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ONLINE ADDENDUM SIX

“Rising Into Ruin”

ALAN MICHELSON, ROBERT SMITHSON, AND
THE (POST) MODERN LANDSCAPE

Kate Morris

In the essay that follows, I argue that Robert Smithson, a canonical American “earthworks” artist, and Alan Michelson, a contemporary Native American video and installation artist, share a preoccupation with states of ruin. The mutual interest of these two artists in systems or structures in decline unites them across the span of decades, as well as across the very divide between modernism and postmodernism. Nevertheless, I argue that the works of Smithson and Michelson differ in important ways that are reflective of their cultural perspectives: namely, Smithson regarded ruin as an end state, while Michelson posits it as a condition that portends other states to follow. The argument hinges on the distinction of ruin as a stage in a cycle rather than as a point in a purely linear progression. In this respect, my thinking is heavily indebted to Dr. Esther Pasztory, whose teaching and scholarship on the arts of the Americas underscores the fundamental concept of cyclical time in indigenous worldview. As a student in Dr. Pasztory’s classes at Columbia, I was taught to consider the ramifications of the Aztec creation myth—which describes repeating cycles of creation and destruction—on Aztec artistic expression, and I was encouraged to extrapolate those ideas to my own study of Native American art. At the time this seemed to me a stimulating but primarily intellectual exercise: however, in recent years, the concept of cyclical time has surfaced quite strongly in Native American art studies. For example, a recent essay concerning cataclysm and prophecy by Hopi artist Victor Masayesva, Jr., emphasizes the continuities between Aztec and ancient Southwestern cultural histories. Masayesva declares that, “Mesoamerican roots are essential to understanding our concept of the North American continent as a sanctuary. For we, as Hopi, are part of this long sequence of emergences,

destructions, and migrations” (Masayeva 2011, 79). What follows, then, is a rumination on ruin, not as an end, but as a beginning.

On a Saturday in September 1967, Robert Smithson¹ boarded the Number 30 bus at Port Authority in New York City and headed west to Passaic, New Jersey. He carried with him a copy of that morning’s *New York Times*, a paperback book, entitled *Earthworks*, by Brian Aldiss, and a Kodak Instamatic camera. Over the course of the next few hours, Smithson wandered along the banks of the Passaic River, photographing various structures: rusting bridges, drainage pipes, empty parking lots, and an abandoned children’s playground. The details of Smithson’s journey are duly recorded in the artist’s mock travelogue, “The Monuments of Passaic,” published in the December 1967 issue of *Artforum* magazine (fig. 1).² Today the essay is important to us not only because it contains the amusing anecdote that the author was disappointed to find that his new paperback, *Earthworks*, was about soil shortages rather than sculpture, but also because the article documents Smithson’s growing interest in both site-specific monuments and the concept of time. For Smithson, a walk along the Passaic River brought him into contact with both the ruins of an industrialized past and of what he declared an equally “ruined” future.



Fig. 1. Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (1967), photographic illustrations.

More than thirty years after Robert Smithson’s foray into New Jersey, another American artist, Alan Michelson,³ journeyed up a severely polluted waterway in metropolitan New York. This time, the artist took along a video camera as he traveled by boat up an estuary of the East River. Michelson, who is of Mohawk descent, recorded his journey in a twenty-minute digital video entitled *Mespat* (2001),⁴ now in the permanent collection of the National Museum of the American Indian (fig. 2). In the video, which has no narration and no ambient sound, an endless succession of rusting barges, metal scrap yards, and chemical storage tanks glide past the camera lens. Michelson’s vision, like Smithson’s, is dystopic; the scarred and degraded environment of *Mespat* is the antithesis of the pastoral and utopian ideals that once attached to images of rivers in the Hudson Valley. In *Mespat*, as in “The Monuments of Passaic,” the focus is again on ruin, documenting the decline of both structures and ecosystems. If, in effect, Michelson’s digital video can be considered an animated corollary to Smithson’s seminal essay, the two works taken together attest to the centrality of dystopic vision, in both American modernism and postmodernism.



Fig. 2. Alan Michelson, *Mespat* (2001), installation view and video stills. Digital video, 19:24 minutes, soundtrack by Michael J. Schumacher. Projection screen, turkey feathers, monofilament, steel, 132 x 168 x 12 inches.

