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ABSTRACT

In the *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel warns of the dangers of irony in art because it challenges the sanctity of rationality, truth, and morality. Over a century later, Robert Smithson — most famous for his earthwork, *Spiral Jetty* — openly embraces irony in his art and philosophical writings. In this paper, I employ Smithson as a direct response to Hegel's conception of irony. I contextualize irony within Hegel's critique of the abstract and self-absorbed Fichtean ego as it is found in the ironic artist. Following this, I utilize Smithson's philosophy as a kind of counterpoint — rather than refutation — to many of Hegel's convictions on the nature and function of art in world historical spirit. Despite their seeming incommensurability, Smithson utilizes his own formulation of the dialectic that is deeply indebted to and in dialogue with Hegel's dialectical interpretation of the work of art. Smithson directly challenges the Hegelian primacy of the inherently rational and anthropocentric nature of art's highest themes by creating works that reveal the unstable and transitory nature of existence. Despite the fact that Smithson rejects the Hegelian attitude toward rational progress, he finds that this perspective alleviates the potentially tragic insight into the meaninglessness of existence and provides a way of avoiding a nihilistic attitude toward the crises that confront us in the modern era.

KEYWORDS

Hegel, Smithson, art, irony, beauty

Irony and the Work of Art: Hegelian Legacies in Robert Smithson

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> For in art we have to do, not with any agreeable or useful child's play, but with the liberation of the spirit from the content and forms of finitude, with the presence and reconciliation of the Absolute in what is apparent and visible, with an unfolding of the truth which is not exhausted in natural history but revealed in world-history.
>
> •Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*

> It is like going from one happy lie to another happy lie with a cheerful sense about everything.
>
> •Robert Smithson, "Fragments of an Interview with P. A. Norvell"

• Introduction •

In his scathing attack on the philosophical egoism of Fichte in the *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* Hegel warns of the dangers of irony in art because it presents "the vanity of everything factual, moral, and of intrinsic worth, the nullity of everything objective and absolutely valid."[1] Over a century later, Robert Smithson – most famous for his earthwork, *Spiral Jetty* – openly embraces irony in his works and philosophical writings. Irony, for Smithson, challenges Hegel's emphasis of artistic truth and beauty, opening up fecund sites for the disruption of aesthetic experience made possible by the modern technological landscape. In this paper, I employ Smithson and his works as a direct response to Hegel's conceptions of irony and the ironic artist, as they appear in his criticism of modern irony in the *Aesthetics*. My purpose in drawing this comparison

between Hegel and Smithson on irony is threefold. First, Smithson offers an artistic response to Hegelian aesthetics in general through his explicit adoption of a materialist dialectics in contrast to one rooted in idealism. In so doing, Smithson allows dialectics to continue to do important work both theoretically and artistically in the modern age. Second, the specific point of contact between Hegel and Smithson on irony develops a dialogue between a problematic – even dangerous – conception of irony (as found in Hegel's critique) and a more fecund and relevant ironic practice (as found in Smithson's works). By playfully rejecting the position of a Hegelian ironical artist, Smithson illustrates how irony can both engage and critique the contemporary landscape. Finally, given the pessimism and fatalism that infuses many social and academic attitudes toward the future of our shared world, Smithson's reconfiguration of the ironic attitude away from a Hegelian framework suggests an artistic disclosure that prevents paralysis and encourages innovation.

Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty.* Photo by Shannon Mussett.

For Hegel, irony functions within the larger framework of beauty's emergence in historical truth, in that irony challenges many of our most deeply held humanistic ideals concerning beauty. Hegel attacks the self-absorbed and aloof posturing of the ironic artist who turns the foundation of spiritual progress into a game of haphazard demolition. I utilize Smithson's philosophy as a kind of developmental counterpoint to — rather than a total refutation of — many of Hegel's convictions on the nature and function of art in world historical spirit, and the danger posed by the ironical attitude toward this development. In many ways, Hegel's condemnation of irony in the *Aesthetics* portends the move that twentieth-century artists such as Smithson take, thus illuminating a deep bond between these otherwise conflicting attitudes toward the nature of truth in art.

Although I briefly explore the distinctions between irony and comedy in the *Aesthetics* (the latter of which Hegel blames for the dissolution of the final stages of romantic art), I focus primarily on the kind of irony that mocks the existence of truth in art. Despite their seeming incommensurability, I find Smithson's utilization of entropy and dialectical thinking to be an important offshoot of Hegelian aesthetics — so much so that Smithson stands as a direct descendent of the Hegelian philosophy of art, even as he is so largely through deconstructing it. Smithson, like Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche before him, exhibits a deep indebtedness to Hegelian formulations of thinking while concurrently rejecting many essential characteristics of spirit, history, and truth operative in the Hegelian worldview.

The initial experience of bringing Hegel and Smithson together on any aspect of aesthetics produces an inevitable sense of discord. Yet, as Gary Shapiro notes,

> Hegel produced the most ambitious, one might say the most monumental, of all histories of art, setting the stage for the disciplines of art history and the history of literature. While Smithson is always an avowed enemy of any grand historical conception of art such as Hegel's metanarrative in which humanity comes to understand itself through artistic self-expression, he also displays some affinities with Hegel.[2]

Shapiro rightly finds these diametrically opposed figures sharing ground on the concept of dialectical thinking. If it is possible that Smithson's return to the earth and the material (as opposed to Hegel's distinct yearning toward the spiritual) "shows the limits and perhaps the end" of

Hegel's account, I find it compelling to read Smithson as the inevitable limit and end of Hegel's depiction of the ironic artist.[3] In a sweeping critical gesture, Smithson bucks European art and art history, thereby partially confirming Hegel's fears about the nefarious ironical artist. Yet, Smithson's reversal of the spiritual advance of art produces works that remain every bit as moving, culturally significant, and beautiful as the works of high art thematized by Hegel. And unlike the ironic artist who stands above and apart from her world, Smithson remains deeply embedded — even materially so — in the world in which he lives and creates. It is thus fair to say that both Smithson and Hegel reject the thoroughly ironic position, although Smithson retains a dialectical tension between the comedic and tragic attitudes in art that Hegel would find suspect.

While Hegel lambasts the ironists' mockery of the eternal and true, his criticism functions as a kind of harbinger. Smithson (who would be susceptible to the same kind of criticism that Hegel levels at Schlegel) directly challenges the Hegelian primacy of the inherently rational and anthropocentric nature of art's highest themes. Hegel finds truth in the great themes of art: "the eternal religious and ethical relationships; family, country, state, church, fame, friendship, class, dignity, and, in the romantic world, especially honour and love," whereas Smithson produces works that reveal the unstable and transitory nature of all such themes.[4] Smithson's appropriation of irony is, however, deeply Hegelian even if unselfconsciously so; irony, for Smithson, does in fact lie "in the self-destruction of the noble, great, and excellent" because entropy is a far more dominant force than progress, thus affirming the weight of Hegel's claims.[5] Without a hint of melancholy, Smithson instead turns to the ironic and comedic (two concepts Hegel significantly keeps apart in the *Aesthetics*) as a balm for the incomprehensibility and magnitude of existence. Since there are no real answers to the grand mysteries confronting us, systematic philosophy (and any theory of art based in such a philosophy) is at best a diversion or a game.

