

## LANDSCAPE AND THE GEOGRAPHICAL TURN IN PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

*When dealing with the photographic practices that have been of interest over the last two decades in reflecting upon the transformation of territory, a new aim emerges clearly: to unravel the geopolitical dimension of each place. Growing social inequalities and ecological imbalance provoked by globalisation and economic neoliberalism have drawn the attention of many artists. Nevertheless, the interdependence of events in geographically distant places that simultaneously touch upon various spheres of exchange is a particularly difficult subject to grasp in photographic terms. This paper seeks to address this issue by focusing on three recent projects: Nitrate by Xavier Ribas, Copper Geographies by Ignacio Acosta and State Business by Mari Bastashevski. Their works and approaches, closely related to Allan Sekula's seminal practice, contribute to defining how this new geographical premise can manifest in terms of landscape representation, and what challenges are at stake here.*

According to postmodern thought, the culture of landscape representation carries a heavy sociocultural legacy. For centuries, “landscape”, understood as a Western cultural construct, essentially belonged to those who did not work the land and, ultimately, its appreciation was defined largely by social and class discrimination.<sup>1</sup>

If Art History's conception of the landscape genre in the past contributed to naturalising the social inequalities that conceal the historical processes shaping the land, increasingly since the end of the twentieth century, many artists in the field of contemporary photography have considered it urgent to work in an opposite direction. However, as many of them have proposed critically through their work, such a rendering visible is far from straightforward for several reasons. Taking into consideration the nature of this difficulty, related to the topic itself but also to the medium of photography and its circulation, the aim of this paper is to point out how the selected artists have dealt with it.

The theoretical and artistic expansion that has occurred in these years around the landscape-territory dialectic has been, in fact, so intense that we could say it is becoming increasingly difficult to contemplate a landscape innocently. In this sense, the influence of the theoretical contributions associated with the spatial turn,<sup>2</sup> and the decoding of the landscape as a social and cultural construct by postmodern thought have been fundamental, and continue especially in the most recent critical writing.<sup>3</sup> In the face of economic globalisation,<sup>4</sup> this knowledge has led different artists to engage with increasingly complex configurations of the land and its inhabitants, demanding new approaches in photographic practice.

### From landscape to territory

In many senses, the 1960s and 1970s constituted the point of rupture at which the limitations of landscape — as a concept and as a genre — began to be recognised, and also accompanied by new artistic explorations at its territorial and conceptual margins.<sup>5</sup> These practices were consolidated over the next decade, and more specially since the early 1990s also started to reflect a new concern for factual understanding of how the territory was being modelled politically and ideologically. Various artists began to wonder about what forces and interests orchestrate the relentless movement of the landscape — as land configured in a certain way — that, in its growing standardisation, reflects the hidden springs of the economic machinery that moves the world in a single direction. There are many projects that we could mention, but there is certainly one that has been particularly influential: *Fish Story*, by Allan Sekula.<sup>6</sup> An essential reference for many artists confronted with the new challenges in dealing visually with the abstraction of neoliberal capitalism, this work has undoubtedly made a key contribution in opening new perspectives; perspectives that came to be defined as a geographical turn many years later.

Without entering here into an analysis of Sekula's project, which has been widely commented on over the past few years, we will specifically point out two factors that we believe are critical to the question under consideration. The first concerns the proposal by Sekula for a type of artistic practice in which the photography is given simultaneously as a means of expression, a means of investigation and, at the same time, an object of research. A second aspect, equally significant, makes of his work a key precedent. *Fish Story*, as book and exhibition, interrelation of photographs, projections and texts of diverse natures, appeared at a time when the cultural debate was dominated by ideas of dematerialisation and virtuality that had arrived with digital technology.

The culmination of extensive research, *Fish Story* constituted a real counterweight linked to the material and the factual, at the same time that it demonstrated the potential capacity of an artistic process to encompass the notion of global scale, in this case transoceanic. The polemics of a dematerialised and volatile economy found a powerful counter-image in this project on the labour of thousands of workers in ports and maritime transport. On the other hand, no less important here, this multiple counter-image displayed by Sekula also related to older references of the landscape genre, but this link with landscape imagery would always be re-inflected by a materialist conception of history in which the question of labour is central. In the first lines of his introduction to the book, Sekula offers, in references to the material and the mental, the past and the present, a glimpse of the multiple semantic strata that his documentary dispositive puts into play.

What one sees in a harbour is the concrete movement of goods. This movement can be explained in its totality only through recourse to abstraction. Marx tells us this, even if no one is listening anymore. If the stock market is the site in which the abstract character of money rules, the harbour is the site in which material goods appear in bulk, in the very flux of exchange. Use values slide by in the channel; the Ark is no longer a bestiary but an encyclopedia of trade and industry. ... the more rationalised and automated, the more the harbour

comes to resemble the stock market. ... The boxes, viewed in vertical elevation, have the proportions of slightly elongated banknotes.<sup>8</sup>

The attention to mineral extraction and raw materials, as well as to the movement of goods at the global level, the displacement of workers, the interrelation between territories and corporate economic and state powers, and of course the fundamental role of images in all this “traffic”,<sup>9</sup> come to mark many of the projects reflecting on the landscape-territory dialectic from the mid-1990s. It should be noted, moreover, that the influence of Sekula is not only thematic but also methodological and conceptual, through an idea and example of photographic practice rooted in the investigative that had not previously reached such a degree of discursive complexity.

