

## Removed

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Located within a palimpsestial convergence of histories, Keith Langergräber's site-based installation *Removed* investigates the tensions between deconstructive and reconstructive processes. Centering around various constructions of landscape – its history in art and the constant reassessment of its gesture; the denaturalized physical land and its revisioning in the face of technology; and the social history of landscape, particularly through museological display – *Removed* assays spaces of transference and the collision of histories that fill them. The installation evokes an archeological process (that deconstructs in order to reconstruct) as a testament to histories of the land, industry and entropic force and in recognition of their various and fictitious constructions. Figuring a postmodern landscape through the concept of the site, *Removed* seeks out and complicates the spaces within paired terminologies: site and nonsite, art and artifact, chaos and stasis, the personal and the theoretical, fiction and science, deconstruction and reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> Such an investigation confronts the fundamental systems of art and nature while it considers the legacies of earth art, conceptualism, institutional critique and how to contribute to the dialogue around these issues in contemporary art. Langergräber layers these annals and systems, uncovering and remapping strata in an archeological cum anthropological cum poetical manner.

Examining sites of simultaneous production and degradation, particularly mining sites, *Removed* becomes a model that identifies this rich bed of confluence. The work references a natural history dioramic display, its main component being a salvaged and reassembled miner's shed captured in a state of imminent collapse. Stabilizing the shed's decay into a solid structure, Langergräber works to defy an entropic process: while the shed appears to be buckling under the weight of an avalanche of debris spilling down the gallery wall, over the shed's roof and onto the floor it is actually held "in an improbable stasis that can only be found in a museological model."<sup>3</sup> The avalanche's connotation is one of unstoppable and violent ruin, but Langergräber suspends the flow of movement, stilling the destruction before it plays itself out. Langergräber plays with the concept of entropy – energy transferred or redistributed into other systems – to bridge the concepts of deconstruction and reconstruction, tackling its use by artists such as Robert Smithson and Stan Douglas and reconfiguring the idea of "ruins in reverse" to manifest a materially based reversed ruin.<sup>4</sup>

Both the shed and the detritus deluge were culled from abandoned sites of industry in British Columbia, sites which embody the cleaved terminology of (de/re)construction. Specifically, *Removed* references Bamberton (an abandoned cement factory on Vancouver Island) and Retallack (a site of mining activity in the Kootney region). Langergräber has undertaken historical research of these areas and their industrial histories, as well as visited the sites, slipping onto chained-off roads and exploring the overgrown nostalgic buildings

and grounds. Like Heizer or de Maria, Langergräber's journey to the sites (of which he may or may not have a personal history) provides the individual referent in work that seeks to articulate the multilayered strata in creating site-based work. From these sites Langergräber has collected rusty tobacco tins, blueprints, metal scraps, core samples, old circuit boards, objects fossilized in cement, doors, rusty nails, wood and materials that testify to an ongoing entropy, such as century-old siding that bears the marks of time as well as recent graffiti. He has also documented the sites photographically and videographically, and inserted his own hand into the adaptation of found material by drawing and collaging onto factory blueprints.

Langergräber reconfigures this varied material in ways which reference institutional display. The material is restructured – as in the miner's shed – imbuing it with a constructed authenticity. It also takes on an allegorical form in the case of the avalanche, which attests to a sweep of industry that has left a scar to be filled in by nature, or by the possibility of new technology. And it has a documentative and illustrative form in the displayed artifactual documents, such as the specific objects which comprise the avalanche, the blueprint drawings or the wall map of silver, lead and zinc mined at Retallack (a clustered abstraction made out of rounded map pins). Together these components speak to Langergräber's process and concern with complicating and questioning systems, especially those around authenticity.

