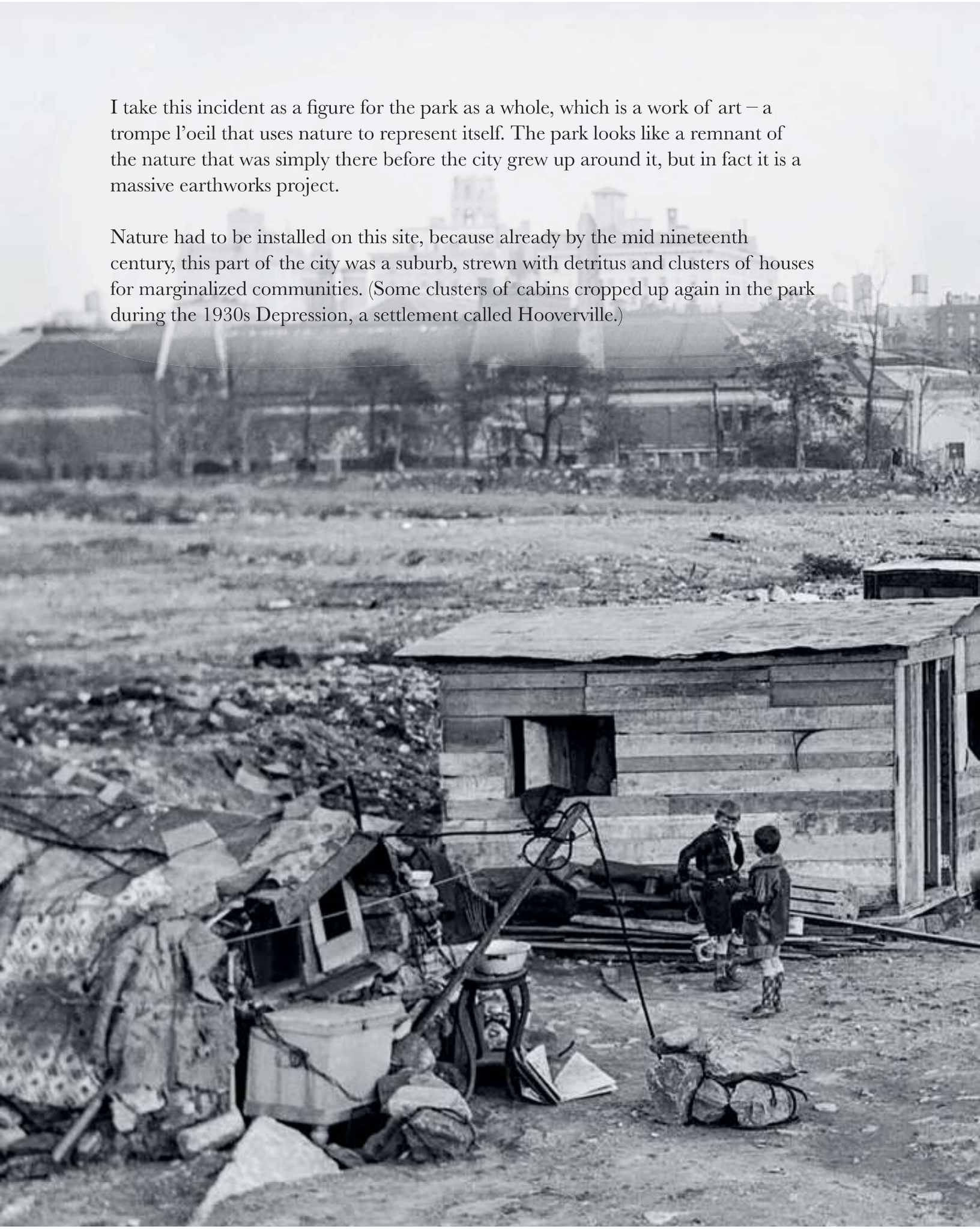
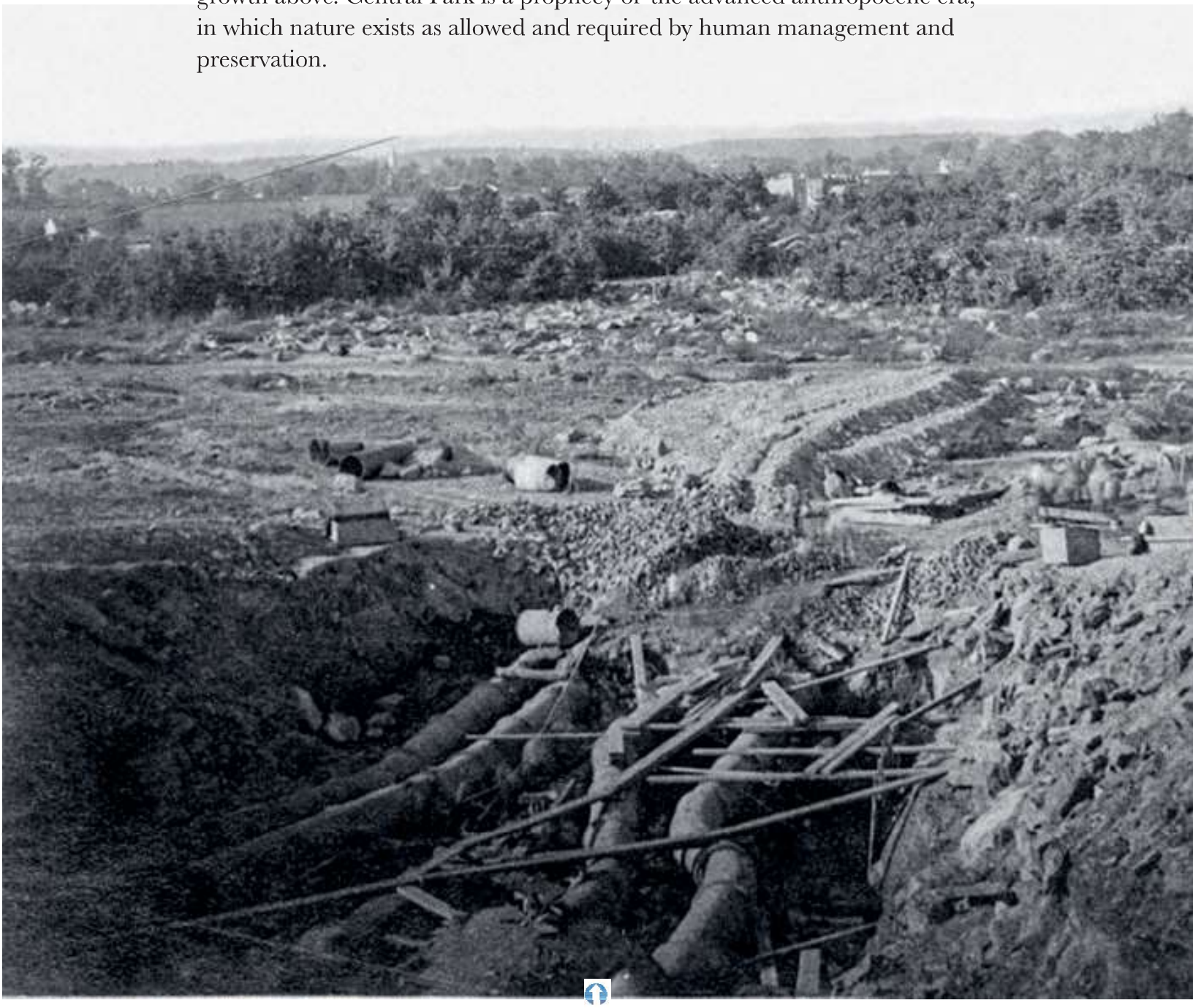
I take this incident as a figure for the park as a whole, which is a work of art – a trompe l'oeil that uses nature to represent itself. The park looks like a remnant of the nature that was simply there before the city grew up around it, but in fact it is a massive earthworks project.

