

UNEASY TENSIONS FROM A BATED DISTANCE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines my thesis work at University of the Arts in Philadelphia in the shadow of my personal feelings of grief over the reality of catastrophic climate change. Research into the sublime, climate catastrophe and alienation from imagination is provoked by my introspective crisis relating to the real and existential threat to humanity. I explore my use of detailed time-lapsed satellite imagery taken from Google Earth Engine documents from specific periods in my life in combination with the inventive use of psychogeography, to connect my approaches in print, animation, video art and installation. Artists such as Guy Debord, David Maisel, Susan Sontag, Edward Burtynsky and Ursula Schulz-Dornburg contextualize my work to further emphasize how our collective imagination is held hostage in the deleterious momentum of the Anthropocene.

## SECTION I: DANGLING FUTURES FROM WHICH WE CANNOT LEAVE

“You little think, and less know, how soon the cup of fury may be put into your hands: myself, with many others, have been made stark drunk with that wine of wrath, the dregs whereof (for ought I know) may fall to your share suddenly.”

— the Ranter Jo. Salmon (1651), *Heights in Depths and Depths in Heights*

“Daydreaming subverts the world.”

— Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*

Since 1995 the United Nations Conference of Parties (COP) has hosted summits around the world annually to bring awareness and action to issues concerning climate change. The consequences of humanity’s impact on the planet’s climate fall under the concept of what has become known as the Anthropocene: the current geologic epoch in which human-influences contribute to directly changing the atmospheric, geologic, hydrologic, biospheric and other earth system processes. At these COP summits, a similar theme plays out every year: people from around agree that climate change and its catastrophic consequences are worsening worldwide, season after season. None of the corporations or empires most egregiously contributing to climate change sign onto agreements that would do enough to preserve the biosphere through the end of the century.<sup>1</sup> In December of 2019, coinciding with COP 25 in Madrid Spain, a majority of Australia declared a state of emergency due to the unprecedented bushfires occurring in the south and east of the continent. According to NASA’s Lynn Jenner, the smoke

<sup>1</sup> While the Paris Accord (drafted at COP 21 in Paris, France in 2015) was a landmark document in that for the first time included the United States and China, much of the climate science community agree that it’s goals were never enough to keep global warming below the needed 1.5°C warming before the 2030 tipping point for climate catastrophe. Unfortunately, even this accord was too much of a sacrifice for American interests as Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the agreement less than a year after it was signed.

from the fires circumnavigated the entire earth. Catastrophic events can bring awareness and action to address climate change on a global scale. However, increased frequency of climate catastrophes results in diminished reactions as it becomes more normalized. What at one point begins as an alarm of concern between activated groups, eventually harmonizes into a dulled hum, cycling with the cacophony of everyday life.

In contemplating the darkness of the world, journalist Max Brod in a discussion with his friend Franz Kafka said, “There is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know.” Kafka replied, “Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us” (Martel, 15). The idea that there is a future inaccessible world—perhaps one where climate catastrophe does not devastate humanity—which is separate from the world that we know here and now, is what is contested here. As climate change continues to accelerate, I am left fighting feelings of resignation, both to society and myself, equally helplessness to make changes that would redefine what hope looks like with such bleak forecasts. At the bottom of this abyss is a pessimistically numb encounter with a philosophy of climate-nihilism, or *doomerism*.<sup>2</sup>

During 2019’s COP 25 climate scientist Bill Hare noted that there were more people crying during the conference than any other previous conference, earning it the name “the Crying COP”. Hare noted that “people from small island states whose islands are going under, are absolutely devastated, almost panicking about the state of the threat they face [everyone] is extremely upset that what they’ve learned about climate change,

<sup>2</sup> Doomerism is an ideology which is pessimistic at its core, believing that civilization will inevitably collapse due to the pathology of human conditions which cause climate change: political corruption, ecological devastation and so forth. Doomers await the end of the world as a remedy for what ails them, even going so far as to advocate for recklessness of accelerationism towards the theorized inevitable collapse. The term generally aligns with people who have abandoned their once utopian or optimistic ideals and dreams of the past, realizing any attempts to solve the problems of society as futile. Essays such as Jem Bendell’s *Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy* has become a philosophical text for the inevitability of a “post-collapse” world within the next 10 years.

the politicians already knew and have done nothing about, and nothing has happened.” It seems that despite the widespread availability and acceptance of information, and the steps being taken around the world to halt climate change are not enough to turn humanity away from the edge of the cliff on which it is precariously positioned. In an interview with the Harvard Business Review David Kessler, author of *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, explains that when the world we live in changes, people begin to grieve collectively over the loss of normalcy. His interview contextualizes the concept of grief with what people are going through during social isolation and quarantine due to the COVID-19 global virus pandemic, cases of which are still presently growing every day as I work on my thesis. “We’re also feeling anticipatory grief.” Kessler notes, “It’s that feeling we get about what the future holds when we’re uncertain. Usually it centers on death, dire diagnosis or [...] more broadly imagined futures. There is a storm coming.”

