

**On Transformation
in the Work of
Sylvia Safdie**

by Celina Jeffery



Previous spread
Sylvia Safdie
Installation view of *Pond/*
Auschwitz II
2011
PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED
COURTESY PREFIX INSTITUTE OF
CONTEMPORARY ART (TORONTO)

¹ Irena Žantovská Murray,
Sylvia Safdie: The Inventories
of Invention (Montréal: Galerie d'art
Leonard et Bina Ellen, 2003).
² Teresa Stoppani, "Dust Revolution:
Dust, *Informe*, Architecture (Notes
for a Reading of Dust in Bataille)," *The Journal of Architecture* 12.4
(2007): 437.
³ Sylvia Safdie, interview by
Celina Jeffery.

SYLVIA SAFDIE IS A PROLIFIC ARTIST whose four-decades-long career has traversed a variety of media and processes. Often drawn to sites associated with migration, she explores the experiences of place and placelessness. In this exploration, objects, rendered as images, are transformed. Safdie consistently treats her discovery, exploration and contemplation of objects and places with subtlety and delicacy. Examining the echoes and traces of history—dust, shards of light, shadows and cobwebs—she illuminates the ephemeral, fragile and sometimes ruinous state of being as well as the redemptive potential of art.

Born in Aley, Lebanon, in 1942, Safdie lived in Mount Carmel, Israel, before moving to Canada in 1953. This dislocation and relocation sparked a lifelong engagement with the retracing and exploration of origins that, in turn, gave rise to the practice of collecting¹; indeed, she describes her travel to, movement through and exploration of Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Turkey, Morocco, India and other places as a form of collecting. Leaving Israel was a major loss in her life, and the practice of collecting, an expression of longing, can be seen as a system of tracing and negotiating memory. Safdie frames her encounter with the places to which she travels through the fragment, which she uses as a portal to an exploration of the conditions of placelessness.

The collection, collation and use of earth, which revolves around its capacity to interrogate displacement, memory and adaptation, have been central to her practice for many decades. *Earth* (1977–2005) comprises five hundred cast-steel bowls, displayed in a grid, each of which contains earth from a location that Safdie has visited or inhabited—the mountain in Montréal, the Yangtze River, the Sinai Desert among them. This project re-imagines the notion of territory: the locations from which these specimens of

earth were taken are never specified and, indeed, in some cases—the Yangtze River, for example—no longer exist; the colour and texture of the earth simultaneously particularize and resist place. The consideration of the partial view, of decontextualized material and blurred or unspecified boundaries that is found in *Earth* extends to Safdie's recent video work.

In 1981, she began her frequent visits to Morocco, which culminated in a body of video work, completed in 2009, about the historical spaces of Berber Jewish life in the southern region of the country. Safdie did extensive research while travelling in Morocco, which included meeting and interviewing local people as well as investigating locations of historical importance to Jewish culture. Amzrou, in the Draa Valley of southern Morocco, was, for more than 2,500 years, home to a large Jewish community that lived among the local Berber tribes. There, Safdie came upon a dilapidated synagogue in the old Jewish quarter, constructed eight centuries ago and abandoned after the Jews peacefully departed the area in the mid-1950s. Local Draoui families subsequently used the space for cooking, producing a layer of black ash on the dusty *pise* walls—a mixture of earth, water and straw. By 2009, however, the synagogue, which was filled with layers of dust, stood vacant, and its caretaker, Mbark Hedioui, would open the door for visitors. A series of works set in this abandoned synagogue forms a major component of her body of video work.

Safdie deliberately chose not to represent, but to focus on extrinsic, marginal features of the location—dust, shards of light, textures and intensities. *Dust and Light* (2009) is a silent, two-channel video installation, each channel comprising single static shots of whirling dust. The atmospheric effects of dust and light play out

