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## Invisible Traces: On Xavier Ribas's Nitrate\*

Laura Vallés

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THERE WAS ONCE A MINE OF GOLD IN PERU, LATER IT BECAME A COPPER MINE, AND NOW THEY SELL THE WATER THAT COLLECTS IN THE BOTTOM. <sup>[1]</sup>

### The Album and the Letters

The starting point for the project *Nitrate* was a photo album called *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* and a series of letters. In the first of the letters a worker from the saltpetre mines in Iquique wrote to the English investor, Lord Aldenham, on 18 July 1900, inviting him to accept the album as a souvenir paying testimony to the production of nitrate in 85 photos. In his reply the businessman expressed his gratitude for the gift: "if the business itself produces a correspondingly handsome result, it will be in great measure be done to your zeal and ability, which are fully appreciated by my partners, as well as by me." Lord Aldenham was then the director of the Bank of England and of Antony Gibbs & Sons, a family-run company that started trading on the Pacific coast of South America at the beginnings of the nineteenth century in conjunction with its partners in Cadiz. It soon accumulated a vast fortune and on-the-ground knowhow with a monopoly of guano in Peru. Photography, beauty and capital go hand in hand to document the business rhetoric and the industrialisation of the Atacama desert at the end of the century.

As Didi-Huberman argued, taking a stance is to become aware. When images take a stance, they desire, expect and demand. <sup>[2]</sup> The images in *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* are accomplices in the desire to make the most of the natural resources, in the expectation to exploit the landscape and transform it into capital, and in the demand for profit. Perhaps for that reason, for adopting this stance, Xavier Ribas decided that the album should be displayed closed in the halls of MACBA, where the exhibition was held from 5 June to 12 October 2014. On the other hand, he did decide to show the two hand-written letters that expressed the intentions of those involved and of their commitment with the landscape.

Though trained as a social anthropologist and as a documentary photographer, it is from art practice that Xavier Ribas constructs his photographic essays, a series of micro-narratives or incursions that aspire to address the events that occurred in Chile between 1870-1920 and to outline a route through the objects of the history of saltpetre during a very specific period from which there is barely any surviving human traces, or at best, what remains is unidirectional. Like Kafka's *Diary* or Brecht's *Arbeitsjournal*, *Nitrate* becomes a kind of 'assembly workshop' and is transformed into an intimate space that confronts histories of subjects with the history of the world and is displaced to Mars in order to hone the gaze and to take a stance. <sup>[3]</sup>

### Body and Conflict

## ONLINE

### Invisible Traces: On Xavier Ribas's Nitrate\*

THERE WAS ONCE A MINE OF GOLD IN PERU, LATER IT BECAME A COPPER MINE, AND NOW THEY SELL THE WATER THAT COLLECTS IN THE BOTTOM. The Album and the Letters The starting point for the project (...)

### Researchers Researching Research: 1st Bergen Assembly

No curators, but 'convenors'. No artists, but 'researchers'. Not a biennial, but an 'assembly'. No exhibition galleries, but 'institutes'. Presenting work by just under fifty participants in a series of (...)

### Frieze Art Fair: fascination, opposition and the spectre of institutional critique.

Like every year in London around mid October, Frieze Art Fair kicks in and all hell breaks loose. The number of reviews and commentaries across the international art press keeps growing with (...)

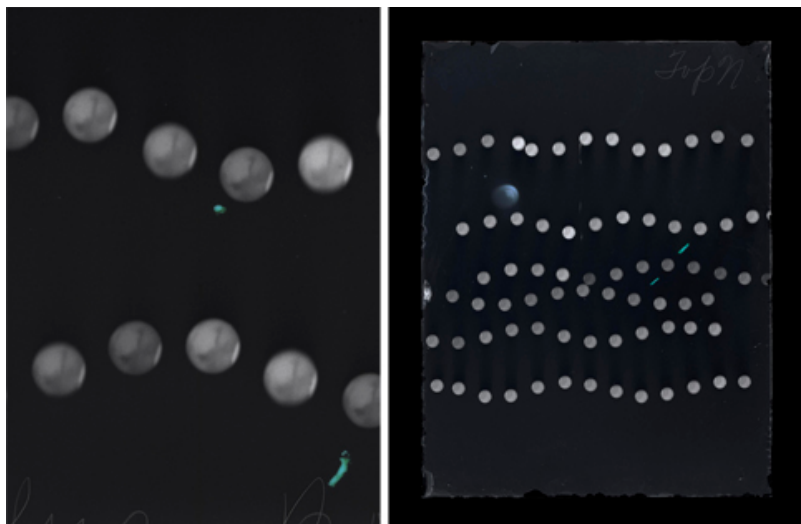
### Concrete Allegories. On Yto Barrada's work

In the work Yto Barrada has made in the last decade in Tangier—the city that, along with Paris, witnessed her growth and training as an artist—photography is used as an instrument of experience and (...)

