CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The notions of centrality give people a security and a certainty because it’s also a place where most people gather. But they tend to forget the fringes...You can’t really get rid of this notion of centrality nor can you get rid of the fringes as they both sort of feed on each other. It’s kind of interesting to bring the fringes into centrality and the centrality into the fringes.

Robert Smithson

I believe in the power of being an outsider. You see things that others on the inside do not see. You can make connections between two different worlds, you can create bridges...

Alfredo Jaar

We paint to show the rest of the world that we own this country and that the land owns us.

Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Yolngu elder

Recent decades have witnessed a proliferation of artists from various cultural backgrounds and disciplines who have created works based in geographical sites located well beyond highly urbanised, Western centres. Despite this interest, only on occasion have artists been drawn to explore fundamental links between urban centres of consumption and geographically distant, or peripheral, sites of mineral extraction. This is an area that deserves more attention as concerns mount over the impact of mining on the environment, local and global economies, and land rights issues.

In this thesis, I address the work of a number of artists who have explored relationships between sites of mineral extraction and large urban centres. They are the American Robert Smithson (1938-1973), the Chilean-born Alfredo Jaar (1953-), and a number of Yolngu Aboriginal clan leaders (all now deceased) from Yirrkala, in the Northern Territory of Australia. These artists bring forward the realisation that people and places the world over are connected unwittingly through ever-mounting tensions incurred by the
supply and demand for crucial mineral resources. The artists have all had a
vested interest in exploring particular mining sites and reflecting on them
in relation to large urban centres of consumption and power that depend so
heavily on mining. A concern of each artist has been to challenge viewers'
thinking about relationships between the two sites and to realise their own
connections to these sites.

To prompt audiences from metropolitan centres into acknowledging or
creating (dialectical) relationships with human and physical geographies
located beyond the sphere of their own familiar environments, these artists
have used strategies to centre both the work and the viewer. A decentring
technique they use is to juxtapose, within one work, dichotomies inherent
in two different geographical sites, one of which is the gallery, or other
centrally-located destination, and the other a mine site. The viewer, part of
the centre, is thus faced with the responsibility of negotiating differences and
similarities between the two sites. In this manner, the intrinsic links that
exist between different people and/or places are recontextualised by viewers
as they negotiate a dialogue between otherwise seemingly disparate sites and
contexts.

It should be noted at the outset that within the context of this paper, a
"periphery" is a geographic area that for various reasons is generally
overlooked or ignored: a marginalised zone in the urban West’s collective
mental image of the world. A periphery is defined in part by its distance
from a centre; it is the centre that assigns positions of (geographic)
marginality, and defines the periphery by adjectives such as isolated,
remote, distant, desolate, barren, deserted, foreign, or more colloquially, as
"the middle of nowhere." Considered in this dismissive light, peripheral
geographies are assumed to be largely unsettled, Terra Nullius, making it
difficult to conjure up images or relationships that otherwise might help
create a sense of place.4 In this regard, peripheral geographies remain "sites"
rather than "places." Moreover, urban centres, generally speaking, are
detached from peripheral sites in many more ways than might be revealed
by distance alone. A centre’s general disregard or apathy toward physical and
human geographies that fall within such marginalised sites often results in
the kinds of hierarchal dichotomous constructs we are all too familiar with, such as the privileging of the "First World" over all other "Worlds", or capital city versus outback community. The artists discussed here have had very different motives for broadening the scope of centrally located viewers and the media employed by each varies considerably. However, despite significant cultural differences, some of the artists' visual strategies and conceptual ideas for connecting geographically distinct sites are similar and form the nexus of discussion in this paper.

The primary objective of this paper is to compare the various visual and conceptual strategies that each of these artists have used. How have the artists encouraged viewers to mediate the differences in perspective and experience between the familiar environment of their metropolitan/urban centre and the unfamiliar geographic site to which the artwork refers? I argue that Smithson, Jaar, and the Yolngu have achieved this to varying degrees through their choice of representational devices and that their works constitute an "intricate melding of site[s], sight, and insight." This melding together relies heavily on the artists' highly conceptual motivations and uncommon juxtaposition of media, while also requiring the viewers' recognition of their own position in the piece, conceptually and sometimes physically. Ultimately, each of the works discussed here serves to expand viewers' perceptions of themselves in relation to their consumption of mineral resources derived from distant mine sites and/or associated people.

In view of our copious consumption of mineral resources (by which we are connected to vast stretches of ground which we will never visit in person, but which visit us through the form of material goods), it is indeed surprising that more artists do not address mining-related topics. Art and mining, however, were once, and not so long ago, more intimately connected. In countries with recent histories of colonial occupation, such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, resource-rich ground remained relatively untouched until the 19th century, when there was an unprecedented growth in mining. Watercolours, lithographs, and painted canvases, such as Eugène von Guérard's Ballarat, 1853-54 (Figure 1.1) and
Figure 1.1 (top)
Eugène von Guérard
Ballarat 1853-54
A. McCulloch, Artists of the Gold Rush,
Melbourne: Lansdowne Editions, 1977

Figure 1.2 (bottom)
George French Angas
Ophir Diggings Summer Hill Creek, 1851
A. McCulloch, Artists of the Gold Rush,
Melbourne: Lansdowne Editions, 1977
George French Angas', *Ophir Diggings Summer Hill Creek*, 1851 (Figure 1.2), abound with themes related to the gold rushes and the creation of new frontier towns.\(^5\) According to Tim Bonyhady, most of these paintings were likely intended as a documentation of "colonial good fortune."\(^7\)

As the goldfields emptied of promise, the miners retreated *en masse* and opportunities for capturing the brilliance of riches, the glamour of new found wealth, and heroic scenes of man pitted against nature no longer existed to capture the artist's imagination. Mining operations today make rather dull fodder for artists. Technologically advanced mechanisation and correspondingly small work forces,\(^8\) high security, low grade ore (by old standards), and operations that are often situated underground and far from urban centres of habitation, have all contributed to alienating vast numbers of people, including artists, from mining sites. In the latter part of this century, relatively few artworks have been inspired by mining or mining-related issues. It is not surprising that, for most people, the intersection of visual art and mining continues to bring to mind nostalgic images of a bygone era of calico camps and camel trains, and of printed illustrations of men proudly displaying their glittering treasures. Whether in terms of a celebratory nationalistic nostalgia such as the book *Goldseekers of the 1890s* (generated by the Australia Post Philatelic Society), or a post-colonial critique of the colonising egotism of this art by Bonyhady, it is 19th century artwork that most readily springs to mind.\(^9\)

Since the 1960s, there has been a renewed interest by artists in peripheral sites. In 1979, Rosalind Krauss published "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in which she analysed the rupture of sculpture from the self-contained, self-referential Formalist style, to a more encompassing discipline sensitive to its physical surroundings and including architecture and landscape.\(^10\) This move away from Modernism allowed many artists to locate and construct a range of outdoor works, from ephemeral sculptures in snow to enormous semi-architectural constructions built of the very earth on which the work would stand. Much of this new kind of art, that has subsequently come to be known as Land Art or Earth Art, was site-specific, requiring the viewer to venture forth to experience the work first hand or requiring the artist to
document the work photographically in order to disseminate images closer to centres of art appreciation.\textsuperscript{11}

The artists discussed in this paper are those that have brought a mine and its related issues to the attention of centrally located audiences without requiring individual viewers to venture forth to the peripheral site to observe a site-specific work. In other words, although the works are grounded in a particular local history they were made to be appreciated within another local history.\textsuperscript{12} This focus eliminates Earth or Land artists, such as the French artists Gilles Bruni and Marc Barbarit,\textsuperscript{13} or the artists of the 1989 public art project at a cordylite limestone quarry at Mount Gambier,\textsuperscript{14} who have constructed works in abandoned mines that are best experienced first hand. Also, the paper does not focus on artists who resort primarily to the genre of documentary photography, including Sebastiao Salgado, who has captured abhorrent working conditions in "low tech" mines of less technologically developed countries,\textsuperscript{15} and Boris and Hilde Becker, who have documented several abandoned mine sites for their aesthetic appeal as monuments to an age of industry. These artists fall outside the scope of this paper because they maintain the traditional relationships between subject and object, viewer and scenery.

In Chapter Two, I discuss various visual strategies Robert Smithson employed to push the boundaries of the traditional relationship between subject and object in art. Smithson sought to extend the viewer's field of vision by encouraging his audiences to project mentally to distant sites of economic and geological significance. These sites included a steel mill, as examined in the work Non-site Oberhausen (1968), various minerals contained within a six-part work titled Six Stops on a Section (1968), and rock salt from The Cayuga Salt Mine (1969) in a project of the same name. These works entailed the relocation of ore or mine waste to the gallery and, unlike his later earth works, did not visibly alter the ground in any perceptible way. In these works, Smithson explored the boundaries of the visible and the invisible by providing alternatives for perception through his use of maps, mirrors, ore samples, photographs, and text, each of which described the mine in a different way. Elements of dislocation, relocation,
and decentring of the viewer, the work, and the distant site, allowed for material and conceptual dialogues between two geographically separated sites.

In Chapter Three, *Alfredo Jaar: Both Worlds at the Same Time*, I explore the link between the methodologies of Smithson and Jaar as alluded to by Dan Cameron in his article *Robert Smithson: Posthumous Dimensions of a Premature Pre-modern*. In the context of post-modernism, I analyse Jaar’s approach to connecting his audiences with the enormous open-pit Serra Pelada gold mine in Brazil that, until recently, was relegated to the periphery of the Western art system. I compare Jaar’s use of reflective surfaces and the incorporation of mineral ores with Smithson’s earlier use of similar concepts and the strategies to decentre the centrally located viewer and to make visible what was previously overlooked.

