



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Robert Smithson,
1972 July 14-19**

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Smithson on July 14 and 19, 1972. The interview was conducted at 799 Greenwich Street in New York City by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Nancy Holt is also present.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's July 14, 1972 – Paul Cummings talking to Robert Smithson. Let's sort of do some background. You were born in New Jersey?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes, in Passaic, New Jersey.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you come from a big family?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No, I'm and only child.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So many artists I've been interviewing lately have been an only child. Did you grow up there, go to school there?

ROBERT SMITHSON: What happened was I was born in Passaic and lived there for a short time. We moved to Rutherford, New Jersey. William Carlos Williams actually was my baby doctor in Rutherford. We lived there until I was about nine and then we moved to Clifton, New Jersey to a section called Allwood. I guess around that time I had an inclination towards being an artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you making drawings?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Oh, yes. I was working in that area even back in the early phases in Rutherford.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you like all the business of moving around all the time? That's a lot of moving.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Actually we moved only twice: to Rutherford and to Clifton. I was very interested in that time in natural history. In Clifton my father set up – built I guess what you could call a kind of suburban basement museum for me to display all my fossils and shells, I was involved with collecting insects and...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did these shells come from?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Oh, different places. We traveled a lot at that time. Right after the war in 1946 we went out West. I was about eight years old. It was an impressionable period. I started to get involved in that at that time. But basically I was pretty much unto myself. I was very much interested in, you know, field naturalist things, looking for insects, rocks and whatever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have any books around that were involved with these topics?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. And I went to the museum of Natural History. When I was, I guess, about seven I did very large paper constructions of dinosaurs which in a funny way I suppose relate right

up to the present in terms of the film I made on *The Spiral Jetty*. I used the prehistoric motif running through that. So in a funny way I guess there is not that much different between what I am now and my childhood. I really had a problem with school. I mean there was no real understanding of where I was at. I didn't know where I was at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you like primary school or high school?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No, I didn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It didn't work?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No. I grew up rather hostile to that. In high school actually I started going to the Art Students League. I won a scholarship to that. In my last year of high school I managed to get only half a day. I was just very put off by the whole way art was taught.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? In what way?

ROBERT SMITHSON: By my high school teacher.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. What kind of things were they doing that...?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, my high school teacher would come up with statements like – I remember this one vividly – that only people that become artists are cripples and women.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, great! This was a high school art teacher?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was their problem?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, they seemed to have all kinds of problems. Everything was kind of restricted. There was no comprehension of any kind, no creative attitude. It was mostly rote. A very unimaginative teaching staff, constricted and departmentalized. At that point I didn't have any self-realization so I really couldn't tell except for the Art Students League did offer me a chance to at least come in contact with other people. I made a lot of friends with people in the High School of Music and Art in New York. I looked forward to coming into...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go to that school?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No, but I had a lot of friends. And we had a sketch class. Every Saturday in the last two years of high school I went to Isaac Soyer's studio. He has a son, Avram Soyer. There were a lot of students from Music and Art High School who used to go there. We used to sketch each other and we'd talk about art and go to museums. And that was like a very important thing for me to get out of that kind of stifling suburban atmosphere where there was just nothing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you get the scholarship to the League?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I applied for that. I did a series of woodcuts, rather large woodcuts of – well, I remember one of them was called teenagers on 42nd Street. It was done in a kind of German Expressionist style. I was about seventeen when I did that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have art books and things at home?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. There was an availability of art books because I kept coming into New York and buying art books and I was pursuing it on my own.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go to museums and galleries?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. The first museum show I saw at the Museum of Modern Art was The Fauves exhibition. I was about sixteen. I had that attitude. And then to go back to Clifton High School and try to present those ideas didn't quite jell. There was just kind of difficulty there. But it was a very important period, I think. I don't know – I suppose things are getting better. At present I am very interested in art education. Ohio State University has just invited me to participate in a conference on New Approaches in Art Education in April 1973.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. Were you interested in other classes in school?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, I was somewhat interested in writing although at that time I had a sort of writer's block, you know, I couldn't get it quite together. I had a good oral sense; I liked to talk. I remember giving a talk, I think in my sophomore year in high school, on *The War of the Worlds*, the H.G. Wells thing. And I gave a talk on the proposed Guggenheim Museum. Things like that interested me. But I found that things that interested me really didn't coincide with school so I became more and more disenchanted and more and more confused.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had no instructor in school who picked up on any of those things?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No. It was all very hostile and cramped, and it just alienated me more and more to the point where I grew rather hostile to the whole public school situation. And in a very, very definite way I wanted nothing to do with high school, or rather I had no intention of going to college at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the writing? When did that start?

ROBERT SMITHSON: That started in 1965-1966. But that was more of a self-taught situation. After about five years of thrashing around on my own, I just started to pill my thoughts together and was able to start writing. Since then I guess I've written about twenty articles.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find it augments your work? Or is it separate from?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, it comes out of my sensibility. I mean it comes out of my own observation. I mean it sort of parallels my actual art involvement. In other words, the two coincide; one informs the other. That was a very crucial time. It was in the fifties and everything was repressed and stupid; there was no art context as we know it now. There weren't any galleries to speak of. I was very much encouraged by Federica Beer-Monti who ran the Artists Gallery when I was sixteen or seventeen. She was an Austrian woman of the circle of Kokoscha and that crowd. She had been painted by a lot of those people. She was very encouraging.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you meet her?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I took my woodcuts to the gallery. It was run by Hugh Stix and his wife. They were very encouraging. It was a non-profit gallery. I would have discussions there with Owen Ratchliff, who was sort of the director. And Federica was just very encouraging. I would say that in a way she gave me an opportunity to work for myself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had a show with them at one point?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I had a show with them. I was the youngest artist to even show there. And I felt – well, you know, if I can show at age nineteen, keep going. I've always been kind of unteachable, I guess, especially at that point. I met other people. I was friendly with the son of Meyer Levin who went to Music and Art High School. I remember his saying that I was the type of person that couldn't go to school, that I would make it very big or else go crazy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Nice alternatives. How did you like the Art Students League? What did you do there?

ROBERT SMITHSON: It gave me an opportunity to meet younger people and people who were sort of sympathetic to my outlook. I mean there wasn't anybody in Clifton who I was close to except for one person. His name was Danny Donahue. He got interested in art. But eventually he did go crazy and was killed in a motorcycle accident. He joined a Brooklyn gang of motorcyclists and just... I mean it was a very difficult time, I think for people to find themselves.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was – what? – in the fifties?

