Homage to Robert Smithson - Plasticity and the ontological form of artist-substance (Performance Lecture)

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Homage to Robert Smithson

Plasticity and the ontological form of ‘artist-substance’ as Non-Site

By

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"The earth’s surface and the fragments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art...one’s mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers carry away abstract banks, brainwaves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason."


The primary intention and function of this performance-lecture is to create a time-based homage to the artist Robert Smithson (i.e. not to his artworks although they count, of course). As the above quotation testifies, Smithson’s practice was as much an adventure in thinking (resulting in philosophical writings/the conceptual framework for ‘non-sites’) as it was in material construction (resulting in art objects/earth works). Of primary significance – and linked to my on-going research concern with what I term ‘artist-substance’ – is Smithson’s call for ‘muddy thinking’ which embraces matter and mind as continually co-evolving and affecting one another, an evocative forerunner to current investigations into the value of plasticity (philosophically, neuorlogically and politically). Smithson’s words above implicate him, the living creature, into his own account but not as a personality or driver of a digger truck about to dump molten asphalt. Rather, the artist, described as one needing to exist within a ‘physical abyss’ to exist as a ‘physical abyss,’ is re-formulated as the caretaker of a carnal, creative aptitude to risk one’s ‘being’ (hence succumbing to the force of Being per se), an aptitude that is the gift of Smithson’s particular making-as-thinking/thinking-as-making based practice. This aptitude is less a ‘doing’ and more an allowance of being ‘un-done’ on the micro level of being an individual body-consciousness. This is possible, is also to speak of an ontological substance that is capable of receiving the changes, like an untranslatable imprint of Being which nonetheless has repercussions for the future shape of lived life. This is no longer to underline ‘Smithson the sculptor’ but to extoll ‘Smithson the sculpted.’

In relationship to standard approaches of locating philosophical value in art where the focus is almost exclusively on art objects and exhibition-social contexts, my alternative proposition that Smithson’s art was in ‘becoming ontologically sculpted’ (and it is here that I wish to unpack my ideas via current accounts of plasticity) can itself be seen as a type of ‘non-site’ within contemporary discourse. My presentation-homage is also, therefore, aiming at standing as a non-site of the artist Robert Smithson. Whilst I am being intellectually poetic there is also a politics to this approach, one echoed by Smithson himself:

"For too long the artist has been estranged from his own ‘time.’ Critics, by focusing on the ‘art object’ deprive the artist of any existence in the world of both mind and matter. The mental process of the artist which takes place in time is disowned, so that a commodity value can be maintained by a system independent of the artist."


This is not to privilege the artist or art practice above philosophy but to highlight the liberatory forces that certain types of art practices unleash on the potential of thought where thought is seen as an aptitude of our muscular brains to receive new forms rather than as the product of res cogitans; Smithson went on an adventure with thought and rather than doing something with it he let it do something with him. This is not to talk of personal motives, this is to speak of new capacities within the brain in association with originating Art:

"Slump, debris slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain. The entire body is pulled into the cerebral sediment, where particles and fragments make themselves known as solid consciousness. A bleached and fractured world surrounds the artist. To organize this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids, and subdivisions is an esthetic process that has scarcely been touched."