I

*Nature is an infinite sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.*
- Blaise Pascal

*One is liable to see things in maps that are not there. One must be careful of the hypothetical monsters that lurk between the map's latitudes...*
- Robert Smithson

Behind an anonymous grey brick storefront, on a relatively nondescript section of Venice Boulevard in West Los Angeles is The Center for Land Use Interpretation. Driving past with the steady flow of traffic, the Center fades into the general atmosphere, devoid of exemplary qualities. Stopped at the red light, one might notice other things in the neighbourhood: a boxy, deep-purple bar called Carbon; the 'world's shortest main street', a mere half-block-long street, situated perpendicular to Venice Boulevard; or the Center's somewhat-more-notorious neighbour, The Museum of Jurassic Technology, whose façade and signage are just
ostentatious enough to get noticed at a glance. The Center, on the other hand, hides in plain sight, marked only by an unremarkable display case featuring a cork bulletin board and a decidedly Cartesian logo. Almost comically, the Center, which states its mission as a '[dedication] to the increase and diffusion of information about how the nation's lands are apportioned, utilised and perceived', is located at the somewhat contested border of Culver City and the city of Los Angeles - slightly complicating municipal funding opportunities, among other inconveniences. The Center was founded in 1994 (or, as founder Matt Coolidge casually explains, 'paperwork was filed') near the industrial port of Oakland, California, with its seemingly endless network of shipping containers. Two years later the Center relocated to its current Los Angeles home on Venice Boulevard. Inside the Center one is confronted with a wall covered with 6-panel tourist brochures for points of interest across the United States, before entering a dimly lit gallery with a series of interactive kiosks, each representing an individual exhibition previously occupying the gallery space. One could easily spend hours examining the information in each kiosk. The exhibition space is adjoined by a bookstore, featuring the Center's publications, projects and the inevitable Center for Land Use Interpretation coffee mug and t-shirt, as well as books of related interest selected by the organisation, ranging from elegant volumes of landscape photography to scholarly treatises on urban archaeology.

Beyond this public front, one encounters the administrative offices, or what one might call the centre of the Center. There is something knowingly generic about the office at first sight: tables covered with piles of paperwork and computers, a row of file cabinets labelled according to region, and a lengthy wall of beleaguered bookshelves, bowing under the sheer weight of information. Like the storefront façade, the blank outward appearance of the office conceals something akin to Jorge Luis Borges's infamous Library of Babel, itself modelled on Pascal's paradoxical sphere in which administrative librarians and travelling interpreters ponder mysterious tomes, and the sublime question - because unanswerable - of whether the library (also known as the universe), is bounded or infinite.

Since its inception, the Center has produced over 30 exhibitions on land use (from 'The Nellis Range Complex: Landscape of Conjecture' to 'Loop Feedback Loop: The Big Picture of Traffic Control in Los Angeles'), has conducted numerous public bus tours in several states, and has published over a dozen inexpensive books, as well as around 20 issues of its no-frills newsletter, The Lay Of The Land. Over the years the Center has established outposts for the purposes of research and exhibition in Wendover, Utah and Troy, New York, with a Desert Research Station (DRS) located in California’s Mojave Desert. Most ambitiously, the Center has established the Land Use Database, which occupies the aforementioned file cabinets but finds its truest incarnation on the Center's labyrinthine website. The Land Use Database is an ever-growing index of sites organised by region (limited to the United States) and according to nine land-use categories: transportation; water; culture; industry; mining; waste; military; nuclear/radioactive; and the somewhat ambiguous 'research and development'. The Center investigates sites it determines to be 'exemplary' - first by researching each site according to the nine land-use categories, then by travelling to the site to produce a field report, or what the Center might call 'a physical portrait of the site’s mechanisms'.

The notion of an 'exemplary site' is, of course, tautological - every imaginable site has unique characteristics, and therefore could be understood as an example of its particular nexus of characteristics - yet such 'conceptual slippage' provides for much of the interpretation in the group's moniker. Though the Center has chosen to limit its work to the physical boundaries of the United States, the number of potential sites, like the Library of Babel, is probably infinite (though not verifiably) - especially as one considers sites below ground (as the Center did in 1998 with the exhibition and booklet 'Subterranean Renovations: The Unique Architectural Spaces of Show Caves'), or the evolution of sites over time. The latter idea, known as geomorphology, brings the work of the Center in close proximity to the ideas of Robert Smithson at the end of his abbreviated life.
For the record, the Center has invoked Smithson frequently, particularly in *The Lay Of The Land*. More significantly, however, the Center in a sense has recognised and adopted Smithson's dual persona of siteseer/tour guide. Adapted, this persona is no longer folded into the notion of the 'artist', but rather finds anonymity in the non-hierarchical structure of the 'organisation', the 'agency': the Center. Like Smithson, who once expressed his interest in the 'politics of the Triassic Period', the Center has a political outlook that is seemingly one of wilful neutrality. As the website claims:

