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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

DUST WARNING (Does Albemarle know about this?)

A feminist critique of extractive capitalism through liveness and location

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

in

Digital Arts and New Media

by

Erin Maria Single

June 2021

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2021

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ABSTRACT

DUST WARNING (Does Albemarle know about this?)

A feminist critique of extractive capitalism through liveness and location

by Erin Maria Single

Lithium is the lightest metal on Earth and plays a critical role in battery and renewable energy technology that addresses climate change. Despite this progress, its mining infrastructure has ruinous effects on the land, peoples, and nature on the remote desert landscapes from which it is mined. The United States has some of the world's largest lithium reserves, but only one active lithium mine. I visited the Silver Peak lithium mine in Nevada to conduct artistic fieldwork during the development of this project. The resulting performance and multichannel video installation reveals the contradictions of the uses of lithium for the viewer and forces an interrogation of its uses with the aim of enabling a realization and consideration of the audience's relationship with this metal. This exploration of site through character offers a feminist critique of capitalism through the lenses of art, technology, and environment.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the Paiute and Shoshone peoples who continue to struggle for their land rights in North-Central Nevada.

And for my grandmother, Eleanor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This endeavor was made possible by my parents who believed and supported my career change into the arts. Thank you to my partner Luca, who drove with me out to Nevada. Thank you to the Florence French Financial Aid Fund for Art for helping fund this project. Thank you to Dave Crellin who recorded voiceover for the installation. And thank you to my advisors Marianne Weems, Dr. Michael Chemers, A.M. Darke, and Dr. micha cárdenas.

INTRODUCTION

This artwork explores the tension that lithium presents as a raw material revered for its contribution to technological advancement that is also destructive to land, ecosystems, and people. I argue that the United States has an unrealized dependency on this material. Through performance and video installation, this project reveals concepts around lithium for the viewer and forces an interrogation of its uses with the aim of enabling a realization and consideration of the audience's relationship with this metal.

Lithium has both old and new uses in a variety of applications, including medical, industrial, and technological. Since the 1950s lithium has been used as a mood stabilizer for patients with bipolar disorder and manic depression.¹ Lithium has also been used in the manufacturing of glass and ceramics.² One of the isotopes of lithium is a key component in the development of thermonuclear weapons.³ Perhaps the most recognized use of lithium today is in batteries that power electric cars and electronic devices such as laptops, cell phones, cameras, and other media. Today, lithium plays a critical role in renewable energy technology which addresses climate change as our society seeks alternatives to petroleum products. Lithium batteries have the capacity to store energy produced from wind and solar

¹ Fels, Anna. "Opinion | Should We All Take a Bit of Lithium?" *The New York Times*, 13 Sept. 2014. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/opinion/sunday/should-we-all-take-a-bit-of-lithium.html>.

² Azevedo, Matthew, et al. "Lithium and Cobalt –a Tale of Two Commodities." *McKinsey&Company*, June 2018, <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/industries/metals%20and%20mining/our%20insights/lithium%20and%20cobalt%20a%20tale%20of%20two%20commodities/lithium-and-cobalt-a-tale-of-two-commodities.ashx>.

³ Bradley, D. "Lithium—For Harnessing Renewable Energy." *USGS Mineral Resources Program*, 2014, pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2014/3035/pdf/fs2014-3035.pdf.

sources and also serves as the main power source for electric cars, a market that is growing in the United States.⁴ California is the nation's largest electric car market.⁵

Lithium is mined from geothermal brine underneath the surface of salt flats or from solid rock mines with ores such as spodumene, lepidolite, and petalite.⁶ The brine extraction process is water-intensive and cheaper than mining from solid rock.⁷

The United States has some of the world's largest reserves, but only one active lithium mine.⁸ Most of the United States's raw lithium comes from South America and Australia and is processed in China.⁹ This project is geographically situated in the western United States. Although it gestures towards the broader issue of extractivism in South America, the focus of this work is on the United States.

My project draws on and is in dialogue with the intellectual and artistic tradition of feminist and queer environmental art. As a response to the profoundly masculine discourse signaled by using the term Anthropocene, queer and feminist art focuses on the relationship between contemporary human beings and the Earth and think of ways to move forward in this crisis.¹⁰ This is a direct response to what author Eileen Crist critiques as the "heroic Western masculinist discourse of the Anthropocene."¹¹ My project borrows also from the tradition of performance art in that there is inherent risk in the action of visiting a mine in a remote area

⁴ Bradley, D. "Lithium—For Harnessing Renewable Energy."

⁵ Penn, Ivan, et al. "The Lithium Gold Rush: Inside the Race to Power Electric Vehicles." *The New York Times*, 6 May 2021. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/06/business/lithium-mining-race.html>.

⁶ Bradley, D. "Lithium—For Harnessing Renewable Energy."

⁷ Penn, Ivan, et al. "The Lithium Gold Rush: Inside the Race to Power Electric Vehicles."

⁸ Bradley, D. "Lithium—For Harnessing Renewable Energy."

⁹ Azevedo, Matthew, et al. "Lithium and Cobalt –a Tale of Two Commodities."

¹⁰ "TFAP@CAA 2021 Day(s) of Panels: Ecofeminisms." *The Feminist Art Project*, <https://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/calendar/view/14775/>. Accessed 11 June 2021.

