

2019

Spiral Jetty, geoaesthetics, and art: Writing the Anthropocene

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Publication Details

Ballard, S. & Linden, E. "Spiral Jetty, geoaesthetics, and art: Writing the Anthropocene." *The Anthropocene Review* 6 .1-2 (2019): 142-161.

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Abstract

Despite the call for artists and writers to respond to the global situation of the Anthropocene, the 'people disciplines' have been little published and heard in the major journals of global environmental change. This essay approaches the Anthropocene from a new perspective: that of art. We take as our case study the work of American land artist Robert Smithson who, as a writer and sculptor, declared himself a 'geological agent' in 1972. We suggest that Smithson's land art sculpture Spiral Jetty could be the first marker of the Anthropocene in art, and that, in addition, his creative writing models narrative modes necessary for articulating human relationships with environmental transformation. Presented in the form of a braided essay that employs the critical devices of metaphor and geoaesthetics, we demonstrate how Spiral Jetty represents the Anthropocenic 'golden spike' for art history, and also explore the role of first-person narrative in writing about art. We suggest that art and its accompanying creative modes of writing should be taken seriously as major commentators, indicators, and active participants in the crafting of future understandings of the Anthropocene.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Ballard, S. & Linden, E. "Spiral Jetty, geoaesthetics, and art: Writing the Anthropocene." *The Anthropocene Review* 6.1-2 (2019): 142-161.

AUTHORS MANUSCRIPT.

February 2019.

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Spiral Jetty, Geoaesthetics, and Art: Writing the Anthropocene

ABSTRACT

Despite the call for artists and writers to respond to the global situation of the Anthropocene (Chakrabarty 2009; Ghosh 2016; Castree, 2017), the ‘people disciplines’ have been little published and heard in the major journals of global environmental change. This essay approaches the Anthropocene from a new perspective: that of art. We take as our case study the work of American land artist Robert Smithson who, as a writer and sculptor, declared himself a “geological agent” in 1972. We suggest that Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970) could be the first marker of the Anthropocene in art, and that, in addition, his creative writing models narrative modes necessary for articulating human relationships with

environmental transformation. Presented in the form of a braided essay that employs the critical devices of metaphor and geoaesthetics, we demonstrate how *Spiral Jetty* represents the Anthropocenic ‘golden spike’ for art history, and also explore the role of first-person narrative in writing about art. We suggest that art and its accompanying creative modes of writing should be taken seriously as a major commentators, indicators, and active participants in the crafting of future understandings of the Anthropocene.

Key words:

Anthropocene; Art History; Art Writing; Creative nonfiction; Environmental Humanities; Geoaesthetics; Land Art; Postmodernism; Robert Smithson; Spiral Jetty.

Recently a call has been issued for the arts and humanities to participate in the debates surrounding the articulation and communication of the urgent planetary issue of global environmental transformation known as the Anthropocene. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009: 205) demonstrates how thinking about climate change brings together natural histories and human histories. Novelist and literary theorist Amitav Ghosh (2016) outlines

the risks of didacticism when the realities of climate change are approached within fiction writing. Geographer Noel Castree (2017) examines how the “people disciplines” have opened up the broader social and ‘human’ ramifications of climate change, whilst at the same time raising critical questions of how society understands itself. Castree notes that despite efforts to make global change science visible, and better known to non-scientists and those of us outside the STEM disciplines, there remains a remarkable lack of understanding of what the disciplines of humanities and arts can *specifically* contribute to the discussion. Castree notes that claims are made ‘upon’ the arts and humanities “to address the looming planetary crisis” (2017: 161), but there are no clear guidelines on how we might do so.

This essay picks up the call from the particular discipline of visual art. Although it has long been implicit in art practice in the West, the discussion of environmental transformation has not been considered central to it; and furthermore very few people (either inside the discipline of art history or outside it) have taken ‘art’ seriously as a way of thinking that can help us articulate, and therefore understand, the current planetary climate crisis. We ask why thinking about the Anthropocene has ignored the notable, if quiet, histories of art and art writing that have engaged with environmental issues since at least the 1970s (such as Fluxus, and eco-feminist practices), and conversely: why contemporary

art writing has only partially addressed the Anthropocene as a scientific fact and not as an embedded mode, essentially asking, ‘if the Anthropocene is all around us, where is it in art?’ We suggest that there are two key methods through which we can locate art, and art writing, in the discourse of the Anthropocene. The first, is to identify a key work that might embody the social and cultural impacts of the Anthropocene: an artwork that could be held up as a marker, evidence of humans acting with geological force on the planetary system. The second is to propose some guidelines that challenge the very linearity of this narrative foundation. Our braided essay thus performs a twist upon its own argument by exploring new modalities of experimental and first-person art writing that we consider to be central to any contribution that art and writing can make to the discourse of the Anthropocene. Our essay then approaches the Anthropocene from a new perspective: we suggest that rather than as a current or future aesthetics to come, the Anthropocene and its attendant geoaesthetic has long been present within the entangled disciplines of art practice, and art writing. We demonstrate how the Anthropocene has in fact been embedded within art since the metaphoric shifts in art and text that occurred as part of the postmodernist challenges that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s and we explore the place of both art and art writing in the narratives of the Anthropocene.

Firstly, we introduce the art and writing of Robert Smithson, a significant artist of the American land art movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Anticipating the naming of our times, Smithson described himself as the quintessential Anthropocen-ic man: “As an artist it is sort of interesting to take on the persona of a geologic agent where man actually becomes part of that process rather than overcoming it—rather than overcoming the natural processes of challenging the situation” (Smithson, 1996: 298). This sense of self *as part of* the planetary Earth system, as opposed to guardian, protector and/or defiler of it, is precisely what many today have argued for as the beginning of a solution to the ecological problems facing us, “us” conceived as multi-species, and “solution” conceived as partial, and situated (Haraway, 2008; Zylinska, 2014; Ballard, 2017). Smithson’s work and the writing around it contributed to a disciplinary shift within the artworld from one of self-reflexive modernity to critical postmodernism, and from art understood within the white walls of the gallery, to art in direct conversation with the planet, although ironically *not* in collaboration with disciplines outside the domain of art itself. Of course, Smithson is not the *only* artist to create works that bring together considerations of land, art, text, ethics, bodies, nature, culture and the geological (we are thinking here of the critically important feminist work by Ana Mendieta, the phenomenological approaches of Nancy Holt, the interactive actions of Yoko Ono and the Fluxus group, the work on Country undertaken by

Daisy Leura Nakamarra as part of the Papanya Tula movement in Western Australia, the challenges to space offered by Michael Heizer, and the climate-focused remediations of Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison) but, significantly, Smithson is the artist to whom everyone else has turned first. In this, and despite our misgivings about reinforcing the sense that we too are writing about a progenerative singular figure, we feel it is only right to find out why others have done so.

