“Collaborating with Entropy”:
Robert Smithson’s *Enantiomorphic Chambers* and the Exhibition of Absence

VALERIO: Some mansion this world is, Prince. I’m telling you: space, space, then more space!

LEONCE: No, not at all. To me, it’s like a narrow hall of mirrors: I scarcely dare stretch out my hands, for fear of banging into it on every side and finding the beautiful pictures lying in pieces at my feet, and there before my eyes the bare blank wall.

-Georg Büchner, *Leonce and Lena*

In the funhouse mirror-room you can’t see yourself go on forever, because no matter how you stand, your head gets in the way. Even if you had a glass periscope, the image of your eye would cover up the thing you really wanted to see.

-John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*

As I speak, rumor (and meteorological reports) have it that Robert Smithson’s legendary earthwork, *Spiral Jetty*, may yet again be undergoing some radical transformation out in Utah.

His monumental sculpture built in 1970 off the shores of the Great Salt Lake was, until quite recently, largely unseeable beneath the lake’s risen waters and it had been that way for most of the past thirty-five years. The reason for its sudden disappearance was that the earthwork was originally constructed at a time when the lake was unusually low and, though *Spiral Jetty* was built of boulders and clearly intended to endure, the water’s rapid veiling of the form came as a surprise.
to nearly all involved, Smithson included. In hindsight, one might now say that a lack of foresight contributed to the earthwork’s vanishing—poor eyesight all around.

Unexpectedly though, in 2003, due to the prolonged draught in the region, *Spiral Jetty* gradually reappeared, salt-encrusted on its weathered edges, but still largely *there* as the spiraling form known from the many original photographs taken at the time of its completion. However, recent rains in the region and last year’s run-off from heavy snowfall in the nearby mountains are now reportedly raising the levels of the lake once more, with the projected outcome being the renewed disappearance of Smithson’s briefly seen *Spiral Jetty*. From these developments, one might conclude that if you want to see the earthwork, you’d better get out there quickly—a suggestion that brings to mind the painter Paul Cézanne’s own memorable injunction that “Things are disappearing. If you want to see anything, you have to hurry.”

The fate of *Spiral Jetty*—its appearance and disappearance at the Great Salt Lake—is in many ways a familiar story with Smithson, a fate that he himself seemed, in theory, to acknowledge and even embrace, having described his work as a means of “collaborating with entropy” (256), his artworks understood as fully vulnerable “sites of time” (105). It is not, however, *Spiral Jetty* that I want to discuss now, though the famous earthwork’s vanishing act in Utah is likely to mirror much of what I have to say. Instead, I will be focusing upon a far less monumental, and certainly less well-known piece of Smithson’s entitled *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, a wall-sculpture constructed six years prior to the *Jetty*, in 1964.
Or rather, I will focus upon this sculpture as best I can. For this piece, too, has suffered the fate of its own disappearance, while leaving behind (again, just like the Jetty) two ambiguously related remnants of the sculpture: the archival photographs taken before the piece’s vanishing, and a curious, two-page text written by Smithson and entitled “Interpolations of the Enantiomorphic Chambers.”

Oddly, no one seems to know what happened to this particular sculpture and in books and catalogues the piece is now generally designated as “lost,” “destroyed,” or “location unknown.” How, one wonders, is a not-insubstantial sculpture like this (it measured, after all, several feet in dimension and was made of heavy metals and mirrors) misplaced or allowed to disappear, even after the artist himself was becoming increasingly well known and collected?

