

## A TOUR OF THE MONUMENTS OF PASSAIC, NEW JERSEY (1967)

He laughed softly. "I know. There's no way out. Not through the Barrier. Maybe that isn't what I want, after all. But this—this—" He stared at the Monument. "It seems all wrong sometimes, I just can't explain it. It's the whole city. It makes me feel haywire. Then I get these flashes."

Henry Kuttner, *Jesting Pilot*

Today our unsophisticated cameras record in their own way our hastily assembled and painted world.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*

On Saturday, September 30, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue. I bought a copy of the *New York Times* and a Signet paperback called *Earthworks* by Brian W. Aldiss. Next I went to ticket booth 21 and purchased a one-way ticket to Passaic. After that I went up to the upper bus level (platform 173) and boarded the number 30 bus of the Inter-City Transportation Co.

I sat down and opened the *Times*. I glanced over the art section: a "Collectors', Critics', Curators' Choice" at A. M. Sachs Gallery (a letter I got in the mail that morning invited me "to play the game before the show closes October 4th"), Walter Schatzki was selling "Prints, Drawings, Watercolors" at "33 1/3% off," Elinor Jenkins, the "Romantic Realist," was showing at Barzansky Galleries, XVIII-XIX Century English Furniture on sale at Parke-Bernet, "New

### *Art: Themes and the Usual Variations*



"Allegorical Landscape" by Samuel F. B. Morse, displayed at Marlborough-Gerson Gallery



The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks.  
(Photo: Robert Smithson.)



Monument with pontoons: The Pumping Derrick.  
(Photo: Robert Smithson.)

Directions in German Graphics" at Goethe House, and on page 29 was John Canaday's column. He was writing on *Themes and the Usual Variations*. I looked at a blurry reproduction of Samuel F. B. Morse's *Allegorical Landscape* at the top of Canaday's column; the sky was a subtle newsprint grey, and the clouds resembled sensitive stains of sweat reminiscent of a famous Yugoslav watercolorist whose name I have forgotten. A little statue with right arm held high faced a pond (or was it the sea?). "Gothic" buildings in the allegory had a faded look, while an unnecessary tree (or was it a cloud of smoke?) seemed to puff up on the left side of the landscape. Canaday referred to the picture as "standing confidently along with other allegorical representatives of the arts, sciences, and high ideals that universities foster." My eyes stumbled over the newsprint, over such headlines as "Seasonal Upswing," "A Shuttle Service," and "Moving a 1,000 Pound Sculpture Can Be a Fine Work of Art, Too." Other gems of Canaday's dazzled my mind as I passed through Secaucus. "Realistic waxworks of raw meat beset by vermin" (Paul Thek), "Mr. Bush and his colleagues are wasting their time" (Jack Bush), "a book, an apple on a saucer, a crumpled cloth" (Thyra Davidson). Outside the bus window a Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge flew by—a symphony in orange and blue. On page 31 in Big Letters: THE EMERGING POLICE STATE IN AMERICA SPY GOVERNMENT, "In this book you will learn . . . what an Infinity Transmitter is."

The bus turned off Highway 3, down Orient Way in Rutherford.

I read the blurbs and skimmed through *Earthworks*. The first sentence read, "The dead man drifted along in the breeze." It seemed the book was about a soil shortage, and the *Earthworks* referred to the manufacture of artificial soil. The sky over Rutherford was a clear cobalt blue, a perfect Indian summer day, but the sky in *Earthworks* was a "great black and brown shield on which moisture gleamed."



The Great Pipe Monument. (Photo: Robert Smithson.)



The Fountain Monument: Bird's Eye View. (Photo: Robert Smithson.)

The bus passed over the first monument. I pulled the buzzer-cord and got off at the corner of Union Avenue and River Drive. The monument was a bridge over the Passaic River that connected Bergen County with Passaic County. Noon-day sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-exposed *picture*. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of "stills" through my Instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank.

The steel road that passed over the water was in part an open grating flanked by wooden sidewalks, held up by a heavy set of beams, while above, a ramshackle network hung in the air. A rusty sign glared in the sharp atmosphere, making it hard to read. A date flashed in the sunshine . . . 1899 . . . No . . . 1896 . . . maybe (at the bottom of the rust and glare was the name Dean & Westbrook Contractors, N.Y.). I was completely controlled by the Instamatic (or what the rationalists call a camera). The glassy air of New Jersey defined the structural parts of the monument as I took snapshot after snapshot. A barge seemed fixed to the surface of the water as it came toward the bridge, and caused the bridge-keeper to close the gates. From the banks of Passaic I watched the bridge rotate on a central axis in order to allow an inert rectangular shape to pass with its unknown cargo. The Passaic (West) end of the bridge rotated south, while the Rutherford (East) end of the bridge rotated north; such rotations suggested the limited movements of an outmoded world. "North" and "South" hung over the static river in a bi-polar manner. One could refer to this bridge as the "Monument of Dislocated Directions."