Instead of providing truth, any philosophical system engenders its own demolition. As a result,

> There is no point in trying to come up with the right answer because it is inevitably wrong. Every philosophy will turn against itself and it will always be refuted. The object or the system will always crush its originator. Eventually he will be overthrown and be replaced by another

> series of lies. It is like going from one happy lie to another happy lie with a cheerful sense about everything.[6]

Proposing that philosophy is a string of objections that go nowhere and express nothing about reality is, to say the least, a distinctly un-Hegelian insight. This sentiment is echoed in Smithson's 1969-70 conversations with Dennis Wheeler where he proposes that

> Everyone who invents a system and then swears by it, that system will eventually turn on the person and wipe him out. It's that way with everything, in the sense that anything that you make is basically going to turn on you, and you'll find that essentially wrong.[7]

Nevertheless, how can these claims to the *untruth* of artworks and philosophical writings be anything other than ironic when presented by an artist who creates both artworks and philosophical writings? I now turn to study irony in Hegel so as to provide a foundation out of which to approach this very dilemma in Smithson. Smithson both is and is not exemplary of the kind of ironic artist that Hegel derides in the *Aesthetics*. As such, Smithson actually carries Hegel forward in ways unanticipated and yet strangely foretold.

• Aesthetical Considerations of Hegelian Irony •

The Hegelian dialectic functions in numerous different landscapes: history, natural science, ethics, politics, history, religion, and aesthetics. Largely concerned with the rational account of the emergence and supersession of contradiction in individual and world-historical cognition, the central point to my analysis regards the way in which Hegel's dialectic is ideal – that is to say, even the fully realized concrete subject achieved at the conclusion of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is one that is self-conscious and self-aware in a way that mirrors and informs human self-consciousness. As such, Hegel's account remains proudly anthropocentric insofar as we are the vehicles through which spirit achieves its scientific shape. Regardless of which landscape Hegel treats in the path of spiritual development, human rationality is the foundation of its progress. Thus anything that challenges the supremacy of reason is an error or a threat that must be either eradicated or understood, overcome, and preserved in a higher

cognitive form. In art, perhaps the most explicit threat to the appearance of reason in sensible form (certainly in the modern era) comes from irony, which rejects the essential truths of rational spirituality through mockery and disbelief.

Hegel's discussion of irony as developed in the Introduction to the *Lectures on Fine Art* occupies the primary focus of my analysis because this is where he most fully addresses the problematic of *modern* irony.[8] As opposed to a notion of irony that emphasizes an unintentional outcome contrary to what was expected, Hegel's discussion of modern irony takes aim at an attitude bordering on sarcasm. The comedic person, by contrast, "focuses his energies on himself and his private interests and desires. Preoccupation with one's own particularity is comic insofar as it is viewed in contrast to the world and the substantial sphere such particularity tends to overlook."[9] Unlike the comedic character who is funny because she is foolishly self-absorbed, the ironic individual cynically raises herself above the universal truths governing social and historical wellbeing by mocking them.

Following his praise of Schiller, Schelling, and Winckelmann in the Introduction, Hegel sets up his discussion of irony with a more tepid evaluation of Friedrich and August Wilhelm von Schlegel's aesthetic theory. Despite their laudable attempts to exalt past art that had been previously undervalued by the tradition, Hegel finds that they demonstrate a paucity of speculative thought, resulting in an inability to properly judge art along philosophical lines. "Greedy for novelty in the search for the distinctive and extraordinary," the Schlegels pillaged the philosophical idea while retaining a suspiciously critical attitude.[10] Hegel adds that, "since their criticism was not accompanied by a thoroughly philosophical knowledge of their standard, this standard retained a somewhat indefinite and vacillating character, so that they sometimes achieved too much, sometimes too little."[11] As a result of their lack of philosophical underpinnings, the Schlegels are incapable of consistently evaluating greatness and mediocrity, often "ascribing universal worth to what was only relatively valuable."[12] From this lack of a speculative platform the principles of so-called (*sogenannte*) irony that Hegel finds particularly distasteful emerge.

Although he pinpoints the emergence of modern irony from F. von Schlegel's aesthetic theory, Hegel notes that irony has its roots in Fichte's philosophy of the ego. Fichte's ego, as the absolute starting point of all

knowing and experience, remains for Hegel "abstract and formal" and thus dangerously detached from the world.[13] In addition to its utter lack of concrete existence (a clear dilemma when addressing *aesthetic* production and experience) Fichte's ego is thoroughly incapable of giving meaningful parameters to particularity, negating every unique characteristic in its overwhelming systematic unity.[14] The problem, from an aesthetic standpoint, lies in the totalizing nature and activity of the ego and the illusory nature of the object, which is wholly tied to the subject rather than spirit. In essence, if all reality can be summed up by the ego, then the ego has total power over all of reality. Such a position grants the ego awesome powers of creation and destruction, but almost necessitates a move toward solipsism and relativism. If it is the case that the Fichtean ego "can remain lord and master of everything" then "in no sphere of morals, law, things human and divine, profane and sacred, is there anything that would not first have to be laid down by the *ego*, and that therefore could not equally well be destroyed by it."[15] All reality becomes a mere show of the ego's own power to itself. Very quickly, it seems to Hegel, the ego will simply spin off into vanity and vacuity, enjoying its own metaphysical sandcastles.

As he notes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*'s discussion of the "beautiful soul," the vacuity of the Fichtean "I = I" formulation creates a consciousness that "lives in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the actual world."[16] The threat of actual involvement in the world leads to a total subjective turn, which, although momentarily satisfying in its apparent ability to create its own world, eventually gives way to consciousness's own dissolution. Schlegel's adoption of the Fichtean ego thus results, as Timothy C. Huson acknowledges, in an artificial mastery over the objective world by any artist who adopts it. The "*absolute* authority of the subject (ego) in being able to create and destroy all value also indicates the lack of any fixed value in the subject itself. In confronting a world without meaning, the subject itself is without meaning," resulting in the fact that "[t]he abstract freedom of Schlegel's artist is in fact no freedom at all."[17] With no essential contact with the world and the objective values therein, any meaning given by Schlegel's artist amounts to nothing more than relativistic narcissism.