Harvard art historian Jennifer Roberts has characterized “The Monuments of Passaic” as an investigation into “the decay of Passaic’s urban infrastructure” (Roberts 2004, 66). The essay is essentially a narrated tour of the artist’s wanderings among various man-made objects that he aggrandized with the term “monuments.” Some were worthy of the term, such as the rusted steel railroad bridge that is the first structure to be addressed in the essay. Smithson paused to photograph the span, and his snapshot is illustrated in the article with the caption, “The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks.” The accompanying text reads: “The steel road that passed over the water was...held up by a heavy set of beams, while above, a ramshackle network hung in the air. A rusty sign glared in the sharp atmosphere, making it hard to read. A date flashed in the sunshine...1899...No...1896...maybe” (Smithson 1979 [1967], 53). Next come the “minor monuments” such as concrete abutments, bulldozers, and pumping derricks

employed in the construction of a new highway. Smithson was witnessing the future, the genesis of New Jersey Route 21, but even as he was presented with the latest technology in road building, he nevertheless saw into the past: “Since it was Saturday,” he observed, “many machines were not working, and this caused them to resemble prehistoric creatures trapped in the mud, or, better, extinct machines—mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their skin” (Smithson 1979 [1967], 53). In his eyes, the houses, shopping malls, and parking lots of suburbia fared no better—these he deemed “ruins in reverse” (Smithson 1979 [1967], 54), monuments of modernity doomed to obsolescence before they were even built. The final monument in “The Monuments of Passaic” is a children’s sandbox in a deserted playground. It is a poignant scene, and Smithson uses it to move past mere melancholia into the realm of the cataclysmic. He writes that the box represented “the sullen dissolution of entire continents, the drying up of oceans—no longer were there green forests and high mountains—all that existed were millions of grains of sand, a vast deposit of bones and stones pulverized into dust.” The sandbox doubled, Smithson writes, “as an open grave—a grave that children cheerfully play in” (Smithson 1979 [1967], 56).

It seems an understatement to call Smithson’s vision dystopic, yet one contemporary critic discerned a glimmer of optimism in it. Craig Owens, writing on Smithson just after the artist’s untimely death in 1973, described his output as “entropy made visible” (Owens 1979, 120),⁵ an affirmation of a universal law, albeit one that describes the reduction of all systems to their least complex state.⁶ Owens’ interpretation was grounded in his analysis of Smithson’s writings, his “site/non-site” installations, and sculptural projects such as *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), and *Spiral Jetty* (1970). As important as Owens’ critical interpretation of Smithson’s work has been in shaping our current understanding of late modernism, it is an equally important marker for postmodern art criticism. It was Owens who wrote as early as 1979 that Smithson’s work was a fundamentally postmodern project: a poststructuralist attack on language and narrative, a deconstruction of hierarchy, and an emptying out of the center (in this case New York City) through engagement with the peripheries.⁷

A postmodern condition that Owens failed to locate in Smithson’s work is an attack on the idea of progress itself, though it seems clear in retrospect that Smithson’s careful documentation of the decline of industrial infrastructures was exactly that. Moreover, it is this aspect of Smithson’s practice that resonates strongly in Michelson’s work, where the notion of progress is conflated with settler colonialism, and thus its dissolution can be

regarded as not only a postmodern but distinctly postcolonial condition. As a Native American, Michelson has a vested interest in this paradigm shift; as an artist who studied landscape painting at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and at Columbia University, he has a history of personal engagement with the systems of visual representation that are complicit in the processes of both colonialism and postcolonialism.⁸

When Michelson journeyed up the East River in 2001, his intent was to produce a “contemporary version of a nineteenth-century moving panorama,” a visual format that has its roots in the romantic landscape tradition.⁹ Rather than reproducing a picturesque scene, Michelson intended to capture a sequence of images of Riker’s Island prison complex, one of New York’s more overt symbols of institutional power. When his boat circled Riker’s, however, Michelson was disappointed with the view. He recalls that “the island itself was smaller than imagined, and from our distance the jail complex was clinical and benign-looking, more like a college campus than a notorious penal colony.”¹⁰ Michelson abandoned this subject in favor of one of greater visual interest: the blighted landscape of Newtown Creek, the three and a half mile estuary that snakes between the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn.