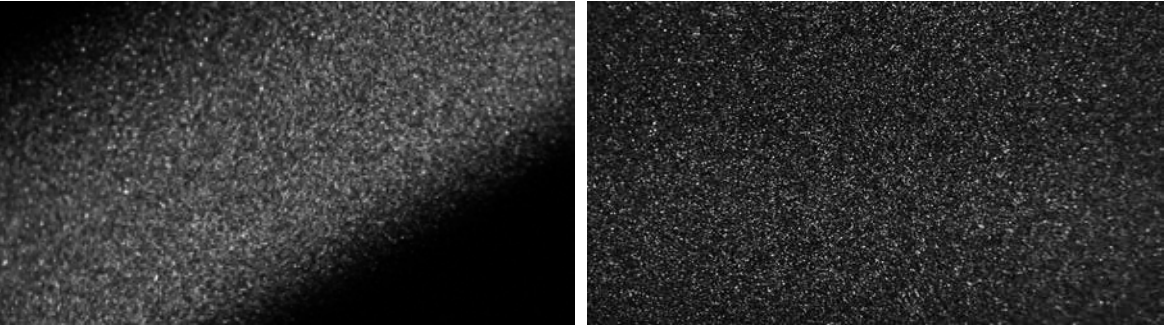
slowly over the course of the videos' six minutes; in the first shot, a diagonal beam of light illuminates a swirling cloud of dust, and in the second, the viewer is as if immersed in it. Here, space gives way to a vortex of motion, at once disorienting and captivating. As architectural theorist Teresa Stoppani suggests, dust itself becomes nomadic: peripatetic and heterogeneous, "[i]t collects and incorporates particles of different origin, bearing traces of its movements and whereabouts *in*—rather than on—itself, by exchanging parts of itself with its environment(s)."² The dust is ceaselessly transformed and transforming in a relationship of endless exchange with the many layers of the site. Perpetually present and in a constant process of displacement, it continuously transacts with its surroundings. Dust becomes, as it were, "ungrounded."

The sense of a perpetual presence is manifest most strongly in *The Guardian* (2009), a large-scale video installation in which Mbark Hedioui, bathed in light-inflected dust, stands in the synagogue and recites the names of Jewish families who once lived in Amzrou. The

soundtrack is composed of multiple layers—Mbark's recitation of names, the *muezzin*'s call to prayer, sounds from the village that infiltrate the synagogue, and the sound of Jewish prayers, recorded during a Jewish pilgrimage to Moulay Ighi in November 2008. "The sound," says Safdie, "allows the cultures to come together again."³

Safdie employs a myriad of scales and formats in displaying this body of work. Whereas *The Guardian* is a large, complex, dual-video projection, *Morning* (2009), in which a woman holding a baby, seen in silhouette, pours water from a pail at the entrance to the old Jewish quarter in Amzrou, is a more intimate screen-based work, accompanied by a sequentially arranged series of photographic stills and drawings. Extracting single images from her video work and working with a variety of scales and formats are interesting developments in her practice that extend and deepen her intensely observational, contemplative impulse.

The artist works fluidly across media, making connections between materials, formats, scale and concepts of place and time. In her *Earth*



Video stills of *Dust and Light* (2009)
by Sylvia Safdie
COURTESY SYLVIA SAFDIE



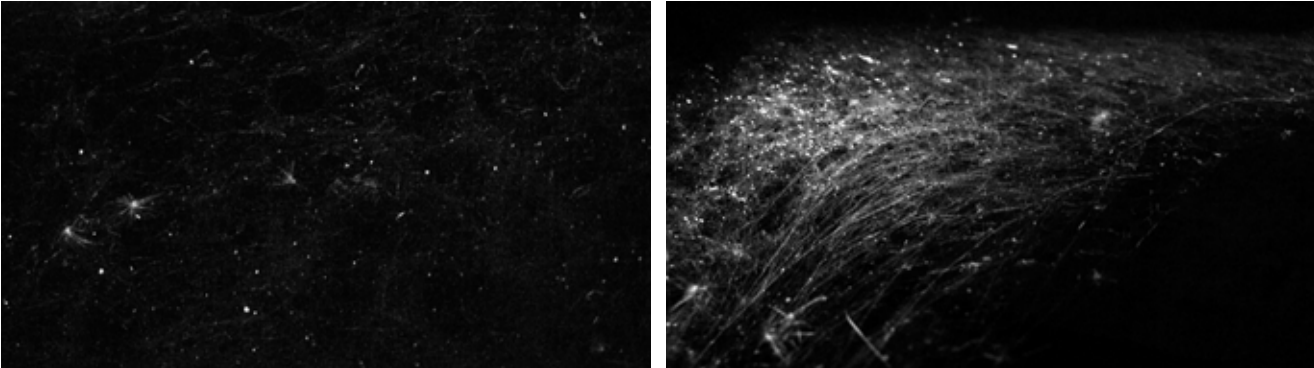
Sylvia Safdie
 Installation view of *The Guardian*
 2009
 PHOTO: PATRICK ANDREW BOIVIN
 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE
 JOYCE YAHODA (MONTREAL)



Sylvia Safdie
 Installation view of *Morning*
 2009
 PHOTO: PATRICK ANDREW BOIVIN
 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE
 JOYCE YAHODA (MONTREAL)



Sylvia Safdie
Selections from *Amzrou*
2013
COURTESY SYLVIA SAFDIE



Video stills from *Web/Auschwitz Series I, Nos. 2 and 4* (2011) by Sylvia Safdie
COURTESY SYLVIA SAFDIE

⁴ Sylvia Safdie, interview by Celina Jeffery, November 20, 2012.
⁵ Eric Lewis argues that Safdie's use of breath—from the pneumatic breath of nature to the relationship between breath and memorialisation in this series—constitutes a kind of meta-narrative of her work. See Eric Lewis, *The Video Art of Sylvia Safdie* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).
⁶ Griselda Pollock, "Art/Trauma/Representation," *Parallax* 15.1 (2009): 42.

