There, Now: From Robert Smithson to Guantanamo

Jeffrey Kastner

'The visual values of the landscape have been traditionally the domain of those concerned with the arts. Yet, art, ecology, and industry as they exist today are for the most part abstracted from the physical realities of specific landscapes or sites. How we view the world has been in the past conditioned by painting and writing. Today, movies, photography, and television condition our perceptions and social behaviour. The ecologist tends to see the landscape in terms of the past, while most industrialists don't see anything at all. The artist must come out of the isolation of galleries and museums and provide a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists, and not simply present abstractions or utopias...We should begin to develop an art education based on relationships to specific sites. How we see things and places is not a secondary concern, but primary.' *Robert Smithson*[1]

Why do so many pieces of writing about art and land (including, obviously, this one) begin with Robert Smithson? There's no doubt that gesturing toward the tragically absent oracle of the dialectical landscape has by now become something of a tic in any discussion of contemporary extra-institutional artistic practices. Yet no matter how sceptical one might be, it's clear that, four decades after he commenced his mature practice, Smithson remains unavoidable.

The last few years have featured a steady stream of 'Smithsoniana' – for a while a major new book on the artist seemed to appear every few months, all topped off with the smart travelling retrospective and catalogue organised by Eugenie Tsai with Connie Butler for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, that ended its run at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in October 2005.[2] The cumulative effect has been a sense that Smithson's presence lurks around every artistic corner, and a recognition of how deeply and variously his influence operates in the contemporary moment. It's true that more than some commentators lamented the show's dryness and dense thicket of artifactual evidence. It even got a dose of the 'there is no *there* there' treatment, evoking Gertrude Stein's existential riddle. But such is the deftness of Smithson's project that even those weaknesses that might have been revealed by the work's museological treatment ultimately seemed just another confirmation of the rightness of the artist's insistent preoccupation with the concept of *there*. What, after all, could be more tangible, more physical, more *there* than tons of desert dirt and rocks pushed into shapes by colossal smoke-belching machines? Seen from the point of view of this earth artist persona, Smithson epitomises that strand of monument making that found a way to link the formal apotheoses of minimalism with elemental cultural and natural forms - and to do so by employing gestures on a scale so grand that they almost didn't even register as artistic. Yet if Smithson the toolbelt conceptualist was mostly concerned with the there-as-thing, Smithson the postmodernist always stressed the concomitant strand of there-as-place, not least because he knew even then that in the coming information society, location and artefact must necessarily be destabilised and mixed. Hence the use of the terms 'site' and 'non-site' in his work; hence its conglomeration of texts, pictures, films, proposals, sculpture, etc; hence its passionate exhortations and wry jeremiads; hence his productively fractured, interpenetrating, quintessentially postmodern practice.

Smithson wasn't alone in his insights about temporality and entropy or, for that matter, in his analysis of the relationships between our prelapsarian past and our compromised present.[3] Indeed, his influence endures not because his work exists in some kind of heroic isolation (something that lurked romantically in the back of my mind for years, even though I should have known better – a projection, I suppose, of the whole 'steam shovel cowboy' image) but because it is integrated with so many elements of aesthetics, so firmly at the nexus of so many strands of cultural, social, scientific and poetic discourses. Smithson's works still fascinates not because it provided resolution to the many conceptual contradictions it took on, but because it so provocatively enacted these paradoxes. His insistence on probing the most elemental dialectics (in/out, past/future, thing/idea, here/there) produced gaps in the conventional wisdom about them that remain tantalisingly open today. And any attempt to read contemporary projects against his example must begin with those that are, in their very character, open to and engaged with such indeterminancies, ready to plumb the destabilised zones between gesture and thing, between thing and place, between place and operation, between operation and audience.

