

First of all, what I understood in the end, after I've been in the desert (introduction)

Extended industrial areas have features that are similar to big natural places. In both cases, human scale is too small to be perceived as part of the landscape. Taking deserts as the object of this comparison, we can think of a big-scale panorama, made only of machines and automatized moving bodies, as a deserted place. Desertification, the type of land degradation through which a relatively dry land becomes increasingly arid, implies that there was life before and that it is now decaying. So deserts are anywhere where time slows down, following its course towards a motionless

condition, which we could describe as being dead. The desert is the place where we don't want to be, because we can't imagine our state of being in this irreversible way of disconnection from life.

(...) the excess of space is correlative with the shrinking of the planet: with the distancing from ourselves embodied in the feats of our astronauts and the endless circling of our satellites.

In a sense, our first steps in outer space reduce our own space to an infinitesimal point (...).

We are in an era characterized by changes of scale. {1}

Desert, from Latin *desertum*{2}, means abandoned place, place that people left

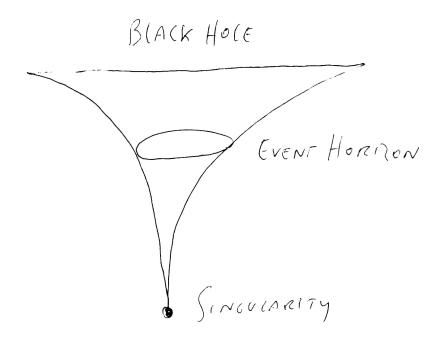
A desert isn't just an empty space, because, beyond the problematic definition of emptiness, everything on Earth sits on ground, like imaginative pictures of yellow sandy dunes do, which indeed are something. Furthermore, if a place is deserted, it implies that something was there before and that every object leaves a trace while disappearing from the land it inhabited. Ruins transform the abandoned place into a platform for remembering past stories and questioning proposals about a new construction plan. Time doesn't keep a normal pace because *Heritage* weighs too much for friable concrete columns and *Renovation* doesn't find its way through the piles of bricks, so things slow down until seconds are no different from light years -in our impossibility of imagining micro and gigantic-.

To understand the abstraction behind a physical place, we can imagine being in the place itself. If we turn our backs we see that, in the city, life goes on as we are used to knowing, but we can't hear voices or noises, it's too far away; people have disappeared from our glance hours ago, only a motionless composition of legos is left, originally buildings and big monuments. We are alone with the deserted site, which, itself, is lifeless. The deserted site misleads us because it looks familiar, like something we know, and at the same time uncomfortable, like something not shaped for human life. Finding courage, we take some first steps into space and the whole view changes: There is no front and back. In round movements we realize we are in a new, self-sufficient environment, with its own architecture, pulse and creatures. This process makes a desert anything but a silent and empty space.

The desert as a portal stretches the Space-Time as black holes do from the Event Horizon on {3}

Mexico – city of Palenque – 1969{4} - Robert Smithson spends many days among the ruins of the Hotel Palenque, which was never completed, but also never abandoned: Its constantly fractured look was the result of a process of decay which was continuously fractured visually as well as in time. No rest and peace was ever given to the building, even if it was never inhabited. Smithson defines it as "de-architecturization": making a floor to destroy it, building stairs that lead nowhere and disappear into the sky. The exploration of Hotel Palenque requires frenetic circular movements around a non-centre, because stairs and passages never finish in spots recognizable as resting corners. Instead they will cause the eye to travel from floor to floor like an endless concrete snake. Even where the half-way construction suggests an open-air swimming pool, to Smithson it looks more like a bath for crocodiles; in part because of the sharp stone edges, but mainly because it reminds him of ancient Mayan human sacrifice, ruins of which are hiding not far in the surrounding vegetation. Behind the innocent expansion of the rain forest over the so-called hotel, a new man-made wonder geology {4} was being born. From a particular window of the hotel, a burned window, all black with just a nude concrete frame to suggest its being "window", there is a view of the rain forest. There, the Mayan ruins have already gone back to a natural-looking morphology. Dust to dust, they are giving back their stones to the same landscape they were taken from. Contrastingly, the Hotel Palenque has constructed its past, failing at being a building in the present. The over-layering of man-made decisions, dictated by Mexican temperament, created a sort of divine necessity {4} that justifies the hotels' existence. Collective Mexican memory has been in this way solidified and melted again in a inescapable process.

This happened because Hotel Palenque is located on the Event Horizon. If we enter the building our body will stretch forever through the snake-like structure.



