the loss of origin that allegory causes, saying that the *Spiral Jetty* engages the site, in his words, in a

"process of becoming and disappearance". That is to say, the texts bring the site into signification but at the same time they cause it to disappear. The lost origin to which the whirlpool cues us in the texts is the loss of the site's physical immediacy and its coherence as meaning; the vortex betrays the gap between the signifier and the signified, the representation of the site and the site itself. I would now like to draw a connection between the whirlpool as an emblem of the *Spiral Jetty*'s allegorical structure and Benjamin's understanding of origin as a disjunction in time.

I have said that given the evidence, Smithson did not intend for the sculpture to decay, but rather located it as a product of the site's temporal flux. Although the sculpture represents the shape of a salt crystal, there is a sense in which the site eludes being emblematized by the artwork, for it moves and changes around the work, not just as a spatial periphery, but also as a temporal periphery. The site is the artwork's pre-history; it is the flux of time on which the sculpture is predicated. By accruing salt crystals, the sculpture evidences its function of making the site's transformations visible as an absence, as a flux that has transpired and exhausted itself. Because the work embodies the shape of the crystal, it thematizes its own position as a remnant of the site. The sculpture is the site's future sediment that stems from a previous immersion in a flow of time. But its orientation towards its absent origin stimulates two temporal directions: it exists in the future and it turns back.

Owens explains that allegory's focus on the past, and its function of retrieving history in and for the present, is precisely what secured the modernist antipathy towards it as an aesthetic strategy, for modernism's fundamental goal, since the nineteenth century, was to shed its rootedness in the past and thereby continually reinvent itself.[104] In connection with its desire to reclaim the past, Benjamin describes allegory as melancholic. Indeed, Benjamin goes on to explain the melancholic aspect of allegory as the psychic lens by which history is

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[104] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 76-77.

perceived in ruins. The true vitality of the past is always drained out of the historic fragment in the process of being appropriated by the allegorical image. He writes, "... if melancholy causes life to flow out of it [the fragment from the past] and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power."[105] In the allegorist's desire to cling to the past, she or he stimulates an expenditure of its vitality, yielding it to the present by stripping it of life. Mick Smith explains that the melancholic ego wants to hold onto the past by consuming it and fixing it to itself. Yet because the past is irretrievable in its entirety, the inevitable result is that the melancholic withdraws into tragic self-absorption centered on the loss of the past, which in turns causes the present to be envisaged as a realm of decay.[106]

If we were to look at Smithson's formulation of the *Spiral Jetty* as a set of ossified remains, fossils or geological sediment we might at first assume that his work is an instance of environmental melancholy, for he locates the Great Salt Lake in the past, representing it, as I have argued, in an allegorical emblem that is essentially a ruin - the salt crystal which is the trace of an expenditure of time and a remnant of the already concluded activity of the site. Yet, by ejecting the site outside itself, dislocating it in time, and most importantly by making this rupture explicit, the artwork slightly alters the melancholy of its allegorical paradigm. Mick Smith points out that allegory offers redemption of a kind, because it opens the slightest of gaps between the subject's representation of the object of loss and the object itself. This critical difference is enough to jar the subject out of melancholy, to witness the emptiness left by the lost object, and thereby reconcile oneself to the passing of time.[107] It is in allegory's potential to distinguish between the artificial image of the object of loss, and the object of loss itself, that resonates with the *Spiral Jetty*.

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[105]Benjamin, quoted in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 70.
[106] Mick Smith, "Environmental Anamnesis: Walter Benjamin and the Ethics of Extinction," *Environmental Ethics* 23 (Winter 2001) 369.
[107]Smith, 370.

I have been arguing that the empty centre of the whirlpool manifests in the essay and the film as their lapses in representation and meaning. The texts evidence the absence of the site in these lapses, conceiving of the site as a primordial past that leaves its trace as a fluid tissue within the brittle fabric of the text. The texts, then, distinguish between their representation of the site, and the site itself. They acknowledge the inability of the allegorical image to fully signify the site and thereby allow the site to be unknown. The 'lucid vertigo' that Smithson describes is caused by exactly this recognition of the void of the site's loss which underlies the text, and which alerts the spectator to its excess beyond the artwork's representation of it. The artwork thus jars itself out of the petrifying lens it applies to the site. I have argued that the fluid quality of the voids constitutes the site as a prehistoric origin. In surfacing the absent site as a quasi-amniotic liquid, Smithson allows it to exist beyond the allegorical desire to retrieve it. The phenomenological connection that Smithson enacts is not melancholic, then; the artist does not draw the site into himself by totalizing it as the allegorical image. Rather he stages the inverse situation; the artist throws himself into the void, and enacts his disintegration into the primordial past as a way to orient the artwork towards the loss that its allegorical impulse initiates. Paradoxically, it is through his imagined experience of immersion into the site, that Smithson surfaces its resistance to being subsumed.

The correspondence between the whirlpool as an allegory of the loss of the site and the salt crystal as an index of its own loss of dynamic natural time requires a more subtle interpretation of the temporal relationship between the sculpture and the site that accounts both for the work's projection into a petrified future, and its ultimate refusal to decay. By thematizing the salt crystal the sculpture indexes the site as a past temporal flux on which its very presence is premised. The sculpture locates the site in its past, and characterizes it by its dynamism; it is a flow replete with the saline fluid that forms the salt crystal. At the same time, as an allegory of a salt crystal, it secures its position at the end of the site's movement; it occupies the contradictory position of a future ruin, thus

joining the pre- and post- historic. The sculpture does not appropriate the site strictly in the manner of an allegorical image, for it exposes its own operation of absenting the site in its emergence as an allegorical fragment. The *Spiral Jetty* emblematizes the site, but further, its emblem exposes the expenditure of time as a condition of its structure. The internalization of the loss of the site in the artwork's allegorization of it, is the mechanism of the work's turn back in pursuit of its absent origin.

The subtle temporal differential between an allegory of the site and an allegory of the loss of the site as time passes, allows Smithson to establish a causal circuitry between the site as a lost primordial past and the artwork as a future ruin, while sustaining the sculpture's shape. In the same way that, as Benjamin says, the allegorical image originates in a process of becoming and disappearance, causing an 'eddy in the stream of becoming' that swallows the material of its genesis, the sculpture exists in virtue of the temporal loss of the site. But, more importantly, because the artwork is an allegory of this loss, it curls back on itself and confronts the black hole the site leaves in its absence. As the petrified matter of the sculpture accumulates over linear time, advancing into the future, it circles back, coiling in perpetuity to seek out the sublimated site.

The *Spiral Jetty* is not merely entropic; it is an allegory of the feed forward of history into the future that entropy entails. That is to say, as the artwork progresses, it allegorizes the loss of the 'indigestible fullness of history', and is consequently suspended in a simultaneous progress and regress. Its allegorical representation of its advancement in time continuously pivots it backwards. Smithson situates the artwork in a future in which it has been fragmented and deposed by the flow of time. At the same time, he organizes the *Spiral Jetty* to prompt a return to the artwork's (and his own) origin in the coursing fluid of the primordial past. The work is thus oriented towards the site's absence, and in its drive to uncover its lost origin it continues to interact with the Great Salt Lake across the temporal fracture on which it is founded. The *Spiral Jetty* weaves together the stasis and hard matter of post-history and the dynamic

flow of time in its primordial connection to the site. The art object and the site are intertwined, but set apart by the black hole that the artwork instigates in its attempt to "explore the pre- and post- historic mind," and "go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts."[108]

Smithson did not design the sculpture to undergo continual degeneration as such; rather the artist used the concept of entropy as the basis for its formation and to raise the question of its origin, but not to stage its destruction. In this sense, the work is both a ruin and it also exposes its connection to a past time, or more precisely, to time past and passing. The sculpture and the site recall the dialectical opposition of the site/non-site, insofar as they are unable to coalesce into a unity. Like Smithson's previous works, the polarization of the site and the artistic intervention define one another through and because of their split. But in a more nuanced way, the artist elaborates the separation of the site and the artwork in terms of a temporal disjunction that allows the artwork to persist as a tangible bridge that leads him back to the primordial past and a physical state of continuity with the site.

Conclusion

The *Spiral Jetty* is disjoined from the site because the lake's activity is conceived as always already in the work's prehistory. In its allegorization of the loss of the site, Smithson problematizes the dialectical opposition between the site and the textualized artwork. The Great Salt Lake is woven into the fabric of the *Spiral Jetty* because the artwork materializes through its semiotic and temporal rupture from the site. The site registers as a vital absence, amniotic fluid, a flux, formless color; it is a dynamic substance that precedes the artwork. By contrast, the artwork in all its modes is a set of fractured objects emptied of meaning; it is ossified and crystalline, produced by the motion of the site but not able to contain

[108] Smithson, quoted in Shapiro, 122.

the site as a representation. Smithson positions the site as a primordial past that arises in lapses of representation, and as a flux of time that leaves its trace in the sedimented salt crystals. His project is not to evacuate the site altogether, but to elucidate it as a continuing undercurrent that upsets the unity of the artwork's meaning and form. The *Spiral Jetty* thus performs the site as a loss on which it is predicated. More accurately, the allegorical emblem of the whirlpool signals an alignment of losses: allegory's fundamental loss of that which it represents, the *Spiral Jetty*'s inability to signify the site, the temporal expenditure by which the artwork emerges, and, perhaps most importantly, the work's loss of origin, which it perpetually seeks to retrieve.

Craig Owens rightly points out the importance of the textualization of art and the materialization of language as a symptom of a profound break with modernism. The appearance of language in visual art was a crucial moment after which art could be understood in relation to the context of its articulation. The linguistic turn raised a distinction between the implicit meaning of an artwork and the way meaning is produced through the circumstances of an artistic practice. Meaning is discerned from the relationship between the artwork and the contingencies of the site in which it is performed. For Smithson, the earthwork was a way to substantiate the precariousness of discursive meaning as a material condition. In the same way that meaning can never be encapsulated in a word but rather in how words are linked to one another in practice, the natural site can never be apprehended through visual representation but rather in how the earth and the artwork interact. Smithson thus links language to visual art through the common structure of semiotic slippage. In the *Spiral Jetty*, the textual artwork appears as the petrified remains of the art object that is figuratively joined to the transience of the land. The site of meaning and the site in the landscape are concomitantly relegated to the past, and the artwork indexes their absent presence. Because discursive meaning and nature are continuously in upheaval, both driven by the fluxes of dynamic time, Smithson parallels the concept of duration, which historically was always related to the discursive arts, and entropy, the natural law

of material degeneration into a state of fragmentation and stasis. We can read the *Spiral Jetty* for what has generated it but what is no longer there: meaning is located in the site and both are swallowed into the past in the process of artistic representation.

Smithson's use of the earth as the site of his artistic practice is thus intimately connected to his formulation of the artwork as a text. By making the Great Salt Lake the subject and the site of the artwork, the artist uses the dynamism of the site to facilitate the dialectical separation of meaning and text. This separation, he shows, in not expressed as a literal dislocation but as a subtle temporal rupture that positions the actual site, which doubles as the site of meaning, as the unrepresentable, absent origin of the artwork. The task for Smithson, paradoxically, is to make the site's absence visible. By evoking the metaphor of the whirlpool in the spiral shape of the artwork, Smithson not only allegorizes the site, he emblematizes the site as a loss that the artwork seeks to retrieve in perpetuity. His implicit commentary is not just that the artwork overwrites the site with its own meaning, but that the discursive meaning of the artwork is governed by the site's absence, by its fluid materiality and its uncontainable temporality. Precisely because the site exceeds the artwork's allegorization of it, the work confers information about the site, not through coherent meaning but by seeking to retrieve its prehistoric state. Smithson echoes this process by using the artwork as his bridge into a state of physical continuity with the Great Salt Lake. He thus crosses the distance between the spectator and the site by positioning the site as a basic physiological reality which precedes differentiation, a universal fluid base that does not define the site as a knowable presence, but suggests its qualities while remaining invisible, namely, the color of the water, the blinding force of the sun, and the salinity of the lake.

Though it may appear that Smithson is resorting to clichés about the landscape as raw, primal, and even feminine in his insinuation of the earth as a maternal body, he does so as a strategy to escape totalizing the site by presuming to represent it. By evoking bodily sensations, and especially the continuity

between his bodily fluids and the lake as an elemental sea, Smithson refuses to delimit the site and overwrite it with meaning. Rather he situates the Great Salt Lake as the only site before meaning exists, an antediluvian ocean. As I go on to analyze later earth art interventions, nature's evasion of representation, and the phenomenological experience of its excess will continue to be important themes by which artists design aesthetic practices that are situated in nature but which resist arresting its inherent complexity. I will follow these themes through the recurrent use of the motif of the whirlpool, by which artists infer the inevitable loss of nature as it resists signification.

Chapter 2 - Contemporary Earth Art: Hollow Sculptures and the Excess of Site

In chapter one, I discussed Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* as an example of a site-specific project that subverts the premise that the earth is the unchanging foundation of an artwork's discursive meaning. My goal was to revive an instance in the history of art in which an artist mobilized the malleability of the earth to express a dialectical exchange between an artwork's discursive meaning and its geographic location and geological specificity. Though the site of the *Spiral Jetty* was evidently remote and inaccessible and thus demanded textual representations, which Smithson provided in the form of photographs, a film and an essay, the artist nevertheless identified gaps in these texts which he positions as portals into a pre-discursive phenomenological state of continuity with the site at the Great Salt Lake. In his elaborate description of a descent back to his own amorphous origin, Smithson situated himself in an intercorporeal relationship with the site. At various points in the textual documents, the artist revives this fundamental relationship to the site. Using parallels between the Great Salt Lake and an undifferentiated state of primordial fluidity, Smithson draws out moments in which his textualization of the artwork fails to signify the site as a coherent representation thus performing the site as a loss of discursive meaning.

At these lapses Smithson demonstrated the fragmentary nature of textual art forms, yet he also recognized how even in its absence, the site oriented and bound the various texts that constituted the artwork as a whole. In Craig Owens' analysis of the *Spiral Jetty*, the textualization of the artwork is significant insofar as it marks a break with modernism's historic separation of the discursive and visual arts. To account for the themes of material language and textual art that pervade Smithson's practice, Owens theorizes the jetty in terms of its allegorical impulse. I explained how in allegory, according to Owens' framework, language is broken up and dispersed when an allegorical emblem overwrites meaning onto a material fragment from the historic past, thus combining textual meaning with a

visual image. The emblem of the whirlpool that the *Spiral Jetty* advances, for example, encapsulates the myth of a whirlpool at the Great Salt Lake and illustrates the salinity of the water by emulating the structure of a salt crystal. In addition, and most importantly for Owens, the spiral sculpture acts as a hieroglyph or rebus, a literal inscription onto the site which initiates an entire chain of textual signifiers, from photographs, to the film and essay which stand between the spectator and the site. Moreover, the *Spiral Jetty* demonstrates an allegorical impulse by using the emblem of the whirlpool to express the radical dislocation of the spectator's perspective, thus layering the site's historic or geographic significance with the artwork's contemporary critique of modernism. For Owens, the artwork overwrites the site with the theme of displacement on two levels: in ascribing an allegorical emblem to the site, the artwork initiates a fundamental semiotic rupture between the site and its representation, and further, the spectator is displaced from the immediate experience of the sited sculpture because it only appears in a textual form.

By this description it would seem that the site is irrevocably buried under the weight of it textual representations. However, expanding from Owens' diagnosis of the *Spiral Jetty*'s affiliation with allegory, I noted that precisely because allegory opens up a gap between the object and the emblem that overwrites it there are points at which the site thwarts the coherence of the textual modes of the artwork. I argued that there is a tangible quality to the lapses in signification by which the site asserts itself as a palpable presence. The residual substance of the site, which Smithson likens to amniotic fluid, stimulates the upheaval of meaning on which allegory is predicated. The loss of the site that allegory initiates is thus the central focus of the artwork, and it is precisely this loss that the motif of the whirlpool allegorizes. The artwork in all its modes orbits around the absence of the site, yet because this absence is the organizing tenet of the artwork, Smithson seizes the opportunity to infer the site as an undifferentiated material presence that precedes meaning and form. He shows that the site is never completely covered by its allegorical emblem, nor is

discursive knowledge ever entirely uprooted from its material base. Instead, the site arises out of the ruptures that its own absence causes, surging forward as an unconstituted fluid that bursts through the tissue of its representation, shaping it around these undeniable fissures. Despite the site's dislocation from its representation and from the spectator, then, Smithson crosses the physical and semiotic distance that the artwork lays out by reviving a pre-discursive phenomenological state of immersion with the earth.

Another issue of dislocation arises, however, from the temporal discrepancy between a pre-discursive phenomenological experience of the site and a textual artwork that is bound to that site. Though Owens reads the *Spiral Jetty* in terms of Smithson's preoccupation with entropy, arguing that the artwork exists as a kind of ruin destined to be reabsorbed by the site, I countered that there is a more subtle distinction between the process of decay that is associated with allegory and Smithson's understanding of entropy as a state of fracture and stability. I argued that Smithson was indeed interested in opening the artwork up to a sense of duration, but that rather than being destined for ruination, the *Spiral Jetty* is already located at the endpoint of a flow of duration. The artwork is shaped by the flow of time and deposited like the salt crystals encrusted on the shore at Rozel Point; it is laid down in the enduring form of a spiral. The hole around which it orbits is the void left by the expenditure of time on which its shape is predicated. The sculpture is thus instantiated in the site, but will not disappear into it, for it has been set apart by a temporal dislocation. Each time the jetty is submerged and re-emerges, it enacts a process of sedimentation rather than disassembly. The artwork is thus understood to have been generated by the site, yet ejected from the natural processes of change by a rupture in time. I concluded by saying that the *Spiral Jetty*'s allegorical emblem, the whirlpool, refers to an alignment of losses, the loss of original meaning as the artwork allegorizes the site, the loss of the physical primacy of the site when the spectator confronts the artwork in a textual mode; and the expenditure of time which sets the sculpture

apart from the site. More subtly, the artwork is predicated on the loss of its origin in the site, and persists because it turns back in perpetuity in search of this origin.

Each of the artwork's losses is an opportunity for the site to appear, perhaps not within the strict parameters of the artwork, but as an excess to its temporal and spatial confines. Though the *Spiral Jetty* attempts to allegorize the site, thereby translating it into a textual representation, it nevertheless betrays its connection to the site's volatile material presence. The site's fluidity, whether we understand this to be a primordial substance or the flow of time that governs the natural world, ensures that the site is not visible as solid or coherent. Yet, the artwork evidences the site's dynamism such that the force of its movement marks the brittle textual remains: the sculpture, the film and the essay. The artwork in turn provides glimpses of the site in the form of disorganized sensations, in the moments of Smithson's return to the originary material that is sublimated in the process of the site's signification as art.

In this chapter, I will show how in contemporary earth art, the natural site continues to resist coherent representation and how artists nevertheless attempt to evidence it as an enigmatic presence in which the artwork is both embedded and from which it has been dislocated. The spiralling whirlpool, Smithson's allegory for the loss of site, resonates with more recent earth art in three ways. The first, and most obvious, is the recurrent appearance of the sculptural form of the whirlpool - and several anagrammatic shapes such as black holes, shells, twisters, nests, and shelters - as a sculptural form. The second is the emphasis on the release of natural energy from the art object. The expenditure of natural force produces and shapes the sculpture so that the site is never available to the spectator as a tangible object. That is to say, the sculpture is entirely bound up in the site, yet at the same time its empty core references the site's intangible fluxes that have passed through it. In its inability to stabilize the site into a self-enclosed object, the sculpture is founded on the evacuation of interior substance. The sculpture's existence is founded on a separation from the site's dynamic processes. The artwork's allegorization of its own origination from the site and

its inability to encompass the site as a totality, speaks to its status as a sublime representation, or as an instance of what Yve-Alain Bois calls the "sublime picturesque".[1] As Bois points out, for Kant the sublime can be found in an object, "by occasion of which *boundlessness* is represented in it,"[2] Contemporary earthworks are precisely the kinds of objects that paradoxically represent boundlessness, or better put, they are the avenue by which the boundlessness of the site is perceived and representation called into question.

The aesthetic of the sublime picturesque brings me to the third connection between Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and contemporary earth art. In much the way Smithson presents the bodily experience of the site as a suppressed excess underlying the textual modes of the work, contemporary earth artists express the natural site as always exceeding our knowledge of it. These artists generate objects and images implicated in a perspective of the site from within it, and also interrupt the presumption that the bodily experience leads to a totalized perception by anticipating, and referencing within the sculpture, the loss of the site's presence in textual or pictorial modes of confrontation. In certain cases the photographic document of ephemeral sculptures exposes the artwork's location as both integrated but ultimately detached from the site. For these artists photography plays an important role in articulating the sculptural process, for there is a clear homology between the fabrication of a sculpture that indexes the release of the natural energies involved in its formation, and the photographic operation of uprooting an image from the particular time and place of the site. For others artists, the sculpture frames the spectator's view of the site from within it, yet because of its hollowness, the artwork prevents the continuity of sensations of bodily immersion. Whether the artist is dealing with a visual image or questioning the way one perceives a natural site, the spectator is faced with an enigmatic phenomenological experience. Earth art thwarts a coherent perception of the site,

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[1] Yve-Alain Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll Around Clara-Clara," *Richard Serra* ed. Ernst-Gerhard Güse (New York: Rizzoli, 1987) 54.

[2] Immanuel Kant quoted in Bois, 53.

either positioning the visitor inside a voided structure or confronting the spectator with a conspicuous absence in a photographic image.

Insofar as earth artists correspond the intimate physical process of sculpting nature with pictorial scenarios that foreclose the perception of the site as a totality, they can be understood to engage the notion of the picturesque. The picturesque was an important concept for Smithson, because it reiterated his preoccupation with locating art on a dialectical fracture between sites and texts in terms of a meeting between the beautiful and the sublime. The principles of the picturesque landscape date back to aesthetic theory from late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. Smithson cites Uvedale Price and William Gilpin's development of a landscape aesthetic that accounted for the physical and temporal experience of nature as an alternative to framing the landscape into idealized pictures, a commonplace practice in the Italian garden tradition.[3] For Gilpin and Price, the picturesque occupied an aesthetic territory between the beautiful in nature, characterized by smoothness, gentle curves and delicacy, and the sublime, characterized by the terror and vastness of nature. As Bois explains, Kant describes the sublime as a temporal experience or a movement of the mind, whereby the imagination " reaches its maximum, and, in striving to surpass it, sinks into itself".[4] The roots of the picturesque artwork in the sublime explain its refusal of the assurance of a Gestalt view of the landscape. In his analysis of Richard Serra's sculpture, Bois develops the category of the picturesque sublime through artworks that underscore the temporal progression of the spectator's body through space. The picturesque sublime artwork tenuously formulates a perspective of the landscape by suturing together ever-changing and discontinuous views.

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[3] Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 159.

[4] Kant quoted in Bois, 53.

The schism in contemporary earth art between the immediacy of the artist's experience in the site and the resulting objects and images that thwart coherent views of it, recall the notion of the sublime picturesque. It may appear that the persistent use of photography in many of the works I will deal with in this chapter contradict the temporal ingredient of the picturesque. One might expect that a medium such as film would be most appropriate to document the transient life of a sited sculpture. To the contrary, as I will demonstrate, the artists I discuss combine sculpture and photography to elaborate the passage of time for the spectator. They do not merely conceive of temporality as a matter of duration, nor do they aspire to represent the passage of time. Instead, artists thematize time as a boundless flux that escapes the object, thus deploying the photographic image (and in some cases, pictorial scenarios) to expose the disjunction between the sculpture and the site, and the discontinuity on which the spectator's view of the site is founded.

My goal is not to downplay the connection earth art has to the site in which it is built, but rather to complicate its relationship to it. Though it is shaped by the site's fluctuations, the artwork must at some point separate from it and emerge as a discernable form. As in the previous chapter, the motif of the whirlpool is more than an allegorical emblem; it is a form that reveals the loss of origin initiated by the very process of allegorical representation. I discussed a passage from Walter Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, in which he describes the concept of a historic origin as an eddy in the stream of becoming, the current of which swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. In my analysis, I will evoke the image of the whirlpool as a metaphor for the way the artwork originates as an eddy in natural activity. The artwork emerges from the fluxes of the site, and is indeed shaped but them, but ultimately it empties out the substance and presence of these fluxes, thereby breaking off from the site and standing apart from it. The integral role of natural processes is visible only insofar as the art object is shaped by this expenditure of energy. Though earth sculptures

are often characterized by their elaborate armatures made from the raw materials of the site, I am drawing attention to the fact that they are also voided of interior substance. Following Benjamin's statement that origin is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual, its rhythm "apparent only to a dual insight" that must be recognized as something "perfect and incomplete", I will analyze earth sculpture as both an object shaped by the invisible forces of the site, and as an index of their expenditure.[5]

In the last chapter, I discussed the *Spiral Jetty* in terms of the complicated relationship between text and matter that Smithson corresponded to the dialectical tension between the artwork and the site. I suggested, however, that rather than focusing on the dialectical movement between the site and the text, Smithson combines them, such that the text references the site as a fluid loss and a palpable invisibility. Using Merleau-Ponty's theory of the chiasm, and Luce Irigaray's feminist revision of that model, I proposed that Smithson discloses a material connection between the artwork and the site which he corroborates in the primordial fugues that punctuate the texts. Similarly, in this chapter I will discuss the sophisticated relationship between the artwork and the site, showing how the site's natural activity engenders the shape of the artwork. Though the site is the artwork's originary material host, it is ejected from visibility. I will argue that the chiasmic tie between the materiality of the artwork and the natural fluxes of the site need not be accessed through an intercorporeal experience of the site. Rather, artists open up a space in the tight braid of the work's chiasmic tie to the site, showing the object to be integrated in the site but distinct from it. The artwork provides an experience of nature that is not synonymous with physical immersion. The central tension of contemporary earth art is the interplay it stimulates between what is perceivable and knowable about a site and what remains unknown. To put it in terms of the sublime, the artwork raises the opposition between apprehension, which is potentially infinite, and the limits of comprehension.

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[5] See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977) 45.

Earth art mediates the spectator's experience of the site as boundless, supplementing the site with the art object but also using that object to separate between "the idea of totality and the perceived impossibility of understanding that totality."[6] The visual and tactile sensations of the sculpture's armature do not lead the spectator into an experience of bodily immersion, whereby the site would become coherent through the penetrating touch of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm. The artwork forecloses the unity of the site by placing it at a distance that can never be crossed. It prompts sensations of the site but the site itself is always beyond a conceptual reach. The artist harnesses the intangible fluxes of the site, but because the object cannot contain them it releases them and stands as an empty receptacle, presenting the viewer with the traces of the event of its origination.

Luce Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty's model of the chiasm provides a theoretical grounding by which I can distinguish Smithson's approach to the site and more contemporary statements. She argues,

> According to Merleau-Ponty, energy plays itself out in the backward-and-forward motion of a loom. But weaving the visible and my look in this way, I could just as well say that I close them off from myself. The texture becomes increasingly tight, taking me into it, sheltering me there but imprisoning me as well.[7]

Irigaray characterizes Merleau-Ponty's model of the chiasm as stifling and problematic to an ethics of difference and otherness. Concurrently, I see contemporary earth art countering the tendency to mediate an encounter with the site through union with it. Instead, artists insistently liberate natural fluxes from the object to avoid stultifying them. Irigaray insists that an ethical relationship is predicated on acknowledging epistemological difference, and not the presumption of an intersubjective exchange pure and simple. Likewise, I argue that the ethical thrust of earth art is evident in the ways it complicates, occludes and otherwise resists mediating simplistic perceptions of the site.

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[6] Bois, 53.

[7] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984) 183.

Though I am linking contemporary earth art to Robert Smithson's work and the art historical discussion that it provoked, there are important differences between the works I am about to analyze and its predecessors of the seventies. My analysis of the *Spiral Jetty* clearly resonates with the body of artworks I will discuss; the contemporary variations of this pivotal work, however, present alternative approaches to making art in natural sites. My first task then, is to distinguish how recent artworks reveal nature as a very present and infinitely complex system, in contrast to the homogenous "antediluvian ocean" which, by Smithson's description, resides in the recesses of geological history and primordial human memory. In contemporary practices, nature provides a stricter and more immediate set of conditions in which to create sculpture. The artwork appears as an intervention in the flow of the site, chafing against the forces that animate the natural world. By affixing an artwork to the site and then separating out natural presence from it, the site registers its own logic of perpetual regeneration and change without ever being possessed within the sculpture. There is thus a fissure between what we know of the site's currents as evidenced in the shape of the artwork, and the phenomena that evade a unified perception. Emphasizing the site's unpredictability, artists dislocate the artwork showing how it is formed out of its friction with the site. Contemporary earth art thus subverts the expectations that the earth is a controllable and stable medium for a site-specific sculpture. Instead the sculpture becomes the receptive medium for the site's unexpected appearances.

In my analysis of the *Spiral Jetty* I argued that the site registers in the artwork as a palpable absence, and that the motif of the whirlpool allegorizes this absence as the artwork's loss of origin in the earth. In the first section of this chapter, I will address the site as the tempo, direction and pressure of natural flows that mold the sculptural form. I will discuss artworks by the British artist Andy Goldsworthy that exemplify the distinction in earth art between the inert matter of the object and the animate forces of nature that give shape to the object. Though, as I have said, the whirlpool is a recurrent motif in contemporary art,

there is a subtle distinction to be made between Smithson's allegory of a lost primordial earth, and the vigorous energies that contemporary artworks gather and release. In contemporary practice, then, the whirlpool is not an allegory of the loss of site; it marks the artwork as a threshold to the site's boundlessness. The artwork's division from the site corresponds to the way, as Benjamin describes, origin swallows its material of genesis. The locus of this evacuation, paradoxically, is precisely the quality that defines and substantiates the work's sculptural qualities. In the second section, I will show how Goldsworthy's preoccupation with black holes is a means of referencing the intangible qualities of the site.

In the third section, I will examine artworks that reconfigure architectural structures to be contiguous with dynamic natural phenomena. The British artist Christ Drury and the American artist Patrick Dougherty initiate a dialogue between architecture and earth sculpture, using their sculptures to confront stable edifices with outbursts of natural energy. Fashioning materials from the site into vortex and twister-like forms, the sculptures siphon disruptive surges of nature, consequently destabilizing the spectator's perspective of the buildings to which they are affixed. The architectural structures are seemingly penetrated by the natural presence the sculpture weaves into them. The sculpture folds nature's temporal drive into the architecture, and also embodies the passage through which this flux escapes.

The hollow core of many earth sculptures provides an intimate space that is marked by the site's activity, but like a shell, it shields the spectator from immediate contact with it. Where the *Spiral Jetty* provides a bridge into a state of union with the site by staging a descent into geological prehistory, the newer generation of earth art provokes a more fractious tension between the experience of being enveloped by the site and being separated from it in an empty sculpture. In the last section I will focus on projects by the Denmark-based artist Alfio Bonanno, the Bavarian artist Nils-Udo, and the shelter series of Chris Drury.

Each of these artists, through the motif of the shell, the nest and the shelter respectively, complicates the experience of the site by placing nature at a distance. Though it is imbricated in the site, the artwork effects two distinct trajectories: it surrounds the spectator, but does not offer a substantial perceptual contact with the site. The artwork counters what the viewer sees and knows of nature by positioning the site in excess to the confines of its interior space. The emptiness of the artwork is the mechanism by which the artwork expresses an ethical approach to the natural site. By dividing the site on itself, the sculpture opens a space from which to view the earth as beyond the spectator's conceptual and perceptual reach.

Brian Massumi makes the claim that natural processes feed into our cultural thought and are always integral to social construction. He notes that the earth courses with life and movement and is the engine fuelling the emergence of ideas:

> Any geologist will tell you that the ground is anything but stable. It is a dynamic unity of continual folding, uplift, subsidence. Measurement stops the movement in thought, as it empties the air of weather, yielding space understood as a grid of determinate positions...This becoming-cultural of nature is predicated on the capture of processes already in operation...The point is that the "natural" and the "cultural" feed forward and back into each other. They relay each other to such an extent that the distinction cannot be maintained in any strict sense.[8]

Accordingly, I take the view that contemporary earth art encapsulates the interweaving of natural and cultural processes, as they feed forward and back into one another. My analysis of the interrelatedness of natural forces and sculptural form responds to precisely the issues Massumi raises with regards to the status of natural activity in relation to cultural knowledge: that the invisible changes of the earth continually inform what we know of the world; and that this knowledge entails the 'capture of processes already in operation'. The production of a determinate idea, however, may stultify the movement of those natural processes

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[8] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (London: Duke University Press, 2002) 10-11.

and deaden our more profound understanding of cultural production. Otherwise put, "If you elide nature, you miss the becoming of culture, its emergence (not to mention the history of matter)."[9] Evidently, the analysis of cultural and artistic ideas requires seeing them in connection to the natural processes that have propelled them into being. I have chosen a body of artworks that both evidences natural activity and problematizes the perception of it. My goal is to foreground the capture of the earth's energies, and the hollowing of sculptural form that results from the attempt to bend nature into a definitive cultural form. The shape of the whirlpool expresses both the natural processes that feed into the artwork from its periphery, and the consequent discharge of force as the sculptural form crystallizes.

The Material Object and the Intangible Site

In my discussion of Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* I identified two distinct points of rupture that the artwork delineates between the spectator and the site. The first is the physical displacement inherent to a textual mode of encounter. The second is the temporal dislocation that situates the artwork as a residual deposit generated at the endpoint of a natural flux. Smithson bridged these ruptures by foregrounding the persistent evidence of the site's material integration into the artwork, binding the work to its prehistory by weaving into it descriptions of precognitive phenomenological experience. The texts are interspersed with moments of return to a state of dedifferentiation with the site. Moreover, because the sculpture is bound to a cyclical process of immersion into and emergence from the lake, it periodically re-enacts its own origination as crystalline sediment deposited by the saline water. Smithson sets the artwork apart from the site, yet by foregrounding the retrieval of the work's lost origin in the earth, he stresses a basic material continuity that tempers the multiple levels of dislocation - temporal, semiotic, perspectival - between the site, the artwork and the spectator.

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[9] Massumi, 11.

In contemporary practice, a similar set of obstacles present themselves in organizing artworks that make the site manifest without imposing a totalizing representation onto it. Rather than polarizing the artwork and the site so that the artwork is set apart as a monumental bridge between its primordial roots in the earth and its future decay, contemporary earth art targets an entirely different scale of temporality, providing a lens with which to view the continual, daily, or seasonal changes of a site. As a result, these sculptural projects are often ephemeral whereas the *Spiral Jetty* is relatively permanent. However, their focus is not on the process of ruination or destruction that the natural world causes. Instead, what is most compelling about these works is the sudden animation of a sculptural object by the forces of the site. Though the interaction of art and nature may be brief, the otherwise indiscernible activity of the site suddenly becomes visible as the art object is carried along the spontaneous trajectory of the site's current. This temporary period of contact is hardly tainted with the fatalism of allegorical ruination. Indeed, it is precisely because of the transience and spontaneity of the appearance and disappearance of nature in art and art in nature that artists evade the aesthetic of ruination, fragmentation and degeneration that Craig Owens associates with the allegorical impulse of site-specific art. The ineffable fact of nature's perpetual regeneration eclipses the demise of the particular artwork and promises infinite opportunities for a renewed exchange. Andy Goldsworthy's practice in particular exemplifies the animation of the art object by the site and consequently, how the art object makes the site's movement visible. Since the late nineteen-seventies, Goldsworthy has expanded his daily practice of experimenting with nature and executing earth sculptures around his home in Penpont, Scotland, to a range of site-specific works on the international art circuit. Always attentive to the conflicting forces within a site, Goldsworthy connects and separates the sculpture from the site by striking a tension between the materials that bind the object together and the fluxes that pull it apart. He designs the works to both resist and be receptive to the animate motion of the site.