Closer to Australian shores are the Yolngu’s painted Bark Petitions that were created as land claims to protest bauxite mining on their land. The geopolitical orientation of the Petitions is well understood, but less so is their role as political works of art. In Chapter Four, *The Petitions of the Yirrkala People*, I investigate the Bark Petitions as artworks and how they were intended to facilitate understanding, or “create bridges,” between two widely separated geographic regions and cultures. I argue that in order to understand the juxtaposition of paintings as visual text with typed text it is essential to understand the meanings of these painted designs in relation to Yolngu culture and land and the effects of external influences on Yolngu communication with outsiders. In this chapter, I also propose a reading of the work in the context of their display at Parliament House in Canberra. Unlike Smithson and Jaar, themselves inhabitants of major metropolitan centres, the creators of the Petitions lived in an area that most urban dwellers would consider to epitomise a peripheral geographic site: remote, sparsely inhabited, and of a different culture. To the Yolngu, however, this so-called periphery is the centre of, their universe and dictates their existence. The Petitions warrant a closer examination because they constitute a prime example of how one culture’s centre can be another culture’s periphery. The Yolngu’s call to retain the rights to their land has
parallels with Jaar's concerns with the way so-called peripheral places and peoples are commonly exploited by decision-makers in the metropolitan centre.

A persistent colonising egotism denies a real understanding of long-term relationships between people and land. This is reflected strongly in the creation of the Yolngu peoples' Bark Petitions, and in the observation that the day-to-day experiences and concerns of art audiences located in major industrial and cultural centres of the West which generally do not include major mining sites and related issues. I believe Smithson's work was highly unique for his time because he revealed links between urban centres and geographies exploited through the consumption of mineral resources by constructing physical and conceptual links between the city and the mine. Jaar's work harbours a more global political perspective regarding links between centres of mining and centres of consumption. His agenda has been to connect people with places that are linked in some way but are separated not by geographic distance alone.

Through an analysis of the work of Smithson, Jaar, and the Yolngu Bark Petitions, I seek to bring a renewed emphasis on the possibilities of art in relation to mining. A comparative analysis of the work of these different artists, who engage variously with the issues of mining and the relationship between centre and periphery, reveals to us that major centres are not self-contained, but are heavily reliant on so-called peripheral areas for supplies of life-sustaining natural and human resources. The artists' understanding is revealed in the methods they have developed individually to connect metropolitan art audiences, even if only momentarily, to distant mining sites.


2 Kate Davidson and Michael Desmond, Islands: Contemporary Installations from Australia, Asia, Europe and America, National Gallery of Australia, Thames and Hudson, 1996, p. 70.


7 Tim Bonyhady, *Images in Opposition: Australian Landscape Painting 1801-1890*, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 78. Bonyhady provides an intriguing account of Von Guérard’s experiences of working as a miner and the effect this had on his paintings that unlike the work of many other artists of his time depicts the devastation of the environment brought on by mining activities.

8 Today mining only employs 6% of the labour force. It is interesting to note here that despite a smaller labour force in the early 1990s the mines were producing 40% of Australia’s export income in comparison to 9% in the early 1960s. Geoffrey Blainey, p. 381.


12 This concept of artworks in relation to the local history in which it was made and the local history in which it is relocated to be viewed is a concept taken from Dave Hickey’s essay “A new world every day” printed in *About Place: Recent Art of the Americas* by Madeleine Grynsztejn, 1995, p. 54.

13 Refer to Weilacher p. 30.


17 Two years after Jaar’s trip, photographer Sebastiao Salgado visited the same mine.
CHAPTER 2
ROBERT SMITHSON

The Centre-Periphery Dialectic 10
Setting the Foundation Stones 14
From "Sightseer" to "Site-seer" 19
   Site/Non-site Oberhausen 20
   Six Stops on a Section 23
   The Cayuga Rock Salt Mine Project 25
Conclusion 28
CHAPTER 2

ROBERT SMITHSON

I found that I was dealing not so much with the center of things, but with the peripheries. So I became interested in the dialogue between the circumference and the middle, and how those two things operated together.

Robert Smithson

The Centre-Periphery Dialectic

From the late 1960s to early 1970s, Robert Smithson pursued the idea of expanding the boundaries of art making and art viewing by decentring a work, its audience, and the role of the gallery as central site of contemplation for art. By separating the components of a work into a dichotomous, and sometimes dialectical, construct, Smithson endeavoured to disrupt institutional and other conventions which serve to frame or contain a work of art. A method he employed to accomplish this was to juxtapose, within one work, oppositions such as “inside” and “outside”, “nature” and “industry”, “object” and “idea”, and “image” and “text”.

With the works Non-site, Oberhausen, Germany (1968), Six Stops on a Section (1968), and Mirror Displacement; Cayuga Salt Mine Project (1969), discussed in this chapter, Smithson extended this concept of oppositions by materially and conceptually splitting individual works into two geographically separated sites; for instance, a “here” and a “there” component, a “city” and a “rural” component, or a “central” and a “peripheral” component. The component closest to the urban-based viewer was always the gallery, which in some instances he termed the “Non-site.” He juxtaposed the gallery or “Non-site” with maps, text, photographs, and geological materials, that signified a distant geographical location or “Site.” In several instances, the Sites that Smithson chose to explore were abandoned mine sites. In a relational sense, the Non-sites were located within centres of mineral consumption whereas the Sites were centres of geological extraction. The juxtaposition of oppositions, the varying perspectives and interpretations of land, and the relocation of earth material
from the Site to the Non-site, encouraged viewers to compose visual and conceptual dialogues between the central site of the gallery and the distant site indexed in the work.

Through the dichotomy of Site/Non-site, Smithson deconstructed commonly perceived hierarchies between centre and periphery. This was exemplified by the dialectical Site/Non-site construct in which the Non-site was considered to be only "partially present", its function serving to redirect a viewer’s attention to the other half of the work, namely the Site.⁶ In this sense, the Nonsite and the Site were mutually interdependent: each functioning as a frame for the other half of the work. The Site/Non-site works were based not so much on the construction of an object as on a conceptual exercise in reading and understanding two sites in relation to one another. According to Gary Shapiro, the whole point of these works was to avoid being a sightseer and to become what Smithson termed a ‘site-seer’ and gain a “transformative vision of what it is to be in (and out of) a site.”⁷ Smithson’s so-called “back and forth thing” or “dialogue” between two geographically separated sites constituted his notion of a dialectical relationship between “the circumference and the middle, and how those two things operated together.”⁸

It could be argued that the dialogue Smithson constructed between the Site and the Non-site was meaningless because Smithson chose to highlight abandoned and otherwise unimpressive or banal landscapes which he never altered in any discernible way. In other words, the Sites remained visually undisturbed by the artist’s hand and viewers were not rewarded with an awe-inspiring view, a structure, or even an object worthy of aesthetic consideration. In fact, although Smithson indicated, within his works, specifically where the Sites were located so that the viewer could actually go there, he admitted openly that there was no point in doing so.⁹ What then was the point of promoting the Site in relation to the Non-site?

It is my contention that two points have not been explored fully in relation to several of Smithson’s Site/Non-sites. The first is the pivotal role of the viewer within the works themselves and the second is Smithson’s down-to-
earth perspective on the effects of an extractive economy and the viewer's participation in mass consumption, industry, and the broader environment beyond the city. I contend that the importance of the Site/Non-sites was not so much the two geographical sites as points of interest, but rather the agency of the viewer in relation to the two.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how, in the late 1960s, Smithson created ground-breaking ways of perceiving and experiencing distant and unfamiliar geographies from within the context of a centrally-located institution. The innovation was to implicate the viewer as both subject and content in the work. The activity of negotiating similarities and differences between the central site of the gallery and the peripheral site was an invitation to reflect on one's place in the world and to see things relationally in a number of different contexts, for example, economically, environmentally, socially, or culturally. The primary aim of this chapter is to determine the key visual and conceptual strategies on which Smithson relied to allow viewers to activate the space between two oppositional sites, to construct dialogues between them, and to bridge some of the preconceived differences between them. How did Smithson connect his viewers with an unfamiliar site that lay peripheral to the day-to-day interests of an urban centre?

Although much debate has centred on Smithson's relationships to the artistic landscape traditions of the Sublime, the Beautiful, the Picturesque, notions of entropy, and whether Smithson was an ecologist, these discussions are not the focus of this Chapter.\textsuperscript{10} What is important here is that Smithson made many acute and realistic assessments of our connections to the ground which are often overlooked in favour of his later and more monumental earth works. But, as Smithson emphasised time and time again through his involvement with geological resources and depleted mine sites, our contemporary connections to land stem largely from the economics of supply and demand, based on the power of the centre to draw materials from so-called peripheries. In Smithson's works there is no escaping the effects of the centre on the periphery and the centre's degree of dependency on peripheries. The works discussed in this chapter stress the
complexity of inter-relationships between geographically separated, yet connected, sites. I contend that Smithson's emphasis on invoking dialectical relations between centre and periphery set a precedent for post-modern artists, such as Alfredo Jaar and many others who endeavour to emphasise economic, political, and social connections between people and places around the world. In a sense, Smithson provided a precedent for such strategies insofar as he challenged viewers to map the spaces between the site of the viewer at the centre in relation to a distant and unfamiliar or peripheral site.  

In order to understand the radical nature of Smithson's work, and his role as a precursor, it is important to consider his work in its historical context. Crucial to this perspective is his role in Minimalism's break with high Modernism and his philosophy of creating art made in response to the "real world" - the world beyond the exclusive neutral space of the gallery. What were some of the movements underfoot that led Smithson to forego his painting and sculptural objects and instead to forge multiple links between seemingly disparate sites? To answer this, I consider Smithson, at the beginning of postmodernism, outlining his penchant for exploring "fringe areas" in relation to art that would in turn lead his viewers to journey conceptually through many different fields. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to an analysis of Smithson's various decentring strategies used in the Non-site Oberhausen, Six Stops on a Section, and The Cayuga Salt Mine Project. I determine how Smithson challenged traditional framing devices by employing geographical and conceptual dichotomies, emphasising relationality as opposed to objects, blurring categorical distinctions, and demanding the intellectual participation of the viewer to decipher the components of each work. In exploring relationships between centres and peripheral sites, Smithson overturned, yet simultaneously emphasised, the propensity to construct hierarchies between two geographical sites in relation to one another.
Setting the Foundation Stones

In the 1950s and '60s, Robert Smithson was associated with New York artists who were displeased with the formalist principles expounded in different ways by the influential critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, who emphasised a distinction between aesthetic experience and everyday experience. In opposition, Smithson and several of his contemporaries felt that art should engage with the world at large (beyond the gallery) and therefore chose thematic concerns and more pluralist approaches to making and experiencing art through performance, video, installation, the use of text, arrangements of hybrid materials, and the raw materials from the earth itself. Modernism, according to John Barth, came to an end with the "reductive style" of Minimalism with which Smithson was initially associated.  

