

Salt and History

Catalogue essay,
exhibition

Beneath the Salt
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Introduction book
Beneath the Salt

Spring 2017

*Don't give me the whole truth,
don't give me the sea for my thirst,
don't give me the sky when I ask for light,
but give me a glint, a dewy wisp, a mote
as the birds bear water-drops from their bathing
and the wind a grain of salt.*

Olav Hauge

Træna is a group of islands on the Norwegian sea, off the west coast of Norway, situated even closer to the North Pole than Iceland. It has been inhabited since the Stone Age, 9000 years ago, and as you might expect from a place surrounded by sea, 30 miles off the continental coast, fishing has always been its chief industry. Life in Træna revolves around the sea; what it has to offer, its dangers and its rhythms and by extension, its salt. For instance, fish is commonly preserved by salt-drying, as in the local speciality of “klippfisk”, or fish dried in salt on rocks. For the purpose of producing klippfisk, Træna used to have vast salt storage warehouses, which are now part of the island's history and landscape. There isn't any naturally occurring fresh water on the island; the water coming out of the taps there is salted. Yet, despite the ready availability of salt via seawater, Træna today also imports large quantities of it for its fish industry.

Artists Marianne Bjørnmyr and Dan Mariner stayed on the island for two weeks as artists in residence and submerged themselves in this fascinating history and local issues. Carefully attentive to the characteristics of this special place, they took inspiration from what they saw as the crux of its identity: the material of salt. From this point of departure, they chose to return to the root of their medium of predilection, photography.

It is striking to realise that salt was the material with which the first experiments in photography were conducted, specifically by William Henry Fox Talbot, the English inventor of photography, in 1840. Salt prints were the earliest positive prints developed from negative prints and were primarily made during approximately the first decade of the history of photography (1840–1850). Salt was combined with silver chemicals to make a solution that darkened when exposed to light. Coating papers with this solution allowed negative images to be produced. These were then translated, originally by contact printing, into a positive image. This early practice of what was not even yet commonly called “photography” was considered a mere chemical manipulation or experiment. The whole process was intuitive and called upon the senses of touch as well as sight: the coating of paper by hand with a brush, the necessity of direct and strong sunlight (there was not yet a strong enough lighting technology, such as electrical light, in the 1840s), the necessary contact of two sheets of paper, the darkening of the paper fibres visible to the naked eye and the complex manipulation of all the materials involved (paper, wooden boxes, reactive liquids).

The salt itself seemed to take on some of the precious connotations of the silver when mixed with it to create such an intriguing and miraculous result: the instantaneous reproduction of a part of reality onto paper, without the need for the time consuming technique of drawing.

Viewed microscopically, a salt crystal looks like a cube, which is perhaps one of the simplest crystal shapes. The crystal, as a geometrical shape and as a remarkable chemical phenomenon, has been of great interest to visual artists. Schopenhauer has philosophically used the crystal as a metaphor for nature's passage from the mineral to the organic. Crystals are inanimate, yet they multiply. Their accretions grow and form dazzling shapes. Thus the crystal's conceptual appeal for contemporary art is that it is an interesting visual shape yet also addresses existential questions around stillness and growth, or more basically, life and death. Crystals have also been viewed as a model for purity, perfection and regularity, for instance in the thinking of Wilhelm Worringer at the beginning of the twentieth century. Interestingly, Worringer also theorised on the "urge to abstraction" in the arts as soon as 1908.

Marianne and Dan's interest in the concept of the salt crystal makes sense in this context. Indeed their attraction to abstraction transpires when observing the images they chose to include in this exhibition. The absence of captions directly associated with the images deprives the reader of any contextual bearings, which is one of the ways the artists prevent an informed reading of the images and allow the development of poetic meditation and free mental associations. In the same vein, we can also remark in this book that our sense of scale is skewed, creating a de-familiarisation of the referent. The underlying artistic ambition is one of abstraction: through their intentional mixing of images from different times, geographical locations and authors, the artists have chosen to leave the viewer in a state of ignorance of the concrete realities that each image refers to. By so doing, they shift the focus to the images themselves and their aesthetic value. One becomes more sensitive to whether it is black-and-white or in colour – which by the way fails to give us any clue on whether it is a contemporary or archival image – sharp or soft-focused. The variety of textures becomes the main event: smooth water surfaces, stark metal, mossy grounds, dewy skies, weather-beaten wrinkles, ripples - but above all, rough, dusty, smooth, sandy, wet or dry and in all its many forms: salt crystals.

Another landmark work of art that is closely related to crystals, accretion, autonomous development and the material of salt is the *Spiral Jetty* by Robert Smithson (1970), in the Great Salt Lake of Salt Lake City, Utah. The Director and the Curator of Exhibitions at the Salt Lake Art Center succinctly defined the work as a causeway of basalt coiling out into the briny lake.

Harvard professor Jennifer Roberts highlights that Smithson was fascinated by crystallography and geology, and in fact treated salt as a motivating factor for the entire project. Even though the salt crystals were not initially part of the material aspect of the work yet, Smithson had anticipated their formation and chosen the site and the spiral shape specifically for this reason, going as far as insisting on including the term "salt crystals" in the medium line of the work. In some respect, *Spiral Jetty* can be thought of as a time-based work, whose physical evolution and "growth" is part of its ontology.

Salt, as a crystal, conjures up ideas of a liminal movement between mineral (static) and organic (alive) as well as a new metaphor for the passing of time and the way we think of history. This resonates meaningfully with Dan and Marianne's endeavour, in that their artistic project links us with the history of a place that is closely associated with its natural environment. We may consider the artistic practice of juxtaposing images and creatively provoking associations to emerge by avoiding the traditional narrative-driven history as a welcome alternative to traditional research into history.

The *Spiral Jetty* is most of the time completely submerged under the salty water, and thus invisible to the visitors' eyes, except from an aerial viewpoint. It has long been the medium of photography that has made possible the experience of this work, starting with photographs documenting its making and made under the artist's guidance, and then later on when it re-emerged as the lake dried out. The photographs are nearly the only way that we access the knowledge of its existence, or in other words, the earthworks [has] become its photographs. The "Spiral Jetty", more than just a material work made of basalt stones, is also a video, an essay and the combination of all the many photographs that have been made of it, blurring the lines on the work's ontology.

Similarly here, and with the material of salt also at the centre of their concerns, Marianne and Dan create a work of many facets, so much so that one cannot be certain what exactly constitutes the work. Their project is akin to anthropology, as they travelled and mingled locally with the people, the institutions (such as the local archive) and within the landscape, to conduct fieldwork research. It is significant that the finished product is a book and an exhibition reflecting on the island's most historically treasured material, salt. Another aspect of the project was to launch an international open call on social media to crowdsource imagery from which they selected to include in this project. They became then the curators and editors of the wealth of material that they had collected. Bearing in mind this long and careful process, one is brought to ask again: what constitutes the work of art? Is it the series of pictures that they themselves made, or those that they collected? Is it their interaction and encounter with the history of Træna and the social bond that they formed with its inhabitants? This social and human dimension of the work is of paramount importance, and yet it steers clear of mere conceptualism by putting such conscious weight on the final object, an exhibition that forms an ode to ancestral analogue practices.

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