

Sylvia Metz

Markus Karstiess: *With the Eyes of the Earth*. An artistic dialogue between Markus Karstiess, Robert Smithson and Claudio Abate.

„This is probably the most difficult area, this whole idea of primal consciousness, primitive consciousness. This is really what I'm interested in.”¹

In the exhibition *With the Eyes of the Earth*, devised by Markus Karstiess, the artist practices what is called *artistic research* someplace. A term that does not appeal to the artist. In other words, in the exhibition Karstiess clings to a personal quest of what remained of Robert Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* (1969) that is in Rome. Karstiess presents himself as artist-curator and exhibitor concurrently. In doing so - not for the first time² - he mixes different levels with regards to content and concept.

This already refers to his complex artistic oeuvre. Approaching these diverse layers we initially see the exhibition itself which in turn consists of diverse visible and invisible individual components. In addition to the exploration of the original site in Rome, the presentation of Claudio Abate's photography series of *Asphalt Rundown*, will be shown for the first time.

Likewise part of the exhibition are preparatory recordings of conversations with people who attended the *Asphalt Rundown* in the past, like the gallery owner Fabio Sargentini and Claudio Abate. There are also photographs which Abate took during the action and ones he took at the Smithson-exhibition that ran simultaneously in Galleria L'Attico in 1969. As well as ephemera like the gallery's placard and invitation card, plus the exploration and unearthing of the *Asphalt Rundown* itself.

Karstiess openly broached the question of exposure to Smithson's legacy. In his film *With the Eyes of the Earth* (2014) which bears the same title as the exhibition, Karstiess

¹ Robert Smithson quoted after: „Four Conversations between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson“ (1969-79), in: Jack Flam (Ed.): Robert Smithson. *The Collected Writings*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1996, pp. 196-233, here p. 207.

² Meanwhile, between 2008 and 2012, together with Christian Freudenberger, Markus Karstiess was responsible for the artistic program at Kunstverein Schwerte. Together with Doris Krystof he conceived the exhibition *Solitargemeinschaft* which was a part of the presentation of K21's collection *Silent Revolution* for an entire year, beginning February 2010.

walks the slope where *Asphalt Rundown* took place. Due to the photographs he chooses a few places which in all likelihood should still be covered with asphalt and starts to dig with a shovel removing grass and soil.

Here we see the exploration of the artistic sources, it is a homage and at the same time an icon's destruction which opens up an everlasting dialog; it is also a physical and psychological consideration about working on one's own roots. It is 40 degrees and the sun is shining, Karsties quits digging, backpedals and exhaustively lies on his back, otherwise he would have got sunstroke. There are probably only a few artistic moments that are this straightforward concerning the debate of one's own fore fathers.

"[...] it's not a completely ephemeral piece, so it should last for quite some time...".³

On October 15th, 1969 the *Asphalt Rundown* took place in the south of Rome and was Robert Smithson's first *flow*.⁴ The *flow*'s concept was to let liquid industrial material run down slopes. For the Roman project Smithson was invited by Sargentini. They had met a couple of months before in New York. In their first conversation Smithson spontaneously had the idea of doing a project with volcanic rock from the region of Naples, potentially from Herculaneum, or with the sulfurous hot springs near Ansedonia, a coastal town on the Riviera.⁵ However, four sketches of the project dated on October 4th and 5th, 1969, reveal an altered concept.⁶

The signed sketches represent two projects: in the first sketch there is the installation *Mirror Project for Italy* which was planned for the interior and the exterior rooms of Galleria L'Attico. In the gallery's rooms mirrors were to be placed at three spots and were to be set up together with mud, soil, shrubbery, sticks and shards of window glass. One can also see a basin with mirrors and volcanic ash that was omitted in the actual

³ Robert Smithson quoted after: „Four Conversations between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson“ (1969-79), in: Jack Flam (Ed.): Robert Smithson. *The Collected Writings*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1996, pp. 196-233, here p. 225.

⁴ Two other *flows* followed in which Smithson in Chicago poured concrete down a slope in November 1969 and glue in Vancouver, Canada, in December 1969.

⁵ Conversation with Fabio Sargentini December 15th 2014. See also: Exhibit.cat. *L'Attico di Fabio Sargentini 1966-1978*, MACRO Museo d'Arte Contemporaneo Roma, Milano 2010, pp. 87-89.

⁶ Reproduced in: Exhibit. Cat. *L'Attico di Fabio Sargentini 1966-1978*, MACRO Museo d'Arte Contemporaneo Roma, Milano 2010, pp. 93-95.

exhibition. Instead there were two mud rows running parallel with mirrors standing upright and one leaning against the wall like recorded in Claudio Abate's exhibition photographs. No photographs of the gallerie's outdoor area remain, rather in the sketch there are Smithson's recognizable instructions as well as a tree with mirrors leaning against a house wall. Four *sites* in Italy are mentioned for which material should be gathered, and Smithson explicitly points out that the works shall be photographed as they appear in the installation.