In his 1967 article "Art and Objecthood," Michael Fried opposed what he termed art's theatricality as evidenced in Minimalism. What Fried criticised about Minimalism was the implication (or acknowledgment) of the viewer within the space and content of the work itself. Smithson had no patience for Formalist aesthetics. In 1968, he said "we hope to get away from the formalism of the studio art... to give the viewer more of a confrontation with the physicality of things outside." In 1969, he added "...I think the major issue now in art is what are the boundaries. For too long artists have taken the canvas and stretchers as given, the limits." As Jack Flam states, "Smithson has come to symbolize the expansive antiformalist movements that emerged in the mid-1960s." What Fried had critiqued as the theatrical incorporation of the viewer into the work is precisely what Smithson cultivated in many of his works and is what lies at the core of his Site/Non-site dialectical constructs.

Smithson's works from the mid-1960s, although they were Minimalist-looking, with their repetition of modular geometric forms constructed simply from industrial materials, differed significantly from those of Donald Judd and Carl Andre in that the conceptual complexity behind his work extended far beyond Minimalist conventions. Glass Stratum (1967), for
example, is Minimalist in its repetition of geometric shapes, simple construction, and use of a light industrial material. However, Smithson’s choice of materials had intrinsic meanings and the ideas behind the work were often geological in orientation. For instance, in this work, the layers of glass referred to geological strata of sedimentary material, the glass itself was manufactured from sediments, and Smithson increasingly came to regard stratification of the earth as strata of text through which earth’s history could be read.\(^{18}\) The ideas behind the work anticipated the rise of conceptual art and therefore mark his move away from a Minimalist framework.

Smithson adopted a particularly conceptual and materially hybrid approach to opening the boundaries of modernism because he believed that “art for art’s sake” had run its course.\(^{19}\) He felt that artists had social responsibilities and, as Cameron states of Smithson, “an artist who had not thought through the implications of what he or she was doing, who was creating art through ‘feelings’, truly mocked the serious mission which art had to perform within the larger context of cultural knowledge.”\(^{20}\) Smithson believed in democratising art by returning it to the world at large and he extended his belief in adding to cultural knowledge by driving his audiences “to their intellectual limits.”\(^{21}\)

This outward-looking, yet simultaneously reflective, approach to art making stemmed perhaps from Smithson’s sense of mission, influenced by larger social and political issues at hand in the 1960s, a period of great social and political unrest in the United States. War had been waged in Korea, then in Vietnam. As a result, industry was booming. In reaction to the destruction wreaked by industry and war, a greater ecological consciousness was beginning to materialise. Within this matrix of national and international unrest and industrial pressure on the environment, Smithson began to examine and critique what Dan Cameron has referred to as “mega-systems,” such as the “museum and the natural preserve”\(^{22}\) and its antithesis, industry. Smithson developed a steadfast interest in seeing things in “a more relational way” and sought to develop art as “a resource that mediates between ecology and industry” by locating an understanding or common point of interest between these two oppositions.\(^{23}\) In relation to utopian
ideals of nature and the wonderful world of consumerism, the mining industry was the "other", intended to be kept at the periphery of collective consciousness and criticised for its primitive associations with dirt and waste. But according to Alloway, for Smithson, "...human intervention in the earth should be thought of as part and parcel of its chaotic diversity" and the phenomenological proposition that as much as the world permeates us we as humans permeate the world. In a similar vein, Alloway has commented that "since the 19th century, man has shared in landscape formation at a scale comparable to that of geological process... it is no longer possible to separate man from nature... [as] the human network[s] of waste penetrate one another to form a unitary landscape." According to Robert Hobbs, Smithson's "primary contribution to art" was his ability to realistically assess mid-twentieth century life, in contrast to society in general, which chose to "nonperceive" or "turn a blind eye to many facets of contemporary life" because it was apprehensive about rapid change. Smithson was interested in how people fail to perceive the relationships between humans and nature and saw his role as a mediator. He stated:

the artist must come out of the isolation of galleries and museums and provide a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists, and not simply present abstractions or utopias. The artist must accept and enter into all the real problems that confront the ecologist and industrialist... Art should not be considered as merely a luxury, but should work within the processes of actual production and reclamation.

Smithson's ethical intent to "confront the ecologist and industrialist" is particularly notable in several earthwork projects he proposed to mining companies that entailed making abandoned mine sites available for public use as "industrial parks." He believed that art could be economically and politically valuable to society through the construction of such earth art projects that acknowledged mining as the foundation of a global market economy. In recognition of this, his proposals were based only partially on reclamation and were not intended to cover up the ground's new profile created by mining processes. A striking example of this is a photograph of the massive open pit Bingham Copper Mine in Utah, over which Smithson superimposed a radiating motif in the base of the pit. For such ideas, that
did little to mask the devastation wrought by mining practices, Smithson did not win the hearts of mining companies or environmental groups. But Smithson none-the-less believed that "the authentic artist cannot turn his back on the contradictions that inhabit our landscape"\textsuperscript{33} and that artists have a cultural responsibility to society to acknowledge intrinsic contradictions: "dialectics not harmony and unity."\textsuperscript{34} He stated: "We should begin to develop an art education based on relationships to specific sites. How we see things and places is not a secondary concern, but primary."\textsuperscript{35} By exposing mining-related sites to public scrutiny, Smithson’s actions revealed the more hidden elements that facilitate consumption and which are not immediately discernible from the context of a city centre.\textsuperscript{36}

Despite Smithson’s numerous proposals to companies to develop their depleted mine sites into industrial parks, the proposals were all rejected except for one which almost came to fruition, but was rejected also after his untimely death.\textsuperscript{37} If he had lived, it would have been fascinating to see how his visions of the "other" in relation to urbanised art audiences would have materialised through these parks.

In the year of Smithson’s death, Rosalind Krauss published her article *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* in which she charted the emerging postmodern categories of sculpture relative to a standard of the site-specific classical figurative monument.\textsuperscript{38} In doing so, she rejected the limitations of formalist analysis of the development of sculpture. She argued that, after Modernism, there re-emerged an expanded field of site-specific sculptural works but with the added dimensions of material hybridity and which needed to be understood in relation to the categories of architecture and landscape. With the emergence of these new forms of art, Krauss mapped a dialectical framework between positivity and negativity, built and not-built, and the cultural and the natural, that she was to represent diagrammatically.\textsuperscript{39} According to Krauss’s categorization, Smithson’s plans for his post-industrial terrains would have fitted neatly into her category of "marked sites" or as something "not landscape - landscape"; as an intervention not wholly definable as landscape or as not-landscape. Interestingly, however, the Site/Non-sites, which only slightly predate the
proposed minesite works, defy categorization beyond "sculpture" in Krauss’ model, despite the fact that they involve a dialectic of nature and culture and sit within architectural and non-architectural spaces (landscape). These works, although difficult to categorize according to Krauss’ diagram, did not reduce 'art to an essence' but rather expanded its realm and created a new awareness of the world through art.\(^4\) Smithson explains:

I never thought of isolating my objects in any particular way. Gradually, more and more, I have come to see their relationship to the outside world, and finally when I started making the Nonsites, the dialectic became very strong. These Nonsites became maps that pointed to sites in the world outside the gallery, and a dialectical view began to subsume a purist abstract tendency.\(^4\)

According to Ann Reynolds, Smithson’s notion of relocating to the gallery material extracted from, or pertaining to, a distant outdoor site, and then drawing the attention of the viewer to this far-away site, was influenced by his fascination for the Museum of Natural History and its manner of referring constantly beyond the objects on display and beyond the confines of the institution.\(^4\) Whether or not the viewer has travelled to the referred sites, he or she is prompted to create connections between the institutional displays and the distant sites they represent. The museum assists in creating these links by providing information and visual aids, such as specimens, maps, and photographs, and other pedagogical material, that assist the viewer in traversing beyond the boundaries of the museum walls to gain a greater appreciation of other geographies. Reynolds believes that Smithson’s manner of thinking about periphery and centrality, and the manner in which he presented natural specimens in his work, developed from a way of thinking that was "formed by the pedagogy of the museum."\(^4\)

The idea of the Non-site stemmed from the notion of distracting or transporting a viewer’s consciousness to such a degree that his or her present state of awareness is reduced or transposed to an imagined or recreated realm. Smithson argued that the museum could, in a sense, create a milieu in much the same way a cinema does by encouraging viewers to project mentally into another environment.\(^4\) He came to regard the
cinema and museum as nonspaces or nonsites because they existed primarily by representing or mirroring other spaces, and thereby collapsing an essence of both time and space. This way of thinking and viewing laid the foundations for his Site/Non-site dialectics. According to Dan Cameron, Smithson was interested in adopting aspects of the museum’s approach and engaging viewers with peripheral sites, but he wanted to take it a few steps further by exploring "art's outer fringes of meaning as well."\(^{45}\)

**From ‘sightseer’ to ‘site-seer’**

The tools of art have too long been confined to ‘the studio’. The city gives the illusion that earth does not exist.

