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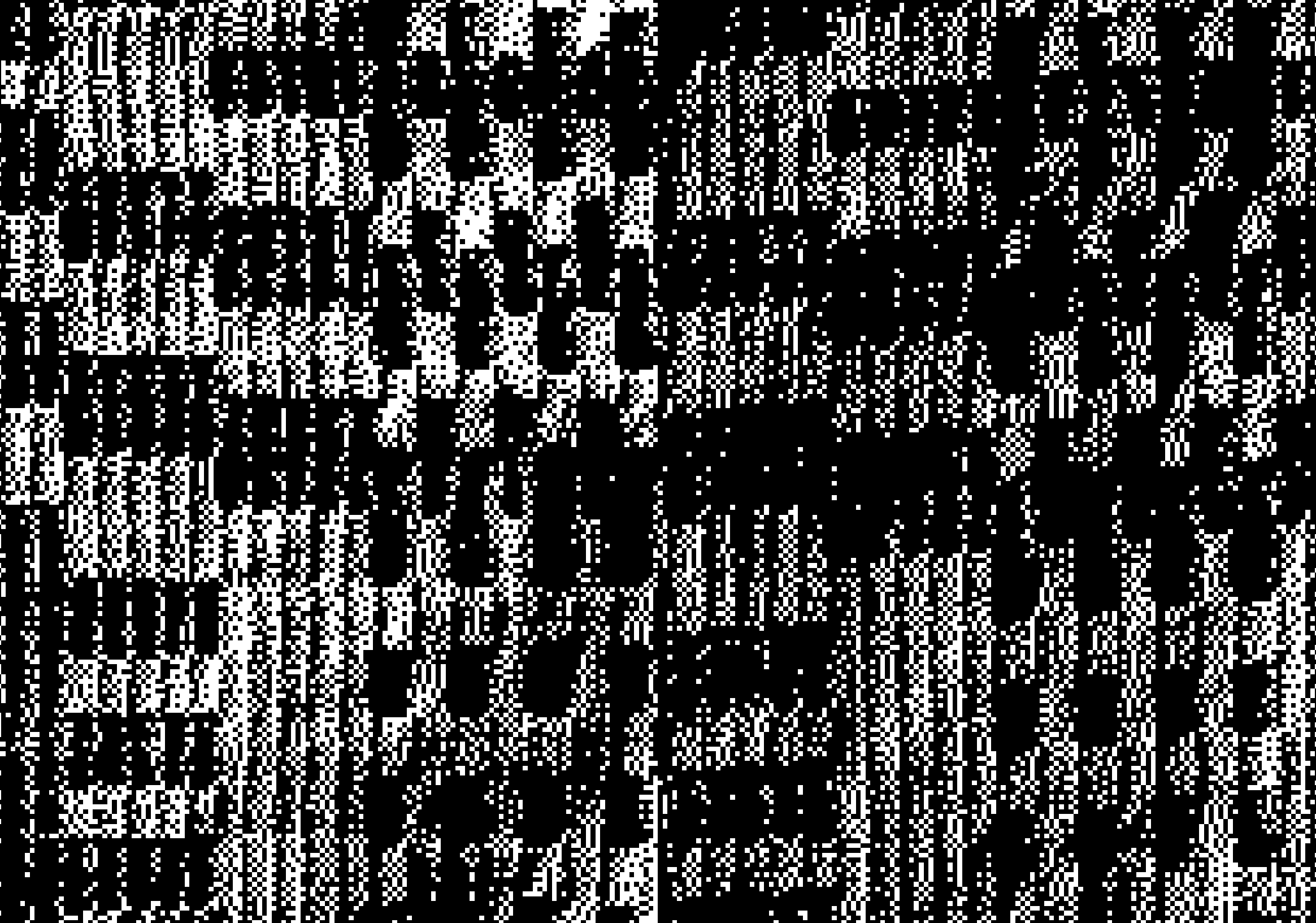
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**AMNESIAC  
BEACH FIRE**

**ANDREA MASON**

# Amnesiac Beach Fire

## Andrea Mason

It is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us.'

– Italo Calvino

In *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Robert Smithson lays out a 1,500-foot-long, 15-foot-wide, anticlockwise spiral walkway using 6,000 tons of black basalt rock and earth at the edge of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Visitors are asked to leave no trace at the site – by taking their waste away with them, by not removing rocks from the work, by not making fire pits nor trampling vegetation.

