Julia Modes

Toxic Beauty: Contemporary Art Responding to Industrial Disaster

Julia Modes
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
julia.modes@hu-berlin.de

In this paper, sculptural works by the two contemporary artists, Saskia Krafft and Silvia Noronha, will be described and discussed in detail. In their works *Salton Sea* (Krafft, 2018), *The Future of Stones* (Noronha, 2017) and *Shifting Geologies* (Noronha, 2021–ongoing) both artists address human-caused environmental catastrophes. However, at first glance, their works, often a result from an in-depth engagement with the areas of interest, appear fragile and beautiful. This tension between aesthetic appearance, heavy content and even toxic materials constitutes the fertility of the works. A comparison with Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) maps out the lineage in which Krafft and Noronha stand. However, no monumental *Sites* were built with heavy machinery, nor travel encouraged. Instead, objects of poetic beauty were created to enchant the viewer, while offering a critical reflection. Since the works do not only address but are built from materials gathered at sites of environmental destruction, they offer the viewers an experience of intellectual realization through aesthetic fascination.

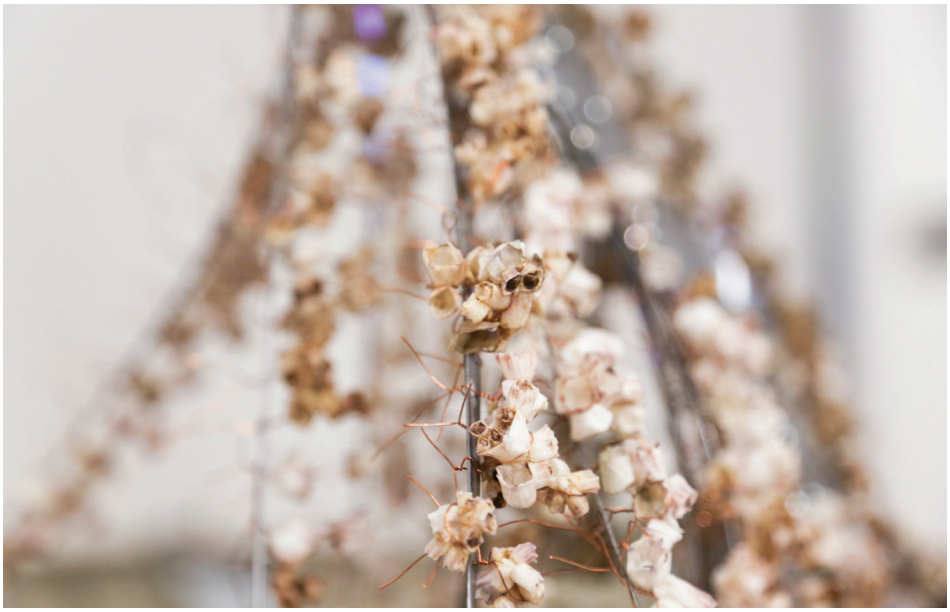
Keywords: contemporary art, anthropocene, sculpture, Land Art, industrial disaster, environmental destruction, toxic materials

I.

In 2018 the German artist Saskia Krafft executed a sculpture entitled *Salton Sea* (fig. 1). Several flat sheet metal stripes are mounted together to form a long, convex band, tilting slightly forward, as if it were a waterfall. On the frontal half, narrow iron bands are screwed to the central stripe, fanning out to the sides, pointing their sharp tips to the ground. The silver, gold and bronze colored screw heads in the central axis appear as lively water bubbles, while the white and brownish attachments of the side branches look like frothy spray. Maybe one can see little copper wires, like fine hairs, blurring the borders of the object, and creat-

