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Robert Smithson's work of rocks and earth, "Spiral Jetty," juts into the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Plans by the state would allow for oil drilling about five miles across the lake.

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Plans to Mix Oil Drilling and Water-Bound Art Clash in Utah

By KIRK JOHNSON

ROZEL POINT, Utah — Will McMillin and Liz Wing walked more than three miles of rutted, muddy road on a recent afternoon carrying a bicycle wheel, a wooden stool and a golf club.



Following directions they had gleaned from art Web sites and small road signs, they arrived here at a remote spot on the shores of the Great Salt Lake.

"We felt like we had to go, and that this was the time to do it," Mr. McMillin said.

Their goal (more later on what they did with their props; think about the Dadaist/Surrealist artist Marcel Duchamp) was "Spiral Jetty," a 1,500-foot curved construction of rock and earth by the artist Robert Smithson that juts into the lake.

A fierce debate, with equal parts art, environmentalism and economics, has erupted over a plan by the state to allow oil drilling about five miles across the lake. The owner of "Spiral Jetty," the Dia Art Foundation in New York, in an alliance with a conservation group called Friends of Great Salt Lake, says the oil rigs would harm the work's aesthetic experience.

Led by their drumbeat of protest, more than 3,000 e-mail messages, mostly against the drilling plan, were received by the state during a public comment period last month. A decision by the state

about whether to let the drilling go forward is expected in April.

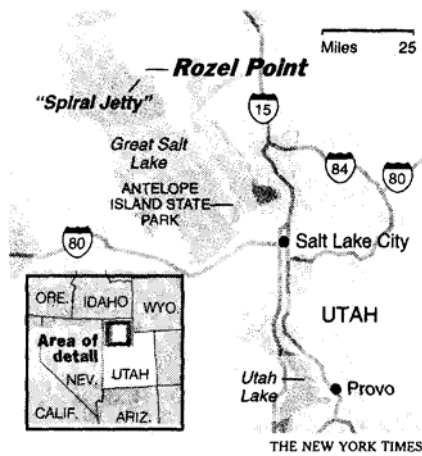
The face-off reflects a profound shift in attitudes about the Western landscape since Mr. Smithson, an earthwork artist, came here with an artistic vision and a dump truck in 1970. Then, these desolate, salt-soaked shores were loved or visited by almost nobody.

Now the soaring price of oil, a new environmental appreciation of the lake's ecological niche and a tourist boom in bird-watching on the vast wetland fringe have coalesced into a fabric that Mr. Smithson, who died in a plane crash in 1973, never knew.

"Like everywhere in the West, the lake is being discovered and people want to protect it and people want to use it," said John Harja, director of the Governor's Public Lands Policy Coordination Office.

What Mr. Smithson might have thought about the drilling plan is among the issues in dispute. State officials and some art historians, pointing to Mr. Smithson's own writing about the "Spiral Jetty," and the film he made about its construction, said he reveled in the juxtaposition of industrialism and beauty, decay and rebirth, rot and permanence.

"The sense of ruined and abandoned hopes interested him," said Lynne Cooke, the curator at Dia. "He didn't look for beautiful places, but rather despoiled landscapes where industry and the wild overlap."



Oil drilling was under way when "Spiral Jetty" was installed in 1970.

State officials say that Rozel Point has always offered a fine tableau of the despoiled and the natural. A natural seep of oil sludge is right down the beach from the "Jetty," harvested since pioneer days. And oil drilling was also under way, they say, in view of the "Jetty" in 1970, though it proved economically unviable. The new drill rigs, they say, are much farther away than the ones Mr. Smithson knew, and that can be glimpsed briefly in his movie.

"One of the things we're having a hard time figuring is what the impacts will be," said Dick Buehler, the director of the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and

State Lands.

The deputy director at Dia, Laura Raicovich, agreed that Mr. Smithson had chosen his site carefully and loved some things that others might call ugly. But Ms. Raicovich said he had also been ambivalent about the context of the "Jetty." He wrote about the rotting pier and the shacks that lined the shore, but in his photographs, she said, he kept the focus on the wild backdrop of the lake.

And the proposed drilling plan is different, Ms. Raicovich added, "because it's a new addition and it's pretty fair to say that it's not desirable — on an aesthetic level it alters the physical experience."

The executive director of Friends of Great Salt Lake, Lynn de Freitas, said an alliance of artists and environmentalists was also something of a new pattern on the lake. In 2005, when the state first proposed issuing offshore drilling leases, Ms. de Freitas's group protested and raised the issue of "Spiral Jetty." Few artists seemed to take notice then, she said. But when she learned in January that new applications for drilling had been filed, she alerted Mr. Smithson's widow, the artist Nancy Holt, and an expert on the "Jetty," Hikmet Sidney Loe. This time, the global arts community took the ball and ran with it.

"In my mind, it was one for all and all for one," Ms. de Freitas said.

Ms. Raicovich said the deeper question raised by the drilling plan was how

to protect deliberately remote art. She also worries, she said, that more people drawn to the site by its newfound attention could become a problem, since the jeep road to the "Jetty" crosses private land. The owner could close off access at any time, she said.

Which takes us back to the beach and Mr. McMillin and Ms. Wing, both of whom were drawn here by the controversy; he from Brooklyn, she from San Francisco. Proceeding down to the foot of the "Jetty," they inserted the section of the bike frame into a hole in the top of the stool — echoing Duchamp's famous sculpture "Roue de Bicyclette." Then they positioned their creation with "Spiral Jetty's" rock — black and white and rimmed with salt — as the backdrop.

Mr. McMillin swung his club while Ms. Wing, 29, who is pursuing her master's degree in museum studies at Harvard, snapped the pictures: earth-art, Dadaism and golf.

"It was sort of idiotic," said Mr. McMillin, 28, an artist who lives in Greenpoint section of Brooklyn. "And the Duchamp reference was, in retrospect, totally pretentious."

But he also called their four-hour "Jetty" experience "mind-blowing" and said that he and Ms. Wing were both left unsure what to think about the drilling plan. They have read about Mr. Smithson and the impulses that shaped his work. They both gazed out and tried to imagine what might be seen across the water and how it might change things.