

Caruso St. John and Robert Smithson: Interferences

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Intersecting points of view constitute the common element of this issue of Cuadernos. According to the Real Academia Española, two people or things cross one another when they pass *'through a point or path in opposing directions.'* The point of intersection is explicitly identified: Caruso St. John (hereafter referred to as 'CSJ') calls upon Robert Smithson when explaining its remodeling project of Stortorget, the town square in the center of Kalmar, Sweden, built between 1999 and 2003. Recognizing this convergence, it does not seem that the respective paths continue in opposite directions. Rather, their encounter responds to what is understood in a nautical context as cruising; again the Real Academia Española provides a definition: *'navigating in all directions within a determined space for a variety of reasons.'* The intersecting points of view, therefore, establish a common sphere, within which the fishing grounds diversify and the courses interweave. This occurs because we are facing a coming together of processes, not of objects, that transcends thematic, ideological, and stylistic differences. As we will see in this text, an intersection is produced in the Kalmar project that reveals the common approach to understanding the creative process that has been developing since the late 1960s.

The duo of CSJ (composed of Adam Caruso –Montreal, 1962- and Peter St. John –London, 1959-) has maintained a continuous interest in the urban aspect of its buildings; striving to materially and culturally reflect the form of the city, they do so fundamentally through the idea of the wall as described by Aureli:

Their approach to architecture rejects the Dom-ino convention, and instead focuses on one fundamental structure: the wall as façade. By this I mean a wall that is not simply a partition, i.e., subject to the Dom-ino model. The wall as façade presupposes that the wall is the absolute protagonist of space; it is an active surface whose presence exceeds its functional role as an enclosing element.¹

Understanding the wall in this way promotes a dialog about material and texture that is based on sensory experience and constitutes a method of spatial definition whose principal means of expression is the external surface. There is no evident search for coherence between the interior and the exterior or between the building enclosure and the structure. Instead, we see the preoccupation for defining and interrelating the spaces, whether they are different or equal, creating the singularity of each of the parts without a hint of a unitary concept. Even in Kalmar the pavement is understood as a wall more than as a ground plan. The authors of this space attempt to instill this attitude in their students:

I think we've always thought of the plan as the result of something. It's not the generator. So with students, we never let them sketch plans at the start. We always insist that they first have ideas about the interior, or the form and material quality of the building on its site. So you always try to have a lot of other ideas that are more spatial and more tangible, before you try to resolve them in the plan. I've always thought that the section was more important than the plan because it's more related to experience.²

The interest in the tangible manifestation of the space and the treatment of the wall as surface go together. This does not imply that the symbolic values of construction should be abandoned even if, as Adam Caruso acknowledges, such values came before the historical moment in which all symbols were determined:

But that isn't an excuse for making architecture without any capacity to hold meaning. I'm not Catholic, but I can still be moved in a church, because its iconography has enormous power, even today. However, I think that some of that power is pre-iconographic, and we are interested in that. But you could also say that the politics of it is

what we're rejecting, because in fact global architecture really isn't a place for anything, or anyone.³

This interesting mention of pre-iconography, reminiscent of Le Corbusier's allusion to the Christians of *'5000 years before Christ'* to justify that he, an agnostic, undertook the Ronchamp chapel project, clearly reveals the interest in a concept of tradition as understood from the viewpoint of memory in an almost anachronistic sense, of which Adam Caruso has left continuous written evidence, such as when he cites T.S. Eliot in this respect:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.⁴

For CSJ, as for Le Corbusier, tradition is an arrow shot forward, a basis for acquiring awareness of contemporary times. Caruso cites jazz music as one of the disciplines that loosely draws on its tradition to create completely current works. He demonstrates an interest in applying a similar process to architecture, which in essence implies as much deconstruction as reconstruction. In this regard, he says, *'Whereas contemporary architecture gets dangerously close to the sun, other artistic disciplines flourish because they participate in and grow within their own traditions.'*⁵

Adding what Adam Caruso has said about the emotional potential of objects to what we have seen in relation to ideas of the symbolic and the traditional, we can come closer to identifying the germinal idea of the Stortorget town square project as a search for the connection between the physical and the cultural spheres through anthropic action that is provided by a particular view of the impact of memory in the layout: It has been a long time since the artistic world recognized the emotive capacity that the physical world exudes and has correspondingly expanded the definition of environment. We can also imagine the environment as something that can encompass human effort as well as matter, a territory in which connections can be established between energy and culture.⁶

