

# UNFOLDING THE DOCUMENTARY DISPOSITIVE<sup>1</sup>

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Since 2009, Xavier Ribas has devoted his photographic practice to looking into the natural history of nitrate. Unlike his earlier series, in which the landscape anchored the artist's documentary and empirical engagement, nitrate unfurls a vast geography impossible for a strictly photographic vision to encompass. *Nitrate* takes the form of an essay that explores the political and geological history of Chile, linking it with flows of finance and consumption in Europe, in such a way that the geography of this material gives form to a colonial structure. The representation of this system of extraction of natural resources that began in the late nineteenth century, and that we now dare to label an *extractionist modernity*, has called for a documentary dispositive that requalifies the role of photography.

One of the central pieces in *Nitrate* shows a large expanse of the Atacama Desert, precisely where the labourers of the old nitrate *oficinas* dug the soil and broke the earth's crust to get at the caliche. The grid composition is reminiscent of the archaeological methods used to excavate the history of a site. The thirty-three photographs that make up the polyptich *Desert Trails* (2012, pp. 64–87) present a detailed orographic description of the ground and its disturbed surfaces. The foreground shows the rubble left by mining and, much further off, on the horizon, we can see petroglyphs that have survived for centuries. The historical time contained in this work, then, exceeds the time of the documentary observation, to the extent that an adequate genealogy of these rocks piled up in the desert requires a materialist approach.<sup>2</sup>

This explains why, to carry out such a project, Xavier Ribas has shifted the bounds of his photographic practice. In this body of work, practices relating to various institutions and interests have come together, such as the research in libraries and archives, interviews and fieldwork trips, as well as the gathering of miscellaneous materials. A confluence of knowledges, methods and modes of communication that overflows the bounds of photography as a medium and impels us to consider *Nitrate* as a documentary dispositive, that is to say, a collection of works that can be read both as an interrelated whole and autonomously. Most of the works comprising *Nitrate* include the photographic image alongside archival images, data, reports,

<sup>1</sup> Author's Note: The use of the French term 'dispositive' presents us with the problem of its translation into English; Giorgio Agamben has pointed out that 'depository' and 'apparatus' are less than satisfactory. Here I use the word 'dispositive' which, though not in common use, maintains the reference to the Foucauldian sense of the term.

<sup>2</sup> See the article by Louise Purbrick in this volume, pp. 29–38.

news items, inventories, lists and even objects, proof that the documentary dispositive can take any form except that of a photographic genre tending to fix meaning.

The definition of the term 'dispositive' presents us with a disparity of meanings, of which the most significant is, as Giorgio Agamben suggests, the 'heterogeneous group that includes virtually anything, linguistic and non-linguistic', together with 'discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions, etc.', concluding that 'the dispositive itself is the network established between these elements'.<sup>3</sup> We could go further and say that the documentary dispositive employed by Xavier Ribas replicates the formal structure of nitrate. Given that this raw material boasts a great versatility transforming its composition, its uses and even its manufacturing process, the insertion of nitrate into the networks of global trade places it at the centre of the quintessential dispositive. The natural environment of nitrate, once extracted from the earth, is the circulation of capital.

Two important series from 2009, *Melilla Border Fence* and *Ceuta Border Fence*, anticipate later formulations in Xavier Ribas's work of what David Harvey calls 'spaces of capital'.<sup>4</sup> The fences that surround these two Spanish enclaves in North Africa delineate boundaries that the photographer walked from end to end, in their entirety. The installation of this double barrier forms a surveillance complex that prevents the passage of immigrants from the south. In regulating the free circulation of people, the modernising project associated with capital shows its most serious inconsistencies. These costly and sophisticated infrastructures are the heirs of the great public works that nineteenth-century photography made into emblems of the colonial mission. As Xavier Ribas says, 'in those photographs, bridges, roads, tunnels and railroads represented a notion of expanding territories, of movement, trajectories and shifting perspectives'.<sup>5</sup>

The views of Ceuta and Melilla show how photographic vision has passed on its functions to new technologies. In its place is a surveillance apparatus that no longer trusts to optical control. Cameras give way to temperature sensors. However, the symbiosis between photography and the expansion of capital has been reflected over time in an abundance of albums. Xavier Ribas drew on some of these for his project about the Spanish-Moroccan border; a multi-dimensional border, as the artist recalls. 'The photographic albums of public works constructed in Spain during the second half of the nineteenth century... document the process of modernisation'.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the time that has elapsed, these landscapes remain trapped in a visual regime that instrumentalises them.

