

*All that is solid melts into air (Salton Sea), 2017*

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**Abstract:** This paper is an analysis of the artist Sadia Sadia's 5'54" filmed loop three channel digital video and surround sound installation '*all that is solid melts into air (Salton Sea)*' filmed at the Salton Sea, Coachella Valley, California in 2017. Integrating a practice that has included music production, sound design and fine art filmed installation, the artist examines the Salton Sea as a site of ecological devastation undergoing drought amplified by the climate crisis. The drying lake exposes 'Salton Sea dust' which contains a mix of arsenic, selenium, chromium, zinc, lead and DDT as a consequence of industrialised agricultural activity. The filmed installation employs aesthetic 'methodologies of transcendence' to initiate sublime, transcendent and epiphanic states, grounded in practice-based artistic research as well as existing sociological, psychological and neuroscientific research. Through an examination of the filmed installation work, the artist interrogates whether there is an element of the sacred that can be found in ecological devastation and whether the redemptive power of awe can lead from individual epiphany through to meaningful collective change. The submission is of a creative work of practice-based research with an accompanying expository text by a practicing artist and filmmaker.

**Keywords:** experiential art; ecological devastation; anthropocene; transcendence; creative practice.

*'all that is solid melts into air (Salton Sea)*' is a video installation that documents the landscape of the Salton Sea in the Coachella Valley, California from the northeastern shore in April 2017. The installation comprises three video loops projected as a single image or as three separate feeds across discrete screens. The central panel was shot at 25 fps and runs variously at 15% to 6% in slow motion to compensate for the speed of the pan. The 'sea panels' left and right run at 10% and the left-hand sea panel is flipped



Figure 1 Sadia Sadia, *all that is solid melts into air (Salton Sea)*, 2017, three channel video installation, surround audio, full HD, filmed on location on the northeastern side of the Salton Sea, Coachella Valley, California in April 2017, master, copyright of the artist.

(reversed) to create symmetry. The surround 5.1 soundtrack comprises audio either captured on location or heard and reproduced later in the studio in order to compensate for atmospheric conditions and wind shear. The audio incorporates sea wash with echo delays, a freight train and diesel train whistle (which were either recorded or heard on location), distant urban landscape and ‘industrial wasteland’ audio. Freight trains are endemic to the location as the site of intensive mechanised agricultural activity.

The title refers to the quotation ‘All that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions in life and his relations with his kind’<sup>1</sup>. The title is not intended to represent an affiliation with a political party or ideology, but rather to exemplify a poetic and linguistically appropriate representation of the human activity and the relationship of nature to capital responsible for the environmental vectors creating the ‘ghost’ landscape of the Salton Sea. The Salton Sea refers an area of ecological devastation exacerbated by ongoing industrialised agricultural runoff<sup>2</sup>. Regional drought is causing the water body to shrink<sup>3</sup>, heightening the salinity of the lake and the production of ‘toxic dust’ is amplified by the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Section 1, par. 18 (1848), lines 12-14.

<sup>2</sup> Emma Newburger, ‘Ghost Towns and Toxic Fumes: How an Idyllic California Lake Became a Disaster’, *CNBC*, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/11/06/californias-salton-sea-spewing-toxic-fumes-creating-ghost-towns-.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Rosalba O'Brien, ‘From The Air, Drone Footage Shows Salton Sea’, *Reuters*, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/air-drone-footage-salton-sea-shows-california-drought-impact-2021-07-06/>.



Figure 2 Sadia Sadia, *all that is solid melts into air (Salton Sea)*, 2017. Production stills, shoreline. The 'sand' is formed from the ground skeletonised bones of dead fish. Northeastern shore, Salton Sea, Coachella Valley, California, April 2017.

ongoing climate crisis<sup>4</sup>. The drying lake exposes 'Salton Sea dust' which contains a mix of arsenic, selenium, chromium, zinc, lead and DDT (or DDX as a metabolite)<sup>5</sup>. The Salton Sea is not unique but rather it is an example of a growing global phenomenon.

<sup>4</sup> Maanvi Singh, "'The Air Is Toxic'": How an Idyllic California Lake Became a Nightmare', *The Guardian*, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jul/23/salton-sea-california-lake-dust-drought-climate>.

<sup>5</sup> Yelena Sapozhnikova, Ola Bawardi and Daniel Schlenk, 'Pesticides And Pcb's In Sediments And Fish From The Salton Sea, California, USA', *Chemosphere* 55, no. 6 (2004): 797-809, doi:10.1016/j.chemosphere.2003.12.009.

