

Nitrate (2014)¹

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Chilean nitrate is a non-renewable natural resource extensively mined in northern Chile between the 1870s and 1920s, mostly by British merchant houses and venture capitalists who in relatively few years transformed a portion of the Atacama Desert into an industrial landscape. Chilean nitrate was traded mainly as a natural fertiliser but it was also used in the manufacture of explosives, making it a crucial ingredient for the acceleration of both life and death.

The mineral largely escaped visual representation from the moment it left the remote grounds of the Atacama Desert. Shipped and traded globally, it was later dispersed over grounds elsewhere, as fertiliser or in explosives, disappearing out of sight.

The question for a documentary photographer is how to visually explore this largely unrepresented mineral, which for over half a century, more than a hundred years ago, was at the centre of the relationship between Chile and Britain? What are the 'visuals' of this shared history? With this question in mind, the project was conceived as an investigation into the material history of nitrate, its different legacies in Chile and the UK, and its uneven geographies and representations.

The project centres itself on what is known as the 'British nitrate era', roughly defined by the time between two wars. The Pacific War of 1879-1883 was a border conflict between Peru, Bolivia and Chile that ended with the annexation by Chile of the nitrate-rich portion of the Atacama desert. At this time British merchant houses and venture capitalists operating in the area acquired a large number of highly devalued nitrate concessions. Raising capital in London and Liverpool they transformed nitrate production in the Atacama Desert taking it to an industrial scale and trading the commodity on global markets. During the First World War (1914-1918) the British merchant houses became



Figure 1. Caliche Fields (2010) Nr 7. Original in color. Ignacio Acosta holding rejected nitrate ore at Oficina Avanza, Atacama Desert, Chile.

the sole suppliers of sodium nitrate to the ammunition factories of the Allied Forces. It was a great time for business, but soon after the war British investment in Chilean nitrate began to decline. Germany, as part of its war effort, had developed the Haber-Bosch industrial process capable of synthesising large quantities of nitrogen from the air; when this artificial nitrogen was no longer needed for the ammunition factories it was diverted to the production of fertilisers, reaching European markets more quickly and cheaply. By the end of the 1920s, with the final blow of the Great Depression, there was very little British capital invested in Chilean nitrate.

Nitrate traces the route of the mineral from its natural state, processed in the *oficinas* (desert factories) of the Atacama Desert, through transported commodity and stock market exchange value to become, ultimately, part of the material and symbolic inheritance of mansions and estates in London and the British countryside. The various photographic series, texts and video that make up the work document geographically disparate but historically connected landscapes – remote nitrate fields and metropolitan financial districts – as well as archives and artifacts.

The project develops along three lines of enquiry: first, the representation of the Atacama Desert as a frontier territory, associated with the construction of national and colonial identities, especially in specific moments of violence; second, the representation of labour and the nitrate worker, and how this representation is possible today; and third, the representation of capital and its mobility, and the forms it may take when it metamorphoses into cultural heritage. *Nitrate* is a visual essay that touches on the relationship between photography and capitalism, the links between extractive industries, frontier territories and contested spaces, and the position of the document and documentary dispositive in contemporary photographic practice.

The multiplicity of materials making up *Nitrate* relates to the notion of the fragment, as each piece functions independently, but their meaning is also relational, deriving as much from their 'position' as parts of the project as a whole, as from their status as independent works.² The project's fragmented narrative uses montage and anachronism as devices to address the echoes in the present of past conflicts through the interrogation of landscapes, archives and events across time and space. The notion of legacy at the centre of this project invokes memory as process and as practice, and the dialectical movement of remembering and forgetting, of presence and absence, preservation and erasure. The text elements that appear throughout the project take the form of lists, and function as extended or oversized captions. Sometimes

these lists may take on the role of images, or act 'in place of' images. The image-text composites throughout the work attempt to overcome the discrete representation of sites and objects.

Nitrate is a photographic investigation produced within an academic environment. It is part of the research project *Traces of Nitrate. Mining History and Photography Between Britain and Chile*, developed at the University of Brighton in collaboration with historian Louise Purbrick and PhD candidate photographer Ignacio Acosta, with the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The project's documentary dispositive reflects the desire to articulate historical processes around Chilean nitrate as mineral, labour, capital and heritage, and for this purpose it brings together cross-disciplinary and collaborative approaches to research and corresponding forms of presentation and dissemination.

Albums And Journeys [1]

The starting point of this project is the album of photographs *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899*. It was sent from Chile in the year 1900 to Henry Hucks Gibbs (Lord Aldenham) in London, who at the time was the director of the Bank of England and head of his family firm Antony Gibbs & Sons, a merchant house operating from London and Liverpool.

