

## Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Emmen: Notes to Self, or, Ghostly Demarcations, Keener Wound

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### I. Site: From Amsterdam

If, on a Saturday's excursion from Amsterdam, you were to cycle to Amsterdam-Zuid Station, take the Intercity train to Zwolle, from Zwolle take the Blauwnet Stoptrein to Emmen, and from Emmen Station walk several kilometres through a wood called the Emmerdennen to Emmerhoutstraat 150, you would see a wide, shallow pit in which a lacustrine body of water is enclosed around a sloping shoreline of variable width. What is this site? Where is this site? It is located on the eastern limit of a prehistoric ridge of sand stretching from Emmen to Groningen called the Hondsrug. It is a place from which sand was once dredged at an industrial scale. It is the place where in 1971 the American artist Robert Smithson realised his only earthworks outside the United States, known together as "Broken Circle/Spiral Hill."

In English, the property at Emmerhoutstraat 150 is often called a *former sand quarry*. The word *quarry*, one etymological theory holds, comes from the Latin *quadrare*, meaning "to make

square.”<sup>1</sup> A quarry, thus, would take its name from one objective potentially realised there: the production of cubic building stones. Fine, but Robert Smithson was no square. The Dutch language offers several names for the site that provide alternative—and potentially more relevant—traction. An official name for the property at Emmerhoutstraat 150, for instance, is *Zandgat De Boer*. In *zandgat*, we find a compound word. Why does this matter? One feature of compound words is that very often they cannot be squared. One span does not agree with the other. These words are restless. They can seem to disagree with themselves, to constantly double back on themselves, to vibrate above their ostensible referents in ways that force us to think dialectically—and then, inevitably, to rethink. These words do things with us. With *zandgat*, we are forced to think a series of overlapping tensions between *zand* (“sand”)<sup>2</sup> and *gat* (“hole,” “gap”),<sup>3</sup> between presence and (constitutive?) absence. The problem is that sand and the absence of sand cannot coincide in space. In the space of a hole, it stands to reason, there is not sand. There is only a place from which sand has already been excavated. Where there is sand, conversely, there is no hole. Or rather, there is only a hole yet to be excavated. But with the compound, we must compose (or else, compost) these words together. *Zandgat* does not resolve itself. We are referred to what the Smithson calls the *dialectics* of landscape, whereby space becomes the negative space of negative space. “A thing,” in other words, is no more than “a hole in a thing it is not.”<sup>4</sup>

Another word that might name the property at Emmerhoutstraat 150 is *afgraving*: an excavation.<sup>5</sup> This is a noun derived from a verb, a thingification of what need not strictly be called a thing: a process of disruption, earth work, architectonic movement. This word *afgraving* also points to the grave, the tomb, and the crypt—in other words, to the monument (e.g., the burial

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<sup>1</sup> *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, s.v. “quarry.”

<sup>2</sup> *Van Dale Groot woordenboek Nederlands-Engels*, s.v. “zand.”

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*, s.v. “gat.”

<sup>4</sup> Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 95.

<sup>5</sup> *Van Dale Groot woordenboek Nederlands-Engels*, s.v. “afgraving.”

monument) and the work of a monument's engraving.<sup>6</sup> Does it also point to Exodus 20:4 in the King James Version?

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness *of any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth.<sup>7</sup>

Ostensibly these lines contain the Biblical commandment prohibiting idolatry, but beyond that they have an incantatory strangeness befitting Emmerhoutstraat 150. Could Exodus 20:4 set the terms of a contemporary artistic or political manifesto? *Sous les pavés, la plage*? What is a graven image if not an engraving? What is an engraving if not a significant displacement? What would it mean to say that a gap in the sand, an *afgraving* of earth, a sandy shore beneath the street, were a graven image? Could a quarry be a material signifier of its own materiality? In Emmen, Exodus 20:4 seems to spiral back on itself. Call this site *mise en abyme*.

