

The Spiral Jetty and the Palm Jumeirah: Robert Smithson's Art and the Art of the Islamic Culture.

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Introduction:

It is the objective of this essay to compare an interpretation of Islamic conceptions of time, space and artifact, too the work and writings, particularly the Spiral Jetty, by Robert Smithson and his conceptions of: time, space and artifact. I want to make apparent here the use of “interpretation” simply because any discussion of Islam like any theology of the world cannot be analyzed in a purely discursive manner, for “true” understanding is ultimately internal to it and external to me. Nevertheless it is my hope to trace intersections between the work of Robert Smithson, which form a rift with the trajectory of western art history, and the art and architecture of Islam, of which the Palm Jumeirah is a part. My approach is dialectic, to bring forth a discussion of overlaps and synthesis as they pertain to conceptions of space, time and artifact. At the same time I am aware of aware that historically attempts at a dialectic between cultures have mostly failed arguably because of Western predilection for authorial domination in the discourse. (1) My intent in a “dialectic” is more in keeping with Smithson’s own use of the term, that is as Gary Shapiro points out a system of “play”, (2) play by it’s nature is antithetical to achieving an ideological inertia in the positivist or utopian sense.

Play because as Smithson suggests all ordered existence, whether it be matter or ideas is ultimately subject to entropy, the force that ultimately unravels all order, constructed or organic, into disorder. Smithson would in fact as Ron Graziani suggests in his book “Robert Smithson and the American Landscape” reject any ideology, political, environmental, or otherwise when it came to issues of the earth, as he considered them all ultimately an exercise in futility in the face of entropy. (3) The corollary in the Islamic conception of temporality, is a condition defined by Sayyed Hossein Nasr as seeking “to create an ambience in which the transient and temporal character of material things is emphasized and in which the vacuity of objects is accentuated.”(4) While the conception of “play” cannot be ascribed to this dialectic of divinity, (the word “Islam” translates to “obedience”), in both Islamic and Smithson’s conception of the dialectic there is a de-centering whereby the infinite and ineffable, the void is let in. And in the albeit brief history of confluence of ideas and dialogue, some entirely beautiful and unique artifacts have developed, ideas and practices that have proved enriching to both cultures.

Time:

In Robert Smithson's art and writings and specifically at the Spiral Jetty time was a prime motivator. Smithson wanted to actively engage, or possibly reengage, as in the conditions of prehistoric art a conception time that was based in the earth. A conception of time that went beyond western art histories, museum based trajectory, of genre and style, a linear and humanist 'progression' of history, and examined time as ultimately something that was neither progressive or regressive, but perhaps something that could be described as digressive. (5) Time where the historical periodic framework was but just a part that contrasted and conflated with other histories of time, from the metaphysical, to aesthetic, to scientific but all subject to the forces of entropy. Entropy the condition through which all ordered systems, move to a condition of disorder.

For Smithson the recognition of entropy in the conception of any system was fundamental. An anecdotal description for which Smithson included in his 1967, "Monuments of Passaic" entitled "Sandbox Monument", is that if you take a child's sandbox, and fill half the box with black sand, and half the box with white sand, and then engage the children to move in a clockwise procession, the difference in the colors of the sand will gradually but ultimately fuse into a gray, the condition cannot be reversed by changing the children's direction to counter-clockwise. (6) An ordered system becomes disordered. The relative terms of order and disorder were not as important to Smithson as the fact that a kind of "dedifferentiation" was taking place. A "sameness" arises. Because it is through relative contrast in perception and phenomenon that we affirm position, and centrality, without the relative parameters of contrast to define a center, the dedifferentiated presence of the void fills the vacuum. It is contrast or differentiation that is essential to the Hegelian dialectic process; it is the engine of western progress and positivism. To Smithson it was the inevitability of "sameness or entropy, that doomed any sort of political dialectic and so made his dialectic inquiries while actively engaged in agency, nevertheless it was an agency that lacked the conviction of progress, and rather became an agency for nothing more than Art.