As I write this paper from social isolation, a self-quarantine measure put into place for myself and billions of people globally, it’s clear to me that Kessler touches on something poignant. Though his solutions to working through grief are a bit catchall to address grieving the climate (be present, be compassionate, balance your thoughts, etc.) the ability to internalize a collective existential problem with our own personal grappling with our existence can be useful. There are many branching existential questions that stem from looking out into a seemingly hopeless future. As Mark Fischer put it “It’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fischer 1). These questions are concerned with bringing meaning and choosing morals to apply to our future lives in the present, to give essence to our own existence as a remedy for a sickness

caused by fixating on survival.

In creating my recent body of work, I framed my grief surrounding climate futures with time-lapse imagery, print and animations through the use of moving images which mark my lifespan and a metaphysical landscape of the future. To create the imagery for the prints, I create paintings onto mylar, which are subsequently used in a variety of print-based mediums including lithography and screen printing. The prints are both worked into video and various animation processes to compose a psychogeographic exploration of the landscapes. In presenting this work, the prints are all printed sequentially on one continuous mylar substrate. This allows for the video to project onto the prints without edges of paper disrupting the viewer's experience. Each of the five videos are broken into modular segments which relate to one another and to the five prints they are projected onto. The imagery within each of the prints are used within their respective videos, which are projected back onto the prints in the installation.

The imagery appears as dark watery clouds that hold within their parts and fissures, the weight of an abyss. Rivers of coal ash, black oil tusche, acrylic plastics carve terrestrial contours and topographical ringlets when evaporating. Using isopropyl alcohol—a sterilizing agent, detergent and disinfectant—the landscape's defining organic features are broken down, edited, weakened and manipulated. Because alcohol resists water, it works oppositionally to the water's flow, creating resists and restrictions for how it evaporates and creates imagery. Additionally, by partially dissolving salt into water or alcohol, I introduce other conflicting chemical processes between mediums, which influence how the imagery settles. I view these chemical interactions as metaphors for

the Anthropocene: humanity's influencing of the landscape is reflected in the chemicals creating the disquieted dark clouds, the harbingers of climate catastrophe.

I do not directly build their details through the geographic locations in the time-lapse videos. Instead I allow the separate parts to develop independently of one another. In contemplating the existential reality of my human impact on this planet as both an individual and part of humanity during the Anthropocene, I scour the imagined-metaphysical landscape and real-satellite imagery for elements of continuity. Using digital manipulation, I create an animated amalgamation of these separate parts. I interweave my internal psychogeographic exploration of the Anthropocene with the birds-eye satellite witness of the reality of climate change happening throughout my life. The real consequences of resource extraction, melting ice-sheets and other contributors to climate change remain obscured from everyday life. This obscurity is a source of dread over the future, just as one fears the darkness when navigating an unfamiliar place.

Throughout my studio practice I have become increasingly drawn to how imagination activates futurity through encounters with the Kantian concept of *the sublime* in bearing witness to climate change. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Edmund Burke was of the earliest philosophers to use the sublime to reflect on artwork. His writings describe mostly landscapes painted at the Hudson River School. Described in its limitlessness and abundancy, to Burke the sublime was the indomitable force which nature possesses. This spiritual and aesthetic force is meant for humanity to bear witness and revere. He wrote: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible

objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Wordsworth). This terror at the source of the sublime that Burke speaks of can be seen in the age of Anthropocene in depictions of devastation wrought upon humanity by climate change.

The depiction of Burke’s ideas of the sublime have a long relationship within art canon, perhaps most notably with the work of J.M.W Turner, an 18<sup>th</sup> century painter whose works often depict violent sea storms and elicit a vast array of emotions. Turner’s fantastical, dynamic and grandiose paintings show manmade structures in ruin, a representation of man’s glorious surrender to nature. In works such as *Disaster at Sea* (1835), the sublime is illustrated as the indomitable power of the landscape portrayed in humanity’s surrender to it. Centuries later, humanity depicts their relationship with nature through a different lens entirely through the use of photography, a medium of image making that could depict real scenes of destruction, violence and poverty.

Currently Edward Burtynsky’s shocking photographs are part of a traveling museum exhibition for a multidisciplinary project titled *The Anthropocene Project*. In collaboration with artists Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier, the project includes a photobook, exhibition, virtual reality, augmented reality, scientific research and documentary film to “investigate human influence on the state, dynamic and future of the Earth” (Burtynsky). On one hand the success of Burtynsky’s work shows a public interest in the increasing prevalence of disaster photography. It’s hard to look away from the painful beauty of his images. To Burtynsky, his goal is to raise awareness “of the normally



unseen result of civilization's cumulative impact upon the planet" (Burtynsky). The mural scale photographs capture a sense of the sublime in their magnitude and awe striking grandeur.

When watching the beautiful cinematography in *Anthropocene: the Human Epoch*, the 2019 documentary Burtynsky co-produced for *The Anthropocene Project*, I couldn't quite place how the film made me feel. Then I read *On Photography* by Susan Sontag. In the book she challenges the power of the photograph in mediating experience and reality. The series of reconstructionist essays shed light on how photographs are "an ethics of seeing" which have irreversibly altered the way humans perceive their place in society and place value on "what is worth looking at, and what we have the right to observe" (Sontag 18). She explained that "Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy [...] The very muteness of what is, hypothetically, comprehensible in photographs is what constitutes their attraction and provocativeness" (Sontag 142). Her work helps to understand the role of disaster photography in fine art.

