

COLLECTIVE TERRAIN

Conversation between LITHIUM Gallery and Adela Goldbard

Between August 31 and September 23 2018, Chicago's time-based art gallery LITHIUM presented a solo exhibition *Concert Baroque* by Mexican artist and filmmaker Adela Goldbard. The exhibition premiered the artist's titular two-channel video that documents the mining activities at the Thornton Quarry, an aggregate quarry in South Illinois that used to supply limestone in the early 20th century for some of Chicago's iconic architectures and roads. The video was presented amidst an immersive installation made of limestones, concrete, asphalt, gravels...materials that were transported back from the site. Solo trumpet performance by musician Joe Suihkonen took place on both the opening reception and on the Chicago Arts District's Gallery Opening Night on Friday, September 14th.

In this exhibition, Goldbard measures the ecological impact of mining and its kinship to capitalism through visual and auditory analogies. The incredible resemblance between the shape of the abandoned trading pit at the Chicago Board of Trade Building and that of open-pit silver and copper mines leads the artist to reflect the connection between extraction and transaction. Encompassing the video installation, the sound of mining was also prominently featured. Accompanying the melodies of the trumpet, the groans of heavy machinery, the clatters of rocks and stones, the rattling of gravels...all these sounds unite and start to compose a very different baroque concert.

In the following conversation between LITHIUM Gallery and Adela Goldbard, they talk about the concepts behind this project, the installation endeavors, as well as some of the highlight of the exhibition itself.

L: Your exhibition at LITHIUM was a while ago, and yet it still feels fresh every time I think of it. It is hands-down one of the most ambitious installations accomplished at LITHIUM and I think it turned out really well. Let's go back to the very beginning. You started *Concert Baroque* since 2015. Could you talk a little bit about how you started this investigation of mining activities and their ecological--but also economic--impact on earth?

AG: In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) permitted the exploitation of Mexico's territory and resources by Canadian and American mining companies. Since then, the exploitations of land, resources and labor have had outrageous outcomes. As of today, 210 out of 290 mining companies in Mexico are Canadian. Between 2001 and 2017 foreign mining companies extracted from Mexico twice as much gold and half of the silver that Spain took in 300 years of colonization (Lemus, 2018). Many indigenous communities have been displaced and activists murdered for defending the sacredness of their people's land. My research for this ongoing project started by contrasting the violence of rock blasting to the violence continuously

exerted by the police force and military (not only in Mexico, but around the world) who protect the economic interests of mining companies (and their own) —lately also colluded with drug cartels— by eliminating protests and protesters. Extraction displaces and kills thousands of indigenous peoples around the world every year in the name of civilization and progress. Rather than a blessing, abundance becomes a curse that brings violence, loot and death to the poorest.

For Chicago, the birthplace of speculative commodity trading, my research followed a different path. I started exploring the formal resemblance between the trading pit and the mining pit as an attempt to visualize how economic development promotes the excessive exploitation of natural resources. By revealing the octagonal coincidence of the mining pit and the trading pit, my work twists and extends Lucy Lippard's metaphor¹: extraction in aid of erection and capital accumulation.

L: It definitely excited me when you said that LITHIUM would be a great location for its proximity to both the stone architectures in downtown Chicago and the Thornton Quarry. You attempt to draw a formal analogy between the open-pit mines and the abandoned trading pits in the building of Chicago Board of Trade. I think site-specificity therefore plays an important role here given that Chicago remains to be the biggest market for commodity trading in the US. How did you find this connection and what did you wish the viewer to read from this analogy?

AG: Limestone, a sedimentary rock that forms from skeletal fragments of marine organisms, was used in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to shape most of Chicago's iconic buildings, greystone dwellings and roads, and is still used as a building material, as an essential component of concrete, and as aggregate for the base of roads (asphalt). Extracted in vast quantities from south central Indiana (The Pentagon, the Empire State Building, and the Lincoln Memorial were constructed with Indiana limestone), limestone has also been quarried in Illinois since the early 20th century. Millions of tons of limestone extracted from local sites have been used to create Chicago's built environment, mostly as construction aggregate. By 1900, quarries in Cook and Will Counties produced about \$2 million worth of limestone and dolomite a year, which accounted for over 6 percent of total U.S.

Thornton Quarry, just south of Chicago, is one of the largest aggregate quarries in the world. The first time I saw the colossal pit while driving on I-294 I was struck by its magnitude: gigantic gray ramparts that resemble an inverted fortification enclose dozens of minuscule mechanical beasts driven by mostly male workers. Blasting and quarrying creates a dystopian landscape of classified and washed crushed rocks waiting to be taken away by construction trucks. This immense hole in the ground is a deep scar, a reverse image of the cityscape it created.

For the show at LITHIUM I went back to the quarry where 2 years ago I shot the video (main component of the show), and transported more than a ton of limestone aggregate to the gallery. I also bought cinder blocks (made of concrete, made of limestone) and a couple of limestone

¹ *The gravel pit, like other mining holes, is the reverse image of the cityscape it creates -- extraction in aid of erection* (Lucy Lippard's, *Undermining*, 2014).

balusters, and poured hot asphalt to complete the installation. This *non-site* (Smithson *dixit*) built inside the gallery became a rock and cement garden, both natural and man-made, an aestheticized and tamed construction-site, where sculpture, video, music and text merge to showcase a fragment of my ongoing research through a multi-sensorial experience.