¹¹ "TFAP@CAA 2021 Day(s) of Panels: Ecofeminisms." *The Feminist Art Project*.

of the desert. By being a female body occupying a landscape that is dominated by a masculine infrastructure and forms of perception, I am rejecting the ideas of extractivism and capitalist spectacle and layering my own viewpoint over the existing landscape.

Approaching this topic as a digital media practitioner who uses lithium batteries daily in various devices needed for work and leisure, I question my own lithium practices while also seeking to raise consciousness in the general public about their own dependency on lithium. The lithium we notice in our devices appears harmless, but this notion is detached from the harmful excavation practices of multinational mining corporations. Using the physical space in the installation as a platform, I sought to visually force these contradictions before the audience's eyes in order to generate awareness and subsequent action.

The artwork uses both digital and analog tools to further reveal these contradictions. In the performance I combine analog turntablism and digital video projection to create a space where the audience enters into dialogue with one another, resembling a bizarre nightclub environment in an artificial boardroom that follows Brecht's principles of estrangement used in his theater of instruction where social issues became subjects for theatrical representation.¹² My aim is to raise consciousness that leads to community engagement and action. This project fits into the pillars of my broader art practice, in which I seek to make artworks that are approachable, activist, and entertaining.

This artwork is significant and timely because lithium demand will increase tenfold by the end of this decade and scouting activity for new mines has increased with several ongoing projects in Nevada, North Carolina, and California.¹³ The New York Times published an article in early 2021 about the impact of mining in Nevada threatening the land and water of the Paiute and Shoshone peoples whose territory spans Northern and Central

¹² Brecht, Bertolt and Willet, John. *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, Eyre Methuen, 1974, pp. 71–73.

¹³ Penn, Ivan, et al. "The Lithium Gold Rush: Inside the Race to Power Electric Vehicles."

Nevada.¹⁴ Lithium is at the center of the national resource agenda as the United States continues to seek economic and technological dominance.

Finally, while lithium is a metal that must be understood globally, I will focus this thesis on a specific site in the United States, the Silver Peak mine in Silver Peak, Nevada. The politics of lithium extraction in South America is complex and fits into a longer history of mining-based extractivism in the Andes both within a nationalist and internationalist framework.¹⁵ This subject requires further inquiry and will not be discussed in this paper. I chose to focus on lithium mining in the United States firstly because of access during a global pandemic and also because of the striking contradictions that initiated my interest in this project in the first place. What happens at a site where excess consumption and minimal production meet?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first significant precedent that has influenced this project intellectually and procedurally is artist A. Laurie Palmer's book *In the Aura of a Hole: Exploring Sites of Material Extraction*. Palmer's research "explores social and sensory aspects of place and process, and traces the movements of materials between the land and our bodies."¹⁶ Her writing and research surrounding her visits and attempts to visit mines and sites of extraction in the US have inspired and shaped my visit to the Silver Peak Mine.

As an artist and activist, Palmer is interested in the areas where one confronts power and pushes back. Coming from a practice of sculpture that is concerned with place and

¹⁴ Penn, Ivan, et al. "The Lithium Gold Rush: Inside the Race to Power Electric Vehicles."

¹⁵ Gómez-Barris, Macarena. *The Extractive Zone : Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, pp. 1-16.

¹⁶ Palmer, Laurie. *In the Aura of a Hole: Exploring Sites of Material Extraction*. Black Dog Publishing, 2014, pp. 6-8.

material, Palmer records her encounters with various mining sites in the United States in an experiential way and explores the context which thus emerges from these encounters, including “environmental justice, First Nation rights, industrial agriculture, chemical weapons, low temperature physics, the Cold War, the invasion of Iraq, biotechnology, bio-geochronology, nanotechnology, Homeland Security, globalized trade, global warming, and unemployment.”¹⁷

Mining’s history involves labor exploitation, racism, profiteering, and environmental disasters.¹⁸ In addition, the mining industry is one of the world’s most male-dominated professions. I saw this as an opportunity to approach with queer and feminist epistemologies. Palmer’s project uses queer theorist Eve Sedgwick’s reparative rather than paranoid approach.¹⁹ Palmer defines reparative as “looking for unexpected details that are not accounted for in the generalized analyses, that contradict predetermined assumptions or render them more complex, that you can’t find through Internet research but only from being there.”²⁰ Whereas the paranoid approach is cynical, hopeless, and generates anxiety that dulls intention and action, the reparative approach leaves room for the “unpredictable folding of a complex, relational world, and the uncertain optimism of unfolding.”²¹

Like Palmer’s mine work, my lithium project accesses site and materials through a character exploring a place. In Palmer’s work the character is the artist herself, whereas my project uses a fictional character that is an exaggerated, contradictory version of myself.

Palmer asks through her research “How might we think differently about the matter that feeds us?”²² I ask a similar question in my own research, How can we expose our

¹⁷ Palmer, Laurie. *In the Aura of a Hole: Exploring Sites of Material Extraction*.

¹⁸ Palmer, Laurie. *In the Aura of a Hole: Exploring Sites of Material Extraction*.

¹⁹ Palmer, Laurie. *In the Aura of a Hole: Exploring Sites of Material Extraction*.

²⁰ Palmer, Laurie. *In the Aura of a Hole: Exploring Sites of Material Extraction*.

²¹ Palmer, Laurie. *In the Aura of a Hole: Exploring Sites of Material Extraction*.