Deconstruction implies taking apart an object, theory or history, laying bare its framework or dismantling it entirely. Conversely, reconstruction involves either a rebuilding of an object, theory or history with the same pieces and their copies (restoration), or a reorganization of the pieces (reconfiguration). Langergräber links these processes of (de/re)construction for *Removed*, taking material from sites/landscapes and resituating them in the gallery. This transference of the material signifiers of a denaturalized site is the critical basis upon which the installation is founded, reopening a discussion around how the site has been conceived and constructed in art practices and what distinguishes art and artifact, simulacra and the real deal. Smithson described the artist as a "site-seer"<sup>5</sup> and Langergräber builds on this vision, rearticulating it in the face of art and environmental histories of the last 30 years.

The Smithsonian dialectic of site (the source of material or place of physical alteration on the land) and nonsite (the site's representation in the gallery) is a useful framework for unpacking contemporary work that addresses the intellectual, institutional and aesthetic archeology at play in making work around the landscape. Langergräber's project is caught in between the site and nonsite, in a space of articulated stasis, working with what might be termed a stilled entropic process. *Removed* echoes and then skews the concerns of Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970). *Partially Buried Woodshed* is a site work that took as its media

a found woodshed (in situ), earth and time. Using a bulldozer, Smithson had the shed partially buried by earth and defined the project when the weight of the earth broke the structure's central supporting beam. The shed was purportedly left to entropic forces, to natural reclamation of the man-made structure, but there was a fictionalized authenticity in Smithson's project, for he could not entirely relinquish his authorship of the work: he expected the site to be maintained and preserved by Kent State University (on whose campus it was situated), rendering the renaturalization of the site an orchestrated construct. Langergräber stays the idea of entropy in Smithson's *Woodshed* even further in the exhibition of *Removed*, calling attention to its fiction by removing his found structure from Retallack to the gallery space and illustrating the notion of collapse/entropic decay as a reconstructed aesthetic rather than allowing time to function as a medium.

While Smithson dematerialized his projects through the element of time,<sup>6</sup> Langergräber reasserts a materiality, rematerializing the art object in a gesture that flips the conceptual nature of earthworks, sites and nonsites, factoring in the photoconceptual work of the likes of Jeff Wall or Rodney Graham who are largely concerned with the idea of place. Recognizing that the documents of conceptual work have assumed value on the market, Langergräber critiques the conceptual project in general and the institutionalization of a thread of art production that sought to defy and deny institutionalization. Museums and galleries are collecting ephemera – the documents of idea of process based projects – giving them status and value. Langergräber takes the document and revalues it against dematerialization, complicating a conceptual history by championing the object.

Where *Partially Buried Woodshed* was about process, *Removed* returns to specificity of material and its historical connotations. Langergräber's subject matter is of paramount importance and the idea of the mine and other sites of industry (abandoned, ruined or operable), speak to the systems of both art and nature that ground his project. First *Removed* deals with the literal mine, referenced by the central component of the piece, the miner's shed and its interior installation as well as the accompanying installations, the pin piece and the wall of drawings/artifacts. *Removed* looks at the sites of mining – places that combine extraction with production – as well as at the factory – places where natural elements, such as lime, are culled directly from the earth and then processed at the site in order to create a new product. Langergräber examines the man-made structures that have inhabited and denaturalized the landscape in order to cull riches directly from the earth, and uses the factory as a demonstrative site which both quarries lime from the earth and processes raw material into a new product. These sites are literally places of simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction and this binary speaks to the entanglement of environmental effects and cycles, social systems and theoretical critiques which are fundamental to *Removed*'s multilayered project.