What resonates with the sublime in Burtynsky's work is partially due to their existence as photographs; a muted devastation occurring in reality. The power of the film's depiction of human impacts on the environment resides in how it incorporates its sublime artistic aesthetics into scientific and anthropological narratives. There are an enormous array of documentaries and news sources that depict issues concerning the alarming impact of the Anthropocene on the environment in places such as the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. However, Burtynsky, Baichwal and de Pencier's film articulates

the sublime vastness of these sites of the Anthropocene in a way that is uniquely provocative. Mediated by photographic images, the devastation is turned into a terrible splendor taking form in an 87-minute documentary. “I wouldn’t consider this work ‘disaster photography’”, Burtynsky clarified in an interview with Frieze magazine during one of the openings for an exhibition for *The Anthropocene Project*.

In depicting lithium evaporating pools in the Atacama Desert in Chile, one would be hard pressed to deny the sublime beauty found in the film’s cinematography of landscape where these man-made structures reside. It’s in this curated combining of the grand scale of man-made structures and the vast, familiar awestraking depiction of nature that the film succeeds in breaking away from being disaster photography. The evaporating ponds cause extremely devastating environmental realities for indigenous communities and produce around half of the world’s lithium for commodities such as batteries. It is a location both deeply integrated into people’s daily experiences and at the same time psychologically absent from their daily life. The film attempts to articulate and attract the viewers with the sublime beauty of these twenty countries and provoke them to “grasp the vastness and sublimity of their own terrible consumption” (Frieze). What Burtynsky’s work puts at stake is that he has gone to great lengths in order to create a work of art capable of capturing the attention of millions of people who might otherwise ignore the alarming rate at which we are accelerating towards an uninhabitable climate.

My thesis work depicts my own relationship to becoming engulfed in the unsettling sublime of the degradation of the environment. My existential questions and how I search for meaning in life, have become consumed by the Anthropocene. I have

found that my mortality is at the core of how I respond to the desecration of the land currently taking place over my lifetime, which contributes to climate change and consequentially determines my future. While Burtynsky or Turner's work depicts an innate beauty of these scenes of horror, I choose to depict the Anthropocene through my own painted metaphorical landscapes, merged with the imagery of human altered landscapes captured of the earth from the innocuous distance of a satellite.

Google Maps satellite imagery (with included user interface icons) is a vantage that is universally recognizable and accessible for anyone with a computer or phone. While most people are accustomed to seeing Google Maps as a means of traversing the landscape in everyday life, I reveal locations on Google Maps that depict large-scale industrial resource extraction projects that are evidence of the human impact that civilization has on the climate. Additionally, I create an intersection between myself and these satellite imaged landscapes by depicting them as animations made from select moments which document times relevant to my life. This view from a safe distance in combination with personal chronological references, allows me to unalienate myself from the devastation of the landscape that I both inevitably benefit from and am threatened by.

Artist David Maisel (b. 1961) also uses large-scale photographs taken from above to show environmental devastation. His 2001 *Lake* photos depict polluted sites inaccessible to the majority of people, meaning his documentation is also evidence that seeks to bind natural systems to human impacts upon ecosystems. He is less concerned with beauty than with the sublime of vastness and obscurity (Brown 57). These images depict a

transmuted and decomposed version of their landscape, full of carcinogens and other toxins that have their own systems of propagation.

According to Maisel, his work is intended to “offer a sense of what has been lost and what the structure and forms of our civilization are taking” (Brown 58). In this sense his work shows us views of our collective role in what we are destroying. He goes on to describe his “topographically uncertain images of the lake to be landscapes of the human psyche, eliciting a deep sense of loss and abandonment, immersion and submersion. In some, strangely human forms seem to have been etched into the surface of the earth as if by some immense hidden hand” (Brown 58) (see figures 1 & 2).

I ask the viewer to activate their imagination through the interconnection of existential questions about humanity’s relationship to the environment. To coax them to do so, I digitally animate magnified microcosms of detail within larger prints. These prints exist both as elements within the video and as physical objects on the wall. This process gives me the ability to pan across seemingly vast areas, similar to how one might scroll cartography on Google Maps. These animations are meant to reflect a psychogeographical terrain. They are integrated into animated time-lapse satellite images of industrial mega-projects (primarily focused on resource extraction and urban development) and their visible impact on the landscape. There is an interconnected relationship between my prints and the satellite imagery in which different magnifications and vantages provide details and subtleties; revealing in each other shifting landscapes of varying entry points of exploration. They are both physically presented to the viewer as objects and as elements of the video projected onto the prints

themselves. The result is an alluring, almost illusory effect which is meant to draw the viewer into the installation to examine the work and simultaneously call into question what is real and what is simply being projected. The viewer can only discover this by experiencing the installation from up close.

The areas I have selected to focus on expose devastating vantages shown from the familiar sterilized safety of satellites.<sup>3</sup> The artwork takes form using time and motion to communicate a process that is always occurring in daily life. The pollution and devastated environments' obfuscation from daily life is one reason why things continue the way they do, determining much of humanity's future to no inconsequential degree. The emergent imagery in my videos depicts landscapes manipulated by my own hand in which I alter the landscapes in parallel with industrial civilization (see figure 3).

Data made available by engineers and scientists engaged with the Google Earth Engine™ (GEE) software, document of the industrial development focus on five geographic locations significant to the emission production and resource extraction linked to climate change.<sup>4</sup> All of the chosen locations are limited by the available landsat data<sup>5</sup> and vary in quality and what time of year depicted.

