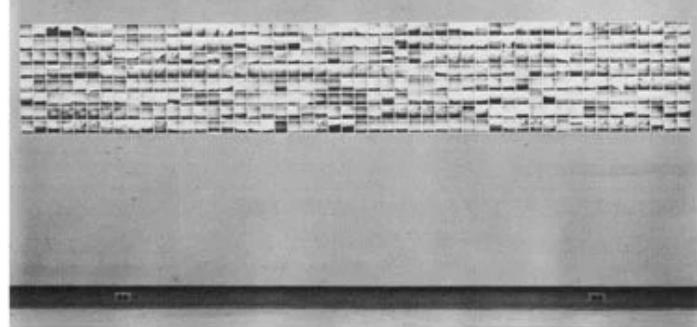


1970, Spiral Jetty

1973, Pierced Spiral



Cavern of Muck, 1969, pencil on paper, 27.9x21.6cm



A CINEMATIC ATOPIA

Robert Smithson, 400 Seattle Horizons (Destroyed). Instantam snapshots, 1969. "We are lost between the abyss within us and the boundless horizons outside us."

ROBERT SMITHSON

Going to the cinema results in an immobilization of the body. Not much gets in the way of one's perception. All one can do is look and listen. One forgets where one is sitting. The luminous screen spreads a murky light throughout the darkness. Making a film is one thing, viewing a film another. Impassive, mute, still the viewer sits. The outside world fades as the eyes probe the screen. Does it matter what film one is watching? Perhaps. One thing all films have in common is the power to take perception elsewhere. As I write this, I'm trying to remember a film I liked, or even one I didn't like. My memory becomes a wilderness of elsewhere. How, in such a condition, can I write about film? I don't know. I could know. But I would rather not know. Instead, I will allow the elsewhere to reconstruct themselves as a tangled mass. Somewhere at the bottom of my memory are the sunken remains of all the films I have ever seen, good and bad they swarm together forming cinematic mirages, stagnant pools of images that cancel each other out. A notion of the abstractness of films crosses my mind, only to be swallowed up in a morass of Hollywood garbage. A pure film of lights and darks slips into a dim landscape of countless westerns. Some sagebrush here, a little cactus there, trails and hoofbeats going nowhere. The thought of a film with a "story" makes me listless. How many stories have I seen on the screen? All those "characters" carrying out dumb tasks. Actors doing exciting things. It's enough to put one into a permanent coma.

Let us assume I have a few favorites. *Ikiru* also called *Living, To Live, Doomed*. No, that won't do. Japanese films are too exhausting. Taken as a lump, they remind me of a recording by Captain Beef Heart called *Japan in a Dishpan*. There's always Satyajit Ray for a heavy dose of tedium, if you're into tedium. Actually, I tend to prefer lurid sensationalism. For that I must turn to some English director, Alfred Hitchcock will do. You know, the shot in *Psycho* where Janet Leigh's eye emerges from the bath-

tub drain after she's been stabbed. Then there's always the *Expanded Cinema*, as developed by Gene Youngblood, complete with an introduction by "Bucky" Fuller. *Rats for breakfast* could be a hypothetical film directed by the great utopian himself. It's not hard to consider cinema expanding into a deafening pale abstraction controlled by computers. At the fringes of this expanse one might discover the deteriorated images of Hollis Frampton's *Maxwell's Demon*. After the "structural film" there is the sprawl of entropy. The monad of cinematic limits spills out into a state of stupefaction. We are faced with inventories of limbo.