Robert Smithson\(^{46}\)

In 1968, Smithson ventured beyond the studio and incorporated into his works elements derived from, or based on, geographical sites located at the fringes of metropolitan areas that had been stripped of economically valuable resources.\(^{47}\) He referred to post-industrial landscapes, such as abandoned minesites, as "low-profile", "entropic", or "backwater or fringe area[s]."\(^{48}\) These were fenced-in areas marked with the expedited decay or entropy of the earth and of corresponding residues of human activity that had changed the structure and composition of the landscape.\(^{49}\) They were sites intended to be separated from the mainstream of everyday life because they were deemed ugly, dangerous, and barren. Smithson remarked "Because of the great tendency toward idealism, both pure and abstract, society is confused as to what to do with such places."\(^{50}\)

But Smithson largely accepted the decay and, at times, appeared to revel in the ugliness because he understood that improvement in one area of life is usually at the expense of some other area.\(^{51}\) By relocating ore and waste from these distant mine sites to the gallery, Smithson essentially “deromanticized” notions of landscape in art by diminishing peoples’ propensities to “non-perceive” consumer connections to the excavation of earth.\(^{52}\) I contend that it is this trade-off between nature and industry, with the viewer or consumer in the middle, that particularly informs the
backbone of works such as *Site/Non-site Oberhausen* and *The Cayuga Salt Mine Project.*

*Site/Non-site Oberhausen*

The central component of this work consisted of five industrially fabricated steel bins that contained chunks of slag (a waste product in the production of iron ore into steel). Accompanying the bins were five identical topographic maps depicting the nearby Oberhausen steel mill and also several documentary-style photographs of the industrial site (Figure 2.1). The work was installed in a gallery in Oberhausen, a city located in the industrial Ruhr district of Germany. Heavy industry, and in particular, steel works, once formed the backbone of this region’s economy.

Taking slag from an industrial site and relocating it to a city-based gallery effectively created a physical bond between two very different and geographically distinct sites. Smithson wrote:

> The Site, in a sense, is the physical, raw reality - the earth or the ground that we are not really aware of when we are in an interior room... I thought it would be interesting to transfer the land indoors, to the non-site which is the abstract container.... You are confronted not only with an abstraction but also with the physicality of here and now, and these two things interact in a dialectical method and it's what I call a dialectic of place.

The steel and the slag were proof of the industrial site’s material existence and provided viewers also with the opportunity to interact with the material physically rather than just visually. The materiality of the steel and the slag within the gallery was one strategy Smithson used to draw the attention of viewers to the distant Site that the Non-site pointed to. What Smithson established in this work was the inter-relationship between the town of Oberhausen and its steel mill. The dispersal of the same material in two geographically separated sites established a sense of equal footing or “a dialectic of place” between the city centre and its perimeter.

Through a redistribution of materials associated with the primary industry of mining, Smithson sought to disrupt the illusion of a city’s autonomy or detachment from the origins in the ground by bringing back into it both waste product and end product. The two materials together thus served as a
Figure 2.1
Robert Smithson
*Nonsite, Oberhausen, Germany, 1968*
steel, bins, slag, maps
material reminder that without waste there can be no product and that everyone is linked inextricably to the ground through the consumption of steel.

Another point to note in the linking of consumers with distant tracts of ground, is that to produce steel in industrial quantities requires vast amounts of energy. In the Ruhr district, coal would likely have been the preferred source of energy many decades ago. The irony is that to produce steel using coal, a double extraction of the earth must first take place, thereby making a significant impact on the environment. The point of double extraction is interesting because it is one reason why Smithson placed waste in the steel bins. So much extraction of mineral resources has taken place in Germany that virtually all industries associated with the manufacturing of steel have shut down. The manufacturing that does take place in association with the remaining steel mill sites is the refining of its waste into another product. The subtlety of *Non-site Oberhausen* therefore lies in his ecological knowledge of the significance of the slag - that it was not just Smithson’s intention to highlight an antithetical relationship between waste and valued steel.\(^{55}\)

Not obvious to an outsider, but well-known to an insider, was the town’s second lease on life through the manufacturing of slag into a valuable fertiliser.\(^{56}\) The relationship between Oberhausen and the extraction and modification of waste into a product, to put back into the earth from whence it came, is a fragile one, as evidenced by the steel bins cradling the waste. The juxtaposition of steel and slag reflected a great deal more about the town’s relationship to its periphery than first meets the eye. The steel bins operated as a frame - emphasising the importance of the slag it contained. Alloway has written “by means of the sites/nonsites Smithson... was able to use the gallery not simply as a container for pre-existing objects but brought it into a complex allusive relation to an absent site.”\(^{57}\)

The introduction of slag into the gallery was a disruption to the gallery space in that outside the context of an artwork the waste would otherwise never have been brought inside and exposed. But, with its display alongside the
steel, the two materials together, Smithson alluded to the pride in the district’s geological resources and of human connections to what lies hidden in the ground. “This kind of process,” according to Gilles Thieberghien, “essentially unified locations which are spatially scattered, making them homogeneous as the points drawn on the paper.”

Connections between the city and its periphery emerged also on a more conceptual level. The placement within the gallery of representational devices of the peripheral Site, such as maps, text and photographs, provided a different kind of insight than the steel and slag alone could provide. According to Owens, the “montaging technique” or juxtaposition of various materials “suggest[ed] an indexical reading” that connected the signifiers in the gallery to the distant site. The topographic map of the Oberhausen Site, for instance, encouraged visitors to consider it from an aerial perspective but required a sort of conceptual and abstract reading. In contrast, the five different sets of photographs of the site placed along the top edges of the maps, along with explanatory text at the base of each map, provided very different kinds of readings of the same site. Smithson provided various alternatives for understanding a site and in this manner encouraged his audiences to explore the Site without actually having to go there.

Various readings were certainly necessary in order to interpret Smithson’s alterations to a topographic map of the Oberhausen Site. From a 1:250,000 map of the Ruhr district, Smithson extracted and enlarged the area corresponding to the Oberhausen steel processing site. The various transportation routes between the processing plant and the storage areas and transportation networks were highly visible and stressed the interconnectedness of the various systems in operation at the Site. However, from the centre of the enlargements, Smithson had obliterated the area that would otherwise have depicted the site’s slag and tailings piles. A topographic interpretation is often considered to be the most accurate method of representing the geographic features of a site. But Smithson’s elimination of the tailings or slag piles from the map suggested that the map was an unsuitable means for documenting an industrial landscape. Additions and deletions to tailings piles and slag heaps meant
that the local topography was in a constant state of flux which any
topographical map is unable to depict. Smithson's erasing of the centre of
the map indicated clearly the impact of an extractive economy and by
bringing some of the "missing" waste into the gallery, Smithson may have
been suggesting that it too was being rapidly depleted. In this sense, viewers
were pushed to interrogate their positions as consumers in relation to
"mega-systems" such as industry, economics, and ecology.

The representational devices, in association with the steel and the slag,
provided the viewer with a "virtual space" or interstitial zone between two
sites on which the viewer was invited to reflect critically. Hobbs refers to
this negotiation of space between sites as the "mobility of mental
projection." According to Hobbs, projection allows a viewer to
"experience" an aspect of another location without actually going there. In
essence, the work then becomes a conceptual map between what is "here"
and what is "there." Robbin's experience of the "Site/Nonsite dialectic" is
that "to experience the works accurately the mind must jump back and forth
and not focus on any particular element" thus implying that the onus of the
work lies in the space between two extremes.

Six Stops on a Section

In this work, Smithson used a stratigraphic map that depicted a cross-section
of earth between New York City and a site called Dingman's Ferry in
Pennsylvania. The map was an old one, and quite simplistic, but listed the
names of rock types, many of which are of economic significance including
sandstone, gravel, sand, and slate (materials that would be integral to local
urban development). Along this cross-section, Smithson made six stops and
at each site he collected geological material and documented the site
photographically.

In the gallery, Smithson filled six rectangular metal bins, each one
representing one of the six stops on the section, and each containing a
different kind of earth sample. The bins were placed in a straight line on the
floor of the gallery, and in sequence, according to the order of their collection
along the geological section (Figure 2.2). Accompanying each stop in the gallery was a photograph of the ground and a corresponding section of the stratigraphic map indicating the general area from which the material had been collected (Figure 2.3). According to Alloway, the combination of map and sample "created a junction between geological and topographic information."

The notion of a "junction" or an intersection between the geological material and the map was reinforced further by Smithson's addition of an aluminium plate cut to represent the silhouette of the stratigraphic profile of each stop. The placement of these plates on the top of each bin partially obscured the geological contents of the box but created an interesting push-pull effect between what the viewer could read as sky (the light coloured metal plate) and the ground below (or underfoot) as represented by the rocks. The scale inversion between the silhouette of a distant horizon line with the chunky rock would have been a disorienting experience between what was here and what was there, and between what was visible and what was invisible. This oscillation between two different scales in one work was another strategy Smithson employed to give the viewer a greater understanding of the Site, and as a means to decentralise the viewer and the gallery as a central focus for the work.

The changes in scale between what is underfoot relative to the surrounding countryside is the sort of thing geologists consider constantly when mapping in the field. Although Smithson provided a map that depicted the Site, he encouraged viewers to remap the country relative to the Nonsite by inviting them to consider the changes in scale contained within the work but, more importantly, to traverse the sequence of bins representative of the six stops. The open portion of the bins with exposed rock could be construed as a kind of search for the right material and as an invitation to reach down to inspect the rocks as though they were actually in situ. The segregation of the material from each stop perhaps alluded to the classification system used by geoscientists to identify rocks. That the sites were not yet mined, but explored in some detail and placed in containers, suggested the possibility of future development, thereby sighting (and citing or siting) interconnections
Figure 2.2 (top)
Robert Smithson
Six Stops On a Section, 1968
R. Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture,
Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1981

Figure 2.3 (bottom)
Robert Smithson
Six Stops on a Section, 1968 (detail)
R. Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture,
Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1981
of civilization and creation with wilderness and destruction. Kay Larson has stated that the Non-sites “offer[ed] a poetics of mineral variety... But one feels an indefinable uneasiness in the Nonsites, forever removed from the paradisical wholeness of the world, and filled with the anxiety of eviction.”

The relocation of unprocessed geological material, therefore, created a bridge or visual dialogue between the gallery and each of the sites depicted, and thereby invited the viewer on a short journey of exploration across country. The placement of the bins at regular intervals is not unlike the pattern of a scale bar found along the edges of a map, while the photographic enlargement of the ground at each stop may have been another tool intended to allow the viewer to formulate a more comprehensive picture of the site in conjunction with the other materials and strategies provided. Such directional or explanatory material, together with the display of collected geological material brought indoors, gave the Nonsites a vague museum-like quality that related back to the Site and the world at large in a dialectical way or mirror-relationship “as mirrored complementaries: one present, one absent.”

