

Robert Smithson SF

The dialog of conceptualism and science fiction has been recognized, but is not frequently spoken about, perhaps because of the very healthy “ghettoization” with which science fiction has defended its libertarian ideals for so long. Science fiction remains an explicit theme in today’s art scene, but if today’s artists bring science fiction ideas into the gallery, museum or art fair, or today’s critics refer cannily to important SF texts, the following is usually the case: science fiction is presented on its own terms but always only within the larger terms of the art world. The art itself remains, therefore, usually irrelevant to science fiction itself.

I assumed this was a natural fact of the cultural landscape. But when *Robert Smithson Retrospective*, organized by Eugenie Tsai with Connie Butler, opened in Los Angeles in 2004, I began to think differently. It was impossible to miss the SF flavor of some of Smithson’s best work – the peculiar time-traveling of the Hotel Palenque lecture, the avid pursuit of the esthetics of the laws of thermodynamics, the “rock sample” floor sculptures and the abiding interest in importing geological science into the art gallery. Smithson’s most important work, the film *Spiral Jetty* (1970) reads like an homage to Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*. Smithson himself wrote of the film in terms that recall new wave author Brian Aldiss’ art & time travel classic, *Crytopozoic!* (1967):

Everything about movies and moviemaking is archaic and crude. One is transported by this Archeozoic medium into the earliest known geological eras. The movieola becomes a “time machine” that transforms trucks into dinosaurs.

Smithson was everywhere presenting his work as a sort of science fiction fantasy come to life. As if the work of art itself were being judged not by what it said about SF but by how it functioned as SF.

Furthermore, like newly self-conscious writers of political pop Ursula LeGuin, Philip Dick and Samuel Delaney, Smithson’s work also came with a smooth, hipster sense of hot-shot speculation into real hardcore science.

I phoned Dan Graham. (I had met Graham long ago when I worked on a construction team overhauling his New York studio. I was in the midst of reading the complete available works of Philip K. Dick at the time, and when Graham walked by, he reminded me of Phil. I asked him if he’d ever read any of the books. Without missing a beat, he stopped and answered,

“I have everything. Even the *complete* philosophical works.”)

The best strategy with Graham is to begin, so as soon as he answered I asked:

“What kind of SF did Smithson like?”

There was no pause. “Science fiction to him was second only to gay camp culture, which of all cultures he loved the most. But Smithson liked the trashiest SF novels. Cheap paperback novels. He probably came to them through his hero worship of William S. Burroughs. He loved Burroughs’ SF. He was an incredible reader, devoured everything. SF in those days supplied a lot of titles to addicts. Smithson loved trash culture and cheap paperback covers. He didn’t have favorite SF writers. He loved them all in general and stacked them around his bed.

His favorite mainstream writer was Borges. But he realized that if you looked at it the right way, Borges wrote science fiction. Jack Smith, Burroughs, Andy Warhol all had a SF interest in the avant-garde. Andy’s favorite movie: *Creation of the Humanoids*, of 1962, was incredibly important to Smithson too. It was actually written by the famous SF writer Jack Williamson and based on his hilarious novel *The Humanoids*. In the movie the 3rd World War has wiped out most of the Earth. Humanity survives with the help of androids, who are gentle and green and very sensitive. The humans turn against them and try to wipe them out. The film is told from the point of view of the Humanoids. It’s incredibly campy but dark and biologically profound.

He also loved Roger Corman, a big favorite. The shoe-string budgets, the way Corman helped other film-makers; his Poe movies. Corman was an Aries. Smithson took me to a Corman festival at Kip’s Bay. He loved Vincent Price. Did you know Vincent Price was a great collector? The best Hollywood collector.”

“Were any other artists into SF at that time? Was it part of the scenes that Smithson hung out in?”

“Joan Jonas liked science fiction and you can see it in her work. She was married to a science fiction writer, in fact. The only other ones I remember being into SF were Smithson, Weiner and me. Weiner loved Michael Moorcock – had copies all over the place. The comical, new-Edwardian thing, the time-travel and humor of Moorcock appealed to him. I loved Dick. You must understand, in those days, the minimalists were the center of things. The minimalists weren’t into SF at all. For them it was theory and the French New Novel. They loved Robbe-Grillet. They liked *Alphaville*, not loved. They loved Godard – he was a big influence – but just not that picture. But some of them liked crime. Actually, Sol LeWitt

loved the crime writer Chester Himes, books like *Pinktoes* and *The Heat's On*.”

“Was SF as important an influence on conceptualism as French theory?”

“It was more influential. I don't know Kosuth, but Smithson wasn't interested in the French thing. He was interested in Pop culture and Borges and camp. Look at his mirror works – they refer to all these things at once. He always used trashy, mannerist colors. He was always very interested in cheap special effects. In terms of art, Smithson's hero was Paul Thek. He loved everything Thek came up with. Thek did step mirror pyramids and dinosaurs, lots of speculative productions. And Thek loved science fiction, all of it, though I'm not sure he read L. Ron Hubbard.”

“Did Smithson ever try to write science fiction?”

“No. He wasn't a frustrated Faulknerian like you.”

“Do you think *Spiral Jetty* is a work of science fiction?”

“Yes. It's *unearthly*. *A message to alien gods*.”

Then he hung up.

It struck me that that's exactly what science fiction is not. It is often a message *from* alien gods, but not to them – it is always directed towards a human common reader.

In what may have been the high point in the sporadic hyper-history of western enlightenment, the 1970s, Smithson himself seems to have withdrawn from the need for genre labels. As movements began more and more to label themselves, land artists pursued a romantic environmentalism that Michael Stevenson has shown to be a Tolkienian reaction to modernity. As camp moved to activism, glam to punk, and conceptual art turned increasingly serious and academic, Smithson's sculpture moved outside of contemporary classification. Insisting on an ever larger popular mechanics esthetic, it inscribed itself onto the planet's skin by rented bulldozer in actual local non-art-world environments.

Science fiction, conceptualism, gay culture, and Borges and Paul Thek seemed to have joined together at this brief moment on a single shoe-string, to fall away – leaving, for the future, as a last and quiet memorial to all that humanity ever really achieved, *a science fiction story turning real*.

Unless....