

An Encounter with The Copt Howe Rock Carvings: Thinking With The Spirals

In A Sedimentation of The Mind: Earth Projects (1968), Robert Smithson make the claim that a passage from Edgar Allan Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket could be considered an example of ‘excellent art criticism’, and a prototype for certain forms of art investigation. In the passage Smithson quotes we find Poe’s narrator describing “two triangular holes of great depth, and also with black granite sides”, equating description (which is in fact Poe’s fabulation) with the act of criticism. In Sedimentations, and other texts by Smithson from this period, we find a very similar elision between criticism, description and fabulation. We also find Smithson utilising the embodied form of travel writing in texts such as A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic (1967) and Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan (1969), a mode not so far from the mode of Poe’s Narrative, that of the semi-autobiographical adventure novel, all be it tinged with elements of horror, mystery and self reflection. And it is in this crossover we find Smithson already experimenting with the strangest and most exciting inference of his claim about Poe’s Narrative: that the form of the mystery novel might offer fertile and viscous new avenues for art criticism. The following hopes to experiment with such a proposition, and consider how might we, as Smithson suggests, employ Poe’s Narrative as a ‘prototype for rigorous investigation’, whilst using the claims in Sedimentations to aid us in this task. What would it be to continue to spiral around from Smithson’s initial proposition and, just as Smithson finds art criticism in Poe’s tales of the weird, treat art criticism as a form of weird tale?

Perhaps it is unsurprising that the Copt Howe rock carvings were forgotten amongst a landscape so haunted by the romance of its recent past, lest these prehistoric artworks trouble the Lake District’s easy memory of itself. We entered the Langdale Valley in search of the rocks and their spiralled motifs in December 2021, a few days before the end of the year. A break in the wet weather offered us an opportunity to work our way up into the heart of the Lakelands, past Loughrigg, Skelwith, Elterwater and other ancient names. Having researched the location we spotted the rocks from the car, two large boulders just a stone’s throw from the road. As my feet step out the vehicle I realise a version of this path must have existed at the time the rocks were carved into, during the late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age (6000 to 3000 years ago), and the weight of time tremored through me. We are alone in the wide open lake-less valley as far as we can see.

The raw enigma one faces when viewing these carvings produces an affect of eerie emptiness, the sense of an unresolvable gulf across time and space which is hard to hold or even focus on. It is the feeling of unending dilation

in view of the unknowable, like a pupil trying to endlessly widen to bring an impossibly dark object into view. But as Smithson reminds us, with this sort of violent lurch across ages of difference; ‘this movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries’. I find that universalising theories about the meaning of the spiral form, as a symbol of becoming, eternity, entropy, always moving away and out from one point, seem facile when in front of them. The carvings produce a problem for language, resist articulation, and so I end up focusing on the ephemera and details surround them. They are weird artworks, a notion I found myself spiralling back around to again and again.

The carvings aren’t so easy to spot accept for one unnatural looking spiral which sits on the ground like the eye of an awoken beast and arrests you as soon as you step down into the field. On approach, the fleeting remains of other spirals dotted around the lower regions of the large damp boulder can be discerned. A wooden ladder bridging the field’s dry stone wall obscures the largest of these spirals, a strange reminder that somehow these carvings were’t discovered until 1999 despite the valley being popular with walkers and climbers. Behind the boulder, up in the low lying clouds and out of view that morning lies ‘the smoothly-soaring pyramid of Pike o’ Stickle’ and the Langdale Pikes, a series of roughly 700 meter peaks which were the sight of a Neolithic Axe factory.

We discover that the spiral carvings reveal themselves more keenly to photographs than with the naked eye and so set about cataloguing and photographing the spirals and taking rubbings of the four carvings we identify. Afterwards as I inspect the rubbings laid out on the ground that vertiginous lurching feeling returns to me as I see them more distinctly now. I think of all I’ve read about their possible meanings in an attempt to ground myself; that they might represent a stylised form of map of the valley’s peaks and pathways, as insignia to mark out and denote a sense of tenure and belonging in the valley, as representations of the entoptic phenomena experienced during psychedelic states as part of Neolithic spiritual practices, or as artistic expressions of nature, life cycles, time and space. But as I attempt these acts of explanation and interpretation, I hear Smithson’s voice muttering over my shoulder and I recognise that, like the art critic who attempts to turn art into ‘a matter of reasoned discourse’ by negating the artwork’s visceral affect, these interpretations only works to occlude the ecstatic truth we face when beholding these ancient artworks: that of an unknown spiralled mark carved by an unknown hand emerging from the mists of deep time to haunt the future. Against this fact, these interpretations become acts of jejune hermeneutics and denies what’s really there; a magical invite to oceanic unknowing. As Smithson says about his own great spiral ‘no sense wondering about classifications and categories, there are none’.

