

*Recasting Site: Robert de Saint Phalle, Roe Ethridge, Mary Lucier and Robert Smithson*

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## INTRODUCTION

*EVERY EXPLORER NAMES his island Formosa, beautiful. To him it is beautiful because, being first, he has access to it and can see it for what it is. But to no one else is it ever as beautiful – except the rare man who manages to recover it, who knows that it has to be recovered.*  
-- Walker Percy<sup>1</sup>

*Recasting Site*'s artists transform ordinary objects, interiors, and environments. Recasting the familiar, they salvage and retool the damaged, rejected and overlooked, allowing for rediscovery and imparting clues about each object's physical history. Tracings of a history imply duration and, along with the foregrounding of media, interfere with face-value readings – the photograph of a room becomes grainy black-and-white abstraction; the simultaneous construction and destruction of a hotel is enthusiastically reinterpreted as a ruin to be valued for its lack of cohesive structure; a photo of the street at night is bathed in emerald green, textured with cracked emulsion and inscribed with a black Sharpie; a twisted, roughly-hewn form is coated in metallic car paint and supports an unlit stage light; photographs of highway landscapes are converted into musical scores through suggestive text. As each new object is encountered, the organic and the synthetic, the analog and digital, the human and the technological compliment, obstruct and expand each other's meanings. Distinctions between medium and subject begin to blur. Things are not always what they seem, causing the gallery to take on the character of an environment to be approached with the curiosity of an explorer.

Robert de Saint Phalle (b. 1978), Roe Ethridge (b. 1969), Mary Lucier (b. 1944), and Robert Smithson (1938 – 1973) incorporate accessible, everyday subjects – a living room, a rusty barrel, a black plastic bag, or shared spaces like hotels and gas stations – into media such as photography, sculpture, performance, and video. Their strategies include giving special attention to the attributes of individual technologies and encouraging viewers to access a discursive, imaginative space that bridges the artworks in the gallery and absent circumstances they trace. The artists put a great deal of thought into how these objects are reworked and transformed, but the results are not overwrought. Instead, to use Walker Percy’s phrasing, it is as though the artists are taking something out of their pockets and showing it to us. According to Percy, exhibitions discourage this sense of direct experience:

By the most exclusive sort of zoning, the museum exhibit, the park oak tree, is part of an ensemble, a package, which is almost impenetrable to [the public]. The archaeologist who puts his find in a museum so that everyone can see it accomplishes the reverse of his expectations. The result of his action is that no one can see it now but the archaeologist. He would have done better to keep it in his pocket and show it now and then to strangers.<sup>2</sup>

In *Recasting Site*, the artists fight the exhibition’s “zoning” and encourage the viewer to take up the role of discoverer versus consumer.

The artists use different methods to tease individual meaning from the context of the “ensemble.” For Lucier the camera is not a tool but an anthropomorphized stand-in for an imperfect perceiver who becomes her artistic collaborator. Ethridge and de Saint Phalle resist the role of the artist as member of an elite club of authorship through

improvisation and an embrace of accident, creating new, unexpected relationships between images and forms. Robert Smithson harnesses the tropes of packaging itself by taking on the role of the knowing tour guide who directs the very act of looking. In choosing the unglamorous as his subject (as do all of these artists) and treating it as though it is “special” Smithson reminds us that many experiences are actually products constructed and tailored for consumption.

*Recasting Site* avoids one-dimensional connections between artists based on an aesthetic “look” or art historical, political, or social commonality. Generational differences are not ignored, but they are not treated as a chronological stream of influence (from Smithson, to Lucier, to Ethridge, to de Saint Phalle). Instead the exhibition and thesis attend to the approaches these artists take in their treatment of technology as subject, allegory as a means of making one thing “other,” and their shared openness to indirect approaches to the familiar. While certain practices of the late 1960s are included (such as published artworks and slide shows), they are not foregrounded. The exhibition seeks to make connections that reflect the recovery of objects, including a sympathetic tendency to recover the undervalued as a way to rediscover it. It is hoped that these objects will appear to have collected over an extended period of time. Timelessness is not a goal, but the collapsing of past, present, and future seems to rumble beneath the surface of *Recasting Site*.

The exhibition resonates with ideas found in several texts dating between 1958 and the early 1980s. They emerge from various disciplines and are written by novelists, artists

and critics. These include Mary Lucier's "Organic" essay from 1978 where she describes the organic artist as "focusing on [the] technology [of his or her medium] not merely as a facilitator of the work, but as an element of content."<sup>3</sup> Craig Owens's discussion of allegory in art (in which he depicts allegory as a transformative "attitude" where "the image becomes something other,") is another lens through which these artists approach media and subject.<sup>4</sup> Numerous Smithsonian writings and interviews inform the conceptual basis of the exhibition as well, including the published artwork *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967), which is on view. In talking with the artists Roe Ethridge and Robert de Saint Phalle, I learned that the writing of novelist and thinker Walker Percy had influenced them. De Saint Phalle introduced me to Percy's 1958 essay *The Loss of the Creature*. In it Percy writes about how commercial or institutional packaging can prevent people from directly experiencing things such as the Grand Canyon or one of Shakespeare's sonnets, insisting that these things must be "recovered" if they are to be truly experienced.<sup>5</sup> This essay became a companion as I explored my own intuitive reactions to the artists' use of recovery as a means for rediscovery.

### **MARY LUCIER: THE ORGANIC ARTIST**

Artist Mary Lucier (b. 1944) is often described as a landscape video artist. While the landscape is frequently a subject, her videos, sculptures, scores, and photography-based works from the late 1960s through today are actually multifaceted in concept, presentation, and subject. The works in *Recasting Site* were chosen to express the complex relationships between technology, language, perception, and subject that exist in much of her art. In works from the 1960s and 1970s Lucier puts an emphasis on what she terms "organic" art.<sup>6</sup> In the slide and sound installation *Polaroid Image Series:*

*Room with I Am Sitting in a Room* by Alvin Lucier (1969-70) and the video *Dawn Burn* (1975-76), the limitations of specific media are exploited and viewed, in part, as analogues for the imperfect and fraught nature of being human. Lucier describes organic art in her 1978 essay *Organic*: “Organic art is art in which the artist’s material is seen as having a complex nature which, when it is expressed, largely determines the composition of the work. Creating work becomes, for the artist, a task of carefully articulating this nature according to its inherent principles and within the parameters of his/her own intentions.”<sup>7</sup> Her earliest works are primarily concerned with perception and imagination as they relate to new technologies such as the Sony Portapack she began working with around 1972.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Lucier’s videos and video installations become more narrative in character, but combine imagery in a fragmented manner that prevents facile readings. She also continues to experiment with how to integrate the technology she uses into sculptural presentations. Her experimentations with video displays are not a subject here but are noteworthy. They include the trapezoidal Formica building block structure for *Winter Garden* (1984); the mix of industrial materials and tree trunks as plinths in *Noah’s Raven* (1993); and the black Minimalist form in which she housed *Dawn Burn*’s seven monitors. More intricate are her site-specific installations such as *Asylum* (1986) where found objects, built environments, and projections invade the white cube. Lucier’s recent videos often result from commissions and reflect the surrounding community as in *Floodsongs* (1998), which addressed the displacement and devastation that occurred after North Dakota’s Red River of the North flooded in 1997.

*Aspects of the Fossil Record, or from Here On, Dance* (1996) exhibits her impulse to combine the sculptural with video. The form of the installation mirrors its organic subjects of the sun, a heron, and the leafy humus layer on a forest floor. The three large monitors hang from the ceiling in the vertical order they would inhabit in the landscape. The monitor that plays imagery of the sun hangs at the top, the video of the heron on the beach is in the middle, and the footage of leaves are placed on the lowest line. Below the monitors, Lucier places three laser disk players, which, at the time, represented high-end laser technology. The attention to media that characterizes Lucier's early work emerges in this fragmented representation of the environment. Her manipulation and distortion of natural sounds harken back to the Minimalist composers who influenced her formation. Lastly, the three-dimensional configuration is a direct result of her training as a sculptor.

The hanging monitors, along with the dangling chords, small loud speakers, and the circle of laser disk players on the floor might be read as organic -- as if a tree with tufts of leaves were being swallowed in a display of invasive vines. The images, like the sound, are manipulated. As in *Dawn Burn*, Lucier relies on the camera's inability to process direct light. In 1996 (vs. 1975) video technology has jettisoned the vacuum tube, this means that, rather than producing a scar, the sun begins to pulse. The heron image in *Aspects of the Fossil Record* is a poignant hinge in the three-monitor configuration. Standing at the edge of the water on the beach, the heron begins to take off. Before it leaves the ground, Lucier loops the video. The heron appears to be tethered to the earth in an alternately awkward and graceful dance based in futility. The leaves below move

rapidly and in a forward direction. Speeding up and slowing down, they sometimes become a blur of brown tones and sunlight. All three channels show a different use of the camera's assets and limitations in order to animate these details of landscapes. The result mirrors the dynamic nature of nature itself – its moments of flux, grace, and crisis. Lucier now sees the laser disks as fossils themselves, reflecting her continued approach to technology as subject and as an analogue for natural phenomena, including the physical body and its relationship to the environment.

This imaginative approach to technology began for Lucier at a very young age. The artist grew up in a family that did not own a television, and that opted, instead, to encourage creativity.<sup>8</sup> Lucier often entertained herself at the family's console-style radio. The radio's cloth-covered speakers were at eye level when Lucier sat on the floor, listening to shortwave radio in her pre-teen years and to rock music during her adolescence.<sup>9</sup> The young girl would wish that the threadbare Oriental rug on which she sat could fly her away from the small town in Ohio like a magic carpet.<sup>10</sup> The shortwave radio was of special interest for its stratified combination of information, coded communication, and static:

But the real thrill was listening to shortwave. The staticky squawks and rhythmic bleeps, punctuated by fragmentary bursts of mysterious speech, made up another, more bizarre landscape that I fantasized as space and time travel ... Shortwave radio, Jules Verne, Tom Swift, 1001 Arabian Nights, Alice in Wonderland, The Wizard of Oz, Alexander Nevsky, the Bible itself ... -- this was my television. A technology primarily of the imagination. An imagining of a technology.<sup>11</sup>

Lucier would combine the stories she had read with noises from the shortwave, constructing an undulating mental space of image, narrative, and sound – her “television.”<sup>12</sup> Today, Lucier compares the shortwave sounds she heard as a child to early electronic music, describing it as a combination of indecipherable voices, the “bleeps” of Morse code, and the “squawks” of static.<sup>13</sup> For the artist, imagination and technology interfaced in a manner that was inseparable and reflexive. The radio was not only a conduit for information. Its unique characteristics became part of the information itself. Technology was experienced through the radio broadcast as much as the radio broadcast was experienced via technology. Lucier’s childhood radio created a world of interlocking opposites for the artist -- immediate and distant, linguistic and pictorial, rational and mysterious, technological and organic.

