

TERMINAL STRUCTURES: ANT FARM'S *CADILLAC RANCH*, 1974

by

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ABSTRACT

The San Francisco art and architecture collective Ant Farm built *Cadillac Ranch* in 1974 outside of Amarillo, Texas, to showcase “the rise and fall of the Cadillac tailfin.” The ten vintage Cadillacs buried nose-first in a row along the old Route 66, with their tailfins jutting up obliquely, is often read as a monument to the golden era of the American automobile. Yet despite (and because of) its continued popularity, the work has rarely been taken seriously as art. This thesis proposes a reevaluation of Ant Farm’s iconic project, and represents an attempt to position *Cadillac Ranch* as an important sculptural installation that speaks to many of the key concerns of the American avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s.

My title references the Jewish Museum’s 1966 exhibition “Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculpture,” which sparked the rapid legitimization of minimalist sculpture in the postwar American art world. Reading *Cadillac Ranch* against this seminal artistic tradition, I argue that the project can be read as a monumental epitaph to the exhausted aesthetic models and sociopolitical narratives of the late-modern period. *Cadillac Ranch* memorializes modernism by rehearsing its formal techniques, but as a hybridized, participatory project, it also enacts modernism’s end.

This thesis begins by describing the development of the *Cadillac Ranch* commission through several media forms. From there, the body of the text proceeds through the lens of minimalist sculptural practices, with an in-depth consideration of the ways in which the project reprograms the formal tactics of minimalism: seriality, industrial materials, readymade objects, etc. Next, I articulate the specificities of *Cadillac Ranch*'s monumentality, with recourse to texts by Tony Smith and Robert Smithson—two figures who helped precipitate the shift into the expanded field of art making after minimalism's emergence. This will involve a comparison of the inherent monumentality of *Cadillac Ranch* to that of large-scale earthworks, while treating such land art as a dialogue between earth-moving practices and media-performative ones. The last section provides an account of the media afterlife of *Cadillac Ranch* as it is visible through mass cultural manifestations of its image and name.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
Sections	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II MEDIA-MOBILE: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION.....	13
III MINIMALISM: OBJECT AND ENCOUNTER.....	19
Auto-phenomenology.....	29
The Road.....	33
Historicity and Temporality.....	35
Into the Expanded Field.....	38
IV THE NEW MONUMENTS.....	42
Land Art.....	50
V MEDIA AFTERLIFE.....	58
Postscript.....	62
REFERENCES.....	64

SECTION I

INTRODUCTION

2014 marks the fortieth anniversary of the completion of *Cadillac Ranch*, a sculptural installation and roadside attraction just outside of Amarillo, Texas, consisting of ten vintage Cadillac automobiles buried headfirst in a row parallel to Interstate 40, formally historic U.S. Route 66.¹ The project was conceived and executed in 1974 by the San Francisco-based art and architecture collective Ant Farm (Doug Michels, Chip Lord, and Hudson Marquez) in collaboration with Stanley Marsh 3, an enthusiastic oil and natural gas baron who provided the artists with funding and land on which to build.² *Cadillac Ranch* was built “as a monument to the rise and fall of the tailfin,” in the artists’ own words—an archive of nostalgia for the golden era of the American automobile.³ For years, *Cadillac Ranch* has been a well-known site, popular among both locals and road-tripping

¹ Bud Lee, “*Cadillac Ranch*, 1974,” 1974, in *Ant Farm, 1968-1978*, eds. Constance M. Lewallen and Steve Seid (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 68.

² Marsh—who prefers “3” to the more conventional Roman numerals—was for decades the ringleader of Amarillo’s peculiar cultural circus, and one of the city’s most well-known and visible citizens. Besides *Cadillac Ranch*, Marsh commissioned numerous works of art, both public and private. Of particular note are two projects with automotive resonance: Robert Smithson’s *Amarillo Ramp* (1973), a graded earthen curl on a dry lakebed on Marsh’s property, and the so-called Dynamite Museum, a project begun in the early 1990s that consists of thousands of mock traffic signs planted all over Amarillo. The signs bear jokes, images, and nonsequiturs.

³ Chip Lord, *Automerica: A Trip Down U.S. Highways from World War II to the Future: A Book* (New York: Dutton, 1976); reproduced in *Ant Farm 1968-1978*, eds. Lewallen and Seid, 157.

tourists, some of whom pass through Amarillo on a journey to retrace a road that has engrained itself in the American Imaginary, one of the country's first highways and a crucial artery for westward migration during the 20th century.

Situated about 650 ft. south of Interstate 40, the Cadillacs are buried nose-first in the dirt at 52-degree angles. They form a neat, single-file line, oriented on an east-west axis, and are buried chronologically, with the earliest car farthest west. The front bumper of each Cadillac has been anchored in cement at the bottom of an eight-foot hole (subsequently refilled with dirt), allowing the progression of tailfins to obliquely project into the air. The cars were buried with factory paintjobs, but today, every conceivable surface has been covered with spray paint graffiti, many times over. They have also been subjected to structural vandalism—no window or hubcap remains, and much of the remaining metal has been beaten and bent. Cans of spray paint litter the ground near the installation. There is no informational or directional signage, and the work is rarely, if ever, mentioned in Amarillo's scant tourist literature. Despite all this, the daily stream of visitors to its roadside site attests to the continued popularity and remarkable assimilation of *Cadillac Ranch* into mainstream cultural consciousness.

As high art, however, it has rarely been taken seriously. The current legacy of *Cadillac Ranch* is defined by the kitsch of postcards and RV parks that bear its name; as an image, it is both recognizable and visually interesting, but apparently unworthy of critical reflection. Perhaps aesthetic accessibility has repelled scholars otherwise interested in Ant Farm's work. *Ten cars are buried in Texas. Take a*

picture, make your mark and move along. But what if we take the joke seriously? Such a question is quite a pertinent one for Ant Farm, who present problems to the historian attempting to categorize and make sense out of their diverse oeuvre, which includes performances and drawings, architecture and video. Scholars have not by any measure ignored Ant Farm, but *Cadillac Ranch*, by far the group's most famous project, has never been the subject of a sustained analysis. The common assessment of the work, as a critique and/or celebration of consumer culture, is not incorrect—Lord claims “*Cadillac Ranch* was intended to be as much a monument to the glory of the tailfin as a burial of the gas guzzler”⁴—but it does not tell the whole story. The project is only truly activated through the various discourses of postwar art, and the ways in which *Cadillac Ranch* engages the automobile, that most American of image-objects, go beyond simple celebration or critique.

In hope of addressing this oversight, and with a historicist attitude coincident with four decades of popular recognition and critical neglect, this thesis thus proposes a reevaluation of Ant Farm's iconic project, and represents an attempt to position *Cadillac Ranch* as an important sculptural installation that speaks to many of the key concerns of the American avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s. Pop art, minimalism, and land art practices all find themselves refracted through Ant Farm's kitschy automotive lens. One encounters a degree of

⁴ Paul Harris, “How the US Fell Out of Love with Its Cars: Tail Fins and Chrome Grilles Were Once the Symbols of a Superpower. Now, with 36,000 Jobs Cut in a Week and Foreign Vehicles Filling the Highways, Paul Harris in New York Surveys the Collapse of an Industry,” *The Observer* (England), Jan. 29, 2006.

resistance, however, in attempting to assimilate the work into any one of these high art contexts. This thesis identifies the subtleties of form and reference that allow *Cadillac Ranch* to navigate between mass culture, high culture, and counterculture, and contends that *Cadillac Ranch* is a successful project *because of* its popularity; its clarity of imagery; its multitude of cultural reference points and modes of address.

Cadillac Ranch clearly retains the genes of 1960s Pop art, whose practitioners cribbed the flat vibrancy of print ads, comic books, and televised images, emphasizing the art object as one image and one commodity among many others.⁵ Ant Farm's autos aestheticize the everyday; they form a public artwork that relies on populist imagery. In the upraised, emphasized tailfins, one finds the logic of the advertisement (*Exciting New Features!*), and the row of cars recreates the commercial space of the auto showroom, though it is an uncanny, transaction-free one. But while the legacy of Pop art is important to and ever-present at *Cadillac Ranch*, it will not be the focus of the present study. The booming consumer culture of the late 1950s gave birth to Pop, but also engendered its fraternal twin, minimalism—a visually dissimilar mode of practice, but one that is very close to Pop in terms of formal strategies and ideology. Minimalism will provide the lens through which I analyze *Cadillac Ranch* in this thesis, but there

⁵ The automobile is the archetype of the American commodity, and many Pop artists engaged its image and aura. The abstracted, anthropomorphic automobiles in the early mixed-media paintings of Richard Hamilton set the stage for James Rosenquist's 1960s work, in which the car becomes a potent symbolic object, a synthesis of Cold War desires and anxieties. Several of Ed Ruscha's important early artist's books are deskilled photographic accountings of roadside phenomena, including vernacular architecture (*Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, 1962) and technological ruins (*Royal Road Test*, 1967).

are other avenues for future scholarship that might illuminate the relationship of Ant Farm's work to the legacies and implications of Pop.⁶

The title of this thesis counters the eponymous organizing principle of the Jewish Museum's 1966 exhibition "Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculpture," a landmark show that began the rapid process of legitimization for minimalist sculpture within the postwar American art world.⁷ The phrase referred to the importance and fundamental nature of form, of shape, in the new work. One of the most acclaimed sculptures featured in "Primary Structures" was Ronald Bladen's *Untitled* (1965): a series of three monolithic metal volumes that appear to protrude from the gallery floor at identical oblique angles, despite the regularity of their geometry.⁸ For me, the clear formal parallel between Bladen's work and *Cadillac Ranch* seems to necessitate a reading of the latter against the minimalist ethos of the former.⁹ What ideological or historicist leap does a minimalist roadside attraction represent? How does the formal instability of Bladen's work become ontological instability in Ant Farm's? Perhaps more importantly, what can we learn from the discursive transformation, occurring

⁶ One such avenue might involve a comparison of *Cadillac Ranch* to Claes Oldenburg's anti-monuments (both proposed and executed), which reprogram specific sites via blockage, dysfunction, or through the retrieval of suppressed histories.

⁷ James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 29-30, 247.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-20. Bladen's *Untitled* was not incidental, but central to the exhibition, where it shared the main gallery with other purposefully striking and spectacular works. According to Meyer, one critic called it "[t]he most powerful [work] in the exhibition," and another claimed *Untitled* "dominated the main room if not the entire show."

⁹ "Ronald Bladen, *Untitled*, 1965," 1965, in Meyer, *Art and Polemics*, 19.

between 1965 and 1974, that leads from the avant-garde acclaim of *Untitled* to the mass culture iconicity of *Cadillac Ranch*?

Minimalism is an effective organizing framework for the present discussion because it distills the formal devices and theorizations of much of the advanced art that preceded, and helped shape, Ant Farm's aesthetic milieu. It will, through the course of this thesis, act as a foil against which the populist, hybridized *Cadillac Ranch* will be measured. Minimalism displays the raw materiality of advanced industry—brushed steel, colored Plexiglas—but the work is, like Pop, seemingly nonartistic, repetitive, dumb. At the end of the decade, earthworks and land-based art declared itself heir to the minimal project, with simplified geometric form and an attention to the circumstantial encounter between subject and object. All this would have been familiar to Ant Farm in 1974, and if we are to reevaluate *Cadillac Ranch*, it should entail an identification of minimalism as the central aesthetic model in its universe.

