

June 7, 2018



American Mine (Carlin, Nevada 2, 2007) by David Maisel

**EXTRACTION:**  
**Art on the Edge of the Abyss**  
Edwin Dobb & Peter Koch

***The age of the sacrifice zone***

*He could see farther into the ground than any other mining man.*

—Often said about Marcus Daly, founder of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company

*We are no longer in a state of growth; we are in a state of excess.*

*We are living in a society of excrescence.*

—Jean Baudrillard

Some scientists say we've entered the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch in which *Homo sapiens* is the most dominant force on Earth. No more convincing—or unnerving—example of our recently acquired global influence exists than climate change, by which we are recklessly modifying every feature of the planet's surface. Melting glaciers and warming seas; prolonged droughts, floods of unprecedented scale, and ferocious super storms; diseased forests and

dying reefs, mass extinction, entire regions rendered hostile to all but weeds and cockroaches; along with tens of millions of our fellow human beings, often indigenous people, forced from their homelands and turned into refugees: If this be our moment in evolution, know it by the turmoil we cause and destruction we sow.

Climate change is one of many outcomes of our ability to remove coal, oil, and gas from the ground and place them in service of human ambition—converting ancient carbon into instant energy. We’ve similarly laid claim to other raw materials, including timber; gold and silver; base metals like iron, lead, copper, and aluminum; sand, salt, shale, silica, clay, and gravel; uranium; rare earths (used in electronic devices like smart phones); dwindling reserves of precious fresh water. And the pace is accelerating, the damage expanding. Now that China, India, and Indonesia have joined the rest of the world in adopting urban industrialization as the highest expression of civilization, and the global human population draws closer to ten billion, we as a species are going to greater and greater lengths, both technologically and geographically, to meet our always-increasing demand for natural resources. As much as anything else, the Anthropocene is the age of extractive industry, whose worldwide signature is the sacrifice zone—an official government term first used to designate areas permanently devastated by nuclear attack, but which now applies equally to ravaged landscapes and poisoned waterways.

How might artists respond to this extraordinary turning point in human history? Can we acknowledge the damage caused by extraction without inadvertently romancing it? Can we confront and defy without reducing our work to impotent, short-lived moral exhortation? Can we go further, subverting ingrained patterns of submission and self-delusion? Can we interrupt the narrative of historical progress that glorifies utility and exploitation, breaking the spell that blinds us to everything humankind has known about hubris for thousands of years, since tribal smiths first dug up formless rock and turned it into tools and weapons, an audacious act that even then people rightly suspected was fraught with risk?

### ***From rage to ruckus***

*History speaks to artists. It changes the artist’s thinking and is constantly reshaping it into different and unexpected images.*

—Anselm Kiefer

*I wish there were more energy going into real, hardcore, nasty investigative reporting kind of stuff in visual form.*

—Lucy Lippard

Peter Koch, who conceived of *EXTRACTION: Art on the Edge of the Abyss* in a moment of “late-life impatient rage,” is well-acquainted with the mixed legacy of extractive industry. Koch grew up in Missoula, Montana, just downstream of the mines, mills, and smelters of Butte—one of world’s richest copper producing centers, with about 22 billion pounds already removed and more on the way. Today, after 140 years of relentless industrialized mining, Butte is also the

uppermost part of the largest Superfund complex in the United States, a place of staggering environmental ruin—"the black heart of Montana," as journalist Joseph Kinsey Howard put it—that includes a vast reservoir brimming with toxic mill tailings; a long-idle open pit mine, now containing some 50 billion gallons of highly acidic, metals-laden water; a permanently contaminated aquifer entombed beneath the town; and a polluted watershed—the first one hundred miles of the upper Clark Fork River, which is a main tributary of the mighty Columbia River, the lifeblood of the Pacific Northwest. "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from," writes native son Edwin Dobb, one of the first people Koch invited to join *EXTRACTION*. "Butte is where we must return, in the manner of a pilgrimage, if we wish to grasp in full the implications of our appetite for metals."

At the end of such a journey, the intrepid pilgrim will arrive at the edge of the immense excavation known as the Berkeley Pit. A mile wide, a mile-and-a-half long, and a third of a mile deep, the Pit epitomizes our dilemma: Where once we depended on it for the metals it yielded—no copper = no electricity = no universally available light and power, to cite but one example—it now poses a grave threat, a threat that will persist. Groundwater will continue to migrate into the pit, continue to become corrupted and rendered lethal, in perpetuity. Standing on the brink, before the towering back wall of the Berkeley, whose semi-circular sloping terraces resemble a gigantic Greek amphitheater, one is overtaken by a sense of doom. A tragedy has played out here. And the reckoning is far from over. As recently as the fall of 2017, some 4,000 migrating snow geese perished within hours of landing on the toxic lake. Viewed from the edge, the pit is a *théâtre du sacrifice*. The gateway to dominion is also a staircase to hell—Milton's "wild Abyss," the womb and grave of nature.

