

ON OBLIQUE AND FRONTAL STRATEGIES FOR EXISTENCE ON A FINITE PLANE

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Zechstein Sea

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Geologists always talk of the earth as 'a museum'; of the 'abyss of time' and treat it in terms of artefacts. The recovery of fragments of lost civilizations and the recovery of rocks makes the earth become a kind of artifice.

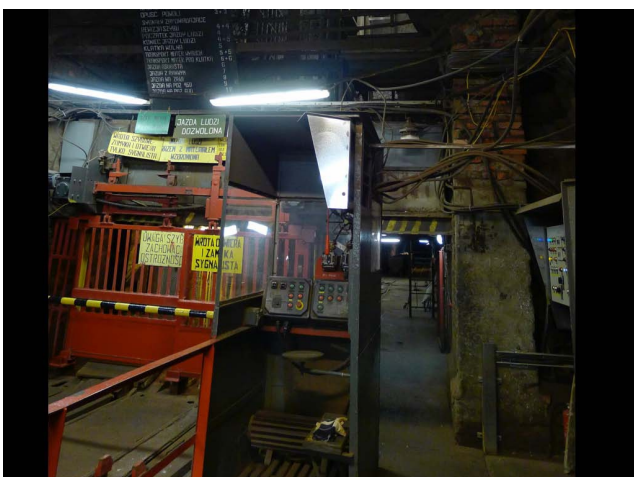
There's no order outside the order of the material. ¹ (Robert Smithson)

If you start the journey from the core of the Earth, you begin with a solid inner core and then a liquid outer core. The inner core is about 80% iron – and also nickel and other dense elements like gold, platinum and uranium. It is about the same temperature as the surface of the Sun. It is solid, but the outer core is a hot liquid. Hot enough to melt rock. Probably the movements of metal, like currents in the oceans, create the magnetic field that surrounds the Earth. This magnetic field extends out from the Earth for thousands of kilometres, and redirects the solar wind blowing from the Sun. Without this magnetic field, the solar wind would blow away the lightest parts of our atmosphere, and make our environment more like cold, dead Mars. It also protects the planet from harmful radiation.

So, we are on the crust now. The crust is the vulnerable, exposed and delicate skin of the Earth. We can lie, crawl, walk and dance on it, thanks to gravity. But the crust is not what we usually face (fully). We don't look down very often. What we face, routinely, are other objects, structures, beings. Only defeated or asleep, in a horizontal position, face down, we have the crust of the planet – literally – *in front of us*.

I propose to spend no time on the surface and go back in. Here is the itinerary of our journey. We are in the Kłodawa salt mine in Poland, founded in 1949, somewhere at the edge of the ex-epicontinental Permian sea, called the Zechstein Sea. About 250 million years ago the Zechstein Sea stretched from the lowland areas of Great Britain to northern and central Poland. At that time this area was near the equator and, due to the high temperatures and arid conditions, the sea evaporated. Its eventual disappearance was part of a general marine regression that preceded and accompanied the Permian-Triassic extinction, the largest extinction event in the history of the Earth, when the global sea level fell by 250 metres.

We are descending in the old communist lift at the overwhelming speed of 6m/sec. The memory of this stomach-lifting and shaking experience reminded me of Hito Steyerl's *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective* (thank you Joseph for recommending this text to me, it proved to be very useful) and its first sentence: "Imagine you are falling. But there is no ground."



¹Text excerpted from ROBERT SMITHSON: THE COLLECTED WRITINGS, 2nd Edition, edited by Jack Flam, The University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California; University of California Press, LTD. London, England; 1996 Originally published: The Writings of Robert Smithson, edited by Nancy Holt, New York, New York University Press, 1979

While we are going down, the pressure of the air increases and the temperature raises. The mine has two working levels 600m and 650m below the surface. Try to imagine it: it is twice the height of the Eiffel tower. The difference in temperature between them is about 6-7 degrees Celsius, so it is 19-20 degrees at 600m and up to 27 degrees at 650m.

