

Passaic Eternal

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How does one reinhabit ruins in reverse?

“We traveled in the shadow of greater powers than we knew. We are bound to achieve what self-knowledge we can; it is a point of honor, of intelligence, of courage; but always in the rambling house of our understanding is one chamber unexplored, one undiscovered stairway leading straight down to the infernal regions.”

—Earthworks, Brian Aldiss

On November 19, 2010, I boarded New Jersey Transit bus 190 from the Port Authority in midtown Manhattan heading toward Patterson via Passaic, New Jersey. As pilgrimages go, this one seemed rather perverse compared to a romantic getaway to the Spiral Jetty or the Lightning Field. While waiting to board the bus, I imagined a fleet of art historical tour-buses marketed to MFAs and docents, shuttling people from 36 Gasoline Stations to Homes for America. Decades earlier, Robert Smithson described his passage to Passaic in the now canonical essay “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey.” In it, he observes the ongoing transformations of his birthplace with a deadpan tone, applying the language of art history to this seemingly banal suburban landscape, effectively finding a true fiction amid a false reality. By retracing his steps, I hoped to discover what light the monuments of Passaic could shed on my own false reality.

But I am not an “archaeologist” or

“historian”. I did not go to Passaic seeking art history’s recent past; instead I wanted to better understand the future it predicted. In Borges’ “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”, the title character attempts to write Don Quixote—not copy the text, or reinterpret it, but literally write Cervantes’ book through sheer creative will. I did not seek to literally go back to Smithson’s Passaic, but my tour was similarly quixotic—how does one re-inhabit ruins in reverse? What traces of history might be found in a place with no rational past?

The trip out of New York was a less than an hour, but it felt much longer as uncertainty lengthens all trips to unknown places. For me this was a pilgrimage; for Smithson, the trip may have been just a visit to his family in nearby Rutherford. It seemed that I was searching for something in that passing landscape, some significant building that might resonate. Nothing really did. The big-box stores stood inert and monstrous. The houses were large, split-level, with pastel siding; some were going up, others were in disrepair, but none were particularly remarkable. None could shed any light on the fabled eternal city or the alleged mortgage crisis. My search for meaning in this housing bubble distracted me to the point that I missed my stop and had to backtrack to the Rutherford-Passaic border to make the passage more authentic. The first monument, a rotating wooden bridge that Smithson crossed, is no longer there, replaced by a concrete one



The Bridge Monument, 2010. Photo by Charles Harlan.



The Bridge Monument on Google Street View, date unknown.

in 2002. Two plaques commemorate the site: one contemporary, describing the mechanics of the original bridge and noting its replacement, the other apparently the same plaque noted by Smithson while walking the original bridge. There was no plaque commemorating the bridge's place in art history.

I'd been to Passaic a few times before actually being in Passaic, plotting my journey with Google's satellites. The Street View images appear to be from two different days, or times of day—the bridge into Passaic and route along River Drive is overcast and gray while the city center is bright and pedestrians wear sleeveless shirts. When I actually, physically, visited Passaic it was bright, but not with the glassy heat that Smithson described. Fall was just beginning to fade: a few patches of brilliant red-leafed trees still stood and the brisk air hummed with highway traffic and the slow-moving river. Crossing the bridge, I entered into the Street View photographs, a present already experienced online, but also already encoded with a past canonized by art history. I found it odd that the city appeared to be indifferent to its own strange place in that history. It felt uneasy to move forward through a landscape I'd only known in suspension.

Few, if any, of Smithson's monuments still stand on the border—it's hard to tell. The construction he described in his text was completed years ago, and the pipes and derricks have been hidden away. The actual road that he walked, River Drive, is now an on-ramp to Route 21. Walking alongside the shoulder of the highway proved dangerous, so I walked along the Rutherford side of the river to try and spot the remnants of the pipes or traces of the original construction site. The Rutherford side was much more suburban and bucolic, or maybe it was just patriotic—an American flag lolled in the early afternoon breeze, geese paused on a soccer field. Occasionally I thought I'd found some sign of the old monuments, but had no definitive proof. All I could be certain of and the only remarks I can make on them now are: They were there.

To cross into Passaic, I had to walk across what I identified as a new monument, The



It is possible that the Great Pipe Monument lies beneath this concrete riverbank. However, this is not the pipe. Photo by Charles Harlan.



The Pedestrian Island Monument, or The City.
Photo by Charles Harlan.



Cave to Car Lots. Photo by Charles Harlan.



The Former River Drive, now Route 21.
Photo by Charles Harlan.



The Sand-Box Monument (or The Desert), replaced by a swingless swing-set. Photos by Charles Harlan and Robert Smithson.



Pedestrian Island, where the exit from 21 meets Union Avenue. In “Entropy and the New Monuments”, Smithson describes objects that do not encourage us to remember the past but to forget the future:

“They are not built for the ages, but rather against the ages. They are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than in representing the long space of centuries. Both past and future are placed into an objective present.”

Drivers glimpsed, and just as quickly forgot, my lone figure on the traffic island. The landscape of that road was not built for the human body. The crosswalk lines seemed ersatz; the form was clearly more for cars than pedestrians. River Drive has achieved a scale only meant to be experienced from the flattened time-space projected onto a windshield. Your highway taxes at work.