Jenifer Roberts makes it clear that the location of the spiral jetty, and its close proximity to the Golden Spike Monument, approximately 10 miles from the site of the Spiral Jetty was no coincidence. (7) The Golden Spike Monument, which commemorates the location and linking of western and eastern United States, via the first transcontinental railroad, began the radical change in the perception of space and time, precipitated by speed, and the standardization of time across the country through the accompaniment of telegraph lines. These low friction continental metal lines now conjoined the frames of past, present and future in a defiance of space, information and experience were being liberated from time and space. Roberts notes the proximity allowed Smithson a counter for his conceptions. "For even at the most basic formal level the Spiral Jetty renounces linearity. If anything it swerves counter-clockwise into the lake, it suggests a derailment of the linear progress that the nearby transcontinental railroad track bed once so perfectly embodied." (8)

While the term entropy, in Islamic culture might be foreign what it describes is not. All matter is accepted as temporal and transitory, the presence of the void in Islamic art has equal importance to the object, the interpenetration of one with the other is the

manifestation of the divine. Seyyed Hossein Nasr's in his book "Islamic Art and Spirituality", defines the condition as such; "Islamic art has always sought to create an ambience in which the transient and temporal character of material things is emphasized and in which the vacuity of objects is accentuated. But if objects were to be completely unreal and absolutely nothing, there would be no existing objects to start with and no art about which to speak. The reality of the situation in all its fullness, however, encompasses both the illusory aspect of things and their being reflections and positive symbols of the higher orders of reality, and finally the ultimate reality itself. Both aspects have to be emphasized. To one corresponds the void, and to the other the 'positive' material, form, color, and so forth displayed in a work of art. Together they depict the full reality of an object, chiseling away its unreality and illuminating its essential reality as a positive symbol and harmonious whole." (9) This definition gets to the core of what we see in all Islamic ornamentation and architecture, that everything other than God is ephemeral.

Like the Spiral Jetty, the Palm Jumeirah Island in Dubai, is a response to a geological condition of entropy, and to a socio-historical condition specific to the Arabian Peninsula, decreasing quantities of oil and revenues. Oil like the sand which cover it, was entropically formed over eons, and again subjected to the process of accelerated entropy this time by a human catalyst that combusted the hydrocarbon to atmosphere. The hydrocarbons which had transformed the country from a nomadic Bedouin culture, a culture whose survival depended largely on perpetual movement through the landscape, not overtaxing any one place (10), was transformed with a speed that correlated to an appetite of twentieth century progress, to a nation with the second largest sovereign wealth fund in the world. While the sovereign wealth fund does much to buffer the UAE in a globalized economy, it does little to build the country for the future, so the country is divesting wealth into projects that will build it into a global center predicated on trade, and tourism. Effectively and literally recrystallizing the geography, by additions such as the tallest building in the world, The Burj Kalifa, and the world's largest man made island the Palm Jumeirah.

Space:

The Spiral Jetty has become arguably one of the most transformative works of art in the twentieth century. Transformative largely for its participation in the nascent beginnings of Land or Earth Art, an art movement predicated on what Rosalind Krauss would come to term "sculpture in the expanded field"(11) whereby the traditional means of experience in western art and specifically sculpture had reached a reductive terminus in modernism. Modernist sculpture by separating from its historical roots in "monument" a cultural artifact that by definition is a synthesis of time, place, and event, a lynchpin between architecture and landscape, to a condition termed by Krauss "not architecture and not landscape" equals "sculpture", the modernist conclusion whereby the reductive practices of abstraction had ultimately defined sculpture by what it was not. This binary impasse "not architecture and not landscape" was liberated by Krauss's depiction of a "quaternary diagram" to include the terms "architecture and landscape" this quaternary diagram in turn liberated art criticism to consider possibilities to include; beyond the definition of "sculpture" as art, "site construction", "marked sites", and "axiomatic structures". Smithson who died in 1973, six years prior to the publication of Krauss's article, was a prime example of the issues Krauss was trying to raise. Krauss considered the Spiral Jetty as

an example of “landscape, not landscape” a binary indeterminate condition which she labeled “marked site”. “Marked as opposed to a qualification of “made” is the operative phrase because it invokes a temporality, a transitory quality, something that resembles the word “pentimenti” in painting and drawing and the ephemeral “land drawings” Michael Heizer made in the desert sand with his motorcycle, that is a contour or line, open to forces still in process of becoming or dissolving. In the case of the Spiral Jetty it is the construction of the spiral engaged rather than fixed within the actions of geological earth time, erosion, accretion, flood and drought, celebrating not resisting the reality of growth and decay. Engaged because it’s presence is contingent on those forces including; human interaction and erosion, the relative factors of flood versus drought which determined it’s presence, or lack of presence, and the salt crystals that given to the high degree of salinity in the lake are continuously forming and dissolving around the perimeter of the spiral.

