

He dug a hole and, using the earth he removed, created a cylindrical tower of the hole's exact same dimensions. These two forms—void and solid—were placed next to each other, creating an optical rhyme. Imagine the three-hundred-foot high column in Guatemala City, with all its debris and bodily remains, triumphantly erected next to the sinkhole. Would we be sickened or heartened, or both?

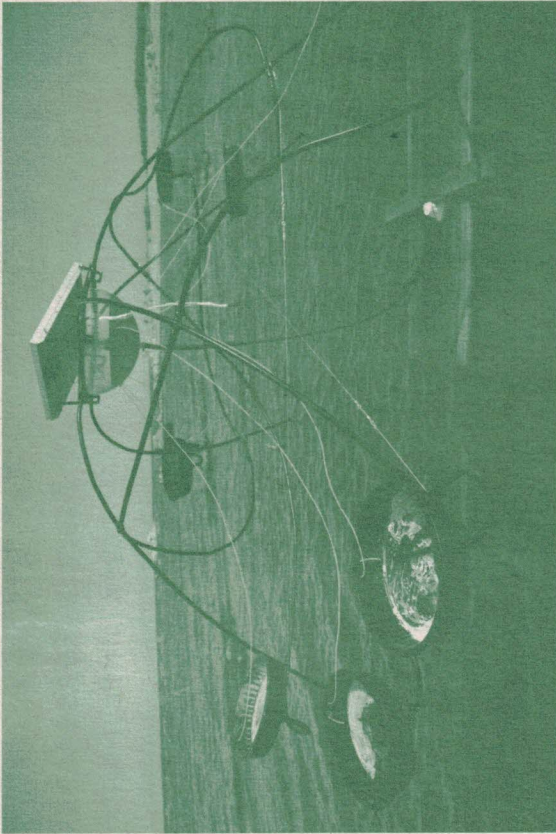
NOTES

1. Ker Than, "Sinkhole in Guatemala: Giant Could Get Even Bigger," *National Geographic* (June 1, 2010)
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/06/100601-sinkhole-in-guatemala-2010-world-science/>.
2. For more on the embodied/disembodied tension of drone visuality, see Caren Kaplan's short online text "Drone Sight," in *Soldier Exposures and Technical Publics* <http://publicbooks.org/artmedia/soldier-exposures-and-technical-publics#kaplan>.
3. William R. Halliday, "Pseudokarst in the 21st Century," *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies* 69, no. 1: 103.
4. Anthony Gucciardi, "Why is the Media Ignoring the Mass Sinkholes Popping Up Around the Country?" *Natural News* (December 2, 2012)
<http://www.infowars.com/why-is-the-media-ignoring-the-mass-sinkholes-popping-up-around-the-country/>.
5. Richard Luscombe, "Settling in Sinkhole Alley: 'If You Live in Florida They're Just a Fact of Life,'" *The Guardian* (Aug. 14, 2013)
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/14/sinkhole-alley-florida-fact-of-life>.
6. Drew Harwell, "Florida's Foreclosure Rate Highest in U.S. in 2012," *Tampa Bay Times* (January 16, 2013)
<http://www.tampabay.com/news/business/realestate/floridas-foreclosure-rate-highest-in-us-in-2012/1270948>.

THE SITE OF ALTERITY: A FAULT DEFINED TOPOGRAPHY

Dominic Paul Miller

Popular curiosity for the Salton Sea in Imperial Valley, CA extends from many lines: post-apocalyptic fetish, nostalgic Modernist ruin, gross manifestation of anthropocentric intervention, just to name a few. Each encompasses much of its otherness as a local. In 2013, I produced *Salt Enclosure*, a collaboration with student engineers, to develop a stand-alone remediation system for the Salton Sea. The sculpture is installed along the shore of the southeastern edge of the sea near the Sonny Bono Riparian Habitat. Our conversations leading to the production of the sculpture focused on governmental efforts to desalinate the sea as yet another intervention into its complex ecology. The immediate region has evolved into a thriving habitat for migratory bird species along the Pacific Flyway, as previous coastal locations have been eroded by human development. Our negotiation of the site, as a confluence of forces both social and physical, cut across a classic tension between design as a function seeking domain and art as critical and experiential. Representation of the site as systemic of engineered intervention and entropic physical conditions was a persistent remainder of that tension. As nature is perverted into moments of isolation, the figuration of ecological events creates yet more idols for capitalist consumption, especially within the context of artistic production.



