



University of Brighton

**LOUISE PURBRICK,
XAVIER RIBAS AND
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TRAFFICKING THE EARTH

Examining strategies of visual display to create
new perspectives on the past

RESEARCH OUTPUT

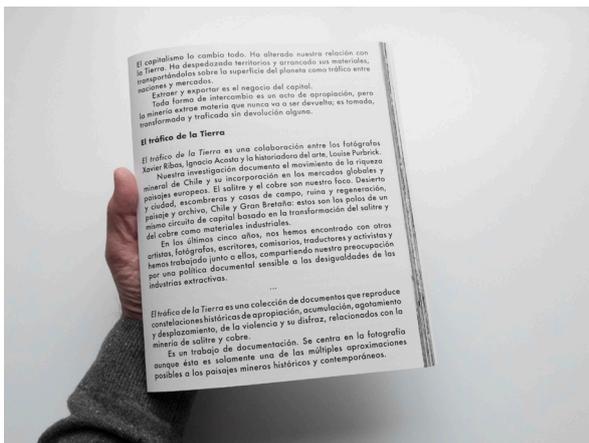


Trafficking the Earth is an installation artwork comprising 336 photographs and texts, and a publication of 58 images and texts, produced in the context of Chilean nitrate mining and its legacies.

Produced collaboratively by Louise Purbrick, Xavier Ribas and Ignacio Acosta, the installation tests a curatorial technique that juxtaposes words and images to create new constellations of meaning. This is done to disrupt a linear narrative of a past running smoothly into the present and to prompt alternative readings. Along with historical images and archival documents, the exhibition and publication draw on the photographic work produced as part of the AHRC funded research project *Traces of Nitrate: Mining History and Photography Between Britain and Chile*, developed by photographer Ribas in collaboration with historian Purbrick between 2012-2018. This included photographic work by Acosta, their joint doctoral supervisee (completed 2017).

Trafficking the Earth documents the movement of mineral wealth from Chile into global markets and European landscapes. Each element is a fragment of the history of mining in Chile from the late nineteenth century to the present day. The work witnesses and makes meaning from the traces left through the industrial extraction of copper and nitrate from the Atacama Desert, Chile, and the accumulation of their values in metropolitan sites, the City of London and the houses of British merchants in particular.

The original exhibition at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo [MAC], Santiago, Chile [8 September 2017 - 12 November 2017] contained additional, contextual works and was accompanied by a symposium, *Visibility, Materiality and Mining*, also held at MAC on 8 September 2017. The parallel publication, described as a 'folded exhibition', was specially produced to distribute free among environmental activists, pressure groups, lawyers and school teachers in mining communities in Chile.



Trafficking the Earth

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo
 Universidad de Chile, Santiago
 7 September - 12 November 2017
 Acosta, Purbrick and Ribas
 336 photographs and texts

Trafficking the Earth



Trafficking the Earth
Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad de
Chile, Santiago, Chile 2017



Trafficking the Earth



(above) **Trafficking the Earth**
[left] The City, London, UK, 2013
[right] El Teniente underground copper mine
Comuna de Machalí, Chile, 2014

(below) **Trafficking the Earth**
Installation view of artwork (detail)
Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad de
Chile, Santiago, 7 September - 12 November 2017