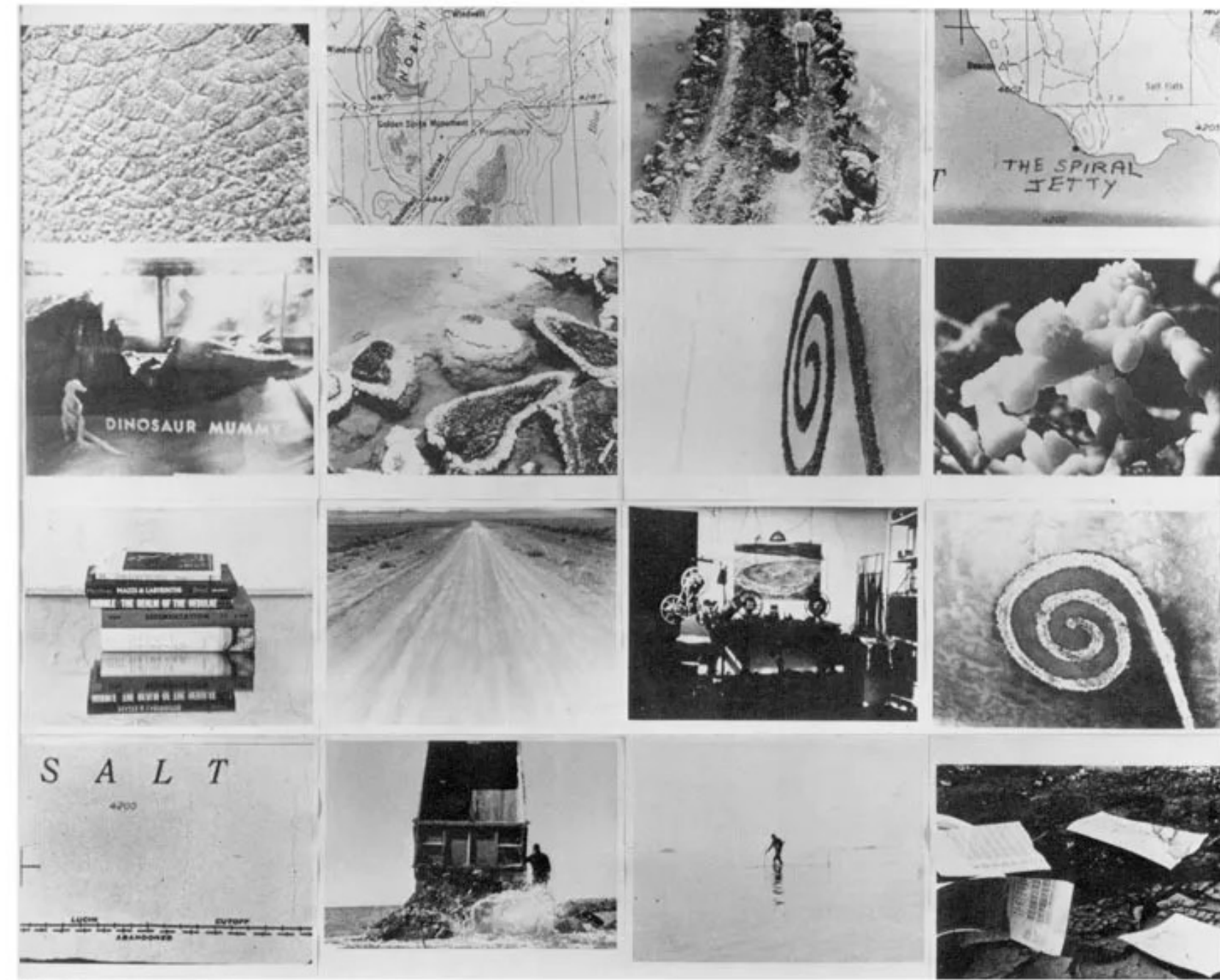
If I could only map this limbo with dissolves, you might have some notion as to where it is. But that is impossible. It could be described as a cinematic borderland, a landscape of rejected film clips. To be sure it is a neglected place, if we can even call it a "place." If there was ever a film festival in limbo it would be called "Oblivion." The awkwardness of amateur snapshots brings this place somewhat into focus. The depraved animation that George Landow employed in one of his films somewhat locates the region. A kind of aphasia orders this teetering realm. Not one order but many orders clash with one another, as do "facts" in an obsolete encyclopedia.

If we put together a film encyclopedia in limbo, it would be quite groundless. Categories would destroy themselves, no law or plan would hold itself together for very long. There would be no table or contents for the Table of Contents. The index would slither away into so much cinematic slime. For example, I could make a film based (or debased) on the A section of the index in *Film Culture Reader*. Each reference would consist of a 30-second take. Here is a list of the takes in alphabetical order: Abstract Expressionism. Agee James, Alexandrov Grigory, Allen Lewis, Ange Kenneth, Antonioni Michelangelo, Aristarco Guido, Arnheim Rudolf, Artaud Antonin, Astruc Alexandre. Only the letter A gives this index its order. Where is the coherence? The logic threatens to wander out of control.

In this cinematic atopia orders and groupings

have a way of proliferating outside their original structure or meaning. There is nothing more tentative than an established order. What we take to be the most concrete or solid often turns into a concatenation of the unexpected. Any order can be reordered. What seems to be without order, often turns out to be highly ordered. By isolating the most unstable thing, we can arrive at some kind of coherence, at least for awhile. The simple rectangle of the movie screen contains the flux, no matter how many different orders one presents. But no sooner have we fixed the order in our mind than it dissolves into limbo. Tangled jungles, blind paths, secret passages, lost cities invade our perception. The sites in films are not to be located or trusted. All is out of proportion. Scale inflates or deflates into uneasy dimensions. We wander between the towering and the bottomless. We are lost between the abyss within us and the boundless horizons outside us. Any film wraps us in uncertainty. The longer we look through a camera or watch a projected image the remoter the world becomes, yet we begin to understand that remoteness more. Limits trap the illimitable, until the spring we discovered turns into a flood. "A camera filming itself in a mirror would be the ultimate movie," says Jean-Luc Godard.

