

Copying a Work by Robert Smithson or: Another
Experience With the Presence of Artworks

"A camera is a portable tomb"¹⁾, wrote Smithson in 1969 during a trip through the Mexican peninsula Yucatan, on which he placed twelve mirrors he had brought from New York to nine different sites along his way. Later he documented these mirror displacements in a poetic photo essay, but in this transposition the mirrors were gone blind, the text describing the experiences had become an obituary. About the risk involved in authentic experiences and its non-communicability knew Smithson: "There is different experience before the physical abyss than before the mapped revision."²⁾

The works of Robert Smithson aimed at a notion that an acceptance of entropy would replace a current relationship to nature which is characterized by fear, revenge and the phantasmagory of control. He understood that the artist could not incorporate any longer his experiences into an aesthetic form which then could be enjoyed without any risk and at the same time without any experience by the critic and art lover. This insight resulted in his 'Nonsites' and the later works which belonged only in a classificatory way to a tendency called 'land art'.

The artist does not want to be the hero any longer that the audience yearns to adore and at the same time the form of his art, though personal as a result of an aesthetically exploring experience, is not any longer individual in a conventional way. It makes no sense to rebuild a Nonsite, but it seems to us a possibility

1) in: Nancy Holt (Ed.), The Writings of Robert Smithson, New York 1979, S.95

2) Ibid., S.84

to reconstruct one of his mirror objects thus making present as well a tricky fascination and a suspension of habitual expectations. We, who are responsible for the reconstruction in this exhibition, had done this before to translate the mute riddle of photographic reproductions and explanatory texts into a speaking one. Not through the original material and mirrors but with the same mirror constellation and similar in size and shape we try to make present the attraction and the lure.

We don't want to offend against a copyright of the original artwork with a pirated edition. But nevertheless we think that it is an advantage of many works by Robert Smithson, that they object to the fetishism as a modern cult to which other artworks respond more easily. The name of the author can't be any longer the coat of the priest which obscures the works and covers the eye of the spectator.

About the artist: Robert Smithson (1938-1973) was a crucial figure in the American art world in a period in which the diversification of styles such as Minimal Art, Land Art and Conceptual Art took place in the works of Smithson and his friends Eva Hesse, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Michael Heizer, Claes Oldenburg and others accompanied by the artists' and critics' discussions in Artforum and Arts Magazine. He was supported by the Virginia Dwan Gallery and later by the John Weber Gallery for whom the question how to sell his works was not a primary concern. Smithson's development started with an examination of the Abstract Expressionism in the fifties, then he moved from Sci-Fi parodies to Crystalline Structures, Nonsites, Mirror Objects and Mirror Displacements, Rundowns of Asphalt and Cement to Landscape Sculptures, Land Reclamation and their filmic translations in the early seventies.