

“WHERE REMOTE FUTURES MEET REMOTE PASTS”:

CONTEMPORARY AND PREHISTORIC EARTH ART

by

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(Under the Direction of Evan Firestone)

### ABSTRACT

The resemblance of the earthworks of Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and other earth artists of the 1960s and 1970s to the prehistoric earth mounds of Eastern North America is almost universally acknowledged, even in the most general survey books on the history of art. Few art historians, however, have attempted to explain the full significance of this resemblance. In this thesis, I argue that Smithson and Heizer used forms and materials that recalled those of prehistoric times as part of a conscious reaction against the modernizing tendencies of the formalist avant-garde led by the critic Clement Greenberg, as well its underlying modernist worldview. This worldview included a belief in the unlimited potential for human progress, but the earth artists' worldview, as shown in Smithson's writings, corresponded with the ideas of entropy theorists, who believed that “progress” was merely a speeding up of the dissipation of energy in the universe. Many of these entropy theorists, such as Jeremy Rifkin, argued for a return to a simpler, more energy-efficient lifestyle. By drawing on ideas of prehistoric art, Smithson and Heizer could do their part to bring about a low-entropy society.

INDEX WORDS: art, art history, 20<sup>th</sup> century art, modern art, contemporary art, Earth Art, earth artists, earthworks, prehistoric art, mounds, earth mounds, Indian

mounds, prehistoric mounds, entropy, entropy theory, Robert Smithson,  
Michael Heizer, postmodernism

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## DEDICATION

To my dearest Mary Ann, who is an inspiration to me always.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the most noticeable aspects of the works of Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer is their resemblance to America's prehistoric mounds built by native peoples of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, as well as the American Southeast. This connection is standard fare in art history survey textbooks, which attempt to find continuity in the long and complex history of art. In their *History of Art*, H. W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson state that the earth artists are "latter-day successors to the mound-building Indians of Neolithic times."<sup>1</sup> Laurie Schneider Adams, in *A History of Western Art*, makes a more specific connection, writing that Smithson's "affinity for the prehistoric earth mounds of America...influenced the shape of his monuments and their integration with the landscape."<sup>2</sup> However, she does not elaborate on how the mounds and Smithson's works are related, nor does she attempt to demonstrate that they were an influence on Smithson. Even in a more focused survey book, Irving Sandler's *Art of the Postmodern Era*, the connection between Earth Art and prehistoric mounds is acknowledged, but not explained. Sandler writes that Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* is "reminiscent of prehistoric monuments, such as the Great Serpent Mound in Ohio," but in what ways is it reminiscent of the Serpent Mound, or is the resemblance so self-evident that there is no need for further explanation?<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the earthworks of Smithson's contemporary, Michael Heizer, also have been related to prehistoric examples.<sup>4</sup> As a result, we are left with a great deal of uncertainty as to the nature of the formal

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<sup>1</sup> H. W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *History of Art* (New York: Abrams, 1997), 862.

<sup>2</sup> Laurie Schneider Adams, *A History of Western Art* (Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark, 1994), 479.

<sup>3</sup> Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 60.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond* (New York: Abbeville, 1998), 98. In discussing how art historians have treated the links between mounds and contemporary art, one invariably thinks of Lucy Lippard's groundbreaking *Overlay* of 1983. Although she does make mention of mounds in the book – she gives a very brief history of their construction and use and suggests possible symbolic interpretations of them – she makes no attempt

similarities between the mounds and the work of the earth artists of the 1960s and 1970s, and whether those similarities are merely a coincidence or the result of direct influence. If they were an influence, what was its nature? Was it merely formal, or was there a conceptual side to it? Can these artists' interest in the art of prehistoric Indians be attributed solely to a resurgence in primitivism, or were there other social and cultural factors at work?

In attempting to answer these questions, we must try to gain as complete an understanding as possible of the aesthetic nature of the Indian mounds, if indeed they were meant to function aesthetically. Such an investigation is, of course, problematic, given the fact that the people who built the mounds had no written language. But since the focus of this thesis is on the influence of mounds on the Earth Art movement, it is necessary here to examine them as though they were works of art because, whether or not their builders intended them to be such, Smithson and Heizer certainly saw them in those terms.<sup>5</sup> Despite the lack of scholarship on the mounds as works of art (rather than as archaeological artifacts), observation and analysis can help redress this omission. Consequently, I begin this thesis with an account of a visit I made in August 2003 to the most famous of all mounds, the Great Serpent Mound in southern Ohio [fig. 1]. In this account (Chapter One) I combine travel narrative with analysis in a manner similar to Robert Smithson's 1967 essay *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*. This narrative, however, is not intended merely as a homage to Smithson; I have chosen to write it in this way because my trip, and the conclusions I drew from it regarding contemporary Earth Art and prehistoric mounds, was a revelation to me, as both an art historian and a devotee of art. Furthermore, in my analysis of the mounds as works of art, which diverges from most scholarship on them, I explore

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to link them directly with Earth Art, or any other contemporary artist or approach. Instead of juxtaposing the information on the mounds with material on contemporary art, she makes her point largely through implication.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape, in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 122-123.

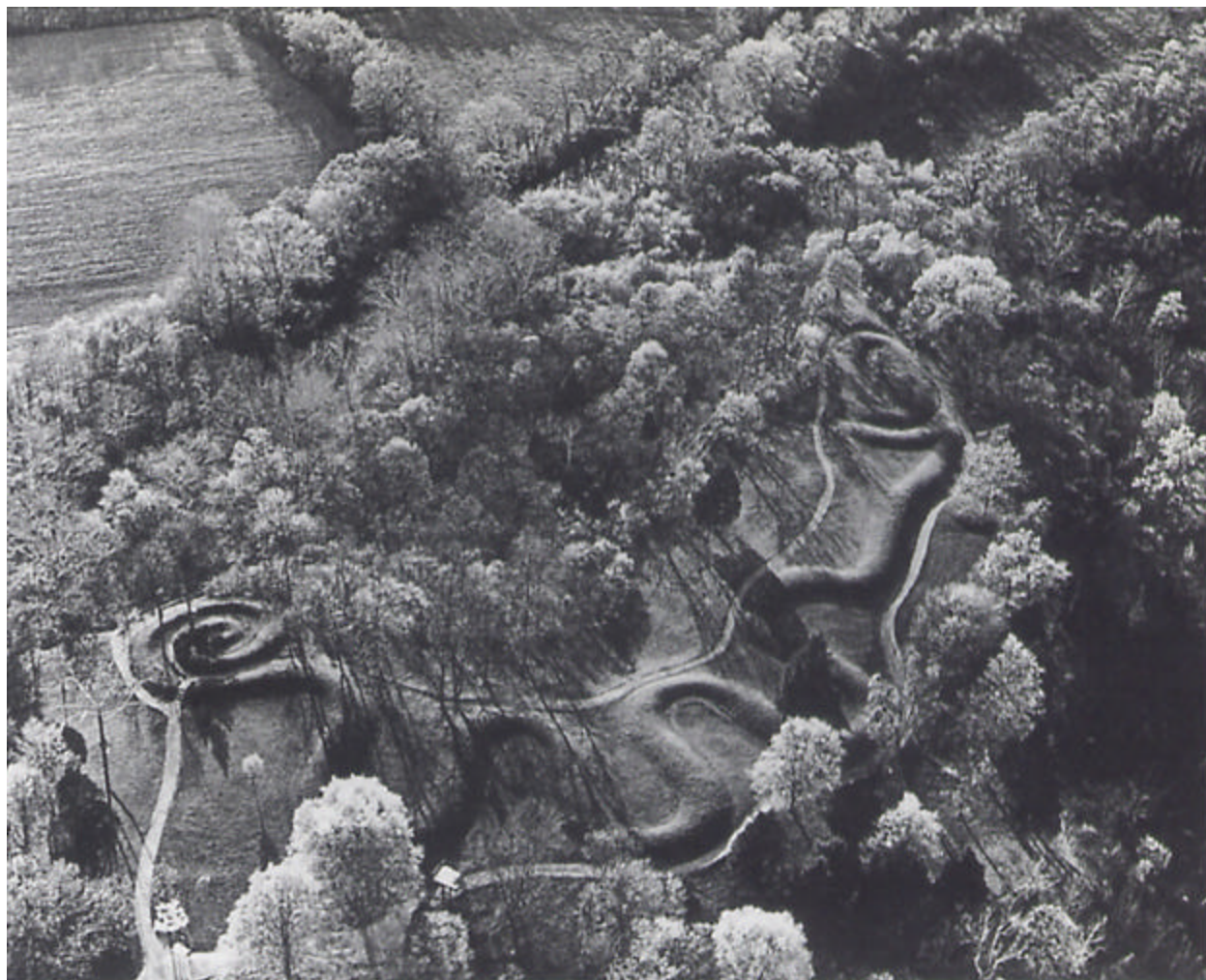


fig. 1. Great Serpent Mound, aerial view. c. 1070 CE. Adams County, Ohio.

uncharted territory. I hope to recreate for the reader the same experience of discovery I had on my visit to the greatest of all prehistoric effigy mounds.

To continue in this spirit of discovery, I will present my conclusions about the influence of Indian mounds on the earth artists in the order they occurred to me. After my narrative, which details the excitement I felt upon seeing the work of prehistoric Americans, Chapter Two turns to the most obvious connection between the work of the earth artists and the mounds – their formal similarities. But this chapter, entitled “Burial Mounds for the Avant-Garde,” will not be a mere formal study. Rather, I make the case that the formal aspects that link contemporary earthworks to prehistoric mounds are often the same as those that serve to distinguish them from the art of the dying modernist movement, based around the critic Clement Greenberg. It is widely acknowledged that the earth artists, Smithson in particular, consciously reacted against the self-proclaimed “avant-garde” art of the Greenberg circle. It appears, therefore, that incorporation into Earth Art of eclectic formal elements that can be traced back to prehistoric mounds was a conscious attempt to escape modernist reductivism.

At this point, one might object to my categorization of the art of Greenberg’s circle as avant-garde, arguing that the work of the earth artists and other postminimalists is what really deserves to be considered avant-garde, while Greenbergian formalism had become an academy by the late 1960s. In response, I would say that I use the term avant-garde not to denote a particular approach, but an ideology. It is not my place in this thesis to argue which artists and styles should and should not be considered avant-garde. I use the term “avant-garde” in perspective; the simple fact is that during the late 1960s, Greenberg and his circle considered themselves avant-garde, whereas the earth artists did not apply the term to themselves. And ultimately, it was the avant-garde mentality against which the earth artists were really reacting,

not the resultant style *per se*.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as modernism became increasingly commercialized after World War II, the avant-garde lost its identity as mainstream society co-opted it. In order to keep art fresh, and to keep it from becoming merely a commodity to be bought and sold, an alternative to the avant-garde had to be found. Even Clement Greenberg realized this.<sup>7</sup>

In Chapter Three, entitled “Art and the Entropy Watershed,” I move from the formal to the theoretical. I argue that in the debate between modernists such as Greenberg and postmodernists such as Smithson, there was more at stake than art-world domination. In the conflict between two artistic ideologies, what we really have are two opposing worldviews. In a 1953 essay entitled “The Plight of Our Culture,” Greenberg aligns himself with what I shall call the “mechanical worldview.” Central to the mechanical worldview – which has existed since the days of Descartes, Newton, and Bacon – is the belief in the eternal possibility for progress, and the belief that science and industry will continue to improve our lives forever. It was only around the time of the earth artists that an alternative to this vision of the future emerged. As a counterpoint to the mechanical worldview, I introduce the reader to Jeremy Rifkin and his “entropic worldview.” This worldview, suggested in Smithson’s writings, is an anti-humanist ideology that centers on the idea that we cannot escape the Second Law of Thermodynamics, and that what exponents of the mechanical worldview call “progress” is actually speeding up the dissipation of energy in the universe to the point of ultimate exhaustion of usable energy. According to Rifkin, we cannot control the direction of energy flow from available to unavailable energy, but we can control the speed of the flow. By abandoning more wasteful

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<sup>6</sup> Although Greenberg’s definition of “avant-garde” was put forth in his 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” he was still sticking to that definition when the Earth Art movement came on the scene three decades later, as seen in essays such as “Counter Avant-Garde” of 1971. See Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5-22, and Greenberg, “Counter Avant-Garde,” in *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 5-18.

<sup>7</sup> See my remarks on Greenberg’s essay “Where Is the Avant-Garde?” in Chapter Two of this thesis.

technologies and reverting to an agricultural mode of life, and by using the sun, rather than non-renewable fuels, as our source of energy, we can ensure our survival for as long as the dictates of physics will allow. I argue that the earth artists, by using the art of hunter-gatherer and agricultural societies as a model, were doing their part to slow down the dissipation of energy and act according to a new entropic consciousness.

In Chapter Four, I shift the focus from the theoreticians back to the artists. I argue that the entropic worldview that Rifkin and others formulated in the late twentieth century is manifested in the work of the earth artists as a new primitivism. In contrast to earlier twentieth-century primitivisms, which were based on a romantic, sometimes even idealistic, yearning to recapture the “purity” and/or the “naïveté” of primitive societies, the primitivism of the earth artists was based on reality and scientific observations. Contemporary anthropologists, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, had disproven the notion that prehistoric peoples were the pre-logical, animal-like beings that they had previously been seen as, and that their societies were often quite complex, and certainly not utopian. Based as it is on such findings, I am not even sure that the earth artists’ admiration for prehistoric art should even be called primitivism. Perhaps a better term will be devised someday, but until then, the old term “primitivism” will have to suffice. The work of the earth artists conforms to this new scientific view of prehistoric man because, as I will show, these artists were influenced not just by the form of the Indian mounds, but their cultural context as well.

Although I believe that a fruitful discussion could be had on the link between Indian mounds and any of the late twentieth-century earth artists, I choose to focus on just two: Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer. Smithson is of interest primarily because of his writings, in which he shows admiration for the mounds, not just for their formal qualities, but for their ability

to meet the needs of the people who built them in a way that protected the natural environment as much as possible. Smithson was never one to look superficially at any work of art or philosophy; in his writings, he always took into consideration all the social and cultural ramifications of any artistic or intellectual idea. Thus, he is an artistic counterpart of Rifkin, who examined the impact of the Second Law of Thermodynamics on virtually every aspect of human society. The choice of Heizer is obvious; in the mid-1980s, he constructed effigy mounds of his own at an abandoned strip mine in Illinois, and I believe that they show an interest in prehistoric earthworks that goes beyond form. As seen in Robert Morris's 1975 essay "Aligned with Nazca," however, not all Earth artists were interested in prehistoric art on more than a formal level, and are thus of less interest for this study.<sup>8</sup> I will turn to the earthworks of Morris where appropriate, as well as those of Walter De Maria, Nancy Holt, and Harvey Fite, mostly for purposes of comparison with Smithson and Heizer, but I will not stray far from a discussion of the latter artists.

Another fundamental distinction between Smithson and Heizer and other earth artists is the degree to which the human presence is imposed on the work of art. Nicholas Capasso points out that De Maria, Holt, and Morris "imposed simple or complex structural systems on nature, or rationality upon chaos...In contrast, other artists [such as Smithson and Heizer] accept *a priori* the rationality of natural systems and phenomena."<sup>9</sup> The art of Smithson and Heizer, therefore, is much more in keeping with the anti-humanist ideals of the entropic worldview, which holds that nature is incapable of being made to conform to the needs of man. But as the ancient cultures of North America demonstrated, there is a way to satisfy human needs and wants using

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Morris, "Aligned with Nazca," *Artforum* 14 (October 1975): 26-39.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas J. Capasso, "Environmental Art: Strategies for Reorientation in Nature," *Arts Magazine* 59 (January 1985): 74-75.

nature as a tool, rather than as an obstacle. Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer recognized this, and perhaps there is a lesson to be learned here by all of us.

## Chapter 1

### The Great Serpent Mound

On a Saturday in the fall of 1967, Robert Smithson took a bus from Manhattan to Passaic, New Jersey. In the essay he wrote describing his ambling journey through his former hometown, he speaks of an old railroad bridge, pipes, a sandbox, and other workaday objects as one might analyze works of art.<sup>1</sup> The builders of these “monuments” certainly did not intend for them to be art, and the fact that Smithson describes them as such makes them seem to the reader of his essay as relics of a now-extinct culture. Smithson lays out his essay not as an organized analytical study, but as a travelogue, an account which, like his journey itself, seems aimless and meandering. He presents himself as an explorer of this wasted landscape, an archaeologist of the post-industrial era. The chaos and disorganization of his essay parallels that of the wrecked landscape he saw. By presenting his observations thus, Smithson transforms what would otherwise be a mundane and ridiculous weekend outing into a profound experience of discovery. In reading his essay, I noticed a similarity between his trip to Passaic and my own voyage of discovery to the Great Serpent Mound in Ohio. Smithson’s feigned lack of knowledge about the culture of the Industrial Age made necessary an approach to the “monuments of Passaic” based on observation rather than research. In my case, the lack of knowledge about prehistoric American mounds was real. I believe, therefore, that it would be more effective to present my observations of the Great Serpent Mound in the same manner Smithson presented his – as the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey.” In *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 52-57.

random thoughts and discoveries of an explorer – rather than to analyze it as an expert would. I felt more like an explorer or a tourist than a scholar on that trip.<sup>2</sup>

I made the journey on August 12, 2003. I approached the site by car from the south, across the Ohio River. Driving along the river on the Kentucky side, the road winds up, down, and around a series of bluffs, affording a good view of the landscape on the other bank. The land along the river is quite fertile, much in contrast, as I would find out later, to the land immediately north of the Ohio Valley. The fertility of this lowland would increasingly be taken advantage of throughout America's prehistory. Most of the mounds that are attributed to the Hopewell people, who lived in the area from approximately 100 BCE to 400 CE, are located along the Ohio or its tributaries, whereas those of their predecessors, the Adena, are scattered all over the southern Ohio landscape. As the lifestyle of the prehistoric Americans shifted from hunting and gathering to small-scale agriculture, their domain shrank, and although the Hopewell did not adopt permanent settlements in the strict sense, their mound groups came to be found in clusters, often contained in ceremonial enclosures. The largest of these enclosures are found at or near major river junctions: at Newark, at the confluence of the forks of the Licking River; near Chillicothe, where several smaller creeks flow into the Scioto River; and at Portsmouth, where the Scioto flows into the Ohio. The Great Serpent Mound is not located at such a site, which makes us wonder all the more about its *raison d'être*.

