

EXTRACTION : Art on the Edge of the Abyss



August, 1972. Utah Copper Company, Bingham Canyon Mine. Jack E. Boucher, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

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, 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 such mind-numbing spectacles as the Donald Trump presidency? 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, pro-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.

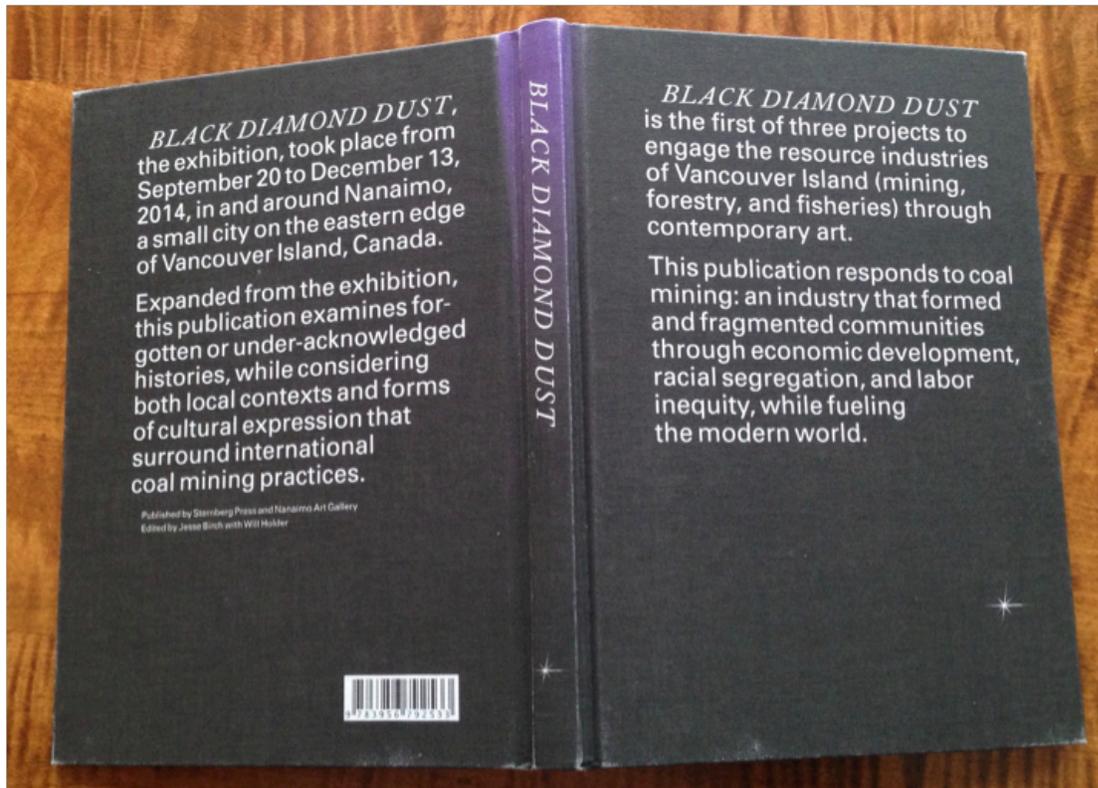
—EDWIN DOBB
edwincdobb@gmail.com

—PETER RUTLEDGE KOCH
peter@peterkochprinters.com

ADDRESS : *EXTRACTION ART* 2205 4th Street Berkeley, California, 94710

Origin of the project—Peter Rutledge Koch

On a beautiful fall day in November 2017, I visited the DIA Beacon Foundation in upstate New York where my attention was caught by a new publication, *Black Diamond Dust*, laying face up in the museum book shop—prime art-world real estate for a modest publication like this one:



