Monuments of Disintegration
A lecture

Matthew Coolidge
(Center for Land Use Interpretation, Culver City, CA)
February 12, 2010
Curtin Hall 175

Befitting the theme of this year’s Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference—“Obsolescence”—Matthew Coolidge brought an eye-popping keynote presentation on “Monuments of Disintegration” to Curtin 175 on February 12. Coolidge, the founder and director of the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), took a captivated audience on a tour of generally unseen American landscapes of disintegration, decay, ruin, and waste. These places—“the terrestrial by-products of production and consumption”—“contain clues that support a more complete understanding of our culture, condition, and future.”

Coolidge opened by grounding the activities of CLUI—which is interested in all built landscapes, not just the disintegrated variety—on the Duchampian sensibility that “art takes place in the viewing of the art” and in an Heisenbergian notion that the act of observation is in itself transformative. Another principle underlying their work is the recognition that “every time you look at something you are turning your back on something else.”

At the core of CLUI is its Land Use Database, a collection of “unusual and exemplary sites.” Available and searchable through their web site—www.clui.org—the database includes Wisconsin’s own Badger Army Ammunition Plant near Baraboo and, just across Highway 12, Dr. Evermor’s rambling Forevertron sculpture.

CLUI uses individual elements from the database to create public exhibitions, publications, and tours that are typically regional and/or thematic in nature. The remainder of Coolidge’s talk took the audience through some of these thematic and regional interests. For instance, the American West’s Great Basin region is particularly intriguing since it poses “special notions of liminality, of self-containment, and of isolation.” As a network of watersheds that has no outlet to the ocean, the rain that falls within it stays within it: it is essentially a big bowl with no drain. And as a physiogeographic space that captures the waste stream, it also captures many of our socially constructed detritus: it has “more large-scale
NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) land uses”—nuclear test sites, waste storage, military bombing ranges, open-pit mines—“than anywhere else.”

“The goal of driving is, after all, parking.”
—Matthew Coolidge

Also of interest to Coolidge are acts of “terrestrial miniaturization.” The Army Corps of Engineers, for example, created two of the largest waterway models in the world: a 200-acre model of the 1.25 million square mile Mississippi river basin and an eight-acre indoor model of the Chesapeake Bay, our country’s largest and most complex estuary.

These engineering marvels, constructed during the final days of the analog era, have since been replaced by digital modeling and are now thoroughly obsolete. The Mississippi basin model sits dormant and degraded to a point beyond repair, while the Chesapeake Bay model was ground up into aggregate for road construction.

Other points of interest in Coolidge’s travelogue of decay and degradation included Detroit, the grand earthworks from the 1960s and 70s, dead malls, landfills, ship dismantling sites, river dams and their environs, and the “bird’s foot” delta of the Mississippi River. Naturally, or un-naturally (as the case may be), a certain unexpected beauty can inhabit these monuments of disintegration, such that an abandoned strip mall might be seen as sculpture or that parking lot signage might lead one to an epiphany: “The goal of driving is, after all, parking.”