



Xavier Ribas is a photographer. Informed by a background in social anthropology, his work examines the often peripheral landscapes in which histories are shaped and contested: the tightly enforced borders of Spanish enclaves in North Africa; weapons factories embedded in British cities; the disparate global sites connected by the commodity of Chilean nitrate. These investigations are presented using image, text and archival material in sprawling networks of interconnected exhibitions, talks and publications. A lecturer at the University of Brighton, he has exhibited at MACBA in Barcelona, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and George Eastman House in Rochester, NY, among many others.

Interview by Louis Rogers
Portrait by Mary Goody

Louis Rogers Your 2015 work *It Would Never Quite Be the Same Again* is centred upon the defacement of statues of Margaret Thatcher and a weapons factory in Brighton. You've also investigated sites of violent protest. What do you make of the political iconoclasm we've seen recently in Europe and the US? Is this a significant moment?

Xavier Ribas Yes and no. History shows that monuments are erected to be sooner or later defaced, demolished or simply put away. Like mining structures, which are turned into rubble once the raw material is exhausted, they are extractive devices. Public monuments are markers of identity. They legitimate a form of belonging established at the expense of others; they are divisive and exclusive. Monuments are borders. Histories, like memories, are not fixed entities, but processes, and all their traces are contested sites. The fact that monuments to slave traders, colonialists, conquistadors and so on occupy public spaces in today's Britain, Spain or the Americas is an anachronism, an affront, and a cause for concern. The violence they represent has cast a shadow for too long, and these public monuments need to be re-signified. If the complacency or laziness of governments leave no alternative, then dumping stuff into the sea is the beginning of that act of resignification: the empty plinth is a palimpsest. Ariella Azoulay in her latest book, *Potential History*, writes about the urgency of unlearning and undoing imperialism, capitalism, racism, whiteness, gender, and so on. That is how we can read these direct actions against public monuments.

LR In *Potential History*, Azoulay also talks about photographs, such as those taken by colonial regimes, as kinds of monuments which "prove the constructed nature of imperial politics". As someone who makes photographs, how do you relate to this history and capacity in the medium?**XR** Azoulay points out that representations assert themselves through what they show as well as through what they exclude. Those exclusions are inscribed in the photograph from the moment of its production, and over time in the way it is used, claimed, made accessible or silenced in archives, destroyed, or simply not taken. This was one of the central subjects of her exhibition *Errata* at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies last year. In *Picturing Empire*, James Ryan writes that Victorian photographic expeditions to the edges of empire were "exercises in imperial assertion". Geographical expansions began with representations, and the camera played a crucial role creating imaginaries of empty, desolate and available lands. Azoulay demonstrates how to read those voids of visibility in photographs, how to think about them as components of the photograph, and how to activate them towards a critique of capitalism. But Azoulay is also an artist, and her visual works show that the potential of photography as a critical practice starts with undoing, dismantling, unlearning preconceptions about the medium itself. On a very basic practical level, any photographer knows that the act of framing with the camera starts by making decisions about what to leave out of the frame, so they know that photographs also speak with what they don't show. The point is to find ways to

activate this out-of-the-frame as a critical position both on the subject matter at stake and on the medium itself.

LR In your project *Nitrate*, you studied the commodity of Chilean nitrate through hugely various perspectives over four years. When and how did this fascination begin?

XR It began with a photographic album of a sodium-nitrate mine in the Atacama Desert that I saw in the 19th-century photographic collection of the Museo Universidad de Navarra in Spain, while researching a commission in 2009. The album documents the process of extraction of sodium nitrate and was sent from Chile to London in 1900 as a present for Lord Aldenham. He was the director of the Bank of England and the head of his family business, Anthony Gibbs & Co, which owned the mine where the photographs had been taken. In a handwritten note preserved in the album, Lord Aldenham associated the beauty of the photographs with that of investment capital and its potential revenue. This in itself is very telling about perceptions of photography in relation to capitalism. Sodium nitrate was a natural fertiliser, but was also used in explosives: it had the dual capabilities of speeding up and shattering life. I became fascinated by the social and political history of sodium nitrate, its geographical interconnections between Chile, Britain and Spain, but also its visual history, mainly composed of a few photographic albums produced by the nitrate producers as records of their investment and to raise capital in the London Stock Exchange. In order to research this complex history, I collaborated with material historian Louise Purbrick and Chilean photographer Ignacio Acosta. In 2012 we created the *Traces of Nitrate* research project at the University of Brighton, with generous support from the AHRC. Since 2012, we've worked in collaboration with partners in Chile, Britain and Spain on the past and present of mineral extraction, nitrate and copper, in Chile and its connections to Britain. We have a website, tracesofnitrate.org, which is the repository of all of our research, including exhibitions, publications and conferences.

