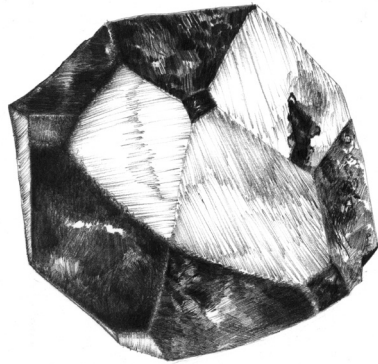


ILANA  
HALPERIN  
MINERALS  
OF NEW  
YORK



28 September 2018 –  
13 January 2019

*The Subway Garnet – found on 35<sup>th</sup> Street  
between Broadway and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue.*



# Minerals of New York

'Nature, like a person, is not one-sided.'

Robert Smithson, 'Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape' (1973)

Ilana Halperin's *Minerals of New York* is at once a history of a city, a portrayal of the deep geological past, and a self-portrait (of sorts). It is made up of multiple elements that constellate around Halperin's fascination with mineral treasures that were uncovered as the infrastructure of modern New York was dug out beneath the streets of Manhattan, her childhood home. In the exhibition we encounter geological specimens, meticulously observed drawings of such specimens, a photograph relating to the history of amateur mineralogy in New York, and a conceptual map that allows us to track the artist's thinking and to locate the subject matter of her drawings on the city's famous grid. We find a readymade sculpture of sorts – a fragment of real museum signage, hinting at Halperin's formative interest in the display and interpretation of natural history, which is echoed too in the brass lettering which reiterates the exhibition's title. And, not least, we hear the artist's voice narrate the relationships between all these elements and more as she soundtracks a slideshow of photographs of midtown Manhattan taken by her mother in the 1980s. Here the personal, intimate landscapes of one person's singular biography are overlaid on a visual record of a city in transition, as real estate developers move in to bulldoze and build anew, and ever-higher, on its firm geological foundations.

An insistence that human lives, urban histories, and geological realities need to be understood in relation to each other runs throughout this exhibition, as it does through the artist's practice more widely. In an argument that has deep resonance with Halperin's work, the philosopher Manuel de Landa writes of human existence as supported both by a 'mineralisation' within us—the evolution of bone as a support for flesh and for movement—and one without, namely the creation of towns and cities that function as complex social exoskeletons. His reading allows us to see Halperin's reference to a 'mineral biography' as more than a metaphor: 'We live in a world populated by structures—a complex mixture of geological, biological, social, and linguistic constructions that are nothing but accumulations of materials shaped and hardened by history.... In turn, these synergistic combinations, whether of human origin or not, become the raw material for further mixtures. This is how the population of structures inhabiting our planet has

acquired its rich variety, as the entry of novel materials into the mix triggers wild proliferations of new forms.<sup>2</sup>

At one level, then, *Minerals of New York* offers a history that looks back at these formative mineralisations. At another, however, it corresponds to the urgent call made by theorist Donna Haraway for forward-thinking ways of grasping our place within the entwined man-made and natural worlds we inhabit today, beyond conventions derived from scientific taxonomy and grand political narratives. 'All the thousand names are too big and too small; all the stories are too big and too small,' Haraway writes, 'we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections.'<sup>3</sup>

Questions of scale and of connection are indeed central to this exhibition. Halperin's tender depictions of minerals are remarkable in their contemplation of interwoven timespans of greatly varying dimensions. At once they figure the time of their own making, the time that the minerals depicted spent within museum collections as exemplars of their kind, the moments (and places) of their discovery by human hands excavating modern New York, the deep time of their terrestrial formation, and even the cosmically distant time of their celestial beginnings. 'Size determines an object, but scale determines art,' wrote Robert Smithson, an artist important to Halperin as to many others.<sup>4</sup> Though she reaches back through millennia, Halperin's artistic treatment of temporal vastness allows it to be perceived and understood at human scale, with her own biography becoming a key measure. Looking at her drawings with this in mind, we might consider them not only as painstaking records of objective observation, but also as a process of empathetic connection with the very stuff of life and experience. In this way, Halperin's ongoing concern with how we relate to natural history has a subtle ecological dimension too, asking us to think differently about terrestrial existence at a moment of incipient catastrophe.