Beginning with the scores she made in the late 1960s, Lucier’s art mirrors that childhood impression of radio as “a technology primarily of the imagination” and “An imagining of technology.” Her impulse to create guided virtual landscapes can be seen in *Recasting Site*’s earliest work, *Polaroid Image Series: Room with I Am Sitting in a Room* by Alvin Lucier. A slide installation in which she collaborated with Minimalist composer Alvin Lucier, it pairs Mary Lucier’s photographs with Alvin Lucier’s sound recordings. Mary takes a black-and-white Polaroid of the room in which Alvin made his recording: “I made a black-and-white Polaroid photograph of a corner of the same room, containing a chair, table, and lamp, with sunlight falling in stripes across the arm of the chair and the rug through Venetian blinds. I copied that picture, as nearly I:I as possible, and continued to make copies of successive copies through 51 generations. (These photos were transferred

to slides for timed performance with the twenty-three-minute audio composition).”<sup>14</sup> The audio features Alvin Lucier reciting:

I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.”<sup>15</sup>

The composer stutters as he talks. He records his voice, then records the recording of his voice, and then records the second recording and so on. As the analogue recordings reach the sixth, seventh or eighth generation, the voice begins to lose its integrity as a conveyor of language and takes on a musical quality. Communication is lost, the stutter is “cured,” and musical resonance is born.

Mary Lucier’s accompanying slides imitate this analogue degradation. She photographs the original photograph of the room, then photographs that photograph, and so on. The more the sound and image are duplicated, the more they falter as bearers of information. New compositions arise, changing the photograph of (and sounds from) a domestic interior into a galaxy of harmonic feedback and glowing images of black-and-white abstraction. In the end, the majority of the frame is filled with grainy blackness – magnified to such an extent that the dust on the Polaroid’s surface begins to resemble white stars on a black ground of space. Mary Lucier writes about the installation:

In one sense this exemplifies the decay which occurs when a technology feeds on itself. Like families that intermarry, the system of production

continues to function as the peculiarities of the progeny grow more and more extreme. But, while it emphasizes the flaws of the system, the process also provides something new and original.

An event without a goal other than transformation, it yields imagery with inexorable logic. An art gallery dealer to whom I showed the work in 1971 indignantly asserted that in those pieces I had destroyed the mystery of abstract art.<sup>16</sup>

Both Mary and Alvin Lucier utilize the limitations of their media. In duplicating it, they destroy its integrity. Out of this destruction a new kind of environment emerges, one that is unexpected and anything but ordinary.

This method of guided viewing that points to an absent place outside of the gallery walls continues in an early score by Mary Lucier called *Media Sculptures: Maps of Space #1 and #2* (1972). For *Recasting Site*, these works are presented in several incarnations: the original, 4 x 6 inch version that Lucier mailed to friends in the form of small gelatin silver prints (of image and text) glued to opposite sides of a board; the score as it was published in the 1975 book *Womens Work*; and in the reformatting Lucier devised for a 2000 anthology of writings about and by her edited by Melinda Barlow. In *Maps of Space #2*, a road fades into a single point as it meets the horizon line of a flat, vast desert landscape. The accompanying text instructs the viewer to, among other things, “build a bridge between yourself and the farthest point in the picture.” Lucier acknowledges that Minimalist composer La Monte Young’s score *Draw a Line and Follow it* influenced this work.<sup>17</sup> Considered a musical score, the “music” is suggested through language and the “song” is made only when the viewer participates. In Young’s case, the action is sparked by imagination, but occurs on the physical plane. For Lucier, the viewer is asked to draw

a “bridge” with his or her mind onto an image. The process is imaginative, rather than physical, encouraging a mental place that acts as a third venue. As in Robert Smithson’s site/non-site works, the materials at hand are one part of a trinity that includes an artwork, the actual site it references, and a discursive mental space that creatively connects them. With *Maps of Space*, a form of inscribing begins to emerge in Lucier’s work.

This idea of writing on an image becomes concrete in Lucier’s early video work from the same period. Taking on the form of performance or single and double-channel videos, imagery is amended or created when Lucier points her Portapak camera at direct light sources of the sun or a laser beam. In these pieces, Lucier writes, “The camera inscribes upon the landscape like a pen; the landscape in turn inscribes upon the vidicon tube, and the resulting tapes are the documents which contain calligraphy.”<sup>18</sup> The intense light scars the camera’s internal vidicon tube (which is responsible for transforming light to image), causing marks to appear on an accompanying monitor. Lucier draws direct comparisons between the camera’s nature and that of the human body, writing:

This scarring of the anthropomorphic camera eye serves as a graphic metaphor for the surrogate relationship between the lens/tube/VCR system and iris/retina/brain. The result of this primal encounter is a trauma so deep that its scars cannot be erased, but, instead accumulate on the image surface as a form of memory, and any picture subsequently recorded by that camera must be viewed through the scar tissue of prior trauma.<sup>19</sup>

The camera allows something the eye does not. The equipment can be pointed directly into the sun or a laser and survive. However, Lucier accidentally discovered when filming dancers outdoors that even the Sony Portapak failed as an accurate recorder of

intense light. Instead of trying to sidestep this phenomenon as one that brought unwanted marks into the frame, she accentuates the light's traces. Similar to *Polaroid Image Series: Room*, an act of destruction is also one of creation. By scarring the tube, a technological ruin begets new imagery, and, as Lucier explains, "any picture subsequently recorded by that camera must be viewed through the scar tissue of the prior trauma."<sup>20</sup> In comparing the marks in these works to scars, Lucier posits that whether we see the marks of our existence (both the ones we receive and give) as positive or negative, they have the ability to permanently transform both the perceiver (camera) and the perceived (landscape and light). They also are associated with language and action.

The burn works that involve the sun are titled *Dawn Burn* (1975-76), *Paris Dawn Burn* (1977), and *Color Dawn Burn* (1979). In all of these, the camera's aperture is opened wide and then pointed directly at light. Lucier explains:

Vidicon burn is a phenomenon of pure light and pure video. Light is essential to video, but the excitable substance on the surface of the camera tube has a limited range within which it can function acceptably. When light fails, the video image disintegrates into noise. Above the acceptable range, light becomes not the illuminator but the tool which engraves its mark on the tube. The laser is like a knife; the sun, a blunt instrument.<sup>21</sup>

The laser as a knife is featured in the *Laser Burn* works. In her contemporaneous performance called *Fire Writing* at the Kitchen in 1975, Lucier stands on a pedestal above several monitors, pointing her camera at a laser beam and moving it vigorously and continuously. With each motion, white wormy forms are added to the monitors' gray ground similar to the light trail of a sparkler waved like a wand in the dark night. The *Laser Burn* works Lucier made during this period were created using a similar process to

*Fire Writing* but without the performative aspect. Instead, the camera and monitor are displayed after the action has taken place. Camera and monitor are installed in the gallery like relics. No videotape is necessary for the laser burn pieces. A lens cap is put on the camera and it is turned on, revealing (on the monitor) only the effulgent traces of Lucier's intentional burning of the tube with light.

In all of these early pieces Lucier reframes and asks us to reread the media she uses. In the *Laser Burn* works the camera's role is the most obviously transformed. There is no image being altered. Only light is recorded. The media *alone* – its technological failures, resulting traumas, and recasting as resilient subject and collaborator – is the subject. The camera is presented as an entity with its own innate qualities and unique reactions to the environment. By transforming our view of the camera from tool to an anthropomorphized perceiver, Lucier is making it “other.”

According to Craig Owens, Lucier's is an allegorical approach. Owens follows his claim that “allegorical structure” occurs when “one text is read through another,”<sup>22</sup> writing:

Conceived in this way, allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning. I am interested, however, in what occurs when this relationship takes place *within* works of art, when it describes their structure.<sup>23</sup>

Lucier, like the other artists in *Recasting Site*, uses allegorical methods to transform meaning. In *Dawn Burn* the failure of the camera plays a major role in this process. “Texts” about mutual inscription between people and their environments are “read”

through the camera's doubling of that process -- a machine that at once inscribes by "viewing" and is permanently inscribed upon by the things it views. By enlisting the technology itself as one of the texts – the figural one (of a scar or relic) through which the primary text (of image or light) is read -- Lucier alters Owens's configuration so that medium becomes a subject that can elicit figurative meaning. This focus on medium, according to Lucier, is an organic approach.

In her essay "Organic" (1978), Lucier articulates her belief that organic artists are "especially respectful of their media – in the sense of being highly cognizant of the technology that surrounds it and focusing on that technology, not merely as a facilitator of work, but as an element of content."<sup>24</sup> All of Lucier's works in *Recasting Site* address this idea in some way – as with the deterioration of media in *Polaroid Image Series: Room*. Lucier explains why this is organic: "My work investigates a technology and exposes its idiosyncrasies. By exploring the flaws and failures of (photographic, video) materials and equipment, I reach a point where the quality of the processed image manifests, at once, aspects of its own generation and decay."<sup>25</sup> Her fascination with physical imperfections and memory traces within the camera reflect what Owens describes as allegory's attraction to "the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete – an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin...."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Lucier compares the damaged vidicon tube to an artifact: "In the burn pieces, time and motion are etched onto the surface of the tube, which is not destroyed but becomes an artifact – redisplayable, with its highly individual markings."<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps *Dawn Burn* exhibits this idea most directly and simply. In the video, the “text” of the camera is “read” through the image as much as the image is read through the camera. Much like the radio of her childhood, “an imagining of a technology” is made visible by paying special attention to the camera’s flaws. On the monitor of *Dawn Burn* the light source of a rising sun slowly moves away from the horizon line of New York’s East River. Across the river we see factory smokestacks and a building located in Queens. They form a graphic silhouette on the otherwise natural landscape. On her side of the river, Lucier positioned the camera immediately before sunrise, placing it in the same spot over seven days. With the exception of the sun rising in real time, the only actions are the rippling water and the occasional bird in flight. With each new, thirty-minute, black-and-white recording a fresh scar is drawn on the tube. On the monitor, the dark line follows the sun’s ascension like a shadowy comet tail. By the end, seven scars have collected on the tube (and can be seen on the monitor). Originally the work was shown on seven screens of increasing size and housed in a large black structure designed by Lucier. In *Recasting Site*’s installation, “day one” is exhibited on one, medium-sized monitor with a single slide projected high on the wall behind it. In “day one” the scarring process can be seen from the beginning, showing that the sun burns the scar as it moves to the top of the frame. The slide projector is mounted side-by-side with the wall. The image shines obliquely, expanding vertically and in a triangular shape as it elongates.

When the ideas of mark making and allegory are considered, writing becomes relevant both as a literal part of the process and as an overarching attitude toward the visual in Lucier’s work. Considering that the artist was a literature major in undergraduate school, and her performances with Minimalist composers are both linked to language, it is logical

that language might be incorporated in her work. According to Owens, allegory in writing leans toward the visual. In the visual arts, Owens asserts it creates the reverse, writing, “This blatant disregard for aesthetic categories is nowhere more apparent than in the reciprocity which allegory proposes between the visual and the verbal: words are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered.”<sup>28</sup> He attributes the eruption of language in conceptual art in the late 1960s as an allegorical one that is most visible in the works of Robert Smithson: “In the text ‘Strata,’ Smithson’s ‘geophotographic fiction,’ blocks of text are presented as geological deposits on the page; lines of print read as stratified layers of verbal sediment. At the same time, the accompanying photographs – of fossils – disintegrate, due to overenlargement, into the photomechanical ‘language’ of the half-tone screen.”<sup>29</sup> Technology and image are also read through the text-biased lens of allegory in Lucier’s work.