Newtown Creek represented a change in direction for Michelson, but it was hardly *terra incognita* for him. Michelson is a voracious researcher, and when he moved to New York in the mid-1980s, he submerged himself in the subterranean histories of its native peoples and environment. He knew, for example, that the estuary was severely polluted (so much so that it is now a Superfund site), and he was aware of the area’s long history as a site of cultural contact and conflict. It was along Newtown Creek, which the Lenape Indians knew as “Mespat”— “bad water place”—that indigenous peoples and European settlers first cohabitated, and from which Native peoples were subsequently displaced. For Michelson, then, Newtown Creek was a site somewhat similar to Riker’s Island in that it symbolized the darker side of civil society. The difference is that the symbolism of Newtown Creek is much more veiled, and its history is little known to the audiences who encounter the images in *Mespat*.

The most immediate impression that *Mespat* makes is in its unrelenting visual recital of industrial waste: for twenty minutes piles of broken concrete and scrap metal, sewage pipes, fuel tanks, rusting barges, derelict cars, and deteriorating highway supports pass mutely across the screen. The pace is mesmerizing, steady, and without punctuation, an effect underscored by the composed soundtrack of low gurgling and thrumming noises

that segue into eerie electronic tones. Writing for *Sculpture Magazine* in 2007, Deborah Everett described *Mespat* as “seductively calm,” having “a drifting, somnambulant quality,” and the “uneasy familiarity of a recurring bad dream” (Everett 2007, 32). Michelson himself has likened the work to “a contemporary *Heart of Darkness*” (Michelson in McMaster 2005, 44),¹¹ referring to that work’s nightmarish qualities as well as to its metaphoric use of the journey upriver as a search for origins. In an interesting corollary to Smithson’s description of “mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their skin,” *Mespat* includes a stunning sequence in which the machines are evidently not extinct: two enormous metal-clawed cranes graze on scrap metal heaps along the banks of the river.

What remains obscured in *Mespat* is the Native history that drew Michelson to Newtown Creek in the first place; the video can do nothing more than register the absence of Lenape people and culture in their traditional homeland. In preparing to exhibit *Mespat* in 2006, Michelson contrived an ingenious way to re-inscribe the Native presence: he projected the video onto an eleven-by-fourteen foot screen of white turkey feathers. The feathers represent “Indian-ness” in a generic way, but they also reference traditional Lenape garments.



Fig. 3. Alan Michelson, *Earth's Eye* (1990), installation view and detail. Forty cast concrete markers, Collect Pond Park, New York City.

Michelson's commitment to revealing what has been forgotten or hidden from view reaches back to his earliest site-specific installations in New York City. For example, *Earth's Eye* (1990) employed cast-concrete markers to trace the contours of the now-extinct ecosystem of Collect Pond, the freshwater source that sustained Manhattan residents until it became so hopelessly polluted in the eighteenth century that it had to be back-filled (fig. 3). Today only a remnant of the water source still flows, powering the cooling system of the Manhattan Criminal Courts building. To bring this submerged history to light, Michelson cast each concrete marker with the impression of a plant or animal form that was "native" to the vanished habitat. The environmentalist ethic that underscores this work is made all the more evident in the title, which is taken from the writings of America's first conservationist, Henry David Thoreau. In *Walden* (1854), Thoreau wrote: "A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is Earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature" (Thoreau 1854).¹²

Descending further into New York's submerged cultural histories, Michelson created a series of installations in 1993 to mark the sites of Manhattan cemeteries that have been obscured by development. *Cult of Memory* (1993), which was exhibited at New York University's Grey Art Gallery on Washington Square, employed dozens of limp muslin forms to evoke the burial shrouds of thousands of victims of yellow fever, most of them poor, who lie buried in unmarked graves beneath the park. For *Permanent Title* (1993), Michelson created charcoal rubbings of the buildings and sidewalks above lost burial grounds and preserved the images on muslin "shroud" bags coated in wax. The bags were displayed at various sites, again directing attention to what lies beneath the surface.¹³



Fig. 4. Robert Smithson, *A Non-Site: Franklin, New Jersey* (1968), installation view. Painted wooden bins, limestone, gelatin-silver prints and typescript on paper with graphite and transfer letters mounted on mat board, 16 x 82 x 103 inches.