In a sense, the six stops are a record of Smithson mining the land for his own interests, or, as Graziani has suggested, Six Stops “could continually be re-mined for other information.” As Graziani points out, the notion of “re-mining tapped resources has had a long history in the mining industry itself, which often returns to abandoned mining sites to re-mine what was once thought to be useless spoil.” This, as discussed above, was exactly the case with the Oberhausen Site.

The Cayuga Rock Salt Mine Project

In several ways, Smithson’s Cayuga Rock Salt Mine Project represented a significant departure from Site/Nonsite Oberhausen and Six Stops on a Section because it explored many more strategies for linking the Nonsite to the Site. First of all, the Cayuga Salt Mine was an operating mine and, rather than simply referring to what lay underground (as with the stratigraphic map in Six Stops on a Section), Smithson took to exploring the Cayuga Mine
both above and below ground. As with the earlier works, he relocated geological material from outside to inside, but, in this work, the bins were jettisoned in favour of the ore being placed directly on the floor. The most significant departure, however, was the incorporation of mirrors and, in particular, their use to visually blaze a trail of reflected light, like a row of beacons, between Cornell University's Andrew Dickson White Museum of Fine Art and the Cayuga Rock Salt Mine located half a mile away.

Smithson's use of mirrors developed from a photo-based proposal to the Museum. His suggestion had been to create a sense of location (and simultaneous dislocation) through a three step photographic process involving taking photographs of the underground mine, then placing the developed photographs of the mine within the mine and photographing the existing images of the site within the site, followed by transferring these twice-removed images of the underground site to the above-ground Nonsite (Figure 2.4). Smithson, however, abandoned this photographic type of dislocation in favour of using mirrors to both locate and dislocate both site and sight, and, in a much more interactive way, by directly implicating the viewer as both subject and object of the work.

The Cayuga Salt Mine Project was a complex work that harboured multiple facets for exploration. Of particular interest here, however, is Smithson's use of mirrors as a means for external and internal reflection and as an interface to facilitate interaction between two systems, such as extraction and consumption, or the linking of geographical dichotomies such as inside and outside, and here and there.

The Fingers Lake region of northern New York State, in which the Cayuga Salt Mine is located, is considered to be a mineral rich area, but most of this richness lies hidden beneath ground cover. Mining activities bring some of this richness to light, but usually at locations situated well beyond the sphere of a gallery audience. For Smithson, the Cayuga Salt Mine, located in the vicinity of the Museum, presented a perfect opportunity to bring to light what otherwise would remain obscured by distance and darkness.
Figure 2.4 (top)
**Robert Smithson**
*Mirror with Rock Salt* (Salt Mine and Museum Proposal), 1968
R. Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*
Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1981

Figure 2.5 (bottom)
Robert Smithson on *Mirror Trail* at Cayuga Salt Mine Site, 1968
R. Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*
Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1981
Starting deep within the mine and working his way up through some of the shafts, Smithson randomly placed several 30 centimeter square mirrors and extended this trail of mirrors to a quarry at the surface, and then on towards the gallery (Figure 2.5). In the gallery, Smithson placed a topographic map of the area which located the sections of the mirror trail as part of the Nonsite. On the floor was an assembly of mirrors and rock salt, with the mirrors placed in various configurations as the formal elements of the Nonsite. The juxtaposition of mirror with ore, and their placement on the floor, effectively drew viewers to look down at the ground (Figure 2.6). The act of looking down and inspecting I have discussed in Six Stops on a Section, but the mirrors on the floor added a whole new dimension to experiencing the Nonsite and to the viewer’s position in relation to the work and the site as an object of consumption (Figure 2.7). The mirrors placed an inescapable emphasis on the ore.

Smithson was interested in linking parts of this invisible underground periphery with the gallery but, as Reynolds has said, without “suppressing his natural souvenir’s ability to refer to its former position in the outside world.” The reflective quality of mirrors was one solution because it broadened the immediate perceptual boundaries of the Nonsite through extension to include the trail of mirrors. This mirror link between the two sites helped to collapse some of the distances and differences between them. To Smithson, the Site/Nonsite relationship was "a double path made up of signs, photographs and maps that belong to both sides of the dialectic at once.” The mirrors added an allegorical aspect to the work by activating the viewer’s involvement in the piece and by highlighting the present in relation to another time and place. Cameron has stated:

the viewer, and the sociocultural circumstances in which he or she was located, were asked to participate more actively in the confrontation with themselves, hence, the very formation of intellectual meaning from the act of encountering a work of art serves, in Smithson’s art, as the basis for the artist’s investigation, and is thus the question pushed most to the fore by such an interchange.

Smithson was intent to extend the realm of art into the world beyond the coveted space of the gallery and self-contained art object by avoiding any
Figure 2.6

Robert Smithson

Eight Unit Piece, Cayuga Salt Mine Project

Figure 2.7
Robert Smithson
Eight Unit Piece, Cayuga Salt Mine Project (detail)
Installation view “Earth Art” exhibition, 1969
possibility of creating a centre, and thus decentred his works to acknowledge such a variety of spaces. He used his "Site/Nonsite dialectic" as a model to emphasise the importance of acknowledging various kinds of spaces: the physical spaces or contexts associated with the peripheral Site itself, the physical space and context of a gallery or Non-site in which material specific to the peripheral site is placed, and the kind of space or dimension which exists between the two extremes of the peripheral outdoor landscape (Site) and the indoor urban gallery (Nonsite). Hobbs has written that Smithson was interested in suggesting "antithetical situations" in his work and that if "sculpture can be about space... it can also be about nonspace." 76

Conclusion

Like the natural history museum model, which refers constantly to areas outside of itself, Smithson facilitated interaction between the distant site and the gallery by encouraging viewers to make connections between the two extremes. Although working in the late 1960s, Smithson's questioning, and the potential of his work to re-define the boundaries of center and periphery, had strong post-modern overtones. By actively mapping the ground and its resources, and making them visible to the art world, viewers were encouraged to make links with the broader context of things rather than appreciating art in a purely esthetic manner. Smithson made the viewer responsible for negotiating, connecting, and understanding a work through his use of several different modes of representation, and works which are located simultaneously in different geographic locations. According to Eugenie Tsai, Smithson "pulled the elements of the representational norm apart into an unidentifiable field of disparate parts, all essential to the whole, all irreconcievably separate, distinct, and discrete" and this manner of thinking and working destroyed "the very basis of unity - the physical boundedness of the sculptural object" so important to modernist ideals.77

The works discussed here were created in opposition of the "art-for-art's-sake" mentality and its self-referential focus which Greenberg had championed and Smithson created a previously unfelt tension in the
making and viewing of art by forcing viewers to expand their vision and to consider not only the work’s broader context in the world at large, but that of themselves in relation to the gallery and the peripheral site to which the work referred. A factor often disregarded in contemporary consumer ideology, a consciousness about where materials originate and what they look like in their raw state. Overlooked economic, political, and environmental links between sites of mineral resource extraction and urban centres of consumption are integral to many of Smithson’s Site/Non-site Dialectics. Graziani has noted that the “Non-sites are structured around how systems are interconnected, how they generate meaning through difference.” He was interested in the “breakdown of private space...” thus placing the subject of the work and the viewer within the wider context of things generally situated outside the art world. Smithson reveals that he was less interested in arriving at a fixed destination in any conventional sense than in the imaginative experience of journeying between locations. By inviting viewers to tour through the Non-sites’ maps, photographs, sequential bins of earth samples, and mirror displacements throughout various parts of the gallery, he invoked the participation of viewers and, as he said, “to give the viewer more of a confrontation with the physicality of things outside.”


2 Gary Shapiro, Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art After Babel, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 20, 84. Shapiro links Smithson to postmodern processes of “decentering the structure, site, and context of the work” and attributes some of this interest to Smithson’s readings of Jorge Luis Borges and Blaise Pascal.

3 Ibid., p. 1, 96. Regarding notions of framing, Shapiro states Smithson was “concerned to question the presuppositions and limits of museums, galleries, and other traditional frames for art” and sought to disrupt “the traditional distinction between what is inside and what is outside the work” but without eliminating the frame altogether. Robert Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, Ithaca: Cornell University, 1981, p. 15, writes “Smithson stretched the
traditional definition of art as object for direct viewing by using conceptual frameworks that stressed particular contexts for seeing."

4 According to Shapiro, 1995, p. 80, the conventional binary construct is to valorize or otherwise give a positive value to the first item in each pair which creates a relationship of reinforcing concepts.

5 It should be noted here that discrepancies in the spelling of "Nonsite," "nonsite" and "nonsite" have been retained as they occur in the original texts.

6 These partially present works were not simply based on an interest in earth as a sculptural material, but challenged perceptions and concepts of space. What is here and what is there and particularly to connect one part of the sculpture with its other part in another location.

7 Shapiro, 1995, p. 64, writes: "'site-seers' are not 'sight-seers'; they do not simply look around at a miscellaneous collection of views. They are seers, visionaries or prophets, of the site, or place," p. 64.

8 Smithson explores also the decentering potential of printed matter in several essays. In the apparently incomplete "The Artist as Site-Seer; or a Dintorphic Essay," he overwhelms the short text with footnotes so that the margins displace the center, see Shapiro, 1995, p. 165.

