PARTIALLY BURIED UNIVERSITY

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Robert Smithson realized one of his first works of Land Art at Kent, Ohio in January 1970. *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) was an example of the process he called "entropy made visible". At the time, Smithson said he had always wanted to bury a building. For my part, I have always wanted to unearth a Smithson.

Fig 1. Partially Buried University, 3D interactive application, 2010. Karen O'Rourke, production: CITU.

Fig 2. Partially Buried University, 3D interactive application, 2010. Karen O'Rourke, production: CITU.

Fig 3. Fig. 1. Site of Robert Smithson's Partially Buried Woodshed (1970), photograph: Karen O'Rourke (2005).

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The Centre Saint Charles has a problem with rain water collecting on the roof and infiltrating the lecture hall just below. Inspired by two of Smithson's projects, “Partially Buried University” involves creating a garden on the roof terrace to absorb the residual water, reduce our carbon footprint and contribute to sustainable development. Since the roof was never intended to support the weight of growing trees and shrubs, it is likely that at some point it will collapse. The garden may then develop on its own, with weeds springing up throughout the building.

A 3-D model of the roof was built, simulating weather conditions and plant growth, thanks to models developed by engineers and scientists at the ECP-INRIA.(i) The visitor stands in front of a 3-D VR projection of the building, on the second floor overlooking the roof which has been made into a garden. She chooses a seed, putting it in a basket, then moves through the garden to plant it. After a number of people have sown poplars, cypresses, pines, maples and chestnut trees, the garden grows quickly, the roof just may give way and visitors suddenly find themselves climbing over rubble in the lecture hall below.

I will document the creation of *Partially Buried University* from preliminary research on Smithson's conception of entropy, and the public reception of one of his earthworks, to the realization involving artists, scientists and developers.(ii)

Partially Buried Woodshed

On January 22, 1970, Robert Smithson "partially buried" a woodshed by having twenty backhoe loads of soil dumped on it until the central beam cracked. Usually artists and theoreticians are concerned with the genesis of the art work. How did it come into being? From his interest in entropy and what he called “the dialectical landscape”, Robert Smithson focused on process, the long-term and medium-term evolution of sites before and after the artist's intervention.

Smithson had been invited to spend a week as artist-in-residence at Kent State University by the organizers of the Creative Arts Festival. Self-taught, well known in avant-garde circles, shown in Europe ("When attitudes become form", 1969), published in *Artforum* and *Arts Magazine*, he had begun to realize his first earthworks in brownfield sites. On the Kent campus, he intended to pour mud down a slope as he had done with asphalt a few months earlier in Rome. Yet that winter in northern Ohio the ground was frozen solid: there was no way he could pour anything. Suffering from the flu, the artist was ready to return to New York. The students gathered around him at Professor Brinsley Tyrrell's house were not willing to see him go so soon: What else could he do? Upon reflection, he mentioned the idea of burying a building.(iii)

In an old farm the university had just bought at the far edge of campus, one of the students spotted an abandoned woodshed, filled with dirt, gravel and firewood. While the artist made sketches, the teacher and the students spent the day carting away most of the wood. A local contractor was hired to move twenty bucketloads of earth from another site on campus and pile them on the shed. According to a witness, “the earth was put on scoop by scoop, like applying paint with a brush”.(iv) When the center beam cracked, the work was completed: it announced the beginning of the process of entropy. Smithson took snapshots with an instamatic camera. The local newspaper ran the headline "It's a Mud Mud Mud World".(v)

Partially Buried Woodshed was one of his first works on a large scale in the landscape. On January 22 he wrote a deed, giving the structure a title and a monetary value (it was Dwan, the artist's New York gallery, who came up with the price). He donated it to the university to prevent it from being bulldozed. “It was given a $10.000 value because if we were going to try to preserve this thing, then we could argue money,” said Brinsley Tyrrell, “The money thing was all a game...to convey its importance to people to whom you couldn't talk about aesthetics.”(vi)
Thus began the slow decline of the woodshed, which gradually lost its logs, roof, walls, as the work was gaining notoriety. Estimated at ten thousand dollars at the time of its completion, it was worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars at its demise fourteen years later. Today the object itself no longer exists, while the work has become legendary. Its bibliography contains dozens of titles.