Marks Series (1997–2010), a large collection of paintings that feature earth and oil on Mylar, bodies seem to appear and disappear as if in an animated sequence. Often layered on multiple sheets, these images create a multiplicity of shadows that also seem to move. In these works, Safdie uses her materials to produce a kind of dusty, powdery surface like that of the synagogue's walls, but here she creates layers of space that have no ground. Time is also evident here—the linseed oil that she uses to bind the earth turns yellowish-brown over time, producing desert-like layers that return us to the cartographies of placelessness. These delicate works continue Safdie's engagement with organic forms and fragmented materials that give rise to perceptions of geography and place as unstable, as being in constant flux and, perhaps, empty as a category.

Safdie's engagement with cultural geographies and histories that have faded is long-standing. The remnants of dwellings, burial grounds and sacred places thus constitute central markers of her practice—a way of seeing, tracing and materializing fragmentation and disappearance. In a sense, her practice is archaeological—she "excavates" discrete and often subterranean spaces in order to probe the fissures of memory.

In 2010, Safdie visited Auschwitz-Birkenau during a period of intense rain that caused extensive flooding at the site. With no intention

of photographing the camp itself, Safdie preferred instead to absorb the experience of being there.⁴ Visiting the barracks, however, she noticed the cobwebs that hovered within the latrines and decided to film them. In the video *Web/Auschwitz, Series I* (2011), barely perceptible images slowly emerge out of the darkness. Faint striations of light evoke the constellations and, even as the depth and density of the image intensify, the viewers remain uncertain about what they are seeing. Moreover, the movement of the air causes the webs to quiver, and they thus appear to animate—to breathe life into—this most dismal of places.⁵

Through sustained observation, the viewer moves from incomprehension to bleak recognition, as the image recedes into blackness. Griselda Pollock has argued that "trauma is the radical and irreducible other of representation, the other of the subject and, as Thing, cannot thus become something."⁶ It is in part, then, through a series of negations—a lack of identification, context, light and nuance—that the traumatic experiences and histories of this space become, paradoxically, discernible. "We are caught," says Safdie, "by the contradiction that, on the one hand, the spider web is created as a place of entrapment—it is a site of death—[and, on the other hand,] in the image captured, the web is fluttering in the wind, giving us the sense of a heartbeat, a sense of breath."⁷ Trauma cannot be located except as metaphor, in

⁷ Sylvia Safdie, interview by Celina Jeffery, August 25, 2014.
⁸ Here, I am referring to Jill Bennett's conception of the traumatic as "transactive," which in visual culture resides in the affective potential. See Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).
⁹ The latrines were crude holes cut in concrete and fitted with wooden seats that were arranged in rows of about fifty seats over an open pit. At the Auschwitz-Birkenau women's camp, the use of the latrines was restricted to just thirty seconds to a minute in the morning and evening. In the quarantine camp, men and women shared the same latrines, which were also no more than holes in a concrete structure, but these had no pit below, and the prisoners were forced to clean them out when they were full. See Celina Jeffery, "Contemplating the Void: Marie-Jeanne Musiol's *Black Holes*," *Prefix Photo* 23 (May 2011).

which this peculiar abject occurrence, far removed from its original function as abjector, transacts and becomes a path of conceptual engagement on entrapment and suffering.⁸

Observing the swelling of the water—a result of the heavy rainfall— at the base of a latrine, Safdie noticed a tiny reflection of light on the water's greasy surface. In *Reflection/Auschwitz II* (2011), an indefinite light source creates a rectangular reflection, almost like a window, on the surface of a thick, stagnant liquid. An oscillation between the recognition of the reflection as a reflection and its abstraction as it appears and disappears in the black sludge produces uncertainty with respect to the limits of representation and the impossibility of comprehending the historical reality of this place. There is a poignancy to Safdie's contemplation of the peripheral areas of the camp, of these otherwise "unseen" spaces that once debased, degraded and humiliated the approximately thirty thousand women who used them.⁹ *Reflection/Auschwitz II* occupies the hidden

space of the latrine's interior precisely because of its negation of context—there is nowhere further for us to look and the oblique, sullied reflection is oddly emptied of expectation.

Pond/Auschwitz II (2011) transforms intense rainfall on a pond in Birkenau (which is situated next to a crematorium that we do not see) into a compelling and visceral experience. The static camera frames a single shot of rain falling on a pond; as the rain becomes torrential, the image abstracts into a space of violence, and then, suddenly, the video abruptly ends. This utterly compelling encounter queries how historical trauma may be transmitted, not through the metaphor of the void or the wound, but by "excavating" the charged spaces of women's latrines to evoke modes of loss.