In parallel to the artistic field, the development of critical thinking around landscape has also been extraordinarily intense over these years.<sup>10</sup> It has now become commonplace to refer to the complexity of the term — complex due to its rich history, but also to its different meanings, depending from which disciplinary and linguistic field it is approached.<sup>11</sup> If the landscape has become a central issue in the discourse of so many different disciplines, it may be due to the fact that it permits a response to social, political and cultural concerns that are intrinsically linked. But also, and more importantly, because landscape is located at the centre of a network of particularly dense and complex interests through which very diverse disciplinary fields are interwoven, and regarding which it is increasingly difficult to think independently.

However, towards the end of the 1990s, the discomfort of some artists with the use of the term landscape to define their projects began to be evident. Due to its links with the pictorial genre, the reference to the term has an overloaded burden of reminiscences which many do not share, or wish to continue to question critically. The material reference of the terms “territory” and “geography” seems in turn to offer a viable way out of the complications implied by reference to the landscape genre’s heritage, especially when the examination of the interrelationship between land use and the production of space<sup>12</sup> has become a pressing issue.

In this hybrid back and forth between the concepts of landscape and territory that shapes and rules many photographic practices of the last two decades, what new areas of knowledge and experience are being opened up? What new discursive spaces does this increasing invocation of geography imply? If the development of digital technologies and the transformation of communications have produced new dimensions of abstraction, which of these changes have an impact on a visual culture founded on the idea of landscape as synonym of belonging? In what way does the landscape survive, represented in the perspective that the new geographical preeminence seems to indicate?

At the beginning of the year 2000, some essays and exhibitions began to articulate in a more precise and concrete manner the signs of this shift appealing to geography as a new artistic category. From the perspective of visual culture studies, Irit Rogoff argued in *Terra Infirma* that the concept of geography was being re-inflected by the artistic field, and proposed an idea of “un-homed geographies” as a possibility of redefining issues of location away from concrete coercions of belonging and not belonging determined by the state.<sup>13</sup> In 2001, the exhibition *Des Territoires* gathered some of the results of Jean-François Chevrier’s seminars, given

since 1994 at the School of Fine Arts of Paris, in response to the need to interrogate economic globalisation and its implications.<sup>14</sup> Ursula Biemann also expressed the need to give priority to postmodern geographical thought in her curatorial project *Geography and the Politics of Mobility* of 2003.<sup>15</sup> Slightly later, toward the end of the decade, Trevor Paglen proposed the notion of “experimental geographies”. Allowing him to position his work between the contributions of the spatial turn perspective and more recent conceptualisations of geography, this concept also gave its name to a collective exhibition in which he participated.<sup>16</sup> Taken together, these examples reflect quite clearly a sort of expanded notion of geography being generated from within the artistic field.

### Toward a geographical turn?

Contemporary photography has been thorough in showing the effects and consequences of globalisation on the territory, the standardisation of certain landscape forms, “Disneyfication”, or the landscape at its most apocalyptic; many examples of all this have been seen in recent years. However, not so many projects have addressed the difficulties of making visible the agents of such transformation. One of the main concerns of such a project would be that although these transformative forces are not always invisible, we have become accustomed to consider them as such. On the one hand, because the landscape genre taught us not to miss them. On the other, because they are not always readily available to the sight of the photographer, either because they are protected spaces, or because they have ceased to exist and there is no record of them. The projects that we will mention below have dealt in different ways with the challenges of photographing these forces and processes. Challenges that do not involve only the “visualisation” of certain circumstances, but also a reconsideration of the meaning of photographic representation.

If the sharpening of the most detrimental effects of capitalism, in its territorial, geopolitical, social and cultural dimensions, has brought new attention to the opacity with which its agents operate, we could argue that, at the same time, a greater ability to unmask these has also been emerging. We can recognise this, for example, in the ability to identify the interdependence of simultaneous events in geographically very distant spaces or in the identification of those points of exchange where an imbalance is created. Three recent projects that are especially significant because of the scope of their respective investigations, and that might be proposed as a good sample of such potentiality, are: *Nitrate* by Xavier Ribas,<sup>17</sup> *Copper Geographies* by Ignacio Acosta<sup>18</sup> and *State Business* by Mari Bastashevski.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond their thematic and methodological differences, one fundamental aspect brings these projects together: the possibility of inverting the terms of an equation deeply rooted in photographic culture and landscape representation.<sup>20</sup> If the invisibility of sovereignty with which global capitalism operates is inversely proportional to the visibility of its territorial, social and environmental consequences, then these artists are concerned not to forget the other end of the polarity. Their projects demonstrate the possibility of bringing attention to that which could, in principle, be

more resistant to photographic representation. This could be, for example, what has been overlooked, perhaps the workers of a mine that was photographed in such a way as to conceal their harsh labour conditions; the vacuum left in a community by the expropriation of territory rich in indigenous heritage; or the decisions of those agents directly responsible for generating social and ecological conflict with the civilian population in order to obtain economic benefit: the hard core of the system. A different question is to discern the degree to which it is really possible to get near this operational centre from which the global imbalance is orchestrated. Despite the immense effort involved in this type of project, the aim of bringing to light those connections that could be of some use in public debate has become a more than reasonable goal.

