

Eva Schmidt

“Geology” as a term is imprecise. Strictly speaking, it signifies two different things: it is the science of the makeup of the earth, but it also denotes the concrete inorganic formations themselves. Within this impreciseness, the concrete being of matter cannot be separated from different forms of abstraction. This would indicate that geology is not only a specialized science but also embodies a comprehensive epistemological knowledge pertaining to scientific theory, philosophy, semiology, and aesthetics. The fundamental character of geology becomes clear when one realizes that as a discipline it has substituted the story of creation with a model of the unceasing reformation of the earth that is ultimately determined through entropy.

When we see a landscape as something to enjoy, whether our point of view is from standing still or while in motion, we perceive that landscape as a *picture*—of mountains and valleys, of forests and deserts, bounded by the horizon and vaulted by the arch of the sky. We see the *picturesque* in the landscape—an aesthetic category that emerged simultaneously with the major advances in knowledge within geology at the end of the 18th century. Everything we see in a landscape is an indication of the history of the earth—here we see a terminal moraine, there a basalt formation. Our thoughts are then turned to the inorganic world, to bizarre wastelands and piles of rock. In their monotony these seemingly empty spaces have been and still are a great source of fascination within art and literature.

In his *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre analyses how consciousness could draw near to being:

The environment may be a field of snow, an Alpine slope. To see it is already to possess it. In itself it is already apprehended by sight as a symbol of being. It represents pure exteriority, radical spatiality; its undifferentiation, its monotony, and its whiteness manifest the absolute

nudity of substance; it is the in-itself which is only in-itself, the being of the phenomena. At the same time its *solid* immobility expresses the permanence and the objective resistance of the in-itself, its opacity and its impenetrability. Yet this first intuitive enjoyment cannot suffice me. That pure in-itself, comparable to the absolute, intelligible *plenum* of Cartesian extension, fascinates me as the pure appearance of the not-me. What I wish precisely is that this in-itself might be a sort of emanation of myself while still remaining in itself. (...) But if I approach, if I want to establish an appropriative contact with the field of snow, everything is changed. Its scale of being is modified, it exists bit by bit instead of existing in vast spaces; stains, brush, and crevices come to individualize each square inch. (...) The in-itself is transformed into nothingness. My dream of appropriating the snow vanishes at the same moment. Moreover *I do not know what to do* with this snow which I have just come to see close at hand. I cannot get hold of the field; I cannot even reconstitute it as that substantial total which offered itself to my eyes and which has abruptly, doubly collapsed.¹

What Sartre describes here with the example of the snow holds true for all attempts to grasp something by *zooming into* it. One loses sight of the original image, one is immersed, and the shift in the scale of one's attention causes details to become enlarged to the point of all context dissolving. Our relationship to the world is, for Sartre, fundamentally shaped by a lack of being and by a desire to appropriate this being. However, at the decisive moment at which the "in-itself" disintegrates into substantive totality, this relationship is upended into an *I do not know what I should do with it*, into reflexive *inaction*.

This moment marks a threshold. Transgressing the threshold of the reverent *I do not know what I should do with it* is possible for those interested in the mining of raw materials

¹ John-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 581 – 582

because they *deny* the existence of this very threshold. Only an eye *blind* to the landscape—blind to any geological context—can reduce the world to raw materials. This reduction occurs with a view to a future process of refinement resulting in a commodity, in which form has completely prevailed over matter. This process of going into the earth with the intention of taking something out is viewed as sacrilege in the context of archaic belief, something that would need to be atoned for with placating rituals.²

The radiograph that Susanne Kriemann found in the archive of the Barringer Hill mine depicts the shadows of two keys, whose psychoanalytic meaning is unmistakable. They suggest the threshold and the transgression of its boundaries; they indicate opening up and accessing something, and also the established structures of ownership. And the artificial lake that today covers the cavity of the Barringer Hill mine mirrors the emptiness of the sky in its expansive surface; this is a manmade landscape of atonement.

Through his artistic practice the American artist Robert Smithson discovered the poetry and *subversiveness* within inorganic material, much in the way that surrealist Roger Caillois took the wonder of mineral forms as a starting point for a descriptive delirium and philosopher Gaston Bachelard developed the theory of the “imagination of matter.”³ In “Strata: A geophotographic fiction,”⁴ Smithson layers photography and text⁵ in the manner of a chronostratigraphic system, in which the younger strata of stone accumulate on top of older strata. Smithson begins with the stratum of the Cretaceous period and goes backwards in time to the Precambrian period. There—approximately in the young Precambrian age—he invokes not only the *Globigerina Ooze and the Bluish Muds* or *A Constant Grinding Down of Rough Terrains*, but also *Lucretius (The Flaming Ramparts*

² Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (Stuttgart 1960). Here, Eliade examines archaic images and rituals that are linked with mining.

³ Bachelard speaks of direct, heavy images from dreams. Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves*, (Paris, 1942), 2

⁴ *Aspen* no. 8 appeared in New York in Fall/Winter 1970–1971. The edition is comprised of fourteen numbered artist contributions arranged by George Maciunas and published by Dan Graham.

⁵ For “Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction” Smithson borrowed some elements of the design and structure of the book *Stratigraphy and Life History* by Marshall Kay and Edwin Colbert, first published in 1964.

of the World) and *De Mineralibus* of Albertus Magnus, from images that themselves call upon Nature: *Feather Impressions*, that emerges from the myth of *The Onica Tree Whose Tears Harden into the Mineral Onyx* and from *Cameras Lost in Shells and Skeletons*. Smithson's stratifications of the media of image and text pervade every geological age and include *maps, books, paintings, drawings, dioramas* and in particular all conceivable types of photography: *overexposed photographs, infrared images, colour slides, half-tone pictures, stereoscopic images, photomicrographic studies, aerial photographs, negatives, and undeveloped film*. One recognizes elements of a materialistic media theory that are inextricably connected with geology, its discoveries, theories, and fictions. A reference to Freud and psychoanalysis is also present. Here, a self-unfolding of being is constituted with the help of science, pictures and its apparatuses, and museum exhibition displays. In stratifications thus form and matter, light and opacity, theory and fiction are intertwined. This means nothing to the *blind* seeker of raw materials or to one who, when faced with the decay of the substantial totality, *does not know what to do*, in keeping with Sartre. Here, a counter model to the idea of raw material as well as to the idea of the inaction of philosophy is constructed: geology full of substance, pictures, knowledge and fantasy are mixed together in an all-encompassing entropic process, which audibly *crunches*.

For all those who do not wish to view the earth as a depository of raw materials and for those who wish to go beyond Sartre's *I do not know what I should do with it*, geological stratification is a model for an archive, a museum, a place of memory. We are connected with landscape and geology through archaic and psychoanalytic images of materiality as well as through the production of theory, the history of science, and the images of art, which model our perception of and contact with materiality.