

INVISIBLE LANDSCAPES / IMPOSSIBLE PLACES



When the phrase ‘we cannot see the wood for the trees’ is repeated, perhaps its meaning is not understood. The trees do not cease to be the wood, and thanks to this the wood indeed exists. The mission of the patent trees is to make the rest of them latent, and only when we fully understand that the visible landscape is concealing other invisible landscapes do we feel ourselves inside the wood.

Invisibility, finding oneself concealed, is not merely negative but a positive quality that, upon enveloping something, transforms it, makes it something new. In this sense it is absurd – as the aforementioned phrase declares – to try to see the wood. The wood is what is latent in itself.

Ortega y Gasset

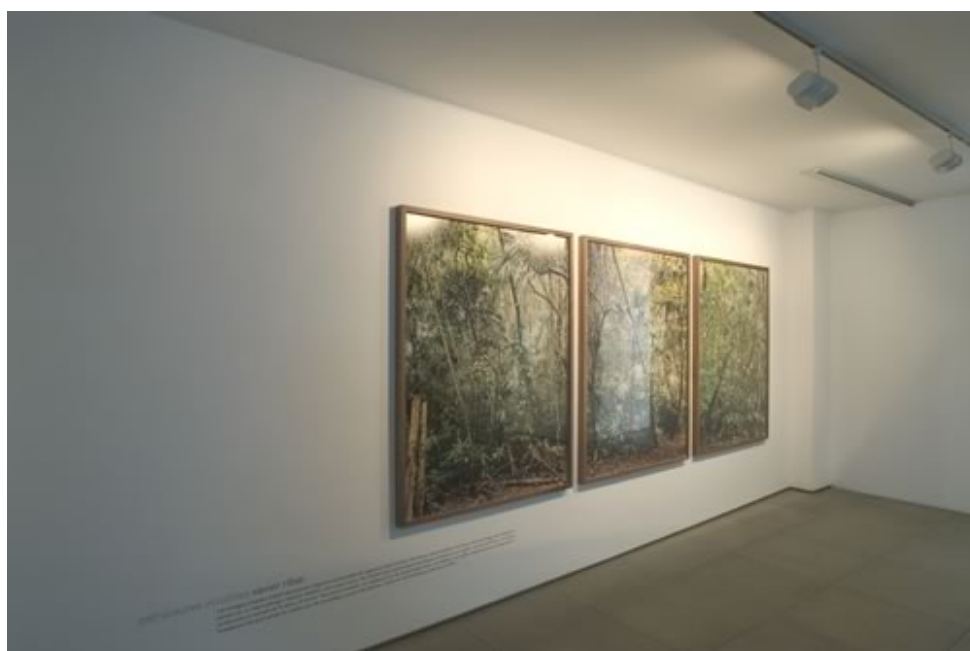
Invisible is everything that is not perceptible through sight. Invisible also refers to what is imperceptible to our way of looking. Therefore a dual condition of invisibility emerges: that which has to do with sight, the physical incapacity to perceive some of the rays of the electromagnetic spectrum, and that which has to do with our way of looking, how our conceptual, cultural, psychological and personal baggage impedes us from seeing certain things. The works that make up this exhibition move between these two extremes.

In terms of sight, simplifying greatly and without taking into account either the neurological or nerve processes, we can say that there are two key elements thanks to which we can see the objects we have in front of us: light and the eyes. Light is a set of waves, or particles, depending on how it is seen, which bounce off objects and reach our eyes. In fact, light is a set of electromagnetic waves. The waves of the electromagnetic spectrum go from radio and television waves, with a longer wavelength, to gamma rays and cosmic rays, with a much shorter wavelength. From this broad spectrum, the light that is visible to our eyes is only a tiny portion, which ranges from violet light (380-430 nm) to red light (625 to 740 nm), passing through blue, cyan, green, yellow and orange. Above and below these rays are ultraviolet and infrared rays,

which can only be seen with the help of special apparatuses. This actually means that the world that our eyes are capable of seeing is very limited in relation to the broad range of waves that surround us. If we could see the remaining rays we would see the world quite differently...

In terms of our way of looking, the meeting between modernity and landscape has generated residual spaces where our way of looking diverges in two opposed paths: indifference and admiration. It is precisely this second path which the artists of this exhibition follow and offer us with their works: looking again at spaces in disuse, sometimes magnificent spaces in decline, sometimes non-places that only generate spaces of waste but that, in both cases, are landscapes transmuted into contemporary ruins.

Our journey through invisible landscapes really starts in the Guatemalan jungle, where the exuberance of nature constantly overwhelms the will of human action to redraw the past through archaeological remains left by history. Our action to re-establish the clearings, to redraw the environs of buildings, creates new limits, new surroundings that delimit the jungle, the nature of culture, thus demonstrating that there are still clear lines, cuts clearly marked as if by a scalpel. In this way the images of Xavier Ribas, entitled *Estructures invisibles*, show us images of the jungle where the limits of the unexcavated areas of the Waka site begin. These fragments of jungle therefore conceal the still buried parts of ancient cities, which generally correspond to the areas of domestic life that provide less information to archaeologists than the religious areas. A landscape consumed by the landscape; a city consumed by nature; a civilisation gobbled up by history. An invisible landscape made visible through man's action of recovery.