I thought—Mining! Fragmented communities! I know about this because I experienced first-hand the toxic waste from what was, at the time, the world's largest underground, and later, open-pit copper mine flowing down the Clark's Fork of the Columbia River through Missoula, my hometown, each spring depositing layers of toxic mud behind the Milltown Dam. We were told never to eat fish caught in the river. Being an avid fisherman and an aspiring aquatic biologist, I deeply resented the entire industry and its apologists. But that was back in the 1940's and 50's, and only the opening act. In 1982 the Anaconda Company ceased mining operations in the Berkeley Pit which immediately began to fill with a mixture of water, sulphuric acid, and heavy metals. In 2023 the "water" that is filling the abandoned pit is predicted to reach the critical depth of nearly 1700 feet at which point it will enter the groundwater and consequently find its way into the headwaters of the Columbia River watershed continually and in perpetuity. Within the next couple of years, the mine owners will start pumping and treating the water, releasing it into one of the creeks that feeds the Clark Fork. But the technology has never been tested on this scale and might well fail, re-contaminating the river.

Here, in America's backyard, our national sacrifice zone, we are up-close and personal witnesses to the toxic effects of oil, gas, coal, and mineral extraction on our environment and in our communities. For this reason alone Montana and, by extension, the entire American West, is a ready-made stage on which to present an international event designed to highlight art on the edge of the abyss.

A collaborative project of this size and shape has never happened before in the American West. Judging from the overwhelmingly positive responses I have received in conversation with museum directors, curators, photographers, artists, writers, humanities programs etc., we are on to something.

What happened in Butte is still happening today and will continue into the foreseeable future—in Montana as well as in California, Indonesia, Chile, Mexico, Canada, Australia, China, Mozambique, Russia, etc. Montana is just another place where art is RARE; instead, we are long on coal mines, fracking, dying forests, tremendous fires, tourism, endangered National Parks, agribusiness, and missile silos too.

The Big Question is: What can we as artists and as citizens do to confront the situation today and then again tomorrow? Can we propose an alternative? Can we envision a slower better world? Can we distract and usurp attention from the media feeding on Trump and terror? Can we make ourselves heard around the American West? Around the World?

In the beginning I never imagined that this idea of multiple simultaneous events, actions, and exhibitions would spread beyond Montana, but the wave is moving and we are reaching Alaska, Idaho, New Mexico, California, Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and Wyoming, too. We have added book arts centers in Minneapolis, Minnesota and New York City. Artists in Mexico and Paris are responding.

This project is about synergy and working together to produce an event and a template for further interventions of this nature. Events will be staggered throughout the summer of 2021 so we can all attend openings, events, and symposia.

We actively invite partners, museums, galleries, artists, and patrons in sympathy with our goals. Please consider joining us.

—Peter Koch
28 February 2018

Coda and update : March 22, 2018

The title: **EXTRACTION: Art on the Edge of the Abyss** will define the flag we are sailing under.

The next steps will be :

- 1) **The EXTRACTION ART Foundation:** We intend to set up a 501(c)3 organization that will give us an identifiable public name. The foundation will serve as a not-for-profit organization for supporting public relations, conference planning, advertising, and subsidizing publications directly related to the EXTRACTION project.
- 2) **LISTSERV:** Jeanette Hart-Mann, Director, Land Arts of the American West, has indicated that she will host a listserv for us at University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
- 3) **WEBSITE :** coming soon.

FUNDING:

1) Institutional and individual projects and exhibitions:

Financed by the individual artist/writer, the museum, or gallery — including all catalogues, customary documentation and advertising.

2) Advertising and communications for the EXTRACTION group including publication / catalogue / documentation— A curated catalogue will be published including participating individuals and institutions following the completion of EXTRACTION 2021:

Funding must come from a collective pool of resources and should be undertaken by a voluntary committee composed of participating individuals and administrators.

We will identify potential publishers and consult with volunteer or professional fundraisers. Crowd funding has been suggested. The editorial content, design, and production will be managed by Peter Koch Printers <www.peterkochprinters.com>

DOCUMENTATION AND ARCHIVES:

We are planning to form an **archive** of the project and invite all participants to do the same. Documentation should include the creation of the collaborative intervention, the evolution of the concept, artworks generated for the intervention, publications, conference planning and the papers that are generated and presented.

