

# GALERIE MARIAN GOODMAN

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### ROBERT SMITHSON

#### *Mundus Subterraneus – Early Works*

13 January – 24 February 2023

Opening reception: Saturday 13 January, 6 – 8pm

Lecture-Performance by Adrian Rifkin: Saturday 13 January at 6pm

Marian Goodman Gallery and Holt/Smithson Foundation are pleased to announce the exhibition *Robert Smithson: Mundus Subterraneus – Early Works* open from 13 January through 24 February 2024. Developed with Professor Adrian Rifkin, this exhibition focuses on Smithson's works on paper made in the early 1960s, presenting drawings and collages that set the ground for his studies of entropy and the fall of modernism. Many of these drawings have never previously been seen. Leather-clad bikers, crumbling cities, movie stills, occult books, and erotic entanglements buzz against references to the dogmas of art history, religion, and totalitarianism. Alongside *Mundus Subterraneus*, a presentation of rare exhibition posters and print material is on view at the gallery's 66 rue du Temple space. The selection is related to Smithson's exhibitions and projects spanning several decades from the late 1950s to the 1980s at venues including New York's Artists Gallery, Castellane Gallery, Dwan Gallery, and the Jewish Museum.

In 1972 Smithson reflected in an interview that his early works were “a kind of groping, investigating period,” made at a time when he was “interested in origins and primordial beginnings, the archetypal nature of things.” These concerns he described were “haunting me all the way through 1959 and 1960, when I got interested in Catholicism through T. S. Eliot and, through that range of thinking, T. E. Hulme led me to an interest in the Byzantine and his notions of abstraction as a counterpoint to the humanism of the late Renaissance.” In 1964 he announced that he morphed into a more “conscious” artist who rejected “lurking pagan religious anthropomorphism.”

*Mundus Subterraneus* pays attention to this groping, investigating phase of artmaking, to a moment when Smithson described himself as creating “phantasmagorical drawings of cosmological worlds somewhat between Blake and a kind of Boschian imagery.” These drawings are a raw, unfettered analysis on the idea of modernism and on systems of knowledge. The exhibition's title is taken from a drawing Smithson made in 1971 based on an illustration of earth's volcanoes and interconnected lava tubes found in *Mundus Subterraneus*, a wide-ranging scientific encyclopedia from 1665 written by the polymath and fabulist Athanasius Kircher. Both Smithson and Kircher were fascinated by what lies beneath the earth's surface and the limitations of human knowledge. In the 1970 film *Spiral Jetty* Smithson narrates, “the earth's history seems at times like a story recorded in a book, each page of which is torn into small pieces. Many of the pages and some of the pieces of each page are missing.” The incongruities and mysteries in the earth's history that fascinated Smithson spiral their way through the layers of historical and cultural archetypes referenced in the works in *Mundus Subterraneus*.

Smithson's works on paper include dinosaurs collaged with magazine advertisements, film stills paired with Corinthian columns, and statues from antiquity layered with bright pop abstractions and flying motorcycles. There are human bodies transforming into trees, references to superstition and esotericism, gender-fluid figures, and queered tropes of ultra-masculinity. He uses a still from the 1961 Ealing Studios film *The Secret Partner* and the record sleeve to Johnny Mathis' album cover *Wonderful, Wonderful*. In some drawings he outlines the swastika, an ancient symbol transmuted through association, set beside a queer coupling in one work, being ingested by a monstrous fish in another. Smithson creates conversations and contradictions by combining divergent imagery from art history, movies, and fetish magazines. Smithson's early drawings have rarely been seen, and they demand much research. They are complicated decipher yet are necessary to engage with to fully understand the scope of Smithson's critical engagement with signs and structures of society.

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Born in Passaic in New Jersey, Robert Smithson (1938-1973) was an artist who expanded what art could be and where it could be found. For over fifty years his work, writings, and ideas have influenced artists and thinkers, building the ground from which contemporary art has grown. An autodidact, Smithson's interests in travel, cartography, geology, architectural ruins, prehistory, philosophy, science fiction, popular culture, and language spiral through his work. In his short and prolific life, Smithson produced paintings, drawings, sculpture, earthworks, film and video, photographs, writings, and all the stops between. From his landmark earthworks to his Nonsites, writings, proposals, collages, detailed drawings, and radical rethinking of landscape, Smithson's ideas are profoundly urgent for our times.

By exploring the conceptual and physical boundaries of knowledge Smithson raised essential questions about our place in the world. Smithson's first solo exhibition, which emphasized what he described as "expressionistic work," took place in 1957 at Alan Brilliant's gallery in New York. The artist's peripatetic life took him to Rome in 1961, when George Lester offered him his first solo international exhibition at Galleria George Lester, where he explored quasi-religious subject matter. His early paintings, drawings, and sculptures are imbued with references to queer and fetish culture, popular movies, science fiction, religion, and art history.

Smithson's works are held in museum collections around the world including: Art Institute of Chicago; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas; The Getty Research Institute, California; New Jersey State Museum; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Dia Art Foundation, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery, Washington DC; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Currently Robert Smithson's work is in the group exhibition *Forms of Ruin* at Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon. In July 2024 the exhibition *Teresita Fernández / Robert Smithson* launches at SITE Santa Fe, New Mexico, marking the first time Robert Smithson's work has been placed in conversation with an artist working today.

*Robert Smithson: Mundus Subterraneus* is organized by Lisa Le Feuvre, Executive Director of Holt/Smithson Foundation with Professor Adrian Rifkin. It is accompanied by an illustrated newspaper with a commissioned text by Professor Rifkin, which he presents on 13 January as a performance event. Professor Rifkin has taught in art schools since 1970, most recently as Professor of Art Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London. Robert Smithson's 1961 essay *The Iconography of Desolation* is also included in the newspaper, along with illustrations of key works from the exhibition.

In February 2020 Holt/Smithson Foundation and Marian Goodman Gallery announced their partnership. Marian Goodman has a long relationship with the work of Smithson, in 1965 Marian Goodman was a founder of Multiples, Inc., a landmark project publishing prints, multiples, and books by leading American artists—including Robert Smithson. *Mundus Subterraneus* is the second exhibition of Robert Smithson at Galerie Marian Goodman and the fourth exhibition with Marian Goodman Gallery. The works and posters on display are from the collection of Holt/Smithson Foundation.

In 2014 the artist Nancy Holt (1938-2014), who was married to Robert Smithson (1938-1973), willed Holt/Smithson Foundation into being. The Foundation has been active since 2018 and develops the distinctive creative legacies of Holt and Smithson. A research-led organization collaborating with artists, writers, thinkers and institutions, Holt/Smithson Foundation realizes exhibitions, publishes books, initiates artist commissions, programs educational events, encourages research, and develops collections globally from its headquarters in New Mexico. [www.holtsmithsonfoundation.org](http://www.holtsmithsonfoundation.org)

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