Trafficking the Earth

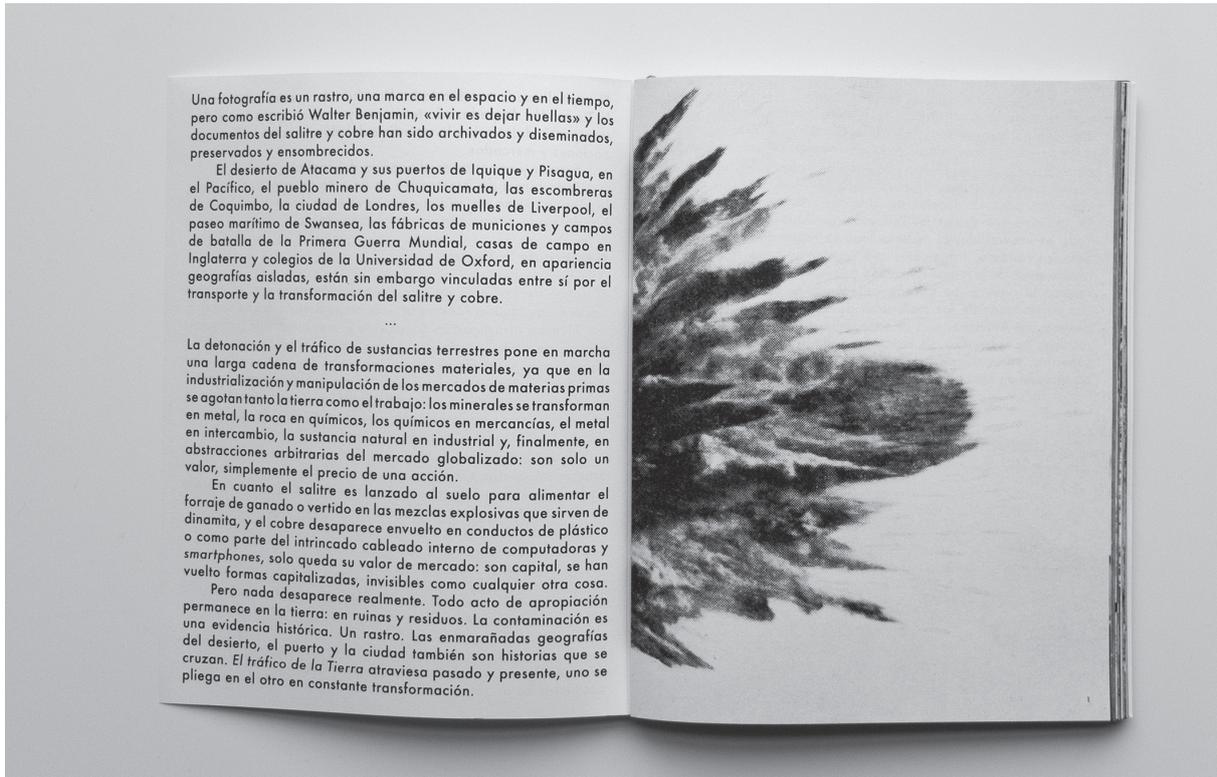
Trafficking the Earth

(right) Presentation box of artwork photographs to the permanent collection of Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (MSSA)

(below) Installation view of artwork Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Universidad de Chile, Santiago, 7 September - 12 November 2017



Trafficking the Earth



Una fotografía es un rastro, una marca en el espacio y en el tiempo, pero como escribió Walter Benjamin, «vivir es dejar huellas» y los documentos del salitre y cobre han sido archivados y diseminados, preservados y ensombrecidos.

El desierto de Atacama y sus puertos de Iquique y Pisagua, en el Pacífico, el pueblo minero de Chuquicamata, las escombreras de Coquimbo, la ciudad de Londres, los muelles de Liverpool, el paseo marítimo de Swansea, las fábricas de municiones y campos de batalla de la Primera Guerra Mundial, casas de campo en Inglaterra y colegios de la Universidad de Oxford, en apariencia geografías aisladas, están sin embargo vinculadas entre sí por el transporte y la transformación del salitre y cobre.

...