At the time, Oficina Alianza was the largest and most modern of the nitrate works in the Atacama Desert. Antony Gibbs & Sons, who owned it, was the first British merchant house to be established on the Pacific coast, having opened an office in Lima in 1822. In 1841 the company had signed an agreement with the Peruvian and Bolivian governments to become sole exporters of the guano collected in large quantities from islands and rock formations along the Pacific coast. As a result of the Pacific War, however, the company established itself in Valparaíso, Chile, and diverted its interest from guano to nitrate.

Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899 contains 85 collodion prints documenting the production cycle of sodium nitrate at Alianza. Starting with the detonation of the desert's crust to expose the buried mineral, the album's photographs illustrate the stages, processes, buildings, machinery and infrastructure involved in the production of nitrate amidst the geographical adversity of an inhospitable landscape. The album is a typical example of nineteenth-century colonial industrial photography in which the landscape is represented as an infinite waste, a desolate, empty background for modern, rational ex-



traction and the creation of wealth. Nineteenth-century photographs represented frontier landscapes as available spaces, spaces of the possible and, therefore, subject to appropriation, a nothingness awaiting to be inscribed.³

The album was accompanied by a letter, written on the 18th of July 1900, which has been kept attached to the back cover: "My dear Lord Aldenham, I am sending you herewith an Album of Views of Alianza Iquique, which I would ask you to accept as a souvenir of our last and I hope not least among Nitrate Oficinas. The views were taken about the middle of last year. Believe me, Yours very sincerely, J. I. Smail." Inside the folded page of the letter, Lord Aldenham kept a handwritten record of the message he sent back to his employee in appreciation for the album: "My dear Smail, I am much obliged to you for the excellent photographs of the Alianza, which form a very handsome volume. If the business itself produces a correspondingly handsome result, it will in great measure be due to your zeal and ability, which are fully appreciated by my partners, as well as by me. Sincerely yours."

The project's conceptual underpinning was largely defined by the two most significant remarks in the album's handwritten messages. On the one hand, the presentation of the album of photographs as 'a souvenir', an industrial object in fact, is relevant to the perception of business and the geographical imagination of colonial capitalism. On the other hand, Lord Aldenham's explicit 'correspondence' between the handsomeness of photography and that of capital illustrates the role photography played, and how it was perceived, during Western colonial expansion. Photography was an important tool in overseas business practices. It was used for commercial purposes in propaganda materials, but also, and most importantly, to raise funds in distant financial centres. As James Ryan writes, photographic albums from border territories were "exercises in imperial assertion".⁴

I first encountered the album in 2008 at the Museo Universidad de Navarra, where it is part of the nineteenth-century photography collection. How the album ended up in Spain, and indeed in the Museum's collection, is uncertain. However, the first trading company of the Gibbs family had associates in Cadiz in the early nineteenth century, and Lord Aldenham's grandfather lived in Madrid for many years. Or perhaps the final journey of

Figure 2. *A History of Detonations* (2014) Nr 3. Chilean Nitrate publicity postcard, c. 1920.

the album from London to Spain has nothing to do with the Gibbs' Spanish connection, but more to do with the political history of the nitrate workers. The socialist revolution initiated by Chilean President Salvador Allende after his election in 1971 was a source of inspiration for the Spanish left, at the time fighting for the end of General Franco's forty-year dictatorship. Through Allende, my generation was familiar with the historical legacy of the Atacama Desert and of the nitrate workers' struggle, since he officially acknowledged the Atacama and the nitrate workers as the birthplace and forefathers of the Chilean left. Allende's socialist revolution was short-lived and ended with the coup by Pinochet in 1973, supported, as is well documented, by the CIA and American corporations such as ITT and Anaconda. That same year of 1973, the Basque military organisation ETA planted a fertiliser bomb in Madrid killing the man Franco had named as his successor, Admiral Carrero Blanco: an action that impacted upon the direction of the longed-for Spanish 'transition to democracy'.