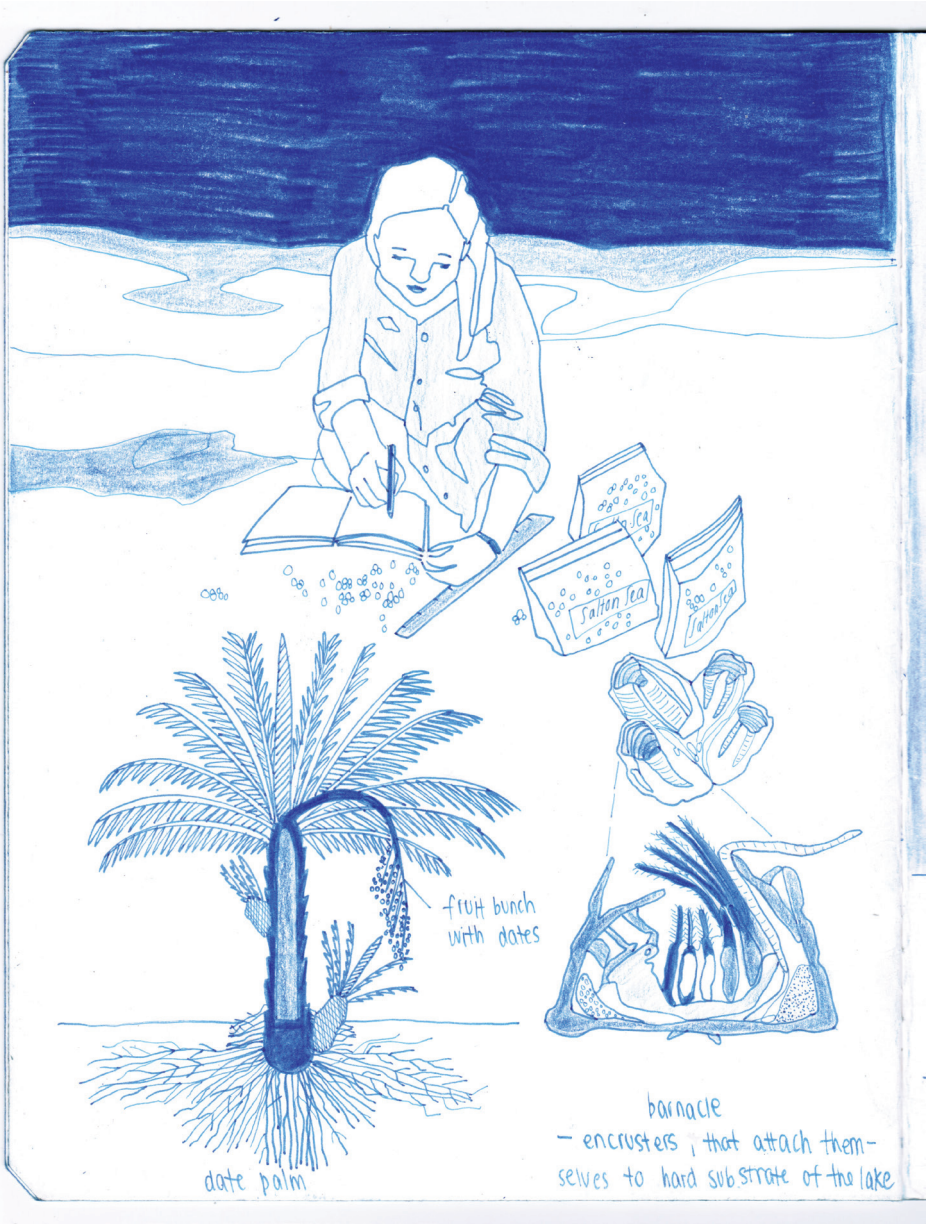
1 Saskia Krafft, *Salton Sea*, barnacles from Salton Sea, sheet metal, metal hardware, copper wire, chain, 2018

ing a tingling appearance. Dangling from the ceiling, on a small metal chain, the sculpture appears fragile and poetic. Moving closer, this impression changes. The sharpness of the metal's edges becomes apparent. The central dots are no longer lively bubbles, but screw heads with defined center notches. The pointed ends of the thin metal stripes seem poised as if to cause harm. And the loose ends of the copper wire feel suddenly discomforting – almost itchy – pointing in all directions, as if to ensure one does not come too close, or dare to touch them. What they affix to the iron structure now becomes visible and gives a clue to the work's riddle. Dead barnacles, their color shades range from rosy white to dull grey–brown, are mounted to the iron branches (fig. 2). These once living lake dwellers, hundreds of them, are tied to the steel lifelessly.



