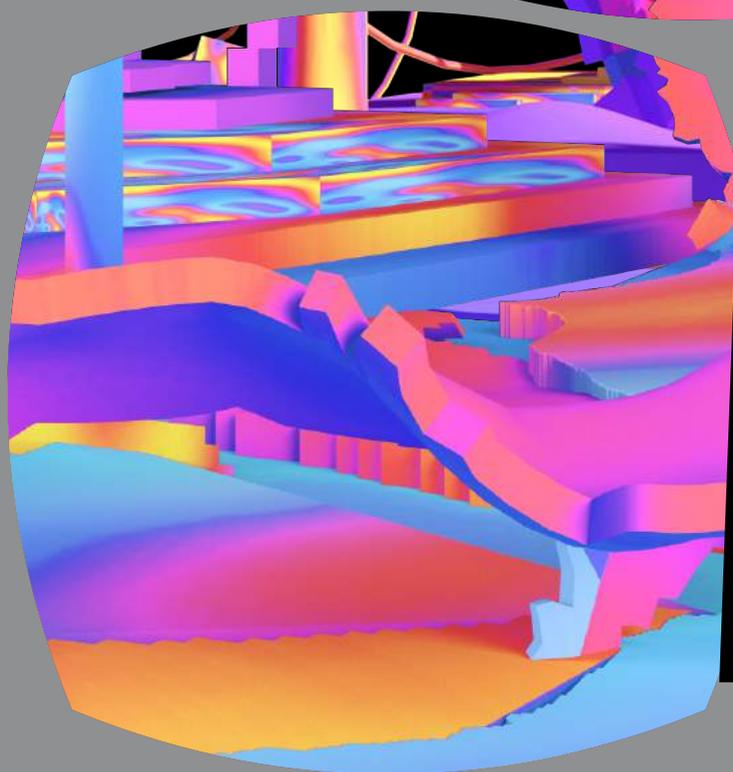


# SONIC ACTS Academy 2018



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# SINKHOLES IN SIGNIFICATION

## SASHA LITVINTSEVA, DANIEL MANN

24.02. SAT 17:30

Film and a lecture at the  
Symposium

o Dansmakers

*This Is Not a Hole:*

*Sinkholes in Signification*

Sasha Litvintseva,

Daniel Mann

Sasha Litvintseva (Russia/UK) is an artist, filmmaker, and researcher whose work is situated at the intersection of geological, embodied, and historical temporalities and materialities. Her work has been exhibited worldwide including at the Berlinale Forum Expanded, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Wrocław Media Art Biennale, and Institute of Contemporary Art, London. Solo shows and retrospective screenings

include at Union Docs, Courisane Film Festival, and Close-Up Film Centre. A graduate of the Slade School of Fine Art, she is currently working on a PhD proposing the concept of geological filmmaking at Goldsmiths, where she is a founding member of the Screen and Audiovisual Research Unit and Associate Lecturer in Media Arts. She is also an independent curator of contemporary moving image and co-curator of the November Film Festival.

Daniel Mann (US/UK) is a London-based filmmaker and writer. He is currently completing his PhD thesis at Goldsmiths on image warfare and the integration of habitual media into armed conflict. Mann's films have been shown internationally. His latest feature film, *Morza el hayam* (Low Tide), was premiered at the 2017 Berlinale Forum and received the Best First Feature Award at the 2017 Haifa Film Festival.

All stills are from the film *Salarium* directed by Sasha Litvintseva and Daniel Mann (41 min, 2017). Courtesy of the artists.



In October 2003, Eli Raz was walking on the Dead Sea shore not far from the Ein Gedi kibbutz. Eli, a scientist, has lived in the area since the 1970s, documenting its geological and biological transformation. On this day, he is out to document and measure a newly appeared sinkhole. Eli drives his jeep as close to the shoreline as he can, parks, and walks down the muddy slope around where the soil meets the salty water. Since the 1980s, he has observed close to seven thousand sinkholes appear along the Dead Sea shore, rendering the natural shoreline all but inaccessible. In recent years, sinkholes have swallowed a number of people and destroyed numerous Kibbutzim, tourist compounds, date orchards, and roads.