The possibility suggested by the works we will analyse below is, more specifically, to locate in a geographically accurate manner the intersections between states and corporations responsible for territorial transformation and their implication in current landscapes. That is to say, how this transformation has been configured historically and how it is projected towards the future; who benefits and who pays the highest price; who is enriched and who is impoverished; which territories benefit, and which are buried under the most lethally contaminating wastes. Of course, in this increasingly complex field of territorial agency, each artist negotiates the dense web of relationships differently; between international treaties, financial markets, cultivation systems, transportation, labour policy, real estate speculation, health care or the increasing privatisation of resources, to name just a few strands. Transnational agency is not something new, but the magnitude of the effects that have been observed in the last two decades probably is. The projects of Xavier Ribas, Ignacio Acosta and Mari Bastashevski eloquently illustrate the extent of this. Their complexity in terms of research and display, as exhibitions and publications, also reveals another important aspect in terms of visual narrative: the difficulty of interpreting them as single images, since each one is always densely interwoven in a multidimensional net of larger sequences, other series or chapters.<sup>21</sup>

*Traces of Nitrate*, a project conceived by Xavier Ribas, Louise Purbrick and Ignacio Acosta at the University of Brighton, has taken shape in different manifestations: exhibitions, workshops, conference papers, urban walks and various publications.<sup>22</sup> The sum of their investigations has linked relations between historical and contemporary extractivism, connecting the history of nitrate with that of copper in the relations between Great Britain and Chile. In the publication *Trafficking the Earth*,<sup>23</sup> printed on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Universidad de Chile in 2017, the authors offered this summary:

Once nitrate is dug into soil to feed cattle fodder or poured into the explosive mixtures that make dynamite, once copper disappears into cables encased in plastic and is embedded within the intricate internal wiring of laptops and smartphones, only their market value appears to remain: they are capital; they become capitalised forms, invisible as anything else. But nothing ever really disappears. Every act of appropriation is found in the land: in ruins and residue. Ecological contamination is historical evidence. A trace. The entangled

geographies of the desert, port, and city are also entwined histories. *Trafficking the Earth* traverses past and present, one folds into the other in constant transformation.<sup>24</sup>

Visualising the stories of these two minerals, nitrate and copper, makes it possible to cover a historical perspective sufficiently wide to recognise inheritances and financial legacies, the economic interests that put the material into circulation, and its transformation into capital, ruling relations between two countries and affecting social, political and ecological spheres in each, but with obviously different consequences between one and the other country. This investigative model, which combines fieldwork with the study of material and archive images, developed over various years, has managed to identify what we could describe as “blind spots” of the landscape genre.

Xavier Ribas discovered the album *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* in the photography collection of the Museo Universidad de Navarra in 2009, and it became the starting point of his research. The resulting project, *Nitrate*,<sup>25</sup> proposes a reinterpretation of the colonial enterprise of Chilean nitrate exploitation at its peak moment between the 1870s and the 1920s. The photographs in the album were taken at one of the nitrate mines near Iquique, Chile, developed with English capital in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The creation of the photographic album was for a specific purpose: to show the good state of the installations to the mine’s English investor. When Lord Aldenham, an entrepreneur who had earned a fortune with trade in guano and then became director of the Bank of England,<sup>26</sup> received the album he responded with a letter of thanks in which he expressed his appreciation of the “handsomeness” of both photographs and the potential revenue from nitrate. It is in this correspondence made between the beauty of the photographs and the logic of capital that Xavier Ribas identifies a crucial meaning of the industrial photography from which the project emerges. Moreover, Ribas’ work also involves another aspect equally underexplored and already evoked by Sekula:<sup>27</sup> the circulation of photographs, with their absences and the effects of their displacement.

Starting from this space of the circulation of images and materials between England and Chile, between some photographs and a company extracting nitrate, between the logics of art and of capital, the lines are established for an investigation aiming to track what has been made invisible in the history around this industry. *Nitrate*, composed of various photographic series,<sup>28</sup> texts and videos, implies a renewed affirmation — as Ribas was already developing in previous projects — that all activity, as invisible as it may appear, leaves some sort of trace that sooner or later may be identified and interpreted. As the evolution of his *Concrete Geographies*<sup>29</sup> already demonstrated, such an exploration no longer applies only to a specific and bounded territory. The investigation he tackles in this instance unfolds over a much wider arena, almost wider than we can grasp, and creates one possible constellation from various points whose connections have been diluted with time and space but that needed to be named and displayed.

The resulting juxtaposition of images of dispersed sites, events and objects works at different levels. *A History of Detonations* (Figures 1 and 2), for example, is a set of 12 posters whose images relate to research material found by Ribas during visits to



Fig. 1. Xavier Ribas, *A History of Detonations* (2014), from the project *Nitrate* (2010–2014). © Xavier Ribas.



Fig. 2. Xavier Ribas, *A History of Detonations* (2014), spreads in the book *Nitrate* (2014). © Hermanos Berenguer.

sites and archives, as well as relevant found photographs, postcards and discarded original press prints bought on the internet. This fragmented narrative can be found on the museum's wall and as interrupted double pages in the exhibition catalogue, suggesting the inherent discontinuities — temporal and geographical — spanned by the whole research.

More concretely, *Nitrate* is developed across various temporal strata connected by the material history of the ore and, more importantly, the legacies it leaves in the present, inevitably also marking the future of the territories involved. The transformations of the ore, from extraction to conversion into marketable and exportable material, and the final transformation into a capital flow with its impact on stock exchanges in London, left physical evidence that the project makes visible, contextualising them historically and politically, reconnecting territories and historically remote landscapes, archives and artefacts.