Robert Smithson (Passaic, NJ, 1938 – Amarillo, TX, 1973) put great effort into shattering the artistic and cultural stagnation of 1960s North America. In his methodology, physical research and written reflections entangled and intertwined until they led to an inseparable amalgam including his unusual way of looking at things, his work, and even his life. Jack Flam, professor of art history at Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, highlights how it *'is significant that Smithson's maturity as a maker of objects and images coincided almost exactly with his maturity as a writer.'*⁷

Smithson spread his tangled fusion of action and thought to artistic compromise with society and territory. He demonstrated a considerable interest in the incorporation of his artwork among the people that it affected. This was evident in his expertise in sharing the ideas of the people to seek ways of returning barren or forgotten land to them. Many of these initiatives, such as the regeneration of various abandoned mines in the

1. AURELI, Pier Vittorio: "El Espesor de la Fachada", El Croquis nº 166, 2013, pág. 12.

2. AURELI, Pier Vittorio: "Forma y resistencia. Una conversación con Caruso St. John", El Croquis nº cit., pág. 7.

3. CARUSO, Adam en Pier Vittorio Aureli: "Forma y resistencia..." cit., pág. 10.

4. ELIOT, T.S. : La tradición y el talento individual, tomado de Adam Caruso: The Feeling of Things. Escritos de arquitectura. Polígrafa, Barcelona, 2008, pág. 11.

5. CARUSO, Adam: The Feeling of Things... cit. pág. 12.

6. CARUSO, Adam: "La energía y la materia", en The Feeling of Things... , pág. 15.

7. FLAM, Jack: Robert Smithson: the Collected Works, University of California Press, Londres, 1996, p. xiii.

8. SMITHSON, Robert: "Entropía y los nuevos monumentos", en Selección de escritos (ed. por Nancy Holt), Alias, México D. F., pág. 16.

9. Ibid. "La energía y la materia", cit. 6.

10. PALLASMAA, Juhani: Una arquitectura de la humildad, Fundación Caja de arquitectos, Barcelona, 2010, pág. 105.

11. VIRILIO, Paul: La estética de la desaparición, Anagrama, Barcelona, 1988, pág. 60.

12. GARCÍA-GERMÁN, Jacobo: 'Los diez pasajes de Robert Smithson', Circo nº 98, 2010, pág. 10.

13. CARUSO, Adam: 'The Feeling of Things' Ibid cita 5 pág. 20.

14. SMITHSON, Robert: 'Un recorrido por los monumentos de Paissac', Ibid cit., pp. 87-95.

15. SMITHSON, Robert en 'Conversaciones con Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, Smithson' (1979) en Tania Raquejo: Land Art, Nerea, Madrid, 1998.

16. PRIGOGINE, Ilya: ¿Tan solo una ilusión?, Tusquets, Barcelona, 1983, pág. 152.

17. PRIGOGINE, Ilya: ¿Tan sólo una ilusión? , cit., pág. 155.

18. SMITHSON, Robert: Selección de escritos, cit., pág. 128.

19. SMITHSON, Robert: 'La entropía se hace visible', en Javier García Germán (ed.): De lo mecánico a lo termodinámico, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, pág. 51.

20. PRIGOGINE, Ilya: ¿Tan solo una ilusión?, Tusquets, Barcelona, 1983, pág. 152.

21. SCHRÖDINGER, Erwin: ¿Qué es la vida?, Tusquets, Barcelona, 1983, pág. 110.

22. PRIGOGINE, Ilya: El nacimiento del tiempo, cit., pág. 32.

23. SMITHSON, Robert: Selección de escritos, cit., pág. 16.

United States, were never brought to fruition. Other projects, however, succeeded, such as those undertaken in the dilapidated area of the city of Emmen, Holland in which Smithson set up his project Broken Circle-Spiral Hill in 1971. The inhabitants of Emmen voted to preserve the project beyond its original end date, despite its lack of usefulness and its maintenance costs.

