PREFACE

Although this book is about Robert Smithson, his work, and his working process, it is not a monographic study. I concentrate on a limited number of projects and concepts that I find crucial to understanding Smithson's work as a whole, important to the cultural history of the mid-1960s through the early 1970s, and relevant to present and future visual practice. Many of my choices are not the obvious or traditional ones. I discuss at great length Smithson's early sculpture of 1963 through 1967, which has been somewhat neglected by scholars, and consider only briefly the most well-known work Smithson produced, the *Spiral Jetty*. The *Spiral Jetty* and Smithson's other later, large-scale earthworks, however, are implied inevitabilities of many of the projects I do consider.

Some of my choices originated with a desire to take a fresh approach to my subject, but as my work progressed, I began to realize that the book had a second focus, history itself or, more specifically, the problem of how to address contemporary art in terms of history. History usually takes a back seat in monographs; it functions as a general framework or set of secondary circumstances that enhance the unfolding of the individual artist's life, work, and achievements. In her essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," Linda Nochlin identifies the monograph as one of art history's techniques for celebrating the manifestation of artistic "genius"—that "atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person of the 'Great Artist'"—at the expense of historical specificity.[1] In approaching my study of Robert Smithson, my primary concern was not to establish Smithson's importance as an artist or to present a chronological unfolding of his major works. Frankly, I felt comfortable assuming that Smithson's significance as a twentieth-century artist is well established and growing and that his work merits serious consideration. Although Smithson's significance has increased, however, the relation of his work and the work of his close contemporaries to their initial historical context has yet to be articulated or clearly understood. This may be due, in some part, to the way that much of this work continues to feel contemporary even as our relationship to its historical moment grows increasingly distant.

Several types of writing on Smithson's work have emerged over the past forty years, each with its own particular historical dimension. There are the interviews or essays undertaken during Smithson's lifetime or retrospectively by individuals who shared a common history with him.[2] Then, during the late 1970s, Rosalind Krauss and Craig Owens began to refer to Smithson, among others, when developing a theory of postmodernism.[3] This second type of writing provided the earliest descriptions of the theoretical significance of Smithson as a postmodern artist during a historical

moment in the critical reception of structuralist and poststructuralist theory in the United States. A third approach, which has been ongoing since the 1960s, situates Smithson's work within established art historical lineages, narratives, or categories or identifies him as a cofounder of one: "earthworks."[4] The latter two types of writing rarely articulate the historically specific theoretical or ideological frameworks that inform them except in terms of their own internal genealogies. For example, Craig Owens is often credited with first identifying Smithson's working strategies as post-modern, while the history of the reception of the critical theory necessary to this iden-tification and Smithson's situation within this history are not and have never been addressed. My work engages with each of these approaches by considering the his-torical dimensions—and limitations—to the arguments they construct. My aim is not to offer the definitive, historically correct Smithson but to propose a way to remain his-torically conscious when writing about contemporary artists and to reveal the benefits of doing so. I consider what it was possible to discuss in the 1960s and early 1970s, how these discussions and their objects and images looked, and what could be assumed and therefore remain unsaid. I have used Smithson as a test case for how to write such a history.

  The most important resource for this project has been Smithson's papers and library, which his widow, Nancy Holt, donated to the Archives of American Art in 1987. This archive is the object of my study, and Smithson's library has served as my principal bibliography.[5] Its contents, rather than the contents of the Smithson estate, the existing literature on him, or interviews with individuals who knew him, set the primary physical and historical parameters of what I have chosen to consider. There are two reasons for this decision, one simply practical and the other more complicated and methodologically significant. First, Smithson's archive provides an opportunity to con-duct extensive historical research on a postwar U.S. artist in a manner that is not yet possible for most of Smithson's contemporaries, since the majority of them are still living and without substantial public archives. The estates of those who are deceased have either imposed cumbersome restrictions on access to their papers or have not consolidated them. Although Smithson's archive as it exists at the Archives of Ameri-can Art is not complete either—such a situation would be impossible—it includes an enormous amount of material. Its large quantity of unpublished materials produced by Smithson renders all of the pre-1988 scholarly literature on the artist incomplete.[6]

