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THE QUARRY

Revisiting the Quarry: Excavation, Legacy, Return
Approaches to the Histories and sites of Land Art
Yorkshire Sculpture Park
2014

Charles Danby and Rob Smith

FRAME 1

MIRROR DISPLACEMENT, CHALK PIT, OXTED ENGLAND 1969

On page 243 of The collected writings of Robert Smithson is an image of his *Chalk Mirror Displacement*- a site and non-site- displayed concurrently in *When Attitudes Become Form* at the ICA and in a Chalk Quarry in Oxted.

[SLIDE] Oxted Quarry views

This quarry is cut into the chalk of the North Downs nestled between two sites of special scientific interest managed by the National Trust and circumnavigated by the Pilgrims Way, looking over the traffic of the M25 as it cuts through the Surrey countryside.

[SLIDE] Orbital panorama

Chalk has been extracted from the quarry since Roman times but this extraction effectively ended in 2006 when ownership of the quarry transferred to Southern Gravel who were licensed to infill the site with 100 000 tonnes of inert building waste. This continued until the autumn last year when the current license expired and it has not been renewed, due in part to local pressure groups that have continuously lobbied for the site to be shut down on account of the dangerous heavy traffic going through the town.

This *Mirror Displacement* was Smithson's only site work to be made in the UK and after the exhibition at the ICA the work was destroyed. It wasn't until 1987, after Smithson's death, that the work was shown in the exhibition *Robert Smithson Sculpture 1968-69* at John Webber gallery, New York. The non-site was then acquired by The Art Institute of Chicago in the same year.

Chalk Mirror Displacement was not seen in the UK after 1969 until 2011 when it was presented in the inaugural exhibition at Firstsite's new building in Colchester, and since it has been exhibited again at John Hansard gallery in 2013. In both cases new chalk was excavated from Oxted quarry, which was then shipped back to Chicago to support the conservation of the work. Under the instructions of the Smithson Estate the mirrors were broken.

FRAME 2

OXTED ENGLAND

The intention in revisiting Oxted Quarry was not to locate the site of Smithson's work. It was to collapse the 'visual distance' between the archival document and ourselves by being in Oxted Quarry.

[SLIDE] Oxted Quarry Smithson site

There are three known photographs of *Chalk-Mirror-Displacement* in the quarry, images taken by Smithson at the time the work was made. These images document an artwork that was only ever temporary, and as such are the only visual record of its site - the intersection of the artwork with the event of its display.

The identification of the site, through these images, became important for reasons beyond simply pinpointing where part of an artwork had once been. It alerted us to a particular relation between an artwork (site) and its documentation.

[SLIDE] Oxted Quarry Smithson site

Because there were two of us we found ourselves physically located not just at the point where the work had been made, but also at the point where the photograph of the work had been taken from. It became apparent that the artwork simultaneously occupied two sites.

The document defines its points of reference in relation to the site, but marking these boundaries places the viewer outside this definition. As such it sets up a 'visual distance' between the viewer and the site presenting a linear relation that standardises and encodes a single viewpoint.

The act of revisiting the quarry collapses this 'visual distance', constructed and upheld by the document, setting up possibilities for new relations to be established. In revisiting we step through the image and text of the document to access multiple viewpoints and material textures in time and space.

As active agents in these relations the methodology of revisiting becomes an approach characterized by 'being in' or 'inhabiting' the site.

[SLIDE] Anaglyph film

By 'being in' the site there is a shift in our agency whereby the quarry frames, informs and structures our movement. We became aware that the topography of the quarry determined our actions assisting or restricting our movement through the site; scree slopes, cliffs and emergent forests blocked our way. Our routes were determined not by an objective but through the land's form, existing pathways, many overgrown and lost, describing patterns of past land use within these contours.

[Film description]

FRAME 3

CHALK MIRROR DISPLACEMENT, OXTED, YORK, ENGLAND 1969

On page 168 of the 1981 publication Robert Smithson: Sculpture by Robert Hobbs the same image of the chalk mirror displacement at Oxted quarry appears- but the caption relocates the site of the quarry to York! The geology would allow for this to be a possibility, a band of chalk runs northwards through Lincolnshire crossing the Humber estuary into Yorkshire up to the impressive buttress of Flamborough head. The Art Institute of Chicago who have the non-site work in their collection concur that the location of the site is Yorkshire along with a number of other publications and other catalogues too.

[SLIDE] Yorkshire Quarry 1

So an imagined narrative begins to emerge, Oxted York becomes a possible location of the quarry.

When Charles Harrison, curator of When Attitudes become Form at the ICA was asked about Smithson's work in an interview in 2008 he replied:

'Yes he made a work with mirrors and chalk. We had to find him a chalk quarry, I can't remember where. The ICA's gallery guy- the fixer guy- was the one who found it.'

[SLIDE] Yorkshire Quarry 2

Forty-Five years on the historical witnesses to the location have forgotten, and so the published images and their legends become the primary source. The site and the work become active in both Surrey and Yorkshire, and two parallel quarries emerge from the captions. This doubling of the site multiplies the binary relationship we found in Oxted between the site of the work and point from where it was documented. This augmentation necessitates a re-evaluation of the relationship between site and non site -

[SLIDE] Yorkshire Quarry 3

Opening up a labyrinth of new possibilities where fact and fiction blend with the material of the site.

It demanded we revisit the quarry, to test the new set of relations and physically enter the site once more.

[SLIDE] Trailer

FRAME 4

YORKSHIRE

Through revisiting the quarry we have made a number of new work. These mark out the constant repositioning of relations between us as actors and the container of the quarry.

