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Entropy, as stated in the Second Law of Thermodynamics, is a measurement of the instinctive state of highly disordered equilibrium toward which energy tends. Accordingly, an understanding of the concept in art can be found in representations of chaotic structures or environments. Throughout David Maisel's photographic oeuvre, entropy is visualized through issues that are central to existence in the American West today. In his series that deal explicitly with water—*The Lake Project* (2001–02), and *Terminal Mirage* (2003–05)—the

viewer is confronted with the unraveling of the interconnected web of culture and nature as a symbol for the entropic. According to environmental writer William L. Fox, this rupture is quintessentially modern, reflected in contemporary society's "essential, existential fear. . . the anxiety of estrangement from the world."<sup>1</sup> At no previous time has a single species so drastically altered geologic time or made its effects visible in such a short period. One can therefore characterize Maisel's recording of human markings on the land as *entropological*, a term defined by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss as "the discipline concerned with the study of the highest manifestations of this process of disintegration."<sup>2</sup>

Archaeological and paleontological references in Maisel's writing bear

strong resemblance to similar preoccupations of sculptor and land artist Robert Smithson. In 1990 Maisel received a National Endowment for the Arts grant that allowed him to travel to the western states to work on his series *The Mining Project*. Here he began shooting in color and utilizing greater distortions of scale and abstraction. With color media, water became a more prominent feature in his work; due to its vulnerability to environmental contamination, water has the ability to assume kaleidoscopic hues. The appearance of the land was a motivator for Maisel's move to the West in 1993, where, as he states, "the bones of the landscape are exposed."<sup>3</sup> Yet possibly more important reasons were those of subject and site. By this point, Maisel was photographing "deconstructed

the concept is represented by what he considered universal, valueless forms that "neutralize the myth of progress,"<sup>6</sup> evident in his statement that "In the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all encompassing sameness."<sup>7</sup> Smithson also posits that minimalist forms could slow the entropic cycle by redefining time from linear to disjunctural.<sup>8</sup> Maisel's work, as with all photographic media, captures a suspended instant of time; yet his goal is the converse: to express the frenetic velocity of entropy while making visible the schisms in the human-environmental system. For Smithson art becomes the *mark* of entropy, whereas for Maisel, art illuminates the *process* of entropy. Maisel explicitly seeks reaction, while Smithson finds clarity in inaction, contending:

particularly true of his understanding of abstraction, which Smithson sees as "renderings and representations of a reduced order of nature." In opposition to his modernist peers, he argues that abstract art cannot be approached without an understanding of nature and faults them for their failure to consider the expression of entropy on the environment, contending, "Abstraction is a representation of nature devoid of 'realism' based on mental or conceptual reduction. There is no escaping nature through abstract representation; abstraction brings one closer to physical structures within nature itself."<sup>11</sup> Curiously, Smithson found the camera—an instrument strongly associated with its descriptive power—most suitable for creating this union.<sup>12</sup> This quality is also

Robert Smithson  
*Plunge*, 1966  
Steel, 14½ x 19 each unit  
Total of 10 units with  
square surfaces  
Denver Art Museum,  
Gift of Kimiko and John Powers, 1977.672

## On Entropology



## THE VIVID WATERS OF DAVID MAISEL AND ROBERT SMITHSON

landscapes of strip mines, cyanide leaching fields, ore concentrators, and tailings ponds,"<sup>4</sup> partially inspired by Smithson's proposed remediations for abandoned mine sites. Although Smithson never made a conceptual distinction between his work in the West and his work elsewhere, his writings show a fascination with the visible effects of entropy on the western landscape. He made a tactical decision to site his seminal work, *Spiral Jetty*, at Rozel Point, Utah, due to the contiguity of abandoned oil wells—drawing a conceptual association between petroleum and fossilization—and aimed for the work to likewise become a fossil of his own creation.<sup>5</sup>