ROBERT SMITHSON: In the fifties, yes. This was I'd say, around 1956-57. I spent a short period – six months - in the army.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you drafted? Or did you join?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No I joined. Actually I joined with Danny Donohue, Joe Levin, and Charlie Hasloff. Charlie came from Dusseldorf. Both Danny and Joe were excluded and that left Charlie and me. The reason I joined was because it was a special plan; it was Special Services and it was a kind of art group, art situation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really! What was that?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, strangely enough, John Cassavetes was in this group. And Miles Kruger, who is an expert in nostalgia.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes! *The American Musical Stage*.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Right. You know him?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, for years! Yes.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, in a way he was responsible for cueing me into the situation. So it turned out that I went to Fort Knox, went through basic training, spent some unhappy hours in cartographer's school, and then ended up as sort of artist-in-residence at Fort Knox. I did watercolors for the mess hall there for local army installations. I want to make the point that it was a very confusing period. Another important relationship was with a poet named Alan Brilliant. I stayed at his place up on Park Avenue and 96th Street, El Barrio area. He was involved with publishing poets.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you meet him?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I met him, again, through Joe Levin. I don't know what has happened to Joe Levin. I think he's become a Zionist or something of that sort and lives in Israel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was Miles with you all through this military period?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I spent a few times with Miles at the Rienzi Café down in the Village where we had discussions. That sort of thing. I don't know him that well. I think this was around 1956. I mean that was an interesting period for me. I'm trying to put it together right now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the poet though – Brilliant?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Brilliant married a novelist, Mateo Savery, and moved out to California and became a little magazine publisher. The Unicorn Press in California. In that time I met Hubert Selby, who wrote *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Franz Kline, a lot of people ... He also introduced me to a lot of people from Black Mountain. And this is like an important thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: At the Cedar Bar.

ROBERT SMITHSON: At the Cedar Bar. Carl Andre said one time that that was where he got his education. In a way I kind of agree with him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A lot of people did.

ROBERT SMITHSON: I think it was a kind of meeting place for people who were sort of struggling to figure out who they were and where they were going.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The late fifties was also a sort of heyday of the Tenth Street galleries.

ROBERT SMITHSON: That's right. I knew a lot of people involved in that. Although I had had this show at the Artists Gallery, I was somewhat unsatisfied; well, the show was reviewed in *Art News* by Irving Sandler and I just didn't feel satisfied. Strangely enough, the work sort of grew out of Barnett Newman; I was using stripes and then gradually introduced pieces of paper over the stripes. The stripes then sort of got into a kind of archetypal imagistic period utilizing images similar, I guess, to Polluck's She-Wolf period and Dubuffet and certain mythological religious archetype.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, That's something like the images in the show in Rome then? – right?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Also that comes out of that period. Charles Alan offered to put me in a show. And the reason I got the show in Rome was because of the painting called *Quicksand*. It's and abstraction done with gouache. I think Charles Alan still owns it. It was fundamentally abstract, sort of olives and yellows and pieces of paper stapled onto it; it had a kind of incoherent landscape look to it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you know Newman's work? Were you intrigued by that kind of thing?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes, I did see Newman's work. But emotionally I wasn't – I mean I responded to it but this latent imagery was still in me, a kind of anthropomorphism; and, you see, I was also concerned with Dubuffet and de Kooning in terms of that kind of submerged...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where had you seen Dubuffet? Because he was not shown that much here.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Oh, I think he had a lot of things in the Museum of Modern Art. And I'd seen books. I think he was being shown at one of the galleries, I can't remember exactly which one. I'm pretty sure I saw things of his in the Museum of Modern Art. I was around twenty at this time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: As long as we're talking about galleries and museums, which galleries interested you most? Do you remember the ones that you went to in those days? You've mentioned Charles

Alan and the Artists Gallery.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Well, a lot of the galleries hadn't opened yet. I was very much intrigued by Dick Bellamy's gallery - the Hansa Gallery. When I was still going to the Art Students League I used to drop around the corner to see Dick Bellamy. He was very encouraging. Also in the late fifties I moved to Montgomery Street; there I was living about three blocks from Dick Bellamy. He was the first one to invite me to an actual opening. I believe it was an Allan Kaprow opening at the Hansa Gallery. At the time I was trying to put together a book of art and poetry with Allan Graham (Which never manifested itself) but I wanted to use... Dick had suggested that I go to see these new young artists Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg. I remember having seen their work at The Jewish Museum in a small show. And also in this book I wanted to include comic strips. I was especially interested in the early issues of *Mad Magazine - Man Out of Control*. Then there was an artist who was interesting, somebody who had a kind of somewhat psychopathic approach to art; his name was Joseph Winter and he was showing at the Artists Gallery; I wanted to include him. I also met Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac at that time. I met lots of people through Dick Bellamy. Let me see what else. I worked at the Eighth Street Bookshop too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? When was that?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I would say in 1958, I think right about that period give or take a year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Those crazy brothers. To kind of go back a bit, who did you stuffy with at the League?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Oh. John Groth, who was an illustrator.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you select him?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, you see, I could only go on Fridays. I also studied with somebody named Beauvais during the week. But I just selected him. He had a sort of loose way of drawing and I was interested in drawing. In the early years of high school I guess I had ideas of being an illustrator of some sort.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Making it useful with a paying career.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. But John Groth was a worthwhile teacher and he had a good sense of composition. I always did my work at home. I did sketching from models and things at the league, but basically I did all my work at home. I worked in caseins. I still have some of those works from that period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did your family like this development?

ROBERT SMITHSON: They didn't like it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There was no encouragement?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, you know, they just didn't see it as a paying enterprise. They saw it as a rather questionable occupation, Bohemian, you know, that sort of thing. Although my great-grandfather was a rather well-known artist around the turn of the century. He did interior plaster work in all the major municipal buildings in New York: the Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan; he did the entire subway system.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was his name?

ROBERT SMITHSON: His name was Charles Smithson. Well, of course since then all the work has been torn out of the subways. I guess it was of that period that Lewis Mumford called The Bronze Decade; you know, that kind of work. There was an article written about him in an old journal from around 1900. Lawrence Alloway is doing a very comprehensive piece on me for *Artforum* so I've given him that magazine. But it was interesting. He was also involved in sort of public art. Then my grandfather worked with him for a while. But then the unions came in and that sort of craft work went out and prefab work came in. And then the Depression wiped out my great-grandfather and my grandfather who was sort of a poet actually --

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was his name?

ROBERT SMITHSON: His name was James Smithson – I'm sorry – Sam Smithson; I'm thinking of the other Smithson, the Smithsonian one. Incidentally, there was somebody at Columbia who claimed that I was related to him, that all the Smithsons were related, you know, to the founder of the Smithsonian Institution, as a matter of fact.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you see how small the world is.

ROBERT SMITHSON: But I don't know about that. I mean that's...

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's only two hundred years ago.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, he had no offspring, I don't know – I never could understand – this man whose name is I.M. Smithson is working at Columbia on all of the Smithsons and how they're related to the Smithsonian one.

NANCY HOLT: There are only three Smithsons in the phone book.

