

Psychosis and the Sublime in American Art: Rothko and Smithson

The Sublime Object

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This paper addresses the work of Mark Rothko (1903–1970) and Robert Smithson (1938–1973), and, referring to the philosopher Kant and psychoanalyst Lacan, discusses how the sublime can have a psychotic aspect. It argues that Kant's categorical imperative, for all its attempts to exclude self-interest and the pathological aspects of the hypothetical imperative, establishes a frame not only for sublime aesthetic experience but also for psychotic delusion.

Rothko

It is often, if somewhat crudely, proposed that American postmodern culture is, or was, a culture of ethical and aesthetic relativity in which master narratives or hard and fast moral rules broke down. If this is put in Kant's terms of moral reasoning then post-modernism may be regarded as an age of *hypothetical* imperatives. If you want x then practical reasoning is employed to calculate the means, y, the formula for which may be expressed thus: 'If you want x then you must do y.' Kant, of course, thought very little of this type of instrumental moral reasoning. In this comparison with Kant, clichéd as it is in part, American modernism appears as an age of the categorical imperative, 'you must do x'. Regardless of personal gain or loss, one must do x.

It is generally accepted that American modernism had principles that came from within, that is, from the demands of reason itself. These demands were meant to be unconditional, even if they conflicted with the artistic challenge of implementing them in the real world.¹ We all know the stories of the honourable struggles of the abstract expressionists, and the way these artists set aside personal gain for the moral high ground of a truly modernist painting. As the painter [Mark Rothko](#) (1903–1970) put it, 'Truth must strip itself of self, which can be very deceptive'.²

The idea that I would like to explore here is that Rothko and many of his colleagues adhered to a proto-sublime categorical imperative in their views about painting, and that they adhered to this idea sometimes right to the 'psychotic bitter end'. Before saying why this bitter end might be called psychotic, I would like to start by saying a little more about why this categorical imperative might be called sublime. For this I would like to turn, somewhat unusually, to Kant's early

work on moral reasoning, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). Here Kant argued that wilful adherence to a categorical imperative marked the beginning of proper ethical judgement because such adherence comes from the part of the self that is autonomous, super-sensible and rational. One cannot hit the high road to the sublime by starting from that other part of the self, the part that lives in the phenomena of direct bodily experience and self-interest, otherwise known as the will to enjoy. The practical morality of the hypothetical imperative lacks the capacity to become sublime, not just because it allows considerations of personal interest to intervene in judgement, but because such piecemeal moral rules quickly run into mutual contradiction. The categorical imperative, on the other hand, has the capacity to become sublime because it touches on the principle of free action. Boiled down to a maxim, any true moral judgement only has validity if it is universally and necessarily binding upon us. As Kant put it, 'Act on the maxim which can at the same time be made a universal law.'³

I should like to suggest that it was the influential art critic Clement Greenberg (1909–94) in his devoted insistence on Kantian aesthetics and medium specificity that provided American modernist painting with its explicit categorical imperative (Greenberg called it 'immanent criticism') in his essay 'Modernist Painting' (1960).⁴ We know the maxim so well today that it seems little more than a toy: that the medium of painting was the art that dealt with a tension between flatness and depth. This maxim was, in effect, the universal explicit law, the principle to which all American modernist painters had to adhere in order to warrant the name. The modernist pursuit of pure abstract form was envisioned as a pursuit that was compelled by the principle of painting (its internal categorical imperative of flatness and depth) and this imperative was meant to cleanse the pursuit of painting of any personal or pathological elements. In America there was a general turn away from surrealist practices over the course of the 1940s because of their dependence on personal unconscious content. The move toward abstraction was partly a move to avoid the personal, subjective and pathological. But this shift from the hypothetical to the categorical ultimately stages Rothko's encounter with a psychotic bitter end.

