

"It's better to burn out, than to fade away. . . ." ¹

Neil Young

I think the world would be a better place if we would all listen to more Neil Young—and not just listen, but take his words to heart. I'm not forming the church of Young, but trying to express how I've tried to look at the world around me. Young's music seems fearless. It is rarely perfect, overworked, or concerned with what others want. That attitude grants the freedom to try a lot of things, to try something outside your comfort zone, to push you beyond what's expected.

How to Get Things Done wants to be a Neil Young track. The work presented is concerned with capturing a moment. Instead of being finished, the projects explored within the exhibition are plans, documentation of future constructions or past endeavours, something temporal and ephemeral. I had two goals in mind when conceptualizing the work: understanding what entropy is, and bringing creativity back into the definition of efficiency. The projects are my visual questions for understanding the writings of Fredrick Winslow Taylor and Robert Smithson, as well as representation of my own working history and a challenge to our perceptions of the constructed environment in which we live.

¹ Neil Young and Crazy Horse, "My, My, Hey, Hey (Out of the blue)", *Rust Never Sleeps*, 1979, Reprise.

My own history is shaped by my father's history. He was/is a carpenter. His life has been driven by the construction industry. As a result of being his son, I have been along for the ride. He moved out from Saskatchewan in the seventies to Prince George, BC (Plate 1). Your home town always shapes you, and my home town is an industrial town, always booming and busting, constantly building yet never growing considerably in population. From an early age, my father trained my brothers and me for a life of work. Shovelling and hammering were our chores, and eventually we all followed him to the job, working for a large commercial construction company. As a skilled labourer, I learned every aspect of construction; as an artist, I have been trying to represent that experience visually to others.



Plate 1

The most interesting part of working for a contractor is the realisation that there is no one correct way to complete a project. The majority of the work is tedious and repetitive, but the pleasurable part of the work is in creatively and efficiently carrying out the task at hand. Worker efficiency has been studied at great length; in 1916 Frederick Winslow Taylor (Plate 2), author of The Principles of Scientific Management, pushed a movement forward with his writing and helped form the basis for the division of labour². His theory, although well intentioned, took the responsibility of planning away from the person actually doing



Plate 2

² Frederick Winslow Taylor. "The Principles of Scientific Management." In *Classics of Organizational Behaviour* (edited by Walter E. Natemeyer, Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2001), 10

the job, and placed it with management. This system, commonly referred to as Taylorism, is currently implemented in all aspects of work, whether you are someone building a house or



Plate 3

serving food at a restaurant. The system breaks labour into individual tasks and asks workers to perform their assigned task to a predetermined average³. This way of working doesn't utilize the natural abilities of each person and tends to make some resent

their jobs, as an individual's role in the final product or service becomes less significant. *Dump Truck* (Plate 3), *Wheelbarrow and Ramp* or *Skid-steer with Pipe* (Plate 4), are works that question the notion

of working to an average, and present the creative thinking I feel is necessary to enjoy work. The projects take average jobs that I may have done every day in my life as a labourer, jobs that build the world around us, and present scenarios out of

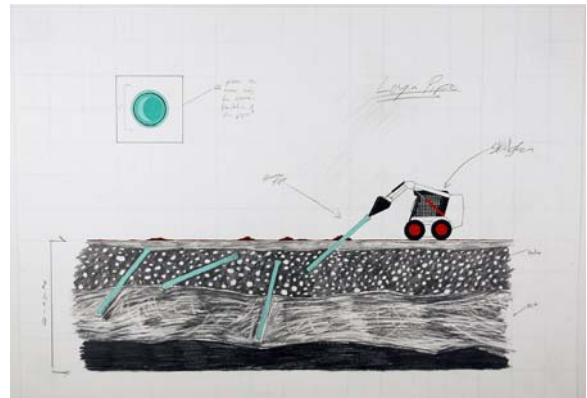


Plate 4

step with how they are normally undertaken. The world is full of individuals, not just averages, so maybe there can be more than one way to do something right. The drawings and models, examples of instructional objects, try to confirm dissimilar processes as worthwhile. The preparatory work, like the drawings of Cuban collective Los Carpinteros (Plate 5), may sometimes appear "more

³Taylor, "The Principles", 11-13

visionary than buildable"⁴, but even if it is not possible to connect pipes underground, or efficient to shovel an entire pile of dirt by yourself, actions which are thoroughly planned out can be seen, not as incorrect, but as another viable option for getting things done.



Plate 5

Taylor's idea of efficiency does not utilize an individual's ability to work efficiently and creates a vacuum of creativity that can leave an individual losing a Sisyphean⁵ battle. Taylor tried to find the most efficient way to complete a task; Robert Smithson I think would say it does not matter how you work, no task can ever be complete.