Material and natural form are thus divided and reconstituted as a sculpture that is then released to dynamic natural forces.

Goldsworthy's practice raises the questions, if nature is not fundamentally antithetical to artistic form, what are the parameters that distinguish the art object from the site? How is it that they can come together, even for a short time, and mutually define one another? In my introduction, I explained that in the nineteen-seventies earth art was influenced by process and body art. I examined how the particular time and space of artistic practice became integrated into the artwork itself, and that this dissolving of boundaries between the site of art and its meaning was the basis for the discourse of site-specificity. Following Nick Kaye, I observed how body art in the landscape by artists such as Dennis Oppenheim redefined earth art by focusing on the contact between the body and the land. Body and process art located the artwork in continuously shifting sites, conflating the artwork with the place and conditions of its production, and making the meaning of the work accountable to temporal changes. I noted however, that though site-specific practices, particularly body and performance works in the landscape, fully engaged the earth as integral to artistic meaning, ultimately these works locate the site of art on the body. Kaye, for example, notes that Oppenheim's *Land Incision* destabilizes the parameters of art by locating the site of the work on the changing surface of the artist's skin.

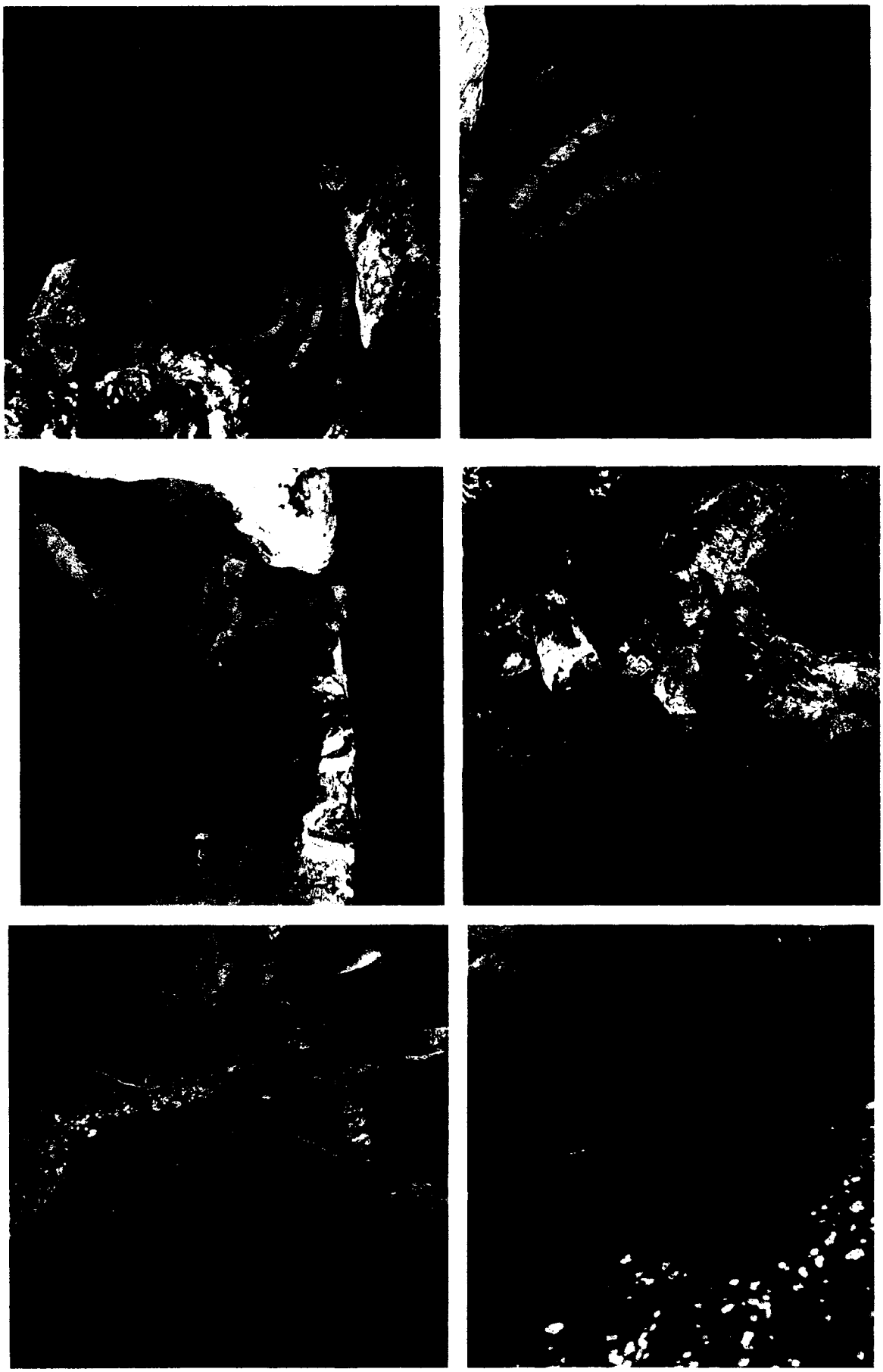
What is noticeable about more recent earth sculpture is that the site of art remains the earth, and the earth is already understood to be a changing entity. Moreover, unlike many process, performance and body art projects, the notion of a sculptural object has not been entirely abandoned. Rather, artists identify a tension between the materiality of the sculptural object and the vital movement of the site. Neither the sculptural object nor the site are fixed, yet because of a contrasting degree of stability there is an identifiable split between the artwork that is engaged with the site, and the spontaneous movement of the site itself. Andy Goldsworthy actualizes this subtle distinction between his performance of

the site and the site that exists beyond the parameters of the artwork. Stitching together a line of hazel leaves with grass stalks, the artist floated the thread on a rapidly flowing stream (Figure 12). First testing this project in 1991 at Scaur Water, Dumfriesshire, Goldsworthy experimented with the temporal parameters and sculptural forms that the currents of the stream would demarcate. Arranging the meticulously sewn leaves into a coil inside a rock pool, the artist photographed the ensuing sequence of events: the stream pulled the leaf filament out of the pool, buoyed it downstream in a serpentine rhythm, drew the ribbon into an eddy, and finally steered it out of sight.

The compelling shapes of the leaf-chain as it rounded the rocky bank and curved against the rippling surface of the stream demonstrate that the object's design responded to the dynamism and implicit forms of the water's movement. To synchronize a sculpture with the stream required that the object remain on the surface, but that it still unfurl and meander in tandem with the water's motion without dissolving or being swallowed into its depths. Goldsworthy chose a medium that would be light enough to capture the drive of the water and thwart its power to submerge. The threaded leaves not only managed the stream, they express its flow as a succession: like fish scales, each discrete leaf overlaps and links to the next.

There is more to the site's movement than a straightforward temporal sequence, however. The unseen currents that propel the water forward become visible through the undulation of the ribbon. The train of leaves is thus swept into the stream's more complex and irregular pulses. As in the *Spiral Jetty*, the sculptural object is both a metonymic fragment of the site and a benchmark that stands outside the site and gauges its activity. Hazel leaves abound in the site and are often incorporated into Goldsworthy's works in the Dumfriesshire area. However their deliberate arrangement into a strong yet flexible chain ensures their receptivity to the water flows. The essential difference between Craig Owens' interpretation of Smithson's work and what is at stake in more contemporary projects like Goldsworthy's is that, here, the sculptural object does not just gather

Figure 12. Andy Goldsworthy, *Hazel leaves each stitched to the next with grass stalks gently pulled by the river out of a rock pool floating downstream low water*, Scaur Water, Dumfriesshire, 5 June 1991.



and allegorize the excess material left by the site's movement; the object is not dislocated from the site by a temporal rupture. To the contrary the object is designed to attach to the temporal progressions of the site.

The leaf-chain navigates the water by affixing itself to the trajectory of the stream's movement while remaining self-contained on its surface. In a sense, by floating the bright green chain, Goldsworthy gives the stream a tool with which to perform its own motion. The artist remarks on his interest in snakes and rivers saying that they are things that "draw themselves" as they make their own paths.[10] The idea that the river draws itself, mapping its own flow is a useful analogy for what Goldsworthy is trying to achieve by intertwining a row of leaves and releasing them onto the stream. His project does not just allegorize the site, it becomes the receptive medium on which the stream traces itself and makes itself visible. The project articulates a reversal from the paradigm in which the earth is an environment to showcase the art object. Instead, Goldsworthy advances the concept that the artwork rests on the surface of the site, drawing out and revealing the invisible natural motion in the depths of that place.

There is no conflation of art and life, of site and sculpture, merely a rearrangement of what we understand to be the focus of the artwork. The harmonious union of material and shape that traditionally defines the medium of sculpture is problematized by the fact that while the natural site provides the raw material of the work and is the force that defines the artwork's shape, it is not bound within that object. The art object presents, and indeed embodies, a qualitative difference between the site as material and the site as vital energy. That is to say the object expresses what is unseen about the site and does not merely appropriate its materials - the leaves, branches, berries, grasses, rock and soil that often compose earth sculptures. Certainly, stitching together leaves is a laborious process of transforming matter into an art object, yet Goldsworthy's work is largely formless without the driving currents of the stream that bring it to

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[10] Kenneth Baker, "Andy Goldsworthy," *Artnews* 99 no.11 (Dec. 2000) 161.

life. Moreover, the movement of the stream is the central focus of the artwork. Though the leaves are metonymic fragments of the site, then, the work is incomplete without the site's vitality. Indeed, the artist pursues precisely the hidden dimensions of the site that remain enigmatic and in excess of the object. The leaf-chain relates to the site, and its component parts were once bound up in it, but in their transformation into a sculptural object the leaves detach from the site. This separation is necessary to make the site's motion visible without muting it. The sculpture may be fabricated out of organic matter, but its primary role is to be the vehicle for the site and the medium of its manifestation. Goldsworthy comments on this subtle distinction between natural materials and the nature of the site. The artwork, in his view, is the means by which to examine the site's unseen qualities,

> Previously I may have only been attracted to the quality of a pebble, the color of a leaf, the shape of an icicle. Now it is also the quality, color and shape of the day and place. I need to understand the intangible and in some ways untouchable nature. Atmosphere, light, energy, life, these are traditionally the territory of painting which I now wish to deal with as a sculpture... Choices are intended to concentrate the eye, perception, so that I can try to go beyond surface appearance.[11]

In chapter one, I noted that Smithson challenged modernist definitions of sculpture by introducing the object to temporality, and that the earth was the ideal medium with which to do so since it is always changing. I argued, however, that Smithson identified a distinction between the sculptural object and the site in that they were governed by different paradigms of temporality. He classified the former in the crystalline realm, which is atemporal and ruled by non-dynamic time, and the latter in the natural world, which is dynamic and changing. The sculpture could co-exist with the site yet be separated from it and remain intact because of the dissimilarity of their temporal logics. Goldsworthy does not separate his sculptural objects from the temporal activity of the site - the leaf

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[11] Andy Goldsworthy quoted in "Andy Goldsworthy: A Pragmatic Aesthetics," interview with Catherine Grout, *Art Press* 192 (June 1994) 31.

chain, in fact, only garners a serpentine shape when it is returned to the site and attached to the dynamic movement of the stream. The artist nevertheless structures his practice around two discrete qualities: the tangible and visually rich materials that compose the art object and the intangible activity of the site. Rather than focusing exclusively on the color, texture and shapes of objects at the site, he uses these to concentrate on the far more evasive qualities of atmosphere, light, energy and life of the site. Furthermore, Goldsworthy does so through the medium of sculpture, but he sets the object in tension with the untouchable dimensions of the site.

The art historian Alex Potts discusses the way artists in the nineteen-sixties privileged tactile sensation as a means of questioning the medium of sculpture.[12] Works such as Joseph Beuys' *Fat Chair* (1964; Figure 13) or Claes Oldenburg's *Soft Switches* (1964; Figure 14) displace structural form with an overwhelming sensorial experience of the object's materiality. The focus on tactility, Potts argues, desubstantiates the qualities normally associated with sculpture because its plastic form is rendered redundant to allow the viewer an unencumbered sense of material texture and substance.[13] In the same way that Smithson described a state of undifferentiated corporeality with the site, which at different moments overrides the hardened textual forms of the *Spiral Jetty*, other artists in the late-sixties experimented with the sensorial potential of tactility in the medium of sculpture. Beuys' fixation on fat and felt, for example, and Oldenburg's use of new industrial materials such as vinyl or foam rubber, evoke an exaggerated tactile plenitude in order to problematize the definition of sculpture according to a balance of material and form. Artists negated the armature of the sculpture by foregrounding the object's materiality, advancing an anti-formalist stance by accentuating tactility.

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[12] Alex Potts, "Tactility: The Interrogation of Medium in Art of the 1960s," *Art History* 27 no. 2 (April 2004) 282-304.
[13] Potts, 286.

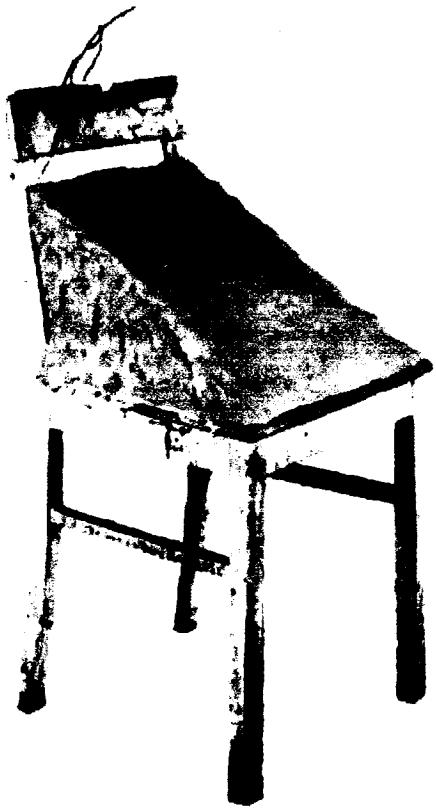

Figure 13. Joseph Beuys, *Fat Chair*, wood, fat, metal, 1964.

Figure 14. Claes Oldenburg, *Soft Switches*, Vinyl filled with Dacron and canvas, 1964.

A similar disarticulation of material and form takes places in contemporary earth art. In Goldsworthy's leaf-chain project, the material object remains self-contained and takes shape because it remains on the surface of the water's movement. The artist separates the materials from the site, binds them into an object and galvanizes its reconstitution as art by affixing it to a flux of natural activity. Once the artist apprehends the raw materials to fabricate the object, it is divided from the animate motion of the site, but the formal shape of the work is achieved when the artist relinquishes the sewn hazel leaves back to the site. There is a qualitative difference between the fabricated leaf-chain and the water's movement that animates it: material and form converse through the division between art and nature. Tactility, and in particular the artist's touch that chooses and binds the materials together, is the agent of rupture between the object's materiality and the form propelled by the site's movement. In Goldsworthy's work, it is only once the object is released to the stream that the sculpture takes shape. By assembling the leaf-chain into a tightly-wound coil, and then allowing it to unravel and be buffeted by the rippling stream, Goldsworthy demonstrates the object's emergence from inert material thing into living shape.

There is an important difference, then, between the separation of material and form in nineteen-sixties sculpture and in Goldsworthy's works. Potts makes the point that in nineteen-sixties sculpture tactility overwhelms form, so that the artwork is delivered to the spectator not by viewing the unity of contour and material but through the evoked sense of immersion in the object. Goldsworthy, however, does not deny the sculpture form; he merely identifies that form as naturally occurring in the site. Indeed, in releasing the work to the site, he enacts a refusal of tactile access to the artwork, and delivers the object to the spectator as a photographed performance. The artist ensures that the artwork comes to life as a function of nature's intangible forces and not through a straightforward drawing out of form from matter. Thus, the tactile sense that Goldsworthy's laborious fabrication of the object would seem to elicit is overrided by the primary gesture on which the work is hinged: the removal of touch as the artist releases the object

back to the site. Moreover, tactility is doubly provoked and denied because in the artwork's transition from a mere object to an ephemeral performance with nature, the spectator only accesses it through a secondary medium (in this case photography). The artist removes his grasp of the object, allowing it to become art in attaching it to natural forms and not because of the shape that he has impressed onto it. Moreover, the photographs document the performance but do not deliver the work as an object to be felt. Goldsworthy's photographed performance of the leaf chain is vivid and colorful; the images synthesize the unrolling of the chain and its boisterous movement in the water into a stunning narrative of art's release into nature and the birth of the material object into animate natural form. Though the artwork evidences the forces that bring this event into being, however, it does not possess them, nor does it make them tangible for the spectator. As I will show, the task of earth art is precisely to uncover the site's hidden energies but to complicate how the spectator senses them.

Where Robert Smithson codes the *Spiral Jetty* with pathways into the site's tactile abundance, Goldsworthy pinpoints a rupture between the material of the sculpture - matter that has been handled, manipulated, fabricated or otherwise directed by the artist - and the intangible forms that bring the object to sculptural fullness. The artwork thus harnesses the site's activity but is not fully integrated into it; the object remains a surface manifestation that is receptive to the trajectory of the site's continual unfolding. Across the divide between processed matter and spontaneous form, the sculpture and the site feed into one another and open the parameters of the artwork through the confrontation between the static object and shifting nature.

The Black Hole - Passage to the Boundlessness of Site

Earth art exposes a fissure between the materiality of the art object and the sculptural shapes that the fluxes of the site bring to it. The qualitative distinction of matter from form opens a gap by which the animate movement of the site

becomes separated from the object but is nevertheless interactive with it. The site's movement is invisible until the object is affixed to its surface and channels it into view. The motif of the whirlpool appears in works dealing with precisely the discontinuity between the hidden energies of the site and the material qualities of the object: its color, texture, density, pliability and so forth. Andy Goldsworthy's works centering on black holes present the spectator with an opening to the site around which the sculpture revolves. The black hole is a cue to the sculpture's position as an eddy in the site, an index of enigmatic natural force.

Alex Potts complicates his argument about the separation of matter and form in nineteen-sixties sculpture with an example of Eva Hesse's work. Though at this critical point in art history, the pursuit of tactile sensation preempted sculptural form, Potts notes that in Hesse's work, the intangible qualities of light on clear surfaces, strangely enough, evoke the sensation of tactility. In *Expanded Expansion* (1969; Figure 15), for example, Potts argues that the creases on the series of latex hangings are sensuous because of the play of light on the surface of the object. The artist caused the wrinkling effect by peeling away plastic sheets that supported liquid latex as it was hardening. The solidified piece is deflated, precariously held together by fiberglass poles, its elastic quality enhanced by its luminosity. As Potts explains, visual effects that are intangible and can never literally be felt, underpin a complex interaction of vividly felt material substance and elusive impalpability.[14] He concludes that the work is simultaneously felt and seen but is neither entirely malleable nor rigidly structured.

What concerns me with regards to earth art appearing after this historic reconfiguration of palpable matter and plastic form in the sixties, is a similar deployment of a sensorial denial that positions the work as neither malleable and continuous with the site nor rigid and imposing on it. Hesse's work for example, foregrounds visual effects to enhance the tactile qualities of the work, but ironically, the play of light and shadow is unavailable to the touch. The result in

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[14] Potts, 292.

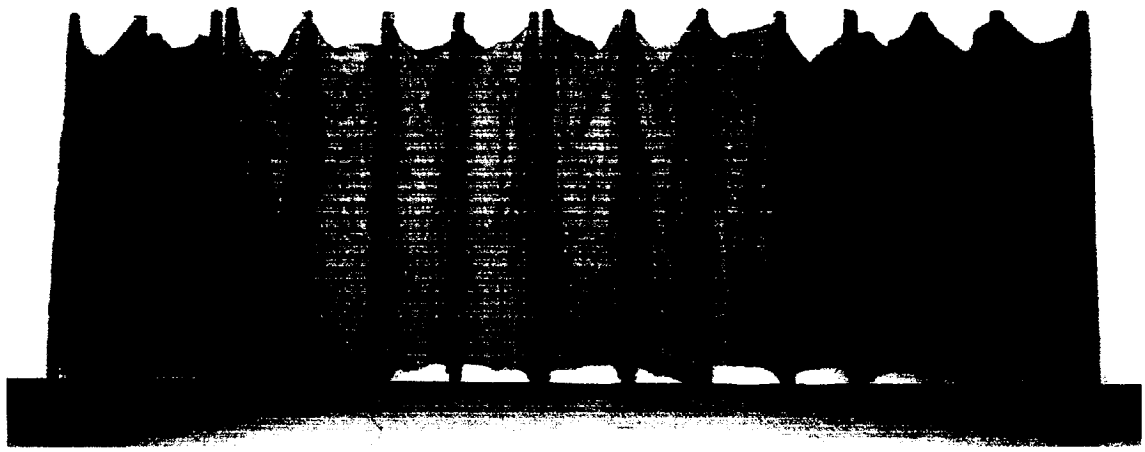

Figure 15. Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, Reinforced fibreglass poles and rubberized cheesecloth. 1969.

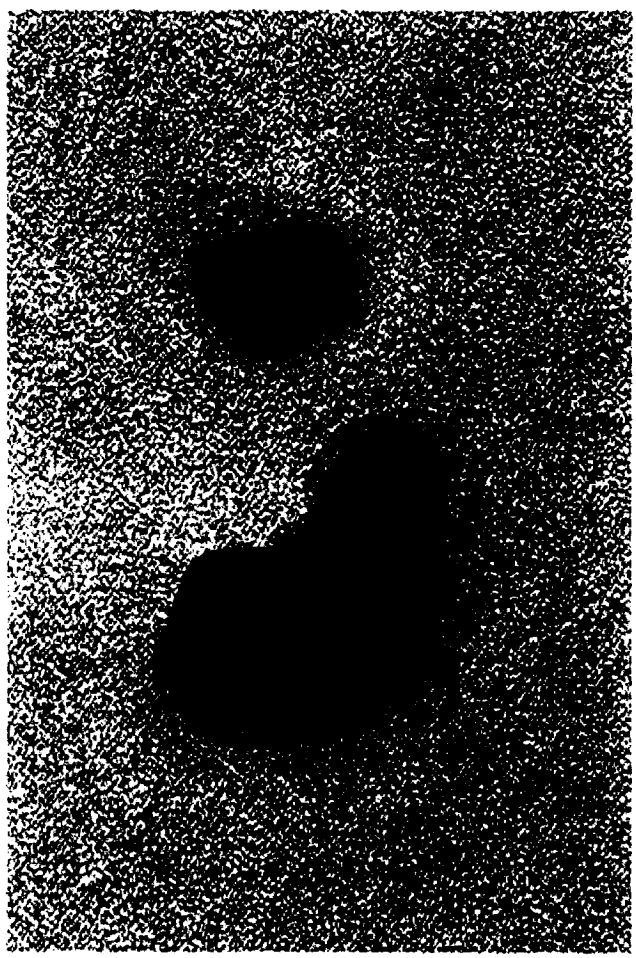

Figure 16. Andy Goldsworthy, *First hole*, sand, Southport, Lancashire, 1977.

Expanded Expansion is consistent with other works of the sixties: the sculpture's tactile allure overshadows the pursuit of a defined armature. In a related way, contemporary earth artists isolate the sculpture's structural foundation from the material that makes it available to the senses, revealing and dislocating it as an invisible and impalpable core. In the same way that Hesse pursues a new experience of tactility by using evanescent light effects, contemporary art problematizes the seamless exchange between the tactile qualities and the structural coherence of the art object by both evidencing and dislocating a more elusive constituent element: the transient site. In earth sculpture, form is the result of an invisible quality, a darkness and depth that contrasts the work's opaque exterior. The recurrent confrontation with black holes lures spectators into a heightened awareness of the artwork's sensual qualities. Yet, the object's vividness is the effect of its elusive foundation - the natural forces into which the sculpture is woven.

So far I have argued of Goldsworthy's leaf-chain that the fabricated object makes the site's movement visible, and that the interaction of the artificial object with natural activity defines the central tension of the artwork. Goldsworthy focuses on the point of contact between the unseen qualities of the site and the object he releases into it. I will now turn to more of Goldsworthy's works to illustrate how this friction between the materiality of the object and the invisible activity of the site feeds into the structure of the sculpture. Goldsworthy began a sustained interest in black holes in Southport, Lancashire in 1977 (Figure 16). The artist recounts,

> I was burrowing through a sand dune when it suddenly collapsed, except for the outer crust which had a little irregular hole in it. When I looked into the space inside it was so black, it was really humming. Now when I look into a deep hole I am made aware of the potent energies within the earth.[15]

Goldsworthy's discovery of the force of the black hole is the result of a structural collapse; the sand dune into which he had been burrowing fell apart, leaving an

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[15] Andy Goldsworthy, *Time* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000) 182.

opening. In that moment, the artist changed his focus from the object he had been working on to the irregular hole left when the sand caved in. This event marks a concurrent shift in the artist's emphasis, from making a sculpture out of natural materials to allowing form to emerge out of the site's spontaneous shifts. The untenable weight of the object the artist had been shaping was supplanted by the sudden upset of structural consistency when the work fell in on itself. Curiously, however, this moment of formal collapse led to an upsurge of natural activity. The result was a compelling doorway to the 'humming' and 'potent energies' of the earth. Indeed, as Goldsworthy realized, not only is this opening what gives the work definition, the shape is generated out of the conflict he set up between the weight and granularity of the sand, and the aridity and imminent force of gravity which pull the sand inward. By hollowing out a sand dune, the artist pitted the material against the forces and conditions of the site, unwittingly producing a compelling shape in the process.

Goldsworthy's anecdote raises an interesting phenomenological issue with regards to the role of physical contact in constituting structural form. There is a distinct moment at which his intervention on the site - his burrowing into sand dune - burdens the object he is creating and brings about its demise. In my discussion of the *Spiral Jetty* I noted that Smithson positions his artwork as an allegory of the loss of site. However, the artist accesses the site at certain points, describing moments of physical continuity with the earth. Smithson's descent into this undifferentiated state parallels Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory in which the purely tactile state precedes and formulates visual perception and cognitive ability. Accordingly, Smithson's lapses into unencumbered immersion in the site position it as the sublimated prehistoric origin of the artwork. There is a considerable difference between Smithson's narrative of physical continuity and Goldsworthy's experience of surprise and estrangement when the sand dune collapses. In the former case, Smithson's sculpture is bound to a primordial base of amorphous matter and revolves around an experience of union with the earth, in the latter, the artist's touch stimulates a conflict between

materiality and natural activity such that the formation of the object results when the conditions of the site override the artist's intention. Goldsworthy's tale reveals that sculptural shape arises out of the site's resistance to his touch rather than his unfettered access to it.

Goldsworthy's practice marks a change in the character of the encounter between the artist and the site. In particular, the locus of touch identifies an area of demarcation from the site rather than standing as an invitation into physical immersion. Goldsworthy's experience is one of alienation from the earth in contrast to Smithson's return to immersion in it. Nevertheless, Goldsworthy strives for opportunities to perceive nature through this rift. In its refusal to be incorporated into an object, nature enlivens the artistic practice with unpredictability. Indeed, the possibility that the earth thwarts what we perceive of it is exactly the ground for Luce Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework. As I noted in chapter one, Irigaray argues that Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology is essentially based on the metaphor of the nocturnal state of the womb. The bottom line of her criticism of the model of the chiasm is that at no point is there a recognizable separation from the "flesh of the world", and by extension, Merleau-Ponty refuses to identify a point of birth and separation from the mother. The theorist, she argues, does not acknowledge the necessary process of differentiation at which point the subject comes into language and meaning. The result is a perception based on solipsism; all sensation is formulated on the grounds of sameness and no true understanding of difference can register. In the chiasm she argues,

> ...something is said about the fact that no mourning has been performed for the birth process, nor for the cutting of reversibility through some umbilical cord. Although a pertinent analysis of the way I form a weave of sensations with the world, it is one that excludes solitude even though its own systematization is solipsistic. The seer is never alone, he dwells unceasingly in *his* world.[16]

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[16] Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 173.

Without a fundamental separation from the world, the subject does not enter it but is always absorbed in a totalizing physical perception of it from within. Irigaray remarks that the subject, "...never emerges from an osmosis that allows him to say to the other...'What sort of event do we represent for each other when together?' ...The phenomenology of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty attempts is without question(s)."[17]

While the *Spiral Jetty* does not fit seamlessly into Merleau-Ponty's theoretical framework - indeed, I argue that it allegorizes precisely this loss of continuity with the world – nevertheless it must be read in relation to Smithson's attempts to return to a primitive state of immersion. Instead of turning away from his rupture with the earth, Goldsworthy incorporates it, inviting the earth's volatility to mark the point at which he no longer structures the artwork and the site takes over. The artistic process he espouses thus sets his own labor at the object apart from the shape that nature brings to it, such that the artwork becomes the kind of event that Irigaray calls for, an encounter between the artist and the earth as other, where the earth is understood as beyond our perception but is nevertheless a network of activity to which the artwork is connected.

Fascinated with the compelling figure of the black hole, Goldsworthy executed a series of works throughout the nineteen-eighties and nineties that brings the site's energy to bear on the shape of the art object, and uses the black hole as a kind of portal to the site's imperceptible presence. His stick dome hole from 1999 (Figure 17) elucidates two corresponding aspects of the black hole: its exact position marks the place in the site that the artist occupied and around which the sculpture grew up, yet at the same time the object negates this physical bridge by registering it as a vacancy. In other words, though the artist works within the site, he articulates its fundamental intangibility and invisibility within the sculpture. In his preliminary exploration of the site in Nova Scotia, where a river transitions into the sea, Goldsworthy describes the initial inability to generate a

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[17] Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference,* 183.

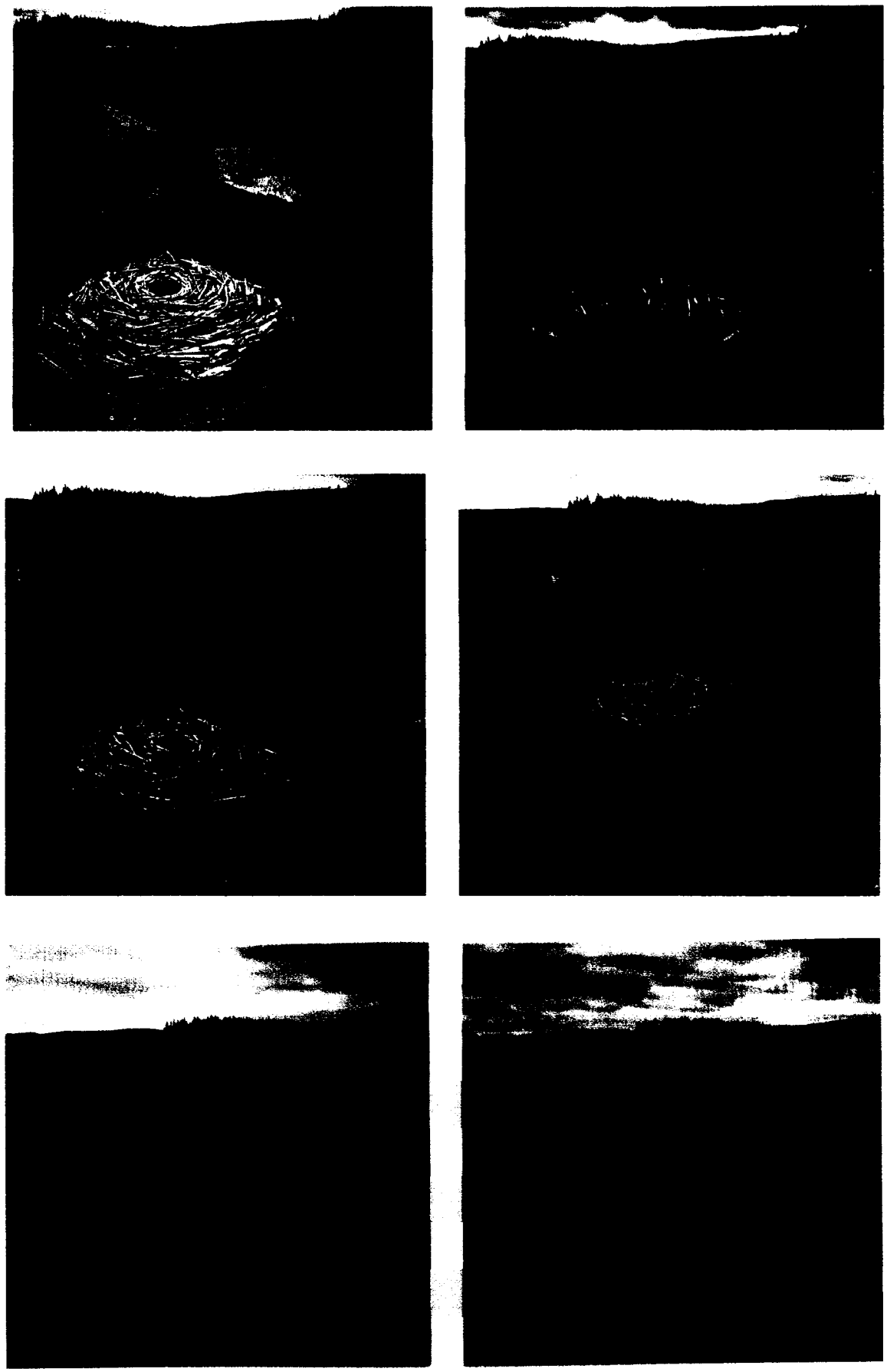

Figure 17. Andy Goldsworthy, *Stick dome hole made next to a turning pool a meeting between river and sea sticks lifted up by the tide carried upstream turning*, Nova Scotia, 10 February 1999.

simple sculptural form because of the volatility and inaccessibility of the water. He narrates,

When I arrived over a week ago, the first thing I saw when I stood on the cliff looking down towards the beach was a pool of water turned in a circular motion by the river. The pool was too deep to wade into and touch directly. A few days later I tried throwing sticks into the pool to see if they would rotate in the water, trying to work the movement from a distance. It was unsuccessful.[18]

Intrigued by the churning pool of water, Goldsworthy recognized that a sculptural object at this site would have to at once express the swirling motion of the water, and be dense enough to not be entirely enveloped by it. The artist bound the sticks into a dome shape so that, like his leaf-chain, they would stay afloat on the surface of the water. He found a spot where, when the tide was out, the agitated water would be staid by the curve of a rock embankment:

Today I returned to make a work to echo the movement of the turning pool. I laid sticks in a circle, adding more until they were brought to a dome, leaving a hole at the centre. The rhythm of laying the sticks was like the turning of the water...The work fitted perfectly into an almost concave area in the rocks about twelve feet wide. I was able to work within the dome by way of a small opening through which I crawled in and out.[19]

The sculpture developed around the artist's body as he molded the sticks in accord with the turning water. Goldsworthy integrated the work into the site, not by inserting the sticks into the water but by emulating the shape of its movement.