It is not surprising then, that Lucier’s first video fused text and technology. Lucier recalls this merger:

Taking my black-and-white Sony porta-pack on a trip to California, I recall spending a great deal of time alone, thinking, in unfamiliar rooms. The solitary impulse to write surfaced, but was subverted, I am sure, by the presence of the camera. I eventually arrived at the idea of writing with the camera itself as the pen, and so I began the peripatetic series of tapes that were to become the three-channel installation called *Air Writing*.<sup>30</sup>

*Air Writing* was a collection of “texts” she describes as “loosely structured, chronological juxtapositions of place and mood, presented much as they were originally ‘written’ – a

short, descriptive journal entry next to a long, rambling letter, next to a ruminative chapter.”<sup>31</sup> Like the “burn” pieces, Lucier’s first video involved some sort of inscribing. In this case, the inscription was directly associated with narrative and highly improvisational.

### **ROE ETHRIDGE: TRANSFORMATION THROUGH CORRESPONDENCE**

In his Polaroid series Roe Ethridge exhumes and enlarges 4 x 5 inch Polaroids he made and rejected between 2005 and 2006. In most cases Polaroid film was used for test shots or because it was the only option available to Ethridge in his studio.<sup>32</sup> With the exception of *Shorefront Parkway* and *LA Backyard (Pink)* no other photographs (digital or film) of these subjects were taken. Ethridge sees the original Polaroids as “relics,” a term resonant with Lucier’s statements about the burnt vidicon tube.<sup>33</sup> To transform each Polaroid from devalued “relic” to artwork, Ethridge scans it, uses the computer to emphasize existing fingerprints and cracks, and then enlarges the image to make a 24 x 30 inch C-Print. The scanner captures the Polaroid image as well as the abrasions, Sharpie marks, and/or fingerprints on the Polaroid’s surface. These large-scale reproductions duplicate the image, but also indicate how it was handled, stored, or inscribed -- the veil of fingerprints and cracks that map the Polaroid’s history. This “map” gives insights into the original’s past and references its existence outside of the gallery (most likely stashed away in the artist’s studio). Ethridge describes the Polaroid as a remainder and elaborates on the relationship between surface and image: “One [reason I like the fingerprints etc.] is that they are on the surface of the Polaroid, forming a kind of foreground layer when it gets placed on the scanner.”<sup>34</sup> Ethridge also associates the thumbprints with early twentieth-

century photographer Eugene Atget's "scene of a crime," saying, "It is an identifying fingerprint. What more obvious scene of the crime reference can you have than the identity of the author?"<sup>35</sup>

Ethridge included many of these prints in his most recent book, *Rockaway, NY*. He has described Rockaway, the location of a part-time apartment, as "a place that seems a bit of a border town: loose zoning laws, weird crimes, housing projects, and a generally sketchy vibe."<sup>36</sup> The artist's attraction to the "border town" of Rockaway parallels his approach to artistic identity and intent – his crisscrossing between failure and recuperation, commerce and art, low-fi relic and digital scan, auteur and amateur. For Ethridge, these prints reflect Rockaway's mood of unacceptability: "The works are a tiny bit criminal, not really artworks because there is no negative. These are not 'real.'"<sup>37</sup> According to Ethridge, each print is a remainder, the "debutante's scrappy date."<sup>38</sup> Rockaway's peripheral status is reflected in their imagery, which seems to be spied out of the corner of the artist's eye when puttering around the studio, standing on a train platform, or walking down the sidewalk. The act of scanning, printing, and hanging these discarded Polaroids is a Punk Rock gesture, but one with reservations. Ethridge is keenly aware that an aesthetic of failure can be as easily assimilated as beauty: "Failure was a punk gesture, but now the punk gesture is an establishment."<sup>39</sup>

Ethridge understands the complications of critiquing the institutions in which one operates. His observations about photography and the industries to which it contributes parallel Craig Owens's thoughts about Robert Rauschenberg's combine paintings. In

Rauschenberg's paintings/assemblages the arrays of objects are, in part, a critique of the museum because they represent "the dumping grounds of culture" that is the museum.<sup>40</sup> Owens points out that the purchase of those paintings by "museums of modern art is thus their final iconic triumph" because Rauschenberg's combine paintings "acquire their fullest measure of significance only when seen *in situ*. Rauschenberg's art remains *in potentia* until it is seen in the museum."<sup>41</sup> The critic then touches on the conflicted nature of the situation, adding, "But this triumph is ultimately an equivocal one, for in order to function as deconstructions of the discourse of the museum, of its claims to coherence, homogeneity ... they must also declare themselves to be part of the dumping ground they describe. They thus relapse into the 'error' they denounce, and this is what allows us to identify them as allegorical."<sup>42</sup> Ethridge is aware of the complex relationship between his role as an artist and the context (institutions, systems of distribution, markets, etc.) in which he acts. His Polaroid works -- with the originals' lack of importance and their recovery through an "illegitimate" and symbolic artistic act -- speak to a similar cycle of critique and participation as Rauschenberg's combine paintings and take on the same allegorical tenor.

Some critics have missed this point. Peter Frank writes in a review of *Roe Ethridge: Apple and Cigarettes* in 2006, "Ethridge has synthesized the lessons of many great photographers before him, while generating images with a power all their own.

However, judging by the selection of pictures at hand, the array of people, places and objects he aims his camera at is so vast that it sabotages any sense of urgent purpose and effaces his sense of an artistic self."<sup>43</sup> In truth, Ethridge intentionally conveys not a lack

of purpose in his choices but, through the inclusion of diverse and sometimes awkwardly paired images, mimics the excessive image production and distribution in art and commerce. As with Lucier's vidicon tube in *Dawn Burn* or the projected Polaroids in *Polaroid Image Series: Room*, a quality of photography (its ability to be multiplied and distributed in magazines, newspapers, as well as online or on billboards) becomes part of Ethridge's subject – an “organic” approach as Lucier describes it. Curator Bennett Simpson has a better understanding of this: “The sequencing of these photographic types (the landscape, the portrait, the narrative tableau, the astronomic) reflects the leveling of imagery that occurs in commercial culture... But one also senses that his catalog rephotographs are an attempt to halt this entropic slide – or that they form a second-order commentary on it.”<sup>44</sup>

In Ethridge's repertoire, the catalog rephotographs are closest in process to the Polaroid-based C-prints since, in both, an existing image is duplicated. In the catalog images, catalog pages are placed on light boxes so that both sides were revealed simultaneously and effulgently. These see-through pages, tattooed with overlapping imagery and lit from behind, are then photographed. In the Polaroid series, the original image is the photographer's own (not part of a mass produced publication), and it is scanned rather than photographed. Yet the Polaroid, like the catalog, is an undervalued object – so undervalued that the artist rejected it. In both series, the final photograph is copying something. According to critic Benjamin Buchloh, this sympathetic strategy with the devalued is allegorical:

The allegorical mind sides with the object and protests against its devaluation to the status of a commodity by devaluating it a second time in allegorical practice... The repetition of the original act of depletion and the new attribution of meaning redeems the object.”<sup>45</sup>

Ethridge devalues a rejected image by scanning it and making a print that isn't “real” – not based on a negative – and accentuating its flaws to emphasize its past as a rejected and dismissed object.

More intriguingly, Ethridge's doubling also includes the act of adopting and adapting a second photographic role of the amateur. In taking on this devalued creative role, Ethridge arguably “redeems” himself from the fraught status of the author or commodity-maker as well. In positioning himself on the border between the amateur who has a “willingness to experiment for his or her own pleasure” and “image service providers” who shoots still lifes for catalogs, Ethridge takes a non-hierarchical approach to genres of photography: “These are both part of my experience outside of my art education. My dad was an amateur photographer who made pictures of pretty ladies, fireworks, barns, his children, etc... When I got out of school I worked as an assistant to several catalog photographers who worked on JC Penny's catalogs.”<sup>46</sup> Ethridge has even included elements of role-playing, as when he adopted the part of specialist-amateur, shooting his moon pictures in 2003. He explains, “I shot the moon pictures with a ‘high end’ amateur telescope, got the mount custom made etc. Technically, I see now, I was committing to the figure of the specialist-amateur, the ‘astro-photography nut,’ but ultimately what the pictures became was something else, about time or duration.”<sup>47</sup>

It is understandable then that the hybrid has become a theme in Ethridge's work, including combinations he describes as "analog and digital, land and sea, here and there, electric and gas, etc," adding, "This seems to be coming out of the idea of tangential connections (the way I used to organize shows including photographs of models and UPS drivers in the same gallery) ... but the tangents are becoming more overlapped and layered."<sup>48</sup> This overlap and tension between roles contribute contradictory elements to the C-prints, making them metaphorical "border towns" that resist easy categorization or "zoning." They are intentionally "sketchy." In the Polaroid series, things that seem random are arranged; what initially appears to be a mistake (that branch is in the way or the light in that window is overexposed to the point of losing almost all detail) reveals itself as a clever formal element that tensely divides the frame. At first glance, this might look like an amateurish collection of fragmented snapshots or documentation of things lying around the studio. Casualness is deceptive in Ethridge's playful but critical territory, which pits intentional deskilling against formal acuity. Creative border towns can be sordid and tricky, but they can also be vibrant locations of cross-pollination and create their own unique cultural landscape, allowing for creative flexibility and new interpretations.

As Peter Frank and Bennett Simpson show, borders look different depending on where you stand. Ethridge has a lot of practice with professional borders, straddling the worlds of commercial and art photography since he moved to New York from Georgia after graduating from the College of Art in Atlanta in 1995. Working for clients such as IBM, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *Town and Country*, he understands both the power

and superfluity of publishing and advertising images. Navigating between roles of amateur, professional, and artist (with a special emphasis on the interstitial spaces and borders), Ethridge resists presumptions about these aesthetics. He rummages through *their* failures and, much like the Polaroid-based images seen here, recovers photography for himself as an organic, constantly shifting “correspondence.” Ethridge explains, “In the most recent projects, I’ve been trying to find a way to reassemble a group of pictures. They generally have a correspondence within, and may be seemingly obscure and hostile to the discursive, legible, literal meaning production.”<sup>49</sup>

Much of the friction within individual images results from the “correspondence” between the amateur and the professional that can be observed in their compositions. This conflict is exhibited through repeated patterns, confident use of perspective, and strong horizons (and other demarcating lines) that add structure to images that are, otherwise, gangling and tense. Shot from above, *Gas Station* shows a crowded street and gas station through the sweeping lines of triangular flags that are suspended between the building and gas pump islands. The streamers echo the automobile tracks in the snow below. These doubled arcs create a unifying net for the disorderly bottom half of the frame that is filled with cars. In *Shorefront Parkway*, the camera lens mutates rows of streetlights into glowing propeller shapes that seem to repeat infinitely as if in a hall of mirrors, adding a sense of theatricality and rhythm to the barely lit cars parked below. The entire image is cast in emerald green – a mistake that conjures the genre of film noir.