ROBERT SMITHSON: As a matter of fact, he called me up as a result of the flyer from the Artists Gallery which one of the students gave him. But I never heard anything about that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He may still be up there digging away somewhere.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Right. My father worked for Auto-lite. I do remember some interesting things that he used to bring me home. He used to bring home films – they had all these car parts sort of automated, you know, like marching spark plugs and marching carburetors and that sort of thing. It's very vivid in my mind. Later on he went into real estate and finally into mortgage and banking work. He just never had the artistic view. On my mother's side I'm middle European of diverse origins, I suppose mainly Slavic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what happened? You had this exhibition at the Artists Gallery at – what? Nineteen or thereabouts?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Nineteen or twenty, around that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did that help your parents' interest in your work?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was just one more event?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Just another event, yes. Well, they came to see it and tried to understand what their son was getting into. They've always been sympathetic. I mean they're really pretty good to me. I had a brother who died before I was born, and then being an only child and my father did take me on trips. Actually now looking back on it, he did have a real sense of a kind of, you know, American idea of the landscape and that sort of thing; but in an American way; I mean he loved to travel...

PAUL CUMMINGS: See something new.

ROBERT SMITHSON: He hitchhiked around the country, rode the rails and everything when he was younger; he sort of had that feeling for scenic beauty, that sort of thing. But couldn't understand modern art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He liked Bierstadt paintings.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. That sort of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how much of the country have you traveled around? I know you've been here, there, and everywhere.

ROBERT SMITHSON: I sort of concentrated on it in my childhood and adolescence. Well, my first major trip was when I was eight years old and my father and mother took me around the entire United States. Right after World War II we traveled across the Pennsylvania Turnpike out through the Black Hills and the Badlands, through Yellowstone, up into the Redwood Forests, then down the Coast, and then over to the Grand Canyon. I was eight years old and it made a big impression on me. I used to give like little post card shows. I remember I'd set up a little booth and put a hole in it and put post cards up into the slot and show all the kids all these post cards.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh. The post cards you picked up on your travels?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. And then on my mother's side it's obscure. Her maiden name was Duke from Austria, that area. Her father was a wheelmaker.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's a strong craft tradition behind, you know, using materials and making objects.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. I guess there is something to that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let's see, you went to the Brooklyn Museum School at one point?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes, I got a scholarship there too. I went there on Saturdays. I didn't go there too long. It was kind of far to go there. I went to life classes with Isaac Soyer again; well, mainly we used to gather at his place. I can't remember where his studio was – it was up near Central Park. We'd do sketching. I think I went there for maybe about three months.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's to the museum or to the sketch class?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. It was just too far. I don't know – I didn't really...

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was the Brooklyn Museum? Did you like that?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No. I can't say that I really responded that much. I think the strongest impact

on me was the Museum of Natural History. My father took me there when I was around seven. I remember he took me first to the Metropolitan which I found kind of dull. I was very interested in natural history.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All the animals and thing.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did they have the panoramas then? I don't remember...

ROBERT SMITHSON: Oh, yes. I mean it was just the whole spectacle. The whole thing – the dinosaurs made a tremendous impression on me. I think this initial impact is still in my psyche. We used to go to the Museum of Natural History all the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was your museum rather than the art museum?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were your parents interested in that, or was it because you were interested?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes – well, my father like it. My father sort of liked the dioramas and things of that sort because of their painstaking reality and that sort of thing. Looking back on that, I think he took me to the Metropolitan thinking that that was the Muserum of Natural History – I could be wrong there but I think I can remember his saying: oh, well, we can go to an interesting museum now. For me it was much more interesting. Then from that point on I just got very interested in natural history. At one point I thought of becoming either a field naturalist or a zoologist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go to college anywhere?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I didn't think you did. So what happened then? In the late fifties...

ROBERT SMITHSON: The late fifties were very curious.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you move to New York?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Right after I got out of the Army – which was when, Nancy? I moved to New York in 1957. Then I hitchhiked all around the country. I went out West. I visited the Hopi Indian Reservation and found that very exciting. Looking back on that, quite by chance, I was privileged to see a rain dance at Arabi. I guess I was about eighteen or nineteen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you been to the museum of the American Indian ever?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You hadn't? So it was a new experience.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Well, you see, I know about Gallup, New Mexico. I knew about and made a special point of going to the Canyon de Chelly. I had seen photographs of that. I hiked the length of Canyon de Chelly at that point and slept out. It was the period of the beat generation. When I got back *On the Road* was out, and all those people were around, you know, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, both of whom I met. And Hubert Selby, I knew him rather well; I used to visit him out in

Brooklyn and we'd listen to jazz and that sort of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I never knew him in all that crowd of people. I knew a lot of those.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, he was a strange person. I mean you wouldn't think of him really as – there was nothing weird about him. In fact he billed himself as an Eisenhower Republican, lived in a highrise. He had lung trouble, I think he had only a quarter of a lung left or something. At one point he tried to commit suicide. I don't know – it just got very bad. He was trying to get his book published at that time. The way I met him was I was sitting at a table at the Cedar Bar. I had read a chapter from his book and I praised it to, I think it was Jonathan Williams of the Black Mountain Press. It just happened that Hubert was sitting there (Cubby as he was called) and – well, of course he was very taken with the fact that somebody liked his story that much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find the Cedar? Was that just through wandering around the Village?

ROBERT SMITHSON: How did I find Cedar? No, I think people just sort of gravitated to it. Tenth Street was very active. I can't remember exactly how I discovered it. But I think perhaps, again, through Dick Bellamy. Miles Forst, Dody Muller, people like that, you know. I know Edward Avedisian too at that time. And Dick Baker who worked for Grove Press and was a Zen monk.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Really!

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I didn't know that. You never showed in Tenth Street, did you, in any of those galleries?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No. By the that time I was even more confused, I mean I had a certain initial kind of intuitive talent in terms of sizing up the situation and being influenced. But I had to work my way out of that. It took me three years. And then I think I was exposed to Europe through my show at the George Lester Gallery in Rome which had a tremendous impact on me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that happen?

ROBERT SMITHSON: As I said, that painting *Quicksand* that was shown at the Alan Gallery; he offered me a show on the basis of that. At that time I really wasn't interested in doing abstractions. I was actually interested in religion, you know, and archetypal things, I guess interested in Europe and understanding the relationship of...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go to Europe then?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes, I went to Europe in 1959.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For how long?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I was in Rome for about three months. And I visited Siena. I was very interested in the Byzantine. As a result I remember wandering around through these old baroque churches and going through these labyrinthine vaults. At the same time I was reading people like the William Burroughs. It all seemed to coincide in a curious kind of way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it was very much of what was happening in those days.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What other things were you reading besides Burroughs?

ROBERT SMITHSON: T. S. Elliot then had a big influence on me, of course, after going to Rome. So I had to wrestle with that particular problem of tradition and Anglo-Catholicism, the whole number. And then I met Nancy – about what year was that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: The show at the George Lester Gallery was in 1961 or something.

ROBERT SMITHSON: 1961 it was. I'm sorry. I'm thinking of the Artists Gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it like being a young American in Rome and having a show?

