

Asphalt Tales and the Ends of History —

Fig.1 From Ed Ruscha in collaboration with Mason Williams and Patrick Blackwell, *Royal Road Test*, 1967, 22-23. © Ed Ruscha.

Fig.2 From Ed Ruscha in collaboration with Mason Williams and Patrick Blackwell, *Royal Road Test*, 1967, 12-13. © Ed Ruscha.

Fig.3 From Ed Ruscha in collaboration with Mason Williams and Patrick Blackwell, *Royal Road Test*, 1967, 52-53. © Ed Ruscha.

Nicholas Boyarsky

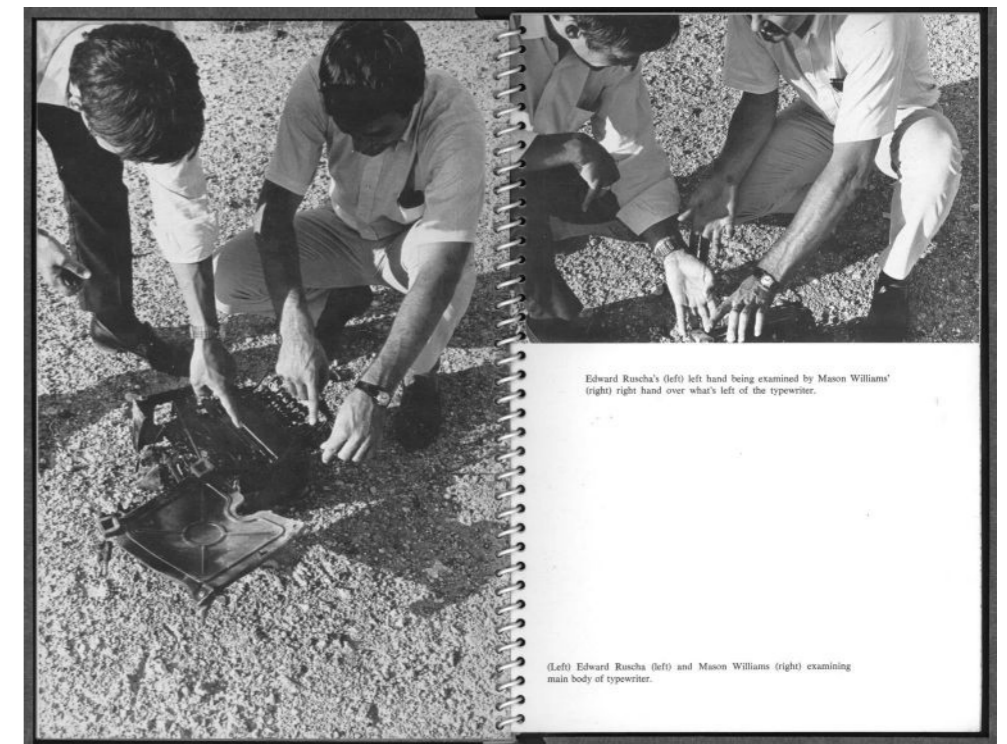
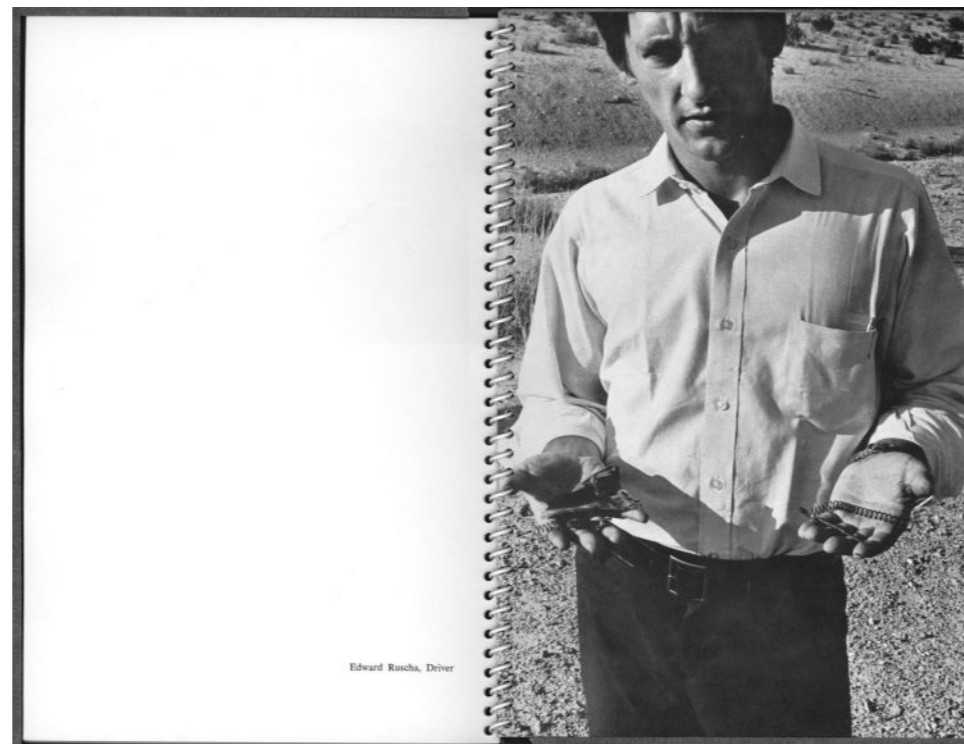
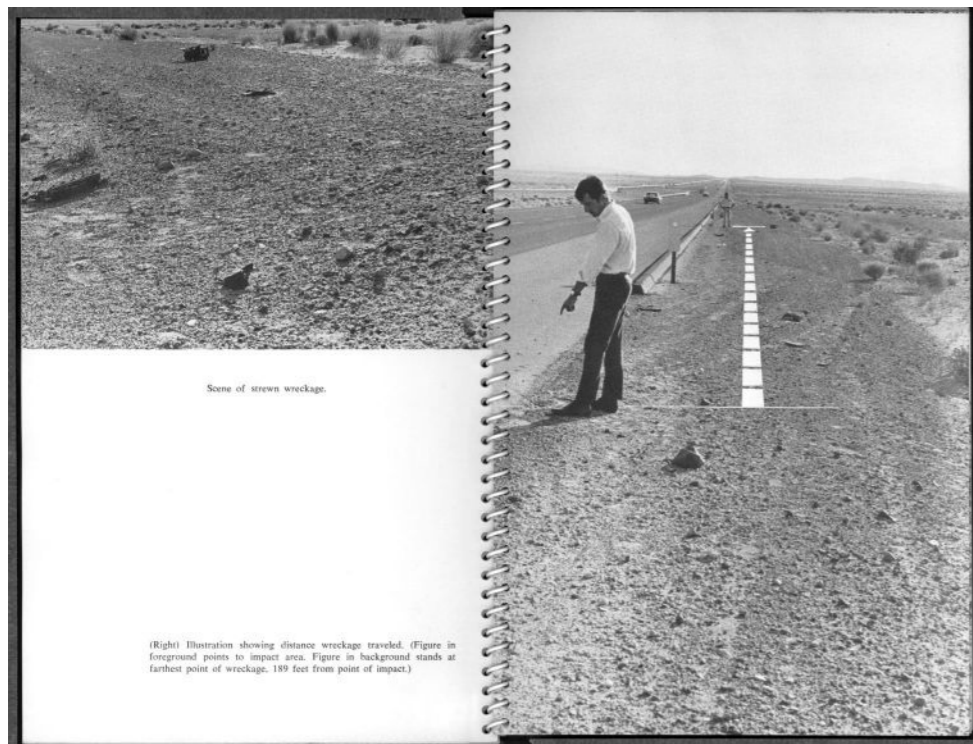
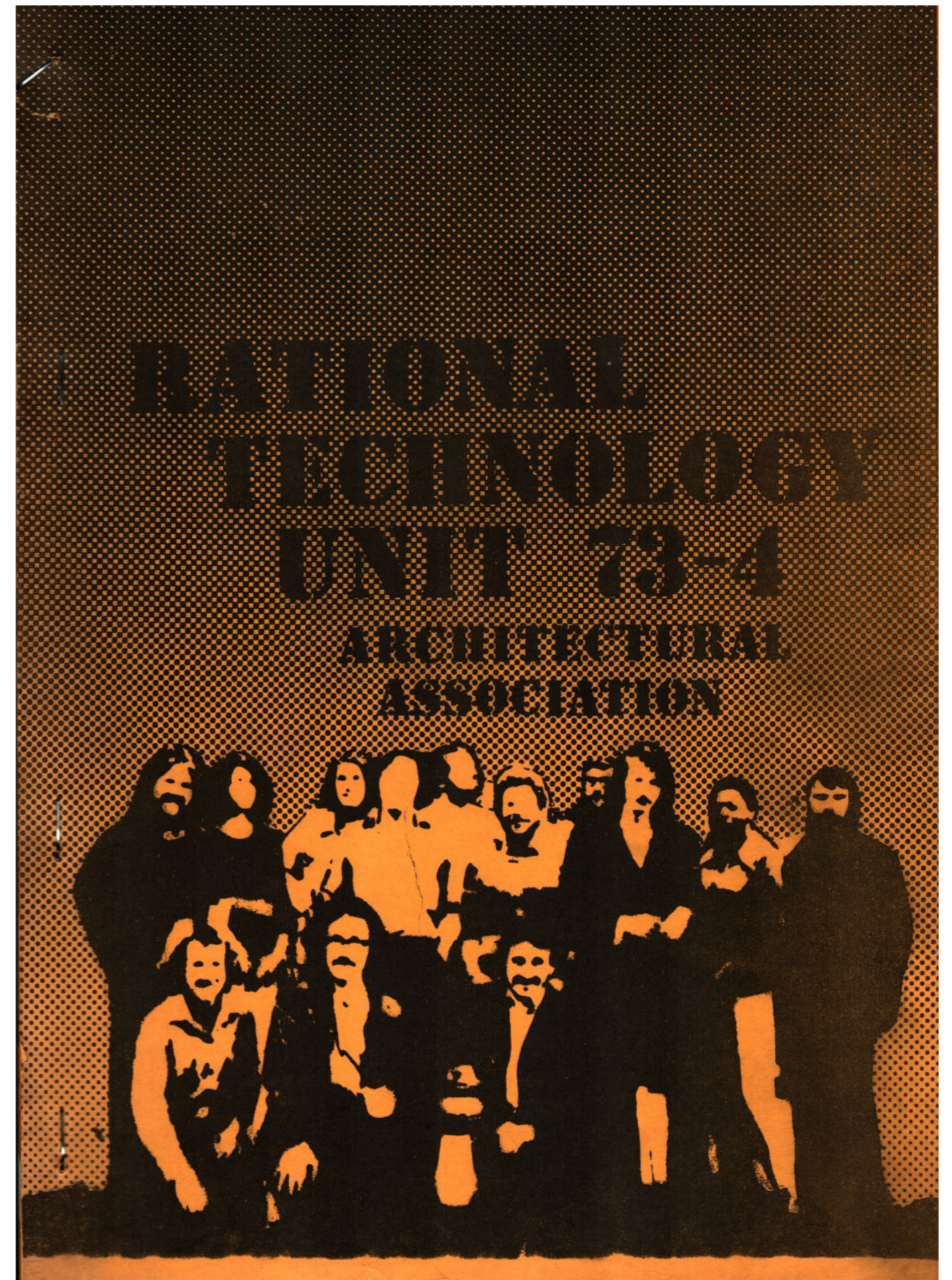