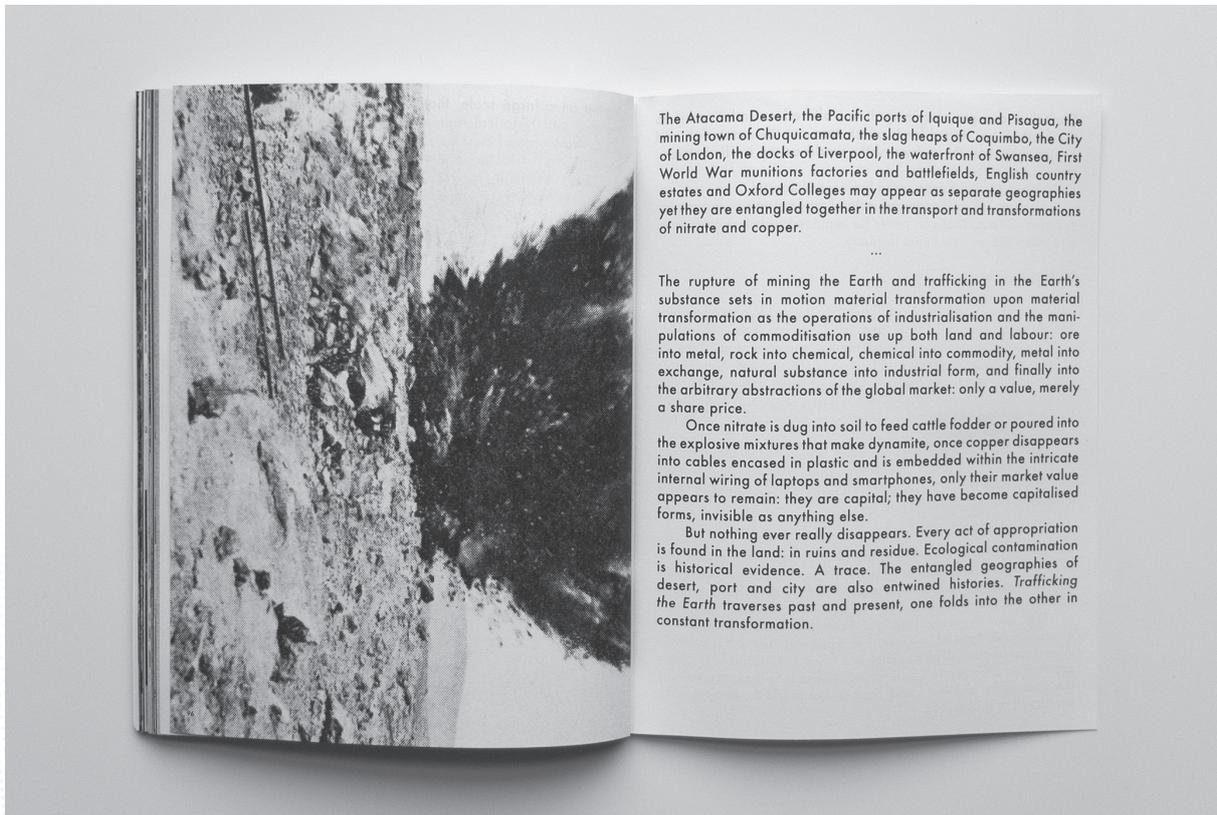
La detonación y el tráfico de sustancias terrestres pone en marcha una larga cadena de transformaciones materiales, ya que en la industrialización y manipulación de los mercados de materias primas se agotan tanto la tierra como el trabajo: los minerales se transforman en metal, la roca en químicos, los químicos en mercancías, el metal en intercambio, la sustancia natural en industrial y, finalmente, en abstracciones arbitrarias del mercado globalizado: son solo un valor, simplemente el precio de una acción.

En cuanto el salitre es lanzado al suelo para alimentar el forraje de ganado o vertido en las mezclas explosivas que sirven de dinamita, y el cobre desaparece envuelto en conductos de plástico o como parte del intrincado cableado interno de computadoras y smartphones, solo queda su valor de mercado: son capital, se han vuelto formas capitalizadas, invisibles como cualquier otra cosa.

Pero nada desaparece realmente. Todo acto de apropiación permanece en la tierra: en ruinas y residuos. La contaminación es una evidencia histórica. Un rastro. Las enmarañadas geografías del desierto, el puerto y la ciudad también son historias que se cruzan. El tráfico de la Tierra atraviesa pasado y presente, uno se pliega en el otro en constante transformación.

