

My previous paper addressed the key ideas of materialities as agents of action, emplacement as an eventmental construct, and the idea that the essence of matter contributes to meaning and structure of the landscape. Emplacement involves material things, and this thingness, both in the construction of objects and the very organic and inorganic materials of the earth, contribute to our sense of the world. But the act of viewing also complicates lived experience. Perception involves ideological, cultural, and historical influences. It frames, contains and focuses our attention on a site within the landscape. In this paper I explore, through the work of Robert Smithson and Richard Tuttle, how dialectic space is a theatre in which a conflagration of forces are at work. Smithson provides the conceptual framework for understanding this dialectic, and Tuttle underscores the intentionality of the perceiving mind.

Smithson says, "...we have to develop a dialectic of nature that includes man"¹. "Things are not things in themselves. They are related to other things....I just want to be conscious of where I am, in relationship to all these different parameters."² A "tangled thicket"³ of political, social, historic, ideological experiences influences perception, and that weaves a mesh of interconnections between things and subjects, seen and unseen. Site and sight are closely connected. Smithson is "interested in zeroing in on those aspects of mental experience that somehow coincide with the physical world", and so am I! Smithson's dialectic of place, where he confronts the physicality of the here and now, springs from his clearly formulated argument about "sites" and "non-sites". "Sites" are the multifarious, indeterminate certainty of a given site that have no defined center, and though physically manifested, remains unlimited and diffuse. "Non-sites" mirror or invert these properties. Non-sites focus on a central "point" and are abstracted from the natural environment. They are a determinate uncertainty, with a chosen array of raw material. Site and non-site also reflect the inherent duality of matter and mind, the basis of perception. Mind and matter converge through perception.

Tuttle makes apparent the importance of perception in communicating feltness of his experience. Interaction with materials and perceptual responses yield a complex visual presence in his work. He explores place through perceptual means, creating objects that exist on their own terms, experienced in space and time. He constructs low relief

¹ Flam, Jack. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley: U of California, 1996. Print. 298.

² Flam, Jack. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley: U of California, 1996. Print. 265.

³ Flam, Jack. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley: U of California, 1996. Print. 227.

forms that combine colors, lines, surfaces and unusual combinations of materials to achieve not just physicality, but a complete sensual experience that defines the space around the piece. His works become “place”, or what he calls, “little truths.”⁴ Unlike Smithson’s large-scale work, these are intimate and self-referential in terms of their “thingness”. The perceptual judgments in their construction address a nexus of phenomenological complexities that converge in each piece.

But Tuttle and Smithson are alike in the way they create presence as physical abstractions that focus on perceptual contingencies. Contingency and limits are relevant to all experience for both artists, and are part of their constructive methodology.

Smithson’s environmental landscape art does not shy away from the complications; in fact, the site/non-site dialectic inherently assumes it. About perception he says, “The investigation of a specific site is a matter of extracting concepts out of existing sense-data through direct perception. Perception is prior to conception, when it comes to site selection or definition. One does not impose, but rather exposes the site – be it interior or exterior...”⁵ The site is nothing but undefined, contingent matter. All the relational “evidence” within our sight, near and far, and around us, is part of the scope of his gaze. Smithson describes this act of perception as intuitive, non-rational, sense-oriented and without cognitive judgment. Cognition, focus, and abstraction, come into play after the sense data is collected. Like a synchecdoche, the non-site becomes a delimited abstraction of the site as a whole. In effect, the incommensurable becomes the differentiated through perceptual and cognitive assessment, limitation and containment. The trajectory from matter to mind to construct makes the transmutable journey to “thingness”.

Smithson’s 1968 earth project from the Bangor Slate Quarry in Pennsylvania exemplifies that transformation. His photographic documentation of the site portrays a bedrock of horizontal layered fragments of slate, “crystalline” structures of material piled in random sizes and directions, which are not picturesque or particularly impressive in size or character. His “construction” shows the non-site of the raw material of slate piled inside a rectangular box, the container in which the material is now seen as distinct and perceptually delineated because it is confined within this geometric form. The issue of displacement and implacement is evident. His effort brings site into focus, exposes the contingency, and

⁴ Grynstejn, Madeleine. *The Art of Richard Tuttle*. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2005. Print. 60.

⁵ Flam, Jack. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley: U of California, 1996. Print. 60.

draws us closer to the feltness or thingness of the materials, which reflects the actual site.

Tuttle also transforms materials to become implaced things, but with a different methodology, and Smithson's dialectic helps us understand what Tuttle is doing perceptually. In a sense, Tuttle's "places" are constructed from an array of material possibilities. Like poetry or haiku these constructions are crystallized visual perceptions as relational events. We see this strategy in his series called "20 Pearls" completed in 2003. As his most lyrical creations, they "read" as embodied abstractions, lyrical compounds or syntactical presences in a visual language that blur the lines between drawing, painting, and sculpture. Perceptual contingency lays first in his choice from the array of circumstantial material possibilities and then how this form into their own constructed environment. Through perceptual relationships, Tuttle produces "thingness" that retains connection to physicality, without being objects, but with a clear presence. The constructed piece becomes relational as the materials locate situationally, activating the space around it. Place becomes a visual incident. "Tuttle desires for us to see – and for his work to remain in – the space where experience is generated, not depicted: the here-and-now of invention."⁶ Like Smithson, Tuttle explores the zone where the hand touches matter and space, at the threshold between mind and matter.