In an interview I did in 2005 with Matthew Coolidge of the Los Angeles-based Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) he used a word I had never heard before to describe the central interest of his organisation: anthropogeomorphology. It took a few moments for the etymology to resolve itself, and Coolidge was characteristically to the point when I asked him for some help. 'It simply refers to human-induced alterations or transformations of the landscape,' he said, 'and arguably everywhere... is to some degree transformed and affected by humans. The places [the CLUI is] drawn to, in

general, are places where the transformations that have gone on are compelling and tell some story about American identity – about culture, about our times – more vividly or more eloquently than other places.'[4] A few months after our conversation, I made a trip to Utah and over the course of about 36 hours visited Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and the research station/exhibition complex at the former Wendover Army Air Base where the CLUI has its most elaborate enterprise.[5] If the main organising principle for the trip was an overdue pilgrimage to Rozel Point, the Great Salt Lake location of *Spiral Jetty*, I was also aware that I was going to have a chance to see, in context, how these two approaches to land-based art practice – superficially different but constitutionally contiguous, and both so very illustrative of their respective socio-cultural moments – did or did not line up with each other.

Despite (or indeed because of) the fact that the CLUI does not itself make anything remotely like 'earthworks' – nor, in fact, have any of the many artists they have sponsored through their robust Wendover-based residency programme – the organisation seemed to me a useful case study for the effects of Smithson's legacy on current practice. Many of its activities have been focused on or located in the geologically and socio-culturally rich American west and like other prominent contemporary projects located in remote desert locations such as Andrea Zittel's High Desert Test Sites, they inevitably evoke the milieu of the first generation earth art – including Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969–70) and *City* (begun 1970), Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977), Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76) and Smithson's aforementioned *Spiral Jetty*. Yet while the operative dialectics in these touchstone early land art works are first and foremost those between the natural and the man-made – between a geological past and an industrial future – in the current landscape, the geological histories of even the most ostensibly isolated sites have already long since been subsumed within programmes of coordinated development, made 'modern' after a fashion that is itself now in some sense also on its way to ruination and abandonment. Many of the CLUI projects I like the best take on this deteriorated future/past with the ostensibly deadpan eye of the archaeologist or archivist.[6] The organisation's rich Land Use Database website and the diverse projects that flow from it regularly have the dual (and engagingly ambiguous) purpose of educating viewers about the meaning of specific sites while at the same time striving to make new meaning in given locations – sites whose history now incorporates not only a geological, natural past, but also a progressively obsolete social and cultural past and, importantly, often also a recent art historical past.

In preparing for a panel I was on recently with Coolidge, I came across the excerpt that serves as the epigram for this essay. Then, as now, it seemed useful as a general framework for thinking about how present-day approaches, in particular that of the exemplary CLUI, might be seen to contain certain echoes of past practices. The passage is part of a longer text (unpublished during the artist's lifetime) in which Smithson describes the theoretical backdrop to a proposal for an artwork on a 400-hectare site in southeastern Ohio slated for redevelopment by its owners, the Hanna Coal Company. Written in 1972 with an eye towards a conference on art education scheduled for Ohio State University the following spring, the text is telling not only for the glimpse it gives of the artist's consistent knack for pedagogical salesmanship, but also for the way it provides a snapshot of some of his central theoretical fascinations near the end of his life. (He died in a plane crash while surveying the site of *Amarillo Ramp* in July 1973.) He says little specific about the work he wants to execute – in fact devoting only one line to his proposition that an unspecified 'earth sculpture' be commissioned for the site of the former mining operation. Yet while the language used to describe the project-as-thing remains underdeveloped, the drift of the conceptual rhetoric is unmistakable: emphasising a conviction in cross-disciplinary collaboration; revealing an affinity for education and research; displaying a sensitivity to mediation, both aesthetic and technological, and its affects on the circulation of information and larger socio-cultural conditioning; and foregrounding an advocacy for artworks that participate in the

production of 'a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists'.[7]

