ROBERT SMITSON

He laughed softly. "I know. There's no way out. Not through the barrier. Maybe that isn't what I want, after all. But this — this — He stared at the Monument. It seems all wrong sometimes. I just can't explain it. It's the whole city. It makes me feel haywire. Then I get these flashes — ."

—Henry Kuttner, Jetting Pilot

Has Passaic replaced Rome as the eternal city?

ROBERT SMITSON

On Saturday, September 30, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue. I bought a copy of the New York Times and a Signet paperback called Earthworks by Brain W. Alsics. Next I went to visit booth 21 and purchased a one-way ticket to Passaic. After that I went up to the upper bus level (platform 173) and boarded the number 30 bus of the Inter-City Transportation Co.

I sat down and opened the Times. I glanced over the art section: a "Collectors' Choice," "Curtain's Choice" at A.M. Sachs Gallery (a letter I got in the mail that morning invited me "to play the game before the show closes October 4th"), Walter Scharzak was selling "Prints, Drawings, Watercolors" at "33% off," Elmore Jenkins, the "Romantic Realist," was showing at Barzansky Galleries, XVIII — XIX Century English Furniture on sale at Parke-Bernet, "New Directions in German Graphic," at Goethe House, and on page 29 was John Canaday's column. He was writing on Themes and the Usual Variations. 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 gray, 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. Canaday referred to the picture as "standing confidently along with other allegorical representations of the arts, sciences, and high ideals that universities foster." My eyes stumbled over the newpaper, over such headlines as "Seasonal Upswing," "A Shuffle Service," and "Moving a 7,000 Pound Sculpture Can Be a Fine Work of Art, Too." Other gems of Canaday's dazzled my mind as I passed through Secaucus. "Realistic wax-works of raw meat beset by vermin," (Paul Thek), "Mr. Bush and his colleagues are wasting their time," (Jack Bush), "a book, an apple on a saucer, a rumpled cloth," (Thyra Davidson). Outside the bus window a Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge flew by — a symphony in orange and blue. On page 31 in Big Letters: THE EMERGING POLICE STATE IN AMERICA SPY GOVERNMENT. "In this book you will learn... what an Infinity Transmitter is."

The bus turned off Highway 3, down Orient Way in Rutherford.

I read the blurbs and skimmed through Earthworks. The first sentence reads, "The dead man drifted along in the breeze." It seemed the book was about a soil shortage, and the Earthworks referred to the manufacture of artificial soil. The sky over Rutherford was a clear cobalt blue, a perfect Indian summer day, but the sky in Earthworks was a "great black and brown shield on which moisture gleamed."

The bus passed over the first monument. I pulled the buzzer-cord and got off at the corner of Union Avenue and River Drive. The monument was a bridge over Passaic River that con-
connected Bergen County with Passaic County. Noon
day sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the
bridge and the river 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 under-
neath the river existed as an enormous movie
film that showed nothing but a continuous blank.
The steel road that passed over the water
was in part an open grating flanked by woode
sidewalks, held up by a heavy set of beams,
while above, a ramshackle network hung in the
air. A rusty sign glared in the sharp atmos-
phere, making it hard to read. A date flashed in
the sunshine . . . 1899 . . . No . . . 1896 . . . may-
be (at the bottom of the rust and glare was the
name Dean & Westbrook Contractors, N.Y.). I was
completely controlled by the Instamatic (or what
the rationalists call a camera). The glassy air of
New Jersey defined the structural parts of the
monument as I took snapshot after snapshot. A
barge seemed fixed to the surface of the water as
it came toward the bridge, and caused the bridge-
keeper to close the gates. From the banks of Pas-
saic I watched the bridge rotate on a central axis
in order to allow an inert rectangular shape to pass
with its unknown cargo. The Passaic (West) end
of the bridge rotated south, while the Rutherford
(East) end of the bridge rotated north; such rota-
tions suggested the limited movements of an out-
moded world. “North” and “South” hung over the
static river in a bi-polar manner. One could refer
to this bridge as the “Monument of Dislocated
Directions.”