**Storyteller:** She has tasked herself with visiting her local Integrated Waste Management Facility once a week for a year. She wants to know about waste, its relation to capitalism and climate change. She needs to understand the nature of it, the volume of it, like a storm chaser terrified of storms. She will examine the discarded goods with a dispassionate eye, in the way that a hospital consultant matter-of-factly dispenses with the person in front of them, writing a follow-up letter, for instance, which states that 'this pleasant woman' has a bone density suggestive of a fragility this same woman does not recognize. Will she accept the inferno, the inferno we form by being together, and become such a part of it that she can no longer see it? Or will she – and this option demands constant vigilance and apprehension – seek out and learn to identify who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are *not* inferno, then give them space, to let them endure?

**Dialogue:** *Spooky*, Denise says, when she tells her later. *Last week we had a dead cat and a dead dog.*

**Rules:** Denise is her portal into the dump. She writes her name into Denise's Visitor Book, and Denise gifts her a hi-vis vest and a red hard hat. Entry is via an open hangar. She is always careful to look left for exiting traffic (she has watched the health and safety video and signed off her compliance), and takes the pathway alongside a low aluminium barrier, which leads to a flight of metal steps up to a first-floor concrete concourse.

**Tribe:** Two JCB diggers, travelling in opposite directions, draw alongside each other. The driver nearest to her shouts across to the other driver, who is wearing ear protectors. George, a site worker wearing a scarf and woollen hat – *to keep the flies off* – shouts across to this driver.

**Finite:** TODAY, AT THE DUMP, the world is in the bin: a classroom globe, tossed into TVS & MONITORS, stands on its head, a round peg in a square crate in want of the hard angles of a TV or monitor.

In *Viet-Flakes* (1966), Carolee Schneemann's film montage composed of Vietnam atrocity images plays on 14 old-school boxy TVs, which hang from the gallery ceiling; cables drape down like tendrils and spool on the floor around 14 DVD players. The world in TVs.

**Sounds:** DOWN THERE, IN DIGGERLAND, two site workers approach a stationary JCB. The man gets into the driver's seat; the woman stands by the passenger-side huge tyre – the door above it is open – and taps the side of the cab with a spanner: *tack, tack, tack*. The driver starts the engine and lifts the digger arm, tilting the bucket forwards and upwards, before drawing it back in, like someone doing Cat-Cow: head lifts, chest presses forwards, back arches (Cow); head curls in, back rounds (Cat). The woman moves away and leans against a blue, industrial-sized recycling bin where she continues to tap: *tock, tock, tock*.

**Behaviour:** George waves at her cheerily as she notates the TVs and monitors: BUSH, DELL, DAEWOO, SHARP, GOODMANS, JVC, SAMSUNG. She smiles and waves back.

**Gestures:** A JCB driver, the one George shouted to, is using the digger arm to bash down METALS, which sit in a container on the ground floor, making room for new bikes and scooters. A trolley catches in the teeth of the bucket. The digger arm bashes repeatedly against the side of the container in an effort to dislodge the trolley, like a horse kicking its belly to dislodge a fly. George flings his arms up and down. The driver presses the trolley against the inside edge of the container, and jerks the digger arm up. The trolley falls. George raises his arms in celebration.

**Harvesting:** George wheels a red trolley full of bikes and scooters to METALS.

**Actions:** A man gently floats pieces of bubble wrap and polystyrene packaging over the cubicle wall at HOUSEHOLD WASTE, a piece of which obscures a book's title. At WOOD & TIMBER, a woman throws in lengths of wood with abandon: a satisfactory *thwuck, thwack, crack*, as each item meets the criss-cross pile of Victorian pine doors, wooden pallets and broken-up particle-board kitchen cabinets.

**Objects:** TODAY, AT THE DUMP, in FRIDGES & FREEZERS, a HOOVER LINK washing machine stands alongside a FLYMO EASIMO lawn mower stands alongside an electric clothes dryer stands alongside an oven stands alongside a ZANUSSI ELECTROLUX. The appliances stand on the ground floor as she enters, where she can walk around them.

In *In the Kitchen (Fridge)* (1977), Helen Chadwick stands confined inside a tall fridge-freezer with an interior upholstered with white PVC. Chadwick's body is just visible through a layer of the PVC: the dark upside-down triangle of her pubic mound, the shape of her torso and thighs. Her head, uncovered, pokes above the top shelf. The lightbulb is on.

**Stories:** TODAY, AT THE DUMP, a hand-carved decorative rocking horse. As she walks further along the wall to get a better view she sees that the head has been sawn off.