The search for a marker of the Anthropocene in art is entangled in the explosion of environmental work in the 1960s and 1970s, and to this end Smithson is only one *possible* marker. The essay proceeds through three phases. In part one, after introducing Smithson's work and its context within art history, we conduct a thought experiment to test the possibility that Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1969), "best known earthwork in the world," (Lippard, 2013: 86) could in fact be the first artistic marker of the Anthropocene. To do so, we take a page out of Smithson's metaphorical book and test the textual and geological boundaries of the work. We introduce the geological strata through which he wrote and trace the art history of the Anthropocene as it points towards *Spiral Jetty*. At the same time we raise some of the issues, contradictions, and problems with this approach. We are also interested in how this search for a marker extends within art writing practices, and again we find Smithson at the intersection of practice and writing. In part two we begin to write in increasingly polyphonic and personal modes, the essay begins to switch between each of our narrative voices to reflect some of the textual shifts we consider necessary if art writing is to contribute to broader thinking about the Anthropocene. We undertake both an actual and virtual journey to *Spiral Jetty* and explore the possibility of the artwork as more than an artwork. If art history has been noticeably absent in the discussions of the Anthropocene, it is not just because it has been ignored by the sciences, but because until very recently it

seemed to have very little to say. By enacting a braided structure, which turns towards “the shifting, hidden, exposed, and expansive truths of the margin as collective tools to help us better understand the world” (Clutch Fleischmann, 2013) we perform a writing that writes *Spiral Jetty* into the Anthropocene at the same time that we write the Anthropocene into *Spiral Jetty*. We consider the artwork through relations that have been silenced by dominant readings of the work. In part three we challenge the silence of art writing itself by looking to some of the art writing that has advocated for the place of personal, critical, and imaginative thought in the discourse of the Anthropocene. We argue that this movement out from the art object and then back towards it is a particular strategy important for consideration of the Anthropocene as a conceptual framework for our current epoch. We present this as one model for how we might *write* the Anthropocene: in artworks, in words, and in aesthetics. Throughout the essay we perform this relationship in our writing and show how by employing analytic devices of metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche in the same way as Smithson and those that followed him, we can potentially transform the way we think about the temporal, physical and planetary dimensions of climate change. Rather than add more ethical, social and environmental obligations to our discipline, we unpack the activities we currently undertake and show that the Anthropocene has always already been present in our texts. Finally, we offer up our critical, playful, multivalent and

communicative methods as potential geoaesthetic tools for understanding the role of art in writing the Anthropocene.

PART ONE: Writing the Anthropocene into art

The artist Robert Smithson has been called both visionary and provocative. His short career spanned only ten years, from 1964-1973 (when he was tragically killed in a plane crash while scoping out a new site for a sculpture.) His work remains renowned for its relationship to land and the environment, and through which he led the movement of art out of museum spaces and into an “expanded field” of practice (Krauss, 1979: 41).

Smithson was a prolific writer and treated the discussion, documentation and the site of his sculptures as equals. He had a voracious mind, and became a self-taught expert in scientific theories of entropy and geology, weaving his knowledge through all his writing.

His iconic sculpture *Spiral Jetty* (1970) an earthwork at Rozel Point in the Great Salt Lake, Utah, is recognized by many outside the art world; and within, it is held up as a singular work that contributed to the shift from modern to postmodern ways of thinking in art (see

Figure one). In 1972 *Spiral Jetty* disappeared from view as the water levels of the lake rose, and only in 2002 did a severe drought cause the lake to recede and the work to

become fully visible again. Smithson's art and writing remains persistent as a reference point, even as culture and climate fluctuate around it.

It is no wonder that Smithson's works have become core to a discussion of art in the Anthropocene because he conceives of his work as part of an interconnected ecological and geological system instead of discrete from it. Smithson's art and writing models how to approach the challenge of the Anthropocene through his own irreverence for disciplinary and material distinctions. Smithson made work that reflects the Anthropocene as a troubling geological and ecological epoch, at the same time as his work teaches us about art writing in the Anthropocene. One way Smithson does this is through an applied, multivalent geology that structures his work with language as well as matter. Shifts in the register of Smithson's writing—at once metaphor, allegory and scale—occur instrumentally in his work. For example, the shifting of material scale in his essay, "Earth Projects," challenges familiar understandings of the relationship between art, geology and the tools of the artist's studio. To this end, Smithson locates, amid various states of erosion, a series of earth projects that focus on an aesthetics of matter:

[T]his slow flowage makes one conscious of the turbidity of thinking. Slump, debris slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain. ... A bleached

and fractured world surrounds the artist. To organize this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids, and subdivisions is an esthetic process that has scarcely been touched (1996: 100).

In framing artistic practice *as* geological process Smithson does not distinguish between organic and inorganic; instead his geoaesthetic practice understands earth and geology as both matter to work with and as theoretical objects for his use. Indeed, part of Smithson's insight, and one reason his work remains so instructive for us today, is because it so explicitly engages geology as a scaffolding for his own ideas, unabashedly allowing the materials of the earth to give his own ideas shape. By exploring how meaning is embedded in forms through geological information about how minerals are embedded in the earth, Smithson was able to make his abstract ideas material, lending his own hypotheses the strength of science's theories. Just as scientists themselves use analogies and metaphors to make sense of their data and distinguish meaningful information from noise, Smithson reaches for concrete models to ground his abstract ideas. Smithson's innovation here, and what distinguishes his grappling with metaphor from that of a scientist, or semiotician, or researcher of another sort whose analogy must be perfect to be

useful, is Smithson's embrace of the geological model even, and especially, where it breaks down.

This geoaesthetic mode in Smithson's art and writing marks a critical intersection for writers interested in mapping art in an age where humans themselves are scientifically defined as a geological force (see Ellsworth and Kruse: 2012; Ribas, 2015; van der Velden et al, 2015). The Anthropocene, then. Crutzen's (2000: 18-19) initial starting date of 1784 equated with the harnessing of steam for the extraction of coal and the beginning of the so-called Industrial age in Europe. The geological record already shows how in the Northern hemisphere a dramatic increase in the development of factories and extraction-technologies contributed to a sudden global rise in energy consumption and the burning of fossil fuels. Material evidence has been amassed in ice layers, speleothems (stalagmites and stalactites), ocean sediments, coral specimens, remnant plastics and carbon signatures. Recently the search for a marker denoting the start of the Anthropocene turned towards the geologies and atmospheres of the American West that were transformed by the first Trinity test on July 16, 1945; here scientists look for the spike of the Anthropocene in marine or lake sediments.

In art history, industrial markers of the Anthropocene are found in paintings like J. M. W. Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway* (1844) in which

technology, atmosphere, human, environment, and energy merge in a haze of motion (Davies, 2016: 99; Emmelheinz, 2015) (see Figure two). The connection is not far-fetched. At the time John Ruskin claimed that Turner was unique in his understanding of geology: “Turner is the only painter who has ever drawn a mountain, or a stone; no other man ever having learned their organization, or possessed himself of their spirit, except in part and obscurely” (1834: 138). However, as in the scientists’ search for a geological marker of the start of the Anthropocene, attention on art depicting the Industrial Revolution has been swiftly replaced by discussions of environmental art in the 1960s. Here art writers find themselves in the same location as the scientists, scratching in the same lake beds, and mapping out a parallel canon. As if on cue, just as we all started looking for it, Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* reemerged from the Great Salt Lake (Nelson, 2005).

