

*Pushed Away  
and  
Leaking Out*

Chan Sook Choi

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# VEINS OF GREEN: CHAN SOOK CHOI'S ARTISTIC RESEARCH AROUND SITES OF COPPER EXTRACTION



(Archive No.119) Artist's notes drafted by Chan Sook Choi while examining concepts for the creation of *Qbit to Adam*. There are three sets: "Land: Why Is It Yours?" "Data: All Objects Have Temperature," and "Bodies: His Body Is Both Stone and Mine." The artist developed them while reviewing the underlying concepts for her work. Related images are attached.

In 2019, Chan Sook Choi traveled to the Atacama Desert, one of the driest regions on earth. Situated between the Andes Mountains and the Pacific Ocean in the north of Chile, Atacama is a vast desert plateau that holds multiple layers of identity and memory. Astronomy: the lack of light pollution, cloudless skies, and ultra-dry air mean that there is minimal interference to astronomical observation, and Atacama is a global center for astronomers studying the origins of the universe. Missions to Mars: the extremely barren ground makes Atacama analogous to a Martian landscape, and NASA uses it as a test site for Mars missions. Archaeology: the dry climate also preserves ancient things – geoglyphs, mummified remains, various artifacts from pre-colonial times – and Atacama holds many important archaeological sites. Mineral extraction: the ground here is also extremely rich in minerals and Atacama is dotted with many mining sites, including the Chuquicamata Copper Mine – known locally as Chuqui – the world's largest open-pit mine in terms of excavated volume.

The various scales and overlapping traces of history that are pursued in the Atacama Desert are examined by filmmaker Patricio Guzmán in his 2010 documentary *Nostalgia de la luz* ("Nostalgia for the Light"). In addition to following astronomical and archaeological studies in the area, Guzmán also visits the former mining town of Chacabuco, which was one of around 170 nitrate towns in Atacama that were shut down in the 1930s as the nitrate mining boom in Chile came to an end (nitrate was then replaced by copper as Chile's primary export, and the country remains

the world's largest copper producer). Chacabuco was turned into a concentration camp under the US-supported Pinochet military dictatorship, which overthrew the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende in 1973 (sending many, including Guzmán himself, into exile). The abandoned desert mining town turned concentration camp held hundreds of prisoners including artists and leftist intellectuals, many of whom were “disappeared” during the years of the authoritarian dictatorship. Along with the astronomers and archaeologists, Guzmán's film follows a group of women who are trying to find the remains of their missing loved ones in this driest of deserts.

Choi's video installation *qbit to adam*, for which she won the Korean Art Prize in 2021, draws on her impressions of the changing relationships between humans and the land in the Atacama desert. As the voiceover to this installation recounts, Choi had been struck by images from the region that she found on Google Earth satellite view. There in the middle of this vast desert of dry, red-brown terrain were two sites that caught the artist's attention. One was the Atacama Large Millimeter Array (ALMA), a multinational astronomical observatory operation consisting of two radio telescope arrays made up of 66 high-precision antennae that reach further and further up into outer space. The other site was the Chuquicamata Copper Mine, a deep and immense open gash left in the landscape after years of operations digging further and further down into the earth. “The land has the world's largest deposit of high-purity copper, while the air, the driest in the world,

can receive clean and high-quality radio waves,” the video's voiceover states, describing this pair of desert operations as “a vertical monument erected to own the land and the air.”

\*

As with much of Choi's work, questions about how the logics of ownership are imposed onto the land – and how certain bodies are dispossessed and displaced through that imposition – are key here. *qbit to adam* begins with the history of the *Hombre de Cobre*, or ‘copper man’ a mummified body that was found by miners at Chuquicamata in 1899. The body, which had the distinct green hue of verdigris, had been preserved over many centuries through a process known as pseudomorphism (“fake form”), whereby a mineral infiltrates an existing form and begins to replace its substance. It turned out to be the body of a miner from the pre-Columbian, pre-Incan Tiwanaku civilization, who had been trapped in an underground tunnel while collecting copper ore in around 550 CE. After he died, his body had been gradually coated in fine copper particles, and these particles had seeped into his flesh so that he became partially mineralized as a figure saturated with its geological setting.

