

# we went for a walk on turkey mountain

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On September 8, my wife Jennifer and I planned to go for a hike on Pyramid Mountain in Boonton, New Jersey. A bridge was out and the trail was closed, so we went for a walk on Turkey Mountain, across the street, instead. We didn't have that much time, so we chose the 100 Steps Trail. I thought the

100 steps would be at the start of the hike, but they were at the end, and as I walked down them, a chain of thought about New Jersey started, from its native plants to its native conceptual art practices.

It took about two hours for us to walk through a largely forested landscape. The forests looked young and soon after we entered, there was a large stone wall of cyclopean proportions, now thoroughly overgrown. The rock of this area is much older than that of the First Watchung Mountain, where we live. Whereas the basalt columns of the First Watchung Mountain formed when lava seeped out onto a shallow seafloor some 200 million years ago when Africa split from North America, the New Jersey Highlands, of which Turkey Mountain is part, are the worn remnants of an ancient mountain chain created a billion years ago during a collision between North and South America. We saw large intrusions of stone in the area, testifying to the immensity of that event. There were also glacial erratics everywhere, reminding us of the much more recent retreat of the Wisconsin glacier.



The cyclopean stone wall, with *Dryopteris marginalis* (Marginal wood fern) and *Microstegium vimineum* (Japanese stiltgrass) in the foreground.

The collision brought iron magnetite ore up from deep underground, and mines were established nearby in the nineteenth century. Conveniently, limestone, a key ingredient used to purify iron during production, was also found all along Turkey Mountain and excavated during the nineteenth century. We didn't see any traces of these, either because they were overgrown or because we didn't spend much that time on the eastern side of Turkey Mountain where the mines were located. The old-growth forests in this area, which survived through the colonial era due to the challenge of farming the hilly area, would have been cut down to feed the furnaces of the Boonton Iron Works. The forests on Turkey Mountain still seem young. There were no large trees. My guess is that they are under seventy years old. It seems that after the trees were all cut down, the land was used for some agricultural purpose.



Few understory plants, but few invasive plants as well.

There were areas with few understory plants, which suggests some deer browse. Without wolves, mountain lions, or other predators besides cars and the occasional hunter, New Jersey's deer population is about twenty times the number present when this was Lenape land. The deer do massive

damage to native plants and spread the ticks that carry Lyme disease. There were not as many invasive species as I would have expected, although some have started to spread, such as *Microstegium vimineum* (Japanese stiltgrass) and *Berberis thunbergia* (Japanese barberry). I have heard that the Invasive Species Strike Force does work there, although their website does not indicate that. Steeper areas had more understory plants, and these were generally native. We saw *Viburnum acerifolium* (Maple-leaf viburnum), *Actaea racemosa* (Black cohosh), *Eurybia divaricata* (White wood aster), *Dichanthelium latifolium* (Broad-leafed panic grass), *Gaylussacia baccata* (Black huckleberry), *Lapsana communis* (Nipplewort), and a number of other plants. We saw the strange *Conopholis americana* (American cancer-root, also known as Bear Corn), which has no chlorophyll and instead is a parasite on trees and other woody plants, particularly oaks. Most of the plant is underground, and all that we saw is the black, withered inflorescence, which would have first appeared in early spring.



Ruins of "the Morgan Place." *Polypodium virginianum* (Rock polypody fern) and *Aquilegia canadensis* (Eastern red columbine) are colonizing the stone construction in the center.

We walked around the ruins of a cabin called “the Morgan Place,” which, according to local legend, was the home of outlaw brothers. Nearby there was a view of Lake Valhalla, where an eponymous country club is based at a gated getaway founded in 1928 by “men of sound judgment and experience” who “planned a community where each resident may enjoy health and happiness behind a firm barrier established against an undesirable element.” No dwelling was to cost less than \$5,000. Lake Valhalla was a popular summer destination for the suburban residents of Montclair, the town I live in, a half mile away (more on Lake Valhalla [here](#))