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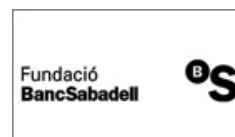
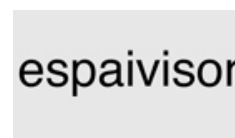
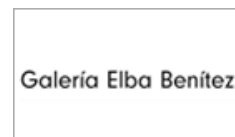
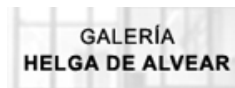
In the first hall of *Nitrate* one can observe two photographic prints titled *Three Moves Are as Bad as a Fire*, 2013. Each framed image contains a grid of 85 photographic plates and some texts. These blackened rectangles contain some grey circles that might seem to be bullet holes, though they could just as well be marbles. From the outset, we can't be sure. Nonetheless, the texts soon reveal a series of notes that connect the images with an expedition of some astronomers from New York who travelled to Iquique in 1907 to coordinate research into Mars. The thousands of photos taken by David Todd and his team over the three months of that summer endeavoured to demonstrate a hypothesis that the planet Mars is inhabitable. At the time, this event was celebrated as a landmark in the history of astronomy due to the innovative use of photography in the field of planetary research (while at once underscoring the bond between colonialism and scientific research).

Two reasons make this event stand out in relation to the work of Xavier Ribas. First of all, the narratives produced by the astronomers reveal an overlap between the geography of the desert and an imagined Martian geography. Secondly, it enabled the discovery of an unpublished text by Mabel Loomis Todd—the first editor of the poems of Emily Dickinson and the wife of the astronomer David Todd—in which she minutely describes the cycle of production of nitrate. The article, featured in the exhibition catalogue,<sup>[4]</sup> is full of references to the noise and movements of the machinery and the workers. In addition, a photography archive compiled by Loomis herself and which Ribas co-opted to make his work *And the Far Silence of Brooding Star Time*, 2013, speaks of a rapprochement to the human side of work, to the worker, "to the unexpected gesture of the bodies at the exact moment of exploitation."<sup>[5]</sup> And when I say "co-opted", I am referring to the fact that he makes use of it to instrumentalise the gaze with the purpose of enabling a plural reading of the events.



On 21 December 1907, just a few months after the Martian expedition in Chile, an outbreak of violence took place at the Santa María school in Iquique. Around three hundred workers taking part in a lock-in were slaughtered by the Chilean army led by General Silva Renard at this school in the heart of the town's old quarters. The massacre was the consequence of an all-out strike triggered by miserable labour conditions and the repression of workers. From that moment onwards, until its demolition in 2011, the place was a destination of pilgrimage, and became a space for the memory of workers. "It is not a historical anomaly that there exist 13,058 photographic negative images of planet Mars taken from Oficina Alianza by the Lowell Expedition, between the 20th of June and the 31st of July 1907, while there exist none of the killing of hundreds of nitrate workers in the School of Santa Maria in Iquique, on the 21st of December of that same year", says Ribas in the final note of the above-mentioned work.

This absence of the body, of the face of a past ignored by History until the mid twentieth century, is once again represented in the exhibition through a video that simultaneously shows two side-by-side shots of the street with the school before it was demolished: *I Write Your Names on My City Walls*, 2010. Beside it a series of graffiti slogans on the wall pays testimony to the political density of the abolished place: ORGANIZA TU RABIA; AMOR Y REBELDIA; SI EL PRESENTE ES DE LUCHA EL FUTURO ES NUESTRO [organise your rage; love and rebelliousness; if the present is one of struggle the future is ours], and, among many others, my favourite, LA HISTORIA NO ES TAN SOLO ESTUDIAR E INTELLECTUALIZAR, LA HISTORIA ES CONSTRUCCIÓN CRITICA Y ACCIÓN [History is not only studying and intellectualising, history is critical construction and action].



It is precisely from this place, from this school, that the biggest funeral the city has ever seen set out. It was used as the final resting place for Luis Emilio Recabarren, a Chilean politician considered to be the father of the workers movement who committed suicide in 1924. As a visual caption, Xavier Ribas places a photo of the entrance to the school together with the images in *Desert Trails*, 2012, the foundational landscape of the exhibition. This grid of thirty-three black and white photos shows the Atacama desert through a fragmented horizon, a territory of frontiers forcibly redrawn after the Pacific War, a container of censored violence that embraces the image of the action and the workers' struggle against colonialism.