Look to the north rim of the abyss and you will see from the lakeshore rise a conical frustum of shrub-covered earth. This is Smithson's Spiral Hill. To approach the Spiral Hill from the edge of the quarry, you must first descend ten meters into the earth to meet the shoreline. Smithson calls the quarry a "sunken site."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the surrealist Leonora Carrington, who tells us that "the task of the right eye is to peer into the telescope, while the left eye peers into the microscope," would say that it is "down below."<sup>9</sup> A literary scholar might call the requisite descent a "catabasis narrative." But I will not draw such crass anthropocentric conclusions. I will merely say, "It has been done."

Descend to the shoreline, follow the shoreline counterclockwise to the Spiral Hill, and you will see that the eponymous spiral is a footpath winding upwards and upwards counterclockwise around the conical frustum. It might occur to you that the form of this earthwork is isomorphic to a volcano. You might think to a text by Georges Bataille called "The Solar Anus."

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<sup>6</sup> *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, s.v. "monument".

<sup>7</sup> Exod. 20:4 (King James Version).

<sup>8</sup> Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 253.

<sup>9</sup> Carrington, *Down Below*, 18.

The terrestrial globe is covered with volcanoes, which serve as its anus. Although this globe eats nothing, it often violently ejects the contents of its entrails. Those contents shoot out with a racket and fall back, streaming down the sides of the Jesuve, spreading death and terror everywhere.<sup>10</sup>

It might also occur to you that the form of this earthwork is isomorphic to the Tower of Babel as it is depicted by the painter Bruegel the Elder.<sup>11</sup> A potential confusion of tongues flashes up. But the site asks one to risk such a possibility. Follow the counterclockwise upward-leading spiral footpath to the Spiral Hill's highest point and from there look out south toward the lake. You will then have a bird's-eye view of the other earthwork Smithson constructed at Emmerhoutstraat 150. From the west, the shore in front of the Spiral Hill is bisected by a roughly 130-degree, 49-meter arcing canal. From the east, the lake just in front of the Spiral Hill is bisected by an arcing jetty sized to correspond with the area of land displaced by the canal. Or perhaps it is the other way around and the canal is sized to correspond with the area of water displaced by the jetty. I don't know.

In the space between the canal and the shoreline is a semi-circular peninsula. In the space between the jetty and the shoreline is a semi-circular inlet. Together, jetty and canal, peninsula and inlet—simultaneously land and land displacement, water and water displacement—suggest the forms of concentric composite circles, half-moons that do not fit together. At roughly the centre of the peninsula sits a granite boulder. All of this comprises the earthwork known as the Broken Circle.

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<sup>10</sup> Bataille, "The Solar Anus," 8.

<sup>11</sup> One of Bruegel's depictions of that tower is (as of April 2022) on view at a museum called the Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen. The Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen, a sarcophagus-fortress of a structure, is Bruegel's Tower of Babel were it horizontally reflected, crossed with Paris-Charles de Gaulle Airport's Terminal 1, clad in mirrors, and capped with an upscale restaurant.



If Smithson is to be believed (I do not know if he should be), the boulder at the centre of the Broken Circle, which surely weighs many thousands of kilograms, was in 1971 one of the largest known to exist in the Netherlands.<sup>12</sup> It is true, in any case, that the Dutch soil is not known for containing very many large rocks. Those that do occur, in the discipline of geology called *glacial erratics*, were carried to their present sites from elsewhere by Ice Age glaciers that long ago melted. Smithson was always more of an eccentric than anything *-centric* and he claims to have been highly disturbed by the erratic boulder in the middle of his earthwork. He resented that boulder, it seems, for breaking the Broken Circle—in other words, for unbreaking the circle by taking place as its central point. It just so happened, Smithson writes, that the only part of the quarry’s shoreline he received permission to work upon was a stretch with that boulder at its centre. There was no other way. He claims, again perhaps hyperbolically, to have been told that only the Dutch army would have been up to the task of displacing his earthwork’s erratic centre. Smithson’s language to describe his encounters with that boulder is notable for what we might call its self-conscious literary flair. The boulder was, he writes, “a kind of glacial ‘heart of darkness.’”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 258.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