In Smithson's cartouche drawings of 1963-64 and in his 1966 essay "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," Smithson began to explore the notion of dialectic between centre and circumference by reversing the relationship between the work's frame or border and its centre. The viewer's attention was thus redirected to the peripheral area of the work thus displacing the traditional centre of a work. Gilles Tiberghien, Land Art, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, Inc., 1995, p. 32, states Smithson was "mixing spatial references and temporal parameters." According to Shapiro, Earthwards, 81. 83, "Smithson adapted the concept of dialectics to suit his own purposes." Rather than the idea of "higher synthesis or attained totality, as in Hegel or some versions of Marxism," he preferred the notion of "movement, displacement, and interaction that breaks down fixed oppositions." On the one hand, according to Shapiro, Smithson speaks as though it is possible to "transcend" these oppositions, while at other times the gulf between them appears to shadow any possibility of a true dialectic because the oppositions are so firmly entrenched. In this instance, it is sufficient to highlight their structure and variability of it. Jessica Prinz, Art Discourse/ Discourse in Art, New Brunswick New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991, p. 88, writes that the images are "equivalent in weight/content to the typed centre of the pages... The essay is a visual and textual collage that mixes verbal and visual 'quotations.'"

10 Hobbs contends that Smithson was concerned with the picturesque by contrast with Thomas Cole’s fascination with the sublime, Hobbs, 1981, p. 30.


14 Tiberghien, 1995, p. 44.


17 According to Alloway, Smithson’s “complexity is in excess of the tolerance of Minimal art,” Alloway, 1972, p. 53.


19 Moira Roth, “Robert Smithson on Duchamp, an Interview,” Artforum, 2 Oct., 1973, p. 47, wrote that Smithson wanted to step outside and attempt to set up a lineage between Modernism and post-Modernism.” Cameron believes Smithson’s work was uniquely his and largely unparalleled in both his time and ours and states that Smithson’s “position is still completely unassailable.”

20 Cameron, 1990, p. 104.


22 Cameron, 1990, p. 105.


24 Ron Graziani, (De)Terminating the Political Enfrangement in the Art by Robert Smithson, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 1992, p. 154

26 Alloway, 1972, p. 54, 55.


34 Cameron, 1990, p. 104.

35 Smithson quoted in Reynolds, 1988, p. 127.


37 Graziani, 1992, p. 234-238.


39 See Krauss, 1979, p. 284.


41 Shapiro, 1995, p. 56.


43 Reynolds, 1988, p. 110.

44 Ibid.

45 Cameron, 1981, p. 103.


47 Coplans, 1974, p. 42.

48 Cummings, interview, p. 231.


51 Coplans, 1974, p. 44.


53 These bins were not unlike his earlier Minimal works.

54 Flam, 196, p. 178, 187.


56 Ibid.

57 Alloway, 1972, p. 58.


60 Reynolds, 1988, p. 119.

61 Ibid.


63 Ibid.

64 Robbin, 1969, p. 53.

65 Graziani, 1994, p. 16.


68 Ibid.

69 Graziani, 1994, p. 17.

70 Ibid.


72 Reynolds, 1988, p. 115.


74 Alloway, 1981, p. 43.

75 Cameron, 1990, p. 105.


78 Cameron, 1990, p. 104.


CHAPTER 3

ALFREDO JAAR:
"BOTH WORLDS AT THE SAME TIME"

Introduction: "Variously distributed" 36

The works

Gold in the Morning 39
Rushes 42
(Un)Framed 43
Frame of Mind 46
Two or Three Things I Imagine About Them 47

Conclusion 49
CHAPTER 3

ALFREDO JAAR:
"BOTH WORLDS AT THE SAME TIME"

Introduction: "Variously Distributed"

In February, 1996, the National Gallery of Australia hosted a talk by Alfredo Jaar. To a hushed audience, the artist recounted his struggle to link his audiences in powerful financial and industrial centres of the world, the so-called "Developed" or "First" World, with physical and human geographies perceived as peripheral, "Third World," or simply inconsequential. His aim, he indicated, has been to educate privileged people by furthering their understanding of links between them and the people and places which remain out of sight, but which provide the resources and cheap labour on which powerful centres depend. Jaar's argument is that technically no centre or periphery exists because each is dependant on the other for resources. The problem, he has discerned, is that "development is variously distributed," resulting in hierarchies between people and resulting in power imbalances between various parts of the world. To facilitate the construction of bridges based on equality and respect for difference, Jaar's challenge has been to prompt his audiences to overcome their biases based on geographical, cultural, racial, economic, and political discrimination and to transcend a collective disregard for what lies beyond one's own familiar and comfortable environment.

For more than a decade, Jaar has incorporated into his art dichotomous structures (such as here/there, inside/outside, centre/periphery, First World/Third World, us/them) intended to represent the extremes that exist between geographic sites and associated groups of peoples. His expectation is that viewers will construct visual (perceptual) and conceptual dialogues between the extremes, reflect on their links in relation to the two perceived poles, and subsequently disrupt polarised notions of centre and periphery. This construction of a dialogue between geographically separated sites is similar in approach to Smithson's Site/Non-site works and the notion of a
dialectical relationship between the gallery and a distant (non-visible) site using a dichotomous underpinning to the work. Dan Cameron alluded to a connection between Smithson and Jaar. He stated that although Smithson was "never fully engaged with social or political issues... one gets the impression that he would have been quite approving of current takes on 'the system' as both its subject and its nemesis, in terms of an artist like Alfredo Jaar, who wants us to see art and politics from an integrated, macro-perspective."  

The focus of this chapter is an analysis of Jaar's post-modern approach which builds on Smithson's explorations of geographical dichotomies and its accompanying dialectic. I examine the materials and strategies that Jaar has employed to represent a distant geography within the gallery and, in particular, his use of reflective surfaces which were also an important element in Smithson's work. I argue that Jaar, like Smithson before him, has sought to actively engage the viewer with a distant mine site by splitting a work materially and/or conceptually and simultaneously situating the components of the work at two geographically separated sites. Splitting a work in this manner disorients or decentres the viewer (and the work) by projecting both into different contexts. It requires different kinds of readings than the traditional subject/object relationship allows and prompts the viewer to transcend or project beyond the gallery in order to consider the two parts of the work. With Jaar's work, however, the viewer is left with the responsibility of reconciling not only the two geographically distinct parts of the work, but to question also negative frames of reference through which "Third World" countries and their inhabitants are too often perceived. Through an analysis of key works, I ask: how does Jaar facilitate his audience's visual and conceptual dialogue with geographies that lie peripheral to their first hand experiences and what does this achieve?  

The five works: *Gold in the Morning* (1986), *Rushes* (1986-87), *(Un)Framed* (1987-91), its counterpart *Frame of Mind* (1987), and a component of *Two Or Three Things I Imagine About Them* (1992), were the result of his journey in the summer of 1985 to the Serra Pelada Plateau located near the mouth of the Amazon River in Brazil."  

He documented gold miners, sometimes
numbering more than 40,000, working in an enormous non-mechanised open-pit mine. Jaar’s intention was to juxtapose this site and its labouring inhabitants with the international demand for gold emanating primarily from wealthier nations of the world, particularly those with colonial histories. Metaphorically, he has used the site and its miners to represent the universal quest for prosperity, whether collectively as nations or individually as the miner and the viewer. The primary intention of these five works has been to provoke viewers into questioning the economic and political disparities that exist between various parts of the world and the viewer’s relationship to it.

Susan Torruella Leval has remarked that Jaar has a sensitivity to global concerns that is likely derived from having travelled widely and having lived in both “Third” and “First World” cities. Jaar refers to himself as a “citizen of the world” and that he does not belong to any particular country. Accordingly, the artist has experienced many socially, politically, racially, and economically polarised environments. It is these insights into the global economy and the human condition that fuels this work. Jaar has stated:

I believe in the power of being an outsider. You see things that others on the inside do not see. You can make connections between two different worlds, you can create bridges, you can show compassion, you can express solidarity.

Jaar’s effort has been to connect so-called “developed” nations, located primarily in the northern hemisphere, with so-called “underdeveloped” nations, largely located in the southern hemisphere. It has entailed crossing the equator extensively in an effort to construct his links between geographies as diverse as Japan, Rwanda, Hong Kong, Finland, Zaire, England, Brazil, Italy, and South Africa. Jaar has said:

My work “focuses on the widening gap between “so-called” Third World countries and the “so-called” Developed Nations. My work deals with both worlds at the same time because no other alternative seems to me real enough.”

By using complex conceptual and visual metaphors Jaar addresses global relations and interactions. This he does by investigating political tensions
visually, on the premise that the viewer's gaze is capable of linking the periphery to the centre and art with politics. This linking of centre and periphery is evident in his installation *Gold in the Morning*.

*Gold in the Morning*

In a darkened gallery are several light boxes placed at various heights, either above or below eye level, and with several resting on the ground (Figure 3.1). Only the transparencies emit light; glowing seductively they draw the viewer into the space and entice them to explore further. Perpendicular to each light box is a gold-plated metal box. The gold softly reflects the illuminated images of miners from the light box adjacent to them and also the images of viewers peering closely at the gold. The gold boxes at ground level draw the viewers’ attention to the ground at their feet, and their bodies correspondingly mimic the posture of a miner or prospector searching for ore. It is here, on the reflective gold surfaces, that the First World and the Third World meet.

The presence of gold cites a point of intersection between the site of the gallery and the site of the mine. On the one hand, gold represents a financial and industrial centre’s capital wealth while, on the other hand, it represents thousands of Brazilian men who toil in the jungles of the Amazon in search for a more promising future. In this sense, the gold describes the physical interrelationship, a dialectic between two places: the site of the gallery as an extension of a gold-consuming capitalist centre and the rich gold-bearing site at the distant Serra Pelada mine.

Gold as a raw resource, or in its manufactured form, is materially almost identical. In this sense, its placement in the gallery metaphorically refers the gold to its possible site of origin in Brazil. There is a parallel here between Jaar’s and Smithson’s work, with the latter’s Site and the Non-site, each containing the same kind of ore, also linking the gallery to the site of extraction. Each site’s ore reflected the other like a mirror, and focused the viewer’s attention on the common denominator between the two sites. Understanding this mirroring of material connections occurs with interpretation, yet another kind of reflection. In *Gold in the Morning*, Jaar
Figure 3.1 (top)
Alfredo Jaar
Gold in the Morning, 1986 (detail)
M. Grynsztejn, Alfredo Jaar. La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990

Figure 3.2 (bottom)
Alfredo Jaar
Gold in the Morning, 1986 (detail)
XLII Venice Biennale, Gold in the Morning, exhibition catalogue, Aperto, 1986
extends the gold into a more self-reflective kind of space by seducing the viewer to consider the gold’s symbolic associations and to reflect on the kinds of relationships between the two sites. What are the links, Jaar asks, between this affluent gallery and the distant mine in Brazil?