At the same time, the artwork stood at odds with the water's current, for the opening in the middle of the sculpture signals the artist's presence in absentia, expressing his point of entry into the site and his intercession on it. The artist's contact with the site is simultaneously effaced and disclosed in the sculpture's formal structure. There was a functional purpose to this black hole, though, as Goldsworthy discovered when the tide began to rise. The true test of the artwork's success came when the river took it over and brought it to life.

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[18] Goldsworthy, *Time*, 114.
[19] Goldsworthy, *Time*, 114.

Around five-o'clock, the sea began to touch the sticks. Very slowly, the work rose... There were interesting reflections within the hole. As the dome separated from the land, it lifted up with sticks shooting out from underneath and I expected the hole to collapse. Instead, it floated ever so gently out into the river, where it began to turn. Made as an echo of the pool's movement, the work was now turning in the pool itself... The hole remained completely intact...It was extraordinary to see a work lifted up and carried intact by the river - something I have never experienced before. I could not have predicted what would happen. That the hole was lifted and turned was confirmation that my response to this place was a correct one.[20]

There are two points worth noting regarding the role of the black hole in the construction and denouement of the artwork. Firstly, Goldsworthy investigated the site and intuited from the circular motion of the eddying pool a possible foothold for his sculpture in the rush of the water's current. From its shape, Goldsworthy designed a work that mirrored the water's movement while at the same time capturing its force and therefore interposing on its flow. Secondly, though he built the dome against the concave rock bank, in fact the work's real traction against the water came from the hole Goldsworthy left behind after building the dome around himself. That the hole lifted and turned, Goldsworthy states, confirms that his response to the place was accurate. The water welled up in the empty space of the sculpture and propelled it downstream: the position of the artist's body thus coincides with the device by which the flood of water could enter the sculpture. Not coincidentally, though the artist surrounded himself in the artwork, the sculpture came to life when he removed himself. Goldsworthy's labor and the site's influxes combined to create a material object with a dynamic form, but these two operations did not occur simultaneously. Rather the artist's body opened a space by which the water could be unleashed into the sculpture, its fluid movement creating reflections inside the black hole.

In removing himself and allowing the black hole to remain empty, Goldsworthy let loose the momentum he acquired by setting the tightly woven sculpture against the rush of water, and thereby relinquished the art object to the

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[20] Goldsworthy, *Time*, 114.

very movement it emulated. The peculiar interplay of harnessing and releasing the site's energies elaborates a different kind of encounter with the site than Smithson staged with the *Spiral Jetty*. Without a doubt, the artist's immersion in the site is a key aspect of the artwork; Goldsworthy crawled in and out of the hole, crafting the sculpture around himself like a nest. However, the artist defines his works as products of his interaction with the site and not just as objects of his own making. Thus, the hole left by the artist's body in the stick dome cleared a passage by which the water grasped the sculpture to carry it upstream and thereby complete it. The artist is not so much displaced from the site as he enacts his own invisibility in order to allow the site to come forward. From this process of removal, the artist shows the site not as a co-extension of his own intentions, but as disarticulated from himself. In building the sculpture, Goldsworthy makes contact with the visible surface of the site - the raw materials of the land. But by removing himself and thereby opening a space in which the natural forces can come forward, he allows the invisible and unknowable earth to manifest.

The black hole, as an index of the artist's withdrawn touch, also testifies to the intimate scale Goldsworthy attempts. In contrast to Smithson's monumental *Spiral Jetty*, Goldsworthy's work shows the friction between art and nature as a confrontation between the limits of the body's field of perception and the vastness of the site. Not only does Goldsworthy photograph the sequence of events as the current uplifted the sculpture and carries it downstream, he juxtaposes the images with the narrative of the work's construction. Included in the overall scheme of the artwork's production are the artist's preliminary visits to the site, his tentative experiments there, details about the time of day, and the cycles of entering and exiting the work as it developed. Goldsworthy thus synthesizes the textual narrative of the work's creation with the photographed sequence of the sculpture's release to the water. Overcoming the discontinuities between the textual and the pictorial media, the artist puts his autobiographical accounts of the work's production in a dialogue with the images of the sculpture's unfolding. Like a

montage, Goldsworthy weaves the anticipation of the upsurge of natural force depicted in the photographs into his written memory of building the work.

As Yve-Alain Bois points out, a montage in film is a technique that fundamentally undercuts a totalized perspective for it is founded on the dissociation carried over from one shot to another. Bois relates montage to the perceptual experience of Richard Serra's sculpture, which enlists the spectator to synthesize discontinuous views of the landscape through 'memory and anticipation' from one vantage point to the next.[21] Though perhaps more like Smithson's works than Serra's in the sense that they take place through text and images as well as sculptural objects, Goldsworthy's work nevertheless ensures that the spectator confronts the site on an intimate scale through his narrative. The sculpture, text and photographs speak to one another of varying perspectives of the work; the narrative transports the spectator to the personal scale of the work's production, the photographic sequence intervenes on the narrative by documenting the events after the artist retracts and the site overtakes the work, and the black hole in the sculpture thematizes the body's immersion and withdrawal as the operation by which the perspective of the site is split into discontinuous views.

The contrast between the individual scale of the narrative, and the expanse of the site beyond the body is a crucial device by which the artist calls attention to the limits of the body's sphere of perception. The aesthetic pleasure of the work is tied to the suspense of the moment when the sculpture is released to the site. This event cannot be translated into a totalized object or image because it is underpinned by the awareness of the site's unpredictability and its sublime presence beyond our knowledge. By keeping the spectator in the realm of the individual field of perception, Goldsworthy refuses perceptual access to that which brings the artwork to life. In the same way Bois explains that the picturesque recalls to the spectator's body its indolence, weight and its material

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[21] Bois, 49.

existence, so does Goldsworthy's narrative invite the spectator to the site, but also complicate sensation, by limiting the perceptual trajectory to the individual body.[22]

Goldsworthy's use of narrative to demonstrate the fracture between the limits of perception and the sublime presence of nature cultivates a different relationship to the site than Smithson's account of his intercorporeal encounter with the Great Salt Lake. Goldsworthy's practice espouses a resistance to seeing nature solely in the vocabulary of bodily immersion, and is closer to what Ted Toadvine calls a "phenomenology of the impossible". Toadvine suggests that nature is not wilderness, animals, plants, or even necessarily an ecosystem striving for diversification, but rather it is the opacity of a wild being which circumscribes our concepts and percepts. Nature is a "pocket of resistance" or the unpredictable par excellence.[23] If there is any continuity between oneself and nature, it is in virtue of the fact that this wild being is not an absolute other or an unfathomable abyss, but that it triggers the other side of the perceivable and the thinkable within ourselves; it is "the call that gives rise to sense". This call is heeded by our desire for what cannot be thought, and as Toadvine explains, desire is not a need or lack but a contact with what exceeds our horizon of thought. It is significant then, that Goldsworthy's body (and analogously, the spectator's as well) opened the space from which nature could pass through the object. The body and the site are not continuous with one another; rather they occupy reverse sides of the perception of the art object: as a tactile object and as an entity driven away from touch by unpredictable motion. The black hole in the sculpture is the object's contact with its own inconceivable excess, the volatile site that gives it form.

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[22] Bois, 46.

[23] Ted Toadvine, "The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences," *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself,* eds. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 150.

Earth art initiates an approach to the natural site as the wild being Toadvine describes. It incorporates the site not by trying to represent it, but more subtly, by standing as a threshold between the spectator and the intangible natural fluxes that demand to be perceived and thought. The site eludes the spectator as a totality and exists beyond the sculpture, but still pushes through the object, changing its formal definition. It quite literally appears as a 'pocket of resistance' in the art object, echoing the more fundamental defiance of knowledge that is the earth's continual 'folding, uplift and subsidence', to use Massumi's phrase. Incorporating this pocket of resistance opens the artwork to its unstable foundation and exposes its status not as a closed human-made object, but as the result of the artist's contact with nature's excess. The sculpture emerges out of an eddy in the site, as Benjamin describes. It is shaped by the collision between the artist's attempt to secure an object in time and space and the continual transitivity of nature that causes the object to eliminate its material of genesis.

Goldsworthy makes the conditions of the art object's emergence explicit in another stick dome from 1991 (Figure 18). Here, the subject of interest is a large chasm in the rocky ground. The artist parrots this chasm by setting into it a stick dome that revolves around a hole. Again, weaving sticks together around an empty centre, Goldsworthy preempts the naturally occurring hole by seizing it within the frame of the artwork. He places the artwork and the site in a mimetic conversation, the chasm leads the spectator's look to the artwork, and the artwork returns attention to the chasm that it imitates. Rather than the sculpture telescoping attention further downward, then, the work pushes it back up to the rocky aperture. The sculpture is bound up in the site, firmly placed inside the gaping crevice, but it problematizes the chasm's visibility, both drawing our look inward and repelling the eye's purchase on it, marking it as simultaneously seen and unavailable. The stick dome frames a void, and thus incorporates and thematizes the evasiveness of the living substance of its earthly host. Like Goldsworthy's stick dome in Nova Scotia, the sculpture centers on its own emptiness.

Figure 18. Andy Goldsworthy, *Sticks stacked, heavy rain, water rising*, Scaur Water, Dumfriesshire, 1991

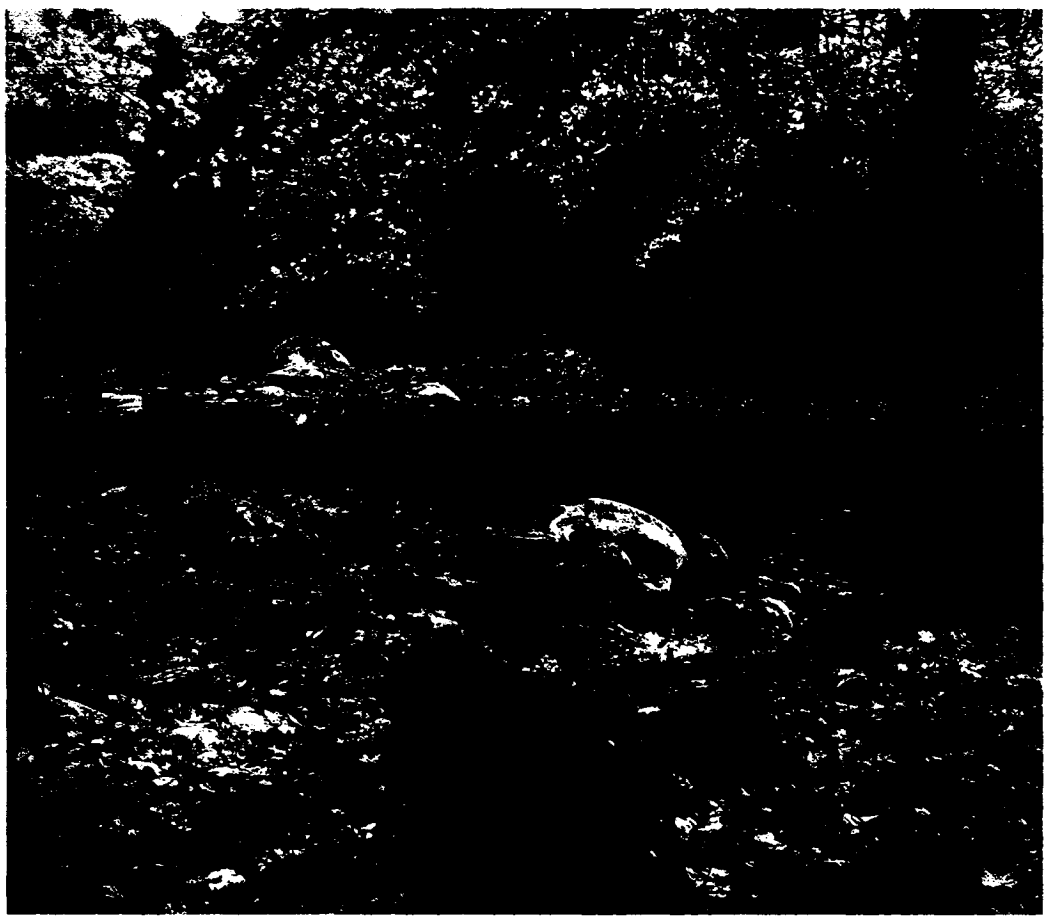

Figure 19. Andy Goldsworthy, *Hollow in stone clay worked around its rim drawn to an edge enclosing a hole*, Storm King Art Center, 19 October, 1998.

The black hole reveals the work's essential hollowness as an object and also connects it to the site. In Benjamin's terms, the work expresses its own operation of swallowing its material of genesis, in this case, the energies embedded in the chasm that attracted the artist to the site in the first place. The sculpture does not just represent a whirlpool, it embodies that phenomenon: it is an interruption in the site's motion, both exposing the activity and turning inward against the exposure. The sculpture causes a push and pull of visual trajectories; the artist singles out the chasm and shapes the work within and through it, fixating attention on its depths. At the same time, however, the sculpture interrupts the preexisting depth of the chasm, spreading across it and spinning around the hole of Goldsworthy' making. The sculpture thus absorbs the chasm, thematizing its depth and darkness without possessing any inner substance as an object. It then pushes vision away from its core to its hollowed exterior, and upwards to the lip of the opening.

Goldsworthy isolates the chasm as a resonant phenomenon that calls one to be attentive to the site. But, the artwork does not replace the chasm by incorporating it. In fact, the very shape of the sculpture denotes the openness of Goldsworthy's artistic pursuit. The work concretizes the site as a lapse in visual coherence and stages an encounter with the impossible; it is a hole made in and about a hole. The insistent tension between visually entering into the chasm and being repelled by the hole of the sculpture generates a collision of magnetic forces between nature and art. The 'humming energies' of the site cannot be seen, but the artwork opens a door by which to encounter them, not by prompting tactile sensation but just the opposite, by focusing on a denial of interior substance and visual leverage. The exchange between the site and the artwork never results in an object at rest only in a conflict of trajectories that ends in an evacuation of the chasm's plenitude and the protrusion of the sculpture's remaining armature. The friction between the artwork and the site does not presuppose that the site is

fundamentally vacant. Instead it reveals it as an evasive yet nevertheless invisible force that is integral to the formulation of the artwork.

Once again, the photograph elaborates the tension between the sculpture and the site. The title of the image, '*Sticks stacked, heavy rain, water rising*' locates the object in a suspenseful instant, a moment when either a flood of water will pour into the chasm and collapse the sculpture, or the rising water level inside the chasm will cause the sculpture to climb up from the depths. Goldsworthy poses the question of the work's fate using the photographic image to preserve the precariousness of the scenario. Were he to film the sculpture during the rainstorm, the visual magnetism between the sculpture and the site would be spent, doled out over the film's duration. However by capturing the sculpture in a single moment at the height of the natural event, the artist infuses the sculpture with the expectation of the site's unseen but imminent force. The title weaves natural presence into the image without providing visual or tactile access to it.

Goldsworthy draws out an awareness of the force of nature's transience even more explicitly in a work at the Storm King Art Center in 1998 (Figure 19). The artist fashioned clay around a depression in a rock transforming it into an open hole. With a hole on its surface, the boulder appears vacant and without density. The illusion that the rock is merely a stone façade rather than a heavy mass triggers a re-examination of its surface and shape. Goldsworthy reconfigures the natural object as an art object, yet this transubstantiation only occurred by clearing the boulder of its internal matter. In so doing, the artist prompts the question of this absent matter; what is the departed source of the boulder's materiality? Moreover, by seemingly emptying out the heavy boulder, he revealed it to be considerably more malleable than one would expect. Goldsworthy deploys the black hole to turn the boulder's concentrated solidity inside out and draw attention to the surrounding changes that form its contours. Once again, though the black hole draws the spectator to look inward, in fact it is the device by which we see what is outside the object, around and in excess of it.

The black hole protrudes, rebuffing a penetrating gaze and effecting an investigation of the object's exterior.

Goldsworthy's photographs secure the impossibility of immersed experience in the site, not only because they are literally uprooted from its time and space, but also by the way in which the image mirrors the sculptural process of evacuating natural activity from the art object. Two works in particular draw attention to the complementary roles of sculpture and photography, elucidating the invisible presence of nature and its role in simultaneously emptying and shaping the artwork. *Sumac Leaves with Hole* (1998; Figure 20) and *Pebbles with Hole* (1987; Figure 21) summarize the effects of Goldsworthy's artistic procedure: the sculptural process of framing the invisible force of the site and the photograph's denial of its coherent visibility. Through the motif of the black hole, the artist mobilizes the destabilizing effects of natural presence underlying the site into a compelling interplay between an opaque surface and a seemingly limitless depth. At the same time, the hole shows how the transfer of natural presence into a pictorial image results in a visual occlusion. The black hole is the central focus of the image, yet it registers as an unsettling emptiness in contrast to the intricacy of the sculptural frame around it. Indeed, like Goldsworthy's other works, the aesthetic function of the black hole is to lure attention inward and push it back to the surface. Because of the starkness of the empty centre, the visual and tactile qualities of the artwork's exterior become more striking. In *Sumac Leaves with Hole*, the eye is pushed to the vibrant colors of the elaborately plaited leaves and their gradual lightening of tone as they approach the interior edge around the black hole. Equally, in *Pebbles with Hole* the artist brings otherwise innocuous stones into view by laboriously assembling them around a void. One is immediately drawn to the gradations of the pebbles from slate grey to white as well as their idiosyncratic shapes. Not only is there a visual contrast between light and dark in both works but the black hole foregrounds the tactility of the

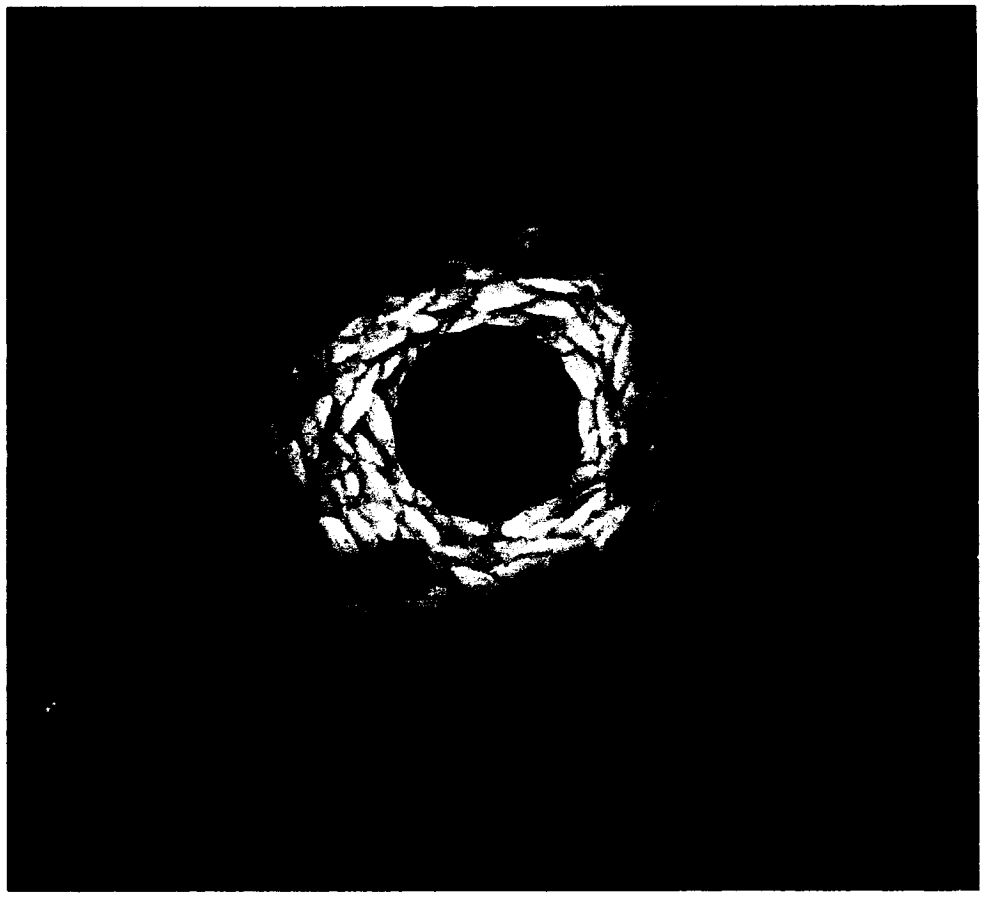

Figure 20. Andy Goldsworthy, *Sumac Leaves with Hole,* Storm King Art Center, 1998.

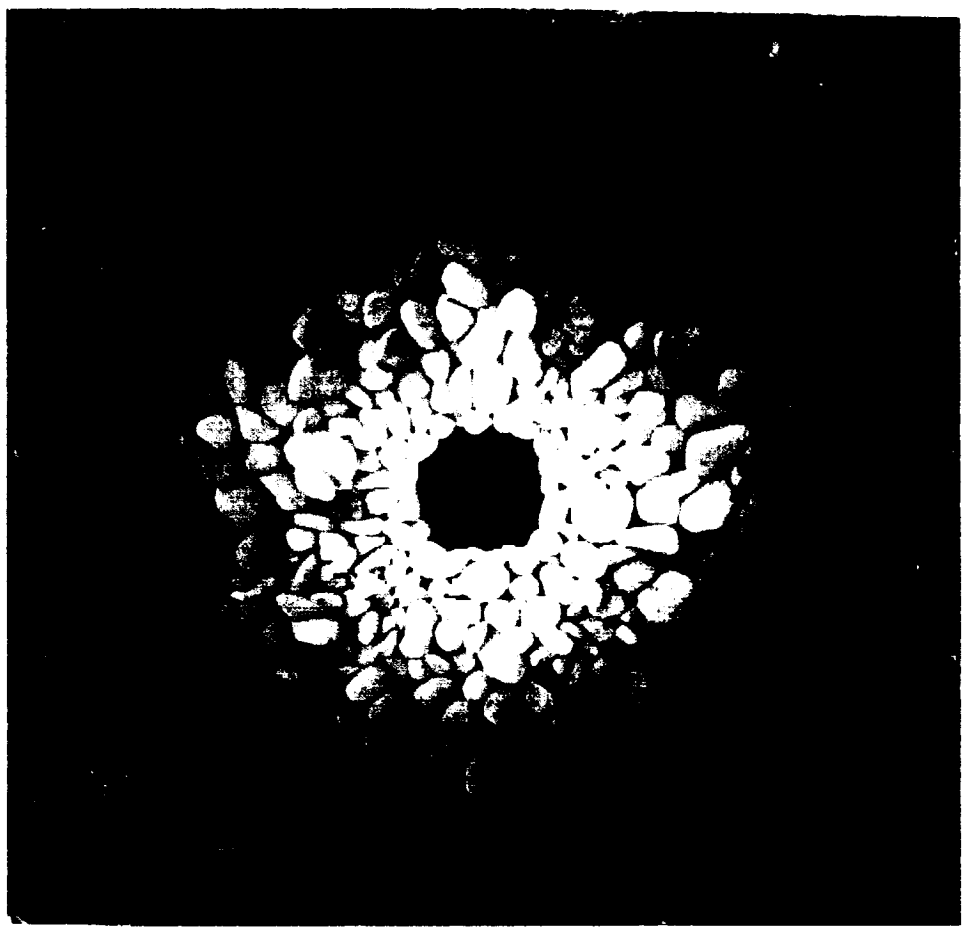

Figure 21. Andy Goldsworthy, *Pebbles with Hole* 1987.

exterior frame. The emptiness and impalpability of the black hole arouses an awareness of the waxy quality of the leaves and the smoothness of the pebbles.

The sculpture and the photograph echo each other's function of both representing the site and expelling its substance. On the one hand, Goldsworthy articulates an intangible energy at the site, which he seeks to release through the practice of sculpture. Because in the parameters Goldsworthy sets for his practice, the art object cannot withhold natural presence, but instead harnesses and releases it, the photograph must translate the site's boundless qualities into a pictorial image without registering it as visible or tangible. Goldsworthy's work thus gives voice to the natural forces that underlie what we see. Yet, can the sensation of the invisible be translated into a two-dimensional image? Is it even meant to if the goal of the sculpture is to initiate the release of energy and presence? It would be more accurate to describe the photographic image as a loss of the invisible; the sculptural practice unleashes natural presence, and the photograph brings this evacuation to a conclusion, rendering the sculpture as an empty shell.

The premise that the sculpture is an emblem of its own emergence from the natural site is apt here for the photographic image as well. Benjamin's metaphor of the whirlpool pertains in the sense that Goldsworthy's sculptures are built into the fabric of the site while at the same time interrupting its currents. His works thus open an internal rupture between the pressure of the work's material integration into the site and the obstruction it produces. The motif of the whirlpool expresses the encounter between the site and the artwork; the sculpture gathers and then unleashes the energetic substance of the site, marking the locus of this collision as a black hole. In a similar operation, the photograph intervenes on the temporality of the site, suspending the dynamic exchange between the sculpture and the site into a single moment, and evacuating the image of its immediate connection to the ongoing temporality of the site. The sculpture anticipates the emptiness that results from its transformation into an image and the photograph finalizes the sculpture's process of release. The substance, or perhaps

we could say the aura of the sited sculpture, has been sucked out of it "like water from a sinking ship," to use Benjamin's vivid description.[24]

As I have noted, there is an ambiguity as to whether the black hole projects outwards or whether because of its emptiness, it invites our look inwards - the black hole both draws attention and pushes it back to the surface. However, it does more than simply foreground the aesthetic qualities of its sculptural frame, it upsets the artwork's allegorization of the site. Though the photograph has the effect of sucking the natural presence out of the sculpture, it nevertheless poses the question of what has been there, for the black hole betrays the trace of that presence. The photograph cannot be dismissed as merely a pictorial representation of the sculpture because it confronts the spectator squarely with the emptiness left by the evacuated natural energies, an operation the photograph itself has contributed to. The black hole of the photograph denotes an economy of the gaze similar to Roland Barthes' notion of the punctum, a detail that unexpectedly springs out of the image, piercing the scene and altering its meaning. In contrast to the studium, which Barthes describes as a wide field of unconcerned desire or general interest in a photographic scene, the punctum refuses to be assimilated into the meaning of the image. Barthes explains, "The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance."[25] Moreover, as Margaret Iversen argues, Barthes' concept of the punctum derived from Lacan's structure of the gaze. For Lacan, the subject blocks out the awareness the he or she is not just a subject of consciousness but is also a subject of desire.[26] Though this awareness is suppressed, it can be glimpsed in, what Lacan terms the gaze. Thus, Iversen points out, in the same way that for Lacan, desire is constituted by the disruptive gaze that looms up and disorganizes the visual field, the punctum

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[24] Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Classic Essays on Photography* ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Connecticut: Leete's Island Books, 1980) 206.
[25] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 51.
[26] Margaret Iversen, "What is a Photograph?" *Art History* 17 no. 3 (September 1994) 457.

reverses the lines of sight and upsets the visual field, erupting into the network of signifiers that constitute reality.[27] Like the gaze, she maintains, the punctum breaks up the coherence of the studium and bursts through the frame of the image.

Similarly, Goldsworthy's black holes picture the site's essential unassimilability. The artist allegorizes the site by arranging leaves and pebbles into a visually rich symmetry. But the black hole prevents this assembly of surface materials to substitute for the site. It discloses the point where an unseen force ruptures the artwork, the place from which the invisible substance of the site has been expended as a condition of the artwork's creation. Like the punctum, the black hole rebuffs penetration into the site on two levels: not only does it threaten to project outward so that the spectator is unable to visually discern the depth or possible texture of the hole, it also prevents the site from being emblematized by the metonymic fragments Goldsworthy has woven around it, for it insistently references the presence that once occupied this place and that generated the material of the sculptural frame around it. Once again, the energies of the site do not inhabit the artwork, but the black hole gives rise to "a subtle beyond" as though, in Barthes' words, "the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see."[28] Photography in Goldsworthy's practice thus discloses the splitting of the sculpture from the site and expresses the function of the artistic practice, to harness and release nature and thereby make the invisible visible as an unassimilable wild being.

Once again, Goldsworthy raises the principle of the sublime picturesque, pairing together an aesthetic of natural beauty, seen in the visual richness of the frame whose intricacy we could say evokes 'restful contemplation', with the sublime disruption encompassed by the black hole. The trace of escaped natural presence epitomizes the characteristic boundlessness of the sublime. Goldsworthy imagines the site's immeasurable force as a burst through the screen

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[27] Iversen, 457.

[28] Barthes, 54.

of pictorial beauty. Photography lends itself to this operation, for as a medium that captures single instants it assembles the sculpture into the moment of release and registers the collision of the beautiful and the sublime within the temporal strictures of simultaneity. Nature is not diffused slowly over time but manifests as a sudden eruption that slips through perceptual confines.

Hollow Sculptures and Structural Disruptions

The figure of the whirlpool denotes the discontinuity between the artwork and the site that allows the recognition of the earth as other, but also as integral to our knowledge and perception of the world. Yet there is a distinction to be made between the acknowledgement of the earth as other and the dualistic characterization of it is as a threat to human history and civilization. In Walter Benjamin's analysis of the baroque tragic drama, history emerges out of an eddy in the eternal flow of nature's regeneration. There is no single point of origin of an idea or series of objective historic events; human history stems from a black hole caused by the collision of the temporal currents of the present and the past. The present redeems the past as a fragment or ruin, but this recovery carves the past out of its context. Equally, in hinging itself to the past, the present creates an enduring form or idea that appears to bear the weight of history and stand against the stream of time that threatens to engulf it. Benjamin writes, "There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world until it is revealed fulfilled in the totality of its history. Origin is not therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development."[29] Moreover, as Craig Owens stresses, for Benjamin, the ongoing rush of time is associated with nature's perpetual regeneration whereby the material of history seems to emerge out of and ultimately return to a (supposedly) primitive natural

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[29] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 45.

landscape. Writing history involves recovering the past from the passage of time and the grip of nature, and to crystallize it in an enduring form in the present.

I have discussed Benjamin's interest in ruins in relation to allegory, and argued that while his model of history resonates with Robert Smithson's work, the *Spiral Jetty* does not ultimately exist in opposition to the natural site in the same way Benjamin positions history in opposition to nature. Benjamin notes, for example that, "The word 'history' stands on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience."[30] Rather than arguing that the *Spiral Jetty* is an instance of nature consuming history and the Great Salt Lake submerging the sculpture, I suggested that Smithson positioned the lake as that which gives rise to the sculptural form, and that the motif of the whirlpool expresses the bridging of nature and art from across the temporal dislocation that Benjamin identifies between the past and the present. The earth, in this case, is not an antagonistic force that threatens to swallow history but an atomizing force that shapes history through dialectical friction.

I have also identified other ways in which artists distinguish the art object from the natural site into which it is integrated. Forming organic materials into a particular shape is only half of the artistic process of earth art. In fact, artists design works to siphon the motion of a site, exposing both the fundamental emptiness of the art object and the considerable dynamism of the natural world around it. By expressing the 'wild being' of the site and the vital rhythms that animate otherwise inert sculptures, artists do not position the art object against nature, but stage its emergence out of it. Benjamin's allegorical model cannot be seamlessly applied to earth art, insofar as the art object is not recovered *from* the transience of nature by the artist, but rather the object is demarcated by the friction between natural activity and the artist's intervention, and is galvanized by nature before disappearing back into it. Earth artists anticipate the destabilizing effect of natural forces on the human world - of history, ideas, and language, for

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[30] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 177.

instance - but also consider the constructive role nature plays in producing and interpreting that world. Two currents fuel the metaphor of the whirlpool in earth art: the temporal movement of nature and the artist's intervention in that movement. Accordingly, nature functions in artistic practice to both mold the artwork and leave the traces of its enigmatic presence. Benjamin's discussion of origin is useful insofar as he characterizes nature as transient and the metaphor of the whirlpool expresses the tension between structured ideas (for Benjamin, the idea of history) and the perpetual fluctuations of time and space. But as earth artists demonstrate, natural processes are integral to the shifting of meaning that a site-specific artwork performs. The image of the whirlpool expresses both the infolding and the ensuing division of nature and cultural forms.

For the British artist Chris Drury, the whirlpool embodies this more complicated understanding of the earth as that which both upsets and informs the historic significance of a site. His sculpture, *Vortex* from 1994 (Figure 22a) is an intricately woven cone of hazel and willow branches, standing next to Lewes Castle in Sussex. The shape of the vortex connotes the transient forces of nature that disturb the historic permanence that the castle proclaims, and elicits a perception of the castle as dynamic. Drury remarks on the project, "This structure of woven hazel and willow sticks (gathered from the woods and hedgerows of the surrounding countryside) was designed to interact with the space and buildings around it. The castle is solid, permanent and rooted in history. By contrast, I wanted to make a work on the same scale that was light, dynamic and impermanent."[31] Gathering branches from the local area and weaving them into a tenuous sculpture, Drury emulated the tall cylindrical shape of the tower to which the work is connected. However, he reinvented the fortified battlement by exposing the precariousness of the castle's roots in the site. Drury comments on the work's fragility, noting how he did not anticipate how heavy the sticks would be, nor how difficult it would be to join the top and bottom halves so that the

[31] Chris Drury, *Found Moments in Time and Space* (New York: Harry N Abrams, Inc., 1998) 42.

sculpture's base could support its entire weight. He muses, "The working title for the sculpture was Falling Tower of Sticks. Fortunately that turned out not to be prophetic."[32] The artist positioned the castle in a balancing act with nature, bending the branches into shape and building them into a soaring, gravity-defying vortex.

For the spectator, the work articulates at once the view from the castle towers and the view of them. Drury reconfigured the circling panorama of the landscape that one might see from the top of the tower, into the continuous spiral weft that spans from the sculpture's tip to the ground. This coiling armature conveys the castle tower in motion by doubling the perceptual experiences of two kinds of circumnavigation: looking at the landscape from the battlements, and circling the tower from outside its fortified exterior. Similarly, the artist references both looking up at the tower from below and looking below from above. Drury states in relation to this "My plan was for a cone of sticks descending from the top of the barbican to the grass, reminiscent of objects falling (or being hurled) from the battlements."[33] From inside the vortex (Figure 22b) the spectator is privy to the two trajectories of the tower: the sensation of an object tumbling towards her or him in ever-widening circles, and a telescoping of vision upwards to the top of the tower as the cone narrows to a single point at the top.

The artist staged a dizzying experience by imagining the tower stripped to its skeletal frame, its stolid façade reset as an interlace with the landscape around its confines. The vortex represents the tower as bound together in history and pried apart by the natural forces of the site, suspended in the confrontation between the two. I have argued that in Andy Goldsworthy's works, the friction between a stable object and nature's dynamism involves an evacuation of energy, suggesting that nature is never embodied in the object but that the pressure of their meeting and the consequent propulsion of natural energies out of the sculpture is the driving force of its shape. In Drury's case, however, the vortex

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[32] Drury, 42.

[33] Drury, 42.

Figure 22a. Chris Drury, *Vortex*, hazel and willow branches, Lewes Castle, Sussex, 1994.