The three other sketches pertain to the *Asphalt Rundown*. In the first sketch there is a truck on a mound and it is dumping hot asphalt that is running down the slope. The second sketch shows the road's condition for the truck and the exact location on the mound where the asphalt should be dumped. The last sketch shows a parked HGV which reminds one of an American truck, from which the asphalt is drained. All three sketches are labeled and they correlate with the later completed project.

Sargentini remembers that from the start Smithson wasn't interested in working indoors but wanted to carry out an endeavor in the great outdoors. However, the gallerist insisted on an indoor-work. Reasons for it can be seen in the fact that *Asphalt Rundown* was a work which would be sold exclusively afterwards via Abate's photographs, for Sargentini wanted to show one of Smithson's works in the gallery and insisted on the installation. After it had become difficult to find a suitable place for Smithson's ideas in Naples, Sargentini suggested that the *Asphalt Rundown* take place in the vicinity of Rome.⁷

The area where *Asphalt Rundown* was finally sanctioned was west of the Via Laurentina and south of Grande Raccordo Annulara (GRA), Rome's beltway which surrounds the inner city. It is a forgotten piece of land which is confined by thick, metres tall grassland and raised safety fences of a newly built residential area. A dirt track leads to the abandoned area of a former gravel quarry. Trash and junk lie around the compound. There is even an abandoned camp comprised of mattresses, tents and all kinds of tinny utensils hidden behind bushes and trees. That was the status in which Karstiess started his search for *Asphalt Rundown* in August 2014. In his hand: a photograph of Abate and a

⁷ Conversation with Fabio Sargentini, December 15th, 2014.

ten-year-old picture from the internet, showing the slope of *Asphalt Rundown* and the caption, saying: „First image since 1969“.

Karstiess had a scholarship at the German Academy Rome Casa Baldi in Olevano Romano from July until September 2014. At the time he was already interested in Smithson. His interest took a turn when he discovered the very picture in the internet ten years ago. It showed a weathered and abandoned place, which in turn activated the desire to work with *Asphalt Rundown*. The scholarship made the idea possible.

Locating the original site proved to be more difficult than imagined. The terrain was heavily weathered and after 45 years it did not look like the photos any more. The different slopes were overgrown alternating between nature and junk, plus nobody cared about Smithson's work. On the second day Karstiess found something, mostly covered by soil, some fragments of the massive asphalt outpour remained. Segments were surrounded by splintered interstices. The terrain was impassable to search everywhere, but the find samples were unequivocal, Smithson staged his *Asphalt Rundown* right there half a century ago.

At the time a truck full of hot asphalt was dumped above the pebble stone pit's slope. For that purpose the truck drove up to the heap's edge so that the asphalt could flow directly down. Smithson only provided the flow's direction. The form the asphalt took was defined by the subsoil, in other words the debris and the speed at which the substance cools. Processes like this artistically articulated the entropy and thus became a symbol for the reversible transition from the orderly status into a disordered which Smithson's Oeuvre prioritized in 1969/70s.

During *Asphalt Rundown* the material became an outer skin with a rock's mold as its underbelly which sealed it at the same time. This free flowing substance and the unintended form immediately evoked associations to Jackson Pollocks' *Drippings*. It also has to be accentuated how different Smithson's work is: with all of Smithson's works and especially with *Asphalt Rundown* we have to deal with a boundary of architecture, sculpture and painting.

Abate worked closely with the Galleria L'Attico in the late 60's and 70's. So he photographed Jannis Kounellis *Horses* in the gallery (1969). He usually attended most exhibitions of the Arte Povera Movement as the photographer who was allowed to record the actions and works. He enjoyed the confidence of other artists as well as Sargentini's and thus was predestined to photograph Smithson's work. There was no official permits at the quarry or the city of Rome concerning the *Asphalt Rundown*. The outright illegal action was not previously arranged with Abate. On the morning of October 15th, 1969 he was called out of bed by Sargentini: without further ado he was put into a car with a cup of coffee, camera and was driven to the gravel quarry.⁹ At artistic activities like this Abate saw himself confronted with the difficulty of taking a photo which „(...) was capable of summarizing the complete work, because mostly there is just one picture left and this, enforcibly, has to be the defining photograph of the work: the artist has to acknowledge and approve it as if it was his.“¹⁰

