

EXHIBITION REVIEW
MATTHEW MANCINI



ELVIRA SANTAMARIA, *Salt Cartographies II*

Sur Gallery and 7a11*d International Festival of Performance Art, Toronto
October 3 – 5, 2018

Adjacent to the Redpath Sugar Plant in Toronto's former industrial portside district, an artist engages with a common, household staple. Sugar, however, takes a back seat as its sister commodity, salt, assumes prominence. Elvira Santamaria's durational performance, *Salt Cartographies*, expresses a personal meditation on the cultural, political, and social value of the periodic mineral (NaCl). Combining the topographical aesthetics of land masses and the nebulous potential of granulated salt, she constructs an internal vision of a map. The outcome affords a small audience with a large-scale creation situated restlessly between sculpture, painting, and ritualistic spectacle.

The gallery's walls are painted white. On the floor rests a rectangular matte-black tarp, approximately two metres wide by three-and-a-half metres long, neatly taped. Santamaria, dressed in black with long salt and pepper hair, stands at its edge. In each corner resides a small, circular mound of "processed" white salt; extremes of light and dark resonate as a thematic presence in the space. Promptly at noon, Santamaria begins walking counter-clockwise around the framed-in floor. Calmly counting *uno, dos, tres...*, her steps are synchronized with each number. Pausing at *trece*, she lies down before one of the salt mounds. She inhales and blows, each time dispersing infinitesimal granules onto the



Elvira Santamaria, *Salt Cartographies II* (2018), views of performance/installation. Photos: Henry Chan.
Courtesy of Sur Gallery and 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art.

once undisturbed terrain. After several intervals of inhalation and exhalation, she rises, briefly assesses the impact, and walks again. *Veinte* now becomes the second number in a pattern; the process restarts, and a yet-to-be scathed dune receives her attention. Before long, the cadence of Santamaria's breath is shared by members of the audience, who, in their own way, give shape to each wind-swept mass.

Over the next hour, waves of salt begin to take on a cartographical resemblance. A predictable rhythm has set in, punctuated by periodic readings in Spanish. Ordinary words like *gobierno, capitales, necesidades, Mexicanas*, and *modificación* are transformed with

dissenting oration, fortifying the political context of the work.¹ Artistic intent aside, the finale provides onlookers with a picturesque Rorschach upon which their own impressions are projected.

Santamaria explores issues centering on the personal and universal, the local and global. These are the fenceposts that frame contemporary reality. Within their bounds is an eternal negotiation between trauma and healing through which human identities are constructed. Her performances draw on these themes as a process of catharsis—not just for her or the audience, but for humanity as a whole. Santamaria embraces the role of martyr in this regard, enlisting, as she says, the



Elvira Santamaria, *Salt Cartographies II* (2018), view of performance/installation. Photo: Henry Chan. Courtesy of Sur Gallery and 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art.

power of “change, transformation, formation, disintegration, entropy, catastrophe and regeneration.”² On the other hand, she is equally recognizable as Mother Earth, the mover and shaker, the cause and effect, of seismic upheaval and corporeal forms. *Salt Cartographies* borders on the alchemical, and grants a familiar substance the capacity to sustain geographical boundaries, capitalist economies, and the requirements of the human body.

This iteration of *Salt Cartographies* is abbreviated compared to previous ones, most notably at the 2016 UK performance festival, *SACRED: Homelands*, which lasted twenty-four hours. Santamaria’s practice aligns with other artists who combine sustained temporality and bodily endurance with a cognizance for socio-economic and environmental issues. Think Joseph Beuys, whose performances expressed criticisms of North America’s capitalist agenda at the expense of people in third-world countries. But Santamaria draws on her own heritage as a springboard for discussing the unequal balance of economic sovereignty and cultural exchange.

In her words, *Salt Cartographies* engages with “memory and reflections... of tragic events... [and] the... reality of Mexico in the North American economic context.”³

The realities Santamaria speaks of draw up ghosts of the past. In one sense, they harken to the Pan-Indigenous mythologies of Salt Beings, the symbolic moniker for white colonial invaders.⁴ Further subtexts can be mined from the morally virtuous Christian phrase, “salt of the earth,” suggestive of foreign ideologies often thrust upon Indigenous beliefs. The salt reserves in Baja California Sur’s *Guerrero Negro* (Black Warrior), similarly resound in the *carte noir* Santamaria begins her work on.⁵ These allusions are perhaps speculative, or they are indeed ebullitions of latent specters of colonialization.

Current issues regarding climate change, world economies, and resource scarcity give Santamaria’s *Salt Cartographies* added relevance. The cumulative transformations they undergo are echoed in her metered use of repetition; the performance is a hypnotic exercise in monotony that, while seemingly tiresome, offers space for the spectator’s own imaginative involvement. Staying for the duration provides an opportunity to witness the unfolding of an artist’s process, yet taking the odd break makes the changes more visually gratifying upon one’s return. Overall, *Salt Cartographies* serves as an *aide-mémoire* for humanity’s ability to shape and be shaped by the lands that nourish it.

Matthew Mancini is an artist, writer, and teacher who critically explores contemporary and historical practices of art making. He lives in Toronto.

NOTES

- 1 In English, the words are “government,” “capitals,” “necessities,” “Mexican,” and “modification.”
- 2 Elvira Santamaria, “Salt Cartographies II Toronto,” <https://www.elvirasantamariatorres.co.uk/single-post/2018/10/03/Salt-Cartographies-Toronto> (accessed 5 October 2018).
- 3 *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
- 4 Barbara Alice Mann, *Daughters of Mother Earth: The Wisdom of Native American Women* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006: 105).
- 5 “The World’s Largest Salt Works Is in Guerrero Negro,” <https://www.mexico.mx/en/articles/salt-works-guerrero-negro> (accessed 16 October 2018).