In the series *From The High-Rises Like Rain* (Figures 3 and 4), which comprises several texts with photographs taken around St. Mary Axe and Bishopsgate in the City of London, Ribas weaves a multi-layered set of connections between the transformative qualities of nitrate as mineral, commodity and capital. The list of nitrate companies registered in the London Stock Exchange Year-Book of 1908, displayed as a framed reproduction of their names, not only reveals that trade in this mineral was almost exclusively run by English companies, but that the year's trading it reflects was the same year that saw the violent events in Iquique resulting in the killing of hundreds of nitrate workers. Other strands connect this past violence with more recent events that seem distantly related but have the same material in common: nitrate. For example, as in the bombs fabricated by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in 1992 and 1993 when explosions destroyed the Baltic Exchange and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking



Fig. 3. Xavier Ribas, *From The High-Rises Like Rain* (2013), from the project *Nitrate* (2010–2014). © Xavier Ribas.



Fig. 4. Xavier Ribas, *From The High-Rises Like Rain* (2013). Installation view of the work *Nitrato* (2010–2014). © Xavier Ribas. Installation view at MACBA, June 2014 [Installation photograph: Marc Roig]. Photographs of the streets around St. Mary Axe and Bishopsgate in the City of London. Text: Nitrate companies listed in the London Stock Exchange Year-Book of 1908. In Italics: text fragments from IRA manifestos, reports on IRA explosions by the Metropolitan Police and the Museum of London Archaeological Service (MOLAS).

Corporation, both located in the City of London. As argued by Ribas, Purbrick and Acosta:

As a basic ingredient of both fertilisers and explosives, nitrate was intimately connected with the industrialisation of life and death, yet an account of its production and trade, including the pivotal role played by British merchant houses and adventure capitalists, is quite unfamiliar in Britain beyond specific research communities devoted to Latin American economic development. Thus, *Traces of Nitrate* directly addresses a lack of historical understanding and cultural awareness of the significance of the nitrate industry ... The project seeks to uncover the extent to which a once highly prized mineral was at the centre of the relationship between Britain and Chile between 1879 and 1914 and how, in this period between the beginning of the Pacific War and the outbreak of the First World War, it was connected to fortunes of the City of London and the ports of Liverpool, Pisagua, and Iquique.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the fact that the interconnections defining the project are so wide in scope and sophisticated that at first sight they may seem to militate against a cumulative meaning, each and every one of the components presented — in the form of exhibitions, publications, conference papers, seminars and workshops — constitutes an indispensable key in rebuilding the material history of nitrate. At what point does the birth of the first labour organisation in Chile converge with the great English mansions of the wealthy elite? In what manner could a few thousand photographs of

Mars be connected with the extraction of nitrate and the harsh working conditions that led to the formation in the nitrate fields of the modern labour movement and the Chilean left?

As stated by Ribas, in the photographic albums of the nitrate industry produced around 1900 as records of investment or as documentation of the production cycle, the portrayal of workers was clearly staged. But this now official visual history of the Chilean nitrate industry conceals the harsh working conditions, which resulted in strikes, massacres, and eventually led to the formation of the Chilean Socialist Labour Party, the Partido Obrero Socialista (POS). For a different visual record of the nitrate worker at work, one has to take alternative paths. Ribas finds it in the photographs of Mabel Loomis Todd (Figures 5 and 6), who, during her 1907 stay in Atacama, as part of an astronomical expedition, the Lowell Expedition to the Andes, took about 100 photographs of the Alianza mine to illustrate an article on the production cycle of Chilean sodium nitrate. These candid and mostly unpublished photographs give a different record of the nitrate worker, presenting the workers not posed for the camera, but as Ribas states, “at the very moment of exploitation”.<sup>31</sup>

Only such a deep and extensive investigation could have discovered that some of the most flagrant absences from the album *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* or from the press chronicles of the time, such as the representation of the workers, could be in the form of records in the archives of an American astronomical expedition that stayed at the very same mine, just four months before the massacre of workers at the School of Santa Maria in Iquique.<sup>32</sup> The threads of the history of



Fig. 5. Xavier Ribas, *And the Far Silence of Brooding Star Time* (2013), from the project *Nitrate* (2010–2014). © Xavier Ribas. Negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd, photographed at Yale University Library. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut.



Fig. 6. Xavier Ribas, *And the Far Silence of Brooding Star Time* (2013), from the project *Nitrate* (2010–2014). © Xavier Ribas. Installation view at MACBA, June 2014 [Installation photograph: Marc Roig].

nitrate are multiple and constantly traverse its different material, visual and discursive strata. However, a sentence on the first page of the book published to accompany the *Nitrate* exhibition provides a glimpse of the internal order that directs this traffic of data and images: “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>33</sup>

The methodological approach that permits the documentary dispositive, by its manner of interrelating different materials, voices, visual and written inventories and various artefacts, transcends the photographic form as a specific medium, as in the precursor, Sekula’s *Fish Story*. A reference that is clearly fundamental to *Nitrate*, whose investigation was able to intertwine two circuits divided by history: “the global circulation of photographic images, and the circulation of capital and goods”.<sup>34</sup> More specifically, the investigation, very much in line with the thesis of Ariella Azoulay,<sup>35</sup> presents the possibility that the photographic image can support an interpretation of history in its more materialistic dimension, interconnecting related aspects such as colonialism and its legacies in current conflicts.