Smithson's mode of address here is plainly ecological – he was, after all, trying to secure support for a commission as part of a larger, ostensibly remediative project. Yet as the artist's writings prove over and over again, no matter how diverse the specific vocabularies or media Smithson employed in his work, the basic grammar was remarkably consistent. If no one can say how his work might have evolved over time, this late text certainly reinforces the notion that the practice of making 'sculpture' remained only one element of the complex process-based programme in which the artist was engaged.[8] Similarly, despite the ecological rhetoric, it seems safe to say that the idea of environmental remediation was for him more a situational strategy than a developing creed. Of course, by the early 1970s, numerous artists were already investigating questions of ecological intervention and reclamation – people as variable in style and attitude as Helen and Newton Harrison, Hans Haacke, Betty Beaumont and Alan Sonfist. There seems to be little evidence in his writing or public comments that Smithson felt any particular affinity for this strand of work. After all, his primary ambition – and this in fact unifies all his other impulses – usually seemed less to suggest how a particular site might be fixed, but rather to consider the ways in which it was broken. And always how these breaks, these disruptions, might serve to instantiate the resonant entropic residues he favoured.[9] In almost every respect, his observations about the Hanna Coal land – this piece of natural landscape, first de-formed and now re-formed by technology, preparing to be sent back into the past, as it were, and returned to a pre-industrial identity as an explicit feature of its post-industrial future – can also be abstracted to more generalised spaces of contestation. And it's in these sites of disturbance that many of his contemporary conceptual descendants can be found working today – attracted to the considerable extra-institutional scope and nuance they offer, and the spaces they provide to move from a focus on grand phenomenological relationships with the land to the ramifying patterns of interaction and use that drive current social and political realities.

Recent works such as Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla's elegiac projects on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques or the quixotic *Guantanamo Initiative* (2004–05) by Christoph Büchel & Gianni Motti suggest the variety of ways in which the notion of landscape and its site-specific use and meanings have continued to provide inspiration for artistic interventions. In the case of the *Guantanamo Initiative*, which Büchel & Motti exhibited at the 2005 Venice Biennale, the artists highlighted the curious conditions through which the US government comes to control the land on which its notorious Guantanamo Bay Naval Base and prison camp are located. When the Castro government took power in Cuba in 1959, they called for the cancellation of the perpetual lease on the 117.6 sq km area of land and water that the US had obtained through early 20th century war treaties. When the US refused to relinquish the land, the Cubans stopped cashing the American's annual nominal 'rent' cheques. It is into this legal lacuna that Büchel & Motti's project looks to intervene, proposing that the treaties be declared null and void so that the artists might exploit this state of abeyance to establish themselves as the new rightful tenants of Guantanamo, a third party that could challenge the US's illegal occupation of the site unencumbered by the political stalemate that characterises US-Cuban relations.

Though it shares as its backdrop a US colonial and military context in the Caribbean, Allora & Calzadilla's projects utilised very different modes of address, featuring several artworks involving residents and the popular resistance movement in Vieques, 70 percent of which was occupied from 1941–2003 by the US Navy as an bombing range, resulting in considerable contamination and health concerns. For *Land Mark (Footprints)* (2001–04) they worked with local people and activists to design special shoe soles that left personalised slogans and symbols as participants trespassed on the then off-limits sand of their legendary beaches. As seen in *Returning a Sound* (2004), a motorcycle equipped not with a silencer but with a trumpet, tooted around

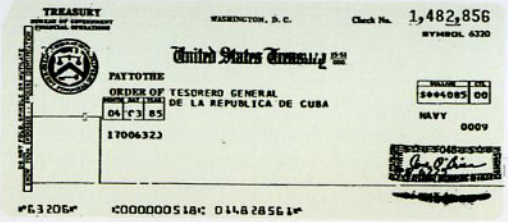
A stop on the CLUI's *Tour Of The Monuments*... A view from the safety of a moving bus of some of the radioactive waste at Envirocare. 'Then to the radioactive waste burial site called Envirocare, where pieces of the plant at Oak Ridge Tennessee are visible on top of the mound, being broken up by men in white suits for permanent entombment below, along with parts of other radioactive places across America, a veritable museum/midden mound.' CLUI photo by Steve Rowell. www.clui.org

Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla, *Land Mark (Footprints)*, 2001–04, digital c-print, 48.8 x 60.3 cm.
Courtesy: Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

the island as a droll and noisy rejoinder to the volleys of explosions to which residents had long been subjected. And in another video, *Under Discussion* (2005), a solitary figure pilots an upturned conference table through the waters surrounding Vieques, crystallising the adjacencies between the island as a piece of land, and as the political centrepiece of a series of circular bureaucratic discussions about the place of Puerto Ricans in US socio-political life (not to mention evoking the spiralling trajectory of Smithson's most famous filmic work, his movie of *Spiral Jetty*).