²² Palmer, Laurie. *In the Aura of a Hole: Exploring Sites of Material Extraction*.

dependency and think differently about lithium? Palmer writes that “matter shapes us too; it pushes back, choreographing movements by its resistances, affinities, transformations, temporalities, preferences.”²³ Palmer’s witnessing of various extractive practices looks “for surprise, and for details that can puncture a totalizing, reductive, and disempowering picture.”²⁴ I explore this idea by excavating layers of lithium in the project. I first visited the Silver Peak lithium mine and bore witness to the extractive process itself. Expanding on Palmer’s practice of encountering these sites experientially and bearing witness to their context which reveals itself upon access or non-access, I argue that the mere presence of a female body at a site of extractive capitalism such as a mining facility, a place where entry is forbidden so the artist takes an inherent risk by being there at all, is a feminist critique of capitalism in itself and an act of protest. I integrated experiential and documentary material captured digitally with a camera and other devices powered by a lithium battery into the installation. Against a backdrop of this slick digital landscape, I continued excavating this relationship to lithium by playing found sounds on dusty surfaces not dependent on lithium batteries through physical needles dragging across a surface and producing sound. The analog machines are used to reveal yet another layer of the lithium strata: lithium as a mood stabilizer. The artist performs as a disc jockey in the performance and manipulates the audience’s emotions by manipulating the time and speed of records.

The second significant precedent that is formally and technically related to my project is Maria Chavez’s experimental turntable practice. In her book of essays and illustrations, *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable*, Chavez describes her genre-defying method towards sound production.

Maria Chavez is an abstract turntablist whose work focuses on playing the sounds a listener tries to avoid on a record player. Her practice is minimal and purist and involves

²³ Palmer, Laurie. *In the Aura of a Hole: Exploring Sites of Material Extraction*.

²⁴ Palmer, Laurie. *In the Aura of a Hole: Exploring Sites of Material Extraction*.

only emitting sound that she physically generates from the turntable. Her sonic vocabulary is what she describes “the sound of friction in a simple amplified state.”²⁵ Her work pushes back against the “Hi-Fi audiophile market” that is the result of electronic companies conditioning consumers to place an imaginary importance on their products.²⁶ Destruction of equipment such as styli and records as potential for sound development. Her work encourages the listener to let go of the preciousness of the materials.

Her techniques are developed during performances only, which uses the “chance procedures, accidents, and energy from the audience.”²⁷ In this way, my turntable performance is also a chance procedure and dependent on an audience and a liminal exchange in the performance atmosphere. I do not have any contact with the audience during my performance, but my performance is imposing and meant to engage them in an established yet estranged world whose familiarity is broken open by the video projections. This distance creates an ambiguity that leaves space for the audience to work out their own emotions in the space—to question whether they have permission to enter the boardroom across the carpet barrier. The work was initially performed for an empty room and in subsequent performances with an audience. While Chavez’s turntable position is kept in listening position rather than “DJ battle position” which creates situations with her audience that put her in a position of discovery.²⁸ Her practice evades the 20th century stereotype of the DJ and is derived from the “neutral positions of chance and improvisation.”²⁹ According to Chavez: “The Language of

²⁵ Chavez, Maria, and Danyel Ferrari. *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable : a Book of Essays & Illustrations*. First edition. Brooklyn: Maria Chavez, 2012, pp. 14-18.

²⁶ Chavez, Maria, and Danyel Ferrari. *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable : a Book of Essays & Illustrations*.

²⁷ Chavez, Maria, and Danyel Ferrari. *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable : a Book of Essays & Illustrations*.

²⁸ Chavez, Maria, and Danyel Ferrari. *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable : a Book of Essays & Illustrations*.

²⁹ Chavez, Maria, and Danyel Ferrari. *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable : a Book of Essays & Illustrations*.

Chance affects all people, regardless of gender, race and is free from marketing stereotypes.”³⁰

In the same way, my turntable performance in the installation is a minimalist gesture that confronts capital and corporate power. I use the symbolism of a traditional DJ booth setup, but slightly estranged because the equipment is so old that it is unrecognizable in the setting. The obtrusive turntables are placed haphazardly on the corporate boardroom table in a provocative way that suggests a take-over, if only for the duration of the performance, of a space meant for capitalists. Instead of a capitalist-commodifying spectacle; however, the equipment is dusty and antiquated and rarely used anymore. These discarded objects become the spectacle, as the jerky movements, rich warm analog sound produced from a built-in speaker inside the machine clash with the slick digital imagery in the projections.

Like Chavez, I use chance and improvisation in my performance. The performance begins with a structure where I pre-select six to eight disco records with titles and lyrics suggestive of mood (“Happy Feeling” by Sister Sledge, “That’s Where The Happy People Go” by The Trammps) and loosely define the narrative order of the performance, but what happens in between the structure is determined by chance and improvisation. I use some of Chavez’s vocabulary and procedures in the performance such as skating, scraping styli and needles to create noises (“the pencils of sound”)³¹, creating or letting manual loops happen due to the damage on the records, and letting the needle scratch the surface of the record bed to produce sound. In future performances I would like to expand my vocabulary through experimentation. First, I would like to incorporate additional layers of noise such as playing the empty channels of a transistor radio or adding more turntables to the mix. Second, I would also like to add some of my own procedures that further reduce the amount of control I

³⁰ Chavez, Maria, and Danyel Ferrari. *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable : a Book of Essays & Illustrations*.