If Kant's work on moral reasoning refigured European enlightenment ethics and American modernist art criticism, by Greenberg's day it also had to contend with psychoanalytic work on the Oedipus complex and the superego, work that

Rothko and the artist [Robert Smithson](#) (1938–1973) knew well. This work drew analytic attention to the fact that the command of reason as lodged in its maxims was always accompanied by an imaginary figure. Indeed, even Kant recognised Freud's basic point when he says that, in the subject's sublime assent to universal law there is always 'an indeterminate relationship between the faculties of the imagination and of reason'. It is in this register of 'the imagination' that Freud sees the function of the superego.

For Freud, the law of reason resounded with the superego, and, taking into account the Lacanian cultural critic Slavoj Žižek's *Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Rothko and Smithson should perhaps be seen in the context of a century that was deeply marked by the problem of the superego and its all too often tyrannical function in ideology. The battle of ideological imperatives, fascism and communism in its command of duty to the fatherland or to the proletariat, barely masked a battle of superegos. Rothko in the 1940s, and the much younger Smithson in the 1950s, were very much concerned with psychoanalytic texts by Carl Jung, and these as well as other texts raised for them the problem of the superego, where something in the function of the paternal metaphor that should bind society to just laws instead breaks out in such a way that it takes command of the body politic in a vast spectacle of carnage and savage enjoyment. ⁵

The Rothko catalogue is interesting here. In the early 1940s Rothko was fond of the painter [Adolph Gottlieb](#) and the latter's endorsement of the Jungian conception of painting as a medium for clarifying and unifying discordant archetypes within the subject. In reading Jung, Gottlieb turned a therapeutic practice for the treatment of schizophrenia into a form of self-exploration for the neurotic by making painting into an archaeological dig into childhood experiences and personal inner conflicts, thereby raising such experiences to the level of historical myth. Throughout the 1940s Rothko, tired of such 'self-expression', progressively abandoned the Jungian and surrealist project of revitalising historical mythology. In its stead, abstract painting, he thought, held out the promise of new types of spaces, tensions and limits as a means of communicating an 'I' that was thought of at the time to be fundamentally pre-linguistic or, more specifically, pre-narrative. Rothko's friendship with the abstract painter [Clyfford Still](#) marks the beginning of this shift. Rothko once said that Still was 'creating new counterparts to replace the old mythological hybrids who have

lost their pertinence in the intervening centuries.’ The new counterparts were flatness and depth as played out in purely abstract painting. This was a way of painting that required no objects in a narrative, no story in the sense of a symbolic with its historical reservoir of mythological beings and laws. Abstraction offered a way to paint an underlying categorical level of what Rothko called ‘the Spirit of Myth’.

Rothko’s literary preference at the time was Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) with its sense of a subject that has abandoned all historical forms of myth for a new historical subject that is engaged in a pre-narrative conflict. Rothko cites Nietzsche to provide a way to verbalise his sense of modern tragedy. A little later Greenberg starts to call on Kant and the sublime. Rothko also occasionally put his project in more Jungian terms. If surrealism gained access to the domain of the Jungian archetypes, abstraction gained entry to the Who or the Thing that guarantees this domain of metaphors, the ‘Spirit of Myth’ itself. In his pursuit of subjective stability and coherence Rothko follows Clyfford Still by trying to paint directly in the flatness of reality a little fragment, a metonym, or little piece of the Thing. In Lacanian terms Rothko attempts to paint the Other of the Symbolic, the radical unconscious alterity in mythopoetic language, or what Freud would term the superego behind the law. This is how Rothko’s biographer James Breslin described it:

Rothko ... constantly felt the imminent danger of being ‘smothered’ by encroaching physical, social, or domestic circumstances. His new paintings created a breathing space. Yet these paintings do not seek simply to ‘transcend’ the walls of an unalterable external reality by soaring upward into either an untrammelled freedom or a vaporous mysticism. Rather, by (in Rothko’s words) pulverising the verge of dissolution – his works free us from the weight, solidity, and definition of a material existence, whose constricting pressures we still feel. Rothko combines freedom and constraint and if these paintings create ‘dramas’ with the shapes as the ‘performers’ they stage a struggle to be free. ⁷

The subject makes a powerful pulverising rational response; he conjures the Thing itself. Rothko does not blithely apply the maxim of flatness and depth. Instead, he invents the ethical grounds on which the maxim is necessary. It is the way to turn flat materiality into the deep ethical dignity of a Thing that can resist the powerful smothering Other that threatens him with dissolution.