For unlike the Jetty gradually being covered over in salty water, Enantiomorphic Chambers seems to have just vanished—without a trace—into thin air. Perhaps it was through the carelessness of a curator, a collector tired of the object and indifferent to its value or its vintage, or the artist himself who, unannounced, may have destroyed the piece. Or—who knows?—maybe, like the earthwork in Utah, the sculpture will reappear one day, found in the back of a flea market somewhere, or retrieved from a neglected attic. More likely, though, it seems the piece is probably permanently lost, smashed or dismantled, or—as I like to imagine it—rusting away in some New Jersey landfill.
Before discussing this particular object’s absence, let me speak more about the thing itself—the remembered and photographed thing—the sculpture hanging upon the gallery wall, as if it were 1964 all over again. *Enantiomorphic Chambers* is, or was (I’m not sure of the appropriate verb tense\(^2\)) an early, pre-earthwork piece of Smithson’s made of painted steel—boldly blue and fluorescently green—with mirrors carefully placed, reflecting directly back into each other. Being “enantiomorphic,” the two chambers are, by definition, mirror images of one another but, in their reversal—like right- and left-handed gloves—they cannot be superimposed; in addition, deliberately compounding the enantiomorphic structure of Smithson’s sculpture, is the fact that what we have here are mirror images of mirrors endlessly reflecting their incongruent congruence.

The black-and-white photographs show the two-part sculpture suspended and projecting out several feet from the wall in rigid formation, resembling in many ways the kind of “specific objects” being made around this time by the minimalist sculptor Donald Judd (though, conceptually, these two artists are otherwise worlds apart, with Smithson having little faith in the specificity of objects). Between the piece’s mirroring sections is an empty space of two or three feet where the bare wall of the gallery is revealed, an absence at the sculpture’s dimensional center where the vanishing point would conventionally, perceptually follow.

At first glance, outside of the defining context of a gallery or an art book, *Enantiomorphic Chambers* looks less like a sculpture, and more like a crude instrument or a makeshift machine of some kind, one that is to be put to use, activated by our engagement; standing between the separate sections, it seems the geometric chambers are to be examined, the

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\(^2\) Also, in addition to verb tense, there is uncertainty about verb count. Is the piece singular or plural, one sculpture and/or two chambers; should I use “are” or “is,” “were” or “was” in speaking of it? These are not gratuitous linguistic concerns, but issues, lodged in the language, that reveal even further degrees of *Enantiomorphic Chambers*’ indeterminacy.
mirrors to be looked within. And indeed, as indicated by Smithson’s text, the sculpture was intended as a kind of quasi-instrument: a machine for seeing (as much, perhaps, as a thing to be seen), a prosthetic device for the real-time, experiential interrogation of, as Smithson described it, “sight as an invention.” Like a not-very-fun funhouse mirror, *Enantiomorphic Chambers* was constructed, according to the artist, as a three-dimensional, externalized representation of our everyday, taken-for-granted binocular vision, like two separated eyes suspended just prior to their coalescing a unified image. Or, the piece might also be imagined as an enlarged and inverted stereoscope within which what is finally seen is not a picturesque, doubled image of, say, Niagara Falls synthesizing into singular formation, but instead—situated between its mirroring chambers—the unwitting observer trying to see, but only to see him or herself seeing.

In comparison with *Spiral Jetty*, far less has been written over the years about this early sculpture. However, Smithson himself, in interviews and essays, pointed directly to *Enantiomorphic Chambers* as a touchstone in his development as, what he himself called, a “mature” artist, indeed acknowledging this particular sculpture as marking a conceptual turning point for him, and the precise time—1964—when he (like many others around him) had just given up painting and begun focusing upon enantiomorphic “crystal structures” and “crystalline

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4 Of course, considering the monumentality of that Utah earthwork, such a discrepancy is understandable, though recently, more has been said about the piece. Among others, Ann Reynold’s *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (2003) and Eugenia Tsai’s *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings* (1991), and Gary Shapiro’s *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* (1995) have all discussed in some detail *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, though none of them have had anything to say about the object’s disappearance.
forms” of geologic formations. Elsewhere, Smithson indicates that his “first physiological awareness of perspective” took place when he built *Enantiomorphic Chambers* and that it was this particular sculpture from which “a kind of dialectical thinking” (359) would later lead to the production of his many “non-sites.” With this understood, *Enantiomorphic Chambers* can be seen to have set in motion work that would lead directly to *Spiral Jetty*, indeed, initiating ideas that were to preoccupy Smithson up until his unexpected death in 1973 when the plane that he had hired to fly him up over his final earthwork in west Texas (so that he could have photographed the staked out work below) crashed at the site, killing instantly everyone aboard.

