

Homage to Robert Smithson - Plasticity and the ontological form of artist-substance as non-site

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Citation:

REEVE, Hester (2017). Homage to Robert Smithson - Plasticity and the ontological form of artist-substance as non-site. In: Art Historians Association 43rd Annual Conference & Art Book Fair, Loughborough University, 6-8 April 2017. (Unpublished) [Conference or Workshop Item]

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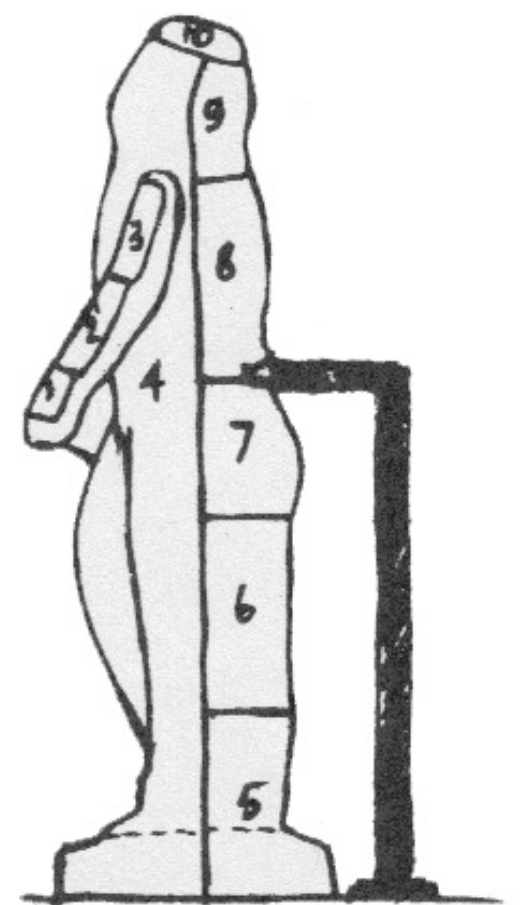
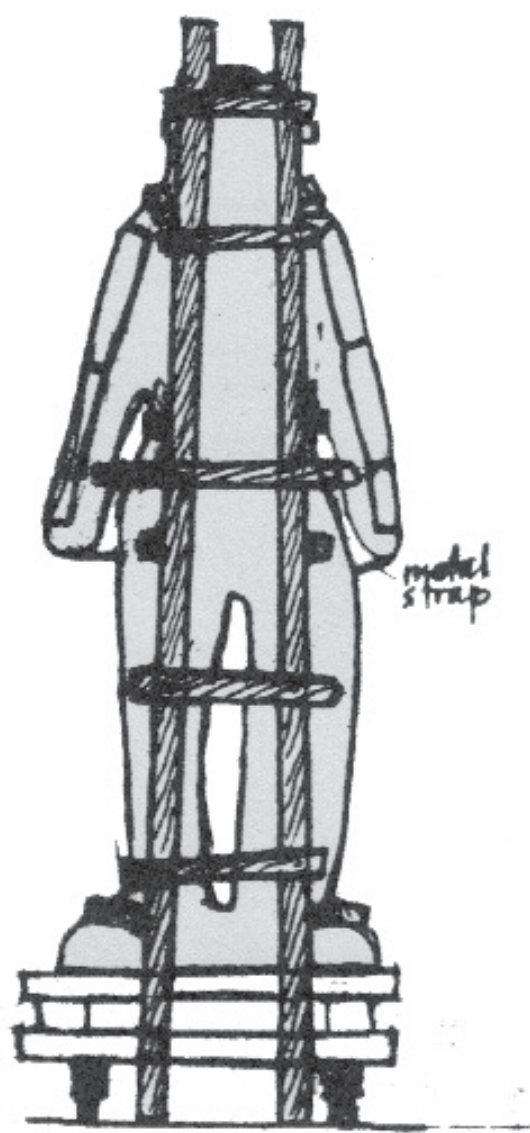
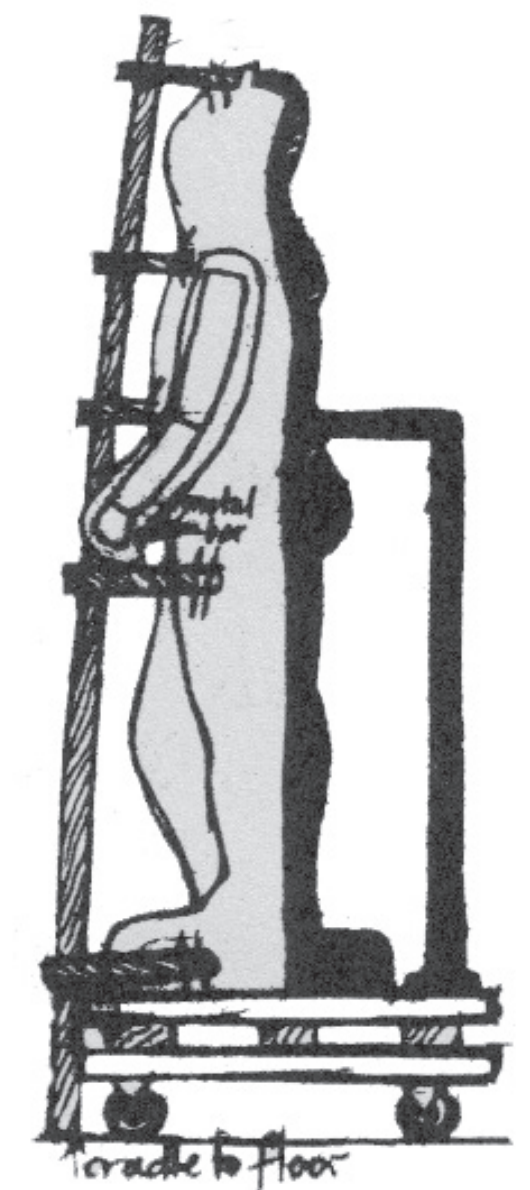
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Homage to Robert Smithson

