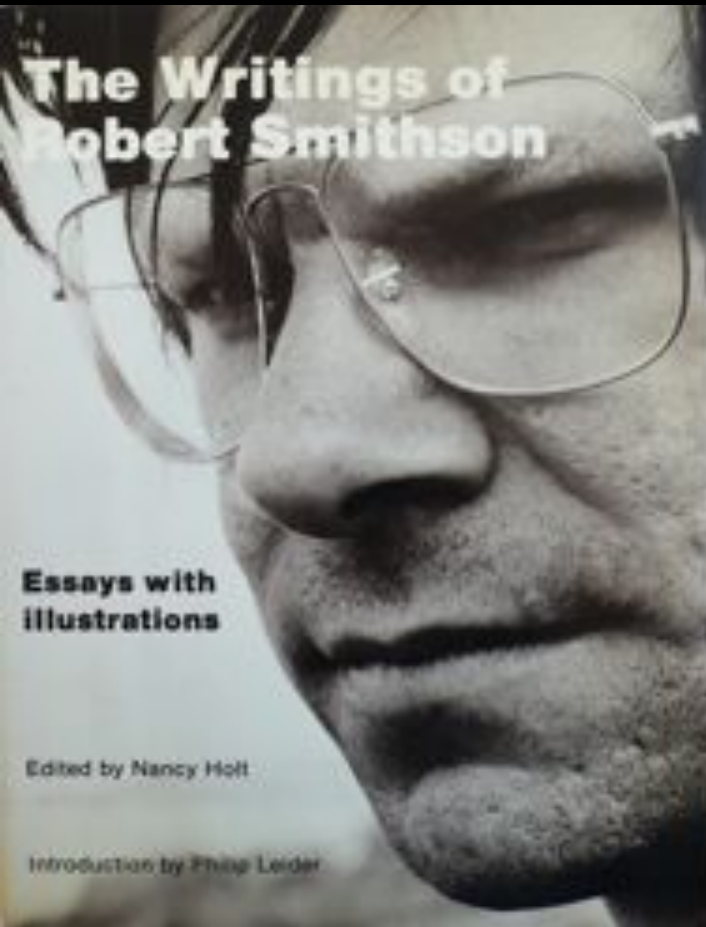




Smithson's Spirals, Pataphysics, and Syzygy

Edward A Shanken

www.artexetra.com



Robert Smithson, 1938-75



Alfred Jarry, 1873-1907

... seeking out and articulating an alternate reality, a new system of values in which the “imaginary nature of things as glimpsed by the heightened vision of poetry or science or love can be seized and lived as real”¹



Robert Smithson, 1938-75

1. Roger Shattuck, “Introduction”, in Alfred Jarry, *Exploits & Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician: A Neo-Scientific Novel*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1996): ix.



Alfred Jarry, 1873-1907

Pataphysics: the pursuit of “imaginary solutions” that examine “the laws governing exceptions” and describe “a universe which can be – and perhaps should be – envisaged in place of the traditional one”²



Robert Smithson, 1938-75

2. Steven Harris, “‘Pataphysical Graham’: A Consideration of the Pataphysical Dimension of the Artistic Practice of Rodney Graham,” *Tate Papers*, Autumn, 2006 (online) fn 13.

Smithson read Jarry while working on Spiral Jetty...



Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970
Rozelle Point, Great Salt Lake, UT