In projects like these, and especially the sprawling interdisciplinary artistic operations of organisations like the Center for Land Use Interpretation, the disrupted moment for which Smithson advocated – of collapsed boundaries; of the harnessing of new technology to condition belief and behaviour; of research and education as elements of artistic practice; of artists and collectives engaged in the creation of 'a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists', one 'based on relationships to specific sites' – has clearly arrived.[10] Smithson's observation that 'the gardens of history are being replaced by sites of time' remains just as astute today as it was when he wrote it almost forty years ago.[11] I like to think he'd appreciate that its message that the artefacts of culture must give way to the new forms that succeed them, and are only enhanced by having recognition of this built into their conceptual foundations, turns out to pertain to his own sites. As is clear in the observations of the CLUI's Matthew Coolidge that serve as our bookending coda here, I like to think that as styles and approaches change and even become examples to work against, something more essential remains operative for a subsequent generation now working if not with, then surely within, the legacy of Robert Smithson.

'We don't move things around with bulldozers much, at least not for "aesthetics", I suppose. We might move some dirt to put in a kind of structure or something. "Sculpting the earth" or whatever you want to call it, isn't something that's really come up for us, but I wouldn't put it out of the question, because it's a viable form of expression. I guess one of the things we tend to try and suggest with the database and the exhibits though, is that the landscape is fairly rich as it is and, in a way, you don't need to do too much to it other than change your perspective – shift your point of view a bit – and the familiar objects, which are often unseen because they're so familiar, become more interesting. I think the existing landscape is almost infinitely rich if you just change the way you look at it.'[12]



1 Excerpt from an unpublished 1972 proposal by Smithson for the reclamation of a strip mine site owned by the Hanna Coal Company in southeastern Ohio. Robert Smithson, 'Proposal', 1972, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, pp. 379–380 [hereafter *Writings*].

2 See Pamela M. Lee's extended review of books on the artist, 'The Cowboy in the Library: The New Robert Smithson', *Artforum*, December/January 2005. It's worth noting that Smithson isn't the only artist of his generation to be receiving such treatment recently. The last few years have seen a number of artworks, curatorial projects and publications dedicated to re-examining and/or recapitulating works by artists associated with that particular moment in post-war art, ranging from the rather goofy (*New York Dirty Room*, 2005, Mike Bouchet's riff on Walter DeMaria's *The New York Earth Room*, 1977) to the rather grand (the 2005 realisation of Smithson's *Floating Island To Travel Around Manhattan Island*, 1970, produced by Minetta Brook in collaboration with the Whitney Museum of American Art). I'm implicated in this trend as well, as one of the curators of *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's 'Fake Estates'*, an exhibition that also took as its starting point an under-discussed work by a much-admired conceptualist who met an untimely end.

3 In his first substantive meditation on all this, 'Entropy and the New Monuments' (*Artforum*, June 1966), *Writings* pp. 10–23, Smithson is always at pains to detail examples of others' artistic production or scientific thought he sees as having an affinity with his own developing views.

4 Unpublished excerpt from conversations between the author and Matthew Coolidge, 4–5 May 2005. Other portions of the interview were published as Kastner, 'True Beauty: A talk with the Center for Land Use Interpretation's Matthew Coolidge', *Artforum*, Summer 2005.

5 Wendover is a quintessentially CLUI place; straddling the Utah/Nevada border, it's a strange mix of modestly glossy casinos and abandoned storefronts. The defunct air base where the CLUI offices and galleries are located was the training ground for the Enola Gay, the aircraft that carried the atomic bomb to Hiroshima in 1945. It lies across the I-80 highway from the Bonneville Salt Flats (where the Genesis spacecraft crashed in 2004 and most of the world land speed records, dating back to the 1930s, have been set) and is about two-and-a-half hours of dirt road away from Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*.

6 The CLUI selects its locations for research (which have included everything from seaports and train depots to shopping malls and the mining and military-industrial sites that dot the south-western deserts of the US) based on what it calls the 'unusual and exemplary' criteria, meaning that it should be both interesting in and of itself and also have characteristics that can be used to understand similar types of places. They summarise their mission as one of 'stimulat[ing] 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.' www.clui.org/clui4_1/mission/mission.html

7 *Writings*, p. 379. The artist completed his *Broken Circle* and *Spiral Hill* in a soon-to-be reclaimed quarry in Emmen, The Netherlands, in 1971 and was pursuing relationships with several other mining firms in the US as well.