In others Ethridge divides the frame as if he were channeling an astute, but drunk, modernist painter. Instead of creating harmony these compositions interfere with themselves, conveying reigned-in randomness. In *LA Backyard (pink)*, for example, a branch splits the image in half. The limb runs diagonally from the lower left corner (one of the first rules of photography is never to let lines emerge directly from a corner) to the top right edge of the image. The spindly wood with its barely developed buds of green dominates the image. It is close to the camera and appears to be about twelve feet in front of the yard where a man is bent over working (seemingly on a building project). The branch visually herds the figure into the right corner of the frame where he is surrounded by the unpainted, processed wood of deck stairs, piled lattice, and the edge of a fence. On the left, tree branches form their own tangled lattice. Similar to *Shorefront Parkway*, the entire image, which seems to be slightly overexposed, is bathed in pale pink.

In several other images the still life genre is conjured. For two photographs, a single object is centered horizontally within the camera's frame. *Black Bag* features a black, plastic wine bag in front of a white brick-o-block wall. The bag is upright and exhibits a strange combination of energy and deflation. Hints of gold graphics peer from between its folds. In the other, a light tan conch shell floats in the bottom one-third of the monochromatic field of a light wood table and a beige wall. The construction alludes to still lifes, but the *mood* of these "sitters" is that of self-conscious teenagers in a school portrait. Unglamorous and bored, one can't help but anthropomorphize their uneventful solitude. With *Popcorn Factory*, still life and readymade seem to merge. While it

appears as though Ethridge stumbled upon this disparate combination of objects in a garage or basement, it was actually arranged on the same shelf in his studio as the object in *Black Bag*. Ethridge says “the shelf where the popcorn and bag were set up was a constantly rotating still life, sometimes just collecting things and sometimes with more intent.”<sup>50</sup>

Considering *Popcorn Factory*'s repeated shapes, color palette, and compositional balance, one would assume there is a great deal of intent. In it a multi-drawer plastic container designed to hold screws and nails, the Valentines Day issue of a *Popcorn Factory* catalog, a conch shell, a GE “Soft White” light bulb box, the edge of a kitchen towel, and a jar holding small shells coexist as a unit. The most compositionally balanced image, it is also the most cluttered. The duplicated rectangular shapes of the GE box, the plastic case and a form in the upper right corner, are joined by arcs and circles, including the curved, standing catalog and the lid of the clear jar. The round, black-and-white GE logo and the red circle on the catalog that reads “Special Offer for You” become end points of a diagonal viewing axis, like a subtle, connect-the-dot version of the branch in *LA Back Yard (pink)*.

These photographs and the *Rockaway, NY* book to which they are connected continue explorations Ethridge began in the 1990s when he started putting “disparate subjects together and themes emerged, it was a way to be guided to the next picture.”<sup>51</sup> For Ethridge, this disparity is accentuated in the way he combines the images. Each new body of work may not include new photographs only, but, more likely, a new mix of images that are both old and new.<sup>52</sup> This process is both systematic and open to

improvisation. Originally, Ethridge described this mode of working as editorial, as in his artist statement for the 2002 Andrew Kreps Gallery exhibition *The Bow*:

Over the past few years I've been trying to make my artwork more fluid and loose. Focused less on a concept and more on the relationships between ideas or images. My experience doing commercial jobs has had a huge influence; I could describe myself as working in an "editorial" mode.

Think about the structure of most monthly magazines. They have a main theme or a cover story. They also have sections that recur every month, also something to open the issue and something to close it. When it's done they start all over again. I think this could be a good metaphor for describing the way the work comes together.<sup>53</sup>

After working in this manner for a few years, Ethridge stumbled upon the fugue and found it to be a more suitable metaphor. It came to him when reading a book by Walker Percy titled, *The Last Gentleman*. In it the character Williston Bibb Barrett is prone to fits of forgetfulness that create gaps in his awareness. The author describes these moments as fugue states. Fugue states sometimes include the creation of new identities or role-playing. Ethridge feels the definition of a musical fugue is also relevant because he considers the way in which he works to be intuitive, musical, and mathematical.

Musical fugues are governed by conventions, but allow for improvisation. The fugue is like the "correspondence" Ethridge discusses. It begins with a subject and is followed by an answer that can be "tonal" (stays in the same key as the subject) or a "real answer" (that transports the "subject" into another key). The fugue also can have countersubjects and false subjects (where the entry of the subject - or answer - that begins but never

finishes). Rosalind Krauss also talks about the fugue as a metaphor for improvisation within media:

What “automatism” thrusts into the foreground of this traditional definition of “medium,” however, is the concept of improvisation, of the need to take chances in the face of a medium now cut free from the guarantees of artistic tradition. It is this sense of the improvisatory that welcomes the word’s associations with “psychic automatism”; but the automatic reflex here is not so much an unconscious one as it is something like the expressive freedom that improvisation always contained, as the relation between the technical ground of the genre and its given conventions opened up a space for release – the way the fugue makes it possible, for example, to *improvise* complex marriages between its voices.<sup>54</sup>

In Ethridge’s exhibitions and books, these “complex marriages between voices” exist between the photographs on view in the gallery or on the page. According to Ethridge, the “found pictures are the first part of the fugue.”<sup>55</sup> When purging a flat file the artist found eight pictures that he liked. These became the structure around which additional works or “counterparts” were chosen for his 2007 London exhibition at Greengrassi Gallery. The idea of original statement and counterparts can be extended to the internal structure of the Polaroid-based prints, with the original Polaroids forming the statements and the C-prints become their counterparts. In this way, the external correspondence between works for which Ethridge is known becomes internalized *within* the photo itself.

Ethridge’s Polaroid series reflects Lucier’s ideas of the “organic” artist and provides a variation on Smithson’s site/non-site paradigm. Through his attention to the Polaroid as a relic, his critical exploration of the photograph as distributable multiple, and the fugue as a metaphor for the correspondence between the “found picture” and the exhibited C-print,

Ethridge advances the theories and practices of these earlier artists. On a formal level, the amplification of the Polaroid's size and dusty surface in Lucier's *Polaroid Image Series: Room* complements the fingerprints and other marks on Ethridge's C-prints. Conceptually, the imperfections in these works change the compositions, adding imagery and making them other. For Lucier a room becomes abstract and for Ethridge the evidence of handling becomes the composition's foreground. Lucier's burned vidicon tube, like Ethridge's Polaroids, survives its wear and tear, becoming an artifact. These imperfect fragments survive as relics, reflecting what Craig Owen calls the allegorical nature of the ruin. In adding elements of play and improvisation to the ideas of these artists and Owens, Ethridge finds ways to subvert the authorship of artist and commercial image-maker.

### **ROBERT DE SAINT PHALLE: METAPHOR AS MISTAKE**

The fabrication of Robert de Saint Phalle's recent works often involves a transformative relationship between an originating object and the final sculpture. In *Quarry* (2008), de Saint Phalle creates a new form that is inspired by the industrial context and formal elements of a rusty barrel. He then joins the two, nestling the new fabrication into the old barrel. In *Blue Coin Banner* (2008), he recasts an earlier work, removing the mold's support and allowing the casting process to become unwieldy and unpredictable. This process transforms the cast of a boulder into an unrecognizable shape that is fluid and frozen in mid-stream. The relationship between an original and its altered copy reflects Roe Ethridge's processes in the Polaroid series. In both cases, the artists resist the role of

knowing author through acts of improvisation. For Robert de Saint Phalle, this transformative treatment is rooted in metaphor.

Akin to Ethridge, de Saint Phalle also resists the conclusiveness of a thesis, instead, he says his art reflects ideas of poiesis: “In *Poetry, Language and Thought*, Heidegger describes poiesis as something that moves away from its standing as one thing to become another. A poetic statement doesn’t necessarily aim to solve or resolve a discreet issue as a thesis could, it is more open ended.”<sup>56</sup> Subjectivity and chance are used to transform objects, primarily while they are being created. Able to devise models so objects can be made to specification, de Saint Phalle intentionally interferes with his own production processes, in part as a reaction to perfection. The artist invites failure, accident, and flaws into the creative act in order to complicate the path between idea and object. Again, according to critic Craig Owens, this sort of “open-ended” process that interferes with its own intentions is allegorical: “[Paul] de Man recognizes allegory as the structural interference of two distinct levels or usages of language, literal and rhetorical (metaphoric), one of which denies precisely what the other affirms.”<sup>57</sup> De Saint Phalle structures his creative process in a way that allows planning to be interfered with by the metaphorical act of calling one thing something else. In the end his sculptures are ripe with this combination of the literal, the metaphorical, and the interference created by their cohabitation.

Several texts have influenced de Saint Phalle's exploration of metaphor, including Walker Percy's essay "Metaphor as Mistake" (1958) in which the author claims that mistakes in understanding can lead to new, more poetic meanings:

I remember hunting as a boy in south Alabama with my father and brother and a Negro guide. At the edge of some woods we saw a wonderful bird. He flew as swift and straight as an arrow, then all of a sudden folded his wings and dropped like a stone into the woods. I asked what the bird was. The guide said it was a blue-dollar hawk. Later my father told me the Negroes had got it wrong: It was really a blue darter hawk. I can still remember my disappointment at the correction.<sup>58</sup>

Percy spends much of the essay discussing how mistaken connections can create expansive meanings that move beyond descriptors, allowing for imaginative impressions to unfold. It is valuable to consider Percy's description of metaphor's transformative power in concert with de Saint Phalle's distillation of poesis as "something that moves away from its standing as one thing to become another." Percy writes:

It might be useful to look into the workings of these accidental stumblings into poetic meaning, because they exhibit in a striking fashion that particular feature of metaphor which has most troubled philosophers: that it is "wrong" – it asserts of one thing that it is something else – and further, that its beauty often seems proportionate to its wrongness or outlandishness.<sup>59</sup>

"Wrong" is something de Saint Phalle welcomes into his art. He is intrigued by and actively engages Percy's idea that the metaphor "asserts of one thing that it is something else." His strategies echo metaphor as Percy sees it, including a correspondence between

outlandishness and beauty -- between wrongness and the possibility of new, unexpected meanings.

In Lucier's works such as *Dawn Burn*, medium (the form) changes or adds to a subject. For de Saint Phalle, metaphor-as-mistake is part of his content (subject) and literally alters the form (medium) of his sculptures. The "wrong" events in the fabricating and naming of a work are as much a part of his subject as the planned ideas that inspire it. In foregrounding the power of metaphor to transform through mistake, the objects he makes are changed in ways that would never occur with planning alone. This inversion of Lucier's approach, however, is equally allegorical. Both reflect Owens assertions that, with allegory, one text is read through another and there is a manipulation of two levels of language (the metaphorical and literal). According to Owens: "In the hands of the allegorist the image becomes something other (allos = other + agoreuei = to speak). He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image."<sup>60</sup> All of these language-based strategies are transformative.