There was a meadow of native plants under the power lines by the hundred steps, and this is where I started to think about Robert Smithson, arguably New Jersey’s most famous artist, a founding voice in both land art and conceptual art. I first encountered Smithson’s work while at Cornell and was drawn to his engagement with geological time, entropy, and the natural world. I noted that he also had a Cornell connection, having been part of the seminal “Earth Art” show at the school in 1969 (see the catalog [here](#)). But Smithson wasn’t the only ghost around: I was also deeply immersed in the novels of Thomas Pynchon, a mysterious alumnus of the university, who, like Smithson, shared an obsession with entropy. In the post-industrial landscape of the late 1980s and early 1990s, entropy was a compelling metaphor for the visible decay of once-thriving industrial landscapes and resonated with postmodernism’s embrace of fragmentation. Moving to Los Angeles to teach, my connection to Smithson’s legacy deepened through my collaboration with [the Center for Land Use Interpretation \(CLUI\)](#), an institution that placed itself historically *after* Smithson, *after* land art, and even *after* art. I collaborated with the Center on a guide to [California’s Owens River Valley](#)—a distant region marked by the city’s intense manipulation of land and water resources. This project was a turning point for me, the first time I embraced art and landscape simultaneously, exploring how human interventions reshape natural environments.

I returned to Smithson when I moved to New Jersey in the 2000s. Smithson grew up in Clifton, the town adjacent to Montclair, where I live. William Carlos Williams was his pediatrician. Smithson repeatedly sought to introduce the art world to the landscape developing across the Hudson, highlighting New Jersey’s landscapes and histories, even when degraded. His piece 1966 “The Crystal Land” recounts a trip to an old quarry near my home that he took with Nancy Holt, Donald Judd, and Julie Finch. In this essay, Smithson equates the crystalline with postwar modernity:

The highways crisscross through the towns and become man-made geological networks of concrete. In fact, the entire landscape has a mineral presence. From the shiny chrome diners to glass windows of shopping centers, a sense of the crystalline prevails.<sup>[1]</sup>

This idea of the crystalline is contemporaneous with, and possibly influenced by J. G. Ballard's *The Crystal World*, a science fiction novel published the same month as Smithson's essay in which a jungle and the creatures within it are turned to minerals by a mysterious force.<sup>[2]</sup> In this essay and throughout other his works, Smithson is concerned about the creeping sameness of the suburbs, and this reference to the crystalline seems to suggest an anthropogenic mineralization, a geologic change anticipating the concept of the "Anthropocene" to refer to the impact of humans on the Earth having the impact of a geological era.

In a subsequent essay, "Entropy and the New Monuments," Smithson specifically refers to the work of artists Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, and Donald Flavin as crystalline. He observes that their work represents entropy, citing Nabokov's observation that "the future is but the obsolete in reverse." Smithson continues "Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future."<sup>[3]</sup> Smithson's explanation of this is a bit convoluted and Judd, for his part, wrote a letter to the editor saying that "Smithson is not my spokesman."<sup>[4]</sup> but the key appears to be that for Smithson, the "very vapidness and dullness" of office buildings, sprawl, and housing developments "is what inspires many of the more gifted artists" to create crystalline works and that, notwithstanding its appearance of stability, the crystalline is fundamentally entropic.<sup>[5]</sup>



*Microstegium vimineum* (Japanese stiltgrass) taking over an area on Turkey Mountain.

For Smithson, entropy represents a counterforce to the notion of progress—a reminder that all structures, whether physical or societal, are subject to decay and dissolution. He illustrates this in the 1967 photo essay “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey.” Armed with a Kodak Instamatic, Smithson embarked on a journey through his hometown’s industrial landscape documenting mundane industrial structures—bridges, pumping derricks, and pipes—as monuments to entropy, ruins even before they are complete, “rising up into ruin.” This ubiquitous, consumer-grade camera made possible the democratization of image-making in the 1960s, and its quality embodied the disposability of both the images and the subjects they captured, aligning Smithson with the chaotic forces of entropy he sought to represent. The result, grainy snapshots with blown-out highlights, served as a medium through which Smithson transformed these sites conceptually, elevating the everyday—at the level of both object and medium—to the realm of art. The imperfections of the images mirrored the imperfections of the landscape, creating a link between subject and representation. Verbally too, by dubbing a sandbox or a pumping derrick a “monument,” Smithson inverted the traditional relationship between art and landscape, suggesting that the industrial wastelands of New Jersey were as worthy of contemplation as any curated gallery. This linguistic shift was more than

mere wordplay; it was a radical reconfiguration of what could be considered art and where art could be found. In sum, Smithson challenged the art world to look beyond the confines of galleries and museums, to find aesthetic value and meaning in the overlooked corners of the industrial landscape.