³¹ Chavez, Maria, and Danyel Ferrari. *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable : a Book of Essays & Illustrations*.

have over the sound produced, such as lowering the center ring to let the 45 rpm record slip off of the table to hear the sound it produces.

Another artist who has done work around sites of extraction and mining whose work inspires and motivates my thinking and making both formally and materially is sound and radio artist, Anna Friz. *SALAR: EVAPORATION* is a multichannel sound and video installation that researches the mining of copper, lithium, and rare earth mines in Northern Chile. The artwork investigates the “micro- and macroscales of human intervention, impact and activity” in remote areas of the high desert and mountainous landscape.³² The massive slow movements of the surreal desert landscape and extreme illusions disorienting perception in the salt desert in the Atacama are played with unprocessed sound recordings gathered on location and electromagnetic signals. The effect is a durational investigation of landscape and infrastructure that highlights the contradiction of miniature technologies and massive environmental impact in extraction zones.

In an essay with her collaborator Rodrigo Ríos Zunino, Friz describes the desert as a site of “wasted land” that is “deemed temporarily productive, and then returned to the status of wasteland.”³³ In her sound performance and radio artworks, Friz challenges the neutrality of “remote” mining areas in Chile’s Atacama desert and instead declares them sites of power and capital exploitation that fuels the technological innovation of the world’s “smart cities.”³⁴

Friz’s notion of field work, gathering observations, images and sounds from a site is a throughline in my own artistic practice and procedurally influenced my lithium project. While Friz’s project frames lithium’s primary contribution to battery technology, my project focuses more on the psychopharmaceutical properties of lithium, a throughline because of my

³² *SALAR : EVAPORATION* | *Esc Medien Kunst Labor*. <https://esc.mur.at/en/projekt/salar-evaporation>. Accessed 11 June 2021.

³³ Friz, Anna, and Rodrigo Ríos Zunino. “We Are Surrounded by Torta.” *Feral Atlas*, Stanford University, 2020, feralatlaser.org/poster/overburden.

³⁴ Friz, Anna, and Rodrigo Ríos Zunino. “We Are Surrounded by Torta.” *Feral Atlas*, Stanford University, 2020, feralatlaser.org/poster/overburden.

background in pharmaceutical strategy consulting and proximity to corporate culture earlier in my career. Like Friz’s work, my performance frames the scale and duration of mining activity through the illusion of place and strata of the grooves on a record; however, my work is concerned more with the near past and the near future rather than a vast geologic timescale. In my performance, time is a key element I use materially to create the affect of nostalgia and disillusionment, which is accomplished by the choice to use music from the 1970’s and to use strictly analog equipment in performance.

Another pair of artists whose work conceptually has influenced this project are Beth Stephens and her collaborator Annie Sprinkle. Stephens and Sprinkle are performance artists whose SexEcology movement combines art, theory, practice, and activism. Stephens and Sprinkle have defined “ecosexuality” as a new sexual identity that explores the places sexology and ecology intersect.³⁵ Their work effectively pushes the boundaries of the environmental movement by combining love and environmental destruction in a playful and meaningful way. In the work *Ecosex Wedding Happenings*, Stephens and Sprinkle “orchestrated 19 large-scale ecosexual wedding performances over the course of nine years in nine countries.”³⁶ These happenings involved the artists making “wedding vows to various entities of nature” including the Soil, the Sun, the Rocks, the Coal, the Snow, the Moon, the Sea, and the Appalachian Mountains, among others.³⁷ The weddings are all co-created with guests who were invited to collaborate with the artists instead of bringing material gifts.³⁸ The purpose of the weddings is to inspire more love for the environment in the face of massive environmental destruction as well as to celebrate the couple’s own love for each other.³⁹

³⁵ *Ecosex Wedding Project* | Sprinkle Stephens. <https://sprinklestephens.ucsc.edu/wedding-complilation/>. Accessed 11 June 2021.

³⁶ *Ecosex Wedding Project* | Sprinkle Stephens.

³⁷ *Ecosex Wedding Project* | Sprinkle Stephens.

³⁸ *Ecosex Wedding Project* | Sprinkle Stephens.

³⁹ *Ecosex Wedding Project* | Sprinkle Stephens.

Their theory/practice research tackles social concerns with optimism and an activist spirit, and my intention is similar in the lithium project to employ similar aesthetic strategies to imagine alternative futures as it applies to mining and extractive neoliberal economics. In my lithium project, conceptually the idea of holding a nightclub or DJ set in a corporate boardroom is an intervention and antithesis to corporate spectacle and as an act of activism. The unexpectedness of this DJ playing a set in the boardroom is similar in form to the notion of the artists marrying various inanimate objects of nature—a little quirky and bizarre, but creating a dialogue and space for potentiality in the face of a grave, paralyzing scenario such as the environmental crisis. Stephens' and Sprinkle's work opens a space for the audience to participate in wonder instead of hopelessness.