Ant Farm would complete *Cadillac Ranch* only eight years after “Primary Structures,” but by 1974, much of minimalism's neo-avant-garde import had been attenuated. If minimalism indeed marked the crux of 20th-century artistic practice, as Hal Foster has argued—simultaneously the fulfillment of the modernist project and the break from that project—*Cadillac Ranch* demonstrates that this new paradigm of art making will, like all others, become obsolete.¹⁰ The new will inevitably become the old, Ant Farm seems to argue, as they memorialize, even

¹⁰ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 54.

mock minimalism by placing it by the wayside as stop-and-go diversion, the world's most colorful set of tombstones. The decayed cars that comprise *Cadillac Ranch* have indeed reached a kind of terminal state, and their tailfins (marking the terminus of the automobile) read as an epigraph for historical styles caught in the cycle of adoption and abandonment. The story told by these tailfins finds an analogue in the “rapid, dialectical mechanism of publicity and commodification propelling the New York art world of the sixties”—art movements as passing fads.¹¹ As I will show, *Cadillac Ranch* actually rehearses many of the foundational tactics of late modern art, bringing them to life in the expanded (wheat) field, and presenting a set of trajectories that the arts might pursue in the postmodern era, all blended together and served on a mass cultural platter. And the work itself is produced in an era of fusion, of blurred categorical distinctions in the realms of architecture and art, social life and politics. *Cadillac Ranch* is the antithesis of the clear-cut and credible primary structure, but it maintains this beginning in order to figure its end.

In forty years, most published references to *Cadillac Ranch* are simple reportage, or what amounts to captions for the reliably reproduced photographs of the work. The year of its completion, for instance, the work received write-ups in several periodicals, including *Esquire*, the now-defunct *City of San Francisco*, and the Italian architecture and design magazine *Domus*, whose interpretation begins

¹¹ Meyer, *Art and Polemics*, 25.

and ends with the phrase “frozen Detroit culture mystery.”¹² These accounts report the project’s completion but stop well short of real analysis. Periodic references continue in subsequent years: *Cadillac Ranch* is the flashpoint in a 1984 copyright dispute between Ant Farm and the Hard Rock Cafe restaurant chain, covered in the *New York Times*;¹³ it is mentioned in obituaries for Doug Michels in 2003; and one creative *Toronto Star* reporter finds that, in the wake of the American automotive crisis and bailouts in 2009, *Cadillac Ranch* “has taken on a darker meaning than its builders ever intended” (as if the demise of American sociopolitical prestige was never present in the work before the bankruptcy of GM, which owns the Cadillac brand).¹⁴ Other newspaper and magazine coverage has confined itself to regurgitating Ant Farm’s catchy rhetoric about the “rise and fall” of the tailfin.

Unsurprisingly, books that take the automobile as a central theme appear to approach *Cadillac Ranch* with the greatest amount of consideration. A collaborative book entitled *Car Culture* (1984) is more attentive than the abovementioned sources. A large black and white photograph of one of Ant Farm’s buried Cadillacs appears opposite the book’s third chapter heading, “Forgive Them Dear Ford.” Invoking Marshal McLuhan, the authors see Ant Farm’s Cadillacs as representative of a shift from “activity to spectacle” that also manifests itself in obsessive customization practices of car fanatics (which is the focus of the

¹² “Cadillac Ranch nel Texas: un’opera degli Ant Farm,” *Domus*, Oct. 1974, 48.

¹³ Joseph Giovannini, “Cadillac Tail Fin: Symbol of Dispute,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1984.

¹⁴ Mitch Potter, “From Tail Fins to Tailspin, Route 66 Changes Gear,” *Toronto Star*, July 20, 2009.

chapter). But even though Ant Farm's work is posited as a kind of end marker or terminal structure, "the final stage of a long and spectacular evolution" of automotive growth and excess, the authors still find it "an obvious and amusing statement."¹⁵ Another interpretation of the work appears in the edited collection *Roadside America: The Automobile in Design and Culture* (1990). The last essay in the collection details the history and cultural resonance of Route 66, from Dust Bowl origins to Cold War demise. In this context, *Cadillac Ranch* is found to be a "sculptural monument to Route 66" within the realm of "nostalgic recreation."¹⁶ Rather than memorializing the autos themselves, the author's unique reading has Ant Farm saluting the road itself, Route 66, which would give way to the Interstate Highway System by 1976.¹⁷

Cadillac Ranch has rarely been placed in a fine art context, but it does appear in John Beardsley's *Earthworks and Beyond* (1984), where it "can only be described as a requiem for the golden age of the American automobile."¹⁸ Beardsley sees the same "flamboyance" in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Running Fence* project of 1976, which, along with Ant Farm's work, can be contrasted against the more serious—and, one wonders, better quality?—art of the New York avant-garde. The catalog for the 2004 retrospective exhibition "Ant Farm 1968-1978" is undoubtedly the most complete scholarly assessment of *Cadillac Ranch*: it

¹⁵ Frances Basham, Bob Ughetti, and Paul Rambali, *Car Culture* (New York: Delilah Communications, 1984), 63.

¹⁶ Arthur Krim, "Mapping Route 66: A Cultural Cartography," in *Roadside America: The Automobile in Design and Culture*, ed. Jan Jennings (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1990), 205.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁸ John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 31.

reproduces drawings, collages, and photographs made by Ant Farm during the development and execution of the project, and even includes an excerpt from Chip Lord's 1976 book *Automerica*, which more fully describes the design process and history of the tailfin. The artists also share their thoughts on its legacy in an interview with curator Constance Lewallen. In this conversation, links from *Cadillac Ranch* to minimalist sculpture and land art are posited, but never followed through.¹⁹ This thesis hopes to fill that void.

The texts of Robert Smithson have proved more directly relevant to the formulation of this thesis than the abovementioned references. It was Smithson's 1966 article "Entropy and the New Monuments" which first suggested to me the close interconnections between *Cadillac Ranch*, minimalist sculpture, and (by extension) first-generation land art.²⁰ At once abstract and expository, Smithson's article set the stage for the present account by positing the work of now-canonical minimalist sculptors as indicative of a new sort of time(lessness) that, in effect, fractures the momentary optical punch of the modernist object: "This kind of time has little or no space; it is stationary without movement; it is going nowhere...and is against the wheels of the time clock."²¹ Smithson's interest in terminal states of high entropy are evident here—wheels cannot turn, provide movement, without an engine supplying energy—but it is never quite clear if the New Monuments are

¹⁹ Chip Lord, Doug Michels, and Curtis Schreier, interview by Constance M. Lewallen, in *Ant Farm 1968-1978*, eds. Lewallen and Seid, 72.

²⁰ The inclusion of a photograph Bladen's *Untitled* (1965) in Smithson's essay being the spark, so to speak, for these associations.

²¹ Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 11.

epigraphic or residual; that is, if they are monuments to something *other than themselves*, or are simply those objects by which contemporary civilization will be judged in the future. *Cadillac Ranch* can be taken as a case study in these terms, but it is understood in the present account as temporally removed from the work at the center of Smithson's discussion—a terminal structure rather than a minimalist New Monument.

Although it does not mention *Cadillac Ranch* specifically, Felicity D. Scott's 2007 book *Architecture or Techno-utopia: Politics After Modernism* provides a macro perspective on the postmodern turn that is embodied in the practices of Ant Farm and other 1970s collectives like Archigram and Superstudio. Throughout the book, Scott shows how the work of these groups—“experimental endgames” characterized by radical reinvention of established building practices, in both physical and conceptual forms—looks into the past and future simultaneously, reshaping the legacy of modernism for a contemporary moment that requires increased efficacy and sustainability.²² The post- and techno-utopias described by Scott are a useful grounding for an analysis of *Cadillac Ranch*, which revels in nostalgia for midcentury modernism while adamantly threatening the purity and recognizability of the tradition. One begins to see how Ant Farm's work moves beyond architectural debates to consider the larger cultural stakes of a contested modernism: turning the tailfin (a popular icon) into an art object is indeed a type of alternative scenario for the object itself, the manufacture of an honorific

²² Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-utopia: Politics After Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 2.

monument from disused scrap metal. Scott also documents Ant Farm's fascination with the image-object dialectic; as is the case at *Cadillac Ranch*, the group had a tendency to regard their objects and performances as entities with inevitable media afterlives. Ultimately, *Architecture or Techno-utopia* shows that the countercultural monument at the center of this thesis is only one of many creative responses to the changing cultural landscape of the 1970s.

To chart a course for the remainder of this thesis: Section II works through the evolution of *Cadillac Ranch* in various media forms, from preliminary sketches to project blueprint. The formal analysis in Section III provides the foundation for the body of the text, which proceeds through the lens of minimalist sculptural practices. Here I consider *Cadillac Ranch* in terms of (minimalist) object and encounter, discussing form, compositional seriality, and the Cadillac-as-readymade, while also breaking down the unique phenomenological program of the sculpture. Section IV will attempt to articulate the specificities of *Cadillac Ranch's* monumentality, with recourse to texts by Tony Smith and Robert Smithson, respectively—two seminal figures who, in different ways, helped precipitate the shift into the expanded field of art making. This will involve a comparison of *Cadillac Ranch* to large-scale earthworks, but will also keep in line with recent scholarship that treats land art as a coherent, if heterogeneous, dialogue between earth-moving practices and media-performative ones. Lastly, Section V provides an account of the media afterlife of *Cadillac Ranch* as it is visible through mass cultural manifestations of its image and name.

SECTION II

MEDIA-MOBILE: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

Cadillac Ranch did not come into the world fully formed. The physical artwork is the result of a developmental process, and it appears prior to 1974 in several projects in different media produced by (and even before) Ant Farm themselves. Linked by their common interest and trajectory towards physical realization, each version of *Cadillac Ranch* can also stand alone as a discrete work that illuminates aspects of Ant Farm's practice and cultural context. This origin story follows a serial logic of shifting forms and increasingly distilled images that mirrors—or perhaps is reproduced by—the sculpture itself, which the artists had designed specifically to illustrate the evolution of the tailfin through ten different model years. In other words, just as Cadillac's signature design feature pronounced itself in increasingly clear relief throughout the 1950s, culminating in the razor sharp, jet-like fins of the '59 Coupe de Ville, Ant Farm's practice moved from abstract collage to precise architectural blueprint during the development of their commission.