From the standpoint of the ego, Hegel moves not to a discussion of the work of art, but of the ego of the artist who creates it. Such a move, "invented by Friedrich von Schlegel" and babbled by many others after him,

takes the artist as a kind of self-styled iconoclast who has no real attachments to her art or even the world and its complex web of social and spiritual relationships.[18] Insofar as the artist is *earnest*, she is centered in intrinsically valuable and true content "like truth, ethical life, etc.."[19] Insofar as the artist focuses on the eternal truths of family, love, morality, state, religion and other such laudable philosophical and spiritual ideas, she follows the appropriate plan and her works will be both serious and beautiful. However, if the Fichtean ego resides in the artist then earnestness is impossible because "no content of consciousness appears as absolute and independently real but only as a self-made and destructible show."[20] The self-centered, nearly power-mad Fichtean ego is incapable of doing anything more than taking capricious pleasure in its own powers of creation and destruction. Such an

> ironical artistic life apprehends itself as a divine creative genius for which anything and everything is only an unsubstantial creature, to which the creator, knowing himself to be disengaged and free from everything, is not bound, because he is just as able to destroy it as to create it.[21]

From here, Hegel's condemnation of the ironical artist only becomes more vitriolic. The artist who takes an ironical attitude reckons himself a "divine genius" who "looks down from his high rank on all other men, for they are pronounced dull and limited, inasmuch as law, morals, etc., still count for them as fixed, essential, and obligatory."[22] Sure, Hegel says, such a person might cohabitate with others – friends and mistresses and the like, living and acting in the world with other people – but "his attitude to it all is ironical."[23] One can't help but picture Hegel's caricature as a sardonic maniac, laughing from his mountaintop of self-conceit and vacuous creativity, hurling insults and bad art at the unwitting populace below. [24]

One way to understand just what is at stake in Hegel's visceral hatred of irony can be found in his concluding remarks about K. W. F. Solger, who he claims was trapped by the extreme moment of "infinite absolute negativity" in the dialectic. At this extreme point, the idea has negated itself "as infinite and universal [so] as to become finitude and particularity."[25] True to the dialectical form he champions in the *Aesthetics*, Hegel observes that the dispersion of particularity is a necessary component of the speculative idea, *but only a moment*, which must be sublated into a unity. The natural course of action is the reassertion of universality and eternality in an ever-higher form through

sublation, whereas, in the words of Joseph G. Kronick, "Irony is dialectics run wild" resulting in "a purely negative skepticism."[26] Such lack of restraint is not unlike a bulldozer wreaking havoc on the pillars of progress at the center of teleological dialectics. Or, as Smithson might phrase it, irony opens us up to a view of dialectics not as they function in the story of humanity's progress, but as they function in the nonhuman machinations of entropy.

Presumably then, the artist is superfluous to the consideration of the work of art for Hegel since even the artwork transcends humanistic emphasis. The more elevated the work of art is — the further removed from the temporal flow and the subjectivity of the artist — the more it will successfully present truth in sensible appearance. Although it may seem to be an ironic claim to say that truth is that which removes itself from the flow of the world rather than engages it, this is precisely Hegel's understanding of the true goal of art. He does not deny the materiality of art (as his elevation of Greek sculpture makes clear) but he stresses time and again that what makes art *fine* is the purification of all contingency — the artist, materials, and time — from the material to the greatest extent possible. Any consideration of the specifics of the artist as a *person*, for example, moves away from the end of art and brings us into the orbit of the ironic.

Hegel notes that insofar as it has been transformed into art, irony focuses on the personal life of the artist as well as his work of art. Such attention to the personal details of the artist's life is most clear in the poetical arts but could, I believe, be extended to any kind of art that emerges from the kind of self-centeredness of absolute subjectivity and skepticism Hegel fears. In its attacks on all that is noble and fine, ironic art

> will have to display only the principle of absolute subjectivity, by showing forth what has worth and dignity for mankind as null in its self-destruction. This then implies that not only is there to be no seriousness about law, morals, and truth, but that there is nothing in what is lofty and best, since, in its appearance in individuals, characters, and actions, it contradicts and destroys itself and so is ironical about itself.[27]

For Hegel, modern irony in art necessitates that artistic presentation illustrate the nihilistic movement of the self-centered ego that produces it. The characters and actions presented in ironic art will themselves be a bunch of dilettantes — iconoclasts in their own minds — who engage in "joking merely for the sake of joking," but who are in reality morally and

socially dangerous forces.[28] Why then, does Hegel keep separate the workings of irony from comedy, when both can be understood as forms of social criticism loaded with menace? A few words on the place of comedy in Hegel's system are needed in order to develop the distinction between comedy and irony; both unleash disruptive forces into art, but the ironic poses a far greater threat than comedy because it attacks the very nature of truth itself.

Although one wouldn't want to overplay the significant culmination of hundreds of pages of lectures on aesthetic theory in an analysis of *comedy* (it does, after all, have to end somewhere) neither should it be underplayed. Hegel relates that with the brief analysis of various forms of ancient and modern comedy "we have reached the real end of our philosophical inquiry" which has spanned the distance from symbolic art to romantic art.[29] Comedy, with its emphasis on the subjective and accidental aspects of existence, in fact leads "to the dissolution of art altogether," because it chips away at the essence of art which "aims at the identity, produced by the spirit, in which eternal things, God, and absolute truth are revealed in real appearance and shape to our contemplation, to our hearts and minds."[30] Also a force of dissolution and critique, comedy loosens the unity realized in spirit's quest to manifest itself in matter through art.

Comedy is best seen in character portrayal for Hegel. True, he writes, there are useless, frivolous and bad people, but that doesn't mean the ideals of usefulness, earnestness, and goodness are somehow problematic. The ideals to which humans *should* aspire are above reproach, even if we can have a good laugh at characters who fail to achieve them or are too ignorant or self-absorbed to even try. But it is an all-too-easy slide from poking fun at character flaws to calling into question the value of the goodness of the good person as irony might do.[31] As Hegel notes, "Irony loves this irony of loss of character" precisely because it is so easy to see the worst kinds of people as indicative of the absence of a rational standard according to which we can judge and even laugh at them.[32] This is why Hegel warns that irony is a "false theory" that "has seduced poets into bringing into characters a variety which does not come together into a unity, so that every character destroys itself as character."[33] The danger of irony, especially in the artistic portrayal of human passion, is that it runs a very serious risk of showing the deepest core of the motivation of human action as "unsubstantial and null" and thus inessential.[34]

Hegel clearly distinguishes between irony and comedy. Admittedly, irony "borders nearly on the principle of the comic," but whereas the comic shows the destruction of "a false and contradictory phenomenon, a whim, e.g., an oddity, a particular caprice" etc., Hegel claims that it is "a totally different thing if what is in fact moral and true, any inherently substantial content, displays itself in an individual, and by his agency, as null."[35] Perhaps aware that his nearly hyperbolic harangue against irony may be interpreted as comedic, Hegel claims that despite their kinship, the ironic is different from the comedic in one crucial way – whereas the ironic attacks the truth itself, the comedic attacks the negativity (in the sense of nullity) that serves as the heart of irony. In other words, comedy laughs at irony. The comedic character is laughable because of her self-centeredness and lack of connection or respect for the absolute; the ironic individual simply mocks the absolute. Comedy reveals the destruction of what is relatively unimportant – what is already false: a character flaw, a whim, a quirk, something silly that was taken as something serious. As soon as the good, the moral, the beautiful, and the just are portrayed as null, we have ventured into the ironic. These truths are taken as sacrosanct and as such remain off the table for comedy. Comedy may attack the inherently untrue in subjective folly but not the inherently true itself. Comedy defends truth but irony "as this art of annihilating everything everywhere…acquires…the aspect of inner inartistic lack of restraint."[36] Irony, it seems, simply destroys while comedy ultimately supports the noblest achievements of humankind.