Figure 22b. Chris Drury, *Vortex* - interior, hazel and willow branches, Lewes Castle, Sussex, 1994.

does not simply reference the elimination of natural energies that takes place in the sculpture's production. Rather, the sculpture speaks directly to the castle's relationship to the natural world around it. Though the castle appears to be a protective fortification from invaders, historically it was also an allegory of the land itself: the castle indicated ownership of the territory and thus to conquer the castle would be to possess the land. Lewes Castle is thus both metonymically and metaphorically bound to its geographic site. Ironically, however, though the castle embodies the land, it is closed off from it. Drury aims to subvert this contradictory interplay between a closed structure and exterior nature. The open weave of the vortex figures the castle as, in Drury's words, "a swing door, between outside and inside, permitting a free flow from one to the other."[34]

The vortex shape does not just refer to the sculpture's literal entanglement with nature, then, it marks the integration of the castle's historic significance into the site's dynamism, figuring the architectural structure in contiguity with its environment. The sculpture pits the momentum of nature's transience against the permanence of the castle, folding them into one another and subverting the perception of the castle as impenetrable. The tower to which the vortex is attached appears suddenly dynamic and exposed. The result, as is generally the goal of a site-specific artwork, is an overlay of meaning. Drury reorganizes the castle's historic core through its confrontation with the volatile natural environment. The sculpture embodies the tower spiraling in the swells of the natural energies around it. The impact of nature is not utter ruination but the uncovering of the permeability between the castle and the surrounding environment. Drury's sculpture establishes that the tower is a vortex that is both tied to and separated from the land. The sculpture's armature is the dividing line that weaves the temporality and materials of the site into the architecture but also holds them apart so that we may see them as distinct yet interrelating phenomena.

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[34] Drury, 12.

Equally, in Patrick Dougherty's work natural presence effects a reorganization of solid edifices. Known for his site-specific sculptures made out of tree saplings, Dougherty creates large twister-like objects that interact with architecture. Like Drury, Dougherty gathers materials from the surrounding environment of the city in which he is working - in ditch banks, roadways, or under power lines.[35] The artist explains that tree saplings entangle easily and have an inherent method of joining so that they can sustain their own weight when they are worked into a large object. What is most striking about Dougherty's choice of material, however, is the quality of motion and direction that the sticks engender when worked into a series of diagonal lines across the surface of the object. His sculptures often appear as natural phenomena such as cyclones or tumbleweed blowing through the site. *Crossing Over* (Figure 23), for instance, installed at the American Craft Museum in New York in 1996, is a tornado of sticks following the curvature of a staircase, twisting around a railing and projecting upwards towards the ceiling and adjacent window. The stairway's procession from one level to the next is figured as a dizzying rearrangement of orientation as the sculpture intercedes on the wall of the stairwell, lifting and turning the visitor's perspective of the space.

Where *Crossing Over* gathers momentum from below and projects it upward, its tightly bound base opening up to a spray of unruly stems, *Easy Does It* (Figure 24) spills right out the window of the Art and Culture Center in Hollywood, Florida. Spiraling downward from the second floor of the building, *Easy Does It* appears to bounce on the ground, rise up in an arc and then descend once again, as though it were a cascade of water poured from the window. The sculpture joins the second-floor balcony to the archway in the courtyard, and alters the façade of the building, opening it up and seemingly releasing a whirlwind bound up inside. Imagining the building expelling its interior substance

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[35] Patrick Dougherty, "Linear Energy: An Interview With Patrick Dougherty, by Roberta Sokolitz," *Sculpture* 19 no. 2 (March 2000) www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag00/march00/dough/dough.htm.

Figure 23. Patrick Dougherty, *Crossing Over,* **and maple saplings, American Craft Museum,** New York, 1996.

Figure 24. Patrick Dougherty,. *Easy Does It*, **maple brazilian pepper saplings, Art and Culture Center of** Hollywood, Florida, 1998.

Figure 25. **Patrick Dougherty,** *Cell Division*, **maple saplings, Savannah College of Art and** Design, Georgia, 1998.

out to the exterior grounds, Dougherty uses the entangling action of the saplings and the vigorous motion they evoke to bind the Art and Culture Center to its surroundings, upsetting its measured confines and launching a spatial disarray out the window in a flurry of organic debris.

A similar disturbance of the solidity of architecture motivates *Cell Division* (Figure 25), an arrangement of saplings twisted into swirls and attached to the grillwork of the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia. Here, Dougherty evokes the latent history of the building, positioning the sculpture as a conduit for its forgotten function. The college was once a county jail and, as the artist explains, the circlets of maple saplings that seem to bore holes in the façade act as a series of escape hatches.[36] Interestingly, by invoking the reproduction of microscopic cells, the artist adds a layer of texture to the building while at the same time the shape of the work revives its historic use. The spreading expanse of cells paradoxically thicken the exterior and penetrate it to set free its buried past. The sculpture encompasses the spontaneous action of cell division, but also recalls historic meaning by attaching it to natural activity. The title, "Cell Division" refers to the reproduction of cells and to the segregated cells inside the jail. The sculpture simulates a spread of organic material to pry the building apart, seizing the connotation of the segregated units within to turn it inside out, weaving biological cells into its surface and at the same time externalizing its historic use. The fact that Dougherty conceives of the cells of his sculpture as escape hatches underlines the artwork's effect of propelling the building's interior outward, both literally, in the sense that it highlights the division of space inside, and figuratively by foregrounding its dormant history. Not unlike Andy Goldsworthy's black holes, Dougherty unleashes the invisible substance of the coherent structure - in this case the building's dormant past - by submitting it to

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[36] Patrick Dougherty, "Linear Energy," www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag00/march00/dough/dough.htm.

the tense elasticity, distension and separation that animates the process of a cell dividing.

Curiously, for both Drury and Dougherty the art object is not located in a proverbial landscape, it is affixed to an architectural structure. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable kinship between their sculptures and those of Andy Goldsworthy and other earth artists who tend towards less inhabited natural sites. In all cases, the sculpture elaborates a central tension between structural definition and spontaneous motion. The artwork initiates a process of uncovering the dynamism of the site - that which has been masked in order to give the structure definition. Goldsworthy calls the sculpture into question by hinging its sculptural form on the site so that its shape develops in accordance with the site's projection of force. Indeed, Goldsworthy's black holes point directly to that invisible natural presence without presuming to represent it. Similarly, Drury and Dougherty's works suggest the unrest within the architectural structures. On the surface it appears that by using raw materials gathered from the untended areas around the site, each artist mobilizes a sense of nature intruding on the architecture. However, in effect, the sculptures evidence the rhythms underlying and residing within the buildings.

The artworks access the concealed volatility of the site, implying it by their vigorous shapes. Most importantly, they reveal that natural presence is untenable within any stable form. Thus, the tenuousness of *Vortex*, the outburst of sticks at the crown of *Crossing Over*, the whirlwind pouring out the window in *Easy Does It*, and the escape hatches enacted by *Cell Division*, all indicate that the sculpture releases animate substance from within stable edifices, and not that it is synonymous with the site's wild being. The sculpture itself does not withhold nature for it is always empty. It thus references natural presence as having passed through it. The fracture between transient nature and the permanent structures on which human history rests is resolved by mobilizing the sculpture as a passageway for the momentum of the site. The site is not imparted with the fatalistic quality of Benjamin's edict that 'history stands on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience'. Instead nature's transience governs the

shape of the sculpture, which in turn opens the site to new discursive and historic meanings. Though by harnessing the energies of the site the artwork circumvents the original meaning of the architecture, the more complex statement is that the site's temporality is built into human history and it challenges our interpretation of the spaces we occupy. The sculpture does not substitute the wild being of the site; quite the contrary, the invisible energies break free of the object, leaving it fully formed but ultimately hollow. Earth artists use the sculpture to exemplify the way our knowledge of a site can be informed by the perception of nature in motion and not as an essential totality.

Being In and Looking at Nature

Contemporary earth art does not stage a purely intercorporeal experience of a site. Rather, the art object establishes a perception of the site inferred both by the materials and shape of the sculpture's exterior and the sensorial denial that its hollow interior transmits. Earth art posits two sets of questions: where does the artwork situate the spectator in relation to the site and how does it achieve this through the interplay of sensorial abundance and deprivation? While these two questions are also at stake in Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, as I have shown, Smithson positions the site as a subterranean fluid presence underlying the textual modes of an artwork. The lapses in the texts that initiate a bodily experience of the site always imply a return to an amorphous physical state whereby physical engagement with the site is synonymous with absolute continuity. There is thus a distinction to be made between the kind of perceptual experience Smithson outlines and what more recent earth art attempts. In this section I will show how contemporary earth art maintains a tension between being immersed in the site and perceiving it from a distance. The artworks consistently reveal nature as out of reach: the artwork mediates the wild being of the site such that it becomes perceivable only in its resistance to being amalgamated into a visible and tactile form.

Up to now, my analysis of artworks by Goldsworthy, Drury and Dougherty primarily revolves around two related themes, the hollowness of the sculpture and the transience of the site. Because nature is always in motion artists recognize the impossibility not only of representing a site accurately in an artwork, but also of perceiving it as a coherent whole. Earth art is thus an exercise in articulating natural presence without stultifying it. As I have shown, artists resolve this dilemma by making a distinction between the uncontainable forces that shape the sculpture, and the exterior armature, which is receptive to the site's energies and inherent forms and suggests them to the spectator. The wild being of the site remains invisible but is nevertheless present to the spectator. The shape of the sculpture's frame conveys spontaneous force, but because the object intervenes on its trajectory, it remains dislocated and therefore cannot provide a coherent sensation of natural presence. Between these two dimensions of the sculpture, the vacant interior that indexes a departed natural presence, and the exterior that has been molded around the once dense and now empty core, the artist conveys the temporal disruption at the heart of the sculpture's creation.

I argued in the last chapter that Smithson located the *Spiral Jetty* at a crossroads between two temporal paradigms, the dynamic time of nature and the atemporal or stable time of the crystalline world. The sculpture could thus exist within the site without being destroyed by it. There is a similar operation in contemporary earth art, whereby the sculpture, although usually not nearly as enduring as the *Spiral Jetty*, is woven into the site yet stands apart from its volatile changes. The work suggests temporality but articulates it as a past event. Indeed, artists position the temporal flux that the object denotes as precisely the event that stimulated its emergence. Sculptures such as Drury's *Vortex* and Dougherty's twisters denote a rush of movement that both inflates the artwork and voids it simultaneously.

In my discussion of Goldsworthy's stick dome hole, I noted that the precise place that the artist occupied in making the sculpture opens up a space from which the currents of the river could enter and carry the work downstream.

By removing himself, the artist released the artwork to the site permitting the water to enter into it and take hold. There is a similar but inverse organization to other earth sculptures that are designed to appear as though a flux of natural activity has given rise to them. The space that this uprising of force leaves behind - the interior of the sculpture- is a passage for the spectator to enter into the work. The artist Alfio Bonanno, who founded the Tranekaer International Centre for Art and Nature (TICKON) in Denmark, makes large-scale earth sculptures that are intended to be experienced from their interiors. In the nineties he built several projects that invite the spectator inside the sculpture. The spiral shape of *Fossil Snail* (Figure 26), executed in 1992 at the Krakamarken Sculpture Park in Denmark, for example, bears a striking resemblance to Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. A critical difference between the two sculptures, however, is that while Smithson's jetty is meant to be walked on, Bonanno's *Fossil Snail* can be entered into. Fashioned out of earth, grass and stone, the work is a spiraling passageway that not only leads into the site, it shelters from it as well. The name of the artwork likens it to a snail shell, but the artist is quick to categorize it in the past, as a fossil, thereby positioning the sculpture as a remnant from another time. Like the *Spiral Jetty*, *Fossil Snail* connotes the prehistoric world, though here the size of the sculpture triggers an association with ancient natural history, the suggestion being that it hosted a snail of monolithic proportions. The grand scale is essential, not just to give the sculpture an archaic appearance but in order to create a passage large enough to receive the spectator. Though from the outside the sculpture appears as a rare artifact, the work doubles as an underground corridor to be occupied by visitors to the sculpture park.

The combination of these two premises, that the animate presence which formed the sculpture is located in the past, and that the space left behind allows one to experience the site from inside the work, mobilizes an encounter with natural presence premised on temporal dislocation rather than physical continuity. This is not to say that the bodily engagement of the work is necessarily lessened,

Figure 26. Alfio Bonanno, *Fossil Snail*, earth, grass and stones, Krakamarken Sculpture Park, Denmark, 1992.

Figure 27. Alfio Bonanno, *Snail Tunnel*, two views, poplar branches, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 1998.

rather that the artist secures a perspective of the site from across a division between the art object and the natural phenomenon from which it allegedly stems. Bonanno places the spectator within the site, but opens a space to stand apart from it. Where Smithson bridges the distance imposed by the textual modes of the *Spiral Jetty* through descriptions of fluidity between the body and the site, Bonanno's approach conjoins bodily engagement and conceptual distance. Though the spectator is quite literally surrounded by the earthwork, this position is not necessarily predicated on a state of precognitive blindness or physical amorphousness as in Smithson's case. Rather, *Fossil Snail* prevents bodily union with the site and locates the visitor in an empty cavern. Moreover, in Bonanno's later work, *Snail Tunnel* (Figure 27) the spectator sees and touches the suggested natural presence after it has passed, in the patterns that shape the sculpture and which outline a cross-section of movement through the site.

Bonanno's *Snail Tunnel*, built for the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in 1998, is a long walkway that guides the visitor through a forest. The work is made from branches found at the site, bent into a carapace and supported by a succession of tree trunks along the pathway. The tunnel is bound to the site, rooted by the standing trees and covered tightly by the molded saplings. The coiled structure defines a pathway that shields its occupants from the forest even as it ushers them through it. The tunnel frames an experience of the site from inside it, yet at the same time shelters visitors from direct contact. *Snail Tunnel* mobilizes the procession through the site as emblematic of the continual denial of a definitive contact between the site and the visitor. In short, though one moves through the site, one can never steady a consistent and totalized perception of it. The sculpture evokes the trail of a creature tunneling underground, raising the earth as it drives through the forest. The interweave of vertical arches and horizontal supports that run alongside the trail, articulates the pressure and accelerating trajectory of the disruption.

The visitor's progress through the work becomes an exploration of the gradual overturning of the ground and opening of space as the artwork divides the

site against itself. The humming natural energies Goldsworthy describes emanating from his black hole, do not occupy this tunnel. Instead, the artwork enacts the pocket of resistance Ted Toadvine elaborates as constitutive of a phenomenology of the impossible, whereby humans are not continuous with nature but experience it in its defiance of our knowledge and perception of it. The tunnel does not lead to a hard core of invisible substance; rather it is an opening to nature's evasiveness. The arches of the tunnel are a series of thresholds that stand as obstacles to the experience of the site in its fullness. The sequence of arches marks the temporal flow of the site that can never be assembled as a totality. One is left to track natural activity after it has passed; like geological strata, the movement is conceivable only in retrospect by following the course of its friction with the sculpture.

Spectators are thus privy to two distinct perspectives of the site through the *Snail Tunnel*, the experience from inside the artwork whereby they are prompted to reach towards the site's evasive presence as they move through the corridor, and a view of the imprint left behind on the surface of the sculpture - in this case, the striations outlined by the horizontal sticks, or the intricate slits between the arches through which sunlight permeates. The artist does not eject the visitor from the site by constructing this hollow passage. The artwork mediates between the two, but does not substitute for natural presence. Bonanno comments that the site itself gives rise to the shape of the sculpture:

> Over the years, I have found that waiting to see a site before deciding [on the form of the work] is important. Each site has its own story to tell. If I am patient, something happens. After a day or two, or an hour or two, I never know how long, I connect with the site and it tells me what to do. The key to what I have to do is there, I just have to find it.[37]

It is important to note, however, that while the site's subtle changes and atmosphere may dictate the shape of the sculpture, the work is predicated on

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[37] Alfio Bonanno, "In Nature's Eyes: A Conversation with Alfio Bonanno," by John Grande, *Sculpture* 20 no. 8 (October 2001) 26.

interrupting the flow of natural activity. Certainly, the image of a snail shell is the strongest indicator that the artwork shields its occupant from exposure to the fullness of the site in motion.

The sculpture has two functions: firstly, it expresses the origin of the artwork whereby the artist intervenes on the site and stimulates an eddy in its flow, causing an elimination of natural force from the sculpture's interior. The sculpture's armature stands as the division between the artist and the environment on which the artwork itself is founded. Secondly, the hollow interior re-establishes a bodily encounter with the site from across the separation on which the artwork is premised. The membrane of the sculpture and its empty core operate in tandem so that the spectator is not dualistically severed from the natural site, but is lured towards it by the traces of the artist's encounter with it and, correspondingly, by the traces of the site's resistance to assimilation. In this way, the site is never solidified into a definitive experience or a concrete representation. In *Snail Tunnel* perception of the site takes place in a rhythm of attraction towards it as one is led along the passageway, and mystification at its inaccessibility, as the arches foreclose physical continuity. Though a completely different mode of spectatorial experience than Goldsworthy's photographed interventions, Bonanno's *Snail Tunnel* is similar in the sense that it encompasses simultaneously the opposing senses of memory and anticipation in order to achieve a discontinuous perceptual experience. Though the sculpture shields the visitor, in fact the work has the inverse function of shielding the site from a colonizing gaze.

In her critique of Merleau-Ponty, Luce Irigaray identifies a double loop at work in the chiasm. There are two directions of movement between oneself and the invisible dimension of the other: an attraction towards the other's wild being and a necessary return to oneself. The invisible elicits desire, yet in its radical difference it also evokes wonder. What is missing from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in Irigaray's view, is the double pole of attraction towards and retraction away from the other, which ensures the separation that would prevent

one from subsuming all that we see into sameness, reducing it to the limited trajectory of our own thoughts and experiences. As Mick Smith points out, for Irigaray, where desire is an attractive force, described as the "silent gravity" of love, wonder is the elemental passion that can compose a space for difference; it is the "thin air" that separates and allows us to keep a respectful distance.[38] Though Irigaray's feminist revision of the chiasm is oriented towards an ethics of sexual difference, her description of wonder relies on metaphors of nature, "the object of wonder or attraction," she says, "remains impossible to delimit, impose, identify...: the atmosphere, the sky, the sea, the sun."[39] Indeed, for Irigaray the elements of the earth are the material sources that drive wonder and stimulate self-reflection.[40] My specific concern, then, is with Irigaray's identification of an encounter with otherness that is founded on both desire for union and a concession to the other's excess. As I explained earlier, she demands a recognition of the subject's separation from the constitutive fabric of the earth, which she associates with the maternal body. A truly ethical exchange can only take place when the subject recognizes the other as beyond the limits of her or his horizon of knowledge.

In Smith's view, Irigaray's paradigm is equally pertinent to the recognition of the earth as a locus of ethical concern. This ethical relation, he says, appears in moments of the other's emergence into signification as irreducibly different from oneself. It can manifest as a spatial relation, in the acceptance that we cannot fully know and occupy another's place, thus giving the other space to be as he or she is without seizing that place for our own purposes. An ecological ethic accepts the excess of nature's difference and would, in Smith's words, "let nature be, allowing it to manifest itself within life and language in all its uncomfortable difference," permitting union through resistance

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[38] Mick Smith, *An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity and Social Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) 183.
[39] Irigaray, quoted in Smith, 184.
[40] See also Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary Beth Mader (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

to assimilation.[41] The resistance of nature becomes apparent in art through the introduction of a pictorial dimension to sculptural practice, a combination that connects to a sublime picturesque aesthetic. As my discussion of Andy Goldsworthy's photographs suggests, though the representation of nature has been called into question, artists have not abandoned pictorial media. The combination of sculpture and photography in the Bavarian artist, Nils-Udo's practice likewise shows how photography can be used to picture nature as a locus of resistance to a totalizing knowledge of a site.

Like Alfio Bonanno, Nils-Udo intricately carves out spaces in a site, yet these places for humans in nature are always haunted by a curious sense of dislocation. Through the motif of the nest, Nils-Udo appears at first to make a statement about nature as the cradle of humanity. Taken literally, his giant nests built to human scale imply our origin in nature. The nest is the paradigmatic space of new life and the struggle for survival against the elements. As Gaston Bachelard notes, the nest is contradictory, for it evokes delicacy and vulnerability while at the same time setting us daydreaming about security. The mention of a nest, he posits, brings us back to the first home, "If we return to the old home as to a nest, it is because memories are dreams, because the home of other days has become a great image of lost intimacy."[42] It is clear from two examples of Nils-Udo's works, one of a nest built in Lunebourg (Figure 28) and the other in Kaneko, Japan (Figure 29a) that the artist uses photography to frame the nest as an emblem of human origination in nature that is fraught with the sense of lost intimacy to which Bachelard refers.

Though Nils-Udo's nests clearly required the artist's laborious physical effort, the photographs portray empty nests devoid of human presence. Photography presents the sculpture as a past encounter with nature, or even more strongly, the nest is the forgotten original home of human life. As is the case with

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[41] Smith, 188.

[42] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look At How We Experience Intimate Places* translated by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) 100.

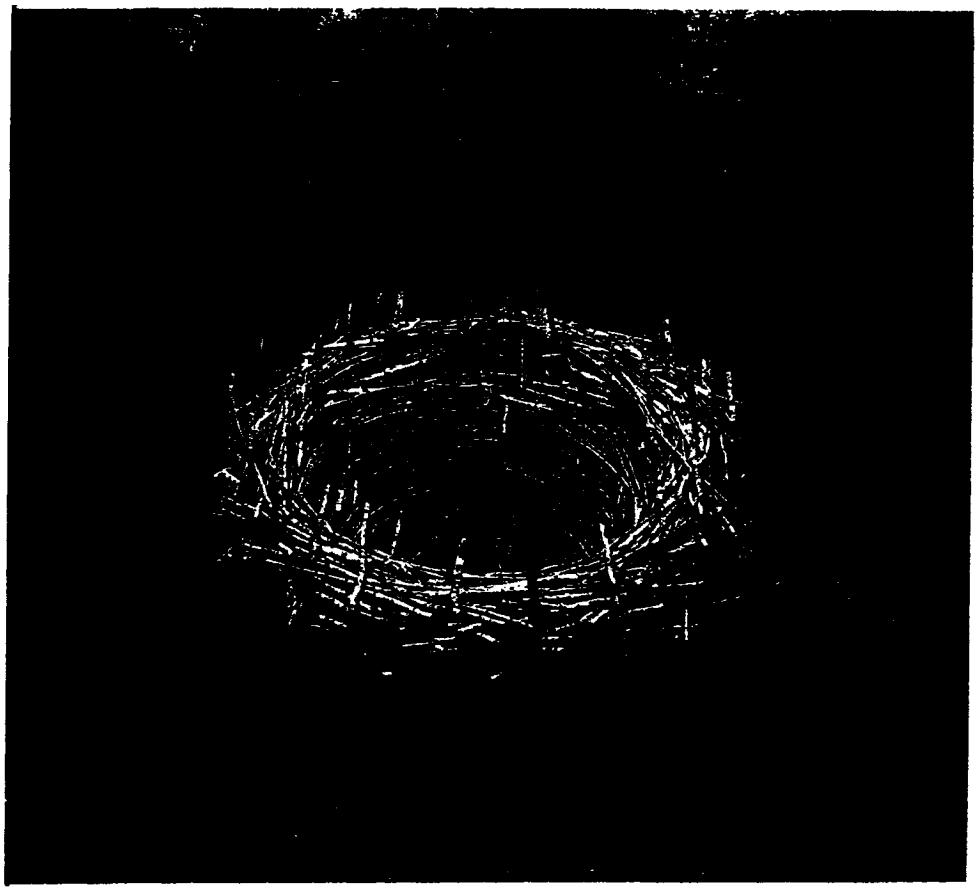

Figure 28. Nils-Udo, *Nest*, soil, stone, branches and grass, Lunebourg, 1978.

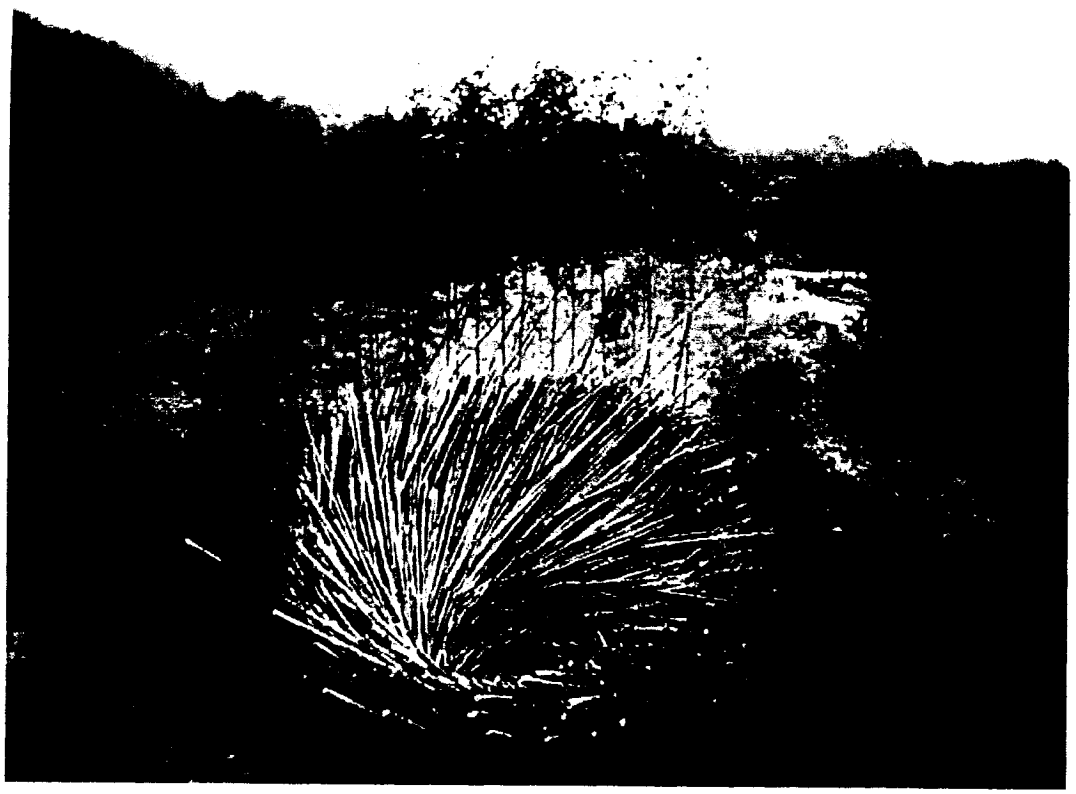

Figure 29a. Nils-Udo *Nest*, bamboo poles, soil and trees, Kaneko Japan, 1988.

many earth art projects, Nils-Udo's works are the result of a protracted engagement with the site. Digging a deep hollow into the ground, selecting materials from around the planned location of the work, bending them into shape and buttressing the layers of heavy branches, Nils-Udo creates his nests by sectioning out a place within the site. The robust exterior of the nest, however, is the inverse of Bonanno's tunnels, insofar as it does not cover from overhead but rather supports from underneath, growing up around the artist. Like Bonanno's tunnels, though, Nils-Udo's nests index direct physical encounter. Indeed, in his analysis of the poetics of intimate spaces, Bachelard comments on the nest as the ideal example of a space formed in nature through bodily contact. Bachelard cites the 19th- century French writer, Jules Michelet's, description of the way a bird shapes its nest as a house built by and for its body, giving it shape from the inside, like a shell. "On the inside," Michelet writes, "the instrument that prescribes a circular form for the nest is nothing else but the body of the bird. It is by constantly turning round and round and pressing back the walls on every side that it succeeds in forming this circle."[43] Remarkably, the circling contours of Nils-Udo's nests evoke this strenuous procedure of spinning around and pressing the materials into shape from the ground up (Figure 29b).

Most striking about the nests, and that which the photographs emphasize, is their resounding emptiness. Like many of Goldsworthy's projects, Nils-Udo's nests are generally ephemeral and fall apart over time so that photography plays an integral role in documenting the sculpture upon its completion. While the spiraling nests are formed by the pressure and movement of the artist's body, the photograph highlights the status of the nest as an abandoned object. Shot from above looking in, the photograph overshadows the potentially nostalgic image of a human nest in the wild by presenting the viewer with a more sobering perspective: a discarded space that no longer functions as a viable place for human life. Like Goldsworthy's black holes, the photograph finalizes the

[43] Jules Michelet, quoted in Bachelard, 101.

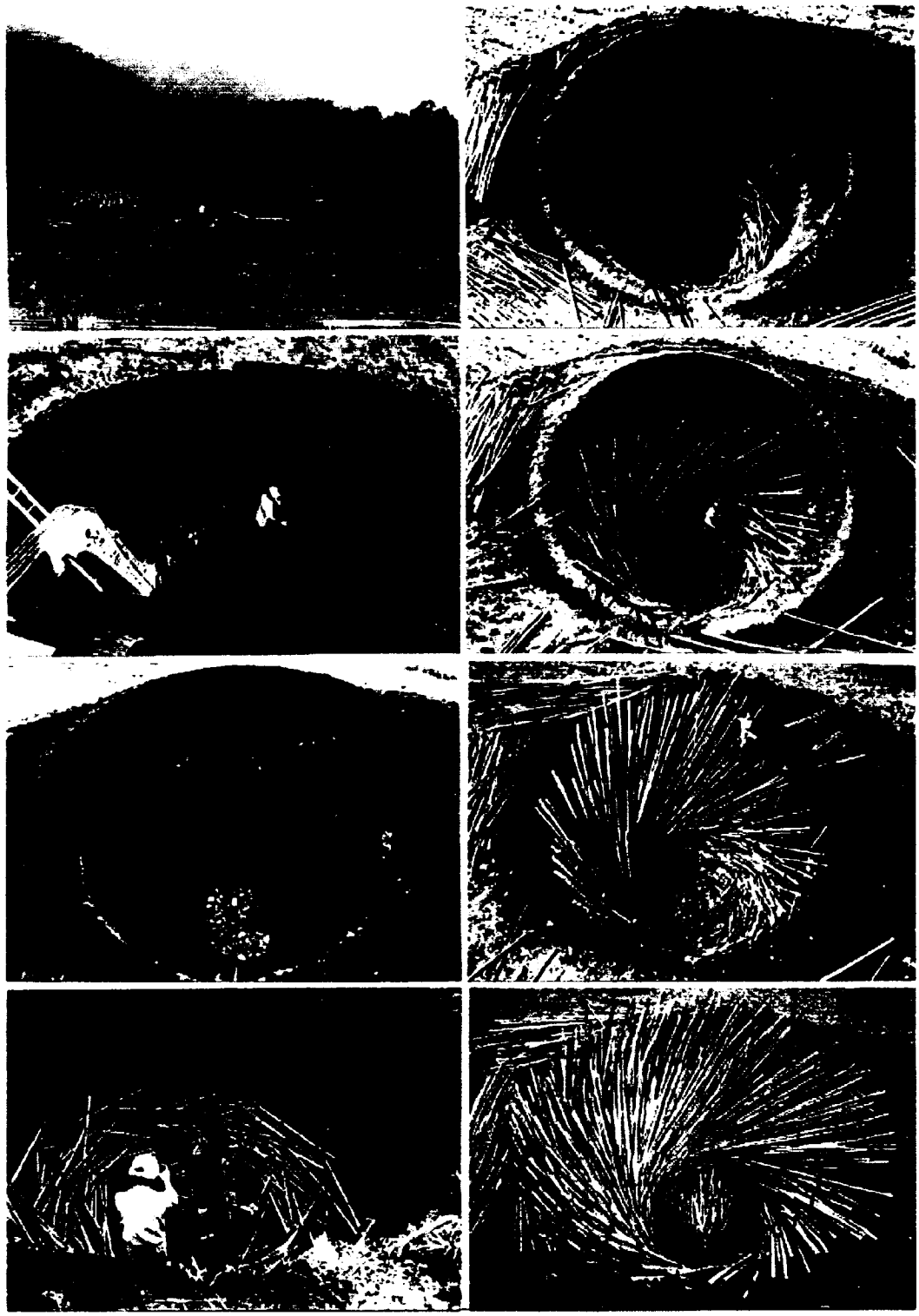

Figure 29b. Nils-Udo, Building nest in Kaneko, Japan, 1988.

sculptural process of dividing the site on itself and evacuating vitality. In this case, however, the photograph secures a slightly different dislocation. Rather than offering the nest as a poetic image of a place in harmony with nature, it presents the sculpture as an uninhabited remain.

The photograph alters the primordial scene of an original home that the nest conjures, and instead situates the spectator outside the nest looking at it and discovering nothing but the remnants of an encounter between a now absent occupant and the wilderness. The image locks the sculpture in a temporal vacuum; the emptiness of the nest projects the event of the sculpture's emergence into the distant past, yet the image persists. Though the artist has left an imprint of his engagement with the site, any possible experience of vicarious immersion into the nest is denied by the essential limitations of the photographic medium. As Barthes describes, "The photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially."[44] More precisely, the photograph develops the sculptural operation of distinguishing a space for humans within nature, and it allows the spectator to look at that place from a distance, to remember the forgotten origin without staging a return to that primal state of continuity. Nils-Udo thus problematizes the notion of nature as an essential habitat in which we are immersed. His photographs frame the construction of the nest as the scene of a fundamental break from the natural environment; the nest segregates a space within nature and the photograph secures for the spectator the discontinuity that the construction of the nest enacts.

On a topic parallel to the nest, Chris Drury has developed the theme of the shelter over the last thirty years (Figures 30-34). Drury underscores the awareness that preserving a place in the imagination for nature to be unknown is as crucial as opening a place for humans to dwell in nature. The artist communicates the interaction between his shelters and the site in terms of a tension between interiority and exteriority. Correspondingly, his works offer two

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[44] Barthes, 41.

different perspectives of the site: from within it and from outside it. Instead of dichotomizing these two facets, however, Drury brings them into conversation, though he is mindful of the impossibility of completely synthesizing his chosen site into either a fixed representation or a complete experience of immersion. He advanced the theme of the shelter over the eighties and into the nineties by drawing on two approaches towards the site akin to what Irigaray would call the silent gravity of desire and the thin air of wonder.

Though initially his shelter projects enacted a stark separation between an interior environment and the exterior world, by the late nineties Drury came to see this distinction as permeable and versatile. Fabricated out of branches, sticks, turf, grass, or whatever materials are available, Drury's shelters are woven into the site. On one level, the shelter's function is to create an interior space: it is at once a surface membrane and an inner sanctuary. Yet, from within, the threshold of the shelter acts as a frame that is inevitably exceeded by the exterior landscape. Drury comments on these two contrasting perspectives saying, "I like the way that a shelter has an interior and an exterior...I like the way this interior space draws you inside yourself, enclosing, protecting, just as mountains pull you outside yourself, pushing mind and body beyond their usual confines."[45] The artist thus describes two diverging trajectories: a deep introspection produced by physical enclosure and a call from outside one's boundaries, a demand that stretches the limits of what we can see.