As a collective, Ant Farm was no stranger to multimedia experimentation. Michels and Lord were recent architecture graduates when they founded the

collective in 1968, and the interdisciplinary nature of their schooling is reflected in their work. Since the group's inception, drawings and collage, printmaking and photography, have been as important to Ant Farm as performance and video. Many of their works exist in different forms, providing the critic or historian with unique insight into the various stages of conceptual development, execution, and (retroactive) documentation of projects. *Cadillac Ranch* is no exception. Before it sprouted as a sculptural installation in a wheat field, the kernel lay dormant in Henry Bolles Lent's 1966 book on automotive design, *The Look of Cars: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*. This book features a diagrammatic illustration of photographed Cadillac rear ends, arrayed on the page in such a way as to illustrate the changes in tailfin design from its emergence in the late 1940s through its decline in the early 1960s. Abstracted from their functional context (i.e., the rest of the car), the tailfins become aesthetic objects in their own right—what Lord would later call a “pure image.”²³ More than that, these isolated fins function as text: from the first small bump of the '49 to the flamboyant angles of the '59 to the more subdued '63, Lent charts a conventional narrative pattern of introduction, rising action, climax and *denouement* that mirrors the changing styles of American car culture at large. The printed page is thus the fountainhead of the *Cadillac Ranch* image, whose

²³ Lord, *Automerica*, 156. In many ways, the automobile is the Ant Farm image-object par excellence. Their projects often include some sort of car, functioning as a symbol with varying resonance and meaning. A survey: the automobile is half of the equation that leads to nomadic architecture (moveable shelter), which, for Ant Farm, manifested itself most clearly in the deployment of inflatables housed in the customized Media Van during a transnational tour in 1971. The design of House of the Century (1971-1973) was partly based on the grille of a Cord automobile, and the infamous *Media Burn* (1976) performance had the artists smashing through a wall of burning televisions in a customized Cadillac El Dorado.

trajectory will propel it into the real world (as sculpture) before becoming subsumed back into two-dimensional printed and digital media forms.

When Ant Farm discovered the autonomous tailfins within *The Look of Cars*, they became obsessed with these quasi-textual photographic objects. “We Xeroxed, collaged and enlarged the image,” recalls Lord.²⁴ These initial appropriations soon found their way into the Ant Farm oeuvre, rearranged and re-collaged in various ways and for different purposes. A page in the *Ant Farm Timeline*, a catalog of the group’s activities assembled in 1976, functions as a kind of proto-proposal for *Cadillac Ranch*, featuring nine of the tailfin photographs from Lent’s text lined up near the bottom of the page with a lean that approximates what would become their signature 52-degree angle.²⁵ With the notable exception of a centralized, three-quarters image of a 1950 Coupe de Ville (the tenth car), the rest of the page consists of text. Ant Farm lays out the itinerary for an imagined event whose purpose and parameters remain ambiguous. What is clear is that one of the day’s activities will include the “Burial of 20 Cadillacs on Amarillo site near Highway U.S. 87”, which will then become a “[t]emporary location for video production.”²⁶ Elvis Presley, a well-documented Cadillac lover, will provide musical talent. This page from the *Timeline* shows Ant Farm envisioning a multimedia spectacle that will revolve around an automotive

²⁴ Ibid., 156.

²⁵ Reproduced in *Ant Farm 1968-1978*, eds. Lewallen and Seid, 122. Page date is uncertain.

²⁶ U.S. Highway 87 is the major north-south road in Amarillo. It crosses I-40 in the middle of the city. Ant Farm’s decision to situate *Cadillac Ranch* east-to-west makes sense, given the aura of westward migration surrounding historic Route 66.

interment. But for the moment at least, the artists are relegated to cheap collage and independent printing for the realization of their fantasy.

Mail art is the next step in the media evolution of *Cadillac Ranch*. Between 1971 and 1974, the members of Ant Farm kept up a correspondence with Stanley Marsh, who, after meeting the artists in person at an exhibition in Houston, had suggested that the group draw up a proposal for a new work.²⁷ By the 1970s, mail art—interventions into the media forms and distribution networks of traditional post—had become a worldwide, if persistently avant-garde phenomenon, and it constituted an attractive (and inexpensive) tactic for the Ant Farmers in their communiqués with Marsh. These objects manifest a particular brand of post-psychedelic informality that the artists cultivated throughout the 1970s.

One standard size envelope, sent from Marquez to Marsh, depicts a shifting landscape drawn in pen and marker.²⁸ On the left side, beneath the text “My Cadillac Ranch,” a fenced-off agricultural tract is yielding strange, Cadillac-shaped fruit—Lent’s by-now-familiar photographic tailfins, repurposed as signs of rural fecundity. The cars stand straight up, their monolithic bumpers contrasting with a crudely rendered mountain range in the background. This scene of perverted nature gives way to a desert on the right, an expanse of sand and sky that is partly obscured by Marsh’s Amarillo address, writ large, and a postage stamp of a balding Eisenhower. A small pyramid and a palm tree occupy the far right-hand register of the envelope, while another half-buried Cadillac (this one drawn, and at the

²⁷ Ibid., 66.

²⁸ Reproduced in *Ant Farm 1968-1978*, eds. Lewallen and Seid, 66.

proper angle) stands at the edge of the sandy waste, its motion lines indicating it has only just fallen from some great height, plunged into the sand like a missile. Marquez's vision takes into account the diversity of Texas geography, showing alpine ranges, desert, and the farmland that would eventually site *Cadillac Ranch*. If the *Timeline* page indicates that Ant Farm had already latched onto the idea of burying cars, this piece of mail art shows that the aesthetic implications of the act—whether the erection of megaliths, the cultivation of strange fruit, or the automobile as bomb—were still being determined.

In February of 1974, Ant Farm sent a proposal to Stanley Marsh that outlined their plan for *Cadillac Ranch*.²⁹ The proposal, executed by Michels, took the form of an architectural blueprint—unsurprising given the artist's formal training, as well as Ant Farm's collaboration with the architect Richard Jost on *House of the Future*, completed two years earlier.³⁰ The work's concept has been fully explicated in this proposal. A precise cross-section of the '59 de Ville, anchored in cement in its triangular grave, is the main visual focus, but the blueprint has a wealth of other imagery and information, including a diagram of the grave dimensions, a cost assessment for the project, and most importantly, the title of the work above another hand-rendered Cadillac and Stanley Marsh's name (it was later augmented with a small photograph of the completed work—a version of a version). Michels's expert draughtsmanship renders the blueprint a legible

²⁹ Benjamin Blackwell, "Amarillo Art Center Poster," 1981, in *Ant Farm 1968-1978*, eds. Lewallen and Seid, plate 16.

³⁰ Lord et al., "Interview," 60. The white, submarine-like House of the Century reprograms and punctuates architectural modernism much like *Cadillac Ranch* does late-modern visual art. The logic of the terminal structure, it could be argued, informs both projects.

statement of artistic intent, an obvious necessity for commissions and proposals, but the aesthetic is quite at odds with the nebulous informalism of the *Timeline* page and Marquez's mail art. Anyone with access to the blueprint could theoretically execute the exact same work, and it is this reproductive potentiality that forms a common thread from Ant Farm's developmental multimedia practices—predicated on appropriation—through the *Cadillac Ranch* installation and onto its pop cultural and postsite iterations.

Ant Farm spent approximately two weeks in May 1974 rounding up their Cadillacs from used car lots, auto junkyards, and private sellers in and around Amarillo. Once the ten cars were located and purchased—most demanding no more than a few hundred dollars—the artists were able to begin installation. The plan articulated in Michel's blueprint was executed over several days in early June, 1974. As Chip Lord recalls, a backhoe operator was given instructions pertaining to the depth of each hole and the manner of lifting the tail end of each car such that it slid into its newly dug grave.³¹ Work was smooth and efficient by all accounts. A party was held on June 21, 1974, where the leading '49 was christened with a bottle of champagne, a gesture that marked the official opening of *Cadillac Ranch*.

³¹ Lord, *Automerica*, 157-59.

SECTION III

MINIMALISM: OBJECT AND ENCOUNTER

A brief glance at *Cadillac Ranch* is enough to confirm an adherence to the basic tenets of minimalism: these are industrially-made, standardized objects, produced and deployed in a serial manner, which retain no trace of the artist's hand and whose aesthetic demands a degree of viewer interaction. Such qualities are obvious, visible even in passing, through a windshield or rearview mirror. Indeed, if Ant Farm's project evinces the specter of minimalism amongst its ruined forms, it is because minimalist work had by 1974 been institutionally recognized and resolutely assimilated into the narrative of 20th-century art. The meteoric rise of minimalism in the 1960s saw both international exhibitions and career retrospectives being mounted for minimalist artists before the decade was over.³² And with institutionalization comes ubiquity: Michael Fried was able as early as 1967 to speak of the "utter pervasiveness—the virtual universality—of the sensibility that I have characterized as corrupted or perverted by theatre."³³ Thus, not only did the counterculture have a set of formal devices to deconstruct; they

³² Meyer, *Art and Polemics*, 247. The author points to Donald Judd's 1968 one-person exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art as evidence of this assimilation.

³³ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimalism*, ed. James Meyer (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 234-35. As is well known, "theatrical" is Fried's descriptor for minimalist art.

were also faced with an established history, a narrative of avant-garde provocation, resolve, and eventual acceptance, which must have appeared overly tidy and teleological. An effective response would have to address both the objects themselves and the discourse surrounding them. With *Cadillac Ranch*, Ant Farm subjects the forms of minimalism to destruction, but as they do so, they recognize the significance of the new paradigm, and the reprogrammed viewership it entailed.

The minimalist engagement with phenomenology, initially articulated by artists, critics, and theorists in the 1960s, is arguably the most important sculptural achievement of the 20th century, for it extracted the art object from modernism's transcendent realm of opticality and reoriented it towards the viewer in real, contingent space and time. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, originally published in 1945 and released in an English translation in 1962, was of great interest to postwar artists attempting to grapple with the ostensible limitations of Clement Greenberg's formalism. The book provided a theoretical framework that destabilized the Cartesian *cogito* as the source of knowledge and posited the act of perception as a necessarily embodied one. Phenomenology is concerned with precisely *how* we come to know the world through positional relationships. According to Merleau-Ponty, subject and object form a coincident perceptual system as two physical entities among many, in real space. Grasping anything in the world entails a simultaneous (and essentially unconscious) account of one's own mobile, vertical, human-sized, forward-looking

body. The subject's physical circumambulation of a cube, for instance, effects a steady distortion of each successive side. For Merleau-Ponty, however, the optical appearance of that cube is not so much *determined by* as *intertwined with* the subject's bodily movement, for it is "by conceiving my body itself as a mobile object that I am able to interpret perceptual appearance and construct the cube as it truly is."³⁴ With its English publication, Merleau-Ponty's notion of a wholly contingent visual experience had a considerable impact on the New York-based avant-garde, and phenomenology began to be incorporated into the theorizations of advanced art—especially minimalism—almost immediately.