The nitrate industry left a significant legacy in the contemporary history of Chile, something not the case in Britain where the memory of this historical link with Chile resides mostly in the work of scholars of Latin America, who in the seventies became interested in Allende's political revolution, in the origins of Chile's economic dependency and, with the irruption of Pinochet, in the origins of state forms of violence. "The nitrate era" wrote historian Michael Monteón back in the late 1970s, "[was] the precursor of the modern Chilean state and contemporary forms of repression."⁵ Monteón was writing in the midst of Pinochet's violent regime, which ended in 1989, but his neo-liberal policies regarding natural resources are still in place today.⁶

Sites Of Mineral Extraction

The Atacama Desert became an industrial landscape in the late 1880s. Foreign capitalists and merchant houses established desert factories, towns and railways to extract its non-renewable natural resources in exchange for workers' salaries and export taxes. As Louise Purbrick writes, "The Atacama Desert was no longer a national landscape of Peru, Bolivia or Chile but incorporated into a geography of European capitalism; it was a 'satellite' of an eco-



Figures 3 and 4. **Desert Trails** (2012) Nr 9 and 29. Atacama Desert, Chile.



conomic system, a location of mines, a site of extraction of material wealth, the riches of the earth's crust assimilated to capital."⁷ As a frontier territory, taken from Peru and Bolivia by military force in 1883, its natural resources of nitrate and copper extracted by foreign capitalists over a hundred and fifty years, the Atacama Desert is a contested, militarised space associated to national and colonial imaginaries.

The conflict of interests with foreign investors meant that the desert became the scene of a double struggle, for the workers' salaries and for the nation's income, and on several occasions, unlike during the Pacific War, the Chilean army took the side of foreign interests. Chilean President José Manuel Balmaceda's intention to nationalise the nitrate industry in 1889 was met by the opposition of the Chilean congress, leading to the civil war of 1891 and to his suicide. The Chilean army also inflicted violence on the nitrate workers killing hundreds during demonstrations and industrial action. And violence took over the country again in 1973 with the uprising of General Augusto Pinochet following President Salvador Allende's nationalisation of copper, also extracted from the Atacama. Pinochet's coup resulted in the suicide of Allende, and was followed by sixteen years of dictatorship. The Atacama Desert bears witness to this recurrent history of violence.

The Atacama is the foundational landscape of the Chilean labour movement. The Socialist Workers Party was founded by the nitrate workers in the port town of Iquique in 1912, five years after the tragic events at the school of Santa María, also in Iquique. Here, on the 21st of December 1907, more than three hundred nitrate workers had been killed by the Chilean army. In the early 1970s President Allende acknowledged the history of struggle and resistance against foreign capitalists maintained in this landscape by the nitrate workers. However during the dictatorship of General Pinochet, the Chilean Air Force used abandoned nitrate towns, cemeteries and slag heaps as targets for firing practice. This was an act of premeditated violence against a landscape associated with the memory of the labour movement, and against the attempt to recover that memory, as in the case of the abandoned nitrate town of Chacabuco, declared a heritage site by Salvador Allende in 1971, but transformed into a detention camp for political prisoners by Pinochet two years later.

Figure 5. Northiana Nr 1. Odds and Ends (2011). Jar containing a sample of Chilean nitrate (c.1880s) owned by nitrate investor and monopolist John Thomas North (1842-1896), known as 'the Nitrate King', photographed in the ballroom of his house at Avery Hill, now part of the Library of the University of Greenwich. Proctor Collection, University of Greenwich Archive, London.

