

# On Extraction

## Interview with art historian TJ Demos and artist Laurie Palmer

ON EXTRACTION

**ELIA VARGAS** Laurie and TJ, each of you are thinking through the role of materiality in art and theory in your own ways. I am really excited to talk to you about this theme extraction: what is the EXTRACTION Program?

**LAURIE PALMER** The program is a series of film screenings and lectures by visitors that TJ and I have put together. A reading group, field trips and workshops, and symposiums. All of that together is a research project. It is an opportunity to learn more about what people are doing, how people are thinking, and how we can help contribute to changing certain ideas and practices around extraction.

**TJ DEMOS** We're tracing critical and experimental theorizations of extraction, where extraction refers not only to mining and drilling for natural resources and energy, but also to labor practices where human energy

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is exploited. Extraction emerges from a long history of colonialism. Various areas of the world have been explored and subjugated by Western industry, exploited for what Jason Moore calls “cheap natures.” Natural resources and communities underwent violent and forced dispossessions, which extends into current conditions of advanced capitalist resource gathering. The prison industrial complex and migrant labor also constitute forms of contemporary extraction.

**EV** Why is this theme ‘extraction’ important at this moment? How does it relate to the disciplines that you both are thinking through?

**LP** There are a lot of people making work in the realm of art practice that is related to these questions now. To add to TJ’s theoretical frame, extraction is a withdrawal without depositing, unless the deposits are the toxic residues. There’s no ecological giving back. We are thinking also in terms of people’s labor, the extraction of resources from poor and communities of color, and the extraction of time. The legacies of hierarchical relationships that have turned nature or the environment into an ‘other,’ also turn certain people into ‘others.’ This is where the social and the environment can be understood together.

Even as we’re living in a time when some of those structures are particularly heightened because of the perception of scarcity — the sense of a growing population, shrinking land base and shifting continental understandings—there’s also a growing understanding of cycles of giving and return, as well as withdrawal. There’s a lot of thinking about how these

practices could be done differently. I feel like we're joining an already gathering throng.

**EV** Each of you have been addressing these themes in your own ways for some time now. Laurie, how does a ten year process of writing a book, *In the Aura of a Hole*, impact how you're thinking about extraction now? TJ, how does having already written a book *Decolonizing Nature* and now thinking against the Anthropocene, impact this expanding field in which there are a lot of new tools to think with?

**TJD** The EXTRACTION project gathers interdisciplinary energies and thinks through visual-cultural and theoretical practices, inviting diverse practitioners—including artists, activists, theorists, and students—to participate and collaborate in ways of analyzing critically what's happening in terms of resource wars and current environmental conflicts. We organized the project before the elections when few of us

thought we would end up here, but as it turns out, studying extraction has become even more urgent.

I'm attentive in Decolonizing Nature to experimental artistic models outside of capitalist extraction, which basically values the world and everything in it economically, from the air we breathe to the soil under our feet. How can we think about alternate systems of value at the fundamental level? It turns out many artists have been developing radical proposals for both critically investigating the historical and contemporary ecological impacts of modern industry, and generating alternative ways of structuring life and relations to the non-human world. One area of current inspiration is the Indigenous resurgence across the Americas. In a context like Standing Rock in North Dakota, there's a battle raging over oil pipeline infrastructure versus Indigenous sovereignty and human and non-human rights; the rights of a river to be ▼

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unspoiled by oil leaks. This is a clash of visions of the world and our place within it.

**LP** It is really a research project in the sense that, for me, I am continuing to learn. Valuing is at the center, revaluing. Personally I am moved by the urgencies right now and my own slower practices of making are somewhat on hold.

**EV** This discrete thinking that you are each doing commingles in the extraction series. Can you talk about some of the artists that you're bringing? The Otolith Group screening is coming up.

**TJD** We're screening *The Radiant*, a beautiful and grave film made in 2012 that deals

with Fukushima's triple catastrophe, the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown that occurred in rapid succession. Their film examines the history of nuclear energy and considers different temporalities within that geographical, cultural, and political context, including nuclear development in the '60s in a place that had recently experienced the horrors of nuclear warfare, as well as anti-nuclear activism, and future visions of what the Otolith Group calls, after Achille Mbembe, the "necropolitics of radiation," composed of a sacrificial environmental economy.