Significantly, Smithson does not maintain this strict division between irony and comedy. This is easy for him, insofar as he rejects the very premise that there exists a kind of truth revealed to and by human beings alone. With such a dismissal, the question of whether or not one is attacking a subjective folly or an objective truth becomes irrelevant. All such human concerns are cause for laughter whenever they aspire to elevate the human over the cosmic.

•Smithson's Ironic Sense of Humor •

Whereas Hegelian dialectics operate under the auspices of undoing contradiction through sublation into a higher shape of consciousness, Smithson's dialectics take a non-teleological and materialistic bent. Like Hegel, he emphasizes contradiction — bringing it into a stark sensible presentation in his works — but unlike Hegel he does not attempt to synthetically resolve it. By rejecting the prominence of the human, Smithson's dialectical method allows for the presentation of irrational forces in artistic arrangements.

His material dialectics are evidenced in all of his sculptures but are most evident in his nonsites and earthworks. His adherence to brute matter — dirt, rocks, sand, glass, mud, glue, etc. — underscores the entropic rather than the progressive. By highlighting the forces of dissolution, decay, and the temporal flow, Smithson's works attack the very heart of spiritual progress beloved by Hegel and could only be seen as ironic from the latter's perspective. For example, embracing a "dialectics of site and nonsite" which ruptures rather than preserves unity, Smithson explains how the iconic *Spiral Jetty* enacts contradiction rather than corrects it. He observes in the essay, "The Spiral Jetty," that the site in the Great Salt Lake

> reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone…A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement…From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence…No sense wondering about classifications and categories, there were none.[37]

In choosing his materials and sites, Smithson often makes similar kinds of paradoxical pairings — immobile cyclones, dormant earthquakes, fluttering stillnesses — in an effort to rupture systematic thinking. There exists no category that can sufficiently maintain contradictions such as these and thus an irresolvable dialectic must take place in the matter itself. Since the ideal is no longer the operative genesis and telos for Smithson, "Ambiguities are admitted rather than rejected, contradictions are increased rather than decreased — the *alogos* undermines the *logos*."[38] In fact, should the Jetty (which is, after all, called a *jetty*) somehow present

itself as a kind of Hegelian presentation of the beautiful, he would have considered it a failure. For Hegel, beauty in art must be purged of any signs of contingency, decay, and death; whereas Smithson underscores precisely these entropic signs. All of the things that beauty in art must accomplish for Hegel – the purging of contingency, decay, and death – must be present in the work of art for Smithson. It is hard, given this small taste of Smithson's views on the dialectics of matter in art, not to see him as Hegel would: an ironic artist scoffing at the truth of rational humanity through an overt turn toward the irrational machinations of brute matter and the forces of entropy.

Smithson's position regarding art and artistic endeavor does evoke the general sense described by Hegel's critique of modern artistic irony. Yet, Smithson disarms the most potent aspects of Hegel's critique by not only accepting the power of irony to challenge truth, but by actually producing enormously influential and profound works of art from within an ironic attitude. As discussed above, Hegel finds modern irony so dangerous because it mocks the eternal and true, giving us the ironical artist as a hero – a hero who is little more than a self-absorbed and socially detached agent. Disregarding the centrality of the human being actually allows Smithson to elide any concern with who *he* is as an artist; whether or not he is an "ironic artist" in the Hegelian sense is largely beside the point when focusing on geologic rather than existential time, and inorganic rather than human bodies. Even if he can be *personally* classified as ironic (and most certainly would be by Hegel) his art enacts the work of irony on its own. A key component of his impressively diverse and robust body of work lies in his extensive writings and interviews where he deals explicitly with the issues of irony, comedy, and humor in the work of art.

In a 1967 interview with Allan Kaprow on the question, "What is a Museum?", Smithson challenges the value of the museum space for art as well as the value of the valuation of art. Revealing his Marxist bent (as well as his Nietzschean morality) he explains that "The categories of 'good art' and 'bad art' belong to a commodity value system."[39] Instead of these *moralistic* categories, he believes we need to shift our attention to an *aesthetic* form of valuation. Upon hearing this, Kaprow takes up the Hegelian mantle and asks,

> How can your position then be anything but ironic, forcing upon you at least a skepticism. How can you become anything except a kind of sly

> philosopher — a man with a smile of amusement on your face, whose every act is italicized?[40]

Notwithstanding Kaprow's brilliant encapsulation of his interlocutor as an ironic artist, Smithson doesn't miss a beat. Rather than deny or accept this characterization, he instead takes the argument to the inability of the American temperament, inherited from a kind of European seriousness, to find art funny and even hilarious:

> The varieties of humor are pretty foreign to the American temperament. It seems that the American temperament doesn't associate art with humor. Humor is not considered serious. Many structural works really are almost hilarious. You know, the dumber, more stupid ones are really verging on a kind of concrete humor.[41]

Humor remains a somewhat fringe concern for both aesthetics and philosophy, thus the idea that most humor isn't thought of as a serious production, worthy of intellectual investment in its own right, is fitting. Smithson's notion of a kind of material or "concrete humor" strikes a note of discord in most of us with our heavily European sensibilities for precisely this reason. However, for Smithson, "High seriousness and high humor are the same thing."[42] In a dialectical inversion, Smithson points to the inherent hilarity of high art — something of which Hegel wasn't unaware but about which he felt a high degree of suspicion.