*CLUI exists to stimulate discussion, thought and general interest in the contemporary landscape. Neither an environmental group nor an industry affiliated organisation, the work of the Center integrates the many approaches to land use – the many perspectives of the landscape – into a single vision that illustrates the common ground in 'land use' debates. At the very least, the Center attempts to emphasise the multiplicity of points of view regarding the utilisation of terrestrial and geographic resources.*
In exploring overlooked peripheries such as the 'alien' landscape of Utah or Area 51 in Nevada - often at the guarded border of the military-industrial complex that calls such remote elsewhere home - the Center is dedicated to exploring the circumference. Despite pluralistic claims of 'objectivity', the organisation is hardly ambivalent in the sites it chooses for studies and public tours. The Center's tours provide a frame, however ephemeral, for the experience of these sites, putting humans in contact with the inhuman scale of ambition and the folly of progress:

Gazing across the flats around Wendover, it is easy to imagine a landscape of purity and agelessness, perhaps what a world would look like without any humans at all. Parts of the area can even look like an alien planet, from the red and turquoise water of the Great Salt Lake, to the treeless hillsides marked with the shorelines of even greater ancient inland seas. One sees a world governed by geomorphological forces, by erosion and evaporation. However, this view is incomplete. To see the full beauty of the landscape, one has to understand the integral role that humans have had in creating and transforming it. Around Wendover, the scale of the engineer's interaction with the comparatively inert material of the earth suggests a relationship that is geologic in time and space. Around Wendover, it is clear that man too has become a major morphological agent. 4

Compare this statement to Smithson's description of Rozel Point, the site on the shore of Great Salt Lake where Spiral Jetty was constructed:

A series of seeps of heavy black oil more like asphalt occur just south of Rozel Point. For forty or more years people have tried to get oil out of this natural tar pool. Pumps coated with black stickiness rusted in the corrosive salt air. A hut mounted on pilings could have been the habitation of the 'missing link'. A great pleasure arose from seeing all those incoherent structures. This site gave evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes. 5

Like Smithson's Spiral Jetty, the Center's various tours do not aspire to the sublime, but rather operate as an agent for the mediation of the sublime, a framing device working inside out - that is, toward the circumference.

II

In the Winter 2003 issue of The Lay Of The Land there is a striking photograph taken by the Center's Steve Rowell of a mind-boggling mining operation at Vulcan's Reliance Pit in Irwindale, California. As described in the newsletter: 'The nearby Reliance Pit is one of the most active in Irwindale. This is the site of Vulcan's main processing facility, an amazing maze of conveyers, hoppers and sorters. Neat piles of crushed and sorted rock are mounded in elegant conical piles of uniform grain size and texture. All this takes place in a 200-feet-deep, massive rectangular hole, surrounded by office park buildings.' The Center conducted the bus tour Margins in our Midst: A Journey into Irwindale in conjunction with its exhibition 'Ground Up: Photographs of the Ground in the Margins of Los Angeles'. On the bus, tour guide Matt Coolidge reportedly told the tourists: 'We will be going to some of the most banal and dramatic landscapes in Los Angeles, and by the time we are done, we won't be able to tell the difference.' The photograph from Reliance Pit illustrates Coolidge's assertion. As a feat of engineering, at least to this layman, the colossal network of 'conveyers, hoppers and sorters' is at once
beautiful and monstrous. Yet, the end product - the aggregated asphalt that covers the urban landscape - is indeed banal. In many ways, the photograph illustrates the work of the Center for Land Use Interpretation - work that one might define, paradoxically, as the administrative sublime.

Whether or not the Center for Land Use Interpretation makes any claims to being a practice or project that should be understood as ‘art’ (to my knowledge they have not), they have nevertheless been championed by the ‘art world’, however ambiguously defined. For example, the Center are included in the 2006 Whitney Biennial of American Art. Practitioners from many fields or academic disciplines, such as geography, are not so eager to embrace the less-than-traditional methodologies of the Center; of course the borders of contemporary art are always contentious and frequently weary of tradition, so the Center finds itself welcomed, once again, at the margins. Though the aforementioned relationship of the Center to Smithson is obvious (and acknowledged by the former), the Center’s work also recalls any number of significant projects at the margins of (small ‘C’) conceptual art practice. I say margins because the projects in question rely less on language than more paradigmatic, canonical examples of (big ‘C’) Conceptual art, and more on their hybrid status at the overlapping boundaries of art, urbanism, sociology and other fields of knowledge.

