Autumn 2007 marked the fortieth anniversary of Robert Smithson's "Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" which, according to the version printed in the University of California Press's *Collected Writings of Robert Smithson*, took place on September 20, 1967. Since that is the exact date of my birth and I was living five miles from Passaic, I thought I might follow in Smithson's footsteps as a sort of rite of passage and reflection, measuring the distance between his time and ours.

More than a response to my age, I hoped that my return would help explain an historical rhythm. Almost forty years separated Smithson from the crash of 1929. A similar historical distance separates us from his day. Smithson understood that something was afoot: the long postwar boom under Fordism - and with it modernism - was coming to an end. A socioeconomic regime determined by production, manufacturing, rational consumption, and regulation was undone. Over the next twenty years the postmodern world of flexible consumption and offshore production as well as the thorough integration of capital and culture, an economy dominated by service industries and finance would rise in its stead. It was hard for me to shake the sense that a similar transition was happening in our day.

Like mine, Smithson's trip to Passaic was a return, an attempt to understand the present by going into his own past. In this, it was very different from Gordon Matta-Clark's *Cutting*, in which the artist sought validation by assaulting the working-class suburbs and then bringing their fragments, like so many trophies, back to the city to be displayed in a gallery. In contrast, undertaken at the age of thirty, Smithson's tour was a lament for the passing of both his youth and the more ordered world he grew up in. Although Smithson's narrative might appear to be an expedition into unknown suburbia, it was actually a journey home, to the town he grew up in, to a world in which production was rapidly being replaced by residue.

During Smithson's lifetime, Passaic underwent prolonged deindustrialization. It was no accident that Smithson began his tour at the old bridge at the corner of River Drive and Union Avenue. The Passaic River, which the bridge crosses, fuels the waterfall upstream in Paterson and, providing a ready source of energy, triggered the area's rapid growth in the nineteenth century, allowing Paterson to become known as "the Cradle of American Industry." With unionization growing at the turn of the twentieth century, manufacturers fled to the open shop South...
and the area began its long decline. During this time, as Smithson showed in the 'Fountain Monument,' industry eagerly dumped its outflow into the Passaic, leading the EPA in 1970 to declare the river the second most polluted in the country (after Cleveland's Cuyahoga, which caught on fire in 1969).3 Although the river is much cleaner today, pipes can be sighted still dumping waste into the river. The Passaic is a river defanged. Kayakers and other boaters routinely ply the waters. But instead, the toxins have spread into the environment as a whole, infesting the planet with filth and toxicity.

Most of the Tour took place at an excavation site for state route 21. Smithson was aware of a December 1966 interview in *Artforum* in which Tony Smith recounted how in the early 1950s he had driven a car packed full of students from Cooper Union out onto the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike, emulating the joyrides popular in New Jersey at the time. The intensity of the experience stunned Smith. He observed, 'it ought to be clear that's the end of art;' concluding that what was important was not the object, but the experience. As what he called 'an artificial landscape without precedent;' the turnpike was similar to Albert Speer's vast parade ground at Nuremberg, a town in which the artist lived in 1954.4 Smith's narrative of the car ride on the turnpike encouraged new art forms such as conceptual art and land art, but it also anticipated the experience economy emerging in the late 1960s.5

But Smithson's reframing of Passaic was different. Instead of driving out, he took the bus and walked, encountering an area that would be bypassed by the state highway.
This was urban residue, deliberately left behind in a process of what economist Joseph Schumpeter had called "creative destruction." Such physical and human residue, abandoned as obsolete, would be a hallmark of postmodernity’s uneven development.

Almost thirty years after Smithson, theorist Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio would describe such sites as *terrain vague*. Sola-Morales observed this change in attitude toward the city emerging in the 1970s as photographers—many of them following Smithson—sought out empty urban spaces produced as by-products during the process of deindustrialization. Places of potential and excitement, generating freedom through the absence that they embody, these spaces captivated photographers and, more recently, architects. For Sola-Morales, these spaces were the last escape for art, itself a cultural residue produced by capital. The unhappy persona of the artist haunts these kindred spaces, defying the crushing sameness of the city.

Capitalism is driven by the accumulation and reinvestment of surplus capital, a productive residue. But *terrain vague* is a different kind of surplus, a waste product, that, in lying abandoned, performs no function except to contain sheer potential. Foreign to the city, these are "places in which the city is no longer:* Terrain vague, as described by Sola-Morales, reflected the essence of capital: "Void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation."