Not coincidentally, 1964 is also the time when Smithson began seriously writing and publishing, indeed, when the dual act of writing and art-making were to, as he described it, “coincide; [the] one inform[ing] the other” (273). In fact, from this point forward, writing was to remain an integral part of his art, to such an extent that one can really no longer separate the writer from the artist, the words from the work (the dancer from the dance), the two—as Smithson might have described it—being now dialectically bound and mirroring one another. For in becoming the “mature” artist, Smithson had become the writing artist, and as he became the writing artist, image/object/text were indeed to converge and connect, endlessly reflecting each others’ symbiotic, enantiomorphic structure. And from this newly worded vantage, Smithson—his perceptual innocence lost—was no longer in a position to, as he said in an interview, “treat language as a secondary thing, a kind of thing that will disappear when it

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4 The non-sites were those crude containers of extracted stone from specific geographic locations (often his home state of New Jersey), placed in a gallery alongside maps and photographs, and intended not to direct our attention, but to disperse it into a vortex of infinitely unsettled reference.

5 It is, however, precisely as an artist/writer that Smithson has been most widely misunderstood, or misrepresented, as critics insist on separating the two tasks, judging (or condemning) Smithson as a good writer but a bad artist, or a bad, “indulgent” writer but a good artist (of usually, uniquely, *Spiral Jetty*).
doesn’t disappear. Language is as primary as steel. And there’s no point in trying to wish it away” (214).

And so, “wish it away” I won’t—either—when it comes to the undisappearing language of Smithson’s text “Interpolations of the Enantiomorphic Chambers.” For there it is, and there it remains (unquestionably present in the present tense, unlike the unpresently disappeared sculpture), printed matter on the page—“as primary as steel.” Earlier, I referred to this written text as “curious” because the piece is hardly presented as a conventional essay, or as an “artist’s statement” about the work. In fact, it’s not quite clear what this piece is, how it is to be handled, or the manner in which it can be understood to accompany the sculpture (if at all). However, with the loss of Enantiomorphic Chambers, the written text itself takes on, almost by default, an
additional degree of locational value, for it is, in a sense (aside from the archival photographs), all that endures of the piece. As such, inevitably I suppose, one reads it expecting some kind of explanation of the sculpture, a textual overlay signaling something of the absent work’s message and meaning. And, in a manner of speaking, the writing achieves just that, functioning like an elaborate label affixed to an art gallery wall, but a label that is now without the art, without the gallery, without the wall.

This two-page text has, like the sculpture itself, two distinct parts that may, or may not, reflect each other (or if they do, it may be only enantiomorphically). In the first section, there is a numbered list of seven points that are systematically presented, each drawing attention to the issue of sight and sightlessness and the physiological dimension of perception. The individual points in the text range from a simple diagram of the sculpture’s mirroring “reflections,” to the statement in point #3 that “the chambers cancel out one’s reflected image, when one is directly between the two mirrors.” Other points include definitions of the enantiomorphic “within the context of binocular vision,” as well as the more descriptive point #5 that the sculpture cannot be seen “from a single point of view because the vanishing point is split and reversed.” Then, abruptly, point #6 matter-of-factly states, “To see one’s own sight means visible blindness,” which is then followed, with point #7, by a quote from H. G. Wells, The Country of the Blind: “They asked him if he still thought he could ‘see’. ‘No’, he said. “That was folly. The word means nothing…less than nothing’.”
Reading this peculiar list from point to point (perhaps—as I’m inclined to do it—as a kind of concrete poem, or as a subversive parody of systematic delineation and revelation), one nonetheless sees a thematic progression from sight, to sight’s “invention,” to sight’s obliteration and loss, all finally culminating with the annulment of language itself, as the very word—to see—finally “means nothing…less than nothing.”