{3}

Space

The ruin of a thing that never came to life leaves a place without name. A place that could never be called by name is just an intersection of coordinates on a map, and we would define it by numbers. If we find ourselves physically in certain un-named locations, we wonder about the definition of "place". Smithson's first job as an artist in a public space was in an airport, which the anthropologist Marc Augé thinks of as the modern antithesis of the place. A "non-place" {5} is a transit area where there's no expectation of experience, where we just pass by: It isn't empty, it is properly defined by walls and made so as to be comfortable when spending time in it, even though it causes the accumulation of meaningless memories. In opposition, a "place" {5} is the space where we live in an active way, a space that we think and construct, where things happen. In the same line of thought, Smithson calls the art gallery space a "non-site" (6) which is usually located within the city. We would think of it as a specific space with name and address, but which, in this case, isn't more than a white box, an artificial container. In fact, the areas he finds outside the city, such as ruins, quarries, abandoned mines, distant plains and mountainous summits {7}; generally we would think of them as free of containment, empty lands in between, but Smithson, in opposition with this view, calls them "sites" {6} because it's there that he feels an authentic energy {6}, which takes over the apparent impossibility, inherent in deserted locations, to live in the everyday way we know. Smithson argues with the concept of containment found in Aristotle's *Physics*, which says there is no unconfined condition. Everything that exists needs to be contained in order to be; existence and space are directly related because in order to exist, a thing must be in space. So space, topos {8}, becomes a fundamental condition to define the thing in itself; a human being is contained in the space Body and the Body is contained in an other space and so on, until the space Earth. We can then imagine Smithson moving material from the bigger "container" Earth and putting it in a tiny container inside the "container" *White Box*{9}; afterwards he sees that the containment still talks about an elsewhere. Like a miniature, the material that composes a site reminds us of the site and creates in us the desire to be as a miniature doll between the rocks. We desire to see the site in its entirety and to experience it physically. This happens because there is no artificiality to separate space, it's just a matter of attributed values {6}. If we could look at a hypothetic map where the scale unit is Smithson's reason-to-be-alive, we would see that a site is a world, while a non-site is worldless {6}, but indeed the world where everything comes from has always been the one which exists within the map.

Earth doesn't know Frame. How much space do we need around us to be in a desert?

If we demolish the barriers between place and non-place, natural space and artificial non-site, we can look at the landscape with new eyes. A dialectic about space helps us realize that there is a man-made division between where we live and where we don't, between how we live and how we can't imagine to survive. But such a system is simply present to rationalize behavior. It is possible to leave a city by foot, reach the countryside, and continue walking to arrive nowhere, turn back and see that the city has abandoned the landscapes' frame. How much space do we need to feel inside a desert? The highways and massive communication systems will mislead us with camouflage: they impose their straight heavy bodies, crossing water, cutting hills, and perforating mountains with the same power as nature; besides, roads never decay. Concrete, metal, asphalt and all kinds of new technological materials are made to last, so we will perceive the highways to be as stable and invincible as the Alps or the Himalayas. Looking at the panorama, we will forget that even the mountains weren't mountains during all the time of times; they could have been flat tectonic plates deep in the ocean, bumping into each other, crushing, rising, being exposed to rain and wind, then going back to dust again. But we see them as giants, supervisors of eternity... It is in this mistaken vision that, during the walk, we will confuse the highways with black rivers, on which we won't walk anyway, because to do so we

would need a science-fiction reality where human life abandoned the planet and the apocalypse is taking over with terrible natural disasters; in such an imaginative time, roads would be free of cars and just empty black connection lines over the whole globes' surface.

How much do we still need to walk in order to feel inside a desert? We can imagine walking forever because the Earth doesn't know Frame. Actually, we can imagine walking around the whole globe many times, creating orbits like in an atomic structure, covering the entire existing walkable surface. Even the Sun, to become a Black Hole, would need to shrink to the size of a blueberry. Every macroscopic object has its equivalent in the microscopic. This is why we can see landscapes in the coffee spilled on the stove when we have forgotten to turn off the fire. It's a matter of scale: We look for the small, but big objects overwhelm us, they can be found in vast open-air spaces and in over-populated areas too, at the source of highways, where human life settles. To be in a desert we don't need to go far in space, or in time either. We are miniaturized dolls on a spheric mass of organic material millions of years old. Because In Here everything is bigger than us, we don't know how to survive Out There.