Saltpetre is a non-renewable natural resource which, once processed, can be used as a fertiliser, but also as an element in explosives. Its capacity to generate life or to cause death depends on how it is transformed. Furthermore, unlike other materials such as copper, which can be used to build lasting objects, once it has been used nitrate disappears and its specificity vanishes. Just as its economic value also vanishes: "nitrate is a share price, a figure in a market, and it is in this most immaterial of forms that it dominates over the desert. It becomes invisible."<sup>[6]</sup> The work *A History of Detonations*, 2013, deploys a constellation of images containing a number of clues that help to decode the multiplicity of understandings and misunderstandings that reveal the work and prepare us for the move to London in the following hall in the exhibition. An advertising postcard for nitrate in the form of an explosion from 1920, some photos from NASA bearing witness to the (uninhabitable) surface of Mars in 1976, the room in the presidential palace where Salvador Allende committed suicide in 1973, the saltpetre offices transformed into a Historic Monument by Allende and later into prisons by Pinochet, a fertiliser bomb, and, among others, a terrorist attack perpetrated by the IRA, the Irish pro-independence group, in Bishopsgate London in 1993 against the Shanghai Banking Corporation, a multinational which, oddly enough, included Gibbs & Sons in its portfolio of investments. As the exhibition curator Carles Guerra stated, this series "is 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".<sup>[7]</sup> These are images that speak of the global from the anecdotal and from apparent randomness.

### **Territory and Capital**

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The final hall in the exhibition affords a look at the flip side of the coin. The photos in *From the High-Rises Like Rain*, 2013, explore London's financial district where the nitrate companies have their offices, a place which is the origin and destination of the capital that made the exploitation of the desert and of its workers viable. Among these views, one can discern a measuring device used to monitor the vibrations of a demolition, the remains of a demolition, a baptismal font with a Greek inscription that reads "Cleanse my transgressions and not only my face", the entrance to Norman Foster's Gherkin, and a series of memorials that recall the IRA bombings in the financial epicentre of British colonialism in the 1990s. The attacks were made with fertiliser bombs that generated a "trace of nitrate" in the space, a print of violence that transformed the district into a frontier territory and, as had happened in another way in the Atacama desert, redrew the limits of economic power.

Through a series of photos, grids, texts and archive materials (appropriated, intervened or presented as such), Xavier Ribas presents an ambitious cluster of subjective registers, questioning a legacy that has permeated the history of Chile so strongly while it has gone virtually unnoticed in the history of England. A narrative on materials in transformation able to foster or to take away life, to appear and to become invisible... like nitrate, but also like capital, responsible for so many of the contradictions of the present, but above all else, the trigger that sparked today's unsustainable economic crisis and social malaise.

In a recent conversation at Frieze Talks during the Frieze art fair 2014 called *Adventures in the Field: The Anthropological Turn*, Dieter Roelstraete reflected on the dangers artists run when they instrumentalise the past as they cast their gaze backwards. At once he recalled how art, unlike science, has the virtue of being irresponsible. And it is thanks to this possibility of perversion that visibility can be lent to events which would otherwise have remained ignored. This anthropological turn in the era of globalisation arises from art's need to be useful, to function, to stir minds and to have consequences. In *Nitrate* Xavier Ribas has shifted the limits of his own practice as he has drawn up a working frame that breaks the boundaries of the image it contains. The efficacy of the 'assembly workshop' alluded to earlier is grounded in an art of memory, a process that allows us to anticipate the historical and political state of the world in order to look to the future that, for those of us who remain positive, we still believe we can build through an exchange of knowledge. There is no other option.

\**Nitrate* is included in the project *Traces of Nitrate. Mining history and photography between Britain and Chile (1870s-1920s)* at the University of Brighton in collaboration with Louise Purbrick and Ignacio Acosta, with funding from a scholarship from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). It will go on exhibit at the museum at the University of Navarra and at The Bluecoat, Liverpool, in 2015.

[1] Hidden in a corner, this sentence opens the catalogue *Nitrate*, MACBA, Barcelona, 2014.

[2] DIDI-HUBERMAN, GEORGE: *Cuando las imágenes toman posición*, A. Machado Libros, Madrid, 2008.

[3] *Ibid.*, p.62.

[4] LOOMIS TODD, MABEL: "The Nitrate Wealth of Tarapacá", in *Nitrate*, MACBA, Barcelona, 2014.

<sup>[5]</sup> Paper by Xavier Ribas and Carles Guerra at MACBA, 5 June 2014.

<sup>[6]</sup> PURBRICK, LOUISE: "Nitrate Traffic" in *Nitrate*, MACBA, Barcelona, 2014.

<sup>[7]</sup> GUERRA, CARLES: "Unfolding the Documentary Dispositive", in *Nitrate*, MACBA, Barcelona, 2014.



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Editorial Concreta 2013