Along the Passaic River banks were many minor
monuments such as concrete abutments that sup-
ported the shoulders of a new highway in the
process of being built. River Drive was in part
bulldozed and in part intact. It was hard to tell
the new highway from the old road; they were
both confounded into a unitary chaos. Since it
was Saturday, many machines were not working,
and this caused them to resemble prehistoric crea-
tures trapped in the mud, or, better, extinct ma-
chines—mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their
skin. On the edge of this prehistoric Machine Age
were pre- and post-World War II suburban houses.
The houses mirrored themselves into colorless-
ness. A group of children were throwing rocks
at each other near a ditch. “From now on you’re
not going to come on our hide-out. And I mean
it!” said a little blonde girl who had been hit
with a rock.

As I walked north along what was left of River
Drive, I saw a monument in the middle of the
river — it was a pumping derrick with a long
pipe attached to it. The pipe was supported in
part by a set of pontoons, while the rest of it ex-
tended about three blocks along the river bank
till it disappeared into the earth. One could hear
debris rattling in the water that passed through the great pipe.

Nearby, on the river bank, was an artificial crater that contained a pale limpid pond of water, and from the side of the crater protruded six large pipes that gushed the water of the pond into the river. This constituted a monumental fountain that suggested six horizontal smokestacks that seemed to be flooding the river with liquid smoke. The great pipe was in some enigmatic way connected with the infernal fountain. It was as though the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice, and a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have an orgasm. A psychoanalyst might say that the landscape displayed "homosexual tendencies," but I will not draw such a cross anthropomorphic conclusion. I will merely say, "It was there."

Across the river in Rutherford one could hear the faint voice of a P. A. system and the weak cheers of a crowd at a football game. Actually, the landscape was no landscape, but a particular kind of heliotype" (Nabokov), a kind of self-destructing postcard world of failed immunity and oppressive grandeur. I had been wandering in a moving picture that I couldn't quite picture, but just as I became perplexed, I saw a green sign that explained everything:

**YOUR HIGHWAY TAXES? AT WORK**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Funds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal Highway</td>
<td>U.S. Dept. of Commerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust Funds</td>
<td>Bureau of Public Roads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,867,000</td>
<td>State Highway Funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2,867,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey State Highway Dept.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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That zero panorama seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is — all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the "romantic ruin" because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built. This anti-romantic mise-en-scene suggests the discredited concept of time and many other "out of date" things. But the suburbs exist without a rational past and without the "big events" of history. Oh, maybe there are a few statues, a legend, and a couple of eons, but no past — just what passes for a future. A Utopia minus a bottom, a place where the machines are idle, and the sun has turned to glass, and a place where the Passaic Concrete Plant (253 River Drive) does a good business in STONE, BITUMINOUS, SAND, and CEMENT. Passaic seems full of "holes" compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancties that define, without trying, the memory traces of an abandoned set of futures. Such futures are found in grade B Utopian films, and then imitated by the suburbanites. The windows of City Motors auto sales proclaim the existence of Utopia through 1968 WIDE TRACK PONTIACS — Executive, Bonneville, Tempest, Grand Prix, Firebirds, CTS, Catalina, and LeVans — that visual incantation marked the situation.

Next I descended it must say the situation I in a new territory! (Baldwin says, "It can't be in fact charge — a traffic light does.") a lower stage of future future behind in order future! Yes, I did. Next point in my suburban C

Passaic center looms each "store" in it was a chain of adjectives again to run out of film. Actually, Passaic center instead a typical abyss a great place for a go door sculpture show!" At the Golden Coach I had my lunch, and loomed at the orange-yellow pan, and read a notice

**READ IT**

This film will be replenished, labelling, or pack, by our negligence or change, that sale of this film is without...

**EASTMAN KODAK**

THIS CARTRIDGE OR SPOLIATION — 12 EXPOS ASA 125 22 DIN.

After that I returned...
is an artificial crater
son of water, and
protruded six large
pond into the
mental fountain that
attracted—what seemed
li a lake. The
stic., connected
was as though the
some hidden tech-
a monstrous neural
organ. A psycho-
and displayed
I will not draw such
fuson. I will merely
and one could hear
stem and the weak
ball game. Actually,
appe, but “a partic-
or, a kind of self-
failed immortality
had been wandering
ldn’t quite picture,
d, I saw a green sign

Next I descended into a set of used car lots. I
must say the situation seemed like a change. Was
it a new territory? (An English artist, Michael
baldwin, says, “It could be asked if the country
does in fact change. It does not in the sense
of traffic light does.”) Perhaps I had slipped into
a lower stage of futurity—did I leave the real
future behind in order to advance into a false
future? Yes, I did. Reality was behind me at that
point in my suburban Odyssey.