In this mine, the salt extraction is carried out using traditional mining methods to preserve all the trace elements contained in the bed. The rock salt is crushed and sieved.



Thanks to that, we are able to descend and dive into a 400-kilometre labyrinth of passages (not all at once:). As I look at the surface of the walls, it seems that the scratches and grooves form some kind of waves that immediately recall the subtle waves of the Zechstein Sea, which must have had very heavy, dense, salty water. I am fascinated by the fusion of human and inhuman forces, geological deformations and traces of human activities. This is such a natureculture phenomenon, the penetrating lines of human interference imposed on the traces of geological activity. The temporality of evaporitic cycles and sedimentation which took millions of years and the temporality of extraction: explosions, collection, transportation and excretion by the humans.



The geological processes that took place here, heavily deformed the mineral beds. "Rock salt and potash-rich successions of each Zechstein cycle are internally folded and contain multiple sheath folds, originated during the lateral flow of salt at an early stage of deformation. And then these folds have been refolded by upright sheath folds. These superposed folds clustered into subsidiary diapirs and pierced through the younger deposits. The latter sank into salt masses to form large-scale synclinoria, the strata of which contain early tectonic and weakly deformed sedimentary structures."²

2 Heterogeneity of folding in Zechstein (Upper Permian) salt formations in the Kłodawa Salt Structure, central Poland, Stanisław Burliga, Geological Quarterly 58(3) March 2014



A diapir (from Greek *diapirein*, “to pierce”) is a geological structure consisting of mobile material that was forced into more brittle surrounding rocks, usually by the upward flow of material from a parent stratum.

So what we finally see, is something that is an almost upright and oblique sea. Subsequently detected, recognized and mined by humans; virtually exploded and transported to the surface. At the current rate of extraction, there is sufficient salt for the next 40 years.

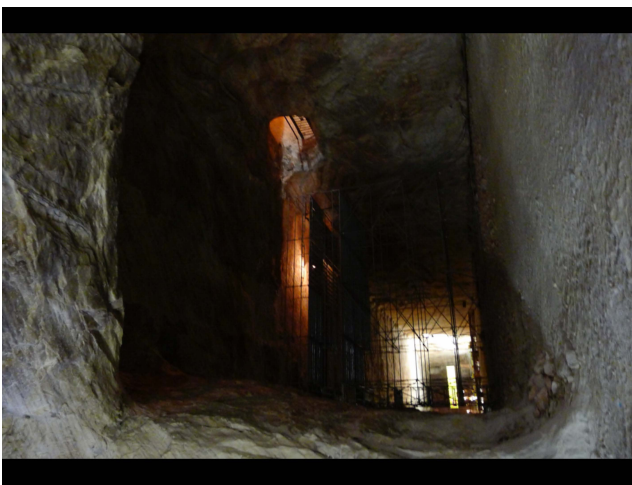


We are driven by the miners another 50m down into the Earth in an ancient Land Rover down a very, very steep ramp. The miners will show us the unlit stores of cylindrical samples collected over the years, all that have been drilled by geologists in order to map the structure of the beds. Only the huge round deposits, leftovers from drilling the ventilation shafts can be sold (reluctantly).



Because of the darkness, it is with difficulty that I am choosing a sample that is relatively stable, is 90cm in diameter and is 140cm high. It weighs almost 2 tones. On the way back our miner-chaperone gets a phone call: there is methane in the mine, we have to evacuate urgently. From the Land Rover we are rushed to a steel train by a phlegmatic engineer who apparently doesn't believe there is any methane in the air, as he sighs deeply: "Oy, they simply don't want to work today." This trip down to the beds of salt is for me a pure psychogeographic or rather psychogeologic procedure, with the notion of *dérive*, that according to Guy Debord, is an unplanned tour through the landscape (not urban in this case but geological and temporal). I wasn't directed by my feelings though, as the situationists would have liked, but rather by a whole series of very strong somatic responses to depth, air pressure, temperature and flows of air – these were my primary means of mapping.