For a sinkhole to appear, a cavity needs to have formed in the sub-terrain. On the Dead Sea shore, this happens when a subterranean salt layer dissolves. The level of the Dead Sea has been dropping steadily since the beginning of the twentieth century and at an increased pace in the past few decades. As the level of the Dead Sea fell, what used to be its seabed became exposed as its seashore. This newly exposed shore contains a thick layer of ancient salt deposits, formed under the sea, covered with a

thin layer of topsoil, and shaped by the sedimentation of geological debris travelling down the mountains into the sea. When this terrain remained submerged, the seawater's salinity meant it was unable to melt the salt deposits; but as it became exposed, the fresh water that came with winter flash floods penetrated through the dry topsoil and began to melt the salt deposits underneath. Over time, absences started to form in the volume of the terrain, and the sinkholes appeared as the sudden collapse of the surface into the subterrain, exposing its depths and reconfiguring its surface. Once a sinkhole appears, others are soon to follow. The sinkholes form chains; they multiply and grow. Every solid surface on the shore harbours the potential to collapse. Young sinkholes are particularly treacherous as they could expand or multiply at any moment. As Eli measures a new sinkhole, the ground gives, and he falls in.

Darkness. I assumed that I was covered inside the landslide, so I instinctively ploughed upwards as hard as I could. For a moment I thought that I have been blinded, or that this is how it is in the afterlife, but then light broke in through the thick dust and a large stain of blue sky appeared. On the top of a pile of soil and rocks, I acknowledged that I am alive, that I can see and I'm healthy and intact. I was still equipped with a camera, a mobile phone, a compass and a pen. The mobile phone was useless inside the hole. When the dust sank down and settled below, the walls of the holes were visible, with the deep cracks in between the layers of dark soil. Climbing up the crumbling material was not an option. I was lost.

\*

The sinkhole collapses two temporal and agential scales: the geological scale of gradual mineral sedimentation and erosion, and the human historical scale of settler colonialism and resource extraction. Merged into the sinkhole are the military-economic project of Jewish settler colonialism and the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank.

The sinkhole consolidates numerous forces that congeal together as the figure of a necropolitical power that fosters life in the desert, builds the infrastructure that can sustain it, and simultaneously marks the space of imperial exception in which colonised bodies are excluded and subjected to death. In 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank and established its military presence over the Dead Sea area, previously under the control of Jordan. Ever since its military rule was set in place, Israel has been systematically annexing the strip of land around the Dead Sea by declaring and registering it as 'State Lands'. By declaring the land as 'abandoned', the Israeli authorities have dispossessed Palestinians of their lands, effectively depriving them of the possibility of benefitting from the natural resources of the Dead Sea while monitoring their movement and access to the shoreline.

The supposed absence of life in the area was used as a pretext by settler colonialism for the confiscation of Palestinian lands. In the Zionist imagination, the desert could be transformed into flourishing arable lands, and Jewish settlements and Kibbutzim used agricultural development



Stills from the film *Salarium* directed by Sasha Livintseva and Daniel Mann (41 min, 2017). Courtesy of the artists.





Stills from the film *Salarium* directed by Sasha Litvinseva and Daniel Mann (41 min, 2017). Courtesy of the artists.

as a colonial strategy of claiming territory. The rapid development of settlements meant that the scarce water sources available in the extreme desert terrain were circumvented to facilitate the irrigation of palm groves within Jewish settlements, leading to the dropping of the sea level and consequently the creation of sinkholes. Eating away the palm groves, crackling beneath abandoned hotels, and puncturing deep holes into the desert roads, sinkholes are the environment's refusal to be complicit with the slicing, cutting, fragmenting, cultivating, farming, and confiscating of land and territory. Making the land uninhabitable in the future, the sinkhole appears as both visible symptom and active cause of this colonial project's failure to instrumentalise life. The sinkhole appears when life is forced into the environment to the point of death.

Since the occupation's beginning, Israel has implemented harsh restrictions on the planning of any construction in the northern areas of the Dead Sea, severely hindering the ability of Palestinians to access their land and gain profit from the natural resources. Though control of the surface territory of the West Bank was given to the Palestinian Authority in 1995, Israel retained control over the subterranean volume beneath, thus allowing private companies in Israel to develop industry by the Dead Sea, leading to the depletion of minerals and falling sea level that cause sinkholes. In the figure of the sinkhole, the horizontal plane of territorial politics and human habitation and the vertical plane of geological materiality and resource capitalism collapse into each other. The sinkhole appears as the surface collapses into the subterrain, and with that collapses the possibility of considering territory merely in terms of surface.

