

From Spiral Jetty to Force Majeure: Reanimating the West and Spiriting the New Communicae

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Darting across the desert landscape that surrounds the Great Salt Lake, our travels are slowed only by the primitive dirt road that connects the Golden Spike to the *Spiral Jetty*. Though the van has slowed to safely hurtle the potholes and rocks in the road, we are no less determined to reach our destination.

It is day four of our ten-day road trip through the Southwest seeking out the great American landscape and art that has become a part of the seemingly lost western frontier. The six of us, students and educators, as part of a three week endeavor framed as a geography course at the University of Arizona, were well packed in our 13 passenger van, and ready to experience the southwest first hand, through site interpretations and guided tours of art in the southwestern landscape. Today, we are taking on *Spiral Jetty*. The clash of expectations and actualities at the jetty I would like to discuss today will continue to inform and influence my experience at Sagehen and the Force Majeure, another land art project that we will navigate shortly.

Arriving in the parking lot overlooking the jetty we first inspect a newly added and not to mention highly polished granite podium gifted to the site by the Eagle scouts. The bronze plaque nailed to the top briefly reminds us that we are looking at Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, built in 1970 this 1,500 foot, 15 foot wide spiral composed of six thousand tons of black basalt taken from the shores surrounding the lake. The podium is easy to spot, smooth and pink in color against the bulging black rocky hillside, which sits adjacent to the shores of the spiral that still emerges from the sand 45 years later.

But wait, we shouldn't start here just yet. I remember now where this all started. This encounter did not begin in the U of A official van or with my five intrepid and brilliant cohorts, or even 4 days earlier when we departed the comfort of our campus. This began 11 years earlier on a different campus, in one of my first survey art history courses. The jetty appeared near the end of the text, in a small black and white reproduction with an accompanying text that may have been verbatim that which we read on the granite podium. Void of all myth and metaphor, the survey text of the Jetty had little influence for the higher education of art history and the emerging discourse of earthworks in America. It was the actual lack of information given here that made the piece so mysterious, and forgettable. This picture presented a still and disembodied image of a simple object, mysterious in its lack of information or surrounding geography it was an art object I quickly packed away and maybe even forgot for awhile, until the summer of 2015, when the opportunity presented itself to see this work in person.

Still less concerned with Smithson's story of myth and metaphor, what I really wanted to know was what it meant to be there, present in landscape to observe and embody the work. What would it be like to be there, to re-physicalize the space? How can we as visitors and academics reanimate the space; quite literally can our presence on the site bring the work back into the modern space and relevancy? I sought to experience the jetty through my senses and to embody the site as a total environment that can be held within four dimensions instead of two dimensions in a black and white reproduction.

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I would pull the Spiral Jetty from the pages of a survey text, like pulling the fantasy from the pages of the cowboy dime novel that no one reads anymore. The practice of inserting ourselves into the earthwork exhumed the jetty from the sticky mud that was attempting to swallow it. I realized now, that I had been waiting a long time to do this, and my expectations were unavoidably high.

So what did it mean to be at *Spiral Jetty*, to have climbed down to the shores and walked out onto elevated curled promenade? Well the first thing we realized is that the shores of the Salt Lake had receded several hundred feet. The Jetty was no longer floating on top of the pink algae-filled waters that Smithson had been so attracted to. But he had been aware that these changes were immanent as it was only nature's course, and so I felt that we were still seeing the jetty as Smithson intended. The pink waters were still visible and outlined the horizon but the color was only popped when the sun would peek out from behind the storm clouds that kindly skirted around us while we explored. The clouds kept the heat down and there was constant but soft breeze that cut through rocky black boulder shoreline. The constant shift in cloud coverage moved the light and changed the Salt Lake landscape continuously during our stay. If you weren't careful you might forget that you are in the desert and hundreds of miles from the ocean. It didn't help that pelicans flew overhead. What I had believed would feel desolate and isolated, felt more like New Smyrna beach Florida. What I had imagined to be savage and unrelenting landscape as Smithson had described it was actually quite pleasant. Had the weather been more severe, I am sure our interpretations of the work would have been influenced greatly.