As soon as the copper man was unearthed, lengthy disputes began – among capitalists from the Global North who were running the mining operations in Chuquicamata – about ownership. The American man who owned the mine thought that he should own the body, but the French man who was leasing the mine thought it should belong



(Archive No.128) Part of studio notes and scrap images.

to him, since his operation was extracting copper and the unearthed body was partly made of copper. The copper man spent several years moving between different entrepreneurs who wanted to exhibit and buy and sell him. All of these men saw the mineralized body as a lucrative business opportunity; none of them considered the option of a respectful interment.

The *Hombre de Cobre* was eventually purchased by two men who took him to Buffalo, New York, to exhibit him at the 1901 World's Fair, the Pan-American Exposition. This was at the height of the era of human zoos and the ethnographic construction of spectacles of racial otherness for white consumption. The owners of the copper man had hoped to use the expo to generate publicity and resell the body for a profit. Their display declared "Human Petrification: The Only Specimen in Existence of a Perfectly Preserved Body from a Race Which Is Now Entirely Extinct." In 1905, the copper man was sold to one of the world's wealthiest men, the Wall Street banker and magnate J. P. Morgan. The mummified figure was later donated to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where it was put on display; a human body turned into a geological specimen turned into a museological artifact. While the museum has a policy of not exhibiting the human remains that it holds in its collections, the copper man is, at the time of writing, still on public view. Chile has made several unsuccessful requests for the body's repatriation.

\*

1. Eduard Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, translated by Cedric Belfrage (Monthly Review Press, 1997).

In his book *Open Veins of Latin America*, Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano provides a history of the twin forces of colonialism and extraction in Latin America, elucidating how, in his words, “our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others.”<sup>1</sup> The veins in the book’s title are both geological and bodily. There are veins in the ground, where valuable minerals have filled a fissure or crack in the rock – like the veins of copper that are mined at Chuquicamata. But veins also serve for Galeano as a biological metaphor for the history of colonial extraction, whereby the land is opened up and bled, with the flow of profit re-directed to accumulate in the Global North’s distant centers of power. In Chile’s case, he writes about the “hemorrhage” of wealth that has occurred historically at the mines of the Atacama Desert, with mostly British and US foreign interests in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries draining all the profits away in what Galeano describes as the “structure of plunder”.

The 1,500-year-old copper man reminds us that Native people worked with metals found in the ground long before colonization. Colonialism doesn’t invent mining, but it turns it into a very different beast. It introduces a new model of time where the short-term success of the individual is separated from the long-term success of the society, so that land and certain (racialized) people can be treated as resources for wholly destructive extraction. Precious materials get removed from their social context and ritual meanings, in order to serve an abstract idea of value

(Galeano describes in his book how the Spanish raided cities like the marvelous Aztec capital Tenochtitlán, taking all the silver and gold jewels, temple ornaments, and objects of worship, hammering the plunder down to make it easier to transport, then tossing it all into a melting pot before turning it into bars that were sent to Europe to become money.) Only under racial capitalism does mining become world-destroying – in many complex and interrelated ways, including through the razing of Indigenous lands and the destruction of sacred sites; the dumping of massive amounts of waste materials; the releasing of toxic chemicals that pollute the air, water, and soil; extensive deforestation; loss of wildlife habitation; and so on.

It’s not that the colonial powers came to the so-called New World to *take* the land for themselves; it’s that they *brought* with them an idea of land as something that can be owned, exploited, sectioned out, and removed from its ongoing ancestral/ecological/futural/more-than-human relations of reciprocity. In the words of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson: “the opposite of dispossession is not possession, it is deep, reciprocal, consensual attachment. Indigenous bodies don’t relate to the land by possessing or owning it or having control over it. We relate to land through connection – generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping, and nonlinear *relationship*. [...] This is our power.”<sup>2</sup>