Thus the minimalists abandoned the notion of the modernist art object as an autonomous "fact" and made aesthetic experience a function of physical context. This occupation and alteration of real space occurred in a variety of ways: Flavin's arrangements of standardized fluorescent lighting fixtures alternately solidified and dissipated gallery architecture, aestheticizing the voids between the works more than the objects themselves, while Robert Morris's suite of untitled works in his pivotal Green Gallery show of 1964 functioned to articulate and delimit space by hanging from, leaning upon, and concealing parts of the room in which they were shown. The latter artist's obdurate, grey plywood objects made clear their engagement with both architecture and the body of the viewer, who was forced to walk around, under, and through various objects. Indeed, it was Morris who most cogently described the phenomenological model with respect to the

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Theory of the Body is Already a Theory of Perception," in *Minimalism*, ed. Meyer, 196.

new (minimalist) work in his series of essays entitled “Notes on Sculpture,” the first two parts of which were published in *Artforum* in 1966. Taking cues from Gestalt psychology in addition to Merleau-Ponty, Morris positioned simple polyhedrons as those objects most capable of prompting acute perceptual awareness on the part of the viewer. The perspicuous sculptures that Morris exhibited at Green Gallery were, in his view, established Gestalts whose chief attribute was the conceptual and visual constancy of their shape—a shape that remained in the consciousness of the viewer even as the work’s optical presence was transformed by his or her movement, changes in lighting, or installation schemas. As Morris notes, “the major aesthetic terms are not in but dependent upon this autonomous object and exist as unfixed variables that find their specific definition in the particular space and light and physical viewpoint of the spectator.”³⁵

By the early seventies, phenomenological discourse had helped precipitate the shift into what Rosalind Krauss would later term the “expanded field”—a space of conceptual possibility and contingency by which postmodern art making could be mapped. Considering its historical position, *Cadillac Ranch* can be said to represent a moment of commemoration for minimalism, a declaration of its popularization and adaptation by mass culture. At the same time, Ant Farm would appear to have just enough historical perspective to be able to take a full account of the heterogeneous rhetoric of the minimalist artists, and reckon with the sea

³⁵ Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture: Part II,” in *Minimalism*, ed. Meyer, 219.

change effected by their practices. This simultaneously critical and celebratory logic is most effectively described by unpacking the relationship of *Cadillac Ranch* to the minimalist model: simplified, geometric form; serial composition; the use of industrial processes and commercial readymades; and theorizations of phenomenological action and theatre. In so doing, the competing discourses of the minimalist object, whether they be capitalist, militarist, nihilist, or post-modernist, will appropriately be taken into consideration.

Ant Farm's goal of showcasing "the rise and fall of the tailfin" is in a fundamental sense dependent on seriality; on objects produced and articulated as a series. Their narrative does not read as such without relational, but distinct, episodes, and the very obviousness of serial logic is evidence that this narrative is legible. What is more, serialization itself—more precisely, planned obsolescence, or seriality inflected by advanced-capitalism—is a highly entropic process, in that it reproduces and distributes what was once a single autonomous entity. Seriality is nothing new in the history of 20th-century art, and was crucial to the advanced work of the 1960s. Pop and minimalist artists both deployed it as a weapon against relational composition and its implied authorial expressivity, and in doing so, they (intentionally or not) mimicked industrial production and the profusion of the commodity. Repeated formal elements bespoke a kind of assembly line art making, which was sometimes literalized in practice: Warhol worked at an impressive and machine-like clip in his aptly-named Factory, producing paintings of reproducible commodities (or ruined automobiles) while certain minimalists, Donald Judd in

particular, contracted out the fabrication of their work to professionals with access to specialized equipment and heavy materials.³⁶ At *Cadillac Ranch*, these gestures towards the methodology of industry are transcended by the truly factory-made and the truly serialized. Cadillacs are made as a series (on an assembly line); they are commodified as a series (every model-year); and their functional context is structured by seriality (on the road, one car after another). No wonder, then, that Ant Farm aligns their cars with the highway in a linear progression. Seriality at *Cadillac Ranch* functions as art historical reference and as contemporary condition.

The use of old Cadillac cars as modular sculptural units removed from the artist's hands the decisions regarding form, thus orienting their work around the paradigm of the readymade. The specific cars interred were dictated by the tacit requirement that they be the model-years most demonstrative of the tailfin's stylistic change. But simple availability was another factor, as Ant Farm had to make due with whatever Cadillacs the used-car peddlers of the panhandle produced. (A degree of chance, and of luck, was thus incorporated into the project.) The material factors of *Cadillac Ranch* are put into relief when considered alongside the tried-and-true, avant-gardist practice of recontextualizing everyday commodities as art objects.

Cadillac Ranch prompts questions about the status and function of the readymade in minimalist sculpture. Is Ant Farm's use of the Cadillac any different

³⁶ Robert Slifkin, "Donald Judd's Credibility Gap," *American Art*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer 2011): 58.

from other artists' appropriation of industrial objects as sculptural media, as in the work of Dan Flavin or Carl Andre? How does the readymade *work* at *Cadillac Ranch*? Such questions ultimately depend on the degree to which the readymade object becomes abstracted from its original use value and functional context. With their concrete-encased engine blocks and splintering chassis, Ant Farm's autos have obviously lost their original functionality. Yet, as serialized sculptural units, the Cadillacs remain completely opaque, neither ideal geometric forms nor mimetic representations. They insist on being read as cars, despite their material breakdown and tilted configuration, and this refusal to present objects *as something other than that which they are* is a hallmark of the minimalist engagement with the readymade. Flavin's fluorescent tubes deflected attention away from their own presence to the ambient light of the gallery space (the *raison d'être* of the lamp being outward illumination), and while Andre's sculpture emphasized the visual and tactile qualities of the brick as an object. Ant Farm follows this lead, but the group deliberately chooses an object with potent cultural resonance, and therefore courts the kind of real or symbolic associations that other artists tried to eliminate. For Chip Lord, "[t]he best readymades have a certain kind of cultural baggage."³⁷

Both the tendency towards serial projects (based on numerical or formal progression, permutation, rotation, etc.) and the use of readymade units were tactics employed by the 1960s neo-avant-garde to resist subjective authorship,

³⁷ Lord et al., "Interview," 71.

even if this goal was ultimately untenable.³⁸ Andre's store-bought bricks and tiles, for instance, lie on the floor in regular, fitted matrices, just as they normally do in a nonart context. Each unit is interchangeable, and the composition as a whole is nonhierarchical. The anticompositionality of *Cadillac Ranch* is not so absolute. In order to articulate the historical progression of the "rise and fall of the tailfin," the Cadillacs must be placed in a specific order, which lends the entire grouping a hierarchical logic that is closer to modernist sculpture than minimalism.

Furthermore, Ant Farm makes the pivotal aesthetic choice to bury their cars at an angle—resolutely *not* the natural state or configuration for a Cadillac. But this is, in fact, what makes the readymade a readymade: Duchamp also personally determined his sculptural compositions, rotating a urinal ninety degrees from its use-orientation and deciding that a snow shovel be hung from the ceiling. These decisions affect the visual character of the work; indeed, they establish its very status as art, rather than article. With *Cadillac Ranch*, it would seem that Ant Farm recovers something of a Dadaist perspective on authorship that minimalism had forgotten. James Meyer's remark that Judd's art was "well made not readymade" is telling—it points to the ease with which the subtleties and implications of the readymade can be misconstrued in postwar art discourse.

³⁸ Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Icon Editions, Harper-Collins, 1992), 270. The author shows how authenticity of an Andre or Flavin sculpture was dependent on the artist's personal involvement in selection, purchase, and registration of the otherwise banal object: "Though the artists depersonalized their modes of production to the furthest extent, they would not surrender the financial and other prerogatives of authorship, including those of establishing authenticity."

Serial composition increases the legibility to the minimalist object, but the tactic of “one thing after another” can be destabilized through the use of visually complex sculptural units.³⁹ *Cadillac Ranch* testifies on this account, for despite its kitsch roadside blatancy, it remains difficult, if not impossible, to describe in the absolute. Automobiles are complicated forms to begin with—quasi-symmetrical, many-faceted, lines both sharp and soft, surfaces rounded and planar—and are thus a departure from the unitary, simplified geometric shapes associated with minimalism. What is more, the cars themselves are not identical, but rather a sequence of model-years whose original stylized exteriors incorporated not an insignificant amount of difference. Upon installation, it would have been easy to discern between the silver curvilinearity of the ‘49 Club Coupe and the sleeker, more angular and pristine white ‘59 Coupe de Ville. Such variance remains perceptible today, but only on close inspection. Natural erosion, structural vandalism, and constant repaintings have left sculptural *form* in a paradoxical state of affairs at *Cadillac Ranch*. Environmental and publically effected decay has increased the complexity of the Cadillacs as objects. Continual physical deterioration fractures what were once clear-cut planar elements, opening up jagged new spaces in each unit and in general complicating the outward forms. Originally smooth surfaces are caked with stalactites of built-up artificial color. Differentiation sets in; the cumulative action upon the Cadillacs has permanently diversified their form.

³⁹ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in *Minimalism*, ed. Meyer, 209.

As a result of these entropic forces, however, *Cadillac Ranch* as a whole has been made more unitary and dedifferentiated. The inherent messiness of spray painted graffiti resists complete visual perception and comprehension, turning the motley into the monotonous. Thanks to the graffiti, any formal description is complicated by the fact that the work exists in a state of flux, its most indelible characteristic being a lack of visual impermanence that, paradoxically, manifests itself as continuity. Each tag has the same (non)effect as thousands more. Every painted name, chiseled date, and moment spent exposed to the elements changes the inherent sculptural form, but the visual effect is ultimately one of sameness—ten colorful car wrecks, bent against the unpredictable Amarillo winds.

We can see then that Ant Farm has acknowledged and complicated minimalism's adherence to pared-down geometries, whatever the size or material. In general, the ontology of form at *Cadillac Ranch* has its genesis in those liminal spaces of minimalism where cracks appear in the rhetoric of sculptural reduction and reveal objects that are anything but stable, machine-made boxes. For instance, if the decayed Cadillacs prompt questions of the visibility and specificity of surface (described above), one may point to a similar perceptual ambiguity attributed to Judd's sculpture that contradicted the artist's stated intentions.⁴⁰ In his seminal 1965 essay "Specific Objects," Judd advocated an art that was neither painting nor sculpture, not representative or symbolic, but a particular and discrete deployment of material in space (i.e., simply *that* object). Following its publication, certain

⁴⁰ Rosalind Krauss, "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd," in *Minimalism*, ed. Meyer, 211-12.

critics recognized a paradox by which Judd's notion of absolute legibility was subverted by the persistence of illusion in his work—the tendency for industrial materials to reflect, obscure, or otherwise distort the actual spatial fact of “this fundamental rock in the road” which “must be described and analyzed.”⁴¹

The natural and artificial variance that conditions the Cadillacs (as sculptural units) might also be considered against postminimalist and antiformal practices that heralded the dissolution of high minimalism. To cite just one example: by creating a situation where the repeated elements of a serial sculpture conform to a general typology but individually vary, Ant Farm rehearses a signature technique of Eva Hesse, one of the first artists to significantly challenge the minimalist aesthetic and its insistence on serialization and uniformity. While the bodily inflection of Hesse's work is absent at *Cadillac Ranch*, Ant Farm similarly encourages close observation of form and shows that reduction and repetition does not entail a lack of complexity. This, in turn, serves to validate the minimalist object, even as it deviates from the paragon of a metal cube.

Auto-phenomenology

Cadillac Ranch elaborates minimalist phenomenology by encouraging another, specific type of viewership that is keyed to the automobile. The result is a complex, albeit uneasy, synthesis of media and motion, of art's physical and experiential terms. Operating under the assumption that the viewer's bodily

⁴¹ Donald Judd, quoted in Meyer, *Art and Polemics*, 158.

relationship to the artwork is the primary perceptual determinant in the phenomenological model, I want to claim that the encounter staged at *Cadillac Ranch* is not only between the art object and the human body, but also, and perhaps more importantly, between the art object and the automobile. In the majority of contact scenarios—moments when the ten cars are actually *looked at*—phenomenology's embodied human viewer is replaced by the driving machine (the auto-body). Of course, Ant Farm meant for people to stop and visit their installation in person, to leave a mark on the cars, to take a picture. But the reality is that visitors (defined here as those who stop their cars on the access road, get out, and walk to the buried cars) are far outnumbered by automotive passersby. This is an important facet of Cadillac Ranch, for it determines the conditions of viewership for the majority of people who see Ant Farm's project while simultaneously presenting a reformulation of minimalist phenomenology—one that is as much keyed to the expanded field of postmodern art making as it is to the aesthetics of industrial production, the mythology of the westward travel, and the unique resonance of the Cadillac, a quintessentially American consumer product.

