

Decline and Fall

Robert Smithson made *Partially Buried Woodshed* in the grounds of Kent State University, Ohio, in January 1970. The American conceptual artist had been invited to the university for a one-week residency and, while there, created this work with the help of students. As its title indicates, the artwork consisted of an old woodshed that was partially buried on one side by twenty truckloads of earth, piled around and onto the structure until its central roof beam cracked. Smithson intended the shed to break up slowly under the weight of the earth, and vegetation to grow over the mound; and he wanted the university to take appropriate care of the artwork and the surrounding site until this process had run its course. However, the artwork's anticipated demise was hastened through a number of circumstances, and although it is considered one of Smithson's most important earthworks, nothing remained of it after only fourteen years.

Smithson came to prominence in the mid-1960s as a minimalist artist but in the latter part of the 1960s he increasingly began to work with natural materials and the landscape. Time and the force of entropy – the gradual dissolution and decay of matter into a state of inert uniformity – were his major preoccupations. In *Asphalt Rundown*, made in October 1969, Smithson poured a truckload of asphalt down the side of an abandoned quarry outside Rome, the first of his 'flow works'. According to his wife, the artist Nancy Holt, these works were 'entropy made visible'.

Fascinated by ruins and the idea of habitations and culture being buried by natural eruptions and debris, Smithson saw geological change as a metaphor for the workings of the mind:

One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing ... Slump, debris, slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain.

A few months after completing *Asphalt Rundown*, Smithson went to Kent State University, Ohio. He wanted to create a 'mud pouring' but freezing weather – it was one of the coldest winters on record – made it impossible. Deterred by the extreme conditions, Smithson was ready to give up on the idea of creating an outdoor artwork but the art students pressed him to think of a feasible project. When he floated the idea of burying a building, they quickly obtained permission from the university authorities for him to use an old farm outhouse in an out-of-the-way part of the campus.

Smithson made a number of sketches of what he wanted, and had a local contractor dump twenty loads of earth around one side and on top of the woodshed, creating a

spiral pathway up the newly created mound. The work was declared complete when the central beam holding up the roof cracked. From that point onwards it was only a matter of time until the structure collapsed entirely.

At the end of the project Robert Smithson formally documented his ‘gift’ of the work to Kent State University. Cleverly, he attributed a significant monetary value to the piece – a useful brake on any bureaucratic impulse to get rid of the work at some later date – and also stipulated how it was to be looked after:

an area of 45’ should surround the art. Nothing should be altered in this area. Scattered wood and earth should remain in place. Everything in the shed is part of the art and should not be removed. The entire work of art is subject to weathering and should be considered part of the work. The value of his work is \$10,000.00. The work should be considered permanent and be maintained by the Art Dept. according to the above specifications.

In conversation at the time, he said that he hoped the piece would not only go on to decay but also would acquire ‘its own history’.

A few months later, in April 1970, Smithson went on to create his most famous work. Built from mud, salt crystals and basalt rocks, *Spiral Jetty* forms a massive coil – 460 metres long and 5 metres wide – jutting out of the shore of the Great Salt Lake, Utah. (Constructed when the water level was extremely low, the spiral can only be walked upon, or indeed, seen, when the lake levels are low: for three decades after its construction it was fully submerged, and in more recent years it has once again come close to being hidden from view as the water levels have risen.) The spiral form may have been a development of the spiral pathway up the mound in *Partially Buried Woodshed*.