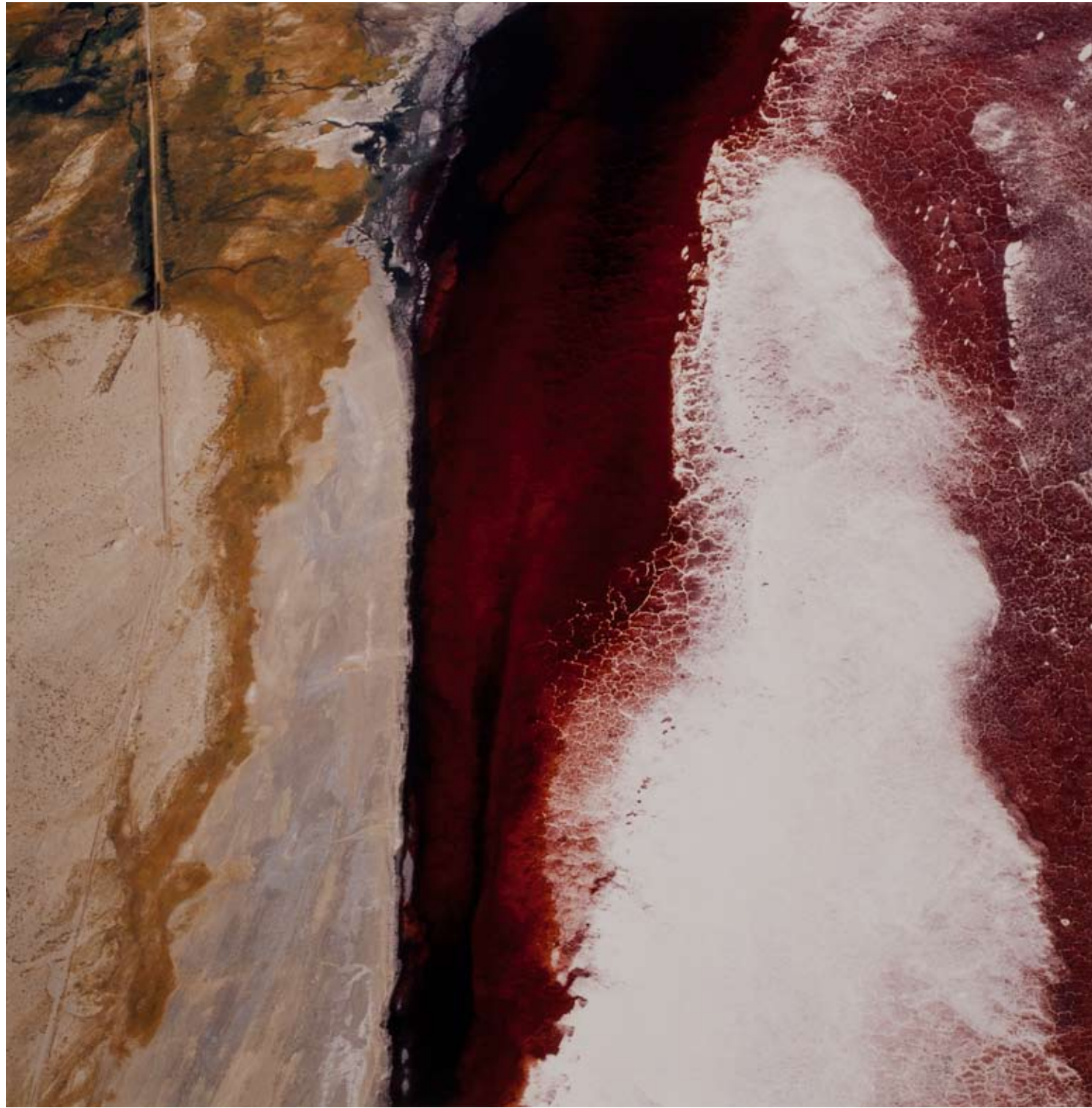
These processes of human and geological time are visual expressions of entropy for both artists. Yet, Maisel and Smithson illustrate surprisingly different formal conceptions of the term: Maisel's version is marked by otherness and hyperreality, whereas for Smithson

Perception as a deprivation of action and reaction brings to mind the desolate, but exquisite, surface-structures of the empty "box" . . . As action decreases, the clarity of such surface-structures increases. This is evident in art when all representations of action pass into oblivion. At this stage lethargy is elevated to the most glorious magnitude.<sup>9</sup>