Salt Enclosure, sculpture as sited in the Salton Sea in Imperial Valley, CA, 2013.
Photo: Dominic Paul Miller

The sculptural component of the project was achieved over a six-month period. We began with a site sketch and speculative rendering of the sculpture. Much of the time proceeding was spent in a process of deconstructing the location as emblematic of engineering's role inside of social production. Damming of the Colorado River failed in 1905 as water was being diverted into Imperial Valley for agricultural purposes. Water flows northward, counter-directionally to the large delta deposited above the Sea of Cortez in the south. In 2004, the Army Corp of Engineers conducted an extensive investigation into the possibility of desalinating the sea. The effort was deemed unsuitable due to costs and impracticality stemming from the process. More recently, additional efforts propose halving the sea. Not addressed comprehensibly, however, is the impact agricultural waste water continues to have as it increases the salinity of the sea, an outcome similar to that of the Mississippi River's "dead zone." Our efforts as collaborators to conceive a functioning system for extracting salts at the site eventually determined a net-balance scenario in which the scale of salt intake and outtake

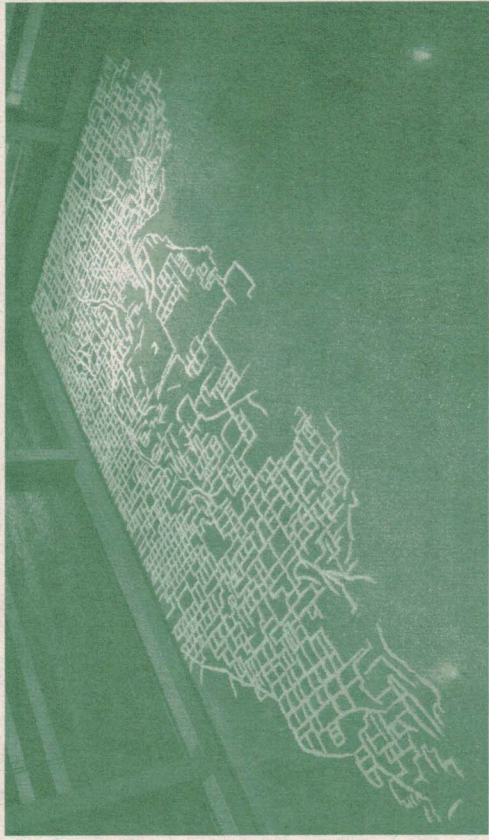
was also factorable to fresh water production. Ultimately, functionality became more elusive as the scale of its requisite outcome grew. Meanwhile, the specificity of the site in question increasingly resisted determination. Divisions between productive systems, such that as in art and engineering, agriculture and engineering, and human and non-human socialization, indicate an a priori alterity situated within social material topology. Otherness as the inquiry of site proposes to uncover individual subjectivity embedded within a broader milieu. It is the fracture between the individual and social mass that introduces a disjunctive productivity in the mode of figuration as it seeks to maintain systematic heterogeneity.

The site of fracture instanced by the project began within the division between art and engineering. This moment grew, however, to span the gap between intervention and critical modes of display. Bridging the site for exhibition purposes risks annexing it for capitalist consumption. Treated as a discrete location within an ecological continuum, representation of the area produces an enclosure allowing certain identities to pass while blocking others. Traditionally, an enclosure protects a habitat from browsing cattle foreign to specific ecology. The resultant interior becomes an exclusion to continuity. Alterity of site locates a field rising from fracture. It is here that we can attempt to map a topography of the individual, but only through a scalable register to that of the social mass. This type of scalability may be considered an entropic frequency, leveling an overall sameness or, conversely, as one which permeates forms as it instantiates heterogeneity. It is both a productive force in the manner of ordered musical notation (fractions of a whole) and the conventional scale of a map, which has an ideological basis.

The artwork alone cannot construct a type of agency in this moment of disjunction. What I'm arguing here is also inscriptive at the immediate site of the subject: a self-contract through which the material basis of the artwork is inherently dialogical to the site in question. It is a contract bound to the construction of the social through consistent (massive) iteration. Scale, too, takes primacy in that process. Often we

forego the collective mass in the interrogation of subjective construction, yet it is precisely there that the fracture may become productive. Scale, in this sense, becomes territorial and regional, formalizing into a motif, along the rhythmic or seismic line: a fault defined topography cross cut by chain reaction or reference. This motif is an inherent localizing frequency as scale registers an interior territory. Whereas the site of subjectivity often indicates a polar opposition to the scale of social construction, it may be understood, here, as the receptive iteration of the focal, which is then scalable to the massive. It is the over-determination, meanwhile, of the other within that mass that becomes problematic. While it remains necessary to consider the aggregation of the whole, it must be achieved through an understanding of fracture and disjunction. Artworks that isolate the local from its broader ontological contexts effectively level the artwork's topological potential through a violent homogeneity. Scale is then incapable of crosscutting form; it merely exists as an exclusion bound to normative opposition.

I return to the issue of site and the artwork's productive outcomes. How may the artwork, as a referent to the site, configure perceptual encounter of the site in hopes of maintaining a heterogeneous topology? Transferred to an exhibition, the once public artwork becomes virtual. It must be read as an excerpt from the material conditions of its production.¹ It becomes a synecdoche of the space that previously encompassed it. Within the new institutional setting, however, it performs an entirely different function. The artwork transforms the neutral space of exhibition (the insertion of work within a certain space of viewership may have political implications but is, for the moment, less directly indicated by an immediate encounter of form.) This transformation of the artwork into a virtual continuum may distance the emergent objects, but allows for place of encounter nonetheless.