The documentary dispositive of *Nitrate* articulates different meanings of investigation, both academic and artistic, and is somewhat reminiscent of that genre — belonging to a tradition associated with institutional critique — that crystallised in the decade of 1970: a type of composition that required the combination of data and photography, and whose result was close in many aspects to investigative journalism. *Nitrate* is a case study that reminds the present of the extractive

policies practised for centuries, particularly in the South American and African continents, whose geopolitical, ecological, and human consequences have been so disastrous.<sup>36</sup>

This documentary dispositive has been further enhanced, in the case of *Nitrate*, by its wider context within the collaborative project *Traces of Nitrate*. The sum of the investigations by Ribas, Purbrick and Acosta has permitted the linking of relations between examples of Chilean extractivism across time, in the focus on nitrate and copper mining — the latter explored by Ignacio Acosta in his project *Copper Geographies*.<sup>37</sup>

Developed through the practice-based PhD *The Copper Geographies of Chile and Britain: A Photographic Study of Mining* undertaken at the University of Brighton, the work of Ignacio Acosta pursues the same direction: the making visible of geopolitical forces that shape territories, revealing the invisible networks between geographically disparate but historically connected places via flows and materials, corporations and governments. In his long investigation between 2010 and 2016, he traced the connections between sites where the extraction takes place, such as Chile (possessing the world's largest reserves of copper), and European financial centres, where capital is administered and concentrated. The different strands that Acosta weaves in his project, again structured in different series and sequences,<sup>38</sup> are also marked by the biographical. Born in Chile, Acosta's early involvement in activist struggles against mineral extraction, followed by his education in England, have definitively shaped the character of his project and its determination to offer a critical spatial imaginary for rethinking the geographies of copper.

From a thematic point of view, the tracing of the routes that copper follows in its various phases of transformation along the supply chain involves multiple transnational interdependences, connecting the processes of the extractive industry with the economic, political, environmental and social spheres. Another sort of flow also traverses the research in the ordering of the ideas and of the sensible, giving form to the project: the distinct modes via which we see the interconnections between all these varied aspects implied by the use of copper, and the identification of key points in these relations of unequal exchange. Each one of the chapters of the work meshes different thematic and discursive threads that run through the project, touching on aspects of copper's supply chain: the transformation of mineral to metal; the landscapes surrounding the copper deposits and metallurgy industries; the urban and architectonic models of the mining towns; the destruction of environmental, archaeological and indigenous heritage; the real estate bubbles following in the steps of extractive industry profits; systems of financial transaction and speculation; sites of the production, storage and distribution of copper; or the return of the material to its place of origin in the form of technology.<sup>39</sup>

To consider the consequences of the flows which criss-cross the planet means beginning to think about those spaces of transit, recognising them as territorial intervals out of focus. In this sense, one of the "knots" that Acosta problematises in his project starts from the recognition of an unappreciated connection, a nexus that is crucial but not sufficiently acknowledged. In the series titled *Coquimbo and Swansea* (Figures 7 and 8),



Fig. 7. Ignacio Acosta, Panoramic view of a former copper smelting site, Las Compañías, La Serena commune, Chile 2014, *Coquimbo & Swansea* series, from the project *Copper Geographies* (2010–2016). © Ignacio Acosta.



Fig. 8. Ignacio Acosta, Panoramic view of a former copper smelting site, Lower Swansea Valley, Wales 2014, *Coquimbo & Swansea* series, from the project *Copper Geographies* (2010–2016). © Ignacio Acosta.

these complex circuits are shown through the straight comparison of two pictures: one is a beautiful panoramic landscape view located in Wales, while the other shows the abandoned state of a copper mine in Coquimbo. These two landscapes, despite the geographical distance between them, are deeply interconnected by a hidden flux of mineral and capital that links present and past. Between 1840 and 1880 Chilean copper was smelted and refined in the Lower Swansea Valley. But the present condition of each location evidences the uneven distribution of wealth and of ecological damage: while Coquimbo's mine remains derelict, the dramatically polluted landscape resulting from the smelting industry in the Lower Swansea Valley has since the 1960s been regenerated through highly successful decontamination programmes.

Beyond their mere appearances, landscapes also hide certain truths. Thus, for example, one of the photographs that makes up the series *Antofagasta Plc. Stop Abuses*, shows another panoramic view, of a eucalyptus forest (Figure 9). It is a toxic forest.



Fig. 9. Ignacio Acosta, Toxic forest of Eucalyptus, Pupio Valley, Chile, 2012, *Antofagasta Plc. Stop Abuses!* series, from the project *Copper Geographies* (2010–2016). © Ignacio Acosta.

The monoculture of this Australian tree has been established in order to absorb the contaminated waters resulting from the extractive industry of the Pupio Valley, in the north of Chile. The area is badly affected by the Los Pelambres copper mine, belonging to the Antofagasta PLC mining corporation. This industrial site not only produces a large quantity of residues, gravely endangering the health of those living in the town near to the dumping area, but has also displaced and disenfranchised inhabitants of the area. Further, the contamination of water resources has caused the annihilation of local traditional livelihoods based on agriculture, irreparable damage to the natural and cultural heritage with the destruction of archaeological sites and the flooding of indigenous burial grounds.

Bringing to the fore hidden connections between Chilean remote extraction sites and the global financial centre of London, in his exhibition displays Acosta contrasts the panoramic view of the eucalyptus forest with a photograph of a demonstration taken outside the Antofagasta PLC Annual General Meeting in London in 2013 (Figure 10). These photographic works are set alongside a written statement by the Human Rights Council of the United Nations, published in May 2015. The official document accuses the mining corporation of repeatedly violating the rights to water and the rights of security of the residents of the Community of Caimanes in the Pupio Valley.