Noting that Michelson’s work from this period “became focused on intersections of the temporal and the spatial—and of ways of bringing previous states of a locale into the here and now,” Everett referred to *Earth’s Eye*, *Cult of Memory*, and *Permanent Title* as “non-sites,” cleverly evoking Smithson’s own New York City gallery installations of the late 1960s. Smithson defined his non-sites—installations of dirt and rocks brought into Manhattan from the pine barrens of New Jersey—as referents to remote places (fig. 4). He explained in an interview that “the site, in a sense, is the physical, raw reality—the earth or the ground,” whereas the non-site, in the gallery, is but an “abstraction” (Smithson 1979 [1970], 160). His purpose was to employ physical material to evoke a place, but also to affirm its absence, to attest to its existence somewhere else. The relationship of Smithson’s non-site installations to “The Monuments of Passaic” is tenuous, though his partner Nancy Holt recalled that the non-sites emerged out of a “new consciousness of the post-industrial terrain” that Smithson garnered in his walks through New Jersey’s decaying urban areas (Holt 1979, 5). By transporting materials from the ruined outliers (the site) into the urban core of New York City (the non-site), Smithson seems to have strengthened the dialectic of center and periphery, yet, as Owens has argued, the non-site is relegated to being “a vacant reflection of the site” (Owens 1979, 122).¹⁴

Installed on Centre Street in Manhattan, *Earth's Eye* does seem to qualify as a non-site: it is a work that hinges on the relationship between presence and absence. *Earth's Eye* lacks any reference to the periphery, however; the installation materializes in the exact location of the “site” to which it refers, namely the destroyed ecosystem of Collect Pond. Thus, while Smithson’s dislocations are resolutely spatial, Michelson’s are temporal. Time intervenes between the fact and the referent in Michelson’s work, and in its passing it leaves knowledge behind, fading into metaphoric distance.¹⁵

A similar temporal shift takes place in *Mespat*, a work that is even more difficult to characterize as a non-site. The work focuses on New York’s outer boroughs, yet there is no “material” to bring into the center other than the images themselves. Further, the work is neither abstract, nor indirectly referential—the video is an unmediated record of a contemporary place. Nevertheless, there is something about *Mespat* that feels haunted, or haunting, as if the past still bleeds through in the blighted landscape of Newtown Creek. Smithson confronted the same situation in New Jersey, writing that he could no longer discern the past from the present—even the future was destined to be plagued by loss. As he put it, “that landscape was no landscape, but a...kind of self-destroying postcard world of failed immortality.” Passaic was riddled with holes, “monumental vacancies that define...the memory traces of an abandoned set of futures” (Smithson 1979 [1967], 54–55). Beneath the surface of Smithson’s florid prose lay the certainty of entropy, a belief in the inevitability of ruin so profound that Smithson asserted that “buildings don’t *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built” (Smithson’s italics; Smithson 1979 [1967], 54). It is not clear whether Michelson agrees that a progression towards loss, failure, and abandonment is inevitable, though his New York installations of the 1990s document a litany of such events and suggest that history is in fact destined to repeat itself.

In the years between filming and exhibiting *Mespat*, Michelson continued to contemplate ruin, or the potential for it, and his radius of exploration on the peripheries of New York City grew wider. In 2003, Michelson trained his video camera on Indian Point, a nuclear power plant located on the banks of the Hudson River forty miles north of New York City. The thirty-one minute digital video he produced there, *Twilight, Indian Point*, records the sun setting in real time, filmed from a stationary position that foregrounds the broad, placid surface of the river (fig. 5). In the background three nuclear reactors appear dwarfed beneath a radiant purple and orange sky. As in *Mespat*, the slow pace of the river’s current and the subtle changes in the light are mesmerizing; in both

works the seduction of the images contests the reality of the impact of industrialization. A significant difference between *Mespat* and *Twilight, Indian Point* is the degree of potential for ruin. As a superfund site, Newtown Creek is in the process of being restored to health as an ecosystem; it is rising from its nadir of devastation. Indian Point, on the other hand, is still considered one of the most dangerous nuclear plants in the nation; it is not simply a site of past violations, but it portends a (possibly) devastating future. The sheer beauty of the imagery in *Twilight, Indian Point* obscures this potentiality, but only for a time; in the closing moments of the video, the viewer is left to contemplate the enveloping darkness.