Why does the appearance of the maxim of flatness and depth change the paintings and launch Rothko from a mild late surrealism to the status of sublime American modernist hero? I would argue it is because he calls upon his inner sense of a sublime ethical Thing as a defence against the commands of a sadistic superego agency, an Other that takes pleasure in his dissolution as a subject, that takes away his enjoyment with its irrational contingent demands.



Fig.1 Mark Rothko

Light Red Over Black 1957

Oil on canvas

support: 2306 x 1527 x 38 mm

Purchased 1959© Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko/DACS 1998

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But this is not exactly what happens. The tension between flatness and depth leads to an ambiguous space where, as Breslin puts it, 'shapes cannot be firmly

bound, easily located, or securely identified'(fig.1).⁸ In one sense Rothko is in the very zone that Kant marked out, where the rational and the imaginary cannot be distinguished. But this goes beyond Kant into psychoanalysis, and Rothko is able to see a third term emerge, one that presses in from the Real itself. Behind the ethical Thing lies a deep ground, a pure drive; desire itself as a demand that has not been caught up in the dialectic of flatness and depth.

This third term begins to emerge in the mid 1950s, just at the time that Greenberg was writing favourably about Rothko and about the imperative of formal purity; just at the time that Rothko was painting the Seagram Murals. Having started slowly, Rothko was then the living father figure of an American modernist painting. Setting Nietzsche aside and reading Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Rothko began to openly identify with the Old Testament prophet Abraham. His willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac was more than the neurotic's struggle of internalised oedipal conflict: it was a merging of his will with the will of God even to the point of absurdity. Abraham is able to pass to the act because of his possession of an *absolute* imperative of divine will. In a pure battle of wills against the superego Other, Abraham steps beyond universal law; he calls on the power of God, a God whose drive is not pathological, a God who halts Abraham's arm as it thrusts the knife. As a subject, Abraham is beyond the ethics of reality at this point and fully in the Real; and so it may have worked for Rothko. Certainly Rothko reported that his reading of Kierkegaard on Abraham filled him with a particular sense of 'I', saying, 'Kierkegaard has that passion for the "I", for that "I" experience, like Abraham in his *Fear and Trembling*. It is the "I" that I myself experience everyday.'⁹

Taking Abraham as a model presents Rothko with a potentially terminal paradox. He is caught between two clashing enjoying substances that exist beyond all subjectivity. Although he starts with the categorical imperative – here the expression of pure form – as a way of avoiding the pathological superego, he ends up putting the traits of his subjectivity at risk. By imitating Abraham in this way what emerges is precisely another un-subjectified and un-subjectifiable form of enjoyment, but this second substance emerges directly from the Real. Thus, the quest for form purified of all pathology ends up with the pure expression of a pathology.

Why, in Freudian terms, is Rothko in psychotic territory? Because the appeal of this will of the God of Abraham, this absolute imperative to the id is so strong as

to distort the ego and its sense of reality. There is a loss of reality because the ego is so overcome by the id that it is torn away from the external world.

Rothko's route to the Kantian sublime did not lead by neurosis and its problem of repressed wishes created by the law. Rather it led towards a psychosis, an encounter with the openly unmitigated enjoyment of the mythical Other, the pure presence of the Other. It is not just an encounter with a smothering overbearing superego that emerges out of the depths of the Other's imperatives, but also the pure drive of his own imperative. In the end Rothko cannot win but at least he can die in the studio 'with his boots on'. The route to the sublime ends here in his last ethical act. He dies at the hands of the blind enjoyment of his Other.