Along the Passaic River banks were many minor monuments such as con-



*The Fountain Monument—Side View. (Photo: Robert Smithson.)*



*The Sand-Box Monument (also called The Desert). (Photo: Robert Smithson.)*

crete abutments that supported the shoulders of a new highway in the process of being built. River Drive was in part bulldozed and in part intact. It was hard to tell the new highway from the old road; they were both confounded into a unitary chaos. Since it was Saturday, many machines were not working, and this caused them to resemble prehistoric creatures trapped in the mud, or, better, extinct machines—mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their skin. On the edge of this prehistoric Machine Age were pre- and post-World War II suburban houses. The houses mirrored themselves into colorlessness. A group of children were throwing rocks at each other near a ditch. "From now on you're not going to come to our hide-out. And I mean it!" said a little blonde girl who had been hit with a rock.

As I walked north along what was left of River Drive, I saw a monument in the middle of the river—it was a pumping derrick with a long pipe attached to it. The pipe was supported in part by a set of pontoons, while the rest of it extended about three blocks along the river bank till it disappeared into the earth. One could hear debris rattling in the water that passed through the great pipe.

Nearby, on the river bank, was an artificial crater that contained a pale limpid pond of water, and from the side of the crater protruded six large pipes that gushed the water of the pond into the river. This constituted a monumental fountain that suggested six horizontal smokestacks that seemed to be flooding the river with liquid smoke. The great pipe was in some enigmatic way connected with the infernal fountain. It was as though the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice, and causing a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have an orgasm. A psychoanalyst might say that the landscape displayed "homosexual tendencies," but I will not draw such a crass anthropomorphic conclusion. I will merely say, "It was there."

Across the river in Rutherford one could hear the faint voice of a P.A. sys-

tem and the weak cheers of a crowd at a football game. Actually, the landscape was no landscape, but "a particular kind of heliotypy" (Nabokov), a kind of self-destroying postcard world of failed immortality and oppressive grandeur. I had been wandering in a moving picture that I couldn't quite picture, but just as I became perplexed, I saw a green sign that explained everything:

YOUR HIGHWAY TAXES 21  
AT WORK

Federal Highway Trust Funds	2,867,000	U.S. Dept. of Commerce Bureau of Public Roads State Highway Funds	2,867,000
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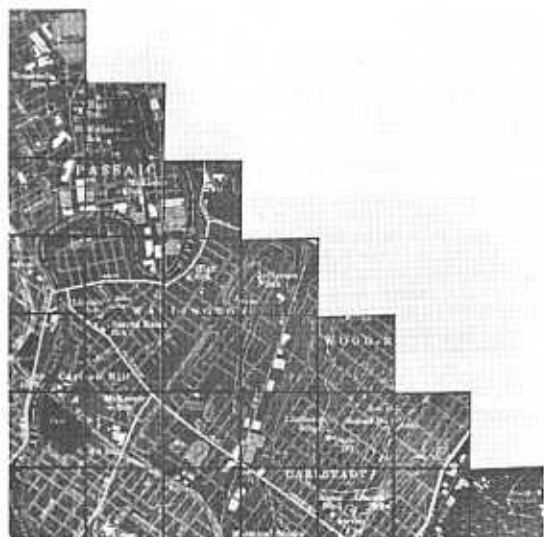
New Jersey State Highway Dept.

That zero panorama seemed to contain *ruins in reverse*, that is—all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the "romantic ruin" because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built. This anti-romantic *mise-en-scene* suggests the discredited idea of *time* and many other "out of date" things. But the suburbs exist without a rational past and without the "big events" of history. Oh, maybe there are a few statues, a legend, and a couple of curios, but no past—just what passes for a future. A Utopia minus a bottom, a place where the machines are idle, and the sun has turned to glass, and a place where the Passaic Concrete Plant (253 River Drive) does a good business in STONE, BITUMINOUS, SAND, and CEMENT. Passaic seems full of "holes" compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures. Such futures are found in grade B Utopian films, and then imitated by the suburbanite. The windows of City Motors auto sales proclaim the existence of Utopia through 1968 WIDE TRACK PONTIACS—Executive, Bonneville, Tempest, Grand Prix, Firebirds, GTO, Catalina, and LeMans—that visual incantation marked the end of the highway construction.