We've heard from Matthew Coolidge, of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, who offered a poignant presentation on mining sites where companies are using defunct subterranean areas as headquarters and archive storage sites. He also surveyed uranium dumping grounds that dot the US Western landscape, posing questions about how extraction leads to accumulations that

pose environmental hazards long into the future.

There's also Beth Stephens' and Annie Sprinkle's brilliant eco-sexual film *Goodbye Gauley Mountain*. They expose destructive mountaintop removal mining in West Virginia, which kills rivers and the surrounding biodiverse living ecosystems in the process. They counter it with an ecosexual sensibility, where love for the earth takes on transgressive libidinal affects as a way to re-invent environmentalism in sex-positive LGBTQ and unexpected ally communities. I think that provides an answer to one of our key research questions: how might we live non-extractively today?

**LP** Subhankar Banerjee is coming, the well-known photographer whose work has leveraged changes in legislation. Elizabeth Knafo is going to screen and talk about her extraordinary film about extraction of rare earth minerals on

the border between California and Nevada. Some of the people coming for the symposium in May include Jason Moore, author of *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, and Brian Holmes and Claire Pentecost, who are coming from Chicago, where they've been working on the Petropolis project. This project maps the paths of oil coming from tar sands through Chicago and then distributed outward from there.

We're bringing a Belgian filmmaker/video artist, Anne Quirynen, who will speak about her poetic, feminist, science-fiction film installation linking the red-running Rio Tinto copper mine in Spain with the dream of escape to the red planet Mars.

**EV** I have two final questions that I want to link together. I'm curious about the future of the EXTRACTION series, both its breadth now and where you hope it will lead? Married to that, in my own work with oil, it becomes ▼

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very clear to me that the politics associated with naming a thing shapes fundamentally the trajectories that it can take. In this way, what role does art play in imagining a non-extractive way of living?

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**TJD** One additional element within our project is a series of field trips, one to the Amah Mutsun Relearning Program at the UCSC Arboretum. They are a Native American tribal band historically based in this area, dedicated now to relearning and reconnecting with their Indigenous heritage, their precontact language, and pre-colonial botanical species, embodied in traditional ecological practices of knowledge and caretaking for the environment. It's a matter of cultural survival but also a way of

knowing.

In an era of mass species extinction and climate chaos, what kind of plants and ecosystems once lived here and bear a resilience to weather the storm of environmental transformation in years ahead? How might we cultivate those species and recover some of the Indigenous wisdom that went along with living with them? For instance, in many Indigenous language, plants constitute subjective beings that aren't referred to as "it," as in objectifying Western languages, but via biocentric pronouns, as Robin Kimmerer writes about, which dignifies nonhuman beings and the environment.

**LP** Art for me is about expanding a sense of possibility. I was involved with a project in Chicago that called for speculative proposals for how to memorialize survivors of police torture. That invitation to speculate allowed people to think of what had seemed

impossible. It was not something that most activists and attorneys are used to. Situating police torture within the unlikely context of art allowed, encouraged, demanded people think in a different register of the impossible. The result was a reconfigured demand for reparations which no one had thought could come through, and it did.

I am not talking about instrumentalizing art towards these kinds of political gains, necessarily, but it was art that opened things up and allowed another possible reality. It's not exactly the same as renaming, but it is about making a bigger frame, which sometimes involves a kind of jostling and disorganization.

**TJD** Race certainly factors into the conditions of extraction. Just as that Chicago project led to some remarkable political gains that were enabled by its artistic framework of creative practice and political activism, so too our

project seeks transformative impacts in the long-term organization of life. It would be wonderful to develop EXTRACTION as the basis of an exhibition, where various projects could be assembled and more collective thinking could occur around experimental artistic approaches to the complex subject.



*More info at: [extraction.sites.ucsc.edu](http://extraction.sites.ucsc.edu)*