Smithson

In the decade or so before Rothko's death his way of doing art became widely admired by younger artists such as Robert Smithson. In the mid 1950s at the age of sixteen Smithson started attending the Art Students League in New York, a teenage refuge from the stifling small town culture of nearby Passaic New Jersey. In a studio photograph he commissioned in 1961 just before his first one-man show he presents what he knows about himself: poised in the middle of his dialectic of desire he, too, was a captive of a battle between the blind enjoyment of two Others (fig.2).



Fig.2 Robert Smithson in his studio, New York c.1960

© Estate of Robert Smithson

When Robert Smithson came to New York he brought with him an appreciation of the power of a categorical imperative and for rational thinking partly received from his family history. As a boy Robert had to deal with the knowledge that he was a replacement child for a brother who had died slowly and painfully from

leukaemia. The need to make sense of this family inscription was partly filled by his maiden aunt who lived with them, and her cosmological and theological ruminations.

It would seem that it was Aunt Julia, his 'second mother' as he called her, who posed a question that came to haunt the young Robert for much of his life: how could God be considered rational if this kind of death was an instance of his laws? Robert also had to account for himself in the context that he, too, was being monitored for the symptoms of leukaemia, he, too, was inscribed in an argument in the Real that threatened his life. Smithson's appreciation for the way he is inscribed in the cosmos was, in his early years in New York City, matched by his appreciation of Christian icon painting: both were encouraged by his reading of modernist poets and critics such as T.S. Eliot and T.E. Hulme, and literature on Christian mysticism. But even more than Rothko, Smithson was engaged by Jungian self-analysis.

At the age of twenty-three, as Smithson read this literature, he made a series of paintings for his first one-man show, held in Rome in August 1961. The presence of the photographer in the studio just before the show was shipped to Rome allowed him to create a statement, a photograph that identifies his position between *The Ikons of Good and Evil*. Two enjoying substances flank him in this picture: one is an icon of an Aztec god who enjoys eating the subject, the other is an icon of a crucified Christ. At the time, his letters speak of his wish for visions of a 'divine suffering'. What he knows through Jung, although not present in the letters, is that he is caught between two archetypes. In one sense he may know that he is caught between a psychotic option and a neurotic option. The Aztec icon depicts the blind enjoyment of a brutally powerful god, one that threatens a consummation of his blood that dissolves him as a subject. The Christ icon shows a god who sacrifices his own blood such that the subject may know the law of a forgiving god.

I would like to suggest that in another sense he was caught between a sadistic option and a masochistic option. The Aztec god is sadistic but allows that the subject is granted a magically infinite body; there is a kind of immortality in being an object of its enjoyment. The Aztec god imposes a sadistic external necessity that the subject accepts as an objective categorical imperative; although the subject's desire is humiliated, his body cannot be destroyed lest enjoyment cease. In the case of the Christian icon, a son accepts his father's law regardless

of the suffering and humiliation it causes. Christ has to match his desire with the desire of god, and in this masochism the subject is also granted immortality.

These paintings raise many questions. Does Smithson identify with these gods? Does he worship them? Or are they statements of what he has come to know through his attempts at having Jungian visions of an Other place? In the case of the pleasure of this photograph I think it is the latter case: he uses the photograph to demonstrate what he knows about desire, not what he desires by way of identification or defence. The clue to this lies in a third painting seen just above his head on the back wall of the studio. A young sexualised subject lies bound and receptive as an object of desire. In this photograph he sets up a scene in which he is framed by two superegos, two Others whose desires both support and bar him from his desire. This is worth comparing to Rothko. Rothko brought an internal Other in to support him as a subject in a battle with an external Other that was able to smother or desubjectify him. Smithson brings in an object of desire, an ethical Thing, to support him as a subject in a battle with two Others that could similarly desubjectify him, make him into an object of their blind enjoyment. These Others could also help him to get his object of enjoyment. He is responsible for creating the ethical grounds on which these two conflicting maxims are necessary.