Mistakes and metaphors are elements in the work of the two artists de Saint Phalle cites as important influences. The first is his great aunt Niki de Saint Phalle who was a 1960s conceptual artist and sculptor raised in France and New York. According to Robert de Saint Phalle, he and his great aunt had an extended, creative, and personal correspondence that included exchanging drawings and letters.<sup>61</sup> As time goes by, de Saint Phalle has begun to understand the influence of Niki de Saint Phalle's approach to

art, family, and the cultural landscape in which she lived. Her incorporation of identity (as an independent woman who grew up in a largely patriarchal and conservative family), has inspired her grand nephew on a personal level (he has similar issues with the family's patriarchy) and an artistic one. While he does not emulate her art, de Saint Phalle says that he connects with his great aunt's "exuberance."<sup>62</sup> Citing the shooting paintings -- canvases layered with pockets of paint and plaster (and sometimes covered with symbols of church and state such as photographs of politicians or statues of the virgin Mary) and then shot at with a gun -- and her robust, larger-than-life Nana sculptures, de Saint Phalle sees his great aunt's work and life as an inspirational example for how art can bridge disparities between internal identity and external, societal expectations.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres is another influence on de Saint Phalle. A conceptual artist who during the 1980s and 1990s combined criticality and tenderness in his treatment of gender and AIDS issues, Gonzalez-Torres was in residence at Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop when de Saint Phalle apprenticed there. Only fifteen at the time, de Saint Phalle read about the artist's work in order to augment that experience. While the influence of his aunt was an incremental, personal one, whose impact he is still only beginning to understand, that of Gonzalez-Torres was immediate and profound. The aesthetics of de Saint Phalle's work is markedly different from Gonzalez-Torres's, but both artists mine metaphor, pushing its "wrongness" in pursuit of transformation and beauty. Gonzales-Torres's pair of clocks *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987-90, is a perfect embodiment of Percy's theory that a metaphor's "beauty often seems proportionate to its wrongness or outlandishness." The two plain, black-and-white industrial clocks (imagine the clock in an elementary school classroom) represent lovers. Their hands are

synchronized down to the second. They are in unison. Through a parenthetical title and doubling, the clocks become a moving metaphor for love, partnership, and, as the clocks' batteries die, death. Gonzalez-Torres's critical distance from the patriarchal and largely republican milieu of the late 1980s and early 1990s shares similarities with Niki de Saint Phalle's resistance to her male dominated family (and society at large) in the 1950s and 1960s. Although Robert de Saint Phalle is a straight white male, he says he does not identify with many of the expectations and belief systems associated with his own demographic, prompting solidarity with Niki de Saint Phalle and Felix Gonzalez-Torres's creative expressions of marginalization.<sup>63</sup>

A 2007 graduate of Bard College's MFA program, de Saint Phalle also cites teacher Rachel Harrison as an influence, appreciating her understanding of artwork as a "reactive" field. In describing her work, he includes the scientific idea of the quantum. De Saint Phalle believes Harrison understands "that a thing is less of an object and more of a field that is reactive to methods of observation," he adds, "I think work that leans toward quantum 'presence' can be seen as coy and evasive when it's really more interested in yielding an uncertainty principle about any single 'reading' of the work."<sup>64</sup> The "artwork responds to methods of observations...making it hard to pin down and giving it a subjective function. There is no meaning inherent in the piece. The reading of the piece is always projected onto it."<sup>65</sup>

The tale of the Blue Dollar/Darter Hawk in Walker Percy's "Metaphor as Mistake" and the uncertainty principle hail from different disciplines, but both acknowledge that observation can change things – the bird or the electron are infused with new meanings or

interpretations. Robert de Saint Phalle takes these ideas to the realm of sculpture. The fabrication process, formal qualities, and title in *Blue Coin Banner* show this inclusion of the reactive field and metaphor as mistake. The work was made for *Recasting Site* and its title directly references Percy's hawk story. Similar to "blue dollar hawk," the title *Blue Coin Banner* does not describe the amorphous, iridescent sculpture, but adds meaning through its incorrectness. The friction between sculpture and title creates an imaginative field akin to the one Percy experienced as a young boy. Percy's discussion of "pointing and aiming" provide a landscape for de Saint Phalle's thinking about this title:

Given the situation of naming and hearing, there can only be one of three issues to an act of pointing at and naming. What is said will either be old, that is, something we already know and know quite overtly; or something new, and if it is utterly new, I can only experience bafflement; or new-old, that is, something that I had privately experienced but which was not available to me because it had never been formulated and rendered intersubjective. Metaphor is the true maker of language.<sup>66</sup>

The new-old does not end with the title. *Blue Coin Banner's* form also combines the known and the unknown in a way that feels both familiar and foreign.

To make the sculpture, de Saint Phalle began with the mold of a easily recognizable object (a large rock) he used to create an earlier sculpture titled *Grotto* (2007). Then he removed the supportive "mother mold" that stabilizes the flexible rubber mold of the rock. He propped the skin-like rubber in a warped position and filled it with epoxy, casting a distorted shape that is very different from the original rock. The result is a billowing, yet collapsing, shape that transforms the rock's convex form and jagged surface into a complex gesture of frailty, arrested becoming, and exhaustion. Because of

the destabilized casting process, the epoxy becomes thin in spots, creating holes in the surface. As in Roe Ethridge's Polaroid-based prints, and Mary Lucier's *Dawn Burn* and *Polaroid Series: Room*, technical mistakes are allowed to emerge as subject. These flaws are not planned, but are orchestrated using the transformative power of the metaphor's wrongness. In de Saint Phalle's work, the subject of metaphor-as-mistake catalyzes certain phenomena in the fabrication process that lead to flaws; these flaws, in turn, physically change the sculpture and assert themselves as part of the subject matter. A loop forms where subject morphs form and form become part of the subject.

The shape of *Blue Coin Banner* summons the bodily, the futuristic, and the emotional – the arc of a dancer's back, a prop from a set in the original "Star Trek" series, or an abstract embodiment of fragility and strength. The form's surface is rough and still holds a slight resemblance to the originating rock, but the twists add another layer of texture with undulating folds that resemble an enlarged, crumpled piece of paper in their randomness and depth. The five-foot tall form is mounted to a white metal pole on a round stand. A ten-foot, white pole then leans on the mounted object and is topped with a powerless, unlit light aimed at the viewer. The epoxy component's surface (except for its highest tip) is covered with Kamelion Krome brand paint, which is used on cars and changes color from iridescent green to purple and back as the viewer moves around the object.

The painted surface adds a sense of sci-fi confidence and, through color-change, alludes to de Saint Phalle's interest in the subjective construction of meaning in art – it looks

different based on the point from which it is observed. The metallic paint also introduces de Saint Phalle's preoccupation with light as an element in his sculptures. The artist intentionally orchestrated a relationship between the light reflected off the paint and the unlit light can at the end of the pole, adding that he wanted *Blue Coin Banner's* surface "to be brighter than the light on the pole which is maybe broken or powerless."<sup>67</sup> The disconnected artificial light source at the top of the sculpture draws attention to the working light tracks above. The iridescent auto paint reflects light from the gallery's track lighting and the skylight. This creates a dialogue between the real and the artificial through a fusing of electric and natural light. Resonant with Robert Smithson's *Hotel Palenque* where the natural and manmade are often intertwined, *Blue Coin Banner* invokes the organic and synthetic in ways that explore notions of solidity, degradation, and the interstitial territory between the two.

The third, small sculpture by de Saint Phalle also exhibits his interest in interfering with easy readings by straddling the familiar and the foreign. Included in his work for the first time, *Untitled* is a found toy that fulfills a function the artist had in mind for *Recasting Site's* third sculpture. Months before the exhibition, de Saint Phalle decided the third work should be a small readymade he would intervene with in some way. Several other ideas were considered, but during installation, he saw a rubber bunny toy when visiting my house. It is a childhood toy that was produced for Gerber by the Arrow Corporation. The bunny is made of yellow rubber and has orange, plastic eyes. It is odd in its oppositional qualities – at once cuddly and cold, old and futuristic. De Saint Phalle liked the idea of curating something of the curator's into the show. With the tail missing, it

was a readymade that had already experienced an intervention, satisfying the artist's desire to include an intervened found object. *Untitled*'s role is primarily that of a meddler. Its presence is unsettling and humorous.

Once installed, the small object became a hinge that connected other works in the exhibition with *Hotel Palenque* in the next room. The ordinary object of a toy, alone and presented as if it were left on the floor, alludes to the mood and compositions in Roe Ethridge's photographs of simple, solitary objects -- the black bag and conch shell. In both *Untitled* and Ethridge's still lifes, what seems incidental is actually posed and thoughtfully considered. De Saint Phalle placed the sculpture so that its back end (with an empty circle where its tail used to be) faces the viewer and its face looks into a corner. To view the front of the bunny, the visitor must stand in the corner and look down or squat. The use of a child's toy also foreshadows the only representations of people in Robert Smithson's *Hotel Palenque*, which are a young boy walking in front of the hotel and a baby doll slumped and alone on an oval chair.

Images of the body are intentionally scarce in *Recasting Site*; with the exceptions just noted and the figure in Ethridge's *LA (pink)*, visitors are the only people in the galleries. However, the body plays a major role in indirect ways. Human physicality is alluded to in several works by Lucier, especially *Dawn Burn*'s anthropomorphizing of the camera and Alvin Lucier's disembodied voice in *Polaroid Image Series: Room*. Smithson's voice in *Hotel Palenque* is another case of an allusion to the body. Robert de Saint Phalle, perhaps more than any other artist in *Recasting Site*, references the body in his art. In

another text on metaphor de Saint Phalle cites as an influence, the physical body and metaphor are addressed as covalent phenomena. In *Metaphors We Live By*, written by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, the authors' assert that metaphor is not merely "a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish" but is "pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action," adding, "Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities."<sup>68</sup> For de Saint Phalle, "how we get around in the world" evolves from the relationship between the body and its environments. This dynamic is present in the allusion to aging in the crumpled, rough surface of *Blue Coin Banner*. It is an even more prominent element in *Quarry*, his second large sculpture in *Recasting Site*.

While in graduate school at Bard, de Saint Phalle found a rusty barrel outside of his studio. He initially saw it as placeholder for a sculpture he had in mind. Eventually the artist decided to include it as an element in a work called *Quarry*. That piece was included in his thesis exhibition titled *Out of Body*. The artist explains how the found object made its way into the exhibition:

I wanted to make a cave form that was open at both ends and lifted off the floor. A levitating, truncated, emptied womb. I found the barrel and used it as a stand-in, but the implications of a rusted, busted oil drum started to crystallize.... It is myself in a way, the thing withdrawn slightly from its container but also something about our relationship to oil, money, and commodity -- something that is never enough.<sup>69</sup>

*Recasting Site* includes a slightly altered version of *Quarry*. In it de Saint Phalle places the rusty, dented barrel on its side and on a white pedestal that is asymmetrically

undercut. Open on both ends, viewers can look through the barrel as if it were a tunnel. The barrel rests on the edge of the pedestal and appears as though it might roll onto the floor at any moment. Its surface is ripped and pulled away in places by wear and tear, creating holes in the metal. As light shines through the side of the barrel (which is the top of the sculpture), the interior becomes a diorama of light and shadow.