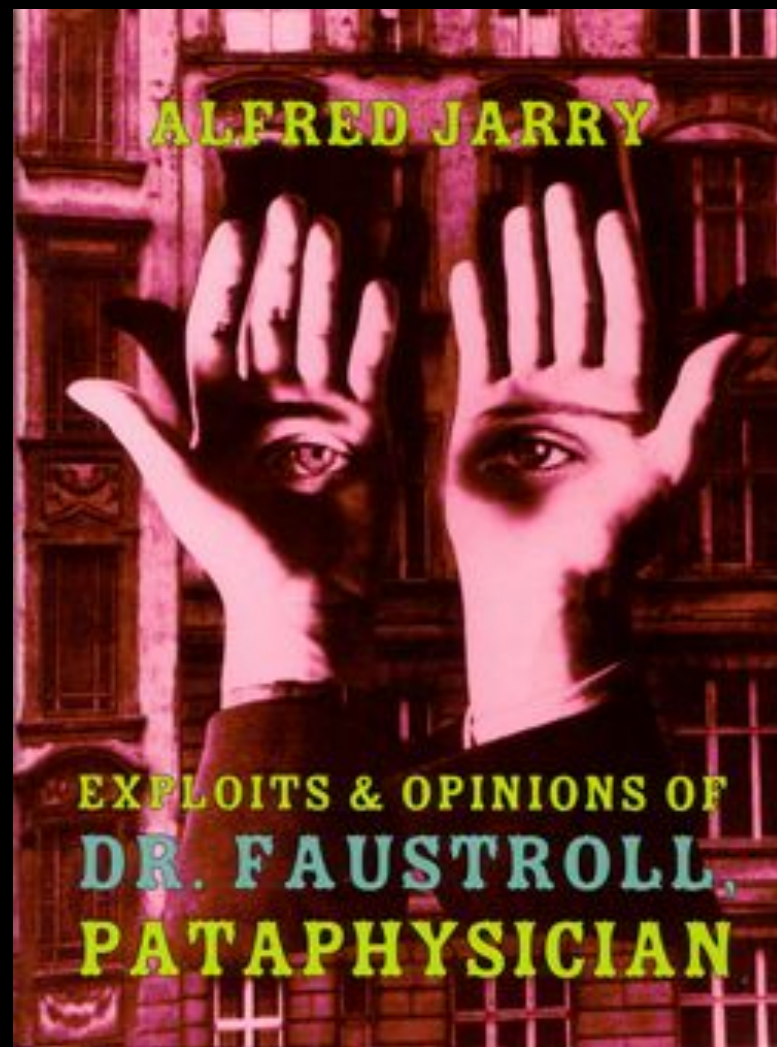


Smithson, *Spiral Hill*, 1971
Zand-En Exploitatie-Mij
Emmen, The Netherlands

Commissioned by *Sonsbeek '71*
Beyond Lawn and Order



Jarry, woodcut, c 1896



Written 1890s, pub. 1911, 1996 edition
Cover: Herbert Bayer, *Lonely Metropolitan*, 1932



Maurice Denis, *Procession Under the Trees*, 1892

Dr. Faustroll bathes in “two-tone wallpaper painted by Maurice Denis, with a design of trains climbing up spirals.”

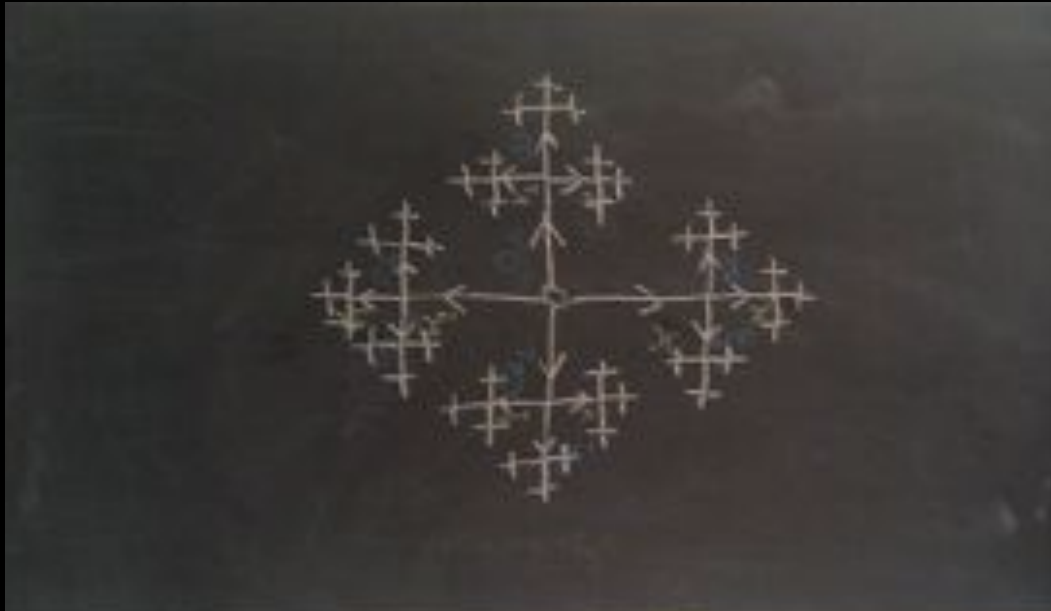


Maurice Denis, *Procession Under the Trees*, 1892



Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970

“the wallpaper of Faustroll’s body was unrolled [another spiral form] by the saliva and teeth of the water.... Like a musical score, all art and all science were written in the curves of [his] limbs, and their progression to an infinite degree was prophesied therein.”



Cayley graph

“For, just as Professor Cayley [British mathematician] recorded the past in the two dimensions of a black surface [chalk-board], so the progress of the solid future entwined the body in spirals.” Jarry, *Dr. Faustroll*, p 99.