Immediately following this list, there is the text’s second section, a separate, half-page story entitled, “Paragraph from a Fictive Artist’s Journal” that reads much like a Borgesian fable of metafictional wit and insight. Mirroring themes just seen in the adjacent list, the “fictive artist” referred to in the title (Smithson, perhaps?) recounts with dead-pan humor his discovery of this fictive book found in a “private art-book library,” an “astounding work” full of “many treasures,” and entitled “The Exhaustion of Sight or How to Go Blind and Yet See.” We then read that this rare work contains “intricate diagrams on ‘seeing sight’,” and that there is much within the book “about eye-glasses as ‘a structure supported by the nose and ears’.” The paragraph concludes with a description of how others have used the book, and that for our fictive artist, “the book is a true paradigm of unending importance.”

But of what paradigmatic importance might this fictive book be for us? And, beyond that final paragraph alone, of what importance might Smithson’s entire two-part non-fiction text be with regards to Enantiomorphic Chambers, and even, also, in thinking about that object’s
mysterious disappearance? Perhaps the text’s very title might give some indication of the writing’s proper placement and importance in relation to the sculpture itself, “Interpolation of the Enantiomorphic Chambers.” “Interpolation,” “to interpolate”—I actually had to look this word up in the dictionary, for its meaning wasn’t exactly clear to me (and, at first, I think I was confusing a promised “interpolation” of the sculpture with its interpretation, though the two words have significantly different meanings). Paraphrasing, “interpolation” means: to insert between a thing or a text; and thus to alter or falsify its meaning; to thereby interrupt what is being said about it.

And so, with this definition of the word in mind, perhaps Smithson’s text can be seen as indeed existing “between” the object and us, altering, and maybe even falsifying the piece’s “meaning,” while “interrupt[ing]” what was originally said or done by the artist. Also, just as a viewer of the actual sculpture was likely to stand between its two separate sections, at its vacant center, placing him or herself between the two mirrors, the read text is now apparently also to stand between us and the object, the now lost object, with “the chambers,” as I’ve already quoted, “cancel[ing] out one’s reflected image, when one is directly between the two mirrors” (39).

Perhaps another link might be made. If Smithson’s opening seven-point list systematically led us down a kind of conceptual blind alley in which, finally, even the very words denoting sight are dissolved and lost, this final paragraph might now be read as hinting at a way out of that dark dead-end, even perhaps a means to see nonetheless through the “exhaustion” of our sight, or as Smithson quotes the fictive artist quoting the fictive text, a way “to go blind and yet see.” Indeed, considering the vanishing of Enantiomorphic Chambers
itself, the kind of sight Smithson is describing in this text might even come in handy as we try and see absences, see into the oblivion of the object’s own loss.

Once again, related issues arise with *Spiral Jetty* that may give us some clue as to how to handle Smithson’s cryptic text (and how to handle it in relation to the sculpture’s vanishing). For Smithson’s similarly disappeared earthwork was also accompanied by a written text, along with a film, and all three of these forms were identically designated by the artist as “Spiral Jetty.”

In fact, each was apparently intended to refer to the others and each was, as well, to be understood as an autonomous variant of the earthwork, indeed, as another *Spiral Jetty*. Consequently, Gary Shapiro asserts in his study of *Spiral Jetty* and its multiple referents, “there is no primary, authentic object . . . , no pure *Spiral Jetty*” (7). However, as a result of Smithson’s calculated uncertainty, one wonders whether the earthwork’s disappearance in Utah is now mattering less or mattering more, or mattering hardly at all (in spite of the 6,000 tons of boulders involved in this weighty matter)?