2 Saskia Krafft, *Salton Sea* (detail), barnacles from Salton Sea, sheet metal, metal hardware, copper wire, chain, 2018

As the title suggests, the sculpture is a product of the artist's in-depth study of the nature reserve where Krafft collected these barnacles: Salton Sea, in the desert of southeastern California, the once fresh-water terminal lake formed in 1905 after accidental flooding from the Colorado River.[1] It is maintained by water runoff from the agricultural irrigation system fed by the river. An island of water in the arid American West, the lake became an important stopover for millions of migratory birds.[2] Recognizing its ecological importance, in 1930 the State of California set aside 32,766 acres on the southern end of the lake as the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge.[3] Humans too learned to enjoy the lake and in the 1950s created a State Recreation Area on the northern shore, increasing its appeal as a tourist attraction. To this day postcards attest to its former popularity. However, industrial agriculture gradually turned the lake into a toxic landscape, the site of massive fish and bird die-offs. Agricultural runoff, laced with fertilizers and pesticides used in the valley's date plantations, flow into the terminal lake. As the lake water evaporates in the desert heat, it leaves behind an increasingly potent, high-saline, toxic brew.[4]



3 Saskia Krafft, *Field Trip* (Salton Sea Sketchbook), colored pencil on paper, 2018

In 2018, Krafft went on a field expedition to the lake after her residency at Andrea Zittel's *A-Z West – Institute of Investigative Living* in Joshua Tree, California.[5] On site, she learned about the devastating effects industrial agriculture had on the lake and its wildlife. She took photographs of dead fish and birds, which she then drew in blue colored pencil on the white paper of her field sketchbook. Further, she made drawings of the area's geography and the endangered bird species, which once had found refuge near the lake. This collection of drawings and photographs is part of Krafft's larger body of work entitled *Salton Sea*. In one drawing she depicts her own research activity, like the act of note taking, sketching and collecting materials in labeled bags (fig. 3). On the same drawing, next to a sectional view of a barnacle, the shape of a date palm tree is depicted and leads towards the sculpture's shape and material: it is the fruit bunch of the palm tree, hanging from the top of the plant and shaded by the leaves. The dead barnacles are tied to the iron skeleton structure as if they were juicy dates ready to be harvested. It is this contrast between fertility and toxicity, between the living and the dead, between light beauty and heavy content that constitutes the complexity of Krafft's work. Most often, solely the sculpture is exhibited, hanging from the ceiling, fragile and poetic as well as sharp-edged – janiform like the beautiful but toxic Salton Sea.

II.

A similar tension between a poetic aesthetic and the brutality of the object's origin can be found in the works of the Brazilian artist Silvia Noronha. On 5 November 2015, the dam of an open-pit iron mine's retaining basin in southeastern Brazil collapsed, flooding Bento Rodriguez and downstream villages with a cascade of mud and toxic mining waste.[6] Three months after this human-caused environmental catastrophe, Noronha, who was living and working in Berlin, flew to Brazil to collect contaminated soil from the site. A seven-minute video, usually exhibited alongside the sculptural works that resulted from this visit, shows the material's origin. Noronha walks through a wasteland of mostly dried mud, collecting soil at a river bed. Here and there remnants of the former human life of the area emerges from the ground: a car-wreck, some wires, a plastic canister or the remaining structure of a house. And among it all walks Noronha, dressed in

black, testing the solidity of the mud around a river bed and shuffling soil with her gloved hands into mason jars.