Behind the ecological damage caused by the methods of extraction lie other dimensions of invisibilities that challenge photographic evidence. As is true of various minerals underpinning contemporary technology, Acosta reminds us that copper is everywhere — wrapped in plastic, in cables behind walls, in cars, computers, mobile phones — but rarely do we see it. We see neither the reality of labour in the mine, nor how the copper is transported, nor do we see how much of this material returns to Chile in the form of waste. What place, then, does photographic practice occupy exactly and, more specifically, what is the place of the documentary dispositive in this network of alleged invisibilities? And, even more important, what type of visibility may it be more pressing to offer? Acosta responds to this question by arguing that photography can be used as a connector: photography can be the link that brings into



Fig. 10. Ignacio Acosta, Church House, Westminster, London, 2013, *Antofagasta Plc. Stop Abuses!* series, from the project *Copper Geographies* (2010–2016). © Ignacio Acosta. A moment of confrontation between a stakeholder of Antofagasta Plc and activists protesting for their water rights.

relation spaces, material flows, companies and capital; it could therefore be seen as, in a literal and metaphorical sense, the conductive material that operates, as copper does, circulating at a global level across different types of networks enabling the communication and transmission of information.

In the project of Mari Bastashevski, *State Business* (2010, ongoing),<sup>40</sup> we find the same interest in identifying the main agents of land disruption, as well as the connection between states and corporations, although the strict representation of landscape is less present compared to the work of Ribas and Acosta. She displays a similar usage of the documentary dispositive, even if the methods and problems resulting from the subject matter differ. In this work, which is also being developed in a long and ambitious investigation over several years, and is configured in various chapters, Bastashevski addresses the issues of businesses that derive from state security, cooperation with authoritarian regimes, and multinational companies that profit from the conflicts they have created, also identifying in the process any informational vacuum surrounding them. In sum, *State Business* seeks to demonstrate the hidden workings of dysfunctional governmental machinery when it relates explicitly to abuse and violence against the most disadvantaged sectors of civil society. But how does one make visible these official machinations that are designed to profit from social and ecological conflict, or even to induce and perpetuate it, with the close connivance of the media industry? For Bastashevski, as in the previous cases, it also

involves an especially meticulous task of research assembly, and an acute ability to interconnect different sources of information.

In reality, she asserts, much of the documentation and information that she managed to find does not, on its own, permit the comprehension of such an efficiently orchestrated situation as that dealt with in *State Business*; it is the connection between them that permits opening new spaces of critical knowledge for civil society by pointing out very precisely the perimeters of power behind which lie the unwritten laws of technocracy. In this sense, Bastashevski also works with the event that the photographic act produces. Two important aspects define this project in relation to the photographic device. On the one hand, its attention to the role of images in media coverage for the neutralisation of this type of conflict. On the other hand, the photographic practice of the artist, through which she manages to demonstrate the degree of access that she was permitted to attain to the subject photographed. The negotiation regarding the distance from which to photograph is a fundamental part of the work, to specify the position permitted and obtained, and the access to the informational value, denied beforehand or obstructed for members of the civilian population.

In response to every refusal — she explains — I ask those who prohibit me from shooting about the extent of their prohibition: if I can't shoot here, can I shoot at the door? How about behind the door? 25 metres from you? The question usually confuses my counterpart, distracts them from their official curtsies and creates a window for spontaneous dialogue. This question allows the hero of the story to define their perimeter of power, whether it is imaginable or legal. When I exhibit my works, I expose these secrets, mentioning the type of the source, and the allowed shooting distance.<sup>41</sup>

In her exhibition presentations, Bastashevski also sets up the tension between the different documents, texts and photographs (Figure 11). Important information is provided but the displayed photographs do not link in a strict causal or illustrative way. In the first chapter of *State Business*, “Emergency Managers”, Bastashevski analyses the water crisis that occurred in Flint, Michigan in 2014, which produced a mass poisoning of the population, mostly African American. As in the other case studies addressed in the project, her research manages to elucidate in a very specific manner how the Flint crisis was conceived, produced and managed, not forgetting crucially who orchestrated it, who benefited and will continue benefiting from it in the coming years — such as the multinational water corporations (Figures 12–14).

In the Flint catastrophe, as Bastashevski's research displays, local water brands were involved in the pipe contract, and the flawed review of the situation that led to the poisoning was carried out by a French company. Besides this, the project carefully indicates how and which areas of the city were seriously affected and which were not. If the disproportionately rising water taxes obliged those who suffered the poisoning to leave their homes, the complaints of General Motors about the quality of Flint water (too corrosive for manufacturing) were quickly resolved by switching the company to an alternative water supply from the suburbs surrounding Flint.<sup>42</sup> As Bastashevski states, the implementation of “for-profit-crisis-regimes” is strategically induced:



Fig. 11. Mari Bastashevski, "Emergency Managers", from the project *State Business* (2010, ongoing). Installation view at MAST, January, 2018. © Mari Bastashevski.



Fig. 12. Mari Bastashevski, Flint City Councillor, Eric Mays, Flint, Michigan, 2017, "Emergency Managers", from the project *State Business* (2010, ongoing). © Mari Bastashevski.

The crisis did not arise in Flint itself. Rather it built up within an internal network of local state and national businesses, in Michigan and Washington, D.C. think tanks or government offices, and at a multibillion dollar corporate estate in France. Built up over the years in a succession of small steps, each leading towards the mass poisoning and each made reasonable with a promise of expertise, growth, and improvement for



Fig. 13. Mari Bastashevski, Flint, Michigan, 2017, "Emergency Managers", from the project *State Business* (2010, ongoing). © Mari Bastashevski.