From the survey text and image I had learned about I was also under the impression that we were not likely to see others at *Spiral Jetty*. It was indeed quite a drive and not necessarily what I would call accessible. I mean, you *really* had to want to be there. I did not give a second thought to the idea that we would not have had the site to ourselves. There were, actually, several groups that made their way in and out of the site during our visit. Families, couples, hikers, bikers, and dog lovers, all came out that day, not only to walk the Jetty, but also to stand at the shores of the Salt Lake, and hike the hillside. It may have been because it was the Sunday before Memorial Day, and it was interesting that this site, 45 years later, would still attract such attention.

Though the beauty of the surrounding landscape alone would warrant such a visit, the site of the jetty itself must have been the attraction for tourists and scholars alike. The surrounding ranch land was flat enough in between the hills and mountains that you could see fairly far off into the distance, and several times during our approach I had asked, "is that it?!". But I was told, I would know it when I saw it.

We ambled down the rocky slope and walked out onto the work. Without the water, it was possible to instead walk the negative space around the jetty, instead of walking on the work itself. I thought that maybe this would be an interesting approach, but the jetty was not as it had been described in the survey text so my expectations were in a constant flux. It did not seem to be fifteen feet wide, or very high off the ground. The sands had crept up onto and into the rocks and it seemed to be sinking. It was impossible to know if I was truly navigating the outside of the structure, or just walking on the edges, long since buried in the sand. I decided about half way down the jetty that I would walk on top of it to avoid what small pools of water were left. Looking down at my feet most of the way to avoid tripping, it was easy enough, again because of all the sand that had filled in the gaps and made for a feasible surface. I found it impossible not to think of Eva Sorum and her work on *Dissolving Landscapes* and nostalgia. She described the memories of our lives like rocks slowly dissolving in water. As I was creating my own memory of the jetty, the force itself was already dissolving. Not to imply that the work is not impressive, or difficult to digest in its size and complex shape, but I knew that this was not the same jetty Smithson had built. Nature had done its part to finish the work on its own, and continues to do so.

Other visitors, myself included, walked the jetty in varying, but no less specific ways. Some follow the path of the jetty methodically; I myself attempted to wander the jetty avoiding patterns where possible. I cut across the jetty, jumping from arm to arm. It became less *object* oriented, and became a space to experiment with movement. I quickly began to form lists in my head, and in the spirit of Robert Smithson's writings, I took sensory notes as to what the space presented and began to animate the jetty within the environment. Perhaps an ode to the film Smithson had produced for the piece, I wanted to be able to recreate the site from sensory memories, long after we were gone from the lakeside.

I felt several sensations like being small or distant, or that the jetty was simply in the way. I felt cold and the breeze was continuous, yet for the most part all I could hear were birdcalls and my own sniffing (I was impossibly sick). In spite of the jetty's clearly distinguished path that spun counter clockwise to a false center, I was drawn away to the surrounding, and now exposed sand, left behind as the water receded away. I strolled around on the lakebed, dreaming of prehistoric Lake Bonneville, and I imagined unearthing fossils. Smithson, who incorporated time travel and prehistory into his film and writings, understood this place to be a time capsule as I now did.

The ground bounced! Walking in large circles in my hiking boots I could feel the ground give a little, but it was not soft like silt or mud. What looked to be wet sand was rubbery and resistance to my inquisitive boot. The sand and salt was congealed into a tar like muck and would stick to my feet. I stood for a while on one such mound of oily muck and left a decent boot print. One day I thought, when we are all history, I imagined our distant alien cousins unearthing this fossil that I had created, and maybe they would give me a name like booticus-plantus-masticus (a vegetarian bi-ped of some sort). I thought maybe, as a geology neophyte would, that the whole lakebed was tar, and perhaps that's the only reason the jetty had not sunk altogether; the entire structure is nested in a bed of tar and salt crystals.

I had a sinking feeling though; maybe this work was not long for this world, and in another 45 years it would become a part of the lake bed that was no longer visible. What discourse does it offer itself to now? Why did it matter, and to whom? But there was evidence that it was not gone yet. There had once been a journal on site that visitors could record their presence here and comment on their experiences. This journal has since disappeared, but one of my fellow travelers remembered that many of the entries told of the difficulties people had in comprehending where they were or how to process the work. Looking around however, I could see a few answers. To the left and right of the jetty was evidence of visitors working through this process, and it seemed as though each one was compelled to augment the landscape. Rocks were moved or piled together, and words drawn in the sand. The best part though may have been the homage to *Spiral Jetty*. Several visitors actually took to recreating smaller versions of the jetty, some more ambitious than others, and one in particular had evidence of a temporary fire pit that gave it a near ceremonial element, emphasizing the importance of the jetty on the human psyche.