Deserts are where coordinates intersect without intermission for many centimeters [10]

From the highest point of the city, the first glance goes South-East. From there; yellow sugar spilled in the shape of little mountains and a grey veil merging in the sky. There is no horizon line, maybe the world ends there.

Getting to the desert: the highway 90 cuts through the hills, literally. The wavy sediment patterns on the walls of the half-spherical volumes show the million-years old geology like in a 1:1 scale model, which I drive through.

The road descends into the hills, it goes down and down and my ears pop.

About Rocks and Ground while being in Rocks and Ground

The perception of the space is always confused, it's impossible to know where I am in relation to objects. The objects, the mountains, now are standing in front of me.

I call them *mountains*, but they look more like huge piles of crystallized sugar, organic pyramids with soft edges. I call them *mountains* because they emerge from the flatness of the space around me. When you look far ahead, the perspective is flattened down by the ochre colour, interrupted by faint *chiaroscuro* shadows of gentle cracks.

I call them *mountains*, but now they are protective walls along my path, descending softly, connecting all the ground I can walk on. As black veils do on women's bodies, the rocky space becomes one complete shape, of which I can't see the borderlines within these horizontal dimensions anymore.

The trails I walk in are concave. It seems as if I'm in a large-scale aquarium, but here and there, rocky blades penetrate the round walls and soil, resembling vertical stacks of giant, ruffled paper. The rounded surroundings make me drift in a circular movement and I loose my orientation. For a moment I don't know where I am, so I forget who I am.

The sky sometimes is opaque and it mixes with the mountains which mix with the water. The water looks semisolid, like a compact, immiscible gelatin. It doesn't reflect the whitish sky, it has its own gradient of indigos. On the western bank every kind of object is crystallized, everything has got a rocky, shiny appearance.

The oily mass of liquid is constantly shrinking towards the centre, where there is a vertically dashed line dividing the lake in two. At this point the water rises, forming the opaque window that impedes me from seeing the other side clearly. The air becomes thick as well: I breathe volumes. I don't talk because of the heat and if I hum the sound gets absorbed into the ground, dragging with it my head, and then my whole body. The pressure is low, like gas sealed into plastic bags - just like all those strewn around me-: I'm in the Lowest Place On Earth.





Time

New Jersey – 1967{12}- on the Passaic River there is a tour of "monuments". Smithson calls them monuments, but they are actually factory ruins from a florid industrial past, and the remains of a never completed highway. The enormous shapes are abandoned along the Passaic's banks and no camera frame can cut them out of the landscape. There is a monumental Fountain with six great pipes, which, for some enigmatic reason, refers to hell, and it floods the river with liquid smoke; the bridge, Monument of Dislocated Directions, in order to open the passage for a few rare floating rectangular shapes with unknown cargo, rotates with an absurd bipolar movement; the Sand-Box Monument is the miniature of a square sandy desert. Altogether, the Passaic River looks like a surreal anthropological museum of a time to come, but rusted and collapsing as if the future will already be old. It is dust without historical events to reveal.

An object the size of a monument renders the landscape view abstract in a vertical composition, from the foundation ascending from the ground and cutting out a spot into the sky, a way to a higher level for the pathos [13]. If the purpose is to display great meanings to pass on to the following generations, a monument that was never a symbol of monumental events becomes a "ruin-in-reverse". The artificial landscape camouflages the natural one through the decomposition of its own lack of content; it died before being fully alive, or maybe it was never alive for an authentic reason. Therefore the desert is created by a hole in the understanding of existence. To be physically in front of the Six Great Pipes would make us question their massive being, and argue their license for pouring all that water into the Passaic's water. In the desperation provoked by this desolate site, where time goes back and forth and no man is tall enough to be visible, we might need to turn these ruins into monuments, as a point of reference. Ceasing to wonder about functions and reasons, we might confuse the Passaic for a mythological holy city. By Smithson -Time turns metaphors into things, and stacks them up in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs. Has Passaic replaced Rome as The Eternal City? If certain cities of the world were placed end to end in a straight line, according to size, starting with Rome, where would Passaic be in that impossible progression? (...) The limits of eternity seem to contain such nefarious ideas.-

Whenever forever

Israel – March, April, May, June 2013{14} – The Judaean Desert is located in between the holy city of Jerusalem and the western bank of the Dead Sea. To leave the city and get to the desert takes just a bit more than an hour by bus, and even if the two places coexist in such a small space, they give very different experiences. Whereas the first is fully charged with human activity, the second doesn't present any other element than the land it is made of. Leaving the city to go to the desert felt like leaving an island every single time. The road was cutting the landscape, showing all the layers of the land's geology, like in a life-sized 3D model of the Earth itself. The man-made objects were disappearing from view, every kilometer a bit more, and soon the bus-stops have become the last sign of civilization. I didn't need to go far to be inside a desert because it was extending all around me already. My ears popped. The perception of the space was always confused, the rocky space was one continuous shape, I was loosing orientation and for a moment I didn't know where I was, so I forgot who I am.