Fig.4 From *Rational Technology Unit 73-74*, eds George Kasabov, Charlotte Nassim and Gerry Foley. Architectural Association, July 1974. Front cover. Alvin Boyarsky Archive.

At 5.07pm on Sunday 21 August 1966, approximately 122 miles southwest of Las Vegas, the artist Ed Ruscha ejected a Royal 10 typewriter from the passenger window of a 1963 Buick LeSabre driven at 90 miles per hour by the musician and poet Mason Williams. The Royal 10 – a model produced between 1914 and 1931 – bounced along the roadside verge for 189 feet, breaking into pieces with each bounce and leaving a fragment of ribbon and shift frame assembly at the furthest point of impact (Figs 1, 2, 3). Several miles further on, the decision was made to turn around and see how the typewriter had taken the fall, with the photographer Patrick Blackwell recording all the pieces strewn along the roadside. The events were documented in the photobook *Royal Road Test*,¹ first published in 1967, which reconstructed the process in reverse and was presented in a style reminiscent of police forensic reports, marking a shift from Ruscha's production of artist books concerned with symbols and materials of urban life to more ludic and Dada-influenced practices.

Whatever the original intentions behind this seemingly enigmatic and random gesture, its recording and subsequent publication allow us to reflect on the relevance of this action for our own times. It offers us a lens through which to speculate on our relationship with petroleum-based asphalt and to unpack a collective denial of the huge environmental impacts of mobility and speed among architects and, to a lesser degree, artists in the latter half of the 20th century. It also allows us to see how asphalt became a subconscious medium in spatial practices that were concerned with the politics and economies of consumption, with genocide and with atomic war. This article questions why architects, planners and designers took little effective action to ward off environmental degradation, despite full knowledge of a future of dwindling resources and a growing awareness of climate change. This silence clearly speaks of a societal complicity with the culture of consumption and profit-oriented development practices.



Yet there is an argument to be made that, before the term ‘Anthropocene’ became popularised in 2000, barely any language existed to formulate a critical discussion around how our ubiquitous reliance on fossil fuels could be abstracted and conceptualised into artistic and architectural practices so that a dialogue could be developed to go beyond mere aestheticisation of the problem.

Writing in 1974 (Fig.4) and reflecting on the impact of the October war in the Middle East, Gerry Foley (author of *The Energy Question*, 1976, and Unit Master of the Architectural Association’s ‘Rational Technology Unit’) identified the conundrum of the energy crisis in the face of the plenitude that the extraction of North Sea oil promised. He argued for an alternative option to the pattern of the Sixties whereby new oil resources could be used ‘to make the heavy investments required to produce a society which, in energy terms, is viable into the indefinite future’.² Foley considered that an effect of the ‘paradox of our situation in Britain may well be to keep the notion of an “Energy Crisis” alive in the middle of a situation of abundant energy’.³ A dialectical awareness of crisis at a time of plenty, he argued, would buy time for the significant social change necessary because, in its present state, ‘technological society cannot solve, within its present terms of reference, the energy problem it has posed itself. It must, therefore, change voluntarily, or by force of society in which the problems will either not occur, or will be capable of resolution.’⁴

The irony that, despite Foley’s argument, North Sea oil revenues effectively bankrolled Margaret Thatcher’s regime and her attempts to shift Britain towards a free-market economy and culture was not lost on Robin Evans. In his review ‘From Axes to Violins’ of 1981, in which he reflected on developments in student work at the Architectural Association over the previous five years, he provided an explanation for the failure of architecture in the 1970s to address problems such as the energy crisis or, in the case of Brian Anson, his colleague at the AA, the politics of city development.⁵ Evans identified a shift from ‘axes’, by which he meant an emphasis on social relevance in architecture, ‘to those who wanted to play it [architecture] like a violin’. For him, this marked a transition away from distinctly anti-formal work (typified by Gerry Foley’s unit, among others), based on the belief that ‘the architectural answer would arise from the resolution of problems that lay outside the conventional boundaries of the discipline. Good architecture was the final organisational outcome of good thinking in the regions of economics, politics, ergonomics or sociology.’⁶ Evans concluded that the ‘general failure’ of those wielding axes to attract students at the AA ‘was most likely because of their refusal to countenance the idea, now so pervasive, that architecture is above all else a medium of expression’, which led them to leave the stage ‘for those who wanted to play it like a violin’.⁷

The Black and White Oil Conference held in Edinburgh in 1974 furthered the intent of Foley’s call to heighten awareness of the energy crisis by arguing for an enhanced artistic expression of this debate. Motivations for this transition from anti-formal to formal, to use the terms of Robin Evans’s hypothesis, can also be discerned in this parallel project to insinuate art practices (violins) into political and economic fields (axes). Writing to Joseph Beuys in April 1974, Richard Demarco, an artist and promoter of the visual and performing arts, outlined his plans for a forum, to be held at the beginning of the Edinburgh Festival, to debate the implications of extraction from the Scottish offshore oilfields and interrogate ‘evidence of the short-sighted and inhuman official views of “progress”’.⁸ For Demarco the role of the artist was critical in this debate: ‘Can the experience of art help, can the artist help?’⁹ Calling for a visionary artist to make Scotland safe from ‘the hands of developers’, Demarco invoked Constable and his role in ‘making sacred what is called Landscape Country’.¹⁰ The Black and White Oil Conference, held later

in the same year, featured Beuys, Scottish Labour and SNP politicians, curators and architects including Richard Buckminster Fuller, Paolo Soleri, Cedric Price, Alvin Boyarsky and Peter Cook (Figs 5, 6, 7). Here artists, allied with architects, were given a platform for an agonistic and performative exchange, which featured Beuys’s *Energy Plan of the Western Man* using blackboards in an open discussion with audiences, and a six-hour monologue from Buckminster Fuller that, unfortunately, proved too much for those in the audience who were not architects.¹¹ Reviewing the event for *The Guardian*, Caroline Tisdall lauded Demarco’s intentions to ‘prove that the social and cultural implications of the changes that come with Scottish oil cannot be left to the restricted interests and interpretations of party politicians, and secondly, that the wider vision of an artist or theoretician should not be dismissed as crackpot and out of place ramblings’.¹² However, the politicians left before Beuys and Buckminster Fuller spoke, this demonstrating to Tisdall ‘how much more of this kind of activity is needed before such a dialogue is accepted as important’.¹³ Demarco’s project to bring discussion of oil into the art world, in the spirit of Foley’s strategy for ‘a direct engagement in social and political issues by which a wide public awareness of the crisis lurking behind the façade of plenty is created and heightened’,¹⁴ drew on Beuys’s project to break down the isolation between disciplines and practices in the form of a ‘generalism’ that Clementine Deliss suggests was ‘nurtured in Scotland by such figures as Patrick Geddes’ in order to ‘re-contextualise given meanings that would otherwise be segregated into specialisms’.¹⁵ In contrast, responses by North American artists to questions of oil were more directly engaged with road culture and the chimeras of speed and mobility.