By an unforeseen chance, I was trapped in Emmen with a monstrous point to contend with. . . . I was haunted by the shadowy lump in the middle of my work. . . . The perimeter of the intrusion magnified into a blind spot in my mind that blotted the circumference out. All and all it is a cyclopan dilemma. . . . Neither eccentrically nor concentrically is it possible to escape the dilemma, just as the Earth cannot escape the Sun. Maybe that's why Valéry called the sun a "Brilliant Error."<sup>14</sup>

Smithson, where is thy lustre now? Do these lines parody an artist's delusions of grandeur? Possibly. But before considering this possibility, we must read the words as they come. We must allow the boulder to take place on the order of what Freud calls the "navel" of the dream, or the point at which the tangled network of dream thoughts becomes unplumbable as it stretches out into the unknown and forces the analysis to stop short.<sup>15</sup> The point of the unplumbable is the point of speculation. At this point, two directions of thought emerge. First, to vision (and/as) inability to see. Which is it? Second, to the conspicuous megalith (and/as) the conspicuous void. Which is it? Smithson refers us to the eye of the cyclops. So we refer to the eye of the cyclops:

While they lifted the olive-wood stake, sharp at the end,  
and thrust him in his eye, I pressed my weight from above  
and twisted it, as when some man bores a ship's plank  
with an auger, while others below rotate it with a strap  
they clasp at either end, so it always runs continuously.  
So we took the fire-sharpened stake and twisted it  
in his eye, and blood, hot as it was, flowed around it.  
The breath of his burning pupil singed all around his eyelids  
and eyebrows, and the roots of his eye crackled with fire.  
As when a smith man plunges a big axe or adze  
in cold water to temper it, and it hisses greatly,

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 528.

for this is how it has again the strength of iron,  
so his eye sizzled around the olive-wood stake.  
He let out a great horrifying cry, the rock echoed,  
and we scurried off in fear.<sup>16</sup>

The cyclops cries out. Nobody has blinded him, and therefore he cannot see. Can we? The above passage from the *Odyssey* performs a synesthetic disorientation, a confusion of persons and senses. The story of Odysseus and the cyclops has been told many times and in many places. Can a return to the text reveal anything new? One first revelation: to blind the cyclops is to violate the *breath of the pupil*. Then we must ask: do pupils breathe? How might this breath sound? The second epic simile in this passage does not attempt a visual representation of the blinding wound but—as if doubling that wound—creates a soundscape: as is the blinding of the cyclops, so is the hiss of hot iron plunged into cool water. Blindness is a “breath” that becomes a “crackle,” a “crackle” that becomes a “hiss,” a “hiss” that becomes a “sizzle,” a “sizzle” that becomes a “great horrifying cry” that penetrates into the rock and resounds as an “echo” so horrifying that one can only scurry off in fear. The figures of this passage are so insistently non-visual as to suggest an identity between the narrator, Odysseus, and his blinded foe. Is this a covert instance of embedded focalization?

*Singe in me, muse!* That is the motto of the cyclops. Poetry, here, is less like painting than it is the static of a poor long-distance connection. It is less a vehicle for representation or sentiment than an incessant murmur in one’s ears, a language which does not cease not working. A wounded eye—a ship’s wooden plank penetrated by the wind of a helical screw—is already an earthwork. This wound winds in directions both volcanic and lacustrine. One realises, for instance, that the depression (*gat*) in which the Broken Circle takes place might also refer us to the eye, as in the phrase *in de gaten houden* (“keep an eye on”), and to the anal orifice (i.e., “asshole,” the gap between the legs).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 9.382-396.

<sup>17</sup> *Van Dale Groot woordenboek Nederlands-Engels*, s.v. “gat.”