The automotive vein of phenomenology is predicated on the simple idea that the movement afforded by the automobile is of a much different type than conventional human locomotion; concurrently, automobile travel sets up subject-object relationships of a particular character. The physical presence of the viewer is maintained in this formulation (i.e., the car is not the one experiencing), but in the

initial approach and first confrontation of *Cadillac Ranch*, the mechanical auto-body functions as an extension of, even surrogate for, the flesh-and-blood corporeality of the viewer within. Attendant in this substitution are shifts in orientation, scale, and most crucially, speed. Encased in an artificial environment, separated from the world by walls of metal and plastic, aluminum and glass, the viewer-as-passenger perceives his or her surroundings as so many momentary images undergoing constant modification. No longer upright and self-propelling, the viewer takes on a passive sitting position that is in certain respects analogous to the tilt of the cars—somewhere between verticality and horizontality. And yet the viewer's passive stance is countered by the frantic energy, manifest as velocity and momentum, produced by the contemporary automobile engine and to which the viewer is subjected. Furthermore, the relative intimacy between artwork and viewer, of the kind courted in museums galleries, is subverted as *Cadillac Ranch* is glimpsed from I-40 or its access road, both several hundred meters away from the burial site. Until one approaches the installation on foot, the closest significant objects are inevitably other cars. All this applies to the viewer-passenger approaching the site. Driving, one is barely permitted to look at all—eyes on the road, as the saying goes. So the phenomenology of the automobile mediates optical experience to a degree unforeseen in earlier minimalist objects and theory. In many cases, it precludes visibility altogether.

Not without reason is the viewer posited as automobile-bound: short of trespassing on private farmland and walking a great distance to the installation,

there is almost no way to visit *Cadillac Ranch* without a car. Whereas a Morris slab might have exerted an effect on the standing, upright viewer as he or she moved through the space in which it was exhibited, *Cadillac Ranch* is driven past more often than it is looked at. Interestingly, the work looks “most minimalist” from the road, where the detail of each car is subsumed into the general formation—stark rectangular blocks like stitches on the horizon line, colorless against the sky.

Arranged in a row parallel to the highway, these forms present an intriguing optical effect as one approaches, passes, and recedes, on the road, at great speed. It is an illusion of multiplication: moving radially from a point in line with the row of cars, a single dark mass appears to elongate and finally fracture into ten uniformly tilted pieces. Considering the prevalence of serial repetition as a compositional trope of minimalism, there is no doubt that many familiar sculptures retain a similar sense of expansion within their phenomenological program. Walking around a cubic Judd relief in a quiet gallery also subjects certain sections of the work to obfuscations and disclosures as one moves from external to internal, latitudinal to longitudinal viewpoints. What Ant Farm has done is to mechanize the movement that allows for such shifts in perception, amplifying both the viewer’s rate of speed and his distance to the object (not to mention the noise and ambient motion of freeway travel). This enhances and singularizes the illusion. Automotive phenomenology is both more explicit and less durational than is conventional—one may only have a relative few moments to view and experience *Cadillac Ranch*.

The Road

If *Cadillac Ranch* calls attention to the automobile as both a phenomenological and aesthetic entity, simultaneously the viewing subject and object of vision, then this program is inextricable from the *road*, used in an abstracted and singular sense. The road—any road—is a physical, identifiable place, but it is also a nonplace, a connective lacuna between two destinations. More than asphalt or earthen matter, the road is space, and as such it is an apposite site for the phenomenology's active viewing subject. In a 1970 interview with Phyllis Tuchman, Carl Andre described the experience of his floor-based sculpture with that of a road:

[A] road doesn't reveal itself at any particular point or from any particular point. Roads appear and disappear. We either have to travel on them or beside them. But we don't have a single point of view for a road at all, except a moving one, moving along it. Most of my works...cause you to make your way along them or around them or to move the spectator over them.⁴²

Here, for road warriors and gallery goers, the relationship of subject and object is a constantly changing one. Every perspective is equal and impermanent, thanks to the implied lateral draw of Andre's road-like floor sculpture. This is an important point: despite gradients (from imperceptible bumps to steep elevation gains), movement along the road can be characterized as essentially horizontal. Most of Andre's floor sculpture, including his famous *Lever* (1966), articulates the same horizontality, drawing the viewer along its length and reorienting perspective to penetrate the ersatz horizon of the gallery's wall-floor juncture. "The engaged

⁴² Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with Carl Andre," *Artforum* 8:10 (June 1970): 57.

position is to run along the earth,” Andre noted of such work. “My ideal piece of sculpture is a road.”⁴³ A related phenomenological situation occurs with his planar “rug” works, constructed of square tiles of various metals that spread out to cover considerable floor space but maintain a negligible presence in cross-section. In works like *Steel Aluminum Plain* (1969), haptic awareness of material supersedes visibility for the upright, forward-looking viewer, who is invited to walk upon a sculpture that remains beneath his or her visual periphery (this situation foreshadows the tenuous visibility of *Cadillac Ranch* for the highway driver). Sculpture’s vertical mass is thus transformed into navigable flatness, and the viewing encounter thereafter transpires across, along, and through space.

An obvious synergy exists at *Cadillac Ranch* between the painted automobiles and the highway, which remains an indelible, steadily humming presence. In North Texas, the relative lack of geographic obstruction allows the old Route 66/Interstate 40 to cut across the panhandle at a level East-West orientation, passing through Amarillo, with the highway helping to determine the matrix of equivalent cubic counties in that region. Already then, the site seems primed for minimalist intervention. Despite the fact that the Cadillacs themselves rise above the surface of the field in which they are planted, the primary directional force of the work—and its site—remains horizontal. Visitors tend to follow the orderly row of cars in a peripatetic manner by walking around and amongst the cars but never straying very far into the incredible emptiness of the

⁴³ Ibid., 57.

field in which they stand. The trademark lean of the cars puts each tailfined rear slightly behind the concealed engine block, which gives the installation a sense of being frozen in an initiated forward movement, perpetually whiplashed, like glasses on a just-yanked tablecloth. It is as if the road exerts a magnetism that attracts the Cadillacs away from the point at which they are interred (an impression strengthened by its proximity to the highway, where a standing figure can be thrown off-balance by the gust of collapsing wind that immediately follows a speeding car or truck.) This expansive and near-featureless landscape provides a conceptual backdrop of unfathomable distances, but the visitor's ability to traverse these voids remains mired in the dialogue between the interred automobiles and those that remain functional on the highway.

Historicity and Temporality

The durational perception inaugurated by minimalism sets it apart from earlier art and elongates the modernist “moment” of instantaneous apprehension into a comparative process. This fundamental truth was recognized by critics and supporters alike—the confused language used by Smithson to describe the temporal aura of the minimalist object in “Entropy and the New Monuments” was more or less echoed in the writings of Michael Fried, Smithson's polemical rival, who saw in the work an endlessness unsuitable to visual art.⁴⁴ *Cadillac Ranch* further elaborates the minimalist model of temporalized perception by

⁴⁴ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Minimalism*, ed. Meyer, 234-35.

incorporating historical relationships within its constituent elements (the different Cadillacs), as well as between those elements and the subjects viewing them. In accordance with the theoretical foundations of minimalism, the basic phenomenological experience is there: the visitor takes time to move around and perceive the work from different positions, taking note of shifts in perspective, the scale of the work in relation to his or her own body, and the effects of sunlight and shadow (which, in the emptiness of North Texas, can be particularly stunning). Instantaneous perception is thus elongated into a comparative process. As already noted, what sets the temporal logic of *Cadillac Ranch* apart from minimalist art is its incorporation and presentation of a specific chronology of American material culture. “The rise and fall of the tailfin” is an historical development that, although rarely represented, is familiar enough and still legible beneath the countless layers of graffiti. As the cars delimit a period of time through readymade physical reference (i.e., midcentury styling), the viewer, as a temporally displaced subject, necessarily claims a historical position for his- or herself that is beyond, or after, the fact. Contemporary subject(s) thus relate to historical object(s). The first set of relationships—between the cars themselves—is unchanging and fixed, maintained even when *Cadillac Ranch* is relocated to a different site.⁴⁵ The viewer, however, occupies an ever-changing temporal distance to the specific period described by the tailfins: 1949-1962. The convoluted nature of time at and within *Cadillac Ranch* begs the question of history within minimalist art itself, specifically, whether the

⁴⁵ The move is described in Section IV.

increasingly pure and theoretically autonomous abstraction of the late modern period can be better understood as existing within conventional history or beyond it. Ant Farm's autos are fundamentally anachronistic, and yet, if we adhere to the phenomenological model of minimalism, the cars belong to contemporary space and time as much as they do any other, so long as there is a perceiving subject.

This unstable temporality is also a function of the work's exposure to entropic processes. *Cadillac Ranch* demonstrates how such processes may disrupt, displace, and destabilize a linear understanding of history; how any artifact may be wrenched from its milieu and rendered ahistorical. Midcentury Cadillacs resonate with the Space Race, the excesses of late capitalism, the enrichment of the middle class, etc. At the same time, the work shows how something apparently autonomous like formalist abstraction (minimalism) can become historicized and associated with a particular period. Does this historical dialectic apply to a progression of industrially produced rectangles that happen to comprise an untitled Judd "stack"? Such objects are only ahistorical in the sense that the validity of abstract geometry is constant—rectangles are rectangles, regardless of culture or epoch. In other respects, the minimalist object is as historically anchored as a Cadillac coupe: an art historian or critic sees not a collection of rectangles but "a Judd," automatically associating the object with postwar art. Whereas a Judd stack is kept pristine in the museum gallery or storage facility, the Cadillacs register their age very obviously; in fact, they flaunt it. Yet the surfaces of

the cars are continually remade. So while the individual elements perpetually disintegrate, they are also always restored.

If phenomenology is based on the way an embodied viewer perceives the object as visually unstable, then the (un)changing surfaces of Ant Farm's autos serve to emphasize and confound this model at once. According to Robert Morris, the minimalist object achieves a tension between, on the one hand, the "known constant" of its simplistic form which presents itself as a gestalt; and on the other hand, the "experienced variable," which can also be defined as the perceptual ambiguities that arise as the object is scrutinized from different perspectives and in different light.⁴⁶ The viewer is forced to reconcile the obviousness of the object (as an easily conceptualized and understood form) with the indeterminacy of its physical manifestation. The painted surfaces of the automobiles at *Cadillac Ranch* reverse the dialectic of constant and variable in a strange way. One "experiences" a collection of identical objects, each one wildly polychromatic and decaying. At the same time, it is clear that the cars are being continuously repainted and transformed, even if these changes are not immediately or easily legible. The transformations of the surface of the cars are obfuscated as soon as they occur.

