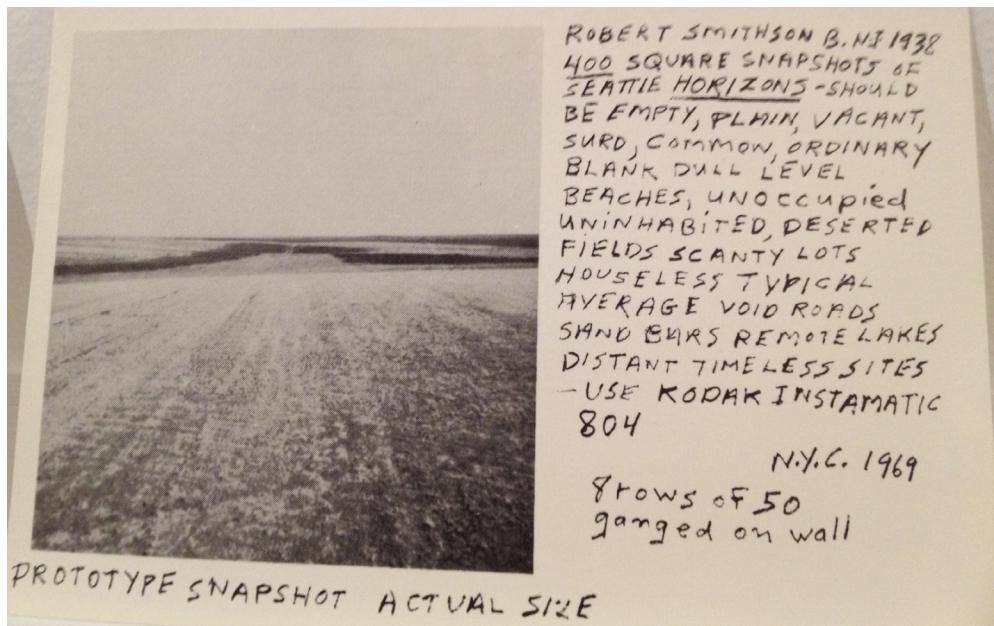


Dematerialized

A 1969 Exhibition on Index Cards

BY JEN GRAVES



ROBERT SMITHSON WANTED PICTURES OF SEATTLE This is the index card Smithson contributed to 557,087. The late artist is best known for his often-photographed land-artwork Spiral Jetty.

When the exhibition 557,087 opened in 1969, John Voorhees, the *Seattle Times* reviewer, railed against it as “artistic pollution, every bit as annoying and dangerous as that in the air.” Voorhees wrote of its curator, “It’s hard to think of such a charming slip of a girl as Lucy Lippard as being a revolutionary.” Voorhees was, perhaps, a charming slip of a critic.

Today, 557,087 looks like nothing much, just a few black-and-white photographs, a glass case containing rows of index cards with typing and handwriting on them, and a wall label. This may be the first time that SAM has memorialized one of its previous exhibitions by treating it as a work of art in its own right.

The exhibition in question *was* extraordinary, and is more so with time. This is the first time it’s appearing in SAM’s galleries since it happened, September 5 to October 5, 1969. It was called 557,087 and was created by New York-based writer and curator Lippard, about whom two books have been

released in the last year. One, published by Afterall Books, focuses on Lippard’s “numbers exhibitions,” each taking the population of its host city as its title. The very first of those was Seattle’s 557,087 (1960 US Census figure). The concept traveled to Vancouver, Buenos Aires, and Valencia (California), before touring the US and going to London.

