

Walking and looking.

Having read Christian von Wissel's *Operations of Recognition - Seeing Urbanising Landscapes with the Feet*, I went to the original on which the writing is based: Robert Smithson's *Tour of the Monuments of Passaic* and also read some of his other works.

Smithson is an artist, philosopher and poet. His writing illuminates; it shines with wit, dry humour and irony. He makes metaphors and similes that tease the reader and shift the reader's perceptual or conceptual stance so that the everyday is rendered unusual. This is what artists in whatever medium do; they enable their audience to encounter the world - aspects of the world - from a different perspective. Smithson's account of his walk is a mixture of precise descriptions, intriguing interpretations - the metaphors and similes - and (mainly dystopian) speculation.

Smithson's art and writings do not all arise out of walking and while many of the disparate works deal with the various landscapes (urban, sub-urban, watery, deserted wasteland...) he does not confine himself to landscapes. Neither, when he is out *en plein air*, does he confine himself to observing, recording and ruminating; he acts upon the environment, interrupts reality, adjusts and distorts.

In analytical terms, Smithson's contributions to the understanding of urbanizing landscapes lie in a series of perceptual shifts, which allow him to render remarkable the unremarkable through materially thinking the environment - the is, by perceiving it by means of seeing it "with the feet". (CvW)

However, Smithson's 'analytical tools' are not value free. Throughout CvW's account of Smithson's walk CvW emphasises (almost relishes) Smithson's negative statements about the urban and suburban environments and he then extrapolates from these to make further judgements about the scene, just prior to the passage quoted above appears the following:

...Smithson recognizes the landscape as being self-made by its suburban inhabitants. And then CvW adds his own comment: ***The ruins in reverse (CvW omits the quote marks around this phrase of Smithson's) are all but one the products of infrastructure projects conceived to guarantee the mobility needs of modern, car-based, everyday (urban) life.*** CvW follows this assertion with a number of dour remarks and quotes about urbanization.

Now, CvW argues that Smithson provides a means of urban research with one of the key concepts being the identification of monuments - which appear to me to be things that stick out in the landscape and are noticed by the observer. CvW cites Tim Ingold "***...regarding the formation of landscapes from within,*** (CvW's emphasis) ***these monuments help to describe the urbanizing landscape as 'the world as it is known the those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them' They give testimony of the material experiences that make up living in the unbanizing landscape...***"

I have two difficulties with this idea:

The first is that the identification of monuments, the picking out of the noteworthy elements of the environment, is quite random and depends upon the observer's whims and interests of the moment. What is noteworthy to one passer by might be glanced over and ignored by another. Just as the camera isolates a segment of the landscape, cutting off that bit from its relationship to that from which it came - a slight shift of angle, a step further on or

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back would produce a different picture with different edges, so the observer picks out what he or she thinks is relevant for discussion and ignores the rest.

My second difficulty concerns the statement that the monuments 'describe' 'the world as it is known to those who dwell therein.' Do they? Does the fact that the incoming observer notices a pile of tyres and interprets it in a particular way really say anything about how the inhabitants of the neighbourhood see it, feel about it, relate to it, maybe even use it?

To research the urban environment you would need a set of criteria made explicit as to what aspects of the environment you are going to count as monuments and this would need to be set before the walk took place, not created while walking.

To make statements about how the world feels to those who dwell within it, you would need to ask them. This simple sounding suggestion is really massively complex; however it is not for the observer to impute feelings, attitudes, interpretations, understandings to those who dwell within. The observer cannot claim the role of universal dweller.

The outcome of research is findings, data, that could be replicated by subsequent researchers. Observations and opinions are personal, they might strike chords and resonances with readers but they might just as easily provoke disagreement and alternatives.

In his penultimate section, CvW argues that Smithson's 'operations of recognition present a responsive model for understanding sub and peri-urban landscapes out of the bodily and visual relation one establishes with their materiality'. What I take him to mean by this is that by being in the landscape, by walking through it and closely observing, describing and interpreting what is seen and felt (and heard and smelt) and making analogues between those observations and other elements in the wider world the 'urban practitioner' (I'm not sure what that designation means) is able to gain an understanding of the way in which the landscape became as it is and how it is now transformed the previous environment. This is basically the first of CvW's three ways in which the 'method' (my quotes) contributes towards understanding the urban environment. The second and third refer to walking as a way of being in and going through the environment and thinking about it while being in and of it.

Participant observation has a firm place among the methods of data collection available to the social scientist. It is a form of qualitative research that can provide more finely nuanced data than more quantitative methods. But it is not without shortcomings; interpretations of data may be disputed and replicability may be difficult. To be successful it needs a strong theoretical base from which hypotheses may be constructed and background assumptions, prejudices and expectations cleared away and it needs a clear method of data collection.

Smithson's and CvW walks provide observations and insights about the environments they explore but in the way that poetry and literature provide pathways into an understanding of aspects of the human condition. I'm not sure that Smithson's example can be taken as a social research method because it is so unmethodical.

Finally, where are the people in Smithson's and CvW's landscapes? Smithson observes one, Rosie, victim of a thrown stone. CvW refers to none, seeing only the marks made by them in the dust and their detritus. People make cityscapes just as they in turn form the people, to describe the one without the other is just half the job.