In the completely opposite extreme: the landscapes that man makes invisible, abandons and ceases to look upon through lack of interest, obsolescence or disuse, are those shown through the series of slides *Esquelets, pells mudades i deposicions del capital* by Jordi Mitjà. This work is a photographic documentation of the border between Spain and France, a place that since European economic unification has generated places of rejection: abandoned exchange bureaux, disused border crossings, diverse closed businesses... In short, contemporary ruins. Ruins not only unused, but also "unseen"; spaces and places where we have ceased to look, where we increasingly pass by faster through car as we no longer have to stop to exchange money, to shop, to verify our passage across borders...



NYC Garbage by Justin Gignac is a work that encompasses the strength of the gesture of the last two: the anthropological way of looking that abandons the domestic space and the social way of looking that abandons the spaces of political-economic use. In a gesture “of contemporary archaeology”, of collecting our most recent memory, Gignac sets about to collecting rubbish from New York and putting it into small methacrylate boxes, thereby giving it a sculptural presence. The recuperation of the excrescencies of the city, of the contemporary life of the “first world” cities, so accustomed to rejection, generates horrible landscapes that our way of looking tries to render invisible. The mountains of rubbish increasingly suffocate us, the smell is ever more difficult to dissimulate and we increasingly try to distance ourselves more, ignoring it more vehemently... Although Gignac’s gesture was apparently naïve as it emerged from the question “is it possible to sell anything with good packaging?”, at root it conceals depth charges for our consciences, for our way of looking, and makes us reflect on the senselessness of the contemporary way of life.

If thus far invisibility has resulted from our disposition to see or ignore what is looked at, with the photograph from the series Topografia del Trauma by Laura Cantarella it is the strength of nature which separates “civilised” man; in other words, “man who lives in the city” in the etymologically original sense of the term, and who, therefore, turns away from it. The incredible strength of the image of this house semi-buried by the lava of the volcano Etna often gives the feeling of being an unreal image, like a story. Even oneiric. The strength of its colours, the contrast with the black of the lava, the green of the trees, the blue of the sky and the orange of the tiles, an almost impossible sky and a marked chiaroscuro, which recalls the paintings of Caravaggio, make it resemble a prepared stage. However, as always, reality greatly outstrips fiction; Laura Cantarella is a “photographer” in the strict sense of the word: she only, or, rather, above all, devotes herself to pressing the button of the camera, thereby selecting pieces of the reality before her, which for the rest of us go by unnoticed. Her eyes are capable of detecting and capturing fragments of reality as only those who can truly capture immediacy know how: without manipulations, without settings, without artifices; merely opening the shutter at the right moment, making visible what for everyone else is invisible: that which we have in front of our eyes.



All of these works are basically an exercise in recovering, through an aesthetic way of looking, landscapes that have become invisible over time, through disuse, rejection or expulsion.

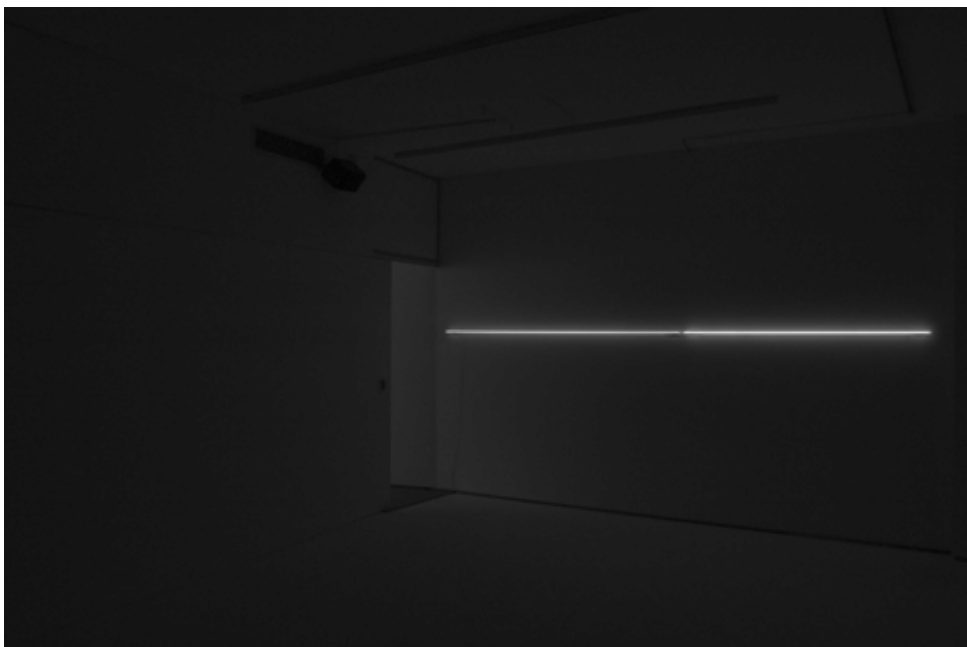
The appearance in the 1960s of the phenomenon of micronations ([see micronations list](#)) also allows the recovery of spaces that have been abandoned and that form new landscapes. Micronations are states, countries or nations without official recognition created by individuals, social groups, families or other groups and which, in many cases, emulate the forms and uses of the “recognised” states, also creating their own currencies, passports, stamps, flags, national anthems, armies... This phenomenon has its origin in the colonial era, when the discovery of new territories and new civilisations allowed the Europeans to appropriate both lands and people and proclaim states where they did not exist, always in keeping with the view of the Europeans themselves of course. This was possible at a time when there were still “spaces to be appropriated” and there was no globalisation of information: communication was still relatively slow. These are the two big differences between this late-colonial sovereignty and the phenomenon of micronations. For the latter there are not many spaces to appropriate and they have had to have recourse to more imaginative strategies: recovering spaces abandoned and endowed with lack of definition by prevailing laws (Principality of Sealand); trying to appropriate the legacy some kingdoms created at the start of the century (Seborga, Kingdom of Redonda); or, simply, inventing virtual spaces and creating pro-independence islands within existing countries (République indépendante du Saugeais, Molossia...). This means that completely invisible places such as tiny islets in the middle of the ocean or abandoned oil platforms are recovered and to some extent made visible. Currently around the world there are more than 2,500 micronations dispersed between the virtual worlds of Internet and the real physical space.