**Constructions:** PLASTERBOARD and METALS sit side by side in large containers on the ground floor. Other categories (HARDCORE & RUBBLE, GARDEN WASTE, WOOD & TIMBER, HOUSEHOLD WASTE and CARDBOARD) are partitioned by concrete walls, which run down to the ground floor, down there, to the land of JCB diggers and crushers, and men and women with long-handled brooms.

### Correspondences:

In *Der Lauf der Dinge (The Way Things Go, 1987)*, Fischli and Weiss harness the energy of never-ending collapse: wood and tables and bags of rubbish spin and turn and flip and fall; substances ignite and explode, drip and drop; chemical reactions cause explosions and eruptions, expansions and contractions; dust flies; fluids flow; chairs tip; tyres roll; carpets unfurl; planks topple; wheeled contraptions power along tracks; barrels barrel; sparks fly; oil burns; a weighted object on a string catches fire and flies around a central pole, like a comet circling a Swingball; clogs trundle; air gusts; a cardboard box floats. And *fin*: a volcano of white steam explodes out of a bucket.

**Contraries:** She watches Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek in a YouTube clip of the 2008 documentary *Examined Life*. A dramatic soundtrack accompanies the camera as it moves down from a shot of industrial fluorescent strips to a heap of mixed waste: plastic bags and clothing. *This where we should start feeling at home. We are used to our waste disappearing, like shit, Žižek says. In fact, waste is our nature and we should love it. Love is not idealisation. True ecologist loves all this.* He gestures to a heap of plastic bottles as the camera pans to reveal that he too is standing in a London waste facility.

**Discourse:** TODAY, AT THE DUMP, in HOUSEHOLD WASTE, a copy of *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell (2000). The paperback has

a yellow band, top and bottom of the front cover – pale and pissy, not unlike the colour of the stained patches of the mattress it sits atop. She presses her ribs against the cold dusty wall, as she leans in to read the subtitle: *How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*.

**Folk tale:** A man, wearing a plaid suit jacket, offers two varnished wooden swords to a young man wearing a grey sweatshirt and black woollen hat. *I'd be happy for these to go to someone*, the man says. The young man carefully places the swords into the cab of his silver Transit van, parked alongside.

**Narrative functions:** TODAY, AT THE DUMP, in *HARDCORE & RUBBLE*, a handheld showerhead covered in dust pokes out from a broken-up concrete floor heaped against the retaining wall. Breeze-blocks sit heavily on top of the rubble. It is just six weeks since the earthquake in Turkey and Syria. For some twelve days she has woken daily to images of rubble and dust-strewn people and things – this being the timespan in which one might still expect to recover people alive from under the rubble. After this period, the story disappeared from news headlines.

In *Regular/Fragile* (2002) by Liu Jianhua, a repetitious facsimile of everyday objects – shoes, toys, hot-water bottles, hammers, bags, mobile phones – cast in shiny white porcelain, cascade down the gallery walls, made in response, the gallery info says, to a series of aviation disasters that happened in China when the artist was going through a hard time.

**Imagination:** She imagines every person, everywhere, emptying out everything from their homes, turning the streets and roads the world over into one gigantic categorized and colour-coded artwork. In the BBC's *Sort Your Life Out* – a 2021 reality TV programme in which families clear their houses of all their possessions, and the show hosts lay everything out on the floor of a mega warehouse, in order to radically declutter – the families displace the problem of what to do with usable but unwanted items by taking them to charity shops,

creating an endless feedback loop of donate, rebuy, lay out, donate, rebuy, lay out, donate, rebuy, lay out; a merry-go-round of buying and giving and buying and giving and buying and giving of goods, which we must love.

**Patterns:** Two pigeons flap around in circles in the arch of the roof of the cavernous hangar.

**Entropy of language:** LATER, AT HOME, in a dream, a woman is on a hospital trolley. She has three toad-like eyes. Her skin is warty. The woman stares at her. Beseeches. She is beseeching. She is *something*. The nurse talks as she inserts her hand into the woman's left eye socket and rummages inside the woman's face, in the same way we see vets' forearms shoving into cows' uteruses. Poor cow. Like in the 2021 documentary *Cow* by Andrea Arnold. Poor bloody cow.

**Language as machine:** On the PAINT trolley: Wickes Trade Silk Emulsion; Cuprinol Forest Oak One Coat Sprayable Fence Treatment; Crown Trade durable primer; Fads Super Value Vinyl Silk; Garden Deco Timbercare Red Cedar; Rustins Quick Dry Outdoor Clear Varnish; Radiator Durable Satin North Pole, low VOC content; Dulux White Mist Easycare Washable and Tough Matt; Wickes Wood Preserver; Dulux Natural Hints Jasmine White; Johnstone's Acrylic Durable Eggshell; Crown Stone White 6 Year Anti Mould Paint for walls and ceilings; Dulux Walls & Ceilings Chic Shadow; Dulux Endurance Polished Pebble; Cuprinol Less Mess Fence Care; Farrow & Ball Estate Emulsion Sulking Room Pink – a message on the lid reads: 'important instructions: make sure the colour of the paint is correct before painting'; Hammerite Radiator Paint: hard-wearing, resists yellowing.