Asphalt, blacktop, bitumen, tarmac, or Jew’s pitch are all synonyms for the black or brown sticky substance that is obtained both from natural deposits and from distilling petroleum. It has been employed for waterproofing and caulking from as early as the fifth century BCE, the ancient Egyptians used it to embalm mummies, and indigenous peoples of North America took advantage of its adhesive properties. First used to pave streets in the 1870s, it has become a universal material of modernity, familiar from road construction and roof membranes. Asphalt came into its own in the 20th century as the transformation from dusty and muddy roads to gleaming frictionless highways facilitated the advent and spread of the automobile and the speed of modern life. Critical recognition of our dependence on this omnipresent oil-based material, which both enables our mobility and keeps the rain out of our lives, yet is symptomatic of our current predicament, is rare. It is, needless to say, a dirty industry, based on extraction from sources, such as the 140,000 sq.km Athabasca oil sands in Alberta, Canada, whose illusion of endlessness protracts our reliance on fossil fuels.

In enabling and facilitating the speed and mobility of the automobile age, asphalt triumphed over the dust and friction of unmetalled roads.¹⁶ The connectivity of the highway was celebrated by the industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes in his book *Magic Motorways*,¹⁷ in which he elaborated on the Futurama that he had designed as the General Motors Highways and Horizons Exhibit at the New York World’s Fair of 1939. Five million people queued to be carried on a moving seat system that simulated flight over a streamlined future highway system, which Geddes envisaged for 1960, that would double road construction across America, with multi-deck highways and bridges to eliminate bottlenecks, alongside many other innovations. By the mid-1970s the consequences of such optimism, in particular the creation of urban sprawl and suburbia, were brought under a critical gaze through the exhibition *New Topographics*, held at George Eastman House’s International Museum of Photography, Rochester, New York, between October 1975 and February 1976.¹⁸ In the exhibition, subtitled *Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, a selection of young

Fig.5 Joseph Beuys at Forrest Hill, Edinburgh, during the Black and White Oil Conference at Forrest Hill Poorhouse, Edinburgh, 19-21 August 1974. Courtesy of Demarco Digital Archive (University of Dundee) and The Demarco Archive.



Fig.6 Buckminster Fuller lectures as part of the Black and White Oil Conference at Forrest Hill Poorhouse, Edinburgh, 19-21 August 1974. Courtesy of Demarco Digital Archive (University of Dundee) and The Demarco Archive.



Fig.7 Speaker's panel at the Black and White Oil Conference at Forrest Hill Poorhouse, Edinburgh, 19-21 August 1974. Panel includes Cedric Price and Alvin Boyarsky. Courtesy of Demarco Digital Archive (University of Dundee) and The Demarco Archive.



photographers, including Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz and Stephen Shore, documented the concrete and asphalt realities of urban landscapes and construction sites. Acknowledging the influence of Ruscha's photobooks, the works emphasised the enforced separation and distance between people and their constructed environment that road culture had brought to the American landscape. Caught between the polarities of the exuberance of Futurama and the sobriety of the *New Topographics* show, Ruscha's writing machine was flung from the gleaming blacktop to become a victim of the destructive resistance that the unmetalled roadside offered. To paraphrase Victor Hugo's chapter 'This Will Kill That' in his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, in which Frollo laments that the printing press, and specifically the book, has killed architecture, the car may have killed the writing machine but it is the insidious and ubiquitous pitch that set the scene for the crime.¹⁹

At the time of *Royal Road Test*, Ed Ruscha had been working on a series of studies that became his 1968 painting *Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, which depicts a wing of William Pereira's recently completed museum ablaze. The building was universally unpopular in Los Angeles and when initially exhibited at Ruscha's gallery the painting was placed behind a velvet rope, as if to hold back angry crowds. The work has a Dadaesque and iconoclastic attitude similar to that of the *Royal Road Test*, but of particular interest is the siting of the new museum next to the La Brea Tar Pits, a former asphalt mine (Figs 8, 9). La Brea (Spanish for asphalt) preoccupied Ruscha through his career and in more recent works such as his *Los Francisco San Angeles* portfolio of 2001. The Tar Pits display the slowness of geological time as, over tens of thousands of years, natural asphalt seeped up from the Salt Lake Oil Field, which underlies much of the Fairfax District, hardening as it surfaced. A major prehistoric excavation site, the asphalt pits have given up thousands of fossils of dinosaurs, flora and even humans who had become trapped and literally petrified. The contrasting time spans of the Tar Pits, which bear witness to the extinction of so many species, and the sprawling city of blacktop freeways that expedite our rush to extinction, set up a deathly dialogue across the history of mankind. Within this temporal dialectic, asphalt ensnares, slows down and overcomes resistance, and at the same time facilitates acceleration towards self-destruction. The thick, treacle-like pitch presents an oozing primordial subconsciousness that is as omnipresent as the palls of smoke to which Ruscha's *Museum on Fire* and his contemporary *Burning Gas Station* bear witness.

Tracking back through different forms of artistic and aesthetic engagement with asphalt leads to the remarkable counter-monument that the Polish architect Oskar Hansen and his team (Zofia Hansen, Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, Julian Palka, Edmund Kupiecki and Lechoslaw Rosinski) proposed for their 1958 winning entry for the Auschwitz Memorial Competition (Fig.10). The team's second-stage design featured a 70m-wide, 1000m-long asphalt road that would run diagonally across the site of the Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp, ignoring the main entry gates, through to the ruins of the crematoria, to end abruptly among fields and woodland. This diagonal cut was intended to expose and reveal the apparatus of the camp to the visitor (Fig.11). Asphalt envelops, freezes time and preserves elements along the road such as barracks, fencing and other structures. *The Road*, an embodiment of Hansen's theory of 'Open Form', was intended to provoke the 'subjective engagement of the visitor' with the camp's memories, physical traces and remnants as the visitor walks along it. The road was intended as a 'site for spontaneous gestures. If one should wish to leave a note with a name, or a figure of an angel, one could do it on the road'.²⁰ There is no identifiable monument, rather a kilometre of experience that challenges the notion of the monument as a fixed object in space. As a counterpoint to the road, Hansen and his team left the rest of the site to nature to

Fig.8 Rancho La Brea Tar Pits, Hancock Park. New Los Angeles County Museum of Arts in the background, Los Angeles, California. Vintage postcard, collection of the author.

