

salt 3:

Cyprien Gaillard

May 26 – August 21, 2011

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Cancun, in Mexico...is an example of the degradation that you find in humans and in a landscape. For many teenagers, a trip to Cancun is their first outside of America, but they couldn't find it on a map. They come back after a week of binge drinking, and the Mayan architecture is just a blur, soaked in alcohol.

—Cyprien Gaillard¹

Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future.

—Robert Smithson²

In the shaky opening shots of Cyprien Gaillard's 16 mm film *Cities of Gold and Mirrors* (2009), we encounter a group of American teenagers—or perhaps they are a bit older, frat boy and sorority girl types—on spring break in Cancun (fig. 1). Against a backdrop of palm trees and a hotel resort designed to imitate an ancient Mayan pyramid, they walk toward the camera, clad in swim trunks and bikinis. Two of the young men drop and do push-ups; the group hoots and hollers. Not that we can hear them. The film is set to a looped soundtrack that might have been drawn from the 1982 film *Blade Runner* or a 1980s nature documentary: minimal synthesized music is punctuated by high-pitched sounds that evoke the cries of a bird or a whale. In fact, it is the theme song for a cartoon called *The Mysterious Cities of Gold*, a French-Japanese produced television series from the early 1980s. Combining aspects of South American history, archaeology, and science fiction, the series tells the story of Esteban, an orphan who joins a group of Spanish conquistadors in their search for one of the mythical Seven Cities of Gold in the New World. The soundtrack provides an odd, almost ironic accompaniment to these initial images, casting the young Americans as latter-day conquistadors, and distancing us from the otherwise familiar spectacle of spring break debauchery.



fig. 1. Cyprien Gaillard, *Cities of Gold and Mirrors*, 2009, 16 mm film still, detail. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers Berlin/London and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London.

The young men who did push-ups are next seen brandishing bottles of tequila like small trophies; then they begin to chug. One drinks the tequila like it's water, the other takes a swig and spits. The ostensibly more accomplished drinker downs the entire bottle, raises a fist in victory, and tosses the bottle over his head as his peers explode into cheers. The other young man continues to take swigs from his bottle, wincing and spitting again and again.

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In the second of five sequences that comprise this non-narrative film, the camera cuts to a banner in the sky, trailing a plane; it carries the logo of the Cleveland Indians baseball team—the grotesque cartoon of a Native American grinning like a Cheshire cat. Flying above the 'spring breakers' on the beach, the flag's logo—which Gaillard apparently fabricated, and which has made subsequent appearances in his work—seems to emblemize various kinds of debasement and displacement, themes that underlie the film as a whole. The images that follow are more idyllic and visually seductive: dolphin fins break the surface of sun-dappled water; the creatures swim and play in a sea of gold



fig. 2. Cyprien Gaillard, *Cities of Gold and Mirrors*, 2009, 16 mm film still, detail. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers Berlin/London and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London.

reflections. The next shot reveals the dolphins to be swimming in a body of water that extends to the very edge of the hotel; these animals do not inhabit the ocean, but an expansive hotel pool—another version of displacement (fig. 2).

In the film's third section, a figure clad in red street clothes—a member of the Bloods gang—dances amidst *Las Ruinas del Rey*, the site of Mayan ruins not far from the modern hotels that emulate the ruins' former architectural glory (fig. 3). The camera moves in a slow tracking shot around the ancient site and then, from a high vantage, the man is shown dancing atop the temple. Moving in slow motion, he might be engaged in some ancient ritual; his monochromatic attire lends him the air of an allegorical figure. Yet his street clothes, including the bandanas tied around his head and face, are part of a code that identifies him with contemporary, urban life and one of its most brutal



fig. 3. Cyprien Gaillard, *Cities of Gold and Mirrors*, 2009, 16 mm film still, detail. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers Berlin/London and Laura Bartlett Gallery London.

subcultures—one that is not indigenous to Mexico. He is an anachronism, suspended between past and present. Yet given the artist's apparent interest in violent forms of masculine sociality (one of Gaillard's videos includes footage of a riot between organized fighting clubs in Saint Petersburg, Russia), the gang member also seems linked to the drinking rituals of the young men in the film's opening scene.