**Signs:** Up here, a concrete wall the height of her ribcage is all there is between her and the waste; she looks over this wall as one might look over a cliff edge, to see what's been dashed against the rocks. In *CARDBOARD*, a flattened box says 'I AM UPSIDE DOWN!' In *PLASTERBOARD*, sheets of broken-up plasterboard have different coloured edgings: red and green.

In *Coral Reef* (2000), by Mike Nelson, a labyrinth of makeshift interconnecting

spaces with rough plasterboard walls and scratched painted wooden doors have few enough objects in them to state transience, and just enough to project an identity of the inhabitants: a wall-mounted clock, a calendar hung on a nail, a camp bed with sleeping bag, a tall unattended wooden counter, a non-denominational shrine, a ship in a bottle, a prayer mat.

**Combinatorial play:** A large red wire crate contains CAR BATTERIES, inside which a brown dog finger puppet is categorically misplaced.

In *Orange Lion* (1991), by Paul McCarthy, a dirty toy lion sits sad-eyed, legs out in front, tail poking out – ‘penis-like’, writes Max Glauner in *Frieze* magazine – between its legs, left paw ‘about to grab hold.’ ‘This little chap,’ Glauner continues, ‘clearly doesn’t belong in the nursery.’

**Labyrinth:** LATER, AT HOME, she opens up her laptop. The screen moves as the episode of *Sort Your Life Out* she was watching before she fell asleep reboots. It’s the part where the family come to see their stuff laid out on the floor of a mega warehouse, organized by category and colour, like a Tony Cragg sculpture. The family watch in wonder as the shutter goes up to reveal 111 bottles of nail polish, 80 packets of out-of-date medicine, 203 hair accessories and one thousand books.

In *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991), Cornelia Parker exploded and reconstituted a garden shed: shards of wood, wheelbarrow wheels, tattered wellington boots and bent bicycle frames are suspended by wires from the gallery ceiling, lit by a single bulb which creates shadow play.

**Facsimile:** TODAY, AT THE DUMP, a forest: pine prunings cover the concrete floor. The green against the grey reminds her of a sweatshirt she bought at H&M, attracted by a green forest transfer that contrasted pleasingly with the grey of the fabric. Back home, she found the sweatshirt too thick. She felt heavy. She improvised by rolling up the sleeves each time she wore it. Then, she chopped off the waistband and cuffs and slashed the neck, *Fame*-style. It was ruined: unreturnable, unfit for the charity shop, nonrecyclable. She stuffed it into a bin bag along with other similarly neutered items and sent it off to landfill.

In *Make a Salad* (2008), Alison Knowles stands at a table, knife in hand, on the bridge of the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern, and chops cucumbers, radishes and tomatoes to the accompaniment of a live orchestra. On a count, she throws the salad onto a giant green tarpaulin that covers the concrete floor, chucks over the dressing, and descends into the hall where she forks it into colanders from which the salad is served. Every time you eat a salad, Knowles says, you are performing the piece.

**Imagined fortress:** In SMALL APPLIANCES: a black boombox, a cassette deck, a kettle, a transistor radio, a portable PowerFoot, two coffee-makers, a fan heater, a toaster, a car tyre, seven bicycle tyres. The tyres are interlopers.

In *Babel* (2001), Cildo Meireles stacked radios in a spherical tower, progressing through the different devices of the ages. The oldest styles – big, wooden, boxy – form three base layers. Smaller box shapes in metal and black plastic and smaller still silver-coloured plastic boxes with rounded edges form a series of concentric rings, some of



which sit proud of the vertical: the whole has the look of a thing with moving parts, like a camera lens. Tuned to different frequencies, the radios emit a cacophony of sound, calling her to listen.

**Optimistic finale:** In *Spiral Jetty: The Film* (2023), Robert Smithson runs along the earthwork. On arriving at the central inner point of the coil he gazes back at the spiral path and the landscape it sits within: the lake, the mountains. A sculpture has washed up on the beach: Mike Nelson's *Amnesiac Beach Fire* (1997), a circle of logs with red plastic triangles of fire stapled to them. A sign. A signifier. An object awaiting a storyteller.