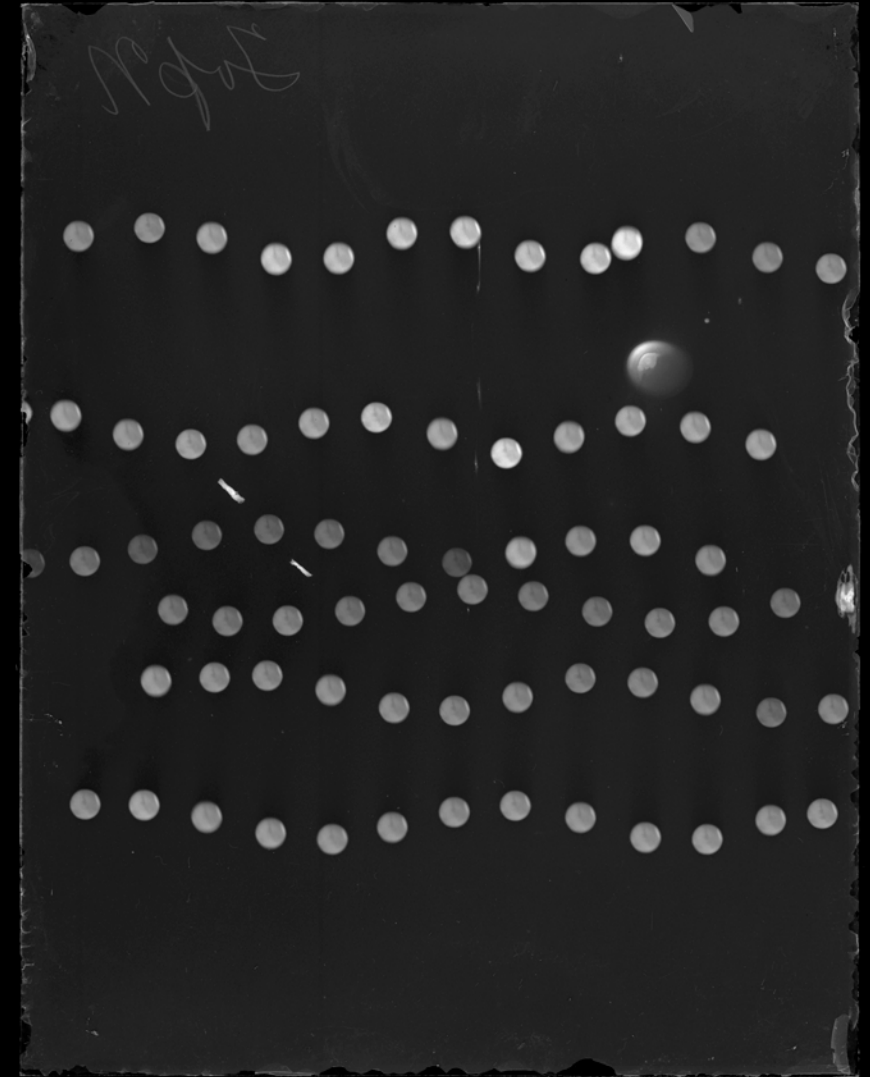
The slag heaps are distinctive elements in the landscape. They are vantage points that make possible the apprehension of this once inhabited, productive landscape, now abandoned and deserted. As topographic accidents, they provide an image of capitalist accumulation and a restitution of the absent body of the worker, barely visible in the old photographs. These artificial structures were made by the movement and the energy of the worker's body with the help of simple tools like a pick and a shovel, shifting stone and refuse from one place to another. The mounds themselves are bodies, suggests Michael Taussig, "bodies made by hand". They are "a miraculous glimpse into the shaping of nature by the human hand, a monument to man's domination over nature through his domination over others, an archive of national history."⁸

The thirty-three photographs of *Desert Trails* show the disrupted surfaces of the land around abandoned nitrate works, towns and ore fields. The photographs are open views mostly taken from the vantage points of slag heaps. They recreate the panoramic perspectives of historical photographs, commissioned by the nitrate producers as records of investment or as propaganda, which are now held in national libraries, archives and museums, and have become the official visual history of nitrate. The contemporary photographs present a detailed, yet fragmented panoramic view of this landscape, bearing multiple traces of its contested past. "Everything suggests", writes Carles Guerra, "that capital has migrated, leaving a wake of inactivity and silence. Eventually to be relocated in the new spaces of financial capital".⁹

Labour History

In December 1907 thousands of nitrate workers walked down from the Atacama Desert to the port town of Iquique, hoping that their presence would encourage the Chilean authorities to find an agreement with the foreign nitrate producers that would improve their tough working and living conditions. After a few days of negotiations and in the face of the resilience of the workers, and the intransigence of the nitrate producers in complicity with the Chilean authorities, the army was called in. The workers and their families were rounded up in the school of Santa María in Iquique, opposite the central market. They refused to call an end to the strike and on the 21st of December 1907 more than three hundred people were massacred by the army. This was to become a foundational moment of the modern Chilean labour movement.

Figure 6. *Three Moves Are As Bad As A Fire* (2013) Nr 13. Original in color. Mars plate from the 1907 Lowell Expedition to the Andes, taken from Oficina Alianza on June 26 1907. Reproduced by permission of the Lowell Observatory.



Only a few photographic images have survived of the events leading to the shooting. They are reproductions of reproductions of reproductions of the original photographs, believed to have been taken by the Consul of the United States in Iquique, Edward Muecke. Neither the negatives nor the original prints ever found, the figures visible in these images are just discernible, an ever-vanishing trace of crowds of men marching, panama hats on, army officials on horses, flags and banners, the school's front façade and the circus tent opposite, moments before the shooting. These reproductions have passed on from publication to publication, fading as if they were oral memories.

The double video projection *I Write Your Names on my City Walls* records the life on the streets around the site where the event took place over a hundred years ago. The original school burned down in the 1930s, but was replaced by a new concrete building, which at the time of filming in December 2010 was due for demolition in the following weeks. For decades, the abandoned school building had been a site of memory for the labour movement and the Chilean left. Workers and students demonstrated and held meetings there, and even occupied the school on many occasions. The graffiti written on the external walls of the building and the banners left there from demonstrations bore witness to the enormous political significance of this site. In the week just previous to our filming the building had been taken over by copper workers from the mine of Chuquicamata, some 200 km away from Iquique. The video installation registers the everyday life on both sides of the street around the school, days before its demolition, recording at the same time the last political graffiti. A transcript of them accompanies the projection.