The Great Serpent Mound is usually attributed to a culture called the Fort Ancient, which occupied the Middle Ohio Valley several centuries after the end of Hopewell. One of the mysteries of the Serpent Mound is that it was one of the few mounds built by that culture.

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<sup>2</sup> I realize that my inferences concerning the Serpent Mound may or may not have any scholarly merit. While I try to back up my statements with anthropological evidence wherever possible, I am ultimately not as concerned with proven facts as I am with my own observations. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the trip that turned out to be the inspiration for this thesis, and the observations that I made on that trip document that inspiration better than any facts can.

Unlike the contemporaneous Mississippian cultures to the west and south, the Fort Ancient built no platform mounds, and few burial mounds. Mounds of those types are evidence of social stratification and strong political leadership (chief's houses were often placed on top of platform mounds), and one wonders, therefore, how the Fort Ancient, who by all accounts seem to be less well organized than the Mississippians, could build an effigy mound far finer than any constructed by the latter.<sup>3</sup> The people of the Upper Mississippi constructed effigy mounds in large groups, some of which still exist in Wisconsin and Iowa. In contrast, there are only two extant effigy mounds attributed to the Fort Ancient, and they are located nearly one hundred miles apart, and have been assigned dates about two hundred years apart.<sup>4</sup> But rather than ask the question of why there are so few Fort Ancient effigy mounds, we might well ask why there are any at all. It is possible that they are the product of Mississippian influence, but by no means certain. David Pollack and A. Gwynn Henderson have suggested that there was no economic exchange between the Fort Ancient and the Mississippians prior to 1400 CE, several centuries after the construction of the Serpent Mound.<sup>5</sup> Whether or not the more limited contacts they had with the Mississippians prior to 1400 could have provided them with the inspiration to build an effigy mound is uncertain, but we must consider the strong possibility that the idea for the Serpent Mound was developed independently of any outside influence, since in any case, it bears little resemblance to Mississippian effigies, which are more schematic and less stylized. The Great Serpent Mound is a logical place for me to start my investigation of prehistoric mounds as works of art, not only because it is the largest and finest effigy in North America, or because it

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<sup>3</sup> David Pollack and A. Gwynn Henderson write that early Fort Ancient settlements consisted of "from 6 to 10 small structures...containing populations of from 24 to 40 individuals." By contrast, some Mississippian towns had populations in the thousands. David Pollack and A. Gwynn Henderson, "Toward a Model of Fort Ancient Society," in *Fort Ancient Cultural Dynamics in the Middle Ohio Valley*, ed. A. Gwynn Henderson (Madison, WI: Prehistory Press, 1992), 284.

<sup>4</sup> The other effigy mound in Ohio is the so-called "Alligator Mound" (which was probably not meant to depict an alligator), located in Granville, Licking County. Of that mound, more in Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> Pollack and Henderson, 288.

comes closest of all the mounds to what we define as a “work of art,” but because the unsolvable mysteries concerning the work’s origins make any written scholarship on it less reliable, forcing me to depend on my own vision more than any other resource.

The main bridge at Portsmouth was out, forcing me to cross the river about two miles downstream. I was therefore forced to bypass the site of one of the most important Hopewell ceremonial centers, which in any case has been well nigh swallowed up by the modern city. Heading north on State Highway 141, I passed the Tremper Mound, now located on private land. It is clearly visible from the road, but one may not immediately recognize it as an artificial mound. I might have missed it myself had there not been a sign to identify it. From that point on in my drive, I was on the lookout for more such hidden mounds. Along State Highway 73, I saw what looked like a mound in a farmer’s field off to the left side of the road. But was it a mound or wasn’t it? I always thought of mounds as site-specific works of art, as works that force the viewer to consider the landscape around them. But these mounds go beyond even that type of aesthetic experience; I found that not only was I contemplating the land immediately surrounding a particular mound, but I was taking a closer look at everything around me, whether natural, a construct of prehistoric man, or a product of modern man. If I could not find a mound, a gas station would do just as well as an artifact. It was as if the process of seeing a site-specific work of art were reversed. Instead of using the work of art as a focal point from which my vision would then radiate outward to the landscape around it, I was combing the landscape first and then locating the artworks within it. It may sound a bit like putting the cart before the horse, but it is all a question of relative importance. When a human makes a mark upon the earth, is he demanding our attention, or does he seek to weave his work into the fabric of nature? It seems that prehistoric man had the latter intention in mind, while modern, capitalistic man seeks to

dominate the landscape with his multi-story architecture and his gaudy signs. In this part of the country, he seems to have failed. The area is mostly depressed and rural, and it takes no more than about thirty seconds to drive through each village that I encounter, reduced speed limits notwithstanding.

The southern part of Ohio is much more hilly and forested than the predominantly flat northern half. It is sometimes known as “Ohio Bluegrass Country.” Highway 73 wound up and down hills, and around blind curves. The farms dropped away, and the landscape became wooded and rocky. I could only imagine what the experience of seeing a mound in such a setting would be like. The idea that I could come up over a hill or around a bend in the road and see a two-thousand-year-old mound excited me. It was highly unlikely that that would happen, but I had been driving for a long time, and I needed the possibility for surprise to overcome the tedium of the trip.

The Great Serpent Mound is dramatically sited, located on a crescent-shaped bluff that projects out to the point where a small run flows into Ohio Brush Creek. The form of the serpent echoes the shape of the hill on which it is situated, and it even suggests a riverine form, with all its meandering and linearity. As such, the mound certainly has the aspect of a site-specific artwork. Since the mound was placed far from major rivers and/or settlements, there must have been some reason for its placement that would make up for the lack of easy accessibility. In addition to being perched on the edge of a bluff, it is also located on the edge of what geologists call a cryptoexplosion structure. A catastrophic event (some scientists believe it was a meteorite crash, others a giant underground explosion) caused the rock in the center of the affected area to be pushed up more than one thousand feet above its original location, while rock on the outer edge of the area dropped down. Since the original disturbance, which probably took place

during the Triassic Period, more than 200 million years ago, various cracks formed in the rock, upsetting the geological order of the area even further. Although there is no evidence of any connection between the cryptoexplosion structure and the mound, and over a dozen other such structures in the Midwest do not offer any evidence of mound building, the Fort Ancient people certainly would have recognized that the place they chose for their serpent effigy was different in appearance from most of the local landscape.<sup>6</sup> That they knew anything of geology is unlikely, but they had their myths and their religion, which almost certainly had something to do with the Serpent Mound, and as Claude Lévi-Strauss would argue, these people's myths *were* their science.<sup>7</sup>

The mythical significance of the snake to prehistoric peoples may help shed light on the reasons behind its construction. Although we will never know the Fort Ancient's specific beliefs concerning snakes, the beliefs of Indians of the historic period may provide clues. The Indians of the Southeastern United States associated snakes with the Under World, a world inhabited by monsters, and a source of danger.<sup>8</sup> The Serpent Mound could therefore have been built to instill fear in a viewer, and its low-lying earthen form does in fact suggest a terrifying presence lurking beneath the surface. But this is likely not all. For the native peoples of America, fear and reverence often went hand-in-hand, a phenomenon that Charles Hudson describes as a characteristic of preliterate societies all over the world, who "seized upon that which was most horrible as an important source of power."<sup>9</sup> There are also myths concerning the benevolent nature of snakes, such as that held by the Southeastern Indians that a rattlesnake saved humanity

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<sup>6</sup> Robert C. Glotzhober and Bradley T. Lepper, *Serpent Mound: Ohio's Enigmatic Effigy Mound* (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1994), 15-18.

<sup>7</sup> In a radio lecture, published in a book called *Myth and Meaning*, Lévi-Strauss explains how science can help validate mythology. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Charles M. Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 166.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

from a plague.<sup>10</sup> A snake, therefore, could stand for all that was good and bad in Native American religion, all that was to be admired and all that was to be feared, making it a fitting subject for a large-scale religious structure.

As I passed through the small village of Locust Grove, the closest town to the Serpent Mound, I saw a sign on the side of an ice cream shop with an outline of the mound on it, pointing the way to the great site. I followed the sign, and suddenly, Locust Grove was behind me. Then, as now, the Great Serpent Mound is in a fairly remote area. About four miles past the ice cream shop, I made a right turn on to the entrance road to the Serpent Mound State Memorial. After driving up a hill and into the parking lot, I was confronted with an old Adena conical burial mound, and a rather shabby building that housed the park's museum. Because of the presence of three Adena mounds in the vicinity, it was for a long time assumed that the Adena had also constructed the Great Serpent Mound. Looking at the roughly ten-foot-high mound next to the parking lot, it seemed ridiculous to think that the semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers who built such humble burial mounds would have the need for a giant ceremonial effigy, or the desire to build one. An undertaking such as the construction of the Great Serpent Mound must have required a massive, coordinated effort, one that could only be achieved by a more organized, settled group such as the Fort Ancient. Yet it was not until 1991, when radiocarbon dating established an approximate date of 1070 CE for the Great Serpent Mound, that it was finally attributed to the Fort Ancient culture.<sup>11</sup> My knowledge of the prehistoric mound-building cultures of North America, relatively scant though it is, combined with my own visual analysis and deductive reasoning, is enough to convince me that this attribution is correct. If the Adena had built the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The reasons for the attribution to the Fort Ancient culture are summarized in Robert V. Fletcher, et al, "Serpent Mound: A Fort Ancient Icon?" *Midcontinental Journal of Archaeology* 21 (Spring 1996): 133-139. This attribution is not yet accepted by all anthropologists, but I find the evidence of Fletcher et al, as well as my own observations, convincing.

Serpent Mound, then it would have been the only example of an Adena effigy mound anywhere. What few serpent motifs have been found among Adena and Hopewell artifacts do not correspond with the design scheme of the Serpent Mound.<sup>12</sup> Even though Adena mounds and artifacts have been found at the site, remains of a Fort Ancient village nearby, combined with radiocarbon dating and visual clues, make a Fort Ancient attribution more plausible than an Adena attribution.

The first view that one gets of the Serpent Mound as one approaches from the south is disorienting [fig. 2].<sup>13</sup> Since I had only previously seen aerial photographs of the mound (which make it look monumental), my first reaction was “this is it?” When one gets so close to a large work of art such as this, it loses some of its monumental quality and takes on a human scale. For this reason, statues of great figures are placed on pedestals, and Mount Rushmore is intended to be seen from a distance. But this was not the experience I had on first seeing the Serpent Mound. There was no “good gestalt;” the form in its entirety never came together, and so I was confronted not with the convincing (if somewhat stylized) representation of the snake seen in aerial photographs, but a series of abstract fragments that I had to put together to form a picture of a snake in my mind. The three meanders of the serpent’s body wound up and down the side of the hill, disappearing and reappearing, so that I was not sure whether it was one continuous mound I was looking at, or several mounds placed one behind the other. It was only when I turned to the left and came upon the magnificent triple coil of the serpent’s tail that everything came into focus [fig. 3]. The tail was for me an orientation point, not only physically, but

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>13</sup> As I begin my visual analysis at this point, it should be pointed out that the Great Serpent Mound was restored beginning in 1887 by Frederick W. Putnam of Harvard University’s Peabody Museum. Although the degree of accuracy of his restoration is a matter for debate, I believe his work to be reliable for two reasons. First, he had visited the mound once before, in 1883, when it was in a much less damaged condition than it was on his second visit in 1887. Second, a stratigraphic profile done by Robert Fletcher, et al shows that the contours of Putnam’s addition correspond fairly well to those of the basket-loaded embankment below it. For a summary of Putnam’s work, see Fletcher, et al, 110-112. For the stratigraphic profile, see Fletcher, et al, 119.



fig. 2. Great Serpent Mound, view from the south.



fig. 3. Great Serpent Mound, detail of tail.

mentally as well. It was suddenly clear to me not only what I was looking *at*, but also what I was looking *for*.

This mound was not about naturalism at all. Questions such as “why can the serpent form only really be seen from the air?” or “what is that elliptical form at the serpent’s head meant to represent?” became irrelevant. As I witnessed this mathematically precise spiral wind around and vanish into the ground from which it was created, I became aware of an order of nature behind mere surface appearance and finicky naturalism. If the Serpent Mound truly is a religious work of art, what would its purpose be but to grasp at this hidden natural order? The walking path went up and over the mound just before the tail; I crossed over and walked along the concave side of the serpent. Three times I had the sensation of the snake’s body advancing toward me and then receding from me [fig. 4]. Even in a giant work of art that cannot be perceived in its entirety except from the air, the illusion of motion is created in the curves of the body and the uncoiling effect of the tail. Some scholars believe that the curves have an astronomical function; it has been observed that at the two equinoxes and the two solstices, the rising sun lines up with the turning point of one of the three curves.<sup>14</sup> I wondered if there might be a practical purpose to the meanders as well. If the “pilgrims” who came to this site were to line up along the edge of the mound for whatever ceremony took place there, the builders would no doubt want to maximize the length of the mound to accommodate as many visitors as possible. Whatever the intended purpose of the curves may have been, their inclusion struck me as the most masterful possible marriage of form and function. Neither formal nor functional concerns had to be compromised for the sake of the other. This is another part of the mysterious order of nature that the Serpent Mound represents; it seemed almost as though all the builders had to do was choose a site, and then everything else fell into place.

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<sup>14</sup> Glotzhober and Lepper, 10.



fig. 4. Great Serpent Mound, detail of body.

The curves of the snake's body eventually straightened out, leaving me to reckon with its triangular head and the enigmatic oval-shaped form adjacent to it [fig. 5]. An altar of stones once stood at the center of the oval, which is today marked by a pair of small trees.<sup>15</sup> Speculations as to what this elliptical enclosure represents abound. Is it an egg in the snake's mouth? Is it the snake's tongue? Its eye? Sometimes, however, an enclosure is just an enclosure. The oval need not be representational at all. It may be the equivalent of the coin slot of a piggy bank, owing its existence purely to the functional requirements of the structure, with no representational significance whatsoever in an otherwise representational object. While a descriptive significance for the oval cannot be ruled out, we may be better able to understand the complex function of this site if we assume it to be abstract.

Walking around the oval and along the convex side of the mound, I came upon a man with his eyes closed and his head tilted slightly upward. He wore a cross pendant around his neck, and he was moving very slowly and deliberately, pausing every few steps. He was engaged in some kind of religious meditation I had never seen before. Apparently, the timelessness of the Great Serpent Mound has taken on significance for people of various religious persuasions. About a hundred years ago, the Reverend Landon West came up with one of the most memorable interpretations of the mound, stating that it represented the serpent of Eden, and that the oval was the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. He believed that the mound marked the actual site of Eden, and that it may even have been built by God himself to warn future generations against sin.<sup>16</sup> Such is the advantage of works of art made by pre-literate cultures; they can have whatever meaning we create for them.

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<sup>15</sup> By "altar" is meant simply a circular pile of stones. The use of this term in no way constitutes an attempt to identify the function of such features.

<sup>16</sup> Glotzhober and Lepper, 7.



fig. 5. Great Serpent Mound, detail of oval enclosure.

In 1908, around the same time that Reverend West came up with his theory as to the origin of the Great Serpent Mound, an observation tower was constructed to the southeast of the mound. If the mound was the handiwork of God, then any aesthetic experience that did not allow the viewer to see it from God's point of view would be unsatisfactory. This unfortunate metal Tower of Babel, however, only reaches a height of twenty-five feet. From this meager elevation, we are not sure what we are looking at [fig. 6]. We do not see a snake, as in the aerial photographs, nor do we see an almost lifelike form rising to engulf us (or is it embracing us?) from the ground we are used to trampling underfoot. All I saw from the tower was a meandering form receding into the distance. It could have been a fairway on a golf course. But a golf course is not a work of art, and what I saw from the tower was not a work of art either, but rather, a Kodak moment. The elevated view makes the mound more comprehensible, and thus in a sense smaller. It can fit on to a picture postcard and be sold for twenty-five cents. But we are still aware of its great size as we look at it from above, perhaps even more so, because the whole appears more accessible. So, what we have made for ourselves, ultimately, is a Great Serpent Mound that is both smaller and larger than the one that the Fort Ancient people made for themselves almost a thousand years ago.

I had not yet brought my film canister to the one-hour photo shop, but I was already looking at a photograph of the Serpent Mound, and it was not long before my eyes and mind wandered off the edge of the picture. I began watching other visitors walking along the path next to the mound, making their serpentine journey into virtual prehistory. I began to think of the motel room I had reserved for that night in Chillicothe, and the warm shower that I would get there. I once again underwent a temporal leap as I climbed down from the tower and turned away from the mound. Re-entering the modern world, I found it to be roughly the same as it was



fig. 6. Great Serpent Mound, view from observation tower.

when I left it – disappointing and predictable. I was thirsty from my walk, but the soda machine at the museum was out of order, and the water in the water fountain was warm. That is the difference between a work of art and mundane reality; a work of art moves us because we have no power over it, but reality annoys us for the same reason. I thought of turning back and taking refuge in the mound that had recently taken me into its spaces and removed my worldly anxieties, but if I had done so, I would have needed two sodas and still gotten none. Alas, I can only be a product of one world. But as I drove away from the site, I wondered if there might not be a way to reconcile the two worlds. I thought about the large earthworks that had been done in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Most of those works had been sited in remote desert areas, far from the trappings of modern civilization. Is it possible that, with their works located in as timeless an area as possible, using the same materials their prehistoric counterparts used, that these earth artists successfully established a dialogue with the people of the distant past?