It was clear that those that visited the jetty found it impactful, enough to react to it physically and locally. But outside of this space, as one drives away, does it retain its relevancy to a layman population? What kind of discourse does it entail when the earthwork has become its passive (maybe just land art at this point), and falls out of the peripheral of the more common and contemporary discourse of art and ecology. The *Spiral Jetty* remains an archive to the past, and as it sinks it becomes a ruin housing the phantoms of 1970's earthworks. It seems that once the visitors leave this site, the conversation is left behind, and the jetty is silent once again. Does the disembodied work no longer speak to the world as an environment, or ecology of the 21st century?

There are however, new ideas at work that are bring the fields of art and ecology together, and in doing so have spirited a new conversation with the world, and it's starting in California. These ideas came into focus for me two days later as we explored the site locations of *Force Majeure*; embodying the space in the same manner I approached the jetty. Currently one of the top concerns for drought in the United States, California is also home to the University of California's field research station Sagehen, and the new home of ecology artists Helen Mayer Harrison's and Newton Harrison's *Force Majeure*. Sagehen, as a site reminded me of *Spiral Jetty* in more way than one. Despite being a densely forested mountainous region in California, the question of accessibility continued to cross my mind. The research station itself was technically public, though public traffic was not permitted. People who wish to visit Sagehen would be required to park in a public lot outside of a locked gate and continue on foot down a single lane dirt road. Thankfully, because of the hospitality of the field station to our group, we were allowed to drive on site and stay in cabins. Even in the van, when we set out to visit the site-specific locations of the Harrison's new project plots, the roads were not so hospitable. Our van rolled and tossed slowly over the primitive and pitted pathway. We had to slowly navigate around felled trees that lay close to, if not partially in the road, branches scraping down the side of the van and we crept up the mountain. We were out to see three out of five garden plots recently planted by the Harrison team.

Force Majeure is not necessarily object oriented but it more of an idea, as found in the couple's manifesto:

...with science informed by Descartes' clock
 And with modernity recreating the cultural landscape
 And deconstructing nature thereby
 From the Industrial Revolution to the present
 Until all at once a new force has become apparent
 We reframe a legal meaning ecologically
 And name it the Force Majeureⁱ

The home of this next stage in *Force Majeure* is set in deep in the Tahoe National Forest that surrounds Sagehen. This nine thousand square acre experimental forest was perfect for the cultivation of this equally experimental earthwork. The Harrisons have planted over twenty thousand varying species of local plants set identically within five small fenced off lots just off the dirt access road. The fencing is an 8' high, chicken wire enclosure that is unlocked, but there to keep the deer out. Each plot is planted every five hundred feet in elevation to see how and the plants cultivate, if at all. The experiment takes the form of three, 20 foot by 40 foot fenced areas acting as controls for each other, with a total of five sites overall. Each control area is intentionally, somewhat over-planted with the same species, with approximately 800 species to start.ⁱⁱ This amounts to one plant per square foot!

Pulling up to the first plot, I am not sure what we had expected. The descriptions of the project had been vague, and now in the presence of the work in progress it was clear why. The plot was small and though it had vegetation growing in it, the plants that had been chosen for the sites had not begun to show, except for a few rose bushes that had made it a few inches above ground. We were allowed inside the gated area, as we were told that our feet would not damage the plot. The ground was soft and my feet sank a little bit. It had been a wet summer so far, so mud was something we had become accustomed to on our trip. The air even smelled wet, and the environment surrounding the sites felt and sounded well insulated as tall pine trees and aspen walled us in.

Moving up in elevation another five hundred feet, we came to the next two plots, and despite the change in elevation the site felt and looked identical. It was exciting to know though, at the very least, that we were present for the start of an experimental project that had no predetermined outcome or aesthetic.

