

Passaic, New Jersey (2006)

On Wednesday, October 4, 2006, I leave home at 9 am. I'm not used to NYC transit system yet. I just moved from Switzerland to Brooklyn last week. I take the B train from *Church Avenue* to *Lafayette* and then the train number 6 to *23 St.* I walk to the SVA library. I first go to 380 on *22 St.* and then realize I should have gone to 380 on *Second Avenue*. I have to show my student ID card to the doorman and again at the entrance. Using 'vision', the library catalogue, I easily find a copy of *Artforum* December 1967 issue. I xerox Robert Smithson's article I was looking for : 'A tour of the monuments in Passaic'. I then take the subway to *Port Authority Bus Terminal* on *41st Street* and *8th Avenue*, the place where Smithson began his tour, back in September 1967. I'm unable to find a wireless network to download a map from Passaic. I desperately need one. Smithson went back on places he knew and let himself be guided by his finds. For me, even if it is a kind of initiatory journey, tracking my romanticized knowledge of New York down, it is above all a very classic tourist trip. With Smithson's text, I have a guide-book and only the map is missing. At *Book Corner*, I discretely photograph a map where a few Passaic streets can be seen.

On Saturday, September 20, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st and 8th Avenue. (...) Next I went to ticket booth 21 (...) and boarded the number 30 bus (...).

The ticket booth number 21 does not seem to exist anymore. Nevertheless, two windows left from number 23 is a *NJ transit service center*. The bus number 30 does not exist anymore either. I'm redirected to another window where I buy a round-trip ticket valid for Passaic. I pay with my credit card. I use an escalator placed in a kind of long tunnel to go to platform number 223. Departure is at 12.

It is not easy to decide which stop I should get off the bus. According to my very bad map which I look on the screen of my camera and to Smithson's writings, I should not go as far as Passaic but go off in Rutherford. Only a few minutes after the departure, I have an incredible panoramic view of Manhattan in the smog. I take some pictures through the window. What would Smithson think of my 6 millions pixels camera which disintegrates every view in an infinite number of grains of sand of different colors. The picture is maybe not that chemical-magical trace anymore but I'm still guided by my camera. I think about Democrite and his atoms. I see ads near the road 'available space, 600 sq ft', 'The home depot'... We are passing by the *Giants* stadium. The team is a sponsor for the new highway. There are highways and interchanges all around. I feel like being in the middle of a net where there is no way out but in which everybody still move very fast and freely. The bus crosses a street called 'Post pl'. A sign states 'Best place to live'. Near the highway, a trailer is the home of 'Veterans of foreign war of the USA'. We leave the highway and enter a suburban housing zone with its small wooden houses and its big cars. The street is like an axis whose both sides are similar, reflecting each other.

We arrive to Rutherford railway station, built with roman pillars. Just in front of the station, *The Bank of New York* uses an even more imperial architecture. Its plan is the one of a classical temple. Looking straight at the bank, I count eight US flags without moving my head. We then follow Union Avenue. Children are playing in schoolyards.

We are suddenly crossing the Passaic River and I can press a little red button above my head just on time to call for a stop. I get off and find myself on River Drive, exactly on the spot where Smithson began his walk along the Passaic River. As the highway which was under construction in 1967 is well finished nowadays, I have to walk along an interchange to reach the bridge, Smithson's first monument. In the weeds near the road, I see some garbage thrown out of car windows. I find a copied CD. I put it into my laptop. There are more than 100 techno-dance music tracks. Some songs are unreadable. I can read their names but not listen to them :

(Techno) Kai Tracid -...Life Is Too Short.mp3
3.mp3
8.mp3
Alex B Meets John P.mp3
ATB Vs Dj Jean - The Lauch Mix.mp3
DJ Pizuli pres/ Natalia (Euro Trance).mp3
SNAP RHY 2003 DJ KC RMX.mp3



I see a graffiti-bombed skull on a highway element. It reminds me of a picture seen in an article about Smithson: a graffiti stating 'Passaic Boys are hell'. I then find a monument. It is made of plastic barrels who are protecting a small space between two roads. Some of the barrels are broken and weeds are growing inside them.

The monument was a bridge over the Passaic River that connected Bergen County with Passaic County. (...) A rusty sign glared in the shard atmosphere, making it hard to read. A date flashed in the sunshine... 1899... No... 1896... maybe (at the bottom of the rust and glare was the name Dean & Westbrook Contractors, N.Y). I was completely controlled by the Instamatic (or what the rationalists call a camera). (...) From the banks of Passaic I watched the bridge rotate on a central axis in order to allow an inert rectangular shape to pass with its unknown cargo.

I reach the bridge and take some pictures. I immediately go on the river bank. It seems rather bucolic for a while but it smells sewer and it's very muddy. As I'm thinking about Walter Benjamin's 'tiger's leap into the past', I make a few archeological discoveries: imprisoned in the mud, looking almost like fossils, some elements attesting a former construction plan appears: bricks, metal pieces, tools... I pick up some of them and put them into my backpack.

Since it was Saturday, many machines were not working, and this caused them to resemble prehistoric creatures trapped in the mud, or, better, extinct machines – mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their skin.



