

Columns

Entropy and the New Monument

JEFFREY KASTNER ON THE FUTURE OF SPIRAL JETTY

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Two dilapidated shacks looked over a tired group of oil rigs. A series of seeps of heavy black oil more like asphalt occur just south of Rozel Point. For forty or more years people have tried to get oil out of this natural tar pool. Pumps coated with black stickiness rusted in the corrosive salt air. A hut mounted on pilings could have been the habitation of "the missing link." A great pleasure arose from seeing all those incoherent structures. This site gave evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes.

About one mile north of the oil seeps I selected my site. —Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," 1972



Northeastern shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake with remnants of past oil exploration, Rozel Point, 2003. Photo: Serge Paul.

ON JANUARY 29, 2008, an e-mail began making the rounds of the art world. Originally sent by artist Nancy Holt to a small group of friends and colleagues, and rapidly forwarded on, the message contained an urgent appeal: Holt had been alerted, just the day before, to the existence of plans to drill for oil in the Great Salt Lake, near Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, and she was asking people to contact the Utah state government to express their opposition before a rapidly approaching deadline for public comment. The drilling in question (a "wildcat," or speculative, operation) calls for a series of exploratory wells to be sunk, using equipment on floating barges, some 3,000 feet into the lake bed of an area called the West Rozel Field Prospect—a parcel in the North Arm of the Great Salt Lake leased in 2003 from the state of Utah by Pearl Montana Exploration and Production, a Canadian oil and gas company. The site lies approximately five miles southwest of Rozel Point—roughly halfway between Gunnison Island, a wildlife sanctuary that is home to one of the world's largest breeding populations of American white pelicans, and *Spiral Jetty*, the 1,500-foot-long coil of basalt and earth that is Smithson's most famous, and Land art's most celebrated, artwork.

Within days, Utah officials were inundated with calls and e-mails from those who had received the alert. Environmentalists and land-use activists were part of the opposition from the beginning, charging that the drilling plan, as submitted, failed to fully assess potential ecological damage to the delicate chemistry of the lake and nearby bird habitat; they also argued that the process had neglected mandated notification requirements that would have given interested parties time to respond. Further, they said, the project as a whole violated terms set in the state's own legislation requiring that proposed uses of its sovereign lands not "compromise public trust obligations" to protect its "navigation, fish and wildlife habitat, aquatic beauty, public recreation, and water quality." (In this spirit, various environmental organizations and the state of Utah had agreed in 2006 to prohibit oil and gas development in the bulk of the North Arm; the projected drilling site, however, is located within a more than 55,000-acre portion of the lake that was specifically exempted.) Lynn de Freitas, executive director of the advocacy and public policy group Friends of Great Salt Lake—who informed Holt of the threat after a colleague at an environmental watchdog organization happened across the permit application on a state website—acknowledges that changing socioeconomic conditions are "forcing the state to think in terms of how they can generate economic livelihood for Utah," including resource extraction. Yet, she said, "This is one of many examples of what we consider to be poor decisions on behalf of a hemispherically important ecosystem. So whether this was, as it is, in proximity of *Jetty* or not, we would still be alarmed and standing up and protesting."

In the face of the widespread public protest, the state, which had originally fast-tracked review of the drilling permits, extended the required public comment period by an additional two weeks. By mid-February, when the new comment period was concluded and the internal review had begun in earnest, the state had received more than 3,500 complaints—including those from a list of high-profile organizations ranging from de Freitas's group and the National Audubon Society to the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Dia Art Foundation, which acquired *Spiral Jetty* from Smithson's estate in 1999. Newspapers from the *Salt Lake Tribune* to the *New York Times*, meanwhile, have published editorials against the plan.

The fate of the drilling project now lies in the hands of officials in Utah's Division of Oil, Gas and Mining, who are conducting their review under unprecedented public and press scrutiny and in a very different context from the one in which they would have were it not for the last-minute intervention of Holt and others. The situation is, in one sense, a remarkably successful example of cultural activism and participatory democracy—that rare case where the momentum of an essentially fait accompli bureaucratic process is arrested, at least momentarily, by the sheer scale of public outcry against it. (Full disclosure: Prior to my writing on this situation for *Artforum*, I was forwarded Holt's message and sent my own e-mail to Utah officials urging them to reconsider the drilling plan.)