The photo serves as a recollection of the event, documentation and artwork all at once. As such it has two parents: the artist of the action, in this case Smithson, and Abate. The photographer decides what remains for posterity, what following generations remember when they talk about Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown*. These pictures transcend time and space, they represent the event's nucleus and ask questions such as „Where is the truck that we can see in the photograph of *Asphalt Rundown* nowadays?“¹¹

Smithson like other Land Art artists has betaken himself into a dependency and knows about photography's importance. It outlives the action like the previously mentioned notes on the sketch for *Mirror Project for Italy* prove.¹² In contrast to artists like Michael

⁸ Roland Barthes designated the content of the photograph's thinking as „It-has-been-like this“ and as the „invariable“. Substitutionally he uses the latin term „Interfuit“ that means „(...) this what I see found itself in a place which lies between the infinity and the perceiving subject (...); it was around and nonetheless instantly it became segregated; it was altogether irrefutable present and, however, was already isolated.“ See: Roland Barthes: *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York 1981 (German Frankfurt 1985, p. 87)

⁹ Conversation with Claudio Abate, December 8th, 2014 and Fabio Sargentini, December 15th, 2014.

¹⁰ Claudio Abate, in: *Exhibit.Cat. Kunst und Fotografie. Italienische Kunst von 1960 bis 1980*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1989, p.15.

¹¹ Cf. Walter Guadagnini, „Der Photograph und das Kunstwerk“, in: *Exhibit.Cat. Kunst und Photographie. Italienische Kunst von 1960 bis 1980*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1989, pp. 7-12, here p. 11.

¹² On the topic of the artist's dependency on the photographic documentation as soon as they leave the gallery room compare: Karlheinz Lüdeking, *Grenzen des Sichtbaren*, München 2006, p. 239; on the question of the importance of photography for Land Art see: Samantha Schramm: *Land Art. Ortskonzepte*

Heizer who had an ambivalent relationship with photographs of his Land Art works. Smithson integrates the medium picture in his work's theoretical concept.¹³ In the case of *Asphalt Rundown* Smithson let his partner Nancy Holt take a picture, in addition to Abate, and Robert Fiori film it. The film was edited later with the two other *flows* from Chicago and Vancouver.¹⁴

„When you see a rainbow, you're seeing something completely subjective. You see it at a certain distance as if stitched on to the landscape. It isn't there. It is a subjective phenomenon. But nonetheless, thanks to a camera, you record it entirely objectively. So, what is it?“¹⁵

In his exhibition *With the Eyes of the Earth*, this total work of art, consisting of mostly different materials, medias and fields of responsibility, Karstiess stages a journey into himself. His examination of Smithson represents the examination of his own psyche, dealing with an artistic superhero who long ago possessed and fascinated him and was stuck in his brain like a recurring song text. Looking at the exhibition's complexity it almost seems as if *Asphalt Rundown* had found Karstiess and not vice versa. It appears almost preordained that it is him of all people who is engaged with the abandoned Roman hill and picks up the traces of October 15, 1969. He brings them together and – like Ulf Stolterfoht puts it – „sees them through“.¹⁶

Karstiess and Smithson are united in their interest in the primitive, in the ylem and the connected primordial experiences. In the same year in which he made *Asphalt Rundown*, Smithson visited prehistoric places like *Stonehenge*.¹⁷ Both, Smithson and Karstiess, are interested in entropic processes that do not rarely become part of their works such as

und mediale Vermittlung. Zwischen Site und Non-Site, Berlin 2014, (Dissertation Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe 2012), esp. pp. 106-138.

¹³ See Samantha Schramm: *Land Art. Ortskonzepte und mediale Vermittlung. Zwischen Site und Non-Site*, Berlin 2014, (Dissertation Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe 2012) here pp. 110-111.

¹⁴ Robert Fiori's film *Rundown* (1993) is available at <http://www.roberetsmithson.com/films/films.html> (lastly retrieved on January 7th, 2015)

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, quoted by Willy Apollon (Ed.): *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, Albany 1996, p. 290.

¹⁶ During the presentation of the film's first edition at the closure exhibition of the Casa Baldi-scholars in Olevano Romano, September 18th, 2014, the co-scholar and writer Ulf Stolterfoht said to Karstiess: „It probably needed you to resolve the work (*Asphalt Rundown*).“

¹⁷ On Smithson and other Land Art artists and their interest in pre-historic art, see: Samantha Schramm: *Land Art. Ortskonzepte und mediale Vermittlung. Zwischen Site und Non-Site*, Berlin 2014, (Dissertation Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe 2012), esp. pp. 32-38.