## Chapter 2

### Burial Mounds for the Avant-Garde

In May of 1966, art critic Irving Sandler put out a questionnaire to various leading artists, asking them their opinions on the state of contemporary American art. There were five questions, perhaps the most provocative of which was “Is there an avant-garde today?”<sup>1</sup> The mere fact that Sandler could ask such a question underscores the problematic nature of the avant-garde concept in the mid-sixties. If the avant-garde is to be understood as a reaction against an academic tradition, then several groups in the 1960s could lay claim to avant-garde status, including Pop art, Minimalism, and Fluxus. Others during this period believed that the role of the avant-garde was to push modern art along a certain course, to avoid repetitiveness and easy popular acceptance.

It was in the latter sense that the critic Clement Greenberg defined “avant-garde,” and it was he who, among all other art-world figures, probably used the term most often. Starting in the late 1930s, Greenberg had developed a definition of avant-garde that was so streamlined and convenient, and so much in line with what was already accepted as the formalist realities of modernist art, that he eventually came to be the unofficial pope of the avant-garde, determining to whom the term applied, and largely ignoring those to whom it did not. Early in his career, his pronouncements seemed prophetic. He was the first to recognize the importance of Jackson Pollock and David Smith as avant-garde artists. In the 1960s, however, his position was eroded

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Smithson, “Response to a Questionnaire from Irving Sandler,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 216. Smithson was one of the artists who responded to this questionnaire.

by Pop Art, Minimalism, and other approaches that did not conform to his definition of advanced art.

By the late 1960s, Sandler was not alone in questioning the existence of the avant-garde. Even Greenberg was skeptical about the future of an institution that he saw as the *raison d'être* of modernist art. In a 1967 essay entitled "Where Is the Avant-Garde?" Greenberg attributed the increasing irrelevance of the avant-garde to the increased speed with which the general public accepted it; he described this acceptance as "almost institutional."<sup>2</sup> Artists could have it both ways; those who wanted to be avant-garde only had to go through the motions, while meeting popular demand. What Greenberg called "Novelty art" (e.g. Pop art, Op art) had arisen because the public wanted a facile art that looked avant-garde.<sup>3</sup>

The avant-garde then, became commodified, and "avant-garde" became a certifier of value, like "Grade A" or "all natural." Ironically, although Greenberg lamented the newfound commodity status of "advanced" art, his concept of modernism may have contributed to the problem. According to him, modernist art since the nineteenth century had been engaged in a self-critical process of purification, in which works in a particular medium became increasingly confined to the properties intrinsic to that medium. Robert Smithson, an emerging artist in the mid-sixties, had a different view. In "Entropy and the New Monuments," one of his first essays (June 1966), Smithson noted that what we should get from the experience of looking at modern architecture is "a clear perception of physical reality free from the general claims of 'purity and idealism.' Only commodities can afford such illusionistic values; for instance, soap is 99 44/100% pure, beer has more spirit in it, and dog food is ideal; all and all this means such values

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<sup>2</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Where Is the Avant-Garde?" in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 260-61. Ironically, this essay first appeared in *Vogue* magazine.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

are worthless.”<sup>4</sup> Two years later, Smithson explicitly blamed the overrationalization of critics for making art into a commodity. “Criticism,” he wrote, “dependent on rational illusions, appeals to a society that values only commodity type art separated from the artist’s mind. By separating art from the ‘primary process,’ the artist is cheated in more ways than one.”<sup>5</sup>

The term “primary process” is no doubt one Smithson picked up in Anton Ehrenzweig’s 1967 book *The Hidden Order of Art*, in which he states the reasons for the devolution of modern art in psychoanalytic terms. Action painting, Ehrenzweig writes,

was a very direct manifestation of unconscious form principles. This may have been true as long as action painting was still young and raw. But after a few years or so the inevitable defensive reaction of the secondary process set in. Today fashionable action painting is little more than a very deliberate exercise in decorative textures with little sensitivity to the unconscious form discipline that first animated it.<sup>6</sup>

The secondary process is a “defensive reaction” because it reacts against the tendency toward fragmentation that Ehrenzweig associates with modern art.<sup>7</sup> Fragmentation is a product of the intuitive primary process, while the secondary process is associated with “conscious gestalt perception.”<sup>8</sup> According to Ehrenzweig, it is the critics who are primarily responsible for initiating this defensive reaction. As an example, he notes that the critics who supported the French Impressionists praised their work not for its loose brushwork and fragmented picture surface, but because they believed it to be an equally coherent alternative to Renaissance perspectival space.<sup>9</sup> In other words, they tried to evaluate revolutionary new art using old criteria. Such is the nature of the “rational illusions” that Smithson associates with critics.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 90.

<sup>6</sup> Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 66-67.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

Smithson, however, goes a step further than Ehrenzweig. He puts a Marxist twist on Ehrenzweig's theory of academicization, adding that the secondary process leads not only to the creation of an academy, but also to the creation of a market for that academy. After all, the assigning of value is a very rational human activity, and it is the job of both critics and merchants. Understanding a work of art and purchasing it are related activities; they both imply an assertion of control over it. But what is the alternative? Can we really be expected to keep our human tendencies toward rationalization in check when confronted with a work of art? Whether we like or dislike art critics, it is overly simplistic to say that they *want* art to degenerate to the status of commodity. But if they are not the culprits in this process, they at least abet it. In Greenberg's words, "if the public should turn away from the market, should turn away from contemporary advanced art, the sum of unhappiness would increase for many artists. Alas, the interests of art do not always coincide with those of human beings."<sup>10</sup>

Can art be divorced from its commodity status? As long as production is carried out for the purposes of sale and consumption, every human product is inherently a commodity. Even if an object is not a commodity by nature, it can be given commodity status by the manner in which it is presented. For instance, a loaf of bread on a store shelf is clearly a commodity, but if that same loaf of bread is thrown in a dumpster, it temporarily loses that identity. It may be removed for disposal, or it may be taken by a hungry person who needs it to survive. Of course, garbage disposal is itself a commodity, and if a person takes the loaf, he may sell it or barter it, and the loaf thus re-enters the realm of commodity. But if an animal carries it off, or if it sits out in the open so long that it decomposes, it is removed from the commodity realm once and for all, and is incorporated into the rhythm of nature.

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<sup>10</sup> Greenberg, "Where Is the Avant-Garde?" in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, 264.

Could this idea apply to art? If a work of art can be placed where nature, not human beings, is its principal steward, perhaps it can at least *appear* as something other than a commodity. In order for this to be accomplished, art has to be removed from its marketplace in the gallery. The “earthworks” of Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, and Nancy Holt are mostly situated in isolated areas of the American desert, arguably the place where a typical gallery goer would be least comfortable. The commodity status of such works is diminished not because they cannot be bought and sold (they can), but because they remove the power of the viewer over the work, a power that makes for a predictable viewing experience. A viewer can look at a work in a museum and have more or less the same response to it every time he sees it. But in the case of De Maria’s *Lightning Field* in New Mexico, the piece only “works” if there happens to be a lightning storm passing through the area; otherwise, it is only a network of metal poles [fig. 7]. Although many such earthworks are owned by galleries and could theoretically be purchased by private collectors, they are not often talked about as commodities because our inability to generate the desired response from these works undermines the usual owner-object relationship. The earthworks obey natural laws, not human laws.

In his masterpiece, the *Spiral Jetty* of 1970, Smithson goes further than De Maria [fig. 8]. Smithson’s goal in this work is not to undermine the owner-object relationship, but to do away with it altogether by giving the object a transitory existence. The *Spiral Jetty* is entirely at the mercy of the Great Salt Lake, in which it sits. In contrast to his wife, Nancy Holt, who in her own Utah piece, *Sun Tunnels*, wanted to “bring the vast space of the desert back to human scale,” Smithson expands the space beyond human comprehension by shattering all artificial boundaries



fig. 7. Walter De Maria. *Lightning Field*. 1970-77. Near Quemado, New Mexico.



fig. 8. Robert Smithson. *Spiral Jetty*. 1970. Great Salt Lake, Utah.

[fig. 9].<sup>11</sup> The ebb and flow of the lake has already caused the jetty to be submerged and to re-emerge several times, just as it has done with other human attempts at “cultivating” the area. In his essay “The Spiral Jetty,” Smithson writes of a stretch of salt flats near the site where the jetty would eventually be located. “Caught in its sediments were countless bits of wreckage,” he noted. “Old piers were left high and dry.” Smithson did not come up with the idea of a spiral jetty until he had selected his site, stating in his essay, “I would let the site determine what I would build.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently, these industrial ruins, victims of the fickleness of nature, must have had an influence on his conceptualization of the work as something that would be under nature’s exclusive control.

In his description of what he saw at the salt flats, Smithson paints a picture of a world in which the balance of power between nature and man is upset. To this end, he constructs a curious metaphor. “The mere sight of the trapped fragments of junk and waste transported one into a world of modern prehistory. The products of a Devonian industry, the remains of a Silurian technology, all the machines of the Upper Carboniferous Period were lost in those expansive deposits of sand and mud.”<sup>13</sup> The use of the oxymoronic “modern prehistory” suggests that time itself has been upset, but Smithson embraced this temporal disorder rather than fearing it. Scattered throughout Smithson’s writings, particularly those of his later years, are references to prehistory. All such references can be traced back to an essay of September 1968 entitled “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects.” At the end of this essay, in the same section in which he laments the secondary process of art criticism in the passage quoted above, he lays out his solution to the problem, which involves the creation of just such a

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<sup>11</sup> Holt quoted in Nicholas J. Capasso, “Environmental Art: Strategies for Reorientation in Nature,” *Arts Magazine* 59 (January 1985): 74.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Smithson, “The Spiral Jetty,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 111.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



fig. 9. Nancy Holt. *Sun Tunnels*. 1973-76. Lucin, Utah.

“modern prehistory.” “The ‘present’ cannot support the cultures of Europe,” he states, “or even the archaic or primitive civilizations; it must instead explore the pre- and post-historic mind; it must go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts.”<sup>14</sup>

It is not clear from reading this statement exactly what Smithson has in mind, but it is clear what he is reacting against: criticism that sets artists and their works within an arbitrary stream of time, a tendency of which Clement Greenberg, with his theories of an evolutionary process in modern art, was the most guilty. “Artists with a weak view of time are easily deceived by this victimizing kind of criticism,” writes Smithson, “and are seduced into some trivial history. An artist is enslaved by time, only if the time is controlled by someone or something other than himself.”<sup>15</sup> In his writings, Smithson criticizes all attempts to impose human value on time. The word “present” in his “Sedimentation of the Mind” essay appears in quotation marks, indicative of his distaste for the setting of temporal boundaries. Prehistory serves as a model for Smithson’s own worldview because it was a period before humans began the process of codifying time and bending it to suit their needs.

Smithson’s affinity for the prehistoric is clear enough in his role as theorist and critic, but what about his career as an artist? Is there any way in which prehistoric examples influenced his artistic style? As the reader already will have surmised, the logical candidates for a prehistoric art form that influenced Smithson and other earth artists are the prehistoric Indian mounds that dot the American Midwest and Southeast. There are obvious resemblances between the mounds and certain twentieth-century earthworks. The *Spiral Jetty* may well have been inspired by the Great Serpent Mound – the most famous of all North American Indian mounds – the tail of which is also a perfect spiral, and Michael Heizer’s *Snake*, one of a series of five effigy mounds

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<sup>14</sup> Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

collectively known as the *Effigy Tumuli*, which he constructed at Buffalo Rock State Park, Illinois, in 1984-85, seems a clear reference to the Serpent Mound [fig. 10].

Such resemblances have convinced scholars that the earth artists and their contemporaries borrowed from prehistoric art to distance themselves from modernism and the rationalist, historicist worldview that went with it. Edward Fry identifies Robert Morris's *Observatory*, a work with clear ties to Neolithic astronomical observatories, as "the symbolic negation of cumulative knowledge, historical and scientific, through Morris's choice of a model that we recognize as prehistoric [fig. 11]."<sup>16</sup> The same could well be said for *Spiral Jetty* and *Effigy Tumuli*. Since earth artists were looking at, and coming to an understanding of, prehistoric art at this time, it would be helpful for art historians studying their work to do likewise, in order to expand upon Fry's comments. Given prehistoric peoples' lack of written language, the first step to such an approach would be a formal analysis of prehistoric artworks that goes beyond mere surface appearance, analysis which can then form the basis of educated speculations about the aesthetic function of these works. When Gilles Tiberghien states that the relationship between Earth Art and prehistoric art is "primarily plastic," his chief failing is a lack of consideration for the total aesthetic experience of large-scale prehistoric works.<sup>17</sup> The Great Serpent Mound is a massive environmental sculpture, just as the works of the earth artists are, and for that reason alone, it lends itself to the same aesthetic criteria used to evaluate its twentieth-century counterparts.

If we apply the same viewing techniques to Indian mounds that we do to Earth Art, issues of site specificity and gestalt come into play. Site specificity involves a play – or a dialectic, as Smithson would call it – between the work of art and its site. The work allows us to see the site

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<sup>16</sup> Fry quoted in Gilles A. Tiberghien, *Land Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 226.

<sup>17</sup> Tiberghien, 225.



fig. 10. Michael Heizer. *Snake*. 1984-85. Buffalo Rock State Park, Illinois.



fig. 11. Robert Morris. *Observatory*. 1971, reconstructed 1977. Flevoland, Netherlands.

in a new light, and the site gives added meaning to the work. In fact, the term “site-specific” is somewhat misleading, because the concept works both ways. Not only is the work of art site-specific; the site is work-specific. The idea of a spiral jetty only emerged in Smithson’s mind after he chose his worksite. Had Smithson not stated that this was the case, there would be the question of whether the work was made to conform to the site, or whether the site was chosen to accommodate the work. This is indeed the case with the Fort Ancient artists as it is generally agreed that the Serpent Mound is engaged in some kind of dialectic with its site. Although it is not clear how the choice of site influenced the form of the mound, its curve does conform to the contours of the ridge on which it sits, and its serpentine form could possibly be a conceptual echo of the meanderings of Ohio Brush Creek, which flows beneath it. One must always be careful not to attribute twentieth-century intentions to the builders of the Serpent Mound, but it should be pointed out that many of the speculations about the mound’s site dialectics were made before site specificity became a component of Western art criticism. One nineteenth-century scholar, for example, noticed the resemblance of an exposed rock face below the rim of the bluff on which the Serpent Mound sits to a reptilian head [fig. 12]. He proposed that this rock face could have inspired the choice of a snake as the subject for the mound.<sup>18</sup> More recent scholars have brought up the fact that the Serpent Mound is situated on the edge of a rare cryptoexplosion structure.<sup>19</sup> If the Fort Ancient were aware of the uniqueness of the terrain, these scholars surmise, they would most likely attribute it to divine beings, making the ground a suitable place for a religious ceremonial center.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Robert C. Glotzhober and Bradley T. Lepper, *Serpent Mound: Ohio’s Enigmatic Effigy Mound* (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1994), 4.

<sup>19</sup> For more on the Serpent Mound Cryptoexplosion Structure, see Chapter 1 of this thesis.

<sup>20</sup> Glotzhober and Lepper, 18.



fig. 12. Rock outcropping on bluff face below Great Serpent Mound.

Whatever the degree to which the Great Serpent Mound is site specific, Michael Heizer picked up on its interaction with its environment. Not only is his *Snake* similar to the Serpent Mound in its zigzagging form; it is also similar in its site dialectic scheme.<sup>21</sup> Both works are situated on bluffs overlooking rivers. And just as the Serpent Mound is crescent-shaped to echo the shape of the ridgetop on which it was built, Heizer's mound curves around a horseshoe-shaped indentation in the cliff that drops down to the Illinois River. Heizer could have placed the snake anywhere on the vast tract of land he was given to build the *Effigy Tumuli*, yet even in his earliest plans, when he hoped to include eight effigies instead of the five that were actually built, he chose that specific area for the *Snake* [fig. 13]. Douglas McGill writes that, "In some cases, such as the turtle, snake, and catfish mounds, the existing terrain suggested a particular animal shape to Heizer."<sup>22</sup> It is possible that the builders of the Great Serpent Mound had a similar revelation when they came upon the bluff that overlooks Ohio Brush Creek.

Erika Doss interprets these similarities as an example of Heizer's "copying" of the "stylistics" of prehistoric art, rather than as a genuine emulation of the site specificity of prehistoric mounds.<sup>23</sup> If meant in the literal sense, "copying" is too strong a word; no one would mistake Heizer's *Snake* for the Great Serpent Mound or any other prehistoric effigy mound. The angularity and abstraction of *Snake* is more in line with some of Heizer's earlier non-representational works (e.g. *Rift*, 1968 [fig. 14]) than with the gracefully stylized curves of the Serpent Mound. If by "copying" is meant copying the site dialectics of prehistoric mounds, then the argument is untenable; Heizer could have copied the forms of the mounds, but he could not

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<sup>21</sup> Klaus Kertess notes the similarity of *Snake* to the Great Serpent Mound, but curiously, he fails to mention the similarity of the two works' site dialectics. Klaus Kertess, "Earth Angles," *Artforum* 24 (February 1986): 79.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas McGill, *Michael Heizer: Effigy Tumuli* (New York: Abrams, 1990), 25.

<sup>23</sup> Erika Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1995), 123.



fig. 13. Michael Heizer. Early preparatory drawing for *Effigy Tumuli*.



fig. 14. Michael Heizer. *Rift*. 1968. Jean Dry Lake, Nevada.

copy their natural settings. The site specificity of his work is as different from that of the Great Serpent Mound as a strip mine is from a cryptoexplosion structure.

Another way in which Heizer plays with the possibility of the site specificity of prehistoric mounds is in his mounds' potential to behave in a landscape as living creatures. Heizer realized this potential in his *Turtle*, which is positioned heading downhill, as though about to slide into the river [fig. 15]. In the *Snake*, too, the head of the animal is closest to the water, suggesting that it may be engaged in a similar activity. The Great Serpent Mound may again be a precedent for the implied movement of these earthen animals; to a modern-day observer, the undulating curves and spiraling tail of the Great Serpent Mound suggest movement, as if the snake is in the act of uncoiling. Another precedent may be found in the so-called Marching Bear Group of effigy mounds, located in northeastern Iowa [fig. 16]. These rather schematic bear effigies are positioned one behind the other, and are all oriented in the same direction, thus prompting the name given to them by modern scholars.