Partially Buried Woodshed would have continued on its slow path of collapse without much further publicity but for a tragic incident on the campus of Kent State University. On 30 April President Nixon, who had been elected on the promise of reducing America’s involvement in the Vietnam war, announced on national television and radio that American troops would attack Viet Cong bases in Cambodia, a country that had been ostensibly neutral throughout the conflict. Many were shocked at this sudden escalation and expansion of the war, and protests occurred on Friday 1 May across university campuses, where anti-war sentiment ran high. At a rally in Kent State University a copy of the American Constitution was buried to symbolise its ‘murder’ (Congress had not authorised this extension of the war) and another rally was called for Monday 4 May. In the meantime there were various disturbances and clashes between protestors and local police in the town over the weekend. A state of emergency was called, the National Guard was deployed in the University, and further rallies were banned. However, two thousand students turned up on the campus on Monday, some not knowing that the authorities had banned the planned rally, others to protest against the presence of armed soldiers on the campus. At a certain point, a group of National Guard soldiers fired indiscriminately at the unarmed students. Sixty-seven bullets

were discharged in thirteen seconds, killing four and wounding nine. The soldiers later said that they feared for their lives but exactly why they fired remains contested. Reproduced in the national and international media, a photograph of a young girl kneeling down beside a dead student on the ground became a potent image of the event that, in effect, brought the Vietnam War to America. The Kent State shootings, as they became known, sparked a round of student strikes and demonstrations, both violent and non-violent, across the nation, and dramatically helped shift public opinion against the continuation of the war in Vietnam.

Shortly afterwards the words ‘MAY 4 KENT 70’ were painted onto the woodshed in bold white letters. Suddenly, the work became an unofficial memorial to the event, much visited by students; and a photograph of the work was used in an anti-war poster. Some began to see Smithson’s artwork as expressive of a malaise within American political society, the cracking of the roof beam by the overwhelming force of gravity serving as a metaphor for the breaking of the political system. Nancy Holt, the artist’s wife, later said:

Obviously, the students, or whoever did that early graffiti ... recognised the parallel. Piling the earth until the central beam cracked, as though the whole government, the whole country were cracking. Really, we had a revolution then. It was the end of one society and the beginning of the next.

By 1975 the continued existence of *Partially Buried Woodshed* was in doubt. Using a soda can filled with kerosene, someone set it alight, and half of the shed burned to the ground. In fact, Smithson’s request that the piece be left as it was had been ignored from the beginning. The contents of the woodshed were quickly stolen, and graffiti were regularly daubed in the inside. However, while it was becoming more and more of an eyesore, it was also increasingly famous in art circles, with artists and journalists, from America and abroad, coming specifically to see the work. Smithson had pioneered the concept of earth sculpture but had left only five outdoor earthworks, including *Partially Buried Woodshed*. Writing to the university, the artist’s wife reinforced this point about the work’s growing importance despite the changes it had suffered:

It is a seminal work which has influenced much other art during the last five years. The fact that it has changed with the slow natural aging of weather and the rapid natural aging of fire is quite consistent with Robert Smithson’s esthetic philosophy.

The question of what to do with the site, however, became a topic of local controversy. Planning to redevelop the area and create a new major public entrance near to the woodshed, the university found the work and its unofficial memorialisation of the shooting embarrassing, and would have had the shed removed if it were not for the spirited resistance of Smithson’s supporters (the artist had died in a plane accident in 1973, aged thirty-five). After much public debate about the value of the work and the university’s responsibilities to Smithson, a compromise was reached: the shed was allowed to remain but all loose timbers were removed and a screen of fast growing conifers was planted to obscure it from view.

In 1982 the central beam finally broke entirely, and the work, with the graffiti still intact, moved closer to collapse. From time to time groundsmen cleared up and took away loose timbers. At some point, someone – it is not known who or by whose order – cleared the site completely, removing all the remaining timber and leaving only the concrete foundation of two of the shed’s walls. This was not noticed until February 1984.

Smithson’s work was gone, or at least the physical remains of it; and it was no longer a feature of the landscape or an element in students’ experience of being at the university. Some argue that the idea of the piece survives intact and independently of the original materials, which were always intended to change over time anyway. Others suggest that what happened to the work was only an artificially quickened example of a process of entropic return to an even uniformity that Smithson believed was the destiny of all matter. Mindful of the past presence of the work and of its place in the history of the institution, the university has not sought to develop or pave over the area. And, moved by the story of the lost work, a number of artists, including Tacita Dean, Sam Durant and Mike Nelson, have made new artworks in homage to the *Partially Buried Woodshed*.

Text—
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