Nature had to be installed on this site, because already by the mid nineteenth century, this part of the city was a suburb, strewn with detritus and clusters of houses for marginalized communities. (Some clusters of cabins cropped up again in the park during the 1930s Depression, a settlement called Hooverville.)



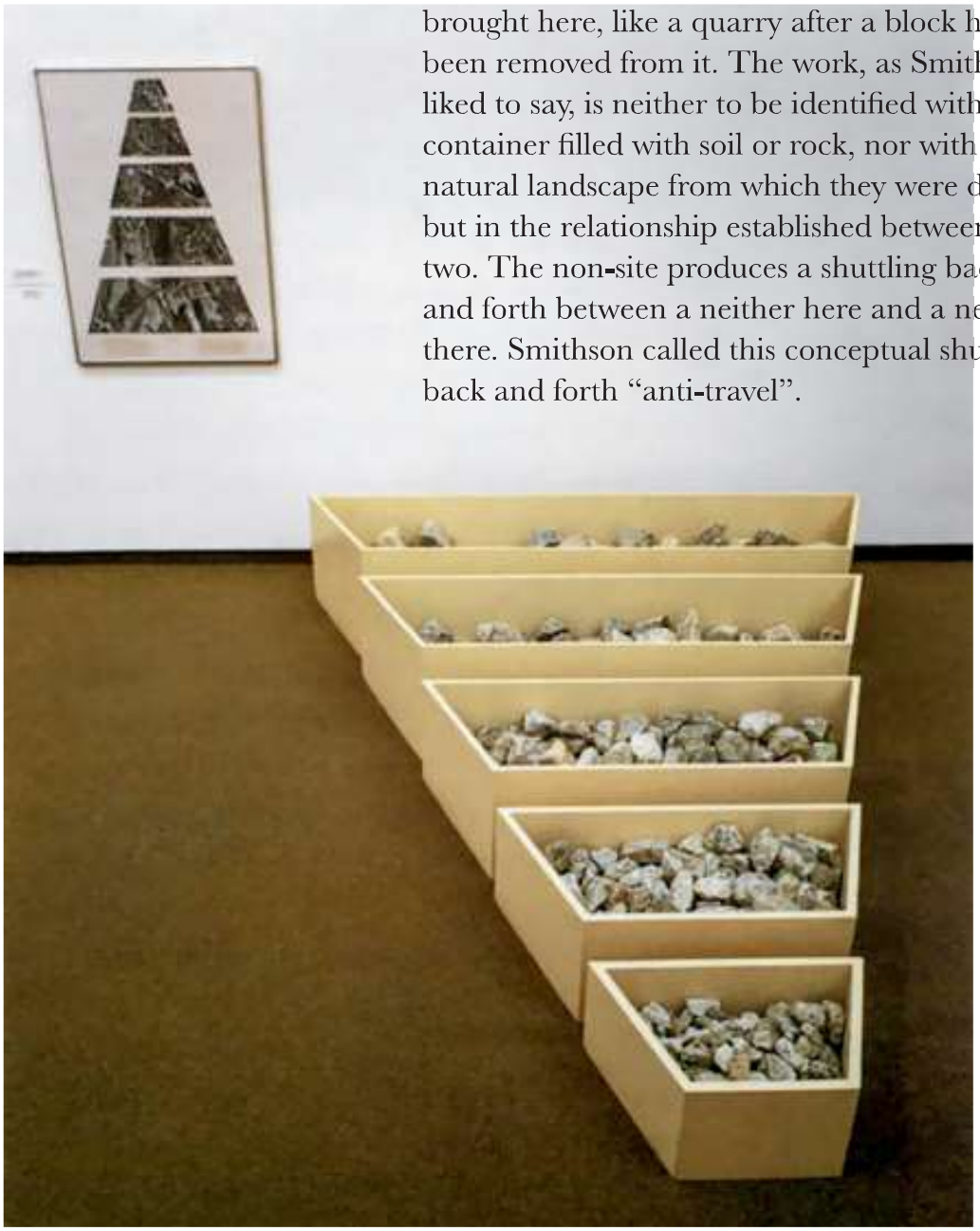
At the time of the park's origin, people were evicted and massive amounts of gunpowder were used to clear the area, allowing more than ten million cartloads of material to be transported out of the park, including rock outcroppings that were not wanted, so that more than a million trees, shrubs, and plants representing approximately fifteen hundred species could be moved in and transplanted into the park.

Before these elements of natural growth were installed, ninety-five miles of pipes were laid down, an artificial drainage system designed to facilitate the future growth above. Central Park is a prophecy of the advanced anthropocene era, in which nature exists as allowed and required by human management and preservation.



2. The Marriage of Sulfur and Mercury

As defined by the artist Robert Smithson in the 1960s, a non-site is a piece of territory exhibited at some distance from its place of origin. The bin filled with rocks in the gallery and the map or photo are relays, sending the gallery visitor somewhere else. We are in a situation where *here* is also an *elsewhere*, or rather neither one nor the other, since the materials exhibited here are just a sample presented under artificial conditions and removed from their source, and yet the place where the rocks or soil came from now lacks the materials that have been brought here, like a quarry after a block has been removed from it. The work, as Smithson liked to say, is neither to be identified with the container filled with soil or rock, nor with the natural landscape from which they were drawn, but in the relationship established between the two. The non-site produces a shuttling back and forth between a neither here and a neither there. Smithson called this conceptual shuttling back and forth "anti-travel".