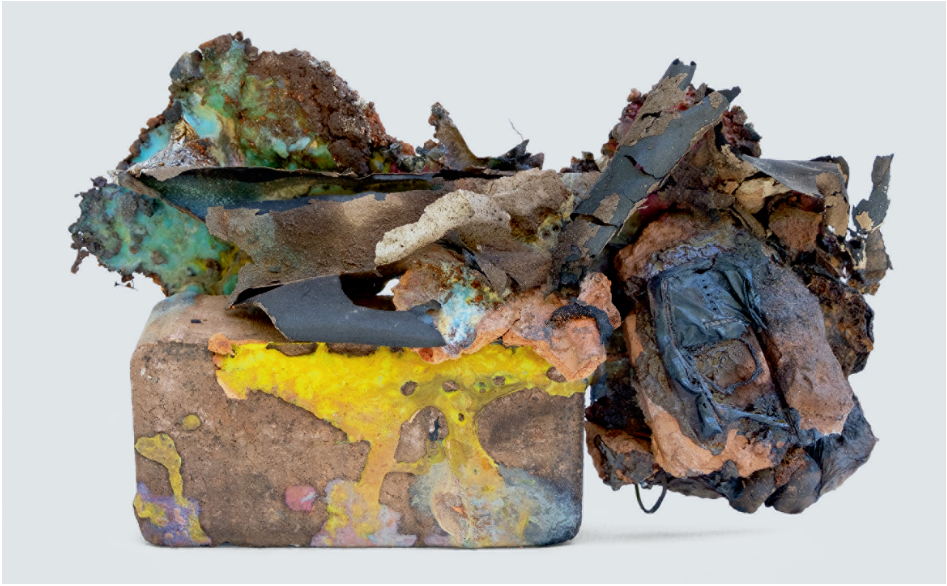
With this raw material, she simulated geologic processes to create *Future Stones.*[7] Using equipment provided by the Institute of Applied Geoscience and the Geochemical Laboratory of the Technische Universität of Berlin, Noronha analyzed the soil samples and learned about artificial stone creation through the application of high pressure and temperature. This acquired knowledge she then applied to her collected soils, essentially fast-forwarding the natural process of rock formation.[8] The result is a pseudo-alchemistic, speculative prediction of a post-human geology. Rock can be understood as a medium that preserves information about the moment of its creation and subsequent existence, thus, future stones will testify to the present-day interactions between humans and the environment. With her 2017 work *The Future of Stones. A Speculative Analysis of Contaminated Material*,[9] Noronha points towards the increasingly precarious interferences between natural ecology and human impact, as well as the development of a man-made *next nature.*[10]

Looking at Noronha's stones, similarly to Krafft's *Salton Sea*, one is first struck by the object's aesthetic grace (fig. 4). The matte black texture, sometimes laced with shades of dark red, is reminiscent of volcanic stones. The irregular surface cracks open at times to expose segments of shiny blue or green, sparkling in the sunlight. Little shiny colorful speckles sit on the surface like magical pearls. These objects, no larger than an open palm, look like remnants from a fairyland – playful and poetic – ready to take us to an imaginary world. However, the knowledge of their origin gives this excited wonder a bitter aftertaste and poses the question, how can beauty emerge from a moment of natural destruction?

Silvia Noronha has continued her artistic and geologic task of stone making. In her latest project, *Shifting Geologies*,[11] she moved the focus away from environmental catastrophe to the status quo – or does she attest to the status quo as environmental catastrophe? That might remain in question. Using her knowledge on simulated geologic processes from her previous project, she applied high temperatures and pressures to a collection of assembled materials in order to create a new form of conglomerate rock. This time her raw materials were objects found during her day-to-day life, often from the streets of Berlin. Despite their more mun-

