

Left To Feel That Wind

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Abstract

Left To Feel That Wind is an installation explores the perception of time stretched across both geological and human scales, through the lens of transformation between the Great Salt Lake and Lake Bonneville. The installation features an intricate hand-layered reimagining of Lake Bonneville, spanning 8 x 18 feet, with its primary material: salt, sand, and water. The Great Salt Lake, depicted by a computer numerically controlled (CNC) system, captures at its lowest water level in November 2022 as a result of climate change. Water drops slowly and evenly from the CNC system, symbolizing the concept of precise time we humans construct and possess in the Great Acceleration. The water permeates into the saltscape, leaving a temporal trace signifies human impact on the environment. The ephemeral contour, along with its surrounding pattern of cracks expands an experience from space-scale to an awareness of time-scale on site, resonating with the passage of industrial time and deep time.

Keywords

Installation Art, Land Art, Geological Time, Deep Time, Ecological Consciousness, Salt Lake, Climate Change

Introduction

My first encounter with the sensitive ecosystem of salt lakes dates back to 2020 when I visited the Salton Sea in California. This inland ocean, formed by an engineering mistake^[1] that introduced a flood from the Colorado River, has been slowly evaporating, returning it to resemble the surrounding desert. The shoreline is strewn with white aquatic remains, desiccated by the wind.

In the winter of 2022, I traveled to the Great Salt Lake in Utah, which had receded to a historically low water level, leaving half of its bed exposed in the air. Robert Smithson constructed a famous land-art piece, Spiral Jetty, on the northern shoreline half a century ago, described as “Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water” in all directions.^[2] I walk along the spiral, behold the mountains, the basalt, and the water, which seems at least a mile away. The foam, created from the water flap the shore, swept eastward caught in the wind. I can see a pinkish hue lining the water and hear the sound of waves melding with the gusts. When Smithson explored the concept of site and non-site, he likely never imagined that his work would never again be submerged by water, nor salt crystal or the scarlet algae. All that remains now is wind and dust.



Figure 1. Photo of Spiral Jetty, 2022 December © Yan Shao

Not far away from the Great Salt Lake, the Bonneville Salt Flats stretched out in front of me as I drove along I-80. Layers of massive salt crystals have accumulated over time, forming a substantial thickness. The main mineral on the surface where I stand upon, sodium chloride (NaCl), is the same substance we humans consume everyday. Gazing to the distance, the splendor reflects the sky blurring the horizon into infinity. As I walk across this expanse, I lose myself in the vast space, with the surrounding mountains never seeming to draw closer. The intricate salt lattices, formed and reshaped by the convergence of mud, resemble our biological cells and neural structures, bringing me back to a state where I imagine myself as an archaea, floating in the salty water.

Though I can't see the salt lake from my vantage point, I feel the gust of wind in the valley that carries a hint of saltiness. I wonder if walking northeast would somehow lead me to the water.

Geologically, what today is called the Great Salt Lake is a remnant of Lake Bonneville, a Pleistocene lake that filled and dried over 60,000 years. Its recent decline began 13,000 years at the end of Ice Age, and it fell to about the level of modern the Great Salt Lake around 2000 years ago^[3]. The salt flats, spanning over 100 miles, are the bed of the ancient Lake Bonneville.

The grand time-space melts my mind: how the salt and water meet and separate in countless moments, crystalize and dissolve, forming unique landscapes that display their ethereal beauty; how the earth evolves itself in the imma-

surable passage of time and complex interplay, driven by energetic and turbulent processes.



Figure 2. Bonneville Salt Flat © Yan Shao

The Great Salt Lake had maintained its balance in the past 2000 years, however, it has shrunk over the last five decades, evaporating two-thirds of its volume due to climate change. The Anthropocene's mark is evident not only in the strata containing artificial materials like plastic but also in the new shoreline of this saline lake.

Since the Industrial Revolution, we have invented precise machines to measure time and divide it into days, hours, minutes, seconds, linking our time consciousness with production and profits. The acceleration of modernization extends to Earth's undulations, where we now are witnessing climate change in our lifetimes, transforming a lake into a desert.^[4]

Artwork

Left To Feel That Wind is an installation that explores the perception of time stretched across both geological and human scales, through the lens of transformation between the Great Salt Lake and Lake Bonneville.

The installation features an intricate hand-layered reimagining of Lake Bonneville, spanning 8 x 18 feet, with its primary material: salt, sand, and water. The interpretative landscape fuses topographic and geologic knowledge, changing over time where water meets the salt-scape.

The Great Salt Lake, depicted by a computer numerically controlled (CNC) system, captures at its lowest water level in November 2022 as a result of climate change. Wa-

ter drops slowly and evenly from the CNC system, symbolizing the concept of precise time we humans construct and possess in the Great Acceleration¹.

The water permeates into the landscape of salt and sand, gradually evaporating under the gallery's climate, leaving a temporal trace signifying human impact on the environment. The ephemeral contour, along with its surrounding pattern of cracks expands an experience from space-scale to an awareness of time-scale on site, resonating with the passage of industrial time and deep time.

The shifting salt-scape, with its multifold substance, remains unstable within space, offering a view on the progressive evolution of inert matter and the delicate balance of the Earth. Through a contemplative depiction of the Great Salt Lake's new shoreline, this installation provides a space reflecting on the broader human influence in the Anthropocene era.



Figure 3. Left To Feel That Wind, Installation View © Yan Shao
Video Documentation: <https://vimeo.com/824272380>

¹ Great Acceleration refers to the acceleration of human-induced changes in the second half of the 20th century, unique in the history of human existence. Many human activities reached take-off points and sharply accelerated towards the end of the century. [International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme, 2015]



Figure 4. Left To Feel That Wind, Saltscapes Details © Yan Shao



Figure 5. Left To Feel That Wind, Saltscapes Details © Yan Shao



Figure 6. Left To Feel That Wind, Dripping Line © Yan Shao



Figure 7. Artist Book: *Transient Surface* about the journey of this project © Yan Shao

Technical Details

The CNC water dripping mechanism comprises an ACRO system sourced from OpenBuilds, paired with a custom-designed water pumping system. The system running on G-Code from an open source software. These components are mounted on a plywood base, then suspended from the ceiling using speedrail tubes for secure attachment and optimal functionality.



Figure 8. CNC Water Dripping Mechanism © Yan Shao

References

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- [4] Thomas Nail, Introduction, *Theory of the Earth* (United States: Stanford University Press, 2021)

Author Biography

Yan Shao is a terrestrial artist and creative technologist based in New York. She creates new media works exploring the uncharted territories of perception, mediating the complex interrelations between humans and the earth. Her artistic language draws inspiration from geopoetics, the transitory essence of nature, and the human responsibility towards ecology, resulting in a unique and evocative narrative. Currently, Yan is an artist fellow at the New York University Gallatin WetLab. She is a recipient of Judson-Morrissey Excellence in New Media Award and the Tisch Initiative of Creative Research Fellowship. She is also a member of Femmes Designer. In 2023, she completed her MPS from Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) at NYU Tisch School of the Arts.