The combination of these two modes generates a state of arrest. Much like Hamish Fulton's practice of documenting forays into the wilderness in which he photographed his footprints and other traces of his presence along the way, Drury's shelters punctuate a journey, marking a shortstop in a longer sequence of events. In the mid-eighties, however, Drury made this endeavor more intimate by focusing on the atmosphere of the shelter and its ability to evoke meditative states of mind. In works such as *Shelter for Dreaming* from 1985 (Figure 30) the artist

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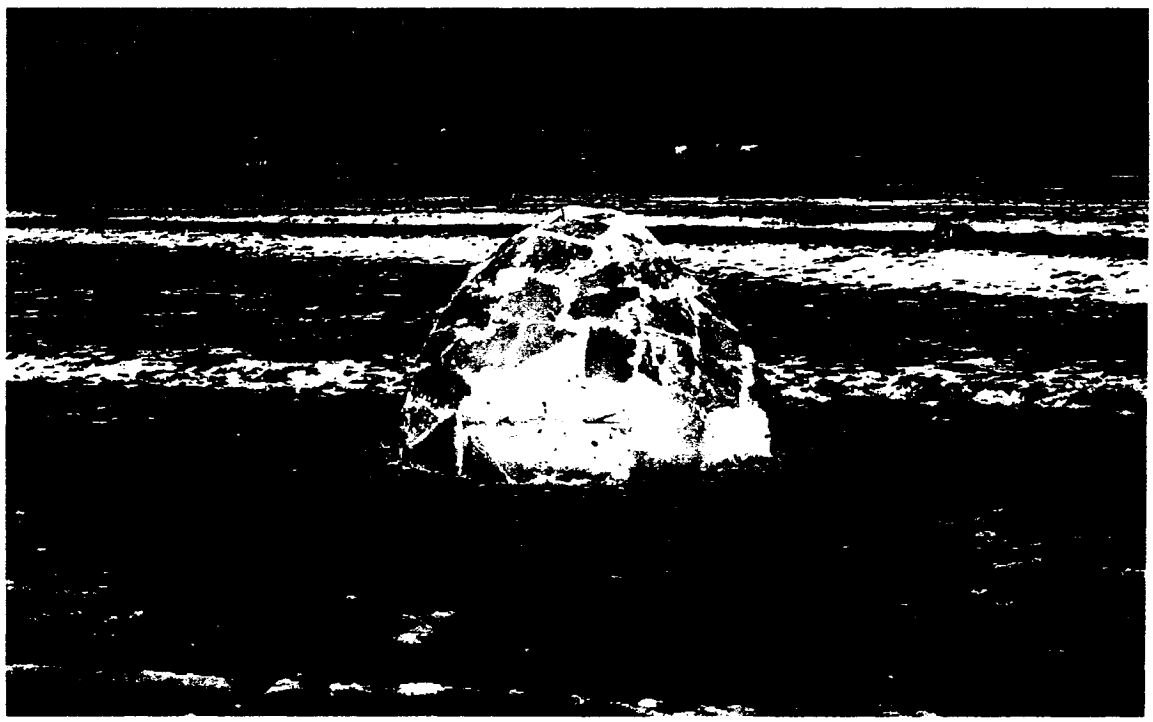
[45] Drury, 20.

Figure 30. Chris Drury, *Shelter for Dreaming*, hazel and dogwood branches covered with turf, Friston Forest, Sussex, 1985.

Figure 31. Chris Drury, *Shelter for the Winds that Blow in Siberia*, ice and hazel stick frame, Sussex, 1986.



sought out locations to, "create a space for being and contemplation".[46] These shelters, he describes, "may be tucked round the corner from houses or villages...To those who discover the structures, they are like mushrooms that have sprung up overnight; in time they will rot back into the earth." The shelter, like a whirlpool, separates itself off from a general flow of movement, be it the artist's excursion in the land or the activity of the site itself, from fluctuating temperatures to storms or sunshine. The work is a self-contained region, enclosed and yet bound up with the whole. The shelter's casing is not just a protective layer, it opens an air pocket within the land: a crevice for introspection in the midst of an abundance of possible sensation.

Where in Goldsworthy's works, the black hole around which the sculpture gravitates is a nucleus of darkness that eclipses the visual coherence of the photographic image, for Drury being encased in nature is mediated by a view of it from a distance; the inner core of the shelter places desire for and wonder at nature in an immediate exchange. The shelter is a place where one is surrounded in the material of the earth, and might appear to instigate an immersive phenomenological experience akin to Smithson's descent into precognitive continuity with the earth. Yet, from the shelter, one is separated from the landscape and looks out at it from a removed vantage point. Though one occupies this space, Drury recognizes the way in which nature exists beyond our sensation of it; as he describes, it pulls one outside the boundaries of the mind and the body. The shelter triggers the spectator to consider nature beyond the limits of one's field of perception. It thereby tempers the immersive state with the thin air of wonder that Irigaray calls for.

In the evolution of his practice Drury demonstrates a subtle shift in his understanding of a space that permits immersion and at the same time produces distance. By the late eighties, the shelter was no longer the trace of his presence, or even a structure with which to explore the tension between interior and

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[46] Drury, 20.

exterior. It became, more precisely, an analogy for a space within the mind in which nature can dwell; it was thus the inverse of Drury's former project of constructing a place to be in nature and to view it. In *Shelter for the winds that blow in Siberia, Shelter for the Northern Glaciers, Shelter for the Trees,* and *Shelter for the Forest Deer* (Figures 31-34), the artist built a place for natural phenomena, events, and other creatures rather than for himself, or another human visitor. The artwork cultivates an aperture for these presences out of the material of the site. The parameters of the shelter are thereby turned inside out; the space is intended for nature and not exclusively for human visitors. Yet, the opening between the artwork and the site, indeed, the opening that the artwork essentially *is*, remains the same. The shelter therefore doubles as a place for humans to be surrounded in, but not overrun by the infinite expanse of the earth, and as a place for nature to dwell within our internal world, sheltered from our knowledge of it; for it to remain invisible yet present and to resist being subsumed into the totality of the mind. The artwork's two operations, to envelop and to create space, for oneself in the other and for the other in oneself, set the stage for Irigaray's double loop of desire and wonder, the rhythm in which one advances toward the other and returns to oneself. The shelter is an acknowledgement within oneself of the other's withdrawal and vice versa. As Irigaray describes,

> In the chiasmus...a presence unfolds that I could not anticipate through a logos already existing for me, nor in the absolute...From the other irradiates a truth which we can receive without its source being visible...[that meaning] remains a mystery for us but we can indirectly perceive something of it...It says nothing in a way, pronounces no word but makes clear the limits of a horizon, of a site of thinking, of existing, of Being.[47]

At the heart of Irigaray's project is another way of seeing and perceiving the other not just as darkness and invisibility, but over distance and through difference; from across a breathing space which opens up the dense musculature of Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology. The ethical feeling for the other, in Irigaray's

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[47] Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love* translated by Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluhacek (New York: Continuum, 2002) 163-164.

Figure 32. Chris Drury, *Shelter for the Northern Glaciers*, driftwood and turf, North Norway, 1986.

Figure 33. Chris Drury, *Shelter for the Trees*, branches, rosebay willowherb, straw rope, Sussex, 1989.

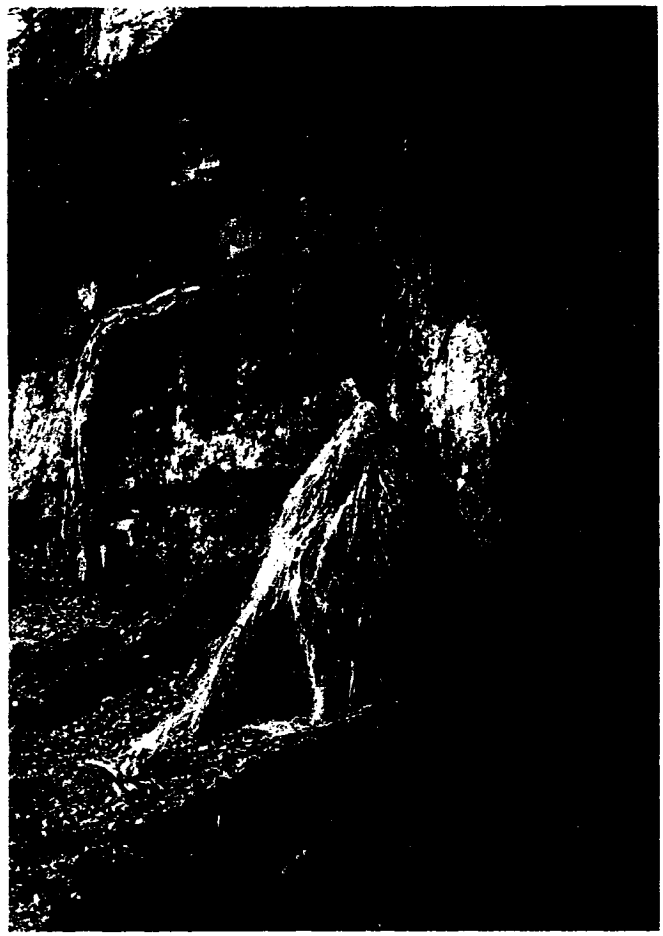

Figure 34. Chris Drury, *Shelter for Forest Deer*, heather braches, grass, Sheffield Forest, Sussex, 1987.

Figure 35. Chris Drury, *Earth Chamber for the Trees and Sky*, stone wall, log ro covered with eartl Aberdeenshire, 1994.

words, "delivers them from the opacity of the night while still arranging nothing - only the unfolding of another manner of looking at the real...It keeps alive the astonishment, the questioning, the movement of thinking..."[48]

This opening in our way of seeing nature is precisely what is at stake for Drury in his later works of the nineties. Not entirely satisfied with a dialectical movement between seeing in a reflective mode and sensing with the body, or the alternation between interior and exterior that the shelter enacts, Drury introduced a two-dimensional image into the three-dimensional space of the shelter in his cloud and wave chambers. The chambers situate the visitor in a dark structure made of stone, soil and wood. Like a camera obscura, the chamber is animated by reflections of the landscape projected through a periscope onto the walls or floor. In *Earth Chamber for Trees and Sky* and *Wave Chamber* from the mid-nineties (Figures 35 and 36), Drury combines viewing the site with the physical sensation of it, staging the experience within the darkness of the chamber, as though to parallel the interior of the structure with the state of precognitive blindness through which one passes into a vision mediated by the body. The image projected through a periscope that confronts the spectator in the heart of the chamber, however, is not a finite representation. It is replete with movement, color and texture, transient yet visually compelling as it moves across the floor with a vaporous quality.

The preliminary diagrams for the chambers (Figure 37) clarify Drury's plan to enact a journey into the pocket of resistance within the visual field. The chambers are set at the end of a spiraling passage that cut out light and lead one into the darkness of the earthen enclosure. Though as Jonathan Crary has argued, from the 16th century onward, the camera obscura was implicated in a metaphysic of interiority, whereby the body of the observer is rendered ambiguous and vision decorporealized, Drury elaborates his chambers out of an entirely different framework, such that the chamber is not the premise for mind/body dualism but is

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[48] Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, 164.

the condition for the perception of the depth, texture and presence of the earth. Though the inner chamber ostensibly detaches the visitor from the surrounding world, this is not to suggest that the bodily perception has been nullified or that the artist is striving for a disembodied perspective. To the contrary, Drury's cloud and wave chambers intensify physical engagement enacting it alongside and indeed *through* the visual spectacle of the periscope image. In the impalpable but no less compelling quality of the reflections there is a departure from the Merleau-Pontian model of perception in which sensation is associated with the tangibility of substance.

Wave Chamber and *Earth Chamber for Trees and Sky* house reflections projected onto the ground, so that one is not so much looking at a controlled image cut out of the infinite vastness of the broader landscape, but rather the viewer is actually surrounded by the visual phenomenon as a kind of atmosphere. Drury remarks of the *Wave Chamber*,

> I really didn't know if it would work until the point when we put the door on and the inside went dark. At that moment the afternoon sun was hitting the water just where the mirror was angled. Inside it was as if a thousand silver coins were dancing across the floor. As the sun moved away, this changed to ghostly ripples, giving you the feeling of standing on liquid.[49]

Moreover, like the cochlea of an ear, the spiral passage amplifies the sounds of the activity outside, of waves crashing on the rocks and wind blowing in the trees. The site is disintegrated and reconstituted within the chamber in the tenuous form of echoes and reflections. Because the visitor experiences the site as weightless currents of light and sound, the site's presence eludes and resists the transition from sensation to a coherent image. Knowledge of nature does not come out of the experience of being surrounded by the natural site. Rather orientation is prevented altogether by the saturation of the senses, including vision, which disturb the convictions of knowledge. One is not delivered from the blind sensation of the body into the abstraction of the mind. Instead, the pretences of the

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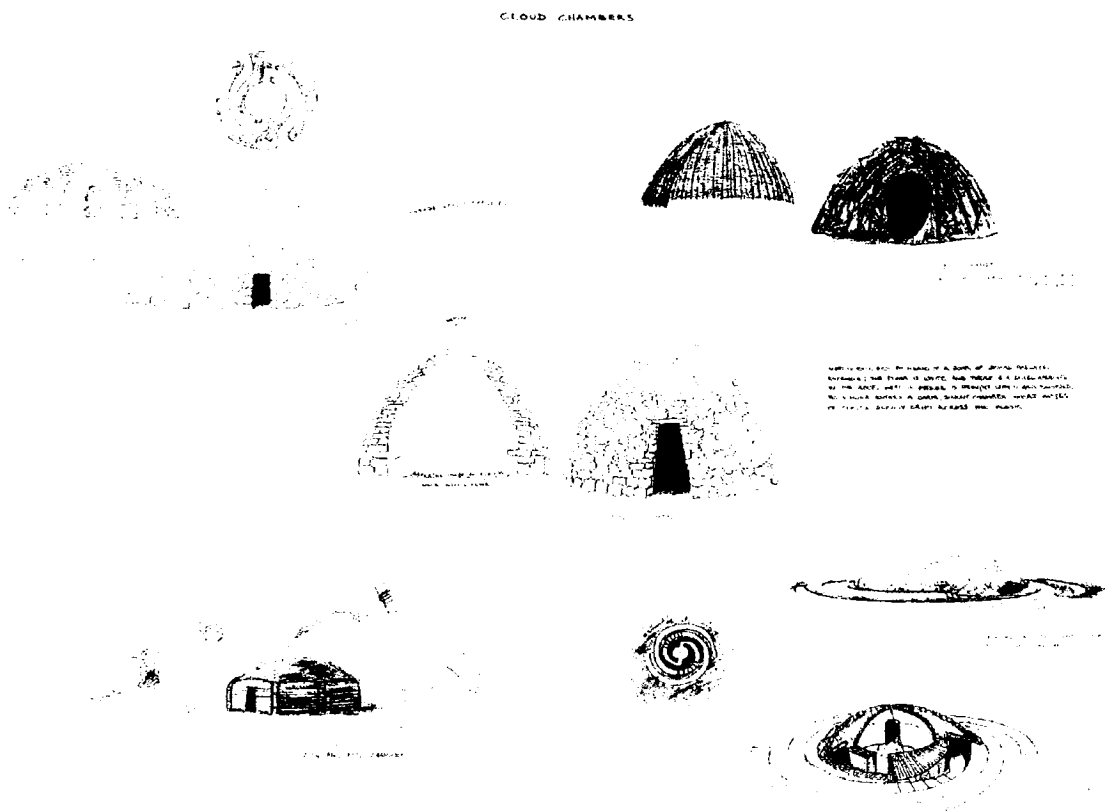
[49] Drury, 117.

Figure 36. Chris Drury, *Wave Chamber*, dry stone with mirror and lens in a steel periscope, Northumberland, 1996.

Figure 37. Chris Drury, *Design for Cloud Chambers*, pen, ink, pencil on paper, 1993.



primacy of the body and the authority of the eye are altered in the chamber, and the visitor witnesses an abundance of natural phenomena in flux. The chamber funnels the continual motion of the natural site and frames it, paradoxically, as beyond perceptual certainty.

Where Goldsworthy deployed the black hole as a device to question the capacity of sculpture and photography to capture natural presence as a totalized representation, Drury complicates pictorial modes of confrontation by flooding the image with movement, or more accurately by producing an image through a flood of movement. Once again the concept of the sublime picturesque arises, for Drury uses a pictorial surface to stage an encounter with the site that subverts a restful contemplation of the beautiful in nature and elicits a 'movement of the mind' as the fluid visual phenomena resists the visitor's attempts to concretize a stable image. Like Alfio Bonanno and Nils-Udo's works, Drury's chambers lead the spectator into a form of engagement that refuses to deliver nature via the substantial reassurance of a tangible object or an organized perspective. The artworks mediate the spectator's experience of the site by internalizing a form of distance that ensures a sense of the site's boundlessness. The viewer is not detached from the site in the sense that the artwork produces a transcendent view; clearly the case of earth art is quite the opposite. Rather, the artwork provides sensation but denies the closure of intention that Merleau-Ponty describes as the look that envelops, palpates and espouses the object of attention.[50] Kant best summarizes the sublime effect of combining sensation and distance when he writes, "For when apprehension has gone so far that the partial representations of sensuous intuition at first apprehended begin to vanish in the imagination, while this ever proceeds to the apprehension of others, then loses as much on one side as

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[50] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) 133.

it gains on the other; and in comprehension there is a maximum beyond which it cannot go."[51]

The crux of Drury's practice lies between the gravitational pull towards a primordial state of continuity, the state of dwelling in nature, and the arrested movement of wonder, letting nature be in excess of our knowledge of it. The artist situates nature's visibility within a dark chamber so that what the viewer knows of it is always overturned by the abundance and dynamism of sensorial stimulation. From inside the site, Drury's artwork opens a gap in our knowledge of nature. The scenario that Drury's shelters and chambers perform is predicated on an eddy in the site from which its invisible presence can be sensed but not represented: a perception of the impossible. Drury's chambers thus allegorize the other earth art projects I have discussed in this chapter. By situating the spectator within the site but mediating the experience of it so that nature is understood as a state of flux beyond the reach of our concepts and percepts, the chambers summarize the ethical impetus of earth art to make the site visible and present within the art object by staging its resistance to our knowledge of it.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that contemporary earth art strives to evidence the boundless transience of natural sites. Artists affix their sculptures to the earth, but also acknowledge the incompatibility of a perceptible art object and the intangible qualities of the earth. The art object mediates the site for spectators by expressing the event of its division from natural fluxes, thereby expelling them from its interior core and positioning them at a distance from the visitor's perception. I have raised Walter Benjamin's metaphor of the whirlpool to highlight the artwork's status as bound up in the site, and its operation of

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[51] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951) 90.

emptying out dynamic natural presence in order to emerge as a palpable and visible object.

I posit Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* as a precedent to contemporary earth practice insofar as Smithson identified ruptures between the artwork and the site that gave rise to it, through which he staged a dramatic return to a state of continuity with the site. There are significant differences between the *Spiral Jetty* and more recent earth artworks, however, in that the underlying phenomenology of the *Spiral Jetty* corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's model of intercorporeal relation with the flesh of the world. Smithson's lapses into undifferentiated material union with the earth exact the prediscursive blindness of the womb and counteract the distance the artist established by locating the artwork as textual sediment. Raising Luce Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty, I suggested the difficulties in positioning the natural site as a maternal host. Following Irigaray, I argued that contemporary earth art does not locate the site solely as a primordial origin and instead attempts to evidence it to the spectator through a different model of encounter. The artworks I analyzed insistently refuse to mediate an immersive state in the site and instead set the spontaneous activity of the site at a perceptual distance. Between the promise of sensorial abundance and the conceptual resistance it produces, the artwork delivers the site in the aesthetic mode of the sublime picturesque.

Though bound up in the material of the site, earth art points to the inconceivable fluxes of nature, evidencing them by complicating coherent perception. The visual occlusion of a black hole, the destabilizing trajectory of twisters and vortices, the resolute emptiness of shells and nests, and finally the ephemeral atmosphere of shelters: each of these invites the spectator into an encounter with nature in a rhythm of desire and wonder, attraction towards the site and retraction from it. Contemporary earth art thus sets natural activity beyond our reach, feeding into yet evading the spectator's perception and knowledge of the world.

Chapter 3 – Facing Nature Ethically: Involutions in the Elemental

In the last chapter, I discussed two complementary aspects of contemporary earth art: firstly, the earth art object is simultaneously integrated with and separate from the natural fluxes of the site that generates it; and secondly, through the combination of sculptural and pictorial media, artists problematize the sensorial experience of nature and thereby mediate an ethical relationship to it. Though earth artists fabricate artworks within the parameters of the transient changes of a site through laborious procedures of testing, touching, bending and molding their materials, the sculptural process that one would expect to prompt a tactile experience for the spectator is in fact interrupted by the pictorial medium by which the artwork is recorded and disseminated. The interjection of a pictorial element - often through the use of photography, but in some cases, the pictorial image is coextensive with the three-dimensional work - positions the spectator at a distance from the natural site. This is not to say that earth artists attempt to create an objective view of nature. Quite the opposite, by combining sculptural and pictorial media, earth artists deny a sense of immersion in the site and instead posit an experience of it across a perceptual divide. Through earth art, we experience nature as that which exists beyond our perception.

This may at first seem contradictory, but by designing their sculptures around an aspect of tactile denial which then translates into a visual complication in the photograph or on the pictorial surface – a black hole, a poignant absence, an array of reflected light - artists make natural activity present without representing it as a totality. The figure of the whirlpool, Walter Benjamin's metaphor for origin which I discussed in relation to the allegorical structure of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, appears in more recent earth art not just as a means of expressing the interrelatedness of a site-specific sculpture and its textual document, but as a way to reference and thematize the artwork's emergence out of the processes of the site's regeneration. Natural activity is not stilled and represented by the artwork, rather, the artwork is shaped through the site's

changes and when its form is complete it separates itself out from that activity. Though bound up in the site, the sculpture stands apart, having expelled the natural fluxes in order to gain stability as an object. The recurrent motifs of black holes, shells, nests, and shelters are anagrams of the whirlpool; the common structure of an opaque exterior and a hollow interior exposes the status of the earthwork as an index of natural presence and as an emblem of its origination from the site.

The object's relationship to the site is subsequently echoed by the photographic component of the artwork. In the same way the sculpture harnesses and releases the natural energies that generated it, the photographic image elaborates its integration into the site while at the same time creating a space to view that site from across a constitutive rupture. In reference to the works of Andy Goldsworthy and Nils-Udo I argued that because the image is uprooted from the particular time and place it pictures, the photograph homologizes the sculpture's emergence as a stable material object out of the site's ongoing regeneration and transformation. As each medium evidences the other's simultaneous presence in and absence from the site, the chiasmic tie of sculpture and photography elaborates the perception of nature as other. Through this complementarity, earth art's linking of the three-dimensional sculpture and the two-dimensional image subverts any possibility of staging an experience of immersion or continuity with nature. Both the sculptural object and the photographic image suggest natural presence without synthesizing it into a coherent whole.

I noted that there is an ethical impetus to conceding the site as always already beyond the artwork. Instead of accessing the site through a return to a state of undifferentiated union with primordial materiality, as Smithson does in the *Spiral Jetty*, contemporary earth artists perform the site as a sensorial excess. Reading this subtle shift away from an intercorporeal relationship with the site through Luce Irigaray's feminist critiques of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's model of the chiasm, I argued that contemporary earth art aims to reinvent a relationship

with the earth that acknowledges the impossibility of subsuming nature into the sphere of human experience. For Irigaray, and ecological theorists Mick Smith and Ted Toadvine, nature is irreducible; it enters into human perception in surprising and unpredictable ways. Because nature is constitutive of our knowledge, while at the same time exceeding it, an ethical relationship is possible through a rhythm of desire and wonder, attraction towards and retraction away from nature. Between desire and wonder, a realization of nature's unknowability pries apart the weave of Merleau-Ponty's model of the world flesh. The recognition of otherness affords a space, or what Irigaray regards as ethical distance, that counters the potential solipsism of Merleau-Pontian intercorporeality.

I argued that the rhythm of desire and wonder is at play in projects by Alfio Bonanno, whose sculptural tunnels lead into the site while at the same time isolating the spectator from it. Likewise, Chris Drury's shelters provoke a sense of enclosure within the earth and at the same time frame it from a removed vantage point. By projecting ephemeral reflections of a site into an enclosed chamber, Drury's camera obscura works further reconfigure the seemingly divergent orientations of dwelling in nature and seeing it from a distance. The camera obscuras, I stated, allegorize the ecological ethic of earth art: the chambers mediate a bodily experience of the site without the use of a totalizing representation that would arrest the dynamic fluxes of nature. Drury thus opens the possibility of experiencing the site while letting it be in excess of our perceptual field.

In this chapter, I examine the alignment of aesthetic and ethical strategies, in projects that, like the works I discussed in the last chapter, deploy various artistic media to effect a phenomenological experience of nature as other. My focus, however, will be on how these works enact a thematic of receptivity. The art I will discuss conveys the perception of nature as an ethical act of receiving sensation, as opposed to actively reaching out for it. I argued in the previous chapter that in order to make natural presence visible, artists (Andy Goldsworthy

and Nils-Udo in particular) stage the removal of their bodies from the site. The locus of this removal - indexed by a black hole, a hollow interior, or empty chamber - coincides with the threshold from which natural presence manifests. This original division on which the artwork is premised locates the site at an ethical distance from the spectator and mediates its sensorial abundance. In this chapter I outline a somewhat different manifestation of the exchange between the art object and nature. Here, the human body (either as a whole or in various parts) is both the territory on which the contact between nature and the artist is indexed, and the allegorical emblem of that contact. Where in the last chapter the artwork registers its discontinuity with nature as an absence or hollowness, in this chapter the artwork is constituted by the friction between two surfaces - usually the surface of the body and the surface of nature. Nature is visible in relation to the human body and the human body in relation to nature.

This is not to suggest the emergence of a humanized nature or an idealized 'natural' human body. To the contrary, in these artworks the human body is distorted and rendered alien by nature, and nature is equally disconcerting when figured as human body parts. The use of the body instead of, or in addition to, the geographic site as the location of the artwork and the territory of human-nature exchange, is a departure from the works in the previous chapter. However, the aesthetic and ethical parameters of the artworks are not so different; though it informs the sensorial experience of the work, natural presence is a cue to the limits of the body's perception. Indeed, more than questioning the ontological status of the body, the artwork evidences a particular mode of sensorial perception. The co-existence of nature and the human body is taken as a given; the precise role of the artwork is to suggest how perception can orient us towards nature's alterity while being interconnected with it. Using the artwork to both mediate and allegorize the bodily sensation of nature, artists develop a complex ecological stance in which not only is nature understood to feed into and then exceed one's field of perception, but the perception of nature's otherness becomes an ethical act in itself. The artwork expresses touching, seeing and in one case

even tasting nature as a detection of bodily limits and the reception of sensorial information in spite of and because of those limits.

As I will show, there is an ecological ethic behind the performance of perception as receptivity that relates to my initial argument in this dissertation that the earth cannot be reduced to an unchanging geographic location. In each chapter I have described several strategies by which artists overturn the false dichotomy between actual sites and discursive sites. In polarizing the earth from our cultural knowledge of the world, not only do we mistakenly characterize the former as inert and the latter as malleable, we unwittingly harbor a territory for essentialism and in so doing, ultimately sabotage any potential to cut our ties with a logic of domination. The earth artists I have been analyzing, beginning with Smithson, trouble the dualism between the materiality of the earth and the "virtuality" of discursive meaning, by putting these two spheres into conversation. The interplay between site-specific works and textual documentation in earth art shows the degree to which nature is instrumental in the formation of our cultural knowledge. Similarly, in this chapter, nature inserts itself into artistic practice. However, I will focus more precisely on how artists elaborate their relationship with nature, not only by expressing moments of physical engagement with natural forces, but by making the character of that engagement the object of the artwork. The artwork is more than a material or temporal bridge between the artist and the site, mediating between the artist's sphere of perception and nature's infinite vastness. Rather, the artwork stages the act of perception itself, and in so doing, invites nature's transient activity to take place. The artwork is not the sedimented object of a dialectical collision between nature and discursive meaning; it is the condition for, and the result of, the emergence of nature as an aesthetic and ethical subject. More precisely, earth artists demonstrate that the foundation of an ethical relationship with nature is a mode of contact that permits a sensation of its alterity but which refuses to deliver a firm grasp of it. In order to foreground the performance of perception as receptivity to the earth's otherness, artists relocate the artwork to the human body and its modes of perception. They demonstrate

that rather than being equated with a specific geographic site, nature is a network of all-pervasive forces that stimulates perception and gives rise to a site's discursive significance.

I have three overarching goals in this chapter. First, I will discuss how earth artists challenge the definition of sculpture by integrating other media into their practice and by deploying the body as the site of artistic meaning. In place of a sculptural object, artists locate the artwork in the relation between the human body and nature, thereby calling perception itself into question. The reconfiguration of sculpture has been a central theme from the outset of this project, in discussing everything from Smithson's use of text to other earth artists' use of photography, architectural structures, and architectonic spaces. What is new in this chapter is that the artworks I will analyze are better defined as practices that are connected to the phenomenological discourse of sculpture (particularly the interplay between tactile sensation and visual experience), but which do not necessarily take place in a grounded location or result in a sculptural object. Here, the artwork is the result of a co-emergence of nature and the body. To mobilize the contiguity of the body and nature, the works I examine here operate in an expanded field of practice that includes body art, process art, conceptual art and installation, from the earth-body sculptures of the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, to the photograms of the British artist Susan Derges, the public interventions of American artist, Jackie Brookner, and the installations of the Japanese artist, Ichi Ikeda.

Directly related to this, my second goal is to show how even within an expanded field of practice, artists nevertheless utilize a tension between three-dimensional space and two-dimensional surface in order to make nature manifest. As I have established in previous chapters through the theories of Merleau-Ponty and Luce Irigaray, the issues of tactility and visibility are key to the phenomenological experience of earth art. In examining the residual aspects of 'sculptural' space and 'pictorial' surface, I am not trying to connect earth art to the modernist tradition which insists on maintaining a distinction between media,

valorizing the purity of each (and particularly the pictorial). Rather, I hark back to these terms to distinguish between the senses of tactility (usually associated with the 'sculptural', be it a three-dimensional object or, in the tradition of minimalism and postminimalist earth art, a 'sculptural space') and visuality (usually associated with 'pictorialism' and the two-dimensional image), so that I can more easily explain how artists evoke sensations of nature from within it, only to overturn the immersive experience by applying a surface on which nature can appear as other.

Tactility and visuality are each provoked, suspended, and re-established through one another, as a means to elicit a 'facing' of the earth's alterity. The three-dimensional, or sculptural quality of an earth artwork is a cue to a shared materiality or interpenetration of the body and nature on which the artwork is founded. But the artwork does not express this relation as tactile sensation necessarily. Rather, artists design their works to assert a two-dimensional surface that makes natural activity visible. The artwork expresses the material relation between the body and the earth as a friction between surfaces. Artists evoke a perception of the earth as that which escapes the assured materiality that would fulfill a tactile grasp and the coherent organization of perspective sought out by the eye in Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. The artwork functions as an intermediary between immersion in and abstraction of the earth; it reveals both the material depth in which, and the pictorial surface on which, nature appears. More precisely, though the artists in question locate their bodies within the materiality of the earth, the artwork instigates an inversion or turn against natural substance in order to gain a perspective of it as other.

What becomes evident is that the discrete categories of 'the three-dimensional object' and 'the pictorial image' are no longer accurate to describe the aesthetic object of earth art practice. Because the artworks in this chapter are constituted by the dynamic of the body-nature relation, it is more appropriate to analyze them in terms of the materiality of that relation and the visual effects that it incites. In place of the notion of a three-dimensional object and its

characterization in terms of material, texture and form, I will use the concept of 'the elemental' to describe the substance in which the body-nature contingency is staged. Instead of the pictorial image, I will be detailing the visual phenomena that appear on the various surfaces of the artwork in terms of 'the face' of nature. The substance of the elemental and the appearance of a 'face' are inextricable components of the earth artwork, though neither effectively encompasses nature in and of itself. It is worthwhile to take a moment to explain these concepts in slightly more detail.

The idea of the elemental arises in recent phenomenological treatments of the concept of the earth. John Sallis, for example, posits that philosophy's concern with sensibility – a preoccupation that he argues is initiated by Nietzsche – is fundamentally a turn towards the elemental of nature.[1] The turn to the sensible, he explains, is a quest for that which is not intelligible as a thing, but for the unbounded and indefinite substance from which intelligible things emerge. The elemental entails this fundamental base and furthermore, Sallis continues, the earth is the primary elemental. Most importantly for my purposes is Sallis' characterization of the elemental, and by extension, the model of the earth which he advances. The elemental earth is more than an inert substance that could be reduced to a schema of production whereby things are merely composed of matter. The elemental earth does not compose things, rather, it is that from which things manifest, or as Sallis puts it, it is the penultimate, "from which of manifestation".[2]

In distinguishing between the material composition of the earth and its manifestation as things, Sallis suggests that the earth possesses an unknown dimension by which it exists as the foundation for that which emerges from it. He notes that the earth subtends precisely by withholding itself or closing itself off,

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[1] John Sallis, "The Elemental Earth," *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*," ed. Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodeman (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2004) 135.
[2] Sallis, 142.

thus providing a terrain on which 'things of the earth' might exist.[3] Moreover, like their elemental foundation, earthly things possess the same quality of self-closure. This leads Sallis to discuss the way in which the earth manifests itself in things, but also how its manifestation resists the transparency of intelligibility. He describes the earth's presence in things as a countenance that is inseparable from a face, "It is the visage of something that withholds itself precisely in offering its physiognomy, of something that displays its secret strength but in such a way as to keep it secret in the very display."[4]

As I have stated, earth artists take the interconnectivity of the body and nature as a given. What deserves analysis in this chapter is the ways in which artists deploy the body as emergent from the earth (as a 'thing' of the earth), while at the same time expressing the earth's resistance to intelligibility. As the site of the artwork, the body does not offer up the earth to an invasive perception in the mode of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Instead, to use Sallis' analogy, the human body is the face on which the elemental earth evidences its countenance. There is thus a double purpose for the body: it indexes the artist's presence and is the territory in which the spectator locates her or himself in connection with the artwork, and at the same time it is performed as the host of the earth's manifestation, or the face on which it reveals itself. Paradoxically, in its appearance, the earth reveals its unknowability. The manifestation of the face is also what distinguishes the earth from raw matter. So, while earth artists immerse themselves in an elemental substance, be it sand, soil or water, they do so in order to identify a turning point when the earth's material becomes an other presence.

As I will show, the mechanism of the artwork is the artist's assertion of the body as a surface against the earth's substance from within it, essentially to turn the earth on itself and evidence its self-closure from intelligibility. The result of this internal division is the coalescence of the earth into an image that discloses its alterity. The image that I am calling 'the face' is, I am suggesting,

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[3] Sallis, 143.
[4] Sallis, 142.

fundamentally resistant to the presumed intelligibility of pictorial representation. Because the body is the locus of the emergence of the face, artists evoke the sensation of the earth's presence, but they do not deliver it as a totalized perception. Through the interplay between immersion in the depths of elemental substance and the friction of encountering that substance as surface, artists pose the question of how nature is sensed through a retraction from perceptual expectations.

This brings me to my third goal, which is to discuss how and why earth artists thematize receptivity in their practice. In chapter one, I argued that Robert Smithson positioned the earth as a primordial source that he called forth to destabilize modernist ideals of a timeless and universally meaningful art object. In reviving the artwork's origin, Smithson opened the art object to temporality, situating it between its emergence from the amorphous substance of its prehistory and its ruination in a futuristic post-history. Smithson thus deployed nature to upset the notion that art possesses a timeless form and essential meaning. In so doing, he revealed that we identify discursivity as fluid and potentially subversive precisely because nature resides in the recesses of our pre-discursive memory, and because it rises up and disorganizes textual meaning. From its beginnings, then, earth art exposed the false dichotomy of the claim that actual sites are stable whereas discursive sites are malleable. Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* can be viewed as an ethical statement in the sense that it not only uncovered and overturned the hyperseparation between nature and culture, but more precisely, it exposed the fact that although the earth is a disavowed foundation, it is present in all aspects of material artistic practice, be it sculpture, film, image or text.