Haraway's thinking might again help us map this dimension of Halperin's art. Haraway proposes the phrase "Make Kin Not Babies!" as a political slogan for our era, arguing that 'if there is to be multispecies ecojustice, which can also embrace diverse human people, it is high time that feminists exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species. ... Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with—become-with, compose-with—the earth-bound... I think that the stretch and recomposition of kin are allowed by the fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time). Kin is an

assembling sort of word.<sup>5</sup> In assembling the materials of her own life in a co-composition with New York's mineral history, Halperin enacts precisely the kind of expansive 'making kin' that Haraway sees as essential in our current ecological predicament. This 'making kin' is played out here also in a suite of earlier works by Halperin which figure her longstanding affinity for the Eldfell volcano in Iceland. Eldfell erupted in 1973, burying some 400 local houses in lava. That this natural event uncannily echoed Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) in a particularly dramatic instance of life imitating art was not lost on Halperin. But 1973 was also the year of her birth, and she decided to celebrate her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in the company of the volcano, treating it as a kind of terrestrial twin. Drawings, a photograph, a mineral sample and a text from Halperin's Eldfell project are held in The Hunterian's permanent collection and join the *Minerals of New York* works here to offer a larger view of the artist's oeuvre. Another early piece shown here, *Boiling Milk Solfaratas* (1999), underscores the lightness of touch by which Halperin achieves the integration of cultural acts with natural phenomena.

It should be noted that the ecological is not the only political register here. In Halperin's 'mineral biography' of New York epochal events in human history register at the edges of her storytelling, as tremors or fissures in the eons-long history of the earth. But they are no less affecting for that. As her slideshow narration alludes to the AIDS crisis, the politics of queer parenthood, to World War II, or as we hear her subtly intimate the deaths of relatives in the Holocaust, we are asked to relate to both the city and to mineralogy as possible sites of memory, as vectors of profound meaning and deep emotion. Her own biography emerges in this narrative as enmeshed with others, and with non-human materials and processes that might also be given a form of 'biographical' accounting. Halperin's gift for making the artefacts of natural history into the subjects of stories finds expression not only in the slideshow, but also in her 'map drawing' and in the illuminating conversation with curator Lisa le Feuvre reproduced within the pages of this booklet. She offers us stories that, like those Haraway wishes for, gather up our complexities while keeping things open. Like the so-called 'Subway Garnet,' which is perhaps the most spectacular of the minerals found beneath New York, Halperin's vision of human life on the earth is multi-faceted, crystalline and revelatory.

**Dr Dominic Paterson**, Curator of Contemporary Art, The Hunterian.

1 Robert Smithson, Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 161.  
2 Manuel de Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, (NY: Swerve, 2000), p. 25-6.  
3 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Duke University Press, 2016), p. 101  
4 Smithson, 'Spiral Jetty,' in Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, p. 147.  
5 *Ibid.*, p. 102

# Minerals of New York

## Excerpts from a conversation

**Ilana Halperin with Lisa Le Feuvre**

(Executive Director, Holt/Smithson Foundation)

Leeds Arts University, 28th March 2019.

**Lisa Le Feuvre (LLF):** You are an artist whose media are ideas and narrative. This narrative, you tell us, starts with a very particular encounter at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. It is the most amazing place for what it holds in its collection, for how it makes displays, for its antiquatedness, for its artistic resonance. Robert Smithson saw this as the most important museum that had ever existed. You started with a particular object in the collection.

**Ilana Halperin (IH):** Yes, it's my favourite museum on Earth for many different reasons... It was always my dream to get into the stores of the American Museum of Natural History. I was introduced to Jamie Newman, a curator there, and she asked me what I wanted to see. Where do you start when someone asks what you want to see in the stores of a museum you have dreamed of visiting? There is a paralysis of over-excitement – so much to see, and no set path to begin from. I bounced the question back to Jamie and asked her which was *her* favourite object. She answered by going deep within the stores. She opened a drawer and took out a single crystal garnet the size of a large grapefruit, and deep blood-crimson red, announcing: 'this is the Subway Garnet. This object is the most famous garnet on Earth because of where it was found.' That place was 35<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway – right in the heart of Manhattan, where I grew up.

**LLF:** That must have been quite a shock. So often we think the urban space is not the site of geological history.

**IH:** It blew my mind! It completely changed the way I understood my home city. I know New York in many ways, but I didn't understand it as is as a site of potential geological phenomena, growth, and wonder. And that's everything that was contained in this object. It had not been on view for decades. I asked Jamie if she had any other minerals from New York, and she said 'yes, of course, we have a whole cabinet. They do not often get

that much attention.' Then, very casually, she said 'you are very welcome to take a look.' And I did.

There were a few hundred minerals in this set of drawers, and I incrementally worked my way through them. I felt this collection was astonishing, but I was overwhelmed. I decided to keep looking until something made sense. That was the encounter that started this all.