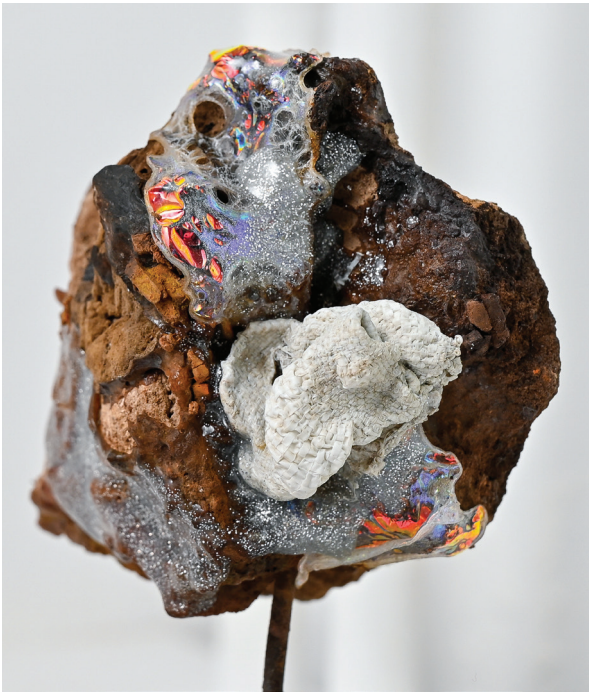
4 Silvia Noronha, *Untitled*, 18 stones made from soil samples taken after the 2015 Mariana Dam disaster in Brazil, 2017

dane ingredients, the outcome is more colorful and extravagant, larger and materially complex. In one piece a cobblestone serves as plinth and object body at the same time. On it, bright yellow material is melted, blurring into purple on the left corner, pink in the middle and light blue in the right bottom corner of one side (fig. 5). Above it, a mix of materials is mounted, ranging from plastic to glass, from metal and concrete to leaves and soil clumps. It is difficult to make out each distinct material; it appears as if Noronha had put a garbage incinerator on pause, scooped out a clump of its contents, and slammed it on the cobblestone. The mixed media mush takes on the shape of a bowtie and, in its colorful appearance it could very well serve as the eccentric and extravagant decoration of a birthday present (fig. 6). Another stone, with its black and reddish-brown base, shows at first glance similarities to the *Future Stones* from 2017 (fig. 7). However, taking a closer look, red, yellow and purple colors swirl on its surface, reminiscent of visual hallucinations as imagined by Terry Gilliam in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.[12] This impression is reinforced by a varnish of silver glitter poured over sections of the stone. A dirty, white scrap of fabric, perhaps a piece of a gauze bandage, breaks the playful color



5 Silvia Noronha, *Untitled*, from the series *Shifting Geologies*, 2020 - ongoing, mixed media

6 Silvia Noronha, *Untitled*, from the series *Shifting Geologies*, 2020 - ongoing, mixed media



7 Silvia Noronha, *Untitled*, from the series *Shifting Geologies*, 2020 - ongoing, mixed media, installation view (detail), 2021

associations. This dirty white fabric, so clearly a part of our everyday life, functions as a *repoussoir* that throws us back into the close examination of the object because it gives us a clue and tells us that these materials that invited us to innocently admire them, entranced by the object's varying textures and colors, are in fact pollutants that we bring into our own habitat.

III.

The works of Saskia Krafft and Silvia Noronha are to be regarded in the lineage of the Land Artists, such as Robert Smithson. Also, Smithson was concerned with natural and industrial processes, while creating several works including materials taken form nature that he had collected at specific locations.[13] These pieces, made to be exhibited in galleries, he called *Nonsites*.[14] However, similar to his colleagues, such as Michael Heizer, Smithson is predominantly known for his

8 Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water, Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970

large-scale site-specific works, which he called *Sites*. In his *Spiral Jetty* from 1970 he amassed 6000 tons of basalt rocks to form an almost 5-meter-wide and 460-meter-long jetty in the form of a counterclockwise spiral (fig. 8).[15] The jetty protrudes at Rozel Point into Utah's Great Salt Lake near an industrial ruin of oil works from the 1920s.[16] It is located about 1000 kilometers north-east of Salton Sea. Just like Krafft's lake of interest, the Great Salt Lake is also a terminal lake with high salinity. A high presence of microbial life caused the reddish coloration of the water that initially attracted the artist to this specific site (Smithson, 1996, 142-145). The presence of a nearby industrial ruin also caught the artist's attention, since he claimed: "the best sites for 'earth art' are sites that have been disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization, or nature's own devastation." (Smithson, 1973, 65)[17] Therefore, the location of *Spiral Jetty* seems to constitute a perfect site with its nearby industrial ruin, as a remainder of reckless industrialization, as well as the salt lake as a natural yet inhospitable habitat. Constructed at a time when the water level was particularly low, the jetty submerged in 1972, two years after its creation. However, due to droughts that caused the lake to recede, the sculpture reappeared in 1993 (Ursprung, 2003, 323).[18] Ever since another period of submersion from 1997 till 2002 the jetty has remained visible.[19] While *Spiral Jetty*, as a site-specific and