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The next sequence takes us inside a hotel atrium full of palms and tropical plants hanging from the balconies of its many-tiered floors. If the hotel's exterior aims to conjure the region's native architecture, its interior plays on a different fantasy of exoticism, bringing the tropical jungle indoors. The film cuts quickly to a large mirrored building, an office building perhaps, likely dating to the 1970s. Seen from some distance, centered in the frame, the building's mirrored facade begins to flicker and suddenly implodes, like a scene from so many action or disaster movies (fig. 4). The image of the building is replaced by billowing clouds of smoke that obscure the landscape altogether.



fig. 4. Cyprien Gaillard, *Cities of Gold and Mirrors*, 2009, 16 mm film still, detail. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers Berlin/London and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London.

In the film's final segment, Gaillard directs his camera at the ceiling of a disco, capturing a spectacular choreography of colored light beams (fig. 5). The elaborate scaffolding that holds the roving, blinking lights suggests the inside of an alien mother ship, but the mirrored disco balls locate us in a night club, where 'spring breakers' below pump their fists in time to the beat.

In a recent interview, Gaillard remarked,

I see these night clubs—it's the same way in Cancun where you have the biggest clubs in Latin America, for something like 35,000 people—as time accelerators, where people age faster and where time is suspended. Human relations are increased, or condensed, faster. But if you go there during the day, it doesn't offer anything. In a way it's a dead space.³



fig. 5. Cyprien Gaillard, *Cities of Gold and Mirrors*, 2009, 16 mm film still, detail. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers Berlin/London and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London.

Gaillard's interest in time on a scale that surpasses or suspends human measurement evokes the work of Robert Smithson (1938-1973), whose ideas about time extended to encompass the geological past and the science-fiction future. Smithson was one of a number of artists in the 1960s and 70s who began making sculptures in the vast, unbounded landscapes of the American West, but he was also interested in the urban decay of industrial cityscapes. Smithson's influence courses through Gaillard's practice, which seems to epitomize a strain of interest in Smithson that centers on the temporality of the modern ruin. (Gaillard's work was also included in the UMFA's recent exhibition *The Smithson Effect*, and one of his film's features *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson's famous earthwork situated in Utah's Great Salt Lake.)

Cities of Gold and Mirrors marks its debt to Smithson through the recurrent motif of mirrors (they are invoked in the film's title), which were a key part of his sculptural



fig. 6. Robert Smithson, *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1-9)*, 1969, nine chromogenic prints from 35 mm slides, 24x24 inches, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, purchased with funds contributed by the Photography Committee and with funds contributed by the International Director's Council and the Executive Committee Members: Edythe Broad, Henry Buhl, Elaine Turner Cooper, Linda Fischbach, Ronnie Heyman, Dakis Joannou, Cindy Johnson, Barbara Lane, Linda Macklowe, Brian McIver, Peter Norton Foundation, Willem Peppler, Denise Rich, Rachel Rudin, David Tieger, Ginny Williams, Elliot K. Wolk. Art © Estate of Robert Smithson /Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

vocabulary. Smithson sometimes positioned configurations of mirrors in a given site or combined mirrors with organic material collected from such sites, titling these sculptures *Mirror Displacements*. His own journey through the Yucatan peninsula resulted in a series of photographs and an essay entitled “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan” (1969). Published in *Artforum*, the essay documented Smithson’s trip and the nine *Mirror Displacements* he staged along the way (fig. 6). The artist adapted the title of his text from anthropologist John Lloyd Stephens’s *Incidents of Travel in the Yucatan* (1843), a nineteenth century travelogue that recounted the author’s journey to various “lost cities” in South America. Smithson loosely followed Stephens’s travel routes through the Yucatan—his journey was a kind of mirror reflection of his predecessor’s—but where Stephens attended to the architectural and sculptural remnants of the ancient Mayan cultures, Smithson’s characteristically deadpan text describes the nine undeveloped

natural environments where he placed approximately twelve square mirrors—in small mounds of dirt, sand, or occasionally nestled within trees—and then photographed them before dismantling them. Smithson omitted the specificity of the culture surrounding him—the ruins at Palenque, for example—in favor of displacements, both literal and metaphorical. In a related slide lecture entitled “Hotel Palenque,” delivered to architecture students at the University of Utah in 1969, Smithson again displaced the distinctive ancient ruins from his narrative, focusing instead on the Hotel Palenque, a dilapidated cinderblock hotel that was “both ripped down and built up at the same time”—a modern ruin near ancient Palenque. Not insignificantly, Smithson was reportedly a bit drunk during the lecture.