557,087 did not leave behind paintings and sculptures—it left behind a “catalog” of these four-by-six-inch index cards filled out by artists whose names are now the canon from this period. Lippard invited more than 60 artists to submit their proposals on the cards. Volunteers executed most of them. Only a few pieces materialized in the conventional sense—including works by the late Eva Hesse and artist/writer John Perrault—in SAM’s contemporary-art “Pavilion,” a hall near the former amusement park at Seattle Center (where Chihuly has a showplace now). The rest of the art was scattered about the city or confined to the cards. It included: grease marks five feet long on a floor; one for each letter of the name of the man who en-

gineered the regrade of downtown Seattle (artist: Rafael Ferrer). Paintings of a local landscape, Lake Washington, by local artists (artist: Bruce McLean of Scotland). A provocation: the story of a group of art students led by their professor to chew up, spit out, and ferment a copy of Clement Greenberg's modernist bible, *Art and Culture*, borrowed from their school's library, leading to the firing of this artist/professor (John Latham). Instructions to remove a chunk of earth 15 feet deep and 100 feet in diameter, making a subtraction from the world rather than adding a new object because "Art is only memory anyway" (artist: Michael Heizer).

"When computers provide artificial memories, our 'private collections' will be unlimited, and the mind will be freer to pursue its own expanding awareness," Lippard wrote in her prescient essay for *557,087*, on display on the index cards at SAM. Earlier in the decade, Ernst Gombrich had written, "All art originates in the human mind, in our reaction to the world rather than in the visible world in itself," which Lippard quoted, and which sets the stage for the era of dematerialization, minimalism, and conceptualism.

All people fight when they hear a statement that begins, "All art." From the audience, the *Times* reported a mixed response, one still perfectly imaginable today. "If anybody else smeared some tar on the floor, they wouldn't get away with it," an unnamed man grunted, while a 26-year-old named Rocky Wilson was quoted to have said, "It puts art on another level, a more real level instead of just pictures hanging on the wall over a mantel." This debate is never-ending.

Some of the ideas and pieces in *557,087* were very good, some were tedious, and some were goofy, but overall, *557,087* was exceptionally of-the-moment and self-aware. Its concept was its largest work, in the same sense that a museum's building can be considered the largest work in its collection. *557,087* presaged what would become forefront cultural concerns of scale and geography, and a rising fascination with the origins of things, from art to people to food. Lippard described McLean's piece featuring local painters' landscapes as "a 'regional art' made by foreigners through

remote control," raising associations with colonialism, corporate-style reach, and surveillance, all pressing issues still today.

For Seattle's historically redlined Central District—bankers literally drew red lines around an area and refused to give loans to the African Americans forced to live there—John Baldessari and George Nicolaidis adapted a piece they'd done in San Diego. Titled *Boundary*, it consisted of black and silver labels attached to telephone poles and street signs demarcating the CD. Seattle had only just voted to end racist housing discrimination in 1968.

Robert Morris's proposal was related to violence, Vietnam, and the way legends blow up. He ordered a shotgun blast at a gallery wall, using "heavy shot in the shells," then a photograph of the wound blown up to an 8-by-10-inch photograph. The exhibition's next venue would hang the photograph, shoot that, and make a larger blowup, enlargements coming at every venue. It makes me think of chauvinism, Niki de Saint Phalle's "shooting paintings" of the early 1960s (she wore a catsuit), Chris Burden's later piece (1971) in which he was shot in the arm as performance, and arena rock.

Should you spend a little time at *557,087*, either dismissing this charming slip of an exhibition or turning over the art that's originating in your mind, maybe I could direct you to an additional pleasant surprise. *557,087* is embedded in an exhibition of SAM's permanent collection, a temporary minimalism-through-color-field-painting display full of virtues and curiosities, organized carefully like a book waiting to be read closely. It begins with these lightly described and sketched works, and it culminates in two giant, hot Frank Stellas from the 1960s. Right now, SAM is pushing exhibitions of old European paintings and a supposedly super-hot video display on the museum's facade, which acts more as a movie for the wealthy trustees living in the luxury apartments at the Four Seasons building across the street. Meanwhile, SAM's collection is rarely in this fine a form, and it hardly matters whether the museum thinks that will sell tickets. ■