One of the books Smithson read at this time was Jung's explanation of historical myths as expressions of a process of male maturation in which the libido is switched from mother to wife, a process accomplished by a transformation of childhood archetypal conflicts into a single unified image of God.¹⁰ Jung shows him what Kant also maintained: it is the subject that must create the ethical ground, must find a Thing to elevate to the ethical status of law. Unlike Kant, however, Jung does not regard desire as necessarily pathological. There is an ethics of desire, a 'truth' to desire that would warrant the making of an icon to it. The painting *The Eye of Blood* 1961, made several months after the paintings in this photograph, has many formal similarities to the images of a unified libido that Jung provides in the illustrations of his book. Jung prompts Smithson to consider his mythical traumatic relations to two maternal superegos and then establish an ethical regard for his own libido, to maintain an unhumiliated desire for an object. The painting consists of a bloody spiral composed of red paint over magazine collage clippings. He arrives at this image in what he describes as a powerful vision that dispels his demons, and later as a painfully frozen image that leaves

him in a deadlock of his own making. The painting borders on being a Thing in the Real; the bloody spiral could overwhelm the collaged objects of reality. It comes close to being an image of the enjoying substance within his own body, and precariously close to an image of the substance of enjoyment found in his two Others of *The Ikons of Good and Evil*.

Why consider this as psychosis rather than neurosis or perversion? Smithson's dilemma has a parallel with Rothko in that for both their enjoyment threatens a desubjectification. More than a guilt, there is a substantial anxiety that the spiral of blood would erupt in the Real. This is something that needs a strong reality check, a way to retain the Thing in reality rather than in the Real. For this he needs to answer for himself the question 'what is the rational law of blood?' Does it answer to his desire, or the desires of the Others, or does it obey the law?

Smithson later married and began what he called his mature work. This work has found its ethical ground, its law. He has concluded that the rationale of the cosmos is entropy; the spontaneous dissipation of energy. The law of entropy, third law of thermodynamics, is taken as the sublime categorical imperative to which all wills must assent. Smithson is Kantian in his search for the sublime Other of the Other, the law under which even the Other is inscribed.

In his first published essay 'Entropy and the New Monuments' (1966), Smithson presents the artist as a director of entropy, a maker of monuments to desubjectification. While this has a morbid side, his own monument to entropy, the sculpture *Enantiomorphic Chambers* 1964 has its erotic potential. Why? With the help of an entropic image of the self (what is sometimes called the 'barber-shop effect' of parallel mirrors that reflect to infinity) one can avoid the commands of the Others. A certain amount of controlled desubjectification allows a distinction to be made between the superego and the law, and to see both of them as having a relation to an enjoying substance somewhere over the horizon of comprehension. In the essay Smithson cited and praised a range of contemporary artists who made theatrical monuments to a controlled entropic desubjectification. These sculptures were sublime ethical Things that could be visited in the world. Similarly, Smithson praises the torpor of desire in Warhol's films and in the formal simplicity of minimalism. The assent to the law of entropy gives ethical dignity; one is not humiliated by the imaginary Other. And, entropy is free from Hegelian or Marxist theories of the historical contingency of the law. Entropy is the proof of the very existence of time itself. He asks his readers to

operate on a scale of thought and time so grand as to raise the question of delusion. Entropy emerges as the rational of the cosmos, the universal law to which all supersensible beings must assent, and yet it is also a law of desubjectivication.

Rothko got caught in a psychosis of his own creation and despite the parallels, Smithson does not. One reason this may be is that Smithson theatricalised psychosis and reason in the same measure. His success as a writer depended on his ability to tease out what Kant called the vague space between the imaginary and the rational, in effect creating a theatre of reason and madness on a single stage of desire. Smithson's stage is inhabited not by specific fantasies but by the structural elements of fantasy, its 'impossible objects' such as mirrors and vanishing points. Smithson would engulf everything, an old hotel, a woodshed, the magazine on the reader's lap and even language itself into a Thing participating in the drama of entropy. But in pushing reality as far as he can into the Real, he always returns empty handed; entropy rules again and he is thrown out, never having really crossed past reality to a place truly of the Other.

