

This video was produced with the support of SKOR | Foundation for Art and Public Domain and Land Art Contemporary.

Land Art Contemporary is a new initiative in Drenthe to be launched on 17 September 2011 with a varied, international, multiyear programme dealing with (the contemporary aspects of) land art. The fortieth anniversary of Broken Circle/Spiral Hill served as the starting point for various parties to focus on the work, in a publication, a video and two exhibitions. Land Art Contemporary will focus on presenting existing and new art projects and cultural heritage in the rural environment of Drenthe, by adding a series of new and modern elements.

In 2012, the perspective of Land Art Contemporary will shift to the further implementation of 'The Ultraperiferic'; an Artist-in-Residence programme in Dalen (near Coevorden) and a digital roadmap for cultural heritage in collaboration with CBK Drenthe.

Land Art Contemporary is a multiyear international program initiated by the LACDA foundation, curated by SKOR | Foundation for Art and Public Domain and financially supported by SKOR, the province of Drenthe, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: Europe Investing in Rural Areas (LEADER), the city of Coevorden, the city of Emmen, Cultuurfonds BNG and the Sanders-Ten Holte family.

The Estate of Robert Smithson is represented by the James Cohan Gallery, New York / Shanghai

www.landartcontemporary.nl
www.skor.nl
www.robertsmithson.com

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Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt filming, Emmen. Foto: Jan Niks, 1971. ©The Estate of Robert Smithson/Licensed by VAGA.

BREAKING GROUND: BROKEN CIRCLE/ SPIRAL HILL (1971-2011)



A video on Robert Smithson's
Broken Circle/Spiral Hill (Emmen, 1971)

Produced by SKOR | Foundation for Art and Public Domain and Land Art Contemporary
Directed by Nancy Holt and Theo Tegelaers

CREDITS VIDEO

Produced by SKOR | Foundation for Art and Public Domain and Land Art Contemporary

Directed by Nancy Holt and Theo Tegelaers

Cinematography 1971 – Nancy Holt
2011 – Benito Strangio

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QUOTATIONS

Spoken text

Voice of Robert Smithson recorded while speaking at the Art Institute of Chicago, October 19, 1971.

Voice-over by

Huib Haye van der Werf reading excerpts from an interview with Robert Smithson by Gregoire Müller '...The Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, is a Cruel Master'. In: Arts magazine, September (1971) as published in Robert Smithson, The Collected Writings. Jack Flam [ed.]. University of California Press: 1996

Documentary Film footage

Polygon journal Dutch television, 'Special news edition of The Netherlands; the first images of the North Sea Flood in 1953.' Collection: Beeld en Geluid Hilversum.
Glacier documentary Mountains with snow, glacier and water; BBC Motion Gallery, NTR-NOT 'De Rusteloze Aarde, afl. 4: De aarde slijt 28-03-1988.' Collection: Beeld en Geluid Hilversum.

longer have their intention attached to them. So it becomes a kind of mental archaeology.

[voice-over]

When one is standing on the top of the Spiral Hill, there is a link-up of two centers, the top center is absent while the bottom center is present – but only from that position. Neither eccentrically nor concentrically is it possible to escape the dilemma, just as the Earth cannot escape the Sun. Maybe that's why [Paul] Valéry called the sun a 'Brilliant Error.'

When I return to Holland, I might bury the boulder in the center, or move it outside of the circumference, or just leave it there – as a kind of glacial 'heart of darkness' - a warning from the Ice Age.

[voice Robert Smithson]

Duration effects everything, temporality effects everything. Yet we are always somehow interested in a timeless moment that intersects with the time filled. That hinges on a notion of space. I guess I am interested in how they overlap, not in excluding either one. We all have certain ideas of the infinite as well as the finite.

Any other questions?

(What's your name?)

Robert Smithson.

[background notes]

The flood in January 31 – February 1, 1953 caused 1,835 deaths and forced the emergency evacuation of 70,000 people. Floods covered 9% of Dutch farmland, and sea water inundated 1,365 km² or 340,000 acres of land.

Hunebeds are stone burial chambers built around 5400 years ago. The huge boulders comprising the hunebeds were transported to The Netherlands by slow moving glaciers 150.000 years ago during the Ice Age. There are 54 hunebeds remaining today, most of them near Emmen in the province of Drenthe.

In June 1971 the stages of the construction process of Broken Circle/Spiral Hill were filmed by Nancy Holt with a Bolex camera on 16 mm film. The 2011 digital-footage was shot from the ground a helicopter and boat by Benito Strangio.

– Excerpts from an interview with Robert Smithson by Gregoire Muller and a transcription of a talk by Robert Smithson at the Art Institute, Chicago.

BREAKING GROUND: BROKEN CIRCLE/SPIRAL HILL (1971-2011)

During the execution of Robert Smithson's (1938-1973) land art project 'Broken Circle/Spiral Hill', which was commissioned by Sonsbeek Buiten de Perken in 1971, his wife and artist Nancy Holt filmed about thirty minutes of footage on 16 mm of the work in progress. Smithson had made a scenario and storyboard himself for some scenes, camera positions and camera movements that he intended to use. Not all of these scenes were executed, on the one hand because of a lack of time and financial funding and on the other hand because Smithson was still struggling with the boulder that lay in the center of the work. The presence of the boulder was a fact and Smithson wondered if he should bury it or remove it from the centre. Ultimately, he decided to leave the stone intact as an indefinable reminder of the Ice Age. According to Smithson, the film could, with its successive bursting of dams and, as a result, water washing as in a flood over the land, be considered a micro cosmos for the disastrous floods in Zeeland in 1953. Smithson wanted to incorporate this event in the film by the inclusion of documentary material.