Yet much remains unresolved. It seems clear that the state, at the very least, mishandled the notification procedure, and that its failure to provide timely and complete information on the nature of the drilling

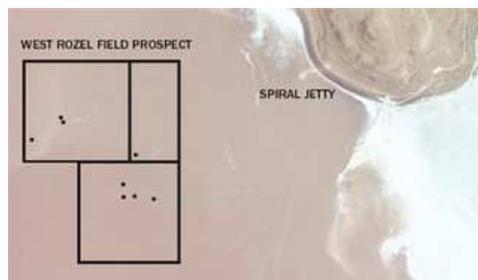
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proposal has exacerbated what was already bound to be a contentious process. At the same time, no one disputes that Pearl Montana did apparently enter into a good-faith agreement for the leases it holds. (If the drilling permit is approved, the Pearl Montana wells would be the only currently active oil operation in the exempted zone, but other portions of the lake and its shoreline have long been host to a variety of industrial mining and salt-extraction operations.) According to a press release posted in late February on a special Great Salt Lake Drilling Update website created by the state of Utah, the attempt to balance the many competing claims was expected to take “30 to 45” further days to complete. And as all parties await what will likely be a mid-April decision, no one to whom I spoke—from Holt and the environmental groups to state officials (a spokeswoman for Pearl Montana did not respond to repeated requests for comment)—seemed confident of what the final outcome will be.



From the standpoint of ongoing tensions everywhere between energy resource development and environmentalism, much of this back-and-forth is par for the course. Of course, the difference here—and likely the reason you’re reading about what is, at its base, a complex land-use debate—is the presence of Smithson’s work. And yet, despite all the discussion, it is difficult to get a clear picture of what specific impact this project might have on *Spiral Jetty*, either in terms of ecology or ambience. Even if the permit is approved and the exploration goes forward, it is far from certain that oil will be found or, if it is, that it will be usable and cost-effective to extract. (Amoco drilled thirteen wells in this same area of the lake in the late 1970s, but the oil found there was of such low quality that the company eventually decided to abandon the wells; now capped beneath the water’s surface, they are invisible from the shore.) In response to concerns about the viewshed around the work, state officials have asserted that whatever equipment is necessary to pump the oil would be underwater, creating, they say, no issues outside of what is expected to be a two-week period during the initial exploration. The equipment and materials for the drilling and extraction will purportedly be transported well away from the entry point for visitors to the *Jetty*, and the location of the onshore storage facilities for whatever is removed would lie fifteen miles from the work. (Meanwhile, the abandoned structures and equipment to which Smithson referred in his *Spiral Jetty* travelogue, left over from a 1920s attempt by the Lakeside Oil Company to get usable oil out of the seeps at Rozel Point, were removed from the site by Utah state officials during a 2005 cleanup.) And while a spill is a terrible possibility, it is obviously by no means a certainty, and the state has attempted to allay concerns by promising that any drilling in the Great Salt Lake—one of the American West’s most treasured natural sites—would be governed by special safeguards.



Satellite map of the northeastern portion of Utah’s Great Salt Lake showing Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, and proposed oil drilling sites by Pearl Montana Exploration and Production. Photo: Digital Globe/Google.