Other feminist land artists such as Yolanda Broyles-González and Joanna Frueh have made artworks about the implications of a female body's presence in the desert. My project draws on this tradition by deploying these ideas in a critique of capitalism, mixing scenes of the natural landscape of the high desert with imagery of capital, mining infrastructure and a corporate boardroom. According to Broyles-González, during her performances in the Sonoran Desert “memory emerges as I move about, as the body interacts with varied contexts”.⁴⁰ She defines place as “a confluence of [her] body and its contexts.”⁴¹ When traveling to the Silver Peak mine in the high desert, I allowed my body to interact with the landscape at various sites: a waymarker on the side of the highway, a crater on the road leading to the mine, and on the dirt roads inside the mine itself. In the vastness of the desert I felt immensely exposed, particularly as a female trespassing on a mining site where a majority of the population are men wielding the power of access and policing. A confluence of emotions—fear, curiosity, and excitement—in addition to my reactions to the context of

⁴⁰ Broyles-González, Yolanda. “The Powers of Women's Words: Oral Tradition and Performance Art.” *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, by Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 116–125.

⁴¹ Broyles-González, Yolanda. “The Powers of Women's Words: Oral Tradition and Performance Art.”

learning pieces of the history of mining in that area, influenced my movements and the video I recorded while I was there. While Broyles-González's work is more concerned with memory, I felt the strangeness of non-memory as it was my first time visiting the site itself, which I had only read about online previous to my arrival.

For artist Joanna Frueh “eros and self-love are part of a revolutionary feminist strategy.”⁴² Her autobiographical performances in the desert celebrate “beauty, sensuality, eroticism, and pleasure”, ideas she feels are lacking in contemporary feminist theory, while exploring the idea of transformation as “reaching for clarity of thought and feeling.”⁴³ This idea of self-love is reflected in my project, specifically in the video projections. Throughout my film, there are intermittent moments of selfie-like imagery that intermingle with the long scenes of the desolate high desert landscape. Staging a DJ performance in a boardroom for the purpose of entertainment and filming selfies at a mining site may appear narcissistic and tone-deaf to some; however, building on Frueh's example, I, too, am not just present at the site but even engaging in a pleasurable and entertaining performance at two sites of extractive capitalism, the mine and the boardroom. In doing so, I am a female layering her joy and complex emotions through performance in a statement against extractive capitalism.

OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS PROJECT

Formally, the project includes a physical installation in the Digital Arts Research Center Light Lab, two video projections, and performance. The physical installation includes a 400 square foot carpet made of modular teal carpet tiles all facing the same direction. The carpet is a vibrant teal reminiscent of United States interior design trends from the 1970s. In

⁴² Frueh, Joanna. *Clairvoyance, for Those in the Desert: Performance Pieces, 1979-2004*, Duke University Press, 2008, pp. 152–168.

⁴³ Frueh, Joanna. *Clairvoyance, for Those in the Desert: Performance Pieces*.

the center of the carpet is a black boardroom table with seven red boardroom chairs. On one edge of the table is positioned two vintage Califone record players, a four-channel analog mixer, a prop conference telephone, two speakers, and an assortment of disco 45 rpm vinyl records. Two full wall video projections meet at the corner of the room. The projections are illuminated from two projectors mounted on the ceiling. A computer running Millumin software is hidden behind a wall panel. Four speakers connected to the projectors are mounted on the ceiling in the corners of the room.

A wall text is displayed at the entry of the exhibition space. Two laser cut wood displays are mounted on thrifed metal grating from a heating vent in an old house in Santa Cruz. A film photograph from the site visit is exhibited above the wall text on one of the grates. The wall text provides context about lithium and reads the following:

“The future always looks good in the golden land, because no one remembers the past.”

--Joan Didion, “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream”

Silver Peak

Discovered 1863

Silver Peak is one of the oldest mining areas in Nevada. A 10 stamp mill was built in 1865 and by 1867 a 20 stamp mill was built. Mining camp lawlessness prevailed during the late sixties, and over the next 38 years, Silver Peak had its ups and downs. In 1906 the Pittsburg Silver Peak Gold Mining Company bought a group of properties, constructed the Silver Peak Railroad and built a 100 stamp mill at Blair the following year.

The town, at times, was one of the leading camps in Nevada, but by 1917 it had all but disappeared. The town burned in 1948 and little happened until the Foote Mineral Company began their extraction of lithium from under the floor of Clayton Valley.

--State Historical Marker No. 155

Nevada State Park System

by: Harold C. Hendersen

Where does lithium “live”?

Lithium is the lightest metal on Earth.

Lithium is highly reactive and floats on water.

If you made a fire with lithium, it would never go out.

Lithium is present in ocean water. It is mined from brines and clays in salt flats and solid rock, like spodumene and petalite.

Lithium-ion batteries are found in electric cars, storage units for wind and solar energy, and most consumer electronics, including laptops, smartphones, digital cameras, and sound recording devices.

Lithium is used in the manufacturing of ceramics and glass.

Lithium has two stable isotopes, Li-6 and Li-7, the latter of which is 92.5% abundant in nature.

Lithium-6 is a critical raw material for producing tritium used in thermonuclear weapons.

Lithium carbonate is used as a medicine to treat bipolar disorder and manic depression.

There are only 8 lithium-producing countries.

Most of the lithium mined from spodumene comes from Australia.

Most of the lithium mined from brine comes from Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia, in an area known as “The Lithium Triangle.”

The lithium market is an oligopoly. Five mining companies, Albemarle (US) along with Ganfeng Lithium (China), SQM (Sociedad Quimica y Minera de Chile S.A.), Tianqi Lithium (China), and Livent (US) control over 70% of the world’s lithium supply.