[SLIDE] Yorkshire mirror action

Mirror Travel is a film that traverses the plural quarry. It draws on the constant and relative adjustment of two moving bodies (actors) in space.

[SLIDE] Mirror Travel

Filmed into a mirror the image seen is reflected, it is a synthetic and constructed image set in a closed-loop relation to the time and space of the action.

As the camera and the mirror trap and re-trap each other so new forms of movement, exploration, are performed and recorded.

The frame of the camera, filled by the reflection of the mirror, creates an image in the landscape that is dependent on negotiated movement of the camera and the mirror and the two actors.

The proximity of the camera and the mirror during this process forces an image that is separated from the spatial context of the quarry. Identifiable points of reference in the landscape become lost and unclear as do transitions between separate quarries.

[SLIDE] Triangulation 1

Quarry Triangulation proposes an infinite series of photographs. We photograph an object at the same moment in time from two positions. Our respective positions are then documented becoming the left/right images of a three-part triangulated photograph.

[SLIDE] Triangulation 1

The central image is an anaglyph, a two colour image, consisting of the photographs of the object colour separated and overlaid. As a composite of these two related but divergent photographs, it resists the conventional single point perspective

[SLIDE] Triangulation 3

that the anaglyph as an optically generated three-dimensional image supposes.

[SLIDE] IMT 1

[SLIDE] IMT 2

FRAME 5

YORK

[SLIDE] Yorkshire Quarry

The post-industrial quarry is a site of active potential. It has a strong visual presence in the landscape, and moreover exists as a one-to-one scale map when set in relation to construction, industry and manufacture, as the material that has been extracted can be tracked directly back into the quarry. Here the quarry as a field of displaced physical material is borderless. Its content spills beyond its physical boundaries into roads, buildings, microelectronics (silica) and foodstuffs. The quarry is everywhere and a material part of us.

In addition Smithson's proposition of site/non-site points to an inherent instability in manufactured objects, to extrapolate this we can say that all manufactured objects are non-sites, as their instability rests in the tension between the form that we encounter them in at any given moment, and the composite 'quarried' material that combines to make them an object in the world.

Yet at the same time that the quarry spills over, so its physical borders present us with a containment of space, or across quarries, a series of excavated islands, containments in the landscape. Adding to the unfixedness of the quarry is the fact that its perimeter can expand or contract; as much as the quarry can be cut in to it can also be back-filled.

[SLIDE] Quarry Ceiling 1

In considering this *Quarry Ceiling* is a proposal that directs us towards the material extraction and the void space of the quarry. It returns the open top of the quarry to the contours of the land. The virtual ceiling it constructs, made visible through mobile and augmented technologies, closes the sky, driving our attention away from the sky towards the earth. It constructs a threshold at the surface of the earth, making apparent the void non-sighted physical space of the quarry.

[SLIDE] Quarry Ceiling 2

In this containment we are sighted within the tiered, terraced layering of the quarry's stacked levels rising from the floor of the quarry to its surface, the cross-section form of which suggests an inverse pyramid.

FRAME 6

ROBERT SMITHSON'S CHALK MIRROR DISPLACEMENT CONSTRUCTED AT THE OXTED CHALK PIT QUARRY, SURREY

Issue 25 of Tate etc... magazine published the image of Smithson's Chalk Mirror Displacement with a caption that amended the miscataloguing of the site. This caption returned the quarry to Oxted in Surrey, pressed between the chalk downs next to the M25.

Southern Gravel has now ceased all mineral extraction and infill activities at the site. This makes the chalk that was extracted from the quarry for the installation of the work at John Hansard gallery in 2013 the last chalk that can be extracted to create the work. This material is now in storage in Chicago, but it has a limited shelf life- Smithson's entropic processes are at work and in around 20 years the chalk rubble will have collapsed into powdery fragments that are not suitable for the installation of the piece. With the quarry closed the future of this work is uncertain but the occupation of this site continues its journey forwards.

[SLIDE] Oxted Housing 1

An application for outline planning permission for the redevelopment of this site has been submitted by Southern Gravel. They are proposing to build 27 detached properties, with the attendant features of post industrial reparation; wildlife enhanced areas, landscaped terracing and the conservation of heritage features.

[SLIDE] Oxted Housing 2

This change in use is not a palimpsest, it is just the next phase in the human habitation of this site, that can be traced in it's material back through the industrial age to the first settlers in neolithic times who gathered flints from the chalk to make their tools. Likewise the quarry still holds the multiple possibilities of site that the archives of the Smithson work have allowed.

[SLIDE] Quarry Plaque

In connection to the Oxted housing development we are proposing a new work that takes the form of a plaque. A circular slab of chalk ten feet in diameter and 10 inches deep taken from the quarry in Yorkshire, and embedded into the site where Smithson's Mirror Displacement was located in Oxted. In the language of the developer our work becomes a cultural focal point, a visitor centre, in a location where the careful landscaping and strategically planted trees act as screens to mask the complexity of this site. This marker becomes a point of transformation where others can re-enter the quarry and open up new relations to the site.

Since When Attitudes become Form in 1969, Smithson's conception of Chalk Mirror Displacement as simultaneous presentation of a site work and non-site work has not been seen- just one half of the work is shown. Our Plaque proposal is a reparation of this broken relationship- by permanently locating a marker into the strata of the rock in Oxted we displace an equal volume of new material, a new non-site.

Our research continues to be active across all of these quarry sites - applying these methodologies for exploring them, their changing land use, and the multiple positions of human agency in the quarry in their post industrial forms.