\*

Copper is known for its distinct reddish-orange-brown hue,

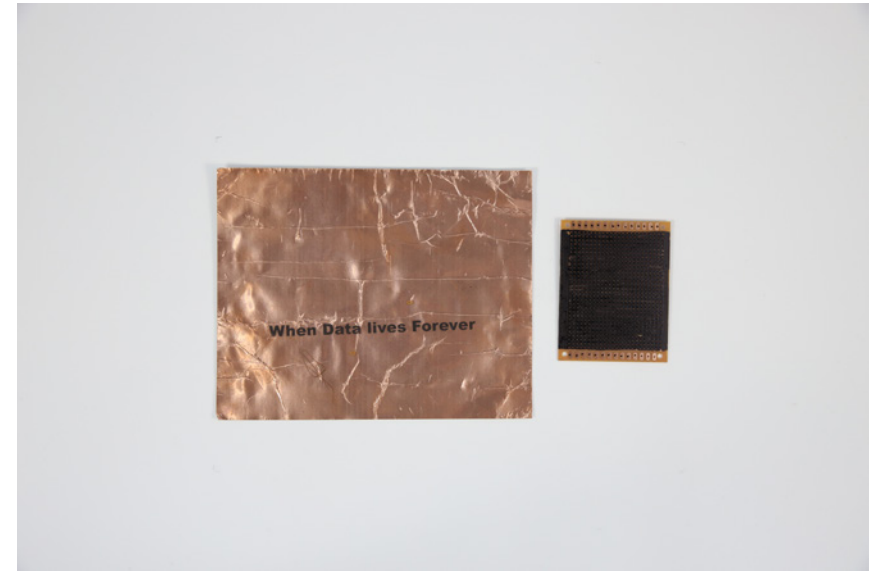
2. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 43.

(Archive No.128) Part of studio notes and scrap images.



but it also moves around in bluish-grey-greens. It has long been used in blue and green pigments, including “Egyptian Blue,” a synthetic pigment that was used in ancient Egypt as far back as 3250 BCE. The Statue of Liberty started out brown, like a penny, but with the oxidization of her copper, she became lichen green. Copper is what imparts the blue-green colors to minerals like turquoise, malachite, and azurite. It’s also what makes the blood of some invertebrate animals appear blue, if they have copper-based hemocyanin proteins instead of the more common iron-based hemoglobins, which will make blood appear red.

In English, the word copper is related to the name of the island of Cyprus, where copper was mined in the time of the Roman Empire. Cyprus was also considered to be the birthplace of Aphrodite/Venus, the Greek/Roman goddess of love, pleasure, desire, sensuality, sex, and beauty, who has long been associated with the red metal. An alchemical symbol for copper is the symbol of Venus, ♀, which has been interpreted as a depiction of the beautiful goddess’s hand-held mirror – a mirror of polished copper. Venus is the only planet in our solar system to be named after a female figure, and the symbol for Venus/copper also became a symbol for the feminine; one that was embraced by second-wave feminists. This explains why you can find the symbol in the name of feminist composer Pauline Oliveros’s all-women group from the early 1970s, the “♀ Ensemble” – but also adapted in the corporate logo for Kennecott Utah Copper, a mining company that is now owned by the ruthless multinational giant Rio Tinto.



(Archive No.121) 2 objects for performance *Qbit to Adam* idea sketches.

Today, more than half of the copper that is taken out of the earth is used in wires and cables. It has very high electrical conductivity and it can be found hiding within all kinds of structures and appliances that run on electricity, including the laptop I'm typing on right now. It's also one of the few materials that can be infinitely re-used and, as a result, there is a strong trade in recycled copper. When the price of copper goes up, so too does copper scavenging and theft: doorknobs, air conditioners, cell towers, gutters, plumbing systems, radiators, railroads, and fiber-optic cables are all common sources of copper that can be resold. In 2011, Hayastan Shakarian, a 75-year-old resident of a small village outside Tbilisi, managed to literally break the internet in Armenia and much of Georgia when she accidentally severed an underground cable while scavenging for copper in the forest near her village – triggering an internet blackout for millions. “I have no idea what the internet is,” she later claimed, exasperated by accusations of cyberhacking.

\*

Choi's research has recently taken her to the vicinity of another of the world's leading copper production areas: a town called Superior in the “Copper Corridor” of Arizona, where most of the copper extraction in the US happens. Close to Superior is Chi'chil Bildagoteel, or Oak Flat, which is sacred to the San Carlos Apache and related Tribes who have gathered, worshiped, harvested, foraged, hunted, and laid their ancestors to rest in the area for many generations. In the 1990s mining interests discovered that many billions

of dollars' worth of copper lies underneath these grounds. The Resolution Copper mining company was formed as a joint subsidiary of Rio Tinto and BHP – two of the world's largest mining conglomerates, which both have headquarters in the UK and Australia. They began lobbying the US Congress to pass a law that would allow them to take possession of the land – which is located within a national forest – and to extract the ore through an underground mining operation that would have devastating, catastrophic effects on the sacred lands.