As always, the question of whether or not these mounds were really intended to be seen as bears on the move is a matter of speculation, but Heizer could very well have engaged in this type of speculation. For information on prehistoric effigy mounds, Heizer consulted an 1855 book entitled *The Antiquities of Wisconsin*, in which author Increase Lapham comments in several instances on the often dramatic siting of the works he studied.<sup>24</sup> He notes, for example, that a ridge on which were found several effigy mounds “may be aptly compared to the backbone of some gigantic animal, the numerous lateral spurs, extending toward the Mississippi or Kickapoo, representing the ribs.”<sup>25</sup> Here, as elsewhere, he refrains from assigning significance to this coincidence, but the mere mention of such phenomena may well have been enough to stir

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<sup>24</sup> McGill, 22. Heizer's wife found the book in a secondhand bookstore.

<sup>25</sup> I.A. Lapham, *The Antiquities of Wisconsin*, reprint (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 77.



fig. 15. Michael Heizer. *Turtle*. 1984-85. Buffalo Rock State Park, Illinois.

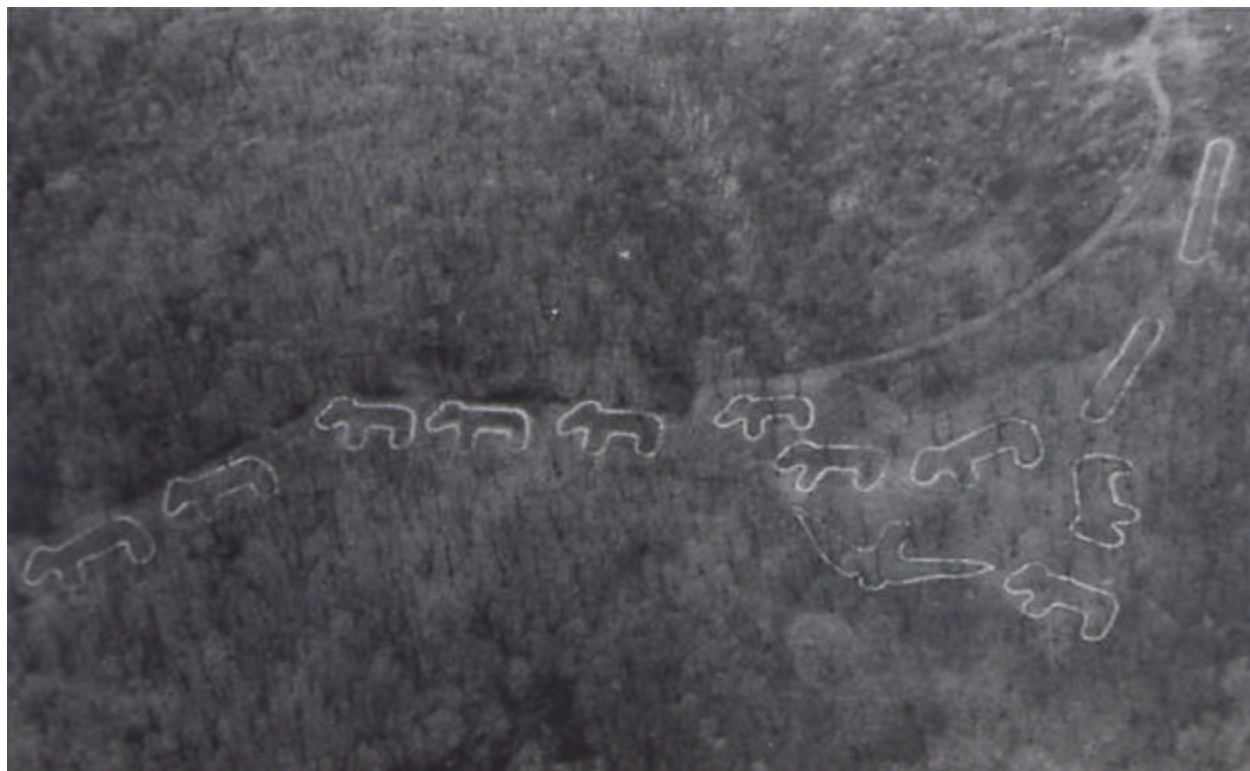


fig. 16. "Marching Bear Group" of prehistoric effigy mounds. Near McGregor, Iowa.

Heizer's imagination. Also useful to Heizer were the many maps of the mound sites featured in the book, including one that shows a large bird effigy in what Lapham deems a "peculiar" position – on a steep hillside, with its head pointing downhill [fig. 17].<sup>26</sup> This is exactly the same position in which Heizer placed his *Turtle*. Ultimately, however, the interaction of Heizer's mounds with their site is different than the site dialectics of prehistoric Indian mounds in that it is made more clear. If anything, then, it is an expansion on the concept of site specificity that can be perceived in prehistoric mounds, which constitutes not a "copying" of forms, but a borrowing of ideas.

The site specificity of Earth Art is usually discussed as a radical departure from self-contained modernist works of art, for which American Indian mounds provide a precedent. The absence of gestalt, also a characteristic of prehistoric mounds, is another break with modernism. Discussing mounds in the catalog of a 1941 exhibition of American Indian art at the Museum of Modern Art, Frederic H. Douglas and René d'Harnoncourt expressed incredulity over the inability of an earthbound viewer to perceive the mounds as wholes. "It is a strange fact that the makers of the mounds could never have had as clear a picture of their work as we have," they wrote, "since some of them, like the Great Serpent Mound in Ohio, appear clearest in aerial photography."<sup>27</sup> They bring to their discussion of the mounds a modernist bias that equates having a "clear picture" of a work of art with the ability to see it as a gestalt. But as Robert Morris pointed out in a 1975 *Artforum* article on a visit he made to the prehistoric Nazca lines in South America, an aerial, overall view may make inferior art critics of us by forcing us into a static, flat view of the artwork. "Aerial photography returns us to our expected viewpoint," he wrote. "Looking down, the earth becomes a wall at 90 degrees to our vision. We see them [the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>27</sup> Frederic H. Douglas and René d'Harnoncourt, *Indian Art of the United States* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1941), 44.

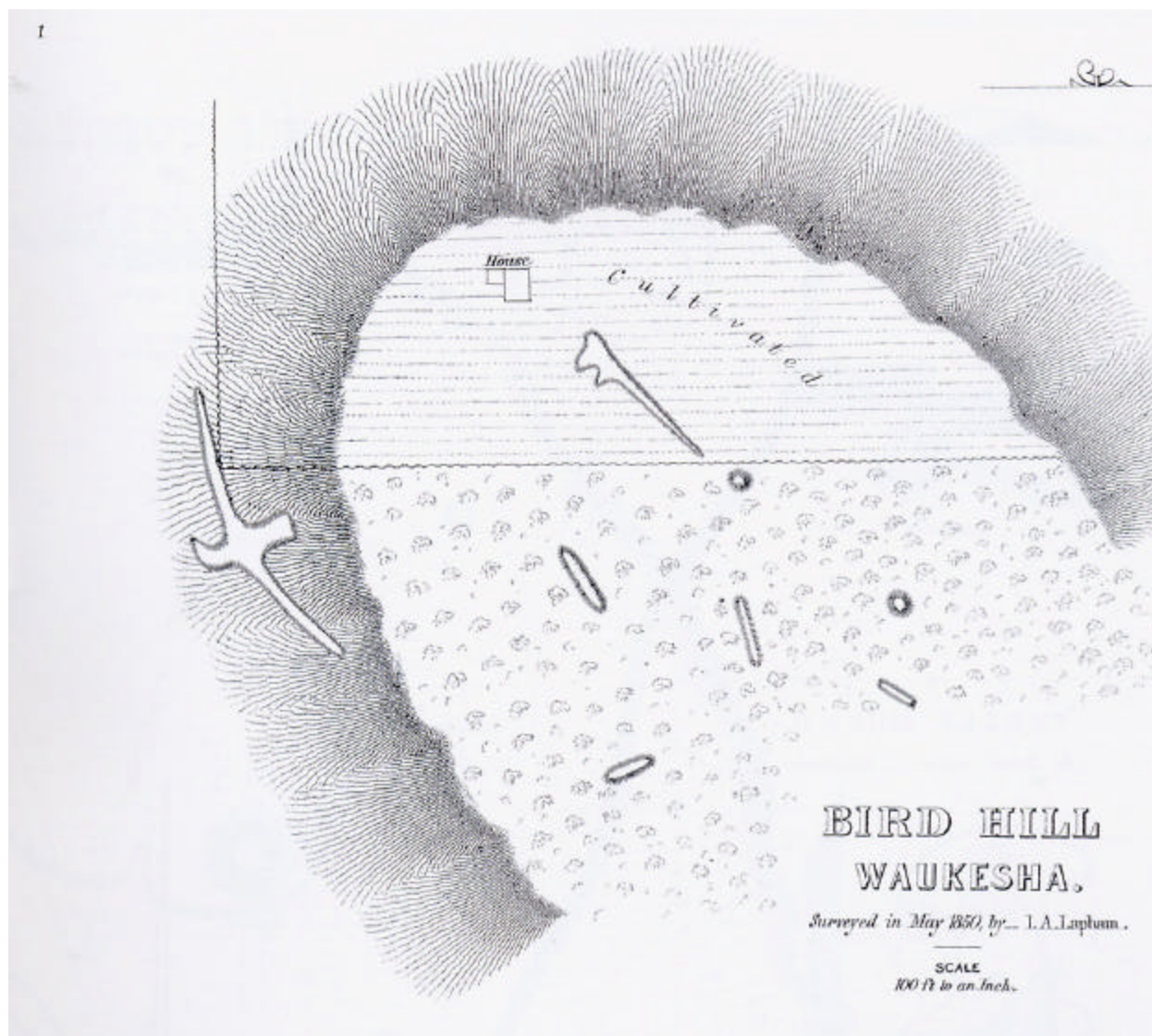


fig. 17. "Bird Hill," Waukesha, Wisconsin, as illustrated in I.A. Lapham's *The Antiquities of Wisconsin* (1855).

Nazca lines] in that familiar elevation which reveals to us every cultural artifact from buildings to artworks to photographs to the print on this page.” In contrast, “after an hour or so of walking and observing, one becomes very aware of how one’s behavior as an observer affects the visibility and definition of the lines.”<sup>28</sup>

Walking among the lines liberated Morris from the limitations of the flat surface, which was central to Greenberg’s conception of modernism. The critic had pushed strenuously for the need to eliminate illusionism and flatten out the pictorial space, and the artists in his circle delivered. When Morris Louis began staining paint into an unprimed canvas so that the paint actually merged with the surface, it became impossible to make a picture any flatter. The only option for these “avant-garde” painters was to continue emphasizing flatness, which naturally called into question their avant-garde status. Smithson mockingly referred to the paintings of Louis and like-minded artists – a group Greenberg labeled “Post-Painterly Abstractionists” – as “wet art,” and he considered those who admired them to have “leaky minds” and “dank brain[s].” “The wet mind enjoys ‘pools and stains’ of paint,” he wrote. “‘Paint’ itself appears to be a kind of liquefaction. Such wet eyes love to look on melting, dissolving, soaking surfaces that give the illusion at times of tending toward a gaseousness, atomization or fogginess. This watery syntax is at times related to the ‘canvas support.’”<sup>29</sup> The last sentence of this statement emphasizes Smithson’s belief that the canvas is too confining, and that “avant-garde” art, in its self-containment, its attempt at purification, and its obsessively formalistic experimentation, is digging its own grave, dissolving in its own pools of paint, vaporizing into thin air.

Smithson contrasts this “wet art” with works of “dry art” by his contemporaries:

Walter DeMaria [sic] and Michael Heizer have actually worked in the Southwestern deserts...The desert is less ‘nature’ than a concept, a place

<sup>28</sup> Robert Morris, “Aligned with Nazca,” *Artforum* 14 (October 1975): 31.

<sup>29</sup> Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 88-89.

that swallows up boundaries. When the artist goes to the desert he enriches his absence and burns off the water (paint) on his brain. The slush of the city evaporates from the artist's mind as he installs his art.<sup>30</sup>

The desert for the earth artists provided an escape from the confines of the canvas and the urban art gallery. Before the earth artists, no “sculptor” had constructed work in a landscape, for that landscape, out of materials found in that landscape, since prehistoric times. The use of natural materials in prehistoric times was a necessity, rather than choice, but this necessity in one sense paradoxically gave the artist greater freedom, a fact recognized even by Clement Greenberg.

“The Paleolithic painter or engraver,” wrote Greenberg, “could disregard the norm of the frame and treat the surface in a literally sculptural way only because he made images rather than pictures, and worked on a support – a rock wall, a bone, a horn, or a stone – whose limits and surface were arbitrarily given by nature.”<sup>31</sup> The prehistoric artist would be a poor model for Greenberg's brand of modernism, in which the limits of the canvas must be rigidly adhered to, and in which no confusion between sculpture and two-dimensional media is allowed. But for Smithson, who wanted to “swallow up boundaries,” and escape the limitations of the canvas, the prehistoric artist provides an example to be followed.

The boundaries Smithson refers to are those set up by Greenberg's avant-garde, with its neat division of the visual arts into painting, sculpture, and architecture: its prescriptive canvases and upright sculptures, and its closure from nature. The beginnings of this trend began, Smithson believed, with Renaissance humanism. In fact, he saw modernism as simply a rehashing of old Renaissance aesthetic ideals. “What Clement Greenberg calls 3 dimensional pictorial space in the Renaissance Tradition is in the Modernist Tradition 2 dimensional flat

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>31</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, 92.

space,” he wrote in 1968. “Both kinds of space are representational and illusionistic.”<sup>32</sup> Because two-dimensionality is just as much a part of the world as three-dimensionality, both two- and three-dimensional pictorial spaces are an attempt to *imitate* nature, without really getting at its underlying reality. Smithson has not been alone in faulting the Renaissance for the dissociation of art from lived experience, and hence, of human activity from nature. Social scientist Jeremy Rifkin has written that the Renaissance system of perspective was instrumental in asserting the dominance of the individual over his environment; in looking at a painting, it became “as if the vista were his exclusive domain.”<sup>33</sup>

If the Renaissance marked the beginning of the process of placing man in a position superior to nature, the obvious solution for escaping this trend would be to revert to pre-Renaissance, pre-humanist methods of art making. For Robert Morris, the Nazca lines eliminated all Western boundaries. “Within such a context for viewing,” he wrote, referring to the Western practice of viewing a work of art at a ninety-degree angle, close up, “the seemingly phenomenological dichotomy between flat and three-dimensional, marking and making, painting and sculpture, has been nurtured. Recalling for a moment the nature of the lines and their context, these sharp distinctions cannot be made.”<sup>34</sup> Smithson realized the potential for an art without boundaries in a June 1968 visit to a Pennsylvania slate quarry. “All boundaries and distinctions lost their meaning in this ocean of slate and collapsed all notions of gestalt unity,” he recalled. Although his breakthrough did not come through visiting a prehistoric site, he asserts in this essay that examining a prehistoric monument can have the same effect. “When one scans

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Smithson, “Outline for Yale Symposium: Against Absolute Categories,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 218.

<sup>33</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *Biosphere Politics: A New Consciousness for a New Century* (New York: Crown, 1991), 231-232.

<sup>34</sup> Morris, 33.

the ruined sites of prehistory,” he writes, “one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits.”<sup>35</sup>

Combining Smithson’s and Morris’s accounts, we can see that the keys to the earth artists’ escape from modernist constraints lay in working outdoors and using prehistoric art as a model. It is not a coincidence that they should have happened on these two solutions, for one seems to imply the other. Not only did prehistoric man rely on nature for the production of his structures, but he also made them so as to take advantage of the natural environment as a medium, carefully integrating them into that environment. A walk around the Great Serpent Mound reveals the remarkable extent to which the Fort Ancient builders were able to fuse art and landscape to achieve a successful aesthetic experience. The way in which the tail of the snake gradually decreases in height until it fades into the earth is exquisite, and the way the curves of the body are arrayed across the side of a hill suggests movement – upward, downward, and sideways. Nor were the builders afraid to alter the landscape to make it more suitable for their chosen subject. Ephraim Squier and Edwin Davis hypothesized that the area around the altar of the Serpent Mound was contoured to create a shallow depression, into which the oval enclosure was set.<sup>36</sup> The only other extant Fort Ancient effigy mound, the so called “Alligator Mound” in Granville, Ohio, is set atop a hillock that is simply too perfectly rounded to be completely natural. It could have been artificially rounded (as Squier and Davis suggest), or it could be an entirely man-made structure [fig. 18]. The advantage to such an artificial elevation would be to enhance the view of the valley of Raccoon Creek, a fork of the Licking River, in which several other prehistoric earthworks, including the great Newark Works, were located. From this, Squier and Davis

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<sup>35</sup> Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 89.

<sup>36</sup> Ephraim G. Squier and Edwin H. Davis, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*, reprint (Washington, Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 97.