I am beginning to interpret Smithson's theory of entropy as illustrated by the constant repairs I made on hundreds of different construction sites. Someone doing home renovations, trying to finish painting a bedroom or paving a driveway is fighting entropy, and no amount of efficiency can stop a natural force of the universe.

Much of Smithson's art career, both in writing and actual practice, revolved around his theories of entropy. Entropy is a key definition involved in the second law of thermodynamics and is basically a measure of disorder in a system (A system being any arrangement that forms a relationship, i.e. a bookshelf, human body, a garage, etc.). The second law states that disorder over enough time will become ordered. For the majority

⁴Laura Hoptman. "Working Drawings." In *Los Carpinteros* (edited by Alexa Favata, Tampa, Florida: Institute for Research in Art: Contemporary Art Museum, 2003), 32

⁵Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. (translated by Justin O'Brein, London, England: Penguin Group, 2005), 115-119

of people, entropy is like aging, something we experience every day but never notice.

Smithson's adventures in entropy began with his writings about the work of the minimalists (Judd, Flavin, etc.) in the 60's. He observed the artists building monuments that worked against entropy. Their use of materials like light and stainless steel (Plate 6) prepared sculptures that appear timeless. If a normal structure, a house or a car, is left to the ravages of the ages, entropy shows the structures will become worn out and

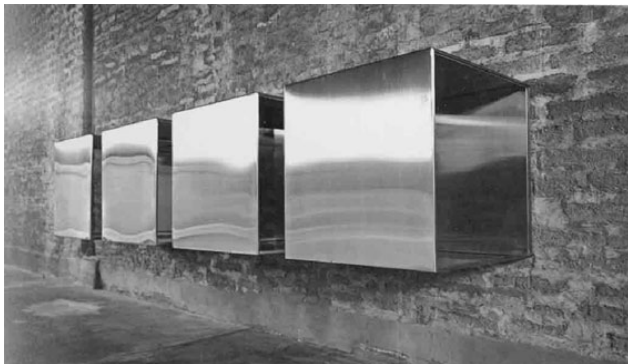


Plate 6

disordered from their original order. Stores like Home Depot® and Canadian Tire® then, are really the armouries in the endless battle against entropy. The tools and materials needed for home renovations help to defy time and keep the world

built around us in a constant state of newly completed. But the minimalists used materials that were impervious to the elements, and Smithson concluded,

They are not built for the ages, but rather against the ages. They are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than in representing the long spaces of centuries. Both past and future are placed in an objective present.⁶

⁶ Robert Smithson. "Entropy and the New Monuments." In *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (edited by Nancy Holt, New York: New York University Press, 1979), 9-18.

Garage Extension (Plate 7) is my own interpretation of the objective present. By building my dream garage, albeit temporarily, and using the materials of the hardware store, I am trying to project the future onto an existing structure and take advantage of documentation rather than relying on materials that



Plate 7

last a millennia. As with Gordon Matta-Clark's seminal work *Splitting* (Plate 8) only photographs remain. Smithson's thoughts on entropy present the idea that the work could exist in its true form for only a moment. Pamela M. Lee, in Objects to

be Destroyed expands the theory:

The notion that the object is made at the moment of the building's ruination—the work's simultaneous self-effacement as it comes into presence—suggest that it actually "rises into ruin," to borrow an expression from Smithson.⁷

Representing the process of time through photographs freezes the work in an ephemeral moment and presents the works in their true form.

The majority of Smithson's work exists today only as documentation; he was an artist concerned with the process almost as much as the final product. His work, *The Monuments of the Passaic*, published in 1967, was a photo essay full of



Plate 8

⁷ Pamela M. Lee. *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*. Cambridge (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), 46

proposed sculptures (photos were badly taken black and white snapshots of existing industrial constructions.) The work expanded his thoughts on entropy that he had developed in a previous essay, *Entropy and the New Monuments*, and pushed the boundaries of sculpture in the expanded field⁸. In the work, Smithson walked along the riverbank and through the neighbourhoods and construction sites of Passaic, New Jersey. He



Plate 9

observed the industrial sites and roadwork as monuments in reverse. Unlike the minimalists, building sculptures from nearly impervious elements, Smithson presented his photos as monuments that have existed for centuries, evidence for his unrecorded history of the future.

An image such as *Fountain Monument* (Plate 9) presents more than the physical object; it is a visual representation of something monumentally un-extraordinary. Ann Reynolds, in *A Guide to the Monuments of the Passaic*, relates the images to instructional illustrations: "they seem to indicate rather than illuminate."⁹ The idea of sculpture being more than a three-dimensional object is intriguing. The pieces *Hotel on Stilts* (Plate 10) and *Excavator and Valve* are two projects



Plate 10

⁸ Rosalind Krauss. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture* (edited by Hal Foster, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), 31-42

⁹ Ann Reynolds. "A Guide to the Monuments of Passaic." In *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 110

closely related to the ideas Smithson tried to embody with his photo essay. Photographing scenarios that related to my thoughts on efficiency and my own history, but which I had not actually had a hand in producing, enabled an expanded view of what I was personally able to construct. The preparatory drawings and models are especially important to these pieces as they appear to give ownership of the entire process over to me and indicate more didactically my hand in the creation of the work.