There is another potential direction of thought here (or perhaps this is the same direction by a different course): to the haunting, the *hauntology*, if you will, of the boulder. To the sepulchre, to the sepulchral engraving, to ways of not being and of what nightmares might come. In the Robert Smithson archives at the Smithsonian Institution, there is a typescript with the following unelaborated observation attributed to longtime Emmen cultural ambassador Sjouke Zijlstra:

the glacial boulder was too heavy to remove and Smithson decided to keep it in the work. seagulls with foodpoisoning from the local dump choose it to be their last resting place: this fascinated him.<sup>18</sup>

Robert Smithson, it must be first noted, is not the eponym of the Smithsonian Institution. The Smithsonian is an American cultural and scientific organization—a large collection of museums, libraries, archives, and research centres—named after James Smithson (1765–1829), a mineralogist and the illegitimate son of a British aristocrat. James Smithson, who died childless, left his inherited fortune to a nephew on the condition that if the nephew were also to die childless, the estate would fall to the United States government for the purpose of founding an “Establishment for the increase & diffusion of knowledge among men” in Washington, D.C. In a turn of events that American president John Quincy Adams called “incomprehensible,” James Smithson’s nephew indeed died childless in 1835 and the United States came into possession of Smithson’s fortune in 1838.<sup>19</sup> The Smithsonian Institution, named for a man who never visited the United States nor had any apparent connections to the country, was subsequently established in 1846.

James Smithson, who was wont to drift from his native England, died in Genoa, Italy. He was buried in that city’s British cemetery, which was at the time situated on a hill overlooking the sea. But Smithson’s remains were not to remain. By the early 1900s, Genoa’s British cemetery faced an existential threat in a nearby

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<sup>18</sup> “Notes from a conversation with Sjouke Zijlstra on 8 9 1982”.

<sup>19</sup> Ewing, *The Lost World of James Smithson*, n.p.

quarry. As a cemetery steward writes in a 1900 letter to the Smithsonian Institution, the quarry

was slowly but surely eating its way towards us from the sea through the rocky side of the hill on which we stand, and excavation has lately come so close to us that the intervention of the Consul became necessary to arrest further advance on the plea that our property would be endangered if the quarrying were carried on.

Actual blasting has in fact been put an end to for the present, and the Cemetery (although the boundary wall is now on the very edge of the excavation) remains untouched[.]<sup>20</sup>



You like this garden?  
Why is it yours?  
We evict those who destroy!<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Le Mesurier, *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections*, 244.

<sup>21</sup> Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 132.

An 1897 photograph of Smithson's Genoa burial site is remarkable for its near-total absence of site perspective.<sup>22</sup> Where is the port? Where is the expanse of the Ligurian Sea? To what blasting does the steward refer? We see an engraved plaque and a bathtub-like sarcophagus before a solid boundary wall, the upper edge of which bisects the frame and blocks the horizon. Above the dividing line, branches stand out against solid white. At the right of the frame, the surface of the wall is darkened by tree shadows. At the left of the frame—closer to the sarcophagus—the wall greys and then verges on the white of the sky above. Caught before (behind?) this wall, we cannot place ourselves in Genoa, or even on the surface of the earth. The site, framed by two vertical tree trunks and that wall, has an asphyxiating—or at least, nauseating—inevitability that seems to render action impossible. It is (take your pick) a walled garden, a prison yard, a museum, or a chamber in which we are to be buried alive. And yet, a limit encroaches. Just beyond sight, all that is solid undermines into air.

It was not long after this photograph was captured that the city of Genoa officially expropriated the cemetery property. This property was to be quarried. When we look at the photograph, we see the death mask of a graveyard. For the cemetery's British custodians, the expropriation raised the question of what to do with the human bones and burial markers that remained on the property, including those of James Smithson. As it happened, Alexander Graham Bell—the inventor of the telephone—took a great interest in the fate of Smithson's gravesite. Bell, who in the early 1900s served on the Smithsonian Institution's board of regents, successfully petitioned the Smithsonian to sponsor the disinterment and relocation of Smithson's remains and sarcophagus from the imperilled cemetery in Genoa to Washington, D.C. In Washington, Bell arranged for Smithson's reinterment at the Smithsonian Institution's headquarters, a Norman Revival-style building popularly known as the Smithsonian Castle.