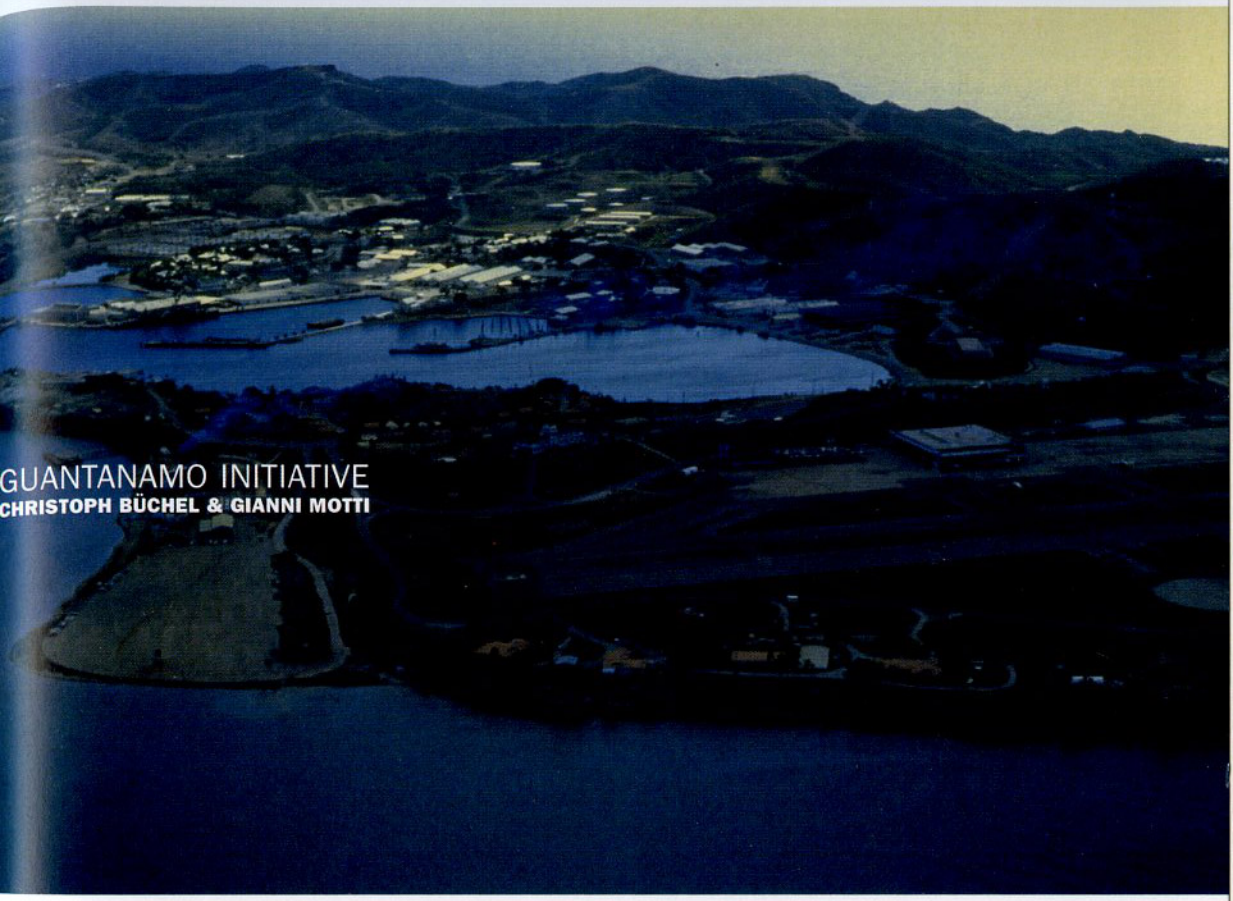
8 Already in 1969, in an answer to a question at the symposium held in conjunction with the *Earth Art* show at the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art at Cornell University, Smithson felt that '...we've come to the point when the artist's time is also valuable in terms of process. In other words, there always has been the idea that there is a class of people who are going to value certain objects and sort of wrest them from the life of the artist. Now the process that the artist goes through is very valuable, just like anybody else – most people's time is considered valuable – so that the usual way out was to say that art is timeless, and therefore the artist is alienated from his own time. So for the artist in this kind of art there is a positive step towards an integration of the artist with his own time.' *Writings*, p. 187.

