

Online Review : The Archive of Place and Land Art as Archive
Amelia Ishmael March 10, 2019

Elizabeth England's case study of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* confronts advanced issues that surround the archives of Land Art works by artists.¹ The article discusses the concept of land itself as an archival document, the ephemeral nature of earthworks and their translations through documentation (such as photography, film/video, and 3D mapping), and conflicts regarding artistic authority versus archival control over the records relating to artworks.

Land Art is a movement in art history that took place in the 1960-1970s, where artists made site-specific installations in an environment (generally outdoors). The movement was in part prompted by artists who wanted to make artworks outside of the confines of the art gallery and museum; By working with organic materials in an unstable environment, land art also opposed the commodification of artworks, in that there was often no art object that could be bought. Land art has presented certain challenges through time, because many of the artworks only exist now through documentation. In the case of *Spiral Jetty* there are photographs of the installation's construction and completion (by Gianfranco Gorgoni, commissioned by Robert Smithson), a 32-minute film by the artist, and the artists' papers (at the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C.) that include notes and sketches. This documentation is sometimes treated as art objects (sold, published, and exhibited) as surrogates of the installation, and at other times the documentation is stored in archives. There is also the installation *Spiral Jetty* itself which was created in 1970 and still exists at Rozel Point, along the northern tip of Utah's Great Salt Lake, which was donated to Dia Art Foundation (in New York) in 1999.

Various archival problems have arisen from environmental works such as *Spiral Jetty*. Because the artwork was designed with artistic intention that it degrades over time, preservation of the artwork is precarious; The artwork is an important artifact of cultural heritage, and is still a

¹ Elizabeth England, "The Archive of Place and Land Art as Archive : A Case Study of *Spiral Jetty*," *American Archivist* 80 (Fall/Winter 2017), 336-354.

tourist destination, yet the question of whether the artwork that exists on this site is still Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, or something else. Documentation of the installation is also an issue— are the photographs and films made of *Spiral Jetty* artworks themselves or supportive materials “subordinate” to the installation? Does some documentation have more authority than others? Elizabeth England raises this question as an archival issue: which are the primary documents and which are the secondary documents? (If the artwork is a primary document, can photographs of it also be primary documents?) Because the documents and artist's papers regarding *Spiral Jetty* have been altered and revised by the artist, when the original design for the installation was redirected, Elizabeth England draws attention to (an essentially Schellenbergian) question of whether the artwork's archives should prioritize the creator's intention or historic truth, and which versions are authoritative and how should they be accessed.

In summary, Elizabeth England's case study draws attention to certain tensions that arise with ephemeral artworks and artists' archives in relation to artistic integrity; In some ways the archivists' role is antithetical to the artist's. When the artworks are designed by the artist to decompose they cannot really be externally preserved without compromising their identity as artworks by the original artist. When the archives themselves could also be considered artworks, the archivist cannot ethically exercise authority or control over the intellectual content of the collection without compromising the creator's intentions. These are special issues that Land Art and its archives pose to archival standards, and it is important for archivists to raise special attention to these issues and to question the interference that their role could take, and the impact that their activities could have to the collection's integrity and value.