Fig. 14. Mari Bastashevski, Flint, Michigan, 2017, "Emergency Managers", from the project *State Business* (2010, ongoing). © Mari Bastashevski.

a city of people that were excluded from this network on the grounds of class differences framed under the catch-all umbrella of insufficient expertise, rendering

the exclusion politically correct in line with the current standards of managerial democracy.<sup>43</sup>

These projects are symptomatic of the necessities implied by a reflection on current circumstances regarding the representation of the contemporary landscape. A landscape made of different geographies involved in their shaping and impact on each population that inhabits them. It is through this dialectic between landscape and territory that it may be possible to glimpse some of the lines of flight that the geographical turn opens up. We can recognise it in a new sensitivity towards the management of distances relating the local and global circumstances of an increasingly complex situation. In this new conception of territory, photographic practices compete with a multiplicity of strata and increasingly dense intersections. Considering the abstraction that characterises capitalism, the geographical turn posed by these projects certainly contributes to the renewal of what we understand by landscape culture, a social bond that evidently does not disappear from the visual equation but is restated so that, in offering us other complexities, we can begin to recognise with greater ability those blind spots of contemporary territory that require attention.

Translated from Spanish by Kevin Gerry Dunn.

Revised and edited by Mary Goody.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 5–34; and Besse, "L'espace du paysage," 7–24.
2. The legacy of the most outstanding contributions that gave rise to the spatial turn would be precisely the attention to this interdependence between surroundings and its inhabitants. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*; Burgin, *In/different Spaces*; and Warf and Arias, *The Spatial Turn*.
3. Scott and Swenson, *Critical Landscapes*.
4. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*; Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*.
5. As the photographic practice of Robert Smithson shows exceptionally well. Sobieszek, *Robert Smithson. Photoworks*.
6. *Fish Story*, which, without doubt, was the culmination of his most ambitious research until then. Sekula, *Fish Story*.
7. There are several interpretations depending on the disciplinary field of study. Here we follow: Guasch, "El giro geográfico," 161–204.
8. Sekula, *Fish Story*, 12.
9. We refer to a circulation of images, also echoing Sekula's famous article: Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," 15–25.
10. A good account of this is given in: DeLue and Elkins, *Landscape Theory*.
11. Olwig, "Recovering the Substantive Nature of Landscape," 630–53.
12. Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace*.

13. Rogoff, *Terra Infirma*, 4.
14. Chevrier recognises that, as in the 1990s, the notion of “territory” has gained an unusual role in the artistic field, and warns against the dangers implied by an artistic instrumentalisation of this notion. His proposal will be articulated in a double sense: to historicise the notion of territory and to exploit its multiple senses, both those that complement and those that contradict each other. Chevrier, *Des Territoires*.
15. Biemann, *Geography and the Politics of Mobility*.
16. Although it has been noted that the diversity of approaches does not really permit the precise definition of the extent of the experimental geographies. Pearce, “Review of Experimental Geography,” and Thomson, *Experimental Geographies*.
17. Website of the artist: [www.xavierribas.com](http://www.xavierribas.com) (viewed 3 October 2018).
18. Website of the artist: [www.ignacioacosta.com](http://www.ignacioacosta.com) (viewed 3 October 2018). Ribas and Acosta’s works discussed here are part of a single project, *Traces of Nitrate*, developed together with Louise Purbrick. The project website: <http://tracesofnitrate.org/> (viewed 2 October 2018).
19. Website of the artist: [www.maribastashevski.com/state-business](http://www.maribastashevski.com/state-business) (viewed 3 October 2018).
20. Berque, *Thinking Through Landscape*.
21. For this reason, we will briefly introduce the visual references offered here inviting the reader to consult their websites and publications for further contextualisation.
22. See the website of the project: <http://tracesofnitrate.org/About>.
23. Whose title also reveals a clear tribute to Allan Sekula. Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” 15–25; and Ribas et al., *Trafficking the Earth*.
24. Ribas et al., *Trafficking the Earth*, 103.
25. The exhibition *Nitrate*, curated by Carles Guerra, was presented in 2014 at the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museo Universidad de Navarra, and the Bluecoat in Liverpool. Ribas, *Nitrate*.
26. In addition to being a director of the Bank of England, he was also a director of the company Antony Gibbs & Sons. Vallès, “Trazos invisibles.”
27. Sekula, “Traffic in Photographs.”
28. *A History of Detonations* (2014); *Desert Trails* (2012); *Caliche Fields* (2010); *I Write Your Names On My City Walls* (2010); *Twenty-Eight Points* (2010); *Three Moves Are As Bad As a Fire* (2013); *The Far Silence of Brooding Star Time* (2013); *Northiana* (2011); *Gibbsiana* (2011); *From The High-Rises Like Rain* (2013). [www.xavierribas.com](http://www.xavierribas.com) (viewed 12 January 2017).
29. Developed between 2003 and 2009. [www.xavierribas.com](http://www.xavierribas.com) (viewed 12 January 2017).
30. See the project website: <http://tracesofnitrate.org/About> (viewed 1 October 2018).
31. [www.xavierribas.com](http://www.xavierribas.com) (viewed 3 October 2018).
32. Interview with the author, 17 March 2013.
33. Ribas, *Nitrate*.
34. Guerra, “El despliegue del dispositivo documental,” 13–18.
35. Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*.
36. Guerra, *Xavier Ribas, Nitrate*. [www.macba.cat/es/expo-ribas-nitrato](http://www.macba.cat/es/expo-ribas-nitrato) (viewed 1 October 2018).