The idea of liberating a “centralized” understanding of a work is a constant theme in Smithson’s work, but is perhaps most evident in his dialectic studies of “Site /Non-Site” which engage the disparity between the artifact represented in the museum and that artifacts origin in the site“ There is a central focus point which is the non-site, the “work of art” is determined by the frame, the containment of the artifact, which itself is in turn determined by the volume of the gallery. This was the centering aspect of the work, but holistically the work could not be understood without the relative decentering qualities of the actual site, qualities that Smithson evoked using maps, photographs, and drawings, along with material taken directly from the site, and sometimes through guided site tours, such as the “Monuments of Passaic”. Smithson defined the site by stating, “the site is the unfocused fringe where your mind loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades, as it were.”(12) More specific to the Spiral Jetty, is discussion about why he chose the remote location. “As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement...From that gyrating space emerged the possibility for the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and non-site whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other...No sense wondering about classifications and categories there were none.” (13)

The notion that the experience of art does not require a position of centrality became one of the most contentious issues in twentieth century art history with the publication of Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood “. Fried’s objective was to rescue art from what he perceived as an existential threat emanating, from the minimalists, a.k.a. the “literalists”, who as artists were rebuking the tradition of the “shape” in and of art-work , as being something akin to window frame, a condition centered on the beholder. As Fried suggests, the painting or sculpture exists as an object unto itself the viewer can transcend, or suspend the condition of “objectness”: “but because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest. It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneous; as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all it’s depths and fullness, to be ever convinced by it.” (14) In the work of the minimalists /literalists on the other-hand, Fried saw the work as

existing as an object amongst other objects in space, a condition whereby the internal threshold of the work was eclipsed by an external participation in space. “Whereas in previous art “what is to be had from the work is located strictly within (it), the experience of the literalist art is of an object in a situation—one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder” (15) Fried considered this de-centering of the object of art, as antithetical, and he goes on to suggest that it is not art at all, but rather a form of theater: “theater addresses is a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, simultaneously approaching and receding, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective” (16)

Two important concepts in Islamic art, and in work of Smithson, which facilitate an appreciation of the void, are: dematerialization, and decentering. Sometimes used individually and sometimes used together, they represent a structural device that enables the viewer, participant to appreciate and integrate the void and the perception of transience into the experience. What I am calling dematerialization can be seen in many examples of Islamic art and architecture, particularly in the muqarnas, in Islamic architecture, like those at the Alhambra, where the stone or plaster finish of arches and domes have been ornately carved away, in a tapering fashion, also known as the “beveled style”, which materially display a gradient of density, from opacity to diaphanous penetrated by light or void, allowing for a graceful and poignant union between, matter and light. While considerably courser in nature, it is the same interface we see at the perimeter of the Palm Jumeirah, in this case though, and like the Spiral Jetty, the void is not so much the light, but rather water, that represents the void as it entwines with material of the land. The boundary here has a porosity by virtue of it’s construction that promotes aggregation, at the same time it accepts decay. The crescent breakwater presents a dematerialized buffer edge to the water, that through the use natural stone instead of the engineers proposed concrete, has in the same way that the contour of the palm maximized the coastline; maximized the underwater surface area and void into a “artificial reef” supporting and ideally revitalizing indigenous marine life.

In Islamic art the condition of decentralized position relative to an artifact, is witnessed in the “arabesque” a motif that finds representation architecturally in the tiled surfaces of walls. Here the repetitive patterning typically geometric or flora in design, defies the viewer’s ability to fixate on any singular or central position, the eye liberated from fixative viewpoint disengages from locating a center and instead is propelled to the perimeter, pondering the infinite. This condition is further enhanced by the tessellate format of the tiles and grout, the grid which while ordered and rhythmic act as a Teflon coating to any conceptions of hierarchy. Optically the wall as barrier is transformed into the void where mater and space coalesce into a condition that favors neither one over the other.

Artifact:

In 1970 Robert Smithson completed The Spiral Jetty, a project in which he and two local contractors, with 2 dump trucks a front-end loader, and 6,650 tons of basalt, spent 6 days to constructing. The spiral of desert basalt is intertwined with the spiral of water from the Great Salt Lake. The jetty itself is 1550 feet in length, and 15 feet wide, to accommodate the cycling of dump trucks. The photographs of the construction process bear a striking resemblance to the banded steel cages, filled with

stones, Smithson called “non-site” installations. The back of a dump truck, it is evidence of the “non-site” in a liminal contained/ centered state before becoming “site,” and thereby subjected to entropy, which in turn de-centers it.