Spiral Jetty then is a particularly useful object of inquiry for us to make sense of the presence of the Anthropocene in art. The issue with using *Jetty* in this inquiry, however, is that *Jetty* is thoroughly overdetermined by art historical discourse, with a long bibliography of canonical art criticism to its name. *Jetty* is consistently named in art historical genealogies as the salty patriarch of numerous influential art practices including: site-specific art, eco-art, land art, monumental art, postmodernism, and temporal practices, among others.

But this lineage is only one branch of a knotty family tree; *Jetty* is clearly *also* connected to other fields, geology most notably, but also geography, biology, ecology, phenomenology, architecture, tourism, land preservation, and on. Indeed, when these other fields are referenced in art writing, they are drawn on to strengthen an argument about the profound authority of Smithson's art, simply bolstering *Jetty's* art historical resonance, rather than extending its relevance into other fields. This is despite the fact that Smithson's art practice is recognised as "one of the *sites* where some of the most significant lines of twentieth-century art and thought intersect with one another" (Shapiro, 1995: 2).

If it is true that the Anthropocene emerges through these works then, in a parallel move to the scientific search for the geological markers of the Anthropocene, we can perform the same exercise in our discipline and claim Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, as a specific and critical indicator of the Anthropocene in art. The paradox, and perhaps peril, of writing about art objects in the Anthropocene is that in order to assert their authority they are treated as discrete items sealed up in the glass case of art history, one which we can temporarily peer at through the lenses of other disciplines but never actually penetrate, rather than as critical objects that may equally be handled and passed around by those in other domains, in precisely the kind of cooperative transdisciplinary maneuvers that the Anthropocene demands. *Jetty is* particularly instructive in illustrating this paradox, because

it is not only an allegory sedimented in the “geologies of words and things” (Gilbert-Rolfe and Johnson, 1976: 66) but also a work that contains biological life in the form of microscopic worlds. It is a potential ‘model’ Anthropocene in miniature (a site of human created climatic and environmental transformation; albeit at a local scale). However, the problem for our search is that *Spiral Jetty* cannot easily be *isolated* as a marker. The mistake of writing ‘about’ *Spiral Jetty* as if it is an entity in space, or a concept to be “employed” either to describe Land art, artistic practice in the 1960s, or even the Anthropocene, is that this approach separates Smithson’s work from its relations with other disciplines, other forms of writing and making, other people and other works. Relations are what make *Spiral Jetty* significant for thinking about the Anthropocene (and, notably, relations are what made *Jetty* interesting to Smithson too). If *Spiral Jetty* is a suitable marker of the Anthropocene, it is a marker formed through organic relationships of sedimentation and disruption, no longer just an artwork, but an entropic ecosystem.

Art-based interpretations of Smithson’s work, from the time of its inception in the 1970s through to today, have established various art-historical “facts” which remain

definitive of the work. Of the many art historians, critics, curators, and artists who have written about Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Craig Owens stands out as one of the most influential, establishing an understanding of *Jetty*, and indeed all of Smithson's works, that is enduringly semiotic. In his 1979 essay "Earthwords," Owens uses Smithson's own writings to make sense of *Jetty* as more than a formal object made of rocks and sand and salt and algae and water; it is, he tells us, a text. Owens uses Smithson's own writing about his sculptures to make sense of his sculptures *as writing*. Throughout "Earthwords," Owens (1979: 122) asserts the absolute interchangeability of Smithson's writings and his sculptures. This interchangeability of mode in Smithson's work is widely discussed, both by Owens and his peers as well as later writers, using the example of *Jetty*. Owens explains that *Jetty*:

is not a discrete work, but one link in a chain of signifiers which summon and refer to one another in a dizzying spiral. For where else does the *Jetty* exist except in the film which Smithson made, the narrative he published, the photographs which accompany that narrative, and the various maps, diagrams, drawings, etc. he made about it? (1979: 128).

Likewise, Simon O'Sullivan (2017: 61) suggests that Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* is an attempt to "fiction the landscape...reimagining what's already there." O'Sullivan's interpretation of *Jetty* acknowledges Smithson's playful engagement with the materials of the geographic, physical place while simultaneously incorporating Smithson's use of metaphor and myth. Like Owens, O'Sullivan acknowledges that *Jetty* is at least three things, the spiral land art sculpture, the film of the same, and Smithson's text about it, and that this together "operates as a complex myth-making machine... that activates its particular context whilst also producing a particular scene where past and future co-exist" (2017: 61).

A further art historical perspective is one where Smithson's work is directly connected to political and social concerns with the environment. In a footnote to his *October* essay on art and land reclamation, fellow artist Robert Morris notes that "Smithson envisioned the possibility of the artist acting as a 'mediator' between ecological and industrial interests" (1980: 102). Morris immediately discounts this possibility: "Given the known consequences of present industrial energy resources policies, it would seem that art's cooperation could only function to disguise and abet misguided and disastrous policies" (1980: 102). Morris continually points to the near impossibility of art to make a difference, because art itself has been commodified. Smithson himself did not see this as a

contradiction, expressing a kind of compassion for the technology that will return to the earth. In Smithson's world, "the tools of technology become a part of the Earth's geology as they sink back into their original state" (1996: 104).

It becomes clear that a shift has occurred as writers begin a process of re-evaluating the role of land art, and its artists, as "canaries in the coal mine" for today's ecological concerns. Lucy Lippard, in her book *Undermining*, calls Smithson "the only one of his generation of land artists... whose ideas, disseminated through his compelling writings, seem particularly relevant and provocative today" (2013: 84). Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse include a discussion of Smithson as part of their map of a new geology of art writing in *Making the Geologic Now* (2012). Drawing heavily on the work of political philosopher Jane Bennett, Ellsworth and Kruse locate art and design practices as geologic events formed from earth materials. In contrast, João Ribas gathers together a collection of foundational texts including Smithson's "Entropy and the New Monuments" to map the Holocene as "the period of geological time in which human civilisation has flourished" (2014: 21). Reducing the Anthropocene to a footnote, Ribas situates human impact within the Holocene. In each instance Smithson is both a go-to marker and a critical voice: his works are held up as icons of art's place in both the Holocene and Anthropocene.

Feminist critics of land art have long asserted that the signal gesture of land art is one of limiting and framing views, of focusing attention (Lippard, 2013; Tang, 2015; Geyer and Berlo, 2008; Kushner, 2013). For example, whilst also asserting its importance, Lucy Lippard assailed such framing of the land as a fundamentally “colonial” gesture, one “made from metropolitan headquarters... offer[ing] an antidote to an urban landscape crammed with art and visual competition” (Lippard, 2013: 88). While Smithson was sensitive to such criticisms, playfully mocking his own East Coast pedigree in his video *East Coast, West Coast*, made in collaboration with Nancy Holt in 1969, such self-consciousness does not neutralize the critique. And so, interestingly, *Jetty* on the one hand embodies precisely the kind of naive ignorance of place that engenders a human intervention in the environment, while on the other hand the work exhibits the quality of interdisciplinarity characteristic of engagements with the Anthropocene.