37. See the project website: [www.tracesofnitrate.org/filter/Copper-Geographies/2016-The-Copper-Geographies-of-Chile-and-Great-Britain](http://www.tracesofnitrate.org/filter/Copper-Geographies/2016-The-Copper-Geographies-of-Chile-and-Great-Britain) (viewed 6 October 2018).
38. *Metallic Threads* (2010–2015); *Sulphuric Acid Route* (2012); *Coquimbo and Swansea* (2014); *Miss Chuquicamata, The Slag* (2012); *Antofagasta Plc. Stop Abuses!* (2010–2014); *High Rise* (2012); *Hidden Circuits* (2015). [www.ignacioacosta.com](http://www.ignacioacosta.com) (viewed 12 January 2017).
39. Website of the artist: [www.ignacioacosta.com/copper-geographies/copper\\_geographies\\_info](http://www.ignacioacosta.com/copper-geographies/copper_geographies_info) (viewed 6 October 2018).
40. An ongoing project that has had various exhibitions. See the website of the artist: [www.maribastashevski.com](http://www.maribastashevski.com) (viewed 3 October 2018).
41. Conversation with the author.
42. The details of this switch were not made publicly available.
43. Bastashevski, exhibition panel. [www.bastashevski.com](http://www.bastashevski.com) .

## References

- Acosta, I. *The Copper Geographies of Chile and Britain: A Photographic Study of Mining*. Brighton: University of Brighton, 2016 (Unpublished PhD thesis).
- Acosta, I. *Copper Geographies*. Barcelona/Mexico City: Editorial RM, 2018.
- Azoulay, A. *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*. London/New York: Verso, 2012.
- Berque, A. *Thinking Through Landscape*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Besse, J.-M. "L'espace du paysage: Considérations théoriques." In *Teoría y paisaje: Reflexiones desde miradas interdisciplinarias*, edited by T. Luna and I. Valverde, 7–24. Barcelona/Olot: Universitat Pompeu Fabra/Observatori del paisatge, 2011. [www.upv.es/contenidos/CAMUNISO/info/U0569065.pdf](http://www.upv.es/contenidos/CAMUNISO/info/U0569065.pdf)
- Biemann, U. *Geography and the Politics of Mobility* (Exh. Cat.). Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2003.
- Bonneuil, C., and J.-B. Fressoz. *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. London/New York: Verso, 2017.
- Burgin, V. In *Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1996.
- Chevrier, J.-F. *Des Territoires*. Paris: L'Arachnéen, 2011.
- DeLue, R. Z., and J. Elkins, eds. *Landscape Theory*. London/New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Demos, T. J. *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017.
- Guasch, A. M. "El giro geográfico." In *El arte en la era de lo global: De lo geográfico a lo cosmopolita, 1989–2015*, 161–204. Madrid: Alianza Forma, 2016.
- Guerra, C. "Unfolding the Documentary Dispositive." In *Nitrato*, (Exh. Cat.), edited by X. Ribas, 13–18. Barcelona/Pamplona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona/Museo Universidad de Navarra, 2014.
- Lefebvre, H. *La production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos, 1974.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. "Imperial Landscape." In *Landscape and Power*, edited by Mitchell, 7–24. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

- Olwig, K. R. "Recovering the Substantive Nature of Landscape." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86, no. 4 (1996): 630–653. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8306.1996.tb01770.x.
- Pearce, M. W. "Review of Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism." *Cartographic Perspectives* no. 70 (2011). [www.cartographicperspectives.org/index.php/journal/article/view/cp70-pearce/108](http://www.cartographicperspectives.org/index.php/journal/article/view/cp70-pearce/108).
- Ribas, X. *Nitrato* (Exh. Cat.). Barcelona/Pamplona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona/Museo Universidad de Navarra, 2014.
- Ribas, X., L. Purbrick, and I. Acosta. *Trafficking the Earth*. London/Santiago de Chile: Intuitive Editions/Editorial Gronefot, 2017. <http://tracesofnitrate.org/2017-Trafficking-the-Earth-1>.
- Rogoff, I. *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*. London/New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Scott, E. E., and K. Swenson, eds. *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015.
- Sekula, A. "The Traffic in Photographs." *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (1981): 15–25. doi:10.1080/00043249.1981.10792441.
- Sekula, A. *Fish Story*. Rotterdam/Düsseldorf: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art/Richter Verlag, 1995.
- Sekula, A. *Fish Story*. London: Mack, 2018.
- Sobieszek, R. A. *Robert Smithson. Photoworks* (Exh. Cat.). Los Angeles/Albuquerque: Los Angeles County Museum/University of New Mexico Press, 1993.
- Soja, E. W. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London/New York: Verso, 1989.
- Thomson, N., ed. *Experimental Geographies* (Exh. Cat.). New York: Melville House/ICI, 2008.
- Vallès, L. "Trazos invisibles: Sobre Nitrato de Xavier Ribas." *Concreta* 12 (2014). [www.editorialconcreta.org/Nitrato](http://www.editorialconcreta.org/Nitrato).
- Warf, B., and S. Arias. *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London/New York: Routledge, 2009.

---

**Marta Dahó** is a freelance curator and researcher, part of the University of Barcelona research group Art Globalization Interculturality (AGI).

---