Nonetheless, from *Spiral Jetty’s* dialectically dislocating point of view, might a similar kind of deliberately staged indeterminacy of location be in play with *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, with its text now read as offering an autonomous, yet supplemental dimension of this long-lost sculpture? And if so, *Enantiomorphic Chamber’s* disappearance (as well as *Spiral Jetty’s*), might even be imagined—in retrospect—as revealing something of the inadvertent, if accelerated
fulfillment of Smithson’s own stated desire to “collaborate with entropy.” In fact, the accompanying texts for both pieces would seem to point us toward each objects’ very vanishing, with their language functioning like a sign pointing to their own inevitable vacancy—the loss on the lake, the fall from the wall.

For *Enantiomorphic Chambers* was, as indicated by Smithson’s text, an object intended not so much to be seen, but rather to make one conscious of that which facilitates seeing, an awareness of “sight as an invention.” The material sculpture’s loss, therefore, now stands as a kind of object-lesson of sight and sightlessness, its “unknown location” only reinforcing the quasi-reality of the object’s very real ephemerality and impermanence, its elemental absence. And that the physical object as object was only ever present as a kind of perceptual hypothesis (though one that was necessarily present in 1964 to, in a sense, get the entropic ball rolling).

“When a thing is seen through a consciousness of temporality,” Smithson wrote elsewhere, “it is changed into something that is nothing . . . . The object gets to be less and less but exists as something clearer” (112). Through the full range of his “mature” work, Smithson was clearly developing an intensified, even prosthetic, mode of seeing that assimilated an object’s fragmentation and eventual vanishing into its visuality, that incorporated the inevitable disintegrations of the form into the ontology of the artwork itself. To see the slow movements, to feel the fall into oblivion, Smithson was consciously crafting a negative capability, what he described as “a type of ‘anti-vision’ or negative seeing” that was to affirm paradoxically, ultimately “one’s inability to see” (130). Smithson was thus to include in his own finally blinded perceptions the object’s impending dissolution, the object’s disappearance, an awareness of absence encrypted into the thing itself. Seeing entropically, seeing the vanishing, Smithson’s “consciousness of temporality” was framed and focused upon the slip, the slide, the perishing of
that which appeared most solid—the stones eroding, the metals rusting away (or simply vanishing)—the artist glimpsing “something clearer” at the other end of nothing.

In his early draft notes on *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, Smithson wrote: “It is a known fact that we do not see with our eyes but rather with our brain. Thinking about one’s sight enables one to build or invent a structure that sees *nothing*” (qtd. in Reynolds 60). Thus blinded and seeing “nothing” with regards to *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, one might indeed be made to feel more forcefully a kind of ontological collision occurring, with the very ground—or wall—upon which the 1964 sculpture depended revealed as dissolved or dissolving, while having delineated in its stead a kind of negative domain, or anti-matter. While in the matter of that object’s loss, such blindness is thus made all the more devastatingly complete, the nothing made even more tangible. Indeed, understood now as involving Smithson’s “‘anti-vision’ or negative seeing,” we are thus situated by this object, or non-object, to see something of our own seeing, a seeing that, if actually seen, is to mean (as Smithson predicted) a kind of visible blindness, almost like the sight of nothing at all.

Jean-François Lyotard, writing of the painter Paul Cézanne’s passionate endeavor “to make seen what makes one see, and not what is visible,” describes the result of such an acute exercise as the affective ability “to grasp and render perception at its birth—perception ‘before’ perception” (102). Transposing something of this insight onto Smithson’s disappeared *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, we might now imagine that the lost object, in conjunction with its interpolating text, may also have made us see something of what makes us see, and not what is visible—sight before sight. After all, as Smithson elsewhere noted, “It is the dimension of absence that remains to be found” (133). Perhaps with the absence of *Enantiomorphic*
*Chambers*, coupled with the mirroring presence of its text, such a negative dimension might finally have been located.

**Works Cited**


