Glue Pour and the Viscosity of Fluvial Flows as Evidenced in Bottle-Gum Glue Pour
Jan. 8, 70 9:30 to 11:30

Christos Dikeakos
Robert Smithson’s arrival in Vancouver in late 1969 was eagerly anticipated within the community of young artists and writers at the University of British Columbia, of which I was a part. Interest in conceptual art was growing in Vancouver during the late 1960s, and we were familiar with Smithson’s essays, particularly *Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan* which had appeared in the September 1969 issue of *Artforum*. The possibility of meeting Smithson and assisting on one of his projects attracted significant interest.

Smithson came to Vancouver, in part, to produce a work for 955,000, an exhibition being organized by Lucy Lippard for the Vancouver Art Gallery. Smithson initially proposed two projects for the exhibition: 10 truckloads of cement or asphalt (or a very large amount), or 50 truckloads of soft accumulations of mud, dumped and poured over inclined, emptied terrain. These fluvial accumulations of hard material flow, which were similar to “rundown” projects Smithson had undertaken in Rome and Chicago earlier in the year, were illustrated in a cue-card sketch submitted by Smithson for the catalogue of 955,000. However by the time the work was actually executed, a slow discharge of water-soluble glue replaced the static and petrified rundown of concrete and asphalt.

**Looking for a Site**

I first met Smithson through Doris Shadbolt (then curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery) and Lucy Lippard in December 1969, during the preparations for 955,000. In early January 1970, Duane Ludden, Ilya Pagonis, Dennis Wheeler and myself went scouting for a suitable location for Smithson’s proposed rundown. Pagonis and I were students in the Fine Arts Department at UBC. We were also curators at the Student Union Art Gallery and in late 1969 had organized *The Photo Show*, which included work executed by students according to instructions received via correspondence. The exhibition emphasized photography as an essential medium for artists. Ludden, an artist who was represented in 955,000 and its earlier Seattle version titled 557,087, produced a suite of geometrical line drawings with space mapping devices titled *Locator*. He was familiar with Smithson’s work and drove Smithson to numerous sites, including large, open gravel pits within the Vancouver region, which Ludden felt were ideal for the rundown. Wheeler was a brilliant English, Fine Arts and History honours graduate from UBC, and a freelance critic who had sought out Smithson during his first trip to Vancouver in November 1969.

Wheeler and Smithson appeared to be intellectual equals, with shared interests in the classics, philosophy, contemporary American literature and poetry, and the exploration of new, radical art practices. They spent entire nights and early mornings, in Wheeler’s Cypress Street flat, discussing art and exchanging ideas on Smithson’s proposals. The bar of the Sands Motor Hotel on Davie Street, across from Doug Christmas’ Gallery, was their alternate hangout. Wheeler was intrigued by the idea of a new disruptive and liberating artistic consciousness as exemplified by Smithson, who radically expanded sculptural practice outside the studio and public art gallery. Smithson’s conversations with Wheeler played an important role in the development of the project proposals that Smithson developed during his stays in Vancouver. Smithson urged Wheeler to read books on geology and crystalline structure. One of these was likely *Principles of Geomorphology* by Don J.
Easterbrook, which Smithson described as a study of “fluvial/alluvial actions.” This provided the theoretical basis for the Glue Pour proposal.

After scouting potential locations for Glue Pour, I pointed out a number of steeply inclined sites on the UBC campus. One memorable site I favoured was on the Point Grey clay banks, close to the location of the soon-to-be-built Museum of Anthropology. The steep clay bank had spectacular ocean and mountain views. To my embarrassment, this seemingly radical location was, for Smithson, a romantic Canadian landscape backdrop; in his words it was “too sublime a view.” Pagonis, who escorted Smithson and Lippard back and forth from the city to the university in his VW Beetle, had better luck. On one of these drives, Smithson noticed a freshly road cut at the western end of Fourth Avenue. On closer inspection, he noted the cut was above a natural ravine. The site was surrounded by thick, second growth forest and, as Pagonis later pointed out, the large swatch of rough upturned soil possessed a moody and isolated emptiness. Although a bulldozer and road building equipment were present on the site, there was no work activity apparent in the area.

Since the hard industrial dead zones, quarries and slag heaps that Smithson had worked with in the past did not exist in Vancouver, he decided to execute the pour within this urban, but isolated rainforest. He was determined to produce an appropriate temporary work. Smithson informed Pagonis and myself that glue, unlike hard materials such as asphalt or concrete, would be sensitive to the site. The glue was purchased in accordance with his instructions from the National Starch and Chemical Co. on Cordova Street, Vancouver. Although Smithson’s Drawing for Glue Pour indicates a desire to use four drums of glue, the exhibition budget allowed for the purchase of just one. 

On Site
On the wet, gray morning of January 8, 1970, the single 45-gallon drum of glue arrived at the pour site. Opening the barrel revealed a bright amber orange substance (Wheeler reports the colour as being purplish). The moment was punctuated with smiles and spontaneous laughter, and a surprised look from Smithson who had expected the glue to have a neutral translucent opacity. Smithson was undeterred and the project continued without hesitation. When the drum was lowered, “the study of the viscosity of fluvial flow” slowly started to move and stretch out in a sticky and colourful slime. Small objects and pebbles were displaced, absorbed within the flow, transported down the slope and placed back onto the freshly disturbed soil as the pour trail lengthened. At the bottom of the ravine some of the “glue slime trail” separated into rivulets and floated in a thin semi-transparent state that resembled melted translucent plastic.