The dialectical impasse between nature and artistic form is reconfigured in more contemporary earth art as a means of evidencing a distinctly natural presence that, despite its exposure, remains an irreducible excess. In chapter two I showed how artists express the emergence of the art object from the natural flows of a site, referencing the moment of separation of the sculpture from the site by hollowing out the sculpture, and indexing the dynamic flow of nature that has

passed through the object but has not been bound up within it. The ethical crux of this practice, I argued, is that artists refuse to affix an essential meaning to the site by presuming to represent it, thereby stifling its dynamism, or by covering over its temporal properties and subsuming it into the realm of abstract human knowledge. Rather, artists either reference natural presence as a past event that has resulted in the formation of the art object or, in the case of Chris Drury's camera obscuras, they allow it to appear as an array of sensorial activity that cannot be organized into a defined object or image.

Drury's camera obscuras point me towards a new avenue by which I will analyze earth art in this chapter. In contrast to other earth artists who deny the sensation of nature as a means of declaring its unavailability to human signification, Drury's chambers provide a sensorial plenitude – from within the nocturnal enclosure, flitting reflections appear and alight the chamber. Rather than evoking a tension between a formed object that can be seen and touched, and the fluid nature that evades our perceptual grasp, Drury refuses even the strict distinction between the perception of an art object and the perception of nature. The camera obscura is not a sculpture but an environment that mediates disorganized sensations of the earth and makes the transient assemblage of light, sound and other senses an integral, if not the prime ingredient that defines the scenario as art. The camera obscura prompts the question, how do we perceive nature? And further, what is it about the way we perceive nature ordinarily that allows us to subsume or overlook it? How can art change this? The artworks I am about to examine address these questions and, I will argue, in thematizing receptivity as an ethical act, they advance ecological approaches to artistic practice.

In the case of each artist I will discuss paradigmatic moments of engagement with nature through bodily sensation. As I have been arguing in the previous chapters, though the initial principles of phenomenological encounter developed out of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy suggest that perception stems from engagement with the "world flesh", or what I call the natural processes of the

earth, contemporary artists deal more explicitly with the inability to subsume nature into our knowledge. The earth thus becomes a category of alterity and otherness. I will raise Luce Irigaray and Emmanuel Levinas' models of ethical encounter to account for the positioning of the earth as other, and to analyze the recurrent figure of open hands that is the common thread among all these works. For both Irigaray and Levinas, though the other is alien and unknowable, we nevertheless sense it. Receiving this sensation is a call to regard the other ethically. I am arguing that earth artists use their works as a means to perform the perception of nature as a receiving of sensation, which allows spectators to 'face' nature as the irreducible other, as that which surrounds and binds us but which nevertheless resists and exceeds our grasp.

I am contrasting the approach of 'receiving' sensation to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in which the subject reaches for, intends towards and penetrates the other or the object of sensation. Luce Irigaray counters Merleau-Ponty's rhetoric with her own model of vision that operates by a tactile logic whereby we see and explore one another through contact with the other's surface. Irigaray's tactile vision is heavily influenced by Levinas' ethics of alterity, and particularly his scenario of the face-to-face. As I will elaborate in the first section, Levinas describes the face-to-face situation as a relation by which subjects face one another differently in regard to one another. The irreducibility of the other in this encounter is the origin of the ethical feeling. Tina Chanter notes that although Levinas has been critiqued for his reversion to an exclusively male subjecthood in his explication of ethics, Luce Irigaray's feminist critique redirects the ethical potential of Levinas' philosophy.[5] Particularly in her exposition of scenarios of tactile vision, Irigaray rewrites the face-to-face scenario with a view to accounting for sexual difference. The other, for Irigaray, is not penetrated, sculpted or grasped in the mode of Merleau-Ponty, but is felt through the divisions that mark alterity.

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[5] See Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Alphonso Lingis develops Levinas' face-to-face scenario by elaborating its physicality, and its inextricability from the elemental. Lingis' notion of the elemental is similar to John Sallis' insofar as it involves both the materiality of the earth, and the mysterious unintelligibility of that materiality. For Lingis, the elemental courses through humans and characterizes our encounters, especially encounters with alterity. Like Sallis, however, the elemental reveals the earth to us and reveals us to one another, but it also encompasses an opacity or withdrawal from total exposure. Lingis' rewriting of the face-to-face, much like Irigaray's, elaborates a tactile contact with alterity, where the face does not manifest as identifiable features but in the character of physical sensations that pass between oneself and another. Most pertinent to the artworks I am discussing is that for Lingis, the transaction of physical sensations is always located within and through the elemental substance of the earth.

What links Levinas, Irigaray and Lingis together is the mode of contact with the other: alterity permeates the senses but is entirely unrepresentable. As Levinas puts it, "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me...It does not manifest itself by these qualities...It *expresses itself*." [6] When I speak of earth artists performing perception as receptivity, then, I am referring to the fact that the artwork takes place on the human body and therefore directly calls into question our modes of perception. In addition, I am relating perception to the ethical paradigm that contemporary artists espouse, whereby the totality of the earth cannot be accessed through a visual or tactile intention towards the artwork, as it does in a Merleau-Pontian paradigm. Because in the artwork, the earth manifests as an alterity that withholds itself, sensation is not taken, but rather, is effected by the exposure of the face. The artwork

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[6] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 50-51.

demonstrates that we receive sensations of the earth, and are indeed physically marked by this contact, but nevertheless the earth is impossible to subsume.

I will begin with a discussion of Ana Mendieta's *Silueta Series* (1973-1980), with a particular focus on the act of imprinting. Mendieta, a Cuban-born artist, exiled to the United States in her youth, is best known for her *silueta* works. In a practice that the artist called 'earth-body sculpture', Mendieta executed the sequence of performances in which she impressed her bodily form into the land. Usually, she staged and photographed the process of the *silueta*'s disassembly as it was washed away, burned, melted or otherwise reintegrated into the land. The imprint, in Mendieta's practice, encompasses both spatial and pictorial elements, not only because after sculpting her form on the site she photographed it, but because the artist structured her performances to express the sensation of the land by sinking herself into its substance and asserting her body as a surface against it. The imprint is both a metaphor for the interpenetration of the body and the earth, and the agent by which Mendieta performs their differentiation as a reciprocal marking of surfaces.

What is particular to Mendieta's practice is how the imprint demonstrates both the body's reception of natural flows and its application of exteriority against those flows. In Mendieta's performances, the imprint serves as a pictorial surface on which a play of natural activity takes place. The artwork is simultaneously concave and convex, a voluminous impression that fills with elemental substance, and a flat surface that pushes this natural activity outward and makes it visible. Indeed I will argue that both the depth and the opacity the artwork are necessary to galvanize the contiguity between the body and nature. Like Goldsworthy or Nils-Udo's photographed sculptures that perform the retraction of the artist's body, Mendieta's *siluetas* perform the emergence of the earth through the absenting of her body.

In Mendieta's practice there is a slight shift in the relationship between bodily presence/absence and natural presence/absence from the artworks I discussed in the last chapter. In the previous works, nature is positioned as a flux

that has passed through the artwork; the sculpture is the sediment of that flux. The artwork is available to the senses but the flux of natural activity is not – the hollowness of the sculpture and the blind spot in the image foreclose tactile and visual contact with nature. For Mendieta, by contrast, the artwork gathers the tension between the body and natural processes into a performance of receiving sensation. From the outset Mendieta does not make nature appear *because* her body has disappeared but rather because in performing her body as imprint, she identifies her body as constituted by the drawing of a boundary between herself and the earth from within its substance.

The emergence of the body from the earth occurs simultaneously with its capacity to receive sensation of the earth's alterity. Not coincidentally, then, Mendieta enacts the body as the penultimate figure of touch: the imprint. The indexical properties of the imprint (its status as a physical marking of the land through the application of surface) thus coincide with its metaphoric connotations (the imprint as a representation of the sense of touch). The imprint creates a surface on which nature's excess - that which is beyond the body but which nevertheless surrounds, enters and exits it - can be seen without being stilled. Because the *silueta* is both a receptacle and a surface, the artwork receives the site's transient substance and makes it visible as a sensorial abundance. Natural activity overwhelms the gesture of receiving that the imprint initiates. It disassembles the shape of the body and exceeds the parameters of the imprint. While nature is available to the senses, it is not bound to the limits of the body's field of perception.

Photography, in this chapter, is less a technique that echoes the artwork's separation from the natural fluxes of a site than it is a medium that emulates the body's surface as it receives and makes those fluxes visible through its friction with them. Mendieta uses photography to document her performance, but she also uses it to emphasize the thematic of the imprint. While some art historians analyze Mendieta's works through Roland Barthes reading of the photograph as a trace encoded with death, I would also point out the importance of the

photograph's ability to absorb sensual presences that are ordinarily not discernable. I will then turn to the British contemporary artist, Susan Derges whose artistic practice shows how photography does not merely entrap and mortify what it depicts; the photographic image is formed when its surface is touched and exceeded by the earth's appearance. The tension between the body and nature that Mendieta so effectively demonstrates in imprinting her body on the land, simultaneously feeling it (the inward trajectory of sensation) and touching it (the pressure that results in the imprint), is likewise mapped onto the pictorial surface in Derges' works. Derges uses an alternative photographic technique known as a photogram. Creating images without cameras or lenses, the artist places photographic paper under water, and then by exposing that paper to a flash of light, the paper is marked by the patterns of light, shadow, and movement in the water. The photogram is quite literally imprinted with the movement of the river that Derges carefully documents from season to season.

I will be making two points about Derges' artworks, both relating to the issue of medium. Firstly, I will argue that although Derges' photograms are, like other kinds of photography, bound to the simultaneity of the sudden flash of light, they are also used as part of an ongoing performance in which the artist records changes to the River Taw in Britain. The photograms are thus reconciled with aspects of process and duration through their contextualization as part of a quasi-biography of the river. The second point to be made about Derges' practice is the immediacy of the contact between the pictorial surface and the water. Rather than presenting a view of the site from outside it, or encompassing the site's phenomenological unavailability to the spectator, the photogram is actually made from a direct impression of the site, from the chemical reaction between the pictorial surface and the surface of the site (in this case, the water's surface). Like skin, the photogram meets the site as surface, sensing its substance and presence through friction, though it is immersed in water. Returning to Luce Irigaray's critiques of Merleau-Ponty, I will suggest that Derges' practice challenges a phenomenology of perception that understands vision as a sense formulated

through the act of reaching out and grasping things in the world. In uniting the pictorial surface with the water and being imprinted by the water's movement, Derges performs her contact with the site as an act of receiving sensation.

In the last two sections of this chapter, I examine works by the American artist, Jackie Brookner, and the Japanese artist, Ichi Ikeda. More than enacting the reception of natural flows through the medium of the artwork (an imprint or receptive pictorial surface), Brookner and Ikeda's works allegorize the act of receiving sensations of nature in the paradigmatic image of open hands. In the case of Brookner's public artwork, *The Gift of Water* (2001), two giant sculpted hands sit on the bank of a swimming pond. Brookner devised a technique to filter and clean the body of water without toxic chemicals, and designed the hands as a metaphor for the work's function – to return the water to the earth in a purified state. I will analyze not only the ecological statement this artwork is making, but also the broader ethical significance of the hands opened in a gesture of both giving and receiving. As well as evoking the idea of giving and receiving water, Brookner emphasizes an ethics of sensation. As the sculptured hands become overtaken by moss, they express the meeting of human touch with natural growth. The figure of the hands receiving sensation from nature underscores the ethical act of giving clean water.

Similarly, Ichi Ikeda, whose project for over ten years has been to draw attention to the state of crisis of the global water supply, voices an ecological ethic in his installations. Like Brookner, the image of hands cupped together in a gesture of simultaneous giving and receiving appears in different aspects of his practice – on photographic stills, light boxes, and on transparent water-storage cubes. I will show how Ikeda situates water as a fluid medium that binds people together, but also how he ties the sensation of water to its exchange between people in acts of giving and receiving. He emphasizes that the plenitude of water informs our understanding of ourselves as connected to others and to the earth. Ikeda's projects summarize the goal of many earth artists: to materialize ethical encounters through the artwork.

The Body Receiving and Surfacing the Site - Ana Mendieta's Siluetas

Ana Mendieta's works in her *Silueta Series* (1973-1980; Figures 38-40) connect to many of the issues I analyzed in the last chapter, such as the formation of the artwork through natural fluxes, the combination of an ephemeral sculpture and the use of photography to mark the body's retraction, and nature's resistance to being represented. Yet Mendieta's *siluetas* re-orient my argument towards the question of how an artwork can express the direct sensation of nature without either resorting to the notion that nature is a stable material foundation, or reducing the sensorial experience to one of immersion in primordial amorphous substance. I will argue that Mendieta presents the *silueta* as a figure of the body's shared materiality with the earth as well as its turn against it from within. The *Silueta Series* thereby mobilizes the emergence of sensation in enacting a facing of the earth as other. I will explain how Mendieta's earth/body performances achieve this in three ways. First, I will discuss how performance art in general, and Mendieta's contribution in particular, advances a statement about the body's simultaneous connection to, and separation, from the earth. In contrast to the works I discussed in the last chapter Mendieta does not obfuscate tactility to position nature beyond our nexus of perception, she actually prompts tactility to elaborate nature as an external force that registers when it crosses the *silueta*'s surface. Secondly, I will show that Mendieta elaborates the aesthetic sensation of the body-earth relationship through the thematic of receptivity. Her performances emphasize a particular mode of touch, in which the earth is not delivered to the spectator via an object, but rather through the wealth of texture and motion that fills and marks the *silueta*. Thirdly, I will discuss the ethical relevance of receptivity for the theorists Luce Irigaray and Emmanuel Levinas, and why, in light of these theoretical approaches, we might interpret Mendieta's work as allegories of the perception of the earth's alterity.

In my introduction I raised Nick Kaye's argument that minimalism had initiated a performative mode to artistic practice by turning attention to the

relationship between the art object and the spectator rather than the inherent meaning of the art object itself. Kaye argues that performance called the object's formal and spatial location into question, and that site-specific art, similarly, troubles the opposition between virtual and real spaces in the performance of place. Thus, the performance of a site renders it specific. I used Dennis Oppenheim's *Land Incision* as an example of an artist using his own body as the site of the artwork, correlating the surface of his body with the land's topography by making an incision in his skin as a record of his contact with the land. The body is thus the site on which the land is performed. Ana Mendieta's works, however, do not just invert this relation, making the land the site on which her body is performed. Nor is the relationship between the body's surface and the earth's surface merely analogous. Mendieta performs the earth and the body as interconnected, and she does so by seizing one of the fundamental tensions of the medium of performance: it implicates the real presence of the body, and at the same time garners meaning through the absenting of that body.

Peggy Phelan explains that in performance art, spectatorship is like consumption, for performance launches presence into visibility and the spectator must try to take everything in before that presence disappears into memory.[7] A performance can be documented (written about or photographed), but because the bodily presence of the performer is irretrievable, any attempt to preserve the performance alters its meaning and rewrites it. For that reason, Phelan categorizes performance as nonreproductive and explains that performance deploys the body metonymically, as opposed to metaphorically.[8] Metaphor, she notes, is reproductive; it works by erasing dissimilarity and negating difference, it makes two into one. Metonymy, by contrast, is additive and associative; it secures a relation of contiguity and displacement. Phelan argues that in performance the body is metonymic of presence, but in the plenitude of its

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[7] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 148.
[8] Phelan, 150.

apparent availability, when it is performed the body disappears and becomes something else – dance, movement, sound, "art". That addition of meaning to the body, that which makes it art and not just presence, is the object of the spectator's gaze. Performance deploys the body metonymically, supplementing bodily presence with the added meaning that the performance itself affixes to it.

Mendieta's *siluetas* speak directly to the metonymic structure of the performed body. Indeed, the imprint is the penultimate figure of the supplementation of bodily presence, for it suggests that presence as a trace. So far, in my discussion of contemporary earth art, I relate the motif of the whirlpool to Walter Benjamin's metaphor of origin, the "eddy in the stream of becoming. I drew a parallel between Benjamin's metaphor and the literal figuration of many earth sculptures as well as their status in relation to the transient site. Georges Didi-Huberman, however, relates Benjamin's metaphor to the figure of the imprint.[9] He notes that the imprint is unmediated, passed directly from matter to matter. The imprint thus implicates a double temporal dimension; like Benjamin's whirlpool, its dimension of origin is knotted to its dimension of finitude.[10] That is to say, though the imprint indexes its creation, in its status as index it expresses only the absence of its creator. It thus mortifies its referent, tying together its moment of origin - when the body leaves its mark - with the perpetual loss of that moment. The imprint not only expresses, it is actually constituted by an absent presence. In performing her body as imprint, Mendieta draws attention to the loss of presence that her performance initiates, and thematizes that loss by figuring it as a trace. Thus, the indexical characteristics of the imprint, the supplementation of the body by its trace, elaborate the metonymic structure of performance. Moreover, as Amelia Jones has argued, Mendieta echoes the loss that the *silueta* exemplifies by photographing it. The photograph is thus a double lack; the *silueta* is a proof of presence while at the same time

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[9] Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'empreinte* (Paris, Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997) 19.

[10] Didi-Huberman, 77.

deferring that presence, and the photograph supplements the *silueta,* initiating an infinite chain of, "supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer."[11]

But if, as Phelan argues, performance absents bodily presence in order to add or affix meaning to the body, the question is, what is added to the body in Mendieta's performance of it as an imprint? What supplements the body is the materiality and dynamism of the earth, which appears co-extensively with the presence and disappearance of the body. More precisely, Mendieta's earth-body sculptures perform the interrelatedness of the body and the earth as they mark and unmark one another. Mendieta's imprint singles out the site and renders it specific by marking it with her body. But not unlike Smithson's *Site/Non-sites*, Mendieta's contact with the site is only available as a trace of presence, in evidence that points as much to the absenting of her body as it does to her presence at the site. The disappearance of the body, moreover, is completed by the dissolution of the *silueta* as the site engulfs it. Natural activity galvanizes the body's presence at the site, paradoxically, by underscoring its disappearance into it. Body and earth reveal and conceal one another in the liminal zone of the imprint.

In performing the contingency of the body and the earth, Mendieta neither anthropomorphizes the earth, nor does she naturalize the body. To the contrary, through their contact the body becomes alien and points towards the earth's alterity. I will return to this claim, but first it is important to demonstrate how Mendieta suggests the material continuity between the body and the earth, and characterizes this connection as a kind of tactile pressure rather than an immersive experience in the earth. Mendieta presents the body as simultaneously filled out and dissolved by the earth. She achieves this in a play between the three-dimensionality of the *silueta* – using it as an object either already filled with organic material or as a space that is filled up over the course of the performance -

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[11] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 35.

and its two-dimensionality – as a surface on which the earth's presence becomes visible. Between being replete with natural material and applying a surface against the site's fluxes, Mendieta shows that the body is constituted by the earth but comes into sensation in the delineation of a membrane that separates the body out of the earth's boundless substance.

Anne Raine argues that Mendieta's *siluetas* produce both pleasure and anxiety, remarking that the artist's bodily figure acts as an uncanny double that prompts in the spectator a palpable intimacy between body and earth.[12] At the same time, because the *silueta* is either sculpted out of inert matter such as ice, flowers, stones, or sand, the figure closes off the possibility of identifying with it, of entering into it or substituting it with ourselves and experiencing the land intimately. By filling the human form with non-human materiality, Mendieta "insists on the unimaginable situation of human body and non-human landscape literally occupying the same space."[13]

As just one example, a *silueta* executed Iowa in 1977 (Figure 38), clearly emphasizes the roundedness and fullness of the uncanny double. Mendieta makes the core feature of the artwork the figure's impenetrability. We cannot distinguish the limbs of the body; indeed, the figure is so tightly bound in thick ice it is not even identifiable as feminine. These alienating features, however, do not prevent a sense of tactile plenitude. Quite the opposite, the milky white surface invites an exploration of the figure's smooth texture and rounded shape. As Mieke Bal stresses in her analysis of Mendieta's *siluetas*, the spectator experiences the body as surface and not as interiority. Bal argues that in maintaining the spectator's focus on the figure's surface, Mendieta imposes an irremediable exteriority on the subject, and in fact posits the exteriority of the subject to herself as an indispensable critical perspective.[14]

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[12] Raine, 245.
[13] Raine, 245
[14] Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 51.

Figure 38. Ana Mendieta, (Untitled) *Silueta Series*, ice, photographed on 35mm color slide, Iowa, 1977.

The uncanny oscillation between the human form and the site is the means by which Mendieta creates a space of possibility for the body and the earth to co-exist without evoking their conflation. This new perspective in which the body and the earth constitute one another in their mutual alienation, through dialectical tension rather than commonality, is also fundamental to the aesthetic sensibility that Mendieta advances. Though many of her performances feature the transformation of the boundaries of the *silueta* as it is overtaken by natural fluxes, it is impossible to ignore Mendieta's insistence on the sculptural qualities by which the *silueta* resists and comes into friction with the changing surface of the land. One presumes that the ice *silueta* will gradually melt way, but it is photographed as protruding, solid, and shapely against the erratic breaks of the snow banks that surround it. Though we know that the *silueta* is made from and will disappear back into the site, within the context of the performance the *silueta* stands apart because of the ambivalent shifting that it causes between the body and the earth.

Like Smithson, Mendieta's performances have an underlying suggestion of the body's return to a state of undifferentiation with the land. However, Mendieta evokes the sensorial experience through the exploration of bodily and earthly surfaces, which challenges the equation of nature with primordial fluidity. Part of the appeal of the *silueta*, as Raine notes, is that the spectator imagines the sensory pleasures to which the figures refer, namely, "the imagined experience of nestling in the curve of the silhouette and feeling the landscape along the surface of the skin."[15] The friction between the body and the land by which the *silueta* evokes tactile sensation conflicts with the amorphous state into which it is devolving, yet Mendieta nevertheless puts material continuity and physical differentiation into conversation. Provoking the simultaneous plenitude and transience of the *silueta*'s materiality (ice that will melt, sand that falls apart, soil

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[15] Raine, 246.

that becomes overgrown and so on) Mendieta hinges sensation on the unavailability of either the body or the earth to the totality of a stable art object.

Raine understands the undecidability between the body and the site in Mendieta's works through the analogy of the matrixial structure where, in contrast to the Lacanian paradigm in which the prenatal state is understood as an absolute fusion with the maternal body, subjectivity is in fact marked by separation and, "co-emerges through shared encounter along intimate, shifting boundaries between the known I and [the maternal] unknown non-I."[16] The 'unknown non-I' that continuously re-negotiates the boundaries of the subject in Mendieta's work, Raine argues, is not necessarily the maternal body/landscape. It is an unfathomable presence that remains unrecognized and unidentified.[17]

Raine's reading of Mendieta's work through a matrixial paradigm in many ways corresponds to my argument in the last chapter that earth art forwards a 'phenomenology of the impossible' in which the art object evidences nature as an unpredictable presence that is unavailable to knowledge. In Andy Goldsworthy's *Stick Dome Hole*, I noted that the trace of the artist's body - marked by a black hole - is the mechanism through which a flux of natural activity enters and sets the art object in motion. Goldsworthy thus positions the artwork as a threshold between himself and the site; natural presence is the obverse side of the artist's presence. As Ted Toadvine explains, we do not experience nature as an absolute other but rather as the other side of the thinkable and the perceivable in ourselves, a 'call that gives rise to sense.'[18] By this Toadvine understands nature as both the basis of our perceptual field, and also that which exceeds its limits. The knot that binds the body and the earth together in Mendieta's work is expressed in the emergence and transformation of the *silueta*, in the simultaneous evocation of human bodiliness and unbounded earthly materiality. During the performance, the

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[16] Raine, 249.
[17] Raine, 250.
[18] Ted Toadvine, "The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences," *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, eds. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003) 150.

land neither absorbs the body into a common primordial materiality, nor does it wholly disarticulate the body and reinscribe its self-enclosure. Instead, the site grows into and away from the body, revealing itself in its contact with the *silueta.* The aesthetic basis of the performance lies in the continual reconfiguration of the boundary between the body and the earth, and the sensation of that boundary as it arises and disappears.

In *Untitled* (Figure 39a), a *silueta* performance executed in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1976, Mendieta uses the imprint as a vessel in which to catch an inflow of water. The *silueta* was recessed deeply into the sand on a beach, situated close enough to the water to interact with the waves as the tide rolled in. To animate the contact between the *silueta* and the water, Mendieta lined the imprint with red pigment. As the tide advanced the water filled the imprint, its swirling eddies mingling with the color (Figure 39b). Gradually the water filled the imprint, rounding out the bodily form as it carried the pigment back into the ocean. Mendieta shows the body's continuity with the site by demonstrating the three-dimensionality of the *silueta* through its ability to receive the water as a container. But she also indicates the body's differentiation from it by highlighting the *silueta*'s two-dimensionality, coloring its surface to galvanize the water's movement as it mixes with the pigment. Where Smithson deploys the color red in the *Spiral Jetty* to evoke amniotic fluid thereby conveying his return to an amorphous condition, Mendieta uses the red pigment to track the trajectory of the water's influx, marking its entry into and its exit from the body as a play of color on the *silueta*'s façade. In its contact with the site, the *silueta* performs the body as a receiving object and a surface against which the water's movement becomes visible. Mendieta corroborates the provoked sensations of being surrounded and filled by the influx of water by picturing the water's movement against the *silueta*'s surface.

Indeed, the notion of sensing nature from within and viewing it against a surface is encompassed by the photographic practice as well as the performance. Though some of her *siluetas* are recorded by a single color slide, Mendieta

Figure 39a. Ana Mendieta, (Untitled) *Silueta Series*, sand and red pigment, performance photographed in series of 35mm color slides, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1976.

Figure 39b. Ana Mendieta. (Untitled) *Silueta Series*, sand, red pigment, final image of performance photographed in series of 35mm color slides, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1976.

photographed this particular intervention in Oaxaca in a series of 35mm slides. Each slide documents the performance in moments of fixity, but these intervals must also be read together as a set. Mendieta makes the site's manifestation visible as occurring both within and on the imprint by setting the photograph's instantaneity and two-dimensionality against the volume and temporality of the water. Rather than presenting the *silueta*'s disassembly as a progression from sculpted object to indistinguishable matter on an uninterrupted film reel, as one might expect a performance to be documented, Mendieta uses photography to highlight surface resistance as a chief feature of the *silueta.*

The sequence of still slides has the effect of montage, revealing the convergence and divergence of the body and the site through the reconfiguration of the *silueta*'s form from one frame to the next. As Yve-Alain Bois explains, the key element of montage in film is not just the production of meaning through a discontinuity between shots, but more precisely, discontinuity is transferred to the next fragment and is understood to come from within it. The effect of montage, Bois quotes Sergei Eisenstein, "is constructed on the capacity of our eye to continue by inertia a movement it has been given. The collision of this 'suggested' path of movement with another path substituted for it also produces the effect of a jolt."[19] As I have argued, Mendieta's *siluetas* invite the spectator's identification but also rebuff entry because they are filled by natural material. But more than interrupting the path of movement of the spectator's eye, the performance effects a jolt because of the ambiguity of the *silueta*'s status as empty vessel and outward-pushing surface; water appears to both enter it from outside and exit it from within. The water enters the imprint as an empty vessel and the imprint pushes water out, marking its exit with color. Though the encroachment of the water is not visible, from one slide to the next the spectator understands the influx of water to enter into the *silueta* from the right hand side of the frame. Over the sequence of slides, however, the *silueta* melts back into the

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[19] Sergei Eisenstein quoted in Yve-Alain Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll around *Clara-Clara*," *Richard Serra* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987) 48.

direction from which the water comes (from left to right), and flattens out upon its contact with the water.

There are thus two interrelated discontinuities: first, though we know that the trajectory of the water is from right to left this is actually implied by the *silueta*'s stretching from left to right. Secondly, the more the *silueta* flattens out, the more the slides elaborate the volume and movement of the water as a play of color against the surface of the imprint. The *silueta* makes the water visible not as it enters into the *silueta* from outside, but as it recedes from inside the imprint, carrying with it the trail of red pigment. Using the discontinuity of a photographic montage, Mendieta constructs an interrelation of natural activity and the shifting boundaries of the body's exterior. The artist connects the changes in the delineation of the *silueta* to the dynamic movement of the water, and contrasts this to the trajectory of the water's movement, which is visible as a surface tension marked by the pigment. Mendieta enacts the co-emergence of the body and the water in a sequence of time-intervals thus conceiving of the body-earth relationship as a circuitry based on both continuity and separation.

The final photograph in the sequence of slides is not an image of the beach after the *silueta* has completely dissolved. Instead, the artist closes the performance with an image of the imprint that is defined only partially by a curved ridge in the sand. The diluted pigment swells with the water over the remains of the imprint. The ridge of sand that pushes against the surging tide summarizes the body-earth relation that Mendieta explicitly advances. The ridge maintains the shape of the body but foregrounds the pressure of the water. It stands in as a boundary that discloses the body and the site as mutually defined through their contact. In this image, the water hugs the *silueta*'s curve, as much impressed by the shape of the body as the imprint appears to have been shaped by the water.

As visually rich as this performance is, there is also a strong tactile foundation to it, particularly in the final image of the ridge of sand. Expressing the contact between the body and the earth as a malleable division, Mendieta

encompasses both the marking of the body by the earth and the marking of the earth by the body. The reciprocity of the performance does not conclude with an image of immersion in the earth, and it equally refuses an image of closure. The slide that concludes Mendieta's performance corresponds to the mode of touch that acknowledges the otherness of the earth. Luce Irigaray best explains this particular logic of tactility in her critique of Merleau-Ponty. Irigaray points out that for Merleau-Ponty the double sensation of seeing and being seen (modeled on the reversibility of tactile sensation – to touch is always also to be touched) is always asymmetrical.[20] In his example of the phenomenon of double sensation, in which one hand touches the other, there is already a structural hierarchy, for one hand has access to the other without being touched by it. One hand covers the other and even 'takes hold' of it. In this paradigm, Irigaray argues, "We never catch sight of each other ...Within this world, movement is such that it would take extraordinary luck for two seers to catch sight of each other." There is, "no Other to keep the world open,"[21] And indeed, the world itself cannot be other, it can only by one's own world.

Irigaray posits an image that modifies Merleau-Ponty's case of one hand touching the other. She evokes as a model of reciprocal exchange between tactility and visibility (and correspondingly between oneself and the other) the image of two hands joined at the palms, with fingers stretched: a relation of symmetry.[22] The point here is not the similarity of the one to the other (Irigaray is explicit about this) but rather that in the relation of simultaneous feeling-felt there is a passage between interior and exterior, between the tangible and the visible, between oneself and the other. This contact, she explains, evokes and doubles the touching of lips, silently applied to one another. The intimate touch of the lips allows for openness, one never closes over the other. As she describes, they

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[20] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 105.
[21] Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993) 182-183.
[22] Grosz, 105.

"remain always on the edge of speech, gathering at the edge without sealing it."[23] Most interestingly, Irigaray employs the metaphor of the two hands joined at the palms to describe the possibilities of seeing the other. This gesture, she continues, "could also be performed with the gaze: the eyes could meet in a sort of silence of vision, a screen of resting before and after seeing, a reserve for new landscapes, new lights, a punctuation in which the eyes reconstitute for themselves the frame, the screen, the horizon of vision."[24]

The ridge of sand that concludes Mendieta's performance not only encompasses a reciprocal touch between the body and the earth, it recapitulates for the spectator a way of seeing the earth by receiving its 'gaze', and mutually constituting a perspective based on that contact. Clearly, for Mendieta, the idea is not that the earth has a literal gaze, but rather her performances enact the earth's uprising as a gesture that comes forward and connects with the body in order to constitute a 'new landscape' or 'horizon of vision' from that meeting. Though the *silueta* quite literally receives the influx of water insofar as it is filled by it, the final slide that depicts the division between the imprint and the water, the ridge that interconnects but separates the water from the body, completes the thematic of an ethical receptivity. Another way to put this is that Mendieta performs the contingency of the body and the earth, and pictures it as a relation of feeling-felt with an other presence. The artist assembles what the body feels of the earth into an image that might be thought of as the face of the earth.

Facing the Earth as Other

Up until now I have emphasized how earth art emerges out of the tense encounter between the artist and nature. I describe the artwork as constituted through a sensorial encounter with nature, as though nature were not only the material of the artwork, or even its catalyst, but an unfathomable presence engaged in a kind of quasi-intersubjective exchange with the artist. Though this

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[23] Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 161.
[24] Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 161.

argument risks anthropomorphizing ecological activity and re-iterating the solipsistic phenomenology that Irigaray critiques, in fact, I am arguing a more subtle point; that earth art entails a facing of nature as other and as alterity, not as a human subject.

Emmanuel Levinas rightly makes a distinction between others, the system of objects to which our senses are directed, and the elemental, the realm of support through which we communicate and receive sensation of one another. Here, it would be useful to suggest that in art, elemental substance evokes sensation, but the earth is ultimately mobilized as a phenomenon of alterity. Mendieta's performance in Oaxaca prompts the sensuousness of wet sand and foaming waves, however the water is also the agent that disarticulates the spectator's identification with the *silueta* by stretching the imprint beyond a recognizably human form. Mendieta recognizes an elemental connection to the earth – the water that flows into the *silueta* - but also identifies a point at which the earth's exceeds the sensations it produces. She thus performs the body's continuity with the earth by deploying the site's elemental material, and stages the earth's alterity by confronting the spectator with a progressive alienation from the human form. As I have argued, Mendieta thematizes the threshold between the body and the unknown earth as a division - the ridge of sand that concludes the performance. Although Mendieta chooses the body as the locus of the performance, then, in opening the body to elemental material and allowing that material to contort it, she uses the body as a surface on which the earth reveals its face.

Alphonso Lingis explains the relationship between the elemental and the face saying, "We do not relate to the light, the earth, the air and the warmth only with our individual sensibility and sensuality. We communicate to one another the light our eyes know, the ground that sustains our postures, and the air and the warmth with which we speak."[25] Levinas' paradigm of ethical encounter with the

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[25] Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*

other, what he calls the 'face-to-face', occurs within the elemental, the medium through which texture, contour, and boundaries are sensed. In this scenario the other faces me with an appeal, a need, or an intrusion that must be heeded. The imperative is not only for recognition, but for contact - to be physically received and reciprocated. This is why, as Lingis explains, the other's face manifests not necessarily as a look but as a gesture, a pressure on the hand, or a shiver of the skin. Facing appears on a surface of exposure; he writes, "the skin...supports the signs of an alien intention and alien moods."[26] The elemental is crucial here, for there is no facing that is not understood through its sensible qualities. The elemental yields the face, and itself surfaces in the gesture of facing.

But does the elemental only surface other beings or other things? Can the elemental allow us to face the earth as a category of alterity, as an ethical imperative? Can we receive the elemental as a means of giving the earth a voice without anthropomorphizing it, or to use Irigaray and Levinas' vocabulary, without subsuming it into sameness? I am arguing that this is precisely what earth artists attempt in creating works that are both bound up in a site but which problematize the sensation of its natural activity. The artwork may be integrated in a site but it turns to face that site as well, offering a surface within the elemental support that becomes the object of our look and touch.