With an emphasis on information and its deployment in various forms ranging from didactic display panels to cheaply produced black-and-white booklets, the Center traffics in a number of modes of address inextricably linked to conceptual art. A few obvious precedents - which I can only assume are, in fact, influences - would include Dan Graham’s *Homes for America* project (1966–67), which took on many forms including a slide show and a layout for *Arts Magazine*, and Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Fake Estates* project from 1973, in which the artist purchased tiny, unusable or inaccessible plots of real estate in auctions, only to resell them later. One project from this time period that seems to anticipate the work of the Center - particularly as an early example of the administrative sublime - is Douglas Huebler’s *Variable Piece #70 (In Process) - Global* (1971), which remained in progress, appearing as a wide assortment of end products, until the artist’s death in 1997, and included myriad photographic groupings and an unfulfilled screenplay that eventually became the weekly comic strip *Crocodile Tears*. The text accompanying Huebler’s *Variable Piece #70* stated:

*Throughout the remainder of the artist's lifetime he will photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner.*

Returning to Borges’s library, we are again confronted with the question of whether such a work is bounded or infinite. Huebler’s earliest conceptual pieces involved mapping, and certainly *Variable Piece #70 (In Process) - Global* followed on the heels of, if not strategically from, the first photograph of the planet Earth, taken from outer space in 1968. Since that photograph, if not long before, society has attempted to chart the globe in its entirety, and to keep track of its contents, whether material resources, human beings or pure statistical information. Huebler’s project intersected with this totalising epistemological desire in its attempt to document ‘the existence of everyone alive...’ using a variety of conceptual systems and strategies of categorisation. The seeming impossibility - dare one say futility - of the task, alongside the artist's almost-Sisyphean commitment to that task, defines the administrative sublime.

Of course it wasn’t supposed to work like this. The presumed achievement of conceptual art, in part, was the final death knell delivered - administered - to art’s attachment to anything transcendent or sublime. In his pivotal, if problematic essay ‘Conceptual Art, circa 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions’, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh writes:
It seems obvious, at least from the vantage of the early 1990s, that from its inception Conceptual Art was distinguished by its acute sense of discursive and institutional limitations, its self-imposed restrictions, its lack of totalising vision, its critical devotion to the factual conditions of artistic production and reception without aspiring to overcome the mere facticity of these conditions. This became evident as works such as Hans Haacke’s series of Visitors’ Profiles (1969–70), in its bureaucratic rigor and deadpan devotion to the statistical collection of factual information, came to refuse any transcendental dimension whatsoever. ... What Conceptual Art achieved, at least temporarily, however, was to subject the last residues of artistic aspiration toward transcendence (by means of traditional studio skills and privileged modes of experience) to the rigorous and relentless order of the vernacular of administration.

Huebler’s important discovery - which it should be stated put him somewhat at odds with other self-proclaimed conceptual art 'purists' - was that at least half the thrill (yes, thrill) of constructing 'discursive and institutional limitations' and 'self-imposed restrictions' was (or is) the failure to stay within such circumscribed boundaries, allowing for 'hypothetical monsters' (that is, something closer to the transcendent) to emerge by driving off the rigorous, Cartesian rationality of the map. Even if he did not come close to achieving his stated intentions, what Huebler really achieved in Variable Piece #70, and what the Center for Land Use Interpretation actively pursues, is the apotheosis of administration. The very nature of these projects eschews the tautological definitions of art-for-art’s-sake that are endemic to Conceptual practice, in favour of administration-for-administration’s-sake: that is, administration taken to the boundaries of experience. The Center, with its accumulating list projects and published reports, succeeds in becoming almost indistinguishable from other organisations and administrations with which it interacts, such as the Bureau of Land Management, the Department of Transportation or even Google’s seemingly omnipotent satellite mapping service. However, staying in character, the Center makes no claims on the sublime - administrative or otherwise:

The Center for Land Use Interpretation is a research organisation interested in understanding the nature and extent of human interaction with the earth’s surface. The Center embraces a multidisciplinary approach to fulfilling the stated mission, employing conventional research and information processing methodology as well as non-traditional interpretive tools.

At a moment in which the historical foundations of conceptual art are being recuperated and redeployed - at least in quotation - at the service of something more closely resembling pure spectacle, the Center is quietly mining the margins of the same period of artistic production in favour of something more, well, exemplary. With its open-ended approach to interpretation, only time will tell whether or not the Center finds its true circumference.

Footnotes
3. Ibid.
5. R. Smithson, op. cit., p.146