Trafficking the Earth

(top) Pages 2 and 3 and (below) pages 102 and 103
Chilean nitrate publicity postcard, c.1920



The Atacama Desert, the Pacific ports of Iquique and Pisagua, the mining town of Chuquicamata, the slag heaps of Coquimbo, the City of London, the docks of Liverpool, the waterfront of Swansea, First World War munitions factories and battlefields, English country estates and Oxford Colleges may appear as separate geographies yet they are entangled together in the transport and transformations of nitrate and copper.

...

The rupture of mining the Earth and trafficking in the Earth's substance sets in motion material transformation upon material transformation as the operations of industrialisation and the manipulations of commoditisation use up both land and labour: ore into metal, rock into chemical, chemical into commodity, metal into exchange, natural substance into industrial form, and finally into the arbitrary abstractions of the global market: only a value, merely a share price.

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 have 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 desert, port and city are also entwined histories. *Trafficking the Earth* traverses past and present, one folds into the other in constant transformation.

Trafficking the Earth

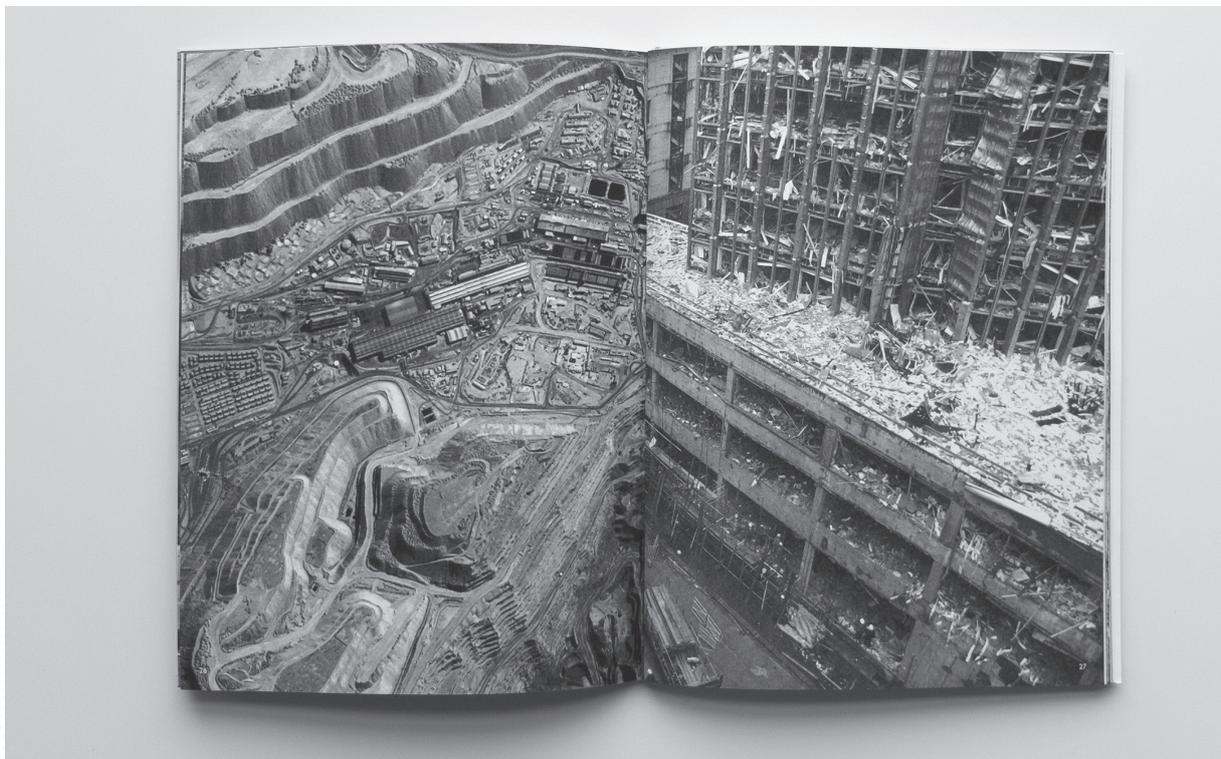


(above) *El tráfico de la Tierra*
Installation view
Centro de Arte y Naturaleza (CDAN)
Huesca, Spain
18 December 2019 - 12 April 2020