Mendieta stages a facing of the earth in another *silueta* work executed in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1977. *Incantation a Olokun-Yemayá* (Figure 40), presents the artist's imprint, but here the body is impressed inside the outline of a giant hand. The focus of this work is not the dissolving imprint – it wasn't photographed in a sequence as a temporal performance. The key is the division between the body's surface and the earth's surface, and the figuration of that contact as an act of touching and being touched. Mendieta created the hand by piling sand along the outline. The hand is not pushed into the land from above, as though to allegorize

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(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 122.

[26] Lingis, *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996) 101.

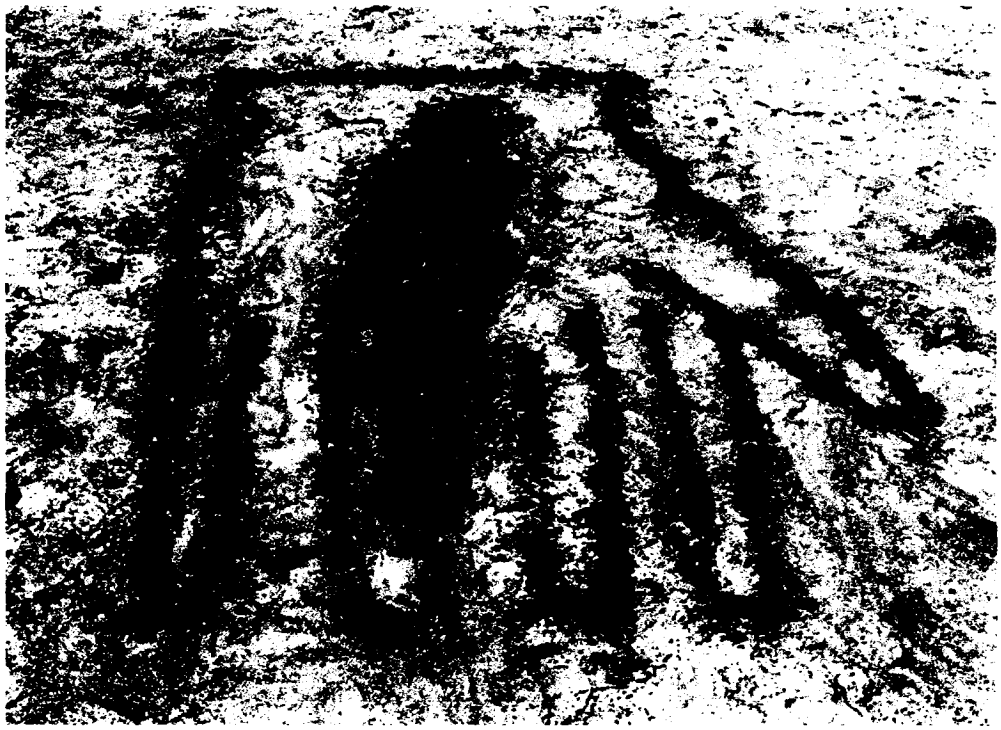

Figure 40. Ana Mendieta, *Incantation a Olokun-Yemayá*, sand, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1977.

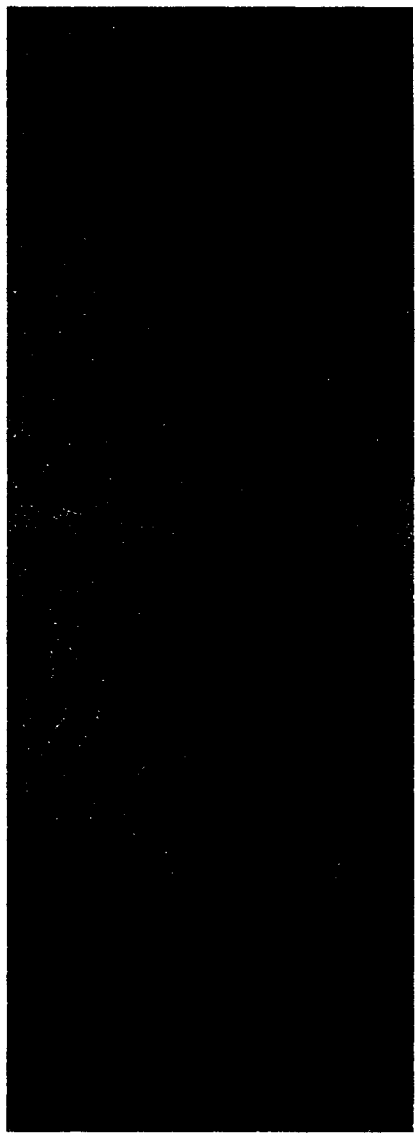

Figure 41. Susan Derges, *River Taw (Birch), 12 January 1998*, photogram, 66" x 24".

the artist's touch, rather it gives the illusion that the edges of the hand are pushing out from underneath the land's surface. The hand is thus set in tension with the body's shape that is pressed into it. The sense of pressure is further emphasized by the fact that the head of the body's imprint is set in the opposite direction of the fingers. The hand does not frame the imprinted body; it is situated across from it, the head at the inverse of the finger into which it is laid. Moreover, the hand does not close around the *silueta*; it remains open against the body's surface, receiving the imprint but not absorbing it. In a now notorious statement Mendieta described her *siluetas* as a way of becoming an extension of nature and of nature becoming an extension of her body.[27] She carries this out, however, not through union with the material of the earth as such, but by turning against it.

Alphonso Lingis writes that the elemental gives rise to sense, and is itself sensed, not by an intentional direction of the viewing eye and the grasping hand aiming at objectives, but by a movement of involution.[28] An involution within the elemental, in the case of Drury's earth chambers, for example, involved the inclusion of a pictorial surface on which the transient activity of the site can appear. The artist turns the site on itself so that the art object is a surface curled inward, a vortex that acts as a passage in which the site manifests its intangible qualities. As we saw in the last chapter, earth artists enact a withdrawal from the site, completing, in Irigaray's terms, a rhythm of gravitation into and a retraction from the site. In pushing her body into the ground, Mendieta also immerses herself in the land and then withdraws, leaving her imprint. This involution gives the earth a face - not a literal face but a surface of appearance. In the case of *Incantation*, the imprint expresses the character of the open hand's touch that pushes against it - the hand receives but does not grasp or enfold. Mendieta pictures this encounter as an exercise in immersion in and pressure against, akin

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[27] Ana Mendieta quoted in Raine, 228.
[28] Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, 125.

to the tactile relation of the two hands pressed together that Luce Irigaray proposes in response to Merleau-Ponty.

Mendieta's address to the earth is no return to the earth as maternal body or descent into primordial fluidity. It is a turn against the earth, an imprint that is positioned against a reciprocal touch – the human body against the earth's hand. Mendieta uses the friction between the surface of the body and the surface of the earth to sustain a kind of sensorial reciprocity; the artist performs an ethical encounter with the earth by figuring it as a hand that is touched and that touches. The hand returns the gesture of the imprint. In the intimacy of matter on matter the imprint is knotted into the land, marking Mendieta's presence on the site, but at the same time evidencing her difference from it. The body's difference from nature (and vice versa) is evident not only by the literal absence of the body, but in the positioning of the body's index in relation to natural activity such that it becomes a space that is filled with the abundance of sensations of the elemental. This receiving of sensation, however, is predicated on the irreducibility of the earth to the body. Though Mendieta provokes internally felt sensation for the spectator, she achieves this by inverting the body and emphasizes its exteriority, offering it as a surface against which the earth manifests as a face. In asserting the contact between the body and the earth as a gesture of facing, the artist mobilizes the aesthetic dimension of the artwork as an ethical encounter in which the body receives sensation through materiality and across division.

Receptive Surfaces - Susan Derges' Photograms

The elemental, in Mendieta's work is the medium that binds the body and the earth together, and when deployed as a surface, illuminates the face of the site. The photograms of the British artist Susan Derges similarly incorporate the elemental as a means of giving nature a face. In a series of photograms from 1998, Derges documented the changes to the River Taw in Britain (Figures 41-44). As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, the photogram is produced without the use of an optical apparatus; Derges does not use cameras or lenses to

generate an image. Instead, the photogram is made on Ilfachrome paper. As opposed to standard photograph paper, Ilfachrome is a positive paper used to print transparencies and not negatives. It has three emulsion layers, each sensitized to one of the three primary colors so that each layer records different color information of the image. During development, in a process called 'dye destruction', unnecessary portions of the color dye are bleached out.[29]

To create the necessary contrast between reflected light and dark background, the artist works at night. She submerges a sheet of paper in the river, and at the right moment affixes the image to the paper by releasing a flash of light. With the flash of light, the paper absorbs the patterns of the water's movement. For Barthes, as I explained in the last chapter, the photograph is an ineluctable testament to what has been. The photogram is an even more literal trace than the photograph, however, because it results from the physical contact of water on paper. The pressure of one surface against another is secured on the paper by the alchemy stimulated by the flashlight. When the light exposes the water, the photogram absorbs the shapes of the river's swirling vortices, ripples, or gentle ebbs as well as the shadows of tree branches. Unlike a photograph, the photogram is both an object that is quite literally immersed in the site, and is also a surface on which the contact between the artist and the site is configured into an image that depicts and enacts a facing of the river.

The photogram's image is formed in a transient play of light against shadow. The dominant component of the photograms is usually the silhouettes of tree branches, which locate the photogram not only in the midst of the river's flow but also within seasonal changes and more ephemeral shifts in atmosphere and light. If we compare *River Taw (Birch), 12 January 1998* (Figure 41) with *River Taw (Hazel), 16 June 1998* (Figure 43) there are obvious differences not only in the species of tree, but also in the degree of coverage that the leaves offer. As curator Charlotte Cotton points out, the deep hues of the prints from the summer

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[29] Susan Derges, "A Technical Note," *Woman Thinking River* ed. Frish Brandt and James Danziger (New York: Danziger Gallery and Fraenkel Gallery, 1999) 79.

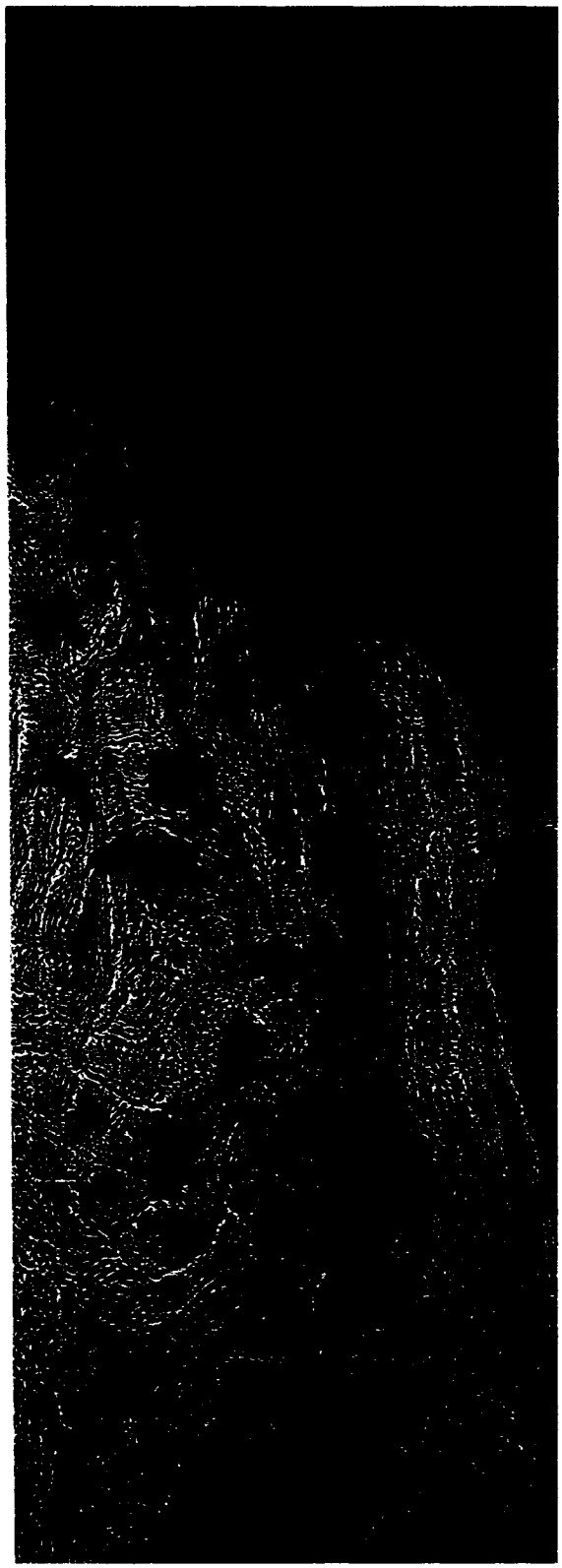

Figure 42. Susan Derges, *River Taw (Crab Apple), 13 May 1998*, photogram, 66" x 24".

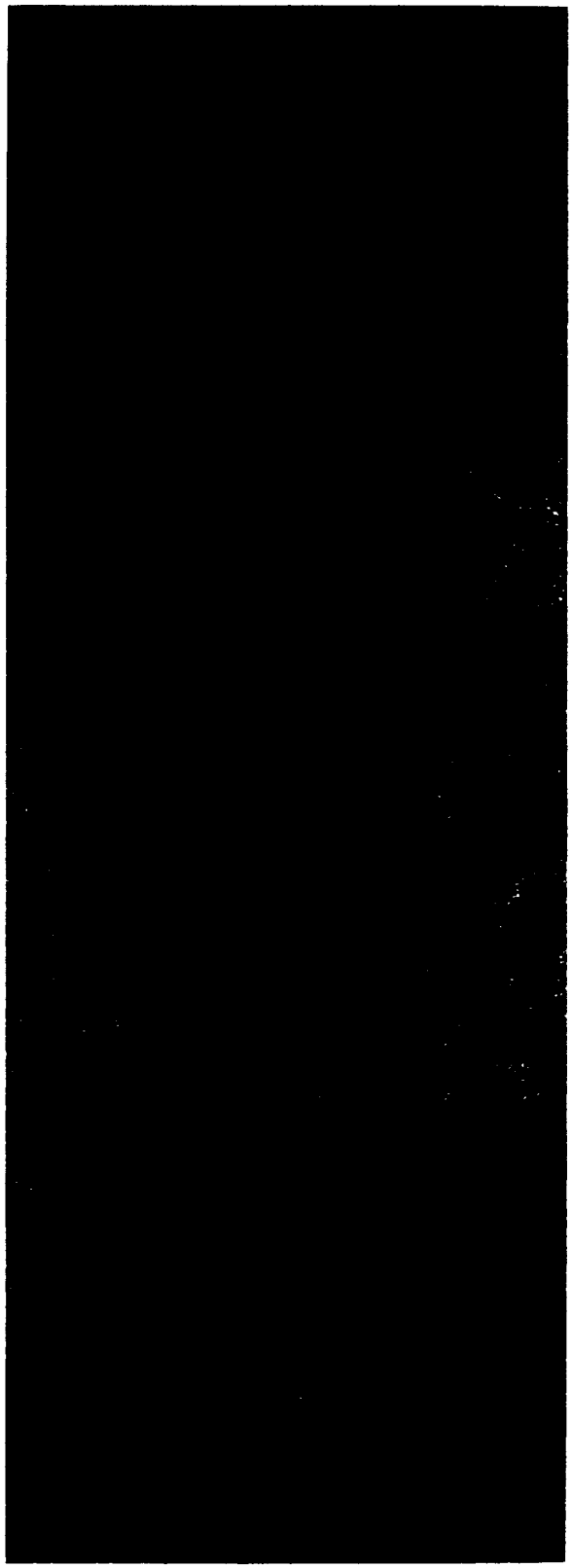

Figure 43. Susan Derges, *River Taw (Hazel), 16 June 1998*, photogram, 66" x 24".

Figure 44. Susan Derges, *River Taw (Leaf Fall) 6 November 1998*, photogram, 66" x 24".

months express the cooling shade of the foliage while the lighter hues of the winter prints show the water's exposure to ambient light.[30] She explains that the variation in color from one photogram to the next can be attributed to the water's sensitivity to subtle changes in external forces.[31] The vigor of the water gives the image shape and texture, and in its interaction with the leaves and tree branches, the River Taw becomes a synergy of light, movement, color, and atmosphere.

The tree branch is a technical device to provide exposure or protection but more than this, its shadow creates a tension on the surface of the water. When activated by the flash of light of the photogram the tree branch assembles the River Taw into an undeniable visage. Like Mendieta's performances, Derges pictures the face of the earth (or to be more precise in this case, the face of the river) as a scenario of reciprocal touch. In many of the photograms, the branches carry an uncanny resemblance to human hands with skeletal fingers. In others, the leaves or branches are less human, but nevertheless evoke the sense that the river has come forward into a particular stance or address to the spectator. The silhouettes of the branches, though they by no means appear solid in the sense of a dense object, nevertheless offer a relatively defined physical presence by contrast to the swells of the river. This presence eerily mirrors the spectator's position in relation to the photogram. Indeed, the human scale of the photogram (at 66 inches long and 24 inches wide) invites a confrontation between the tree branch and the spectator.

Leo Steinberg suggests that stylistic cycles are definable by their built-in idea of the spectator.[32] Certainly, there is a commonality between Derges photograms and Mendieta's performances in how each invites the spectator to enter into the elemental substance of the site, and at the same time rebuffs that entry. In doubling the *silueta* as an index of bodily presence and a space constituted by natural material, Mendieta initiates in the spectator an uncanny

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[30] Charlotte Cotton, "Water Forms," *Woman Thinking River*, 9.
[31] Cotton, 9.
[32] Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 81.

oscillation between identification with and alienation from the *silueta.* Derges secures a similar relation of immersion and resistance between the spectator and the site in two ways: by situating the spectator inside the river and by positioning the photogram as a trace of contact between the body and the river. Placing the Ilfachrome paper under the water, the artist locates the spectator inside the river, lying horizontally and looking upwards at the canopy of leaves that hangs over the river's surface.

Steinberg's discussion of the flatbed picture plane is helpful to explain how Derges achieves a perspective from inside the river but which also exposes a tension between the elemental depth of the water and the surface of the image. Steinberg argues that in modernism, the concept of pictorial flatness is primarily a function of how the orientation of the image is directed at the spectator's experience, or more precisely, how the pictorial surface tilts into the space of the viewer's imagination. He hypothesizes that one of the most significant shifts in the history of modernism occurred in the nineteen-fifties when the artwork internalized a horizontal as opposed to a vertical orientation.[33] Though a Rauschenberg or a Dubuffet painting hangs vertically on the wall (Steinberg singles these two artists in particular) it nevertheless tilts the spectator's perspective so that she or he is located perpendicular to the image, looking down at it from above. Steinberg's theory of the flatbed picture plane, a term he borrows from the flatbed printing press, stresses that the horizontal orientation of the painting references the labor of art-making and affirms the flatness of the canvas, as opposed to the vertical orientation which was a requisite of the illusion of space and depth in Renaissance perspective. Horizontality psychologically evokes the workbench, the 'disordered desk' or the 'unswept floor' of the studio. Steinberg writes, "The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards – any receptor surface on

[33] Steinberg, 83.

which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, *on which information may be received, printed, impressed...*" (my italics)[34]

In the same way that the painting tilts the picture plane to a horizontal orientation in the imagination, so also do Derges' photograms enact a horizontal picture plane. A significant difference, however, is that rather than the spectator looking down at the painting from above, as one would look at the floor or a table, Derges positions the spectator lying down on the horizontal plane with the image floating above. This perspective mimics the tension between the surface of the water and the tree branch that lays over it. Particularly in works such as *River Taw (Hazel)*, in which the leaves touch the water and flatten out against it, there is a heightened awareness of the surface of the river and the spectator's position in its depths. By tilting the picture plane and essentially pushing the spectator flat, the image references the artist's specific technique of producing the image by laying the paper in the water.

Where Mendieta imprints her body to perform its contiguity with the earth, Derges tilts the picture plane so that the spectator confronts the image from within the river. Further, I would suggest in accordance with Steinberg that the horizontal perspective emphasizes the application of the image onto the surface of the photogram, as a transaction involving the 'receiving, printing or impressing of information on a receptor surface'. Not only is the photogram analogous to the body, then, its perspective initiates a mode of sensation through the contact of flat surfaces. The image of light and shadows are affixed to the photogram as pressure would register on the skin. The technique of the photogram to which the horizontal plane refers parallels a tactile logic. Like skin, the photogram is a receptive medium; it absorbs the image but its receptivity is predicated on its assertion of surface.

The photogram posits the spectator's encounter with the image as a kind of facing; the photogram, and by extension the imagined contact between the

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[34] Steinberg, 84.

spectator and the river, stimulates the silhouetted tree branch to come forward as the face of the River Taw. The horizontal perspective highlights the pressure between the tree branches and the water's surface in the image. Via the photogram, the spectator's facing of the river occurs within an immersive experience of the water itself. Yet, the photogram as pseudo-skin echoes the surface of the water as it assembles the tree branches to spring forth as an image in the midst of its ambient light. The technique of the photogram raises two crucial aspects of facing: first, facing is an encounter of sensation from within an elemental medium, and second, the face of the other is a surface of appearance that rises up in that medium. The branch garners its character from the hues of reflected light and the patterns of water that move against its shadow. The pushing and pulling streams of water thus illuminate the branch. The tree branch interrupts the possible sense of a homogenous elemental plenum into which the spectator could dissolve, and instead draws attention to the water as a specific river, with both depth and surface; as boundless but also as withdrawing from view through the disclosure of limits. The river is defined in its exposure to the sky and the changes of the season as well as being framed by vegetation. The conditions of the river's specificity mark the photogram and correspondingly, are impressed upon the viewer.

The photogram is thus the inverse of what Edward Casey calls body-mapping. In his discussion of the different ways of mapping the earth, Casey describes artworks that act as body maps. This kind of mapping, he explains, emerged with abstract expressionism, when artists used their bodies as a means of indexing on the canvas a visceral sense of the place that is the subject of the painting. The circumambient landscape is retraced in bodily motions, and these same motions leave traces on the canvas, not representing the landscape's precise contours, but reimplacing the bodily perception of them on the pictorial surface.[35]

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[35] Edward S. Casey, "Mapping the Earth in Works of Art," *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, Ed. Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodeman (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2004) 261.

Casey cites Willem de Kooning's abstract landscapes "Woman in the Landscape" and "Door to the River" as examples in which the artist's body seems to be spread out over the landscape, instating it on the canvas by its very motions, so that it conveys the feeling of the meeting of the body with the surface of the earth. In body-mapping, the earth is not represented; it is corroborated on canvas through the body's perception of it.

Body-mapping marks changes in the body's perception of the earth, however, it does not necessarily evidence the changes to the earth's shifting surface. Derges' photograms, on the other hand, do track those changes. I have examined the technical process of making the photogram, emphasizing that the alchemy between the Ilfachrome paper and the river takes place in the moment when the flash of light activates the absorption of the image. It is important to point out that Derges' practice also cultivates an awareness of the river's transformation over time. Each photogram acts as a kind of entry in a yearlong diary of the river. Derges extends her darkroom to the site[36], marking the photogram paper (and by extension, the body of the spectator) with the traces of the river, instead of tracing her individual movement within the site. Like Mendieta's *Untitled* performance in Oaxaca (Figures 39a-39b), however, we do not witness the vitality of the site through motion - temporality is not to be confused with duration. Rather, the image reveals the river's changes in telling instants, from one image to the next. As the stark branch in January gives way to delicate blooms in May, fuller branches in June, and isolated leaves tossing in the wind in November (Figures 41-44), and as the hues convey both seasonal changes and diurnal shifts in atmosphere, Derges documents the River Taw as a limitless unfolding of ecological events. The artworks synthesize the river's transformation into moments that do not express the site in motion so much as each image stimulates the river to rise up, make contact and become visible momentarily.

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[36] Cotton, 8.

The photogram is not the product of the body mapping its trajectory on the site. Quite the reverse, Derges presents the photogram, and symbolically the body of the spectator, as the surface that is marked by the river's movements. Inherently contradictory, for the still image is created by ephemeral conditions, the photogram reveals the river's resistance to transparency as, in John Sallis' words, a face that is continually threatened because its coming forth is always a coming to pass.[37] The countenance that the water brings to light, and which appears as a consequence of the division that the photogram inserts within the water, is both present and unintelligible, impenetrable but still fragile in its exposure. The visage of the river that arises in the elemental fluid of the river is thus closed off to the invasive movement of seeing as grasp in the mode of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, or perceiving as marking in Casey's example of the landscape as body-map. Instead, the River Taw pushes against the surface of the photogram, where the spectator receives sight as tactile pressure.

The tree branches come forward *through* the material qualities of the water, as spectral appearances and not as objects. The convergence of light, water, branch and receptive surface does not express the river as a totality, but rather as a sensorial abundance that configures an image but also confounds a definitive form. The image is neither a metonymic fragment of the River Taw, nor a substitute for it. The photogram reveals the subtleties, or perhaps even the secret life of the river – its lively current in spring, its enveloping depths in summer, the lonely gusts of wind in the winter. Moreover, Derges does not record a narrative biography of the river; the river faces because the photogram offers a surface for its brief appearances.

Derges' photograms operate by a different logic of aesthetic encounter than can be explained by either disembodied apprehension or tactile sensation. They are closer to Irigaray's model, in which the other withholds from one's own self-same perception and thus, as I quoted in the last chapter, "irradiates a truth

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[37] Sallis, 142

which we can receive without its source being visible... [and] remains a mystery for us but we can indirectly perceive something of it."[38] The notion of receptivity is not just a matter of the photogram's absorption of the image. Rather, receptivity characterizes the encounter that the photogram incites; it is a perceptual mode by which the body resists being absorbed by the elemental, and in doing so offers itself to witness the face of the river via a logic of reciprocal tactility.

The Ethics of Receiving - Jackie Brookner's Gift

Mendieta's earth-body sculptures and Derges' photograms entail a facing of the earth from within it, not by way of an exchange of gazes nor by 'taking hold', but by stimulating its appearance on the surface of the elemental. The sculptures of the American artist, Jackie Brookner, likewise revolve around strategies that initiate the earth's manifestation. Like Mendieta and Derges, Brookner's works evoke a sensation of natural processes, but cultivate an approach to sensibility through reciprocity: the giving and receiving of sense. That is, Brookner locates her artworks in a circuitry of exchange, deploying them to elicit the earth's manifestation, and to thematize perception as a receiving of sensation within the abundance of the elemental.

The question of how art might articulate nature is the subject of *Prima Lingua* (1996-2001; Figures 45a-45c). Like many of Brookner's works, *Prima Lingua* is a biosculpture, an object engineered by the artist to function as a water filtration system. Brookner's biosculptures are made of stone, rock or concrete, materials on which mosses, liverworts, ferns and other plants can grow and on which snails can proliferate. The artist explains that the biosculpture is a biogeochemical filter: as water flows over it, plants, bacterium and other organisms transform pollutants into sustaining nutrients, demonstrating how there

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[38] Irigaray, *The Way of Love* translated by Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluhacek (New York: Continuum, 2002) 163-164.

Figure 45a. Jackie Brookner, *Prima Lingua*, concrete, volcanic rock, mosses, ferns, wetland plants, fish steel, 64" x 101" x 80", 1996 – 2001 (shov here: 1996 - mosses beginning grow).

Figure 45b. Jackie Brookner, *Prima Lingua*, 1996 – profile.

Figure 45c. Jackie Brookner, *Prima Lingua*, 2001 – mosses and ferns grown in.

is no waste, only transformation in healthy ecosystems.[39] The mosses absorb toxins and even heavy metals, while the porous concrete substructure removes larger particulates and debris. *Prima Lingua*, one such biosculpture made of concrete and volcanic rock in the shape of a giant tongue, stands in what began as a pool of polluted water. Between 1996 and 2001, Brookner pumped the water over the surface of the tongue. Over time vegetation grew and thickened on the sculpture, gradually purifying the pool.

It is significant that Brookner chose a tongue as the sculptural motif. The artist describes the tongue as literally licking the water in which it stands. As the water pours over the work, it calls to mind dripping saliva. There are several particularities to the tongue that convey the relation between the sculpture, the water and the subsequent growth of vegetation. In foregrounding the role of the tongue to lick the water clean, Brookner invokes a specific mode of sensorial experience that cannot be expressed by any other body part. The act of licking involves two kinds of sensation: touching and tasting. Tongues feel contour and texture, sensing through tactile exploration. However, they need only apply their surface against something in order to taste. Tasting, unlike touching, is a matter of receiving flavor. Though the tongue of *Prima Lingua* is large and thick, it is the receptivity of its surface that is the focus of the artwork. Not coincidentally, the tongue pushes out, flattened and wide rather than lying at rest. The tongue offers the lively growth of mosses and plants as though they were a burst of flavor. The aesthetic richness of the work is hinged not on the tongue as a sculptural object or on the vegetation in and of itself, but on the particular way the tongue cues the experience of the vegetation – allowing it to blossom uninterrupted by a penetrating touch.

Additionally, the tongue marks a passage between the interior and the exterior of the body. Unlike any other appendage, the tongue is located in a liminal zone, able to both reach outside and retract inside. Brookner seizes this

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[39] www.jackiebrookner.net\Biosculptures_files\Biosculptures.htm

aspect of the tongue as that which externalizes expression and invites sensation inward, to make a point about the interconnectedness of nature and the body. The tongue is (usually) the primary instrument by which one communicates language. Yet where the discursive realm (the realm of language and speech) is often considered in a dualistic logic to be separate from and superior to the terrestrial sphere of nature, Brookner secures their inextricability. Nature in Brookner's work is a primary language, a *prima lingua*, to which we are privy before human language. Where Mendieta and Derges deploy their artworks as a vehicle to face the earth from within the elemental in the contact between two surfaces as, in Irigaray's words, 'two lips gathered at the edge of speech', Brookner attempts a facing of nature *as* this moment of poise that leads to enunciation. Language, here, is shown to arise from an elemental basis, carried up through the body in the same way the plants grow as a result of the continual flow of water pumped over the tongue. The tongue in itself does not form a word; it exposes the unintelligible transaction of sensations that precede and inspire speech. Moreover, it is not housed in a mouth but in a system of elements - in water, air, and light. Brookner's tongue thus exteriorizes the body; it is exposed flesh that reacts with external nature, thereby revealing that language is spurred forth by the internal sensations generated by the friction between the body and nature.

The face of nature, encompassed by the growth on the tongue, is paralleled to the articulation of a word. Brookner specifies, however, that the emergence of the face of nature, like speech, is contingent on a subtle connectivity and division between two: between the speaker and the listener, or in this particular case, between the internal body and the external earth. The perception of nature, like the communication of language, is predicated on receiving the other's subtle expressiveness. Thus, in turning internal processes of speech into external processes of taste and touch, Brookner acknowledges the influx of sensations of nature that precede and inform discursive meaning. She then figures the face of nature as an expression of language founded on receptivity; nature takes root and flourishes because of the tongue's passive offering of itself as surface.

Where for Smithson, art materializes language as dense and inert sediment, in Brookner's work, language is carried out within the fluid dynamics of the elemental. The continuous pouring of water over the tongue stimulates the emergence, not of defined words or sedimented material, but of what we might call vegetal utterances that rise up and fall away. The artist states that the piece is a visible image of transformation, revealing decay as part of creation.[40] But even more subtly, in offering the tongue as a receptive surface, the work makes nature's manifestation visible in the midst of its transformation. In this, Brookner's work reiterates John Sallis' point that the face of the earth exposes its physiognomy while also withholding itself. In its involution within the elemental, its simultaneous thrust forward and push back against the water that pours over it, the tongue gives rise to Brookner's micro-ecosystem. Natural activity is open-ended; it blooms but is never secured as a closed object to be held or seen in the grip of a Merleau-Pontian touch. The continual transformation of the system eludes sensation as a means to intelligibility. The tongue's location within the system of growth and decay opens a different approach to sensation, through the supply of contact.

Brookner's other biosculptures, like the tongue, substantiate a passage through which the elemental flows and mediates a sensual experience of nature, and similarly posit the receiving of sensation as an ethical mode of perception. Her public work, *The Gift of Water* (Figures 46a-46c) executed in Grossenheim, Germany in 2001, features a literal wellspring of the elemental in the midst of an ecological circuitry between the artwork and the site. Like *Prima Lingua*, the sculptural component of the work, in this case the giant hands, is part of a natural water filtration system. The hands are made of a lightweight, textile-reinforced concrete, on which the purifying mosses and bacterium grow. A misting fountain from between the hands aerates the water and moistens the mosses, which in turn, purify the water. *The Gift of Water* was made as part of a new public swimming

[40] www.jackiebrookner.net

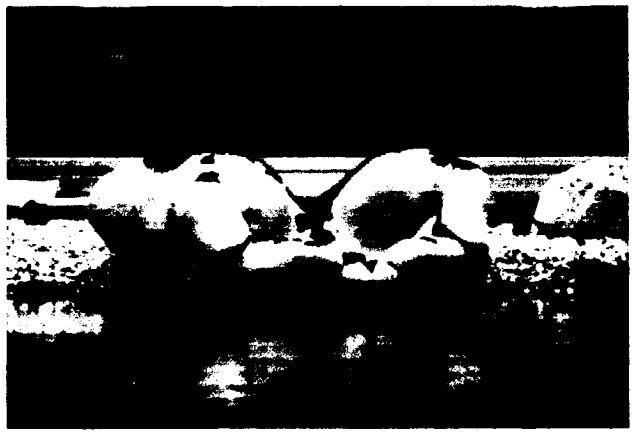

Figure 46a. Jackie Brookner, *The Gift of Water*, textile reinforced concrete, mosses, wetland plants, misting fountain, Grossenheim, Germany, 2001.

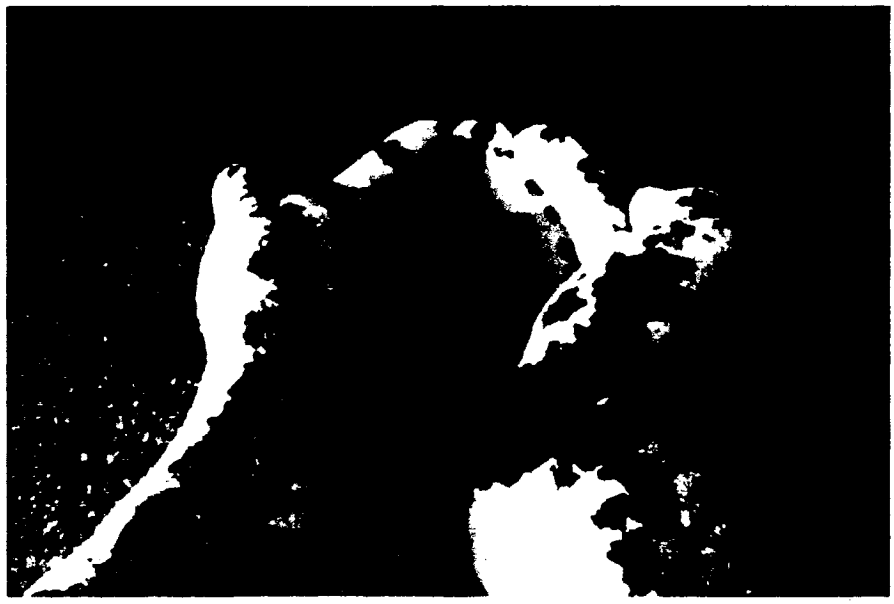

Figure 46b. Jackie Brookner, *The Gift of Water*, 2001 – mosses growing on hands.