But Smithson's use of the Instamatic also points toward broader themes of image-making, consumption, and interpretation. Freud's concept of *nachträglichkeit*, or "deferred action," is useful in understanding Smithson's writings on New Jersey. This psychoanalytic observation illuminates how we, as contemporary readers and scholars, retroactively assign new meanings to earlier works or concepts that first raised the issues we are encountering. As Hal Foster—who introduced the concept to me in a seminar at Cornell about thirty years ago—argued, avant-garde movements like Smithson's engage in a temporal relay of anticipation and reconstruction, where the full significance of their actions or creations only becomes clear through subsequent reinterpretation.<sup>[6]</sup> Smithson's documentation of Passaic, thus, was not only a snapshot of a decaying industrial landscape but also a projection into the future, where these seemingly banal structures would resonate with additional meaning.

Before going on, it's important to note that Smithson died young in a 1973 plane crash, and in the years since a whole Smithson industry has emerged, elevating Smithson to mythic status within the land art movement. The epitome of this, or its intentionally parodic epitome, is perhaps Conrad Bakker's "Robert Smithson Library & Book Club," a humorous conceptual project that is "a carved and painted sculptural rendering of every single title/edition from Robert Smithson's library." This posthumous activity around Smithson reveals how his work continues to be mined for relevance, distorting the immediacy and rawness that defined his early engagements with entropy. What might have begun as critiques of land use and industrial ruin have, in some cases, become objects of institutional and academic reverence—ironic, considering Smithson's challenge to the formal art world.

In another essay on Smithson's Tour, I argued that a critical difference between Smithson's day and post-2000 understanding of such industrial wastelands is that they became seen as sites of potential by architects and developers, their wasted quality understood as a sort of rough beauty that could then be sold by developers. The most famous of these sorts of sites is, of course, Manhattan's High Line, which has been re-envisioned by developers and architects as an opportunity to merge urban decay with modern design, fixing the entropy into a curated experience that has increased real estate values in the area at a rate 92% higher than the rest of the borough (see <https://provocations.darkmatterlabs.org/a-smart-commons-528f4e53cec2>, but beware, this is a redirect to Medium.com).

This transformation of a former industrial ruin into a luxury destination perfectly exemplifies the contemporary shift in the perception of decay—from something to be avoided or mourned to something marketable and profitable. A more analogous example is Brooklyn’s Gowanus Canal, one of the most polluted waterways in the country, now being sold as possessing an “edgy” aesthetic for the creative class. Here, the industrial decay that once signified environmental neglect has been reframed as a cultural asset, attracting developers and investors who see its grittiness as part of its charm. Smithson’s vision of industrial wastelands as symbols of entropy is now absorbed into the very cycles of development he critiqued.



The withered flower spikes of *Conopholis americana* (American cancer-root, also known as Bear Corn), a plant that lacks chlorophyll but survives by being parasitic on oak roots.

In the fifty-seven years since the Tour, Smithson’s use of an Instamatic has been reframed by the explosion of image production. In 1970, individuals took around 10 billion photos each year. Today, that number has surged to nearly two trillion, thanks to smartphones and AI-enhanced photography. This overproduction of images has altered the way we experience the world. As we passed an opening in the trees with a view of Lake Valhalla, a young woman was photographing herself in the foreground. This is normal now. Individuals feeling an obligation to take selfies crowd every vista, stand in front of every historic site, prevent famous artworks from being seen,

trample on flowers, and fall off cliffs regularly. High-resolution photos of every corner of the planet circulate endlessly online, transforming once-obscure locations into global destinations. This saturation of imagery reduces landscapes to mere images, flattening their histories, cultural significance, and ecological complexity. Where Smithson's low-res images sought to capture the raw and decaying, modern photography often aims for idealization, creating highly curated and sanitized versions of reality. The focus has shifted from engaging with the landscape itself to capturing and sharing an idealized version, one designed to conform to the aesthetic expectations of social media—images meant to be consumed quickly and forgotten just as fast.