**LLF:** This garnet has a name. It has a classification, a drawer where there is a family of similar objects – a network formed by naming. Language is such a powerful thing. We use it and it eludes us, we use it for classification and often we try to break that naming to break assumptions. Naming makes an object different from others, it makes this garnet an exception. Why this object is called what it is? Was the Subway Garnet found in a subway?

**IH:** No! It was found in the sewer during an excavation in 1885. The city was drilling and preparing to build the sewer system near the site of the eventual subway system, and this object was found. A famous mineral collector named George F. Kunz donated it to the New York Mineralogical Club, and finally it made its way to the American Museum of Natural History. It was recognised as a beautiful, magnificent thing. I agree, it is. And I am sure the conversation went something like: 'this is a beautiful, magnificent thing, we *cannot* call it "The Sewer Garnet." It was found near the future subway construction site, so let's call it "The Subway Garnet."' This iconic, magnificent name stuck.

**LLF:** Anyone who has ever worked in a museum knows that the public always want to get into the stores, and the truth is most museum workers feel the same. Many years ago, I worked at the National Maritime Museum in London and I would find every reason to go to the stores. Like most stores it was looked after by someone who rarely left the site, and who knew every story. I always wonder what it is about the storerooms that are so interesting... It is because they are not seen? Is it because there are stories? Potential discoveries?

**IH:** I think of it being like an iceberg: the collection on view is the top of the iceberg that you can see, and the stores are all the rest of the iceberg that you know is there but you don't know what it is, how big it is, or what its volume is. I like slippery, difficult objects to categorise, impossible items to understand; things to work your way around, that are hiding in the drawers, that won't sit as neatly within the curated collections on view. I've found that in every collection I've ever gone into.



# Minerals of New York

## Microcline Crystal

Found in White Plains

My Uncle and his family moved to Westchester. This was before in the late 1970's. On some Sundays we would drive out to meet them for Chinese food - on this occasion out to White Plains for lunch with another family - friends of my Uncle. Empty ramps, parking lots, verses, buildings, which we were told by my mother had no personality. My sisters would fight about who had to sit next to me, I got so car sick it wasn't a question of if I would throw up, only when. At the restaurant - a large empty space and a banquet table with a lazy Susan. And everyone yelling. My father came to New York alone as a boy. He went from telling newspapers on the subway to delivering half the baguette from Heights. He even delivered a baby who became a downstairs neighbor in the building where I grew up.

Jamie found this Stilbite far below the sidewalk in the tunnel they bore out seven stories underground, to make the Second Avenue Subway line. Most mineral life would be pulverized by the giant drill which could cut through 20 yards of rock in a single day. The tunnel was an idea 75 years in the making, though the Manhattan Schist it would be down in is about 470 million years old. I was born only a few blocks away from the Stilbite, either at New York Hospital, or Lenox Hill, but in the way of collective memory, I don't know if it was me or my sisters born in one of the other. I don't know when the Stilbite was born. I know it was in the rock. A built core sample of the city. A sparkling arterial system that connects one island to another. On the Isle of Skye and along the West Coast of Scotland are many Stilbite (zeolite) localities. Garnets lie on the beach in Koyardart, and Elie villages are really tiny garnets you can find by lying face down in the sand in a particular bay. A long way of taking a garnet from Scotland is much the same as a New York garnet and my bones are the same as yours.

## Malacolite in Limestone

Found on Broadway + 207th St

There is a photograph taken in 1942 on 207th Street in Inwood towards the northern tip of Manhattan on one of the only exposures of naturally occurring marble in New York City. It was taken during a field session with the Pick and Hammer Club, a mineral collecting club for teenagers run by the Brooklyn Children's Museum (one of the first in the first children's museum on earth) in Crown Heights. My parents grew up in the neighborhood down East End Parkway, drawing in Saturday morning classes with Mr. Randall and planting seeds in 'The Botanic Garden'. There is a beautiful photographic archive on the Pick and Hammer Club at the Children's Museum, the Pick and Hammer Club is one type of immigrant children sharing intently at one type of mineral or another, studying the qualities of matter formed by the earth, by rocks slithering and melting, by swirling crystalline life below.

Mineral Residents (both hand and eye)

I have never been to Grants Tomb, only to Riverside Church one block south, where as children or slightly more grown, we would assemble for peace.

had been growing since he was a young man. Yonah Schimmel for Knishes. A cheese shop on 107th Ave. and finally tiny cannolis and tarts from Venetians.

