

20 Robert Smithson's Pursuit: Mapping some Traces of Remnants

Nils Plath

School of Design, University of Applied Sciences, Münster, Germany

*... all the maps you have are useless, all this work of discovery and surveying;
you have to start off at random, like the first man on earth;
you risk dying of hunger a few miles from the richest stores. ...*

Butor 1996

Abstract

In drawing close attention to selected works by artist Robert Smithson and filmmaker James Benning, this essay deals with questions of remaining and recollection in landscape, art works, and literary texts. In the view expressed here, mainly with reference to Smithson's lesser known map works and to Benning's film on his art work Spiral Jetty in the Great Salt Lake in Utah, the perception of space and time – that is, landscape as we see it – always begins and ends with a map. Meaning, with a representation in mind. This is so because we learned to read maps in some other place, somewhere else than the place we are when we find ourselves consulting them at a later point in time. Thus, the use of maps can be viewed and interpreted as a practice of re-reading.

20.1 Remains to begin with

What is left to say, when confronted with the unattainable goal of marking certitudes on maps, of labeling what is inscribed in them as new or old world orders, destined to fail over the course of centuries? After all, time makes all of the age-old results of discovery and surveying look like forms of fiction in the end.

Fictions do not transmute that easily into history, of course, even if everlasting boundaries between the two realms cannot be drawn. Is the reverse also true for history that claims not to be fictional?

Some reassuring assertions will serve as a point of departure for the following remarks, which aim to address attempts at mapping and cartography:

Wherever maps are displayed, histories are unfolded. Maps tell numerous, most often conflicting, stories of appropriation and exploitation. Maps are signs of multiple relationships. As time pieces, maps furnish particulars about time and its observations; they show how these correlate with the process of establishing locations, through which time itself is framed in turn. Maps make it possible to see how connections are established between the presumptions behind the process of representation and the things represented by the historical modes of representation that they embody. Although legible through cultural mediation and for the purposes of orientation, maps as works in progress cannot be totally permeable in any given context; neither can they be exhaustively interpreted. Nor can they remain decorative artifacts in the display cases of new practices of historical interpretation. These assumptions require that some readings be continued.

The key task of mapmaking has long been regarded as the delivery of knowledge for the purpose of orientation. As numerous examples from throughout the course of history prove, maps may be imprecise due to incorrect measurements or formats, or the deliberate or visually necessary falsification of perspectives. Again and again, the ability of maps to reproduce reality is revealed as temptingly truthful, yet this claim to be truthful is but a mere pretense. Still, regardless of whether a map is read or interpreted as an image or as an instrument, as a narrative or a document, it continues to convey a measure of knowledge concerning cultural orientation. The type of orientation it illustrates affects both space and time equally and simultaneously: both are inseparably related, and no so-called spatial turns in cultural discourses can dissolve the reciprocal relationship between them. Maps testify to the materiality of what they claim to depict; as images of places they claim to represent, they literally put these places in the hands of the reader.

Since they are put forth as narratives, the mediatized landscape depicted – although only captured in a formal sense – appears to be a section of the world at large, more than just a means of transport or a vehicle for representation, exchange, and communication: it historicizes not only the ways that landscape is used, but also the ways it is read. A map, when it is viewed, tells of this, right in front of (and in) the eye of the reader. Throughout history, maps have been archives of legible time, and in the history of art, they are assured a prominent position in more than one spot along the timeline.