Sola-Morales observed that *terrain vague* was a place in which something had happened, long ago.
Abandoned, such forgotten sites retained energy from their previous uses: "seems to predominate over the present." In *terrain vague*, there is promise an potential: such a site contains the trace heat of the past occupation, like a seat on a train vacated at the previous stop.

For architects the *terrain vague* served as a masculine fantasy, a site of desire, an emptiness to fill. Previously architects sought virgin territory, but with modernism discredited, the greenfield and the *tabula rasa* produced by urban renewal were as well. In the *terrain vague*, architects sought a new hope, a form of post-urban renewal, a way to reclaim emptiness by delighting in its already despoiled nature. If making such spaces was wrong, finding them could only be a delight.

Sola-Morales pointed out that the photograph was the prime means of representation by which the metropolis was apprehended, so it was no mere conceit that Smithson punctuated his tour with Instamatic photographs. In taking snapshots of seemingly banal features in the posturban terrain-pipes belching sewage, a pumping derrick, an old bridge-Smithson turned them into monuments, Duchampian objects of contemplation. Going out into the ruins of industrial America, Smithson demonstrated how experience was more important than production, that a once powerful order was being supplanted.

I sought in vain for Smithson’s monuments, but the picturesque bridge over the Passaic River that Smithson started his tour with was gone, replaced by a concrete span that could have been attractive, but was made
banal through the addition of faux-historical lights meant to recall gas street lights. The Great Pipe Monument and the Fountain were gone, leaving no traces. The Sand-Box Monument vanished, childhood memories paved over.

But Smithson wouldn't have been surprised. These objects, for Smithson, were "ruins in reverse:" What interested Smithson were how the monuments left by the industrial age were being enveloped by new ahistorical, infrastructural encrustations. Smithson observed that at Passaic a process of entropy was at work. The ruins would soon vanish, replaced by a world of sameness, the information in them lost. For Smithson, the monuments demonstrated how the post-urban landscape is already in a state of decline and decay, an environment without quality that demonstrates the collapse of modernist form and centralized power. Throughout, Smithson's goal was to illustrate the process of decay through entropy, the natural law whereby all forms of energy cool down, dissipating to a condition carrying minimal information and no potential.

The bridge over the Passaic is neutralized, its potential depleted by the forces of development. Just as the terrain vague proliferated forty years ago, it is endangered today, its spaces overspecified by massive real estate investment and an artificial building boom. In falling in love with absence, architecture killed it. Mutations are replaced by probabilities, brownfields by condominiums. Abandoned spaces are not so much pregnant with possibility as filled with plans for development. Once the bust ends, construction will begin again. The plans are already in place, factored into real estate value. Where can we find potential today? Where is our Passaic? If Passaic was a "new Rome" for Smithson, where is our own new Rome?

Today, as a diffuse global Empire has taken power, America is a superpower in decline, its economy destroyed, unable to present a new Rome to us. But rather than an American collapse, the implosion at the center is acting like an economic black hole to undo all economies. Following the principle of entropy that Smithson once observed, Passaic, New Jersey has dissipated across the continent. Whereas Smithson offered us a discrete area of urban decay, we now see not only a continent, but an entire world exhausted by the forces of capital.

Perhaps over time terrain vague will return. Closed malls, abandoned districts once filled with hipster boutiques, foreclosed macmansions, abandoned luxury apartment buildings by brand-name architects, towers in Dubai, corporate headquarters in Shanghai: perhaps all of these will offer up the terrain vague of the future. But our architecture is cheap. Nothing but drywall and plywood, today's architecture tries to physically approximate the virtual models used to design it and the empty financing schemes used to pay for it. Lacking the solidity of past ages, ours won't even register as ruins in reverse.
Endnotes

1. That date is erroneous. In the Tour, Smithson refers to an article in the day's *New York Times* by critic John Canaday, "Art Themes and the Usual Variations; Marlborough Showing 'New York Painter.' The article was published on Saturday, September 30, 1967. This corroborates Smithson's statement that the Tour happened on a Saturday. September 20, 1967 is a Wednesday, something I know well since my mother used to recite to me the old adage "Wednesday's child, full of woe." Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey;' Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 68-75.


8. Sola-Morales, 120.


Images: courtesy of the author