  Working with an archive as vast as Smithson's forced me, almost immedi-ately, to consider how to use it. If my approach had been monographic, even initially, I would have focused on the "work proper" and all of its obvious source materials,

such as preparatory sketches, drafts, models, and cited texts, and disregarded the rest, more than half of the material in the archive. However, I was drawn to these less immediately qualifiable items—a large variety of magazines, tourist pamphlets, postcards, books, and records—and I chose to give equal consideration to them, almost from the start. It was this decision that ultimately set me on a different methodological course from others who have written about Smithson.[7] When considering Smithson's entire archive, its contents become less unique, less individually specific, since they include images, materials, and a record of activities that were a part of a large number of people's lives and, consequently, part of a particular period in history that extends well beyond the personal history of the artist or his work.[8] When considered as a part of this archive, Smithson's work remains embedded within a broad sampling of its historical context, and it can be more readily recognized as part of this context.

Early in my research, I began to notice morphological relationships among a number of things in the archive. My discovery of some of these relationships drove me to look more closely at items that were not initially identifiable as central to the "work." I discovered morphological relationships between things that were purely formal, others that were purely structural, and some that were a combination of both. For example, a number of diagrams and textual descriptions in books and other printed materials in Smithson's library share the same formal structure as a number of his own drawings and three-dimensional works (see, for example, figures 1.13, 2.5, and 2.9), even though they do not seem to possess any functional similarities. These and other morphological relationships that I discovered brought eclectic groups of authors, disciplines, concepts, and images together, seemed to confound many of the established narratives for Smithson's work and for the period as a whole, and offered points of reentry into a number of significant historical debates.

Comparative morphology and history are usually understood to be unrelated, if not diametrically opposed, analytical methods. The historian Carlo Ginzburg provided me with a healthy response to this problem: "Even if typological or formal connections were out of bounds for the historian (as Bloch has maintained), why not analyze them anyway, I asked myself?"[9] In several books and in numerous essays, Ginzburg uses morphological classifications "to reconstruct a series of phenomena which [he] would like to analyze historically."[10] As a result, his morphological networks sweep against history's hierarchical and chronological grain and restore apparently negligible phenomena to view. By formally linking such phenomena to other much more familiar or "relevant" historical material, he proposes a complex type of history

based on cultural circulation between types of knowledge—formal and informal, popular and elite—that is neither hierarchical nor holistic.

The questions Ginzburg asks and his morphological approach to archival materials helped me to recognize the conceptual underpinnings of my tendency to pursue morphological relationships among things in Smithson's archive. As the number and variety of items on my lists of these relationships grew, I began to be able to focus on their precise formal, structural, and conceptual points of overlap and finally to identify their shared historical significance. These networks of overlapping morphological relationships provide the historical and conceptual framework for most of my arguments in this book.

My decision to adopt a morphological approach was substantiated by my understanding of Robert Smithson's working process, as also revealed by his archive. Although Smithson finished high school, he was essentially an autodidact, and his learning and working processes take a somewhat unorthodox shape. Every item in his archive communicates something, either implicitly or explicitly, about this working process, and after close and extended observation, general patterns of use emerge. These patterns reveal Smithson's own morphological sensibility and, in turn, support my own decision to use morphology as an instrument to move beyond the usual art historical assumptions.[11] For instance, Smithson was a prolific writer, and his writings are compelling and complex, filled with references to a wide range of fiction writers, poets, film makers, philosophers, critical theorists, and other artists, whereas most of his drawings and other two- and three-dimensional works, although often equally compelling, can appear to be rather simple and didactic. This apparent disparity in complexity has led to the assumption, often unstated, that the drawings, photographs, and three-dimensional works illustrate Smithson's writings or, worse, are secondary supplements to them. The beauty and visual sophistication of Smithson's mid-1960s drawings and three-dimensional work actually made a number of critics uncomfortable when they saw them in the artist's first major museum retrospective in 1980 through 1982 because they had considered both to be "black and white" diagrams of his ideas.[12] This reaction came about partly because little of this work had been seen for ten years; it had been known only through reproductions, which were usually black and white. But it also reflects a general tendency to overlook the significance of the drawings and early three-dimensional work due to an unacknowledged critical bias in favor of the seemingly rarified literary and theoretical apparatus of the writings.[13] This emphasis on texts, regardless of the theoretical claims of individual authors, has undermined the profound intertextuality of the work.