therefore immobile work still can be visited in Utah, Smithson also created a series of *Nonsites* that are shown in galleries worldwide. For *Spiral Jetty* this includes several photographs and a 35-minute 16mm color film, which documented its formation and allowed Smithson to communicate further thoughts and ideas about the piece.[20] As a record of the physical but stationary and relatively inaccessible work, the film was considered "a work of art in itself – since it is about light, color, scale, etc." (Smithson quoted in Ursprung, 2003, 317). In November of 1970 the film was shown simultaneously at Dwan Gallery in New York and Ace Gallery in Vancouver, which had jointly provided the funds for the work and film (Ursprung, 2003, 317). This concept of *Sites* and *Nonsites* was a common phenomenon in Land Art and, in the case of Smithson, often contained both documentary materials, such as aerial photographs and films, and geological artifacts displaced from the sites.

Unlike Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, the works of Saskia Krafft and Silvia Noronha do not have a *Site* one could travel to and examine. No monumental rock formation was created at the area of study. Even though their materials were taken from a specific place at a specific time, and the catastrophic histories of those places play crucial roles in the works, no pilgrimage is encouraged. Instead, their works, refraining from the grand gestures of moving soil and rocks with heavy machinery, address a more general and less site-specific problem. Even though derived from a particular incident, they point towards larger issues that play out on a global scale, such as the hazards of industrialization, the lack of protection for nature, or the deadly consequence of overusing chemical fertilizers. By collecting materials, but not making the location the focal point of their art, Krafft and Noronha enable their works to transcend the local sites of their genesis and encourage a general reflection on the relationship between humans and nature. The natural matter is the work's material foundation, but solely serves the poetic meditations on the permanent rearrangement of the planet's ecology in the age of the Anthropocene.[21]

While Krafft's and Noronha's artistic processes are guided by similar intentions, they differ in their methods. Krafft nearly adopts the role of a scientific researcher, operating as collector, documenting the state of existence with the camera, taking notes, and retrieving samples. The final sculpture fuses her re-

search and gathered materials into an aesthetic object that communicates her acquired knowledge through an artistic gesture towards beauty. Noronha, on the other hand, takes on the role of an oracle. By collaborating with scientists, she foresees the future, and offers the beholder a glimpse of that vision with her geological artifacts. The beauty of her objects is not a result of active manipulation, as she hardly interferes in the artificial process of accelerated rock formation. Thus, in a magical way, her work articulates nature's cunning ability to produce beauty, even if its components are highly toxic. In this way Noronha's work holds us in the tension between the beauty produced by natural, at times simulated processes and confronts us with the specter of destruction.

In 2016, the professor of History of Consciousness Donna Haraway attested in the introduction of her book *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* that we "live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times" (Haraway, 2016, 1) marked by a simultaneous appearance of "vastly unjust patterns of pain and joy" (Haraway, 2016, 1). She continues claiming: "The task is to become capable [...] of response. [...] Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (Haraway, 2016, 1). It feels as if Haraway had Krafft's and Noronha's works in mind while writing. By addressing two human caused natural catastrophes in their artistic practice, Krafft and Noronha are responding to human caused natural destruction and thus embrace the dialectic of painful destruction and joyful beauty. At the same time their artworks with discomfort-stirring contents are aesthetically calm and poetic, shown in literally quiet exhibition spaces. Therefore, one can conclude in Haraway's terminology, that through their artistic practice Krafft and Noronha are staying with the trouble.

Endnotes

1 John Stafford Brown published on the region of Salton Sea as early as 1923 (Brown, 1923).

2 On birds at Salton Sea, see Patten et al., 2003.

3 On the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, see: https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Sonny_Bono_Salton_Sea/about.html (accessed 25 January 2022).