In April Smithson was in Utah to build *Spiral Jetty* at Rozel Point on the shores of the Great Salt Lake. At about the same time, Kent State University was the scene of protest against the American invasion of Cambodia. The Ohio National Guard was called in. On May 4, guardsmen opened fire on demonstrators, killing four students and wounding nine others. The campus was evacuated, twenty-five students arrested. Some time after the university was closed, on the lintel of the shed appeared a graffiti painted in large white letters: “May 4 Kent 70”. As Nancy Holt remarked later, “the students obviously recognized the parallel. Piling the earth until the central beam cracked, as though...the whole country were cracking. It was the end of one society and the beginning of the next.” (vii). It certainly divided Americans into

two camps, the peaceniks and the war mongers. Kent State was thought by many to be the last great nationwide protest, the swan song of sixties' era student revolts, paving the way for Ronald Reagan's “conservative revolution” ten years later.

On July 20, 1973 Smithson was killed in a plane crash in Texas while preparing his project *Amarillo Ramp*. Although he had specified when he made the work that he wanted it to be allowed “to go back to the land”, his widow, Nancy Holt, considered it an important work and petitioned for it to be preserved, and maintained.

In the years following the killings, Kent State's reputation was tarnished. Eager to attract students and alumni donors, the University administration invested in sports facilities. Oblivious of the work's growing importance, Kent State President Glenn Oldsasked the university architect to prepare a project for enhancing the campus which would involve the demolition of the woodshed. It now stood near the new entrance to campus, on the way to the football field. To make matters worse, in March, 1975 during spring break, an arsonist set fire to the shed. The left side was destroyed, while the right side, where the earth had been piled up, was spared. This gave university officials added reason to demolish the entire structure: it was not the original, they argued, it was dangerous (visitors could be injured by the debris), it was ugly. A group of art professors objected. In the contemporary art world, *Partially Buried Woodshed* had become an object of pilgrimage: visitors came from afar to admire one of the earliest works of "Land Art". The University Arts Commission voted to preserve the work. After much negotiation, a compromise was reached: the shed remained, but the gardeners who maintained the campus were allowed to cart off debris that fell on the ground. Later the university would plant a grove of conifers around it, a barricade meant to hide the view of the “eyesore” from the road.

Visiting Kent State in 2003 I was struck by the beauty of the spot where Smithson had caused a chain of events nobody could have foreseen.[fig. 1] The process contines even today. Nancy Holt believes that it is characteristic of works of art to provoke a cascade of effects: "Works of art tend to be focal points and centers of energy that other people spin off of, and that's because works of art have no other reason for existence. They are not there for any functional reason: so they get right to the heart of things."(viii). For some today (like Dorothy Shinn), Smithson's work continues to live its life, while others, including Brinsley Tyrrell, believe that beyond a certain point the art work no longer exists: for them the site is a ruin with only archaeological value.

Partially Buried University

At first sight *Partially Buried University* (fig. 2] has little in common with its namesake. It was designed in the framework of the project Terra Numerica which developed "new tools to model the 3D city and explore new forms of urban representation". Whereas the Smithson work was experimental, more or less improvised to fit the situation, my project was more of a top-down, highly planned affair that took two years to conceive and several months to model. Smithson was inventing an art form he called “earthworks”, I was interested in imagining artistic uses for technologies developed for the military and industry.

The concept of "competitive cluster" (pôles de compétitivité) is part of an industrial policy launched by the French Interministerial Committee for Planning and Development (CIADT) in 2004 to increase

France's capacity for innovation. It aims to foster an active partnership between industry, research centers and training organizations from both the public and private sectors in a strategy "designed to create synergies around innovative projects conducted jointly in the perspective of one or more markets." Led byThalès, Terra Numerica mobilized seventeen partner organizations (all members of the cluster Cap Digital) for four years to represent the large urban areas: "urban heritage in 3D for the benefit of sustainable cities."

The context is that of a large, "top down" project driven and supported by the governmental bodies to increase the attractiveness and visibility of France in the field of information technology and communication. As a member of Cap Digital, the CITU laboratory focused on scenarios using augmented reality and virtual reality. A 3D application was produced by the CITU with the help of partners at the ECP-INRIA.