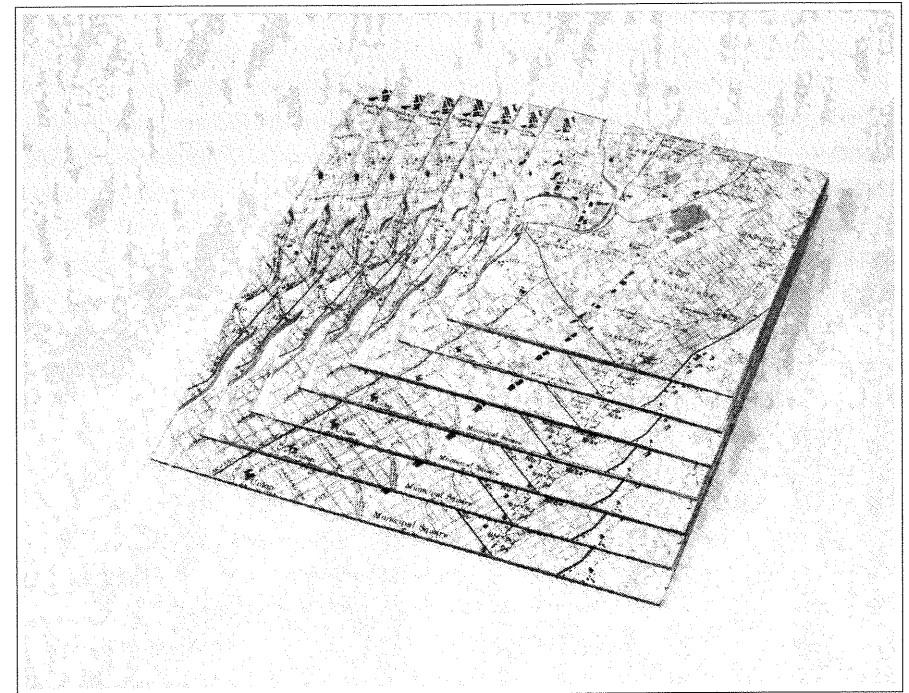


Fig. 20.1. Robert Smithson: *Untitled (Map on Mirror – Passaic, New Jersey)*, 1967

20.2 Mediations and Materialities revisited

Following the introductory citation here, which is taken from the novel *Degrees* by French writer Michel Butor, there is a section titled “Mapscapes or Cartographic Sites.” It starts with one of the many essays by the late American artist Robert Smithson: “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,” originally published in the March 1968 issue of *Art International*. A glance at a quote in this text takes us back to the nineteen-sixties, to the heart of the discussion concerning two topics in particular: one, how to determine if an artist’s work really can be classified as a work of art; and two, the issue of reading and interpreting the phenomenal world. In all areas of life, the latter was usually first considered a secondary, mediated experience, a substitute for a general encounter with the void. At the same time, Smithson’s words describe the conditions under which, as he saw it, the art of his day was produced. He characterizes the artist as a “site-seer” faced with an omnipresent, “absolute void in time,” with the overall disintegration of nature into “an infinite series of movie ‘stills’.” The artist is looking for a fiction “that reality will sooner or later imitate.” (Smithson 1967)

Smithson writes:

From Theatrum Orbis Terrarum of Orrelius (1570) to the '[p]aint'-clogged maps of Jasper Johns, the map has exercised a fascination over the minds of artists. A cartography of uninhabitable places seems to be developing—complete with decoy diagrams, abstract grid systems made of stone and tape (Carl Andre and Sol Le Witt), and electronic 'Mosaic' photomaps from NASA. Gallery floors are being turned into collections of parallels and meridians. (Smithson 1967, p. 91)

The obvious density of these few lines – in which Smithson links the situation in his day to history and manifest promises of a future to come – remains challenging for those currently attempting to understand maps and art. Smithson mentions the fascination that maps and technology alike have held for artists in every era. And as he knows, maps do appear on the pages of literature, too. As Smithson reminds us in his essay, a map makes a prominent appearance in Lewis Carroll's famous poem "The Hunting of the Snark." The map depicted in Carroll's piece shows "nothing," and yet, because it has a frame, this map of "nothing" actually makes the "nothing" visible, for it illustrates the object recalling the written framework that determines every map. However, in the last of Carroll's novels, the reverse is true. According to Smithson, Sylvie and Bruno talks about a map that contains "everything":