ROBERT SMITHSON: It was very exciting to me. I was very interested in Rome itself. I just felt I wanted to be a part of that situation, or wanted to understand it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way? What were the qualities?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I wanted to understand the roots of – I guess you could call it Western civilization really, and how religion had influenced art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What got you interested or involved in religion at that point? I find that interesting in the context of the people you knew, because it wasn't generally something they were all that interested in.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, in a funny way there was a kind of aspect to it. I guess I was reading people – like I read Nightwood, T. S. Elliot, and Ezra Pound. There was a sense of European history that was very prevalent. Also I was very influenced by Wyndham Lewis.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? But Pound is not particularly involved with...

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, he was interested in a kind of notion of what Western art grew out of and what happened to it. I mean it was a way of discovering the history of Western art in terms of the Renaissance and what preceded it, especially the Byzantine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you mean the ritual and the ideas and all those things?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. That sort of thing.

NANCY HOLT: Also psychology, psychoanalysis...

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. I think a kind of Jungian – I think even in part Jackson Pollock's interest in archetypal structures. I was just kind of interested in the façade of Catholicism and that kind of building and that sort of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But were you interested in Jung or Freud particularly?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes, I was at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You read their writings and thing?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you ever go into analysis?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It didn't go that far?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find that those activities worked for you? Did they answer questions for you? Or did they just pose new ones?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I think I got to understand, let's say, the mainspring, you know, of what European art was rooted in prior to the growth of Modernism. And it was just very important for me to understand that. And once I understood that I could understand Modernism and I could make my own moves. I would say that I began to function as a conscious artist in around 1964-65. I think I started doing works that were mature. I would say that prior to the 1964-65 period it was a kind of groping, investigating period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about the show at the George Lester Gallery.

ROBERT SMITHSON: I did three paintings that I think were probably the best. They were sort of semi abstractions based on a rough grid and roughly based on – one was called *The Inferno*, another was called *Purgatory*, another was called *Paradise*.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Dante-esque.

ROBERT SMITHSON: It was Dante-esque, but done in terms of – it was a rough irregular grid type painting with sort of fragments of faces and things embedded in this grid, and other things were kind of iconic, tending toward a kind of Byzantine relationship. I was also very much interested in the theories of T. E. Hulme; as I said, that whole circle, that whole prewar circle of Modernism.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What artists were you interested in at that point?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I really wasn't – I was really interested in the past at that point. I would say that initially -

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was a kind of modern literature in old art.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Initially – well, like this was when I was nineteen – the impact was Newman, Pollock, Dubuffet, Rauschenberg, de Kooning; even Alan Davie who I had seen I think at the Viviano Gallery; the whole New York school of painting. I mean I felt very much at home with that when I was in my late teens. But then I rejected that in favor of a more traditional approach. And this lasted like from maybe 1960-1963.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think you rejected those things that you ...?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I just felt that they were too – they really didn't understand ... First of all, anthropomorphism, which had constantly been lurking in Pollock and de Kooning, I always felt that a problem. I always thought it was somehow seething underneath all those masses of paint. And even Newman in his later work still referred to a certain kind of Judeo-Christian kind of value. I wasn't that much interested in a sort of Bauhaus formalist view. I was interested in this kind of archetypal gut situation that was based on kind of primordial needs and the unconscious depths.

And the real breakthrough came once I was able to overcome, I would say, this lurking pagan religious anthropomorphism. I was able to get into crystalline structures in terms of structures of matter and that sort of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What precipitated that transition, do you think?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, I just felt that Europe had exhausted its culture. I suppose the first inklings of a more Marxist view began to arise rather than trying to re-establish traditional art work in terms of the Eliot-Pound-Wyldham-Lewis situation. I just felt there was a certain naiveté in the American painters – good as they were.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I mean in a visual way, or a conceptual way?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Because I gave up painting around 1963 and began to work plastics in a kind of crystalline way. I began to develop structures based on a particular concern with the elements of the material itself. But this was essentially abstract and devoid of any kind of mythological content.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Also there was no figurative overtone to it.

ROBERT SMITHSON: No, I had completely gotten rid of that problem. I felt that Jackson Pollock never really understood that. And although I admire him still, I still think that was something that was always eating him up inside.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's interesting because the development away from the traditional kind of imagery and yet an involvement with natural materials...

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, that comes – I would say that begins to surface in 1965-66. That's where I really began to get into that. I mean that I consider my sort of emergence as what I call a conscious artist. Prior to that was my struggle to get into another realm. In 1964, 1965, 1966 I met people who were more compatible with my view. I met Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, and Donald Judd. At that time we showed at the Daniels Gallery; I believe it was in 1965. I was doing crystalline type works and my early interest in geology and earth sciences began to assert itself over the whole cultural overlay of Europe. So that I had gotten that out of my system. This whole other period represents a very ... That I consider myself mature --

PAUL CUMMINGS: Out of chaos comes --

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Well, out of the defunct, I think, class culture of Europe I developed something that was intrinsically my own and rooted to my own experience in America.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you been back to Europe since then?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes, I have been back to Europe. And I did this piece in Europe. I mean the Dutch piece of course – *The Broken Circle* – I consider a major piece. And when I consider that in terms of what I'm now interested in which is... I mean around this time 1965-66 I was asked to give a talk, to be on a panel up at the Yale with Brian O'Doherty and John Hightower and Paul Weiss. The topic was art in the city. At that time my ideas of crystalline structure and lattices and that kind of thing had developed. And I had met people who were sympathetic to that view and who were just beginning to emerge themselves. And as a result of that I got a job with Tibbetts, Abbot, McCarthy and Stratton as an artist consultant. That was for the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, which never came into existence. They eventually lost the contract. I would go there from month to month

and talk to the architects. This got me more and more – I mean, in other words, the kind of abstract works that I was working with there were essentially kind of rooted in a kind of crystalline type of mapping. And then this mapping just extended itself to a more global sense and I got involved in mapping sites, and then, you know, the emergence of the landscape.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what led you to the crystals? When did it become apparent that that's what it was you were working with?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, once I disposed of all the lurking anthropomorphisms.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it about the crystalline structures that you picked up on?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I think it goes back to my earlier childhood responses, you know, like a direct response to – I have always been interested in collection rocks and I did have a rather large rock collection. The first thing I wrote was in 1966 for *Harper's Bazaar*. The article was called "The Crystal Land" and it was about a journey to New Jersey to a rock quarry with Donald Judd.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, what's the name of the place out there?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Montclair.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Isn't there a famous rock place in New Jersey?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Franklin Furnace. That's where I did one of my nonsites.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, this is like Phase One sort of background. You know, in other words, what I consider my fulfillment would be another tape.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Okay.