When I came across the two steps cut into the rock, I had been looking for them for some time, because they are reproduced in Smithson's own article about Central Park published in 1973, where he presents the park as a construction, an ongoing dialectic, and therefore especially suited to the logic of photography, not only because of its picturesqueness but also because of its artificial temporality. The park is not a static entity, but a series of interventions, never finished – a revelation of picturesque nature that no longer separates nature and art. Central Park arose with

photography and lives in the camera's eye because it is only ever a series of breaks in continuity, he says, rather than an intact metaphysical formation. To view nature in transcendental terms produces not only ecological despair and visions of cosmic doom, renewed legends of paradise lost, but also the aesthetic counterpart of such a view – formal abstraction in art. Smithson proposes an intervention in the park, such as a "mud extraction sculpture" that took earth out of the Pond and placed it in another part of the city requiring "fill", a work that turns maintenance into physical dialectic through documentary treatment in photography and film.

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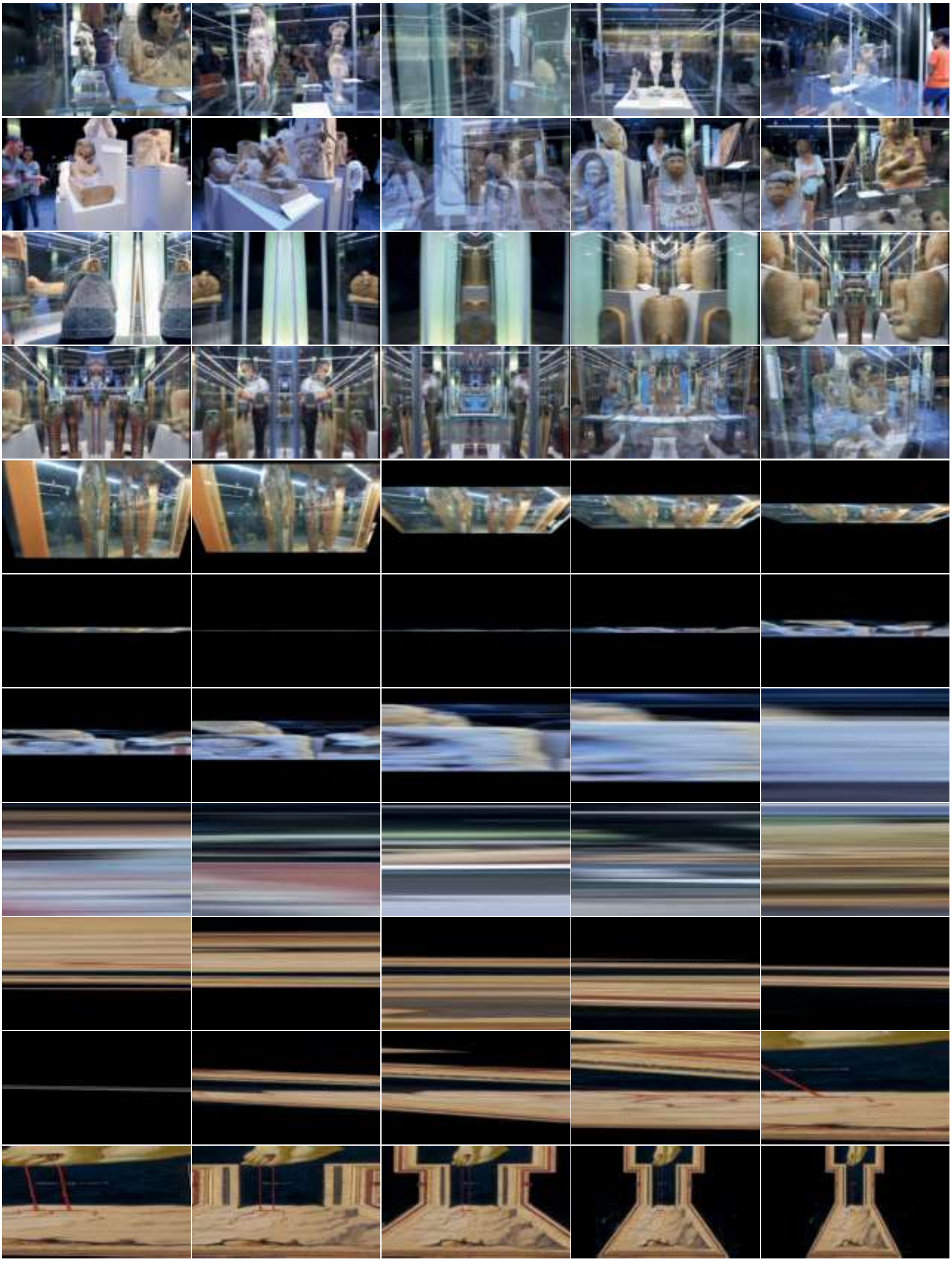