Next I descended into a set of used car lots. I must say the situation seemed like a change. Was I in a new territory? (An English artist, Michael Baldwin, says, "it could be asked if the country does in fact change—it does not in the sense a traffic light does.") Perhaps I had slipped into a lower stage of futurity—did I leave the real future behind in order to advance into a false future? Yes, I did. Reality was behind me at that point in my suburban Odyssey.

Passaic center loomed like a dull adjective. Each "store" in it was an adjective unto the next, a chain of adjectives disguised as stores. I began to run out of film, and I was getting hungry. Actually, Passaic center was no center—it was instead a typical abyss or an ordinary void. What a great place for a gallery! Or maybe an "outdoor sculpture show" would pep that place up.

At the Golden Coach Diner (11 Central Avenue) I had my lunch, and



Negative Map Showing Region of the Monuments along the Passaic River.

loaded my Instamatic. I looked at the orange-yellow box of Kodak Verichrome Pan, and read a notice that said:

READ THIS NOTICE:

This film will be replaced if defective in manufacture, labeling, or packaging, even though caused by our negligence or other fault. Except for such replacement, the sale or any subsequent handling of this film is without other warranty or liability. EASTMAN KODAK COMPANY DO NOT OPEN THIS CARTRIDGE OR YOUR PICTURES MAY BE SPOILED  
—12 EXPOSURES—SAFETY FILM—ASA 125 22 DIN.

After that I returned to Passaic, or was it the *hereafter*—for all I know that unimaginative suburb could have been a clumsy eternity, a cheap copy of *The City of the Immortals*. But who am I to entertain such a thought? I walked down a parking lot that covered the old railroad tracks which at one time ran through the middle of Passaic. That monumental parking lot divided the city in half, turning it into a mirror and a reflection—but the mirror kept changing places with the reflection. One never knew what side of the mirror one was on. There was nothing *interesting* or even strange about that flat monument, yet it echoed a kind of cliché idea of infinity; perhaps the “secrets of the universe” are just as pedestrian—not to say dreary. Everything about the site remained wrapped in blandness and littered with shiny cars—one after another they extended into a sunny nebulosity. The indifferent backs of the cars flashed and reflected the stale afternoon sun. I took a few listless, entropic snapshots of that lustrous monument. If the future is “out of date” and “old fashioned,” then I

had been in the future. I had been on a planet that had a map of Passaic drawn over it, and a rather imperfect map at that. A sidereal map marked up with "lines" the size of streets, and "squares" and "blocks" the size of buildings. At any moment my feet were apt to fall through the cardboard ground. I am convinced that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past; it is in yesterday's newspapers, in the *jeune* advertisements of science-fiction movies, in the false mirror of our rejected dreams. Time turns metaphors into *things*, and stacks them up in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs.

Has Passaic replaced Rome as The Eternal City? If certain cities of the world were placed end to end in a straight line according to size, starting with Rome, where would Passaic be in that impossible progression? Each city would be a three-dimensional mirror that would reflect the next city into existence. The limits of eternity seem to contain such nefarious ideas.

The last monument was a sand box or a model desert. Under the dead light of the Passaic afternoon the desert became a map of infinite disintegration and forgetfulness. This monument of minute particles blazed under a bleakly glowing sun, and suggested the sullen dissolution of entire continents, the drying up of oceans—no longer were there green forests and high mountains—all that existed were millions of grains of sand, a vast deposit of bones and stones pulverized into dust. Every grain of sand was a dead metaphor that equaled timelessness, and to decipher such metaphors would take one through the false mirror of eternity. This sand box somehow doubled as an open grave—a grave that children cheerfully play in.

... all sense of reality was gone. In its place had come deep-seated illusions, absence of pupillary reaction to light, absence of knee reaction—symptoms all of progressive cerebral meningitis; the blanketing of the brain ...

Louis Sullivan, "one of the greatest of all architects,"  
quoted in Michel Butor's *Mobile*

I should now like to prove the irreversibility of eternity by using a *jeune* experiment for proving entropy. Picture in your mind's eye the sand box divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy.