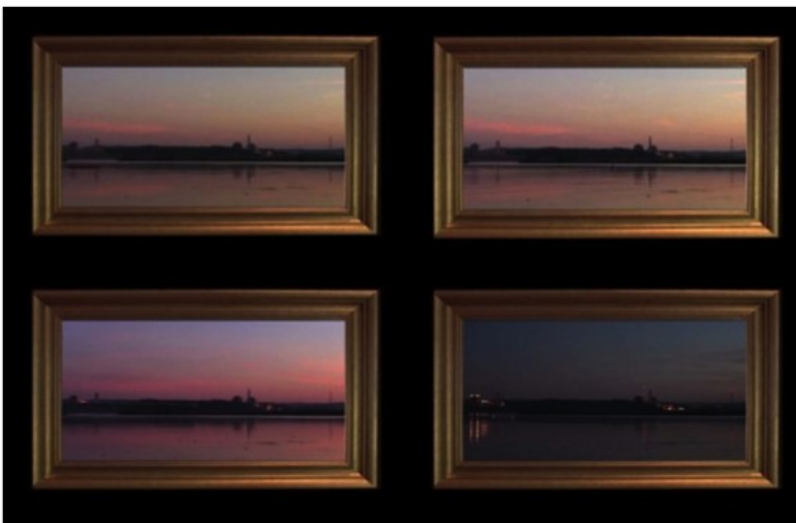


Fig. 5. Alan Michelson, *Twilight, Indian Point* (2003), four stills of single projection. Digital video, gilded frame, 56 x 71 inches.

The tension between tranquility and threat that is conveyed in *Twilight, Indian Point* attests to Michelson's success in evoking the concept of the sublime—the philosophical notion that landscapes inspire intense emotion precisely when and where beauty collides with horror. The concept was of great interest to Smithson, too,¹⁶ yet Michelson's decision to exhibit his video of Indian Point in an ornate gilded frame indicates that he is reaching further back into the origins of the sublime, to the mid-nineteenth-century Romantic landscape tradition. This association was made even more explicit in Michelson's installation at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto in 2007, in which the artist repeated the technique of framing his digital projections. *Of Light After Darkness* is

comprised of three video “canvases,” each featuring a thirty-one minute video shot at sunset at a location integral to the history of colonialism and industrialization in Ontario (fig. 6). The first work in the series pictures Fort York, a military garrison erected at Toronto by the British in 1793 that is now a National Historic Site. The second video captures images of the Stelco Steel Mill belching smoke into the skies over Hamilton Bay, and the third is of wind turbines located at Port Burwell on Lake Erie. In framing these scenes—perhaps even these processes—in the guise of nineteenth-century landscape paintings, Michelson engages directly with the legacy of landscape representation and its complicity in colonialism.



Fig. 6. Alan Michelson, *Of Light After Darkness* (2007), installation view. Three digital videos, gilded frames, 31 minutes.

Perhaps the location of Indian Point on the Hudson River inspired Michelson to invoke the landscape tradition of the Hudson River School of painting in particular; *Of Light After Darkness* is explicitly modeled after the work of one of its preeminent members, Thomas Cole (1801-1848). Cole was known not only for his scenic views of the Catskills, the Connecticut River Valley, and the Hudson River, but also for allegorical series such as *The Course of Empire* (1832-1836) and *The Voyage of Life* (1842).



Fig. 7. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire* (1833-1836). Five panels, oil on canvas. Four panels 39.5 x 63.5 inches; center panel 51 x 76 inches.

