

Robert Smithson Spiral Jetty, 1970

One of the most remarkable examples of Land art is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, located at Rozel Point peninsula on the northeastern shore of Great Salt Lake. With the assistance of a team operating dump trucks, a front loader, and a tractor, Smithson created the sculpture over three weeks in April 1970. Six thousand tons of black basalt rocks and earth were formed into a coil measuring 1,500 feet long and 15 feet wide, which winds counterclockwise into the lake. Through the generosity of the artist Nancy Holt, Smithson's widow, and the Estate of Robert Smithson, the artwork entered the collection of Dia Art Foundation in 1999.

Before creating *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson had established a remarkably diverse artistic practice. He began his career as a painter, but started to experiment in the mid-1960s with different media, including drawing, film, sculpture, writing, and eventually earthworks. Deeply informed by his interest in geology, crystallography, and science in its popularized forms (such as science fiction literature and cinema, encyclopedic collections, even natural history museums), Smithson's art focused on processes of accumulation, displacement, and entropy in order to reveal the contradictions in our visible world. In the late 1960s, his work increasingly revolved around the relationship between art and place, in which he defined the artistic concepts of Site and Nonsite. Smithson's *Leaning Mirror* (1969), for instance, is a seminal indoor earthwork that consists of two six-foot-square mirrors embedded at a precise angle in a mound of reddish sand from an outdoor site. In other instances, Smithson worked directly in the peripheral spaces that inspired him. Sometimes the results were fleeting documentations, as with the illustrated travel-essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967); other times permanent, large-scale sculptural interventions, as in the case of *Spiral Jetty*.

"I like landscapes that suggest prehistory," said Smithson.¹ The artist chose to create *Spiral Jetty* in Great Salt Lake due in part to the lake's unusual physical qualities, including the reddish coloration of the water caused by bacteria and the crystallized salt deposits that form on the peninsula's black basalt boulders of hardened lava—scattered remnants of the now extinct volcanos in the area. The fractured rocky landscape and fluctuating water levels of Great Salt Lake also appealed to the artist's long-standing preoccupation with entropy.

Smithson's distinct definition of entropy, drawn from popular science and science fiction alike, fixated on the chance operations of nature that lead to a state of transformation. Created at a time when water levels were particularly low, the artwork was submerged from 1972 onward, visible only through photographic and film documentation. However, regional droughts thirty years later caused the lake to recede such that a salt-encrusted *Spiral Jetty* reappeared in 2002 for the first prolonged period in its history. Existing in a state of continual change, *Spiral Jetty* makes entropy visible and encourages visitors to repeatedly explore the work.

Smithson often suggested that by responding to the landscape rather than imposing itself upon it, *Spiral Jetty* is a site to actively walk on rather than a sculpture to behold. The act of traversing the artwork was enacted in Smithson's film *Spiral Jetty* (1970), which was made in the months following the completion of the sculpture. Alongside aerial footage of *Spiral Jetty* is a poetic sequence of the artist running along the spiral to rest at its innermost coil. In an interview with Kenneth Baker, Smithson explained how the visitor's experience of space shifts as one walks through the work: a "constriction or concentration exists within the inner coils . . . whereas on the outer edge you're kind of thrown out, you're aware of the horizons and how they echo through the *Jetty*."²

Immediately following its completion, *Spiral Jetty* was deemed a momentous achievement in specialized art magazines, the popular press, as well as among his peers. Today it continues to be recognized as an iconic artwork. Disappearing and reemerging, bound to site and circulated in documentation, the work exists in a state of permanent flux. "One apprehends what is around one's eyes and ears," wrote Smithson, "no matter how unstable or fugitive."³

notes

1. Robert Smithson, "Conversation in Salt Lake City" (1972), interview by Gianni Pettea, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 298.
2. Robert Smithson, "Talking with Robert Smithson," interview by Kenneth Baker, in *Robert Smithson: Spiral Jetty*, ed. Lynne Cooke, et al. (New York: Dia Art Foundation; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 158.
3. Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty" (1972), in Cooke, *Robert Smithson*, p. 9.

Robert Smithson was born in 1938 in Passaic, New Jersey. In 1953, as a high-school student, he won a scholarship to New York's Art Students League, where he studied in the evenings for the next two years, also taking classes at the Brooklyn Museum School in 1956. Smithson's first solo exhibition was in 1959, at the Artist's Gallery, New York. In 1964 he began to produce what he considered his first mature works of writing and sculpture. Major retrospectives of his work have been organized by the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York (1980), the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo (1999), and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2004). Recent solo exhibitions on his work include *Robert Smithson in Texas* at the Dallas Museum of Art (2013–14) and *Robert Smithson's New Jersey* at the Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey (2014). In 1973 Smithson died in a plane crash in Amarillo, Texas, while working on the earthwork *Amarillo Ramp*.

selected bibliography

Cooke, Lynne, Bettina Funcke, Karen Kelly, and Barbara Schröder, eds. *Robert Smithson: Spiral Jetty*. New York: Dia Art Foundation; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Smithson, Robert. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Edited by Jack Flam. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Smithson, Robert. *Spiral Jetty*. 1970. 16-mm film (color, sound), 32 minutes.