Of course, if we filmed such an experiment we could prove the reversibility of eternity by showing the film backwards, but then sooner or later the film itself would crumble or get lost and enter the state of irreversibility. Somehow this suggests that the cinema offers an illusive or temporary escape from physical dissolution. The false immortality of the film gives the viewer an illusion of control over eternity—but "the superstars" are fading.



ALBERGIA DOZE AND THE BLUISH MUDD. Creta THE LATIN WORD FOR CHALK (THE CHALK AGE). AN ARTICLE CALLED GROTTOES, GEOLOGY AND THE GOTHIC REVIVAL. MISSISSIPPI ROMANCES. GREENSANDS ACCUMULATED OVER WIDE AREAS IN SHALLOW WATER, UPRaised PLATEAUX IN AUSTRALIA. SEDIMENT SAMPLES. CONIFERS, REMAINS OF A FLIGHTLESS BIRD DISCOVERED IN A CHALK PIT. CAUSES OF EXTINCTION UNKNOWN. THE FABULOUS SEA-SERPENT. THE CLASSICAL ATTITUDE TOWARD MOUNTAINS IS SLOPPY. A DISPLAY OF PLASTER TRICERATOPS EGGS IN A GLASS CASE. THE ROCKS OF MONTANA. GLIBIGERINA CRETACEA ENLARGED 30 TIMES IN A BOOK. THE WEARING OF STONES CONTINUES. A CONSTANT GRINDING DOWN OF ROUGH TERRAINS. SOMETHING HAD FANGS 6 INCHES LONG. KILLED BY THE HEAT OF THE SUN. THE SACRED THEORY OF THE EARTH CAUSES BEWILDERMENT. SOME BOOKS CONCERNING THE DELUGE BRING CHAOS TO MANY. GRAY MISTS AND MUCH HEAT. PERPLEXED BY PEBBLE DEPOSITS. COLUMNS OF SALT ILLUSTRATED IN DE RERUM FOSSILIVM. PAINTINGS OF CRETACEOUS PERIOD SHOWN AS ARTIST'S CONCEPTIONS ON LARGE PANELS. FROM 135 TO 70 MILLION YEARS OF TRAITÉ DE PETRIFICATIONS. WOODCUT SHOWING TWO STONES FALLING FROM THE HEAVENS DURING A STORM. A DEAD TORTOISE. IN THE ZONE OF AIR-THUNDERBOLTS. BELEMNITES. BELEMNITE, ETC. CERTAIN BEDS OF THE KOKUK IN THE CENTRAL MISSISSIPPI VALLEY. THE FLAMING RAMPARTS OF THE WORLD (LUCRETIVS). DE MINERALIBUS ALBERTUS MAGNUS. FEATHER IMPRESSIONS EXHIBITED IN A PALEONTOLOGICAL MUSEUM. FOSSILIZED VENOM. THE TREE ONICA WHOSE TEARS HARDEN INTO THE MINERAL OIL. FROM THE HORTUS SANITATIS. SOME GRAINS OF SAND WERE SQUARE AND OTHERS PYRAMIDAL. CAMERAS LOST IN SHELLS AND SKELETONS.