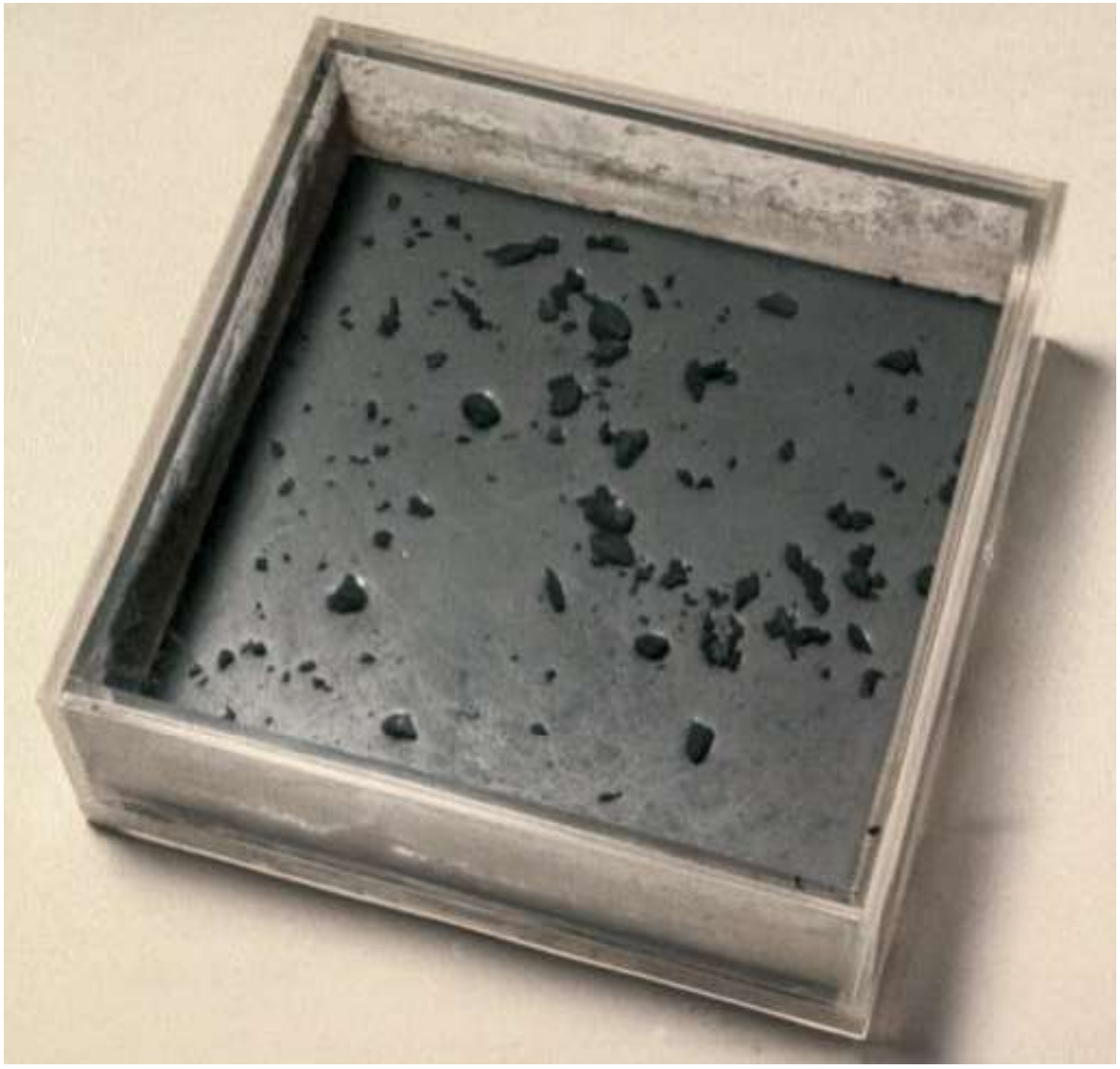
In recent years, theorists have been pointing us to the realities of a posthuman world. As if for the first time, we have been introduced to a world of vibrant matter, the life of things, the agency of objects, and actor networks where the actors are mostly not human.