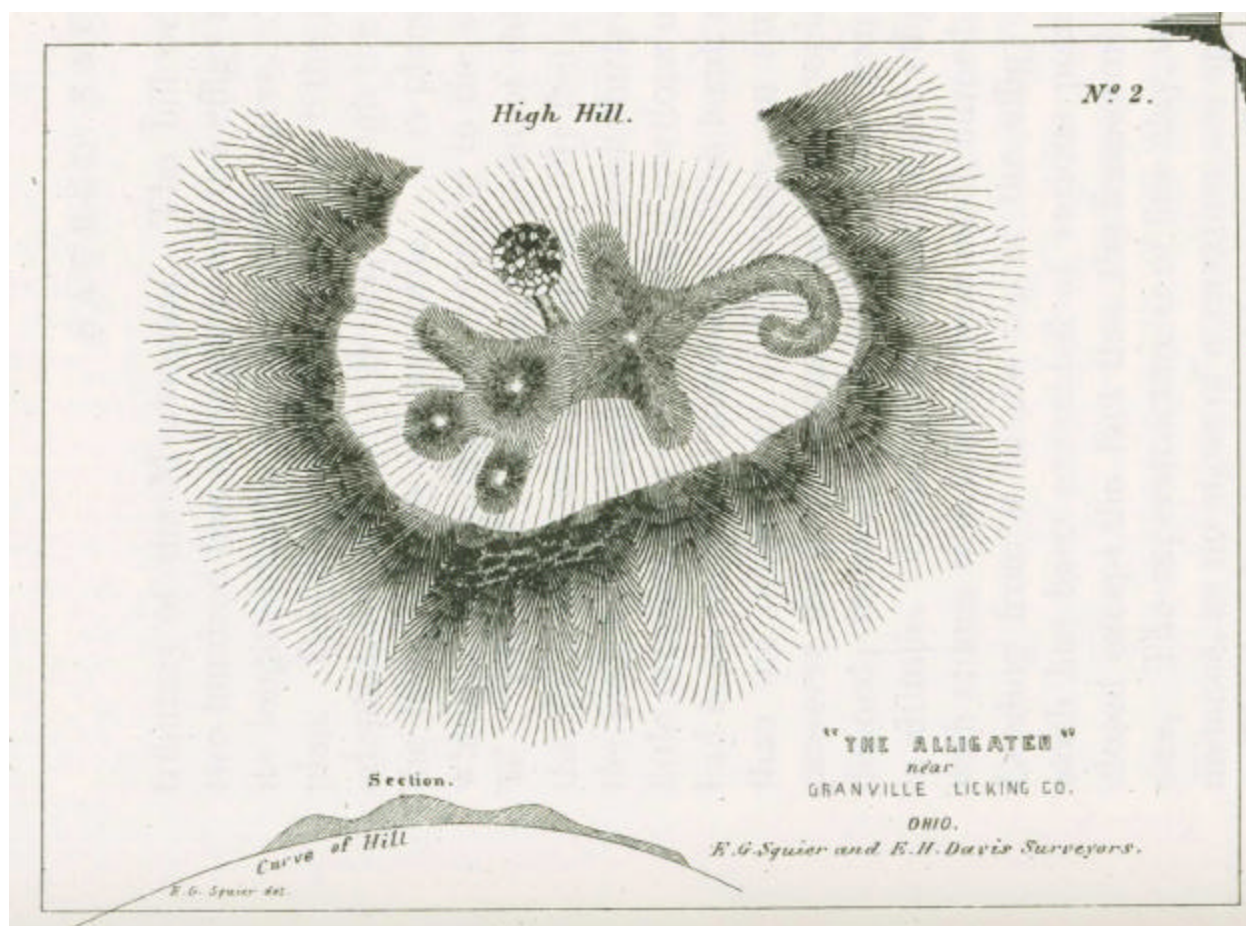


fig. 18. Alligator Mound, as illustrated in *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*, by Ephraim G. Squier and Edwin H. Davis (1848).

conclude that the Alligator “was perhaps the high place where sacrifices were made, on stated or extraordinary occasions, and where the ancient people gathered to celebrate the rites of their unknown worship.”<sup>37</sup> Whatever the purpose of Ohio’s two effigy mounds, they share a common strategy of site dialectics. They are both sited on jutting precipices, taking advantage of the surrounding landscape to enhance their dramatic effect, and where necessary, their builders tailored the landscape to suit their needs. One must agree with Increase Lapham that the mound-building peoples of North America “had an eye for the beautiful as well as the useful, in choosing their places of abode.”<sup>38</sup>

Although it is not possible to answer for certain the question of whether or not the prehistoric mound-building peoples actually considered their work art, all the signs we see today indicate that they did possess some degree of artistic consciousness. In fact, it is precisely for their decorated pottery, clay pipes, crude metalwork, and earthen mounds that the Woodland cultures of the prehistoric American Midwest are distinguished from their predecessors. At least from our perspective, therefore, the emergence of these cultures marks the beginnings of art in America, making their effigy mounds perfect candidates for the “remote pasts” role in Smithson’s meeting of remote futures and remote pasts. Site specificity, rejection of gestalt principles, and interaction with nature that are characteristic of the earth artists’ works were not radical in their time because they were without precedent. They were not. Rather, Earth Art was radical because its precedents were situated outside the stream of art history. History had driven art into the narrow confines of the gallery, and reduced everything to flat forms and neat categories. The only way to break out of these constraints was to break out of history and start anew; examples from prehistory, such as earth mounds, served as guides to starting over.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 99-100.

<sup>38</sup> Lapham, 13.

Clement Greenberg, the prophet who predicted the greatness of Pollock, the man who moved modernist art forward with a typewriter rather than a paintbrush, had no more answers. But before he faded from the scene, he made one final prophecy. “The avant-garde as an historical entity may be approaching its definite end. In that case the production of high art would have to be taken over by some other agency. What that other agency might be, I can not [sic] imagine or conceive.”<sup>39</sup> With this final eulogizing pronouncement, the avant-garde was laid to rest beneath the dirt and rocks of Robert Smithson’s and Michael Heizer’s earthworks.

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<sup>39</sup> Greenberg, “Where Is the Avant-Garde?” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, 265.

## Chapter 3

### Art and the Entropy Watershed

In 1939, a now little-known sculptor named Harvey Fite began converting an abandoned bluestone quarry near Saugerties, New York into a display space for his larger pieces. The place was a ruined reminder of a bygone era. Stone from there, as well as other quarries in the Catskill Mountains, had once been used to pave the sidewalks of New York City, but once concrete came to be preferred, the quarries were left to be reclaimed by nature, or in this case, an enterprising artist. Fite called his reclamation project *Opus 40* after the number of years he planned to work on it [fig. 19]. At first, he did not intend for *Opus 40* to be a work of art, but after working on it for more than two decades, he started to realize that that was exactly what it was becoming. The breakthrough came when he erected a nine-ton, fourteen-foot-high columnar monolith at the center of the quarry in the early 1960s. He chose not to carve or alter the monolith in any way, preferring to let its raw natural energy speak for itself. His own rather academic creations paled in comparison to the power of untamed nature, so he removed the sculptures that he had already installed in the quarry, scattering them about the surrounding lawn.

Fite would continue to work on *Opus 40* until 1976, when he was killed in a fall at the quarry, thirty-seven years into the forty-year project. The work in its incomplete state is not entirely successful; it has a certain emptiness to it, as though Fite did not quite know what to do with the empty pits if his sculpture was not placed in them. Yet there is much in this accidental discovery of Earth Art that can be learned about the movement as a whole. Is it any wonder that Fite discovered the potential of *Opus 40* as a work of art by allowing nature to be a dominant



fig. 19. Harvey Fite. *Opus 40*. 1939-76. Saugerties, New York.

presence? Is it a coincidence that *Opus 40* is located at an abandoned industrial site, just like *Spiral Jetty* and *Effigy Tumuli*? Indeed, the chief success of the Earth Art movement lies in its ability to reconcile the natural and the manmade. If Renaissance humanism placed man above nature, the earth artists brought the two back together.

When earth artists utilize despoiled sites, it is possible to see their work as industrial reclamation, as environmentalist art. This is sometimes the case, but not always. Toward the end of his life, Robert Smithson drew up a proposal to convert an abandoned strip mine in southeastern Ohio into a work of art. As a larger agenda, he suggested that “there should be artist-consultants in every major industry in America.”<sup>1</sup> This idea died with him, but Michael Heizer later realized the conversion of a strip mine into an earthwork with his *Effigy Tumuli* project. For his part, however, Heizer claimed not to be interested in art for reclamation, even as he worked on a project intended by its commissioners for that very purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Like Heizer, Smithson was not initially concerned with reclamation; that interest only emerged late in his life, after he had made his most representative earthworks, including *Spiral Jetty*. There is nothing in either the *Spiral Jetty* film or essay that indicates a desire to reclaim old industrial sites; the essay suggests that the only requirement for the site of the project was that the water have a reddish color.<sup>3</sup> What we see expressed in most of Smithson’s earlier writings is a fascination with industrial decay, but not yet a desire to reclaim it. In an article published in the December 1967 issue of *Artforum* entitled “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” Smithson speaks of bridges, pumping derricks, pipes, and other pieces of industrial equipment as though they were works of art. He describes the center of town as “no

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Smithson, “Proposal, 1972,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 221.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas McGill, *Michael Heizer: Effigy Tumuli* (New York: Abrams, 1990), 35.

<sup>3</sup> Smithson, “The Spiral Jetty,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 109.

center – instead it was a typical abyss or an ordinary void,” and then proceeds to wonder if Passaic has replaced Rome as “The Eternal City.”<sup>4</sup> The ruins of Rome reveal as much about its time as the ruins of Passaic do about the recent past. At the end of the essay, Smithson identifies the culprit of modernity’s degradation: entropy, or the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Smithson illustrates entropy with the example of a sand box, one half of which contains white sand, and the other black. A child is instructed to run clockwise in the sandbox until the sand is mixed and turns gray. Then, the child is told to run counterclockwise. The result of this process is not a return of the sand to its original state, but on the contrary, a greater degree of mixing and grayness. “Of course,” Smithson continues,

if we filmed such an experiment we could prove the reversibility of eternity by showing the film backwards, but then sooner or later the film itself would crumble or get lost and enter the state of irreversibility...The false immortality of the film gives the viewer an illusion of control over eternity – but “the superstars” are fading.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, we are all doomed. No attempt at reclaiming a ruined landscape will reverse the entropic process. It seems difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile Smithson’s pessimism of 1967 with his more hopeful vision of art-as-reclamation of 1972. Philip Leider attributes this shift to the transformation of Smithson from a quasi-Marxist to a businessman; he believes that Smithson’s reclamation ideas represent a selling-out to mining companies.<sup>6</sup>

There is, however, another possibility that must be considered: the emergence of the field of entropy theory. Although Henry Adams had applied the Second Law of Thermodynamics to human endeavors in the early decades of the twentieth century, it was only around Smithson’s time that theorists began proposing comprehensive social theories centering on an acceptance of entropy. In 1971, the economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen published a book entitled *The*

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 55-56.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Leider, “Smithson and the American Landscape,” *Art in America* 89 (January 2001): 77-78.

*Entropy Law and the Economic Process*. Smithson read this book, and quoted from it at length in a 1973 interview. In the interview, Smithson provided an opinion on reclamation that differs markedly from the pretty picture that he sold to mining companies. “It seems,” he said,

that the reclamation laws really don’t deal with specific sites, they deal with a general dream or an ideal world long gone. It’s an attempt to recover a frontier or wilderness that no longer exists. Here we have to accept the entropic situation and more or less learn how to reincorporate these things that seem ugly.<sup>7</sup>

Although we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that Smithson was becoming more business-minded in his later years, it is more likely that entropy theory provided him with the impetus to move away from his defeatist attitude toward entropy, and to begin searching for a way to live with it.

Another attraction of entropy theory was that it opposed the mechanical worldview that Smithson associated with modernism, his artistic nemesis. In an essay of 1966, he identified the originators of the avant-garde as “a group of colorful French artists” who, at the turn of the century, “banded together in order to get the jump on the bourgeois notion of progress.” Alas, their attempt to overtake progress became an example of Zeno’s paradox, whereby

the avant-garde goes ten times faster than progress, and gives progress a headstart of ten meters. The avant-garde goes those ten meters, progress one; the avant-garde completes that meter, progress goes a decimeter; the avant-garde goes that decimeter, progress goes a centimeter;...and so on to infinity without progress ever being overtaken by the avant-garde.

Where the avant-garde fails in its effort to overcome bourgeois progress is that they both share an “ideological consciousness of time.”<sup>8</sup> It thus becomes a collaborator with progress, and though the “colorful French artists” at the turn of the century might have missed this unintended – and for them undesired – consequence, Clement Greenberg did not. He noted “the profound

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Smithson, “Entropy Made Visible: Interview with Alison Sky,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 194.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Smithson, “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 35.

degree to which Modernist art belongs to the same specific cultural tendency as modern science,” and he expressed the belief that both would continue.<sup>9</sup> In a 1953 essay entitled “The Plight of Our Culture,” Greenberg stated that the persistence of industrialism must be taken into account “in any discussion of the future prospects of our culture.” It would seem unlikely that someone who started his career writing for the Marxist journal *Partisan Review* would be happy about this state of affairs, but Greenberg was actually quite bullish on the future of American culture in this context. “Science and industrialism do, and will, make a great difference,” he wrote, “and the future is likely to present a scheme, and possibilities, radically different from those of the expired or moribund civilizations we already knew.”<sup>10</sup> Although there was still a little of the Marxist left in him – he still thought industrialism degraded high culture – he saw hope that the two could be reconciled by the ingenuity of man.<sup>11</sup>

What Greenberg is expressing, then, is a humanist belief in the unlimited potential of the human race to achieve progress. Over the course of the following decades, entropy theorists would take issue with this notion. Jeremy Rifkin, in his 1980 book *Entropy: A New World View*, refutes what he calls the “surplus theory of history,” which he identifies as one of the central theoretical bases of the mechanical worldview. “According to the modern world view,” he writes, “history is a steady line of progress in which the surplus of each period provides the margin of free time necessary to invent new tools and technologies...which result in even more surplus and leisure time and so on.” Historical evidence, according to Rifkin, indicates exactly the opposite. Hunter-gatherer societies took up farming not because of a surplus, or because their hunting and gathering became easier, but because of the scarcity of wild plants and animals.

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<sup>9</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 91.

<sup>10</sup> Clement Greenberg, “The Plight of Our Culture,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 131.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

To the emergence of such a scarcity that necessitates fundamental societal change, Rifkin gives the name “entropy watershed.”<sup>12</sup> What Greenberg calls industrial progress, Rifkin calls the hastening of the next entropy watershed. All that new technology has accomplished is to speed up the flow of energy in the universe which, according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, always proceeds from a usable to an unusable state. The lifestyle of hunter-gatherer societies supported them for millions of years before they had to shift to an agricultural mode of life. The latter supported humankind for only thousands of years before the means for carrying it out were exhausted, and the shift to an industrial society was made. After only a few hundred years of industry, Rifkin believes that another entropy watershed is fast approaching.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the solutions that humans devised to overcome past entropy watersheds, however, Rifkin’s solution to the current crisis is not to develop a new mode of life, but to revert to old modes. One of Rifkin’s regressive prescriptions is an abandonment of nonrenewable energy sources, and a return to renewable sources, most importantly the sun. But it is not enough simply to switch to a different source of energy; our entire way of life must undergo a parallel change. The new era necessitates “a greater conformity to the ancient rhythms of life.” He dismisses recent developments in active solar technology, in which sunlight is concentrated in a collector, then stored, and finally pumped to wherever it is needed to perform work. Such a system is useless because the materials used to collect, store, and move the energy are nonrenewable. Not only is it useless; it is unnecessary, since adequate passive solar energy systems were developed thousands of years ago, when people had no other way to heat their homes.<sup>14</sup>

Rifkin’s vision of a society that more closely resembles those of the past can in no way be deemed utopian. No one would argue that such a life would be more comfortable than the life

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<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Rifkin with Ted Howard, *Entropy: A New World View* (New York: Viking, 1980), 63.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

we live now. Nor will the adoption of an older lifestyle be our salvation. Nothing can reverse or stop the entropic process; the point is to slow it down by, in Rifkin's words, "keep[ing] a society's energy flow as close as possible to that which naturally takes place in our environment."<sup>15</sup> The Renaissance idea that it was man's duty to harness the chaos of nature, and impose order on it, must be rejected. Man can no longer be considered separate from nature.

Although Rifkin's book was written seven years after Smithson's death, both men's attitudes toward entropy were strongly influenced by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen. Just as Georgescu-Roegen's writing inspired Smithson to begin looking for an art that would be more conscious of the approaching entropy crisis, it laid the groundwork for Rifkin's book, for which Georgescu-Roegen wrote the afterword, and which is dedicated to him. Although much of Georgescu-Roegen's *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* is economic jargon and mathematical formulas, his general conclusions provide a starting point for Rifkin. "Everything man has done during the last two hundred years or so puts him in the position of a fantastic spendthrift," writes Georgescu-Roegen. He continues,

There can be no doubt about it: any use of the natural resources for the satisfaction of nonvital needs means a smaller quantity of life in the future. If we understand well the problem, the best use of our iron resources is to produce plows or harrows as they are needed, not Rolls Royces, not even agricultural tractors.

Expanding on such prescriptions, Rifkin was able to create a comprehensive worldview based on the acceptance of entropy, and the notion that, as Georgescu-Roegen states, "his [man's] existence is a free gift of the sun."<sup>16</sup>

Although Smithson's authority was not as encompassing as that of Rifkin, he did his part in his own field by suggesting that art could serve as a low-entropy use of lands that had fallen

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 21.

victim to the entropic acceleration of the industrial age. According to Suzaan Boettger, the sites Smithson chose, “disordered and rough, such as a quarry, contain[ing] abandoned industrial pumps and vehicles, or...bizarrely colored,” reflected his interest in humanity’s contribution to the entropic process. “The entropic forces breaking down these places were not necessarily natural processes,” Boettger continues, “but more frequently resulted from mechanically aided human intervention.”<sup>17</sup> And just as Rifkin asserted that ancient cultures could be models for a new entropy-conscious society, Smithson looked to the distant past for his ideas for reclamation art. He stated that Indian “earthworks mounds” could be used as a model because they are an example of “nature and necessity in consort.”<sup>18</sup> The mound building peoples found a way to satisfy their needs while disturbing their natural environment as little as possible. In fact, the inspiration to use earthen mounds for burial seems to have come from nature. The first mound burials occurred not in artificial mounds, but in glacial kames, natural mounds of earth and gravel left behind by the retreating glaciers of the last Ice Age. As life in the Eastern Woodlands became more sedentary, it became necessary to construct mounds, as one could not always count on finding a natural burying place close at hand. To a certain extent, the mound-building peoples became more wasteful as their cultures developed; as their small, semi-permanent villages gave way to cities, their mounds became bigger, and some of the largest contained no burials at all, but were instead used as architectural platforms, on top of which a temple or chief’s house would be built.<sup>19</sup> But even when confronted with these colossal constructions, one never senses that they are not in harmony with nature. Ways could even be found to prevent borrow pits

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<sup>17</sup> Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002), 58.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Smithson, “Untitled, 1971,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 220.