The desert challenges each personal consciousness through the displacement of spacial perception. Perception is subjective and for the eye, placed where there is no human-size reference, what is small can be big and what is big can be small a few seconds after. The size of an object and its position in space is understood only through the comparison with another object, and where there isn't any, any object can be placed wherever, far away in the landscape and right in front of us almost at the same time.

Rocks were the only elements small enough to be taken by my hands, but sufficiently heavy so that my body could feel their presence. Now and then the rocks had the same shape as the landscape in front of me, and vice-versa. One was in my hand and the other was standing in front of me, a mountain, but they looked the same. I could imagine becoming a mini version of myself, sitting on the strata of rock. At the same time, I could see myself in life-sized version, hiking through a mountain. Being that small I could observe every single detail like a real explorer and study the rocky formations in layers. I could imagine embracing the mountain itself just by holding the rock inside my hand. I can be wherever, and I can place myself whenever in time as well. In the same way, I could have been at the feet of that mountain since the creation of the mountain itself, being there since forever, and staying there forever.

Each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins{15}

the man thought that morning... Recently he was waking up from dreams he didn't want to leave because they seemed to be memories.

The man and the boy are walking since an undefined amount of time into an undefined moment in time. The world is on the way to an irreversible apocalypse; deserted, as in the deepest meaning the word can reveal: nature is in ruin and the human species on the brink of extinction. Space and time aren't important because people can't keep track of them. That morning, the man thought that each memory recalled must do some violence to its origin. As in a party game. Say the word and pass it on. So be sparing.

The origin of the memory is The Man, who created it through the act of remembering the past (the time before the terrible events that we ignore took over the whole planet). Even if the definition of origin is the thing that was there first, Origin is actually the last word we read in the sentence.



The origin is what stays at the beginning, but also at the end. Like a singularity, the original point of a black hole, it is what gives birth to the hole, that then expands like a spiral tunnel, becoming bigger and bigger, swallowing all the astral material around. At the same time, the singularity is also what stays at the end, what we can see from the Events Horizon, an imperceptible far away dot that we - we as astronauts – can't reach because we would stretch in space and time. So the origin is always the same thing and the memory is what creates the tunnel that enables a communication, in this case by remembering. But as the sentence tells us, the origin is also the consignee of a violent act, changing it each time it is remembered.

In *The Road*'s context there is an absence of time-counting, therefor of time-understanding. Everything seems to move towards the End, so the present is the only time that counts because it's useless to make projects for a non-coming better future. So, it would seem impossible for a memory to exist, the black void created into the man's life is huge, and that's why in case of the memory phenomenon there is violence as the memory could possibly be personified.

We are now imagining an immaterial thing coming from another space-time becoming tangible, tangible like the few objects that the man and the boy carry on a cart for kilometers and kilometers.

Egypt – spring 2013 - My friend Genevieve was walking alone in the Sinai Desert. At the end of the day she was out of food. She still had some water, but her body was slowly abandoning her. It's in this tragic moment that Genevieve finds an old pack of sugar at the top of a sand dune. The sugar had probably been forgotten by some other hikers, but the idea that it was willfully left in the sand, in a past perfect tense, specifically to save her, passed through her mind, and accompanied her back until Cairo.

Since a desert is always an extreme condition, in this cases where the future doesn't seem as if it will come, our mind has to adjust to the environment, and starts to think extreme as well. We allow desires that would look like mirages in every other place, but that now become as real as objects. Every material object that falls in a desert can possibly stay there forever. As well, every object we imagine, or remember, can stick with us long enough to think it's in our hands or it's making us feel corporeal pain. Therefore, if a desert is outside of time-counting, the physical time that we will need to let go of any kind of self-control will decrease until it reaches a constant fictional present. Time absence is one of the ways in which the desert enables materialization or disappearance: we could want to be saved by a package of sugar or, like in the case of *The Road*, we would look for violence.