9 'My own experience is that the best sites for "earth art" are sites that have been disrupted by industry, reckless urbanisation, or nature's own devastation.' From 'Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape' (*Artforum*, February 1973), *Writings*, p. 165.

10 *Writings*, pp. 379–380.

11 *Writings*, p. 105.

12 Coolidge, op. cit. note 4.



Above: Poster with aerial photograph of the US Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay. Christoph Büchel & Gianni Motti, *Guantanamo Initiative*, 2004–05. Courtesy: the artists; Maccarone Inc, New York; Hauser & Wirth, Zurich/London

Opposite: United States Treasury rent check in the amount of $4085, the annual payment for Guantanamo Bay and adjacent lands, uncashed by the Republic of Cuba. Christoph Büchel & Gianni Motti, *Guantanamo Initiative*, 2004–05. Courtesy: the artists; Maccarone Inc, New York; Hauser & Wirth, Zurich/London

Figure 1. World Oil Consumption, 1950–2004

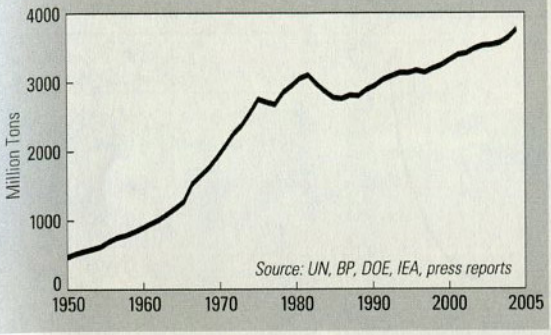


Figure 2. World Consumption of Coal and Natural Gas, 1950–2003

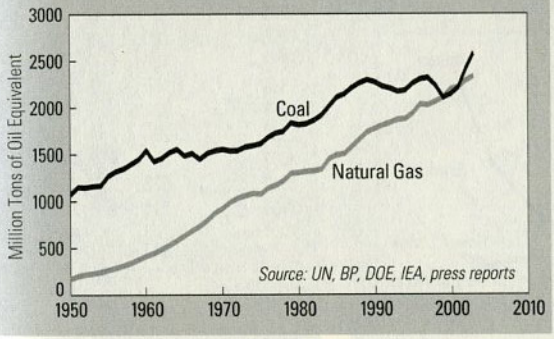
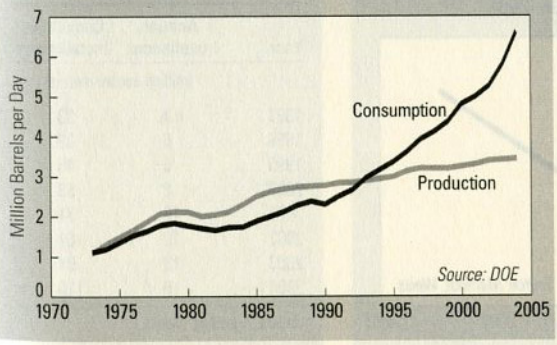