WELL UNDER A STEGOSAURUS SKELETON. BONY PLATES. THREE OUNCES OF BRAIN. 45,000,000. NO WORDS COULD DESCRIBE IT. CRAGGY CLIFFS. INDEPENDENT OF LIFE. MOUNTAIN LAKES OR INLAND SEAS MARKED AS BLUE STRIPES ON AN OVAL MAP. PLASTIC SEAWEEDS IN THE MUSEUM. A GREAT COLLECTION OF FOSSILS IN THE ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM AT OXFORD. MUNDUS SUBTERRANEUS. KIRCHER AMSTERDAM 1678. STONE PLANTS. JOHN CLEVELAND'S NEWS FROM NEWCASTLE OR NEWCASTLE COAL PITS PUBLISHED IN THE AGE OF CYCADS. A FINE CHALKY DEPOSIT (PERHAPS DUST BLOWN FROM RAISED CORAL REEFS). MONO LAKE—THE DEAD SEA OF THE WEST. BELEMNITES SWARMED IN THE MOUNTAIN SEAS. POETS CELEBRATING GROTTOES. THE RECENT MONKEY-PUZZLE HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE JURASSIC PERIOD. WELL PRESERVED PTERODACTYLS. THE BURNET CONTROVERSY. MANY CRAWLED ON THE OCEAN FLOOR. DELTAIC SANDSTONES OUTCROPPING IN YORKSHIRE. A MODEL OF A BRYOZOA ONE MILLION TIMES LIFE SIZE. MEANDER-ING RIVERS. GO MY SONS, BUY STOUT SHOES. CLIMB THE MOUNTAINS. SEARCH THE VALLEYS. DESERTS. THE SEA SHORES, AND THE DEEP RECESSES OF THE EARTH (SEVERINUS). MOUNTAIN THE JURASSIC CONSISTS MAINLY OF OOLITES AND CLAYS. RHAEtic BEDS. SEVERAL LAND-MASSSES NOT SHOWN ON A MAP. LUXURIANT VEGETATION. PARADISE LOST. WINDS OF THE OCEAN. ARCHAEOPTERYX. FLESH-EATERS WALKED ON THEIR HIND LEGS USING THEIR FORE LIMBS FOR GRABBING PREY. BONES WITH AIR CAVITIES SHOWN IN A DRAWING. LOW TIDE. DEAD JELLY-FISH IN A LAGOON. PAINTING OF FERN FOREST. POST CARDS OF Zion CANYON. A BOOK ON URANIUM. AN ARTIST'S CONCEPTION OF MOUNTAINS IN A SWAMP. CHART TELLS OF THE EVOLUTION OF WASTE. OVER-EXPOSED PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE SUNDANCE SEA. A NOVEL ABOUT THE LIFE OF AN ICHTHYOSAUR. WHEELS MARKED THE POLES. INFRA-RED PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE GULF OF GEOSYNCLINE.



DEEP VALLEYS. DATA FROM DRILLED HOLES. HE MAY EVEN NOW—IF I MAY USE THE PHRASE—BE WANDERING ON SOME PLESIOSAUR-HAUNTED OLLITIC CORAL REEF, OR VISIT THE LONELY SALINE LAKES OF THE TRIASSIC AGE (H.G. WELLS). TRACKS OF DINOSAURS DISCOVERED AT TURNERS FALLS, ON THE CONNECTICUT RIVER IN MASSACHUSETTS. THE COLUMNAR JOININGS OF THE PALISADES. INERT. ALL SLIDES INTO A LOST MOMENT. A CLIFF BELOW THE WEST END OF THE GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE. VOLCANIC MOUNTAINS AT THE CHILLED ZONE. A RESTORED SECTION OF A TRIASSIC FAULT BLOCK SHOWING LAVA DIKES. A BOOK IS A PAPER STRATA. A COLORED PHOTOGRAPH OF THE REDWOOD FOREST, ARIZONA. A LANDSLIDE OF MAPS. ECLIPSE OF THE MOON. GYPSUM. AN ILLUSTRATION FROM THE PALETECTONIC ATLAS. DYING IN THE YUKON AMID THE TECTONIC ROCKS. TECTONIC ISLANDS SURROUNDED BY GREEN FOAM. ...NOTHING CAN APPEAR MORE LIFELESS THAN THE CHAOS OF ROCKS... (DARWIN). SOUTHERN ELLSMERE. AND ABUNDANT QUANTITIES OF GRANULAR MINERALS. THE EXHUMED PRE-LATE TRIASSIC PENEPLANE CAN BE SEEN NEAR THE GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE. A GENERALIZED GEOLOGIC CROSS SECTION SHOWING MAGMA OFFSHOOTS. A DIAGRAM SHOWING A FAULT ZONE. WEDGES OF SEDIMENTARY STRATA. A PHOTOGRAPH OF ROTTEN DIABASE. RAPID RAIN LOSS. A RESTORATION OF A ICAROSAURUS. FALL ZONE. SWASH. 600,000 CUBIC YARDS OF SOMETHING. A BLOCK DIAGRAM SHOWING DRIFT. BARRIERS OF MUD. THE EARLIEST OF THE THREE GEOLOGICAL PERIODS COMPRISED IN THE MESOZOIC ERA (DICTIONARY OF GEOLOGICAL TERMS). BLACK HEATHS, WILD ROCKS, BLACK CRAGS, AND NAKED HILLS (WILLS COTTON). IN THE WAKE OF LAVA FLOWS. CHROMATIC EMULSIONS OF NAMELESS ROCKS. A NARROW RANGE OF GREY TONALITIES. THE ANONYMOUS SURFACE UNIFORMITY. FREEMAN PHOTOGRAPHS. DEGENERATE TECHNIQUES. DISPLAYS IN PLASTIC.

## STRATA A GEOPHOTOGRAPHIC FICTION