While various institutional mechanisms were set in place to monitor bodies around the Dead Sea and to limit the livelihood of some, and while the attempts to instrumentalise life through agriculture have in fact expedited its decay, the Dead Sea was reimagined by the Israeli state and private companies as the ultimate source of life, rebranded as the desert oasis to attract local and international tourists and to normalise the military rule. Israeli settlements located on the northern shorelines of the Dead Sea are deeply involved in the extraction of raw minerals for a booming cosmetic industry. The mineral mud extracted and processed by Israeli companies along the shoreline was thought to have rare healing capacities that can cure unforeseen skin diseases. Vitality and youth were proven to be a lucrative business. The tanned bodies that float on the oily water wear mud on their skin as a token of life.

\*

In July, the temperature around the Dead Sea never drops below body temperature. Even in the middle of the night, it stays in the high thirties, and soon after the sun comes up, it is already in the upper forties. Shade offers little relief. The over-abundant solar energy is strong enough to kill. The presence of our bodies in this landscape is only possible as mediated through fuel: through the air conditioning of our car, as powered by petrol. We counteract the solar energy with the energy produced by a fuel made out of innumerable dead prehistoric organisms decomposed by millions

of years of sunlight. In death, life sediments in the geological layer as fossil fuels, which, in turn, are seen as non-life, as resources to be extracted and burnt into the atmosphere, only to further participate in biological and chemical processes, including ocean acidification. The death of the prehistoric organisms powers the engine of our car and keeps us alive.

We leave the car for only a few minutes at a time. We take a shot, and we run back in to cool our faces and the camera. The engine and the camera are as much intruders in the environment as we are. The engine is enabled by, and the camera enables the production of, fossilised sunlight. Photographic images, in the sense that they are captured light, and fossil fuels, in the sense that they are 'compressed energy derived from fossilized sunlight' (Bozak 2012: 18), can be both thought of as 'fossilized light' (13). Each frame we record is doubly bound to the sun, as each frame is an imprint of sunlight reflected off the landscape, and 'each film frame is a measure of our civilization's control of the sun, in the form of fossilized sun or carbon that we have captured, refined, and duly exploited' (29). We have to take off our sunglasses to accurately set the exposure on the camera, and the sun blinds us. It burns our skin.

The sea offers little relief. It is thick and hot; almost too hot to enter. The water is so salty that it burns the skin: we feel the outlines of our bodies very distinctly. It is so thick that in rubbing skin on skin it feels slippery like oil. It is so thick and salty that it rejects our bodies, pushing them to its surface. In this landscape, the water casts out a living body, and the earth subsumes it. The water, with its high mineral content, does not support life, and the ground kills. They operate in different registers of life/nonlife and life/death. In this landscape, the liminal zones between both life/nonlife and life/death are iteratively negotiated, just as the distinction between the absencing of life by nonlife and by death is constantly re-articulated.

While the Dead Sea mud is subsumed into the pores on the skin of people worldwide, it facilitates the formation of pores in the surface of the Dead Sea landscape, which subsume people. The definition of life as self-directed biochemical activity only stands 'from the standpoint of the organism's so-called final membrane, [...] a membrane that links and separates it from its environment. The final membrane of an individual human is usually thought of and experienced as skin' (Povinelli 2016: 52). Life and nonlife are only differentiated 'if the scale of our perception is confined to the skin' (56). The mutual metabolism of subsumption between life and nonlife, as established between the landscape and the bodies on the Dead Sea shore, operates not only by shifting the scale beyond the confines of the skin of a single individual, but also by shifting the scale of what we understand by 'skin'.