PARTICIPATING MUSEUMS & GALLERIES:

Confirmed participation:

Missoula Art Museum (MAM)

Brandon Reintjes
Senior Curator
Missoula Art Museum
brandon@missoulaartmuseum.org
(406) 728-0447

The Holter Museum of Art

Jennifer duToit-Barrett
Assistant Curator & Collection Manager
Holter Museum of Art Helena ,Montana
Jennifer@holtermuseum.org

North Dakota Museum of Art

Laurel Reuter, Director
North Dakota Museum of Art Grand Forks, ND
ljreuter@ndmoa.com

Lewistown Art Center Gallery

Mary Callahan Baumstark, Director
Lewistown, Montana
lac.executivedirector@gmail.com

Churchill Arts Council

Valerie Serpa, Director
charts@phonewave.net
Fallon NV
<http://www.churchillarts.org>

Seager Gray Gallery

Donna Seager
<http://www.seagergray.com>
Mill Valley , CA

Gallery i6

Griff Williams
San Francisco CA
<https://galleryi6.com/>

Calabi Gallery

Dennis Calabi
<http://calabigallery.com/>
Santa Rosa, CA

BOOK ARTS GALLERIES

Confirmed participation:

Minnesota Center for Book Arts

Amanda Kaler
Interim Executive Director
Minneapolis MN
akaler@mnbookarts.org

The Center for Book Arts

Alexander Campos, Executive Director
acampos@centerforbookarts.org
New York City, www.centerforbookarts.org

More galleries and museums are continually being invited, some of which are already considering related programs—stay tuned

CURATORS

Peggy Sue Amison

Artistic Director:East Wing
peg@east-wing.org
+49 151 718 716 35
<http://east-wing.org>
Dubai UAE

Betty Bright

Independant curator and writer
associated with The Minnesota Center for the Book
<http://www.bettybrightbookart.com>

Kate Contakos

Atelier Contakos, San Francisco
<http://www.ateliercontakos.com>

Gordon McConnell

Billings Montana
james.gordon.mcconnell@gmail.com

Erin Elder

curator & consultant
<http://erinelder.com>
<http://gibbouscreative.net>

ARTISTS

Christopher Benson

Christopher Benson Studio
& THE FISHER PRESS
www.bensonstudio.com
www.thefisherpress.com
bensonstudio@comcast.net

Holly Downing

<https://hollydowning.com/>

Erica Osborne

Associate Professor of Art
Colorado State University
Erika.Osborne@colostate.edu

MaryAnn Bonjourni

University of Montana, Missoula
MaryAnn.Bonjourni@mso.umt.edu

Jack Craft

Texas Panhandle
<http://www.johnrobertcraft.com/info/biography/>

Nina Elder

artist & researcher | www.ninaelder.com
co-founder | Wheelhouse Institute | www.wheelhouseinstitute.com

Bill Gilbert

Lannan Endowed Chair: Land Arts of the American West
<http://www.unm.edu/ffiwgilbert/>

Jordan Hayes

Dancer and Installation Artist
<http://routinemethod.blogspot.com/?m=1>

Peter Rutledge Koch

www.peterkochprinters.com
www.codexfoundation.com

Gordon McConnell

Billings Montana
<http://gordonmcconnellstudio.com>
james.gordon.mcconnell@gmail.com

Sandra Dal Poggetto

Helena, Montana, Missoula
<http://www.sandradalpoggetto.com>

More invitations are continually being sent

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

James Balog

<http://jamesbalog.com/>

<https://chasingice.com/team-member/james-balog/>

Mandy Barker

mandy-barker.com

Richard Barnes

<http://www.richardbarnes.net/>

Chris Boyer

kestrelaerial.com

lighthawk.org

Terry Evans

terry@terryevansphotography.com

terryevansphotography.com

David T. Hanson

<https://www.davidthanson.net/>

Patricia LaGarde

<https://www.patricialagarde.com/>

Ken Light

kenlight.com

Michael Light

<http://www.michaellight.net/>

David Maisel

<http://davidmaisel.com/>

Richard Misrach

<https://fraenkelgallery.com/artists/richard-misrach>

Kim Stringfellow

<http://www.kimstringfellow.com/>

More invitations are continually being sent

WRITERS

Robert Bringhurst

poet / linguist

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Bringhurst)