For years, the skyscrapers in New York were finally planted in Mid-town and down at the end of the island not by choice, but because there the dense pegmatite rock was exposed at the surface - mica schist strong enough to hold the weight of towers. This same type of rock inhabits the coast of Maine, vast areas of Scotland and Riverside Park along the Hudson. As a kid, I knew mica from streets that glistened in the sun, playgrounds peopled by boulders that seemed made of silver and gold. Rocks on the beach with layers you could peel open like pages in a book. A mineralogy curator named Peter told me mineral samples of mica are sometimes termed 'books'. My mother remembers finding books of mica in the alley next to the building where she grew up in Brooklyn. Edgar Allan Poe lived across from Riverside Park when he is rumored to have written The Raven. If you find a shimmering stone in the area and leave it on the granite plaque on West 33rd Street, your book of mica becomes part of a memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. I imagine a library of all these volumes together. A layer of only rocks and minerals. Every layer another narrative.

Almost exactly below El Museo Del Barrio, and across the street from the tip of the Great Whale, seeing who could stand under the tip of the whale's nose far as long as possible without running away. But mostly, we played hide and seek in the Hall of Minerals and Gems. We slid down huge chunks of Jasper. Lay on our backs next to Manoliths of copper. We thought we were so tough, running around the dark lit passageways of diamonds and petrified trees. We didn't know that in 1976 (following a huge bust by some boys from Florida who broke into the museum in 1968 and stole 24 gems - including the Star of India, the world's largest sapphirine) the Hall had just been redeveloped to mimic the interior of a cave. The Hall was designed to make you want to explore. In an article I read about the re-opening of Gems + Minerals, they said they wanted people to 'touch their specimens, put their arms around them, tell 'em love with them.' And I did.

The other Jewish memorial home is located near here. We would face going back to Riverside, too many funerals we'd been to. I don't know if it would be a cairn or a pile of rocks but a burial chamber tumbling across Broadway.

My parents moved into the building on West 86th St. in 1970, the year my older sister was born. It was a different building then, filled mostly with music teachers. As the elevator went up and down, through the grate (before they put in elevator doors) clinking through the thin pipes and glass you would hear Lubia playing the cello, opera singers on 4, violin on 5, Mrs. Moritz and her husband taught (and played) piano. Upstairs on 11 one wall was filled with oil and charcoal portraits of orchestral musicians they knew well. Mrs. Moritz lived across the hall from us, though I don't remember if I ever met her husband before he died. They lived in the building since at least 1942 in a rent controlled apartment - the people who bought her place got it when Mrs. Moritz was in her 80's, and then she lived to be 105 years old. I would see her every day, rain, snow or shine walking down Broadway on her own. Once a week she played bridge. In the late 80's they tore down the building next door. A two story building with 23 different businesses became one huge luxury apartment building with 3 large chains. Bibas Doughnuts, Barbours on the corner. The ballroom dance school on the second floor, the jewelry store who pierced our ears, hardware store, store that sold me a clove cigarette at a time, pizza place, liquor store. All gone. My mother photographed every shop street as they shut down. And 150 feet below the street where I grew up - a sparkling piece of garnetiferous schist found before my building was even there.

The rest of the street came from Zabars + Fairway. I still miss bagels from Hiltl (and when they closed) and bear claws from Grossingers.

when we were very little - circular disks of fried potatoes like a plate of floating stations. Every year on Dec. 31st we would travel around the city for my parents across New Years Party Party. International food supplies found on 4th street + 7th Ave for Yonah Schimmel. Grape leaves, Kadusians for Mojada - where my father

Near Mount Sinai, not a biblical mountain in the desert, but a medical center, where my father died high above 100th street. Personal mineral memories. And I know, we are humans, we are bones and muscle and brains and blood, but the iron in the Subway Garnet is the same iron that is in my body, and the Marble floor in the Metropolitan is as carbonate as my bones. We are also mineral residents. Stilbite and Siderite, my father, my mother and I.

Pattie Irving, and Robert, Eli and the boys lived a few blocks away. We went to their house for the seder every year. (alternating nights from Barbara's house for the black, one fish, Bill). Around the black, one fish, two fish where I went with my mom for lunch after my own visits to the mountain not in the desert. time after time after time.

Near the yeshiva I went to for kindergarten + first grade. The only and most of this place are Friday bingo games and cigarettes with coffee and wine. Drinking before the Sabbath.