Questions that have not been asked yet; the why, the how, and the what; may not be asked or answered for another decade, if ever. The work does not lend itself to a formal aesthetic, as it is quite literally soil, with small rose bushes just peering out of the ground. There is no gallery space, or final product to evaluate just yet. The Harrison's are working with and against time and nature, working in cycles and edging environments. This project has its European predecessors that we can base out critiques on for future evaluations. For the moment, this project is an artistic mystery and an ecological experiment; both sides of this story circumnavigate art and science, emphasizing process over product. Referring back to the Harrison's manifesto:

"...the process of art making guarantees that the artist will not know the full content of what he or she has done. This is what is meant by working at the edge of awareness. Therefore, retro- spective analysis often enriches future work." ⁱⁱⁱ

So how did I feel after my time spent in situ? What conclusions could I approach now? In today's world of convenience and technology, information is readily available through any number of haptic devices, and relevancy is everything, lest you fall to the bottom of the Google search results, as *Spiral Jetty* seems destined to. Jeff Brown, the site manager for Sagehen Field Station, summed this phenomenon up perfectly. He said that we must speak in sound bites or no one will hear us. With the world at our fingertips information is consumed quickly and most often in an abbreviated manner. This is communication. Often scientists find it hard to speak with anyone but other scientists, and artist can be guilty of the same, but the sites we visited can stir a universal conversation. Getting an idea across to the world, quickly and succinctly takes understanding and empathy. A person has to know what you are talking about, and then they have to care. Only then will the efforts of ecologists and artist today, insight change for the betterment of the world tomorrow. It also helps with project funding, but that is another rabbit hole.

The Harrison's have started a new conversation about ecology and art, but the future will write itself. The space in which the plants grow will animate itself, with or without human visitors. Nature will take its course and as the seasons cycle in the Sierras, and the relevancy now only pertains to the environment it grows into. What happens next relies on the Harrison's legacy and the empathy of the public (whomever that may be in the next ten years). Environment itself, as a concept, has already changed from natural, to built, to virtual, environments. It will be interesting to see how art and ecology navigate these in the future.

For more information on the *Force Majeure* experiment, please visit the centerforforcemajeure.org.

Notes:

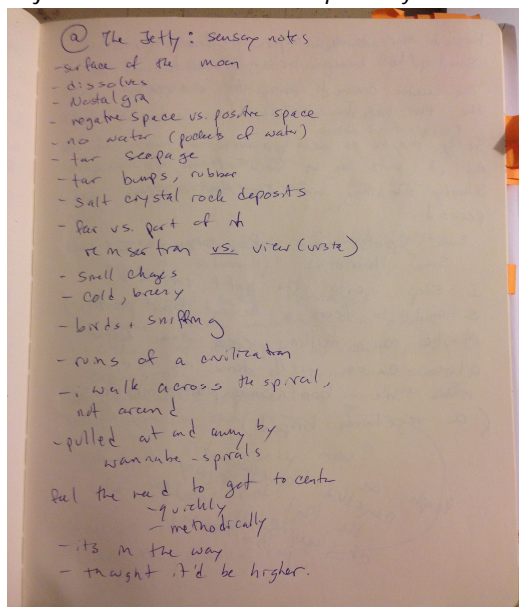
i Merrill Ingram, "Ecopolitics and Aesthetics: The Art of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, A Manifesto for the Twenty First Century", *The Geographical Review*, (New York City, April 2013) pg. 260.

ii Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison, *The Force Majeure*, "Saghen: A Proving Ground", The Center for Force Majeure, accessed June 15, 2015. Web.

iii Ingram, 272.



Our University of Arizona van arrives at *Spiral Jetty*. Photo Credit: Author



Sensory notes from my Field Journal. Photo Credit: Author



Tar and sand congeal and seep to the surface. Photo Credit: Author



One visitor's ode to *Spiral Jetty*. Photo Credit: Author



Sagehen Field Station, experimental forest, Tahoe National Forest, California, site of the Harrison's *Force Majeure*. Photo Credit: Author



Fencing in plot 1 at Sagehen, August 2014. Photo credit: Sagehen.blogspot.com



Site 4, completed enclosure, at Sagehen, August 2014. Photo Credit: Sagehen.blogspot.com