In Chapter 11, a German Professor tells how his country's cartographers experimented with larger and larger maps until they finally made one with a scale of a mile to a mile. One could very well see the Professor's explanation as a parable on the fate of painting since the 50s. Perhaps museums and galleries should start planning square mile interiors. The Professor said, 'It has never been spread out, yet. The farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So now we use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well. (Smithson 1967, p. 93)

Obviously, Smithson applies the interest in representation and its imaginary effect on the order of things to the way the viewer sees himself with regard to maps as illustrative references in texts. He insists that the ultimate determinant is the missing center, for a missing center implies the lack of a gravitational center, as well as points of reference that can be used for orientation: "Where is the central point, axis, pole, dominant interest, fixed position, absolute structure, or decided goal? The mind is always being hurled towards the outer edge into intractable trajectories that lead to vertigo." (Smithson 1967, p. 95)

An imaginative notion like Carroll's – of the map as a palimpsest of the world, as a reproduction of empirical space that could potentially cover an entire country, the unfolding and spreading of which provokes the inhabitants of the country involved in farming and ranching to object to this kind of academic production of reality – must have pleased Smithson the artist. After all, his work was about unfolding and spreading out standards; it was about constructing perspective, and allowing the critical eye to examine given formats and claims to property; he made unexpected

analogies and created references in order to both expand and destabilize these things, too: on paper as well as in the so-called outdoor space, the gallery, or film. To do this, he shifted around sand, dirt, stones, trees, mirrors, words.

Smithson's works and words implement and reveal the frames of narrative, giving them their designated space by avoiding a central perspective and employing (sometimes speculatively or satirically) different modes of discursive language to articulate key questions about ways of mapping descriptions and the use of directional aids – in this case, art and the map. Because of this, Smithson's works are simultaneously articulations and disarticulations of fixed points of orientation and reference in reading, which – because scholars perceive and thus appropriate a work in different ways – normally assign points of view to those reading maps and their legends. This is the case, not only when a work is first viewed, but also later, when art historians position and classify a work in the context of art history. When one returns to it, in other words. In Smithson's works, maps are references to a world that is abstractly illustrated and defined by those who have a stake in evaluating it. Cut up and mounted, and yet more than just simple references to William Burroughs's cut-up collages for instance, folded, in one case at least, to make an allusion to contemporary artistic styles of the time, Smithson's maps can be viewed as complex reflections upon the usability and the usage value of representations at large.