While the Berkeley Pit is the historical origin and symbolic nucleus of *EXTRACTION*, the project encompasses much more. Multiply the Pit by hundreds of operations of similar size and impact, add thousands of underground mines (diamonds, gems, gold, and other precious metals) and strip mines (coal), then imagine them distributed across all continents save Antarctica. That will give you a fuller picture of the predicament posed by modern industrialized mining. And that survey doesn't include the many other large-scale artifacts of extraction—clear cut valleys and mountainsides; oil and gas fields, refineries, and terminals; coal trains and power generating stations, petroleum tankers and transmission lines; dams, factories, and manufacturing facilities; abandoned quarries, waste ponds, dumps, and spill sites; lifeless barrens, dried-up lakes, and sterile streams where once plants and animals were plentiful; plus countless reclamation and remediation projects. Taken together, they form a brutal, ever-present cultural arena where most of us reside most of the time and, as consumers of products and services to which we are addicted, help perpetuate.

The question we must ask ourselves is whether we possess the daring and imagination to break the silence surrounding the perilous bargain *Homo sapiens* has struck by hitching its fate to the metastatic growth of extractive industry. Can we plumb the source of our undoing—that urban industrial civilization is essentially sacrificial? That as surely as night follows day, nemesis follows hubris? That human folly of such colossal proportions exacts an inescapable and equally colossal if sometimes displaced or delayed toll? And can we reach the public with our efforts when the media is obsessed with mind-numbing spectacles? Can we induce ruptures in the all-

encompassing waking nightmare of popular and commercial imagery, making our voices heard around the American West? Indeed, around the world?

We launched *EXTRACTION* because we believe the answer is yes. More than that, we believe we have no choice but to try. Merely bearing witness is not enough. As visionaries and outsiders, we are capable of appropriating and reconfiguring contemporary propaganda and re-deploying it in service of our own alternative concepts and transformative objects. We can use photography, video, painting, sculpture, land art, performances, installations, site-specific work, and various hybrids thereof to conduct “hardcore, nasty” investigations of extraction—all of its forms and all of its consequences—exposing the abundant evidence of Faustian overreach most people don’t wish to acknowledge, and re-represent it with all the eye-opening, assumption-smashing power the arts have always exerted on the human condition. We can counter the violent subjugation of nature brought about by mining and drilling with the playful but liberating strategy of *détournement*. Through radical engagements and inspired derangements we can destabilize the way extractive industry is portrayed and consumer culture promoted. We can hijack and reroute the conversation about what constitutes a good life in the opening decades of the 21st century. We can sound an alarm.

We can raise a ruckus.

### ***Setting the Stage for the Summer of 2021***

*One cannot be pessimistic about the West. This is the native home of hope.*

—Wallace Stegner

*My job is to make images and leave the decision-making and conclusion-drawing to other people.*

—Laurie Anderson

As the region where the Second Industrial Revolution colonized hope’s native home, the American West is a ready-made stage for a constellation of events designed to produce the ruckus we envision. But neither the subject matter of *EXTRACTION* nor those who choose to participate are limited to a single geographic area. Initial conversations with museum directors, curators, photographers, artists, writers, humanities programs staff, and others suggest that the idea could easily spread beyond the West, indeed, beyond the U.S. We are addressing a global problem, after all, one that isn’t going away.

Here in brief are our goals:

1) to invite, provoke, and convoke galleries, museums, libraries, and public and private art spaces and organizations throughout the American West to program individual and group exhibitions, book arts gatherings, performances, symposia, and related activities, all with the defining theme of *EXTRACTION* and held during the same period—the summer of 2021.

2) to encourage individual and collective artists, poets, composers, choreographers, filmmakers, etc. to address the theme during this time by creating new works across all media.

3) to persuade writers, editors, publishers, photographers, curators, and individual artists to create documents, produce publications, and establish and maintain archives (both digital and print) linked by the shared theme, so that a comprehensive record of *EXTRACTION* exists to inform and inspire others.

4) to foster a cooperative, synergistic, non-hierarchical, self-propagating network of all of the above with the common purpose of creating a multi-layered, cross-institutional, trans-border multimedia ruckus over the single most urgent planetary concern of our time—the environmental costs of unbridled globalized extractive industry, including the negative effects of climate change; the deterioration of land, water, and air; and much else.

As happens at *documenta*, the free-for-all art extravaganza that takes place every five years in Germany, no one in particular owns or oversees *EXTRACTION*. Anyone, located anywhere, is welcome to contribute or participate in any way they wish. Those involved can be both creator and catalyst. Unlike the Exquisite Corpse of the Surrealists, our collaboration will be transparent, everyone will be able to see what others are doing, and how and where the overall project is evolving. We don't consider ourselves social workers or political activists. We aspire to the timeless role of aesthetic troublemaker, or trickster, producing artworks as interventions that disturb the collective oblivion that makes possible our suicidal cultural contract regarding extractive industry. What each of us does after our dreadful awakening is for each of us to decide.

Learn more about *EXTRACTION* at [extractionart.org](http://extractionart.org).

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The above post part of the [MAHB's Arts Community space](#) –an open space for MAHB members to share, discuss, and connect with artwork processes and products pushing for change. Please visit the MAHB Arts Community to share and reflect on how art can promote critical changes in behavior and systems and [contact Erika](#) with any questions or suggestions you have regarding the space.

MAHB Blog: <https://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/extraction/>