In his 1966 essay, "Entropy and the New Monuments," Smithson analyzes a number of his contemporaries (Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, Sol Le Witt and members of the "Park Place Group") to elaborate on the concept of "entropy" at the heart of their art. As I have hinted above, the entropic is perhaps the most significant and distinctly anti-Hegelian force operating in Smithson's own work. Rather than building up to a teleological grand slam, Smithson finds technological, humanistic, and artistic accomplishments to be far more vulnerable to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The law of entropy charts how "energy is more easily lost than obtained" positing "that in the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing sameness,"[43] rather than a completely differentiated yet thoroughly unified substantial subject.[44] Focusing on waste, loss, and devastation suggests "that history and 'progress' are limited by entropy, the ineluctable undertow of all human and natural processes."[45]

How does one make art in the face of the kind of future evoked by T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland*? For one, historical teleology must go since what awaits us is not a progressive realization of spirit's self-awareness, but decay, decrepitude, and death. But such an abysmal insight can foster some pretty depressing artworks if not tempered with a profound, almost Olympian ability to laugh. Smithson explains three years later:

> As long as art is thought of as creation, it will be the same old story. Here we go again, creating objects, creating systems, building a better tomorrow. I posit that there is no tomorrow, nothing but a gap, a yawning gap. That seems sort of tragic, but what immediately relieves it is irony, which gives you a sense of humor. It is that cosmic sense of humor that makes it all tolerable.[46]

Confronted with the yawning gap of non-being, one has a choice between the wisdom of Silenus or the wisdom of Aristophanes. Perhaps, however, there is a third option taken by Smithson himself: maintaining the tragic and comic insights in a kind of dialectical tension wherein one does not necessarily give way to the other but both are maintained in the work of art itself.

Elaborating on the notion of entropy in "Entropy and the New Monuments," Smithson notes that architect and futurist Buckminster Fuller was told by some that the concept of a fourth dimension (time) was "ha-ha". In a similar vein, Smithson observes that the topsy-turvy world into which Alice plunged was created by the mathematical mind of Lewis Carroll, resulting in a highly ordered manifestation of humorous non-sense. Perhaps, Smithson suggests, we can treat laughter in a similar serio-comedic fashion: "Laughter is in a sense a kind of entropic 'verbalization.' How could artists translate this verbal entropy, that is 'ha-ha,' into 'solid-models'?"[47] The suggestion alone makes us pause, but a detailed analysis of "the different types of Generalized Laughter, according to the six main crystal systems" (what he calls "Solid-state hilarity") follows, which includes the "chuckle" as a triangle or pyramid (Tetragonal), the "titter" as prismatic (Orthorhombic), and the "guffaw" as asymmetric (Triclinic) among many other laughter/crystal structures.[48] Only Smithson can ride the line between high seriousness and high humor with such aplomb; one is simply unsure whether to take this suggestion seriously or to laugh at it. Smithson himself wryly concludes, "From here on in, we must not think of Laughter as a laughing matter, but rather as the 'matter-of-laughs'."[49] The analysis of laughter along the concept of the crystalline (a favorite thematic in Smithson's artworks and philosophical writings

insofar as it presents us with an inorganic and ancient perspective on time and life) illustrates a dialectical tension that is utterly irresolvable. Although it would be difficult not to hear Hegel mumbling under his breath that Smithson here invokes a kind of irony "which likes to pass itself off as the highest originality" but which "treats nothing seriously," Smithson's humorous presentation still maintains a critical component of earnestness in its playfulness.[50] Instead of merely offering us the temporal decomposition of high art into irony and comedy as we find in Hegel, Smithson presents us with works that refuse to transition into their contraries, opting instead to engage us in the experience of aesthetic contradiction itself.[51]

In line with the achievement of aesthetic contradiction, Jack Flam's Introduction to the *Collected Writings* illustrates the enigma of Smithson's projects. Smithson embraces an ironic position regarding art as a sacred, almost divine manifestation of truth and beauty, and yet one would be hard pressed not to find these elements in many of his sculptures and earthworks. As Flam notes, "One of the most striking aspects of Smithson's work as a whole is the way in which he uses a strongly anti-romantic, anti-sublime stance to create, paradoxically, what seems to be a romantic evocation of the sublime."[52] In his denial of the European romantic aesthetic (a high point of art for Hegel) we don't find the presentation of ugliness and triviality but rather profundity and in many cases, beauty. This is due to the fact that Smithson expands, rather than restricts, the sphere of aesthetics by detaching it from the essentially human.

Smithson rejects the primacy of the subject as both the principal meaning and orientation of the artwork. Under the influence of Anton Ehrenzweig's "dedifferentiation" (as well as Freud's understanding of the "oceanic"), Smithson believes that the artist – or at least an artist who evokes the entropic in his work – lives at the lower levels of consciousness, which subvert and elide rationality's strict requirements for limits and boundaries. In this dedifferentiated milieu, subjectivity melts away as the creative process melds with the forces of the universal ebb and flow. Margaret Iversen notes, "For Smithson, the artist's job was to endure, temporarily, the suspension of boundaries between what Ehrenzweig called the self and the non-self, and then return to tell the tale."[53] The rational critic of art (or in the case of Hegel, the philosopher of rational aesthetics) however, "cannot risk this abandonment into 'oceanic' undifferentiation, he can only deal with the limits that come after

this plunge into such a world of non-containment."[54] In other words, the artist resides in the tension between "oceanic fragmentation" and "strong determinants" while the art critic finds meaning and comfort only in the resulting determinations.[55] In the process of dedifferentiation, Smithson claims that the dialectic gets "unusual" due to a sense of overlapping meanings — a concept, strangely, that he finds to be a strength in Freud, Marx, Hegel, and Pascal.[56] To be pulled too far in either the direction of total subjective annihilation or that of total determinacy results in nonsense on the one hand, and the subsumption of art into hyper-rationality on the other, both of which are forms of madness.

Within this tension, the anthropomorphic and the rational dissolve, leaving us with a stark reality that simply persists in a kind of Heraclitean flux of change. It is no accident that Smithson's focus on dedifferentiation and de-architecturing leads him to assert that "The actual *disruption* of the earth's crust is at times very compelling, and seems to confirm Heraclitus's *Fragment 124*, 'The most beautiful world is like a heap of rubble tossed down in confusion'."[57] Such confusion presents the artist with the unique opportunity, not to *correct* contingency, but to *arrange* it new ways: "A bleached and fractured world surrounds the artist. To organize this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids, and subdivisions is an esthetic process that has scarcely been touched."[58] Rather than improving on the material world — taking it out of contingency by removing blemishes and signs of decay — Smithson finds that bringing these forces to the foreground is precisely the task of the artist. To Hegel's claim that "the aim of art is precisely to strip off the matter of everyday life and its mode of appearance, and by spiritual activity from within bring out only what is absolutely rational and give to it its true external configuration," Smithson would counter that artists must refuse the temptation to correct the impurities of their media.[59] "By refusing 'technological miracles' the artist begins to know the corroded moments, the carboniferous states of thought, the shrinkage of mental mud, in the geologic chaos — in the strata of esthetic consciousness."[60] Avoiding the desire to purify the materials with which he works, the artist avoids the illusion that the artwork is somehow outside of time, while also allowing for new kinds of art to emerge.