(below) *Resolution is not the Point*
Installation view
Photo 50, London Art Fair
London
17 - 21 January 2018



Trafficking the Earth



Trafficking the Earth
(top) Spread of pages 44 and 53 prior to compilation.
Details of three paintings from the art collection of
Henry Hucks Gibbs, Lord Aldenham (1819-1907)
scanned from a Sotheby & Co. auction catalogue
London, UK, 1937

Trafficking the Earth
(bottom left) Aerial view of Chuquicamata, c. 2013
(bottom right) Press photograph of the IRA
Bishopsgate bombing, London, UK, 1993

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



Trafficking the Earth
(left) Masts from clippers owned by the Gibbs & Co merchant house, Tynesfield, UK
(right) Advertising billboard, Route 25 Calama, Atacama, Chile, 2012

The body of data and documentation posed questions as to the means through which photographic display might consolidate and develop the enquiry and be utilised to communicate a shared understanding with a wider community.

The questions were refined during the development of the exhibition and publication. They asked how collaborative investigation into nitrate mining could be used to better understand the communication of fragmented and hidden histories, ones which are politically charged and which survive in the traces of visual and material culture.

- What strategies of visual presentation are most effective in generating, sequencing and interpreting a dispersed material culture and a disparate historical record such as the British-Chilean relationship over the nitrate trade?
- In what ways can the practice of exhibiting visual research contribute to a greater public understanding of neglected colonial histories?
- To what extent can re-mapping the routes of nitrate trafficking between Britain and Chile broaden an understanding of the visual culture of colonialism and revise histories of imperialism and globalisation?
- How far is a photographic exhibition (static or published) a tool of resistance?

RESEARCH CONTEXT



Xavier Ribas
A History of Detonations
12 posters

Exhibited alongside the *Trafficking the Earth* artwork at the original exhibition of the same name, held in Chile, and providing some of the imagery for the publication. Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Universidad de Chile, Santiago, 7 September - 12 November 2017

***Trafficking the Earth* represents a collection of documents that reproduces historical constellations of appropriation and accumulation, depletion and displacement, violence and its disguise, begun by mining nitrate and copper.**

The photographs range across the life of nitrate from mining to the traces left of its use:

- documenting former and current sites of extraction in the Atacama Desert;
- visualising labour and labour communities through research in photographic archives in Chile and the USA, and historical sites related to the formation of the modern Chilean labour movement;
- visualising investment capital through documentation of sites in the City of London and research in archives in the UK related to merchant houses and venture capitalists.

The contextual knowledge base drawn on for the curated exhibition also included sustained archival research, which enabled the identification of places, objects and their histories. These records of the nitrate industry (for example, nineteenth century photographs within the Museo Universidad de Navarra, or the Archives of Anthony Gibbs and Son (Guildhall Library) were scrutinised as representations: their visual language was far from objective, suggesting preconceptions of what was 'foreign' or 'familiar', which defined land as a commodity, and which privileged the character of the financial investor, masking the identity or contribution of the nitrate miner.

It was conducted in collaboration with partners at the Universidad de Chile, Museu d'art Contemporani de Barcelona and Museo Universidad de Navarra, Spain, and The Bluecoat, Liverpool, UK.

RESEARCH PROCESS

***Trafficking the Earth* directly addressed a gap in historical understanding and cultural awareness of the global significance of the nitrate industry.**

The form of a public exhibition was used to explore how transformation over time could be carefully mapped to create 'biographies' of nitrate sites and artefacts, paying close attention to how mineral wealth has been collected, classified, or allowed to disappear, and to the preservation or regeneration of twentieth century landscapes of industry and finance.

A current generation of photographers have developed a slower practice of critical scrutiny of the aftermath, focused upon a site of violence rather than the act of violence itself. Such photography engages with the interests of anthropologists, archaeologists, cultural historians and cultural geographers in the meaning of the site of history.