Since childhood, Smithson had traveled to a number of unspoiled areas of special landscape interest and therefore considered studying natural science. His early use of a panoramic scale distanced him to a great degree from the artistic interests of his time. He used this scale in order to take on spaces more suitable to large interventions than to the creation of isolated objects. At this scale, architecture would acquire, as for CSJ, a fundamentally territorial, social, cultural, and urban dimension and therefore participate in an updated understanding of the monumental as a foundation of actions prior to the instant in which they were to occur:

Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future... They are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than in representing the long spaces of centuries.⁸

Therefore, Smithson's position on time was related to processes. He was not interested so much in durability as he was in the arrival of the metastable instant that generates a tension that induces movement, change, and at the same time ignores the remote origin compressing itself in ephemerality. Despite their pursuit of lasting and solid architecture, the manner in which CSJ conceives architecture as background, as if capable of containing life and events, is not far from the Smithsonian understanding of time. It is therefore not surprising that Adam Caruso cites Smithson to speak of these matters because in a town square, in which architecture is reduced to nothing more than paved ground, demonstrating itself only as an area, the ideas of both artists find a more natural association.⁹

It should be noted that CSJ's attention to the wall as an element of spatial definition is based upon aspects derived from physical experience. When this element is extended to the surface of a town square, we can apply certain aspects of Smithson's Land Art- the use of pre-iconographic symbols in the geometric inception of works such as Spiral Jetty or The Crystal Land or the materials used in his earthworks- which bring it closer to the idea- derived from the deposit of latent energy in the movement and placement of rock and more poetic than historic- present in the Kalmar project. The convergence of viewpoints we have been discussing acquire an unexpected presence; their point of intersection is more a unifying knot than it is a mere encounter.

The Landscape

Before creating their own firm in 1990, Adam Caruso and Peter St. John had worked in the ARU (Architecture Research Unit), the architectural design laboratory for built research and criticism, founded and directed by Florian Beigel and Philip Christou. In this studio they experimented with objects that after losing their identity as autonomous elements go on to construct places and to require a way of looking that blurs the outlines, as Pallasmaa proposes when he contrasts haptic experiences with visual images:

While images of architecture can be rapidly consumed, haptic architecture is appreciated and comprehended gradually, detail by detail. While the hectic eye of the camera captures a momentary situation, a passing condition of light, or an isolated and carefully framed fragment (photographic images are a kind of focused gestalt), the experience of architectural reality depends fundamentally on peripheral and anticipated vision. The perceptual realm that we sense beyond the sphere of

focused vision —the event anticipated around a corner, behind a wall, or beneath a surface— is as important as the camera's frozen image.¹⁰

The place-constructing object has a connective potential that operates in a field of relationships at different levels, constituting a new type of landscape that possesses intermediate spaces that activate transformations of which visible traces remain. Territory comprehended in this way not only contributes to the building an ability to look outside, thus transcending self-absorption, but it also allows the exterior to come inside the building. That is the property of the '*construction of outward appearance*' that CSJ adopted from Florian Beigel and that we can recognize in their attempt to move the terrestrial depths to the plan of Stortorget's town square.

Although there is a great deal of eighteenth-century English picturesqueness in CSJ's architecture, their interior gaze complements the scale of the landscape garden. John Soane did this as well in his own home by interlocking contrasting rooms in sequences made up of routes that take on the nature of thresholds. CSJ's vision does not fully unfold either; rather, it is conceived in substrata sequentially superimposed, and the whole that they construct is made visible through the sum of its fragments loaded with endless allusions.

In Stortorget, the time sequence is understood as a process, as an unfinished work frozen in time and stripped of eternities. The town square crystallizes the moment in which history is captured with the rapidity of a snapshot. Even the square's materials reproduce the function that Virilio attributes to the attire of the Lumière brothers' film stars: '*the fashion of platinum hair, like that of lamé clothes, mirror-material of flashing metal, is destined to make of the star a formless being also, as diaphanous as if the light was pouring through her flesh.*'¹¹

Crystallization, picturesqueness, and time are also basic factors in the configuration of Spiral Jetty, Smithson's best-known work. In 1970 he moved 6500 tons of basalt, dirt, and salt from the Utah desert to the Great Salt Lake to create an enormous coil 1500 feet long and 15 feet wide. This spiral is the paradigm of the interaction between nature and anthropization and is a result of Smithson's intense study of eighteenth-century English treatise writers. Spiral Jetty led to the recognition of the consciousness of the transformative potential of the landscape subjected to the awareness towards the place, to human intervention, and to the inexorable erosion of the passage of time.