Passaic center looked like a dull adjective.
Each “store” in it was an adjective unto the next.
A chain of adjectives disguised as stores. I be-
gan to run out of film, and I was getting hungry.
Actually, Passaic center was no center—it was
instead a typical abyss or an ordinary void. What
a great place for a gallery? Or maybe an “out-
door sculpture show” would pep that place up.

At the Golden Coach Diner (11 Central Avenue)
had my lunch, and loaded my Instamatic. I look-
at the orange-yellow box of Kodak Verichrome
film, and read a notice that said:

READ THIS NOTICE:
This film will be replaced if defective in manufac-
ture, labeling, or packaging, even though caused
by our negligence or other fault. Except for such
replacement, the sale or any subsequent handling
of this film is without other warranty or liability.

AXES 21
Dept. of Commerce
101 Broadway
1005 Broadway

The Sand-Box Monument (also called The Desert).
(Photograph, Robert Smithson)

After that I returned to Passaic, or was it the
kershit—for all I know unimaginative sub-
scious could have been a clumsy eternity, a cheap
stall of The City of the Immortals. But who am I
to tell such a thought? I walked down a park-
ing lot that covered the old railroad tracks which
at one time ran through the middle of Passaic.
That monumental parking lot divided the city in
half, turning it into a mirror and a reflection—
but the mirror kept changing places with the re-
fection. One never knew what side of the mirror
three was on. There was nothing interesting or
then strange about that flat monument, yet it
forwarded kind of cliché idea of infinity; perhaps
the “secrets of the universe” are just as pedes-
taline—not to say dreary. Everything about the
site remained wrapped in blandness and littered
with shiny cars—one after another they extended
into a blinding nebulous. The indifferent backs of the
blandness and collected the remaining afternoon
sun. I took a few listless, entropic snapshots of that
luscious monument. If the future is “out of date” and
“old fashioned,” then I had been in the future.
Had been on a planet that had a map of Passaic
drawn over it, and a rather imperfect map of that.
A sidereal map marred up with “lines” the size of
moon, and “squares” and “blocks” the size of
buildings. At any moment my feet were apt to
fall through the cardboard ground. I am con-
vincing that the future is lost somewhere in the
dumps of the non-historical past; it is in yester-
day’s newspapers, in the jejune advertisements
of science-fiction movies, in the false mirror of
our rejected dreams. Time turns metaphors into
things, and stacks them up in cold rooms, or
places them in the celestial playgrounds of the
suburbs.

Has Passaic replaced Rome as The Eternal City?
If certain cities of the world were placed end to
end in a straight line according to size, starting
with Rome, where would Passaic be in that im-
possible progression? Each city would be a three-
dimensional mirror that would reflect the next
city into existence. The limits of eternity seem
to contain such nefarious ideas.

The last monument was a sand box or a model
desert, Under the dead light of the Passaic a-
noon the desert became a map of infinite di-
integration and forgetfulness. This monument
of minute particles blurred under a bleakly glowing
sun, and suggested the sullen dissolution of en-
tire continents, the dying up of oceans no
longer were there green forests and high moun-
tains—all that existed were millions of grains of
sand, a vast deposit of bones and stones pul-
verized into dust. Every grain of sand would be a
dead metaphor that equaled timeless, and to
decipher such metaphors would take one through
the false mirror of eternity. This sand box somehow
doubled as an open grave—a grave that chil-
dren cheerfully play in.

... all sense of reality was gone. In its place had
come deep-seated illusions, absence of pupillary
reaction to light, absence of knee reaction—
symptoms all of progressive cerebral menin-
gitis: the blanketing of the brain ...

-Louis Sullivan, “One of the greatest of all archi-

tects,” quoted in Michel Botor’s Mobile.

I should now like to prove the irreversibility
of eternity by using a jejune experiment for proving
entropy. Picture in your mind’s eye the sand box
divided in half with black sand on one side and
white sand on the other. We take a child and
have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the
box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn
gray; after that we have him run anti-clockwise,
but the result will not be a restoration of the
original division but a greater degree of greyness
and an increase of entropy.

Of course, if we filmed such an experiment we
could prove the reversibility of eternity by show-
ing the film backwards, but soon or later the
film itself would crumble or get lost and enter
the state of irreversibility. Somehow this
suggests that the cinema offers a transitory tem-
porary escape from physical existence. The
false immortality of the film gives the viewer an
illusion of control over eternity—but “the super-
stars” are fading.