In 2006 the Emirate of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates completed the “Palm Jumeirah Island, classified by the construction and engineering professions as a “mega project”, a mega project is typically defined as a project costing 1 billion dollars or more, the Palm Jumeirah cost an estimated 12.3 billion US dollars to build. Anecdote has it that upon visiting the site and seeing the first designs for the island, Sheikh Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai first response was simply “bigger”, he then according to legend, sketched the outline of a palm tree in the sand. The island takes the shape of the “Palm Tree” a form with a 2 km axial trunk, that is bilaterally bisected by 17 palm fronds. The palm shape land mass was formed by a construction technique called rain-bowing; a method of spraying dredged sand from the floor of the gulf and then compacting it in lifts, through a process called Vibro-compaction. this was then surrounded by a crescent shaped “breakwater”, built of large boulders. It should be noted that while the civil engineers originally consulted that the island for structural reasons be built from concrete, Sheikh Al Maktoum, insisted that it be constructed from “natural” materials. The largest artificial island in the world, coincidentally can be considered the largest reclamation project in the world, 100 million cubic meters of rock and sand were aggregated together to a level 4 meters above sea level. The construction of the island took 5 years, using a labor force of 40,000 mostly South Asian workers. In addition to adding substantial land area to the emirate, the palm island by virtue of it’s contour adds 78.6 KM of coastline to existing total 72 KM of the emirate, more than doubling the amount of beach front real-estate, for the development of international residential community of global business nomads, and peripatetic ex-pats and tourists.

Both the Spiral Jetty and the Palm Jumeirah are symbolically charged. With the Palm Jumeirah there is the Palm Tree The palm tree design is symbolic in Arab culture (as well as many cultures worldwide) as a symbol of peace and paradise, which seems entirely appropriate given that the islands ambitions to build an international tourist destination. But additionally the palm tree is indicative of Islamic tradition, the “Tree of Paradise” figures prominently in Islamic art and architecture. Raya Y. Shani in her article, “Paradise Glimpsed by the Muslim Believer at Prayer” points to a connection between the tree of paradise motif and the use and form of the mihrab in mosques, like for instance at the Mosque of al-Khassaki, in Bagdad, where the conch shell, resembling the fronds of palm tree canopy, is combined with the trunk of palm tree, to form the mihrab. “ The two are in fact connected with sanctity and fertility. One stems from the ancient shell motif that fills the niche heads of sacred shrines; the other is the palm-tree representing the Tree of Life in paradise. By placing both together, with the candelabrum motif, in the mihrab context, these iconographic types seem to have acquired heavier iconological weight; they have become symbols of paradise, providing shade and fertility to the virtuous. At the same time the omnipresence of God is also conveyed, so it would seem, by the radiating conch.” (17)

At the Spiral Jetty the obvious connotations of the symbolism are apparent in it’s form. The spiral suggestive of fundamental organic growth patterns (the nautilus shell) , to the basis of sacred geometries (the Fibonacci sequence), and a comprehension of the trajectory of time, (the vortex). As already suggested Jenifer

Roberts points out the conscious geographic juxtaposition of the spiral jetty turning counter-clockwise, to the nexus of the linear east and west railroad tracks. There is also in its form, specific to its location, a conjuring of the Native American creation myth of the Great Salt Lake, which was formed accordingly by an underground conduit which linked the Ocean to the Great Salt Lake connecting the middle of the lake, and the ocean by two vortices (spirals). As a graphic the spiral intertwines matter and void into a dynamic continuum where there is neither beginning or end, where a center is in constantly catapulted by a sense of the abyss, invoking Michael Fried, "as if apprehended in an infinite perspective"

While not a spiral, the Palm Jumeirah nevertheless does carry with it a tradition found in Islamic calligraphic practices, of which the spiral is certainly apart. Calligraphy where text and gesture are coupled, text becomes ornament; ornament becomes text, each acting as a vessel for the other, each propelling the other and more importantly the reader to the threshold of the infinite and ineffable. 'Calligraphy is the geometry of the Spirit', the letters words and verses of the Quran are not just elements of a written language but beings or personalities for which the calligraphic form is the visual and physical vessel" (18) This physicality and emphasis on the interplay of the letter and the space between the letter, is seen in Smithson's thinking on language as well, "My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas" (19), This idea of language as matter, becomes literally apparent in the drawing "A Heap of Language" 1966, where letters and words, take on the appearance of geology, stratified like tectonic plates, and shaped by gravity.. "words and rocks contain a language that follows the syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it opened up into a series of falls into a terrain of particles each containing its own void" (20)