I would like to suggest then that Rothko and Smithson take on the categorical imperative as it leads to the Real, but that Smithson's skill, his *sentiment de la vie*, is to theatricalise the Real; it is what will make him picturesque. The subject that emerges in the essay has a will to make of art a theatricalised glimpse of the Real in reality. He provides a tour of the pure faculties of desire in the cosmos, inhabited over and over by the pure objects of desire, the vanishing point, the mirror, the horizon line. It is here that he lays his ethical grounds. He understands the sublime, he knows he has to be the author of the law that constitutes his subjectivity.

This ethic can be seen in Smithson's response to Michel Fried's defence of Rothko and other abstract painters against the 'theatricality' of minimalism.¹¹ Smithson pointed out that Fried's attack on theatricality was itself theatrical; it was a question of where one sought to be theatrical, Is the artist to be theatrical in art or theatrical in the world? The important thing for Smithson was where the artist sought to make the Thing emerge, and here his assent to a law in the Real allows an ethical relation to the reality of the world. This is evident, too, in Smithson's interests in the German phenomenological philosopher Martin Heidegger; man is a being-in-the-world who is subject to

entropy. And when Smithson turns to the sciences of physics and geology, he finds that all matter is headed toward energy loss and stasis in a crystalline structure. The essay played across a line in a way that appealed to scientists and artists alike. Was this essay an hallucination about science or science about hallucination?



Fig.3 Robert Smithson

Ithaca Mirror Trail, Ithaca, New York 1969

Mixed media

image (map): 525 x 365 mm image, each (photographs): 510 x 760 mm

Purchased with funds provided by the American Patrons of the Tate Gallery, courtesy of the Tate American Collectors Forum 2002© The estate of Robert Smithson/VAGA, New York/DACS, London 2006

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Unlike Rothko, Smithson takes the Thing out in the world, out in reality. The difference can be seen in a work such as *Ithaca Mirror Trails* 1969 (fig.3), where he uses the same formal trope as Rothko, a square shape set against a rectilinear ground, a background with an inner square that repeats the frame. But Smithson uses a mirror for a square, and the landscape as a ground.

In this work reality is not indexed by the flat materiality of the canvas support and frame. Smithson has shifted the frame. Reality is the external world, its material support. Into this he places the mirror. Anywhere in the world of reality the Real can be seen, conjured, made to erupt. By repeating this formal trope over and over Smithson gives us the cinematic effect that Žižek suggests we use in Rothko's work to see the eruption of the Thing in the Real.

For Rothko the tension between flatness and depth is pursued to the point at which the abstraction of limits reveals the presence of the Thing, of enjoying substance located at the heart of the field of the Other and intruding into the subject's experience. The tension between flatness and depth in Rothko's work becomes an impossible vacillation that collapses with the approach of the Real. The point with Rothko is that the pure freedom of the categorical imperative goes in the direction of this without limits, and that for Smithson even this direction ends with entropy. Entropy is the without limits that need not entirely desubjectivise the subject. In acting as the universal limit it resubjectivises the subject in the world. It is worth noting here a remark Smithson made in an

interview in 1970 where he proposes that the subject is inscribed as a limit not just in an argument of art or language but in the world: to the question, 'When Yves Klein signed the world, would you say that was a way of overcoming limits?', he responded, 'No, because then he still has the limits of the world'.¹²

Ithaca Mirror Trails was made and documented as a cinematic encounter of the limits of reality in the Real, one that leads on to another and another instance with moments of recuperation of the body in between. For a moment the body is occupied by the Thing and then it is not; it must be done again and again leading to a truly sublime encounter. The trail leads somewhere, to a salt mine with a cave, a feminine womb is mentioned from the mythologies of mining. It is a mine of crystalline salt, a place in reality where all matter has done its duty to the law of entropy, but here there is no art, no photographs in the impenetrable darkness, and for good reason: the effect of the Real is lost. The enjoyment of the Other is non-specular, and rationally not limitless at all. There is only a wonderfully grainy photograph of him coming out of the cave in the afterthoughts of an encounter with the drives. He is theatrical in giving us the non-site of the Real and not a bit of a charlatan, as his aunt Julia used to call him.

