

James Cohan Gallery

Robert Smithson at James Cohan

Art in America, June 2000, by Susan Harris

This recent exhibition, "Robert Smithson: Language to Be Looked at and/or Things to Be Read: Drawings 1962-63," brought together a body of drawings that has been overshadowed by the artist's later sculptures and earthworks. Smithson made two-dimensional works exclusively from 1957 to 1963, and he remained a prolific draftsman until his untimely death in 1973. Some of the pieces shown here had never been exhibited before. Others were included in the 1991 exhibition "Unearthed: Works on Paper 1957-1973" at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, where, for the first time, Smithson's earlier works were presented alongside the earthwork drawings in order to demonstrate their visionary similarities.

The drawings and collages at Cohan well represented Smithson's exploration of the visual and material possibilities of language. In works that one experiences alternately as drawings and texts, the artist combines and juxtaposes diverse words, numbers and pictorial elements in a seemingly random manner. Many of the drawings render a phrase, a nonsensical word or a mark repeatedly over the page; this kind of accumulation often suggests a form that is prescient of Smithson's later earthworks. In one drawing, the phrase "Lethargy, coma, catalepsy, trance, caused by Neptune, Moon in Aries ..." degenerates into illegibility as it is repeated down the left side of the page--effectively mimicking a fall into those very states. In Untitled (Done), words and letters such as "MMMMMMMM," "PUSHPUSHPUSHPUSHPUSHPUSH" and "Put it on--it is a stormcoat" are repeated, stacked and pressed up against each other along with scribbles, renderings of naked figures and other episodic visual events. The drawing in fact resembles a collage--a technique that Smithson had begun exploiting in 1961 as a vehicle to bring together disjunctive references to popular culture, natural history, science fiction and language.

Smithson's experiments with language correspond to those of concrete poetry, a literary movement that influenced many artists in the early '60s. Concrete poetry focused on the physical shape and graphic patterns a poem took, as opposed to the written expression of

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ideas. Smithson's deployment of words as compositional elements on the page parallels the way that language was treated in concrete poetry, except that the careless, handwritten quality of his drawings is distinct from the mass-produced graphics and typography used by concrete poets.

Smithson was always drawn to the crossover between writing and visual art. His idiosyncratic engagement with the pictorial and linguistic aspects of language in these 1962-63 drawings sheds light on his entire esthetic production, while foreshadowing a number of critical practices that persist in art-making today.