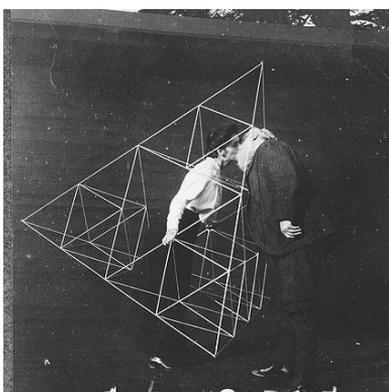
Alexander Graham Bell was not only the inventor of the telephone and the man responsible for James Smithson's interment at the Smithsonian Castle but also a man of great interest to Robert

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<sup>22</sup> Prematio Studio Fotografico, *Tomb of James Smithson in Italy*, 1897.

Smithson. Bell attracted Smithson's attention in particular for his work as an aeronautics engineer, which led him to construct tetrahedral kites intended for (but which never accomplished) human flight. Bell's kites, Robert Smithson proposes in an unelaborated essay footnote, are "flying 'thought-word-thing' triangles."<sup>23</sup>

What is a flying "thought-word-thing" triangle? A bell that calls elsewhere. A wind that wounds. The breath of a burning pupil. A spectral seagull lying dead on a boulder in Emmen. The noise of foisting lava in one's ears. Grinding water and gasping wind. A line of flight by which the *bird* is the death of the thing.



*Caught in a flying "thought-word-thing" triangle. Is there love in the telematic embrace?<sup>24</sup>*



*Alas, poor Yorick? At a soon-to-be-quarried hilltop cemetery in Genoa, the United States Consul is pictured with Smithsonian Institution founder James Smithson's exhumed skull.<sup>25</sup>*

The province of Drenthe, as Robert Smithson was aware, is noted in travel guides for hosting a great number of *hunebedden* (known also as dolmens): prehistoric piles of glacial erratics, the ruins of burial chambers for mortal remains long since dedifferentiated into the earth. If you were to walk from Emmen Station through to Emmerhoutstraat 150, you would pass several of these large rocks

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<sup>23</sup> Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 345.

<sup>24</sup> *Alexander Graham Bell kissing his wife*, 1903.

<sup>25</sup> *American consul William Bishop, holding skull of James Smithson*, 1904.

in the intervening woods. It is monuments such as the *hunebedden*, Jacques Lacan argues, at which signification begins and to which signification ultimately refers. If, as Hegel puts it, *the word is the death of the thing*, it follows that, as Lacan writes, “the first symbol in which we recognize humanity in vestigial traces is the sepulture.”<sup>26</sup> Smithson, for his part, argues that “a tendency toward ‘tombic communication’ is still with us”—and perhaps only ever more palpably with us—in the postmodern writing scene.<sup>27</sup> Riffing on Marshall McLuhan, Smithson proposes that *the medium is the mummy*.

There seems to be parallels between cybernation and the world of the Pyramid. The logic behind ‘thinking machines’ with their ‘artificial nervous systems’ has a rigid complexity, that on an esthetic level resembles the tombic burial structures of ancient Egypt. The hieroglyphics of the Book of the Dead are similar to the circuit symbols of computer memory banks or ‘coded channels.’ Perhaps one could call a computing machine—an ‘electric mummy’—the medium is the mummy.<sup>28</sup>

So the symbol begins as the Pyramid, the megalith, the burial marker, the sarcophagus-bathtub-Stedelijk Amsterdam? This is but one version of the thesis of language’s materiality. There are others. Perhaps symbols are shit by any other name. If you were to descend the Spiral Hill and go for a close look at the boulder, you would find that it is surrounded by weeds, goose feathers, and goose droppings. Australian wombats are like quarries: they produce cubes.<sup>29</sup> The geese at the *Zandgat De Boer* shit in spirals.

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<sup>26</sup> Lacan, “Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” 77.

<sup>27</sup> Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 342.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Natasha May, “Box Seat: Scientists Solve the Mystery of Why Wombats Have Cube-shaped Poo,” 2021.



The medium is the *merde*? “Broken Circle/Spiral Hill” calls for a delirious stereography: one eye in the microscope, the other in the telescope.