Smithson's sense of irony and play scoffs at the seriousness of art criticism and museum culture that he strives to undermine with his nonsites, mirror displacements, and earthworks. The aesthetics developed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe paved the way for the

dominance of the museum and the rise of art history and criticism along clearly demarcated lines. Rather than clarifying the advance of world spirit as Hegel might have it, Smithson eschews the drive for purity of form as it arrogates to establish genres in art. In an unpublished piece (c. 1966) he finds that "Purity is a desperate nostalgia, that exfoliates like a hideous need. Purity also suggests a need for the absolute with all its perpetual traps."[61] As a result of the demands for purity,

> Esthetics have devolved into rare types of stupidity. Each kind of stupidity may be broken down into categories such as bovine formalism, tired painting, eccentric concentrics or numb structures. All these categories and many others all petrify into a vast banality called the art world which is no world.[62]

By mocking the categories of art held so dear to Hegel's own analysis, Smithson shows his utter disdain and disregard for the determinations that dominate aesthetic theory. Yet it would be disingenuous not to find a kind of gravity in his art and writings that belies the notion of Smithson as *merely* ironic. He not only makes fun of truth — something that Hegel accuses the ironic artist of doing — he entirely disavows the notion of rational truth as such, opting instead for a kind of proliferation of truths which result from the fragmentation of entropic systems. Returning to his interview with Kaprow (who refuses to back down on his interpretation of Smithson as an ironic artist) we find a confirmation of Smithson's inherently Nietzschean position. When Kaprow pushes the notion that as soon as one engages in museum or gallery showings one is ensnared by the cultural valuation of art, he tells Smithson that any antagonistic orientation to cultural validation is essentially "ironic." Smithson reframes the problem by evaluating irony in terms of deconstruction (using Ehrenzweig's term, "dedifferentiation"):

> I would say that it [Smithson's position] has a contradictory view of things. It's basically a pointless position. But I think to try to make some kind of point right away stops any kind of possibility. I think the more points the better, you know, just an endless amount of points of view.[63]

In other words, refusing to make *a* point engenders multiple points of view because for Smithson, the undetermined is more fecund than the determined.

Smithson's multiperspectivalism does not, however, exclude attention to important and even dire issues confronting the artist in his or

her time. Sometimes he embodies a serious and wholly *un*ironic attitude, thus revealing himself as still tethered to the world in a way that Hegel's flippant ironist is not. In a 1970 symposium on the artist's relationship to the political, Smithson contributed a piece to *Artforum* entitled "Art and the Political Whirlpool or the Politics of Disgust", in which he evokes a more solemn tone than usual. Every attempt to remain free from the fray of politics is impossible; eventually the artist will be "devoured" by the political because "The rat of politics always gnaws at the cheese of art."[64] Being sucked into the whirlpool (an image and theme that runs throughout Smithson's work) of one's time often causes pain, horror, disgust, and fear. The artist cannot simply reclaim all the forces of entropy (pollution, war, violence, dehumanization) within the political realm. There is no way to "laugh" off the decaying pig head from the *Lord of the Flies*. Sometimes social and political structures make life a hell on earth. Smithson fears a state where

> the Earth thickens with blood and waste, as the population increases, the stress factor could bring "the system" to total frenzy. Imagine a future where eroticism and love are under so much pressure and savagery that they veer towards cannibalism. When politics is controlled by the military, with its billions of dollars, the result is a debased demonology, a social aberration that operates with the help of Beelzebub (the pig devil) between the regions of Mammon and Moloch.[65]

Clearly Smithson's concern for the plight of the planet and the dangers of social and political decay prevent our judging him as the worst kind of Hegelian ironical artist. There is nothing in these lines indicating an artist who remains above the fray, cocooned in his own abstract ego. The specter of this decline into a planetary hell brought about largely through political machinations causes Smithson to claim in an earlier piece that "The Establishment is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."[66]

The artist's *inability* to simply step outside of the temporal stream through the production of a sensible manifestation of the divine prevents the kind of aloof attitude Hegel decries in the ironical artist. This is because the artist, for Smithson, is agonizingly aware of the fluctuations of temporality. In fact, Smithson claims that artist has been estranged from time for too long.

> Critics, by focusing on the "art object," deprive the artist of any existence in the world of both mind and matter. The mental process of the artist which takes place in time is disowned, so that a commodity value can be maintained by a system independent of the artist. Art, in this sense, is

> considered "timeless" or a product of "no time at all"; this becomes a convenient way to exploit the artist out of his rightful claim to his temporal processes.[67]

The critics who focus on the timelessness of the artwork essentially discount the artist; saving the work of art from time in order to mummify it only serves to exploit the artist and to present the lie of ideality.[68] To the Hegelian assertion that the ideal of art must be rescued from its temporal setting and purified of external contaminants, expressing "inactive, eternal repose,"[69] Smithson would counter, "Every object, if it is art, is charged with the rush of time even though it is static."[70] Smithson's emphasis on understanding and respecting the artist's time brings the existential subjectivity of the artist to the foreground — a kind of anthropocentric bent rejected by almost all of Smithson's works. Despite this ironic turn, Smithson earnestly disparages the exploitation of the artist resulting not only from capitalistic forces but also from the spiritual elevation of art into the beyond; we cannot set up the work of art as a kind of timeless manifestation of truth without totally devaluing the persons involved in its creation. And with this move toward the serious, we come full circle — even the ironic attitude turns into its opposite when confronted with the realities of politics, environmental devastation, and capitalist exploitation. The ironic does not have to totally reject the sanctity of certain components of being human in the world. In fact, the ironic may provide us with a kind of humanity that anchors us more firmly in our world precisely because it refuses to elevate the lie of rational humanity above all other viewpoints.

• Conclusion •

In this paper I have shown how Hegel's formulation of irony in modern art takes a robust trajectory through the works of Smithson. Hegel condemns the ironist for rejecting the essential truths that fuel the engine of the dialectic. The essence of spirit emerges in the sphere of art by fusing the timelessness of the absolute with the flawed materials of the natural world. The work of art thus stands as a paradoxical revelation of the eternal in the flux of nature. To take an ironic position toward this teleology is to attack the very foundation of Western spiritual progression.

Smithson's project affirms the domination of entropy and the insignificance of human progress thus directly and surreptitiously embodying the exact dangers of irony in modern art foretold by Hegel. Nevertheless, Smithson maintains an element of earnestness where he acknowledges the deep connections the artist has to the world and the significance of the artist's time. In this affirmation of social and material ties, he avoids the detachment of the artist in the ascension of the work of art to spiritual truth.

Hegel's *Aesthetics* produces a kind of sadness about the passage of art away from the living truth of a people, while Smithson celebrates the way in which art metamorphoses into a whole new cultural force removed from the confines of purity, truth and spirit. Rather than viewing art as sacred because it is produced by free and rational human beings, Smithson places artworks in the distinctly un-Hegelian insight that there is no progress, no real creation, and nothing better to come — only a cheerful string of lies refuting lies. Although art remains an important endeavor, it no longer provides us with the sensuous presentation of the divine. Rather, art helps to alleviate the potentially tragic insight into the meaninglessness of existence, all the while presenting us with something profoundly and unexpectedly beautiful. In large part, this relief comes from a cosmic sense of humor that laughs at our entropic predicament.