The global supply for lithium is expected to triple by 2025 due to increased mining activity and increasing demand for batteries and electric cars.

Albemarle’s Silver Peak mine will double its production of lithium carbonate by 2025.

The dual video projections are edited as a two-screen film. The video is color graded to have a desaturated look which mimics the photography filters seen on social media platforms such as Instagram. The video itself shows various long durational shots of scenes in and around the Silver Peak lithium mine and surrounding desert landscape. A character also appears in these landscapes dressed in a striped boatneck shirt, neon yellow puffy sleeve covers, and black overalls. The video begins with the character walking towards the camera and ends with the character walking away from the camera. Various scenes of collapsing and expanding landscapes through mirrored imagery in the two projections creates an illusion of space. The footage is ambient and while there is no clear narrative arc in the film, the character appears and disappears throughout, with the film’s beginning and ending marked by her walking towards and away from the camera. The character appears somewhat narcissistic and the slick video of her body in the stark desert landscape has the quality of content that may have been published on Instagram or appeared in a music video. There is a selfie quality to how she presents before the camera. Close-up shots are mixed with wide establishing shots. There is no sound in the film, rather the performance provides the soundtrack.

At the start of the performance audience members are led into the exhibition space where they are encouraged to read the wall text first. Before the performance begins, a land

acknowledgement regarding the land on which UC Santa Cruz is located as well as the land on which the Silver Peak lithium mine is located is read aloud by the artist sitting at the boardroom table in front of the turntables to the audience. The land acknowledgement recognizes the history and presence of Indigenous peoples and their relationship to their traditional homelands and creates awareness of the cultural erasure, colonization, and subjugation they endured.⁴⁴ The land acknowledgement reads the following:

The land on which we gather in this installation and at this university is the unceded territory of the Awaswas-speaking Uypi Tribe. The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, comprised of the descendants of indigenous people taken to missions Santa Cruz and San Juan Bautista during Spanish colonization of the Central Coast, is today working hard to restore traditional stewardship practices on these lands and heal from historical trauma.

The land on which this film was shot and the site of the Silver Peak lithium mine is the unceded territory of the Numu or Northern Paiute people and the Te-Moak Tribe of the Newe or Western Shoshone people. Their territory in Central Nevada was stolen by white settlers who began their destructive cycle of exploiting natural resources in this area in the mid-19th century.

The performance run time is 8 minutes and 37 seconds. It begins with static noise coming from one of the record players while the needle is playing the record plate without a record. The artist plays a character dressed in a striped boatneck top and black overalls matching the imagery in the video projection. After the land acknowledgement the artist in character walks off-stage to trigger the video projections and then walks in to sit down at the boardroom table, which mirrors the image of the character walking towards the camera in the

⁴⁴ *Land Acknowledgement*. <https://www.ucsc.edu/land-acknowledgement/>. Accessed 11 June 2021.

projections. Acting as a disc jockey, she begins playing a set of disco music on the two Califone record players in front of her. She employs various procedures to establish a sonic vocabulary of pitch modulation and static. For one procedure, she drags her finger along the side of the record plate, slowing down the music and lowering the pitch. Another procedure involves adjusting the lever on the side of the record plate to speed up the records throughout the performance which raises the pitch and speed of the sound. Her transitions are jerky and abrupt. A male voiceover heard through the overhead speakers disrupts the performance around the eight minute mark. The script is voiced by an unseen security guard character who states in a loud, authoritative tone, “Does Albemarle know about this?” This is a cue for the artist to abruptly halt her performance. She signals this by sliding the needle off the record, which makes a scratching noise, turning off the equipment, and abruptly leaving the boardroom table and walking off-stage.

The piece is meant to be performed in front of a live audience in a gallery performance space. There is no streaming available to digital visitors. The live performance is all that exists. Keeping the liminality and liveness of the DJ relationship to an audience is critical to the work. Photographic documentation of the installation is provided in Figures .

Conceptually, the project reveals the contradictions that lithium presents—as a key material for electric cars and renewable energy technology, but one with ruinous effects on land, water, wildlife, and people. The project engages themes of mental health, extractive capitalism, and environmental justice. To show these contradictions formally, the slick digital video projections contrast with the analog and antiquated analog record players and vinyl records that the artist manipulates as she performs. Her transitions are jerky and not smooth like the expected smooth beat matching from a disc jockey. The work is also about the illusion of space, the shallowness of the digital archive, and the impact filters have on perception.

Excavation and the idea of removing material from the ground to be processed and used in the service of humans is investigated metaphorically through playing sounds from the physical grooves of a record. Building a world through the layers of sound and video in the installation represents the strata of solid rock. The distance between digital and analog is emphasized by a fetishization of analog tools and equipment used in the performance. The audience's expectations of a capitalist spectacle with smooth, slick, Hollywood imagery, and smooth DJ transitions is disrupted by the choice to use strictly analog equipment in the performance. During the performance, the artist excavates the idea of lithium through layers of sound and noise that built upon each other during the performance. The sonic vocabulary includes noises that suggest sediment and evaporation in addition to disco music.