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, '¿Qué es un dispositivo?' in <http://ayp.unia.es/r08/IMG/pdf/agamben-dispositivo.pdf> (accessed 18 February 2014).

<sup>4</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Xavier Ribas, *Geografías concretas [Ceuta y Melilla]*. Pamplona: Universidad de Navarra, 2012, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> The collection of the Museo Universidad de Navarra has albums by James Clifford, Jean Laurent and José Martínez Sánchez to which Xavier Ribas had access while carrying out this project. See Xavier Ribas, *Geografías concretas*, p. 12.

The function of a documentary dispositive then – more than implementing techniques of observation – consists in returning to these representations of the past and exposing them to new meanings.

In this respect, the photographic album *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899*<sup>7</sup> that prompted the academic research carried out by Xavier Ribas in collaboration with historian Louise Purbrick and photographer Ignacio Acosta – undertaken in parallel to the documentary project that is *Nitrate* – remains an expression of the interests of a global company: the intention being to mobilise financial capital and stimulate investment. That is the sense in which the views of Oficina Alianza were celebrated as a solid promise of profits. With his thank-you note, the man to whom the album<sup>8</sup> was presented confirmed industrial photography as a genre suspended between the discourse of art and the logic of capital. ‘If the business itself produces a correspondingly handsome result...’ – says a handwritten note conserved inside the album – it would mean that aesthetics could catalyse profit. As Allan Sekula wrote in his earlier analysis of the photographic representation of mining work, such images are in themselves ‘elements in a unified symbolic economy’.<sup>9</sup> He further warned of a greater risk: ‘The possible post-romantic... reception of these photographs is perhaps even more disturbing.’<sup>10</sup>

Aware of this danger, Xavier Ribas resignifies the images of the Atacama Desert. Given the ease with which the memory of the nitrate works and the industrial past is re-evoked, he considers that the political effects of these images should be critically examined. Perhaps the most perverse of these effects is the one that extends the notion of natural resource beyond the nitrate itself to include the workers. Nitrate contaminated the workforce that was needed to remove it from the earth and put it into circulation. So it would not be an exaggeration to say that workers at the nitrate *oficinas* were exploited, as Teresa Brennan would have said, in the same way as a natural resource: without the right to representation.<sup>11</sup> All of which has led to the perception of the desert as an excessively abstract place that tends to be celebrated for its atmospheric qualities.<sup>12</sup> A space which it is necessary to inscribe with a specific event in order to halt the reproduction of this stereotype.

*Desert Trails*, the work referred to above which represents better than any other the expanse of the desert as an open and inconclusive semantic field that nevertheless invites a multiplicity of readings, ends with a photograph to one

<sup>7</sup> Album in the collection of the Museo Universidad de Navarra.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Hucks Gibbs, Lord Aldenham (1819–1907), received the album sent from the Oficina Alianza in July 1900, when he was the director of the merchant house of Antony Gibbs and Sons and Governor of the Bank of England. See p. 134 in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> Allan Sekula, ‘Photography between Labour and Capital’, in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie (eds.), *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948–1968: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton*. Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and The University College of Cape Breton Press, 1983, pp. 193–268.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>11</sup> Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy*. London: Routledge, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> See the article by Andrea Jösch in this volume, pp. 43–46.

side of the grid showing the former headquarters of the *Unión de Trabajadores Ferroviarios Consejo de Santiago* (The Rail Workers Union of Santiago). This was the starting point for the funeral cortege of the Socialist leader Luis Emilio Recabarren on 21 December 1924 (p. 63). This single image, in its contrast to the polyptych with which it is juxtaposed, reintroduces the dialectic and cuts through the inertia of the interpretations that permeate the space of the desert. Suddenly, the desert ceases to prioritize an aesthetic perception and becomes associated with the history of the labour movement.<sup>13</sup> Recabarren, founder of the Socialist Workers Party (POS) in 1912, is the figure that marks the turning point between a passive geography subject to the abuses of extractionist policies and the process of political representation that promises to emancipate the workforce.

The photographic tradition of the industrial sublime, that flirts with the fusion of the beautiful and the profitable – and with respect to which Xavier Ribas's documentary dispositive works against the grain – strives to keep alive the illusion that manpower is replaceable by installations, equipment, machines and, in the case of the mining of nitrate, by a landscape which, having assimilated the workers as natural resource, renders them invisible. Hence, what is presented for analysis in the large photographic compositions of *Nitrate* seems to be an unproductive and abandoned place. Everything suggests that capital has migrated, leaving a wake of inactivity and silence. Eventually to be relocated in the new spaces of financial capital. The eleven views of the City of London that make up the series *From the High-Rises Like Rain* (2013, pp. 140–63) represent the other extreme of the pendulum which is colonial enterprise, images in which we seem to see the origin of the capital that was invested in Chile. The long caption that accompanies them displays the official record of the network of companies involved in nitrate mining in 1908, from the London Stock Exchange Year-Book for that period (pp. 149–52). This information reminds us of the positivist nature of all documentary practice and its affinities with investigative journalism, although ultimately the data offers no substantial revelations, since it does not facilitate any verifiable connections with the locations that appear in the photographs making up the series. That link remains strategically inactive.