Fig.9 Rancho La Brea Tar Pits, Hancock Park. New Los Angeles County Museum of Arts in the background, Los Angeles, California. The largest and most beautiful showplace for art built in a quarter of a century. Vintage postcard, collection of the author.



Fig.10 Oskar Hansen, Sketch for 'The Road' - Monument project in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Stage II, 1958, photo, crayon, paper, cardboard, 14.5 x 37.5cm, MASP 7030. Museum of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Both competition designs prepared with co-authors: Zofia Hansen, Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, Edmund Kupiecki, Julian Pałka, Lechosław Rosiński.

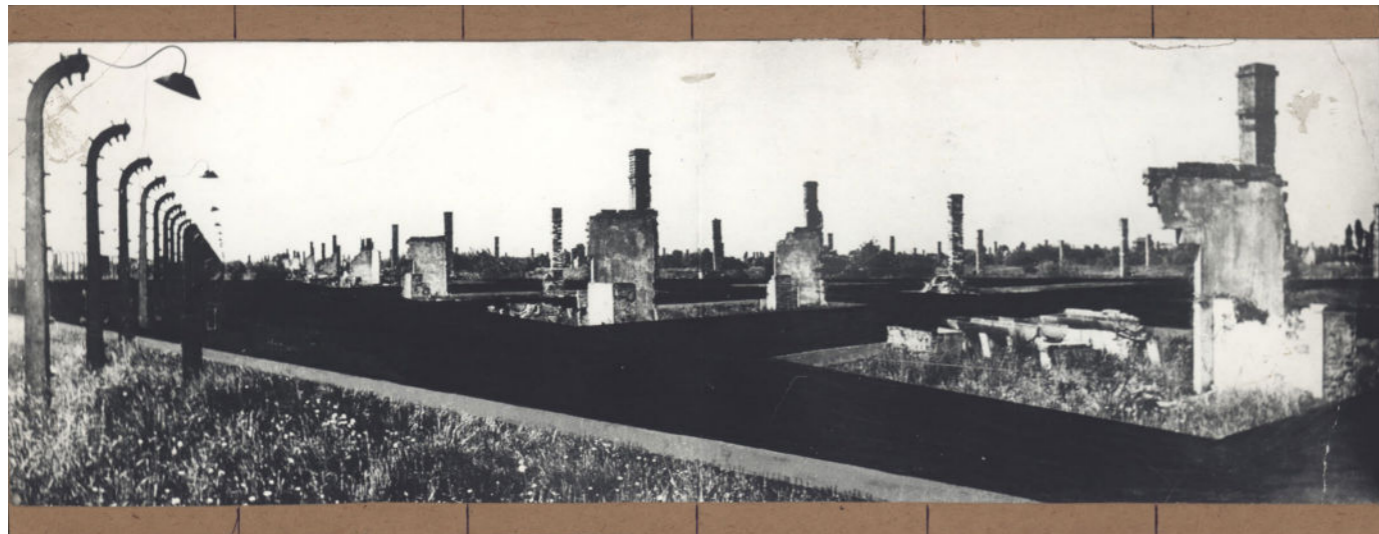
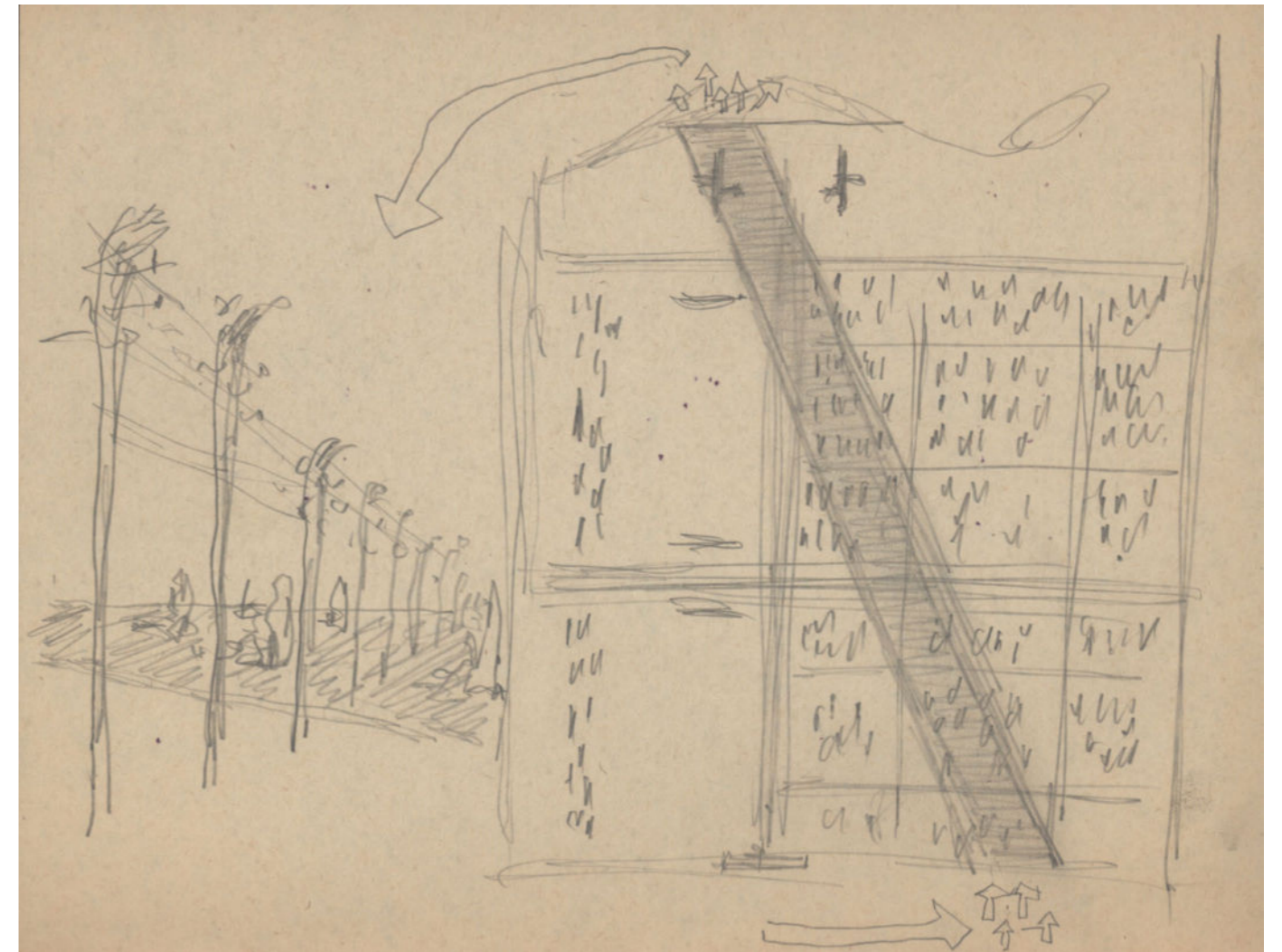