Smithson ensured that *Jetty* asserts its simultaneous relevance in multiple domains and discourses, in part through the co-existence of these conflicting positions. Its simultaneous relevance was also assured through his materials for the sculpture, his choice of spiral form based on Native American mythologies of the site, and his presentation of that sculpture in multiple media and forms (Gilbert-Rolfe and Johnston, 1976: 67). Thus *Jetty* paradoxically both formally engages in the kind of delimiting framings and

appropriations that feminism, post-colonial criticism, and critical theories of the Anthropocene reject, even as it performs its relevance outside of the art world—making it Anthropocenic by design. The internal contradictions pile up, and arguments ensue: But, *isn't* Jetty undeniably colonial, imposing an outsider's will on the land, a will that is preserved and tended-to by the artworld powers-that-be?; But if it *is* colonial, isn't that anathema to the collaboration and interdisciplinarity necessary to address the Anthropocene? Is *Spiral Jetty* simply a reflection of the geological age of the humans and all the multivalence that that entails?; How does *Jetty* behave? If the Anthropocene is understood through the entanglements of capitalism and colonisation and gender as layered over and within land and environment, to be Anthropocenic means that *Jetty* is not and never was a singular subject. In fact it is as an Anthropocenic object—one that behaves in the way the Anthropocene does—that *Jetty* is such an important marker. It is a marker and therefore, for better and for worse, a symbol of humanity's irreparable impact on the planet—impact measured in damage, the damage measured in time.

Furthermore, if it is true that Smithson's work serves as a model for art in the Anthropocene, with the understanding that his art encompasses his practices with text, what then does Smithson's writing tell us about art writing in the Anthropocene? What does this writing look like, and at? Critical art writing about the Anthropocene typically does one of

two things. Art writers either identify sets of disconnections modelled in the illustrative ecocritical modes that have dominated literary criticism, for example Malcolm Miles's work on eco-aesthetics (2014), or construct narratives that hold such chaos at bay, and in which art can save the world such as T. J. Demos's *Against the Anthropocene* (2017). Each model operates as a black-box: a discrete space in which small boys run in circles, demons rush to sort hot from cold, entropy is averted, and the Earth returned to a healthier state (see Hayles 1999: 101-102).

There are, of course, important exceptions. Arguing that we cannot see the Anthropocene but we can "vizualise" it, theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff suggests that the Anthropocene has resulted in an "aesthetic anaesthesia of the senses" (2014: 224). In his eyes, we can no longer make sense of the dominant tangle of capital and visibility in the Anthropocene and that our next step is to engage in countervisuality and counter-aesthetics. Making a similar observation around the aesthetics of the Anthropocene geographer Kathryn Yusoff's explorations of philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's observations on geopower suggest that art practices and art writing are concerned with "the possibility of the new, overcoming the containment of the present to elaborate on futures yet to come" (2012: 971). Also within geography, Harriet Hawkins (2015) has made a clear case for a consideration of geoaesthetics as a mode that brings together considerations of

environment, place, geology and art history. Yet all these observations turn to critical, historical and philosophical writings outside of art history to locate the Anthropocene in work of art. But how do we bring these multivarious understandings into a deeper engagement with the art objects and texts themselves. Where is the Anthropocene *in* art?

Until art writers can recognize a work like *Jetty* as both a subject of land art *and* disrupted ecosystem *and* elite tourist site *and* geological object *and* any number of other things, without prioritizing one characterization over the other, art writing will struggle to admit the Anthropocene.

Thus far, we have made two perhaps conflicting claims for what the Anthropocene means for *Spiral Jetty*. First that *Jetty* is an interdisciplinary model in which a marker of the Anthropocene can be found, and second that it is troubled: that to bear the weight of the Anthropocene means that *Jetty* is inevitably entangled in the very behaviours that have served to bring the Anthropocene into being. It is Anthropocenic because it confirms that there is power in numbers, and it reaches out to other disciplines, *and* ____, *and* ____. The eclecticism begs the question: if it is so contradictory, and if our approach reinforces the problems with the canon that have plagued art history, what can *Spiral Jetty* actually contribute to an understanding of how we write the Anthropocene? One answer, such as there is one, is that if *Spiral Jetty* is a masculine imposition on the physicality of the earth,

this does not mean we must read it as such. In fact, this is precisely the promise and challenge of thinking carefully about art in the Anthropocene: we must acknowledge the co-existence of many disciplines, allowing for the simultaneity of many readings, as the Anthropogenic object passes through many hands.

PART TWO: Spiral Jetty

We anticipated that the next step in this project would be to look for *Spiral Jetty* in the critical literature of the Anthropocene. Inspired by Ghosh's declaration that to write the Anthropocene involves risk and stepping into zones of unknowing, we decided that if we were to continue writing alongside Smithson there were now three critical activities to undertake. The first was to be plural: to write with narrative voices that were in between, that could break down, bubble up, disagree, and re-form in new allegorical valances. It wasn't just Smithson who could show us the way — there were models, texts emerging across the spectrum of arts writing that braided voices, that disclosed their geoaesthetic strata as they wrote. The second was to approach sites of resistance both real and metaphorical, that had already formed within existing relationships of writing and environment. Ghosh writes that the vocabulary and substance of climate change resist the

arts; because like petroleum it is “viscous, foul smelling, repellant to all the senses” (2016: 73). He says, the Anthropocene resists literature because the Anthropocene is both the recent past as well as the present and future. And yet he also points to sites of resistance: authors Margaret Atwood, Barbara Kingsolver, and Ursula Le Guin, whose work embrace geological timescales that are beyond the science fictions most of us can imagine. Our third activity was to test Smithson’s geoaesthetic modes with feminist methodologies by paying attention to the points at which Smithson’s writing and *Spiral Jetty* have been exceeded by evidence of ecological, social and cultural inequity. This last step was less a question of drawing new boundaries, than one of mode. How could we argue for a seminal artwork by a successful, well-funded white man, as a marker of the Anthropocene in our field? Surely there were other options?

Being on the edge of the Tasman sea in the south Pacific Ocean , and furthest from the site, Susan would go first.

On Tuesday, following a provocation to write about libraries, I sat at my computer and began the process of unearthing the stories of *Spiral Jetty*. *Jetty* had always held a place

in my image of the world, but I had never really paid it much attention. Now I allowed myself to draw the material presence of something fixed in space on the other side of the world a little closer through the screen, and make it manifest. Noting that the Utah Geological Survey had been keeping an eye on the *Jetty* since it was built, I copy down the specifics 1,500 feet (457 meters) long, 15 feet (4.6 meters) wide, a counter clockwise spiral and only visible when the climate conditions cause the level of the lake to drop below an elevation of 4,197.8 feet (1,280.2 meters) (Case, 2003). This measurement of lake levels via elevation connects the lake to the land and other bodies of water, out to “sea level” which isn’t really a fixed data point but a mathematical geoid: the marker at which the *Jetty* begins. The Great Salt Lake is a terminal basin, the water can only escape through evaporation. When the *Jetty* was built the water was particularly low in the lake, but by 1972 it had risen dramatically, mostly submerging the *Jetty* until 2002 when regional droughts caused the *Jetty* to reappear. The historical average surface elevation of the lake is 4,200 feet, currently the water elevation is 4191.5 feet, new signs have been erected and tourism is booming. *Spiral Jetty* is built into the north arm of the lake where the water averages 27 percent salinity. This means that the *Jetty* isn’t just a geological object; it is a habitat for salt-tolerant bacteria and algae. Drawing their energy from the sun, microbial

pigmented Halophiles colour the water pink. The salt is good, it cements the *Jetty* together, forming a hard crust, a protective layer on its surface.