4 On the chemical evolution of the Salton Sea, see Schroeder et al., 2002.

5 Conversation with the artist. For further biographical information, see: https://www.saskiakrafft.com/.

6 An article in *The Guardian* from 25 November 2015 gives an impression of the disaster: https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/nov/25/brazils-mining-tragedy-dam-preventable-disaster-samarco-vale-bhp-billiton (accessed 25 January 2022).

7 In the following, objects from Silvia Noronha's series *The Future of Stones. A Speculative Analysis of Contaminated Material* (2017) will be called *Future Stones*.

8 Conversation with the artist.

9 For further pictures and information, see https://silvianoronha.com/future-of-stones/ (accessed 25 January 2022).

10 On the discourse on the so-called *next nature,* see van Mensvoort, 2020; https://nextnature.net/ (accessed 25 January 2022).

11 For further pictures and information, see https://silvianoronha.com/shifting-geologies-2021/ (accessed 25 January 2022).

12 Terry Gilliam: *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, 1998, 1h 58m.

13 For Smithson's sculptures, see Hobbs, 1981.

14 On the dialectic of *Sites* and *Nonsites,* see Alloway, 1981.

15 The exact data of the jetty varies in different publications. The website of the Dia Art Foundation states the measurements 18.000'x180', Hobbs states 6,650 tons of material and on the measurements of the coil: 1.500' long and 15' wide, Ursprung mentions almost 7.000 tons of material with a width of about 5m and a length of about 500m (Hobbs, 1981, 191; Ursprung, 2003, 317; https://www.diaart.org/exhibition/exhibitions-projects/robert-smithson-spiral-jetty-site (accessed 25 January 2022).

16 On *Spiral Jetty,* see: Smithson, 1972, 222-232; Hobbs, 1981, 191-197; Ursprung, 2003, 316-325; Cooke et al. 2005, passim; Ehninger, 2013, 315-319; Schramm, 2014, 13-19; Dwan, 2016, 265-267.

17 Reprinted in Smithson, 1996, 157-171, 165. Also Smithson's text *The Monuments of Passaic*, 1967 published in *Artforum* shows the artist's interest in industrial sites or remnants (Smithson, 1967).

18 Smithson himself had witnessed the jetty submerging in June and July 1971 and reappearing in August the same year. See Ursprung, 2003, 323-324. Hobbs and Shapiro mention that just before his accidental death in 1973 Smithson considered building the *Spiral Jetty* up, for it to be visible again (Hobbs, 1981, 196-197; Shapiro, 1995, 196).

19 On the reemergence of *Spiral Jetty,* see: Ehninger, 2013, 315-316, fn. 95; Schramm, 2014, 19.

20 On the film *Spiral Jetty,* see: Childs, 1981, 68-81; Shapiro, 1995, 5-20; Smithson, 1996, 138-142; Baker, 2005; Ehninger, 2013, 319-325; Schramm, 2014, 170-189. Serge Paul has transcribed and annotated the spoken word in the film (published in Loe, 2017, 23-25).

21 Also, Smithson created works in which he addressed human caused natural destruction. In his work series *Upside Down Tree*, he planted trees upside down, which James Meyer calls "a violent reversal of its natural state" (Meyer, 2016, 18). *First Upside Down Tree*, (date unknown) Alfred, New York (Meyer, 2016, 377, fn 7); *Second Upside Down Tree* (1969) Captiva Island, Florida (Hobbs, 1981, 149, cat. no. 41); *Third Upside Down Tree* (1969) Yucatan, Mexico (Hobbs, 1981, 164, cat. no. 45).

References

- Alloway L., Site/Nonsite, in: *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (ed. R. Hobbs), Ithaca-London, 1981, pp. 41-45.
- Baker G., The Cinema Model, in: *Robert Smithson, Spiral Jetty: True Fictions, False Realities* (ed. L. Cooke et al.), Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 2005, pp. 79-113.
- Brown J. S., *The Salton Sea Region, California: a geographic, geologic, and hydrologic reconnaissance with a guide to desert watering places*, Washington, 1923.
- Childs E. C, Robert Smithson and Film: The Spiral Jetty Reconsidered, *Arts magazine*, 56/2, Oct. 1981, pp. 68-81.