Using a conceptual methodology from Smithson, and a keen perceptual awareness from Tuttle, my current body of work on the Kendaia site is investigating place as an eventmental convergence -- a constellation of materials, contingencies (historical, geological, cultural), perceptual constructs, and phenomenological relationships that underlie my lived experience of this place.

I am considering all of these contingent elements through drawings, paper sculptures, and prints. I isolate visual artifacts to capture their contingent presence in a series I call the "Incident of the Red Cup." The incidence of various pieces of trash evident at the site are occasions for focusing on the overlay of past and present and the human impact on the landscape. The two historic markers on the site also provide a different kind of contingency, providing possibilities to explore memory, horizons, mirroring, and reflection. Like Smithson, I am collecting a lot of sense data from the site, in the form of photographs, frottage, and natural materials. Part of my work will incorporate these elements in some fashion. I am also abstracting these materials into "non-sites" that have their own delimited physicality and "thingness" in the form of paper sculptural constructions.

⁶ Grynsztejn, Madeleine. *The Art of Richard Tuttle*. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2005. Print. 47.

These have transparent "skins" with abstracted forms from the site that convey a sensual, lyrical fragility.

Smithson and Tuttle embrace this spatial and perceptual complexity. As Smithson writes, "It's a matter of wrestling with these material properties and at the same time with the mental experiences...a matter of setting up correspondences...." ⁷ This describes exactly what I am trying to do.

⁷ Flam, Jack. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley: U of California, 1996. Print. 215.

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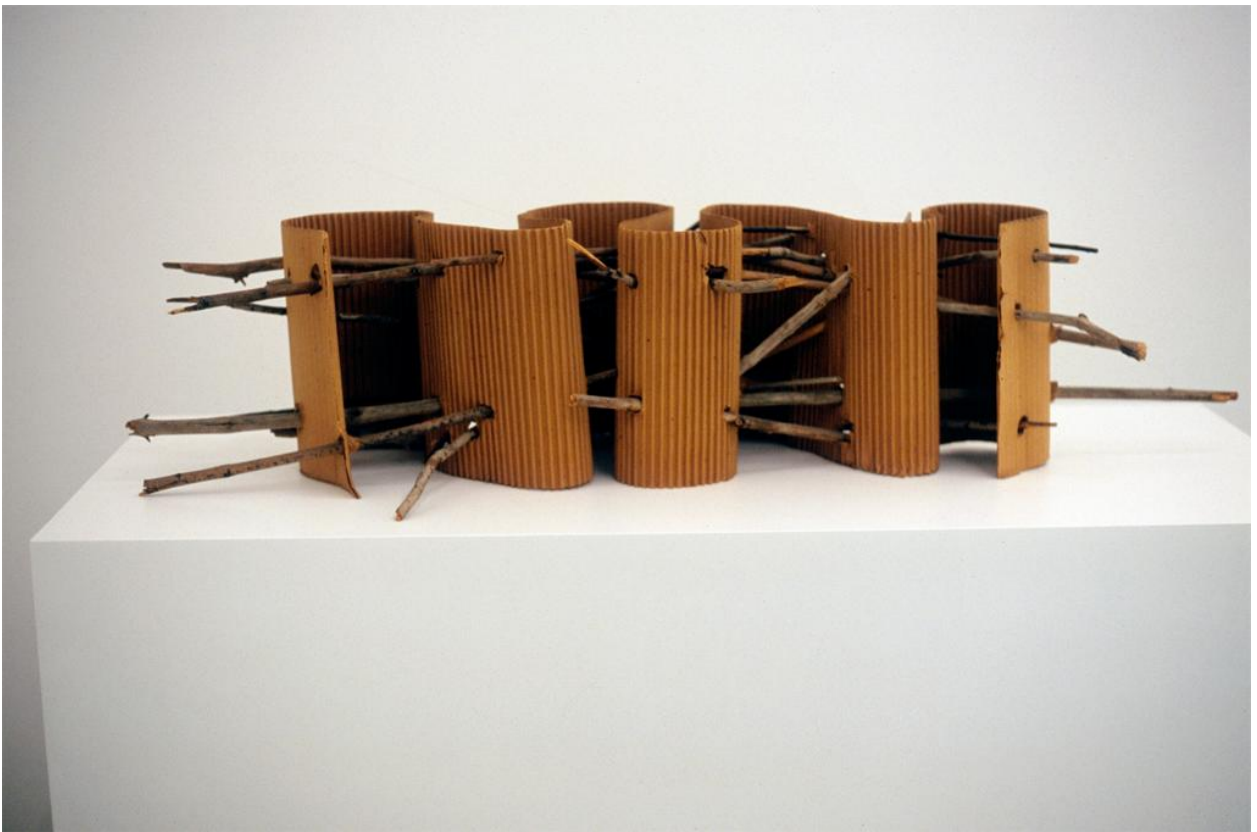
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Images



Robert Smithson Non-site



Robert Smithson Pierced Meander



Richard Tuttle 20 Pearls



Richard Tuttle 20 Pearls