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

By
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“The earth’s surface and the figments 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 wear away abstract banks, brainwaves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason.”

A Sedimentation of the Mind,in ‘Robert Smithson The Collected Writings,’ edited by Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2nd Edition 1996, pp. 100-1

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, neurologically 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,” is reformulated 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. That 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:

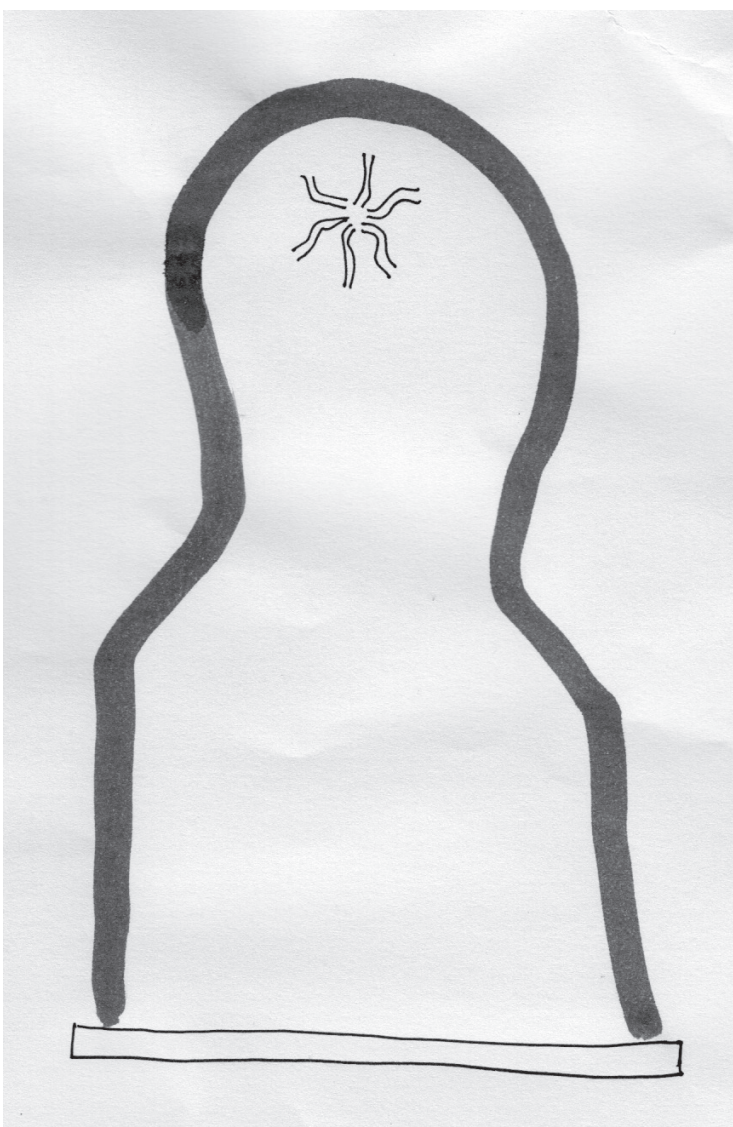
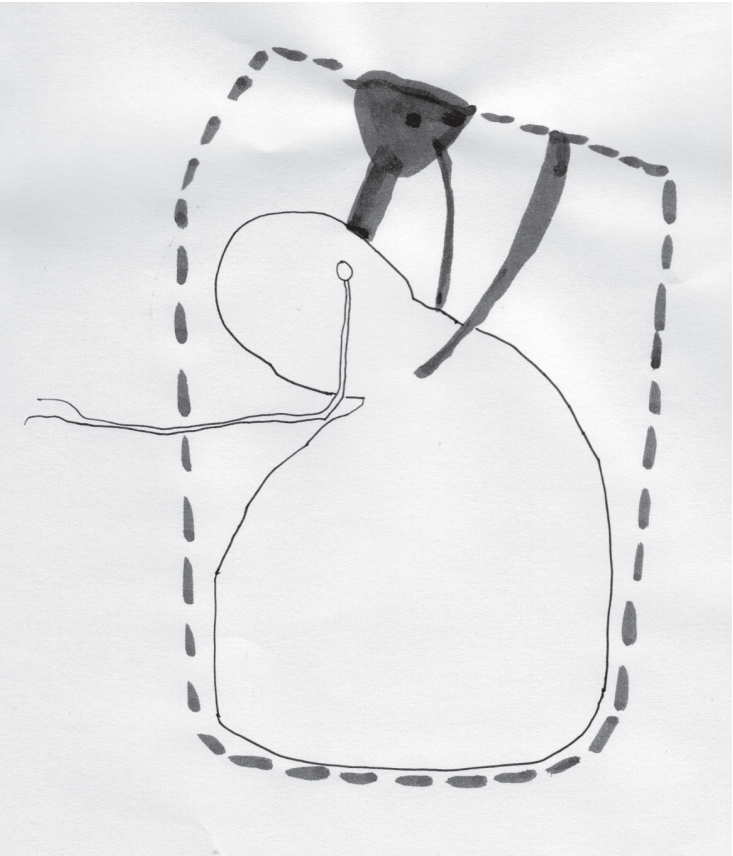
“For too long the artist has been estranged from his own ‘time.’ Critics, by focusing on the ‘art object’ deprive the artist of any existence in the world of both mind and matter. The mental process of the artist which takes place in time is disowned, so that a commodity value can be maintained by a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

A Sedimentation of the Mind,in ‘Robert Smithson The Collected Writings,’ edited by Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2nd Edition 1996, p. 111

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.”

A Sedimentation of the Mind,in ‘Robert Smithson The Collected Writings,’ edited by Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2nd Edition 1996, p.101



“Perhaps the artist is getting to be a rarer and rarer phenomena. Oh, there is art a plenty in the galleries which multiply as I type and despite economic austerity. But is that the measure? Fine by me to call yourself an artist, it helps, it musters up some energy to do something that is after all quite hard in today’s world. But, for me, there are few artists in the deepest implication of the term; an artist is one who against their will is uncomfortable in culture and must raise questions about the space between culture and what lays outside its walls, an un-gettable space which nonetheless can change everything. If only I could safely remove my tongue and send it off to work its way through a chink in that outer wall, then I might merit the title more. Yes, very few artists (but lots of art, much of it quite brilliant): “An artist is a ghost and needs a medium to transmit itself” [Francesco Finizio].”
Who is an Artist? Hester Reeve, Transmission text, 2016