Inside this shadowy “womb” there is a form made by de Saint Phalle whose underside is milled by machine to echo the barrel’s adjacent interior. Offset exactly one-inch from the inside of the barrel, this manufactured shape is made of urethane paint on urethane foam, both used for automobiles. One end is flush with the edge of the barrel. The other extends beyond the barrel’s lip, coming to a triangulated point that aligns with the undercut pedestal’s ascending, obtusely angled vertical plane. In hues reminiscent of the 1970s, its colors gradate from a shade of olive to chartreuse to a misty pink. The top of the form is flat, slick and shiny. As ambient light enters the drum, graduated color is veiled with graduated light that fades into shadow. This creates a second moment of doubling in the sculpture. The relationship of painted and natural illumination in *Quarry* is another example of de Saint Phalle’s consideration of light as a compositional element in his sculptures.

The top of the constructed form in *Quarry* is perfectly smooth except for a small raised circle near the center and a four-inch “scar” on the surface of the pointed edge, protruding from the barrel. The “mark” resembles a wound with stitches but is actually a topographical detail copied directly from a Google Earth 3D file of Titusville,

Pennsylvania. According to de Saint Phalle the town is the location of the first modern, commercial oil well.<sup>70</sup> The raised blemish simultaneously suggests landscape, industry, and a physical trace of injury. Slightly raised, this intentional deformity sabotages any perception that the “new” element is any more perfect than the old. De Saint Phalle says that his treatment of the painted foam object intentionally borders on being overworked.<sup>71</sup> The combination of scar, the angled edge, the shadowy interior, and the paint’s graduated color add compositional “weight” to the already precariously perched barrel.

*Quarry* exhibits de Saint Phalle’s interest in making art as a way to “consider different metaphorical relationships between body and world, conscious and unconscious, inside and outside, model and actual.”<sup>72</sup> With *Quarry*, there is an actual object and a model (the milled element) that simultaneously mirrors and expands its meaning. The form itself has an interior and an exterior. The term “quarry” also has a natural association with Smithson and echoes his intentional conflation of the physical world and mental processes – in “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” he writes: “The earth’s surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other—one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects, or what I will call ‘abstract geology.’”<sup>73</sup> In *Quarry*, this blurring between the biological/mental and physical is exhibited in symbolic ways such as the barrel (skin/womb) housing an interior form (body), the modeled topographical map (geographic location) mimicking a scar (physical or emotional wound), and the barrel itself as a symbol of industry and waste. Through doubling, mimicking, and scarring, de Saint Phalle uses casting and inscribing to recast

the found object's meaning from industrial detritus to one imperfect skin housing another.

### **ROBERT SMITHSON: SALVAGING THE CREATURE**

In the slide show and lecture *Hotel Palenque*, Robert Smithson uses tropes of tourism and teaching to rediscover two sites. More than any other artist in *Recasting Site*, Smithson challenges the packaging of experience, specifically addressing the realms of tourism and education. The content (an ordinary, nearly dilapidated hotel) and format (the lecture) of *Hotel Palenque* combine in a double critique aimed at packaged viewing and institutionalized learning. The mundane nature of the hotel, the preciousness of its neighboring Mayan ruins, and the format of the lecture as a passive educational experience are called into question by Smithson. His lecture subverts what Walker Percy calls the “symbolic complex” by adopting its very strategies of appropriation and expectation. In his essay “The Loss of the Creature,” Percy uses the example of a tourist at the Grand Canyon: “The highest point, the term of the sightseer’s satisfaction is not the sovereign discovery of the thing before him; it is rather the measuring up of the thing to the criterion of the performed symbolic complex.”<sup>74</sup> Smithson mines the no man’s land between experience and expectation for its ability to transform both what is mundane and what is valued, an act of recovery Percy describes as “salvaging the creature.”

The published artwork, *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, which appeared in *Artforum* in 1967 and is included in *Recasting Site*, uses a similar method to

transform the ordinary. In it Smithson hijacks the language of tourism in order to mock the very idea of packaged looking and highlight the mix of industry and nature in damaged landscapes. In *Passaic* and *Hotel Palenque*, Smithson exemplifies Percy's "rare man" who manages to recover the beauty in things that have already been discovered: "In truth, the biography of scientists and poets is usually the story of the discovery of the indirect approach, the circumvention of the educator's presentation – the young man who was sent to the *Technikum* and on his way fell into the habit of loitering in book stores and reading poetry; or the young man dutifully attending law school who on the way became curious about the comings and goings of the ants."<sup>75</sup> With *Hotel Palenque*, Smithson takes on a similar role, but his "loitering" is purposeful and conceptually pointed.

Robert Smithson took the photos in *Hotel Palenque* when he stayed there during a 1969 trip to Mexico with gallerist Virginia Dwan and wife and artist Nancy Holt. The photographs became part of the slide lecture about hotel Palenque where Smithson showed thirty-one images of the Yucatan hotel to architecture students at the University of Utah in 1972.<sup>76</sup> In the lecture now titled *Hotel Palenque*, Smithson describes what appeals to him about the architecture and site, using words such as "marvelous," "handsome," "satisfying," and "ingenious."<sup>77</sup> He also melds mental states such as terror with mythological stories of the Mayans and architectural elements such as dark doorways and labyrinthine passages. Combined, the historical, mental, and physical become analogues for blurred chronological time and a lack of logical, spatial progression -- as when he says of the building, "This kind of de-architecturization

pervades the entire structure. And you have to remember that it's a-centric, no focuses, nothing to grip on to, no certainty, everything is completely random and done to please somebody's everyday activities.”<sup>78</sup>

In the hotel Palenque, Smithson finds a location that is at once being constructed and torn down – a physical place that is charged with coexisting opposites such as life and death, past and present, space and time. Art historian Ann Reynolds believes that the monument naturally includes the temporal and the physical: “As markers, monuments plot out and charge a space with meaning, but in themselves they are simultaneously physically still and yet filled with opportunities for temporal awareness through remembrance.”<sup>79</sup> Considering this, *Hotel Palenque* can be seen as a contemporary monument standing in for the Mayan ruins nearby. By co-opting the hotel as a non-site, Smithson rescues the ruins (the site) from history's packaging in favor of his own, bringing into question historical and contemporary views that archeologists, anthropologists, historians, and artists have attached to them.

Smithson's lecture is loaded with temporal awareness but in a convoluted way that ignores chronological time. He employs low-level perception promoted by writer Anton Ehrenzweig. The author had an influence on Smithson's work and championed “the artist's vacant unfocused stare.”<sup>80</sup> This approach encourages a conflation of time and space that disrupts usual approaches to perspective and history. In *Hotel Palenque*, Smithson conjures stories of Mayan rituals and gods. He also compares the building of the hotel with ancient building practices associated with the Mayan ruins. In both instances he talks about distant and recent pasts as if they existed simultaneously. For

example the difference between contemporary Mexicans and ancient Mayans are completely ignored when he compares the hotel to Mayan ruins:

You know this window is actually looking out over the things that we went there to see but you won't see any of those temples in this lecture; that's something you have to go there to see for yourself, and I hope that you go to the hotel Palenque so you can learn something about how the Mayans are still building. The structure has all the convolution and terror, in a sense, that you would find in a typical Mayan temple... So that to me this window, this seemingly useless window really called forth all sorts of truths about the Mexican temperament.<sup>81</sup>

Smithson does not necessarily want to find truths about this place or its people. Instead he creates an ironic, fictional, and fragmented situation that exposes what he sees as mythologies of looking. The result is a reification of the viewer's sovereignty, including the perceiver's role in granting importance to the monument. Smithson takes a different approach to issues of authority than those of Ethridge and de Saint Phalle. Although Smithson's tack, like Ethridge's, adopts role-playing, Smithson does not interfere with his own authorship. Instead he kidnaps the "knower" role of the tourist guide, amplifying his own authority as an expert in order to make suspect *any* mediated viewing experience.

This is a strategy Smithson has used in several photographic travelogue works. In them he fractures fact, fiction and mythology, mixing them together in a colloidal fashion for the purpose of transformed looking. Using the language and processes of a tourist exploring a ruin to describe the hotel, Smithson revitalizes the Mayan ruins, which remain off site. The result is that both hotel and ruin, in allegorical fashion, become something other. Smithson asks the audience of students to build their own cognitive bridges between the slides and the absent Mayan ruins. According to art historian Ann

Reynolds, Smithson's archive with annotated books on Mexico from a variety of sources show that the omission of current events was not an oversight but a strategy: "Smithson read history in many directions and on many levels in preparation for his trip to Mexico; he seems to have discriminated between texts on the basis of subject matter and not on the basis of 'scientific' validity."<sup>82</sup>

There are two similar works that precede *Hotel Palenque*. Both, like *Palenque*, use photography, description, and location. These earlier projects were created for and published in *Artforum* magazine. All three photo-based works simultaneously imply narrative (through storytelling) and interfere with it (by subverting expected subject matter and conflating the mental and physical). In *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967) and *Incidents of Mirror-Travel* Smithson presents torqued, diaristic accounts of the seemingly mundane and overlooked. In *Passaic* Smithson photographs ordinary sites that are what he called "ruins in reverse" or "all the new construction that would eventually be built."<sup>83</sup> In it he uses poetic language reminiscent of Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac who influenced him. In *Passaic* Smithson describes a parking lot with the same sort of rambling flourish: "Everything about the site remained wrapped in blandness and littered with shiny cars --- one after another they extended into sunny nebulosity. The indifferent backs of the cars flashed and reflected the stale afternoon sun."<sup>84</sup> At the time New Jersey was an exercise of opposites with many in-progress engineering projects juxtaposed against urban decay. These contradictions and the tone of "indifference" and "blandness" in this transitioning suburban landscape provided a

place where the scientific theory of entropy that fascinated Smithson had a physical form.