Fig.11 Oskar Hansen, Sketch for 'The Road' - Monument project in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Stage II, 1958, pencil, paper, 16.3 x 21cm, MASP 7035. Museum of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Both competition designs prepared with co-authors: Zofia Hansen, Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, Edmund Kupiecki, Julian Pałka, Lechosław Rosiński.



rewild over time: 'The process off the road would play the role of a biological clock.'²¹ This 'clock' is intended to measure the passage of time following the tragic events, and the drawings, collages and model for the scheme illustrate this process of abandonment as the camp is transformed into a living landscape. The simultaneous experience of the frozen time of the road, in contrast to the slow pace of nature's reclamation of the rest of the camp over time, establishes a framework of multiple perspectives from which to comprehend the enormity of the site and its memories. Associations with speed, progress and mobility that condition our perception of roads are inverted by the slow performative walk that leads forwards through the camp and then back towards the entrance. In this context Hansen's *Road* invokes Walter Benjamin's characterisation of the Angel of History, written in 1940, which speaks of a similar notion of reversal. Inspired by Paul Klee's monoprint *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin describes how the angel, looking backwards, contemplates the storm of progress:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.²²

The adjudication committee for the competition was led by the British sculptor Henry Moore, who was initially attracted to the premise of *The Road* and the conceptual challenges that it presented to conventional sculpture and ideas of what constitutes a monument. However, as the process unfolded, Moore withdrew his support for the scheme and promoted a compromise version that collaged together various entries into a recognisable object. This approach was in part a response to survivors who could not empathise with Hansen's seemingly abstract proposal. Moore ultimately withdrew from the jury, citing concerns about political influences behind the project and its 'lack of emotional content'.²³ In so doing, he closed the door on Hansen's Open Form and the contribution it could make to the discourse on the counter-monument. Hansen's vision for asphalt, in the form of the road, as a critical medium and lens to confront the enormities of history in a dialogue between different time-frames, continues to resonate as we face the environmental crises of our times.

Writing retrospectively in 1976 of his photographic series *Asphalt* (1961–62), Shomei Tomatsu declared that 'Asphalt is the skin of the city'. Shifting his gaze from searing images of the aftermath of atomic destruction in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (such as 'Bottle melted and deformed by atomic bomb heat, radiation', 'Steel helmet with skull bone fused by atomic bomb' and 'Man with keloidal scars') to the everyday life of Tokyo, Tomatsu found in asphalt a medium for a redemptive reading of the city. Looking carefully at busy road intersections, the photographer found 'all kinds of metal scraps pressed into the asphalt and worn down by tires', commenting that they 'hardly seemed like metal, the light they emitted was so indistinct and dim. They looked like galaxies, glittering in the ebony dark, shadowy and beautiful.'²⁴ The *Asphalt* photographs capture ephemera of the city that are impressed into road surfaces and then reproduced and memorialised as found photographic fossils. Unlike Hansen's *The Road*, their ambiguity and lack of scale are transformative, shifting our focus to an aesthetic reading of the city and universe.

For Robert Smithson, a master dialectician, asphalt became a medium through which to draw out dualities and paradoxes that informed his researches into entropy. There is a literalness to his *Asphalt Rundown* of 1969 that comes from its making, a truckload of hot pour offloaded down the steep embankment of a quarry outside Rome, which stimulated Smithson to extemporise on the theme of entropy (Figs 12, 13, 14). In an interview with Alison Sky for SITE's *On Site* publication called *Entropy made Visible* (1973), Smithson discussed the notion of fluvial entropy: 'Geology has its entropy too, where everything is gradually wearing down.'²⁵ He then turned to architecture, putting forward the notion of 'entropic architecture or a de-architecturization' that manifests itself temporally in 'entropic building situations which develop around construction' across the city in opposition to completed buildings.²⁶ For Smithson, 'architects tend to be idealists, and not dialecticians. I propose a dialectics of entropic change.'²⁷ By this we might understand that, by drawing the focus away from the object (building), Smithson is taking a longer view of something that may be leading to a point where its 'surface will collapse and break apart, so that the irreversible process will be in a sense metamorphosized'. Consciousness of such interrelated processes and the time spans associated with fluvial entropy stimulates speculation:

You can see in my work that the art is always against itself. There's always an aspect where the mirrors cancel their own reflectivity, the perspective has no vanishing point, the gravitation is suspended. In the case of [*Asphalt Rundown*] it sort of stops just before it hits the bottom. So in the case of the falls ... it's arrested again.... That's sort of like isolated like a petrified river ... so there you have the sense of something very definitely in time, yet the moment gives you that sense of timelessness. The actual visual perception of that. And of course, out of this we just have this whole kind of domino effect of all the permutations of the notions of flow, the fall, the downpour, and in a sense it goes a little like some of the receding nonsites...²⁸

The intrinsic and phenomenological characteristics of asphalt interested Smithson less than the quest to materialise and to visualise the dialectical process. In so doing Smithson's challenge to the hegemony of architecture and planning in matters of the environment had a radical intent similar to his concept of site/nonsite, which had challenged the primacy of the gallery and institutions of art in relation to the representation of Land Art.