Copied by Smithson in his notebook, *A Metamorphosis of the Spiral*

Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970
Rozelle Point, Great Salt Lake, UT



recording the past

Smithson, *Spiral Hill*, 1971
Zand-En Exploitatie-Mij
Emmen, The Netherlands



a prop for envisioning the future



Jarry, woodcut, c. 1896

clockwise spiral from
extremity to core

“universal symbol of growth”



Smithson, sketch for *Spiral Hill*, 1971

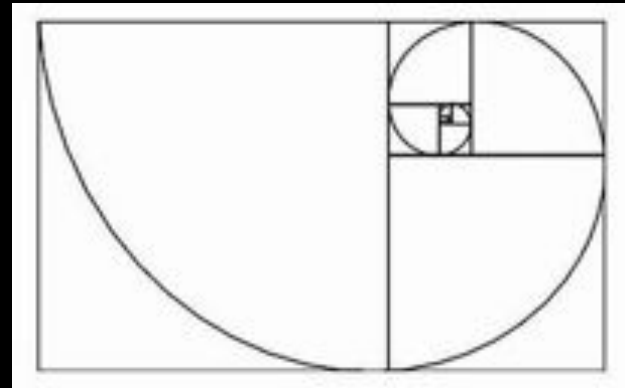


Smithson, film still, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970

← counterclockwise ↑

entropy

Paul Klee Notebooks
Volume 1
The thinking eye



“Am I being released from the center in a movement that is becoming more and more free?
Or: Are my movements more and more bound to the centre, which in the end will swallow me up?”



GRIMAL
JETTY
←



Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* (excerpt) 32 min, color, 1970





Smithson's film suspends the spiral journey into the future – at least as a corporeal experience. It places physical embodiment in tension with the ephemeral liberation afforded by the spiraling camera, which frees the point of view-*cum*-spirit from the physical meat of existence.





Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970
Rozelle Point, Great Salt Lake, UT



Smithson, *Spiral Hill*, 1971
Zand-En Exploitatie-Mij
Emmen, The Netherlands

Commissioned by *Sonsbeek '71*
Beyond Lawn and Order

Smithson's spirals generate affective responses and effects; physiological parallels to the "crystal steps [that wind themselves] into a spiral during growth"

1.5mm graphite crystal showing a 12-sided growth spiral with two kinds of steps. Note both clockwise and counter-clockwise spirals.

John A. Jaszczak collection and photo.





John Langdon, Ambigrams, c 1973

Syzygy symbolizes the “the communication of the conscious and unconscious minds: the conjunction of two organisms without the loss of identity” – Carl Jung



Smithson, *Broken Circle and Spiral Hill*, 1971

“celestial observatory or an astrotime machine”

Rob Graziani, *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape* (Cambridge UP 2004): 125.



Broken Circle
Holland 1972
R Smith

shot from the
top of the Spiral
Hill

29.6.71



Great Serpent Mound, Adams County, Ohio, US (c1070). Photograph: Richard A Cooke/Corbis



Squier and Davis, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1848.



Great Serpent Mound, c. 1070



Smithson, *Broken Circle and Spiral Hill*, 1971



Caspar David Friedrich,
Wanderer Above Mists, c 1818



Robert Smithson atop *Spiral Hill*, 1971



a “disciplinary device in jeopardy ... a broken clock” - Rob Graziani

“incantations ... of an arcane and intricate theological argument”

“less as signs to us than messages for the earth carved in her bosom”