The absence of sound in all three videos focuses attention exclusively on the elusive and subtle visual transformations at play. This silence, and Safdie's choice *not* to represent the built environment of Auschwitz-Birkenau is significant



Video still from *Reflection/Auschwitz II* (2011) by Sylvia Safdie
COURTESY SYLVIA SAFDIE

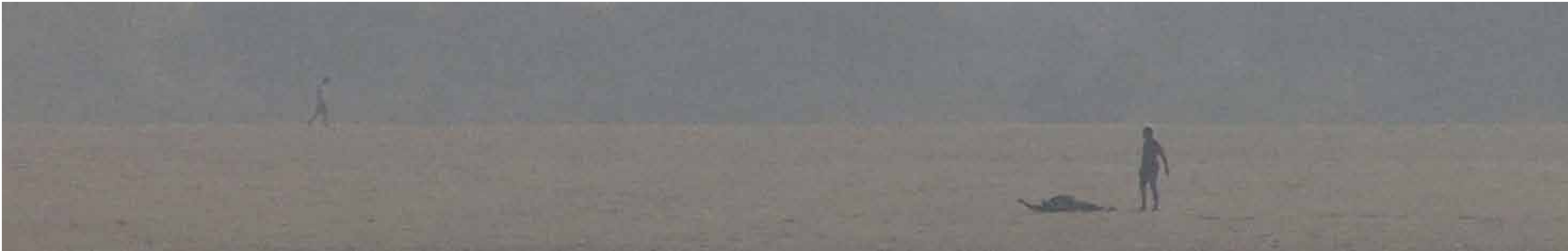


Sylvia Safdie
 Installation view of the exhibition
The Absent Present at Prefix Institute
 of Contemporary Art (Toronto)
 2014
 PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED
 COURTESY PREFIX INSTITUTE OF
 CONTEMPORARY ART (TORONTO)



Sylvia Safdie
 Installation view of the exhibition
Amzrou/Morocco at Galerie Joyce
 Yahouda (Montréal)
 2013
 PHOTO: PATRICK ANDREW BOIVIN
 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE JOYCE
 YAHOUUDA (MONTREAL)

Video still from *Morning/Varanasi, Series II, No.1* (2012) by Sylvia Safdie
COURTESY SYLVIA SAFDIE



here; instead, she uses the unpredictability of exterior events (such as the flooding) to harness the affective potential embedded in the site itself. The indirect transformation of ephemeral phenomena—rain, wind, cobwebs and light—within the peripheral spaces of Auschwitz effectively refute single metaphors and give rise instead to multi-layered reflections on the past as a lived and living site of memory.

Safdie’s practice, which involves travelling, exploring, searching and collecting, reconfigures place, negating territory as a fixed and stable category. In recent years, she has produced a new series of works that primarily grew out of her visits to Varanasi, India. *Morning/Varanasi, Series II*

(2012) depicts two men practising what appears to be yoga on the edge of the Ganges. In an indistinct, hazy landscape, their figures morph into shapes that suggest stretching beasts as a distant, lone figure slowly traverses the frame from left to right. The image, slowed down and presented as a horizontal strip, draws the viewer into a state of serene contemplation of the passage of time, which, here, is subsumed within the composition of space. Safdie’s landscape is subtly malleable, mobile and shifting, and the indistinct gestures of the figures become part of this mobile landscape.

Safdie’s sites of inquiry often emerge from her migratory roots and engage with the notion of the “unmaking” of physical boundaries. Her

explorations, which have extended into the realm of historical trauma, are invariably in dialogue with ideas of the transformational—of discovery, contemplation and potentiality.

The author gratefully acknowledges Sylvia Safdie for her willingness to discuss her work, as well as John Heward and Patrick Andrew Boivin.

De la transformation dans l’œuvre de Sylvia Safdie

Dans le présent essai, Celina Jeffery se penche sur l’œuvre de Sylvia Safdie, artiste prolifique dont la carrière, depuis cinquante ans, a épousé divers médiums et processus, dont de récentes incursions

du côté de la vidéo. Souvent attirée par des sites associés à la migration, elle explore des expériences de lieu et de non-lieu. Dans cette exploration, les objets, rendus sous forme d’images, subissent des transformations. Safdie traite toujours avec subtilité et délicatesse les objets et les lieux qu’elle découvre, investigue et contemple. Dans son examen des échos et des traces de l’histoire – poussière, rayons lumineux, ombres et toiles d’araignée –, elle met en lumière l’état éphémère, fragile et parfois délabré de l’art, tout comme elle en souligne le potentiel rédempteur.