Smithson thus saw the film as an integral part of the work and several months after the completion of the work wrote a letter to Sjouke Zijlstra. In this letter he requested if the for

that reason newly installed Sonsbeek Unlimited foundation would take care of the restoration and the maintenance of the work, and could make means available for the completion of the film. Later, in another letter to the foundation's chair Mr. P. Sanders, he asked again if there was a party prepared to commission the realization of the film. Due to his tragic death in an airplane accident in 1973, while searching locations for a new work in Texas, Smithson never completed the film.

The video BREAKING GROUND: BROKEN CIRCLE/SPIRAL HILL (1971-2011) draws a picture of Smithson's intentions in relation to the disastrous floods, the megalithic tombs, the quarry itself and the geological history of the area, based on the available directions of the artist. In this video, realized forty years after the completion of the work itself, the original 1971 footage is combined with two recent recordings of video and sound, which include aerial shots and scenes shot from the quarry lake.

Theo Tegelaers, Senior curator
SKOR | Foundation for Art and
Public Domain

QUOTATIONS

[voice-over]

The Ice Age – advancing – receding – on the edge of the moraine – off the record – no time passing – no knowledge of the glacial bulldozing – no knowledge of mechanical bulldozing – dozing on the moraine – dozing on the machine – grain by grain – stone by stone – rock by rock – boulder by boulder – a sluggish order – land into water – water to land – glacial memories – melting masses – heap upon heap – innocuous, amorphous heaps – the cycle vanished into water and earth – swivelling – turning treads – turning wheels – turning reels – eyes tired of looking – the camera takes over – over what? – on and off – inwards and downwards into isolation – starts and stops – on all sides the quarry slipping – pushing through the sand – a vague memory – a vague expectation – both spilling into the camera’s eye.

— From: Broken Circle/Spiral Hill, Emmen, Holland (script), 1971 by Robert Smithson.

[voice-over]

Originally the show was supposed to take place in a park, and the idea of putting an object in a park really didn’t motivate me too much. In a sense, a park is already a work of art; it’s a circumscribed area of land that already has a kind of cultivation involved in it. So I didn’t want to

impose an object on such an area, or in any way deface a land that was already cultivated. I was looking for an area that was somewhat raw because Holland is so pastoral, so completely cultivated and so much an earthwork in itself that I wanted to find an area that I could mold, such as a quarry or a disused mining area. Finally, Wim Beeren contacted a geographer, Sjouke Zijlstra, who also runs a cultural center in Emmen. He knew of several quarry sites with green lakes.

I was thinking of working with a circular piece – with a combination of jetty and canal in a circular situation so that a lake bank could serve as a diameter. This was an idea lurking in my mind before I got there, but when I saw the site it just fit – in terms of the banks of the quarry lakes – so I decided to do that.

[voice Robert Smithson]

I am not really interested in excavation type situations. The piece in Holland was made with drag lines, and it was essentially carved out of this blunt peninsula that existed in front of the boulder that extended into the lake. A series of dikes were built inside one half of the circle. Each dike would be broken, and then the water would flood in, and then another dike would be dug out. Then that would be flooded. So essentially the process is a series of flooding shots and that’s probably how I’ll develop the film regarding flooding. The piece itself will act as a microcosm for a larger sense of flooding

and in particular too, a flood that devastated Holland in the mid-50’s. That will all be worked into the film. You have two sides to nature. You have nature when it’s tranquil and then you have nature when it rages. A lot of people tend to have a Disneyland idea of nature, that somehow it’s all pastoral and it isn’t. There are storms and there are other forces. The closer you get to that the more you develop the sense that there is a balance between what you would call tampering and things as they are but nature has a way of tampering with its seemingly solid ground.

[voice-over]

The quarry happened to be on the edge of a terminal moraine. During the last Ice Age, the glaciers moved down there and deposited all different kinds of materials, mainly sand. The area was made up of red, yellow, white brown and black earth, with boulders that had been carried by the glaciers and tumbled into a round shape. The piece itself was developed from a small sand peninsula that extended into the green lake, and in the center of the peninsula there was this glacial boulder that just happened to be there. It was quite by accident that it turned out to be the center of the piece.

All throughout this area they have what they call Hun’s beds: burial chambers, basically in the shape of the hull of a ship embedded in the ground, with precariously balanced

large flat rocks going from one side to the other. For the film, I had in mind shooting a boulder of a Hun’s bed and zooming into the rock so that you only see the surface, and then pulling back so as to see the rock surface of my boulder. There would be a forward zoom and a backward zoom that would link up the two boulders in a kind of cinematic parallel that would cover vast stretches of time.

When you are dealing with a great mass, you want something that will, in a sense, interact with the climate and its changes. The main objective is to make something massive and physical enough so that it can interact with those things and go through all kinds of modifications. If the work has sufficient physicality, any kind of natural change would tend to enhance the work. Geology has its own kind of entropy that has to do with sediment mixtures. Sediment plays a part in my work. I am interested in collaborating with entropy. Some day I would like to compile all the different entropies. All the classifications would lose their grids.

[voice Robert Smithson]

Levi-Straus says that anthropology should have its name changed to ‘entropology’ which comes from entropy. This means that in essence you are sort of digging up these structures that are in a very advanced state of disintegration. They once had meaning in terms of what they were supposed to be doing, but they no