I find a tunnel in the bank. Maybe the pipes photographed by Smithson were attached to it. It's a kind a reverse monument today: one concrete block is emerging from the slope and a big vertical tunnel runs into it a few feet under the ground.

It was though the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice, and causing a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have orgasm.

Smithson was talking about sodomy as he was describing the pipes. A psychoanalyst might today talk about a more feminine space or maybe about castration. It is hard to stay on the banks because the mud makes it hard to walk and because the vegetation is rather dense. In the bushes between the highway and the river, I see a homeless person with his stuff. I go back to the bridge. Even if we can still read the exact same inscription as described by Smithson, the bridge is completely different today and cannot be opened anymore. There is a highway now and the river traffic seems to be nonexistent. I remember Bergson's figure used by Deleuze to describe time : a reversed cone who contains several stratum of past, all condensed in its peak, the present moment. I follow Smithson's path walking along River Drive. It is first a mid-class neighborhood. I find two monuments there. First, there is pile of thrown away stuff, a kind of suburban monument, with a mower and some furniture. Next, I find two big sets of mailboxes, marking the entrance of a residential area.



I pass by a football arena. The team is called 'Passaic Indians' and there is a big US flag on top of the entrance door. The street then turns into a more working-class neighborhood. I see another monument: a flat tire left in the grass. I think about the movie 'The end of suburbia' and about the consequences of future oil shortage for that type of places.

That zero panorama seemed to contain ruin in reverse, that is – all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the “romantic ruin” because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built. This anti-romantic mise-en-scene suggests the discredited idea of time and many other “out of date” things. But the suburbs exists without a rational past and without the “big events” of history.

I cannot find number 253, where Smithson saw a construction plant. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of car sellers, as described in his text. They seem to insist more today on payment eases than on car models, like the 'Wide track Pontiacs' referred to by Smithson. A big yellow sign announces : 'Easy credit approval - No problem ! Bankruptcy - Judgment - Slow pay - Repossession'. It is also stated : 'Se habla español'. A construction company still exists just behind the car sellers but I cannot access to it. It is called 'Smith Sony, Paving Contractor'. On its entrance building, I take a picture of a billboard showing the twin towers and the message 'God Bless America, September 11, 2001'. As I'm thinking about the new echo of Smithson's thoughts about entropy, history, time, ruin or empire in today's New York, I'm called by a guy in his car. He asks me 'Do you need an help ?' as to say 'What are you doing here ?'. The words 'fine arts' are enough to make him smile and he leaves me alone.

Next I descended into a set of used car lots. I must say the situation seemed like a change. Was I in a new territory ? (...) Perhaps I had slipped into a lower stage of futurity – did I leave the real future behind in order to advance into a false future ? Yes I did. Reality was behind me at that point in my suburban Odyssey.

It's already 2 pm and I'm very hungry. I buy a hamburger to the first fast food restaurant at the entrance of Passaic. A bunch of high school students are burping and calling themselves 'nig-gaz'. I walk in the parking lot of 'Uhaul, truck location'.

That monumental parking lot divided the city in half, turning it into a mirror and a reflection – but the mirror kept changing places with the reflection. (...) The indifferent backs of cars flashed and reflected the stale afternoon sun.

On a wall, there is a graffiti-bombed inscription 'time' with two arrows. Some streets further, I see a very old *Coca-Cola* sign painted on a red bricks wall. It would be completely unreadable if we were not so used to the *Coca-Cola* logo. Passaic Main street is split by a parking lot on its middle. On both side, the same 99¢ stores and fast-food restaurants. There are some cheap jewelry stores, with '20% off' signs. Eternity for sale ! I ask a passer-by where *Central Street* is. He is not sure, but he thinks it should be where there once was a porn theater. He tells me that all of the nine movie theaters in the city have closed. 'Everybody has a home theater today !'. I ask another person who doesn't even want to listen to me and does not stop. I finally find the street but not number 11, where Smithson had eaten at the *Golden Coach Diner*. There are a *Mc Donald's* and a *Dunkin' Donut* there today. A whole meal is spread out on the sidewalk.



Has Passaic replaced Rome as The Eternal City ?

The sun is already rather down and, crossing Main street to go to the bus stop, the sun is reflecting on the back of the parked cars. I just miss the 4 pm bus. The bus stop is located right in front of the 'Montauk' theater. It is closed by a gate and a sign says 'Always closed for renovation'.

The last monument was a sand box or a model desert. (...) This monument of minute particles blazed under a bleakly glowing sun, and suggested the sullen dissolution of entire continents, the drying up of oceans – no longer were there green forests and high mountains – all that existed were millions of grains of sand, a vast deposit of bones and stones pulverized into dust. Every grain of sand was a dead metaphor that equaled timelessness, and to decipher such metaphors would take one through the false mirror of eternity. (...) I should now like to prove the irreversibility of eternity by using a jejune experiment for proving entropy. Picture in your mind's eye the sand box divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree and an increase of entropy. Of course, if we filmed such an experiment we could prove the reversibility of eternity by showing the film backwards, but then sooner or later the film itself would crumble or get lost and enter the state of irreversibility.

I buy another ticket from a small independent company to go back to New York without waiting one hour in Passaic center. From the bus, I see groups of young people, all wearing bandanas, on streets corners. The bus takes the highway and brings me back to New York.