with *Asphalt Rundown*. Smithson was fascinated by asphalt as a material in solid as well as in liquid state. In 1969 Smithson along with Bernd Becher undertook a field trip to the slag heaps of the Ruhr.¹⁸ He found a piece of asphalt that he instantly named Asphalt Lump which was later exhibited in the Gallery Konrad Fischer in Düsseldorf. Karstieß decided to use the very pieces of asphalt he took from Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown*. He made casts of the asphalt and converted it into a new work, like in the sculpture *Down is up* (2014)

In the newly devised *Scholar's Rocks* Karstieß makes a great leap to the millennia old tradition of carved stones which stand in artistically mounted asiatic gardens and that have been conveyed since early Song Dynasty (960-1279). The stones were naturally formed through erosion-processes and only partially man-made. Often they remind one of landscapes, animals, human figures or mythical creatures and serve as study subjects for academics. Karstieß saw several *Scholar's Rocks* during his stay in Japan in 2002. He was fascinated by one particular aspect: as model they stand for the monumental and in their tinyness they symbolize the huge mountains or the sea. In turn Karstieß compares this characteristic with Smithson who translated the gesture of Pollock's *Drippings*. This in small is monumental and as Smithson let the asphalt run down the slope it turned into the real monumental.

However, now that *Asphalt Rundown* crumbles away entropically, this monumental vanishes again. Karstieß' version the gigantic in the miniature becomes manageable in the truest sense of the word, like in the old *Scholar's Rocks*. One who lets oneself fall into this philosophic tone, experiences the same monumentality in small like in big: „One can put it into the pocket or put it on the shelf, everything is inside. The sea and the mountains“, Karstieß comments about his *Scholar's Rocks*. Herein a part of the work's iconic already exists: Karstieß succeeds in enclashing pieces of Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* in the lower part of his *Scholar's Rocks*. Somehow all of the components of these works were once mineral and have now been modified and mutually carry each other and can be separated again if required.

¹⁸ Compare Philip Ursprung, *Grenzen der Kunst. Allan Kaprow und das Happening. Robert Smithson und die Land Art*, Munich 2003, p. 312.

Now then, is this blasphemy? Did Karstiess destroy Smithson's work – or even save it? How does one deal with a Smithson-work that has been reconquered by nature and forgotten by the society that surrounds it? Should it be cleaned up and made accessible to the art pilgrims, like with Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970)? Or do the photographs of *Asphalt Rundown* that Abate took suffice? After 45 years would Smithson have wanted Karstiess to look for the *Asphalt Rundown* and through his own work and exhibition recall it anew?¹⁹

On the one side Karstiess through his removal of the material factually destroyed an iconic work. Insofar the work is seen as part of the artist, it is even an attack on Smithson himself. Yet, leaving it at this interpretation would fall short and neither would do justice to Smithson nor to Karstiess who downright claim an archaic radicalness in their artistic position. The iconic moment of *Asphalt Rundown* is disposed ambiguously: It is a very famous Smithson work which we exclusively know and can know visually conveyed and not as Land Art that we can visit. Indeed, this is true for other Smithson's works too, but we could go there and look at them in situ. Against this background the iconic has a particular quality, there is only the documentation of 1969. Only Karstiess makes the *Asphalt Rundown* accessible to us again and begins with the material.²⁰

Karstiess' project should rather be seen as an artistic dialog with a colleague and as a conclusion of the entropic process Smithson initiated. Maybe Smithson would counter and say that there is no beginning and no end, who knows? What it is all about for both artists is the materialization of the uncontrollable and primordial. Eventhough the form is irrelevant.

These asphalt lumps that began their way as mineral pebble stone, later as industrial material and now, with Karstiess, run through another process, become a carrier of significance and refer to a time gone by, of a deceased artist and his intentions.²¹ Thus, a dialog becomes possible and in the end it does not matter who in reality lived when. The

¹⁹ On the contemporary artist's dealing with Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, the reduction of earthwork on photographic works and their reflection through Smithson himself see: Chris McAuliffe: „Pilgrimage and Periphery. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and the Discourse of Tourism“, in: *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence. The Proceeding of the 32nd International Congress in the History of Art*, The University of Melbourne, 13-18 January 2008, edited by Jaynie Anderson, Melbourne 2009, pp. 765-768.

²⁰ Thanks to Sigrid Ruby for this important tip.

²¹ Compare Peter Geimer: *Derrida ist nicht zu Hause. Begegnungen mit Abwesenden*, Hamburg 2013, p. 17.

work's analysis and interpretation can only have a subordinate status because the parenthesis Karstiess makes goes directly back to Mesopotamia. Thereby busting every definable, absolute frame of interpretation – and this is also part of the concept and picks up the material's variable form. With his work *With the Eyes of the Earth* Karstiess creates a space that moves between the real and the imaginary – as well as between the past and the future.