Bob Phillips, a Utah contractor experienced in the building of mineral-extraction dykes, collaborated with Smithson on the build. Phillips moved 7,000 tons of black basalt from the shore of the lake, that had been placed there by Pliocene volcanic eruptions about 5 million to 2 million years ago. “It's tricky working out on that lake,” Phillips says. “There's lots of backhoes buried out there.” A proposal in 2008 by a Canadian company to drill for oil in the Great Salt Lake, five miles from *Jetty*, received 3000 letters of protest. Phillips believed that Smithson would have had less of a problem with oil drilling hurting the *Jetty* than with the “well-meaning” clean up of the shore.

Just after his death, Phillips's son took a collection of sketches for appraisal to a taping of the popular television series *Antiques Roadshow* (2017). Pointing gently with a pencil in hand, he shows the lines where Smithson and Phillips have measured out the size of the spiral, and where Phillips has added lines in red crayon detailing the slope and shape of the rock bed and Basalt covering. Just to the side are arrows drawn in by Smithson: to the left “oil wells” to the right “sandbank.”

I find myself travelling past the monument, and following tangents that map the Anthropocenic stench of petroleum; after all, Ghosh comments, it is easier to aestheticize

oil than coal. Over 500 orphan wells remain unplugged in Utah, the funds from their lease helping clean up the Lake (Maffly, 2016). In 2005 Utah's Division of Oil, Gas and Mining removed “rubbish including gathering lines, boilers, tubing, pump jacks, tanks, the skeletal remains of a single-wide trailer, and even the rusted hulk of a military amphibious vehicle” (Milligan, 2006). I try to trace a route in Google maps from the site of the Trinity tests to *Spiral Jetty*. Google suggests I can drive it in about 13 hours, which sounds about right.

Other boundaries rear up. As he narrates the journey of being in a helicopter flying over the *Jetty* Smithson talks of the searing blindness caused by looking too closely at the sun, and the realisation that to tell the story of the *Jetty* he would need to find a map of a previous world: “The continents of the Jurassic period merged with continents of today” (1996: 151). Smithson starts looking for the Pterodactyls, corals and sponges of a previous time.

Back to the library. The geologists describe the *Jetty* being “draped” with a crust of white salt crystals. In another image, the water around the *Jetty* is startlingly pink, the salt-crystal surface is bleached out and there is a dark shadow of a plane, its tips fitting nicely between the edges of the inner spiral. The photo was taken on September 14, 2002 and the lake level is 4197.3 feet. I search for an online calculator to convert the measurement to metrics.

To write the present fiction of *Spiral Jetty* in the Anthropocene means unpacking my library from the boxes of a recent move; and tracing my way across the edge of an ephemeral archive of texts and resources in which lives, memories, and intimacies intersect with formal discussion and the hushed tones of admiration. At the same time, *Spiral Jetty* threatens to slip once more under its crystal blanket: can it be a marker for the Anthropocene if we cannot see it? Ghosh says that to escape our logocentrism, perhaps we should think in images. He points towards the greatest fear of contemporary art, not the tangle of interdisciplinarity that threatens to restrain Anthropocenic work, but a radical transformation in which fictions become our reality, and our images become illustrations. To think the Anthropocene is to think in images. It strikes me that art history has until very recently simply ignored climate change because of our resistance to becoming a didactic, an illustration of some outside truth. The predicament of *Spiral Jetty* as a potential marker of the Anthropocene adds to this resistance. As soon as we approach *Jetty* it quietly sinks below layers of well-worn discourse, wrapped in mirrored crystals of familiarity. Smithson himself complained, “the art object [is isolated] into a physical void, independent from external relationships such as land, labor, and class” (Perloff, 1990: 85).

Spiral Jetty has a different life outside of art. In a populist piece for *American Scientist* English professor Robert Louise Chianese (2013: 20-21) describes *Spiral Jetty*: “a

useless berm, a raised driveway, a widget on a stalk... inert and drab, isolated... essentially pointless.” Chianese’s concern is with the environmental impacts of Jetty, and he ends his short piece commenting on the irony of artists and activists using the global importance of *Jetty* to prevent oil-drilling nearby. Contemporary geological functions of *Jetty* are mapped by city councils, and geological engineers. It may disappear from view, but it will not disappear. The Anthropocene muddies the waters.

There is another caveat here. The Anthropocene is not one and the same with anthropogenic climate change. One is perhaps the symptom of the other, but they also do not always slot nicely together. Critical to living and working within the Anthropocene is how we use its very foundations to understand the story of the *anthropos*. In these contexts we define the age of the Anthropocene more broadly than just geology, and climate change; it is a time in which unequal and cruel distributions of labour, brutal wars, forced migration and regime changes triggered by drought, and the violence of neo-liberalism waging war across the planet are all contributing factors. We are all living with the real effects of the Anthropocene—a geological age in which even the surface of the Earth has become untrustworthy—.

Techniques can be found close at hand. Alena J. Williams says of Smithson’s wife and frequent collaborator Holt “her work has rarely engaged with Feminist debates.

However [it] suggests how one might alter a field of production by merely setting foot into it (2011: 19). Williams talks about how Holt's work "illustrate[s] how the constitution of landscape is bound not only to the physicality of the earth, but also to the physiology and psychology of the viewer, as well as the sensibility of the person framing its view" (Williams, 2111: 19). One is true of the other. How might I, as a feminist art writer, set foot in the Anthropocene and find within it *Spiral Jetty*? How can *this* be where my attention leads? "The scale of the *Spiral Jetty* tends to fluctuate depending on where the viewer happens to be" (Smithson, 1996: 147). That is Smithson himself, anticipating me sitting here, now.

It is October 2014 and the Utah Museum of Fine Arts is taking science teachers to see the *Spiral Jetty*. The first page of the teacher's guide introduces the site and describes why it should be considered a masterpiece. The following pages are a series of worksheets that will encourage students to "use art to see first hand the effects of climate change and natural disasters" (Decker, 2014). Teachers are advised to check the water level of Great Salt Lake through USGS National Water Information System before heading out to Rozel Point. Then students are encouraged to build their own shoebox earthworks. The aim is to model environmental transformations. Students subject their shoebox earthworks to a series of time-based experiments. There is a list of appropriate learning outcomes. The questions

get more and more complex. Towards the end of the exercise students have to report on the relationship between Smithson's definition of entropy, and climate change. I begin to imagine these 8th grade students, muddy feet, misting their shoeboxes, thinking about entropy and an artist spinning out of control above them.