The breadth of this audience interest matched the diverse nature of the subject and the methods of enquiry requiring a complex approach and one that reflected the fragmentary nature of visual and material histories. The curation process also recognised the diversity of the academic approaches at work in understanding global influences on and traces left by the Chilean mining industries: visual cultures of colonialism; contemporary photographic practice; the material culture and heritage of conflict.

To bring this to the audience, the researchers chose to use 48 specially written texts alongside 288 photographs. These images included a range of photographic subjects: historic photographs of mineworking, pictures of text in letters, contemporary landscapes and cityscapes and macro-photography. The curation brings this to the audience through an interchange of contrasting or comparative views: photographs of wide-sky landscape alongside those of intimate detail; compositions of a broad, inclusive nature alongside those with unusual crops and angles; workers in active work, posing on site or at rest; scientific laboratory detail against domestic interiors; some images are segmented and separated in the piece, offering hints at the ways the trace of cultural and financial capital reveals itself.

The eight text elements of the publication operate alongside the 50 images, fusing the disparate visual stimuli. The bilingual text is arranged for Spanish and English each to occupy one half of the publication. Imagery is often printed across the uncompiled spreads so that, when compiled, one image is split over two parts of the publication, each becoming an independent part of the relationship with the bilingual text [see pages 06 and 08]. This invites an understanding of the historical and visual research process that underpins the complex historical subject and the work needed to uncover, appreciate and communicate it.

The visual strategies adopted enable the audience to navigate a journey through the documented traces of the nitrate mining. They confront these traces through the photographic and textual work, which reveal a history that is contested and obscured by the movement of global capital. The trace is recognised as a complex material residue that is both evidential and evocative. A register of presence and absence, it appears, simultaneously, to belong to both past and present. *Trafficking the Earth* used the potential of the trace motif to reduce separations between different moments of time and reveal the complexities of a shared global past. It engaged a wide variety of people including gallery visitors, heritage professionals, researchers in the university sector and members of local history groups.

Trafficking the Earth



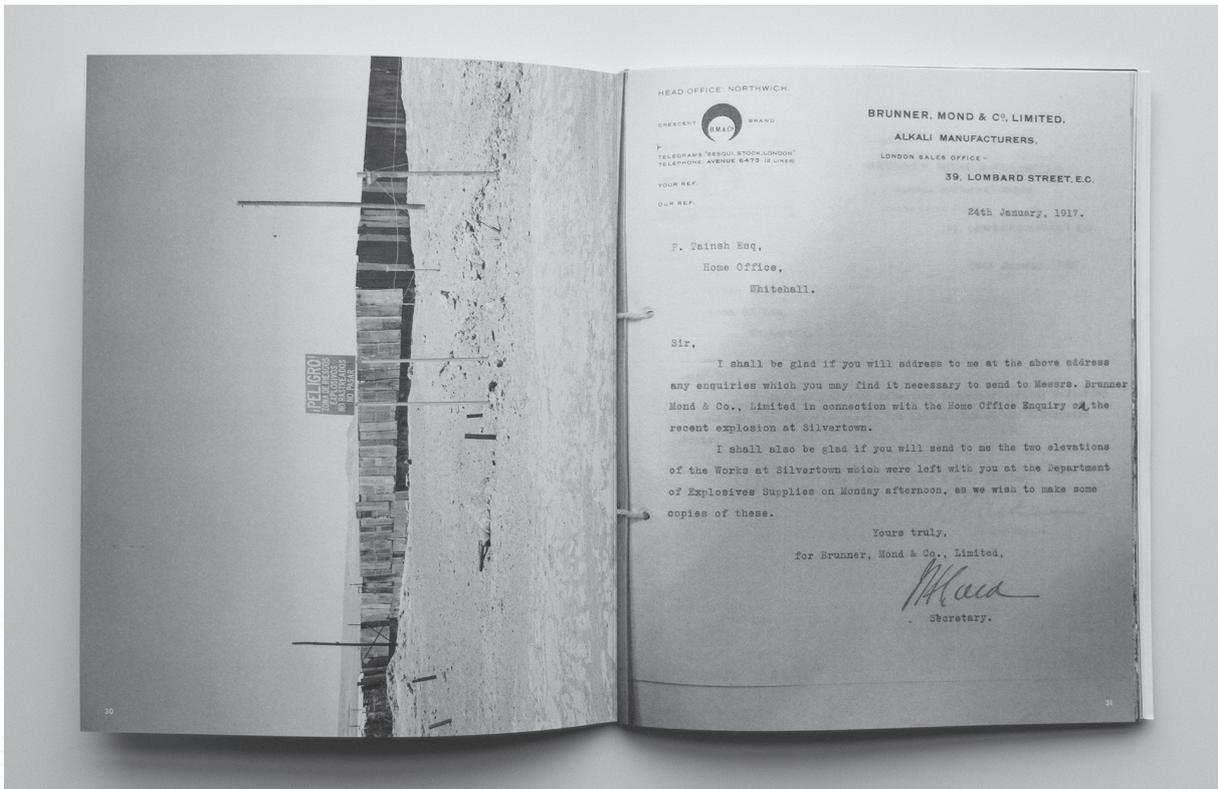
(above) **Trafficking the Earth**
(left) The Temple of Augustus, Virginia Water, Windsor Great Park, UK, some five hundred metres from the property where Augusto Pinochet lived under house arrest during 1999, 2015
(right) Oficina Paposo's slag heap Chile 2012