Gold in any quantity is a hard-won extraction and its material presence in the gallery makes evident the absence of the hard-working miners featured only in the transparencies and not amongst the viewers. But Jaar juxtaposed the world of the producer and the consumer, the miner with the viewer, by casting both their reflections onto the gold. On the surface of the gold box, the two sites and associated people are merged, with each image reflected simultaneously on the gold, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between the two geographies that, without the precious metal, would not otherwise exist. The viewer’s reflected image implicates the viewer in the work, as linked to the extraction of gold, as part of both sites. The technique of layering images on a reflective surface, including the viewer’s reflection, recalls Michelangelo Pistoletti’s use of polished surfaces on which he photographed or painted images of people. The viewers’ reflections were thus combined with the illusionistic figures. In Jaar’s work, the viewer’s image in the gold, in amongst the images of the miners, is more diffuse and is not intended to satisfy the viewer with an image of himself or herself in a piece of art. Instead, Jaar intended the physical reflection as a cue for contextual reflection on possible relationships between the two sites and on the viewer’s position in relation to both.

The light boxes and accompanying gold boxes were placed at architectural intersections throughout the gallery. These were corners crucial in the construction of the space, but in relation to floors and walls, considered marginal and thus seldom observed by viewers. Jaar, however, chose to emphasise these outer edges through his placement of the illuminated and gold boxes and thus drew the viewer’s line of vision toward them (Figure 3.2). The position of the boxes pointed to the kinds of marginalised, virtually invisible, spaces that these miners occupy as part of a giant labour force working to fuel major capitalist centres of the world. Madeleine Grynzstejn remarked that in 1915, Kasimir Malevich’s “nonobjective”
canvases were hung "away from the viewer thus dramatizing the traditional relationship between audience and art work" and that Jaar has applied a similar concept to this work. In Jaar's work, the placement of the miners above and below eye level can be viewed also as a dramatic disruption to the space but more importantly, as a disruption of the viewer's more traditional 'out of sight, out of mind' mentality in relation to inhabitants of the Third World.

The transparencies depict cropped images of mud-streaked bodies and muscles straining under the weight of oozing burlap bags heavy with wet dirt. That the images are placed high, toward the ceiling, and also at ground level, activates the space and the viewer's connection to the mine site and the activities of the miners. Following the sequence of glowing images around the room, the viewer appears to trace the movements of the miners climbing in and out of the circular pit. The miners must climb hundreds of ladders, up and down, only to emerge from the pit at the end of the day with little additional prospect of climbing any social or economic ladder. Their connection to the site is intrinsic, with rock underfoot and earth coating their bodies. It contrasts sharply with the leisurely stroll of the viewer on a level floor through the gallery. Jaar makes visible the labour exerted by these men, a labour that Grynsztejn has described as "concealed...[while at the same time] supporting our high-tech post-industrial world" or the world of the viewer.19

Jaaar prompts audiences to explore an unfamiliar geography from within the context of a gallery, thus creating a visibility from invisibility by reducing physical and temporal distances between the viewer and the Other, or between "here" and "there". This mirroring of two sites through the common denominator of ore, and the viewer's negotiation of the dichotomous extremes between the two geographically separated sites that together inform a work of art, is similar to what Smithson referred to as a "dialectic," a "dialogue," or a kind of "back and forth rhythm that goes between indoors and outdoors."20
Rushes

In December, 1986, the Spring Street and Avenue of the Americas subway station in New York was fitted with eighty billboard-sized photographic posters depicting men labouring in the earth (Figure 3.3). Included were close-ups of bodies straining under the effort of carrying heavy loads of dirt and panorama shots of a site resembling an open pit mine. This scene that Grynsztejn has referred to as "montage", spread along both sides of the tracks for the length of almost two city blocks, was superimposed with graphic symbols resembling stock exchange numbers. Commuters were left to figure out for themselves the context of this public art project. Other than these symbols that pertained to the gold market, Jaar did not provide any explanations or text to accompany the work.

In Rushes, Jaar sought to link two largely antithetical environments: one of the largest urban centres and financial capitals of the world, New York, and a relatively small community of miners living in primitive conditions at the edge of the Serra Pelada mine. The site of the subway was a metaphorical meeting point between the two sites and their respective groups of people.

Despite the geographical distance that obviously separated the two sites, Jaar was intent to blur some perceived boundaries of difference between them by inviting New Yorkers to share their space, for one month. By mirroring the "here" and "us" of harried underground New York commuters with the "there" and "them" of miners also deep within the earth at Serra Pelada, Jaar emphasised how both groups of people were bustling about in their respective sites endeavouring to secure a better life. Gold, as a form of international currency, the possession of which indicates power, wealth, status, and comfort, was the common denominator between the gold rush at Serra Pelada and the rush of traffic in the subway. Smithson asked of his own work "Is the Site a reflection of the Nonsite, or is it the other way around?" It would appear that Jaar is asking the same thing by suggesting that the scramble to get to the top, to make a decent wage, is equally applicable to both sites.
Figure 3.3
Alfredo Jaar
*Rushes*, 1986-87 (detail)
installation: Spring Street subway station, New York
The price of gold is determined in major financial centres, such as New York. The inclusion of the numerical signs and symbols with the images taken of Serra Pelada linked the site of the mine with the site of an international market: the New York Stock Exchange. The images in this subway, a station en route to Wall Street, visually linked the producers of the Third World with the consumers of the First world and created an insight for New York residents and visitors of other peoples' realities and hard labour that helps fuel the construction of centres of wealth.\textsuperscript{25} The work was installed for one month and included the Christmas holiday season. For many regulars to the station, this length of time would have created a familiarity with the miners and with their site in relation to the viewer's, thus conceivably to some degree breaking down the dichotomous view of "us" and "them."\textsuperscript{26}

By installing the work in a space and format generally reserved for expensive, high-profile advertising, and by using every billboard frame available, the mine began to invade the space of the station. The extent of advertising a single subject effectively overwhelmed the commuters with a blitz of fragmented images and signs from which they were left to create their own cognitive maps of where the site might be and to consider their relationships to it, both materially and in relation to the people in the images. That Jaar does not alter the mine site in any visible way and displaces it photographically to an urban centre is not unlike Smithson's documentation of a Nonsite within a Site that otherwise would remain invisible.

(Un)Framed

An enlarged photographic image, laser-printed onto a sheet of vinyl measuring 9' x 28', depicts seven young miners from Serra Pelada standing in a row (Figure 3.4).\textsuperscript{27} The scale of the miners suggests that they are standing only a few paces in front of the viewer. Some of the men display an air of arrogance, of defiant pride, and reflect a distinct challenge as they confront the viewer face on, almost eye to eye. In contrast to this, other men look exhausted, as though their spirit has been broken. Placed on the floor,
Figure 3.4
Alfredo Jaar
(Un)Framed, 1987-91
wooden frames with window glass and mirror, laser photograph on vinyl
R. Vine, "Images of Inclusion, Art in America, July, 1993
leaning against this mural-sized image are several glass and mirror panels framed in wood. The size and shape of the frames suggest that these objects are windows.

Windows as barriers mark the interface between two separate spaces: inside and outside, or here and there. They transmit light and images in two opposing directions and, as reflective surfaces, are mirrors as well. The wooden armatures of these windows are grids which conceivably could extend to infinity in all directions. Rosalind Krauss has stated:

> By virtue of the grid, the given work of art is presented as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric. Thus the grid operates from the work of art outward, compelling our acknowledgment of a world beyond the frame. The grid maps the space inside the frame.

There are several grids placed irregularly along the length of the work. They extend beyond the boundaries of the image and suggest that what is invisible, off the edge of the photograph, is still part of the work. What is alluded to here metonymically is that what is visible is but a fragment of a larger invisible "fabric". The grids with clear glass surfaces extend an invitation to observe the men who occupy the spaces behind these windows. The mirrored surfaces, however, repel the viewer from entering and instead invite self-absorption. According to Jeffrey Rian, "The mirror has often been used in painting to suggest a certain self-referential dimension that qualifies the traditional notion of art as a reflection or a window." The grid of the windows, containing both clear and mirrored glass on the same plane, create a kind of visual and spatial 'push-pull'. The illusionistic background space of the miners contained within the frame of clear glass and the reflected foreground space of the viewers are on a collision course and invite critical reflection in both the optical and intellectual sense of the word.

The non-transparent nature of the mirrored glass acts as a shield obliterating from direct sight the site that lies behind. Viewers know intuitively that what lies behind the sections of mirror are the torsos, hands, and legs belonging to the miners, however, by standing in front of the work
themselves this is not what they see. The spectator’s position implies a superior stance, but instead, the viewers’ own bodies appears before them, fragmented, like that of the miners’ bodies partially obscured by the opaque mirrors. It is as though a partial visual and spatial inversion has occurred. The space of the miner has entered the gallery and the body of the viewer has simultaneously entered the space of the miner. This amalgamation of time and space into a new object for observation disrupts the traditional subject/object relationship. The subject (the viewer) now forms a component of the object thus undoing the notion of framing the other through stereotyping and hence Jaar’s emphasis of the “un” in his title (Un)Framed. The overlapping of the two bodies into an unrecognisable and fragmented single image, like an ephemeral montage, suggests an incomplete interchange between one site and the other. Grynsztejn has written:

Both the observer and the observed are thus treated to a destabilization and an oscillation undermining their respective positions and authority, or lack there of. Their mutual fate in a reflected diaspora of colors and lights points to an alternative relationship between viewer and Other: a ‘model of cultural confrontation’ in which the dominant or, better still, no longer dominant culture can share the space with another culture ‘without obliterating it.'