Figure 46c. Jackie Brookner, *The Gift of Water*, 2001 – misting fountain.

complex in which the water is filtered entirely by wetland plants without the use of chlorine or other chemicals (Figure 46d).

The gesture of the giant hands which reach from the bank into the pond express the reciprocity of the artwork's relationship to the site – its simultaneous receiving and giving. Though the hands are not pressed against one another like Irigaray's image of mutual touch, the artwork expresses a similar relation of 'feeling-felt if we read it in terms of the contact between the hands and the pond. The hands are gathered together, open against the water. This image, which might evoke the receiving of water, cupping it in order to drink, is inverted into a gesture of donation. From between the hands the misting fountain projects a stream of water back into the pond. The title of the work, 'The Gift of Water' has two directions. Clean water is given as a gift to the human public from the wetland ecosystem; but at the same time the artwork returns that gift of water to the ecosystem, since it acts as a catalyst for the growth of vegetation that cleans the water.

The artwork negotiates the encounter between the public and the natural regeneration of the site. But it is the reversal of this exchange – the overturning of receiving into gift - that fosters the emergence of the face of that ecosystem. Water is the aesthetic subject of the work: the pond reflects the light, the water is touched by the giant hands, and it projects out from them in a misty cloud. Further, the work mobilizes the water to express its function to visitors and to the ecosystem. Brookner reminds us that water, as an elemental substance, binds us to the earth. Water permeates the sculpture and the site, weaving them together as a system of mutual support. Because of the water, mosses and plants spring up and grow on the hands. The pond provides a medium through which the ecosystem appears on the surface of the sculpture. The hands figure this appearing as a facing through the immediacy of touch. Immediacy is not carried out as a tactile grasp that would suffocate or cover the vulnerable exposure of nature, but in the receiving of touch through the giving of surface. In the double meaning of the hands, the sculpture elicits the sensation of the water's plenitude and at the same

time provides the ground on which the site makes its appearance. Brookner inspires the aesthetic and sensuous pleasure of water, and transforms this into an ethical encounter – a facing of the site through sensibility.

Because it is a public work connected to an existing wetland ecosystem, the question of site returns in the *Gift of Water* in a more pressing way than the self-regulating ecosystem of *Prima Lingua.* That is to say, more than being a sculptural object, *The Gift of Water* functions within a larger arena of experience - it is a filtration system installed within a natural place and a public space. The giant hands are not discrete objects; they are propositions to the visitor of how to approach the site at large. Insofar as it internalizes and self-referentially expresses the perceptual experience of reciprocity that it creates with the ecosystem, *The Gift of Water* is better categorized as an installation than as a discrete sculpture. Alex Potts explains that installation work can be understood within a certain dialectical oscillation in twentieth-century sculptural aesthetics, between a positivistic insistence on firmly defined entities on the one hand, and a radical undoing and unfixing of the definable object on the other. The space of an installation, into which a spectator enters, has its own materiality and definition conjured up by a fabric of enclosure.[41] Potts argues that the shape of the installation resides in the framing that focuses the viewer's looking, as though the 'thingness' of the sculptural object has been turned inside-out. He stresses that the shift from sculpture to installation is a symptom of sculpture's absorption of its conditions of staging and display, as well as a troubling of the modes of viewing and perception that those conditions give rise to.

My goal in positing *The Gift of Water* as an installation, instead of either the more general characterization of a site-specific work or a public sculpture, is to underscore Brookner's statement (or even her appeal) to the public about how to approach the swimming complex: to receive it as one would a gift, rather than to take it and occupy it as one's own. The giant hands punctuate the complex and

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[41] Alex Potts, "Installation and Sculpture," *Oxford Art Journal* 24 no. 2 (2001) 17.

Figure 46d. Jackie Brookner, *The Gift of Water*, 2001 – swimming complex.

embody the system of interrelatedness between humans and ecosystem. Put more strongly, they suggest a mode of perceiving the wetland environment. Mick Smith makes the point that tangibility is the touchstone of a modern reality oriented towards the instrumentalization of matter – towards "things that exhibit a paradigmatic materiality, that are solid, fixed, bounded, isolable..."[42] Instrumental logic operates in accordance with a mechanics of solids, denying that which is permeable, fluid and less tangible. Brookner's hands signal that the swimming pond cannot be understood as a bounded space that is fixed and available to a colonizing touch. The openness of the hands, which allows for the uprising of water from between them and the growth of mosses on their surface, is a recommendation of how to conceptualize the site as sensuous but not tangible; material but alive and changing.

In Potts' description, an installation isolates an architectonic shaping and disperses focus to the staged environment.[43] Accordingly, *The Gift of Water* invites entry into the pond and, in the gesture encompassed by the giving hands that yield the face of the wetland, orients focus to the surrounding ecosystem that sustains it. It thereby posits a different kind of sensibility, one not oriented towards the tangibility of an object, but rather to a subtle awareness of the swimming pond as integrated with and regulated by the biological workings of the wetland. This awareness is not an invasive knowledge of the space; instead, like the hands that become overgrown with mosses, it cultivates an open touch that subtends the thriving ecosystem and does not choke its vitality.

Touching (Within) the Elemental Earth - Ichi Ikeda's Big Hands

The water projects of the contemporary Japanese artist, Ichi Ikeda, taking place over the last ten years, demonstrate not only the ethical approach to the earth as a category of alterity, but also how the condition of the earth feeds into

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[42] Mick Smith, *An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity, and Social Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) 171.
[43] Potts, 17.

human relations via the elemental. Ikeda organizes public installations and performances designed to raise awareness about the planet's diminishing supply of water. His works, however, situate water not only as a topic of ecological concern but as the elemental medium that connects the earth and its inhabitants, and that is the fluid base of what we might think of as an emerging global consciousness – a commitment to others that crosses limited boundaries such as national borders, local community, and geographic location. Water, in Ikeda's artworks, is in fact the medium for the ethical feeling towards the other; it yields sensibility and cedes an answer to the other's imperative.

Ikeda held what he called a "*Big Hands Water Conference*" in Bangkok, Thailand, in 2000 (Figures 47a-47c). For this installation he staged a conference of hands, twelve sets in all, gathered together around a large table. The pairs of hands, actually large photographic stills, hung above twelve chairs. On the table in the middle, the artist projected an image of his own hands immersed in water, open and holding it. The gesture of cupped hands, which like Brookner's hands suggests the receiving of water, is interrupted by the printed text in the center of each pair. The hands are imprinted with captions such as "Because of water pollution, 20% of fresh water fish species are nearly to the point of extinction"; "The diseases related to water are supposed to cause one child to die every 8 seconds"; or "After 50 years from now, it is supposed [the] number of people suffering seriously from shortage of water will reach to 66 countries, two-thirds of the population of the world."

The warnings of depleted supply, disease and toxicity undercut the plenitude of the water in the image. The reflected light that catches the rippling around the hands is belied by the subtext of the earth's ailing condition. The installation is a call to action and cultivates a slightly different relationship between artist, spectator and nature than the works of either Mendieta or Derges. In fact, Ikeda's goal for the *Big Hands Conference* was to solicit a commitment from spectators to sign a Water Sender's Agreement, in which people agree to send water to people in the future. Like Brookner's *The Gift of Water,* the artist

Figure 47a. Ichi Ikeda, *Big Hands Water Conference*, installation, Bangkok, Thailand, 2000.

Figure 47b. Ichi Ikeda, *Big Hands Water Conference*, video projection,

Figure 47c. Ichi Ikeda, *Big Hands Water Conference*, – 'Warnings in the Water', photographic still, 2000.

positions the image of two open hands as an emblem of simultaneous giving and receiving. Though they are open to receive the water, Ikeda encodes the image as an offering.

Ikeda's *Big Hands Conference* is linked to his international ambition (what he calls his *Water for the Future* project) of getting donations to generate large holding containers of water, which are then put on reserve for future use. Other installations involve configurations of transparent cubes filled with 80 liters of water. The signature image of donation, the pair of hands from the donor, appears on each cube. In his artist's statement Ikeda writes that it is estimated that everyone needs 80 liters of water a day to maintain a basic standard of health, but already there are many who have as little as five liters a day. Ikeda's response to this predicament is to travel to cities such as Kyoto, New York, Tai Pei, and most recently to Pittsburgh (2005), to create large reservoirs of water. For each of these interventions, which he calls his *80 to 80,000 liters* works, the artist enlists donors for 1000 cubes of 80 liters each, which he then puts into storage for future use (Figures 48-49).

Ikeda's prognosticated future is not entirely abstract, or even so distant. His *80,000 liter Water Boxes* work in Kawaguchi City, Japan, in 2004, is a water purification and storage facility from which the artist endeavors to send 'water lines' to 48 countries that are predicted to suffer from water shortage by the year 2025 (Figure 50). Ikeda converted an old Sapporo beer factory into a warehouse equipped with machinery to collect rainwater and recycle it. While the facility accumulates and purifies the rainwater, Ikeda's mandate is to build water lines that will reach out to the 48 countries and distribute the stored water. Ikeda extends the water lines to their destined countries slowly over time so that they grow in centimeters or meters until the year of the project's completion. As they cross the literal distance between countries the water lines close a conceptual distance between people. The Kawaguchi water factory is not intended to replace the necessary political legislation that would prevent water shortage. Instead, it is

an exercise in revealing the ability of water to cross national boundaries and unite people through the recognition of our shared materiality within the elemental.

Interestingly, Ikeda does not limit the scope of his gesture to people in the present. He conceives of his water lines as growing section by section into the future, reaching out to a new generation. The artist does not place conditions on who might receive the water and in this sense underscores its alterity. That is to say, the elemental quality of water, and its projection into the future is also what secures the ethics of the artwork. As Stephen Ross explains, what is dangerous about the earth and what speaks to its excess beyond the human desire for order, is its abundance. By abundance, Ross refers to the earth's unpredictable unfolding into the future. "Abundance is the material expression of a future and of other species and kinds that we may never hope to make stable." He concludes that what is required is a celebration of biodiversity as, "salutation and exaltation – toward a *parousia*, a future [to] come, toward others we do not know and cannot imagine."[44]

Ikeda's *Water for the Future* project relays spectators their most basic human need, the need for water, and translates this need into giving. Water is the subject and also the dominant aesthetic component of Ikeda's installations – it is poured into containers, touched by hands, poured into cups, reflected against the light on the surface of the cubes. At the same time, the undercurrent of the artwork is always a response to another's need. Ikeda answers the imperative for water through its sensuousness, deploying it not only as a basic necessity but also as a medium of ethical action. What becomes evident here is that the ethical imperative towards the other is not just to be heeded in the abstract but through sensibility; the other's need is a claim on one's own substance. As Alphonso Lingis explains of Levinas's face-to-face scenario, facing is an answer for the destitution of the other with one's own bread (or in this case water); it is a claim on one's own sustenance, "made wholly of the substance of the sensuous

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[44] Stephen David Ross, "Biodiversity, Exuberance, and Abundance," *Rethinking Nature*, 256.

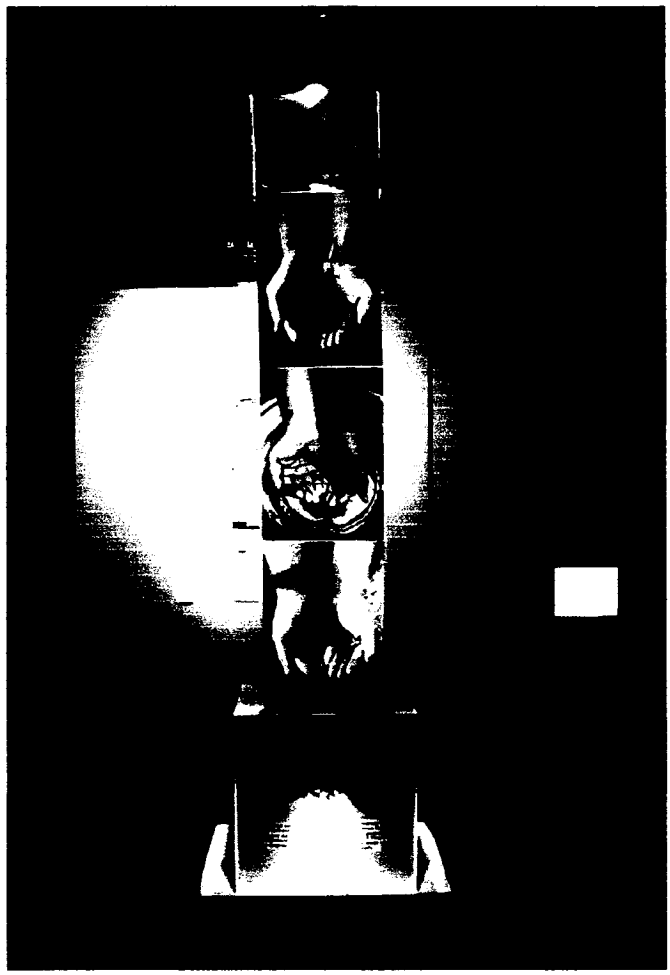

Figure 48. Ichi Ikeda, *80-Liter Water Box* in UK-Japan Art Forum, 2003.

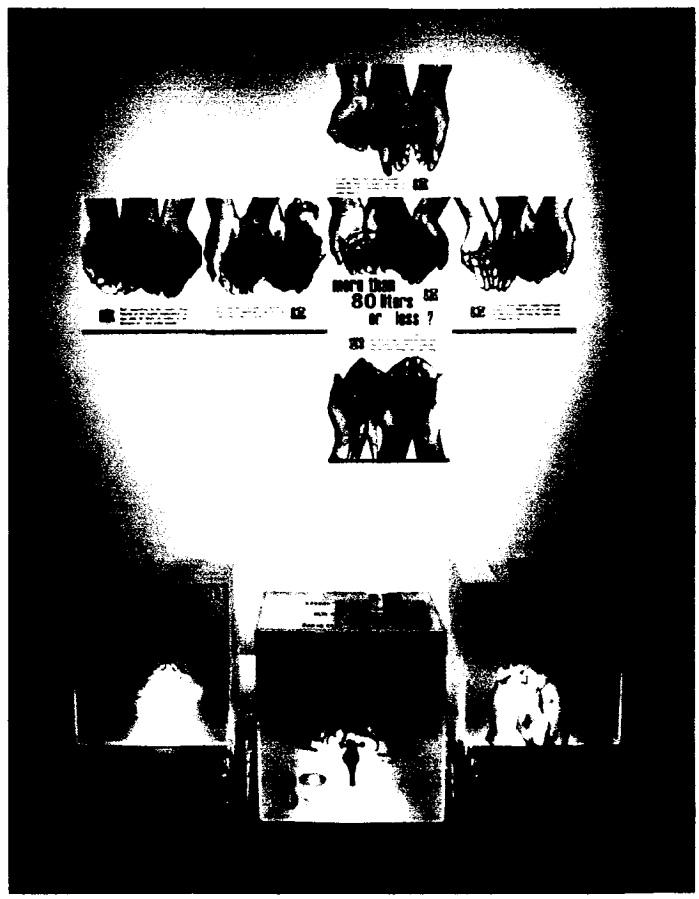

Figure 49. Ichi Ikeda, *80-Liter Water Box*, Toyota Japan, 2003.

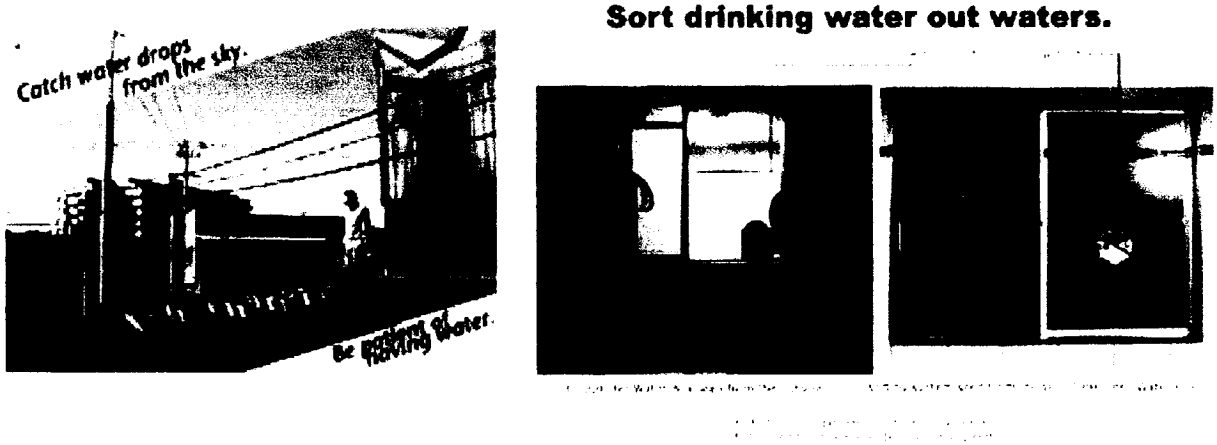

Figure 50. Ichi Ikeda, *80,000-Liter Water Boxes in Kawaguchi City*, assembly of placards explaining project, 2004.

element."[45] Ikeda's ethical statement is completed in the doubling of meaning in the image of the hands. The hands feel the water, are immersed in it, and are gathered together to receive it. But Ikeda transposes the image of a partaking of sensation into a gesture of offering, the water is forwarded elsewhere; the receiving hands are inverted into an outward push, a gift directed towards another.

The openness of the gesture also complicates the potentially possessive activity of storing water in individual cubes in many of his installations. While the cubes and storage units could be interpreted as misanthropic stockpiling, by covering the cubes with the image of the open hands Ikeda reminds us that water cannot be possessed, grasped, or delimited as an object; water's fundamental nature is to flow, and to exceed limits. Indeed, this is why Irigaray codes the ethical feeling as itself fluid; as a 'never-surfeited sea' that tends towards infinity rather than totality; it cannot be 'fixed, frozen or accounted for.'[46] Steeped in the fluid excess and dynamism of the elemental, the ethical is a surprising flow of emotion that contradicts the solidity and self-enclosure of instrumental principles. Like Brookner, Ikeda prompts the aesthetic pleasure of water, and directs this into an uprising of ethical sensation; the gesture of the big hands initiates a circuitry of facing an unknown other through the elemental.

There is no obvious demarcation of the face of the other here. Rather, the hands that punctuate all of Ikeda's works encompass both the appeal of the other and the reply. Because each of Ikeda's works reroutes one's own need into a gift to an unknown other, the hands are positioned in a symbolic torsion within the elemental: they take in the water and they push it outward, calling out in need and answering that need simultaneously. This involution is entirely facilitated by the water, which surfaces against the hands, rippling and reflecting. The earth's alterity, which is implicit in the fluidity and impenetrability of the elemental, thus inserts itself in between the face-to-face, elaborating and substantiating the relation of giving and receiving.

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[45] Lingis, *Sensation*, 86.
[46] Mick Smith, *An Ethics of Place*, 184.

Conclusion

By closing with Ikeda's works, I am not positioning inter-human relations, as opposed to human-earth relations, as the pinnacle of ecological ethics. I would suggest, rather, that Ikeda's works must be read in conjunction with works that confront the earth as other, by artists such as Mendieta, Derges or Brookner. My aim is to show that in earth art encounters with others, be they human others or the earth as other, requires a similar paradigm shift. This shift includes (but is not limited to) a re-evaluation of how we perceive and respond to the other, and shedding the condition that the other's similarity to oneself is a requisite of ethical feeling. Artists propose that an acknowledgement of difference and ethical contact are one in the same goal.

I have argued that the interplay of three-dimensional space and two-dimensional surface in earth art is a strategy by which artists re-define perception as receptivity. The recurrent assertion of a receptive surface, be it the bodily imprint, the photogram, or the framing of an installation, cues us to an insurmountable division between oneself and the earth. The elemental wells up in this division, mediating contact and sensibility. For earth artists, the alterity of the earth manifests and can be faced on the surface of the elemental. In its fluid dynamism, however, the elemental eludes the penetrating tactile and visual modes of a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. Artists therefore incorporate techniques by which the artwork receives and makes apparent the manifestation of the earth rather than seeking out and occupying through sensation.

My starting point in the last chapter was to suggest that natural and cultural processes feed forward and back into one another, that we locate ourselves not only in a network of discursive interplay but also in a nexus of the natural activity. How we sense and interpret that activity is another matter. For earth artists it is not enough to revel in an elemental plenum; there is always the risk that we subsume natural processes into a purely self-interested or solipsistic perceptual experience. Ethical contact requires an involution, a retraction from the

immersive experience, a turn to face the other, and the earth itself, across and through limits. The ethical imperative is received from beyond one's perceptual field and discursive frameworks. In earth art, the elemental not only yields the face of the earth, it is that which materializes ethics and stimulates sensation despite, and indeed because of, the other's excess and irreducibility.

Conclusion - *Whorls*

Chris Drury's installation, *Whorls* (Figures 51-53), executed in 2005 at Villa Montalvo in Saratoga, California, summarizes many of the aesthetic strategies and ethical aims of earth art that I have discussed in this dissertation. By way of conclusion, I will analyze this installation by relating it to my key arguments; specifically, that earth art denies a coherent perception of a site, that it does so by evidencing the impossibility of representing the earth as such, and that as an alternative to representation it proposes a mode of sensation based on contact with the earth's alterity. *Whorls* is composed of three parts: *Redwood Vortex* (Figures 51a-51b), a sculpture made of woven branches in the shape of a vortex turning around the trunk of a redwood tree on the grounds of the gallery; *Fingerprints* (Figure 52), several sets of enlarged fingerprint patterns applied to the walls of the gallery in two tones of red earth from the grounds of the Villa Montalvo; and *Sequoia Whirlpool* (Figure 53), a whirlpool pattern of sticks on a large rectangular bed of sequoia (redwood) needles (16' x 8' x 10') on the floor of the gallery. Each part of the installation expresses how physical sensation and natural processes are linked by common fluid dynamics. The work also suggests the impossibility of totalizing those processes into objects or images. The installation draws a parallel between the art object and the body, both of which are shown to stem from patterns of nature in motion.

Redwood Vortex, like Drury's previous work *Vortex,* at Lewes Castle, is a tenuously held open weave of branches. The sculpture is attached to a redwood tree at the point where its greenery begins and surrounds its trunk all the way to the ground. The armature both frames the tree and infers its vital activity within. Drury explains that the spiraling pattern of *Redwood Vortex* emulates the movement of sap up and around the tree trunk, stating that the installation aims to draw connections between the movement of fluids in the body and the movement of water on the earth. [1] In the same way Robert Smithson deployed the *Spiral*

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[1] www.chrisdrury.co.uk/

Figure 51a. Chris Drury, *Whorls – Redwood Vortex*, woven poplar branches, 60ft, Villa Montalvo Gallery, Saratoga, California, 2005.

Figure 51b. Chris Drury, *Whorls – Redwood Vortex*. Interior. 2005.

Jetty as a bridge to the site's primordial substance, Drury's sculpture shows that the driving force of the tree's growth is an underlying elemental fluid. Similarly, just as Smithson drew a parallel between the Great Salt Lake and amniotic fluid, Drury raises a comparison between the sap that pulses up the tree trunk, into branches and leaves, and blood which travels through veins and arteries in the body. The comparison between bodily fluids and elemental fluids, as we have seen, arises in many earth artworks. Ana Mendieta evokes the influx and outflow of blood, suggesting the interpenetration of the body and the earth, by lining one of her *Silueta* works with red pigment and letting it interact with the incoming tide. Ichi Ikeda conceives of water as a medium that sustains people and as a matrix that links people across boundaries and limits.

Earth art, however, is not simply concerned with making the statement that humans are interconnected to the earth, but more precisely, given these interconnections it poses the question of how to regard the earth ethically. A key approach has been to reveal the earth as a resistant presence within the artwork. Though artists situate the earth as the originary force and substance of the artwork, it manifests only insofar as it eludes that work. Early on in the earth art movement, for example, Smithson identified the site as an antediluvian ocean, a state of precognitive formlessness. The whirlpool shape of the *Spiral Jetty* expresses both the artwork's loss of its original state of continuity with the earth, and its perpetual quest to return to that origin.

Where Smithson uses the artwork as a mechanism to turn back time and retrieve its primordial origin, later earth artists open the possibility of confronting the earth in its ongoing rhythms of growth and change. In contemporary projects, the earth is not accessed via the artist's or the artwork's devolution into fluid, but rather in the artist's strategic instantiation of the artwork in friction with the site's transformations. The figure of the whirlpool reappears in different sculptural variations, among them black holes, twisters, shelters and nests. The sculptures of Andy Goldsworthy, Patrick Dougherty, Alfio Bonanno, Nils-Udo and other works

Figure 52. Chris Drury, *Whorls – Fingerprints* and *Sequoia Whirlpool*; *Fingerprints*- fingerprints on acetate projected onto wall and transcribed in two tones of red earth, Villa Montalvo Gallery, Saratoga, California, 2005.

Figure 53. Chris Drury, *Whorls – Sequoia Whirlpool*, detail, redwood sticks and needles on bed of sequoia needles, stone, 16 x 8 x 10 ft, Villa Montalvo Gallery, Saratoga, California, 2005.

by Chris Drury, are all situated in sites that are continually subject to natural transformation. The sculptures do not provide perceptual access to those intangible qualities of the site; rather, their figuration conveys the intertwining of the art object and the site, and the subsequent emptying out of the object. The sculpture expresses its ability to harness the dynamic energies of the site, however its emptiness discloses its incapacity to withhold those energies. The sculpture exists as a discarded husk, evacuated of the site's generative forces. By contrast to Smithson's jetty, then, the sculpture does not attempt to bridge with the primordial origin in the earth. Instead it indexes the earth as absent to the object, but nevertheless a vital and ongoing presence at the site.

The question of earth art is thus one of how to represent the earth without totalizing it or, otherwise put, of how to convey the wealth of sensations that exceed the artwork. As early as the *Spiral Jetty*, this question led Smithson to resort to multimedia strategies which, when combined, would elaborate the site's magnitude, and its excess beyond the parameters of a single art object and beyond even the possibility of representation. Because they were fragmentary, and essentially detached from the site, Smithson characterized the various modes of the *Spiral Jetty*, including the essay, the film and even the sculpture (in the sense that it could be read as an externally applied graphic impression) as textual. But although Smithson was concerned with exposing the loss of site at stake in the creation of a site-specific work, and he made an explicit parallel between the artwork and a chain of empty signifiers, the artist nevertheless encoded the *Spiral Jetty* with cues to the site's material persistence. The texts break apart at various points evidencing the site as an upsurge of fluid that destabilizes the coherence of the artwork. Smithson associates the locus of the site's uprising with a threshold to physical continuity with the earth, a move that aligns his work with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological model in which knowledge and perception are predicated on a precognitive state of material unity with the 'world flesh' and with unencumbered tactile access.

Luce Irigaray raises an important critique of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology that clarifies a particular shift in the mode of contact with the site in contemporary earth art. Irigaray notes that for Merleau-Ponty, perception is founded on a totalizing tactile grasp of the object of perception. Tactility becomes synonymous with a penetrating reach that is only ever fulfilled when it affirms what the subject already knows, rather than offering sensations of the unknown. Irigaray argues for the importance of retracting and acknowledging the excess of the other. The thematic of retraction or withdrawal from the earth, and the consequent reinvention of sensation, not as an avenue to knowledge but as an experience of the earth's alterity, founds new approaches to earth art practice. More than indexing the site as an expenditure of substance from the sculpture, many artists use forms of textual representation to elaborate the sensations of the site, as well as the resistance that these sensations pose to coherent perception. Andy Goldsworthy uses photography and narrative to isolate the site's manifestation into moments of outburst, when the site's force thwarts attempts to be gathered into an object or image. For Ana Mendieta, the photographic function (and the image itself), elaborates the performance of the body as a surface; photography posits a discontinuity, ejecting the performance from its immediacy with the site and registering it in fragmentary images, in the same way that the body, when performed as a *silueta,* applies itself against the earth, encountering it through its disjunction with the land. The textualization of tactile sensation affirms a certain inaccessibility of the object or the other.

Drury's *Fingerprints* encapsulates the relationship between the detachment of the textualized artwork, and a model of tactile sensation based on the resistance that alterity poses. Drury took twenty-four pairs of fingerprints, which were donated from friends of the gallery, put them on acetate and projected them on the walls, then transcribed them in two tones of soil. The artist states that the whorls of the fingerprints convey the way that messages from touch are

relayed to the brain through liquids in vortex movements.[2] Drury delineates tactile sensation, not as the assured exploration and penetration of the world of objects, but as a communication from outside that enters the fingertips and travels through the body in the medium of elemental fluids. The fingerprint does not mark an entryway into the earth, it marks a contact with it – quite literally since the artist inscribes the prints in soil. Sensation is received across the surface of the skin, rather than being taken, or perhaps more accurately, covered and stifled by the hand.

Receiving, as opposed to grasping, denotes an acknowledgement of the limits of the body's field of perception, and the earth's excess beyond it. It is thus an aesthetic mode conducive to an ethical stance, by which the earth is not reduced to human knowledge. By describing touch as the relay of messages, Drury clearly distinguishes between the body and the earth, and locates sensation as the passage between oneself and the irreducible other. However, he implicates the 'messages' of sensation in the same losses and reconfigurations of meaning that underlie all language. In the same way that text, for Smithson, is subject to fragment and lose coherence, the fingerprint shows that sensation is carried on the tumultuous currents of the earth's fluidity; it does not pave an avenue into the certainty of tangible objects. Rather, sensation is transient and malleable, revealing the earth as an enigmatic presence.

Textual and pictorial modes of art, no less than sculpture or performance, open the possibility that the artwork prompt the sensation of otherness. Susan Derges' photograms, for example, elaborate the process of photography as an act of making tactile contact with the site. The photogram, like Drury's *Fingerprints*, evokes the pressure between surfaces - in Derges' case between the photogram paper and the site. The image results from both the transference of sensation and the site's resistance to the pictorial surface. This image, which I discussed through the notion of the face, is a withdrawn manifestation of the earth. Derges'

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[2] www.chrisdrury.co.uk/

photograms convey the site as a countenance – the image allows the site to be perceived as a presence, but at the same time betrays the transience and imminent dispersal of that presence. I discussed the photogram as a device by which the artist provides a receptive surface on which the site can appear. We might similarly read Drury's *Fingerprints* as a surface on which the site's dynamism is assembled into an enigmatic image, though this operation does not take place through the literal contact between the pictorial surface and the site. In connecting the patterns of the fingerprint to vortices of liquid as it flows up towards the brain, Drury links the images on the gallery wall to the sculpture *Redwood Vortex* outside. *Fingerprints* offers a cross-section of the tree trunk and the imagined upward movement of sap, and parallels the elemental fluid of the tree to the elemental fluid of the body. Drury translates the sensations of the tree that were undoubtedly at play in the fabrication of the sculpture, into a pictorial surface that both captures the tree as a pulsing circulatory system and thematizes touch as his own contact with that pulse.

The correspondence between the thematic of sensations that remain incomprehensible, and the outburst of natural energies that we can describe, as the site's face, appears in Jackie Brookner's installations. In the same way that Brookner deploys the sculptural object as a surface on which nature can appear and flourish, Drury uses the sculptural object and the pictorial surface co-extensively to convey the sensations of the site in its perpetual transformation, and allow it to remain unknown. Interestingly, Brookner's biosculptures are shaped like giant body parts, and in particular sense-organs such as hands or the tongue. The façades of the sculptures, which continuously grow and change, illustrate natural regeneration as uprisings of sensation. Moreover, the sculptures propose sensation in a particular mode, as occurring through the resistance between surfaces, in the receiving of information across the division between oneself and the other. The manifestation of the face of the earth becomes synonymous with the blossoming of the tangible object into disordered growth

and change, and concurrently the dispersal of coherence into open-ended sensation.

Brookner's biosculptures have another commonality with Drury's *Whorls* insofar as both artists mobilize body parts and construe them as natural phenomena in order to reposition the body in relation to the earth. Where Drury's *Fingerprints* draws together touch, the transmission of sensation, and the pulsing of sap in a tree, *Sequoia Whirlpool* takes up the engines of fluid dynamism, metaphorically aligning the human heart with the redwood tree. The artist composed *Sequoia Whirlpool* not only to reiterate the vortex pattern of liquid in blood and in sap, but also to accord this shape with the human heart. Specifically, the work maps out a planar view of the cardiac twist, the formation of tissue at the apex of the heart. The tissue of the heart, Drury explains, is formed by the spiraling flow of blood that is pulled in from the periphery and pushed out again.[3] The bed of tree needles that turn into a vortex, spinning in a circle and then seemingly disappearing into a hole, emulates the heart's intake of blood. Instead of staging the output of blood, however, Drury places a hard stone beside the hole of the vortex, marking with it the place where blood is returned to the body. The stone stands in for what would be a burst of blood-flow as the heart pushes it back out. The layout of the bed of needles, a vortex situated beside a stone, forms a cross-section of a heartbeat. In this sense, *Sequoia Whirlpool* is a text: it maps the nucleus of activity of the body, and equally that of the redwood tree outside. The pattern of the heartbeat, when mapped out, is the same as that of the fingerprint when it touches a surface, and of the tree as it draws water from the ground through its roots and pumps sap upward.

Sequoia Whirlpool also reveals a play between fluid and solid matter. Although the stone may be read as the locus of the outpouring of blood from the heart, it could also be viewed as an emblem of the redwood tree, the human body, or more broadly, the sculptural object in earth art. The stone is the crystallized

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[3] www.chrisdrury.co.uk/

sediment ejected from the swirling natural fluxes delineated by the needles. As a figure of the body, the stone emerges out of the generative force of the vortex, but ultimately stands beside and in tension with it. The indication of its origination in the subterranean realm within the earth registers only as a pocket of resistance in the pictorial text – from a flatbed perspective the needles disappear into unseen territory. When viewed from a horizontal plane, the space that unites and sets apart the stone and the black hole (and accordingly, the body and its lost origin in the earth) is constituted and charged by vital elements - the needles that infer blood, sap or water. *Sequoia Whirlpool* allegorizes the stone's emergence as a turn against these elemental currents. This involution resulted in the vortex, the opening of an aperture to the earth's depths, from which the stone sprang. This scene also explicates the dawning of a constitutive rupture with the earth and with this the onset of sensation. The stone is set apart from the black hole and yet exists in its orbit, surrounded by elemental flows but in its stolidity confronting those flows. It encompasses the locus of touch that *Fingerprints* evokes, the massive tree trunk around which sap circles in *Redwood Vortex*, and the fleshy tissue of the cardiac twist that sections the heart into compartments and which is the metaphor governing the three works that *Whorls* compiles.

The allegory of the stone and the black hole discloses the impetus to reinforce the inextricability of our sensations of the earth from the discursive web that orients knowledge. Like Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, *Sequoia Whirlpool* exemplifies the fact that insofar as the art object materializes meaning, it is subtended by the earth and draws from its division from it. This is not evident, however, without reading the object as a material text – in the case of *Sequoia Whirlpool*, the object is positioned on a horizontal plane and only then seen in relation to the underlying vitality from which it issued. The crucial point is that the division between the art object and the elemental earth gives rise to sensation, and specifically to an awareness of the earth's sublimity. Concurrently, the earth divides the words we might affix to the meaning of the artwork and opens the weave of language to its material basis. From these sensations of the earth's

alterity, and not from abstraction, arise the infinite possibilities of the discursive realm.

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