\*

What is a hole? A hole in the wall is 'not made of the shadow you see', nor 'of the air that is inside it, nor of the plaster and bits of paint that have fallen on the floor' (Casati & Varzi 1994: 9). A hole, rather, is a superficial phenomenon, meaning it is an interruption in the surface of an otherwise continuous object. Surface is understood here as 'the first part of a material object to come into contact with the object's environment' (11), rather like

the skin that separates and links an organism to its environment. Surface 'delineates the form of the object by enveloping it' and thus 'defines the inside and the outside of the object' (11). An appearance of a hole presupposes the existence of a surface that can be breached, reconfiguring the relationship of inside/outside. In this way, 'holes are parasitic on their hosts' (16). A hole is neither a location nor a presence. 'It is uncertain whether the hole really *occupies* the place where it is localized. In fact, it seems that there is a hole there just *insofar* as nothing occupies that place' (9). A hole, then, is an active *presence of an absence*.

A hole punctures photographic negatives to render them useless. This technique – often employed by the Zionist Archives – was labelled 'killing images'. The photographs stored at the Zionist Archive document the project of settling the Jordan Valley and the lands around the Dead Sea. They are devoted to narrating the landscapes of the Judean Desert by weaving into them patterns of Jewish life: irrigation systems, tractors, horses, factories, palm trees, and, most significantly, human bodies – settlers – that labour, bathe, and rest under the scorching sun of a mid-twentieth century summer. The oft-quoted Zionist phrase 'a land without a people for a people without a land' encapsulates a profound failure or refusal to see the environment as it was and to include within it the political agency of the native Palestinian inhabitants. Is that also a hole? A hole in the plot? A hole in the image?

Photographs, with their indexical facticity, do not only show spaces and places. More significantly, they are also harnessed as visible evidence that tie (human) ownership to land. Looking at photographs of the Dead Sea one might say: the settlers were there – while others were absent from the image. One might say: we see ourselves in the land; therefore it is ours. Representation is, after all, inextricably linked to the existence of life – even after its decay and disappearance – it is bound up with traces of existence and, eventually, with a claim to historical belonging.

But this archive is an archive of holes. 'The archive is not a stock from which we draw for pleasure, it is constantly a lack' (Farge 1989: 70): it is essentially about the lack in-between the artefacts that it holds. These lurking lacks and holes divert our interest from what we see in the images towards the way the images were made and the narrative that they sought to support. Once lack sneaks back into the image, the stability of solid narratives begins to crumble, or – shall we say – collapse, exposing a vacuum of meaning that had always been lurking below. This vacuum, so vigorously concealed, can no longer remain outside of the picture. It reappears as a hole.

The holes punctured in the representation are slowly migrating to the object of reference: the landscape itself. That is, 'killed Images' become 'killed landscapes', with holes and lacks puncturing their surface. The sinkhole is that lack: not merely a lack of matter or soil, but an archival lack that punches holes into the stability of the historical narrative. If history – as the Zionist Archives demonstrate – leans on a representational regime that aims to signify the landscape and the humans that dwell within, the sinkhole defies clear signification and threatens linear history with a discrepancy, an interruption, or a plot hole.

The sinkhole makes the invisible visible and, as such, is imbued with political agency. The shores of the Dead Sea were once a pivotal image for the visibility of the State and the project of inhabiting the environment. Today, they are decimated with 'lacks' that attest to the failure to force foreign life forms into the ecology and to systematically erase and conceal indigenous populations: the failure of a constructed history. Sinkholes render the absence horrifically present, revealing the State's perpetual violence towards both humans and the environment. In fact, as the presence of pure absence, they challenge history with alternative narratives that are no longer maintained by any human author. They open a gateway to both the distant past and the prospective future that, together, swallow up meaning and force us to face a lacunary hole.

\*

I started writing farewell letters to my family. The writing gives me the feeling that I can talk to someone, the characters appearing before my eyes to give me comfort. I am writing with the feeling that no one will ever read the letter, besides my family – should my body ever be found. In the meantime, the air is getting thicker and the heat gradually intensifies. Of course, the one water bottle I have with me was left in the jeep. From time to time, a light rain of dust and pebbles falls down on my head. I know that this could cause a larger landslide. The writing soothes me – but I try not to move at all. The question is how to survive. I think about the stories often broadcasted on the television about soldiers who survived the war – isolated and lost. Of course, there's no comparison – I'm healthy and intact. My home is not far and someone will soon come to pull me out. ●

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