END OF TAPE 1- SIDE 1

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is side 2. It's July 19, 1972. Anyway, would you like to start this side and say something about William Carlos Williams?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Well, this took place I think in either 1958 or 1959. William Carlos Williams was going to do an introduction for Irving Layton's book of poems. So I went out to Rutherford. And it wasn't for an interview. He was in pretty bad shape at that time, he was kind of palsied. But he was rather interesting. Once he found out that we weren't going to be doing any articles he was pretty open. Sophie Williams was there too. He said that he enjoyed meeting artists more than writers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? Why?

ROBERT SMITHSON: He just found them more interesting to talk to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Contrast, maybe.

ROBERT SMITHSON: As it turned out, he had a whole collection of paintings by Marsden Hartley, Demuth, Ben Shahn; and also paintings by Hart Crane's boy friend, which I thought was interesting. He bought them -

PAUL CUMMINGS: I can't remember who that was.

ROBERT SMITHSON: I can't remember his name either. He talked about Ezra Pound, which I thought was interesting apropos of all the controversy about Ezra Pound. And it turned out that when Pound was giving his broadcasts in Italy he said something to the effect that "Old Doc Williams in Rutherford, New Jersey will understand what I mean." So the very next day the FBI descended on his house and he had to explain that he wasn't involved in that kind of political attitude. And he went on to talk about the other poets. He seemed somewhat estranged from them. Let me see what else. Oh, he didn't seem to have much liking for T. S. Eliot. He said he just remembers Hart Crane inviting him over to New York for all his fairy parties; that sort of thing. And what else? – Well, he showed us all these paintings. There was a painting that somehow reminded me of a painting by Duchamp, you know, that's wrong wrong book. Demuth did like two dogs running around sniffing each others asses. He talked a lot about Allen Ginsberg coming out at all hours of the night. And having to spring poets out there. Allen Ginsberg comes from Paterson, New Jersey. I guess the Patterson area is where I had a lot of my contact with quarries and I think that is somewhat embedded in my psyche. As a kid I used to go and prowl around all those quarries. And of course that figured strongly in Paterson. I read that I was interested in that, especially in this one nice part of Paterson where the – it showed all the strata levels under Paterson. Sort of a proto-conceptual art, you might say. Later on I wrote an article for Artform on Passaic which is a city on the Passaic River south of Paterson. In a way I think it reflects that whole area. He did have a kind of sense of that kind of New Jersey landscape.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was he amused at the idea that you were one of his children in a sense?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Oh, yes, he said he remembered me, he remembered the Smithsons. He was amused at that actually, yes. He was just very, very ... There are certain things that I know I'm forgetting. But it was a kind of exciting thing for me at that time. And what else? Where else were we?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious also, as I said, about the religion and the theology since it was mentioned in so many kind of oblique ways on the other side of the tape. Did you have a very strict religious upbringing?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No. Actually I was very skeptical even through high school. In high school they thought I was a Communist; and an atheist, which I was actually. That problem always seemed to come up. In fact, while I was still going to high school, a friend of mine, Danny Donohue, and I did a joint project, a tape recording, for a psychology class/ And it was essentially a questioning of the premises of religion drawn mainly from Freud and H. G. Wells.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a good combination.

ROBERT SMITHSON: I guess I was always interested in kind of origins and primordial beginnings, you know, the archetypal nature of things. And I guess this was always haunting me all the way through until about 1959 and 1960 when I got interested in Catholicism, I think, actually though T. S. Eliot and through that range of thinking. T. E. Hulme sort of led me to an interest in Byzantine and his notions of abstraction as a kind of counterpoint to the Humanism of the late Renaissance. By and large that sort of attracted me. So that my interest was mainly – I was sort of interested I guess in a kind of iconic imagery that I felt was lurking under a lot of abstractions at the time buried, you know...

PAUL CUMMINGS: In Pollock.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Buried in Pollock and in De Kooning and in Newman, and to that extent

still is. My first attempts were in the area of painting. But even in the Artists Gallery show there were paintings carrying titles like *White Dinosaur*, which I think carried through right now, a similar kind of preoccupation. But I hadn't developed a conscious idea of abstractions. I was still really wrestling with a kind of anthropomorphic imagery. Then when I went to Rome I was exposed to all the church architecture and I enjoyed all the labyrinthine passageways, the sort of dusty decrepitude of the whole thing. I mean it's probably a very romantic discovery, that whole world. I mean I had just faced mainly prior to the trip to Rome the New York art world and what I was developing there. So this was sort of an encounter with European history as a nightmare, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All of it at once.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. I was very much – in other words, my disposition was toward the rational, my disposition was toward the Byzantine. But I was affected by the baroque in a certain way. These two things kind of clashed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. But in the sense of forms and colors and images rather than the ideas that they represented?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. I mean I never really could believe in any kind of redemptive situation. I was fascinated also with sort of Gnostic heresies, that sort of thing, Manicheism and the dualistic heresies of the East and how they infiltrated into the...

PAUL CUMMINGS: But in what sense? – as abstractions? Or as things applicable to...?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I think it was a kind of cosmology. I guess I was interested in some kind of world view. I had a rather fragmented idea of what the world was about. So I guess it was a matter of just taking all these pieces of fairly recent civilizations and piecing them together, you know, mainly beginning with primitive Christianity and then going on up through the Renaissance. And then it became a matter of just working my way out from underneath the heaps of European history to find my own origins.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was really the ideas rather than the rituals of any of these things?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, I was sort of fascinated with the ritual aspect of it as well. I mean the ceremonial, almost choreographed aspect of the whole thing, you know, the grandeur...

PAUL CUMMINGS: The sounds and lights.

ROBERT SMITHSON: There was a kind of grotesqueness that appealed to me. As I said, while I was in Rome I was reading William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and the imagery in that book corresponded in a way to a kind of grotesque massive accumulation of all kinds of like rejective rituals. There was something about the passage of time, the notion of the ritual as being defunct actually interested me more, you know, the kind of thing about erecting these situations fascinated me. And there was also a kind of...

PAUL CUMMINGS: you mean building monuments and...?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. The way Burroughs sort of brings in a kind of savage Mayan – Aztec kind of imagery to that; yet at the same time there was always an element of a kind of overt corruption surrounding the whole thing. It was a very strange combination of influences also still coming from the range of Mallarmé and Gustave Moreau and that kind of thing was also still plaguing me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A kind of decadence?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. A kind of...

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the end-of-the-century elegance.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Which I felt was very much in Burroughs. So it wasn't so much a matter of belief or test of faith or something like that. It was a kind of fascination with these great accumulations of sculpture and kind of labyrinthine catacomb kind of thing that...

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean why they were built and what the purposes were?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. I mean I liked sort of the uselessness of them, And also there were these great carvings and drapery out of rose marble and things like that with gold skeletons, you know, underneath. It was just a very...