Albums And Journeys [2]

All the known photographs of the nitrate *oficinas* of the time were made for or by the nitrate producers, as representations of investment or as documentation of the production cycle. These photographic albums now pass as the official photographic history of nitrate. Alongside the photographs of *Oficina Alianza*, the album *Salitreras de Tarapacá* is the other most important surviving record of the nitrate industry at the end of the nineteenth century. It was produced in 1889 by Louis Boudat, a French photographer based in Iquique.

Salitreras de Tarapacá was put together on the occasion of the first 'combination' of nitrate producers, a syndicate organised to regulate production and maintain the price of Chilean nitrate on world markets. It documents the most important nitrate works of the time, giving information about their

directors, traders and managers, as well as details of their production, machinery and work force. The album is like a family portrait of the nitrate producers, and a statement of ownership embedded with the rhetoric of colonial capitalism: large open views of production and investment, a consolidated force of foreign producers, a desolate landscape put to work.

As in the album *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* sent to Lord Aldenham, in these photographs the nitrate workers appear caught not in the moment of work but still, mostly looking at the camera, in the open fields or in front of machinery. Their detained bodies 'in the shape of work', their poses as if working, presumably following the photographer's instructions, inhabit the moment of photography. They appear as an extension of the machines, or as part of the landscape, an indication of scale and distance. Imagining the nitrate industry of the time, one must read the out-of-frame and between-the-lines of these nineteenth-century photographs and their captions. One has to work *against* them, as the time they were made was a time of great unrest and violent repression, a memory they do not contain. In order to see the body of the worker at the very moment of work one has to find other photographs.

Albums and journeys [3]

Five months before the tragic events in Iquique, an astronomical expedition arrived at *Oficina Alianza* and stayed there for five weeks. The *Lowell Expedition to the Andes* travelled from New York to South America to photograph, for the first time ever, the complete surface of planet Mars. The aim was to provide evidence in support of the theory of 'life on Mars', strongly advocated by wealthy amateur astronomer, writer and patron of the expedition, Percival Lowell. Finding that the Atacama Desert had near-perfect conditions for astronomical observation, the expedition, sailing south along the Pacific Coast from Panama, came ashore in Iquique on the 14th of June 1907.

Around 1907, Mars embodied a utopian vision of scarce but shared resources and advanced, intelligent beings, an ancient planet that seemed to have lost most of its water. Percival Lowell's theory of 'life on Mars' pictured a planet whose inhabitants had built massive irrigation works to transport the water melting seasonally from the ice caps to irrigate the warmer, desertified lands of the planet's equator. Lowell imagined a Martian society that had overcome 'national' differences for the purpose of managing and sharing the planet's scarce water resources. For Lowell the theory had a poignant reality, for he believed that Mars was the future of the Earth, and the abode of life.



Renowned astronomer David Todd was in charge of the expedition, also accompanied by his assistants, his daughter, and his wife Mabel Loomis Todd. Over six weeks the 'Mars expedition' produced 170 glass plates with about 10,000 negatives of the planet. The expedition members also wrote personal diaries and made notes on their work and on geographical observations, which were later published in various articles in magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Popular Astronomy* and *The Century Magazine*.

Inspired by numerous horse and train rides across the desert, their writings contain meditations on the dryness of the landscape and the process of desertification of the earth as seen in Atacama, projecting onto the Martian geography observations made in the desert, thus superimposing two geographical descriptions, a lived geography and an imagined, distant one.¹⁰

Three Moves Are As Bad As a Fire contains the 170 photographic plates made by the expedition at Alianza¹¹, organized by date from left to right, top to bottom, one half then the other. The diptych is cut by a band of text: geographical observations taken from diaries and articles written by the different members of the expedition. These two geographical representations, one visual of Mars, and another written of the Atacama, mutually reflect each other.

Mabel Loomis Todd was well known as a writer of travel literature, but more so for being the first editor of Emily Dickinson's poems after her death in 1886. Mabel Loomis was Emily Dickinson's neighbour, friend, and long-time lover of her married brother, being herself married to David Todd. While staying at Alianza Mabel Loomis Todd wrote *The Nitrate Wealth of Tarapacá*, a long literary account of the expedition, including a detailed firsthand description of the entire production cycle of sodium nitrate as she witnessed it there, from the explosion of the desert surface to the shipping of the sacks of refined mineral. To illustrate her article and lectures she took about a hundred photographs.