- Cooke L., Baker G. and Kelly K. J., *Robert Smithson, Spiral Jetty: True Fictions, False Realities*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 2005.
- Dwan V., Writings, in: *Dwan Gallery: Los Angeles to New York 1959-1971* (ed. J. Meyer), National Gallery of Art Washington, Chicago, 2016, pp. 241-283.
- Ehninger E., *Vom Farbefeld zur Land Art: Ortsgebundenheit in der amerikanischen Kunst, 1950-70*, Munich, 2013.
- Flam J. (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings,* Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1996.
- Haraway D., *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham-London, 2016.
- Hobbs R., *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, Ithaca-London, 1981.
- Loe H. S., *The Spiral Jetty Encyclo: Exploring Robert Smithson's Earthwork through Time and Place*, Salt Lake City, 2017.
- Mensvoort K. van, *Next Nature: Why Technology is our Natural Future,* Amsterdam, 2020.
- Meyer J., The Art Gallery in an Era of Mobility, in: *Dwan Gallery: Los Angeles to New York 1959–1971* (ed. J. Meyer), National Gallery of Art Washington, Chicago, 2016, pp. 17-97.
- Patten M. A., McCaskie G. and Unitt P., *Birds of the Salton Sea: status, biogeography, and ecology,* Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 2003.
- Schramm S., *Land Art: Ortskonzepte und mediale Vermittlung Zwischen Site und Non-Site,* Berlin, 2014.
- Schroeder R. A., Orem W. H. and Kharaka Y. K., Chemical Evolution of the Salton Sea, California: nutrient and selenium dynamics, *Hydrobiologia* 473, 2002, pp. 23-45.
- Shapiro G., *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1995.
- Smithson R., The Monuments of Passaic, 1967, *Artforum,* VI/4, December 1967, pp. 48-51.
- Smithson R., Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape, *Artforum*, XI/6, February 1973, pp. 62-68.

- Smithson R., The Spiral Jetty, *Arts of the Environment* (ed. G. Kepes), New York, 1972, pp. 222-232.
- Smithson R., A Cinematic Atopia, *Artforum*, X/1, September 1971, pp. 53-55.
- Ursprung P., *Grenzen der Kunst: Allan Kaprow und das Happening, Robert Smithson und die Land Art*, Munich, 2003.

Illustrations

Fig. 1 Saskia Krafft, *Salton Sea*, barnacles from Salton Sea, sheet metal, metal hardware, copper wire, chain, 2018, photo: Saskia Krafft.

Fig. 2 Saskia Krafft, *Salton Sea* (detail), barnacles from Salton Sea, sheet metal, metal hardware, copper wire, chain, 2018, photo: Saskia Krafft.

Fig. 3 Saskia Krafft, *Field Trip* (Salton Sea Sketchbook), colored pencil on paper, 2018, photo: Saskia Krafft.

Fig. 4 Silvia Noronha, *Untitled*, from the series *The Future of Stones – A Speculative Analysis of Contaminated Material*, 18 stones made from soil samples taken after the 2015 Mariana Dam disaster in Brazil, after a simulation of the rock formation process, 2017, photo: Silivia Noronha.

Fig. 5 Silvia Noronha, *Untitled*, from the series *Shifting Geologies*, 2020-ongoing, mixed media, photo: Brisa Noronha.

Fig. 6 Silvia Noronha, *Untitled*, from the series *Shifting Geologies*, 2020-ongoing, mixed media, photo: Brisa Noronha.

Fig. 7 Silvia Noronha, *Untitled*, from the series *Shifting Geologies*, 2020-ongoing, mixed media, installation view (detail), Kunsthaus Dresden, Städtische Galerie für Gegenwartskunst, Dresden, 2021, photo: Anja Schneider.

Fig. 8 Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water, Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970, photo: Jacob Rak, taken in 2016, Wikimedia Commons.