<sup>19</sup> It should be pointed out that not all mound-building cultures built platform mounds. Although such mounds are quite prevalent at Mississippian sites in the Middle Mississippi Valley and the American Southeast, they do not appear to have been built by the Fort Ancient, the Ohio Valley contemporaries of the Mississippians. The existence of platform mounds is largely a result of political centralization and social stratification.

(depressions in the ground created by the removal of earth to construct the mounds) from becoming a blight on the landscape. The residents of the Mississippian village of Etowah, in present-day Cartersville, Georgia, incorporated their borrow pit into their system of defense; the pit merges with a ditch that runs around the outside of the village [fig. 20].

At the extensive complex of geometric enclosures in Newark, Ohio, attributed to the Hopewell culture, several different strategies for incorporating the borrow pitting sites into the overall plan are in evidence [fig. 21]. At the so-called Great Circle, the earth used to create the circular wall was taken from inside the circle, creating a ditch that extends completely around the perimeter. At the circle-and-octagon enclosure to the north, however, there is no ditch, and it is believed that the earth used to construct those walls was taken from borrow pits scattered about nearby. Why there were different strategies for obtaining fill in use at the same site is not known, but some believe that the obtaining of earth and the construction of earthworks had ritual status, with all the protocol and prohibitions that rituals entail, and therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that the method used for obtaining earth for the construction of an earthwork depended on the function and/or relative importance of the work.<sup>20</sup>

Since the only way to build mounds in prehistoric North America was to ferry basketfuls of earth back and forth, mound building was a labor-intensive activity that required a communal effort. Smithson's vision for art as reclamation necessitated a return to a collaborative art-making process. "The artist, ecologist and industrialist," he wrote, "must develop in *relation* to

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<sup>20</sup> A. Martin Byers has identified several rules that he believes governed the procurement of earth fill in Hopewell society. He refers to this code as the "Sacred Earth Principle." See A. Martin Byers, "Is the Newark Circle-Octagon the Ohio Hopewell 'Rosetta Stone'?" in *Ancient Earthen Enclosures of the Eastern Woodlands*, ed. Robert C. Mainfort, Jr. and Lynne P. Sullivan (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 135-153.



fig. 20. Borrow pit at Etowah Mound Site. Cartersville, Georgia.

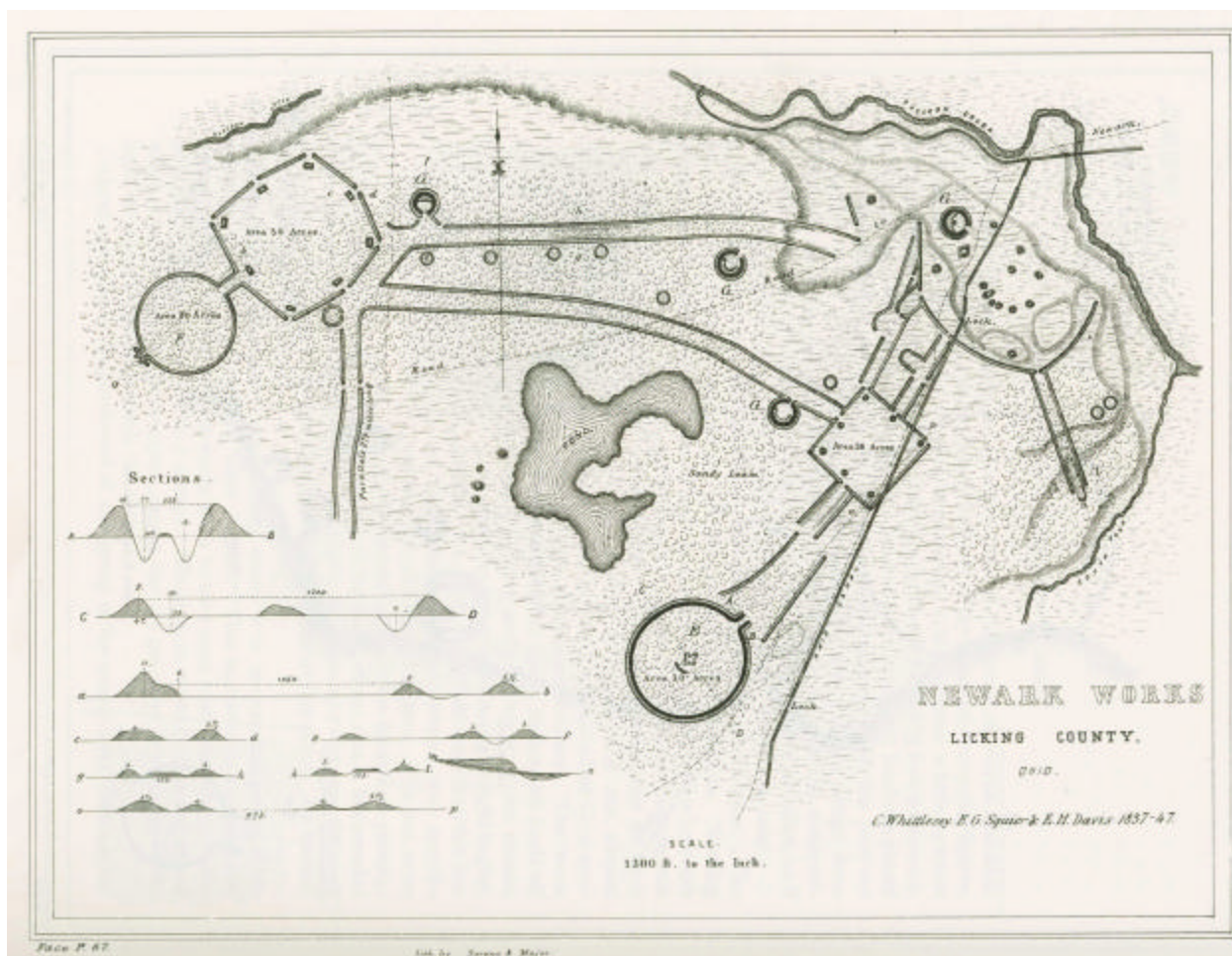


fig. 21. Map of Newark Earthworks, as illustrated in *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*, by Ephraim G. Squier and Edwin H. Davis (1848).

each other, rather than continue to work and to produce in isolation [Smithson's italics]."<sup>21</sup>

Clement Greenberg, in "The Plight of Our Culture," also argued that culture and work should be united, as they had been in what he referred to as "pre-urban" societies.<sup>22</sup> But Greenberg, with his reductive formalist methodology, failed to establish a connection between this philosophical ideal and the aesthetics that he advocated. In the absence of any aesthetic strategy to bring about such a union of art and labor, his statement is nothing more than hollow idealistic yearning.

If the main thesis of "The Plight of Our Culture" – that art and industrialism can coexist happily, without the latter corrupting the former beyond recognition – seems somewhat disingenuous, Greenberg and his circle did not realize it. On the one hand, they seemed to embrace the possibilities of the new materials industrial technology had afforded them, but on the other, they were afraid of what would happen if technology undermined formalism by provoking Dadaist symbolic identification. They wanted to incorporate the materials and vocabulary of modern technology into their art, but not its ideology. According to Smithson, however, industrial materials by their very nature carried with them a whole host of symbolic associations, and they therefore could not be used for purely formal ends. Discussing the "fetish for steel and aluminum" of artists such as David Smith and Anthony Caro, Smithson wrote that "molded steel and cast aluminum are machine manufactured, and as a result they bear the stamp of technological ideology. Steel is a hard, tough metal, suggesting the permanence of technological values." By using rust-resistant metals, modernist sculptors were adopting the value system of the machine age. "In the technological mind," Smithson continued, "rust evokes

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<sup>21</sup> Smithson, "Proposal, 1972," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 221.

<sup>22</sup> Greenberg, "The Plight of Our Culture," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, 150.

a fear of disuse, inactivity, entropy, and ruin. Why steel is valued over rust is a technological value, not an artistic one.”<sup>23</sup>

Greenberg believed that industrial materials were useful for the development of modernist art because they allowed for new constructive possibilities. Construction was to Greenberg a characteristic of modernist sculpture that distinguished it from previous sculptural approaches, with their emphasis on the “monolithic.”<sup>24</sup> While Greenberg was looking toward the immediate future – that is, the continued success of modernist art, for which he was the spokesperson – Michael Heizer was thinking of the distant future in his choice of materials. “Sculpture, paintings, and drawings using the materials of the earth,” said Heizer, “are to my mind, a proposal and a projection about a period that may exist on this planet when synthetic and amalgamated industrial products will be unobtainable because of social dysfunction.”<sup>25</sup>

In this statement, Heizer sounds very much like Rifkin in his anticipation of a time when certain resources are unavailable, as well as in the connection he draws between energy shortages and “social dysfunction.” Any direct influence of Rifkin on Heizer is doubtful at best – and such influence on Smithson is impossible – but Rifkin’s theories parallel those of the two artists because all three came to be aware of the coming entropy crisis simply by looking at the world around them. Both Smithson and Rifkin, for example, mention the blackout that blanketed much of the Eastern United States in 1965 in their writings.<sup>26</sup> For Heizer, the Vietnam War seemed to be the event that played the greatest role in changing his attitude toward the state of world affairs, as well as the way in which his art took current realities into account. While his

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<sup>23</sup> Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 86.

<sup>24</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Sculpture in Our Time,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Julia Brown and Michael Heizer, “Interview,” in *Michael Heizer: Sculpture in Reverse*, ed. Julia Brown (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 28.

<sup>26</sup> Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 9-10, and Rifkin, *Entropy: A New World View*, 92.

earlier works, such as *Double Negative* of 1969-70, involve cutting into the earth [fig. 22], his later earthworks are more constructive in nature; *Effigy Tumuli*, for example, uses earth as a building block. He also became more open about the effect the war had on him later in his career. In a 1990 talk with Douglas McGill on *Effigy Tumuli*, he said that, “It looked like the world was coming to an end, at least for me. That’s why I went out in the desert and started making things in dirt.” He had no trouble making the symbolic connection between what artists were doing in the United States and what American technology was doing in the world as a whole. He continues:

At the time, the army was making tanks of highly refined steel and armor, and sending them over to Asia to fling them on the ground. Under the pretext of war they were giving this gift of alloyed materials to Vietnam. That seemed very degenerate to me, spiritually. When you make a sculpture by digging out dirt, you’re negating all of these materialist concepts.<sup>27</sup>

Heizer’s concerns about the potential of militarization to hasten the demise of the human race have been justified by entropy theorists. Jeremy Rifkin argues that not only does the American military divert nonrenewable resources and money away from other human needs, it fails to achieve its ostensible purpose: ensuring the security of the United States. “Today [1980], we spent three times as much in real dollars as we did on defense in 1948,” he writes, “but who could claim that we are three times more secure when, within twenty minutes of the commencement of an all-out nuclear war, 160,000,000 Americans would be dead?”<sup>28</sup> War is both a contributing factor in the energy crisis, and an effect of it. Citing reports of shootings at American gas stations and plans to develop a “quick strike” military force to send to the Persian Gulf to protect American oil and gas interests, Rifkin predicted that,

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<sup>27</sup> McGill, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Rifkin, *Entropy: A New World View*, 159-160.



fig. 22. Michael Heizer. *Double Negative*. 1969-70. Mormon Mesa, Nevada.

if the flow of nonrenewable energy slows sufficiently to grind the American economic machine to a standstill, the hue and cry for immediate action will be deafening. There will be no more liberals or conservatives then, no more hawks or doves. Only millions of desperate people seeking relief at any cost. That time is not way off in the distant future. It could come at any moment.

“The alternative to panic and bloodshed is a difficult one,” he continues, “the most difficult any civilization has ever had to undertake since the beginning of history.”<sup>29</sup>

At this point in his book, Rifkin begins to lay out his plan for adopting not only different energy sources, but also a lifestyle that is compatible with those sources. What is missing from this section of the book is a plan for changing the human thought process, which may be the most difficult task of all. “As humankind has developed its mental activity from instinctual response all the way to abstract mathematical reasoning, it has generated greater disorder in the world around it. The hunter-gatherers afflicted the world with far less damage than modern man and woman with our greater power of abstract reasoning.”<sup>30</sup> So is the solution to return to “instinctual response?” Is that even possible? Or has the ability to think rationally been so ingrained in the human psyche that to return to previous modes of thought is an unrealistic goal?

Herein may lie an exception to the rule. Our intellect may be the only aspect of our mechanical way of life that will be preserved intact as we make the transition to an entropic worldview. As much as Rifkin deplores the abstract, rational thinking of the Renaissance humanists, who provided the philosophical pretext for the speeding up of energy flow, his theory is as much a product of rational thought as theirs. In entropy theory, the mechanical worldview is a prerequisite for the entropic worldview in the same way that capitalism is a prerequisite for socialism in Marxist theory. It takes a mechanical mind to undo what the mechanical mind has created.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 166-167.

Michael Heizer is an example of an individual with such a mind successfully adopting an entropic consciousness. He said that he decided on representational imagery for his *Effigy Tumuli* project because “there was no way I could come into that region and do what modern man had done since they ran the Indians out, which was to build more cities, more modern things, more abstract-looking things.”<sup>31</sup> But at the same time he worked on the *Effigy Tumuli* project, he was constructing “abstract-looking things” of his own in the Nevada desert, just as he had done for over a decade. Such contradictions notwithstanding, Heizer should not be seen as a hypocrite. A key component of an entropic consciousness is the realization that the end of the human race, the earth, the universe, is inevitable, and that no amount of right thinking or good work can alter that fate. Indeed, in the entropic worldview, there is no such thing as “good work;” there is only “more bad” and “less bad.” Smithson and Heizer, possessing this consciousness, sought a middle ground between human interests and environmental concerns. Earthworks artists have sometimes been accused by environmentalists for the supposed insensitivity of cutting into the earth with machines, but it can at least be said that they have also on occasion used their art to comment on the degradation of the earth, instead of only trying to artificially prettify the landscape or ignoring the environmental crisis altogether. In an article published in the February 1973 issue of *Artforum*, ostensibly on the subject of Frederick Law Olmsted’s design for Central Park, Smithson dismisses the ideas of environmental idealists, arguing that they fail to offer real solutions. As an example, he cites an accusation made by the neo-Impressionist painter and critic Alan Gussow that the earth artists are like “Army engineers” who “cut and gouge the land....What’s needed are lyric poets to celebrate it.” Smithson responds:

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<sup>31</sup> McGill, 24.

Perhaps if Gussow had lived in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, he would have suggested that Olmsted write “lyric poetry” instead of moving ten million horse-cart loads of earth to make Central Park. Artists like Gussow are the type who would rather *retreat* to scenic beauty spots than try to make a concrete dialectic between nature and people. Such an artist surrounds himself with self-righteousness and pretends to be saving the landscape. This is not being an ecologist of the real, but rather, a spiritual snob.

Smithson envisions the possibility of an aesthetic manipulation of the earth free of aggression; “after all,” he writes, “sex isn’t all a series of rapes.” He mentions as an example of this environmentally-sound art the “Indian cliff dwelling at Mesa Verde,” where “one cannot separate art from nature. And one can’t forget the Indian mounds in Ohio.”<sup>32</sup>

Is Smithson simply citing the mounds as another example of the merging of art and nature to go along with Mesa Verde, or does he mean to say that one *can’t afford* to forget them? Another question one might ask is whether he feels that Indian mounds should be an influence on contemporary artists only as works of art, or if they should form part of the basis of a new worldview. Certainly, they are among the only indicators that an alternative to the mechanical worldview of the European Renaissance was once prevalent in America, and that this worldview could be expressed artistically. Mound building lasted for more than two thousand years, much longer than any of Clement Greenberg’s celebrated avant-garde styles, and many mounds have survived to this day, despite attempts by modern man to wipe them out. Instead, it is the products of modern man that have become obsolete. In Macon, Georgia in the nineteenth century, part of a Mississippian burial mound was destroyed in order to make way for railroad construction. Rail corridors have always been made as straight and efficient as possible, and this time, the straight line happened to pass directly through a mound. The mound, an organic form that exemplifies the union between man and nature, was destroyed when modern man decided to

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 122-123.

build one of their “abstract-looking things.” But now, the American railroad is becoming obsolete, and what is left of the mound is protected by the National Park Service.

The site of Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* is full of examples of failed attempts by humans to impose their will on the unyielding landscape of the Great Salt Lake. He mentions in his essay that boats cannot sail the lake due to its high salt content. He describes a meeting with one of the last homesteaders in Utah, a man who marked the end of an era. He had attempted to develop one of the islands in the lake, but gave up due to the unavailability of fresh water. He took Smithson and his wife to Little Valley, a place with “abandoned man-made harbors,” to look for his sunken barge. Then, they had to fix a gashed gas tank before proceeding on to the site where the *Spiral Jetty* would eventually be located. On the way, they passed the site where the first transcontinental railroad had been completed exactly one hundred years earlier.<sup>33</sup> In the film Smithson made documenting the creation of the *Spiral Jetty*, the camera pans over a map of the area, and one can clearly see that this once great railroad line is no longer in use. Although he came to the Great Salt Lake looking for red water, the location suited him because so many human attempts to cultivate the land had met with failure. It is no surprise that the *Spiral Jetty*, a low-entropy work that, like the prehistoric Indian mounds, is an example of the merging of art and nature, is arguably the most successful use of the lake by a human being to date.