The notion of landscape in Canadian art is loaded, inextricably linked to national identity. It has carried both a (modernist) sense of promise and served as a (postmodern) sign of that promise's failure. Langergräber takes into account the personal, local, national and international accounts of the land, the impact it has on a society and vice versa. Peter Culley has written on the phenomenon of Vancouver as a site of significant art production:

Even the undeniably ravishing landscape – so present and yet so distant – can feel like an ongoing rebuke... Like a thick fog, a sense of creeping illegitimacy permeates the city's relationship to that landscape and its history, its gleaming promised future permanently obscured, its historical sins unacknowledged and expiated. That this crushing sense of impermanence and imposture should have accompanied the production within Vancouver of a large number of important artworks – many concerned with precisely these questions of urban modernity, loss and failure – can hardly be coincidental.<sup>7</sup>

What is it about Vancouver's newness and malleability in the face of such an overwhelming landscape that promotes this earnest work? This is not easily answered, but our short western art history has demanded we look not only to the land again and again, but to the theoretical frameworks that place us here. Perhaps it is precisely that sense of impermanence that allows for such articulate and multifaceted work around notions of land and identity. A Vancouver history of art might begin with Emily Carr and the influence of the Group of Seven, promoting a utopian modernism reliant on the imagery of a raw Canadian wilderness. This led to 1950s abstraction and into a further reconceptualization of the landscape in the 60s, in which the N.E. Thing Co. and others reassessed the parameters of what could be art by both claiming (and rejecting) the local landscape as art, as well as intervening in the landscape to use it as a medium (as did Smithson in the several works he made in Vancouver, such as *Glue Pour*, 1970). This reconceptualization of the landscape made a break which fed into the photoconceptual work of the likes of Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Roy Arden and Stan Douglas for which Vancouver is currently internationally renowned. This continual readdress of the landscape is riddled with a neo-conceptualism, a returned concern for aesthetics and a re-materialization of the art object.

Building on a legacy of landscape in artistic and psychographic terms, Langergräber's work allows meaning to be drawn from multilayered histories, specifically histories of the land in British Columbia and artistic practices of Vancouver.<sup>8</sup> He conjures up the systems of art and nature, seeing art history as an archeological, anthropological and aesthetic investigation. Using the idea of removal in the context of site/nonsite, Langergräber's process operates

between the sites of the field and the gallery, revisiting gestures made by Gordon Matta-Clark and Mark Dion. Contextual commentary made by removing site to gallery has become a given in postmodern practice, but the rearticulated tension in *Removed* has found pertinence in this place and time (especially in a hyper-technological age and in the face of environmental crisis). In the process of removal, Langergräber opens up the site for dialogue and fills the gallery space to comment on its institutional function and its reobjectification of the documents of earth and conceptual works. *Removed* stills an artistic history, highlighting its construction. As Smithson stated in 1968: "There is nothing 'natural' about the Museum of Natural History. 'Nature' is simply another 18th and 19th century fiction."<sup>9</sup>

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1. The term "site-specific" derives from the delineation and examination of the site of the gallery in relation to space unconfined by the gallery and in relation to the spectator. ...To install is a process that takes place each time an exhibition is mounted; *installation* is the art form that takes note of the perimeters of that space and reconfigures it." Erika Suderburg in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 4.

2. "Terms come to life when set against the resistance of the objects, conditions, situations, events, societies, histories – as well as the other terms – that they articulate. Everything has its context. ...everything is figured through something else, through something other." Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds. *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 323.

3. Artist's statement, August 2001.

4. Jack Flam writes that "the very shoddiness of the New Jersey suburbs seemed to be the tangible embodiment of the entropic condition, constantly falling apart at the same time that it was in the process of being rebuilt, creating what Smithson described as 'ruins in reverse.'" Jack Flam, ed. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996, p. xxi.

5. Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997, p. 2.

6. "...Smithson takes time itself not only as one of the main themes of his art, but also as one of his most important mediums. ...It is in a sense the matrix that holds together the whole diverse body of his work – words and images, philosophical concerns and the secularized remnants of religion, even his political and social engagements." Flam, p. xix.

7. Peter Culley, "Out of the Blue: Three Works on Vancouver," *Border Crossings*, 2001, p. 66.

8. Keith Langergräber, *Terminal Sites*, 2001, p. 1.

9. Flam, p. 85.