After leaving the rocks and on our way back we visit Cathedral Cave, a small quarry system with one large central chamber from which it takes its name. Down here surrounded by rock in the grand void of the cavern, the spirals still impressing on my mind with their maddening revery, I feel the pull of the abyss, ‘the suspension of boundaries between self and the non-self.’ I panic as in my ear I hear Smithson’s foreboding whisper; ‘one seizes the spiral, and the spiral becomes a seizure’.

Outside the cave, in the cool afternoon air I resolve to meet the challenge of the spirals, else subside into ‘oceanic undifferentiation’. Not to tame the carvings but to think further with them. Later on, back at the house, I read through Susan Sontag’s Against Interpretations. In it she chastises how ‘interpretation was summoned to reconcile the ancient text to “modern” demands’. I wonder what it would be to have these ancient artworks, so clearly incapable of mimetic deciphering, speak to us in the way they did when they were made, not to constrict them to modern demands or easy gestalt solutions, but to experience them how they were.

That night I dreamt of the long valley at midnight. But not as it stands today, but as it stood long ago, before Wordsworth and Coleridge colonised our imaginations of this landscape, before it’s Victorian museumification, and long before agriculture and Herdwick’s stripped it of its thick forest floor. Above the parapet of branches, Pavey Ark watches over the auroch and elk sleeping amongst the trees to the sound of water tricking down from Stickle Tarn. And there are the boulders, those two erratics sitting higher out of the soil than they do today. And there is a man, flint axe-head in hand carving laboured spirals all night long, chipping round and round into the volcanic rock and into futurity.

I awake to that feeling of time opening up bellow me again. As a classmate had commented on Smithson’s writing, ‘these feedback loops are chaotic and unsolvable’. The troubled task of bridging the mind of Neolithic man with that of our own ‘post-mythic consciousness’ seems like a doomed route leading only ‘back to the abyssal circuit’.

In the new ascendent morning I looked to Sontag again and contended to look to the spiralled rock art as they are now rather than attempt to dig away and excavate them from history. I look through my photos of them and the spirals look out to me like weird talismans of the incongruous. Mark Fisher describes the weird as that which delivers ‘a sensation of wrongness so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here.’ The illegibility of rock art troubles our definitions of art because it feels like it shouldn’t be there, can’t be appraised by modern aesthetics, won’t be enveloped into the rationalist discourse modernism uses to justify art’s power and affects, becomes weird, and so produces anxiety. Like all properly weird objects, the Langdale rock art betrays that it is ‘our conceptions must be inadequate’. Fisher notes the weird as often an indicator of being in the presence of the new. Could it be that through our encounter with the spirals and the recalibrations they demand we might travel to the kind of place Smithson’s jetty aimed to take us, to ‘the places where remote futures meet remote pasts’?

That evening, on the shore of Lake Windermere, at the boundary between day and night, earth and water, I watch a swimmer pull their wetsuit over each limb, augmenting themselves with their black second skin. As they swim out and submerge themselves, a cascade of ashy silver ripples emanates out into the lake, reverberates out amongst the other waves of influence. There is an animistic magical interpretation behind the production of rock art, but, as Timothy Morton would argue, there is also a very tangible magical function to all art which the spirals interpretive viscosity and unquiet affects reminds us of, one modernism and its critical apparatus has tried to erase. As Timothy

Morton admits, ‘art has an effect on me over which I am not in control’; the same overbearing affect we have spoken of, the same charm Smithson chides critics for trying to negate through writing, and the same ‘capacity to make us nervous’ which Sontag says interpretation tries to tame. Art denies easy re-tracings of influence, works instead through ‘dangerous causative flickering’. Magic is about occulted and indirect lines of causation, and like magic, ‘art is demonic: it emanates from some unseen (or even unseeable) beyond’. Across fells and lakes, the rock art attracts the curious and ‘interferes directly with the realm of causes and effects’ through their spiralling reverberations like the ripples on the lake. They exist beyond their image, work beyond commodification, persist virus like in the mind, recur and reform themselves, and, just like magic, make things happen in diffuse and hidden ways. ‘From the dread bosom of the unknown past’ the spirals move and move us like some grand unquiet beast bellow the surface.

Back in the studio in London the spiral rubbings hang on the white walls of our own contemporary cave system like magical sigils scared into the walls. I show the spirals to my tutor group and a someone suggests that approaching the spirals might be about ‘staying lost, because that’s where knowledge is’. And perhaps this is right, that they and we best remain unfixed, allowing us to spiral around their ever expanding orbit with them, collecting and receiving their gifts and charms, and if they so choose, follow them across boundaries and time.

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