If we go back to the photograph of the young Smithson in his studio we see the advance he has made. The drives are not just in art, they are in the world; revealing them as material empirical facts of the world strips them of their pathological character. More than this, it reveals the faculty of desire in man as one and the same faculty in the world. He need not be humiliated in his desire by these powerful often sado-masochistic drives; he can sit in the middle with his own 'natural' faculty of desire intact.

The story Smithson presented around the making of the *Mirror Trails* was a theatricalised struggle to remain subjectivised even after an exposure to the full force of the drives. Several months later he found a site on the Great Salt Lake of Utah, a lake so heavily coloured by red algae that it appears to be a lake of blood. This became the site of his most famous work, *Spiral Jetty* 1970 (fig.4).



Fig.4 Robert Smithson

Spiral Jetty April 1970, Great Salt Lake, Utah

Black rock, salt crystals, earth, red water (algae)

3½ X 15 X 1500 feet

© Estate of Robert Smithson / licensed by VAGA, New York, NY; Collection: DIA Center for the Arts, New York

Photograph: Gianfranco Gorgoni

Filmed from a helicopter, and with sunstroke threatening his clarity of mind, Smithson walked along the spiral jetty to its end. This was a carefully orchestrated shot, one that he diagrammed with the pilot and cameraman such that when he reached the end he appears to dissolve into the sunlight reflected from the water, reeling in a spiral of blood. The Thing does not erupt in the Real. If anything, he walks back in reality, tired and reflective, even depressed. The walk returns his body to him. If Rothko and Smithson had Jung to show them how to psychoticise their artistic practice, by 1967 Smithson also had Anton Ehrenzweig (1908–66), who shows how to formulate an exit strategy. In *The Hidden Order of Art* Ehrenzweig used Melanie Klein's concept of a 'dedifferentiation' leading to an 'undifferentiation' that produces an encounter with the Real, but with a return via a 'schizo-depressive position'.¹³ Smithson had a way out of the psychotic potential of the sublime, a way back to the picturesque.

In the land reclamation work he undertook in his last years after *Spiral Jetty*, and in his essay on Frederick Law Olmsted (designer of Central Park in New York), Smithson showed an ambition to be an artist-negotiator between 'man and land', between industrialist and ecologist, an ambition to turn his practice away from the sublime and to the picturesque. This phase of work deserves further attention beyond the scope of this paper. But what he proposes as a negotiator is that a categorical imperative can be both a scientific principle and the real harbourer of

the drives. We would tend to think of the drives as something pathological, something that is at work only in the hypothetical imperative. Smithson's point will be that it is when we are most rational that we are also closest to the drives.

Notes

1. › Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art*, Oxford 1989, p.19.
2. › Lecture given by Rothko at the Pratt Institute, October 1958, quoted in James E.B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, Chicago 1993, p.397.
3. › Immanuel Kant, *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H.J. Paton, London 1972, p.98.
4. › Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' (1960), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Chicago 1995, vol. 4, p.86.
5. › Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, New Haven 1993, pp.49–120.
6. › Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, p.168.
7. › Ibid., p.279.
8. › Ibid., p.278.
9. › Ibid., p.393.
10. Carl Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, New York 1952.
11. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum*, June 1967, pp.12–23; Robert Smithson, 'Letter to the Editor', *Artforum*, October 1967, p.12.
12. Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, 'Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley 1996, p.245.
13. Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*, London 1993, pp.257–79.

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