The disruptive and deconstructive power of irony and humor unsettle codified conceptions of what makes art good or worthwhile. This potential for mayhem causes unease in Hegel, leading to his criticism of the modern ironic attitude in particular. However, Hegel's analysis also heralds forms of ironic art that, although they are perhaps not his ideal of beauty, open us to new and unexpected sensuous presentations. Ironically, rather than producing an aloof artist, this move anchors artists such as Smithson in the material of the Earth. Smithson's position regarding truth in art would certainly have been seen by Hegel as ironic, which is both an accurate judgment and yet somewhat unmerited. Smithson's investment in dismantling the anthropomorphic center, focus, and goal of art frees him from the strict limitations that Hegelian aesthetics require. And yet, he also provides a kind of affirmation of Hegel's analysis insofar as he positions art as a unique site for preserving the tension between diametrically opposed forces.

Smithson's disavowal of the subject (or even the organic, for that matter) removes him from the Hegelian charges of subjective perversion

and derangement insofar as the work of art shows us that human beings are merely a part (and a small one at that) of a far greater system of entropic decay.[71] The greatest perversions and derangements result from the inevitable machinations of entropy itself, not from facetious practical jokes played by artists. Perhaps the larger question that Smithson forces us to ask is: what does this decentralization of the human and increased sensitivity to the entropic offer us in the modern age? I believe we are only now beginning to be able to address this question and so offer only a preliminary attempt at an answer. One point in particular seems to be most relevant, and that is that an ironic position in the Smithsonian sense allows us to see ourselves as part of much larger processes of change and transformation. Once we no longer find ourselves as the masters of nature (a problem that lies at the heart of Hegelian philosophy) then we can stop fighting against nature and discover ways in which we *are* nature. Ironic art can show us how to embrace that which is not actually foreign to us but is who and what we are. From the other side, we can stop the guilt-ridden, handwringing pessimism resulting from our contributions to global decline. Smithson's art confirms that we are in fact responsible for natural degradation, destruction, and the production of massive amounts of waste. Yet, these byproducts are also the inevitable results of entropy as such. Once we move past the hope for an Edenic return to a pristine past, we can actually begin to find ways to reincorporate that which horrifies us into new, possibly better, forms. Smithson's art reveals this kind of reclamation to be a real possibility.[72]

In the end, both Hegel and Smithson reject the wholly ironical in art – this is why Smithson refuses to accept or reject Kaprow's characterization of his work as ironic. To simply challenge the values esteemed by Hegel is to affirm them. Smithson's stated and practiced goal rides the fine line between upholding and destroying, in an irresolvable dialectical tension. Through irony and humor, he evokes earnestness and beauty without ever taking himself (or having us take the work) too seriously. As soon as we begin to promote his artwork to the eternally true, we are forced to laugh at ourselves for falling into the traps of the past. Conversely, as soon as we begin to disregard his whole project as absurd, we realize we are irrevocably drawn to its power and grace. The lasting impact of his art indicates his success in preserving the dialectical tension between tragic and comedic insights into our cosmic quandary as ephemeral manifestations in a great entropic system. In this accomplishment, he displays an intimate and not altogether antagonistic connection to the very European ideologies he rejects. Smithson's

question mark to the heart of Hegelian aesthetics actually shows the power of Hegel's framing of truth in beauty for the human imagination. For Smithson's own dialectical opposition to Hegel preserves his philosophy even as it rejects it. The connection between them illuminates not only Hegel's legacy in modern art – much of which he would be loathe to admit is even art – but also the enduring relevance and infinite possibilities in artistic creation still left to us. In an age where irony usually takes the form of a cynicism bordering on despair, and the end of art and the dread of Armageddon are woven into the social fabric, we are well served by such reminders.

•Notes •

[1] Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T.M. Knox. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 66.
[2] Shapiro, Gary. *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 22.
[3] Ibid., 24.
[4] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 220.
[5] Ibid., 67.
[6] Smithson, Robert. "Fragments of an Interview with P.A. Norvell." In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Ed, Jack Flam. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 195.
[7] Smithson, "Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson." Edited and annotated by Eva Schmidt in *Collected Writings*, 210.
[8] This is not to say that Hegel does not provide an important discussion of irony as it appears in Attic comedy in the *Aesthetics* and elsewhere in different forms (particularly *The Phenomenology of Spirit*'s description of the Unhappy Consciousness and the placement of modern irony in the final discussion of *Moralität* in the *Philosophy of Right*) but only that this analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. For more on the role of comedy and irony in ancient Greek theater (particularly its relationship to the mask) see George, Theodore D. "Specifications: Heidegger, Hegel, and the Comedy of the End of Art." *Epoche*, Vol. 8 No. 1 (Fall 2003): 27-41. Bernard Freydberg also highlights the significance of ancient comedy for Hegel (particularly Aristophanes) in his own lament on the loss of the comedic art in modern times and his hope for a rebirth in the future, something I find happening, in part, in the works of Robert Smithson. Freydberd, Bernard. "Hearkening to Thalia: Toward the Rebirth of Comedy in Continental Philosophy." *Research in Phenomenology* 39 (2009): 401-415. See also William Desmond's light-hearted attempt to read Hegel's sense of humor and its relationship to Aristophanes' comedy. (Desmond, William. "Can Philosophy Laugh at Itself? On Hegel and Aristophanes." *The Owl of Minerva* 20 (Spring 2009): 131-149.) Hegel may very well be more humorous than we have made him in the canon, but his criticism of modern irony is almost entirely without mirth.
[9] Roche, Mark W. "Hegel's Theory of Comedy in the Context of Hegelian and Modern Reflections on Comedy." *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* , Vol. 56, No. 221 (2002), 413.
[10] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 63.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 64.