The most relevant and specific logic of this series on the City of London is defined by those places that, in the 1990s, were the target of bomb attacks. When attributing these explosions to the IRA, the British police used the expression 'traces of nitrate'.<sup>14</sup> The trace of the destruction wrought by these bombings has been reabsorbed as an incentive to development that has produced a landscape of new building, and what was once a scene of trauma is now a space taken over by financial sector employees on their breaks.<sup>15</sup> The

<sup>13</sup> See the article by Pablo Artaza Barrios in this volume, pp. 47–50.

<sup>14</sup> The IRA used fertiliser bombs in their terrorist attacks.

<sup>15</sup> Of the eleven photographs in the series *From the High-Rises Like Rain*, only one contains a reference to the bomb attacks: a plaque in memory of the three people who died in the bombing in 1992 that was attributed to the IRA. Another possible indication of these events is

connection that the artist introduces is put forward through a mapping of the City elicited by a sequence of violent events, and this enacts an essential characteristic of the documentary dispositive: the ability to create a network out of chronologically discontinuous incidents.

Within the network created by *Nitrate*, Xavier Ribas has found space for a wide spectrum of references. The ambitious geographic and historical scope of the project generates a profusion of names and events: the cumulative surplus value of this commodity embodied by investors like Henry Hucks Gibbs (1819–1907) or John Thomas North (1842–1896); the policies on natural resources of successive Chilean presidents, such as José Manuel Balmaceda (1840–1891), Salvador Allende (1908–1973) and Augusto Pinochet (1915–2006); the Chilean Civil War (1891) and the First World War (1914–1918), in which the right to mine and commercialise nitrate was a matter of dispute; or other moments of great violence such as the massacre at the School of Santa María in Iquique in 1907, when the striking nitrate workers were brutally repressed; and even the voice of Mabel Loomis Todd (1856–1932), who witnessed both the process of nitrate extraction and the astronomical observation from the Atacama Desert of the planet Mars, and whose stay in the region took place just four months prior to the killings at Iquique.

The series that includes images from diverse sources and represents the attempt to give meaning to this constellation, is entitled *A History of Detonations* (2013) – a clear sign that the artist's preference is for an entropic order born out of relative chaos, such as would be produced by an explosion of data. The events cited above form a random sequence: Mars, Iquique, Alianza, Chacabuco, Santiago de Chile, Tyntesfield, Avery Hill, the City of London and so many other places cease to belong to real geography to form part of the discursive space created by the documentary dispositive. It is in this shared space that new correlations are formed, so that Mabel Loomis Todd might have been summing up the radical arbitrariness running through this mass of events, incidents, materials and signs with a phrase noted in an article: 'Although winter in Chile, it was summer on Mars.'<sup>16</sup> But the documentary dispositive does not merely reshuffle historical or geographical data. It also affects the division of labour separating competences of researcher, artist and spectator/reader, and of the institutions that support them.

As applied by Xavier Ribas, documentary practice acquires the function of a connective, relational and extremely productive platform that, far from confirming the differences between academic and artistic research, seeks ways of representing cooperation between the two. The project is imbued with the urgent need to bring into relation institutions whose strategies of communication are, at first glance, quite different. To this end, the documentary

Norman Foster's building, constructed on the site of the Baltic Exchange, destroyed by the bombing of that year.

<sup>16</sup> Mabel Loomis Todd, 'Our Ruddy Neighbor Planet', *The Independent* (New York), 9 April 1908. David Peck Todd Papers (MS 496B), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

dispositive enables a regime ready to administer the meaning of photography, and the uses made of it in multiple contexts. The images of hands holding up negatives – those consulted in the taxidermy section of the Natural History Museum at Tring, featuring the famous greyhound that belonged to John Thomas North (pp. 130–31), or those made by Mabel Loomis Todd (pp. 90–100) and preserved in the library of Yale University – pinpoint the use of the archive as one of the key moments of this project. But, even more importantly, it shows that photography does not depend exclusively on a technical apparatus, but on a dispositive open to incorporating practices otherwise excluded.

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