Figure 3. Oil Consumption and Production in China, 1973–2004



World Fossil Fuel Consumption, 1950–2004

Year	Oil	Coal	Natural Gas
	(million tons of oil equivalent)		
1950	470	1,074	171
1955	694	1,270	266
1960	951	1,544	416
1965	1,530	1,486	632
1970	2,254	1,553	924
1971	2,377	1,538	988
1972	2,556	1,540	1,032
1973	2,754	1,579	1,059
1974	2,710	1,592	1,082
1975	2,678	1,613	1,075
1976	2,852	1,681	1,138
1977	2,944	1,726	1,169
1978	3,055	1,744	1,216
1979	3,103	1,834	1,295
1980	2,972	1,814	1,304
1981	2,868	1,826	1,318
1982	2,776	1,863	1,322
1983	2,761	1,916	1,340
1984	2,809	2,011	1,451
1985	2,801	2,107	1,493
1986	2,893	2,143	1,504
1987	2,949	2,211	1,583
1988	3,039	2,261	1,663
1989	3,088	2,293	1,738
1990	3,136	2,270	1,774
1991	3,134	2,225	1,806
1992	3,170	2,203	1,836
1993	3,139	2,168	1,869
1994	3,199	2,182	1,876
1995	3,246	2,255	1,937
1996	3,323	2,302	2,033
1997	3,398	2,315	2,024
1998	3,417	2,233	2,059
1999	3,485	2,103	2,106
2000	3,526	2,141	2,194
2001	3,538	2,211	2,217
2002	3,563	2,412	2,286
2003	3,637	2,578	2,332
2004 (prel)	3,760	n.a.	n.a.

Source: UN, BP, DOE, IEA, press reports.

Fossil Fuel Use Surges

Worldwatch Institute, *Vital Signs 2005–2006*. www.worldwatch.org

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Figure 1. World Photovoltaic Production, 1971–2004

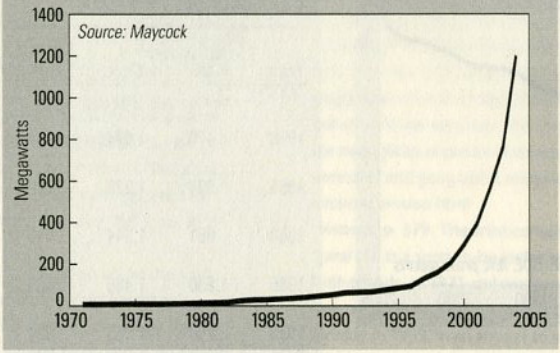


Figure 2. Photovoltaic Production by Country or Region, 1994–2004

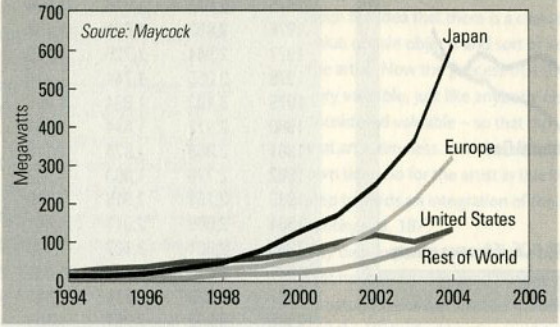
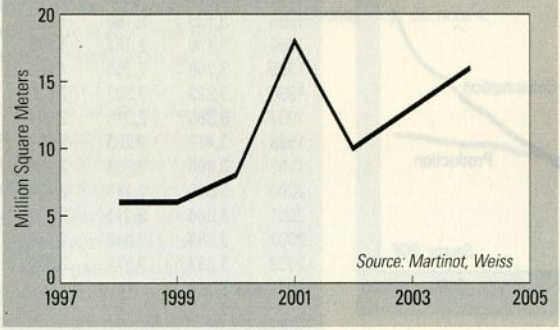


Figure 3. Global Solar Water Heating Annual Installations, Excluding Pool Systems, 1998–2004



World Photovoltaic Production, 1971–2004

Year	Annual Production	Cumulative Production
	(megawatts)	
1971	0.1	0.1
1975	1.8	1.9
1980	7	19
1985	23	98
1990	47	273
1991	55	329
1992	58	387
1993	60	447
1994	69	516
1995	78	594
1996	89	682
1997	126	808
1998	155	963
1999	201	1,164
2000	288	1,452
2001	391	1,842
2002	562	2,404
2003	761	3,165
2004 (prel)	1,200	4,365

Source: Maycock.

Global Solar Water Heating Installations, Excluding Pool Systems, 1997–2004

Year	Annual Installations	Cumulative Installations
	(million square meters)	
1997	n.a.	33
1998	6	39
1999	6	45
2000	8	53
2001	18	71
2002	10	81
2003	13	94
2004 (prel)	16	110

Source: Martinot, Weiss.

Solar Energy Markets Booming

Worldwatch Institute, Vital Signs 2005–2006, www.worldwatch.org