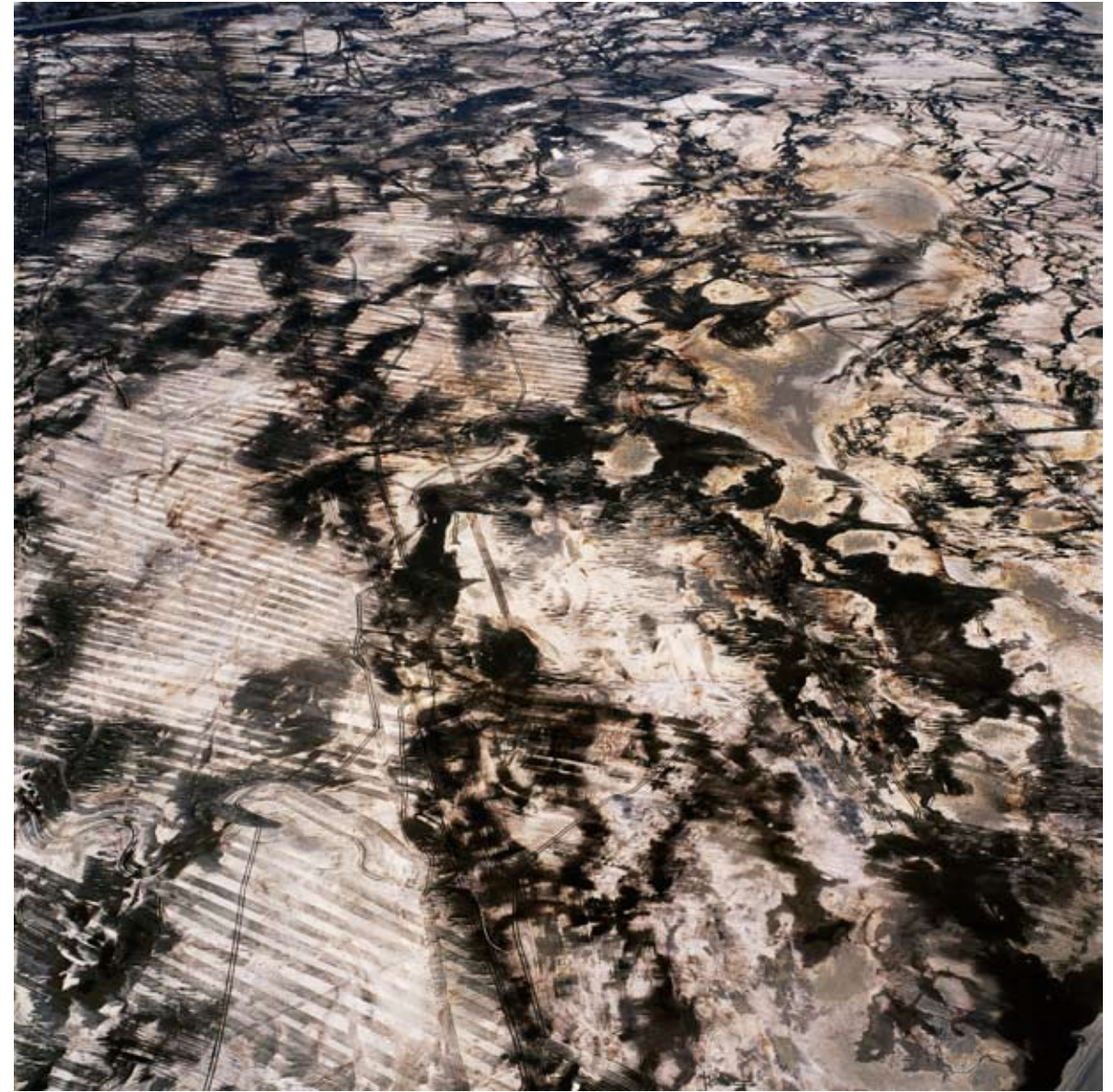
Maisel finds an inherent dialectic in Smithson's work in the conflict between the natural and the rational: "a closed epistemological system which questions perception and knowledge."<sup>10</sup> Similar dialectics can be detected in Maisel's work—city vs. desert, beauty vs. horror—yet, in photographing, Maisel offers a decidedly cultural view of the western landscape. In his writings, Smithson also encourages a unified consideration of humans and nature—and of art and nature. This is

evident in Maisel's work. By exposing environments that are, in large part, caused by a dangerously increasing rate of entropy, his photographs present a decidedly lucid picture of the structures in which it acts.

In *The Lake Project*, Maisel establishes that water has been treated as an extraction industry comparable to others in the West, and *The Lake Project 1* (2001) clearly illustrates this parallel. The use of "lake" in the title of the work gives some indication that one is viewing a body of water; however, all that can be immediately identified are three vertical bands of color, which, in their intensity and abstraction, immediately remind one of a non-representational painting. On closer scrutiny, sand and greenish pools of standing, brackish water emerge, bisected by a road on the left side of the photograph. The powdery white mineral deposits on the right appear to have been scoured through,



David Maisel  
*The Lake Project 1*, 2001  
 Chromogenic color photograph, 15 x 15  
 Denver Art Museum, Gift of Alan Manley,  
 2010.543