Iran's Lake Urmia is among a number of drying or desiccated lakes subject to agricultural exploitation with toxic consequences to a natural ecosystem<sup>6</sup>, alongside Lake Poopó in Bolivia (mining runoff, climate change) and Kazakhstan's Aral Sea (agriculture, weapons testing), the latter of which was cited as 'a textbook example of unsustainable development'<sup>7</sup> as far back as 2002.

## A Methodology for the Transcendent

There are vectors which have been found in aesthetic, psychological and neuroscientific inquiry to heighten the likelihood of certain types of affect. My interest as an artist has been in better understanding and designing a methodology surrounding the experience of the transcendent and epiphanic states, in order to encourage or induce such a state in a viewer or participant.

The methodology around this activity draws on the research of a number of scientists and psychologists involved in the study of extremes of emotional valence and arousal in human beings. I extrapolated these findings to design a research study, drawing on my practice-led and practice-based research and my subjective observations and interpretations as an artist<sup>8</sup>. I have employed some of these devices in '*all that is solid melts into air (Salton Sea)*' including the use slow motion, grand vista, accommodation and surrounded environment.

Slow motion has been employed across all three channels at varying speeds to compensate for the speed of pan as well as to affect perceptual meaning. Slow motion is indicated as a factor in achieving a 'Level III' 'Truth and Transcendence', a 'feeling that we have understood something important, something timeless, perhaps for the first time'<sup>9</sup>.

The filmed installation artwork '*all that is solid melts into air (Salton Sea)*' also employs qualities defined in a prototypical approach to awe, which includes central features of vastness (in this case a pan across a vast horizon) and accommodation with peripheral features including threat and beauty<sup>10</sup>. The sense of subliminal threat, read through subtext within the work and heightened by the surrounded audio, is intended to enhance the experience of a devastated landscape as sublime. We do not see the precise detail of the shoreline, the 'sand' of which is comprised of the skeletal remains of fish, or the

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<sup>6</sup> Akbar Rahimi and Jürgen Breuste, 'Why Is Lake Urmia Drying Up? Prognostic Modeling with Land-Use Data and Artificial Neural Network', *Frontiers in Environmental Science* 9 (2021), doi:10.3389/fenvs.2021.603916.

<sup>7</sup> Rama Sampath Kumar, 'Aral Sea: Environmental Tragedy in Central Asia,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 37 (2002): 3797–3802. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4412601>.

<sup>8</sup> Sadia Sadia, 'Empirical Methodologies and The Value of Subjectivity in The Analysis Of The Experience Of Contemporary Experiential Art', *Art And Perception* 9, no. 1 (2021): 1-20, doi:10.1163/22134913-bja10009.

<sup>9</sup> Sheena Rogers, 'Truth, Lies and Meaning in Slow Motion Images', in *Psychocinematics: Exploring Cognition At The Movies* (Oxford Scholarship Online: Oxford University Press, 2013):163.

<sup>10</sup> Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, 'Approaching Awe, A Moral, Spiritual, And Aesthetic Emotion', *Cognition and Emotion* 17, no. 2 (2003): 305.

poison in the air and in the water, but there are enough hints and signifiers to tell us that there is something ineffably disjointed and out-of-place in what we are viewing. Fear heightens sublime feelings, and ‘motivates organisms in an evolutionary significant way...The capacity for a work of art to grab our interest and attention, to remove us from daily life, may stem from its ability to trigger our evolved mechanisms for coping with danger’<sup>11</sup>. The triptych format addresses the narrative power of altars, the trinity and the divine. We look at images of dark water and, as the surface ripples speak to atmosphere and environment, we cannot help but question what lies unseen, beneath and under. I employ images of water in this and other works as a metaphor for the ‘collective unconscious’, and through the footage of this diseased body of water we subliminally experience a sense of the consequences of our treatment of nature as capital.



Figure 2 Sadia Sadia, *all that is solid melts into air (Salton Sea)*, 2017. Production still, Sadia Sadia filming at the northeastern shore, Salton Sea, Coachella Valley, California, in April 2017.

## On the Redemptive Power of Devastation

The Indian philosopher Ananda K. Coomaraswamy defines the moment of epiphany as ‘samvega’, a ‘state of shock, agitation, fear, awe, wonder or delight induced by some

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<sup>11</sup> K J Eskine, N A Kacinik, Jessie J Prinz, ‘Stirring Images: Fear, Not Happiness or Arousal, Makes Art More Sublime’, *Emotion* no. 12 vol. 5 (2012):1072.

physically or mentally poignant experience', a recoil experienced in connection with natural objects or works of art, 'wherever perception leads to a serious experience'<sup>12</sup> (or in the case of 'all that is solid melts into air (Salton Sea)' a natural object represented within an artwork).