The archive provides abundant proof that Smithson based his visual work on complex combinations of images, principles, and methods, compiled from the vast number of texts in his library, which he condensed into deceptively simple but conceptually complex designs. The archive also reveals that Smithson began some of his essays as straightforward narratives to which he then added increasing numbers of borrowed ideas or quotations until the narrative thread was buried under an elaborate collage of analogies. Conversely, he began with assemblies of borrowed ideas or quotations that he worked and reworked until they flowed together as his own words in the final, published versions.[14] Once these respective patterns of layering materials from numerous, eclectic sources become clear, any attempt to prioritize one medium over another, even if it is unintentional, seems fundamentally misguided. But, even more important, the logic operating behind Smithson's patterns of working emerges as well. This logic is based on morphological classifications. Smithson combines things and ideas to reveal fundamental formal and structural connections between reading and viewing and between categories of thought and images that remain invisible to established hierarchies of interpretation. Smithson intends for all aspects of his work—straightforward and oblique, popular and philosophical—to be appreciated and made sense of collectively in terms of their paradoxical formal and structural similarities. Smithson's ability to construct his work around such deep morphological connections was one of his most impressive skills. His archive has given me the tools to understand and appreciate this crucial aspect of his work and to recognize relationships between a number of projects that otherwise would not be immediately intelligible.

My pursuit of a morphological history reveals Smithson's own morphological strategies within their historical moment for the first time, even if some of my conclusions complement the arguments of others who have considered Smithson's working process. For example, Craig Owens's 1978 essay "Photography *en abyme*" contains a brief but insightful discussion of Smithson's photographic strategies.[15] Owens's general aim is to problematize photography's assumed relation to the "real" by defining photography in terms of its own self-referential structure, what he calls *en abyme,* a literary construct that refers to a narrative's internal folding, mirroring, duplication, and reduplication of its images. He illustrates this set of structural terms through some carefully chosen examples, and his argument depends heavily on them as proof. He doesn't connect the photographers either to his interpretations of their images or to the theoretical texts he uses to make those interpretations until the very end of the essay, when he discusses the work of Smithson. And Smithson, unlike

the other photographers whom Owens discusses, is allowed to speak because he does so in a language that is compatible with other individuals Owens cites: Roland Barthes, Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jacques Derrida. The implication is that Smithson's working practice is informed by structuralist and poststructuralist thought.

I could use Smithson's archive to supplement Owens's implicit claim by identifying which authors and which texts Smithson was reading, based on what books and magazines he owned and what was available in English at the time, and thus reconstructing the historical limits and personal idiosyncrasies of his theoretical knowledge.[16] But whereas Owens's real interest is in using specific aspects of Smithson's work to construct a larger theoretical argument about photography, I am interested in reconstructing broader aspects of the historical and conceptual field in the United States during the late 1960s, of which structuralist theory was only a part, to reveal how Smithson, and by extension, a number of his contemporaries, worked within this field to produce counterculture. Structuralism and poststructuralism in various guises made up a part of this field, but they were not synonymous with it. Nor were they or their art historical companions, modernism and postmodernism, the key terms of Smithson's practice. In fact, the way in which Smithson and his contemporaries understood and thought about structure—and modernism—was fundamentally different from the way Owens understood it or contemporary art historians in general understand it today. Looking at the archive as a whole, rather than just scanning it for source material that I could immediately tie to Smithson or to established art historical narratives or theoretical constructs, has enabled me to recognize these differences and theory's historical dimension. In doing so, I am able to acknowledge the shared theoretical conditions that permit Smithson, Owens, and me to speak about structure, reduplication, and mirroring, but I can at the same time remain aware of the differences in our working methods, based on our historical relation to the theories, including structuralism and poststructuralism, that inform us.[17]