In the process of compiling the data and images for this project I focused on two

<sup>3</sup> While visually these images show a perspective miles above how an individual experiences a typical landscape, it is impossible to deny the individual's connection to Google Maps and satellite cartography in their daily life visa vis the smart phone in their palms. According to the Guardian, people look at their phones an average of 80 times a day. Of all smartphone users, 77% regularly use navigation apps (Panko).

<sup>4</sup> The five sites I've chosen are the Tar Sands in Alberta Canada, Chuquicamata Copper Mine in Chile, the Greenland Ice Sheet, various locations of mass-deforestation in the Amazon Rainforest (namely Muflo de Chavez in Bolivia and Rondonia in Brazil), and finally the disappearance of the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, my thesis work is developing over a longer period of time than I had previously planned for. Because of this, the work is continuing to change with access to materials and space. Similarly, I will have to adapt the installation's presentation should an alternative site become necessary, or physical exhibition being impossible altogether.

<sup>5</sup> Landsat data is a term used to describe the satellite data used by NASA to take images of the Earth. Starting in 1972 in these satellites capture millions upon millions of images of the earth, much of which is made available to the public for the use in research and other human projects.

distinct timespans relating to my life: years spanning the entirety of my life (1988-present), and the months I have been working towards my MFA at University of the Arts (2018-present). I exist currently where these time-lapses stop. With the data collected and shared by climatologists to predict our certain fate how do I imagine my future should climate change continue the path that has been prophetically warned about by climatologists? (IPCC 1). There are different illustrations of what landscape changes can be observed based on the timing of the satellite imagery. On one hand yearly satellite imagery illustrates a large and often more dramatic change in the physical landscape, appearing over time to change consistently as the data filters out weather and other conditions which might obscure the imagery from year to year as the images are compiled. Yearly images show relatively little change in weather and lighting over the course of their 32-year span. Because of this the yearly imagery takes on an eerie quality. It's as if they were captured in the same span of time. This suggests a fictional or speculative version of the landscape and allows me to introduce my own parafiction upon the world through my prints. The motion of yearly images in sequence elicit biological functions like breathing, pulsating cells, rhythmic organic growths and malignancies.

On the other hand, the monthly captured images of areas communicate a different aesthetic. Changes in quality, clarity and sometimes resolution cause significant variations between months depending on weather conditions and seasons. Details of my interwoven prints vary in visibility depending on these variables. For example, winter in Canada causes the landscape to white out with extreme snowstorms. The tar sands crude oil extraction site in Alberta becomes dormant and details such as roads and rivers take

on a different aesthetic entirely (see figure 4).

Using tusche and coal on plastic mylar, I paint films that depict the looming void that awaits in an uncertain tomorrow. Layering up and redacting with needlepoint, I explore organic shapes and allow them to flow through darkness of ink and spill through their decaying landscapes. Through a magnified perspective the series of prints cling to the beauty of a grotesque abyss and allow me to contemplate the vast scale of detail within the work. Without representational forms, the microcosmic landscapes within the prints become navigable cartographies when magnified through video. At a viewer's distance of the physical print, the almost anthropomorphic imagery has a mesmerizing draw to them. There is an allure to the depth of detail formed in the image. From a distance the viewer can project their mind into amorphic shapes, triggering pattern recognition. These prints represent the sublime transformation of the earth that humanity is both simultaneously creating and enduring. They are at the same time a type of psychogeographic portraiture.

Guy Debord asked people to navigate landscapes based on emotions and behavior (McDonough 14). In doing so the participants change both their own relationship to the landscape and the reality of the landscape itself. This kind of psychogeographic navigation of the landscapes that I develop in my imagery is only possible when entered through the microcosms of detail as they flow in the piece. I ask the viewer to look closer, to enter inside the print's grotesque form to see the landscape within it. I ask them to experience the aerial vantages of industrial devastation of the environment. It is in this encounter that the tension between the participant's existential subjectivity meets the

devastation of the Earth (see figures 5 & 6).

In merging my abstracted version of the future with the current reality I am able to finally become part of the devastation with the environment and push past my feelings of alienation. The footage in *Untitled Landscape 1* spans from 1988-2030. Starting with my birth year and at the deadline warning for humanity globally in IPCC's report titled *Global Warming of 1.5°C*, I draw a throughline between myself and the Anthropocene. In the IPCC's 630-page report, many apocalyptic predictions are made surrounding the expected rise of global temperatures above 1.5°C. The IPCC's warning is that without "a sharp decline in greenhouse gas emissions to pre-industrial levels by 2030, global warming will surpass 1.5°C in the following decades, leading to irreversible loss of the most fragile ecosystems, and crisis after crisis for the most vulnerable people and societies" (vi).

In order to confront the creeping eco-nihilism experienced by many in the epoch of Anthropocene, I look to identify with the devastation I am revealing through this series. Each new environmental disaster spins us further out into a distance away from empowerment and towards normalization of catastrophic climates. Each individual change in the landscape that goes unseen leaves a significant impact. My artwork is an existential response to this reality wherein I contemplate my own humanity bound to its role in the Anthropocene.