## II. Non-Site: From New York

Robert Smithson constructed “Broken Circle/Spiral Hill” on occasion of the 1971 edition of the Arnhem’s Sonsbeek exhibition, which that year was titled “Sonsbeek buiten de perken” (“Sonsbeek beyond the pale” or “Sonsbeek beyond lawn and order”). Previous iterations of the exhibition had occupied Arnhem’s Sonsbeek Park but participants in Sonsbeek 71 were unsatisfied with the confines of a nineteenth-century landscaped park and the nostalgic version of nature (e.g., as docile, pastoral, static, idealised, etc.) that for them it embodied. Interested in new possibilities for engagement around cybernetics and information theory, the Sonsbeek 71 participants opted to set the show at a network of sites across the Netherlands, amongst which the *Zandgat De Boer* in Emmen was one. Rather than functioning as a sculpture garden, Arnhem’s Sonsbeek Park was reimagined on the model of a switchboard or communication hub fitted with a video studio, an auditorium, and an information pavilion connected by telex machine to satellites across the country.<sup>30</sup>

In an interview, Smithson comments that “the idea of putting an object in [Sonsbeek Park] really didn’t motivate me too much. In a sense, a park is already a work of art; it’s a circumscribed area of land that already has a kind of cultivation involved in it.”<sup>31</sup> A staunch anti-humanist, Smithson objects strenuously to a “wishy-washy transcendentalism” that he finds so often informs not only park

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<sup>30</sup> Stichting Sonsbeek, *Sonsbeek 71*.

<sup>31</sup> Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 253.

planning and outdoor exhibition design but early-1970s ecological thought writ large.<sup>32</sup> “Nature,” as Smithson puts it, “is simply another 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century fiction.”<sup>33</sup> Smithson traces this fiction to the *cemetery*, a “sylvan setting” that emerged during those centuries concurrent with the accelerating decline of churchyard burial.<sup>34</sup> A correspondence—indeed, a conceptual overlap—emerges across the cemetery, a stultifying garden full of what Smithson dismisses as “little pyramids, you know, for the dead,” and the traditional sculpture park, a stultifying garden full of discrete little artworks.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps Smithson’s dismissal of the cemetery allows us to see why he found the dolmen-like boulder in the centre of the Broken Circle so irritating: it threatens to turn the *zandgat* into a park. In Genoa, an *afgraving* of stones threatened a plot of gravestones. In Emmen, the “cemetery” and the “sedentary” threaten the sedimentary.

The parks that surround some museums isolate art into objects of formal delectation. Objects in a park suggest static repose rather than any ongoing dialectic. Parks are finished landscapes for finished art. A park carries the values of the final, the absolute, and the sacred.<sup>36</sup>

Robert Smithson died at 35 in 1973 when his chartered aeroplane crashed into a Texas hillside. Just across the Hudson River from Manhattan at a site in New Jersey called Hillside Cemetery is a granite headstone engraved with Smithson’s name. What is a Hillside cemetery? In the United States, it is always another. Naming conventions for American cemeteries dictate porosity, Arcadian blandness, an insistent resistance to emplacement.<sup>37</sup> To ask anything

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<sup>32</sup> *Id.*, 163.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*, 85.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*, 309.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*, 155.

<sup>37</sup> Sigmund Freud was not particularly impressed by America, but he was amused, at least, by what would later be called the “American way of death.” In a 1937 letter to Marie Bonaparte, Freud recalls a slogan he deems “the boldest and most successful” instance of American advertising: “Why live, if you can be buried for ten dollars?” See: *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, 436–437.

meaningful about a place called Hillside Cemetery, one must first ask, *which one?* If you were to download a list—or, as someone more computer-literate would say, a *dataset*—containing the names of every cemetery in the United States and sort this list by word frequency, you would find there are 228 cemeteries with names containing the word “Hillside,” including nine in the state of New Jersey alone.<sup>38</sup> This makes “Hillside” the 131st most frequently occurring word amongst all American cemetery names. There are, further, thousands of cemetery names containing the word “Hill,” which ranks (after “Saint”) as the second most frequently occurring word amongst American cemetery names. There are dozens of American “Pleasant Hill” cemeteries, and at least one “Colonial Hill,” “Gravel Hill,” “Round Hill,” “Pebble Hill,” “Iron Hill,” “Flint Hill,” “Rock Hill,” “Sand Hill,” “Quarry Hill,” and “Circle Hill” cemetery. There is not, however, a “Spiral Hill” cemetery. Nor is there a “Broken Circle” cemetery. Not officially.