The ultimate film goer would be a captive of sloth. Sitting constantly in a movie house, among the flickering shadows, his perception would take on a kind of sluggishness. He would be the hermit dwelling among the elsewhere, foregoing the salvation of reality. Films would follow films, until the action of each one would drown in a vast reservoir of pure perception. He would not be able to distinguish between good or bad films, all would be swallowed up into an endless blur. He would not be watching films, but rather experiencing blurs of many shades. Between blurs he might even fall asleep, but that wouldn't matter. Sound tracks would hum through the torpor. Words would drop through this languor like so many lead weights. This dozing consciousness would bring about a tepid abstraction. It would increase the gravity of perception. Like a tortoise crawling over a desert, his eyes would crawl across the screen. All films would be



Robert Smithson, Stills from *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. "The longer we look through a camera or watch a projected image, the remoter the world becomes, yet we begin to understand that remoteness more."

brought into equilibrium — a vast mud field of images forever motionless. But ultimate movie-viewing should not be encouraged, any more than ultimate movie-making.

What I would like to do is build a cinema in a cave or an abandoned mine, and film the process of its construction. That film would be the only film shown in the cave. The projection booth would be made out of crude timbers, the screen carved out of a rock wall and painted

white, the seats could be boulders. It would be a truly "underground" cinema. This would mean visiting many caves and mines. Once when I was in Vancouver, I visited Britannia Copper Mines with a cameraman intending to make a film, but the project dissolved. The tunnels in the mine were grim and wet. I remember a horizontal tunnel that bored into the side of a mountain. When one was at the end of the tunnel inside the mine, and looked back at the en-

trance, only a pinpoint of light was visible. One shot I had in mind was to move slowly from the interior of the tunnel towards the entrance and end outside. In the Cayuga Rock Salt Mine under Lake Cayuga in New York State I did manage to get some still shots of mirrors stuck in salt piles, but no film. Yet another ill-fated project involved the American Cement Mines in California — I wanted to film the demolition of a disused cavern. Nothing was done. ■

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Robert Smithson, *A Cinematic Atopia*, in “Artforum”, September 1971, puis
Collected Writings, pp. 138-142]

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“Certains artistes voient une quantité infinie de films. [...] Le cinéma procure un cadre rituel à la vie de nombreux artistes, et cela induit une sorte de mysticisme du ‘petit budget’ qui les tient dans un état de transe perpétuelle. ‘Le sang et les tripes’ du film d’horreur pourvoient à leurs ‘besoins organiques’, tandis que le ‘froid métallique’ des films de science-fiction pourvoit à leurs ‘besoins inorganiques’. Les films sérieux sont trop chargés de ‘valeurs’ et, pas conséquent, négligés par les artistes les plus sensibles”

“Les artistes qui aiment l’horreur penchent du côté de l’émotif, tandis que ceux qui aiment la science-fiction penchent du côté du perceptif.

Plus encore que les films, la salle de cinéma elle-même est une machine à conditionner les esprits. [...] Le confinement du corps à l’intérieur de ces boîtes obscures conditionne indirectement l’esprit. Même l’endroit où l’on achète son billet s’appelle ‘box office’. Le hall d’entrée est généralement bourré d’équipements en forme de boîtes : distributeur de boissons, comptoir à confiseries et cabines téléphoniques. Le temps est comprimé ou suspendu à l’intérieur des salles de cinéma, ce qui met le spectateur dans un état entropique. Passer du temps dans une salle de cinéma, c’est faire un ‘trou’ dans sa propre vie”

Entropy and New Monuments, in “Artforum”, juin 1966

In a secret Paris cavern, the real underground cinema

Jon Henley in
Paris

🐦 @jonhenley

Wed 8 Sep 2004 11.42
CEST



📷 Them bones, them bones: Les Catacombes, part of the miles of tunnels underlying Paris. Photo: AP

Police in Paris have discovered a fully equipped cinema-cum-restaurant in a large and previously uncharted cavern underneath the capital's chic 16th arrondissement.

Officers admit they are at a loss to know who built or used one of Paris's most intriguing recent discoveries.