It is *The Course of Empire* that captured Michelson’s imagination and inspired him to create *Of Light After Darkness* as a postmodern rejoinder to the romantic archetype (fig. 7). Cole’s series consisted of five separate majestic landscape compositions, each intended to portray a sequential stage in the cycle of human civilization. The empire is fictitious; it progresses from a vaguely American *Savage State* (peopled by tiny Indian hunters “attired in skins,” pursuing their prey through the wilderness) through an *Arcadian State*, to more explicitly Romanized versions of *Consummation of Empire*, and *Destruction of Empire* (Cole 1836). The series ends in a final state of *Desolation*. According to the authors of *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*, Cole’s series reflected his growing concern with Jacksonian-era notions of progress, unfettered growth, and westward expansion: “He believed that no society, however powerful, could endure forever. Civilizations, like individuals, begin in youth and glory and but conclude in disillusionment and death. For Cole’s American viewers, the issue was not whether his vision was correct, but whether it applied to *them*. Was the doom foretold in *The Course of Empire*—the passage from greatness to destruction—a record of past civilizations or a prophecy about the future of the United States itself?” (Miller, et al. 2008, 257.)

Time passes in the course of Cole’s series, the sun rises and sets, and the seasons change; however, all the events take place in a single location, and the environment is

irrevocably scarred in the process. The three panels of *Of Light After Darkness* compress this cycle into fewer “moments” and distribute the impact of empire building over three separate landscapes, but they also process sequentially. According to Michelson’s website, “Each site represents a different environmental era—past, present, future—in the colonization and development of the area.” Like Cole, Michelson assigned each panel a different title—*Gloom of Approaching Night*; *Dying Day*; and *Glorious Light of the Setting Sun*—all aptly chosen for scenes filmed at sunset. Michelson’s titles are culled from the writings of photographer Edward S. Curtis (1868–1952), the master perpetrator of the trope of the “vanishing Indian.”¹⁷



Fig. 8. Alan Michelson, *Shattemuc* (2009), video stills. Digital video, 31 minutes, soundtrack by Laura Ortman.

All of these themes that emerged in Michelson’s video works of 2001–2007—an engagement with nineteenth-century tropes of representation and the legacies of colonialism; the focus on environments irrevocably altered by industrialization; the

narrative structure of past-present-future—culminate in a final video project, *Shattemuc*, of 2009 (fig. 8). Commissioned for the Skidmore College Tang Museum of Art exhibition “Lives of the Hudson,” *Shattemuc* was shot from the perspective of a boat moving up the Hudson at night, illuminating the shoreline with a marine searchlight. In this footage, scenes of a serene woodland environment drift slowly by the lens, interrupted intermittently by channel markers that loom into view in the foreground and then are left behind as the boat continues upriver. Eventually, the landscape changes, segueing into scenes of an urban and industrialized shoreline marred by factories, quarries, and loading docks, all eerily quiet in the middle of the night.

Michelson’s exhibition notes on *Shattemuc* elaborate on the significance of the two separate environments that are featured in the piece: the earlier segment is “nature-dominated” and focuses on the “wooded banks of Hook Mountain...which for eons sheltered Indian tribes and in 1609 was the site of a bloody battle between Henry Hudson’s crew and the local Indians over a pillow and shirts.” The second sequence “depicts the largely industrial shoreline of Haverstraw, the site of major mining and brick plants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the present site of rock quarries, a gypsum plant, and a coal-burning power plant.”¹⁸ Both shorelines are documented in the present, but they become symbolic of different historic eras, and the sequence progresses much as Cole’s *The Course of Empire* does—from a “savage” state to an industrialized state. Whether the final frames of *Shattemuc*, in which the searchlight pans away from the shoreline to illuminate the surface of the river itself, represent “desolation” or a more hopeful future, remains to be seen.

For modern viewers, Michelson’s move to filming at night with the aid of a marine searchlight brings to mind a decidedly contemporary form of vision: surveillance. *Shattemuc* was filmed from the deck of a de-commissioned police launch; however, the introduction of the spotlight here is a direct reference to earlier traditions of viewing along the Hudson, many of which were documented in the “Lives of the Hudson” exhibition. From the turn of the century to World War II, steamer tours of the Hudson River were extremely popular. During the day, passengers lounged on the decks, enjoying views of Bear Mountain and the Palisades, but at night, searchlights mounted on the bridge of the ship directed their attention to monuments along the shore. What shifted with the transition from day to night tours was the focus on what might be considered scenic. Night tours gravitated away from the picturesque landscape scenery of the Hudson River School, and focused instead on the “monuments” of civilization: the Statue

of Liberty, Grant's Tomb, and palatial houses such as the Vanderbilt Mansion at Hyde Park. These are the kinds of constructions that seem worthy of the term "monuments"—thus they are the antithesis of what Smithson deemed the "monuments" of Passaic, and of those that Michelson presents in *Shattemuc*.