A salt mine, I guess, probably almost every mine, gives an overwhelming sense of enclosure. It is not a human territory. We, the humans and almost every other form of organic life are not really welcome there. I found one organic thing, that appeared to be a seed, in the upper shaft.



Being underground inverts the relations of power. There, we are the guests of the immense mass of earth, at the mercy of ventilation systems, as various gasses are being released from the rocks. It is a full dependence on the unstable stability of the layers of rocks, on the artificial provision of air and drainage systems, as the most dangerous events, apart from leaking gas, are unexpected floods. Given that salt mines are relatively safe, there isn't much to fear. But a sense of inversion remains. I am trying to stick with it, as it seems legitimate. It is something that we lost on the surface.

I am looking closely at the walls. The lines of sediments, the folds, the relocations, all these constitute a language. This is the language of the rocks, folded and refolded, pushed upwards, exploded, drilled, scratched and partially evacuated. The language of the strata talks silently through its structures, as evocatively as any scripture.



Sometimes the language of the layers becomes quite dramatic. Like in 1977 in nearby Wapno, when the communist regime demanded a sudden increase in salt extraction and the shaft started to subside, and subsequently the whole mine literally collapsed inwards. The story of a ruthless approach is also written in the discontinuation of lines, movements, fractures, the dispersion of rocks and other signs of decline.



It is also a language that doesn't serve any purpose of communication, it is just its way of being, a vital force. A matter that constitutes its own sign. I recall my favourite passage from *The Order of Things. An Archeology of Human Sciences*, by Foucault describing the 16th century understanding of language: “In its original form, when it was given to men by God himself, language was an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them. The names of things were lodged in the things they designated, just as strength is written in the body of the lion, regality in the eye of the eagle, just as the influence of the planets is marked upon the brows of men: by the form of similitude.” The scripture of the sediments was very convincing in its absolute honesty about what happened over these 250 million years. Looking at it was a moment of complete *dérive*. It made me think about the legacy of Spinoza, where matter is vital and self-organising, 'radically immanent' as opposed to any form of transcendentalism. Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* says: “The classical emphasis of unity of all matter, which is central to Spinoza, is reinforced by an updated scientific understanding of the self-organising or 'smart' structure of living matter.” Matter apparently *is* self-organized, and it is relational in a sense that relations between various elements of an environment are endless and interdependent.

In the whole narrative of this project, the visit to the mine, with its vertigo lift, unlit geological stores, the wild Land Rover ride and alleged release of methane, what becomes an overwhelming sensation is that of moving inside the planet, in its crust, where what constitutes an outside layer (like the wall of a corridor) is actually the wall of an earthy intestine, a human artefact, a negative of what normally stays complete and intact. The whole process of externalizing something that should remain interior emphasizes the notion. It is insiding out or outsidings in. The only way for me to grasp it is to turn to Deleuze's hardcore concept of 'absolute interiority' – “Treating the outside as an exact reversion, or “membrane”, of the inside, reading the world as a texture of the intimate, thinking the macroscopic (or the molar) as a torsion of the microscopic (or the molecular)...”³ All these features constitute a *fold* in the Deleuzian universe.

We access the world frontally, as we have a front ourselves and the whole perceptual machinery is located in our front. Any disruption of the intact frontal surface causes a shock. Blood on the surface of the skin as much as a sink-hole in the road. From my feminist, embodied perspective, it implies a tremendous vulnerability and susceptibility. It seems that the more frontally we encounter the world, the more vulnerable we become. If we consider frontality in connection with the (relative) frontality and vulnerability of mineral beds then what becomes obvious is their defenceless availability to human exploitation.

3 Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*,

Anyway, I have my drilled treasure, a witness to drilling between levels in order to create a ventilation shaft. I am one of the exploiters, albeit using the unusable, the remains, a leftover, a side effect.

It travels to Gdańsk, as part of The Baltic House Lab 2015 and, due to its enormous weight, it cannot be installed in St. John's, a treasured Gothic church, which houses our exhibition. It lands in the graveyard next to various architectural details that have fallen off the church over the centuries. It becomes another witness, or rather a point of reference, a very remote reference in temporality. They start chatting to one another.