Galeua Crystals with Harmotome + Chabazite on Greiss Found on 92nd St + 4th Ave

Sphero-stilbite Found on 86th St + 4th Ave

Bornite, a Copper Iron Sulfide Found on 81st Street, Park East + Park

Garnetiferous Greiss Found 150 feet below curb on 87th St + Broadway

Very new. Music art in high school of the heart. AKA LaGuardia. AKA the life saver after years of bullying. AEA where I started shoe shining and made very close friends. Mr. Greenberg would blast open and teach us how to sharpen tools. Mr. Bing talked about Florence, about Michelangelo, I thought of his years later when I was 17. I was 17. I was 17. I was 17.

Green Muscovite Found on 93rd St between 94th + 95th Ave. They had a set for worms.

Deryl in Mica Schist Found on 94th St + Riverside Drive

My father used to take us to the Landmark Tavern in Hells Kitchen for fish chips plate of floating stations. Every year on Dec. 31st we would travel around the city for my parents across New Years Party Party. International food supplies found on 4th street + 7th Ave for Yonah Schimmel. Grape leaves, Kadusians for Mojada - where my father

We used to rehearse in a small building in a tiny playground, a few blocks away with the Parks Shakespeare Company. The group was run by the city Parks services, and we came from everywhere. Then we went back out. We were in Hylschel, who performed in Nursing homes and school gyms. Then we'd go to a diner - star diner half moon, moonlight - but not starlight and rice pudding.

Stilbite Found in the 2nd Ave Subway Tunnel at 62nd St

The Subway Garnet (a cousin of the Actual Subway Garnet) Found in the jetties of Far Rockaway

I have a Subway Garnet found in the jetties of Far Rockaway by an early member of the Pick and Hammer Club. My great Grandmother Bobby worked in a house off the boardwalk. Yes, yes - in the oldest profession on earth. She used to bring my grandmothers who we called Papeye to the house with her. She sat in the waiting room with all the men. My mother thought she had a dozen aunts, as all the ladies were at the apartment on Utica all the time. Not aunts, colleagues from Far Rockaway. Bobby was also a bit cheeky girl at a club on the Lower East Side. My great Grandfather was a promoter for the Yiddish Theater on the Lower East side as well. The Pick and Hammer Club tracked down where rubble from construction sites got dumped. The subway (sewer) excavation from 35th street between Broadway + 77th Ave. called up in Far Rockaway, so they combed the jetties to see what they could find. This is where my Subway Garnet comes from, found many years before the Hurricane would have washed the garnets away.

The Subway Garnet was found in 1885 and presented to the American Museum of Natural History by George F. Kunz. It was unearthed during the sewer excavation 9 feet under the street - and should really be called the Sewer Garnet, though as this is not very glamorous, it became known as the Subway Garnet - a much more fabulous name. I met the Subway Garnet in summer of 2012. Peter (Danish in Scotland) put me in touch with Jamie Newman at Natural History in New York.

The Subway Garnet Found on 35th St between Broadway + 77th Ave helping to fulfill a life long dream - to get into the stores of the museum. I asked Jamie to show me her favorite object in the collection and out came the Subway Garnet - perfect, blood red, the size of a large grapefruit. It never occurred to me that the streets of New York could produce such geological wonder. The idea of minerals formed below the streets of New York seemed somehow unlikely. That anything of the natural world, of caves and volcanoes could ever occur there, but it does.

Garnet (Almandine) Found on 65th St + Broadway

There is another cabinet there filled only with minerals formed below the streets of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx and Staten Island. From then on, I went to visit the Minerals of New York every time I was in the city.

Serpentine Found on 58th St + 11th Ave

Body drift on someone else's agenda. Years wasted. Family began to try and be parents with us. Two queer women. They let me

Stilbite with Scopiform Found on 45th St. between 1st + 2nd Ave.

The Subway Garnet (a cousin of the Actual Subway Garnet) Found in the jetties of Far Rockaway

I have a Subway Garnet found in the jetties of Far Rockaway by an early member of the Pick and Hammer Club. My great Grandmother Bobby worked in a house off the boardwalk. Yes, yes - in the oldest profession on earth. She used to bring my grandmothers who we called Papeye to the house with her. She sat in the waiting room with all the men. My mother thought she had a dozen aunts, as all the ladies were at the apartment on Utica all the time. Not aunts, colleagues from Far Rockaway. Bobby was also a bit cheeky girl at a club on the Lower East Side. My great Grandfather was a promoter for the Yiddish Theater on the Lower East side as well. The Pick and Hammer Club tracked down where rubble from construction sites got dumped. The subway (sewer) excavation from 35th street between Broadway + 77th Ave. called up in Far Rockaway, so they combed the jetties to see what they could find. This is where my Subway Garnet comes from, found many years before the Hurricane would have washed the garnets away.