Perhaps an evocative way of emplacing the particular Hillside Cemetery in New Jersey containing a granite headstone bearing the name Smithson would be to think of it as what the artist might call a “monument of the Passaic”—a ruin in reverse, in reverse. This is to say that if on a Saturday’s excursion from New York you were to go to the Port Authority Bus Terminal at 41st Street and 8th Avenue, buy a newspaper and a paperback novel, board New Jersey Transit bus number 190 at Gate 232, and disembark at the first stop, the intersection of Orient Way and Barrows Avenue, you would find yourself atop the eponymous hillside. That hillside, a north-south ridge running parallel to Manhattan for several kilometres, marks the western limit to a hinterland between New York and all points westward known as the Meadowlands, a heavily polluted low-lying wetland colonised by the Dutch in the seventeenth century as *Nieuw Nederland*.<sup>39</sup> Follow Orient Way one hundred meters south from the bus shelter, crossing over an east-west highway called Route 3, and you find yourself between a restaurant called the Colonial Diner, established 1986, to the west, and Hillside Cemetery, established 1882, to the east. If you were to wander through Hillside

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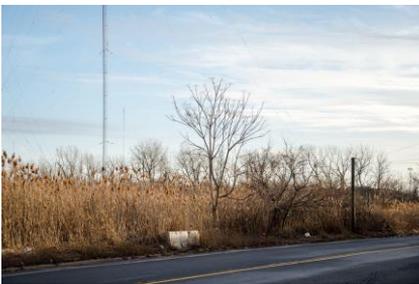
<sup>38</sup> ArcGIS Data and Maps, “USA Cemeteries.”

<sup>39</sup> This followed Hudson’s visit aboard a ship called the *Halve Maen* in search of a passage east.

Cemetery reading the headstones, you would eventually come across one bearing the name “Smithson.” You might find this discovery thrilling. Or you might be bemused to see that this headstone is American kitsch of the highest order: polished granite, symmetrical, engraved with floral patterns and a cross.

A cross—really? What had you sought? A spiral? A limit-experience? An ascent? A descent? Have you come out to New Jersey to contemplate an object of formal delectation, a little pyramid—a nice little word-thought-thing triangle—for the dead? This Smithson headstone is not a Smithsonian earthwork. One could say, if nothing else and as Smithson might, that “It was there.”<sup>40</sup> Or, rather than say anything, you might think of buying one of those solar-powered plastic cats that will not keep bowing its lifeless automatic paw until the end of the world. If you look out eastward past the Smithson headstone, you might realise that all of the sound and fury in the expanse is no more than the meaningless plungings of automatic paws. This might be a relief or this might be a terror.

Look down the hill and you will see the reeds, the radio masts, the flyovers, the railway bridges, the traffic, and the mud of the Meadowlands. Look across the Hackensack River—past Secaucus, past Weehawken—and you might see traces of the Manhattan skyline. Do you reflexively and perversely imagine the sky as the canvas it might have been on 9/11? Or does your gaze fall nearer: to the grey fortified tower of a Smithsonian Castle on the near edge of the abyss called Medieval Times Dinner & Tournament?



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<sup>40</sup> Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 68.