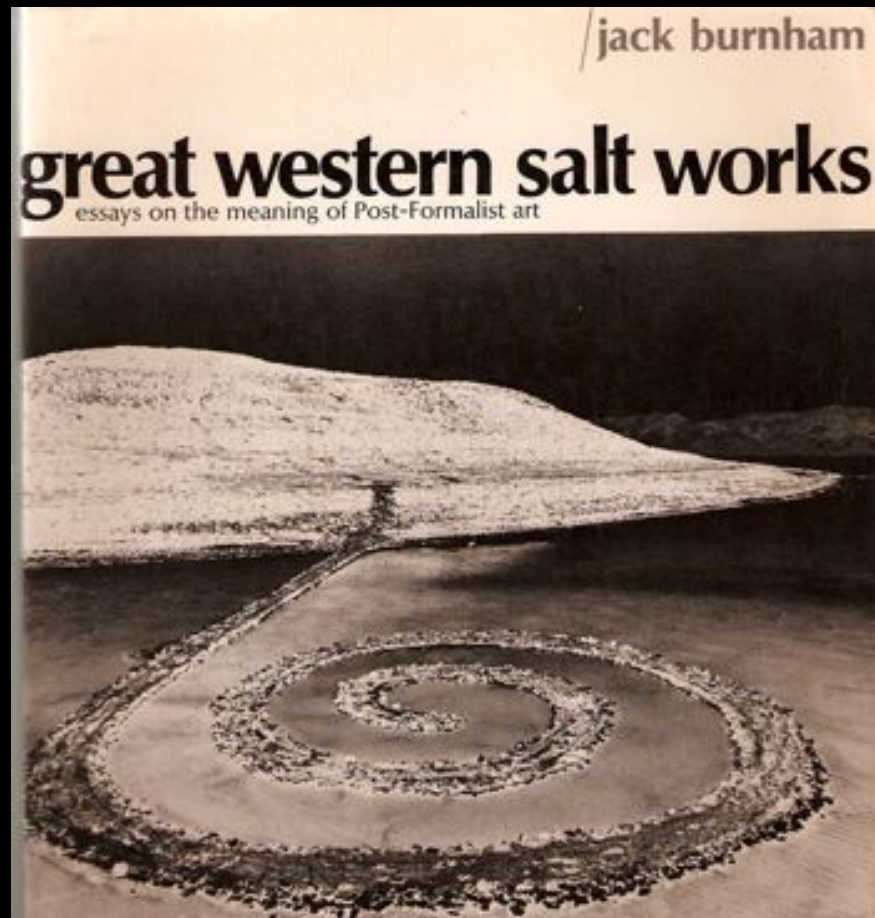
- Carl Andre

/jack burnham

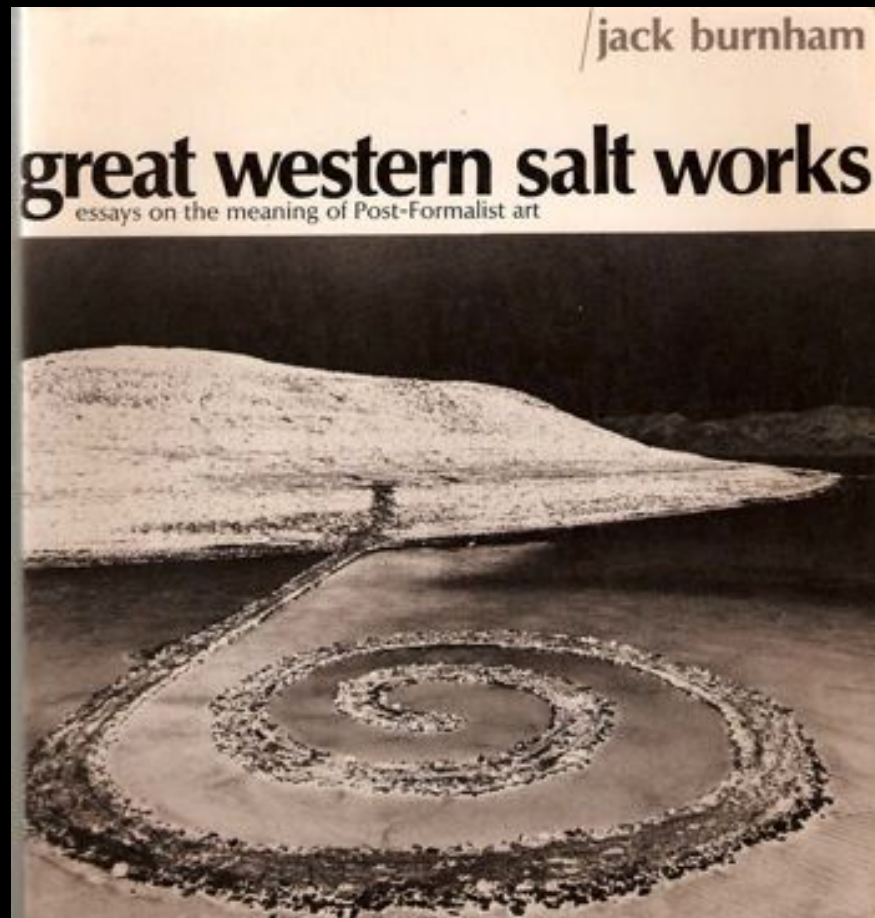
great western salt works

essays on the meaning of Post-Formalist art





“shamanize us into realizing our true condition” - Jack Burnham, 1974



Smithson's artistic, pataphysical, shamanic incantations might "invert the evils of his tribe, and in doing so draw people away from substitute objects and back toward the ancient memories of life and productivity" (Burnham, 1974)

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