[13] Ibid.
[14] In this sense, Hegel maintains his position on Fichte as found the *Phenomenology of Spirit* wherein he attacks the Fichtean Absolute for its erasure of difference in the assertion of unity. Maintaining a theory that upholds the sameness of the Absolute, even when pitted against all other cognition, is "to palm off its Absolute as the night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 9.
[15] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 64-5. Emphasis original.
[16] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 400.
[17] Huson, Timothy C. "Hegel and the Concept of 'Tragic Irony.'" *Southwest Philosophy Review: Journal of the Southwestern Philosophical Society* Vol. 14 No. 1 (1997): 125. Emphasis original.
[18] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 66. This ironic detachment causes Hegel to claim later that the Schlegels, "with their premeditated irony could not master the mind and spirit of their nation and time." Ibid., 1175.
[19] Ibid., 65.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 66.
[22] Ibid. Even if other people apprehend the ironical artist's works as serious presentations, their judgment only shows their ignorance. Taking on the voice of the egotistical and somewhat cruel ironical artist, Hegel calls these duped souls "deceived, poor limited creatures, without the faculty and ability to apprehend and reach the loftiness of my standpoint." Ibid., 65.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Hegel often employs metaphors of distance and loftiness when describing the ironical artist. Untethered by the demands of the Ideal, such an artist floats above the rest of us like a disembodied and flippant Cartesian ego. Yet, Hegel's venomous attacks on Schlegel are perhaps belied by his own use of irony in his general philosophical methodology. The idea of Hegel's questionable treatment of Schlegel on the issue of irony as a strategy is taken up in Grau, Alexander. "Glauben, Wissen: Ironie: Hegels postanalytische Überwindung der Erkenntnistheorie." *Glauben und Wissen, Zweiter Teil (Hegel-Jahrbuch 2004)*. Edited by Andreas Arndt. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004, 197-202.
[25] Ibid., 68. Hegel returns to the notion of irony in Solger in a footnote in the *Philosophy of Right,* trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, 101-2.
[26]Kronick, Joseph G. "The Limits of Contradiction: Irony and History in Hegel and Henry Adams." *Clio* Vol. 15 No. 4 (1986): 401.
[27] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 67. Should the ironical ego remain in empty and totally inward subjectivity, then the world will persist as a denuded shell of itself and all activity remain in vain. However, given the nature of the Hegelian dialectic to unravel its concentrated extremism by producing its seeming opposite, this empty ego may once again grow dissatisfied with itself and seek something substantial. Although truthfully, Hegel has little hope that the Fichtean ego at the heart of modern irony can accomplish anything more than a yearning for concretization from which it lacks the ability to escape. Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 296.
[29] Ibid., 1236.
[30] Ibid. The strangeness of ending the *Lectures on Aesthetics* on comedy (and comedy in theater in particular) leads Richard Collins to assert that we are meant to read the lectures as a kind of comedic performance. A somewhat strange claim in itself, Collins is at least correct that "As a performance of the working of Spirit in philosophy, the *Aesthetics* is a piece of virtuosity which performs not only the dissolution of art but the dissolution of its own performance on the way to the Absolute." Collins, Richard. "The Comic Dissolution of Art: The Last Act of Hegel's 'Aesthetics.' " *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 33 No. 1, (March 1981): 67.
[31] The treatment of character is where Hegel mistrusts modern comedy and blames it for the dissolution of art as spiritually relevant. Part of the problem with modern comedy lies in the fact that, unlike its ancient predecessors (particularly the comedies of Aristophanes) modern comedies (such as Molière's works) cause the audience to laugh at the characters alone; the characters do not laugh at themselves. Thus, there is a cruelty at the heart of modern comedy that is lacking in moral edification.
[32] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 67.
[33] Ibid., 243.

[34] Ibid., 244.
[35] Ibid., 67.
[36] Ibid., 160.
[37] Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty." In *Collected Writings*, 146.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Smithson, "What is a Museum?" In *Collected Writings,* 50.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments." In *Collected Writings,* 11.
[44] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 489.
[45] Shapiro, 36.
[46] Smithson, "Fragments of an Interview with P. A. Norvell," 195.
[47] Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," 21.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid. Felicity Colman argues that we can find "much of this type humorous posturing in Smithson's film of the Spiral Jetty" as well. Colman, Felicity. "Affective Entropy: Art as Differential Form." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (April 2006): 174. She is right in a certain way as, for example, the *Spiral Jetty* essay informs us that the kind of laughter evoked by the paleontological/geological perspective on time is not one of pure hilarity but a kind of "cosmic" sense of humor that keeps us anchored in the entropic without succumbing to it. In the last few lines of this essay Smithson writes, "The ghostly cameraman slides over the glassed-in compounds. These fragments of a timeless geology laugh without mirth at the time-filled hopes of ecology." The dinosaurs being filmed snicker humorlessly at the cameraman filming them as they signal the distant past and inevitable future — a past and future in which the species filming them did not and will not exist. Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," 152.
[50] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 296.
[51] Smithson does the same kind of thing when he analyzes Ad Reinhardt's *A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala*. In his analysis of this strange and comical work of art, Smithson urges us to "take this 'Joke' seriously," which Smithson himself does, all the while suspending us on the border between laughter and earnestness. Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art." In *Collected Writings,* 87.
[52] Flam, Jack. "Introduction," In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, xxiii.
[53] Iverson, Margaret. *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007, 79.
[54] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," In *Collected Writings,* 102. Such inability to enter into irrationality shows the limitations of art criticism which, for Smithson, appreciates but fails to enter into the artistic process. He wryly observes, "Art critics are generally poets who have betrayed their art, and instead have tried to turn art into a matter of reasoned discourse, and, occasionally, when their 'truth' breaks down, they resort to a poetic quote." Ibid., 107.
[55] For a detailed discussion of how Ehrenzweig's psychoanalytic theory plays in Smithson's works, see Shapiro 88-9 and Graziani, Ron. "Robert Smithson's Picturable Situation: Blasted Landscapes from the 1960s." *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 20 No. 3 (Spring 1994): 419-451.
[56] Smithson, "Four Conversations between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson," 207.
[57] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects." In *Collected Writings,* 102.
[58] Ibid., 100.
[59] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 289.
[60] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," 107.
[61] Smithson, "An Esthetics of Disappointment." In *Collected Writings,* 334-5.
[62] Ibid., 335.
[63] Smithson, "What is a Museum?" 51. Perhaps exasperated by the fact that Smithson will not simply affirm himself as an ironic artist, Kaprow concludes the interview by stating "this article itself is ironic in that it functions within a cultural context, within the context of a fine-arts publication, for instance, and makes its points only within that context." Ibid.
[64] Smithson, "Art and the Political Whirlpool or the Politics of Disgust." In *Collected Writings,* 134.

[65] Ibid., 135.
[66] Smithson, "The Establishment." In *Collected Writings,* 99.
[67] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," 111-2.
[68] Smithson makes a similar point in an interview with Anthony Robbin where he argues that "People who defend the labels of painting and sculpture say what they do is timeless, created outside of time; therefore the object transcends the artist himself. But I think that the artist is important too." Smithson, "Smithson's Non-Site Sights: Interview with Anthony Robbin." In *Collected Writings,* 175.
[69] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 176-7.
[70] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," 112.
[71] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 576.
[72] To illustrate this point, one of his most ambitious proposals for a land reclamation project envisioned placing an enormous revolving disk at the bottom of the mile-deep Bingham Copper Mine (now Kennecott Copper). Such a project, suggested, rejected, and minimally preserved in his writings and sketches, would force the viewer to confront the devastating void caused by the world's largest open-pit mine, while drawing attention to (rather than away from) how human technology functions in the larger workings of entropy.

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