**SECTION II:** NESTED WITHIN ABSTRACT REFLECTIONS  
RESIDE CONCERNS FELT WITH INCREASING ALIENATION

“Empires spread deserts that they cannot survive.”

– Read in the ruins of Ur and Mu Us, the desertified fields of Wadi Faynan and the Techuacan Valley.

For the past several years my artistic practice has become increasingly more confronted by these existential questions and how they related to the decisions I make in my daily life. During my yearlong internship at the Borowsky Center for Publication Arts at University of the Arts, I discussed Vaneigem’s work briefly with artist Clifton Meador. During my internship I worked with Amanda D’Amico and Meador as press assistant on the Heidelberg KORS Sheetfed Offset Press to help produce the artist book *Acheiropoieta (Not Made by Hands)* in 2020. In creating this work, Meador used photographs of Antebellum South-era prints sourced from the library of congress that were then dye-sublimate printed onto cotton. These cotton swatches became the material used to create imagery for the book.

There is a philosophical abstraction of material that occurs in this process. The book’s content relates imagery of the Veil of Veronica<sup>6</sup> to the cotton plantations in the American South. The ability for this experimental print process to articulate an abstract meta-narrative inspired me to make a triptych for my Works in Progress show in the Fall of 2019 titled *Topographies of Otherness Beneath the Worried Sky*. This work—which served as a building block for my final body of work—developed out of a series of handmade paper monotypes that were stuck without direction. The imagery captured a

<sup>6</sup> The Veil of Veronica is a traditional Christian relic which depicts Jesus Christ’s face on a cloth. Heralded during medieval times as “the true image” of Jesus, tradition states that this depiction of Christ in the cloth was “not made by human hand”, and rather by God.

fantastical atmosphere of a sublime abyss. They could be interpreted as an astronomical void and simultaneously exposed root-forms on the dark underside of an eroded ravine (see figure 7).

It was in this process of developing a new body of work alongside Meador that I encountered a philosophical concept referred to as *survival sickness*. The term originates from the 1967 book by Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. It describes the absurdity of the exhausting futility of everyday life; it is simply loving the very poison which is destroying one's body and killing us. To the situationist, *everyday life* is a tautological concept that refers to "the relationship between what constructs an individual's subjectivity and the apparatuses that degrade it." (Vaneigem 32). What is subjective to an individual relates to how they distinguish themselves from others in "the unique relationship between the subject and object." (Bogost 23). I began to question more deeply the ways in which the ambiguity of imagery relates to what the viewer will take away from a piece. This became particularly concerning in the context of global issues from which are experienced universally in disparate ways. Vaneigem states that "in modern life, choosing to continue living is a political decision" (Vaneigem 32). These words deeply resonated with me when I considered the realities of climate change: each individual that chooses to continue living each day must decide their relationship to alienation in the modern world by conscious practice.

Concluding my work with Meador, I finished the triptych of prints. The response to this triptych was mixed. While alaudid for the beauty of their imagery, they also confused viewers. Some saw little to parse from what they were presented with leaving

them uninterested beyond their aesthetic qualities. Many others however found themselves projecting onto the abstract imagery their own concerns. They found a metaphysical and emotional space to relate to within the abyss of the imagery, lured in by encounters with pareidolia.<sup>7</sup> The triptych does not possess a bodily form of its own, existing instead within the viewer's body and mind.

These prints were the beginning of attempting to touch on the connection between one's own subjectivity and the world that is being devastated around them. Returning back to Vaneigem, survival sickness describes a unique desperation: "Survival is life reduced to bare essentials, to life's abstract form, to the minimum of activity to ensure [...] participation in production and consumption." (Vaneigem 42). The abstract forms in *Topographies of Otherness Beneath the Worried Sky* is the body abstracted from everyday life in a philosophical sense. It is the body beneath its appearances and the various hidden roles that we play within ourselves as participants in society. Buried in the bleak abyss of the piece is this philosophical concept of survival sickness, elucidating a sentimental malaise caused by the existential threat that the climate crisis imposes on each individual and simultaneously humanity as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> Pareidolia is a psychological term which describes a tendency to interpret a benign image as something significant. This behavior is most frequently attributed to seeing human faces in various objects.

### SECTION III: CLOSING IN ON WHERE WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN

“We come from a broken place, yet here we stand.”

— Anonymous, *Desert*

“Have ye courage, O my brethren?...He hath heart who knoweth fear but **vanquisheth** it; who seeth the abyss, but with **pride**. He who seeth the abyss but with eagle's eyes, -- he who with eagle's talons **graspeth** the abyss: he hath courage.”

—Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

In the Anthropocene there is a democracy of objects, or “object-oriented ontology” as Ian Bogost theorized. He writes that “an object itself isn’t for the gaze of a subject, or representation or a cultural discourse” but rather that all objects “equally exist while they do not exist equally” (Levi 2). This means that although humanity is living through Anthropocene, we are not at the top of a hierarchical position as we would like to imagine ourselves. Instead we are simply a part of a more horizontal relationship with existence.