The Subway Garnet was found in 1885 and presented to the American Museum of Natural History by George F. Kunz. It was unearthed during the sewer excavation 9 feet under the street - and should really be called the Sewer Garnet, though as this is not very glamorous, it became known as the Subway Garnet - a much more fabulous name. I met the Subway Garnet in summer of 2012. Peter (Danish in Scotland) put me in touch with Jamie Newman at Natural History in New York.

The Subway Garnet Found on 35th St between Broadway + 77th Ave helping to fulfill a life long dream - to get into the stores of the museum. I asked Jamie to show me her favorite object in the collection and out came the Subway Garnet - perfect, blood red, the size of a large grapefruit. It never occurred to me that the streets of New York could produce such geological wonder. The idea of minerals formed below the streets of New York seemed somehow unlikely. That anything of the natural world, of caves and volcanoes could ever occur there, but it does.

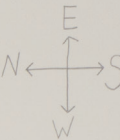
Garnet (Almandine) Found on 65th St + Broadway

There is another cabinet there filled only with minerals formed below the streets of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx and Staten Island. From then on, I went to visit the Minerals of New York every time I was in the city.

Serpentine Found on 58th St + 11th Ave

Body drift on someone else's agenda. Years wasted. Family began to try and be parents with us. Two queer women. They let me

I had my first studio on 14th street just off 77th Ave. I got the space from a friend of a friend of Peter Leggieri - who owned Peter's Sculpture Supply on 12th Street between 1st + 2nd Ave. Peter had one of the last remaining stone carving supply stores in New York City. Marble, Alabaster, hand made tools from Italy. When I was a teenager I trained as a stone carver and got my first set of tools from Peter's when I graduated from High School. Then every summer I would apprentice at the shop. The door was always open. The whole neighborhood came by. We sat on piles of rough boulders and talked. We polished, placed and sealed the 100lb stone. Amphibole Found on 14th St + 5th Ave



Chrysotile (Asbestos Lighter) Found on Staten Island

Listed as 'location unknown', though most likely it came from the Asbestos Quarry at Ward's Hill only just across the island from Snug Harbor, the first home for sailors too tired to return to sea. For years I went to Snug Harbor with a picnic for my birthday. Much later, I took Alison on the Staten Island Ferry (the cheapest date when my men was growing up) to Snug Harbor. And then we went on the East River Ferry using the piper as the best way to get around. We picked up the streets from a sperm bank on wall 34th St on the East River Stop and set on the top deck. I was going to get inseminated, so I laughed and said - well - this might be



**LLF:** We live on this planet, and we live in all kinds of places. It could be cities like Leeds, Glasgow and New York; it could be smaller places, or those locations in the American West where the population census records five people. The landscape, or earthscape, of this planet is first shaped by geological history - by glaciers, by time, by minerals. Then it is shaped by human history, and today there is no part of this planet that has not been shaped by both processes. When we collect these minerals we are doing a form of time-travel; we touch a time before we humans were here. My opinion is surely we now live in a world where there is no such thing as nature that has been untouched by humans. We are everywhere. Yet, geological processes will outlive us, and art history will be much longer than both of our short lives. Your artwork will outlive all of us.

**IH:** I like collapsing all of those notions of time together to see what might happen. What if we disassemble the idea that, as humans, we are the dominant geologic force? We have, in certain pragmatic and practical ways, altered the surface of the Earth, the air, the atmosphere and the ocean – and in potentially irreversible ways. And at the same time, we are material. We are mineral, geologic material, intimately connected to any other strata above or below in this system we might call Earth. I think, in an ethical context, we need to learn to live in a way where we take responsibility for thinking about how we are embedded in these layers. The question I want to ask is: what signature, what traces are we embedding in these layers narratively, physically, materially? I would like us to leave us a good layer. I may not be as interested in what counts as nature, and instead much more interested in embodied ways of embedding ourselves in a complex system of continual change that we are a part of.

**LLF:** So let's think about this in relation to art history. Do you see your work sitting within a lineage of what's known as, albeit not a term that I like, Land Art?

**IH:** I would say that I share the legacy of some questions Land Artists were engaged with looking at, thinking about, and experimenting with – that is, finding new ways of connecting to inside and outside the gallery. I was thinking yesterday about works by Robert Smithson like *Glue Pour* [1969] and *Asphalt Run Down* [1969]. I was also thinking about *Splitting* [1974] by Gordon Matta-Clark. This was in the context of being in an art school environment in Leeds with *Minerals of New York*. I was also thinking about some of my early days and works and early things I was inspired by. I couldn't think of them out with a geologic context.

