

"I am not concerned here with the original 'functions' of such massive projects, but rather with what they suggest or evoke."

Robert Smithson

A Thing is a Hole In a Thing it is Not (1968)

A NONSITE, PINE BARRENS, NEW JERSEY, 1967: Knowing is Not the Same as Remembering

The notion of "place" is a human construct contrived primarily of sentimental significance. A nondescript dot on the proverbial line from "here" to "there," existing whether known or unknown, remembered or forgotten. Without further information or context, a "place" is just a location, a constellation of seemingly irrelevant coordinates. It's this divergent relationship between the irrelevance to the irrelevance while being saturated in site-specificity that is the paradoxical crux of the nonsite. In other words, one does not need to be well versed in the cultural milieus of or even step foot in the Pine Barrens to grasp Robert Smithson's *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey, 1967*.

Linguistically Smithson equates the gallery-based "nonsite" to a metaphor of the real-world site.¹ He is not asking you to recall or imagine an area; instead, he introduces you to the site. The site dictates the syntactical elements to create the visual vocabulary of the piece. He isn't creating a narrative; instead, he is developing a syllogism. *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey, 1967*, materializes as a two-part piece. The first part is a 12-⁵/₈ inch by 10-⁵/₈ inch Photostat map and text. The Photostat map is of the Woodmansie quadrangle, cropped in the shape of a hexagon. Underneath the map is an applied box of typed text that reads:

A NONSITE (an indoor earthwork)

31-sub-divisions based on a hexagonal "airfield" in the Woodmansie quadrangle new Jersey (Topographical) map. Each sub-division of the Nonsite contains sand from the site shown on the map. Tours between the Nonsite and the site are possible. The red dot on the map is the palace where the sand was collected.

The second part is a floor-based segment, composed of 6 triangles wedges correlating to the hexagonal map. Each wedge is made up of 5 trapezoid-shaped open aluminum containers, with a single hexagon container in the

¹ Smithon, Robert. "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites" (1968) Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, edited Jack Flam, University California Press, 1996, (p. 364)

center (the "31-subdivisions" to which the text refers). Each set of five containers progress in size as they radiate from the center and are filled with sand from the site. The containers, all powder coated cerulean, stand one foot tall, on a white wooden base, which spans a diameter of about 5-½ feet around (the "airfield" to which the text refers).

A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey, 1967, references a forgotten place without the saccharine of nostalgia. Typically sculptures result in a physical setting for a narrative, rather than the site as the subject. Sculptures are rarely "of" places; they tend to be "about" places. Smithson subverts the urge to read the nonsite as a portrait of a place by isolating and refracting the essence of the site into quasi-autonomous elements of sculpture. He positions historicity as something that happens to an area over time, much like erosion. The fact that erosion is caused by human interference in a long enough timeline is just immaterial. By encountering the nonsite, you now know the site by a transfigurative process, and knowing is not the same as remembering but is just as relevant.

WORKS CITED

1. Smithson, Robert. "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites" (1968) Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, edited Jack Flam, University California Press, 1996.
2. Smithson, R. (1967) *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens New Jersey, (Photostat of map); 1968 (Nonsite) 1967 [painted aluminum, sand, painted wood, and Photostat of map with typed text]* National Gallery of Art, Washing, DC, United States. nga.gov n.d. Retrieved from: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.161688.htm>