What follows is my reconstruction of four key trajectories of Smithson's working process. Each of these trajectories embodies a historically specific set of conditions and debates, which I articulate through a set of morphological relationships discovered in Smithson's archive. The year 1966 provides a shared point of temporal reference for three of the four by marking the beginning, middle, or end point for a set of overlapping discussions, which span a six-year period from 1963 to 1969. Although brief in terms of chronological time, these years were extremely productive for Smithson. He developed most of his basic working principles and formats during the first

three years of this period. All of these principles and formats consist of overlapping visual and conceptual elements, modified by a variety of adjectives and combined in a number of different relationships to each other but ultimately drawn from a relatively stable set. Thus none of the principles and formats based on this set of elements can be considered in isolation or in terms of a strictly progressive model. They are all willfully entangled. Smithson moves round and round them until they accrue extremely dense meanings. Thus, in each section of the book, I also move round and round these principles and formats to build an appropriate analysis.

In late 1969 and early 1970, Dennis Wheeler conducted a series of lengthy interviews with Smithson.[18] As the two men talked, they sifted through a significant amount of diverse materials that became part of Smithson's archive, and Smithson produced the drawing *A Surd View for an Afternoon* (see figure 3.37). Their conversations and the drawing divulge much more than information about Smithson's work and ideas; they provide detailed diagrams of his thought at a particular moment in time, which became the basis for my analysis of some of Smithson's late works in the fourth chapter of the book.

The four trajectories I choose to articulate—and Smithson's work in general—also share a physical and conceptual reference point, the 1965 work *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (see figure 1.24). This work is emblematic of Smithson's desire to reveal what I call "enantiomorphic situations."[19] "Enantiomorphic" describes a mirror-image relationship between things that are alike in all other respects, the most common example being the relationship between the right and left hands. The enantiomorphs in Smithson's *Enantiomorphic Chambers* consist of two mirrored chambers. When observers stand in front of these paired chambers, their gaze is not met by the expected reflections because the internal exchange of reflections and counter-reflections generated by the enantiomorphically configured mirrors cancels out the central, illusionistic plane of focus by directing the focal point of each eye outward, in the opposite direction from the other eye. Such an experience creates a blind spot at the center of vision. Enantiomorphic construction literally, and by extension, metaphorically, allows Smithson to reveal the blind spots or enantiomorphic situations embedded within a number of historically contemporary models of perception. These models are usually binary in structure, but their oppositional terms are really just mirror images of one another—enantiomorphs—with a shared blind spot, a set of hidden assumptions. In each chapter of my book, I focus on the enantiomorphic situations Smithson seeks to expose and dismantle in descriptions of the perception of abstraction, the metropolis, space and time travel, nature, and psychological and

sexual disorders. These situations are also the points at which his work most clearly participates in historically specific debates.

I begin my introduction and each of the four chapters of the book with an extended analysis of an individual project or a limited group of works. This strategy might try the reader's patience, but clearing my interpretative space of as many established art historical narratives as possible allows my arguments to emerge from looking at the work and reveals the way Smithson considered and then directed the experience of the work through sketches, photography, and exhibition design. Little of the published writing on Smithson interacts with the work in this way, and many of the works I focus on have been paid scant attention in the existing literature. From this analysis, I move to one or more contextual historical moments that I elicit from morphological relationships suggested both by the archive and by Smithson's own morphological excursions. The final section of each chapter brings together the preceding visual and historical arguments to focus on another aspect of Smithson's work and the enantiomorphic situation it embodies.

Rather than seeking to be comprehensive either in terms of addressing Smithson's work or the historical moment it was a part of, my intention is to propose through my working method a broader spectrum of possibilities for where and how to look when writing a history of contemporary art. My goal throughout has been to understand Smithson's working method, its historical terms or limits, and its potential to be useful again, under different historical conditions and in different hands.