In the film, Smithson juxtaposes two scenes of increasing entropy: trucks dumping rocks into the lake, and the gentle lapping of the lake water. One process is mechanical, noisy, and fast; the other is natural, quiet, and slow. But both processes lead toward the same end result, and by juxtaposing them in his film, Smithson implies that both the trucks and the lake are used to create the *Spiral Jetty*. But while the former will eventually leave the scene, becoming like the dinosaur skeletons at the American Museum of Natural History that Smithson also includes

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<sup>33</sup> Smithson, “The Spiral Jetty,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 111.

in the film, the latter will remain, and continue to shape the work. The idea of the “Great Artist,” which originated in the Renaissance, and was inherited by the prophets of the modernist avant-garde, is that an artist can achieve a certain degree of immortality through his life’s works, even though his body must eventually die. But the *Spiral Jetty* presents a different view. It shows that if a work of art is continually being created, it can never pass into history.

The staying power of prehistoric mounds, both as works of art and as monuments of a now-extinct way of life, made them perfect models for an art form that could serve the new entropic era. As Rifkin noted, the change to an entropy-conscious society cannot come about simply by a change in energy sources; it must involve a complete lifestyle change. That meant that the streamlined, mechanical artworks of the modernist era had to go, along with the values of industrial progress and human perfectibility that went with them. As Heizer explained it, rocks now serve as “surrogate objects, replacement objects, replacement for the art object.”

Something in lieu of a consciously created, highly surfaced, highly detailed, academically studied work of fine art. A piece of rock in exchange for all of that. What carries it? Massive weight. That implies another tradition, one that was prevalent in primitive times. At that time, rock was the only material there was, they didn’t cast concrete or metals but they did work with dirt. In our times there’s a real question about modernity and how far it stretches. My real feeling is that we have returned to a primitive stage.<sup>34</sup>

For Heizer, then, this “primitive stage” was not something to be sought after, as Rifkin would have it, but something that was already a reality. When Harvey Fite hoisted his nine-ton monolith into place atop the old quarry, he realized that its natural expressive power surpassed any of his own creations, which now were not even fit to occupy the same space. The image of the great rock rising above the ruins of modern industry, with art serving as a mediator, is a powerful one, and one that would be repeated by Smithson and Heizer in their quest to escape

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<sup>34</sup> Brown and Heizer, 13.

the high-entropy, dead-end path of the avant-garde. Heizer has remarked that “we’re probably living at the end of civilization.”<sup>35</sup> How fitting it is that the end of civilization should look so much like the beginning.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 16.

## Chapter 4

### A New Primitivism

When we consider the work of Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer in relation to the “earthworks” of prehistoric North America, we become involved with issues of primitivism, another twentieth-century context into which we must set the Earth Art movement. The “primitivism” of the earth artists, however, is so radically different from earlier twentieth-century primitivisms that it barely deserves the designation. The chief difference between the primitivism of modernist artists and that of the earth artists is that the former is largely formal in nature. Rarely was the form of non-Western art considered in tandem with its content and function. Most modernist artists who borrowed from “primitive” sources chose instead to either recontextualize the forms they appropriated, or to imagine a function for them. The earth artists, on the other hand, particularly Smithson, took into consideration speculations about the cultural context of prehistoric North American mounds as they borrowed their forms. Although some of this change can be attributed to advancements in anthropology, which debunked old myths about the nature of prehistoric and non-Western cultures, much of it was wholly of the artists’ doing. After all, the “myth of the primitive” will not die in the public mind simply because a few anthropologists contradict it. And with decades of examples of primitivistic Western art before him, it takes a certain kind of attitude on an artist’s part to break with the trend. Smithson, who seemed so intent on exploding old myths of modernism in general, would seem to have been equal to this task.

One of the first Western artists mentioned in connection with the term “primitivism” is Paul Gauguin, who fled to Tahiti in 1891 in pursuit of a primitive life. When he arrived at the Tahitian capital of Papeete, he discovered, to his disappointment, that Westerners had already altered the local culture beyond recognition, so he first retreated to a remote part of the island, then left Tahiti altogether for the Marquesas Islands, as his attempts to uncover a “primitive” lifestyle were continually frustrated. Tahiti was not an authentically primitive place as much as it was a place where, set against the exotic background of surf, sand, and tropical forests, Gauguin could indulge his fantasies under the pretense of being “primitive.” His fantasizing can be seen in paintings such as *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* of 1897, in which the central figure is reaching up to pick a fruit, similar to depictions of Eve in Temptation scenes throughout the history of Western art [fig. 23]. The idea of a South Pacific island as Eden is a European’s fantasy projected onto a place the history and culture of which were little known to the outside world. Gauguin saw what he wanted to see in Tahiti, not necessarily what was actually there.

In Germany in the early twentieth century, the Die Brücke group of Expressionist artists also sought to recreate a “primitive” lifestyle in their summer excursions to the ponds at Moritzburg. They bathed in the nude and played games with bows and arrows and boomerangs, and thus, writes Jill Lloyd, “Stripped of their clothes and ‘civilized’ trappings, the artists and their models were ‘at one’ with nature and led the life of modern ‘primitives.’”<sup>1</sup> The idea that the “primitive” lifestyle and closeness to nature were inextricably linked persisted in Smithsonian’s and Heizer’s time, as can be seen in the communes set up by some participants in the counterculture of the late 1960s. The communards believed that Native Americans embodied what Timothy Miller calls a “profound nature wisdom” not shared by non-natives. They

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 30.



fig. 23. Paul Gauguin. *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* 1897.

established friendly relations with Indians on reservations near their communes or, if none such were nearby, they could show their affinity for the traditional Indian way of life by living in tepees, wearing loincloths, and conducting peyote ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> Although their re-creation of the traditional native lifestyle was generally more authentic than that of the Die Brücke group – they were sometimes instructed by actual Native Americans on how to live like Indians – the idea of the Indians’ “profound nature wisdom” is much less well documented.<sup>3</sup> What the communards shared with the Die Brücke group, therefore, was a view of tradition non-Western cultures which, though positive, was just as stereotypical as those of Westerners who saw those cultures in a negative light. They both emulated “primitive” culture by re-creating it as an alternative to the modern Western way of life, in contrast to Smithsonian and Heizer, who tried to learn lessons from Native American cultures on how to reconcile the necessities of humanity with ethical treatment of the environment, and who applied what they learned to the exigencies of their time, rather than simply throwing up their hands and retreating from the modern world.<sup>4</sup>

With the major European powers dividing non-Western parts of the world among themselves around the turn of the century, art from the colonized countries inevitably found its way to Europe, becoming fertile source material for modernist artists such as Picasso. Unlike Gauguin, Picasso had no interest in pursuing a primitive lifestyle, so most scholarship on his work prior to his death held that the influence of African masks on his art, which he saw at the Trocadéro Museum in Paris, was purely formal.<sup>5</sup> This interpretation proved limited when a 1937

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Miller, *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 153.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Bennett Berger writes that bad news of world events was received at communes with “a sort of bemused and mock-helpless shaking of heads, suggesting the inevitably self-destructive course on which the urban industrial world was set, and suggesting also a confirmation of their own decision to insulate themselves from that world bent on self-destruction and to live as simply and self-sufficiently as they could in their pastoral style.” Bennett M. Berger, *The Survival of a Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 109.

<sup>5</sup> For an example of this type of formal analysis, see John Golding, “The ‘Demoiselles d’Avignon’,” *Burlington Magazine* 100 (May 1958): 155-163.

interview of the artist was published after his death in 1973. “The masks weren’t just like any other pieces of sculpture,” Picasso said. “Not at all. They were magic things.” He also said that on his first visit to the Trocadéro, his 1907 masterpiece *Les Femmes d’Alger* (O.K. 1907) [fig. 24] “must have come to me..., but not at all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism painting...!” Since this interview came to light, it has been generally accepted that the masks in Picasso’s work serve some symbolic purpose. Perhaps Picasso did use them to exorcise his personal demons, as he stated.<sup>6</sup> Or perhaps, as Patricia Leighton suggests, he used them to criticize the European colonization of Africa.<sup>7</sup> Or it could be that he simply saw an air of superstition in the masks and was drawn to them because he was superstitious himself.<sup>8</sup> In any case, however, Picasso took the masks out of their original cultural context. Yet he claimed that he “understood what the Negroes used their sculptures for...They were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent.”<sup>9</sup> How, one might ask, did he come to this understanding? He never expressed interest in the masks as ethnographic documents, so his conclusion would seem to be based not on scientific knowledge, but on the same kind of fantastical projection characteristic of Gauguin’s primitivism. Even though his interest in them went beyond form, the only aspect of his admiration for the masks that is visually communicated in *Les Femmes d’Alger* (O.K. 1907) is the formal, because the prostitutes’ mask-like faces are the only African elements in the painting. The subject is Western, the proto-Cubist style is Western, and the larger cultural implications of the painting

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<sup>6</sup> See Mary Mathews Gedo, “Art as Exorcism: Picasso’s *Femmes d’Alger*,” *Arts Magazine* 55 (October 1980): 70-81.

<sup>7</sup> See Patricia Leighton, “The White Peril and L’art nègre: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism,” *The Art Bulletin* 72 (December 1990): 609-630.

<sup>8</sup> John Finlay writes, “In summoning imagined *nègre* spirits hidden within the magic-making masks, carvings and fetishes, Picasso was evoking sorcery and revealing his perennially superstitious nature.” John Finlay, “‘De la magie blanche à la magie noire’: Primitivism, Magic, Mysticism, and the Occult in Picasso,” *Apollo* 158 (October 2003): 19.

<sup>9</sup> Picasso quoted in Gedo, 80.



fig. 24. Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger*. 1936.

are Western. Signe Howell describes Picasso's statement about the functions of African sculptures as typical of Western beliefs concerning the primitive; such ideas are "products of the western mind, satisfying particular needs in western ideology from the eighteenth century onwards. They tell us much more about ourselves than about the primitive people they are supposed to explain."<sup>10</sup> Like the context that Gauguin created for Tahiti, the context that Picasso created for the African masks was designed to suit his own needs, whether personal or cultural.

As more scientific information about non-Western cultures became available, artists took on more of an interest in the original contexts and functions of non-Western works of art. As Kirk Varnedoe put it, the bookstore replaced the ethnographic museum as the primary source of information for artists interested in "the primitive."<sup>11</sup> Unlike Picasso, the artists of the New York School understood the context of the non-Western art to which they were exposed. They saw a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941 devoted to American Indian art, and they took advantage of the increasing amount of scholarly attention paid to Native American art and its underlying worldview in journals such as *Dyn*, which published a special issue on the American Indian in 1944.<sup>12</sup> Jackson Pollock, who compared his "drip" technique [fig. 25] to "the methods of the Indian sand painters of the West," possessed a good deal of literature on Native American culture, and probably witnessed Navajo sand painting firsthand.<sup>13</sup> Where the similarities end is in the outcomes of these similar methods. While Pollock's technique produces the same end product as centuries of Western art (i.e. a painting hung on a wall), Navajo sand paintings were used as ritual healing, and then erased. The novelty of Pollock's technique in the

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<sup>10</sup> Signe Howell, "Art and Meaning," in *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, ed. Susan Hiller (London: Routledge, 1991), 233.

<sup>11</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, "Contemporary Explorations," in *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, Volume 2*, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 662.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 39.

<sup>13</sup> Pollock quoted in Kirk Varnedoe with Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 48.



fig. 25. Jackson Pollock. *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30*, 1950. 1950.

context of Western art history is that it placed greater emphasis on the process of making a work of art. For the Navajo sand painters, however, their work could be a matter of life and death. The New York School painters may have been interested in shamanistic ritual and Indian myths, but how can such ritual be authentically re-enacted, and how can this interest be visually communicated, except through forms, in oil on canvas? Despite Pollock's knowledge of sand painting, as with Gauguin's vision of Eden in the South Pacific and Picasso's prostitutes-as-savages, the end result of his borrowing was still thoroughly Western.

Appropriating the forms and techniques of non-Western works of art was not a problem for Pollock and his New York School colleagues, or for Picasso before them, but translating the original meaning of those works into a Western context in a way that would be at all meaningful to the artists or their audience was considerably more difficult. The difficulty of finding meaning beyond form in the works of "primitive" art is exemplified by New York School painter Barnett Newman's reaction to three prehistoric Indian sites he saw on a 1949 trip to Ohio. "Here is the self-evident nature of the artistic act, its utter simplicity," Newman marveled.

There are no subjects – nothing that can be shown in a museum or even photographed; [it is] a work of art that cannot even be seen, so it is something that must be experienced there on the spot: The feeling [is] that here is the space; that these simple low mud walls make the space; that the space outside, the dramatic landscape looking out over a bridge one hundred feet high, the falling land, the chasms, the rivers, the farmlands and far-off hills are just picture postcards, and somehow one is looking out as if inside a picture rather than outside contemplating any specific nature.<sup>14</sup>

Although Newman's use of words such as "experienced" and "feeling" suggests that he was profoundly moved by his visit to the prehistoric site – perhaps the experience could even be called transcendental – it is clear that what moves him about these sites is their form, specifically

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<sup>14</sup> Barnett Newman, "Ohio, 1949," in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 174-175.

the space created by the forms. He is not moved by the massive amount of labor required to build the mounds and earthworks, nor by the fact that they have survived many centuries to stand as some of the few documents of a possibly once-great culture, both of which are impressive. He makes no attempt to analyze the three sites as individual works of art, nor does he attempt to guess at a context for them.<sup>15</sup> It could be argued that the unique spatial sensation he describes had an impact on his “Zip” paintings, with their emphasis on space, but any such influence is not made explicit, but as the mounds and earthworks seemed to him to have “no subjects,” they could only influence the form, and not the content of his works.

Perhaps the reason New York School artists had so much difficulty incorporating anything more than the forms of non-Western art into their work was the sources of their version of primitivism. The most important of these sources was undoubtedly the theories of Carl Jung, and his concept of the “collective unconscious.” Jung’s idea is that there are various archetypes, which take various forms, embedded in the unconscious that have been shared by humans throughout time. If artists could tap into the collective unconscious, so the reasoning went, they could authentically recapture the mythical spirit and supernatural power of primitive art. In his 1962 book *The Savage Mind*, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss dismissed the idea of a collective unconscious, arguing that it leads to nothing more than formal mimesis. “It is only forms and not contents which can be common,” he stated. “If there are common contents the reason must be sought either in the objective properties of particular nature or artificial entities or in diffusion and borrowing, in either case, that is, outside the mind.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> That Newman tends to describe the three sites he visited as one work, rather than describing and analyzing them individually, is all the more surprising and disappointing given the fact that those three works – the Newark Works, Fort Ancient, and the Miamisburg Mound – were built for different purposes, and at different times. The enclosures at Newark and Fort Ancient were both built by the Hopewell. The purpose of the geometric enclosures at Newark was undoubtedly primarily ceremonial, while the function of the irregular hilltop enclosure of Fort Ancient is not clear. The Miamisburg Mound is a conical burial mound built by the Adena, a culture predating Hopewell.

<sup>16</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 65.

The emergence of Lévi-Strauss in the late 1950s and early 1960s goes a long way toward explaining the reasons for the differences between the primitivism of the New York School and that of Robert Smithson, who was familiar with Lévi-Strauss's work.<sup>17</sup> The anthropological scholarship that the New York School artists had to draw on, such as that of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Sir James Frazer, displayed a much different attitude toward primitive peoples. According to such scholars, primitive man was not just a predecessor to modern man; he stood apart from him because he operated by instinct, rather than reason. Lévy-Bruhl referred to such people as "pre-logical," while Frazer placed them in what he called the age of magic, the first stage in the cultural evolution of human beings, which was followed by the ages of religion and science.<sup>18</sup> In a book of 1926 that bore the rather condescending title *How Natives Think*, Lévy-Bruhl wrote, "that which to us is perception is to him mainly the communication with spirits, souls, invisible and intangible mysterious powers encompassing him on all sides."<sup>19</sup> Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl certainly influenced the artists of the New York School; they read Frazer extensively, and Lévy-Bruhl's ideas would have been in the air with the arrival in the United States during World War II of the French Surrealists, who were familiar with his work.<sup>20</sup>

As anthropologists began to study the systems by which native peoples of the world organized their lives, however, the view of "primitive" man as pre-logical or alogical was summarily rejected. Lévi-Strauss was one of the anthropologists who took the lead in rejecting such antiquated thinking. In *The Savage Mind*, he wrote that "the 'savage' has certainly never borne any resemblance to that creature barely emerged from an animal condition and still a prey

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<sup>17</sup> Smithson mentioned Lévi-Strauss in a 1971 interview. See Robert Smithson, "'...The Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, is a Cruel Master,' Interview with Gregoire Muller," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 181.

<sup>18</sup> Polcari, 38-39.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 38.

to his needs and instincts who has so often been imagined nor to that consciousness governed by emotions and lost in a maze of confusion and participation.” He believed that what kept previous scholars from making the discoveries that he had made was an assumption that, because such societies lacked economic or technological sophistication, they must also have lacked intellectual sophistication.<sup>21</sup> To the earth artists, who rejected the commodification of art and the wasteful proliferation of industrial technology, a view of indigenous societies that got beyond economic and technological considerations had appeal.

Also appealing to the earth artists was the idea that such societies, though not “pre-logical,” possessed an alternative system of logic to that of the European Renaissance and the Enlightenment. According to Lévi-Strauss, primitive systems of logic and classification are born out of necessity, not by a desire to rationalize and categorize everything. “There is certainly something paradoxical,” he wrote,

about the idea of a logic whose terms consist of odds and ends left over from psychological or historical processes and are, like these, devoid of necessity. Logic consists in the establishment of necessary connections and how, we may ask, could such relations be established between terms in no way designed to fulfil this function? Propositions cannot be rigorously connected unless the terms they contain have first been unequivocally defined.<sup>22</sup>

The lack of wholesale arbitrary categorization in “primitive” societies could well have served as ammunition for someone like Smithson, who argued for an aesthetic that did not separate art into mutually exclusive categories such as “painting,” “sculpture,” and “architecture.” “This esthetic is non-critical,” he wrote in his notes, “in that it avoids catagorical [sic] imperatives such as ‘painting and sculpture.’ It tends toward a more abstract phenomenology.”<sup>23</sup> The prehistoric

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<sup>21</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 40-42.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Smithson, “Outline for Yale Symposium: Against Absolute Categories,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 218.

mounds of North America are a good model for Smithson's new aesthetic. Are they architecture? Are they sculpture? Or do they belong in another category, more utilitarian than works of art? If Lévi-Strauss is to be believed, they are none of these, because the prehistoric mound builders would have had no need to draw such distinctions between the arts. Art for the prehistoric cultures of North America was connected with daily life, ritual, and the natural environment; it was not the self-sufficient activity for which Clement Greenberg argued.