David Maisel  
*The Lake Project 25*, 2002  
 Chromogenic color photograph, 48 x 48  
 Courtesy the artist

revealing capillary-like rivulets that coalesce into a carmine stream running through the center. This visceral linkage of human blood and water manifests the essential bond between Maisel and Smithson—Maisel is able to make visible Smithson’s poetic and hallucinatory lines: “On the shores of Rozel Point I closed my eyes, and the sun burned crimson through the lids. I opened them and the Great Salt Lake was bleeding scarlet streaks. My sight was saturated with the color of red algae circulating in the heart of the lake, pumping into ruby currents, no they were veins and arteries sucking up the obscure sediments.”<sup>13</sup> Maisel purposely

utilizes the aerial view as a formal expression of entropy: by abstracting landscape and condensing large areas of space, one is unable to place where one is and what one sees. No traditional artistic references of foreground or background are available for the viewer; thus one is unable to locate a horizon or determine a sense of scale, resulting in contextual disorientation. However, a frame of reference is of immeasurable importance to the meaning of this work. Common adage proclaims that water tells the stories of the West. Central to an understanding of its importance are the frequently oppositional issues of water rights and environmental

sustainability. Prior to the 1913 diversion of its source river by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, Owens Lake, California—the site of the *Lake Project*—was saline, but blue in color, and maintained a surface area of over one hundred square miles. As a result of the city’s expropriation, by 1926 its waters had exsiccated for the first time in over 800,000 years, turning the resulting bed into arid mineral flats.<sup>14</sup> Constant, toxic dust storms now endemic to the Owens Lake playa are over one hundred times more severe than those on other dry desert lakes, as frequent saturation and desaturation of the soil causes a



David Maisel  
*Terminal Mirage 4*, 2003  
 Chromogenic color photograph, 48 x 48  
 Courtesy the artist

cracked, brackish surface particularly prone to airborne erosion.<sup>15</sup> Yet, despite appearances, the lake is teeming with life, albeit singular and extraordinary. Like the section of the Salt Lake chosen by Robert Smithson for *Spiral Jetty*, the remaining alkaline water is subject to infestations of microscopic halobacteria and unicellular algae that give it a vivid, blood-red hue; these organisms require extreme salinity to survive and are so resilient that they are among the exceptional organisms believed to exist on other planets in the solar system,<sup>16</sup> befitting the otherworldliness of Maisel's photographs.

Federal rulings have required Los Angeles to control the dust rising off Owens Lake. The remediation seems benign—refilling the lake with minimal amounts of water and seeding with salt tolerant plants. Yet, these efforts

are intensive: the bed of the lake must be bulldozed and leveled and massive ditches and berms constructed to contain and recirculate the water.<sup>17</sup> Smithson offers an anecdote that illustrates how such attempts to turn back time result in greater complexity than intended:

I should now like to prove the irreversibility of eternity by using a *jeune* experiment for proving entropy. Picture in your mind's eye the sandbox 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 spin anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division,

but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy.<sup>18</sup>

In his essay "Entropy and the New Monuments," Smithson references the cultural historian and critic Wylie Sypher's definition of entropy: "Entropy is evolution in reverse."<sup>19</sup> Smithson discerns that entropy is necessary for the functioning of society. Yet, as Ron Graziani highlights, "by reconceptualizing the sublime . . . as a slow, drawn-out, low energy form of entropic inevitability—instead of a traditional pictorial image of an awe-inspiring powerful force—Smithson's narrative of modern society's entropic confinement collided with those seeking transcendence."<sup>20</sup> This understanding is quite evident in the toxicity of the sites Maisel photographs. In these waters we see a contraction of life to a few resilient

species rather than an evolutionary diversification. Furthermore, the acts of transferring water or minerals across the desert are themselves entropic processes. Remaking the environment to suit human needs changes both the recipient and the source environments. Such acts mark a species that feels unconstrained by evolution and places itself at a distance from its own environment, hauntingly echoing Sypher's definition. There is no need to live near water, our primary requirement for life, as we can take it from elsewhere.

