

**James Nisbet, *Second Site*, Princeton University Press,
Princeton, 2021, 144 p.**

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James Nisbet

Second Site

The question of site was built into Land Art projects from their very emergence in the late 1970s. So, too, was their eventual degradation. These works, like all other things, are subject entropy's steady march into chaos. What James Nisbet—professor of art history at the University of California, Irvine—aims to take up in his 2021 book *Second Site* are the ways in which these secondary effects (and affects) could be understood as a version of “site” in their own right. Recontextualizing several famous and not-so-famous monumental artworks, Nisbet considers how physical change over time manifests conceptual change, identifying these artworks as his titular “second sites.”

Loosely playing with Robert Smithson's articulation of sites and non-sites, Nisbet comes to this secondness by understanding that 1) no site is ever unchanging, and 2) the term “second site” evokes “second nature” not in its colloquial usage but as a recognition that no pristine, untouched “first nature” exists; he also plays on the homophone “second sight,” which refers to predictions of the future and the works' inextricable relation to time. He posits that each of these qualities of secondness are grounded in the seismic shifts resulting from climate change and that the set of ethics emerging through his essay may be applicable to contexts outside of art theory and conservation. The book is divided into three chapters: “Succession,” “Time Worlds,” and “Site-Images.” Employing many examples to articulate the nuances of each category, from Ant Farm's *Cadillac Ranch* (1974) to Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* (1965–present), Nisbet's most compelling and fleshed-out example—Richard Serra's *Shift* (1970–72)—is threaded through all of them. The examination of this lesser-known work set in rural Ontario is a breath of fresh air compared to the extensive writing on Serra's contentious 1981 *Tilted Arc* (although this work does get some airtime in *Second Site*). Located on the northern

edge of the Greater Toronto Area, *Shift* is a site-specific work that represents the approximate distance at which one subject loses sight of the other as they move apart. Nisbet argues that *Shift*'s predication on the ability to see across an open field alludes to histories of colonization, recalling the now-absent forests traditionally managed by the Mississaugas, since replaced with vast swaths of open farmland, presently at the mercy of encroaching urban sprawl. One of the highlights of the book is a discussion of how members of the local King City community have banded together to protect the work from developers. The legal implications of the work, much like those of *Tilted Arc*, almost supersede the artistic intent, perhaps even becoming a second site.

Ultimately, the question at the heart of Nisbet's essay is one of excess produced beyond the works' original intent. Although he remains curious about this “secondness” and identifies the requisite remains, ruins, and mechanical or digital reproductions of land art, he says little about the added value of this excess. Much has been written about site-specific work, leaving Nisbet with the difficult task of offering novel insights. His achievement in *Second Site* is the way in which he places a number of site-specific works of varying renown into conversation, recontextualizing each through the lens of its secondary effects and impacts, and layering this onto urgent concerns around conservation—both curatorially and ecologically.

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James Nisbet
Second Site, cover,
2021.

Richard Serra
Shift, installation view,
1970, image taken from
the book.

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