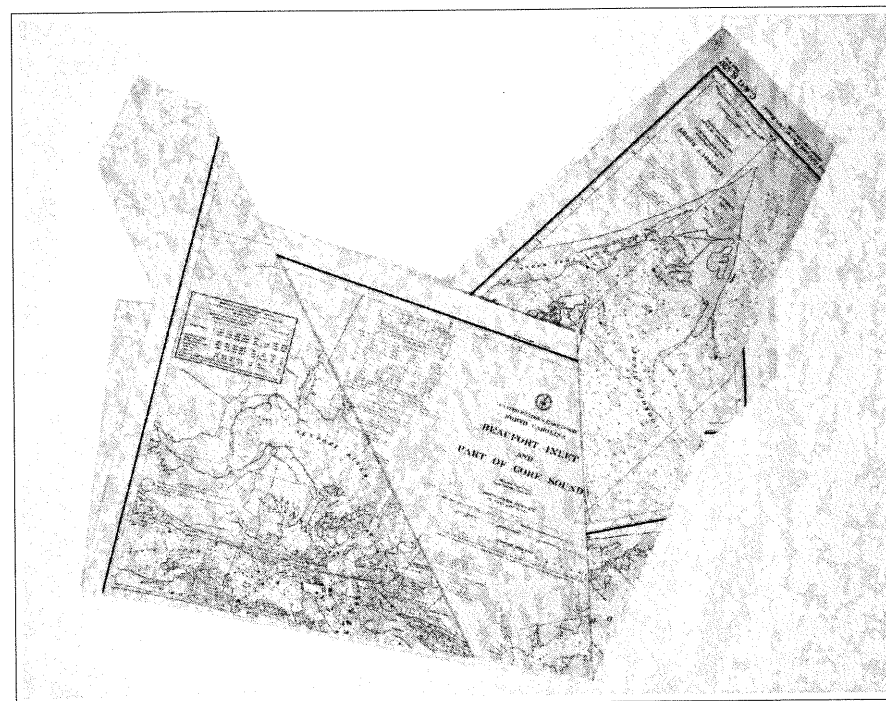


Fig. 20.2. Robert Smithson: Untitled (Folded Map of Beaufort Islet, Map 16), ca. 1967

Instrumentalized as material that will contain or support content, as a subordinate visual element, as a supplement to something else, or as eye candy, maps seem to identify a kind of viewpoint of a world marked by usage. This perspective is clearly fascinated with the prospect of inventorying these phenomena, including the conditions required for their creation, in abstract ways and in anticipation of the Structuralist analysis and controversy that broke ground globally a short while after Smithson's demise. This process is one of appropriation, accomplished by creating catalogues of patterns, like the ones made as an industrial product (see Dan Graham's typology of suburban row houses in New Jersey, to which Smithson refers several times in his writings, and Ed Ruscha's serial photographs of buildings along Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, also cited by Smithson). However, this process of classification and categorization is answered in turn by an original impulse to create disorder.

It can be asserted that Smithson's fundamental belief – that objects or phenomena of the material world and the notions they came to represent over time in various discourses – are only of temporal value. Thus, all of the historical order of what was called cultural history will be subject to decay and evanescence. This explains Smithson's lifelong fascination with traces of primeval history, its sorting, classification, and presentation in museums of natural history and printed works.

In an essay on cinema Smithson explains why he mistrusts an enduring assumption on which every order relies – especially the assumption that locations and their representations manifest something already represented in a different medium at a different time some place else:

There is nothing more tentative than an established order. What we take to be the most concrete or solid often turns into a concatenation of the unexpected. Any order can be reordered. What seems to be without order often turns out to be highly ordered. By isolating the unstable thing, we can arrive at some kind of coherent, at least for a while. The simple rectangle of the movie screen contains the flux, no matter how many different orders one presents. But no sooner have we fixed the order in our mind that it dissolves into limbo. Tangled jungles, blind paths, secret passages, lost cities invade our perception. The sites in films are not to be located or trusted. All is out of proportion. Scale inflates or deflates into uneasy dimensions. We wonder between the towering and the bottomless. We are lost between the abyss within us and the boundless horizons outside us. (Smithson 1971)

Drawn to the ambivalence of paradoxes, Smithson's words and works mirror something Deleuze and Guattari would have called re-territorialization. With the expected results: Although they engage in the process of destroying illusions, Smithson's works also create their own illusions. They are entirely products of their time, critical of ideologies and institutions, artistic in their critique of artistic concepts – and as such, they have become models for later generations of artists. Smithson's works, densely interconnected and rich with references, are transformed into re-mythologized surfaces, upon which further appropriations in altered contexts are projected.

Just as they destroyed myths, these works, with their long half-lives, created one of the late twentieth century's most successful myths about the process of creating art.

A brief hunt for traces and remnants in written and visual images shed light on some modes of perception that need to be recounted in an act of interpretation or translation. This is a way to examine references in Smithson's work that go beyond what is visible; a way to begin telling a tale that can only be briefly alluded to here by presenting what can be seen at first and second glance.

*Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly,
there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap.*

Beckett 1974

20.3 Landscape and Language

This narrative will have to be condensed to just a few aspects. Just as all maps testify to limitations and selectivity, as well as to the relationship between universalism and particularism in general, these aspects are intended to do nothing more than shape a framework for reflection, where we undertake to situate everything: a process of translation. In looking at the maps, one notices the materiality of the words and works, and this materiality indicates the fact that the human being, who always appears to be absent in Smithson's works, consistently leaves behind a variety of traces, both in language and in his environment. And this attests to the fact that he has continually attempted to recognize and interpret linguistic similarities in the wilderness, in the starry sky. Smithson's exploration of an environment determined by entropic processes can probably be called obsessive, and his exploration of things within contexts existing outside the temporality of the individual was more than just a superficial critique of the ideological gestures of his day. In his own words, they were "drillings" or "borings" that produced ground samples and had their own esthetic value.

The wide-ranging repercussions of this are described by Smithson in an essay written for the magazine "Landscape Architecture" and published in April 1968. He sketches out what he calls an "esthetic method," which brings together anthropology and linguistics with regard to the "building":

Boring, if seen as a discrete step in the development of an entire site, has an esthetic value. It is an invisible hole. [...] All language becomes an alphabet of sites. The boring, like other works, is becoming more and more important to artists. Pavements, holes, trenches, mounds, heaps, paths, ditches, roads, terraces, etc., all have an esthetic potential. [...] By extracting from a site certain associations

that have remained invisible within the old framework of rational language, by dealing directly with the appearance of what Roland Barthes calls 'the simulacrum of the object,' the aim is to reconstruct a new type of 'Building' into a whole that engenders new meanings. From the linguistic point of view, one establishes rules of structure based on a change in the semantics of building. (Smithson 1968a, pp. 95 and 96)

As well as in the semantics of mapping, one might add. The plan for the landscape has to be rewritten – according to Smithson's statement, which was informed by early Structuralist writings and later considered premature post-structuralism – by means of establishing a fundamental change in perception.

Accordingly, Smithson's land inscriptions – his earth works such as the Spiral Jetty in Utah, the Amarillo Ramp in Texas, or the Broken Circle in Holland – should not be regarded as monuments intended to remain static, but as objects whose expiration dates and decay are inherent. This is demonstrated, for instance, in Partially Buried Woodshed (1970), a work installed on the campus of Kent State University, which actually did collapse (and became a landmark, commemorating the four students killed by the National Guard in an anti-war demonstration on May 4, 1970). Instead, these works on mapping are allegories written into a world that is perceived as a map. These repeated inscriptions of written language into the environment are primarily remnants of acts of orientation, performed as acts of writing oneself into a language meant to be a testimony to the will to create, the will to leave behind traces as documents of the finality and transitory nature of everything in the world. Even the most impressive building projects represent more than mere functionality when they are regarded and interpreted not only as inscriptions of certain languages (the language of architecture being only one of many other languages), but also as inscriptions of the will to communicate over the course of time.

How, then, can landscape and maps be perceived, interpreted, read? When and where? As work or writing? Since we are confronted with these questions whenever we look at Smithson's pieces, one can see them as indeterminate leftovers, remnants, and reminders of the plurality of perspectives that make a work and give