It seems that scale is the only way to understand the entropic forces of *Spiral Jetty*. Here in this non-site, erosion and physical disorder are met by a solid object — what can be more solid than 7000 tons of volcanic basalt—?

I wonder now about walking back through the ecosphere, through the classroom, through all those black and white slides shown in cold lecture halls, to a point where I discover the ecology of *Spiral Jetty*: an ecology that might well up out of the Anthropocene.

Eventually I push the art history books aside and begin on a new pile: Teresa Brennan, Donna Haraway, Carolyn Merchant, Anna Tsing, and Deborah Bird Rose. If *Spiral Jetty* is indeed a marker of the Anthropocene in art then its impacts must be able to be traced here, to this pile of books on a desk overlooking the ancient coast of Gondwana and the sinews of Collins Creek as it winds its way off the escarpment and down into the Pacific Ocean.

Liz picks up the story, at another time, in another country.

One peculiarity of squinting back at *Jetty* from the vantage of today is that it appears to align geographically and chronologically with other markers along the horizon of the mid-century — the Trinity test site, a moment in time when carbon dioxide ppm increased markedly, the expansion of irrigation and agriculture into the desert— markers that *also* delineate the onset of the Anthropocene in the purview of other disciplines.

Another peculiarity of looking back at *Jetty* from the vantage of today is that we inevitably introduce that asynchronous word, “back” to such discussions, because for most of us that is chronologically true. We look at anachronistic documentation of the *Jetty* in books, in online slide-shows, in exhibitions. But this documentation, which was by definition made in some anterior time to our own, totally undermines the fundamental fact that *Jetty* is an object *that exists today*. That it is not simply an historical object, or an artifact, but an actual place existing in the present, as well as a future destination.

Unlike many, whose mental image of *Jetty* is crafted solely from its documentation, mine comes from having actually seen it. I made a pilgrimage to it last year, long before Susan and I had any intention of writing anything together, let alone this. Nonetheless, I

went there. *In person. In real life. On site.* And as this pile-up of prepositions make evident, going to see it *IRL* really fetishizes *the place*. As Lippard (2013: 82-83) points out, most people know *Jetty* from pictures and, as Owens (1979: 122) and O’Sullivan (2017: 61) claim, its documentation is not only just as good, it is *interchangeable* with the sculpture.

So why go to the trouble? If there is, as claimed, some specifically-contemporary exhaustion caused by continuous anxieties about “missing out” fueled by the algorithmic comparison-machine of social media, (Przybylski and Murayama et al, 2013: 1841-48) wouldn’t the Utah-sited *Jetty*’s “infinitely substitutable” (Owens, 1979: 122) quality render it essentially redundant, if not irrelevant, in light of its other, more convenient forms? Wouldn’t a savvy citizen of the Anthropocene take that as a sign that she is effectively “let off the hook” of needing to have that experience? Why bother?

Well, the short answer is: my husband, James. He’s a sculptor, and therefore has a thing for “things in the world.” He would not be convinced by Owens’ equivalences—or, rather, he would be convinced, but not *satisfied*. Which points out the obvious: what is true for Owens is not for James. We art-enthusiasts tend to take for granted that what works for us works for everyone, that what convinces us is not a product of our own experiences and tastes but rather confirmation of the art-writer’s *right-ness* about a given work, rather than simply an alignment of our preferences, an art-critical filter bubble. Indeed Owens’s art-as-

text notion, while conceptually precise and effective for those of us (me!) inclined to consume art in that plane, is not satisfying for those (James) who are interested in materials. In matter.

And so when at the end of 2017 it happened that my family was moving from New York City, our home together for more than a decade, back to my ancestral land of California, and it became clear that James and, for some portion of the journey, I would be making this trip by car, we planned our route with a trip to *Jetty* in mind. (We had done a similar cross-country drive for our honeymoon years earlier, stopping at another iconic artwork Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977), so there was some sentimentality intrinsic to this transitional-moment land-art pilgrimage.)

It is worth wondering if the explanation for Smithson's work's longstanding relevance in artworld discourse is because he ticks both my and James's boxes, his work a proverbial "perfect marriage" of content and form, satisfying both semiosis-minded conceptualists and hunky materialists alike. Perhaps Smithson made something for everyone by producing both the sculpture that stays put out in Utah and its multifarious and circulating equivalents on film, on paper, and in the gallery.

But what about technology? I think another reason we went to see *Jetty* in person was precisely *because* we were told so often that the documentation is *just as good*. There

is so much in contemporary life that we are exposed to remotely (ideas, people, places) through the increasingly rapid circulation of information online and elsewhere, and that convenience and accessibility is, all in all, a blessing; but the privilege of being an artist in this era is in getting to indulge in these specifically inefficient inquiries to test hypotheses of one's own design. In a sense, I think we wanted to scrutinize the art-historical claim of equivalence for ourselves, measuring the distance between our expectations of the work and the physical work itself.

After leaving our girls with their grandparents in California, I flew to Salt Lake City, where James picked me up in our car so that I could finish the long cross-country drive with him. On the way to *Jetty* we stopped at the Golden Spike National Historic Site, which commemorates the joining of the final rails of the transcontinental railroad (see **Figure three**). There's a museum-building set alongside the train tracks, so you can walk out and see the famous nail, although I was more interested in the documentation inside where it was warmer. One of the park rangers, seeing me looking at the names of those depicted in the famous photo of the railroad finally meeting in the middle of the country, two trains nose to nose with various proud, quiescent people gathered around them, asked who I was looking for. I told him that Theodore Judah was my distant relative (my grandmother's maiden name is Judah), and that he was the engineer of the transcontinental

railroad although family lore is that he was cheated out his profits by the Big Four, went crazy, and died young. Could the ranger show me where he was in the photo?

To my disappointment, my uncle wasn't in the iconic image, nor, it seems, was his wife Anne. (He was dead by the time it was taken and no one thought to invite his widow to the celebration.) The ranger abruptly disabused me of my garbled memories of the family history: yes, it is probably fair to say that Judah started out a bit naive about the financial value of the thing he was creating, but no, it's not fair to say he was "cheated" by the Big Four— they were simply rich investors in the project and he was not; Judah in fact contracted yellow fever, cruelly, on a cross country trip back to New York to lobby the Rockefellers for funds so that he could buy out the Big Four, or at least secure his own a stake in the railroad— he died before he could get there; he was a "visionary" engineer and inventor, who was called "Crazy Judah" for the improbability of his dream to build a railroad across the Sierras— he was not himself "crazy"; and so on.

I felt faintly shamed by these strangers who knew more about my family history in the technological West than I did. Not more than some of the members of my family, but more than I. I wasn't really upset by the *facts* that they knew that I did not, but rather that they had some insight that I didn't into the trajectory of one line of my family that flung it

out into the West, a trajectory that I myself was still on. Did these rangers know where it would take *me*?