For Smithson, the monuments of Passaic were "anti-monuments": he considered constructions such as a highway buttress and a derelict drinking fountain "the opposite of the romantic ruin" because they were "out of date" yet bore no history and could point only to a "false future" (Smithson 1967, 54-55).¹⁹ Smithson's "Tour" had no highlights to offer, it repudiated the anticipatory tone of romantic travel guides in favor of a litany of the commonplace. Michelson's monuments of the industrial infrastructure—piers and loading docks, channel markers, rusted barges, factories and power plants—are equally banal.

In this respect—as a slow, ponderous contemplation of the ordinary rather than the extraordinary—Michelson's work reveals its strongest affinity to Smithson's and to other works of the late 1960s that are accused of "endlessly reporting the same nothingness" (Foster, et al. 2011, 551). In Michelson's hands, banality is powerful: the panoramas of ruin we confront in both *Mespat* and *Shattemuc* are devastating precisely because of their ubiquity; these are scenes we know to be repeated in environments throughout the world. *Mespat* and *Shattemuc* differ from one another, however, in their temporal ethos: only the former can be considered "endless."

The importance of this distinction is demonstrated in a quotation from critic Rosalind Krauss's description of Richard Serra's 1968 film *Hand Catching Lead*—a film in which a hand repeatedly tries, and fails, to catch a falling object. Krauss' words might as easily have been penned about *Mespat* as they were about the art of the 1960s in general. She writes of "the serial nature of the film, its 'one thing after another'...in which an action is denied its climax." Serra's work "does not drive toward a termination, since there is no terminus, no proper destination, so to speak. So, while [it] suggests temporality, it is a temporality that has nothing to do with narrative time, with something with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is not a time within which something develops, grows, progresses, achieves. It is a time during which the action simply acts, and acts, and acts" (Krauss 1986, 101). Whether eight hours long—Andy Warhol's stationary shot of the Empire State Building (*Empire*, 1964)—or three minutes long (Serra's *Hand Catching Lead*), the point is that these films never reach a climax; theoretically, they never actually

end. Such works represented what Pamela Lee has recently identified as a 1960s version of Hegel's "bad infinity" (Lee 2004, 276).

The exception to this rule of 1960s art lies in Smithson's work. As noted at the beginning of this essay, the defining concept for Smithson was entropy, not infinity. Entropy is sometimes defined as the degree of disorder or randomness in a system, but in Smithson's view, the most compelling aspect of the second law of thermodynamics is the assurance that all systems *progress* towards a state of randomness. Entropy tells us that nothing can stay in suspension forever; dissolution is inevitable. In "The Monuments of Passaic" Smithson's entropic vision may come across as temporally muddled, but phrases like "rising into ruin," "limited eternity," and "a lower stage of futurity" obfuscate what is actually a rather linear progression.

Just as Owens discerned an aspect of hopefulness in this narrative of decay, Michelson too seems to have been inspired by it. Sympathetic as he is to Smithson's dystopic vision, Michelson has also been drawn, paradoxically, to the latent hopefulness of "entropy made visible." In both *Mespat* and *Shattemuc* he focuses on the crumbling infrastructure of industrialization, and by association, of colonialism itself. Recall that in Cole's model, *The Course of Empire*, the final state is "Desolation"—picturing the empire in ruins closes the cycle. Is Michelson trying to do the same, this time with colonialism? His perspective as a Native man, and as an artist whose work exemplifies "indigenous visual sovereignty" makes this a real possibility. A few years ago, writing on contemporary First Nations art in Canada, Ruth Phillips argued that the postcolonial experience of indigenous Americans has not been the same as that of indigenous people elsewhere in the world. She wrote: "In contrast to former external colonies, for internally colonized peoples there have been no definitive acts of political liberation, and no formal closure to the colonial era...[T]he lack of formal closure on a political level has given special prominence to activist projects within the sphere of the visual arts" (Phillips 2003, 284). Michelson's work over the past decade has been just such an activist project, a sometimes dark, but always visually eloquent and absolutely determined proclamation of closure. In *Twilight*, *Indian Point*, and *Of Light After Darkness*, Michelson shows us the sun setting on colonialism. In *Mespat* and *Shattemuc* his camera lingers on the ruins.