The spiral disappeared below the water. Some years later, drought caused it to emerge profoundly altered by the whitening of the precipitation of salt crystals and silt that filled the primitive, cracked land. Currently, the foundation which preserves Spiral Jetty is attentively and continually observing the work's successive changes. García Germán discusses the uncertain nature of this evolution:

The idea that a place can cease to be physical, oft-repeated by R. Smithson, in order to become a line in time and in memory, capable of uniting the real and the imagined, allows one to think in a state of '*unreality*' for any given location, between an infinite past, that dates back to the creation of the world, and a combination of futures, all possible but none definitive.¹²

Energy, Matter, Time

Energy, matter, and time are universal concepts applicable to every phenomenon, thing, or situation. However, the specific ways in which our authors understand them determine the discursive intertwining that interests us. In regards to the above-mentioned urban renewal taken on by CSJ in Kalmar in collaboration with the Swedish artist Eva Löfdahl,

Adam Caruso has highlighted in the following terms such concepts as drivers of the project in a thermodynamic approach that defines a new vision:

I hope that Stortorget continues to preserve the large volume of energy used centuries ago for the extraction of granite and limestone from the glacial deposits that surround Kalmar as well as the urban identity that these stones provide to the center of Kalmar.¹³

These words allow us to detect the strategic correlation between matter and energy that is meant to be acting in the town square and identify it as the catalyst of the intervention. We see that moving the stones from other areas of the city and relocating them in the new ordered space was conceived as an operation with the flow of energy maintained and accumulated in the material and still visible today. This implies a thermodynamic approach that supports the frame from which to propose a new way of looking at form and material, memory and time. In this thermodynamic frame, in this energetic view toward matter, CSJ's central theme and Robert Smithson's interests resonate with one another.

In the famous walk through his hometown of Passaic, Smithson traveled around the outskirts of New Jersey and found processes that keep New York City alive. The thermodynamic theory states that open systems need to feed off of the entropy in their environment in order to maintain their structure. It happens in the same way with cities. The North American artist traveled to entropic cores located in industrial areas, and his fine-tuned view was capable of detecting in them monuments of a new time, monumental deficits that led him to wonder if Passaic had '*replaced Rome as The Eternal City.*'¹⁴ This question reproduced, perhaps unconsciously, the demands of Justinian and Ivan the Terrible by Byzantium and Moscow as the second and third Rome, respectively.

Kalmar's town square has been rearranged managing a scattered material of stones brought together to produce the place. As we have seen, Adam Caruso explains the shaping potential of the urban development of this deposit of energetic memory preserved in displacements and relocations. This understanding of the town square based on its material memory shows us an intelligent view of its surroundings, equivalent to that view projected by Smithson in his walk. The displaced stones that were afterwards reunited in the entropic processes of Stortorget are the tangible sign of the life of the city just like the peripheral monuments detected and photographed in Passaic. Smithson had already anticipated this new and profound view of geological evolution:

*I think that the majority of us are very conscious of geological time, of the enormous stretch of time that sculpts matter... I think in terms of millions of years, which encompass the times in which human beings did not exist.*¹⁵

The Dissolution of the Object

In 1969 two exhibitions consolidated the trends with which artists, through action, attempted to appropriate life as an object of work. Process art, performance art, Body Art, installation art, and earthworks sought to shift the artistic act from objects to processes. This movement also tried to develop multiple experiences that questioned the methods and foundations derived from the inheritance of minimalism, pop art, and objet d'art upon deepening in the advanced renewal attempts since the beginning of the decade proposed by neo-Dadaists such as happenings and Fluxus and by the beginning of conceptual art. The first of the exhibits was When Attitudes Become Form, held in the Kunsthalle in Bern and later in the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The show included works by Richard Serra, grease sculptures by Joseph Beuys, and the documentation of Richard Long's artistic

walks. The second exhibit, Anti-Illusion: Procedures/ Materials, held in the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, was dedicated to process art with works by Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois and offered an emotional response to the minimalism canon.

The thoughts of Adam Caruso have often visited the field of contemporary art, sensitive to the displacements defended by artists like Beuys or Smithson. The Kalmar project shares this sensitivity that tends to dissolve the object in its relationships. The Stortorget project follows a strategy that encompasses the urban operation beyond the attention to a delimited and autonomous piece. It conforms a network of energetic, cultural, and material flow that appeals to the memory of the whole city when translating them to a form far away from the typological understanding of outlines, that moves away from the preservation of the continuities of the urban designs in order to dissolve the object in its multiple looks to that which surrounds it and sustains it.

We cannot help but link this dissolution with the one Robert Smithson practices in his non-sites, whose gallery of imprisoned rocks, along with the documents indicative of its origin, open an expanded field of the object that at the same time turns out to be an expressive display of a process that returns to its origin.

The Recovery of Time

In 1967, in his work Structure, Disipation and Life, Ilya Prigogine, a Belgian chemist of Russian origin who won the Nobel Prize in 1977, formulated for the first time the concept of dissipative structure. This theory explained that in situations of thermodynamic imbalance, matter is capable of autoregulating itself, a phenomenon that produces complex organizations. It offered an alternative to the tendency toward disorder and heat death as understood by classic thermodynamics. From that point on, it has been possible to assume that life is an open and unpredictable system that can be nourished by the increase in entropy of the environment so as to maintain its structure, channeling the flow of matter and energy in order to produce complex structures that evolve through nonlinear mechanisms of interaction.