Almost ten years after *Asphalt Rundown*, in 1978, SITE/James Wines completed their *Ghost Parking Lot* project in a car park at the suburban Hamden Plaza shopping mall in Hamden, Connecticut (Figs 15, 16, 17). In SITE's first realised public artwork, 20 automobiles were embedded at different depths and enveloped with asphalt. Since this is situated in the context of both Pop and Land Art and designed concurrently with projects for Best Products Company, it is tempting to extend Robin Evans's double metaphor and suggest that the axe-wielding of Robert Smithson had passed into the violin-playing of James Wines. Certainly, Wines was highly aware of post-modernism and his skills in working with property developers, however sophisticated, led to great success in implementing projects that sit easily between critical art practice and one-liners. The influence of Smithson resonates through the dialectical inversions of the Best stores, which – by recasting the supermarket as a ruin and by exposing the thinness of its physical construction – embody some of the notions of his 'entropic architecture'. The provisional nature and informality of the building site that Smithson extolled, both as an indictment of the architect's 'idealism' and a window on to different geological time-frames and processes, are brought to bear on SITE's deconstructed elevations. In his book *De-Architecture* of 1987, which builds on Smithson's notion of 'de-architecturisation', Wines summarised

Fig.12 Robert Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown*, Cava dei Selce, Rome, Italy, 1969. Asphalt, earth, sculptural event. © Holt/Smithson Foundation ARS, NY and DACS, London 2023.

Fig.13 Robert Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown*, Cava dei Selce, Rome, Italy, 1969. Asphalt, earth, sculptural event. © Holt/Smithson Foundation ARS, NY and DACS, London 2023.



Fig.14 Robert Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown*, Cava dei Selce, Rome, Italy, 1969. Postcard map. © Holt/Smithson Foundation ARS, NY and DACS, London 2023.

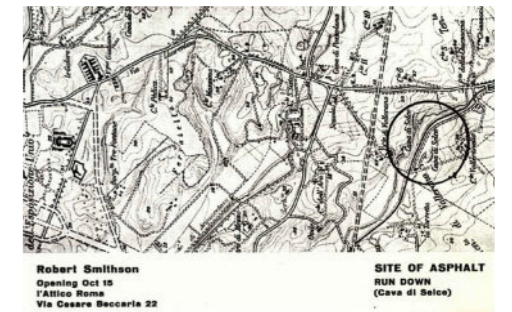
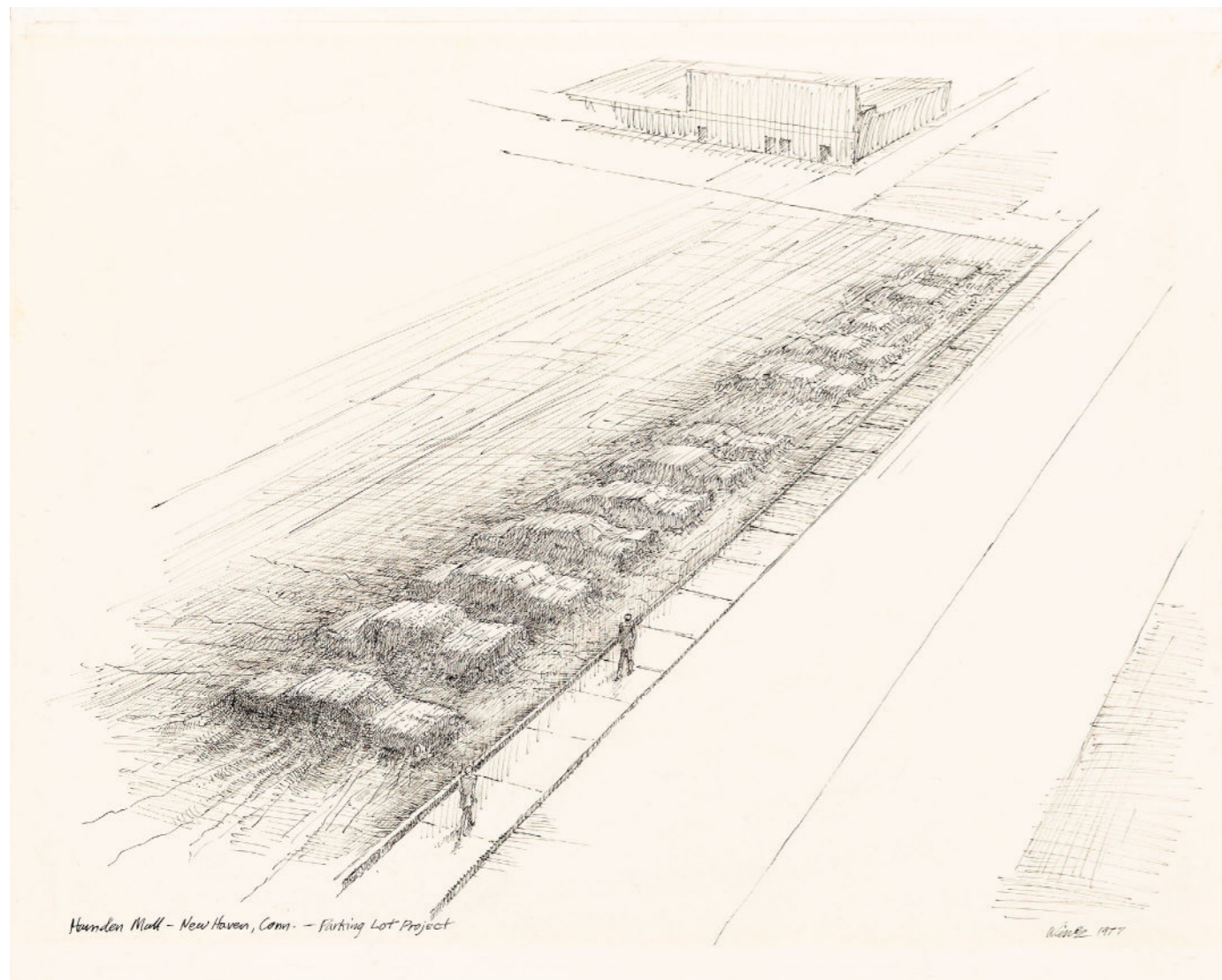


Fig.15 *Ghost Parking Lot*, National Shopping Centers Parking Lot, Hamden, CT, USA 1977
Project by SITE. Drawing by James Wines. Pen and ink on paper, 34.8 x 43.2cm. DMC 2293, Drawing Matter Collections.