Disco music was chosen as a happy hook that draws the audience in first with a jubilant emotion, and then subsequently distances them by layering on other sounds such as record player noises, including the scratching of the needle on the empty plate, the clunk of the speed change or forcing the skipping of a record, signifying that the illusion of wealth and prosperity signified by the boardroom table and corporate culture is not what it seems. Throughout the performance different mood states are explored by modulating the speed and pitch of the records, back and forth in an unsettled composition. The changes in the records keeps the performance moving forward into greater and greater chaos. The resulting affect is a bizarre and melancholy waiting room that keeps the audience wondering what or whom they are waiting on. Disco music was produced at a time in the United States when FM radio was taking over AM radio, and so it was some of the most well-produced music in history that was designed to sound decent on any device. It also signals a nightlife culture of excess and escape which also signals the artist's desire for freedom from the overwhelming pressure of corporate culture.

The 1970's was one of the most egalitarian times in United States history. There was an affection for the status quo, which disco represents. Large-scale social programs

provided a safety net until the 1980's when Margaret Thatcher's economic policies in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan's economic policies in the United States removed it and disco was replaced with the proliferation of punk rock.

In the performance, two Califone record players are used in the DJ set-up. Historically Califone record players were used in institutional settings to play voice recordings of grade school lessons in the classroom. The two particular record players used in my performance were purchased secondhand off of Craigslist whose previous owner had obtained them from his sister who taught in public school in Atlanta, Georgia. The vintage equipment also adds to the feeling of nostalgia the performance generates.

The key moment in the performance is when the character is asked to leave the site by a voice heard in a booming tone from the room speakers hung from the ceiling in the installation. "Does Albemarle know about this?" causes a disruption in the performance and mood swimming of the DJ character, upon which she abruptly halts the performance and leaves the stage in unison with her character walking away from the camera into the landscape in the video projection. This moment reflects my experience in visiting the mine, as I originally sought permission from Albemarle to visit, but did not receive it, and so I went anyway to the site and was subsequently asked to leave by a security guard.

The project engages the theoretical vocabulary of activist neuroaesthetics, originally defined by Warren Neidich, as a field of cognitive science developed by whose establishing principles are that "our capacity to consciously and directly affect our complex environment of evolving relations through artistic interventions is key to an emancipatory ethics."⁴⁵ By consciously refunctioning and estranging the environment, we are estranging and refunctioning our material brain's neural plastic potential—literally enhancing its capacity to 'think outside the box.'⁴⁶ Activist Neuroaesthetics fights against the "tactics of

⁴⁵ *ACTIVIST NEUROAESTHETICS*. 26 Jan. 2021, <https://activistneuroaesthetics.art/>.

⁴⁶ *ACTIVIST NEUROAESTHETICS*.

the neural economy which attempts to privatize and normalize the suppression of free thought and produces a regime which further weakens the cognitariat and makes obvious neural capitalism's totalitarian tendencies.⁴⁷ I argue that by making art we can relax our cognition and use defamiliarization or (ostranenie) to combine politics and aesthetics to think differently about complex and difficult issues like the environmental crisis. Bertolt Brecht's concept of "Verfremdungseffekt", or the alienation effect used as a defamiliarization technique that "while allowing the object to be recognized, at the same time makes it appear unfamiliar."⁴⁸ Brecht brought Marxist politics into the theater with a didactic purpose, to educate his audience. In a similar fashion, I mean to educate my audience about their dependency on lithium and expose the forces of extractive capitalism that can be traced to the batteries in our everyday devices. Contrary to Brecht's stark performances without a set, my performance uses a highly mediated digital set to accomplish these same ideas of estrangement.

The obstacles of producing a video, physical installation, and live performance in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic were many. Regional stay-at-home orders during 2020 and wildfires in California made travel to the site difficult. Completing artistic work in isolation in addition to the general stresses of graduate school also had a heavy toll on my mental health. Reduced staffing and technical support at the university provided for limited tech installation and troubleshooting.

The artwork was built and designed over the course of the three months leading up to the exhibition. Mapping the projections on the walls of the exhibition space proved a further challenge, as seismic activity and poor joint connection of the projectors to the ceiling caused the images to shift slightly from one day to the next, meaning that they had to be manually adjusted beforehand in the Millumin software for each showing. I traveled by car to

⁴⁷ *ACTIVIST NEUROAESTHETICS*.

⁴⁸ Rouse, John. "Brecht and the Contradictory Actor." *Critical Theory and Performance*. University of Michigan Press, 2007, pp. 300-301.

the site of the Silver Peak lithium mine in Silver Peak, Nevada, in order to shoot the video footage. I used my own equipment to shoot, direct, and act in the film by myself. I edited the film in Adobe Premiere after the trip. Some technical obstacles while filming were the extreme sun and exposed conditions of the site. I used a variable ND filter on my camera in order to block the light to shoot at the video settings I wanted. Sound was difficult to capture because of the high winds in the area which caused distortion.

The stage area was assembled from found furniture, carpet tile and equipment provided by DANM. The main mechanical challenges involved the projection mapping, specifically aligning and leveling the projection seams along the wall. The video was shot in 4K, and DANM does not have a computer powerful enough to process this type of video, so I had to purchase a new laptop. The laptop did not allow for multiple screen projections, so in order to use the Millumin software to create two wall projections, I had to use a workaround that used a Caldigit TS3 Plus Thunderbolt Dock, DisplayLink software, and two USB 3.0 to HDMI Adapters to break up the signal to make the computer think that it was connecting to three different monitors.

For the soundtable set up, I used two Califone record players, a four-channel mixer, and two speakers to route sound from each record player into an individual speaker. I used the mixer and manual dials on the record player to manipulate the volume of each player during the performance. The disco records I selected and sourced myself from a collector on Ebay.