Route 21 went over the new River Drive, creating a shaded passageway that seemed to be a portal, or a cave, through which the light at the end of the tunnel shone on the only monument to span the short decades: used car lots. However, Smithson’s Pontiacs have since been replaced by Hondas. The defunct company’s stately Executive, Grand Prix, and Firebird are no longer in fashion, succeeded now by Civic, Accord, and Inspire. Perhaps the car lots are the lone monument to endure due to their use of fossil fuels, giving them some strange connection to prehistory. Or it could be because the metamorphosis documented by Smithson—the construction of Route 21—served to recalibrate the landscape for these automobiles, a change that was happening in small towns across the country at the time. I passed beneath the superhighway and descended into the cold light to see the only unchanged portion of the Passaic landscape. The future, it turns out, is certified pre-owned. Or is it that the future tends to be prehistoric?

Passaic Center’s storefronts alternated between silence and screams; vacant and boarded up voids stood next to YO-YO, 99¢

DREAM, and SOO BOUTIQUE. The number of stores with signage in Spanish demonstrated the demographic shift of the city. Though the “adjectives” have changed, Smithson’s description of the center as a “typical abyss or ordinary void” remains apt. Everything about the site is still wrapped in blandness and littered with shiny cars. The signs chattered aimlessly, forming only a heap of language, or a gravel pit. But who am I to entertain such a thought? The usual suspects of chain stores and corporate franchises were also well represented, leaving me less inclined to linger.

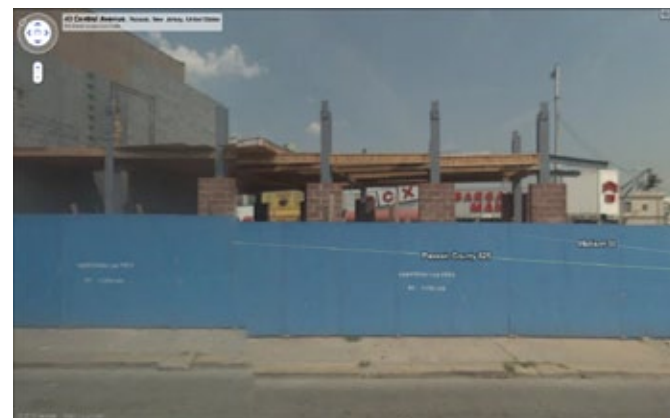
I felt like a weird detective tracking down the mysterious monuments. Smithson’s metaphors had, in fact, become things, and I was trying to find them in the hopes that they might shed some light on the future they anticipated—the future that was now my present. While the monuments were, for the most part, plowed over, their mysteries proved still vexing. The question for Smithson and myself was what does Passaic tell us about time—personal, municipal, and monumental? As the science-fiction texts he referenced predicted, we live in a time so accelerated, so anticipatory, that the present itself often appears paralyzed in a permanent future perfect, a place marked by both interminable waiting and instant gratification.

I traversed the city center in search of the final lost monument: the sandbox, within which Smithson hoped to prove entropy and undermine the fading stars. Consulting my Google Map printouts, I knew it was likely to be in any of the small parks within walking distance of Central Avenue. The park is still there, now outfitted with a modern jungle-gym. Carefully comparing the photo in my copy of Robert Smithson: Collected Writings with the lines of the sidewalk, I recreated its composition with my point-and-shoot’s viewfinder. I could neither prove, nor disprove Smithson’s “jejune experiment”. The Sand-Box Monument has been replaced by a swingless swingset. And yet its disappearance proves entropy as effectively as the analogy Smithson proposed. Bemoaning the

impossibility of walking along the old River Drive or across the original rotating bridge would miss the point. These places were not significant because Smithson observed them, but because he observed their transformation. He described an infinite future in which we now live, and it turns out that it’s kind of an uninteresting place, this future—it is designed to be encountered in flickering seconds, from an automobile, en route to some other past-less place.

I was engulfed in constructions—those described by Robert Smithson and now inherited underfoot by me, as well as those constructions currently underway in present-day Passaic. “More and more complicated grows the Ark.” Smithson writes of Passaic’s place in relation to Rome and other “eternal cities” in an impossible progression. The Great Pyramid of Giza was the world’s tallest building from its completion at the dawn of civilization until 1889 AD. It is a record spanning millennia. Today, not far distant from Cairo in Dubai stands the world’s tallest building, the Burj Khalifa. It has held this distinction for one year. Plans are already underway to unseat it with an even greater tower in Beijing. The culture that produced the Pyramids had a sense of time and permanence that ours has lost, or has at least forgotten. I was again reminded of “Entropy and the New Monuments” and its prescient observation of “the reduction of time down to fractions of seconds”. How would Passaic’s monuments appear in 5,000 years?

Across from a Dunkin’ Donuts (11 Central Avenue, the former home of Smithson’s Golden Coach Diner) stood an empty office building. The architecture and materials were prefabricated in the now pervasive Home Depot aesthetic. At the time that the area was mapped for Google Street View, the building was still under construction—a few support beams surrounded by ubiquitous blue construction barriers. The discrepancy between the near past of the screenshot and the present building in front of me felt something like time travel.



The view from 11 Central Ave, on Google Street View and in 2010. Perhaps a great place for a gallery. Photo by Charles Harlan.