A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey

He laughed softly. I know. There's no way out. Not through the Barrier. Maybe that isn't what I want, after all. But this—this—He stared at the Monument. "It seems all wrong sometimes. I just can't explain it. It's the whole city. It makes me feel haywire. Then I get these flashes—"

—Henry Kuttner, Jesting Pilot

... today our unsophisticated cameras record in their own way our hastily assembled and painted world.
—Vladimir Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading

On Saturday, September 30, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue. I bought a copy of the New York Times and a S ignet paperback called Earthworks by Brian W. Aldiss. Next I went to ticket booth 21 and purchased a one-way ticket to Passaic. After that I went up to the upper bus level (platform 172) and boarded the number 30 bus of the Inter-City Transportation Co.

I sat down and opened the Times. I glanced over the art section: a "Collectors", "Critics", "Curators' Choice" at A.M. Sachs Gallery (a letter I got in the mail that morning invited me "to play the game before the show closes October 4th"). Walter Schatzki was selling, "Prints, Drawings, Watercolors" at "$33.50 off", Elinor Jenkins, the "Romantic Realist," was showing at Barzansky Galleries, XVIII—XIX Century English Furniture on sale at Parke-Bernet, "New Directions in German Graphics" at Goethe House, and on page 28 was John Canaday's column. He was writing on Themes and the Usual Variations. I looked at a blurry reproduction of Samuel F. B. Morse's Allegorical Landscape at the top of Canaday's column: the sky was a subtle newsprint gray, and the clouds resembled sensitive stains of sweat reminiscent of a famous Yugoslav watercolorist whose name I have forgotten. A little statue with right arm held high faced a porch (or was it the sea?). "Gothic" buildings in the allegory had a faded look, while an unnecessary tree (or was it a cloud of smoke?) seemed to pop up on the left side of the landscape. Canaday referred to the picture as "standing confidently along with other allegorical representatives of that arts, sciences, and high ideas foster." My eyes stumped over the newspaper, over such headlines as "Seasonal Up-Swing," "A Shuffie Service," and "Moving a 1,000 Pound Sculpture Can Be a Fine Work of Art, Too." Other gems of Canaday's dazzled my mind as I passed through Secaucus. "Realistic works of raw meat beset by vermin," (Paul Thek), "Burks and his colleagues are wearing their time," (Jack Bush), "a book, an apple on a saucer, a ruffled cloth," (Thyra Davidson), Outside the bus window a Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge flew by—a symphony in orange and blue. On page 31 in Big Letters: THE EMERGING POLICE STATE IN AMERICA SPY GOVERNMENT. "In this book you will learn... what an Infinity Transmitter is."

The bus turned off Highway 2, down Orient Way in Rutherford.

I read the blurbs and skimmed through "Earthworks." The first sentence read, "The dead man drifted along in the breeze." It seemed the book was about soil shortage, and the Earthworks referred to the manufacture of artificial soil. The sky over Rutherford was a clear cobalt blue, a perfect Indian summer day, but the sky in Earthworks was a "great black and brown shield on which moisture gleamed."

The bus passed over the first monument. I pulled the buzzer-cord and got off at the corner of Union Avenue and River Drive. The monument was a bridge over the Passaic River that connected Bergen County with Passaic County. Noon-day sunshine cinemized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-exposed picture. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detailed image of my Instamatic 400 into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank.

The steel road that passed over the water was in part an open grating flanked by wooden side-walks. (Photo: Robert Smithson)

The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks. (Photo: Robert Smithson)

The Monument with Pontoons: The Pumping Derrick. (Photo: Robert Smithson)

Art: Themes and the Usual Variations

Walks, held up by a heavy set of beams, while above, a ramshackle network hung in the air. A rusty sign glared in the sharp atmosphere, making it hard to read. A date flashed in the sunshine... 1899... No... 1896... maybe (at the bottom of the end and sign was the name Dean & Westbrook Contractors, N.Y.). I was completely controlled by the Instamatic (or what the rationalists call a camera). The glassy air of New Jersey defined the structural parts of the monument as I took snapshot after snapshot. A barb seemed fixed to the surface of the water as it came toward the bridge, and caused the bridgekeeper to close the gates. From the banks of Passaic I watched the bridge rotate on a central axis in order to allow an inset rectangular shape to pass with its unknown cargo. The Passaic (West) end of the bridge rotated south, while the Rutherford (East) end of the bridge rotated north; such rotations suggested the limited movements of an outmoded world. "North" and "South" hung over the static river in a bipolar manner. One could refer to this bridge as the "Monument of Dislocated Directions."

Along the Passaic River banks were many minor monuments such as concrete abutments that supported the shoulders of a new highway in the process of being built. River Drive was in part bulldozed and in part intact. It was hard to tell the new highway from the old road; they were both confounded into a unitary chaos. Since it was Saturday, many machines were not working, and this caused them to resemble prehistoric creatures trapped in the mud, or, better, extinct machines—mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their skin. On the edge of this prehistoric Machine Age were pre- and post-World War II suburban houses. The houses mirrored themselves into colorlessness. A group of children were throwing rocks at each other near a ditch. From now on you're not going to come to
our hide-out. And I mean it!” said a little blonde girl who had been hit with a rock.