Just as *Monuments of the Passaic* gave Smithson permission to call photography sculpture, it also gave him an avenue to vent his feelings about the expanding urban sprawl and communicate his opinions on what the future is:

I am convinced that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past; it is in yesterday's newspapers, in the *jejeune* advertisements of science fiction movies, in the false mirror of our rejected dreams. Time turns metaphors into things, and stacks them in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs.¹⁰



Plate 11

Smithson must have been a sci-fi junkie. Reynolds compares his "ruins in reverse" to the experiences of Dr. Xavier in Roger Corman's film *X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* (Plate 11). The Doctor in the film develops X-Ray vision, but as he loses control of his newfound sense, he begins to see

¹⁰ Robert Smithson. "A Tour of the Monuments of the Passaic, New Jersey." In *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (edited by Nancy Holt, New York: New York University Press, 1979.), 52-57

the world descending into a future ruin.¹¹ On seeing signs hanging with no supports and buildings as skeletons, Dr. Xavier exclaims in horror. This revelation precipitated the works *Roof Truss and Scaffold*, *Eaves Trough*, and *Staircase to Nowhere*. By presenting common elements of a residential building in their correct location, but missing the structure, I am questioning the relationship of these elements to the order in which a structure is created. The roof truss supported by scaffolding and stairs waiting for the rest of a building (Plate 12) create scenarios connected to an abstracted association with time. These attempts are trying to supersede Smithson's revelations about entropy.



Plate 12

Smithson's thoughts on time seem tied to the science of fiction rather than the world of scientists. His thoughts on the future, and his records of the world around us, present a romantic view of a force too large for the average person to fight against.

¹¹ Reynolds, "A Guide," 115

These projects show that it was possible to pick up the fight; you simply need to break with convention.

My own practice is drawn to process. The excitement is in the work, not in admiring the finished product. The steps I have taken to portray a passing moment may not be the most efficient use of my time, but unlike Taylor, I am not attempting to create a new science. Taylor's system has pushed progress forward; Robert Smithson's works and writings about entropy have clouded the definition of what forward is. I find much of Smithson's writing confusing, too wrapped in romantic metaphors, but I think I now understand the basic idea. Entropy in life is the constant battle against time. My own work has been an attempt to portray that battle, to show the work and labour that goes into fighting disorder, or to show the systems of order that make up the world that we live in. Neil Young also sang "It's better to burn out, 'cause rust never sleeps'"¹² I guess Neil already understood entropy.

¹² Neil Young and Crazy Horse, "Hey, Hey, My, My (Into the black)", *Rust Never Sleeps*, 1979, Reprise.

Plate List

- 1) Mr. PG, Prince George, BC.
http://www.ourbc.com/travel_bc/bc_cities/yellowhead_hwy/prince_george.htm
- 2) Frederick Winslow Taylor, c. 1900
<http://www.ftu.edu/Frederick%20WinslowTaylor.jpg>
- 3) *Dump Truck*, Jordan Schwab, 2009. Digital Colour Print.
Provided by artist.
- 4) *Skid-steer and Pipe*, Jordan Schwab, 2009. Drawing. Provided by artist.
- 5) *Escalera* (ladder), Los Carpinteros, 1998. Water-colour on Paper. www.medaid.org/.../carpinteros/works/wlm.jpg
- 6) *Untitled*, Donald Judd, 1966. Stainless Steel.
artintelligence.net/.../02/introjuddboxes.jpg
- 7) *Garage Extension*, Jordan Schwab, 2009. Digital Colour Print. Provided by artist.
- 8) *Splitting*, Gordon Matta-Clark, 1974, Englewood, New Jersey.
http://interactive.usc.edu/members/peggy/archives/2007_10.html
- 9) *The Fountain Monument*, Robert Smithson, 1967, Passaic, New Jersey. http://www.robertsmithson.com/photoworks/monument-passaic_300.htm
- 10) *Hotel on Stilts*, Jordan Schwab, 2009. Model. Provided by artist.
- 11) *X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, Roger Corman, 1963. Poster.
http://home.avvanta.com/~dr_z/Movie/Posters/Reproductions/X-RayEyes_Rep.html
- 12) *Staircase to Nowhere*, Jordan Schwab, 2009. Digital Colour Print. Provided By artist.

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Young, Neil and Crazy Horse, "Hey, Hey, My, My (Into the black)", *Rust Never Sleeps*, 1979, Reprise.

Young, Neil and Crazy Horse, "My, My, Hey, Hey (Out of the blue)", *Rust Never Sleeps*, 1979, Reprise.

Exhibition Documentation