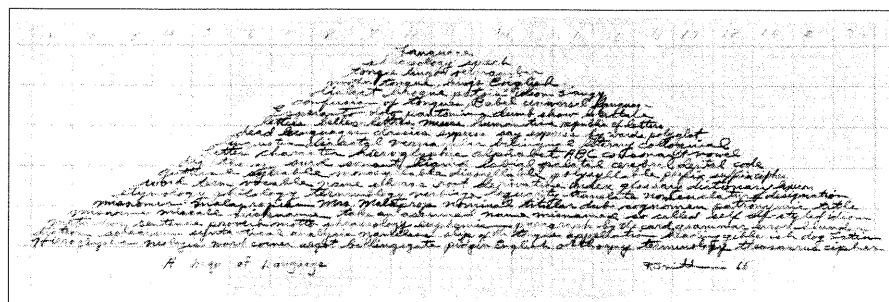


Fig. 20.3. Robert Smithson: A Heap of Language, 1966

it its multiple identities. Yet Smithson himself – who, after his premature death in 1973, was remembered mainly for his Land Art – supplies us with an answer to all of these questions, in the form of a work that is rather fragile in comparison to the massive sites where he left his handwriting on the map. The work is a delicate pencil drawing, entitled Heap of Language. It depicts a pyramid made up of linguistic terms: words that are key terms or that form an instruction manual for texts and literature. One can decipher words and terms such as “confusion of tongues,” “Babel,” “belles lettres,” “bilingual,” “name phrase root,” “hieroglyphic,” and so on. “Like so many of Smithson's pieces,” says a well-informed commentary on the work by Gary Shapiro, “it forces us to attend to the way in which it transgresses the presumed boundary between work and text. It asks whether all work consists of writing and whether all writing is matter to be arranged.” (Shapiro 1995, p. 157) If language can be built up into a mute heap or pyramid, says the commentary, then “...the geological strata can be read as lines or paragraphs that constitute a text.” (Shapiro 1995, p. 160)

To come to a quote from Smithson:

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 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 are entombed in the earth's crust. When one scans the ruined sites of prehistory one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits. (Smithson 1968a p. 89, quoted in Shapiro, p. 160)

This is precisely what is shown in the maps incorporated into Smithson's works on paper. They mean for us to take away ideas that affect both our shared and our uniquely individual ways of seeing and orienting things in space and time. For Smithson, the cartography of space and time is a consequence of travel, of the process of locating particular places, the result of scanning the landscape, comprehending it through the use of maps and by actually being on location. The definition of outside and inside thus becomes a process of delimitation through the perception of time and space – two phenomena that can only be perceived as representations, anyway. An interviewer once asked Smithson: “Do you actually denote the boundaries? Like you draw a map of a particular square and constrain yourself from traveling other routes?” Smithson answered: “No, first I find the sites. Then I draw the squares. I'm scanning the physical material before I start to set up the plan; in other words, the map layout follows the scanning. It's not reconceived, so that it's discovered rather than pinpointed.” (Smithson 1968b)

In one of his many articles that complement – or rather, should not be separated from the works, since both testify to his enduring interest in question about time, entropy, and finitude – Smithson registers the materiality of words that manifests in their fragmentary character:

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 rupture. 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. This discomfoting language of fragmentation offers no easy gestalt solution; the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle. Poetry being forever lost must submit to its own vacuity; it is somehow a product of exhaustion rather than creation. Poetry is always a dying language but never a dead language. (Smithson 1968c, p. 107)

Smithson seems affected by the fact that one can encounter a form of language in any landscape and its elements. The construction of landscape – through the succession of the landscape painters who first used this term, adopted into the English language from the Dutch – has to assume the existence of a language, if the aim is to connect oneself and landscape's various elements in order to make a whole. Getting down to the essence of denoting things, one has to come to a realization: that things contain, in Smithson's words, their "own void." No "gestalt solution" can make this uneasiness and discomfort go away, or master the "discomfoting language of fragmentation."

20.4 Moving Images of Time

Maps and depictions of landscape incorporated by the viewer can be recovered in narratives that tell the story of their historical production, which bears witness to the loss and gain of orientation in and through language. James Benning is an American filmmaker well-known to European cineastes who are interested in avant-garde film beyond Structuralism. His landscape films can be described as cartography in moving images, so we might look to his work to deliver this type of narrative. Benning remembered and described his first trip, made in 1989, to Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, located in Utah's Salt Lake. While being on the road with Dick Hebdige, who kept a travel log of their trip, Benning tells of his first encounter with the work, which inspired some of his works, including his penultimate film to date, *Casting A Glance*. The story is a two-fold reading of a map, one might say. On the one hand, it was the reading of maps – or non-existent maps – that led Benning to Smithson's enormous Land Art piece, or rather, led him astray on his way to the work. On the other hand, the narrative is a reading of the landscape itself, interpreted as a map: as a man-made perspective of space, centuries in the making, and infinite, while Smithson's work is an inscription on this perspective. Taking into consideration Benning's film on the Spiral Jetty, *Casting A Glance* (2007), one can even hear three different readings of maps when listening to Benning's narrative.