Returning to *Cities of Gold and Mirrors*, the drinking rituals of the young Americans on display in the film’s opening establish parallels with the discourse of modern ruins as it comes to us via Smithson and subsequently Gaillard. In a recent exhibition at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, Gaillard presented a monumental “social sculpture” in the form of a pyramid built of cases of beer, a work to be destroyed through the audience’s consumption. Gaillard’s elision of architecture and alcohol here is telling, not only with respect to *Cities of Gold and Mirrors*, but also as it concerns his broader artistic project, which centers on an exploration of the built environment, understood as a historically conditioned site of contested meaning. In another interview the artist mentions an article he read about the real-estate crisis on Spain’s Mediterranean coast:

It said: “After 20 years of partying, Spain wakes up with a hangover.” I thought it was put really well: partying as a metaphor for bad urban planning and a city in ruins being the hangover. Most people see these tower blocks as monumental and dehumanized, but in the end they raise this universal question about inheritance; each generation takes the city as the previous one transmitted it.⁴

If such tower blocks are the hangover that gives the lie to modernist architecture’s belief in societal progress, in Gaillard’s work they also come to represent a kind of entropic

architecture as envisioned by Smithson. Almost all of the late artist’s work was informed by ideas about entropy, which stipulates that all systems move from a state of order to one of low-energy disorder. For Smithson, the laws of entropy were explicitly tied to questions of architecture. His *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), for example, was created through an act of destruction, piling loads of dirt onto an already deteriorating structure until its central beam cracked under the weight. While the inexorable disintegration of all systems might seem a worthy cause for despair, Smithson understood entropy, on the contrary, as a productive critique of human evolution and progress. For him, history was a series of disasters that reveal our belief in evolution through rationality to be false.

In a similar spirit, Gaillard’s films and videos often feature the spectacular demolition of modern buildings, as if in fulfillment of Smithson’s vision of buildings that would “rise into ruin.”⁵ Yet the demolition of modern buildings expedites the entropic process, staging a kind of shortcut through history. As Gaillard has said of the spectacle that accompanies such destruction, “It eclipses history. It eclipses all the problems. It justifies everything. It is Machiavellian: the end justifies everything. It works as a kind of public amnesia.” Like the consciousness-obliterating effects of alcohol, then, the public amnesia induced by the spectacle of destruction carries consequences. Another hangover inevitably follows.

—Jill Dawsey, Acting Chief Curator
Utah Museum of Fine Arts

1. “New Romantic,” Interview by Jonathan Griffin, *Frieze*, Issue 130 (April 2010): 85.
 2. Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments” (1966) in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1996), 11.
 3. Cyprien Gaillard in conversation with Catharina Manchanda, gallery guide for *Cyprien Gaillard: Disquieting Landscapes*, Wexner Center for the Arts, 2010.
 4. “New Romantic,” Interview by Jonathan Griffin, op cit.
 5. Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (1967) in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, op cit., 72.
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Cyprien Gaillard (b. 1980) was born in Paris and lives and works in Berlin. He has had solo exhibitions at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany; MCA 13, Malta Contemporary Art, Valletta, Malta; Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH; Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA; Proyectos Monclova, Mexico City; Museo de Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, Spain; L’Atelier du Jeu de Paume, Paris; and the Hayward Gallery, London. His work has also been included in numerous group exhibitions, including *The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today*, MoMA, New York (2010); the Eighth Gwanju Biennial (2010); *Post Monument, XIV Biennale Internazionale di Scultura di Carrara*, Italy (2010); *Les promesses du passé*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2010); *Perpetual Battles*, Baibakov Art Projects, Moscow (2010); *40 Lives Of One Space*, Special Project 3 Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art, Moscow (2009); *The Generational: Younger Than Jesus*, New Museum, New York (2009); and 5th Berlin Biennial, Germany (2008). Gaillard was awarded the Prix Marcel Duchamp in 2010 and his work will be featured in the upcoming 54th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale (2011).

salt is an on-going series of semi-annual exhibitions showcasing work by emerging artists from around the world. *salt* aims to reflect the international impact of contemporary art today, forging local connections to the global, and bringing new and diverse artwork to the city that shares the program's name.

salt (sôlt)

n.

1. A colorless or white crystalline solid used extensively in ground or granulated form as a food seasoning and preservative
2. An element that gives flavor or zest
3. Sharp, lively wit
4. A mineral sharing definitive characteristics with Utah's capital city