The hyper-saturated, AI-enhanced images of the smartphone are designed to create a vivid and idealized version of reality, often more compelling than the place itself. In the process, the actual experience of the place is subordinated to the desire for a perfect image—one that conforms to the aesthetic expectations of social media, to be consumed quickly and forgotten just as fast. The result is a disconnection from the real, where the value of a place lies not in its intrinsic qualities but in its capacity to generate likes, shares, and digital engagement. The era of the Instamatic is long over; instead, we are immersed in Instagram's hyper-saturation and our experience of places is thoroughly absorbed into images. What Jean Baudrillard called the hyperreal bulldozes any unique sites as effectively as any earth mover. As travelers flock to capture the perfect shot seen on Instagram, the destination's history or ecosystem is subordinated to the production of the image. The original place fades into obscurity, becoming a simulation valued only for its photogenic qualities. Driven by this circulation of idealized images, the relentless pace of overtourism accelerates the degradation of the very places people seek to experience, both physical—the literal exhaustion and wearing out of the beloved site—and spiritual—the uniqueness of the site is lost.

But in thinking about Smithson's Tour, it's worth a detour to Tony Smith's 1966 recounting of his experience on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. Smith had grown up in West Orange, not far from Smithson, although Smith was 26 years his older. [In an interview with Sam Wagstaff, Jr.](#), Smith describes his nighttime drive from the Meadowlands to New Brunswick.

It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me

that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art.

The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it. Later I discovered some abandoned airstrips in Europe—abandoned works, Surrealist landscapes, something that had nothing to do with any function, created worlds without tradition. Artificial landscape without cultural precedent began to dawn on me. There is a drill ground in Nuremberg, large enough to accommodate two million men. The entire field is enclosed with high embankments and towers. The concrete approach is three sixteen-inch steps, one above the other, stretching for a mile or so.

Smith's comparison seems to suggest a dialectic of attraction and repulsion. The Nuremberg Rally Grounds represent a vision of absolute control and spectacle, while the Turnpike, in its unfinished state, evokes unbounded potential. Both spaces share a kind of inhuman scale, dwarfing human presence in favor of something larger and more abstract. These environments, in their unfinished or ruined form, expose the fantasies of power and control that underlie such grand projects, while also revealing their failures—making them sites that invite critical re-engagement.



A path on the trail through an area that is likely wet in the spring.

The experience of pure space that Smith felt, not framed by the conventions of the gallery or museum, challenges the traditional boundaries of art. This notion of an artwork without clear limits, where the experience itself becomes art, would echo in Smithson's work, in "the Crystal Land" essay" and "A Tour of the Monument of Passaic, New Jersey." Both Smithson and Smith saw the potential of such experiences to transform how we engage with the world around us. Where Smith encountered pure space in the Turnpike's unfinished openness, Smithson exposed the inevitability of decay in the industrial ruins of Passaic.

Against this, I need to pose one last project, Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking* (1967). Along with his classmate at Saint Martin's School of Art in London, Hamish Fulton, Long began experimenting with solitary walks in the landscape as a way experiencing a condition, however he also saw walking as a form of art, making a mark on the landscape through a direct, physical act, using his body and movement as tools. The path in *A Line Made by Walking* was temporary, an ephemeral intervention in nature that, like Smithson's entropic sites, would eventually fade back into the landscape.

Long's connection to Smithson lies in his redefinition of landscape art—not as something created through monumental or permanent interventions, but as something rooted in process and temporality. Like Smithson, Long suggests that the landscape is not static but is always in a state of becoming and undoing. However, while Smithson focused on entropy and decay, Long's work embodies a quieter, more meditative engagement with the landscape, where the act of walking itself becomes a way to inscribe meaning onto the land, leaving a mark that will eventually disappear into the landscape.

But all this is ancient history, subsumed by the art industrial apparatus of gallery-museum-academy. As generally practiced today, land art has become kitsch, identified with the overstylized works of Andy Goldsworthy. Instead of engaging with nature, his work risks being perceived as decorative interventions. His neatly arranged stone piles, for instance, have inspired a trend where hikers leave cairns or small stacks of rocks alongside trails, much like little piles of shit, that are popular on social media but undermine the very environments they are sited in.