What does this mean then to deterritorialize humanity from the higher position on earth that is generally assumed? Lecturing at *A Night of Philosophy and Arts in Israel* in 2015, curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud elaborated: “Beings take precedence over knowledge. Things take over perception and the world comes through as a pure horizontality in which no entity occupies the center, including human beings” (Bourriaud). To move forward in addressing the catastrophic problems presented to us by the predicted future, Bourriaud argues that humanity must move past its relationship between itself and other species and forms of life on earth. He says that “simple acts of penance, a fetishism of the peripheral, decentering as an act of critique” are common in

today's artistic communities, but "when it comes to considering our position in the Anthropocene, we are not able to consider this outside of the sphere of guilt" (Bourriaud). All this to say that there is a discernable difference between what art says it is doing in the context of the Anthropocene, and what ways the art affects progression towards a doomed future.

In my work there are multiple vantages to break the distinction between my subjectivity to the world and my own internal understanding to it. On one hand, there is a struggle to identity the specifics of material used or to identify the location being shown to the viewer. The imagery to reveals itself and at the same time conceals its truth, appearing to be one thing but in reality is another. There is also a tension between the progress of moving forward through time and the exploited natural life. I ask the viewer to activate their imagination to understand whether these represent real places or imaginary places. By blurring fact and fiction the viewer is put in a position to consider their own relation to the climate.

This relationship between abjection and blurring between fact and fiction was inspired in part by the photography of German artist Ursula Schulz-Dornburg (b. 1938) in her series *The Land in Between* (2018). The work is a documentation of abandoned rural Eastern European brutalist architecture which present an abject relationship between the fleeting power of human civilization within vast unhospitable landscapes. These bleak duotone photographs capture at once monuments of a forsaken past and also the desolation of desertification that is encroaching many of the world's regions. Her photos capture a space of which we can witness its abandon while it is simultaneously still

inhabited (see figure 8).

Despite her documenting real locations, Schulz-Dornburg's photos can be seen through a lens of speculation over future climates. Climate changes causing the devastation and abandon in the regions that she photographs is in many ways predicted to impact all of the earth by the IPCC. Like Schulz-Dornburg's photography, my thesis body of work sees abstract landscapes interconnected with climate change as parafiction. Portraying both the human and the environment as the same crisis, a threshold or boundary between simultaneously persisting worlds opens. [See: Figure 9]

In Schulz-Dornburg's work the viewer is asked to imagine a destitute city into which the desert creeps, but for most of us it has not reached yet. In my own work I ask the viewer to enter into a seemingly unnavigable place as a speculative one that sits nested between a state of otherness and an anticipated future. My landscapes, like Schulz-Dornburg's, serve as a memorial with a hauntological presence in that they portray both a space speculative loss of humanity through humanity's own impact on the landscape. Their spirit is that of a vapid emptiness in a land that serves to remind us of a lost future to which we have nothing possible to give.

The Anthropocene belongs to all of humanity, and along with the epoch all of the catastrophic climates loom ominously as a certain future. It is also a part of me. My work is not just about documenting the world and what has happened to it, but also my experience of the world in crisis. My focus is to articulate where I am in the current crises to express and present that place as an artistic practice.

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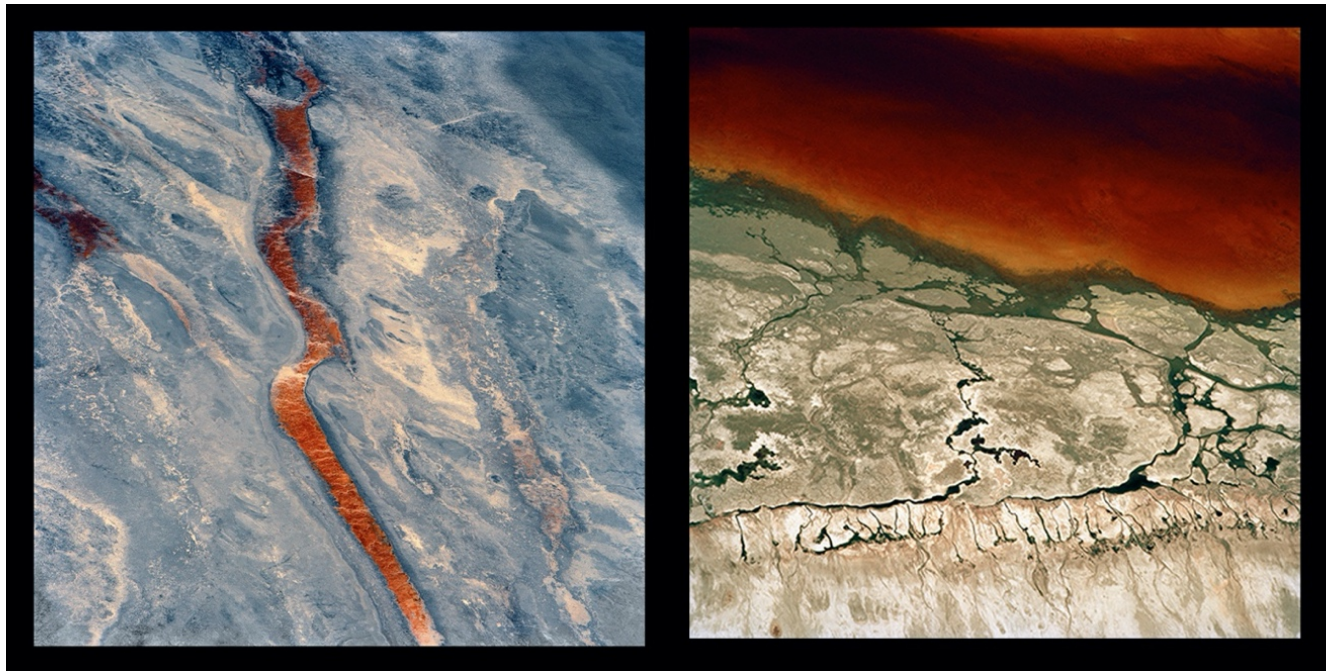


Figure 1 : David Maisel, *The Lake Project* 61 & 66, 2001.