PAUL CUMMINGS: There seems to be a curious kind of macabre overlay on some of these things?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. I guess at that time there was. It took me a while to work out of that preoccupation. A kind of savage splendor, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What has supplanted that?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, gradually I recognized an area of abstraction that was really rooted in crystal structure. In fact, I guess the first piece that I did was in 1964. It was called the *Enantiomorphic Chambers*. And I think that was the piece that really freed me from all these preoccupations with history; and I was just dealing with grids and planes and empty surfaces. The crystalline forms suggested mapping. And mapping -

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mapping in what way? I mean, how do they...?

ROBERT SMITHSON: In other words, if we think of an abstract painting, for instance, like Agnes Martin's, there's a certain kind of grid there that looks like a map without any countries on it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

ROBERT SMITHSON: So I began to see the grid as sort of a kind of mental construct of physical matter, and my concern for the physical started to grow. And right along I always had an interest in geology as well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there a conflict of interest development there?

ROBERT SMITHSON: A conflict?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you want to go into geology as an activity?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No, I think the geology sort of developed out of my perception as an artist. It wasn't predicated on any kind of scientific need. It was kind of an aesthetic. Also the entire history of the West was swallowed up in a preoccupation with notions of pre-history and the great pre-historic epics starting with the age of rocks and going up, you know, through the...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. All those marvelous again with different colors and – right.

ROBERT SMITHSON: The Triassic and Jurassic and all those different periods sort of subsumed all the efforts of these civilizations that had interested in me I guess.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what was happening just prior to the clarification of the grid system idea? Had you continued painting? Or did you stop painting? Or were you making things that were a combination?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I sort of stopped. I did drawings actually.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were they like?

ROBERT SMITHSON: They were kind of phantasmagorical drawings of kind of cosmological worlds somewhat between Blake and – I'm trying to think – oh, a kind of Boschian imagery, you know. They were just sort of...

PAUL CUMMINGS: There were still figurative overtones?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Oh, very much, yes. Very definitely. They were sort of based on just iconic situations. I think I made those drawings around 1960-61. They dealt with sort of explicit images like, you know, the city; they were kind of monstrous as well, you know, like great Moloch figures.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were they large?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No, they were very small.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Done in what kind of material?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Pencil and paper.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Very complicated? Very traditional?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, they were sort of like – they were sort of rambling. They consisted of many figures sort of involved in a kind of way. But just in pencil and...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what did that do then after the summation of all that...?

ROBERT SMITHSON: That freed me from – the whole notion of anthropomorphism was done away with in that. I got that out of my system, you might say. They were somewhat like cartouches.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the grids appeared in...

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes – well, it was more of a crystalline thing, more of a triangulated kind of situation. I started using plastics. I made flat plastic paintings. I have one in the front room that I can show you. Then these plastics -

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you pick plastics? – because that's a shift from pencil and paper to...

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, actually there was a kind of interim period there when I was just doing mainly a kind of collage writing situation. I did kind of writing paintings, I guess you'd call it, you know, I was just writing but they included just pasting, like I would do --

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just like Burroughs cut out and paste the poetry he did?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes – well, not exactly. They were sort of just – I would take like a magazine that had, oh, a lot of boats in it and then just paste all these boats on a piece of wood or something like that. There was a lot of nebulous stuff I was doing then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Testing materials?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Oh, I know what I was doing. Actually there was a show at the Castellane Gallery which I suppose sums it all up to a great extent. For instance, I was also doing things – I started working from diagrams. I would take like an evolutionary chart and then paint it somewhat in a kind of Johns-ian manner, I guess; sort of scientific diagrams and paint those. But it was a very kind of confused period around 1961 or so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the Castellane Show?

ROBERT SMITHSON: It was just a lot of these paintings of – not only paintings but also – oh, it was a curious mélange of things – I took a stuffed pigeon and took it apart and pasted it on a board. Things like that. I took pickle jars and made up specimens and labeled them with curious scientific names. Then I started just pasting all these similar photographs. I did a series of chemicals. I'll show you...

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see.

ROBERT SMITHSON: And then there's another one. I'll get that one, too. This was the kind of painting I did. You see, there's a kind of... Well, this is something later; this is when I worked for Tibbetts, Abbott, McCarthy, and Stratton in 1964.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is one of your studies for the airport?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes, I just saw a parallel in terms of this kind of...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Those are free forms.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Very sort of organic. I guess there was a tug of war going on between the organic and the crystalline.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the crystal won.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes – well, actually I think they kind of met – a kind of dialectic occurred, you know, later on so – both areas were resolved, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The Castellane Show was in 1962. When did you get involved with the Dwan Gallery? Was that soon after?

ROBERT SMITHSON: That was in about 1965 I'd say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was a couple of years later, about three years later.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened in that period of time?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I got married actually, and that took up a lot of my time. I don't know – it seemed that I really didn't do much of anything. I did start to write then. I was writing around that

time, but I really wasn't bringing things together. I was writing a lot of notes. I really didn't do that much work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: At one point I know it seems that you started just writing articles every month or every other month for various publications.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. They sort of encourage your own... Well, the first article was published in 1966.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you get involved with the Dwan Gallery? Did Virginia find you, or did you find her? Or how did that happen?

ROBERT SMITHSON: How did that happen, again? Well, this is what happened: I met Ad Reinhardt in 1965. Well, actually in 1963-64 I was doing these plastic paintings, these crystalline paintings and I started to get more into the serial structures that I showed at Dwan in 1966. Ad Reinhardt asked me along with Robert Morris to help organize a show at Dwan – the Ten Show. Then I did a piece called Alogon, the one which the Whitney owns now. It consists of – well, in effect it was like the seven inverted staircases. That was in the Ten Show. Also around that time I had a lot of dialogues with Sol Lewitt and Donald Judd. A lot of things began to pull together at that time. Prior to my going with the Dwan Gallery I showed the Enantiomorphic Chambers that Howard Lipman owns. That impressed Virginia Dwan. Right after I showed in the Ten Show she asked me to be in the gallery. And at the same time, actually in 1965, I had given a talk at Yale with Brian O'Doherty and John Hightower on Art in the City. I guess a lot of my thinking about crystalline structures came through there because I was sort of discussing the whole city in terms of crystalline network. An architect from Tibbetts, Abbott, McCarthy and Stratton was sitting in the audience and he asked me if I would like to participate in the building of the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, you know, just in terms of trying to figure out what an airport is. So I invented this job for myself as artist-consultant. So for about a year and a half from 1965 though 1966 I went there and talked with the architects. And that's where the mapping and the intuitions in terms of the crystal structures really took hold in terms of large land masses where one is dealing with grids superimposed on large land masses. So that the inklings of the earthworks were there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do with the architects, what kind of conversations did you have with them? What kind of activity were you able to do with them?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, to an extent they were – I mean most of the building process was done through computers. I was more or less just looking at the layout of the airfield. My final proposal was something called "aerial art" which would be earthworks on the fringes of the airfield that you would see from the air.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Flying over.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. I mean they would provide me with all the mapping material. And we had interesting discussions. I made models of possible airports. But I became less and less interested in the actual structure of the building and more interested in the process of the building and all the different preliminary engineering things. For instance, like the boring holes to take earth samples. I later wrote an article called "Toward the Development of an Air Terminal", which was all speculation on the different aspects of building. So I was sort of interested in the preliminary aspects of building.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you with them toward the end of building particular sculptures or earthworks or things? Or were you really involved with them on a theoretical kind of...?