Smithson's writings provided the impetus for Maisel's subsequent project, *Terminal Mirage*, and led the photographer on a search for imposed structures around the Great Salt Lake. The use of "terminal" in the title denotes the lake's lack of a natural outlet, a circumstance resulting in its characteristic brackishness. Yet, humans have altered this property through extraction and reconstruction of the lake's contour. Thus, "terminal" also parallels the devitalized physical condition of the lake as a consequence of intervention. Maisel considers this work "rational mapping"—giving order to cataclysmic sites.<sup>21</sup> As such, his photograph of Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, *Terminal Mirage 4* (2003), at first seems atypical; at the outset, Maisel endeavored to photograph the work as an homage. Indeed, the predominantly cool color palette found in only a few other images from *Terminal Mirage*, and the diminutive size of the earthwork in relation to land and water, lend the photograph a unique sense of placidity.<sup>22</sup> Yet, in the context of Maisel's entropology, we can also see *Spiral Jetty* as an indictment: a formal structure no different than those in Maisel's other images. Smithson justifies the practice of land artists as linked to the natural progress of entropy that continually affects the land, but more suggestively, to processes of industrialization and suburban sprawl. As he sees the concept as a valueless state, he makes no differentiation between these

activities.<sup>23</sup> Maisel, in contradiction, notes a growing disconnect between humans and the ecologic system caused in part by industry and sprawl, without exculpating himself—as a denizen of the West—as a causal factor. In many respects these artists chose the same remote, western spots as industry and the military—both uncovered in Maisel's photos—for the same reasons. It allowed them both space and the lack of an intrusive eye: these were hidden terrains.

#### Notes

- 1 William L. Fox, "Shadowlands," introduction to *Oblivion*, by David Maisel (Tucson, AZ: Nazraeli Press, 2006), n.p.
- 2 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York: Criterion Books, 1961), 367. Robert Smithson notes the need to consider art within Lévi-Strauss's framework in "Art Through the Camera's Eye," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 375.
- 3 David Maisel, interview by Geoff Manaugh, *Architect*, March 20, 2006; [http://www.architect.com/features/article.php?id=35223\\_0\\_23\\_0\\_M](http://www.architect.com/features/article.php?id=35223_0_23_0_M). Last accessed 1/13/2011.
- 4 David Maisel, "The Enchantment of the Aesthetically Rejected Subject," artist's statement about *The Mining Project*; <http://www.davidmaisel.com/works/picture.asp?cat=min&tl=the%20mining%20project>. Last accessed 2/28/11.
- 5 Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 111.
- 6 Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 13.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 10 Maisel, "Unraveling Smithson: Some Thoughts and Considerations Regarding Robert Smithson's Art and Writings and Their Effect and Influence on My Own Art Practice" (2004); [http://davidmaisel.com/works/inf\\_pre\\_ess\\_smithson.asp](http://davidmaisel.com/works/inf_pre_ess_smithson.asp). Last accessed 1/13/2011.
- 11 Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmstead

and the Dialectical Landscape," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 122.

- 12 Smithson, "Art Through the Camera's Eye," 374. Smithson states: "It appears that abstraction and nature are merging in art, and that the synthesizer is the camera."
- 13 Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," 113.
- 14 Wayne P. Armstrong, "Why Owens Lake is Red," *Desert Magazine* 44, no. 4 (1981): 23; and Marith C. Reheis, "Owens (Dry) Lake, California: A Human-Induced Dust Problem," in *Impacts of Climate Change on the Land Surface*, United States Geological Service (1997); <http://geochange.er.usgs.gov/sw/impacts/geology/owens>. Last accessed 1/13/2011.
- 15 Reheis, "Owens (Dry) Lake, California." The lake is notable for being the worst single-point source of airborne particulate matter in the country, with dust storms—termed "Keeler fogs" in local vernacular after a town on the east shore of the lake—carrying loose, microscopic particles of arsenic, cadmium, chromium, and other heavy metals.
- 16 Armstrong, "Why Owens Lake is Red," 24.
- 17 David Maisel, "The Owens Lake Project," *Nieman Reports* 59, no. 1 (2005): 17.
- 18 Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 56–57.
- 19 Wylie Sypher, *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art* (New York: Random House, 1962), 74, quoted in Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," 13.
- 20 Ron Graziani, "Robert Smithson's Picturable Situation: Blasted Landscapes from the 1960s," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 3 (1994): 431.
- 21 Maisel, "Unraveling Smithson."
- 22 A second photograph, *Terminal Mirage 15*, 2003–05, featured on Maisel's website but not included in his book, is much more forbidding—with red waters, a charcoal-black landscape, and the glowing white form of *Spiral Jetty* centered in the work. For image, see: [http://www.davidmaisel.com/works/photo/ter\\_gr1\\_m\\_15.jpg](http://www.davidmaisel.com/works/photo/ter_gr1_m_15.jpg). Last accessed 1/13/2011.
- 23 Although Smithson does note a difference in their ultimate form. "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 82.