(overleaf) **Trafficking the Earth**
(top left p.13.) Louise Purbrick examining the photographic album 'Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899', Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain, 2012
(bottom left p.13) Chacabuco nitrate town, Atacama, Chile, 2011; (bottom right) Letter from alkali manufacturers to Home Office regarding Silvertown explosion, 1917

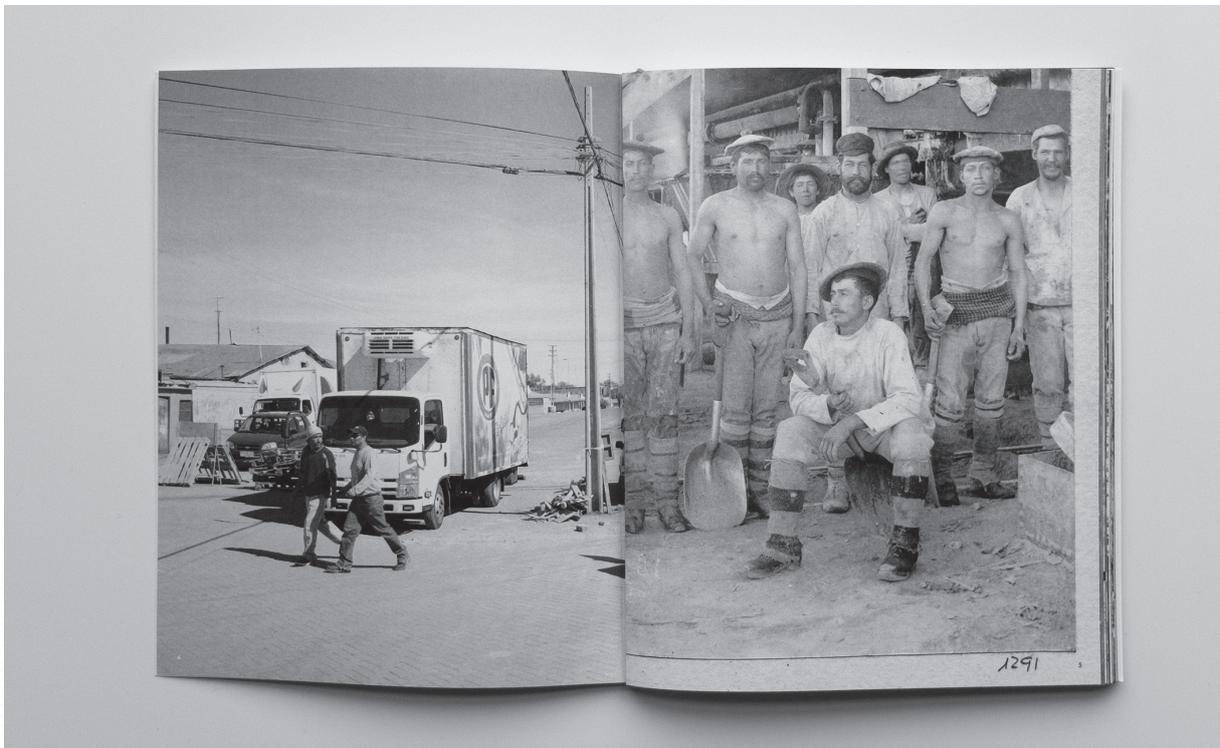
Thus it is possible to see, and perhaps feel, historical change in a ruin; it is not read as a narrative that opens and closes in carefully crafted prose of a history book. Instead, the past just appears in the present.