Figure 2: Matao Dreskin, video still from *Untitled Landscape 2*, 2020.



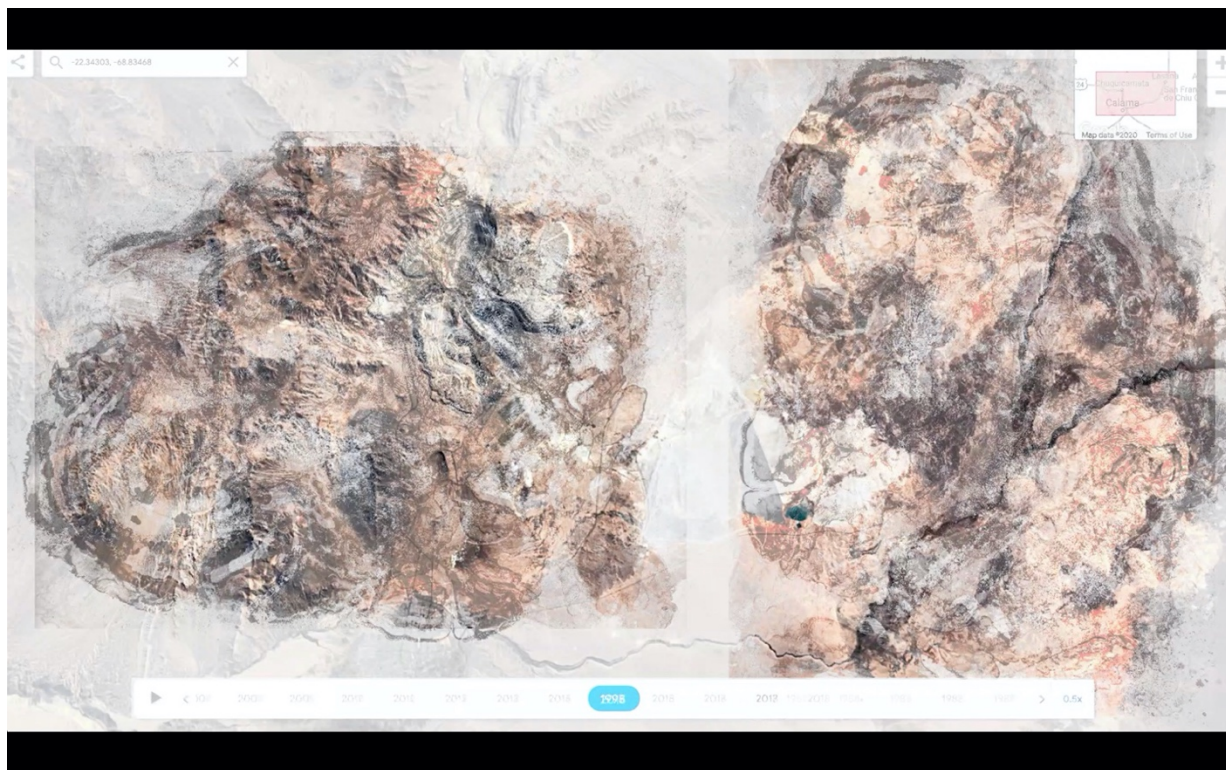


Figure 3: Matao Dreskin, Video still from *Untitled Landscape 1*, 2020.



Figure 4: Matao Dreskin, Video still from *Untitled Landscape 2*, 2020.





Figure 5: Matao Dreskin, *Untitled Psychogeography 1*, 2020.