Adam Cornford

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Cornford

Peter Coyote

<http://www.petercoyote.com>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Coyote

Edwin Dobb

Essayist, journalist, fiction writer

National Geographic, Harper's, Guernica

David James Duncan

<https://www.davidjamesduncan.com>

Elizabeth Farnsworth

efarnsworth5@gmail.com

William L Fox

Nevada Museum of Art

Director, Center for Art + Environment

<https://www.nevadaart.org/ae/>

Brenda Hillman

Olivia Filippi Professor of Poetry

Saint Mary's College of California

<http://blueflowerarts.com/artist/brenda-hillman/>

Jane Hirshfield

poet / essayist

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Hirshfield

<http://www.barclayagency.com/site/speaker/jane-hirshfield>

Lucy R. Lippard,

author of *Undermining: A Wild Ride through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*

(NYC: New Press 2014)

Aaron Parrett / Territorial Press

Helena Montana

<https://www.territorialpress.com>

Jan Zwicky

poet / philosopher \ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Zwicky)

More invitations are continually being sent

LIBRARIES AND RARE BOOK DEPARTMENTS

The following libraries have responded and are planning exhibits:

The Donohue Rare Book Room

Gleeson Library at University of San Francisco
John Hawk, Librarian: hawkj@usfca.edu

University of Nevada, Reno

Donnelyn Curtis Rare Book Librarian
dcurtis@unr.edu

University of Montana, Missoula

Donna McCrea, Special Collections;
donna.mccrea@umontana.edu

Environmental Design Library,

University of California, Berkeley
David Eifler, deifler@berkeley.edu

ORGANIZATIONS

expressing interest in collaborations

The CODEX Foundation

<http://www.codexfoundation.org>

Dark Mountain Project

<https://dark-mountain.net>

Land Arts of the American West

Thris Taylor landarts.org 806-834-1589
Texas Tech University College of Architecture LUBBOCK
Lubbock Scapes Collective member

Gregory Allicar Museum of Art

Lynn E. Boland, Ph.D.
Director and Chief Curator (formerly University Art Museum)
Colorado State University Fort Collins, CO
www.artmuseum.colostate.edu

IAIA MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY NATIVE ARTS (MoCNA)

Manuela Well-Off-Man

Chief Curator
108 Cathedral Place, Santa Fe, NM 87501
manuela.well-off-man@iaia.edu
iaia.edu/museum

Drumlummon Institute

Aaron Parrett, President
To promote and publish art and literatures created in Montana and the broader American West;
Helena Montana
<https://drumlummoninstitute.org/about/>

More invitations are continually being sent

ADVISORS AND CONSULTANTS

Richard White

Margaret Byrne Professor of American History
Stanford University

Susan Moffat

Global Urban Humanities Initiative
Project Director
susanmoffat@berkeley.edu
University of California Berkeley

Bill Gilbert

Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Art & Ecology and
Lannan Endowed Chair: Land Arts of the American West
Department of Art and Art History
University of New Mexico

Kathleen M. Ryan

Landscape Story: Women, Photography and the Environment
Department of Journalism
University of Colorado Boulder

Arif Kahn

UNM Art Museum
Director

Jeanette Hart-Mann, Director

Land Arts of the American West
Farmer//Artist and SeedBroadcaster
Assistant Professor of Art and Ecology
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque
hartmann@unm.edu
<http://landarts.unm.edu>
<http://seedbroadcast.org>

Sandra S. Phillips

Curator Emerita of Photography
SFMOMA

Matthew Coolidge

Center for Land Use Interpretation
Culver City CA

TJ Demos

Center for Creative Ecologies
University of California Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz CA