My column doesn't contain anything other than salt. It is an undifferentiated, homogenous creature. It is what it is, just a heavy lump of precious matter. It is a de-natured bit of nature. It does not represent, it rather presents itself, or makes itself present. It is about the process that on a larger scale has been going on since humanity started to pierce and disrupt the crust of the planet. It is part of and witness to it. It doesn't even undermine any of its necessities or tragedies. The only thing it does do is to constitute a seemingly useless product of it – too big to be consumed and too awkward to handle. As such, it becomes an anti-monument or an artifice of disruption.

But I am not here to investigate the ultimate outcome of the project. What I m trying to do now is to conceptualize my sudden discomfort caused by the salt's dangerous frontality, its bareness and exposure.



In the course of writing this piece it occurred to me, that the question of the geological beds-folds-diapirs-obliquity-frontality-vulnerability might be relevant in terms of the status of an art object. As to why this product of evaporitic cycles, this victim and residue of human utilization, could suddenly become an artwork? Meaning, setting new relations, becoming a point of reference and a locus of various intensities? How the ruthless process of parasiting on its oblique, vulnerable position can

possibly transfigure it into a momentary site of intensity? The only answer I have is also oblique in itself and a bit uncertain.

There is a desperate need to disrupt a ritual of receiving and perceiving images. Billions of monitors, that stream the flat images of 3-dimensional objects and places, wake up an enormous hunger for any tactility, a need to touch, to see what cannot be seen, to de-familiarize and de-square the images. The flat image is almost always somehow rectangularized. Even this presentation is. Oblique and frontal, with no reservations, can only be a three-dimensional physical encounter, as it is not cropped and crippled and it is tactile. So - a Site. When I wrote that "only defeated or asleep, in a horizontal position, face down, we have the surface of the planet *in front of us*", I meant that a Site (understood as a art piece) can actually activate what's under our feet, as a designated piece of land, a terrain, and produce this sudden relation of frontality with the crust of the planet.

Frontality and obliquity seem to be always relational. You need to have a sense of verticality and a sense of behind, which implies control over the environment. I've been trying to go a step further. In search of an imagined non-relational frontality, when you are becoming what you perceive as frontal, I remembered the experience of the Zechstein Sea and the salt mine. As there, underground, in the lift, in the passages, and the dark stores of geological treasures, maybe due to their beauty, I experienced a rare sensation of being part of the walls, the scratches, the salt dust on the floor, and a part of the cylindrical giants that attracted me so much. Their physicality seemed to be overwhelming. Since I was surrounded by it, dizzy with the speed of the lift and jolted in the car, I completely lost my compass and references. This embodied disorientation, this moment of a very special tension, when the senses get confused and they suddenly tell you that the environment controls you more than you control the environment (which is always true anyway and which women handle better than men – I tested it:), might produce an experience that I consider political. Why? This a question for a whole new text. Perhaps it is enough to say that, using a suddenly familiar line from Hito Steyerl's text *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*: "A fall toward objects without reservation, embracing a world of forces and matter, which lacks any original stability and sparks the sudden shock of the open: a freedom that is terrifying, utterly deterritorializing, and always already unknown." Disorientation and, consequently, disempowerment could be, in my understanding, a great tool for building a new, post-human subjectivity, where the issues of relationality, of grounding, of interdependence and, consequently, of power relations are crucial.

So I will finish, as I began, with a fragment of the same conversation with Robert Smithson:

*"I'm reversing the perspective to get another viewpoint, because we've seen it so long now from the decorative design point of view and not from the point of view of the physicality of the terrain. That perception is needed more now than the abstract because we're now into such a kind of soupy, effete thing. It's so one sided and groundless."*⁴

⁴ Text excerpted from ROBERT SMITHSON: THE COLLECTED WRITINGS, 2nd Edition, edited by Jack Flam, The University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California; University of California Press, LTD. London, England; 1996 Originally published: The Writings of Robert Smithson, edited by Nancy Holt, New York, New York University Press, 1979