LR You seem drawn to abstract and elusive subjects: the absences in urban landscapes; the shape-shifting substance of nitrate. Photography and film, meanwhile, are often used to verify positive, material presences. How do you approach these undocumentable subjects with documentary media?

XR I have become more interested in the discarded, the ephemeral, the unremarkable. All photographs focus on what is in front of the lens, but I'm concerned with how to move from the object to its history: how to articulate its becoming or its disappearing; to find a system of representation that allows us to somehow visualise how things end up being the way they are; to open up the subject's past and perhaps its future. In Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* [1846-1848], for example, there is a picture of the tower at Lacock Abbey with a text accompanying it, which dwells on the ancient remains contained in the tower and other stories that took place in or around it. Of

course, none of this is visible in the photograph, so the photograph acts as a detonator for the narration, a visual anchor for the story. It's a beautiful photograph, but the writing liberates the viewer from being stuck in its composition or technical accomplishment. The surface of things, what things look like, is of course interesting, but my focus now is on the historical processes that objects and places are immersed in, rather than on making a beautifully accomplished single picture, as perhaps it was in my early work.

LR You now use film, archival research and more, as well as photography and text. How did you arrive at this multi-stranded practice?

XR Generally speaking, my work has gone from thinking about actions to thinking about histories. If I started with an anthropological mindset, which I still have, I have gravitated towards a more archaeological one. But my research interests have been fairly consistent all along: space; the margins; contested sites and histories. My visual language tends to follow my research interests. I rarely start with an image in mind, but with a site or object or history. The visuals evolve from the requirements of research: how I would like to think about something or what I am capable of articulating about it. Every project is a proposition, with a visual strategy put in place for it. When the subject matter has little or no visibility – because it has disappeared, or has been marginalised or forgotten, or left outside the frame for whatever conceptual or political reason – a photographic practice has to be different from, say, a documentary form that relies solely on clarity of representation in singular photographs or photographic series. So various forms of text and archival materials, as well as repetition and fragmentation, are brought in to conjure that absence. For me, it has been a process of learning to become more confident in questioning or replacing the single image with different forms of montage, such as photographic grids and image-text constellations. *It Would Never Be Quite the Same Again* is the furthest I have gone in decentring the image in relation to the text. The image becomes, so to speak, a visual caption for the text, instead of the other way round.

LR Do you have a specific audience in mind for these projects? You've broken out of strictly academic circles of conferences and journals into galleries and wider publications.

XR For the past 20 years I have worked with one foot in an academic department, and another in the exhibition space. My photographic practice is made in these two environments together. Some of the *Concrete Geographies* works were the result of commissions, artistic residencies and fellowships, while *Nitrate* is the result of this overlap between academic and fine-art environments. I don't think of the audience during the research, conception and production of my work, but the audience is taken into consideration when the work is presented; for example, in a contemporary art

space as opposed to a university gallery or a community centre. Every institution has its own audience. Contextualisation, for example, might take different forms depending on the institution hosting the work. I like to think that someone's work is not only the photographic or visual pieces one encounters in a gallery or in a monograph, but also the conferences, workshops, or online presentations that accompany it.

LR What are you working on now?

XR Just before the lockdown I photographed plaster casts in the Museum of Classical Archaeology in Cambridge. I was interested in these modest reproductions of sculptural stone fragments of gods and other mythological figures and how these original stone fragments, in turn, relate to the absent bodies of slaves and workers who were engaged in the extraction of the stone and in the monuments' constructions. I am at the very beginnings of this work, and still unsure what form it will take. With the *Traces of Nitrate* team, we are researching glacial ice, or "solid water" as it is referred to by Chilean environmentalists and activists. Mining operations, especially those of copper and lithium, will depend in a not so distant future on the use of the water from ice stored in nearby glaciers. A conflict between mining corporations extracting copper and lithium – Covid is only making this worse – and local communities, whose livelihoods are threatened, is in the making. We are looking at how this future is being conceptualised and laid out for exploitation by mining corporations and politicians, and how it is contested by environmentalists and local communities who imagine and fight for a different future: one of environmental justice. What we are trying to develop is a photographic practice that does not record the past and the present but one that points the camera towards the future.