Towards the end of the pour, Smithson gently pulled the plastic liner from the steel drum and proceeded to squeeze out the last remaining puddle of glue. This emptying of the glue sack was an impromptu and humorous performance; the plastic liner implied a birth sac while the last spill of glue seemed like a luridly coloured charge of semen flowing out of a giant prophylactic. For a moment, the gesture appeared as a regenerative action towards the violated soil of the road cut. Unforeseen in Smithson’s preparatory drawings was the science fiction quality of the event—the colourful, slow-moving and slimy mass produced a formless cover-up of material slippage (we have, of
was an embrace of a state of imperfection. The location of the site is currently identified by two unintentional and ironic markers: a yellow sign that reads “Information” recalling the title of a 1970 MoMA exhibition of conceptual art, and another sign almost at the edge of the pour site. It reads “Do Not Dump Refuse.” Today, the site of the Glue Pour is within the domain of an ecological and recreational area named Pacific Spirit Regional Park and the traditional territory of the Musqueam First Nation. Under present circumstances, it would be nearly impossible to restage this work. The local, urban citizens—who idealize nature and the wilderness while neither living in or subsisting from it—would be outraged and likely mobilize to prevent an “environmental threat” such as glue spillage. Smithson would have had to find a more acceptable organic, biodegradable substitute. But in 1970, the work occurred on a remote and unremarkable site outside public attention. (Let’s not forget that the misplaced concern of environmentalists prevented Smithson from producing perhaps his greatest Vancouver work, a proposal to site 100 tons of glass—the Island of Broken Glass—on Miami Islet, near Ladysmith, BC.21) Satisfying the current environmental concerns would require a lengthy consultation and approval process from numerous stakeholders and government authorities including the regional parks authority, the municipal environmental department, UBC operations department, the provincial environmental branch, outdoor wilderness and sport groups, the Musqueam Band Council, etc. A lengthy chemical analysis and pre-testing, together with the costly removal and redemption of the “contaminated” soil would have to take place if Glue Pour was to be given a permit today. The paperwork from this exhaustive process would cover an area far greater than the 45 gallons of glue poured by Smithson on that January day in 1970.

Glue Pour disappeared almost as quickly as it was realized. Today the visible trace of entropy has retreated and the north face of the site has the appearance of a typical West Coast wilderness area, a densely covered place within a stone’s throw of upscale, large-lot residences. Ferns, salal and thickets of thorn-ridden blackberry bushes surround the “Do Not Dump Refuse” sign. A grove of semi-native weed trees, willow, alder and poplar are anchored and thriving on the incline of the road cut that Smithson noticed thirty-three years ago.
Notes

1. From a handwritten note by Dennis Wheeler: "Viscosity of fluvial flows as Evidenced in Bottle-Gum Glue Pour. Jan. 8, 70 9:50 to 11:30 has to do with the density of the flow—on Drum Bottle-Gum 79-9945. This package contains things damaged below 45 F. Dennis Wheeler Archives, Vancouver Art Gallery. The Glue Pour was executed on January 8, 1970, and not in 1969 as stated in some of the literature on Smithson. The confusion of dates may arise from the reproduction of a Smithson drawing in the catalogue for the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition 1955,000, which is dated 1969.

2. The Photo Show also included many of Ed Ruscha's books, including Every Building on the Sunset Strip (1966) and Various Small Fires (1964); Bruce Nauman's Clear Skies (1969); a "variable" work by Douglas Huebler; photographs and videos by Dan Graham, Michael Kirby and Bob Kinmont (for whom Lucy Lippard provided contact information); "statement" works by Vito Acconci. Shooting a photo every time I blink as I walk the street, a photographic work and essay by Jeff Wall; photo/book works by Ian Wallace and myself; and large scale photographs by Ilya Ponomov. Dan Graham's Vanishing Point (1969), photographed by Fine Arts and Architecture students is the most complete version of this project.

3. Smithson was keen on locating appropriate excavation and abandoned quarry sites. In Vancouver, he wanted to explore the numerous unstable gravel pits that resulted from ice Age accumulations.

4. Robin Blaser, a distinguished poet, as well as a teacher and friend of Wheeler notes that Wheeler was the first person in Vancouver to bring our attention to the "shock moment" of art. via Smithson's practice; he was the first in Vancouver to embrace this concept, especially the idea of an art that considered the ecological as a site of imagination and production. Wheeler and Smithson's ongoing discussion moved them to explore the "outer reaches," such as the Island of Broken Glass proposal, and Glue Pour for that matter. Blaser comments that, "They were both crazy to go there, to those new areas of sculpture." From a conversation between the author and Blaser, July 28, 2003.


7. In conversation with the author, April 17, 1999, Vancouver, Ilya Pagonis also stated that it was important that Glue Pour was created without any formal invitations or announcements. "It was considered a private happening where the participants were invited to an artist's outdoor happening.