Figure 7. *And the Far Silence of Brooding Star Time* (2013) Nr 6. Photograph taken by Mabel Loomis Todd at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907. Reproduced by permission of the Yale University Library.

Figure 8. *And the Far Silence of Brooding Star Time* (2013) Nr 21. Negative taken by Mabel Loomis Todd during the Lowell Expedition stay at Oficina Alianza, July 1907.

In her text Mabel Loomis Todd makes constant allusions to the movements and sounds of manual labour, making of this article a unique contribution to the reading of the photographs sent to Lord Aldenham seven years earlier¹². Her own photographs, taken from the hip and without a tripod, seem to address, in correspondence with the text, the movements and sounds of bodies at work. In one of the pictures, her shadow is partially visible at the bottom of the frame. Other photographs show the physical toil of men and animals, shifting ore or refuse from one place to another. Unfortunately, her negatives are in a bad state of conservation, being faded, scratched or with chemical alterations, the majority slightly out of focus, or blurred.

The images clearly respond to imaginaries associated with the 'border of Empire', seeing natives and workers not as individuals but as part of the scene. But the subject of her photographs is not investment, or property, or the production cycle, as it is in the other known photographic albums of the nitrate desert. Neither is it the worker, or the machine, or the worker standing, as an extension of the machine. Loomis Todd's photographs constitute a visual diary of a frontier territory, capturing fleeting moments of hard labour around the nitrate fields of Alianza, making visible the movement of the bodies of men and animals at the very moment of exploitation. While not providing a vision 'against the grain', Mabel's photographs do give, however, a 'deviant' view. These negatives are, perhaps, the only known photographic images of that time and place not made by the nitrate producers themselves. It is for this reason, and because they have never been published before, that her photographs are an important contribution to the visual history of the nitrate desert.

And the Far Silence of Brooding Star Time is composed of 21 photographs from the Mabel Loomis Todd archive, hand-held and photographed against a white A4 paper in Yale University Library.¹³ It is an interpretation of her visual diary, the part of it that looks more closely at what other photographers left unseen, and a presentation of the actual negatives and of the process of working through her archive at Yale University Library. The lines of text under some of the photographs are captions written by Mabel Loomis Todd for images she selected for her lectures.

On the expedition's return home, Mars became a desert narrative imagined from the driest landscape on Earth. Percival Lowell called the Mars photographs "doubt-killing bullets from the planet of war". But, in the end, the theory was abandoned and fell into obscurity. In the context of the history of nitrate, however, the Mars photographs, along with Mabel Loomis Todd's pho-

tographs, can be read not only as the photographic negatives of an illusion, but also as the counter-images of an imagined geography, and of its fallen nitrate workers.

A Desert Archive

Smoking tobacco was an important part of the social and working life of the nitrate worker. Like chewing coca leaves, smoking tobacco helped in enduring the harsh working and living conditions in the Atacama Desert. Smoking and tobacco are recurrent subjects in oral histories, diaries and literary accounts of life in the desert.¹⁴ Included in the exhibition is a large collection of over six hundred used tobacco wrappers dating from the 1870s to the 1920s (the 'British nitrate era') that have been dug out from the rubbish dumps of abandoned nitrate towns in the Atacama Desert by Gjorgji Gjuranovic, an amateur historian and archaeologist from Iquique. This personal collection is an archive of the desert, preserved for more than a hundred years in the driest landscape on Earth.¹⁵ Laid out in a large grid, it configures a historical tapestry of the material life of the nitrate worker.

From the 1920s onwards Chilean nitrate production in the Atacama Desert became financially unsustainable, the factories began to close down and the desert towns were eventually abandoned. The closing of nitrate *oficinas* was followed by the dismantling and selling of their machinery, the metal and wood from their industrial and residential constructions and railway lines, bricks, pipes, glass panels and corrugated iron. Industrial sites were not left to crumble, but literally removed right down to their foundations. Whatever form, shape or structure may have been left standing, seen as worthless or an impossible task, was later demolished by earthquakes and by Pinochet's air force.

For years local enthusiasts of the desert, or of history, have made leisurely expeditions to the former industrial towns and settlements to excavate the rubbish dumps, searching for things of little value such as cutlery, crockery, tins, bits of machinery and tools, personal and industrial documents, clothes, pottery, and so on. These collections of fragments of discarded objects can give an idea of the everyday life in the desert nitrate towns, they can bring to the present some sense of the material history of the disappeared communities of nitrate workers. Such is the case with Gjorgji Gjuranovic's collection of used tobacco wrappers. These fragile fragments of paper contain images of historical figures, characters and celebrities of the time, as well as popular verses, riddles, jokes and anecdotes. They constituted a source of popular knowledge and had an im-

portant role in social life in those isolated workers' communities. The meticulous and careful gathering and recovering of such discarded, fragile and ephemeral objects is a reminder of the social condition of the document, and the social and political value of collecting and collections.