James and I got back into the car, and headed down a long dirt road through cattle pastures full of fluffy, startled cows. James was telling me about how we had to “be careful” because his friend’s friend had warned him that some huckster-artist had constructed a smaller simulacrum *Spiral Jetty* that was visible on the road to the bigger, actual one. Not to be fooled. As we bounced and jostled our way down the dirt track, eventually turning right so that the salty crust of the dried lakebed ran along our left, a disappointingly small spiral slowly came into view. “Ha ha ha!” we laughed knowingly. “There’s the fake one.”

Fifty feet later we arrived at *Jetty*’s parking lot. The joke was on us. (A wash of awkward emotions, I wish I had filmed our faces as we came to the realization.) We got out of the car feeling embarrassed for ourselves. What assholes! Duped by the *real* thing.

Jetty’s parking lot is slightly elevated, carved out of a hillside abutting the lake, so we started scrambling down the rocky hill towards the work. “Should we lock the car?” I wondered aloud. James stopped, and looked at me like I was a maniac. We hadn’t seen another human for miles.

At the bottom of the hill, the lakebed. *Jetty* seemed to gather itself up, reclaiming some of the authoritative monumentality that our misrecognition had cost it. *Jetty* is actually quite large. Surprisingly so, when you get up close. There was no water in the lake when we visited, and so the igneous rocks and raised sandbed were totally exposed. Even though there was a sign in the parking area warning visitors not to take away rocks or to mark them at all, there was right in the center of the spiral one larger rock with various messages and initials scrawled on it. We went about rolling it over to expose its more “untouched” aspect, and then replaced rocks here and there that had rolled out of place. After a few minutes of tidying, the whole thing was markedly more legible as a spiral. As Art.

James took it upon himself to walk the whole coil, from where it grew out of the bank, to the center, and back again, in a methodical way (which took a while), while I vivisected it, scrambling this way and that. Sticking it to the man.

That achieved, we took some selfies, got back in the car, and headed west.

PART THREE: Geoaesthetics

It is no coincidence that the artistic imagination of heroic (mostly male, white) New York art-darlings of the late 60s and beyond were drawn to the same landscape as the U.S.

military for its weapons testing in the decades immediately prior to (and since) *Jetty's* construction. They were seduced by the same thing: the purported *emptiness* of the American West.

Lippard explains the necessity of emptiness to land art, describing the lengths to which land artists would go in order to create works that faithfully illustrated their own misconceptions about the West. She writes that “in a rural setting... land art would more often entail subtractions (of “ranchettes” dotting the open landscape) than additions” (2013: 88-89). And these kinds of “subtractions” were of course no less necessary for the scientists and soldiers using the West as their continental test site, who seized land from ranchers and farmers (and any unregistered inhabitants they could ““smoke out of [their] hole”” (Fehner and Gosling, 2000: 51)) to create the required space for the testing grounds for their nuclear arsenal. And today, as scientists evaluate another human-made slow-rolling disaster threatening life, and life sustaining atmospheres, it is fitting that this same site has drawn scientists of another kind, geologists, scouring the earth for markers of a “golden spike” (Carrington: 2018) of their own. The persistence of the American West as a focus for attention in the Anthropocene is troubling because we know that the cascading effects of climate change and other ecological shifts occurring in the Anthropocene bear unevenly across the globe, with those in the Global South much more likely to feel its pernicious

effects, more quickly and more violently. Ghosh points to the bitter irony of this: “The Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us” (Ghosh, 2016: 62-63).

The overlapping metaphors and interdisciplinary resonances found in our imaginary of the American West tend to amplify each other, and therefore continue to pull focus from the Global South. These recurring echoes about the American West point both to the region’s persistent overdetermination of our discussions about the Anthropocene generally at the same time as they also point to the West’s enduring lure. The diversity of such disciplines currently scouring the West for their equivalent golden spike marking first traces within the methodological boundaries of their domain, from the geological to the technological to the art historical, all point to the supra-disciplinary draw of this place, or perhaps more precisely its mythologies. The convergence of so many overlapping claims on the American West propose that the Anthropocene is simultaneously intervening into each of our disciplines, making its presence known. If, as Ghosh (2016: 83) claims “the Anthropocene has become our interlocutor” then it is no surprise that metaphors about the empty land are starting to pile up and trip us, and our disciplinary delineations are tangling.

Which begs the question: did the Anthropocene invent land art? In other words, is the logic of land art dependent on the Anthropocene, both as the nexus for its concepts and

the originator of its forms? And, if it is, where is the evidence of the Anthropocene in art? First, the idea that the Anthropocene is responsible for land art asserts that Smithson's works were co-productions with the material world, and that *Jetty* shares some of its agency with the Anthropocene. To extend this a little: if the Anthropocene possesses the agency by which bodies are made and through which they relate to others (human and nonhuman), it equally displaces the horizon by which we have measured art practice. In this, rather than being defined as an event within which art and writing occur, the Anthropocene accounts for the set of behaviours that we name art and writing. Smithson understood this set of behaviours as multiple forms of displacement (1996: 121). *Spiral Jetty* displaced previous understandings of what an art object might be, at the same time as it presented a geological environment for new life. In this sense, *Spiral Jetty* is an artwork that both reflects the environmental, geological and atmospheric modalities of the Anthropocene *and* is an environment, geology and atmosphere formed from many bodies: human, animal, mineral, algal. *Spiral Jetty* then, in addition to being an artwork, is an ecosystem whose displacement is in the very soil, basalt, water, salt and algae from which it was made. This seems evident enough, and Smithson admitted as much when he acknowledged that, "*Spiral Jetty* is physical enough to be able to withstand all these climate changes, yet it's intimately involved with those climate changes and natural disturbances" (1996: 298). This

“intimate involvement” in Smithson’s work is both less and more radical than it sounds: less radical because it is not the first to make this claim (photography, for example, has from its inception been framed as “the pencil of nature” (Talbot, 1844)); yet it is also more radical than it may seem on its face because land art instrumentalizes the Anthropocene’s promiscuous transgression of boundaries, and its agency, claiming them as its own. The complexities and implications of the Anthropocene do not fit neatly with singular, discrete moments of recognition; the Anthropocene demands metaphors, chains of signification, just as Smithson’s work does. To react against *discontinuous* categories is what Smithson learned from the Anthropocene. Second, if the logic of land art *is* dependent on the Anthropocene, then this implies that art writing— critical writing, art theory, art history, nonfiction narratives, and so forth— is as well.