8. Smithson's use of glue, instead of mud, asphalt or concrete, was prefigured in a drawing produced in the fall of 1959 proposing a work using glue and mirrors for the Galleria Attica in Rome.


10. From the Robert Smithson Papers in the Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 3895, frames 60–61. A copy of this letter was provided by Grant Arnold. My preoccupation to list all the possible motivations for Glue Pour is symptomatic of late 60s and early 70s avant-garde practice. The shift was to provide an almost circular, intellectual speculation for the genesis of the work, sometimes at the expense of the final art production.

11. These medium format black & white photographs of the Glue Pour were included in the Photo Show at the SUB Art Gallery, but were lost during the deinstallation of the show. Smithson's 400 Seattle Horizons was also exhibited at the SUB Art Gallery as part of 995,000, but was purposely destroyed. Smithson complained that the horizon work was uneven and contained too many West Coast clouds and sunsets.

12. According to my recollection and the content of the black & white contact sheets in the Dennis Wheeler Archive and in my own archive, Nancy Holt did not photograph the commencement of the Glue Pour in slide format. Most of the photographs were taken by Smithson, with a few opening frames by Lippard, who shared Smithson's Instamatic camera. Nancy Holt situated herself at the bottom of the ravine and may have taken photographs using Smithson's camera from that position. I remember a somewhat heated and teasing discussion occurred at the time between Holt and Smithson as to the purpose and context of the Glue Pour.

13. Lucy Lippard, Six Years: the dematerialization of the art object 1966 to 1972 (New York: Praeger, 1973): 184. In a contradictory statement on the role of photography, Smithson stated to Dennis Oppenheim in Avalanche magazine #1, (1970) that "photographs steal away the spirit of the work," i.e. the work as the original is lost.

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or taken by (displaced by) the photograph or the photograph is a substitute for an unredoubtable original.

14. Smithson, Ed Ruscha and William Burroughs all proclaimed the camera as the ideal device for indexing and scanning reality. But a number of young Vancouver artists decided to define and articulate a strategy for using photography to record a local urban semiotic of place. The indexing and scanning of material reality for Vancouver takes on a critical discourse of urban expansionism and its sociopolitical ramifications. The intent was to use photography to represent a kind of "featureless expanse" of a new modern and changing metropolis, the site of entrepreneurial speculation, also the dead-end industrial sites of the boom-and-bust cycles of resource dependent economies, and the urban sprawl of the modern city into traditional agricultural reserves. The early Vancouver photo-projects were both conceived as art and non-art, i.e., as art with a receptive aesthetic value and "non art," in the sense that it was worthless within a non-existent Vancouver market for such work. See also Scott Watson, "Discovering the Defaced Landscape" in The Vancouver Anthology: the Institutional Politics of Art (Vancouver: Or Gallery and Talon Books, 1991): 247–265.


17. The "crystalline" Glass Strata with Mulch and Soil (1970) is another Smithson work that is known primarily in slide form. The photographs of it are the work of Ian Davidson, who originally commissioned the work. He was instructed by Smithson to have a camera ready at all times and to photograph the work during seasonal changes. There is a parallel here with a work by Dan Graham, Vanishing Point for Photo Show (1969), produced by providing a specific set of instructions to UBC art students.

18. During the late 60s and early 70s artists in Vancouver took up the impetus, coming out of early conceptual art, to declare gestural painting dead. For instance Photo Show, the run of which overlapped with 955,000, aimed at positioning photography as the new essential medium for artists.

Smithson’s choice of glue for the pour meant that the work would disintegrate and destroy itself as a model of entropic physical erosion. The 45-gallon drum could not be tossed or splattered in a controlled way, unlike the cans of paint used for Morris Louis’ pour paintings. Due to the cool temperature the Glue Pour flowed slowly with a sticky viscosity, like a poured plastic substance with a science fiction protoplasmic quality. When Smithson, Wheeler and Pagonis gently lowered the drum, the glue did not fan out like the concrete and asphalt that Smithson used in his earlier pours and had originally considered for his Vancouver pour. Smithson’s interest in experimenting with materials outside the painting metaphor is central to this work. The impact of this work remains stubbornly challenging. The pour was an ambivalent, amorphous sculpture and, for us, was not experienced at the time as a radical progressive of painting seeking a new auxiliary ground or surface. The issue was not a revival of painting or conventional sculpture but the placement of a conceptualized strategy for a dematerialized art seeking alternative structures within a decentralized and open approach to artistic practice.


20. Smithson, for us in Vancouver, verbalized materiality and subsequently materialized language when he stated, "all language becomes an alphabet of sites." See "The Thing is a Hole in a Thing it is Not," in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings: 96.

21. On January 29, 1970, the Vancouver Sun reported that permission to proceed with Smithson's proposal for Island of Broken Glass had been rescinded by the BC Government due to conservationist's alarm over broken glass being spread over a possible, but unproven, nesting site. When a Vancouver Sun reporter visited Miami Beach, the only found evidence of birdlife was bird droppings, one seagull and a bird skeleton.