

Xavier Ribas: Mud

by Felix Vogel

Xavier Ribas' landscape-photography series *Mud* consists of 30 photographs showing bare ground with dry ochre mud. The photographs were taken at the place of the Maya village Panabaj, on the shores of Atitlan Lake in Guatemala. The village Panabaj was buried under a mudslide on 5th October 2005 due to hurricane Stan. Just a few days after the catastrophe the place was officially declared as a mass grave, burying approximately 800 Panabaj inhabitants five meters under the ground.

Mud just shows the earth and its violence that could put a whole city under ground. There are only little remains of a city, not more than a single puzzle piece (Untitled *Mud* #19). Sometimes you observe little signs of human invention — doughty sticks that were put in the ground, little stones or footprints to mark the former houses, street and places, hoping against hope to rebuilt the village again — otherwise you could think that it is just earth, earth without history. Only these little hints let you guess that there was something; that the place has a history. But still, we can only see traces of what was there earlier and we are forced to imagine a landscape that had to look so much different than shown in the photographs. We have to search this traces and built our own image of a village that we have never seen and we will never see again. Moreover, these signs of human invention evoke associations with ancient Maya cult-sculptures; sculptures, which had a religious/cultic function. Now, it is questionable, if the special composition of sticks in Untitled *Mud* #21 or the circles in Untitled *Mud* #27 have a cultic function — they most likely are just there to mark something invisible — but their reference to a history of symbols (of the past) or a history of icons is obvious and isn't it a metaphysical function, if these sticks mark something that cannot be

seen again, if they transcend the invisibleness of the lost city?

In *Mud*, past, present and future are constantly visible, but not in a chronological order, rather it could be argued that every three times melt together to a meta-time. Likewise, there are obvious similarities to the archeological excavations in ancient Pompeii, but with the big difference that in Pompeii you just see the past today, whereas in Panabaj past, present and future are visible all at once.

I would like to argue that *Mud* does not only confront us with a geographical problem (tropical climate, mudslides, rain forest and the human invention in biological micro and macro systems), but also with a socio-political, or even better: biopolitical problem. Guatemala has been — with the help of the USA as a fact of the bipolar world order — in a state of civil war, which is sometimes even described as genocide, for a period of 36 years. Anti-communist military dictatorships did not take care of their population, above all the Maya residents, who were the biggest victims of the civil war. Since then, the situation seems to have changed, but 2004 the national-conservative Óscar Berger Perdomo became head of state and now the violation of human rights is nothing rare for a second time. The conflicts between urban and rural regions are fought with many victims and behind the democratic surface no one seems to care about the rural population. Ironically, the inhabitants of Panabaj are buried under a “surface”, without showing much of the past — a surface that is allocated with geographical catastrophes, but it is actually a symptom of today's biopolitics. Now, in Ribas' series *Mud*, we just see the visualization of consequences of biopolitical practices in a country that (still) struggles with its past, present and future.



Xavier Ribas, Untitled (Mud #4), 2006, C-print, 50 x 60 cm. Ed. 6.
Courtesy: ProjecteSD gallery.



Xavier Ribas, Untitled (Mud #6), 2006, C-print, 50 x 60 cm. Ed. 6.
Courtesy: ProjecteSD gallery.



Xavier Ribas, Untitled (Mud #19), 2006, C-print, 50 x 60 cm. Ed. 6.
Courtesy: ProjecteSD gallery.



Xavier Ribas, Untitled (Mud #21), 2006, C-print, 50 x 60 cm. Ed. 6.
Courtesy: ProjecteSD gallery.



Xavier Ribas, Untitled (Mud #25), 2006, C-print, 50 x 60 cm. Ed. 6.
Courtesy: ProjecteSD gallery.



Xavier Ribas, Untitled (Mud #27), 2006, C-print, 50 x 60 cm. Ed. 6.
Courtesy: ProjecteSD gallery.