This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced manuscript of a review article accepted for publication in *The Art Book* following peer review. The definitive version is Dominic Rahtz, ‘Jennifer L. Roberts, *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History*’ [book review], *The Art Book*, vol. 12, no. 1 (February 2005), pp. 41-2 at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8357.2005.00506.x

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MIRROR-TRAVELS: ROBERT SMITHSON AND HISTORY

JENNIFER L. ROBERTS

Yale University Press 2004 £30.00 $40.00

176pp 10 col/70 mono illus

ISBN 0-300-09497-3

Thirty years after Robert Smithson’s accidental death in 1973 his importance can be measured by the fact that in the last year or so three university press monographs on his work have appeared (including the present book). These, and the publication accompanying the major retrospective currently touring the museums of contemporary art in the United States, add to an already substantial body of written material. This body of writings has at its centre Smithson’s own *Collected Writings*, which first appeared posthumously in 1979, edited by his wife Nancy Holt. The review of this book by Craig Owens published in the journal *October* in the same year, and the centrality of Smithson in Owens’ influential essay of 1980, ‘The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism’ (also published in *October*), mark the beginning of the strong reading of Smithson’s work as paradigmatically post-modernist, an interpretation with which any subsequent reading has to contend.

Jennifer L. Roberts, in her book *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, is aware of this and also of the need to distinguish her own approach. She is critical of the way that many accounts of Smithson’s post-modernism focus too narrowly on his opposition to high modernist criticism. For Roberts this tends to exclude a broader conception of history that she argues was an essential part of Smithson’s own thinking. This stress on history means that Roberts does not deal with the full scope of Smithson’s work, tending to leave out of account the so-called ‘quasi-Minimalist’ sculptures of the mid 1960s, for instance, or the innovative series of ‘Nonsites’, begun in 1968, works that are less useful for her thesis. In this respect her book can be seen as a kind of foil to Ann Reynolds’ *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press, 2003) which tends to place more emphasis on the structuralist aspects of Smithson’s practice, and hence discusses just those works that Roberts excludes.

Roberts is concerned not only with elucidating Smithson’s idiosyncratic conception of history, but also with analyzing and evaluating the ways that this conception was realized in his work—especially the site-specific work—as it encountered and refigured actual historical material. The relationship between Robert Smithson and history is thus constituted at several different levels. There is Smithson’s own conception of history, the actual historical material he encountered, and finally the historical value of his work on this material. The second chapter is the key chapter of the book. Here Roberts lays out what she takes to be the distinctive character of Smithson’s conception of historical time, which is not conceived in its usual narrative terms as a sequence of events but rather as a purely material process of accretion. This process is governed by an entropic principle which means that it tends towards a final condition of equilibrium. The principal metaphor employed by Smithson to suggest this process was that of crystal formation, and Roberts draws attention not only to Smithson’s frequent references in his writings to contemporary literature on crystallography, but also to the way that he saw contemporary art, particularly Minimal Art and his own work between about 1964 and 1968, in terms of crystalline structure. The most important feature of Smithson’s crystal formation theory of history was the way it incorporated the condition of stasis. The time of history was seen not as a continuously flowing stream but as a series of frozen states, in each of which was manifested an “extratemporal” dimension of history. Roberts argues (although I think she makes too much of this) that this interest in the suprahistorical in the historical, the eternal in the temporal, was a continuation of the overtly religious concerns of Smithson’s paintings of the early 1960s, a period of Smithson’s career discussed in the first chapter.

Mirroring (or enantiomorphism, as it is termed in crystallography) was a formal scheme frequently employed by Smithson in his work, and one of the particular areas of interest in Roberts’ book lies in the way she extends this figure to apply to Smithson’s theory of history. Just as mirrors are used in a work like *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1964) as a means by which vision is articulated rather than things which are themselves seen, so in historical terms the mirror figures as the still-point, or absence of history, that nevertheless articulates the relationship between historical past and future. An example of how this is manifested in Smithson’s work is discussed in chapter 3, which analyzes Smithson’s ‘The Monuments of Passaic’ (published in *Artforum* in 1967), a photographic and textual record of one of several excursions made by Smithson in his native New Jersey. As Roberts describes, this work represents the civil engineering projects being built in the city of Passaic as mirror images of its industrial decline, or as, in Smithson’s phrase, “ruins in reverse”. Rather than the figure of the mirror functioning as a disarticulating principle, and hence comparable to strategies characteristic of a post-structuralist post-modernism, Roberts argues that for Smithson it functioned much more as a transcendent realm encompassing all possible perspectives. One of the effects of this elision of perspectives, however, tended to be the dissolution of any politics of difference. In the case of Passaic, this meant ignoring its recent history of racial tensions. In the case of Smithson’s ‘Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan’ (published in *Artforum* in 1969, and the topic of chapter 4 in Roberts’ book), this meant indirectly affirming the Western ideology that imputed a ‘primitive’ timeless consciousness to the indigenous population of the area. Roberts’ complaint is that, for all of Smithson’s enantiomorphic subversions of traditional historical narratives, the perspectiveless indifference implicit in his theory of history corresponds to a political indifference. Her verdict is more ambivalent in the case of Smithson’s famous ‘earthwork’, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), the subject of her final chapter. She views the emphasis in the *Jetty* on the materiality of its making as implicitly critical of the progressive and commemorative version of history seen in the nearby Golden Spike National Historic Site (where the first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869). At the same time, however, this materiality takes on the detached, suprahistorical dimension characteristic of Smithson’s entropic view of history and thereby transcends all politics of opposition.

The value of Roberts’ book lies in the questions it asks of Smithson’s practice that have not been asked so far. In particular it asks the question of the value of history in his practice, seeking to set the more abstract conception of history espoused by him against the actual historical material he encountered, so as to determine the historical character of his response and also to provide a counter-view to the historically narrow characterization of him as a post-modernist. There are theoretical difficulties, however, with seeking to present a view of history as itself historical, and one of these is the question of the historical definition of the interpreter’s own view of history. The consequence of asking this question (which Roberts is not unaware of) could only be the sort of ‘post-structuralist’ *mise en abyme* from which Roberts has tried to escape in her own analysis.