ROBERT SMITHSON AND CYBERNETICS:
LANGUAGE, TECHNOLOGY AND ABSTRACTION

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

The work of artist Robert Smithson (1938-1973) enjoys a renewed interested since the beginning of the XXIst century. However, the importance of the impact of cybernetic theories on his work has not been stressed so far. Taking as essential basis Robert Smithson's notebooks and writings, this dissertation consists in an analysis of the impact of cybernetics in his thought and art through the close relationships between language, technology and artistic abstraction.

With the principles of cybernetics, Smithson formulates a critique of modernist abstraction and builds the foundations of his plastic practice. Focusing on issues at stake in cybernetics, he is aware of new representation problems. He then reaffirms a semiotic basis for visual arts, namely an invisible structure that is essential in classical art.

Smithson's works achieve rotations of meaning that appear at the different levels that we study in the three parts of the dissertation: rotation of the notion of timelessness as traditionally dealt with in Western culture (I), rotation of modernist abstraction (II), rotation of the relation to time and memory (III). With these three types of rotations Smithson rethinks the forms of the artwork in the age of electronics.

We analyze how Smithson's work constructs, how it operates and what it implies over time. We show how the plastic and esthetic issues Smithson contemplates at the time of the electronic revolution in the years 1960-1970 resonate to the present day with the situation of contemporary art at the time of the digital revolution.