Of course, Greenberg-era formalism did have its advantages in regard to how artists viewed works by their prehistoric counterparts. Barnett Newman was able to evaluate prehistoric mounds using the same criteria as that used to evaluate his own art, an approach which contrasts greatly with that of Picasso, who had to dream up a function for the African masks he saw at the Trocadéro in order to make them relevant to his work. But like Picasso, he was unable or unwilling to speculate as to the origins or social functions of the mounds, perhaps shackled by a scientific view that held pre-literate cultures to be alogical, and therefore inaccessible to a modern, rationally-thinking artist. Contrary to Newman's assertion, mounds do have "subjects;" more appropriately speaking, they have functions. In his reading of the mounds as "nature and necessity in consort," Smithson implicitly takes these functions into consideration. Scholarship on the mounds during Smithson's life was not yet advanced enough for him to speculate as to their precise uses, but at least he was interested in how they may have been used. Unlike Newman, he is interested not merely in the form of the mounds, but in their social implications; by building mounds and earthworks, Smithson suggests, the prehistoric peoples of Eastern North America were able to integrate art, nature, and daily life. For the earth artists, who hoped to break down the barriers between art and other segments of society, the great

amount of planning and cooperation that must have gone into the building of the mounds made them suitable models.<sup>24</sup>

Not only are prehistoric mounds and earthworks indicative of extensive planning and social organization; many of them are also precisely geometrically ordered. The Hopewell earthworks at Newark are an uncanny example of this order. The group is comprised of two circles, a square, an octagon, and an oval, plus smaller works. Moreover, the relations of certain elements to each other also adhere to strict measurements. The distance between the centers of the two circles is 1920 meters, the same as between the center of the octagon and the center of the square. This measurement is also exactly six times the diameter of the smaller circle. Finally, the larger circle and the square are of equal area.<sup>25</sup> The significance of these measurements has not been determined, but it is more than likely that there was astronomical significance to some of the forms, particularly the circle-octagon grouping. Incredibly, this group is oriented at ninety degrees to the only other known Hopewell circle-octagon grouping, the High Bank Works near Chillicothe, ninety kilometers away. Both sites provide consistent information on the 18.6-year lunar cycle.<sup>26</sup> Many of these discoveries were not made until the 1980s, so that someone like Barnett Newman, who visited the Newark Works on his 1949 trip, would have had no idea of the extent of this mathematical precision. Nevertheless, it is clear to any viewer of either the so-called Great Circle or the Circle-and-Octagon (the square and oval are no longer extant) that geometry played a significant role in determining the forms of these enclosures.

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<sup>24</sup> My comment here refers chiefly to my discussion of Smithson's desire to unite the work of the "artist, ecologist and industrialist" on pages 65-68 of this thesis.

<sup>25</sup> Bradley T. Lepper, "The Archaeology of the Newark Earthworks," in *Ancient Earthen Enclosures of the Eastern Woodlands*, ed. Robert C. Mainfort, Jr. and Lynne P. Sullivan (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998), 117.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

What is also clear from looking at the Newark Works is that their builders not only possessed a great deal of sophistication, but that they put their intellect to a different use than that to which we put ours. As Rifkin states, “we simply possess a different *kind* of knowledge than that which people held 500 or 5,000 years ago [Rifkin’s italics],” rather than superior knowledge, a statement strongly resembling Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological viewpoint. Where Rifkin differs from Lévi-Strauss is in the moralistic ends to which he puts this main idea. “Divorced as we are from nature,” he continues,

we have no real chance to become enlightened, as that word has been understood by peoples throughout history. True, our ancestors had no scientific understanding of and explanation for the phenomena around them, but perhaps they had a better intuitive grasp of what was really important in life.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps, then, the prehistoric mound-building peoples used their intellect to different ends than modern man uses his because it was their aim to live and work in harmony with nature.

Smithson’s and Rifkin’s belief in the efficacy of prehistoric cultures as a model for renewal are ultimately built upon Lévi-Strauss’s findings, but the practical applications they devised reflect their own attitudes. The fact that an artist and a social theorist could both arrive at similar conclusions as to the relevance of prehistoric culture in modern society indicates that life experiences and world events, not academic theories, were the main driving force behind the new primitivism. The power failure that swept across the northeastern United States in 1965, the Vietnam War, and the OPEC oil embargo of 1973 all helped to erode confidence in the mechanical worldview and its accompanying lifestyle, and to revive interest in older ways of life. By the time Rifkin wrote *Entropy: A New World View* in 1980, these feelings had become so widespread that he did not even need to mention Lévi-Strauss – none of the anthropologist’s writings appear in Rifkin’s bibliography.

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<sup>27</sup> Jeremy Rifkin with Ted Howard, *Entropy: A New World View* (New York: Viking, 1980), 251.

On the surface, the primitivism of the earth artists could not be more different from that of the early modernists. Whereas the primitivism of Gauguin was born out of escapism, and that of Picasso from superstition, the “primitivism” (if it can now even be called that) of the earth artists arose out of necessity, and a perception that the modernist worldview was leading to chaos. Advances in the social sciences helped to bring about this change, but science can only change attitudes toward prehistoric and non-Western cultures; it cannot by itself provide an artist with the impetus to emulate such cultures in his work. Such motivation came to the earth artists the same way it came to Gauguin – a realization that the present situation was less than desirable. Where their approach differed from Gauguin’s is in the manner in which they incorporated the lessons they learned from prehistory into the contemporary social framework, rather than trying to hide in some sort of primitive past that could only be formally re-created, not reclaimed in fact. Rather than running away from the realities of their time, they attempted to reconcile past and present; rather than trying to “recover a frontier or wilderness that no longer exists,” as Smithson put it, their goal was to “reincorporate these things that seem ugly.”<sup>28</sup> America’s prehistoric mounds and earthworks provided them with a precedent, because they saw not just the forms, but also the social implications behind those forms.

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Smithson, “Entropy Made Visible: Interview with Alison Sky,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 194.

## CONCLUSION

In looking at the world of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the earth artists could see the problems with the modernist worldview, and the need for new art-making concepts. But how did they come up with the idea to use Indian mounds as a model for their new aesthetic? As they looked around them, two major issues must have caught their eye: the rise of environmentalism, and a resurgence of interest in Native American culture.

Native American rights had once again become an issue, due in part to the failed policy of termination of the 1950s, whereby the government began to eliminate certain reservations in an attempt to incorporate Indians into mainstream society, and in part to the general struggle for social justice in the 1960s, typified by the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War. By 1970, John Howard could write, “Perhaps inspired by the ‘black power’ and ‘brown power’ movements, Indians are now attempting to formulate a set of goals for their people; they are attempting both to define themselves as Indians and to work out a coherent and effective set of strategies for acquiring sufficient political power to act on their own behalf.”<sup>1</sup> Howard was probably referring at least in part to the American Indian Movement (AIM), founded in 1968. Among AIM’s actions was a march on Washington in 1972, during which its members demanded, among other things, a restoration of their right to make treaties with the Federal government, which had been taken away a century earlier.

In addition to campaigning for greater Indian rights in the present, the members of AIM had an eye to the past as well. Another of their goals was the preservation of Native American

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Howard, “American Indians: Goodbye to Tonto,” in *Awakening Minorities*, ed. John R. Howard (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), 22-23.

culture. Decades of attempted assimilation had to be countered, they believed, by keeping centuries-old traditions alive. As Mary Crow Dog, who was involved with AIM, recounts,

As long as people prayed with the pipe or beat the little water drum, Indians would not vanish, would continue to exist as Indians. For this reason our struggles for Indian rights over the past hundred years came out of our ancient beliefs. And so, under the impact of AIM and other movements, more and more native people abandoned the missionaries and went back to the medicine men and peyote road men.<sup>2</sup>

In the same activist spirit of the 1960s that spurred many Native Americans to demand better treatment, many Americans began to call attention to the environment. That the environmentalist movement had widespread support in the late sixties and early seventies was demonstrated by the tremendous interest in the first Earth Day in 1970; Earth Day celebrations that year drew twenty million participants. The movement was also large enough to get the attention of government, which responded by creating the Environmental Protection Agency and the Council on Environmental Quality, as well as passing a great deal of environment-friendly regulation. With increased media attention on such environmental problems as smog and disasters like the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, environmental issues could not have escaped anyone's attention, least of all Robert Smithson, interested as he was in entropy.<sup>3</sup>

After a lull in interest in the environment in the middle to late 1970s, environmental concern rebounded during the 1980s as Michael Heizer worked on the *Effigy Tumuli*. Ironically, it was the election of conservative President Ronald Reagan which brought about this resurgence of interest. "The anti-environmental orientation of his administration," write Riley Dunlap and Angela Mertig, "provided environmental organizations with reason – and ammunition – for

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Crow Dog with Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 93.

<sup>3</sup> Riley E. Dunlap and Angela G. Mertig, "The Evolution of the U.S. Environmental Movement from 1970 to 1990: An Overview," in *American Environmentalism: The U.S. Environmental Movement, 1970-1990*, ed. Riley E. Dunlap and Angela G. Mertig (Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis, 1992), 2.

mobilizing opposition to his policies.’<sup>4</sup> This increased attention to environmental issues during the eighties could well have been an influence on the *Effigy Tumuli* reclamation project; at that time and after, Heizer exhibited in his statements an environmental consciousness that had not been demonstrated in his earlier works.<sup>5</sup>

The new interests in environmental conservation and the native cultures of America sometimes morphed into fanaticism, however, and it is necessary to distinguish the beliefs of the entropy theorists and the earth artists from those who sought a literal replication of prehistoric ways of life. Many of the latter category are radical environmentalists, or as Murray Bookchin calls them, “ecomystics.”<sup>6</sup> Taking aim at the bumper stickers sported by members of the Earth First! movement that read “Back to the Pleistocene!” Bookchin, a social theorist whose writings were a formative influence on Rifkin, states that a complete return to a prehistoric way of life is unattainable, mainly because it is not possible to recreate a “Paleolithic consciousness.”<sup>7</sup> “Paleolithic people lived in such vastly diverse climatic and environmental conditions,” he writes, “that they could hardly have shared a common sensibility – still less the unified set of values and beliefs that ecomystics and primitivists so eagerly impute to them.”<sup>8</sup>

On the surface, the bumper sticker slogan and the comment made by John Davis, a former editor of the Earth First! movement’s journal, that “Many of us...would like to see human beings live much more like the way they did fifteen thousand years ago as opposed to what we see now” sound a lot like Rifkin’s assertion that the new age of entropic consciousness “will require a greater conformity to the ancient rhythms of life.”<sup>9</sup> However, two facts nullify such a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>5</sup> See pages 69-70 of this thesis for these statements.

<sup>6</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Re-enchanting Humanity* (New York: Cassell, 1995), 123.

<sup>7</sup> The Earth First! Movement was founded in 1979, a year before Rifkin’s book was published. Rifkin cites Bookchin’s *The Limits of the City in Entropy: A New World View*.

<sup>8</sup> Bookchin, *Re-enchanting Humanity*, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 123.

superficial resemblance. Firstly, Rifkin makes it clear that the entropic era will be a step forward, not a step back. He discusses ways in which the existing social structure can be utilized as much as possible in the construction of an entropy-conscious society; for example, he devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of how the entropic worldview can be made to mesh with the Judeo-Christian worldview. Secondly, and most importantly, Rifkin's theory is the product of scientific thought, not idealism. As Bookchin notes, the belief of prehistoric peoples in the power of magic is "completely understandable in view of how little they knew about the frightening natural forces that determined their well-being," but

What is incomprehensible is that millions of ostensibly civilized people today, even educated urban dwellers, firmly believe that Paleolithic and modern aboriginal beliefs provide a more valid, insightful, and superior account of the natural world than the brilliant explanations given by modern science.<sup>10</sup>

Because the new entropic consciousness that Rifkin hopes to instill in his readers requires the acceptance of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, a return to some ill-defined prehistoric way of thinking is out of the question. He calls for a recontextualization of modern life, a re-ordering of priorities that will bring them more in-line with those of ancient peoples, not a wholesale re-creation of ancient ways of life. If Lévi-Strauss is correct that only form, and not content, can be part of a consciousness common to people of different eras, then formal re-creation would have no real effect anyway.

Just as Lévi-Strauss pointed out the "emptiness" of primitive forms, the artists who followed in his wake took little or no interest in the forms of "primitive" art, as had their modernist predecessors, but focused instead on its context. By 1984, Kirk Varnedoe could write that in contemporary art, "primitivism seems to have come full circle, from object without

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 132.

context to context without object.”<sup>11</sup> Just one year later, however, this assessment was called into question by the completion of Heizer’s *Effigy Tumuli* [fig. 26]. Here, it seemed, was the object *and* the context. The forms of the *Tumuli* are derived from prehistoric works of art, while their purpose is to reclaim a land laid waste by modern industry. Form and content merge because the society from which the forms are borrowed also can serve as a model for ethical land management and environmental conservation.<sup>12</sup> But herein also lies a major point of criticism of the *Effigy Tumuli*. Does the use of the prehistoric mound as a formal source necessarily guarantee a successful land reclamation? And conversely, is the project’s land reclamation function best served by the construction of earth mounds, or is Heizer guilty of stereotyping and oversimplifying? As Erika Doss writes,

Native American culture may be based on an ethical stewardship of the land, but simply copying its stylistics is hardly an effective critique of a postindustrial world. Reducing the complexity of primitivism to a few visual bon mots and ecologically correct clichés is arrogant; reducing the complexity of environmentalism to the same is untenable.<sup>13</sup>

So do the *Effigy Tumuli* represent the triumphant merging of form and context that had eluded primitivistic art for the entire twentieth century, or are they an example of the tendency that Bookchin deplores, the naïve hope that the values of the past can be brought back simply by re-creating the past? No matter what one’s opinion is on this point, it must be agreed that the *Effigy Tumuli* signify a change in Heizer’s attitude about the role his art can play in society. By using the millennia-old form of the earthen mound to reclaim an industrial wasteland, Heizer created a new context for his art, and realized a goal that the late Robert Smithson had proposed

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<sup>11</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, “Contemporary Explorations,” in *‘Primitivism’ in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Volume 2, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 661.

<sup>12</sup> That Native American cultures are models of ethical land management and environmental conservation is largely a perception, not a proven fact. For a discussion of this issue, see Shepard Krech, *Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: Norton, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Erika Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1995), 123.



fig. 26. Michael Heizer. *Effigy Tumuli*. 1984-85. Buffalo Rock State Park, Illinois.

during the early years of the Earth Art movement. Whether the change was genuine or misguided is a matter for debate, but for better or worse, it profoundly changed Heizer's attitude toward his work. He has shown himself to be more socially conscious, and more open about the social context of his work since the completion of the *Effigy Tumuli*. For example, in a 1983 interview with Heizer, Julia Brown noted that the artist's Nevada property was located next to a nuclear testing facility, to which Heizer responded, "I'm reluctant to discuss it that much."<sup>14</sup> In his 1990 talk with Douglas McGill, Heizer was less reticent. "The Air Force tests a lot of planes over the Nevada desert," he told McGill.

They use *Complex One* [a work he made in Nevada from 1972-74] as a radar target. The fighter planes come from all over Nevada to hit it. They come racing up, kick on their afterburners, and break the sound barrier going straight up. It knocks all the dogs down on their backs.<sup>15</sup>

When Erika Doss says that the *Effigy Tumuli* are "a physical and public art disaster" in which "actual reclamation is questionable," she may be right.<sup>16</sup> But when the work is considered in the context of the Earth Art movement as a whole, one finds that its message is entirely consistent with the aesthetic goals and social agenda of Earth Art: it is public property, not a small-scale, easily possessed commodity; it uses earth as both the sculpture and the pedestal, creating an entirely natural setting for the work of art that is in direct opposition to the "isolation of art worlds" that Smithson deplored; and it attempts to reclaim a land ravaged by modern industry, and to reconnect man with his natural environment.<sup>17</sup> In pursuing these goals, the earth artists had as their precedent the prehistoric Indian mounds of North America. The kinship between the art of the present and the art of the distant past that Smithson hinted at in his

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<sup>14</sup> Julia Brown and Michael Heizer, "Interview," in *Michael Heizer: Sculpture in Reverse* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 16.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas McGill, *Michael Heizer: Effigy Tumuli* (New York: Abrams, 1990), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Doss, 117.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Smithson, "Proposal, 1972," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 221.

writings was made clear. And at last, most recently in *Effigy Tumuli*, primitivism in twentieth-century art had reached its highest level of expression; artists now paid homage to the unknown artists of prehistoric cultures in both the form and purpose of their work.

In this thesis, I have attempted to advance the discussion of the parallels between contemporary and prehistoric earthworks beyond questions of form and materials. I hope to add to the discourse on the art of Smithson and Heizer by connecting their affinity for prehistoric American mounds with aspects of their artistic approach and personal philosophies already widely discussed and accepted by art historians, namely their rejection of the modernist avant-garde, their dissatisfaction with the commodification of art, and their affinity to a fledgling worldview that sought a way of life more harmonious with nature. I also hope to advance the discourse on prehistoric mounds as works of art; even though I have mostly discussed the mounds from the perspective of Smithson and Heizer, I have also, where appropriate, identified aspects of those ancient earthworks that I believe suggest aesthetic concerns on the part of their builders. Even though I can never conclusively prove that the mounds were intended to be works of art, I believe that I have at least shown that they have been, and can continue to be, fertile source material for artists of our time.

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