The ideal setting for this work would be a nonprofit performance space, institutional art gallery, or multimedia art festival. This work is suited for the entrance or lobby of an art gallery, where the audience will engage once with the artwork as participants and observers. The audience felt varying layers of comfort entering the carpeted area, sitting down at the boardroom table, and coming nearer to the sound equipment during the performance. This ambiguity and desire to seek permission is an affect I sought to achieve by

having the carpet provide an artificial barrier to the stage area. From the experience, the audience will get both a feeling of community membership by embodying the environment of a nightclub and a concert venue while also gaining information about a critical social issue. The performance should be pleasurable and entertaining while at the same time activist. The goal is for the work to be both appealing and accessible to my audience, while still subversive at its core.

CONCLUSION

Overall, I feel that the artwork as implemented in the MFA exhibition given the challenges of the pandemic was a success. I was able to give several live performances for a crowd of less than five audience members at a time who subsequently gave me feedback on the artwork which I incorporated into future performances. There were several areas identified for improvement. First I will lengthen the performance to twenty to thirty minutes so that it is more amenable to holding a festival slot and so that becomes more durational, to allow for more exploration thematically into building more layers of noise and chaos. There are several new gestures with the turntables which I would like to incorporate in future performances, one being removing the rack that holds the 45s and letting the record spin off by their own momentum and the resulting sound. In addition, I would like to build longer periods of noise and chaos within the songs instead of slick transitions between songs. For example, I would like to build an additional layer of sound by playing the empty channels of a transistor radio during the performance. I would also like to incorporate additional turntables into the set up and scatter them around the table so that there is more movement by the artist and dynamism during the performance. I would also like to have a more pronounced gesture at the ending of the work, as the voiceover that disrupts the scene and ends the show was either lost on audience members or not loud enough during the performance.

In addition, I would like to add more visual and tactile elements of excess to the stage design. For example, the boardroom table did not read as clearly as it could have so I want to add more props to signal that it is a boardroom table, such as financial reports arranged at each seat so that the audience appears to have been invited to a meeting and luxurious leather chairs that signify the wealth and excess of corporate culture. I will also layer fine powder or sand around the set as a prop that will leave traces on the audience's shoes, skin, and clothing that live beyond the ephemerality of the performance. There will be piles of sand on the table and on the floor that will get disrupted and scattered during the frenzy of the performance.

Next, I would place the wall text outside of the actual performance space to encourage visitors to read it before entering the space. Having audience members read the context before entering would make a more pronounced beginning to the performance. Ideally I would not like to have any conversation with the audience before the performance to remain in character. To provide additional context about lithium, I would like to design a mobile application that audience members can download on their phone to remind them of their own dependency on lithium.

For the next iteration of the project, I would like to set up the projections and turntables in a lobby environment, either of an art gallery or nonprofit performance space. Conceptually, I aim to create a "waiting space" similar to being "on hold" which is echoed in the disco songs which could be considered elevator music in the performance. Depending on the space, I may remove the table altogether and just show the video projections and the sound performance.

In the future I would like to focus more on developing this character to be less passive, more humorous, and with less quietude. This time I chose to depict myself as the character, and it felt limiting. The main conflict that the character faces is wanting to confront capitalist power but being overwhelmed by it and feeling like she could not make a

difference. Developing the character more towards an extreme that is less like myself would allow me more freedom to make bigger shifts in story.

I was surprised that some audience members chose to sit down at the table with me during the performance while others remained on the periphery. I originally sought to achieve a restless and uncertain affect in the audience by creating the barrier of the carpet making them feel like they needed to seek permission to enter the space.

This artwork fits into my larger body of work conceptually due to its presentation of a body in a landscape and engaging with a site through character development. During my experience working as a commercial strategy consultant in the pharmaceutical industry early in my artistic career, I noticed the contradictions as well. I was working on sales and marketing projects for new treatments for oncology with great potential; however, the cost of these medicines limited access. These contradictions and the morality I felt being a cog in the corporate, capitalist machine ultimately distanced me from this work and led to a career change where I could comment and critique more freely systems of capital and power. Like this project, I want the tone of my future artwork to remain accessible, activist, and entertaining. Liveness and location are key elements of my practice which I would like to continue to explore through photography, audio video installation, sculpture, and performance. In addition, I would like to continue collaborating with musicians on future projects.

During a time of global immobilization, I took a risk and ventured to a lithium mine in order to make a feminist critique of extractive capitalism. My living presence at the lithium mine in the high desert and my live performance in the installation created a record that I was there and that I aimed to resist the general ambivalence with which we let large multinational corporations decide the fate of land, peoples, and nature unobserved and without restraint. The performance drew attention to lithium's contradictions as a metal we depend on for the devices in our everyday lives at the expense of the natural environment.

Through my female body occupying and staging a performance on a landscape that is dominated by a masculine infrastructure and forms of perception, I created a feminist spectacle of my own that was entertaining and thought-provoking for my audience.

FIG. 1: Still from video projection



FIG. 2: Still from video projection



FIG. 3: Still from video projection



FIG. 4: Still from video projection



FIG. 5: Installation view



FIG. 6: Props used during performance



FIG. 7: View of installation from entrance of the exhibition



FIG. 8: Wall text



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