Under the concept Paisatge Electrònic, and with the collaboration of the musician and DJ Joan Malé (Monoceros), musical pieces have been brought together from the panorama of the most minimalist electronic music that with their sonority somehow evoke landscapes that conceal themselves like unexpected images in our interior and emerge as these cushions of sound are constructed. They often take us to Nordic landscapes with great expanses of ice and snow. With the neon installation that oscillates the intensity of the power of its light in a white space, a hypnotic setting is created that helps us to be carried away by these images. Invisible images that will always be invisible given that they are produced more as a series of sensations of the soul than as experiences that can be exteriorised. Indescribable landscapes for others as they are interior experiences.



As we said at the start, there is a distinction between two types of invisibility. If until now we have journeyed through landscapes that, for various reasons, are invisible to our way of looking, we now delve further into the landscapes that are invisible to our sight, in other words that our eyes are incapable of perceiving physically and need the help of science and technology to make them visible to us.

This is the case, for example, of the two representations of an atom that have been chosen. On the one hand, the representation of Nils Bohr, who, following the plan of our solar system, shows it as a set of electrons orbiting the nucleus, something which generates an image of great aesthetic power. On the other hand, with a different concept of matter, we find some images by H. E. White created based on the theories of Erwin Schrödinger, who understands atoms as clouds of electrons around the nucleus. Both are representations of a world without image; both make visible worlds that to our eyes are invisible. Moreover, in making them visible, in giving them image, they reveal different conceptions, which define those who describe it more than the world they seek to describe. They are images that, fundamentally, despite the apparent “scientific objectivity”, reveal to us that they are no more objective than a landscape painted by any artist.



With the project Seti@Home, carried out by Berkeley University, a computer screensaver is presented, which works collaboratively in a network and makes visible the analysis of the radiofrequency waves received by the radio-telescope Arecibo, the biggest in the world located in Puerto Rico, to look for signs of extraterrestrial life. Once again a remote and invisible world is made visible: the radio signals captured in outer space.

Along the same line is the map by the geographer Joan Busquets. This is not only the graphic representation of space, to which most maps have accustomed us, but also shows the space-time relationship and how the means of transport conditions our perception of space according to the speed at which we move. Thus, Busquets compares the same journey from Vielha to London, one made by plane, the other by car. In this way, we see how the physical space expands or contracts if we travel at 50 or 900 km/h. Joan Busquets shows us something we have all experienced in our lives but had never seen before represented in an image. Lastly, Bettina Bachem captures the suggestive images generated by an oscillograph, a device that measures oscillations of waves when reaching sand, of São Conrado beach in Brazil and creates a video that has the same hypnotic effect as looking at the sea or a crackling fire for hours.



Although the reflection on invisibility focuses on the landscape, we see that, more than speaking of the landscape itself, what it does is to reflect on our relationship with it and our limitation to perceive it. Therefore, we see how between us and the landscape a synergy is produced, a constant relation of coming and going of concepts, ideas or limitations, both physical and “conceptual”, which conform both to us and to the landscapes before us, whether making them invisible or overexposing them to our way of looking.

As we have seen, then, invisibility has multiple facets and, consequently, the landscape has as many ways of showing and concealing itself as there are forms of invisibility. These forms of invisibility are bi-directional, both from the landscape to the person perceiving it and from the perceiver to the landscape. They mutually affect each other, it being practically impossible to separate one from the other and, at the same time, what is visible and what is invisible.

Lluís Sabadell Artiga

Photos by Laura Cantarella