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*Passaic*, like *Hotel Palenque*, appropriates tourist tropes to expose the fiction of unmediated “experience.” Smithson creates a more direct situation by adopting these tools of formulated looking. Writer and commentator Walker Percy’s strategies for “salvaging the creature” can be a useful lens in parsing Smithson’s approach in *Passaic*. Percy writes at the beginning of his essay, “The Loss of the Creature,” “EVERY EXPLORER NAMES his island Formosa, beautiful. To him it is beautiful because, being first, he has access to it and can see it for what it is. But to no one else is it ever as beautiful – except the rare man who manages to recover it, who knows it has to be recovered.”<sup>86</sup> Percy uses the Grand Canyon as an example of something that must be recovered, listing the methods of the “Inside Track,” the “Familiar Revisited” and the “Accidental Encounter” as possible ways to sidestep the traps of the tourist set by the “planners” who make experiences to be consumed.<sup>87</sup> He writes about a movie where a character walks along the Grand Canyon:

But the moviemaker knows something the planner does not know. He knows that one cannot take the sight frontally. The canyon must be approached by one of the stratagems we have mentioned: the Inside Track, the Familiar Revisited, the Accidental Encounter. . . . [the character] has another [non-tourist] objective in mind, to revenge his wronged brother, counterespionage, etc. By virtue of the fact that he has other fish to fry, he may take a stroll along the rim after supper and then we can see the canyon through him. The movie accomplishes its purpose by concealing it.<sup>88</sup>

Smithson is the moviemaker and the character with a mission in *Passaic*. Through this strategy of playing several roles – the artist, educator, and tour guide – the site of the Mayan ruins are exposed through their concealment, allegorically speaking, the “text” of the ruins being read through the “text” of the hotel. Much like Lucier reading the text of the body through the text of technology, Ethridge reading the text of the “relic” Polaroid through the C-print and de Saint Phalle reading the text of fabrication through metaphor, Smithson’s allegorical approach transforms the hotel and the ruins.

Allegory is brought in as subject matter in *Passaic*. The first image in the article is a photographic reproduction from *The New York Times* of the Samuel F. B. Morse painting called *Allegorical Landscape*. Early in *Passaic*, Smithson writes about a reproduction of a Samuel F. B. Morse painting:

I looked at a blurry reproduction of Samuel F.B. Morse’s *Allegorical Landscape* at the top of Canaday’s column; the sky was a subtle newsprint grey, and the clouds resembled sensitive stains of sweat reminiscent of a famous Yugoslav watercolorist whose name I have forgotten. A little statue with right arm held high faced a pond (or was it the sea?). “Gothic” buildings in the allegory had a faded look, while an unnecessary tree (or was it a cloud of smoke?) seemed to puff up on the left side of the landscape.<sup>89</sup>

This reprinted photograph at the beginning of the *Artforum* work is a third-generation reproduction that Smithson presents as an artifact from his journey. The rest of the images are black and white snapshots taken by Smithson. Several of the photographs share uncanny compositional similarities with the Morse painting. In the image of a bridge titled *The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks*, for instance, the dark

foliage and shaded water on the right corner is in a triangular shape similar to the shadowed cliff in the painting. The top right corner of both also has an airy tuft of tree leaves. The bridge has the same shape and placement and shares the brightness of the body of water in the painting. In Morse's work, the water narrows as it recedes via the illusionistic device of single-point perspective. In the photograph, the vertical lines of the bridge to the left mirror the vertical columns of the university on the left of Morse's painting. The compositions of *Monument with Pontoons: The Pumping Derrick* and *The Great Pipe Monument* are also framed and divided similarly to Morse's painting. As in Ethridge's Polaroid series, Smithson devalues the devalued. In devaluing Morse's allegorical painting by reproducing a reproduction and then recreating fragments of the composition using new subject matter and the medium of photography, Smithson redeems Passaic, New Jersey, by associating it with the picturesque and the monumental. If devaluing the devalued is, indeed, an allegorical act, then Smithson also redeems Morse's painting – and, by association, redeems allegory. The fact that he does this using humor in an art magazine that was considered the primary platform for theoretical texts, adds another ironic layer to the contexts of this tour.

The images used in *Hotel Palenque* were taken on the trip that also produced *Incidents of Mirror-Travel*. The photographs are snapshots because Smithson was a technophobe who was only interested in and able to use the camera in this way.<sup>90</sup> Unlike Roe Ethridge who incorporates deskilling for conceptual reasons, Smithson's use of photography is, arguably, one manifestation of his belief that "a great artist can make art by simply casting a glance."<sup>91</sup> When considering *Passaic*, *Hotel Palenque*, and *Incidents of Mirror-*

*Travel in the Yucatan* (also published in *Artforum*), *Mirror-Travel* is the most psychedelic in tone, conjuring conversations with gods and hearing voices through the air conditioning vent of the rental car. In *Mirror-Travel*, instead of photographing the Mayan ruins of the Yucatan, Smithson placed mirrors in the trees and on the ground and then photographed them. This mirroring achieved a conflation of space (sky and earth appeared in the same image – paired but never able to be joined) and purposefully subverted the romantic ruins packaged and promoted to tourists. Smithson interferes with the landscape by introducing light reflected off of the mirrors, writing sky onto ground – a low-tech version of Lucier’s early videos such as *Air Writing*, *Fire Writing* and *Dawn Burn*. In *Hotel Palenque*, as in *Passaic*, Smithson approaches architecture that is considered ordinary as if it was worthy (historically or aesthetically) of an official tour and, as in *Mirror-Travel*, he ignores the sites one is supposed to view when touring a destination.

In the slides of *Hotel Palenque*, the beauty of crumbled walls and old paint, the interweaving of architecture and nature, the convolutions of intertwining passageways, and states of ruin (demolition) and renewal (additions) emerge from the depths, corners, and fringes of the hotel. The images include hallways, “gardens” of cast off bricks, and freestanding doorways that frame “murky” darkness.<sup>92</sup> Partially destroyed floors are seen from below and jut into the frame, interrupting the sky with ragged concrete and spindly steel poles. Empty chairs line halls that appear to end at the forest’s edge. Bridges and passageways appear to lead futilely to areas of disuse. In one image, crooked tree trunks support a ceiling. Like large whittled sticks, they stand vertically resembling a dead,

interior forest “rooted” in cement blocks. Fiction and fact are interwoven in Smithson’s lecture. The fictitious emerges, first, through storytelling that conflates the area’s ancient and modern history. Second, while Smithson’s experience at the hotel was real, he imagines how these places might be used, their histories and possibilities. He does not know or prove, but speculates like an amateur anthropologist. Speaking of an image of rubble and land, he says, for example, “Here we have some bricks piled up with sticks sort of horizontally resting on these bricks. And they signify something. I never figured it out while I was there but it seemed to suggest some kind of impermanence. Something was about to take place.”<sup>93</sup> About a hanging bridge, he prompts the audience to imagine a situation where that place might become activated:

Here is another view of the drawbridge and you can see where the drawbridge goes. Now that is a tiny bar actually. It’s very, very claustrophobic and its been closed down. I just love this view. I think that this suspension bridge crossing this empty pool, and those marvelous brick walls, they just offer so much gratification; the textures are really marvelous and really Mayan in spirit I think. Also you know that the Mayans didn’t have to quarry their rocks they just went around and picked them up off the ground because all the ground is just loaded with all this broken rock. It seemed like a marvelous way to build things and I am sure that they did the same thing. Also you can see that little catwalk going around there and you can inch around there and get better views of the iguanas and that sort of thing. Now if you imagine yourself walking across this drawbridge and you go through that little dark disused bar there and...<sup>94</sup>

Through the imagining of functions and scenarios, the students are encouraged to create a mental place that bridges the photograph (a document) and the actual hotel. Additionally Smithson asks that the hotel be imagined in relation to its past (Mayan building practices) and its fictitious present-ness (asking them to imagine walking across a drawbridge that is

merely the image of a drawbridge). This is another example of guided viewing in *Recasting Site* and parallels the technique used by Mary Lucier in *Mapping Space* where she asks the viewer to imagine performing certain mental activities on photographs.

Photography is an important tool in Smithson's work. It is also a medium Craig Owens links to allegory: "With the allegorical cult of the ruin, a second link between allegory and contemporary art emerges: in site specificity, the work which appears to have merged physically into its setting, to be embedded in the place where we encounter it... Because of its impermanence, moreover, the work is frequently preserved only in photographs. This fact is crucial, for it suggests the allegorical potential for photography." He then quotes Walter Benjamin: "An appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses of allegory."<sup>95</sup> It can be argued that, instead, Smithson is trying to rescue these things (the hotel, the Mayan ruins, the Passaic) *from* eternity – to disrupt our expectations and see them with a fresh eye rather than through the historical or cultural amber in which they have been defined for posterity.

In *Passaic* Smithson ends with a narrative about how once black and white sand are mixed they cannot be separated again: "Of course, if we filmed such an experiment we could prove the reversibility of eternity by showing the film backwards, but then sooner or later the film itself would crumble and get lost and enter the state of irreversibility. Somehow this suggests that cinema offers an illusive or temporary escape from physical dissolution. The false immortality of film gives the viewer an illusion of control over

eternity – but ‘the superstars’ are fading.”<sup>96</sup> Smithson’s text implicates photography and eternity in an awkward, mutually-critical dance. He, like Lucier, emphasizes the irreversible nature of our interactions with the physical world, the mutual inscription of perception and place. For Smithson, this ability to inscribe meaning through perception is a freedom that can be used to recast experience, monument, or place.

Even with limited photographic skills, Smithson takes full advantage of the photograph’s ability to arrest narrative, the camera as an extension of perception, and film as a fourth dimension in which the physical world and mental processes can cohabitate, writing in

*Passaic:*

The monument was a bridge over the Passaic River that connected Bergen County with Passaic County. Noon-day sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge into an over-exposed picture. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of “stills” through my Instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank.<sup>97</sup>

The organic world converges with perception and the mechanical in this moment. All three overlap with each other in a de-differentiated manner. With this passage, the tangible (landscape) and the virtual (cinematic) wash onto the shore of perception as one wave. According to art historian Ron Graziani, the tension between the physical and perceptual served to create a more direct connection between perceiver and perceived, writing, “Smithson’s picturable situation meant s(t)imulating one’s access to the natural,

staging the tension between the real and artificial without camouflaging either ingredient.”<sup>98</sup> This relation of the real and artificial weaves in and out of *Recasting Site*, including the issues of “authenticity” in Ethridge’s Polaroid-based prints and in de Saint Phalle’s *Quarry* where the natural light and painted light form a double layer of luminescence and shadow.

The real and artificial are also at play in the lecture format of *Hotel Palenque*. Smithson adopts the didactic medium of the lecture in order to challenge the act of “knowing.” Through irony, Smithson merges his “real” role as an artist with the artificial roles of tour guide and teacher. Smithson hopes to create a more direct experience of looking and discovery by kidnapping the packaging of institutional education that Percy believes prevents students from truly experiencing a Shakespearean sonnet or a dogfish:

The sonnet is obscured by the symbolic package which is formulated not by the sonnet itself but by the media through which the sonnet is transmitted, the media which educators believe for some reason to be transparent. The new textbook, the type, the smell of the page, the classroom, the aluminum windows and the winter sky, the personality of Miss Hawkins – these media which are supposed to transmit the sonnet may only succeed in transmitting themselves. It is only the hardest and cleverest of students who can salvage the sonnet from this many-tissued package.<sup>99</sup>

With *Passaic* and *Hotel Palenque* Smithson salvages the hotel, Passaic, New Jersey, the art magazine, the lecture, Morse’s allegorical painting, the Mayan ruins, and allegory itself. While Ethridge and de Saint Phalle interfere with their own authorship in order to maintain a fluid field of play that at once implicates them and provides moments of escape from the role of knowing producer, Smithson interferes with the institutions that

package experience through a different form of role play. As he acts out the optimism and ambitions of the tour guide, he simultaneously points out the failure inherent in guided viewing and the Western hierarchies of looking it reinforces.