ROBERT SMITHSON: On a theoretical level. In 1966 I showed a model at the Dwan Gallery right after my show, a model for a tar pool in a gravel enclosure. And I would say that it was mainly theoretical at that time. But right along, right from that point – well, around 1966 there was an inkling or an intuition that earthworks might be an interesting idea to get into. I was trying to fit together this... I had also suggested to the architectural company to let Robert Morris and Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt do something, and they each presented proposals which I included in the aerial art program. Morris proposed that...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, the green?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. And I wanted to do a spiral actually, a triangulated spiral made out of concrete. And then there were also other projects – there was another spiral of a kind of reflecting pool, in other words, a basin.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. A long trench.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Right. Instead of just -

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did Bob Morris come in? Where did you meet him?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I met him during the meetings for the Ten Show. I guess that was the first encounter. Then I met Don Judd through Dan Flavin. I did show a light piece with mirrors in 1963, my only light piece; it was a kind of curious work. I made it in 1963. I showed it in an exhibition called "Current Art" where I met Dan Flavin. Dan was very friendly with Donald Judd. After that show I remember Dan Flavin came over here and rapped all night. And one thing led to another. And then there was this little gallery called the Daniels Gallery which Dan Graham was involved in.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. For about a year, wasn't it?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. And that sort of operated as a kind of catalyst. Sol LeWitt showed there. All the people from Park Place. There was just a lot of energy generating around that time and a lot of peoples' works were really starting to manifest themselves. It was a very energetic period, and an important period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did your association with the Dwan Gallery help you? Or wasn't it a help?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Oh, I think it was a great help. Virginia Dwan somehow never imposed any kind of preconceived value on what was going to happen there so that the gallery in a way functioned as a kind of developmental area. You know, there was...

PAUL CUMMINGS: A lab where you could try out.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. We were going to look for land actually to do an outdoor show. I remember in 1967 I went down to the Pine Barrens of New Jersey with Virginia Dwan and Carl Andre and Robert Morris. We looked around for property with the possible idea of doing some work on sites. So Virginia was always sort of involved on that level. I mean she was interested in the development of the consciousness as much as anybody else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, there were always things that sort of seemed to be happening. You were in a "Primary Structures Show" at The Jewish Museum in 1966.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: As well as "Art in Process" at Finch for which you did a whole series of...

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Well, that piece I did up there was called *The Cryosphere*, and that essentially is hexagonal units that were linked up somehow in my mind with a notion of ice crystals. Then I made a breakdown of the actual, almost a statistical analysis of the piece which I included in the catalogue, marking down the qualities of the paint that I had painted it with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, have you gotten involved in the mathematical structure? Or the mathematical ideas in some of the crystalline developed structures? Or not?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Not really – well, the title *Alogon* – the piece that I showed in the Ten Show – comes from the Greek word which refers to the unnamable and the irrational number. I mean there was always a sense of ordering, but I couldn't really call it mathematical notation. But there was a consciousness of geometry that I worked from in a kind of intuitive way. But it wasn't really in any way notational.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It wasn't like a theoretical map or any sort?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was really the shapes that were...?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, it was – yes – a kind of lattice structure, you know, that could be conceived of in a kind of crystalline way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, just apropos of that one title, how do you develop the titles for your things? Some of them seem to have very long names. Are they specific references?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, like the *Enantiomorphic Chambers*?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

ROBERT SMITHSON: That refers to two shapes that tend to mirror each other. In other words, like the left and right hand could be considered an enantiomorph. So it was a kind of bi-polar notion that comes out of crystal structure. They are two separate things that relate to each other. I would say that in the *Enantiomorphic Chambers* there is also the indication of a kind of dialectical thinking that would emerge later very strongly in the nonsites.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about all this sort of endless series of group exhibitions that you've been in around the country over the years? Do you find them useful for you? Or are they just kind of exposure?

ROBERT SMITHSON: At that time I thought there was a need for them. I think that there was something developing – this was in the mid-sixties – that wasn't around before in terms of spaces and in terms of exhibitions. The works were making greater demands, I think, on interior spaces. The small galleries of the late fifties were giving way to these large white rooms and they seemed to be a growing thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But by the late sixties everybody worked out of the buildings.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Well, that's what happened. I mean there was always this element toward public art. But that still seemed to be linked somewhat in like large works of sculpture that

would be put in plazas in front of buildings. And I just became interested in sites. Well, I'd always been interested in... I guess in a sense these sites had something to do with entropy. This is, I guess, one dominant theme that runs through. You might say that early preoccupation with the early civilizations of the West was a kind of fascination with the coming and going of things. And I brought that all together in the first published article that I did for *Artforum* which was the Entropy article. And I became kind of interested in kind of low profile landscapes, once again the quarry or the mining area which we call an entropic landscape, a kind of backwater or fringe area. And so the entropy article was full of suggestions of sites external to the gallery situation. There was all kinds of material in there that broke down the usual confining aspect of academic art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Something that you buy and take home.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. Now I see that that's probably like, you know, this kind of sense of...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Also the material has no sense of scale, doing things that, you know, were out of doors, very large, almost competing, you know, with any architectural activity that might be around.

ROBERT SMITHSON: I was also interested in a kind of suburban architecture: plain box buildings, shopping centers, that kind of sprawl. And I think this is what fascinated me in my earlier interest with Rome, let's say, just this kind of collection, this junk heap of history. But here we are confronted with a kind of consumer society. I know there is a sentence in "The Monuments of Passaic" where I said, "Hasn't Passaic replaced Rome was the Eternal City?" So there is this kind of sense of an almost Vorhazian sense of passage of time and labyrinthine confusion that has a certain kind of order. And I guess I was looking for that order, a kind of irrational order that just sort of developed without any kind of design program.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it becomes, in a way, a kind of altering of nature someplace, doesn't it?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, that's something that I think in the course of one's preoccupation with abstraction, the tendency toward abstraction, this is lodged, I think, in books like abstraction and empathy where the tendency of the artist was to exclude the whole problem of nature and just dwell on these abstract mental images of flat planes and empty void spaces and grids and single lines and stripes, that sort of thing, tended to exclude the whole problem of nature. Right now like I feel that I am part of nature and that nature isn't really morally responsible. Nature has no morality. So in that sense -

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how do you feel a part of it? I get the feeling that you have a different sensibility now than, say, in the late fifties.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Oh, yes – well, to an extent. I just think it's extended over greater stretches of time. In other words, it's almost as though I was involved in a kind of personal archaeology all though this, you know, just sort of going through the layers of, let's say, the last 2,000 years of civilization and going back into the more archaic civilizations – the Egyptian and Mayan and Aztec civilizations. I did travel. I hitchhiked to Mexico when I was about nineteen and visited the pyramids outside of Mexico City.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that because you knew about them? Or you wanted to go to Mexico?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I always had this urge – there was something about that kind of – all this civilized refuse around.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Great hidden...?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. And then I guess that entropy article was more about a kind of built in obsolescence. In fact I remember I was impressed by Nabokov, who says that the future is the obsolete in reverse. It was just that I became more and more interested in the stratifications and the layerings. I think it had something to do with the way crystals build up too. I did a series of pieces called *Stratas*. Virginia Dwan's called *Glass Strata* which is a lot of pieces of glass; it's eight feet long by a foot wide, looks like a glass staircase made out of inch-thick glass; it's very green, very dense and kind of layered up. And my writing, I guess, proceeded that way. I thought of writing more as a material to sort of just put together than as a kind of analytic searchlight, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But did the writing affect the development of things that you made?