This is a safe, sanitized version of nature, focusing on visual balance rather than the unpredictable forces of entropy and decay that figures like Smithson foregrounded. The result is art that, while pleasing, tends to comfort rather than confront, inviting passive admiration rather than provoking deeper engagement with the complex realities of the environment.



The 100 Steps and the PSE&G High Voltage line on Turkey Mountain

Ever since encountering Smithson almost forty years ago, I have wondered how I could continue in the trajectory of Land Art. It is heroic, fascinating, evocative, and primal. But projects like Spiral Jetty are also the ultimate masculinist art fantasy of the young man with the dump truck and bulldozer. More than that, today it seems art in general is stalling as it did in Smithson's day. Overcommodified, overexposed, overexhibited, art seems exhausted. Yet, art moves forward in stages, with periods of stasis reflecting the historical exhaustion of certain modes of critique or creation. In the

1960s, artists like Smithson sought to move beyond the constraints of traditional media and institutional art, finding new forms—such as land art—that radically redefined what art could be. Today Smithson’s work has been institutionalized and commodified, absorbed into the very system it once challenged. The numbing effect of this over-historicization is palpable. What we face today is not only a saturation of art but also a saturation of critique. Every gesture, every form of critique, risks being immediately absorbed by the market or by academic discourse. This creates a sense of artistic paralysis. While new technologies like AI and generative art offer possibilities, none have yet revealed a clear direction forward, as land art and the conceptual art it spawned once did.

But Smith’s observation of the drive that, “There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it,” could be applied to the walk on Turkey Mountain. Like Long’s project, a walk could be a form of art. Perhaps not for everyone, but at least for the walker. However, instead of the formalist eye of the postwar modernist we need to start with a different eye, in this case that of the field botanist—even if an amateur field botanist.

Up until a few years ago, I had no real idea of what I saw when I walked through a landscape. But through studying botanical guidebooks and using the iNaturalist application on my smartphone, which uses artificial intelligence to identify plants, I’ve come to an entirely different level of understanding of what I see. Instead of masses of undifferentiated green, one can see the diverse flora that belong—and don’t belong—to a specific site.<sup>[2]</sup> We find resonances of Smithson’s obsessions in the entropic anthropogenic forces in our landscape—invasive species and ecological disruption—against the natural order of plant communities. In this sense, the forest walk is a form that counters entropy by exposing the resilience and adaptability of plant communities, even as invasive species represent new layers of disruption and decay.

I am still struggling with finding ways to represent these walks. Replicating Smithson’s Instamatic images seems like a misstep, given the changes that have happened in the visual economy since. For now, I am usually working with a medium format digital camera. Where smartphones prioritize speed and instant gratification, my camera emphasizes slowness, intentionality, and depth. The high resolution of medium format photography captures the richness and detail of each scene in a way that reveals textures and layers that are only simulated by smartphones. Moreover, with their slow focus and slow sensor readout, medium format cameras force a slower pace. This more deliberate process mirrors the act of walking itself—a careful, sustained engagement with the landscape, rather than a quick capture meant for immediate consumption on social media. This allows for a deeper engagement with the botanical complexity of the walks. The key, however, isn’t the photography or representation. It is my better

understanding of the flora that surround us. Returning home, I can study these to better understand how to create appropriate plant communities in my home garden, where I have set out to reverse the entropic condition of the heavily degraded suburban yard with an intentional native plant landscape. And then, having done so, it's time to take another walk.

1.  
Robert Smithson in Jack Flam, ed. *Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 8. [↑](#)
2.  
Smithson mentions Ballard several times in his writing around this time. It is possible that he read an excerpt of *the Crystal World*, saw an advance copy, or read a prospective description. [↑](#)
3.  
Smithson in Flam, ed. *The Collected Writings*, 10-11. [↑](#)
4.  
Donald Judd, *Arts Magazine*, February 1967, 8. [↑](#)
5.  
Smithson in Flam, ed. *The Collected Writings*, 12-13. [z ↑](#)
6.  
See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996).
7.  
I have found few better examples than the one by my friend, the field botanist, native plant nursery owner, and artist Jared Rosenbaum on his discovery of an isolated population of Wild Ginger in a quarry. (<https://wildplantculture.com/home/2016/11/21/wild-ginger-and-the-sacred-question>). [↑](#)