Resolution's proposed copper mine would be the largest in North America. Published reports show that the company seeks to extract \$144 billion worth of copper over the mine's anticipated production life of 40-60 years. Their underground “block caving” techniques would eventually cause the ground surface to collapse, leaving an enormous hole where Chi'chil Bildagoteel now stands. San Carlos Apache Tribe Chairman Terry Rambler states, “Our position is clear: It is impossible to mitigate the damage that would be inflicted on Western Apache culture and religion if the mine is constructed. The mine will cause Chi'chil Bildagoteel to collapse into a 1.8-mile-wide, 1,000-foot-deep crater. A sacred site that has been used by our people since time began will be gone forever. We will never agree to a project that destroys Chi'chil Bildagoteel.”<sup>3</sup>

At the time of writing, the legal battle between the San Carlos Apache Tribe and Resolution Copper is ongoing. Rio Tinto (who is the majority owner of Resolution) has, in recent years, destroyed multiple sacred Aboriginal sites in

3. “Midnight Backroom Deal” <http://tiny.cc/MidnightBackroomArchived>



(Archive No.121) 2 objects for performance *Qbit to Adam* idea sketches.

Australia, including the Juukan Gorge caves, which showed 46,000 years of continual occupation. To expand its iron-ore mining operations, Rio Tinto blasted these ancient rock shelters with dynamite in 2020, knowingly and irrevocably destroying one of the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura peoples’ most sacred sites.

One of the ways in which Resolution Copper tries to justify itself is through the logic of greenwashed resource colonialism: as society moves away from fossil fuels and towards electrical power, more copper will be needed for all the electrical wiring, and therefore all the destruction and desecration that is enacted during copper extraction operations can be packaged as a “resolution”. It’s a reminder that green capitalist Band-Aids that maintain the existing orders of extraction in perpetuity are not, in fact, going to save the world.

\*

A focus of Choi’s research on her trip to Arizona was the tumbleweed, a ubiquitous form of plant life in the American West. Tumbleweeds are a common trope from Western films, where they roll through deserts and deserted towns in shots that signify that *nothing is happening*. They can also be a symbol of drifting passivity – as in the start of the film *The Big Lebowski* (1998), where the tumbleweed introduces The Dude as a figure of aimlessness. In fact, while they might look like lifeless leftovers, tumbling tumbleweeds are busy reproducing themselves. The term tumbleweed does not refer to a type of plant, but rather to the globular

above-ground anatomy of a number of different plants. Tumbleweeds start out as shrubs with roots in the ground and then one day they self-detach and take off, using the wind to roll around and disperse their seeds. The tumbleweed is a vehicle – a mobile architectural structure that can carry seeds further than the seeds would be able to travel if they rode the wind on their own.

In the US, tumbleweeds are categorized as non-native, extremely invasive, and noxious. Treated in isolation, they can be blamed for contributing to native plant extinctions and for spreading fires. But if they are looked at *in relation* to their ruinous environmental/historical contexts, their pervasiveness can be understood less as a *cause* of ecological destruction and more as an *effect* of it. Tumbleweeding plants thrive in sites of industrially disturbed soil where there is little other vegetation around. After centuries of deforestation, tumbleweeds can also travel much farther, and thus reproduce much more rapidly than they otherwise would have. Before the imposition of monoculturally plowed fields, tumbleweeds would have been caught in the barriers of forests and native prairie grasses, but when the land has been cleared for monoculture, it is also cleared for diaspores. “Diaspore” is the botanical term for seed/spore dispersal units like tumbleweeds. The word is only one letter away from “diaspora” – both words come from *dia* ‘across’ + *speirein* ‘scatter’. Choi’s research in this direction is still ongoing, but the artist plans to work on a film and a kinetic installation that will look to tumbleweeds as diasporic objects.



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