

Acropolis Cinema presents



April 12, 2016 ~ 7:30PM ~ Art Share L.A.

## ABOUT THE FILM

Towards the end of 2015, James Benning made one of his occasional expeditions to Utah, to the place where Robert Smithson's colossal land-sculpture *Spiral Jetty* (1970) extends out into the Great Salt Lake. The water-level was low, leaving the vast bulk of the Jetty exposed in the crisp air. His film *measuring change* captures two thirty-minute periods of that particular day, in the unblinking, unmoving takes that have become his trademark—beginning at 8:57am and 3:12pm respectively. A belated digital companion piece to his 16mm masterpiece *casting a glance* (2007), this new film hypnotically contemplates Smithson's art-work in relation to its wider environment and to the humans who walk on and around its gargantuan coils.

61 minutes // US // 2016

### **This Immortal Coil: James Benning's *measuring change***

"It is the place where the walls of this world of ours wear the thinnest and something beyond burns through."

—G K Chesterton

"The scale of the *Spiral Jetty* tends to fluctuate depending on where the viewer happens to be. Size determines an object, but scale determines art. A crack in the wall, if viewed in terms of scale, not size, becomes the Grand Canyon. A room could be made to take on the immensity of the solar system."

—Robert Smithson

"I admire [Smithson] so much. I'm certainly influenced by him and how he tried to understand landscape... He's interested in these grand schemes of geological time—my films don't deal with such large time-scales, but I think about time because he thought about such great distances of time."

—James Benning

*measuring change* is the third major film to be made about *Spiral Jetty*, Robert Smithson's colossal masterpiece of land-art constructed in 1970 at Rozel Point on the shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake. The first was Smithson's own 16mm short, simply entitled *Spiral Jetty* (1970), which recorded the theoretical origins and the construction and completion of the work. The second and third are both by James Benning, a longtime Smithson aficionado and indefatigable cross-country traveller who over the decade has conducted numerous pilgrimages to *Spiral Jetty*.

*casting a glance*—the minuscule title taken from Smithson's famous dictum that "a great artist can make art simply by casting a glance"—formed half of Benning's 2007 double-pronged farewell to 16mm (indeed, to celluloid of any gauge), along with the railroad-themed *RR*. For this critic at least, Benning's finest achievement to date (it's a permanent fixture in the upper reaches of my personal all-time top ten) *casting a glance* is one of the most elaborate cinematic *trompes-l'oeil* ever attempted. It gives the outward indication of having been shot over an epic thirty-odd year timespan: each sequence, showing the jetty at various stages of exposure thanks to the lake's wildly fluctuating water-levels, is preceded by a specific date-stamped title-card.

In fact, Benning shot *casting a glance* over a period of eighteen months, ingeniously "mapping back" with reference to the appropriate historical juncture.

Nearly a decade later, Benning now presents the comparatively straightforward measuring change - its title carefully all-minuscule—latest fruit of his impressively prolific "digital period" which began with 2009's *Ruhr*. On one level a companion-piece and follow-up to *casting a glance*, it also completes an unofficial trilogy with Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* film. The three projects stand alone and work independently, but they also can be seen as taking part in an evolving dialectic with each other—one based upon an essential dialogue with the rocky, algae-strewn, three-dimensional ur-text that is the *Spiral Jetty* itself.

Because while we speak of art-works being "finished" at a certain point, this is really only a bureaucratic convenience and a semantic contrivance. Paul Valéry once remarked (paraphrasing da Vinci) that poems are never completed, rather abandoned. And works of art could be said to be consummated firstly when they are interacted with by others—i.e. the public—and secondly when they are referred to by other art-works.

*measuring change* concerns itself with how the public interacts with public art. Its two fixed-camera half-hour shots survey the jetty from 8:57am to 9:27am, and then from 3:12pm to 3:42pm, on December 28th, 2015—Benning's 73rd birthday. He observes the scene from a considerable distance: water levels are very low indeed; the drought-afflicted Great Salt Lake has receded to the point that it is only present in the shot as a wide, subtly shimmering Weimaraner-grey toward the horizon.

The scale of the jetty is difficult to determine—until, after a significant period in which (to repeat the phrase often used by those encountering Benning's landscape scrutinies for the first time) "nothing is happening", a walker appears from the bottom of the screen. This figure heads towards the jetty, his tininess allowing us to appreciate the gigantic size of Smithson's spiral. A second walker appears, and then a third—they are all too far away for individual features to be distinguishable, or even for us to be sure about their age or gender. But the speed and nature of their movements provide certain clues. After exploring the Jetty for a few leisurely minutes, walking its coils, they return from whence they came.

The second of *measuring change's* two shots presents a vista significantly bleaker, chillier, more icily hostile than the first. The light is dying, the hills in the distance are hazier, the wind blowing across the microphone is more biting redolent of Arctic gusts. But, after an even longer delay this time, hardy representatives of humanity are again present: another trio, walking with some purpose towards—but this time not onto—the jetty. Instead they continue towards the lake, their pixellated presence diminishing with every step. The area around Rozel Point on this particular day is an uninviting one, dunnish of palette, leached of life—it's startling to recall that Smithson was drawn to this particular spot because of the extremity of its hues.

Intrigued by accounts of the wild, mainly vermilion colorations of salt lakes in California and Bolivia ("in all stages of desiccation, and filled with micro bacteria that give the water surface a red color") Smithson travelled with his wife Nancy Holt to the Great Salt Lake. His imagination had been fired by reports that the water in the northern half of the lake, above the biecting Lucin Cutoff—which carries the transcontinental railroad—"was the color of tomato soup."

Remnants of industry, "junk and waste" transported Smithson "into a world of modern prehistory. The products of a Devonian industry, the remains of a Silurian technology, all the machines of the Upper Carboniferous Period were lost in those expansive deposits of sand and mud... A great pleasure arose from seeing all those incoherent structures. This site gave evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes."

That last line was quoted by Benning in 2008 when he was interviewed by *Cinema Scope* magazine about *casting a glance* and *RR*. "He didn't want to build something that was in a white-walled museum or gallery," Benning said of Smithson, "but wanted to put it in the world, and see what the world would do to it."

Ironically enough, *measuring change* actually did make its debut in a "white-walled" gallery, projected onto such a surface in Berlin's 'neugerriemscheider' space (yet more minuscule!) in February of this year. But with its opening and closing "credits", the piece works just as well in a theatrical context—thus functioning as a limpidly crystalline bridge between the cinematic and installation strands that have intertwined through Benning's oeuvre since the 1970s.

Like much of his best work, *measuring change* is intimately self-reflexive, deriving from and conducting a dialogue with a specific precursor (in this instance, *casting a glance*, though the jetty does make other, more fleeting appearances, elsewhere in his back-catalogue). But it also engages deeply, respectfully, and passionately with the work of another master, Smithson—and both Benning and Smithson are themselves both taking from and adding to the bizarre confluences of man-made and natural forces which *Spiral Jetty* and *Rozel Point* provides. These are organic conversations of grand complexity, open-ended in scope, and to which we are all invited to contribute. *Spiral Jetty* thus becomes avatar and corollary of a spiral galaxy, its immeasurably vast, gaseous arms reaching out towards infinite space.

Neil Young, April 2016 ♦



## Upcoming Events

April 27, 2016 ~ What Has Happened Is That Time Has Passed:

An Evening with Ben Russell

New films + live multimedia performance

8:00pm ~ Automata Theater ~ 504 Chung King Ct, Los Angeles, CA.

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