Almost mountains

Netherlands – OBA Bulk Terminal - fall 2012 – me{16} - The OBA is a coal storage located in Amsterdam, in the industrial area along the Noordzeekanaal that leads to the North Sea. The site extends over 650.000m² of land where the coal is piled up in the shape of mountains, mountains 20 meters high.

My first visit to the OBA Terminal was in fall 2012. I had been searching for a long time for industrial areas to visit, without being able to explain the need of it. My friend Niek had the same mysterious fascination, and he found the OBA through their web-site. After we passed the security check, the guide offers us a chocomelk, then he leads us to get a pair of proper workers' water-proof black boots and a fluorescent orange jacket. We get on a pick-up and finally start the tour through the coal mountains.

They are huge and pitch black. An organic white veil is here and there, striped by deep cuts into the coal visibly made by water; the cuts sign the mountains as little rivers. We drive next to the cargo train wagons, under a metal tunnel structure, then we look up and there is a crazily big crane dangling above us. We take a turn and a red hull parades in front of my eyes; just the hull is in the car frame so that the boat's dimensions are left to the imagination. From the car it is hard to photograph things completely, so our guide is thinking of a way to let us "run free" outside. On the road just tractors and no moving object smaller than a tractor. It looks like another planet with no human scale. The tractors are half-tank and they model the black slopes like dunes. They smoothly sink and emerge again. They carry the coal here and put it there. All around me it's black.

I call them *mountains*, but they look more like huge piles of black huge sugar, organic pyramids with soft edges. We drive the corridors in between them and we bend our heads to see the summits. The perspective is unusual: I call them *mountains* because they are bigger than any other pile of material I've ever seen, but the "altitude" isn't over the 20m; geologically, to call them "mountains" I must myself become Xcm high:

Minimum height to be called mountain: 600m Amsterdam is above sea level by 2m

OBA "mountain": 20m

Me: 1.65m

600 : 22 = 1,65 : X 22 * 1,65 / 600 = 6cm

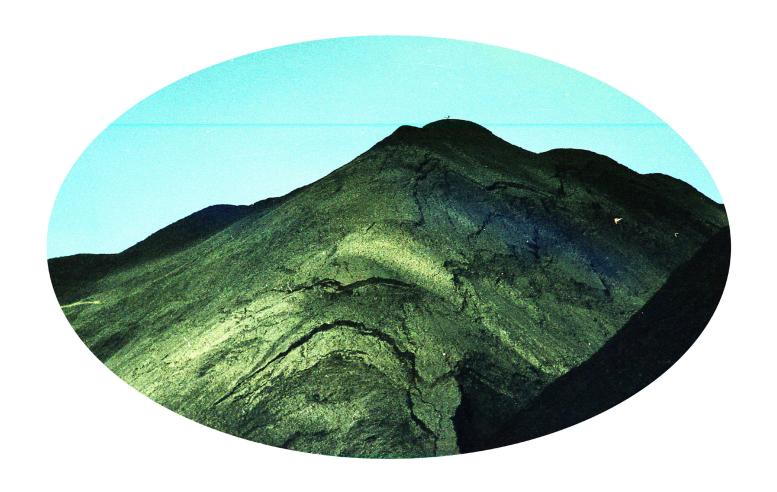
6cm = about 2 coal rocks

At that time, without this calculation, I remembered the family rides in the Cervo Valley by the Alps, and there is no way you can see a mountains' summit being at its feet. In the OBA we just need to take a few steps back to look at the complete panorama, like at models on a pedestal: erasing the length between me and the mountains they become miniatures.

I don't have a picture of the Alps with me so I'm not sure I can compare. I've probably never analyzed the Alps properly because I feel I don't remember enough. Now I'm walking on the coal, I arrive half way to the top, and I look into the camera gate. I cover with a finger the tractor going through the black facade in front of me and it is there: the fog becomes a cloud, the coal pile a mountain and if I'm taking this picture I must be an alpinist. In the 135mm camera lens it's a real landscape, big enough to be proper of the Earth.

When I get to the summit the illusion is over and if I look down I feel as if I'm inside a miniature again. The whole site is visible: the coal arrives on the cargo boats or through the cargo railway, the crane moves it on to a conveyor belt which runs all around the storage area, the tractors carry the coal from the conveyor belt to the ground, piling it up, constructing mountains. When someone buys coal the tractors move it again on the conveyor belt and all the whole process goes backwards. The coal moves from here to there, it's never the same coal and the black mountains change shape and dimension. They are not made of the same rock the Earth soil is made of, they are not created by tectonic plates crushing and bending. The OBA is a temporary illusional landscape.