When I saw *Glue Pour*, all I could think about was lava. When I saw *Splitting*, I had been spending a lot of time in Iceland thinking about earthquake records, and all I could do was imagine *Splitting* in the context of a geologic event. And I still feel that way. I think I connect to a lot of the more ephemeral and gestural activities of Land Artists than to more permanent works. [Smithson's essay] 'A Sedimentation of the Mind' was a revelation. It totally changed what kind of language I could use to try to articulate these ideas that were just starting to form.

I was making the piece *Boiling Milk Solfataras* [1999] at the same time as thinking about these landmark artworks. I also made a variation gestural work because I was thinking so much about *Glue Pour* while in this Icelandic landscape context. In short, I ended up pouring milk down a hill in the middle of the city of Akureyri. I also ended up pouring skyr (an Icelandic yogurt-like substance) down the street. What instigated this latter action was a conversation with a local volcanologist who explained that if you want to understand lava there are two types: First 'Aa,' which is a really thick and viscous. It doesn't flow, rather it is rocky and crunchy and moves very slowly. Second there is 'Pahoehoe,' a long liquid, it goes far - and it flows. The volcanologist told me that if I wanted to understand these two types of lava that I had just been experiencing out in the middle of the fissure row, which had been actively erupting from the 1970s to the mid-80s, I should 'go to the store, get yourself some milk, then get yourself a container of skyr and pour them down the hill. Then you will understand lava.' So I did it.

**LLF:** Again, you are coming back to time - this time of the flow, this time of sinking into the earth. Perhaps one of the most temporal things we can ever understand is our own temporary nature. I wonder if the very gesture of making artwork is to make us more aware of the temporalities within which we exist.

**IH:** I totally agree, and it also reminds me of another concept in paleontology: the concept of trace fossils. Inspired by the early writing of Smithson, I have accumulated an alternative geologic vocabulary. The term 'geologic intimacy' is one of those things. The term 'autobiographical trace fossil' is another. In paleontological terms, a trace fossil is a record of an action in life - it might be a dinosaur footprint, or it could be tiny air bubbles - breathing patterns from some ancient creature that floated to the surface of a mud pool. Then perhaps there is a change in the weather pattern, the breath dried out, got infilled with more mud and then, 250-million years later, it is cracked open and you see somebody breathing. A trace

fossil records the actions of life, whereas a traditional fossil as we would understand it is a presentation of the moment of death. Kind of like an assemblage of death.

**LLF:** You talk about the fossils being an assemblage of life and death – surely you can't have one without the other?

**IH:** You can't have one without the other but, in a trace fossil you never see the organism, you only see the trace of what it was doing while it was alive. I wonder what happens if we consider each of us individually leaving a biographical trace fossil as a series of actions.

**LLF:** Then you are also talking about memory. In this exhibition we have different lines of temporality. So around us as we are talking, there beautiful drawings observing mineralogy. Then, in the slideshow, you are tracing a particular urban biography of a block in New York through remembered history that is personal.

**IH:** The 35mm slideshow is primarily composed of photographs that my mother, Gayle Portnow Halperin, took in 1986 when the neighbourhood that I grew up in—the Upper West Side in New York City—was undergoing an intense wave of gentrification, the first wave of yuppie gentrification. The block from 86<sup>th</sup> Street to 87<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway, which was linked to the building where I grew up, was mainly 'mom-and-pop stores' as we would describe them; or in British English, family-owned shops. Many of the businesses had been there for decades. Anything you needed to do in your life you could do on that block, and suddenly all of them were being closed and demolished. Before the shops shuttered up my mother interviewed each of the retailers to ask them 'how long has this shop been here?' and 'will you close for good or will you be moving?' Then, she would take a photograph of the shopfront and signage and some people in the neighbourhood. She set out to capture the feeling of the block before it was completely demolished.

[...]

**LLF:** This project is very much a biography that focuses on the minerals of New York. You now live in Glasgow, and you are temporarily here in Leeds. Have you thought what would be a mineral biography of Glasgow? I know you don't know Leeds that well, but what is your immediate thought of a mineral biography of this city?