Into the Expanded Field

Automotive phenomenology is fully realized at *Cadillac Ranch*—an installation that is not only purposefully sited in a direct and proximate

⁴⁶ Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part II," in *Minimalism*, ed. Meyer, 219.

relationship to a specific, historically resonant roadway, but which takes automobiles as its constituent sculptural elements. However, it may be factored into accounts of other projects from the 1960s and 1970s, and not only those in the realm of minimalist sculpture. Ed Ruscha's 1963 artist's book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, for instance, put forth the possibility of aesthetic value in vernacular roadside architecture, encountered in an auto-phenomenological manner and treated as a kind of readymade sculpture during trips from Los Angeles to Oklahoma City and back. In this project, the location of Ruscha's artistic labor is on the road, in the spaces between urban centers, as he picks out remote and serial sites for photographic documentation. Coincidentally, Ruscha would travel the old Route 66 through Amarillo on these trips. One of the images in his book depicts a site in that city: *Standard, Amarillo, Texas* (1962), a photographic snapshot that would later become the source for a series of paintings and prints. And it is the extreme perspectival diagonals in these later works that evince a sense of movement and speed, as if the gasoline station itself is being optically wrenched away from the subject, passing on the highway.

What, then, is the import of automotive phenomenology, and how does it help us understand minimalism? Part of the answer is that it provides a conceptual coupling that links *Cadillac Ranch*—an assuredly postminimalist project—back to one of the points of origin of minimalist phenomenological rhetoric. With that, we return to the published polemics.

If the 1966 *Artforum* article “Talking with Tony Smith” has had an outsized influence on late modern and contemporary art discourse, it is not because anyone has been particularly keen to dissect Smith’s architectural influences or sculptural modeling procedures, but because of a certain two-paragraph section buried within the six-page spread that announces the end of art. As the reader may be aware, the crucial passage describes a nighttime drive on the unfinished New Jersey turnpike undertaken by Smith and several of his students more than a decade earlier, and how the novel encounter with the industrialized highwayscape shook Smith’s understanding of what art can be. Smith’s recollection registers a literal change in perspective for the artist, whose unfamiliar and unlit passage transforms both the once-familiar urban landscape and his encounter with it. “There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it,” he notes, emphasizing a newfound, if unformulated, attention to phenomenological subjecthood.⁴⁷ Editorially, the turnpike episode (and other text) is lodged amongst a collection of images of Smith’s abstract geometric sculpture, with axonometric drawings and cardboard mock-ups appearing alongside black and white photographs of finished works in steel. These pages not only posit a latent connection between proto-minimalist sculpture and artificial landscapes; they also point towards an experiential aesthetics removed from modernist visibility—indeed, the drive

⁴⁷ Samuel Wagstaff, “Talking with Tony Smith,” *Artforum*, 5 (December 1966): 19.

“liberated” Smith from his “views...about art”⁴⁸—and oriented around physical presence and spatial relationships.

Smith’s account of his drive is today regarded as a kind of origin myth for minimalist phenomenological theorizations and practice. What has gotten lost, however, is precisely that which enabled Smith to move beyond artistic convention: the automobile, the machine that literally transported the artist to and through previously unknown conceptual topographies. Smith himself neglects to consider the manner in which he is moving through space. He recalls the “dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats,” the void “punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights.”⁴⁹ The syntax here reproduces the speed with which one drives and encounters objects, one right after the other. Mechanized, mediated movement very much determines Smith’s experience. This was a *drive*, after all, and if we are to take seriously the phenomenological equivalency of art and experience that remains so crucial for postmodern art practice, we should give due credit to the mechanic medium that catalyzed this critical discourse by illuminating a dark road in the Meadowlands.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19.

SECTION IV

THE NEW MONUMENTS

The Tony Smith turnpike episode is representative of larger shifts in late-modern artistic discourse that had come about before Ant Farm ever buried a Cadillac. According to James Meyer, “Smith’s account ... provided dramatic illustration of how sixties art was exploring an ever expanding site.”⁵⁰ We have already seen how minimalism placed the onus of art on specific triangulations between viewer, object, and space, steering sculpture away from the object *per se* and towards a kind of situational aesthetics. Land art took up this project in the late 1960s and early 1970s as artists sought an increasingly direct and critical engagement with the material world. Minimalism shares with land art a predilection for simplified forms and an attention to the specificities of encounter, within the gallery and without. More importantly, the discourse surrounding these two modes of practice aligned in its recognition of two key issues: entropy and monumentality. Perhaps the growing feeling that art had reached an impasse in the 1960s—Smith’s conclusion, “it ought to be clear that’s the end of art,” is

⁵⁰ Meyer, *Art and Polemics*, 232.

demonstrative of this attitude⁵¹—stimulated the desire to leave something behind, or at the very least to mark an end, which unites the work of the minimalist and land artists. The avant-gardist terminal structure would alone remain when all other cultural production had atrophied on the shelves of the grocer-gallery or within the simulacra of the television screen.

Robert Smithson had just such structures in mind when he penned the 1966 essay “Entropy and the New Monuments,” which recognizes entropy as a pervasive and motivating force in contemporary culture.⁵² (An effect of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, entropy describes how unevenly distributed energy tends towards equilibrium—ordered systems inevitably move towards disorder, the final state of the universe being one of uniformity and dedifferentiation.) Smithson’s essay describes the entropic nature of his urban environment, the objects produced within that environment, and the manner of their production and consumption. Within the minimalist art evolving under the auspices of the New York avant-garde, Smithson discerns a move away from modernist dialectics of form and content, and towards the eradication of both history and artistic action itself:

Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future. Instead of being made of natural materials, such as marble, granite, or other kinds of rock, the new monuments are made of artificial materials, plastic, chrome, and electric light. They are not built for the ages, but rather against the ages. They are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of

⁵¹ Wagstaff, “Tony Smith,” 19.

⁵² Specifically, American advanced-capitalist culture of the late 1960s.

seconds, rather than in representing the long spaces of centuries. Both past and future are placed into an objective present.⁵³

These works are monuments, but not in the traditional sense: rather than commemorating a specific act, person, or moment in the past (or future), minimalism gestures towards, indeed reenacts, the unstoppable forces of dedifferentiation and entropy. Smithson illustrates this concept in his essay with a photograph of Bladen's by-now familiar *Untitled* (1965), with its rectangular masses and pyramidal angles. *Cadillac Ranch* may be a prime example of Smithson's New Monument, but at the same time, it seems to acknowledge the outdatedness inherent to the art in question—the sense that the minimalist object is an artifact of and within its own time. The logic is convoluted: if the “futurist ethos” of Smithson and others' art was aligned with current taste in the 1960s, why is this aesthetic still relevant today?⁵⁴ Ant Farm's succession of futuristic relics in Texas does not answer the question; it simply stresses the issue. As each tailfin supplants the previous one, “the new” becomes a recursive visual performance, until the entire group reaches an equilibrium of outmoded innovation. The Cadillac once represented the socioeconomic as well as the aesthetic future of America. That past, and that future, have been compressed into “the objective present,” for *Cadillac Ranch* is resolutely of the moment, in that it is ontologically determined by the daily modification of its surfaces. When looking at the ten automobiles, one looks into the past for representations of the future, and one is

⁵³ Smithson, “Entropy,” 11.

⁵⁴ Meyer, *Art and Polemics*, 60.

struck by the *sameness* of it all. The designs are roundly passé, and are today as difficult to differentiate as ten half-buried and decayed corpses.

If ontological and locational stability are fundamental elements of the traditional monument, *Cadillac Ranch* would appear fundamentally anti-monumental, for it is subject to decay and relocation. Ant Farm has acknowledged that they did have notions of entropy in mind while formulating their plan for *Cadillac Ranch*, but artists' statements reveal that their conception of entropy was a somewhat superficial one. They were drawn, initially, to the idea of old automobiles, abandoned and disintegrating in rural fields: "We...talked about the image of the cars rusting gracefully in the field. You know, you see an old Model T in a field with that beautiful patina of rust."⁵⁵ This is a romanticized, almost filmic fantasy of traditional America in the throes of 20th century modernization—in other words, a decidedly historic viewpoint, one Smithsonian would probably deem "too heavy on 'values.'"⁵⁶ So far as their recorded statements suggest, Ant Farm's concern with entropy was focused primarily on the ways that their work would be altered by visitors, and today the cars continue to dedifferentiate; to literally break down into a visual equilibrium. The lack of fence was purposeful—Ant Farm wanted the work to be an "interactive monument," free and open to the public.⁵⁷ Insofar as *Cadillac Ranch* constitutes a gestalt, it is ordered in its disorder, an equalized edifice to entropy.

⁵⁵ Lord et al., "Interview," 71. The protective spray paint shell thwarts any and all oxidation.

⁵⁶ Smithsonian, "Entropy," 16.

⁵⁷ Lord et al., "Interview," 71.

For all of its popularity and iconicity, *Cadillac Ranch* is decidedly unspectacular—it has only to compete with a highway and a horizon for attention. Today, we see an undifferentiated series of ten withered husks; defaced and deformed metal corpses crusted with innumerable coats of cheap spray paint. As an unprotected, public art installation, the work is forever exposed to natural elements and the effects of human interaction, and the ten Cadillacs bear forty years worth of polychromatic mark making on their surfaces. Over the years, the cars have been periodically repainted in uniform colors, for reasons both celebratory and somber. (In 2002, for instance, they were “restored” with paintjobs approximating their original colors as part of a publicity campaign for a hotel chain.)⁵⁸ Yet the effect of these revisionist whitewashings is really no different than that of the graffiti they nullify, and when they do occur, the work as a whole becomes a series of visual echoes, reflections, ghosts.

If *Cadillac Ranch* continually oscillates in visual aspect, this subtlety extends to the situational aesthetics of the work as well. In 1997, all ten automobiles were unceremoniously exhumed and relocated. As the city of Amarillo expanded, Marsh decided that civilization was encroaching upon his famous roadside attraction. “We lost the horizon when the city moved out to it,” he was quoted as saying in *USA Today*. “It doesn’t work unless the horizon’s there.”⁵⁹ The march of suburban development seems, in this statement, to have slowly swallowed up a key element

⁵⁸ Lord, *Automerica*, 162.

⁵⁹ Patrick O’Driscoll, “Cadillac Art Rounded Up to Move Away from City,” *USA Today*, Aug. 25, 1997.

of the original site, negating the mythos of the boundless Texas horizon with the same imperceptible and relentless force that affects the visual character of the cars themselves. Pains were taken to make sure that the new location—another dusty wheat field, two miles due west—replicated the original site as much as possible. The Cadillacs were installed the same distance from I-40 as before, along the same east-west axis. Used cans of paint were transplanted, along with other detritus. To the highway-goers and cross-country tourists that comprise the work's ideal audience, all traces of this carefully orchestrated spatial shift, along with the violent mechanizations that accompanied it, have been wholly effaced.

