

Sarah K Jorgensen  
Being there. 2004

A lot has been said of the Spiral Jetty. There are films, a mass of literature and series of performance pieces on the Jetty (which is operated by the DIA Foundation for the Arts), none of which I have had much experience of. I can say that lake level has dropped during the recent five years of drought to reveal a spiral jetty covered in reflective salt crystals--a site more beautiful than the original mucky piece Smithson had created in the 70's when the lake level was lower than it is today. Perhaps the visual experience of 2004 differs from that of 1970s, but the jetty's location retains the same properties that compelled Smithson to create the piece on the edge of the Great Salt Lake: the bed of a Pleistocene Lake, undulating geomorphology surrounding the salt lake, remnants of oil drilling and piers, cattle, junked cars. Far from the types of art enclaves that would attract a more typical DIA visitor, the people I saw that day at the Spiral Jetty were an interesting bunch of large Mormon families out for a drive, military officers on leave and tourists mulling around vans adorned with stickers marking states visited, who had somehow made their way out there--perhaps because they stumbled upon it as they headed to the Golden Spike. Traversing the water's edge a couple of dreadlocked backpackers jumped on rocks, occasionally landing in sludge. I wanted to go out there with my Dad for his 70th birthday, so he humored me. I don't feel like we had enough time to absorb it, and I wonder how people who have not encountered the pages of Art Forum know about it. Its the kind of place you want to come with someone you can share a magic moment with, or else you find yourself pondering questions such as ones that I overheard "How much do you think they could sell it for?" and "I wonder how big those trucks must've been to move this stuff". But as a "permanent" exhibit, Smithson's Spiral Jetty is a success as an artwork and as a place. It's an encounter. That, to my mind, is the meaning of content in art: the moment that you stand before something- and its subject matter, its formal elements, its history, your background all coalesce. I am reminded of a time in high school when I hung a variety of mirrors in the middle of the woods in Maine and then sat behind some trees and watched people wander through it and begin dancing and marveling at their own reflection and the reflections of reflections of rocks and trees. Smithson touted his work as being about entropy: the string theory of his day. He was initially obsessed with natural forces. He was also a contradiction- like any artist wanted to make something as permanent as the force of nature. I read somewhere (not in the official literature on the Spiral Jetty), that before his premature death Smithson had plans to raise his work above rising lake levels

The contrasts in land and oil drillings that surround the site elicit a visceral response, whether a visitor is trained in formalism, earthworks, public art, geology or none of the above. Although it has become a work that has been more written about when actually seen- words of art critics seldom do justice to the experience. It has become textual- something to occupy theorists and post moderns. Craig Owens' has said that the viewer's "point-of-view" of the *Spiral Jetty* "is no longer the function of a physical position, but of the mode ... of confrontation" (that is, photographic, cinematic, textual). I wonder whether Owens has actually been out to Rozel Point on the two hour tour on long, poorly marked gravel roads and unimproved dirt roads through mountains that once rose as beaches and islands from under the great depths of Lake Bonneville, past herds of calving cattle and an occasional abandoned car, to marvel at the candy pink color of the lake, the mysterious coils shimmering just below the surface, and the beautiful purple mountains that mark the periphery of the lake and the spiral jetty with rests upon it. I am curious to know if Owens absorbed the peculiar atmosphere of wasteland mixed with stunning scenery and then returned home with tar between his toes and under his shoes, salt stains on his clothes, salt crystals forming on legs, hands and arms that explored the muck of the of the immobile cyclone.