Sites Of Capital

The London Stock Exchange Year-Book of 1908 lists 45 nitrate companies, sharing 18 postal addresses located in 9 streets in the City of London (and 3 streets in Liverpool). This counter-geography of nitrate in the financial district of London gives an indication that this industry was run and managed by a small number of people. But, above all, it is an indication of its different geographical dimensions on each side of the Atlantic.

In the Atacama Desert, construction and demolition was a single cycle of arrival and departure of capital, of investment and abandonment. In the City, however, construction and demolition perform a constant, hardly interrupted, cycle of production and reproduction of capital. On some occasions, however, as happened in the early 1990s, demolition fell unexpectedly upon the City.

On the 10th of April 1992, the Baltic Exchange, located in the City of London since the mid-eighteenth century, was demolished by a fertiliser bomb inside a white van, planted by the IRA. The following year, on the 24th of April 1993, the IRA planted another bomb inside a blue tipper truck parked opposite the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) in Bishopsgate. As a result of the blast the medieval church of St. Ethelburga was completely destroyed, but was rebuilt ten years later to house the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. The font that survived the explosion displays an engraved circular palindrome in ancient Greek that reads: 'Cleanse my transgressions, not only my appearance'.

From the High-Rises like Rain includes a framed text piece that combines the register of the nitrate companies in the London Stock Exchange