Since there are similarities and parallels in their precursors, methodologies to engage the transcendent may also serve to trigger the epiphanic experience or state. They are bedfellows, alongside the experience of the sublime and Maslow's 'peak flow', all of which bear a relationship to one another but may vary in valence and arousal but also more crucially in duration. Epiphanic experience is found to be long-lasting while the experience of the transcendent may be more fleeting and durational. Both enjoy antecedent states of awe and are heightened by fear and threat, which in the case of epiphany may also include anxiety and depression<sup>13</sup>.

The experience of awe as informed by anxiety and depression, or combined with threat and fear, are not affects that one might commonly associate with the experience of the transcendent or the lasting, often permanent change of the epiphanic. Since 'emotional systems tend to monopolize brain resources' and it is 'much easier for an emotion to control a thought than for a thought to control an emotion'<sup>14</sup>, one might then reasonably make the argument for art, and in particular artworks that engage a number of the senses simultaneously (as in film-music or music-aroma) to arouse emotion, as drivers of a decision-making process. If 'emotional feelings communicate information about the body state that can inform internal decisions'<sup>15</sup>, then given both these positions it stands to reason that artworks that arouse emotion function as a more effective instrument for social change than an appeal to the intellectual or the analytical in human beings. If we are to transform human adaptability for survival in the anthropocene (or capitalocene) era, then emotive, ecocentric artworks are powerful tools in the creation of a new materiality that redefines the relationship between nature and capital.

There are then any number of avenues open from individual epiphany through to collective change (including but not limited to): the embodied experience of the individual replicated a multiplicity of times to an aggregate where the individual becomes the collective; the Buddhist epistemological perspective where transcendent realisation in a single individual has the power to influence immediate environment and thence the world at large; and the 'wild card', the unpredictability and non-deterministic sequence of Edward Lorenz's chaotic dynamics and 'butterfly effect'<sup>16</sup>.

I can appreciate that it can be difficult to see devastation as redemptive. But many cosmologies include destruction as an inevitable and essential part of creation. This is

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<sup>12</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'Samvega: Aesthetic Shock', *Aperture (Archive: 1952-2005)* no. 16 (1972): 4-9.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew G. McDonald, 'The Nature of Epiphanic Experience', *Journal Of Humanistic Psychology* 48, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>14</sup> E. S. Benson, 'The synaptic self', *Monitor on Psychology*, 33(10) (2002).

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Gratch, Director for Virtual Humans Research, University of Southern California Institute for Creative Technologies, 'Ekman vs Fridlund', personal correspondence with the author, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Edward N. Lorenz, *The Essence of Chaos*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993.

part of the cosmogenic cycle, a global 'hero's journey' into the abyss which then brings about wisdom and reformation in the return. Without the tension between the sacred and the profane, without the journey into the abyss, there can be no redemption. If we define grace as 'a divine influence operating in individuals for their regeneration and sanctification' then by this definition, artworks that encompass devastation and communicate emotively to hasten the evolution of the Ecocene are hierophanies, breakthroughs of the sacred, carriers of grace.

Here is where I arrive at the redemptive power of devastation to create lasting change, first on an individual level and then collectively, through the experience of the transcendent and a sense of the eternal sacred in the natural world as communicated through the technoethic arts.

*Note: Experiential art can be challenging to define in language because it is intended to be understood through the embodied experience of the work, which is influenced by scale and presentation. These artworks are not designed for online digital presentation and such presentation is intended for illustrative purposes only.*

**Sadia Sadia** is a practicing artist and academic with interests in neuroaesthetics, emotion and encompassing environments. She is also an award-winning record producer and writer. Sadia has an M.Sc. in Political Science and Economics from the University of London, an M.A. in Design Studies from the University of the Arts (UK), and a Ph.D. in Fine Art from RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. Her work has been screened internationally including the Cinémathèque Française and the Melbourne International Film Festival and forms part of internationally significant permanent collections including the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI). She is a member of the EPÆG (Ergonomics, Psychological Aesthetics, Gestalt) Research Group, University of Bamberg (DE), a Fellow of the Royal Society for Arts (UK), and a Senior Industry Fellow at RMIT Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (SoA) (AUS).