If we could imagine (conclusion)

During all my journeys into the various kinds of deserts I was willfully avoiding geographical, geological and temporal data. I felt I could trust the space around me and my observation skills. Indeed, when I was in the Judaean Desert, I found out that I was in the Lowest Place On Earth way before I read the corresponding information plaque. The Lowest Place On Earth is 450m below the sea level, along the highway 90, on the western cost of the Dead Sea. There, there is a parking lot and a shopping centre. It's quite an uneasy place, because of the heat, humidity and especially because of the sulphuric exhalations which release a nauseating smell. In that moment the desert wasn't only in the landscape, but in my head as well. My mind was deserted, covered in dusty wallpaper with blurry images of mountains... time had slowed down for all those days, the dust had settled.

My mind state was a silent apocalypse where all the wondering about time and space was contracting and expanding. Apocalypse, from the ancient Greek, means revelation, disclosure of knowledge; what is normally thought as the End, the one with the capital letter, is actually a new beginning, suggesting that nothing can really stop. So when I thought I could finally draw a dot on my imaginary map, I was just at the point of discovering new roads to follow and the revelation was in the transportation. If the desert is inside, I find it difficult (so maybe "we") to imagine air routes or highways that exit imagination, maybe because it's still difficult to believe that imagination starts in a specific spot of the brain, the self seems to be everywhere in the body. Instead, I can imagine, because of the absence of a precise moment in time and of a precise place in space, a black void of perception spinning out of control. Such a black hole is the desert that stays inside, seemingly different from the one outside, but perceived in the same way. I can imagine that if this infinite revolution doesn't stop it will expand, taking in all the light of the surroundings. It's inescapable. The only doable thing is to jump into the self-unknown and slowly learn how to self-map it.

Notes

- {1}Quote by Marc Augé, Non-Places, chapter The Near and the Elsewhere.
- {2}Desert, from Latin *desertum*, means lonely, abandoned; from the verb *deserere* which means to leave; *deserere* is composed by *de* with negative value and *serere* which means connected; Desert: disconnected.
- {3}Graphic representation of a black hole. Singularity: what originates a black hole; a massive stellar body in process, at the end of its life circle, implodes keeping its mass, but decreasing the physical dimension; this inbalance creates a gravitational attraction able to attract every other body in the surroundings, including light. Event Horizon: the point of non-return, the outer boundary beyond which it's impossible to escape the black hole's attraction.
- {4}Essay Hotel Palenque, by Robert Smithson. By Smithson One can't figure out why they put that door there, but it seems to belong, it seams to have some sort of Maya necessity. It just grew up sort of like a tropical growth, a sort of Mexican geologic, man-made wonder .
- {5}*Non-Places*, by Marc Augé.
- {6} Earth Mapping, by Edward S. Casey, chapter Mapping with Earth Works.
- {7}Introduction to the book Land Art, by Gilles A. Tiberghien. By Tiberghien The deserts, the quarries, the abandoned mines, the distant plains and the mountainous summits give us the sense of a world where art takes on a new meaning, were museum disappear, and humanity is eclipsed. -
- {8} Topos, from Greek means place. Topos is the section about space in Aristotle's *Physics*, IV book.
- {9}A "white box" could be the container where Smithson places the material like in the work *Non-Site*, New Jersey, 1968. It could also be the art gallery where the container is exposed.
- {10}Autobiographical text from my study exchange in Jerusalem, Bezalel Academy, 2013.
- {11}Judaean Desert: Mount Sodom and view over the Dead Sea and Jordan, Israel. Pictures by Sara Cattin, 2013.
- {12}A Tour of Monuments on Passaic, essay by Robert Smithson.
- {13} *Pathos*, from Greek, means suffering or emotion. For the ancient Greeks, thought was one of the two forces that composes the human soul; the other is *Logos*, the force of rationality.
- {14}Referring to the autobiographical text, note 10.
- {15}From the novel *The Road*, by Cormac McCarty.
- {16}Autobiographical text from one of the day trips at the OBA Bulk Terminal, Amsterdam, 2012; the first visit was with my friend Niek Peters, the second one with my friend Omri Bigetz.
- {17}OBA Bulk Terminal, Amsterdam, Netherlands. Pictures by Sara Cattin, 2012.

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A thesis by Sara Cattin Gerrit Rietveld Academie Audio Visual department Amsterdam Autumn 2013