Tsai, Eugenie, ed. *Robert Smithson*. Exh. cat. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; Berkeley: University of California, 2004.

Spiral Jetty, 1970

Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Box Elder County, Utah
Black basalt rock, salt crystals, earth, and water
1,500 feet long and approximately 15 feet wide
Dia Art Foundation

Dia Art Foundation

Spiral Jetty entered the collection of Dia Art Foundation through the generosity of Nancy Holt and the Estate of Robert Smithson in 1999. Founded in 1974, Dia is committed to advancing, realizing, and preserving the vision of artists. Dia fulfills its mission by commissioning single artist projects, organizing exhibitions, realizing site-specific installations, and collecting in-depth the work of a focused group of artists of the 1960s and 1970s. For more information, visit www.diaart.org.

PARTNERSHIPS

Dia partners with Great Salt Lake Institute at Westminster College, Holt/Smithson Foundation, and the Utah Museum of Fine Arts at the University of Utah to further advocate for *Spiral Jetty*.

Great Salt Lake Institute, Westminster College

Great Salt Lake Institute advises on environmental issues, site maintenance, and accessibility pertaining to *Spiral Jetty*. For more information, visit www.greatsaltlake-institute.org.

Holt/Smithson Foundation

Holt/Smithson Foundation exists to continue the creative and investigative spirit of the artists Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson. For more information, visit www.holtsmithsonfoundation.org.

Utah Museum of Fine Arts, University of Utah

The Utah Museum of Fine Arts ensures that *Spiral Jetty's* cultural reputation is upheld locally and promotes the exceptional significance of the artwork within Utah. For more information, visit www.umfa.utah.edu.

AFFILIATION

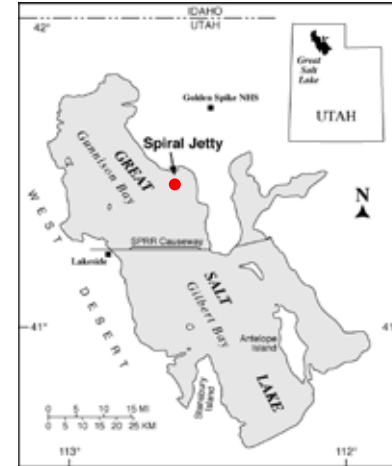
Department of Natural Resources

The Division of Forestry, Fire, and State Lands within the Department of Natural Resources oversees the lakebed where *Spiral Jetty* is located. For more information, visit www.naturalresources.utah.gov.

Directions to Spiral Jetty

Spiral Jetty is an approximate 2.5-hour drive from Salt Lake City.

1. From Salt Lake City, take I-15 north for 65 miles.
2. Take Exit 365. Turn right onto UT Route 13 (toward Corrine). Last gas station is in Corinne.
3. Continue west for 18 miles (UT Route 13 becomes Highway 83). Follow signs to the Golden Spike National Historic Site (GSNHS) Visitor Center.
4. Turn left onto Golden Spike Road and continue 7.7 miles to the GSNHS Visitor Center. Last bathrooms are at the visitor center. Cell reception ends.
5. From the visitor center, drive 5.6 miles west on the main gravel road (N Golden Spike Loop). At fork in road, continue left (west). There are signs directing you to *Spiral Jetty*.
6. Drive 1.4 miles. At fork in road, turn right (southwest).
7. Continue driving for approximately 9 miles. The road will curve north around Rozel Point.
8. The road ends at a cul-de-sac parking lot directly above *Spiral Jetty*.



Courtesy Utah Geological Survey

Tips for your visit

Dia is proud to be the owner and steward of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. We rely on your help to preserve the artwork for all of us now and for future generations.

Please leave *Spiral Jetty* and the natural environment exactly as you found it. Visitors must "leave no trace" at the site. Carry out any waste with you. Do not take existing rocks from the artwork, make fire pits, or trample vegetation.

Guests are advised to bring water, food, and waterproof boots, along with weather-appropriate clothing.

For general inquiries related to *Spiral Jetty*, contact spiraljetty@diaart.org.

Robert Smithson

Spiral Jetty, 1970



Spiral Jetty

Great Salt Lake at Rozel Point

Box Elder County Utah

Dia Art Foundation

535 West 22nd Street New York City

www.diaart.org