In my scenario, the visitor stands on the first floor of the Centre Saint Charles. She can move around the area on the terrace set aside for the garden, visit the rooms and corridors that overlook the terrace, move down one floor to the lecture hall, move up to classrooms on the higher floors. At the entrance to the terrace, a shelf contains several varieties of seeds for her to plant. After choosing one, she must move around to place the plant where it will begin to grow. As the number and size of the plants increase, the terrace becomes fragile and collapses into the lecture hall below.

For Smithson, entropy meant not only the deterioriation of order, but more importantly, “the clash of uncoordinated orders”.(vii) He told an interviewer “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.... 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.”(x)

Yet the action of entropy over time is contradicted by other processes. “Scientists have long been baffled by the existence of spontaneous order in the universe.” writes mathematician Steven Strogatz. “The laws of thermodynamics seem to dictate the opposite, that nature should inexorably degenerate toward a state of greater disorder, greater entropy. Yet all around us we see magnificent structures -- galaxies, cells, ecosystems, human beings -- that have somehow managed to assemble themselves. This enigma bedevils all of science today. Only in a few situations do we have a clear understanding of how order arises on its own.”(xi)
In *Partially Buried University* the viewer can see a projection in time (accelerated): the evolution of the garden, the collapse of the terrace, the invasion of the biosphere. The whole process has been greatly simplified, but users can continue to plant trees even after the collapse. The idea of collectively maintaining a garden on the terrace above the lecture hall to absorb the excess water could provide a functional solution to an architectural problem. The process creates a tension that must be taken into account, to ensure perhaps that the garden does not collapse. I would like to maintain the tension between the work of “entropy”, the possible collapse of the roof, which would disrupt the course of events, as breaking the center beam of the woodshed did in Kent, and the agency of users (humans or plants) who might take advantage of the breach to build something new. As Smithson's work seemed to symbolically represent the rift in American culture of the seventies, so *Partially Buried University* could also refer obliquely to the French university strike in the spring of 2009.
I would like the final work to maintain this tension. What do we want to do after all? Plant a garden? Bury a university? And if being "ecologically correct" meant cutting off the branch on which we are seated? Others may argue that the "invasion" of the Centre Saint Charles by "weeds" ("vagabonds" as

Gilles Clément calls them) is the best-case scenario. In ecology, entropy is a measure of biodiversity. By introducing plants "foreign" to the terrace, we could contribute to this diversity.
The project should reveal the dramatic tension between entropy and organization, between the act of an artist "demiurge" and the inhabitants of the Centre who live with the consequences. They may want the artwork to be removed (and the roof rebuilt), but they might also take advantage of its action to create something else. This is not necessarily in the lecture hall, as I suggest in the prototype, but if the roof (or part of the roof) collapses, that's where we fall. The result does not depend entirely on the growth of vegetation, human users could develop improvised architectures, transform the lecture hall into a duplex, add a spiral staircase, a skylight.

References and Notes:

i Digiplante : Mathematical Modelling of Plant Growth http://digiplante.saclay.inria.fr/

ii. "Partially Buried Unversity" was produced by the CITU (Universités Paris 1 - Paris 8) as part of the TerraNumerica Program. Software development by Jordan Prot. The plant growth models courtesy of ECP-INRIA. The project would not have been possible without the energy and talent of the entire Citu team.

iii. Dorothy Shinn, Robert Smithson's Partially Buried Woodshed, Kent State University School of Art, 1990.

iv. Robert Swick, quoted by William Bierman, "Spare the Woodshed! Burn the Woodshed!", Akron Beacon-Journal, July 20, 1975.

V. A derogative allusion to a popular 1963 film, It's a Mad Mad Mad World. as Smithson notes in "Entropy Made Visible", Interview with Alison Sky, On Site N°4, 1973, in Jack Flam, Ed., Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings, University of California Press, 1996:307.

vi. Brinsley Tyrrell quoted by Dorothy Shinn: 4.

vii. Nancy Holt, quoted by Dorothy Shinn: 5.

viii.Nancy Holt, ibid: 16, n. 19.

ix.Lawrence Alloway, "Robert Smithson's Development", Artforum, November 1972: 53-61.

x. Robert Smithson, "Entropy Made Visible".

xi. Steven Strogatz, Sync: How Order Emerges From Chaos In the Universe, Nature, and Daily Life, New York: Hyperion, 2003