**IH:** Before I came I had been wondering about the geological history of

Leeds. Thinking about what's underneath the ground, what's above, and what's below. On the one hand we can consider any city to be a series of geological core samples that incorporate personal histories, geological histories, biological histories, mineral histories, political histories, cultural histories. And they are all entangled together. Any city can explore itself through time, including deep time. Wool is an example of an embodied layer of strata within the history of Leeds, in the same way as the foundational bedrock.

**LLF:** What about Glasgow?

**IH:** Glasgow! My second home city! Well – first the Fossil Grove comes to mind, which is an incredible 330-million-year-old petrified tree grove in the middle of the city, but after that, I automatically connect Glasgow to what's outside of it. Glasgow is intrinsically connected to the hills. I live part-time on the Isle of Bute, and that is a really volcanic island. It also has a really dynamic geology, so it has a very full mineral history in a different way. You can find garnets there. Scotland has a very similar mineral history, in parts, to New York. Rocks that are really old that have melted over time, over and over again. It is also a very nice way to think back to New York as a city with people that are from everywhere, and so is the landmass. And when we think that the west of Scotland was connected to part of Greenland, was connected to part of Norway, to Appalachia. And actually any territory that you are on has been somewhere else before and travelled. Rocks are really the first immigrants.

[...]

**LLF:** What about the physicality of the research you are doing? You talked about looking at the minerals, but did you also touch them?

**IH:** Yes. I must admit, because of the access I was getting, I had to be hyper-aware and very careful. Coming back out of the museum and into a mineral awareness of the city, I always come back to mica. New York is a city of mica. It's a really egalitarian mineral, it's everywhere, it sparkles, it's glorious and totally accessible...

**Audience question (Howard Eaglestone):**

You are building intelligence into this material. If one thinks about archaeological drawings, they tend to convey information, but your drawings have imagination.



**IH:** I think that gets to the heart of them. They are not trying to illustrate the mineral but to get a sense of it. I think it is a leap to say I am having a conversation with them. That would be a step too far, but I am spending time with that mineral, trying to get to know it. Your words remind me of a volcanologist William Melson. He spent 40 years working on the same volcano, and when talking to him I was likening his experience in some ways to my burgeoning relationship with the Eldfell Volcano, in Iceland (which formed the same year I was born). That is a really long relationship, longer than most marriages, and I asked 'Do you miss it? Do you think about it?' He said that 'you love what you get to know...this is not a passive form of love, this is how I feel. I don't need to see the volcano to know that I love it, just as I don't need to see my daughters to know that I love them.'

This is what I have been doing with the minerals. I know and love them, and have been building an incremental relationship with them, and so for drawing them I allowed myself to have a fluidity with them in terms of that relationship. I am not trying to replicate them. For a mineralogist these are probably highly inaccurate, but I don't mind because this isn't what I am trying to do with them. I am trying to cultivate a different kind of story.

**LLF:** I want to close on two very particular things that I think are going to stay with me for much longer than today. One is this importance of developing a relationship with minerals. What does that mean? Relationships are about building time, about respect. Of being present through memory and imagining. The other is this idea of rocks being the first immigrants. Perhaps we can take this further, it is not just on this terrestrial territory. It goes beyond that. Art is something that really matters, that has something to teach us about being human. Your art is the perfect case in point.

*Conceived and transcribed by Dr Catriona McAra. Edited for The Hunterian by Lauren Cross and Dominic Paterson. A full transcript will appear in a forthcoming book on Halperin's work, edited by Dr McAra.*

**Lisa Le Feuvre** is the inaugural Executive Director of Holt/Smithson Foundation, an artist-endowed foundation dedicated to furthering the creative legacies of the Nancy Holt (1938-2014) and Robert Smithson (1938-73). Le Feuvre's research takes the form of exhibitions, publications, collections and public lectures. She has curated exhibitions in museums and galleries across Europe, published her writings in international publications and journals, spoken in museums and universities across the world and has played a pivotal role in shaping academic and arts organisations.





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## **The Hunterian:**

Public Engagement, Collection Care and Development & Projects teams especially: Andrew Boyle; Harriet Gaston; Andrew Jackson; Chris MacLure; Aileen Nisbet; Mike Richardson.

Dr Catriona McAra

Patricia Fleming

Lisa Le Feuvre

Special thanks to Ilana Halperin.

## **Ilana Halperin would like to additionally thank:**

Dominic Paterson, Lauren Cross, John Faithfull, Matt Wheeldon, Graham Domke, Peter Davidson, Jamie Newman, Sam de Santis, Neil Clements, John Betts - Fine Minerals, Bay City Cargo, Alison Stirling, the mineral collectors of New York and Gayle Portnow Halperin.



University  
of Glasgow