ROBERT SMITHSON: It provided a kind of – in other words, language tended to inform my structures. In other words, I guess if there was any kind of notation it was a kind of linguistic notation. So that actually I, together with Sol LeWitt, thought up the language shows at the Dwan Gallery. But I was interested in language as a material entity at that time, as something that wasn't involved in ideational values which a lot of conceptual artists become, you know, essentially ideational and -

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you mean as a material, though?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, just as printed matter. A kind of – the information which has a kind of physical presence for me rather than – I would construct my articles the way I would construct my work, you know, just sort of...

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about that. Does it relate to – what? – to philosophy? Or to semantics? Or do you find it relates to a more aesthetic attitude toward art?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, I think it relates probably to a kind of physicalist or materialist view of the world which of course leads one into a kind of Marxist view. So that the old idealisms of irrational philosophies began to diminish. Although I was always interested in Borges' writings and the way he would use sort of leftover remnants of philosophy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you get interested in him?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Around 1965. That kind of taking, let's say, a discarded system and using it, you know, as a kind of armature. I guess this has always been my kind of world view.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you think it's so much the system that's the valuable aspect, or the utilization of it?

ROBERT SMITHSON: No, the system really isn't...

PAUL CUMMINGS: It doesn't count?

ROBERT SMITHSON: It's just a convenience, you might say. It's just another construction on the mires of things that have already been constructed. So that my thinking, I guess, became increasingly dialectical. I was still working with the resolution of the organic and the crystalline, and that seemed resolved in dialectics for me. And so I created the dialectic of site and nonsite. The nonsite exists as a kind of deep three-dimensional abstract map that points to a specific site of the surface of the earth. And that's designated by a kind of mapping procedure. And these places are not destinations; they're kind of backwaters or fringe areas.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you arrive at those different areas?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I don't know – I guess it's just a kind of tendency toward a primordial consciousness, a kind of tendency toward the prehistoric after digging through the histories.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But do you work from, say a large map? Or do you work from having been in that part of the world in a way?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, a lot of the nonsites are in New Jersey. I think that those landscapes embedded themselves in my consciousness at a very early date, so that in a sense I was beginning to like sort of make archaeological trips into the recent past to Bayonne, New Jersey.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So in a sense it was a real place that then became abstracted into a nonsite?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. And which then reflected the confinement of the gallery space so that the site itself was open and although the nonsite designates the site, the site itself is open and really unconfined and constantly being changed. And then the thing was to bring these two things together. And I guess to a great extent that culminated in the Spiral Jetty. But there are other smaller works that preceded that – the investigations in Yucatan.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that come about? Was that again through...?

ROBERT SMITHSON: I guess the same kind of – you know, here was a kind of alien world, a world that couldn't really be comprehended on any rational level; you know, the jungle had grown up over these vanished civilizations. I was interested in the fringes around these areas.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you mean, fringes?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, like these backwater sites again, like maybe a small quarry, a burnt-out field, a sand bank, a remote island. And I found that I was dealing not so much with the center of things but with the peripheries. So that I became very interested in that whole dialogue between, let's say, the circumference and the middle and how those two things operated together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But most of the sites are not in metropolitan areas, are they? They're usually in the country.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Most of them are in New Jersey; there's one in Bayonne, there's one in Edgewater, one in Franklin Furnace, one in the Pine Barrens. Since I grew up in New Jersey I would say that I was saturated with a consciousness of that. And then, strangely enough, the other ones – I did a double nonsites in California and Nevada, so that I went from one coast to the other. The last nonsite actually is one that involves coal and there the site belongs to the Carboniferous Period, so it no longer exists; the site becomes completely buried again. There's no topographical reference. It's submerged reference based on hypothetical land formations from the Carboniferous Period. The coal comes from somewhere in the Ohio and Kentucky area, but the site is uncertain. That was the last nonsite; you know, that was the end of that. So I wasn't dealing with the land surfaces.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you develop the idea of the sites and nonsites, you know, as opposed to building specific objects?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, I began to see things - I began to question very seriously the whole notion of Gestalt, the thing in itself, specific objects. I began to see things in a more relational way. In other words, I had to question, you know, where the works were, what they were about. In other

words, the very construction of the gallery with its neutral white rooms became questionable. So I became interested in working- in a sense bringing attention to the abstractness of the gallery as a room, and yet at the same time taking into account less neutral sites, you know, sites that would in a sense be neutralized by the gallery. So it became a preoccupation with place, that sort of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was your relationship with the Park Place group? Because they have popped up here and there.

ROBERT SMITHSON: I did a show at Park Place once with Leo Daldorn and Sol LeWitt. John Gibson was running it then. I knew him. And he was friendly with Virginia Dwan. I never really was that involved with Park Place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. I don't identify you with that place generally.

ROBERT SMITHSON: No. I never really had that kind of technological optimism that they have. I was always questioning that particular thing, I guess – I don't know -

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was an idea which didn't work?

ROBERT SMITHSON: Yes. I preferred Sol LeWitt's mode of thinking. And Carl Andre's. But all those people were in some way connected with that. It was more of a – I don't know – it was kind of a – it didn't have all that sort of optimism about technology. Also in 1966 I did an article with Mel Bochner on The Planetarium which, once again, was sort of an investigation of a specific place; but not on a level of science, but in terms of discussing the actual construction of the building; you know, once again, an almost anthropological study of a planetarium from the point of view of an artist. Stop it for a minute. (machine turned off).

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing you never finished discussing was the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, they eventually lost their contract. The pieces were never built. Although there was an interest, I don't think that they fully got out of me what they thought they would have gotten. But as far as my relationship there goes, it was very worthwhile for me because it got me to think about large land areas and then, I think to a great extent the dialogue between the terminal and the fringes of the terminal – once again, between the center and the edge of things – has been a sort of going preoccupation, part of the dialectic between the inner and the outer. That kind of range of thinking preoccupies me quite a bit.

END OF INTERVIEW

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