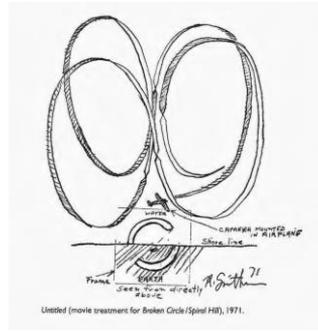
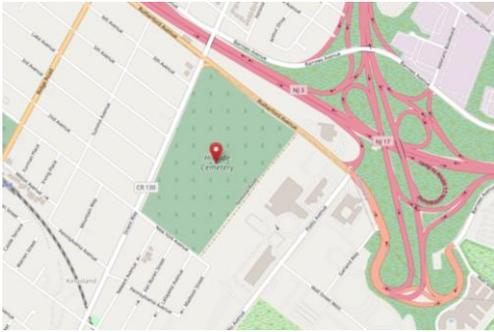
Look just north of Medieval Times and you will see the castle parking lot. Look just north of the castle parking lot and you will see a hotel called the Courtyard. Look just past the Courtyard and you will see a hotel called the Renaissance. Look past the Renaissance and you might glimpse the American Dream® shopping mall and indoor ski slope. A narrative composes itself in one sweep of the gaze.

If you were to place a pin on a map marking the exact location of the Smithson headstone, you would see that this headstone takes place almost exactly at the centre of the Hillside Cemetery property. This fact might seem significant—or simply funny. You might begin to trace the potential outlines of an unplumbable correspondence between this headstone and the boulder that so haunted Smithson in Emmen. Granite gets the last laugh after all. And then your eyes might drift westward across the New Jersey map to a cloverleaf highway interchange between Route 3 and Route 17.<sup>41</sup> This interchange might wind another chain of spiralling associations. You might, for instance, remember a page in Smithson’s *Collected Writings* printed with a diagram of the artist’s unrealised plan to mount a movie camera to an aeroplane and fly it in a “cloverleaf maneuver” over the *Zandgat De Boer* in Emmen.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> OpenStreetMap, “Map of Lyndhurst.”

<sup>42</sup> Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 257.



One seizes the spiral and the spiral becomes a seizure.<sup>43</sup>

I identify these outlines neither in the interest of superstition nor paranoia. I make no argument and I draw no conclusion. Rather, I write after Bataille:

It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form.<sup>44</sup>

Or Smithson:

When does a displacement become a misplacement?<sup>45</sup>

Or the recently deceased Joan Didion:

We tell ourselves stories in order to live. . . . We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.

Or at least we do for a while.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Id.*, 147.

<sup>44</sup> Bataille, “The Solar Anus,” 4.

<sup>45</sup> Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 124.

<sup>46</sup> Didion, “The White Album,” 11.

Or at least we do for a while. Joan Didion owes much of her popular reputation to the first sentence of the above quotation. But she qualifies that famous assertion with a rejoinder that puts our fate in question. Do we tell ourselves stories in order to live? Or do we trace correspondences and correspondents, string figures and crossed lines, defiances that define, definitions that defy, spirals that unspiral, places that displace, ties that blind, cloverleaves that redouble and then double back? Is there a difference? Should there be?

On a Saturday's excursion from Amsterdam to the *Zandgat De Boer*, I will only mention by way of closing, you may notice that the last stop before Emmen is Nieuw-Amsterdam. Blessed rage for order! But this bell calls elsewhere. "Size determines an object," Smithson writes, "but scale determines art."<sup>17</sup>



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<sup>17</sup> Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 147.

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### List of Images

- Alexander Graham Bell kissing his wife Mabel Hubbard Gardiner Bell, who is standing in a tetrahedral kite, Baddeck, Nova Scotia*. 1903. Gilbert H. Grosvenor Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. LC-DIG-ds-06863.
- American consul William Bishop, holding skull of James Smithson, at the British cemetery at San Benigno, outside Genoa, Italy*. 1904. Gilbert H. Grosvenor Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. LC-DIG-ds-09987.

OpenStreetMap contributors. Map of Lyndhurst, New Jersey, U.S.A. OpenStreetMap Foundation, accessed June 8, 2022, <https://www.openstreetmap.org>.

Prematio Studio Fotografico, *Tomb of James Smithson in Italy*, 1897. Historic Images of the Smithsonian Catalog, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

All other images are by the author.