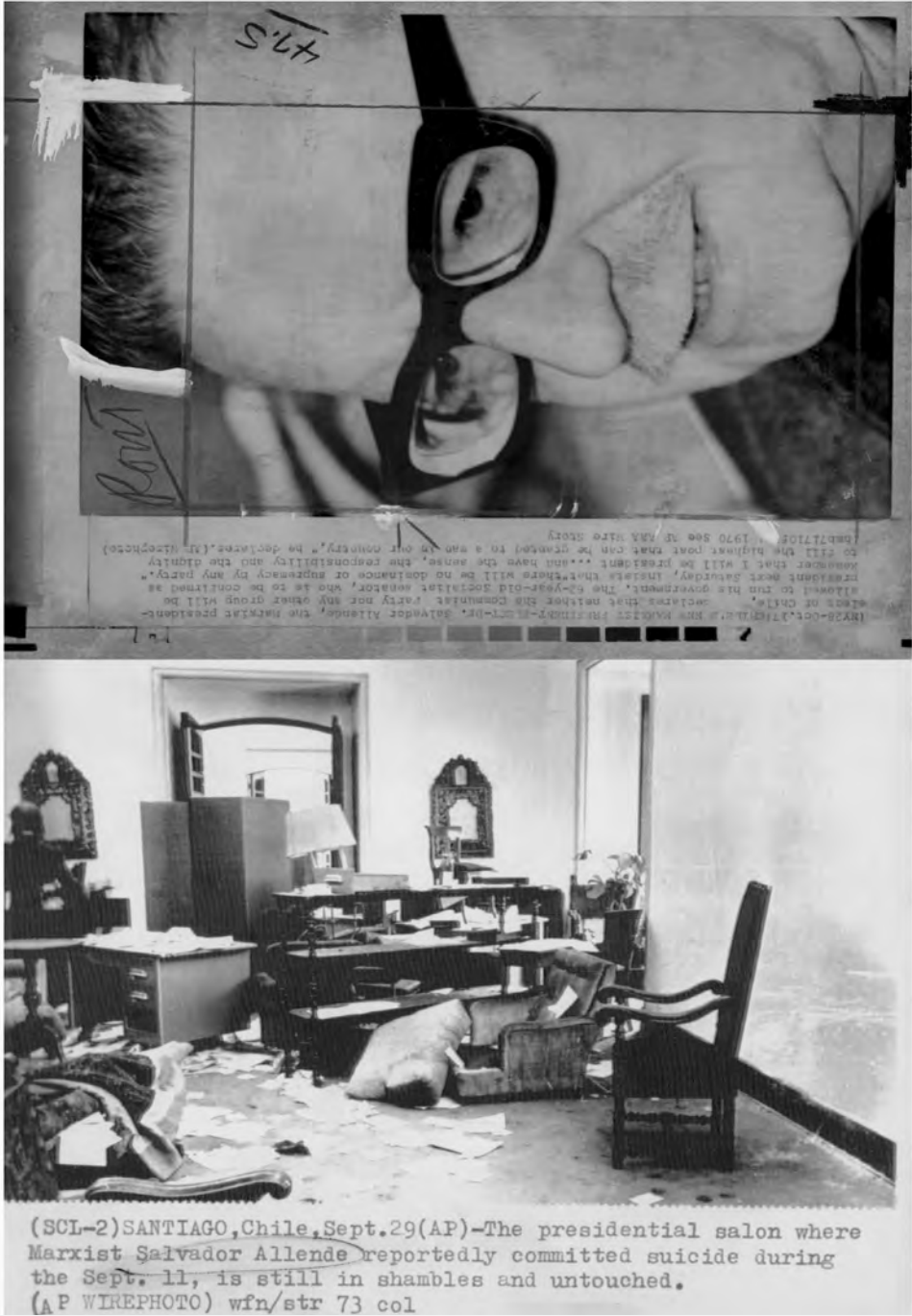


Figure 9. **A History of Detonations** (2014) Nr 11 [layout of the MACBA book pages 52 and 27]. Original in color. Found discarded press wirephotos of Salvador Allende in 1971, and of his office in 1973 after committing suicide.



Year-Book of 1908, listed by address, and text fragments from IRA communiqués and reports on the IRA explosions by the Metropolitan Police and the Museum of London Archaeological Service (MOLAS). The images and text of this final series, therefore, bring together two geographies superimposed onto each other: that of nitrate as commodity and capital, and that of resistance to colonial impositions.

With the explosions on the streets of London's financial district, the transformative and destructive qualities of nitrate as mineral, commodity and capital come full circle■

Lecture at the Auditorium, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Barcelona. Friday afternoon, 29th November 2013.



*Figure 10. From **The High-Rises Like Rain** (2013) Nr 1. Original in color. Site of the Baltic Exchange IRA bomb attack in 1992, opposite St. Mary Axe, City of London.*

*Figure 11. From **The High-Rises Like Rain** (2013) Nr 9. Original in color. Site of the Baltic Exchange IRA bomb attack in 1992, St. Mary Axe, City of London.*

Notes

- ¹ This paper is a revised version of the symposium's keynote presentation. Since then, the project Nitrate has been exhibited at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), The Bluecoat, Liverpool, and the Museo Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona.
- ² Georges Didi-Huberman, Cuando las imágenes toman posición. Editorial Antonio Machado, 2008
- ³ See Paola Cortés-Roca, El tiempo y la máquina, Editorial Colihue, 2011
- ⁴ See James R. Ryan, Picturing Empire. Photography and the visualization of the British Empire, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 53
- ⁵ Michael Monteón, Chile in the Nitrate Era. The Evolution of Economic Dependence, 1880-1930, University of Wisconsin Press, 1982
- ⁶ There are significant overlaps between nitrate and copper in the way they circulate from material to immaterial form, from mineral to capital, and between the historical global networks of nitrate and the contemporary ones of copper, which the 'Traces of Nitrate' research team seek to explore in a forthcoming exhibition and conference in Chile. See Ignacio Acosta's photographic project Copper Geographies (www.ignacioacosta.com)
- ⁷ Louise Purbrick "Nitrate Traffic". In Xavier Ribas Nitrate, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2014, p. 30
- ⁸ Michael Taussig, My Cocaine Museum, University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 87-88
- ⁹ Carles Guerra, "Unfolding the Documentary Dispositive". In Xavier Ribas Nitrate, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2014, p. 16
- ¹⁰ For the concept of imagined geography see Edward W. Said, "Orientalism". The Georgia Review, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 1977), p. 162-206
- ¹¹ Reproduced by permission of the Lowell Observatory
- ¹² For the complete transcript of Loomis Todd's unpublished manuscript see: Xavier Ribas, Nitrate, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2014
- ¹³ Reproduced by permission of Mabel Loomis Todd Papers (MS 486C), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library
- ¹⁴ See the literary works by Hernán Rivera Letelier
- ¹⁵ See installation photographs at www.xavierribas.com. Reproduced by permission of Gjorgji Gjuranovic

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XAVIER RIBAS

Barcelona, 1960. Based in Brighton, UK. Photographer, senior lecturer at the University of Brighton, and visiting lecturer at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia. He studied Social Anthropology at the University of Barcelona and Documentary Photography at the Newport School of Art and Design. His recent works take the form of large photographic grids, often including text, archive materials and moving image, examining temporary settlements, urban sites of corporate development and exclusion, border territories, and geographies of extraction. Xavier Ribas has been involved in many international exhibitions including the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, the Stedelijk Museum, the Bluecoat Liverpool, Museo Universidad de Navarra, Belfast Exposed, Aperture Gallery, George Eastman House, Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Centro Huarte - Pamplona and Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo - Madrid.