Robert Smithson's works coincide with the concepts that the artist had in mind in his written work due to their eloquent reflection about entropy. The consideration of the thermodynamics of imbalance allows us to expand the judgment of his works. In addition to being valuable instruments for making clear the degradation processes that entropy entails, they predict and protect coherent transformations of matter whose manipulation shows its capacity to create organized structures, source of complexity.

All of this fosters a change in the scientific and artistic consideration of time. Prigogine compared the relevance of Darwin, who showed us the relation between humankind and life, with the ideas of Einstein, who went a step further to mutually link the evolution of life with the cosmos.¹⁶ It can be agreed, therefore, with Prigogine in talking about displacement of the mechanical to the thermodynamic as '*an unquestionable tendency toward the numerous, the temporary, the complex. This profound change is not a consequence of a preconceived decision or a new fashion. It is imposed on us by a series of unexpected discoveries.*'¹⁷ With Smithson, art also expanded his vision, conquering time, as reflected in his observation that the '*object gets to be less and less but exists as something clearer. Every object, if it is art, is charged with the rush of time.*'¹⁸

As the dissolution of objects as autonomous elements strengthens, these absorb time as fundamental category with an intense and magnificent attention of Smithson to the context, which overcomes the preoccupations of North American minimalism, establishes new connections between art and the natural environment, and liberates the artist from the gallery and increases

his sphere of activity. Smithson converted the entropic and temporal ideas of Prigogine into an object of artistic reflection, as much in his actions, non-sites, earthworks, photographs and films, as in his written works.¹⁹

Prigogine's words that follow here could seem to have been conceived in order to inquire into the significance of Smithson's earthworks, in which the entropic current of time becomes trapped, highlighting the spiral flow that feeds them:

How is time imprinted on matter? Ultimately this is life, it is time that engraves itself on matter, and this applies not only to life but also to works of art...We have no idea, but nevertheless it appears to me that the work of art is the inscription of our broken symmetry...in matter, in stone.²⁰

The taut spirals of mud, rock, and salt crystals of Spiral Jetty are capable of producing enormous quantities of what Erwin Schrödinger called negative entropy. The spiral also appears as the geometric metaphor of Smithson's way of thinking; his texts are a boundless succession of reflections, intense analogies, and revealing intuitions, in which are clearly shown the substitution of conventional, linear ideas with creative, dialectical flow. These writings are, in their own right, as illuminating as the interventions of the artist on a large scale in nature. We can likewise imagine Smithson observing how Prigogine, explaining his idea of dissipative structure, declares that '*elements of matter have to look further, and matter has to become sensitive.*'²²

The stones in Kalmar store urban memory like those of Smithson in his earthworks. With these stones, CSJ insinuates a past that becomes present in the surface of the town square. As we saw with T.S. Eliot, Caruso presents to us the past in fragments that illuminate the present. The linear threads break and in their place appear fragments whose meaning is collected in the pebbles. These fragments also emerge from interpretive texts of the very designers of Stortorget, who cite architects like Miguel Angel, Siza, Loos, Alberti, Schinkel, and Rossi, attracting them to their own experience and showing the presence of the past as a permanently available provider. A provider, certainly, and not an index, with which the experience of history is converted into revitalizing strength that inspires free and modern ideas, inquiring and flexible that in turn provokes open systems and processes without end, leading to an early view of the future that predicts it as transformed in new uses. Time for CSJ is discontinuous and thought-provoking and appears liberated from all forms of dependence; however, it becomes contemporary by establishing itself in the experience of architecture and connecting it to place and to life.

In this understanding that dissolves the meaning and experience of history into fragments divorced from the consolidation of catalogs of images, we find one last point of intersection between the viewpoints of CSJ and Robert Smithson. The North American artist had defended the '*destruction of classical time and space*' offering the idea of the '*momentary monument*' as a result of the flow of time and energy that recognizes a deposit of the past as the sum of numerous stratifications and is fixed in a snapshot with which '*[b]oth past and future are placed into an objective present.*'²³ We may well consider Kalmar's town square to be that momentary monument, whose stones dissolve with a fleeting sparkle and the sound of water.



ENERGY
MEMORY
ENTROPY
PLACE
MATERIAL