And yet Michelson does not simply leave us in desolation as Cole did. In Michelson's framed trilogy, the final state is explicitly named as the future, and it is a hopeful one. *Glorious Light of the Setting Sun* depicts an Ontario wind farm, suggesting that with the

fall of empire as we have known it on this continent, comes the possibility of a more sustainable future—a *Light After Darkness*.

¹ Robert Smithson (1938–1973) was born in Rutherford, New Jersey. He studied at the Art Students League of New York from 1955–1956, and was a member of the minimalist movement of the 1960s. He is best known for his large-scale earthwork *The Spiral Jetty*, constructed in the Great Salt Lake, Utah in 1971. He died in a plane crash in 1973.

² Robert Smithson’s essay, “The Monuments of Passaic,” was first published in *Artforum* in December, 1967. It was reprinted in Holt (1979, 52–29) with the new title, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey.” All citations in this essay correspond to the page numbers published in Holt.

³ Alan Michelson (Mohawk; b. 1953) was born in Buffalo, New York and raised in western Massachusetts. He studied art at Columbia University in New York and earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Tufts University and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. His video and installation works have been exhibited widely in the United States and Canada, and included in the Sydney and Moscow Biennales.

⁴ Digital video with sound, 19:24. Original instrumental score by Michael J. Schumacher. First exhibited at State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2006.

⁵ The phrase is taken from the title of an Alison Sky interview with Smithson (Sky 1979 [1973]).

⁶ In the interview with Alison Sky, Smithson describes entropy as “a condition that’s moving towards a gradual equilibrium” (Sky 1979 [1973], 189).

⁷ Owens’ characterization of Smithson as a postmodernist is taken up most strongly by Gary Shapiro. 1995. *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art After Babel*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Jennifer Roberts launched a strong challenge to this interpretation of Smithson’s works in “Landscapes of Indifference: Robert Smithson and John Lloyd Stephens in Yucatan.” *The Art Bulletin* 82.3 (September 2000): 544–567. Roberts deftly connects Smithson’s various travel narratives to colonialist prototypes such as Stephens’ journey to Central America in 1841 (which Smithson all but re-enacted in 1969).

⁸ See W.J.T. Mitchell, ed. *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

⁹ Personal communication. For more on panoramas, see Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.

¹⁰ Personal communication.

¹¹ Joseph Conrad’s short novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) has been described as “a thematic exploration of the savagery-versus-civilization relationship, and of the colonialism and

racism that make imperialism possible.” Wikipedia.org/Heart_of_Darkness, accessed September 1, 2013.

¹² Michelson’s engagement with Thoreau continued into 2007 with his installation, *A Closer View*, for Wave Hill. The sound installation reflected on Thoreau’s acts of civil disobedience. For more on Thoreau’s night in Concord jail and its relevance to the shaping of his thoughts on nature, see Rebecca Solnit, *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscape for Politics*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Berkeley Press, 2007.

¹³ Michelson’s New York-based works are documented on his website, www.alanmichelson.com, and described at some length in McMaster (2005, 38–45). I am particularly grateful to Kathleen Ash-Milby for first bringing Michelson’s work to my attention in 2008, and for generously sharing her research with me as both of us continue to write on the topic. Ash-Milby (2011, 22–24) provides a very informative account of Michelson’s New York installations.

¹⁴ Owens continues: “Whenever Smithson invokes the notion of the center, however, it is to describe its loss.” *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Given Smithson’s professed interest in geological time, it is interesting to note that Michelson’s installations are more effective in indicating the accrual of *both* physical and temporal strata than Smithson’s original non-sites were.

¹⁶ See Robert Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape,” in Holt 1979, 117–128.

¹⁷ The title of this trilogy directly contradicts Curtis’s prophecy.

¹⁸ Alan Michelson, *Shattemuc* wall text, “Lives of the Hudson” exhibition, Tang Art Museum, 2010.

¹⁹ Smithson’s photograph of the drinking fountain was not published in the essay, but it has been recovered in the archives and illustrated by Jennifer Roberts (Roberts 2004).

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