With this reinstallation in mind, it becomes clear that the only thing that has never actually changed about the work is its suggestive compositional arrangement. Chronology, linearity, and 52-degree angles—chosen to duplicate the slant angle of the pyramids at Giza—have all proved to be heartier crops than chrome, glass, and rubber. The headfirst entombment of the cars, however, might be the most crucial formal contribution to the iconicity of *Cadillac Ranch*. Burying the front ends of classic cars, such that they poke jauntily out of the earth, seems both humorous and absurd, a combination in line with much of Ant Farm's oeuvre. But the visual effect is more complex than that, often hinging on anthropomorphism and able to evoke contradictory sentiments with surprising ease. A goofy indecency, a lack of propriety on the part of inanimate objects, is evoked by so many rear ends in the air. One might glean a sense of naivety or even embarrassment, as if the exposure of one's chassis is cause enough and coincident

with sticking one's head in the ground. Alongside such personifications, however, there is an undeniable solemnity about the group as a whole. The looming metal bears a strange mystique, like ruins from some past or future age whose imposing form and cryptic arrangement suggest unfathomable extinctions.⁶⁰

Smithson's entropy extends to the art himself and his peers were making, the modernist skyscraper (and other public architecture), B-movies, science fiction novels, and suburban landscapes. Mass culture would seem to be the true site of entropic action, with artists like Smithson simply enunciating and concretizing a phenomenon infinitely larger than themselves or their work. Making a minimalist sculpture from a Cadillac, perhaps the ultimate commodity in the matrix of postwar American consumer culture, is a gesture of acknowledgement on the part of Ant Farm, who have translated the notion of entropy from the abstract and avant-garde to the particular and popular. They have created a *new* New Monument that cultivates its own countercultural marginality in the face of art practices that, by 1974, had already started to lose their radical force. *Cadillac Ranch* subverts its own "high art" pedigree with the campy humor and lack of aesthetic refinement—minimalism in drag. In fact, Ant Farm's oeuvre is full of seriously considered and precisely executed projects that have been cloaked in humor and pseudo-science-fiction. And despite the severity and cerebral character of Smithson's art (and most minimalism), he too seems to have seen and appreciated a certain comedy in the world's entropic slide, even going so far as to

⁶⁰ It is not without reason that *Cadillac Ranch* has often been compared to Stonehenge. The project also inspired other automotive megaliths, e.g., Jim Reinders's *Carhenge* in Nebraska.

systematize the typologies of laughter as “entropic ‘verbalization[s]’”—an absurd and funny thing for an *Artforum* essayist to do.⁶¹ So while *Cadillac Ranch* drags the minimalist project down several aesthetic notches, it also fulfills a specific and under-examined model of minimalist work that revels in the farcical and lowbrow; that would celebrate the entropic shift from gallery to graffiti. Ultimately, there is a populist side of the minimalist aesthetic that allows for its continued success as public art, even when it lacks the anything-goes attitude of *Cadillac Ranch*.⁶²

Cars and crud and color—the visual language deployed by Ant Farm is not intellectualized, but it does retain within itself a complex set of meanings that only become legible through close visual analysis and contextualization. *Cadillac Ranch* is a multivalent artwork, but it always returns to the *terminal* in form, reference, and rhetoric. That is to say, the concept of extremities, of endings, forms the nucleus of the project; it is to this idea that my analysis continually returns. Tailfins are an appropriate device for a group of artists who in 1974 were breathing the exhaust fumes of an already-outdated modernism. Ant Farm’s work in Amarillo stands today as a monument to the unsustainability and potential collapse of modernism and the modern era. From minimalist sculpture to oil crises, from modern architecture to the Vietnam War, *Cadillac Ranch* points to those entities that are or represent a breaking point, and which will, sooner or later, either reach an impasse or fracture into new and not altogether amenable modes of practice. It is necessary for *Cadillac Ranch*, as a resolutely public artwork,

⁶¹ Smithson, “Entropy,” 21.

⁶² One thinks of Richard Serra’s immense and immensely popular public sculpture.

to fold into itself (through material appropriation, visual reference, locational resonance, etc.) the discourses of the popular realm, which are always simultaneous and discordant. The mutating meanings of *Cadillac Ranch* are a testament to the revolutionary atmosphere of its precise historical moment, 1974. Rather than lamenting past glories or contemporary faults, *Cadillac Ranch* articulates a dialectic of mobilization and exhaustion that reflects Ant Farm's countercultural milieu, which relied on public engagement, participation, and constant adaptation in the face of entrenched aesthetic and social systems. The possibility of transformation, we are told, is inherent even to the terminal structures of late modernism.

Land Art

So what is the relation of *Cadillac Ranch* to the postminimalist art engendered by Tony Smith's drive and epitomized by land art practices in the 1970s? Rosalind Krauss put forth the concept of the "expanded field" in 1979 article as an interpretive framework that helps make sense of and organize postmodern art making.⁶³ The model provides a matrix of interrelated points within which the critic or historian may orient cultural production, and provided (on publication) new ways of thinking about sculpture at a time when sculpture itself had been distended by a variety of practices, from earthworks to architectural interventions to documentations of outdoor performance. Krauss's term is pluralistic: firstly, the

⁶³ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, Vol. 8 (Spring 1979), 30-44.

expanded field represents an attitude of critical openness, where art is no longer shackled to modernist standards of media specificity and authenticity. New paradigms of practice, such as the “axiometric structures” and “marked sites,” are legitimized as areas of exploration. In a more literal sense, however, the expanded field also represents the simple need for more room to work, catalyzed by the increasingly ambitious size of (minimalist) sculpture in the late 1960s.⁶⁴

The goal of Krauss’s article was to attenuate the expansion of sculpture, as a critical category, beyond recognition by posting new models that might assimilate into themselves the different kinds of art being produced since the late 1960s. One of the side effects of this new categorical mapping, however, was the association of the expanded field with land art. Although it was executed during a period of intense land-based activity undertaken by the international avant-garde, *Cadillac Ranch* does not bear much outward resemblance to the large-scale earthen sculpture that has come to be synonymous with land art. How do we resolve this categorical disconnect? The biggest problem is the association itself: scholars have shown that only a minority of what may be termed “land art” consisted of massive abstract sculptures made of dirt. Cartographic practices, performance, and photography were all important media for land artists, who either did not have the resources or were not interested in constructing earthworks at the scale of Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* (1969) or Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970)—two of the most spectacular, and therefore emblematic, land art projects.

⁶⁴ Meyer, *Art and Polemics*, 163. E.g., 1967’s “Scale as Content” exhibition (Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.) features “giganticist” work by Ronald Bladen, Barnett Newman, and Tony Smith.

The essential logic of sculpture, according to Krauss, is inseparable from that of the monument, because it marks and commemorates a specific site: “It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place.”⁶⁵ Sculpture before modernism therefore manifested a kind of site-specificity that was not recovered until the minimalist and land art practices of the 1960s and 1970s. *Cadillac Ranch* operates in a comic vernacular distinct from that of Heizer and Smithson, but it is just as cognizant of its own monumental aura. The archaic arrangement of its upended automobiles plays up a fascination with ancient sites and architecture—from the Nazca Lines to the Cahokia Mounds—that are often seen as precedents for large-scale land art. Both the members of Ant Farm and their benefactor, Marsh, are quick to remark the congruence between the slant angle of the Cadillacs and that of the pyramids at Giza—highly romanticized and enigmatic structures that remain archetypes of the ancient monument. Of course, death logically precedes the act of interment and fortifies the aura of such structures. But whose death, or which terminus, does *Cadillac Ranch* mark and commemorate? Is it something as simple as the tailfin (a design element) or something larger, like the booming American automotive industry and car culture of the 1950s? Do we read minimalism’s obituary in its serial forms, or that of media-specific modernism? Or should we look beyond the work itself to the road that guides it, Route 66, which by 1974 was fast approaching obsolescence at the hands of the Interstate Highways System?

⁶⁵ Krauss, “Expanded Field,” 33.

If one reads *Cadillac Ranch* as a terminal structure, a monumental remnant, there are different cultural registers to which it might be assigned. One such register is the material history of the Atomic Age—precisely delimited by the model years of Ant Farm’s Cadillacs. The Bomb is encoded in the visual qualities and meaning of the work, functioning as a symbol of the realities of postwar militarization. The cars at *Cadillac Ranch* are indices that register the commercialization of military technology, and the extent to which postwar American culture was defined by the atomic aesthetic. Cadillac tailfins, easily the most iconic midcentury automotive feature, were directly inspired by aviation design: GM’s Harley Earl got the idea of twin tailfins from a Lockheed P-38 Lightning fighter, and his designs kept aeronautical engineering in Detroit’s peacetime factories long after they stopped manufacturing for the war effort.⁶⁶ And as the sociopolitical import of the Space Race ballooned near the tail end of the 1960s, so did the space-age tailfin. Ant Farm’s autos are no longer proxy fighter jets, of even spaceships—the manner of their burial suggests they are like bombs themselves, or radioactive remnants from a thermonuclear blast. As predicted in Marquez’s mail art, the Cadillacs seem to have nosedived, bomb-like, into the Texas soil, their tailfins left exposed in the middle of a site that, despite its agricultural fertility, can often resemble a wasteland. *Cadillac Ranch* was executed in 1974, as the United States continued to both produce warheads (partly at Amarillo’s Pantex plant, the nation’s only facility for assembling and disassembling

⁶⁶ Lord, *Automerica*, 153-54.

nuclear weapons) and test them (above and below ground, in the American Southwest and elsewhere). Ant Farm's work inserts itself into the Cold War politics of its historical moment as an apocalyptic reminder of the Bomb, the ultimate terminal structure, waiting to leave others in its wake.

But there are other readings that may be drawn from the triangulation of object, site, and cultural context. At *Cadillac Ranch*, the physical and historical specificities of Amarillo, and of the road that travels through it, are as important to the construction of meaning as the teleology of the tailfin. In other words, *Cadillac Ranch* is site-specific—a work that has, in the words of Miwon Kwon, “[given] itself up to its environmental context, being formally determined or directed by it.”⁶⁷ For example, the notion of *productivity* can be put forth as a condition of the North Texas landscape that is also captured and communicated by the sculpture. Despite the aridity and temperature fluctuations characteristic of the High Plains, the earth itself is overwhelmingly productive in and around Amarillo, where the city abruptly gives way to immense agricultural tracts and cattle ranges not five minutes from downtown. With this context in mind, Ant Farm's own ranch, apparently sprouting from the ground, might be viewed as yet another product of the region's fecundity. In addition to farming and ranching operations, the area is also rich in oil and helium, and is home to the National Helium Reserve. The abundance of these natural resources in turn points back towards the ten gas-guzzlers buried during the 1974 oil crisis. And it was of course the industrial

⁶⁷ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 11.

productivity of the postwar years that birthed the increasingly audacious American automobile, not to mention the system of highways and newly-constructed suburban zones that automobile culture demanded.