Salt Map, Imperial Valley (cropped and tiled), 2013. SUBTERRANEA installation view.
Photo: Dominic Paul Miller

Components from *Salt Enclosure* were shown as part of the exhibition, *SUBTERRANEA*, at UC San Diego.² Photographs of the sculpture sited in the Salton Sea were displayed alongside a map created with salt compounds collected by the sculpture. The map details the agricultural belt sitting below the Salton Sea along with the river networks delivering water to the sea. The map becomes a productive remainder to the sculpture's intended functionality through a critical implication of agriculture's impact on the sea. Does this establish a necessary methodology to incite a material encounter to an artwork within the space of exhibition, and therefore a functional scalability to social construction? Moreover, does this indicate an impossibility of form (in this case the original sculpture,) to pass into the status of artifact while maintaining its original *presentness*? If the object is maintained as an event with historical capacity, may form establish a mode of transitive presence? Can form carry with it the trace of both its surroundings and production across time and displacement? Certainly, we can acknowledge the experiential history produced by an artwork, which although virtual or projected onto the object, maintains at minimum the discrete ground from which authenticity may be imagined. It is an artwork precisely because of

its capacity to cut across time while bringing with it the multiple, constructive frequencies that historically encircle it. In this sense, the artwork is a living container for the past, but only, perhaps, if subjected to a stratigraphic encounter. If an event is to be taken as a historical marker it must break from the past as it negates the field of its surroundings.³ To what extent can the artwork carry remains of its original setting?

It is impossible to uncover a location unaffected by the political, as no site can exist entirely detached from culture or human construction. However, we still maintain the proposed neutral space of encounter—the exhibition context. The integration of ideology into such spaces becomes an a priori condition of any artwork. This is evident in Michael Asher's, *Untitled*, (1991) located on the campus of UC San Diego. The site situates the work into two parallel layers: as part of the Stuart Collection, a private collection of public (read: neutral) artworks sited throughout the campus and as a referent to the site's militaristic history. The piece consists of a marble drinking fountain positioned near the singular remaining evidence of the area's previous identity as a military installation. The marble replica of a ubiquitous commercial drinking fountain sits near a flagpole and plaque indicating the history of the site as Camp Matthews. The viewer locates oneself within the confluence of institutional and behavioral conditions. The question of translocation within the space of representation, therefore, posits the encounter within the institutional setting as inherently political. How access via the artwork's actual "public" is constructed within the temporary archive of exhibition becomes another formal dimension within the total schema of the work. Ultimately, through the space of viewership, the seismic topology of social terrain becomes reassembled in a bureaucratic motif which partitions objects and signs in a relative, harmonic scale. The internal conditions for visibility meet new criteria for their configuration within the site of viewership. While previously what was extracted from a location formed the material basis for the artwork, once situated within the site of exhibition, the partitioning of forms effects a

new materiality. Subsequent integration of the two motifs consolidates the artwork's materiality *en masse*. This is to suggest that the translocation from sitedness, to production, to that of representation enacts a totalizing schema of the artwork.

Within the components of *Salt Enclosure* little remains visible of the processes of collaboration and requisite integration of disciplines. One of the exciting moments within that process was a discussion of land art in the western United States with the engineers involved with the project. It wasn't until we began working that I discovered Robert Smithson's own writings on the Salton Sea. Looking with the engineers at works such as *Spiral Jetty* as aesthetic encounters to the West became one of the modalities guiding our work. The evolution of our structure prefigured its own photographic documentation as well as physical integration within an exhibition setting. Meanwhile, as a monument, the sculpture indicates a visual failure to intervene successfully at the scale of its territory. Within the domain of engineering, this net-balance scenario drove the design towards certain features while maintaining some of its original characteristics as speculation and abstraction. The form emerging from this collaboration is imbued with fragments of the dialogue and negotiation of the site as an impossible totality.⁴

NOTES

1. This section is indebted to Smithson's writings on the "non-site" as prefigured by his project with Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton for the air terminal between Dallas and Fort Worth. Robert Smithson, "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site," in Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack D. Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 51-60.
2. *Salt Enclosure* (day 2, noon sun), *Salt Enclosure* (day 08, plant light) & *Salt Map*, *Imperial Valley* (cropped and tiled) are part of the exhibition SUBTERRANEA at UC San Diego's Structural and Materials Engineering Building Visual Arts Gallery, curated by Elizabeth D. Miller and Melinda Guillen.
3. Through Nietzsche's challenge to the pursuit of origin (*Ursprung*.) Foucault identifies origin as a place of inevitable loss. It lies before the body as a witness to birth. Uncovering origins within history unmasks the face of the other as genealogy "excavates

**TOPOLOGIES OF THE
UNDERGROUND**
metaphors, extensions and speculations



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