Fig. 20.4. Film still from James Benning: *Casting A Glance* (2007), filmed at the Spiral Jetty on Rozel Point in the Great Salt Lake, Utah

Traveling through the country in the late nineteen-eighties, Benning decided to pay a visit to Smithson's work. At the time, the Spiral Jetty was under water, largely forgotten by the art world. Benning did not have a map to find it, so he had to rely upon his memory of the description Smithson himself had given in order to find the jetty. Without a map, he recounted to himself Smithson's notes on how to find the path. The park service did not give out maps of the location at the time, and there were certainly no art tourists making pilgrimages to the site, so Benning could not find the original jetty, which he considers to be a main influence on his own films, or "in any case, for *Deseret*, in which the Jetty appears three times." He captured the wrong site with his camera, and even used the footage later to document his trip in one of his films. (Hebdige 2007, p. 144) In his conversation with Hebdige, Benning talks about how he missed Smithson's Spiral the first time: "And when I came back to film *North on Evers* it was still under water, not exposed like it was today ... When I came back I realized straightaway it wasn't even the Spiral Jetty I'd walked along the first time but the commercial jetty ... you saw how it goes way, way out into the lake and then kind of curves a little at the end." All of these things – the way he missed it, his capturing the wrong site, the void, the disorientation – became constitutive elements of the narrative in which, once again, depictions of landscape are told as stories about claims to possession and use. They make us see landscape

as an on-going process of re-telling; they document landscape as something that will never be fully or exhaustively mapped, as something that leaves behind its remains, as a leftover, a void, a trace, a reminder of the passage of time, whose task it is to mark a certain spot in a very idealized space.

One can assume that this is the point that interests those who author the history of cartography with their arsenals of moving and still images of landscape. Smithson himself claimed that his film on the Spiral Jetty was part of the work he placed into the landscape – the Salt Lake. This means that it is difficult to say where the work as a work should be positioned. If, in the case of the Spiral Jetty, the work is a film, an object in a specific location, or an essay on the pages of a magazine. This uncertainty, as to how to view the “works,” as well as the fact that it is impossible for the works to be a totality (and thus be perceived as such), are also what make the works so appealing to those who reflect upon the frames and framework in which narratives of space and time unroll. There seems no place imaginable where it would be possible to collectively grasp and experience landscape without a narratological consciousness, meaning, the consciousness that stories are told when we look at maps. In the view expressed here, the perception of space and time – that is, landscape as we see it – always begins and ends with a map. Meaning, with a representation in mind. This is so because we learned to read maps in some other place, somewhere else than the place we are when we find ourselves consulting them at a later point in time. When reading a map, our stories and histories lead us back and forth, toward and around places we are not, right at the moment in which we are engaged in the process of orienting ourselves in the place we actually are: movie theaters, studies, galleries, libraries, lecture halls, or the pages of a book.

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William Cartwright · Georg Gartner ·
Antje Lehn (Eds.)

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Editors

Prof. Dr. Dr. William Cartwright
RMIT University
School of Mathematical and
Geospatial Sciences
Melbourne VIC 3000
Australia
william.cartwright@rmit.edu.au

Prof. Georg Gartner
Vienna University of Technology
Institute of Geoinformation and
Cartography
Erzherzog-Johannplatz 1
A-1040 Vienna
Austria
georg.gartner@tuwien.ac.at

Dr. Antje Lehn
Akademie der Bildenden
Künste Wien
Schillerplatz 3
A-1010 Vienna
Austria
a.lehn@akbild.ac.at

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