Smithson is a doubly meaningful marker in the search for the Anthropocenic in art history then, not only because of *Jetty* but for his writing beyond it, art writing which braids personal narratives with outside texts, scientific propositions, and theoretical arguments. Alongside Smithson’s “Earth Projects,” his earlier essay “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” models such convergences and conjunctions by intercutting his narrative of a day’s travels in New Jersey with the voices and texts of other sources around him, including the newspaper on his lap, road signs that he passes, and the box of Kodak

film for his camera. One reason texts, like Smithson's "Passaic," often incorporate external sources from the world around the author, even when writing in the first person, is because to do so asserts the interconnectedness of the author/subject with his/her/their world, as well as the plurality of voices, of subjectivities, in that world itself. Just as above we wrote that Smithson's *Jetty* is Anthropocenic because it is conceived as part of an interconnected ecological and geological system instead of discrete from it, the braided narrative in Smithson's writing does the same. Such moves are common to art writing today, where the text is constantly informed by the Google search bar, and where it is impossible to disentangle the self from the planet, yet they are also easily located in writing that pursued the multivalences of postmodernism. If the art of the Anthropocene does begin at and intersect with postmodernism, then these multivalent voices are only one small part of its story. In this way too Smithson's writing is a significant golden spike for shifts in the discipline of art, because the point at which he is writing his texts is, resultantly, the point at which Anthropocenic art writing emerges.

It is perhaps unsurprising that so much Anthropocenic art writing has been produced by artists, because, as curator Brian Wallis explains, in the introduction to his 1987 book *Blasted Allegories*, an anthology of writing by artists:

It is not necessarily that [artists] supplant theoretical forms of writing, but that they open avenues beyond those allowed by the current consensus of critical forms. That is, they afford a way of creating new models, new identities, and new options for movement. These writings demonstrate alternative capacities to generate ambiguous, complex, and experiential forms of knowledge which are collective and cultural but not equatable with bourgeois norms-- this is stressed as a basis for broad political change (1987: xvii).

These “experiential forms of knowledge” that artists’ writings often detail operate in parallel with the kind of knowledge production or practice-based research that many contemporary, conceptually-driven studio practices undertake. Artists are freed from needing to build on any “consensus of critical forms” precisely because those forms are not their own; they didn’t originate in the studio. Further, in the challenge of reinventing art writing in Anthropocene, artists have another natural advantage; it is in creative practices,

rather than critical, scientific, or historical ones, that society inscribes its dreams of the future. This is precisely why art matters. Gloria Anzaldua, a Chicana poet whose own programmatically boundary-crossing writing from the 1980s continues to inspire writers merging theory and memoir today, made clear the profound potentiality in the work of writers and artists, explaining, "like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture creates" (1999: 100). Ghosh makes a similar argument in his conclusion to *The Great Derangement*, writing:

the great, irreplaceable potentiality of fiction is that it makes possible the imagining of possibilities. And to imagine other forms of human existence is exactly the challenge that is posed by the climate crisis: for if there is any one thing that global warming has made perfectly clear it is that to think about the world only as it is amounts to a formula for collective suicide. We need, rather, to envision what it might be (2016: 128-129).

Artist Martha Rosler, who describes her own work as “dealing with issues of personal life in my own work, in particular how people’s thoughts and opinions can be related to their social positions” (2004: 7), describes art’s purpose more succinctly, writing, “the

clarification of vision is a first step toward reasonably and humanely changing the world” (2004: 8). Given such a mandate, it is, indeed, most often artists who are producing critical art writing in an experiential, interdisciplinary, and polyphonic mode. Artists writing in such an Anthropocenic mode are not only Smithson, and Rosler, but many others, including Laurie Anderson, Adrian Piper, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Hito Stereyl, Liam Gillick, Thomas Hirschhorn, Victor Burgin, Chris Kraus, Moyra Davey, Judith Barry, Dan Graham, Jill Johnston, and certainly many more. This is not to say, however, that it is *only* artists who can write in such a mode. Experimental and Anthropocenic art writing is also produced by others working outside, but adjacent to, the studio. In addition to Lucy Lippard, we would add Maggie Nelson, Hilton Als, Lesley Stern, Rebecca Solnit, Molly Nesbit, Lynne Tillman, Dodie Bellamy, Brian Dillon, Laura Watts..... It is important to note that polyphony in Anthropocenic art writing is often literal, created by collaborators writing in pairs or groups, as with: Allan deSouza and Allyson Purpura, Simryn Gill and Michael Taussig; Julieta Aranda, Anton Vidokle, and Brian Kuan Wood; and Michael Marder and Annis Tondeur. (It is probably also meaningful that all of the collaborative groups we listed here include at least one artist.) Our lists here are partial, in both senses of that word, because they are necessarily incomplete and they are ours, biased by our specific experiences of the world. Yet it is noteworthy that so many of these writers are women

(women's writing traditionally having the dubious "advantage" of operating outside of the mainstream, as feminist literary scholars have long noted (Brody, 1993; Gilbert and Gubar, 1979; Le Guin, 2016)), and that so many authors in the "non-artist" category write in hybrid modes that have necessitated the invention of hyphenated literary genres often considered creative artforms themselves: auto-theory, ficto-criticism, new narrative, lyric essay, and---.

Which returns us to our initial question: "if the Anthropocene is all around us, where is it in art?" Can art writing really help us understand, and perhaps even respond to, the Anthropocene? Taking these works seriously entails also recognising them for their tangled, and multi-domain contradictions: forms of writing that are both art and text, descriptive and performative; a sculpture that is at once an imposition in a lake and a habitat for the creatures that live there; and works by authors who slip between confessional, critical positions, and descriptive narrative. In each instance these works mirror and teach us something about the character of the Anthropocene. They help us imagine new possibilities. Perhaps one solution to the problem that faces *us*, as artists and art writers circumscribed by our respective disciplines, time-zones, and cultures, lies in attempting to wrestle *together* with the Anthropocene as it surfaces in our messy and multivariant fields. Our work is suspended between the digital fluidity of the Internet and

the grainy particulars of the lake bed. Such suspensions contain a warning, because they not only model but embody the threat of messy, entangled, supradisciplinary metaphors, associations that arrive in seemingly endless chains that threaten precision and, in both senses, discipline. But these suspensions also offer a model; as we embrace emerging modes of critical art writing that are engaged and engaging, personal and polyphonic, perhaps radically digressive and always interdisciplinary, we find ourselves working outside of our disciplinary comforts. We must, as art writers in the Anthropocene, ensure that each link in our chains of reference, of metaphor, of allegory and allusion, connect clearly and logically to the next for our arguments to rattle and resonate, one link turning in on another in careful, conscious coils. In a spiral, perhaps.

<end> 10721 total words.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

We would like to acknowledge the support and collegiality of MECO, The Material Ecologies Research Network at University of Wollongong, Australia, and thank the

anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of our manuscript and their many insightful comments and suggestions.

IMAGES:

Figure One: Liz Linden. *Rozel Point, December 8, 2017*. 2017. Digital photograph of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, (1970).

Figure Two: Joseph Mallord William Turner. *Rain, Steam, and Speed – The Great Western Railway*. 1844. Oil on canvas, 91 x 121.8cm. Turner Bequest, The National Gallery, London.

Figure Three: Andrew J. Russell. *The ceremony for the driving of the golden spike at Promontory Summit, Utah on May 10, 1869; completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad*. At center left, Samuel S. Montague, Central Pacific Railroad, shakes hands with Grenville M. Dodge, Union Pacific Railroad (center right). U.T., May 10, 1869. Selenium-toned gelatin silver photograph, 28.2 cm x 35.5 cm. Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

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