L: I think this “artificial garden” made of these limestone pieces and gravels seems to me an effective way of examining mining, an activity that de-naturalizes the materials, stripping off their earthiness and turning them into commodities. The garden you constructed seems to be in this liminal space where this process is taking place.

Here come some of the behind-the-scene parts. Originally, you proposed a much bigger structure for the installation: an almost amphitheater-like hexagonal structure made of wood scaffolds and covered with asphalt, and sadly we didn't have the budget or the human power to fabricate it. The plan then transformed to a stepped-pyramid-ish structure with a large cavity at the center. It would take over 100 cinder blocks to build and I think at that point we were worried about the load bearing of the floor and had to abort that plan as well. The final version is what it was at the show, a structure similar to a bonfire pit and people can sit on the cinder blocks and interact with the books and brochures you provided. What's consistent throughout these three versions, though, is your insistence on a structure that invites the viewer to physically participate. Why do you think this kind of interaction is important? How do you think it has enhanced the viewing experience?

AG: I have thought and dreamt of dozens of octagonal structures in the last 3 years. Every structure I've sketched has been intended as an immersive experience: through scale, texture, smell, and sound I want the viewer to have a sensorial encounter. I believe that the transformative experience of art cuts through our senses in order to arrive to conscious speculation.

The silver miniature included in the show was modeled after the trading pit and is a scaled example of one of the structures I have thought of building. A stylized trading pit, an amphitheater, a music stage covered in silver, recalling Alejo Carpentier's novel *Concert Baroque* initial paragraphs where knives, forks, fruit trays, wine flagons, fish platters, saltcellars, nutcrackers, goblets, and teaspoons made of silver cling and clasp producing a concert of shiny music while being packed for the main character's trip from Mexico to Europe; silver, one of the most important commodities traded in the futures market in Chicago and elsewhere; silver, a metal with an extractive history that dates back to antiquity, essential for the support of the Spanish empire and still extracted abundantly in Peru and Mexico.

L: The piece is titled *Concert Baroque*, so obviously, sound and music play an important role. For LITHIUM's installation you had a separate soundtrack that plays a cacophony of heavy machineries clacking and stones thumping, and it was not necessarily synchronized with the imagery. Could you explain this choice a little bit? Additionally, we had a trumpet player who played sporadically throughout the opening night. If I remember correctly, he tended to play at the quieter moments where little sound came from the soundtrack. I think the way the live

performance alternated with recorded noise, together with how the sound paired with the monumental two-channel projection, has really generated a solemn atmosphere. What music did he play and how did it tell more about *Concert Baroque*?

AG: *Concert Baroque* is an anti-colonial novel by Cuban writer and musicologist Alejo Carpentier that narrates the coming to consciousness of an upper class Mexican in the 18th century. A critical revision of Vivaldi's opera *Moteczuma*, the novel challenges colonialist ideology and the hegemony of Western history through myth and music alluding Severo Sarduy's — Carpentier's fellow writer— theory about Latin American Neobaroque as a form of resistance. Borrowing from both authors, and with the help of Diego Espinosa who created the sound design for the video and Joe Suihkonen who improvised an ensemble of Baroque music (including some fragments of *Moteczuma*) and Mexican traditional funeral music, I added more layers to the work through aural components. This accumulation of media —sound, image, sculpture—, contexts, references, analogies, metaphors, etc. is intended as a "Neobaroque comment" on the exploitation of land.

L: I don't know if this is a contemporary symptom or not, but nowadays when we talk about art we tend to talk about anything but the art, haha. With so much contextualizing information provided, it's good to finally come back to the video and to appreciate its qualities in both form and content. Generally you pair a fixed shot with a pan shot--sometimes both are fixed shots--and even though they are from two distinct scenes, the two shots are stitched together in such way that they form a surprising geometrical continuum. I think there is truly a kind of material transformation being suggested there, a moment when stones become asphalt and dirt becoming smokes...

AG: When art is conceived as research, the research itself fuses into the aesthetic elements of the work. Personally, I've always been interested in making work that explicitly reflects on socio-political issues, in art influenced by anthropology and ethnography, in political art. I'm also interested in formal and material research, especially in the grammar of video, photography and sound and their juxtapositions, and in the dialectical relations amongst reality and its representation, re-enactment, simulacrum and replication. In *Concert Baroque*, slow motion, panning, the juxtaposition of two shots and the sound design composed of recordings from the quarry and appropriated rock blastings, unveil certain imperceptible details and transform the asphalt plant and the quarry into a choreography where machines become dancers and humans are almost imperceptible. The aestheticization of this extractive landscape emphasizes its bleakness and desolation, and sets the tone of the immersive installation that transports the viewer to a dystopian landscape. It is through the multi-sensorial experience of the work that attention is brought to socio-political aspects of extraction: the research, context, comment and the sensuous experience of the work are experienced simultaneously.

L: There's a kind of stillness in your video that I find very powerful. In this work, the serenity of the visual contrasts with the epic sound of groaning machines and the pounding rocks. It can also be found in your previous works, in which you would use stillness to prelude the shock of the event and its aftermath, be it an explosion or an abrupt crash.

L: Lastly, if you are to expand this project in the future, how would you do it?

AG: I am fixed on the idea of an immersive public sculpture that encapsulates and summarizes affectively all the layers and analogies of the project. I want it to exist in Chicago, and to become a functional structure that contributes to the speculation for a less exploitative future.