The idea that the meaning of the word and or letter combined with how the word and or letter is expressed, the notion of intertwining the two, empowering both, is in part what Johann-Cristoph Burgel interprets in Islamic Art as a "super-imposed systems" whereby two or more systems, (calligraphy and architectural form) for instance, conflate and their synthesized reading magnifies both their potentials. Burgel goes on to point out that this idea of the conflation of mediums is part of a need for structure in Islamic Arts. In his article "Mightiness, Ecstasy and Control: Some General Features of Islamic Arts", (21) he points out the "mightiness" of the arts, in their ability liberate the mind into a state of ecstasy. Outside the purview of the "creator" this was a problematic issue, the very definition of the word "Islam" has to do with submission and obedience, and any art that fell outside that obedience and acceptance of the creator would be considered a threat to a divine beauty. It was therefore necessary, that as Burgel points out a structure be implemented. This structure was, "ruled by the two poles of ecstasy and control, and thus imprinted by, and conveying a feeling of mightiness, which is attained through submission". Two of the primary vehicles for structure, beyond super-imposition as Burgel points out are the use of repetition, which has been discussed relative to idea of de-centering, and conical structures, both of which superimpose themselves on each other in act of dynamic reinforcement, culminating not at a center per se, but at concentric horizons in the infinite and ineffable. This as Burgel shows can be witnessed in Islamic music and poetry where as he suggests there is a "tightening" particularly of what is repetitive, like a verse or a note, which if imagined visually becomes structurally conical. Additionally and literally this happens in architecture and ornamentation as well,

where as Burgel suggests there is a “tightening” of repetition, which is most obvious in the masonry architecture, where repetition (of the module) is a tectonic necessity in a dome for instance, and as a result a three dimensional space or “shelter” is formed, reinforcing the concept of concentric horizons by the now inclusion of interior and exterior.

While the teleological underpinnings of the “structure” Burgel describes in Islamic Art, are less obvious in writings by and on Smithson and his work, there is as Craig Owens asserts a “structure” not perhaps between the two poles “control and ecstasy” but between what he quotes the author Jorge Luis Borges as claiming “the distance between the present and an irrecoverable past.” This is what Owens describes as a return to the allegorical, which modernist art had essentially declared an anathema, and what he describes as Smithson’s genius. “Allegory first emerged in response to a similar sense of estrangement from tradition; throughout its history it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed.” (22) Allegory by definition of Owens is constituted by many of the same structural components suggested by Burgel: Super-imposition, repetition, and transience, as Owens explains the structure like the one Burgel describes is something that cannot be added post-facto, it must be implicit to the work, from its inception to its presentation. The difference between the two structures is what Owens describes, as allegory not being: hermeneutic, for in the structure of Islamic Art, the idea of obedience to the Koran pervades in all interpretations.

Allegory as Owens describes it “is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete- an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin” Owens goes on to describe the “ruins thus stand for history as an irreversible process of dissolution and decay, a progressive distancing from origin”. It was here that he described the importance of what he saw in Smithson’s work as an “emblem of transience, the ephemerality of all phenomena” a “memento mori” of the twentieth century”. But it is the role of photography which Owens points out contains the impulse to fix images and memories from falling into the abyss that is at the heart of allegory. “As an allegorical art, then, photography would represent our desire to fix the transitory, the ephemeral, in a stable and stabilizing image.” Along with what Owens calls the “psychological resonance” of allegory, conjured by the myths associated with the Great Salt Lake, there is in the Spiral Jetty a further invocation of the allegorical process in its use of ruin, transience, and in use of media, and documentation as a way of advancing the allegorical resonance.

Since its completion the jetties appearance as sculpture already made difficult (in the art historical sense) by its remote location, (not in a gallery or museum) has appeared and disappeared under the lake with the ebb and flows of drought and flood. Its existence as “artwork” has arguably less to do with its physical three dimensional presence, and more to do with its presence in media. The Spiral Jetty is known almost entirely by existence in media, either film, photographs, and or text. It is through a presence that is fundamentally conscientious of its interplay with its physical source, at The Great Salt Lake, but given that remoteness, its comprehension needs to be manifest through media, through the use of allegory and more particularly the inflected symbolism of the spiral. Smithson set the parameters which enable the dialectic between physical and conceptual dimensions through the

documentation of it's construction, by means of film; celluloid frames spiraling behind a lens, both in their collection and projection, constitute a spiraling sequence of time. Add to that the fact that Smithson recorded much of the film from a Bell Helicopter, whose spiraling blades are both seen and heard as a sound vortex in the film, the spiral form manifested itself both viscerally and vicariously throughout the project; it exists in both real and recorded time.

Finally there is the question of scale; while in relative terms, the Spiral Jetty compared to the Palm Jumeirah is tiny, both project scales nevertheless require a perceptual distinction between what is immediately perceptible on the ground; a perception based on proximity, which identifies a courser reading of stratification and layers of earth. And the complete perception of form which can only take place from a disengaged vantage point, primarily from an hundreds of feet above in an aircraft. Thereby setting up simultaneity in perception that takes place in both readings, where the reified perception of totality is mixed with the intimate and tactile perception of "being on the landform" or vice versus.

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