his theory of architecture in terms of communication and narrative: 'The responsibility of architecture – indeed of any *public* art – is to communicate.'²⁹ To take art conversations about the environment into a suburban milieu such as Hamden, as opposed to the post-industrial sites where Smithson operated, was therefore logical and subversive. For Wines public art must assert itself as a 'situational (not objectified) presence', otherwise it 'fails to address one of the most interesting challenges of a true community-oriented statement – that is, serving as a commentary on the urban environment'.³⁰ Wines quotes Herbert Marcuse's statement that 'The only true role of anti-art is in the streets and marketplace' to reinforce his broader strategy of engaging with everyday life. The 20 cars were prepared, stripped and sandblasted before being taken to the site and positioned in a series of excavations. They were filled with concrete and contours were built, surfaces primed and sealed, before the final layer of asphalt was poured over the entire project and surroundings to merge with the existing parking lot. Finally, the lines of the parking bays were repainted. The resulting permanent installation defamiliarised the suburban shopping experience by inverting the relationship between automobiles and asphalt. SITE highlighted 'a number of factors characteristic of the American mobilized experience – the blurred vision of motion itself, the fetishism of the car itself, indeterminacy of place and object.'³¹ The implementation of *Ghost Parking Lot* was carried out with a precision similar to Ant Farm's earlier *Cadillac Ranch* project of 1974, in which ten successive generations of Cadillacs were buried nose-first into the ground alongside a highway in Amarillo, Texas. Here the unmediated deployment of Cadillacs became, in the words of Ant Farm, 'a roadside attraction that at some point turned into art and then back into roadside attraction'.³² SITE's refutation of the spectacular and their exploration of the complexities of asphalt gave *Ghost Parking Lot* cogency in their argument for an architecture that must work with indeterminacy and ambiguity and shift emphasis from 'problem-solving to conveying narrative information and social and psychological commentary'.³³ Writing in 1987, James Wines found himself in a position to pick up the axe again by calling out architecture's inability to solve any long-range problems: 'Like any art form, it can only comment on their existence and bring them into sharper focus. A catastrophic fossil-fuel deficiency, for example, would surely determine the fate of architecture long before architecture could have any measurable effect on providing alternatives.'³⁴

Asphalt Tales have taken us to the ends of history, from the oozing asphalt tar pits of La Brea, via the optimism of Fukuyama's 'end of history' in which liberal democracy built on notions of progress may constitute the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution'³⁵ to what Vilém Flusser has called post-history – by which he means 'stories about the end of history' such as narratives of future conflagrations and droughts brought about by climate change and over-reliance on fossil fuels that, in their very telling, also make history. The ability to make these narratives, in Flusser's words 'to unscrew ourselves from historical consciousness [and then] to drill ourselves into another hole',³⁶ allows for discussion and for storytelling that reveals a larger continuum. Through the example of Robert Smithson, we can see how, in the dialectics of entropy, the idealism of the architect and the static way that 'architects build in an isolated, self-contained, a-historical way' is challenged by a new dynamic: 'I think things just change from one situation to the next, there's really no return.'³⁷ For Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown* 'reflects a greater scale of dialectic. In this case, just following the slope, running down and dissipating itself.'³⁸ For Oskar Hansen, the asphalt road became a device to articulate a dialectic that, on one hand, freezes time through the immersion of objects and structures along the road in tar and, on the other, abandons the site to nature's timescale.

Fig.16 *Ghost Parking Lot*, National Shopping Centers Parking Lot, Hamden, CT, USA 1977
Project by SITE. Main section of installation cars buried under asphalt. SITE.



Fig.17 *Ghost Parking Lot*, National Shopping Centers Parking Lot, Hamden, CT, USA 1977
Project by SITE. Section of the project facing Hamden's main boulevard. SITE.



Human agency negotiates these two timeframes, creating the space for what he termed 'subjective engagement'.³⁹ SITE's inversion of automobile and asphalt through the burial of the car, and all that it stands for, in a typical suburban environment extends an invitation to the popular imagination to contemplate a future without mobility and to question fundamental certainties of the built environment hitherto taken for granted. Tomatsu's anthropomorphising of asphalt as the 'skin of the city' mediates between the slow suffering of radiation damage and the ephemeral beauty of the city.

It remains to situate Ed Ruscha's quixotic project to destroy the writing machine, to burn down the museum and the gas station, and to produce forensic documentation of the asphalt realities of Los Angeles in photobook projects such as *Thirty Four Parking Lots*⁴⁰ and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*.⁴¹ In the absence of societal change that Gerry Foley had called for, this is best left to his fellow perpetrator Mason Williams, who produced the preface to *Royal Road Test*, drawn from a definition of the Dada movement contained in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

It was too directly bound to its own anguish to be anything other than a cry of negation; carrying with itself, the seeds of its own destruction.⁴²

- 1 Ed Ruscha in collaboration with Mason Williams and Patrick Blackwell, *Royal Road Test* (Los Angeles: self-published, 1967).
- 2 Gerry Foley, 'The energy crisis - where are we now', in *The Rational Technology Unit at the Architectural Association 1973-1974* (London: Architectural Association, 1974), 19-21 (21).
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Robin Evans, '1975-1980 AA projects. From axes to violins', *AA Files*, vol.1, no.1, ed. Mary Wall (London: Architectural Association, 1981), 116-20 (116).
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Letter from Richard Demarco to Joseph Beuys, 23 April 1974, Demarco Archive, <https://www.demarco-archive.ac.uk/search?utf8=&q=Black+%26+White+Oil&commit=> [accessed 11 December 2022].
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Nicholas Boyarsky in conversation with Richard Demarco, Edinburgh, December 2019.
- 12 Caroline Tisdall, 'Black and White Oil Conference', *The Guardian* (7 September 1974), 7.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Foley, *op. cit.*, 21.
- 15 Clementine Deliss, 'Beuys' Anthropological Reservoir', in *Greetings from the Eurasian. Joseph Beuys* (Antwerp: M HKA, 2017), 93-95 (93).
- 16 Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'Three pieces of asphalt', *Grey Room*, no.11 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 5-21.
- 17 Norman Bel Geddes, *Magic Motorways* (New York: Random House, 1940).
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