## CONCLUSION:

Hierarchies are also discouraged in *Recasting Site*, infusing the exhibition with the holistic tenor of an environment that is more than the sum of its parts. In placing Mary Lucier's work with that of the younger artists and then putting Robert Smithson's Hotel Palenque last, the exhibition (like the hotel itself) is structured to appear as though it "extend[s] both in and out of time."<sup>100</sup> To accomplish a similar effect in relation to space, the skylights are left partially open and *Aspects of the Fossil Record, or from Here on Dance* is placed near the hall window. This creates a relationship (through light and vista) to the rural environment outside and connects the organic, crafted, and technological as viewers walk through the galleries. It also complements Smithson's ideas about the site/non-site by reminding viewers of an outside space. Photography as document, fiction, and object, is another means for bringing other sites into the gallery. Considering the tourist tropes and guided viewing in *Recasting Site*, it is logical that photography (the tourist's most valued tool) dominates the exhibition. Lucier's *Fossil Record* is used as a bridge between the photographic-based works in the first gallery (Ethridge's Polaroid series, Mary Lucier's *Polaroid Image Series: Room* and Robert Smithson's *A Tour of the Monuments of the Passaic, New Jersey*) and the sculpture of Robert de Saint Phalle installed in the second gallery. *Fossil Record* hangs from the ceiling in the hall between the first and second galleries. The three monitors, speakers, and wires appear to be

sculptural and organic. Landscape is most overtly referenced in its imagery – a sun, a heron, and leaves on the rainforest floor, providing a three-dimensional companion for Robert de Saint Phalle’s three sculptures. The manipulated images of the natural world also bring the elements of sun, sea, and earth indoors, contextualizing *Quarry*’s rusted barrel. Standing in the first gallery and looking toward the second, *Aspects of the Fossil Record* and *Quarry* are framed by the doorway, making a visual link between the video piece in the foreground and the sculpture in the distance.

Relationships like these give one a feeling of traveling by foot through a landscape. This independence provides the space for audiences to create imaginative connections with the art in order to regain what Walker Percy describes as sovereignty. In “The Loss of the Creature,” he writes that direct discovery can be possible in two ways:

(1) an openness of the thing before one—instead of being an exercise to be learned according to an approved mode, it is a garden of delights which beckons one; (2) a sovereignty of the knower – instead of being a consumer of a prepared experience, I am a sovereign wayfarer, a wanderer in the neighborhood of being who stumbles in the garden.<sup>101</sup>

Through the choice of artists, the placement of works in the galleries, and the interwoven treatment of media and subject, *Recasting Site* becomes a “neighborhood” primed for discovery. This is why any tour of the exhibition would be a failure. Guiding viewers would interfere with the artists’ and the curator’s intentions – and be ironic considering Smithson’s tourist parodies in *A Tour of the Monuments of the Passaic* and *Hotel Palenque*. Instead, visitors are asked to wander and explore, rediscovering the familiar –

to wind in and out of time, space, media, and moods in a manner that feels organic, sometimes humorous, and is often surprising.

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<sup>1</sup> Walker Percy, "The Loss of the Creature" (1958) in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has To Do With the Other* (New York: Picador, 1975), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Walker Percy, "The Loss of the Creature," 62.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Lucier, "Organic (1978)" in *Art + Performance: Mary Lucier*, ed. Melinda Barlow, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 241.

<sup>4</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" Part One, 68; *ibid.*, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Percy, "The Loss of the Creature," 46.

<sup>6</sup> Lucier, "Organic," 241.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Mary Lucier, "Virtually Real (1995)" in *Art + Performance: Mary Lucier*, ed. Melinda Barlow, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 256; The Brooklyn Rail, "Mary Lucier with Phong Bui," by Phong Bui, March 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2007/3/art/mary-lucier>.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Lucier, interview by author, 31 January 2008, New York, phone call.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Lucier, "Virtually Real (1995)" republished in *Art + Performance: Mary Lucier*, ed. Melinda Barlow, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 256.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Mary Lucier, interview by author, 30 January 2008, New York, hand written notes, phone call, New York.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Lucier, "Organic," 242.

<sup>15</sup> Alvin Lucier, "Alvin Lucier: I Am Sitting in a Room (1969) [Score]" in *Art + Performance: Mary Lucier*, ed. Melinda Barlow, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 67.

<sup>16</sup> Lucier, "Organic," 242.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Lucier, interview with the author, 28 November 2007, New York, hand written notes, artist's studio, New York.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Lucier, "Air Writing (1975)" in *Art + Performance: Mary Lucier*, ed. Melinda Barlow, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 94.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Lucier, "Light and Death (1991)" in *Art + Performance: Mary Lucier*, ed. Melinda Barlow (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 249 – 250.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 250.

<sup>21</sup> Lucier, "Organic," 243.

<sup>22</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" Part 1, 69.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Lucier, "Organic," 241.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" Part One, 70.

<sup>27</sup> Lucier, "Organic, 243.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 74.

<sup>29</sup> Owens, "Earthwords," 123-124.

<sup>30</sup> Lucier, "Air Writing," 94.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 95.

<sup>32</sup> Roe Ethridge, interview with author, 28 January 2008, New York, e-mail.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 3 March 2008. Full quote reads, "Themes of "becoming relic" abound. I think of these Polaroids, on some level, as this type of "relic" thing."

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, 28 January 2008.

- <sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, Note: Ethridge's discussion of Atget's scene of the crime references Walter Benjamin's observation that "It has been quite justly said of him that he photographed [Paris streets] like scenes of crime," from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Walter Benjamin: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 226.
- <sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 28 January 2008.
- <sup>37</sup> Roe Ethridge, interview with the author, 14 December 2007, New York, hand written notes, artist's studio, Brooklyn.
- <sup>38</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>40</sup> Owens, "Allegorical Impulse Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," Part Two, 70.
- <sup>41</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 71.
- <sup>43</sup> Peter Frank, "Roe Ethridge: Apples and Cigarettes. At Gagosian Gallery" in *Art on paper*, 86.
- <sup>44</sup> Bennett Simpson, "Roe Ethridge," *Texte zur Kunst* no.54 (January 2004): 163.
- <sup>45</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art" in *Artforum* (September 1982):44. Quoted by Hal Foster in "Wild Signs: The Breakup of the Sign in Seventies' Art," *Social Text*, No. 21, (1989): 264.
- <sup>46</sup> Ethridge, interview with author, 2 March 2008, New York, e-mail.
- <sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, 28 January 2008.
- <sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 3 March 2008.
- <sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 2 March 2008
- <sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 3 March 2008.
- <sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 28 January 2008.
- <sup>52</sup> Roe Ethridge usually puts new and old images together. Normally, he would not exhibit a single body of work such as the Polaroid series together without including photographs from other series and dates. The Polaroid-based works would be presented as part of a larger context – one similar to their inclusion along with portraits and other images in the book *Rockaway, NY*. For *Recasting Site*, Ethridge allowed the Polaroid images to be shown as one body and the context to emerge from the relationships between his work and that of the other artists. He also worked with the curator on arranging the photographs in *Recasting Site*.
- <sup>53</sup> Roe Ethridge, artist statement in Press Release for *The Bow*, Andrew Kreps Gallery, April 27-June 1, 2002.
- <sup>54</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 5-6.
- <sup>55</sup> Ethridge, interview with author, 14 December 2007, hand written notes, artist's studio Brooklyn.
- <sup>56</sup> Robert de Saint Phalle, <http://www.desaintphalle.net/mainpages/writing.htm>
- <sup>57</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," Part Two, 63.
- <sup>58</sup> Walker Percy, "Metaphor as Mistake" (1958) in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has To Do With the Other*, (New York: Picador, 1975), 64.
- <sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 65
- <sup>60</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism" Part One, 69.
- <sup>61</sup> Robert de Saint Phalle, interview with author, 9 March 2008, New York, phone call.
- <sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, 25 March 2008, e-mail.
- <sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, 9 March 2008, phone call.
- <sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 9 March 2008, e-mail.
- <sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, 8 March 2008, phone call.
- <sup>66</sup> Percy, "Metaphor as Mistake," 79.
- <sup>67</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>68</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.
- <sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, 14 December 2007, e-mail.
- <sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, March 2008.
- <sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, 25 March 2008, phone call.
- <sup>72</sup> Robert de Saint Phalle, MFA thesis, July 22, 2007, 2.
- <sup>73</sup> Robert Smithson, Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 100.

<sup>74</sup> Percy, "The Loss of the Creature," 47.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Smithson gave the lecture as a one-time, performative work at the university of Utah. The lecture was recorded. That recording and the slides were reformatted for gallery presentation after the artist's death.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Smithson, "Insert: Robert Smithson Hotel Palenque, 1969-72" in *Parkett*, (March 1995): 119, 120, 122, 123.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, 126.

<sup>79</sup> Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 113.

<sup>80</sup> Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). Quoted by Lisa Roberts in *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 102.

<sup>81</sup> Smithson, "Insert: Robert Smithson Hotel Palenque, 1969-72," 120.

<sup>82</sup> Reynolds, 173.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 72.

<sup>84</sup> Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," 73.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Smithson wrote about and discussed entropy for much of his career. In *Entropy Made Visible* (1973), an interview with Alison Sky he said, "On the whole I would say entropy contradicts the usual notion of a mechanistic world view. In other words it's a condition that's irreversible, it's a condition that's moving towards a gradual equilibrium and it's suggested in many ways. Perhaps a nice succinct definition of entropy would be Humpty Dumpty. Like Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again. There is a tendency to treat closed systems in such a way. One might even say that the current Watergate situation is an example of entropy. You have a closed system which eventually deteriorates and starts to break apart and there's no way that you can really piece it back together again." For more about Smithson and entropy see the interview in its entirety at <http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy.htm>.

<sup>86</sup> Percy, "The Loss of the Creature," 46.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, 50

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," 69.

<sup>90</sup> Lynne Cooke, conversation with the author, 18 January 2008, New York, hand written notes, Dia administrative offices, New York.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects (1968)" in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, 112 (Berkeley: University of California Press).

<sup>92</sup> Smithson, "Insert: Robert Smithson Hotel Palenque, 1969-72," 119, 124.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, 129.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, 122

<sup>95</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," Part One, 71.

<sup>96</sup> Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," 74.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>98</sup> Ron Grianzi, "Picturable Situation: Blasted Landscapes from the 1960s," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Spring, 1994): 436 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press). Retrieved from Jstor.

<sup>99</sup> Percy, "The Loss of the Creature," 57.

<sup>100</sup> Smithson, *Hotel Palenque*, 126.

<sup>101</sup> Percy, "The Loss of the Creature," 60.