The region is not technically a desert, but the wide-open spaces typical of Amarillo's geography have certain commonalities with the deserts of the American West, to which many land artists were drawn. (If nothing else, the site is far removed from urban art centers, a requisite for a post-Pop avant-garde weary of over-commodification.) Contemporary scholars treating land art's engagement with urban grounds have restructured the discourse as a conversation between interrelated sites, rather than a withdrawal of the artist from the city and its spatial-political systems.⁶⁸ *Cadillac Ranch* makes for an interesting case study in these terms. Upon approach, it appears incredibly remote, a singular feature marking the horizon between immense fields of sky and soil. Yet *Cadillac Ranch* is just beyond the city limits and a short drive away from a bar or a bed or a 72-oz. steak. Its position relative to Amarillo might very well change as the city expands into the surfeit of surrounding space, but for now, it would seem that the work is uniquely balanced between city and desert, at the threshold of civilization and nothingness simultaneously—a tenuous dialectic achieved only in the best land-based art. This can be identified as an effect of the highway that calibrates *Cadillac Ranch*, but it is ultimately the car itself that makes the situation possible. The road and the automobile are both technologies transportation and displacement, so it is

⁶⁸ Emily Eliza Scott, "Desert Ends," in *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, eds. Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2012), 67-85.

not surprising that Ant Farm's work breaks down the clear distinction between the urban and exurban. Indeed, I would argue that the automobile is as important to land art as the land itself, because it brought the artist (and eventually the viewer) "beyond the institutions of art."⁶⁹ This occurred literally, as artists abandoned urban centers and gallery architecture, but also conceptually, as in the productive drives of Smith, Smithson, Ruscha, and others, which helped to open up new aesthetic modes like land art and conceptualism. Whether trespassing on a turnpike or site-selecting in the Mojave, the automobile provided the functional means for the shift into the expanded field.

Robert Smithson's *Amarillo Ramp* (1973), a graded earthen curl on a dry lakebed several miles northwest of Amarillo's city center, completes the circuit of conceptual groupings that have helped define this thesis: *Cadillac Ranch* (car culture); land art (monumentality); and Amarillo (Stanley Marsh 3). Marsh commissioned *Amarillo Ramp* and *Cadillac Ranch* within months of each other, and both works sit on his land (Smithson's in a much more remote location). *Amarillo Ramp* is best known as Smithson's last work—the artist was killed in 1973 in a plane crash while surveying the site, along with a pilot and photographer.⁷⁰ Ant Farm certainly knew about *Amarillo Ramp* in the months leading up to the construction of *Cadillac Ranch*, and while the two works are superficially distinct, they share an uncanny congruence in their material and metaphorical associations.

⁶⁹ Wagstaff, "Tony Smith," 19.

⁷⁰ The earthwork was completed posthumously by Nancy Holt (Smithson's wife), Tony Shafrazi, and Richard Serra.

Both have been subjected to physical decay and media treatment.⁷¹ Smithson's work picks up where he left off several years previously, synthesizing the earthworks *Spiral Jetty* and *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* (1971) by presenting only a fraction of a spiral, with a recalibrated directional force: while the jetty focuses inward on a horizontal plane, the ramp leads from a central position outward and upward, into three dimensions. The manner in which Ant Farm's Cadillacs are buried only *suggests* that they have plummeted from the sky, fighter jets transformed into automobiles, piercing the Amarillo agri-scape. The single sculptural articulation that *Amarillo Ramp* achieves is a tailspin-like vertical trajectory. Such a reading seems possible only in light of Smithson's tragic death; while morbid, it is justifiable, given the precedents for retroactive mutations in the legacy and meaning of his work.⁷² But the final form of *Amarillo Ramp* is suggestive of nothing so much as a freeway on-/off-ramp that, like *Spiral Jetty*, leads nowhere, stranding the theoretical traveller several feet above a small irrigation pond. This defective road resonates with the broken automobiles planted only miles away. If *Cadillac Ranch* represents commercial burial (or exhumation), *Amarillo Ramp* is architectural abortion; if the road is never completed, the automobile becomes obsolete.

⁷¹ Specifically, in song: Bruce Springsteen's-pop rock "Cadillac Ranch" (1980) and Lee Ranaldo's droning soundscape "Amarillo Ramp" (2000) form unlikely complements.

⁷² As is well known, Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) came to function as an unofficial memorial to those killed in the Kent State shootings when someone tagged "May 4 Kent" on the deteriorating structure.

SECTION V

MEDIA AFTERLIFE

“The world may never understand what was done here today, but the image created here...shall never be forgotten.”

- Ant Farmer Doug Hall as JFK, *Media Burn* address, 1976

Continually thrust into new formats and occupying disparate physical and technologic sites, *Cadillac Ranch* is an archive of its own mediation. Recent scholarship on the origins of land art in the late 1960s has attempted to clarify the movement’s contested relationship with the media, claiming that the gap between a physical work of land art and its image is in fact one of the most productive tensions within the entire discourse.⁷³ The question for many land artists (and their critics) was whether a mediatory agent, such as a photograph, offers nothing more than a dilution of the direct experience of *being there*, or whether this same photograph simply functions as an alternate, but equally effective, site for the work. This distinction became even more pertinent for the artists when images of their work began to be incorporated into popular magazines and broadcast on

⁷³ Tom Holert, “Land Art’s Multiple Sites,” in *Ends of the Earth*, eds. Kaiser and Kwon, 17-31.

television. As Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon have noted, “it would not be wrong to state that some Land art works were produced for the media and by the media simultaneously, raising the more difficult question as to whether Land art can exist without the media.”⁷⁴ *Cadillac Ranch* could, of course, physically exist without the media, but this situation would deny it the added layer of entropic proliferation and dispersal that mediation necessarily produces.

Whether or not *Cadillac Ranch* can be classified as such, it does share with land art this close relationship to photographic representation. The dialectic of mobility/dynamism and stasis/exhaustion, evident in the simultaneous fluidity and crystallization of the formal elements of the automobiles, extends to the various media practices that are so vital to its iconicity. The image of ten half-buried Cadillacs has been widely reproduced, disseminated, and appropriated by all forms of private and public media (and not always with the permission of the artists). But the uncanny monumentality of the half-buried cars, set against the vast expanses of level earth and empty sky that characterize its north Texas site, makes the work an especially attractive subject for photography. Ant Farm’s installation retains the unique visual appeal of much canonical land art, whose “spectacularly media-genic novelty”⁷⁵ seemed to lend itself to reproduction in a two-dimensional, and more importantly, mobile medium. There is, however, another important reason why *Cadillac Ranch* tends to become a photograph—as a

⁷⁴ Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon, “Ends of the Earth and Back,” in *Ends of the Earth*, eds. Kaiser and Kwon, 27.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

sited installation of buried metal, the work resists the tendency towards fetishization that affects smaller, sellable art objects. Like Pop art, it celebrates commercial imagery (tailfins); like land art, it anchors its nonobjects in the earth, far from commercial systems of buying and selling. This state of affairs has been nicely summarized by Tom Holert: “Paradoxically, the less an artistic practice takes as its objective the marketable and reproducible art object, the more its agency increases in media assemblages.”⁷⁶ Reproduction of the *Cadillac Ranch* image, photographically or otherwise, remains the only way to subvert the work’s grounded permanence.

One photograph in particular—a grainy, black-and-white image associated with Bruce Springsteen’s 1980 album *The River*—serves to demonstrate a unique avenue of mediation to which *Cadillac Ranch* has been subjected. In the picture, the Boss is seen sprinting towards the camera, framed by a series of rear axels that rise out of the lifeless Texas underbrush and recede from left to right across the middle register of the photograph. From a purely formal standpoint, the Cadillacs serve as dead weight, a motionless backdrop for the figure’s lively activity. Their shapes are clearly delimited, confined to their cubic spaces, in way that the frenzied Springsteen, arms and legs flailing, is not. From a different, socio-historical perspective, though, the two are opposing (albeit intertwined) idealizations of the class system: the Westward-bound Cadillacs signify mid-century optimism and upward mobility, while the leather-and-jeans Springsteen,

⁷⁶ Holert, “Multiple Sites,” 99.

turning back towards his New Jersey roots, heroicizes the working man. The rusted metal chassis generate a quasi-industrial backdrop in the latter reading, a perfect complement for the virile masculinity of the emergent rock star. Through all of this, it should be remembered that Springsteen is posing as an artist in front of an art work, completed only six years before. *Cadillac Ranch* occupies a very prominent place within the larger project of *The River* (it lends its title to one of the songs), and in return for the roundly American imagery it lends to Springsteen's songs and album art, Ant Farm's installation has tapped into a global distribution network, mediated by a cultural form that its land art predecessors never even approached: popular music.

On completion, Ant Farm inaugurated their installation—and the process of endless replication—by producing hats, t-shirts, and souvenir postcards bearing the *Cadillac Ranch* image. The ersatz work has since appeared in television commercials, music videos, and more than one feature film. Beyond these commercial reproductions, the work enjoys endless documentation by the steady stream of visitors who jump out of their cars for a quick snapshot that almost inevitably ends up online. This ongoing proliferation of this image-object has complex ontological implications for the work itself. It is in acts of replication and dissemination that the aforementioned dialectic of mobility and stasis becomes evident. On the one hand, the iconicity of *Cadillac Ranch* depends on its continuity as an image—one need not have driven through Amarillo, for instance, to recognize the 52-degree angle of the Cadillac that has smashed into the façade

of the Los Angeles Hard Rock Cafe like some piece of stylish space junk. Yet in its endless trans-media iterations, the discrete, sited work is broken up, transformed, transmitted. The cars remain lodged near the Texas Interstate, but they have also embedded themselves in the global information superhighway, reserialized in slightly different versions and from slightly different perspectives in page after page of online image galleries. This has, of course, only increased the work's exposure and cemented its iconicity. Fragmentation—change, movement—thus exists alongside continuity—stasis—as characterizing the relationship between *Cadillac Ranch* and media practices in general.

Postscript

In the summer of 2012, a new earthwork arose alongside the I-5 in Anaheim, California, only about 40 miles (as the car drives) from the terminus of historic Route 66 in Santa Monica. This sculptural intervention in the urban landscape appears to be an enormous spine of brownish rock, out of which sprout six consecutive outcroppings in the form of classic Cadillac tailfins, each facing westward and tilted at an oblique angle. With a height of 440 feet and an approximate area of 12 acres, the work is indeed monumental, but its faux-geologic contours were sculpted neither by wind nor rain nor avant-garde artist, but by the so-called Disney “Imagineers” (and a retinue of contracted laborers) out of rockwork, a plaster-on-steel-frame building technique. Cadillac Range, as it has been dubbed, provides *mise en scène* for Cars Land, a 12 billion dollar expansion to

the Disney California Adventure amusement park based on the 2006 animated film *Cars*.⁷⁷ *Cadillac Ranch* was of course the inspiration for the film's creators, and Ant Farm's image appears several times throughout, in CGI-rendered rock, as Cadillac Range. This is not the last mediation to which *Cadillac Ranch* will be subjected, but it is certainly the culmination of the trans-media narrative that began back with the "pure image" of the Cadillac tailfin that the Ant Farm found in the pages of an unknown book. The iconicity of the project has crystallized in this automotive Rushmore, even if Ant Farm gets relegated to footnotes and film credits. *Cadillac Ranch* has once more become a popular roadside attraction, but one wonders, as memory of the film fades, as attendance numbers decline, as Southern California dries up and life disappears from its sun-scoured streets, when these strange plaster forms will finally become terminal structures themselves.

⁷⁷ Mark Eades, "Disney is Building an Anaheim Mountain Range," *Orange County Register*, Aug. 21, 2012. The Walt Disney Company has duly acknowledged Ant Farm as the creators and owners of the image, which appeared in the film before its concretization in Los Angeles.

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