As I walked north along what was left of River Drive, I saw a monument in the middle of the river—it was a pumping derrick with a long pipe attached to it. The pipe was supported in part by a set of pontoons, while the rest of it extended about three blocks along the river bank till it disappeared into the earth. One could hear debris rattling in the water that passed through the great pipe.

**The Great Pipes Monument.** (Photo: Robert Smithson)

**The Fountain Monument:** Side View. (Photo: Robert Smithson)

**The Fountain Monument—Bird’s Eye View.** (Photo: Robert Smithson)

**The Sand-Box Monument (also called The Desert).** (Photo: Robert Smithson)

Nearby, on the river bank, was an artificial crater that contained a pale limpid pond of water, and from the side of the crater protruded six large pipes that gushed the water of the pond into the river. This constituted a monumental fountain that suggested six horizontal smokestacks that seemed to be flooding the river with liquid smoke. The great pipe was in some enigmatic way connected with the internal fountain. It was as though the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice, and causing a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have an orgasm. A psychoanalyst might say that the landscape displayed “homosexual tendencies,” but I will not draw such a class an-

thromorphic conclusion. I will merely say, “It was there.”

Across the river in Rutherford one could hear the faint voice of a P. A. system and the weak cheers of a crowd at a football game. Actually, the landscape was no landscape, but “a particular kind of hothoty” (Nabokov), a kind of self-destroying postcard world of failed immortality and oppressive grandeur. I had been wandering in a moving picture that I couldn’t quite picture, but just as I became perplexed, I saw a green mise-en-scène suggests the discredited idea of time and many other “out of date” things. But the suburbs exist without a rational past and without the “big events” of history. Oh, maybe there are a few statues, a legend, and a couple of curios, but no past—just what passes for a future. A Utopia minus a bottom, a place where the machines are idle, and the sun has turned to glass, and a place where the Passaic Concrete Plant (253 River Drive) does a good business in STONE, BITUMINOUS, SAND, and CEMENT.

Was I in a new territory? (An English artist, Michael Baldwin, says, “It could be asked if the country does in fact change—it does not in the sense a traffic light does.”) Perhaps I had slipped into a lower stage of futurity—did I leave the real future behind in order to advance into a false future? Yes, I did. Reality was behind me at that point in my suburban Odyssey.

Passaic center loomed like a dull adjective. Each “store” in it was an adjective unto the next, a chain of adjectives disguised as stores. I began to run out of film, and I was getting hungry. Actually, Passaic center was no center—it was instead a typical abyss or an ordinary void. What a great place for a gallery! Or maybe an “outdoor sculpture show” would pep that place up. At the Golden Coach Diner (11 Central Avenue) I had my lunch, and loaded my Instamatic. I looked at the orange-yellow box of Kodak Verichrome Pan, and read a notice that said:

**READ THIS NOTICE:**

This film will be replaced if defective in manufacture, labeling, or packaging, even through caused by our negligence or other fault. Except for such replacement, the sale
listless, entropic snapshots of that lustrous monument. If the future is “out of date” and “old fashioned,” then I had been in the future. I had been on a planet that had a map of Passaic drawn over it, and a rather imperfect map at that. A sidereal map marked up with “lines” the size of streets and “squares” and “blocks,” the size of buildings. At any moment my feet were apt to fall through the cardboard ground. I am convinced that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past; I in yesterday’s newspapers, in the science-fiction movies, in the false mirror of our rejected dreams. Time turns metaphors into things, and stacks them up in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs.

Has Passaic replaced Rome as The Eternal City? If certain cities of the world were placed end to end in a straight line according to size, starting with Rome, where would Passaic be in that impossible progression? Each city would be a three-dimensional mirror that would reflect the next city into existence. The limits of eternity seem to contain such nefarious ideas.

The last monument was a sand box or a model desert. Under the dead light of the Passaic afternoon the desert became a map of infinite disintegration and forgetfulness. This monument of minute particles blazed under a bleakly glowing sun, and suggested the sullen dissolution of entire continents, the drying up of oceans—no longer were there green forests and high mountains—all that existed were millions of grains of sand, a vast deposit of bones and stones pulverized into dust. Every grain of sand was a metaphor that equaled timelessness, and to decipher such metaphors would take one through the false mirror of eternity. This sand box somehow doubled as an open grave—a grave that children cheerfully play in.

... all sense of reality was gone. In its place had come deep-seated illusions, absence of puppylike reaction to light, absence of knee reaction—symptoms all of progressive cerebral meningitis, the blanketing of the brain...

—Louis Sullivan, “one of the greatest of all architects,” quoted in Michel Butor’s Mobile.

I should now like to prove the irreversibility of eternity by using a j sexes experiment for proving entropy. Picture in your mind’s eye the sand box divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy.

Of course, if we filmed such an experiment we could prove the reversibility of eternity by showing the film backwards, but then sooner or later the film itself would crumble or get lost and enter the state of irreversibility. Somehow this suggests that the cinema offers an illusion of temporary escape from physical dissolution. The false immortality of the film gives the viewer an illusion of control over eternity—but “the superstars” are fading.