All of this only brings into clearer focus the state of exception that is art, and art-making. As long as there are humans there will be artworks. Unlike all the other animals, humans make art – continually, irrepressibly. We can let go of a humanist myth of mastery over materials and of the dominance of form over matter. We can accept that the agency of materials works through art. Yet artworks are not the same as things. Artworks are not simply continuous with the flow of materiality; they make a difference.

Art is an interruption of life, a staged death inside of life, and also, conversely, a place where life is cultivated under artificial conditions. The artwork is neither the dead counterpart to the life of things, nor is it the animate presence in the face of inert matter. Matter vibrates in and through art, certainly, but at a different frequency due to the cut in reality effected by the artwork. The artwork is a place where both death and life are interrupted, made to cross over one into the other, with the result that on occasion, perhaps, something beyond or beneath life and death comes into view.

Animals being mauled by a predator will sometimes go into a state resembling death, becoming limp and unresponsive; this state is sometimes called "tonic immobility" or "thanatosis". It is sometimes described as a form of mimicry or deception in the hope that the predator will lose interest, but in fact it is not mimicry – it is a real biological function. The animal enters a state approaching death, and undergoes a winding down of the organism's physiological mechanisms. Sometimes it emits a foul smell, such as that given off by a dead body. Perhaps it is a way for the victim, who is in immediate and grave danger, to accept and anticipate death. This is not so much life struggling against death as death making a cameo appearance inside of life. And often enough, this preserves life. The predator is satisfied or simply put off, leaving the animal behind, and after a period of time the animal will recuperate its full functionality and return to life.

Fugitive Mirror is a little-known work by Robert Smithson that has rarely been shown. The work began as an island of bright yellow sulfur chunks floating on a shimmering sea of mercury inside a plexiglass box. But at a certain point, it is not certain when, the mercury became dark matter, and the bright jagged shards of sulfur floating above the surface became submerged dark lumps. Here is a photograph from 1998,



the earliest known image of the work. It is becoming less and less differentiated, an entropic process that Smithson would have expected and welcomed.

The original idea, with the bright yellow sulfur floating on the mercury, can be seen as a sort of model for an island of sulfur he was planning to install in Dollar Bay in southern Texas, not far from an important sulfur mine, in 1969/70. I think the relationship may be the other way around – the planned piece in Dollar Bay might have been the model for this, the water of the bay standing in for the mercury that he really wanted the sulfur to rest on.

In placing sulfur into mercury, *Fugitive Mirror* brings back together what was already joined in nature in the ore known as cinnabar (HgS), a source for bright red pigment since Antiquity. The Roman architect Vitruvius, writing in the first century A.D.,

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says (Book VII, Chap. IX, Sec. 1): "When the lumps of ore are dry, they are crushed in iron mortars and repeatedly washed and heated until impurities are gone and the colours come." Pigment makers also made the color by taking already separated mercury and sulfur and grinding them together until the orange-red color emerged. The result of this synthetic process is called vermilion, rather than the naturally occurring cinnabar, but in fact the two terms were used interchangeably when describing the pigment that emerged. If you put sulfur into mercury, as Smithson has done, but don't grind or heat them together, the slow result of the process is the dark grey matter we see, called metacinnabar. Winding down since it was made, *Fugitive Mirror* has offered a highly undramatic, and almost entirely unseen, performance of dying color.

But there is something unfinal about this death. If one were to heat the dark stuff in Smithson's plexiglass box sufficiently, the metacinnabar would sublimate into bright orange-red. Alchemical tradition considered sulfur and mercury the Adam and Eve, the Sun and Moon, of all matter; from their 'marriage' all material life originates. *Fugitive Mirror* began by staging the marriage, placing the (active) bright sulfur on the (receiving) gleaming mercury, but then withheld any alchemical operation, letting entropy take its course instead. Yet the potential for alchemical sublimation and bursting color are held there, in a state of material abeyance that is neither dead nor alive.

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