The image of the viewer reflected into the space of the miners is a deceiving ploy. The placing of the mirrors adjacent to clear panes of glass effectively blurs the physical and intellectual distances between “here” and “there” and creates a fictional space that as Ruth Bass claims, “subvert[s] any claim to a sovereign perspective.”

Robert Hobbs has written of Smithson’s works that “the mirrors suggest not so much the actual reflecting of particular circumstances as the function of art but as an ongoing means of symbolic displacement” thus blurring the boundaries between what is perceived as belonging to one space or another. Pushing this notion of blurred boundaries further, Steven Jenkins argues that in Jaar’s work “seeing ourselves reflected alongside the Other, any us-versus-them dichotomy crumbles.” The viewer then, as Krauss would say, is “mapping the space inside the frame” and Jaar has extended this concept to suggest that the inside is simultaneously mapping the outside.
There is space between the windows to look behind the mirrors. The act of looking behind the mirror is what Jaar wants us to do - to take a closer look at what is there, has been there all along, but lies obscured behind our narcissistic tendencies to look no further than ourselves. The miners are not visible in their entirety because they have been cast in shadow, marginalised from our thoughts. The mirror, as metaphor, describes how an outward view is so often intended to double back on itself; to satisfy and reassure the self. Bass has commented that "the mirror allows the other to consistently escape our gaze."  

Jaar has stated that he uses mirrors:

...as a metaphor for the narcissm of our society that only cares for itself: the mirror acts as a seductive device inviting people to see themselves and suddenly in the private space of the mirror they encounter someone else they have never met...and suddenly here in this work the mirror becomes the site of an encounter, something that never happens in real life.

Goldman has commented:

We have grown accustomed to believing that the mirror gives back an unaltered vision of who we 'really' are. For that reason, it becomes all the more discomforting to peer into Jaar's 'looking glass' and see, not a full-frontal reflection of a stable, confident self, but a stranger, at once partial and unresolved.

By actively incorporating the viewer into the image of the other, I believe Jaar has sought to provoke viewers into questioning geopolitical boundaries of difference and to see themselves and others in a more relational manner.

Frame of Mind

In Frame of Mind (Figure 3.5, 3.6), Jaar makes the viewer work even harder. Several light boxes contain the faces of Brazilian miners and are placed in such a manner as to make the images visible only as reflections on the surfaces of gilt mirrors that hang low to the ground. The placement of the mirrors in this case, unlike (Un)Framed, does not allow viewers to observe themselves.

But the viewer does not realise immediately that no self-gratifying image can be obtained, and that no matter how much they try, they are not part of this picture. Goldman has said "it is only with some conscious effort and
Figure 3.5 (top)
Alfredo Jaar
*Frame of Mind*, 1987 (detail)
light box, colour transparency, mirror, gilded frame
M. Grynsztejn, Alfredo Jaar, La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990

Figure 3.6 (bottom)
Alfredo Jaar
*Frame of Mind*, 1987 (detail)
light box, colour transparency, mirror, gilded frame
M. Grynsztejn, Alfredo Jaar, La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990
Figure 3.5 (top)
Alfredo Jaar
*Frame of Mind*, 1987 (detail)
light box, colour transparency, mirror, gilded frame
M. Grynsztejn, *Alfredo Jaar*, La Jolla
Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990

Figure 3.6 (bottom)
Alfredo Jaar
*Frame of Mind*, 1987 (detail)
light box, colour transparency, mirror, gilded frame
M. Grynsztejn, *Alfredo Jaar*, La Jolla
Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990
deliberate realigning that he or she can organise what surfaces in the mirror into a coherent and singular whole." \(^{38}\)

The viewers' physical involvement in trying to see was intended by Jaar to create an awareness of how difficult it is to be noticed when an individual or a nation is marginalised. Jérôme Sans has written that the work reflected those things that inhabitants of influential centres do not want to see, or what is painful to see, and therefore, in effect, "turn a blind eye" to the circumference, convincing themselves that its misery is not part of their reality. Again, as with *Gold in the Morning*, the awkward placement of the images to odd or unused portions of the gallery space operate as a metaphor for the centre's marginalisation of people at the periphery. \(^{39}\) Reflecting on the difficulty of seeing the images, Jaar has commented:

> The work is demanding and I think it is fundamental. I really want the audience to get involved physically. If they don't make the effort, they just don't see. And that physical commitment is *sine qua non* of my work. That first physical involvement is ideally a first step before an intellectual involvement.\(^{40}\)

In this work, Jaar puns on the word "gilt" and "guilt". The ornate gilt wood frames are reminiscent of traditional European framing devices. They are metaphors for historical associations of wealth, prestige, and power, associated particularly with the colonial heritage of early-industrialised countries. The gilt frame, Grynsztejn remarked, is "a symbol of the gratuitous excesses of Western capitalism." \(^{41}\) Within these frames "heavy with history and symbolism," an inversion has occurred. \(^{42}\) What the viewer is accustomed to seeing in a gilt frame has been subverted and replaced with the images of unfamiliar and nameless gold miners. In our minds, the frames contrast sharply with the portrait images of the mud-streaked miners and, according to Jaar, implicate the viewer in the problems many so-called developing countries are struggling to overcome\(^{43}\)

*Two Or Three Things I Imagine About Them*

Jaar's work *Two Or Three Things I Imagine About Them* has had many manifestations. The version referred to here was a kind of artist's book/project that consisted of what appeared, on first impression, to be a
genuine Chilean Passport and three folded maps, packaged together in a plastic sheath. The Chilean passport related to Jaar, his travels, and the kinds of resistance he encountered in travelling with a Chilean identity. The pages of the passport were printed with an essay titled “Identifications” and included the portrait pictures of the seven gold miners, the ones featured in the large vinyl work in (Un)framed. The maps, when unfolded, were in fact large posters folded in the classic map style. One of the posters was an image of the same seven miners standing in a row at the edge of the Serra Pelada mine.44

The essay recounts how a passport functions ideally as a document of access but which for many people, as a form of national identity, represents a form of restriction or dismissal. As viewers ponder their own identity in relation to this symbolic little book, it becomes evident that Jaar has used the pages of the passport to make visible to the “hallowed institutions of art” the people and places at the periphery that are generally dismissed or overlooked by those fortunate enough to own a passport and an identity that is deemed acceptable.

Running parallel to this work was The Booth (1989), installed in 1990 at the National Museum of American Art, which consisted of a photographic booth occupied by a photographer. Once inside this booth, the viewer could have their photograph taken - unaware that “Third World” labourers, such as Serra Pelada miners depicted in photographic transparencies on the exterior of the booth, would frame the central image of the viewer in the photograph (Figure 3.7). Like the passport, Jaar again subverted viewers’ expectations by making more visible existing links between privileged consumers and “Third World” producers and disrupting the subject/object relationship, this time by inscribing them both in the picture. The photograph functioned as the dialectic between geographically separated places and people separated by discriminatory practices.45

In essence, Jaar brings to the viewer a personal picture of what it feels like to be left on the other side of the fence by bringing “the ‘out there’ ‘in here’ for contemplation.”46 The passport, and its images of the miners, questions
Figure 3.7

Alfredo Jaar
The Booth, 1989
Manipulated photographic image (detail)
National Museum of American Art
economic and political conventions and their consequences for individuals. The pages represent people who will likely never find their "passport to prosperity" unless development becomes more evenly distributed. To this end, Jaar again seeks to "make bridges all viewers are enabled and feel compelled to make" between First and Third World nations.

Conclusion

Few artists have tackled the enormity and the complexity inherent in Jaar's specific sites located outside the mainstream of contemporary life in the West. But Jaar, like Smithson, has been intent to redefine the premises on which contemporary art making can be based and critiqued, or, as Smithson once said, "provide a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists, and not simply present abstractions or utopias." 47

The crucial point to Jaar's works are the dichotomous extremes he encourages viewers to challenge through their recognition of the nature of the dialectical relationships embodied in the work. By grounding his works in social, economic, political, and historical issues and events, Jaar has encouraged viewers to construct material and conceptual dialogues by reconsidering what has traditionally been out of sight or outside the frame of art. By addressing subjects largely unexplored in mainstream art, Jaar has succeeded in pushing the boundaries of the art system.


4 Jaar distrusts terminology such as "First World" and "Third World" and prefers to view development as "variously distributed across" the world, Vine, 1993, p. 92.


8 Ibid, p. 20.


10 Personal communication with Alfredo Jaar, September, 1996.


12 Goldman, p. 20.

13 A parallel to consider is what Craig Owens once wrote in relation to Lothar Baumgarten's juxtaposition of a mineral name (say gold) with a photograph of native South American culture. It "transforms a landscape into a prospect, and the viewer into a prospector." Craig Owens, "Improper Names," *Art in America*, Oct., 1986, p. 130.


16 Hobbs states that the viewer becomes "the central focus of his work" (Hobbs, 1981, p. 154). I believe that this would occur as well if the images of the other people were not included. I contend that the central focus of Pistoletti’s like that of Jaar’s Gold in the Morning, is the point of intersection between the different people featured, a kind of collapsing of time, space, and distance.

17 Grynsztejn, p. 15.

18 Ibid.


21 Grynsztejn, p. 17.


23 Grynsztejn, p. 17.


25 Grynsztejn, p. 17.

27 Vine, p. 92.


35 Bass, p. 115.


37 Goldman, p. 20.

38 Ibid.


40 Kate Davidson, Photofile, p. 18.

41 Grinzstejn, p. 16.

42 Sans, p. 145.


44 While engaged in the research for this thesis I came across several references to a style of photographic image that generally depicts a carefully arranged group of people of high political or social rank who, at the time, would have been engaged in a struggle to retain their land from colonial expansion. This kind of photographic “petition” is associated with people of strong oral traditions. It is interesting to note here that the miners of Sierra Pelada have been successful in convincing the government of Brazil not to sell the land to foreign investment. The Brazilian government heeded their request because of the significant impact these miners have had in reducing the country’s foreign debt.

45 In his talk at the National Gallery of Australia, Jaar recounted his dismay that so many viewers were simply delighted to have their photograph taken in the Museum and did not
comprehend the subversion and the notion of distancing the other through the centrality of self.