But just as the presence of *Spiral Jetty* has invigorated the debate over environmental issues in the Great Salt Lake, so too has the environmental dispute provided a timely opportunity to reconsider the unique status of it and other signal works of Land art as they age into their third and fourth decades. Originally intended as a dramatic break from what Michael Heizer famously referred to as the “sagging” floors of traditional art-world institutions in favor of the “real space” of the natural landscape, many of these works now rely on institutional support and stewardship to survive; situated, for practical and conceptual reasons, in what were once remote, isolated areas, they increasingly face threats from the inexorable encroachments of modern civilization. Heizer has spent years fighting plans for a railway line, designed to carry radioactive waste to the controversial Yucca Mountain Repository, that is slated to pass within a mile or so of his ongoing *City* complex, 1972, in the remote Garden Valley area of central Nevada. The same week the *Spiral Jetty* drilling story broke, senior officials from Dia were in the midst of negotiations to purchase a conservation easement on land to the south of Walter De Maria’s *Lightning Field*, 1977, in west-central New Mexico, to extend a buffer zone preserving important line-of-sight vistas surrounding it. And Holt’s own most famous work has recently been affected by local land speculation. *Sun Tunnels*, 1973–76—an X-shaped arrangement of four large concrete tubes, oriented toward the position of the sun at the winter and summer solstices and bearing holes that correspond to different constellations—is located in an extremely desolate area of northwestern Utah, more than two bumpy hours’ worth of dirt-road driving north of the Bonneville Salt Flats. As recently as last year, however, parcels of land adjacent to Holt’s plot were offered as part of a US Bureau of Land Management auction. Though the leases were not purchased at the time, development—and, in particular, the ever more intensive search for natural resources—remains a potential threat to the unique character of this and other such sites.

Interestingly, in the weeks after the Pearl Montana drilling plan became public, another viewpoint started to percolate up from the art community and blogosphere: Would the whole scenario—somebody floating a bunch of modern industrial equipment out into the Great Salt Lake in order to dig down through layers of space and time to find something produced by the entropic action of geologic forces on organic matter from eons ago—really have bothered Smithson? Might he not, in fact, even have appreciated it? It’s a fair enough question. After all, this is an artist who not only tolerated but in fact courted ruin and decay; who teased ecologists as “people [who] want to stop eating [because] they are afraid the lettuce they are eating has feelings”; who once described his preferred work zone as “that area of terror between man and land”; and who, of a failed desalination plan for the Salton Sea, once said, “Here we have an example of a kind of domino effect where one mistake begets another mistake, yet these mistakes are all curiously exciting to me on a certain kind of level—I don’t find them depressing.”

Holt, Smithson’s widow and frequent collaborator, is obviously in a tricky situation with all this. There are very real practical concerns related to the conservation and protection of works such as *Spiral Jetty*, and she, along with organizations like Dia, has a dual, and perhaps occasionally conflicting, obligation to both preserve the physical work and be true to the wishes of the artist, which in this case can only be guessed at. Yet few people are better equipped than she to make such a guess, and she told me that despite her husband’s general theoretical interest in decay, *Spiral Jetty* is, and was from the beginning, a special case. “Within Bob’s own body of work, works like *Partially Buried Woodshed* [1970] were obviously meant to decay,” she said. “The life span on that was not too long—it did decay in stages; someone tried to burn down part of it. So that was actually kind of built into the piece itself, its own entropy. With *Spiral Jetty* it wasn’t like that. Bob really wanted that to last a long, long time. He wanted to build something, and he talked about that, so strong and so solid that it would go through all kinds of natural changes, like be underwater and then come out, and be present for the ages. So that’s a whole other sense of time. When we talk about entropy and Bob, we have to think about the two extremes. He was totally open to *Spiral Jetty* having all

kinds of changes, and it does. Every time I've been out there it looks different—the water color changes, the amount of salt on it changes, how much is visible changes.”

The current situation with *Spiral Jetty* is not the first, and is unlikely to be the last, set of potential “changes” faced by a mode of work that is, by its very nature, designed to operate in a matrix of real-world cause and effect. Isolation may be, as Walter De Maria once famously observed, “the essence of Land art,” but even the most profound isolation is always relative and relational. If the implicit critique of the antiseptic environment of the modernist white cube made by Smithson and his peers was more than a rhetorical one, these works must not only endure the potential impact of alterations to their chosen settings, they must also in some sense embrace such change. This is not an argument for cavalierly abandoning the masterpieces of Land art to their entropic fates, be they creepingly natural or abruptly industrial. It is rather a contention that the fact that they face such fates should be less lamented as a sign of their physical vulnerability than celebrated as a sign of their conceptual strength; that in fulfilling the richness of meaning they promise, these works are not only inevitably but also desirably bound to the world around them—vivid, actual, full of all the great pleasure, and the abandoned hopes, of the “real space” they chose to engage.

Jeffrey Kastner is a frequent contributor to Artforum.

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