

# Robert Smithson and I

By Peter Hutchinson

**I**N 1962 I spent the summer in Provincetown. There I met Edward Avedisian. On returning to New York, Edward introduced me to Bob. It was before he married Nancy Holt, and he lived in a very small apartment on the Lower East Side. I visited him there and was struck by the bathroom, which he had painted entirely black. The toilet, which had an old-fashioned water tank near the ceiling, had to be flushed by pulling on a chain. On the end of this chain, Bob had hung a small plastic skeleton. He had a great sense of humor, and his wearing black and playing other pranks like the skeleton were really indicative of his attempt to lighten difficult problems in his life. In fact, we both were not showing in Manhattan and we would spend lots of time planning how to correct this and how to write articles for magazines.

Bob was the first person I had met who had such an intense intelligence and knowledge of so many things—geology, astronomy, science in general—and an amazing literary style, dense with meaning. In fact, he tried to teach me how every single word must be carefully considered for its meaning. Of course, I never followed this, though I admired it. My writing, dare I say, was more lyrical, very quickly written and hardly ever edited, perhaps out of laziness, or, as I like to say, to save time.

After his marriage to Nancy, they moved to a large loft in lower Manhattan, where they would invite me for dinner once a week. After eating we would sit on a large couch in the living part of the loft under a mirrored ceiling talking about almost everything, Nancy contributing her bright intelligence and ideas. While discussing my (at the time) recent work with models for earthworks, which included tubes filled with crystals and plants, Nancy was the one who suggested using mold as well. She had, I believe, a history of working with animals in a previous job.

In 1963, at the short-lived but important John Daniels Gallery, run by Dan Graham, I remember what I think was the first meeting of Bob with Virginia Dwan. Soon Virginia joined our group of discussions, and we were all reading and discussing books by writers such as Robbe-Grillet (I was particularly impressed with his essays in *For a New Novel*) and Marshall McLuhan, Immanuel Velikovsky, Nathalie Saraute, and various writers of science fiction. Bob and I together saw *Planet of the Vampires*, *The Blob*, *The Thing*, *The Fly*, and many other science fiction films. I know these writers and films influenced us all and led to my writing some fiction in that area, especially short stories. I am not sure that Bob wrote any fiction—maybe I am wrong. The recent book *Art and Science-Fiction* by Valérie Mavridorakis includes Bob's and my writings (in French).

I remember Bob taking me on a trip to New Jersey, where he was from, to search the woods for a

fire salamander. Unbelievably, he actually found one of these beautiful creatures under a pile of wet leaves. Growing up, he kept large lizards in his home, which I heard were sometimes allowed to roam around the house. Bob also kept preserved in bottles various animals of this sort. Perhaps this reminded him of entropy and of how all things decay and finally turn to dust. (Although, preserved in formaldehyde, this would take much longer.) As is known, Bob was fascinated by the idea of entropy. And it is a theory worthy of interest (or, should I say, a fact). I, on the other hand, was more involved with the opposite, the accretion of dust into planets of evolution and the fact that life is nature's riposte to entropy by increasing complexity. Of course, one could argue that inevitably everything loses organization. However, although the final fate of the universe cannot be known, Einstein noted that energy and information can never be lost. I would add that as energy slows down it becomes matter.

One day, after I had been banished to Spanish Harlem, not being able to afford lower Manhattan, a uniformed chauffeur appeared at my house on 102nd and Lexington, carried my bag to a limo, and drove me to the airport, where I boarded a plane with Christo, Bob, Dennis Oppenheim, and John Gibson, and possibly a few others, I forget. This private plane, with a champagne lunch, flew us down to Houston as the guests of John and Dominique de Menil, where we each presented ideas for a future sculpture installation in Houston. My project was a huge glass tube filled with mush from the making of paper. Bob's was a field of tar or bitumen dotted with hills of sulphur. I loved his idea although he was not so keen on mine. And his project was long before the discovery and photographs of the moon Titan. Christo proposed a pyramid of a million empty, colored oil barrels. None of these things came to pass in Houston, but I believe Christo did eventually achieve this in the Middle East, maybe Dubai.

Somehow Bob and I drifted apart, maybe partly because we were showing in different galleries, he with Dwan and I with Gibson. And also I moved to Amsterdam for almost two years.



ROBERT SMITHSON, UNTITLED, 1963, REVERSED SPRAYED CHERRY RED ON PLASTIC AND TWO SILVER PANELS, 18 BY 11 INCHES, PHOTO BY PETER DONNELLY

I remember the last time I saw Bob. We had a friendly drink at the Spring Street bar and he invited me to his loft, but unfortunately I had another appointment and said I couldn't go—not knowing, of course, of the tragic accident he would have. How I wish that I had gone with him.

Bob will always be dear in my heart and memory. I also would add that his *Spiral Jetty*, to me, is the iconic permanent earthwork. ❧

*PETER HUTCHINSON was an early member of the Land Art movement and later cofounder of the Narrative Art movement of the 1970s. Like Smithson, Hutchinson wrote on the influence of science fiction on art and they often exchanged ideas on the subject. (See Dissolving Clouds, published by Provincetown Arts Press.) Hutchinson has been a presence in the Provincetown art community since 1962 and has resided in Provincetown full time since 1981. His work is in galleries and museums in New York and Europe and can be seen at artSTRAND gallery in Provincetown this summer.*