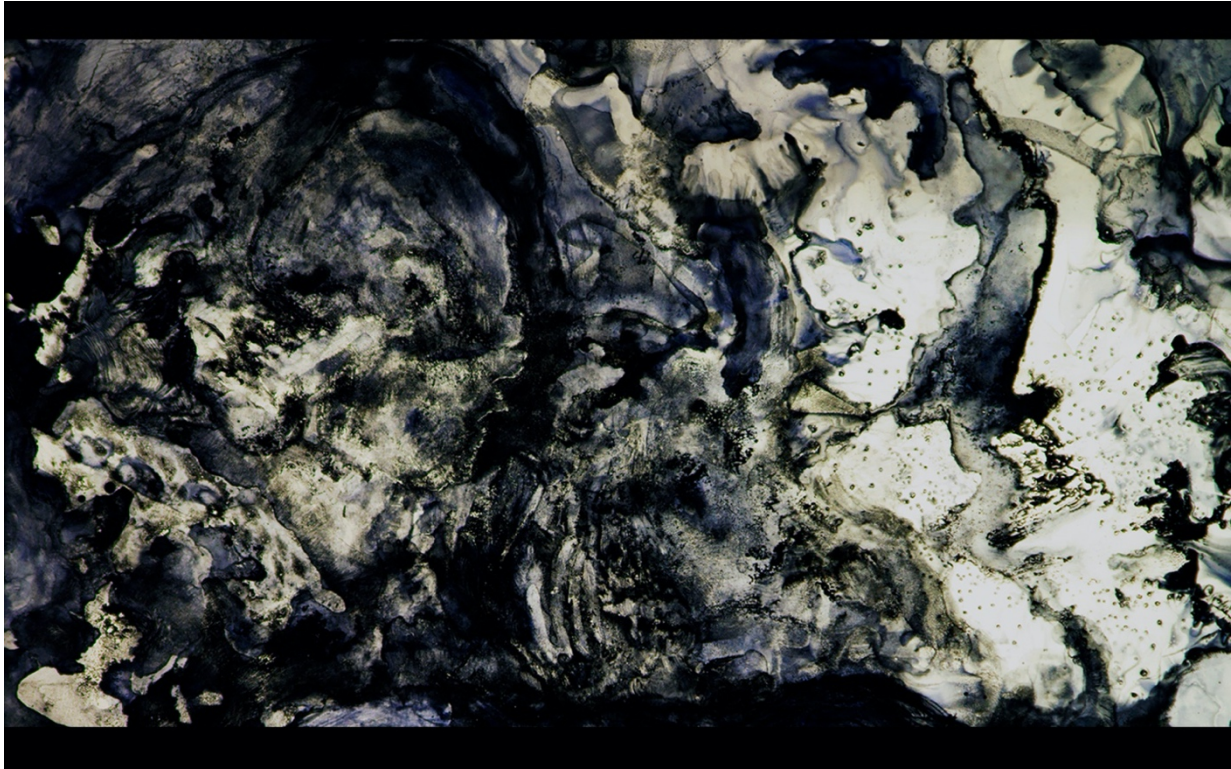


Figure 6: Matao Dreskin, *Untitled Psychogeography 2*, 2020



Figure 7: Matao Dreskin, *Topographies of Otherness Beneath the Worried Sky*:

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- ii. *The Sun Tucked Deep Behind Tomorrow*
- iii. *Within the Incarcerated Sky, Pillars of Light Pour Down the Walls*





Figure 8: Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, Photographs from *The Land in Between*, 2018.

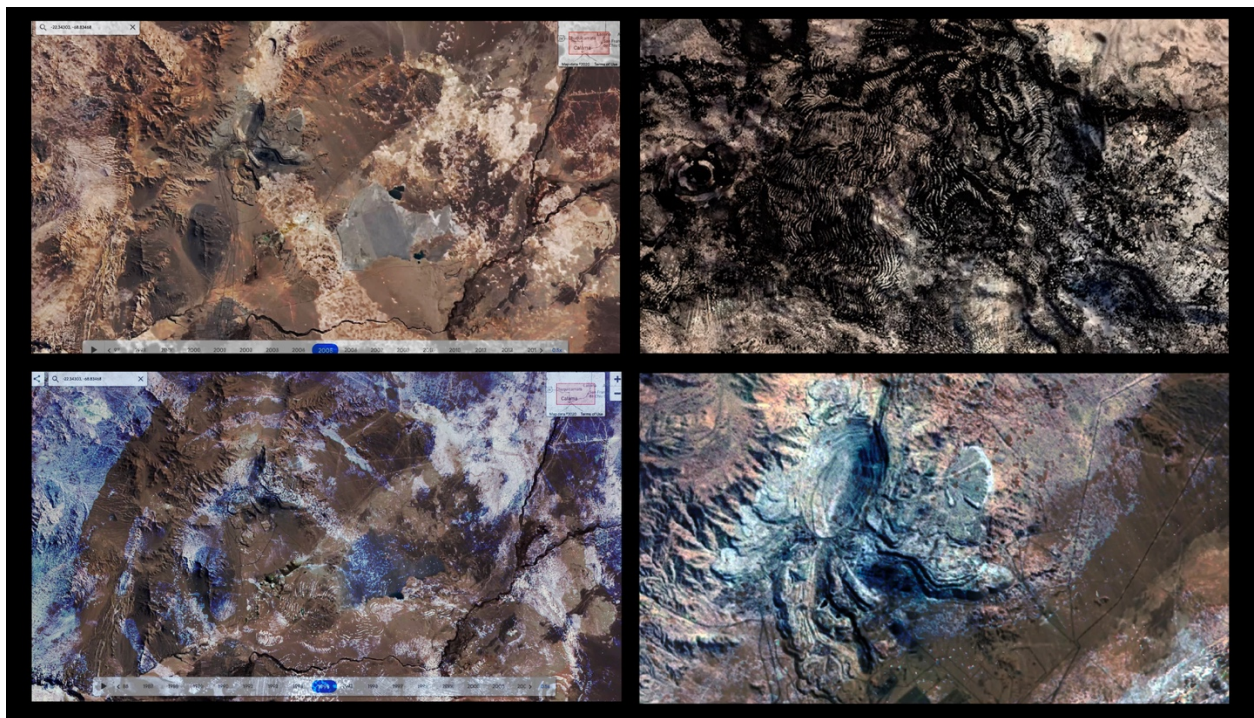


Figure 9: Matao Dreskin, stills from *Untitled Landscape 1*, 2020

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