Así, es posible ver y tal vez sentir el cambio histórico en una ruina; no se leer como un relato que se abre y se cierra en la elaborada prosa de un libro de Historia. En vez, el pasado aparece en el presente.

Trafficking the Earth



Trafficking the Earth



(top) **Trafficking the Earth** installation detail showing juxtaposition of image and text loosely wall-hung

(bottom) **Trafficking the Earth** (left) María Elena nitrate town, Atacama, Chile, 2011 (right) Photograph from the photographic album Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899

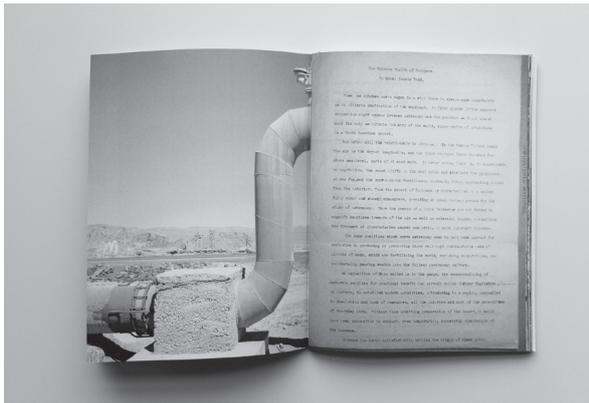
RESEARCH INSIGHTS



***Trafficking the Earth* uncovered new ways for complex historical and political perspectives to be brought to an audience.**

The subject of the photography itself is the surplus of mining, its ruins, rubble and waste. The curatorial process, however, moves away from a straightforward set of pictures and instead offers perspectives through which the effects of global capitalism can be understood.

Assembling and analysing these spatial, visual, material, archival records indicated where British and Chilean histories converged and separated. It allowed research insights into the selective process of remembering and forgetting the past, and the problems associated with contested spaces and unequally shared legacies.



These curatorial methods reveal new interpretations of the 'traces' that remain of a large-scale capitalist activity, which have become dispersed and rendered invisible except for their nature as capital. The work is a display of documentation. Photography is only one type of document in historical and contemporary mining landscapes, and the exhibition develops ways in which fragmented imagery is placed alongside text to bring experience and understanding. A photograph is a trace, an imprint of time and space, but as Walter Benjamin wrote, 'to live is to leave traces' and the documents of nitrate and copper are found in many places, preserved and obscured. Through the curation, audiences become aware of this process and share an understanding of the historical uncovering that photography can provide.

Trafficking the Earth
(top right) Jar containing Chilean nitrate once belonging to John Thomas North (1842-1896), c.1889

(bottom left) Pipe Atacama, Chile, 2012

(bottom right) Manuscript of *The Nitrate Wealth of Tarapacá* written by Mabel Loomis Todd after her stay at Oficina Alianza Iquique in 1907

The researchers' photo essay in *Transformations* develops this method and is explicit as to the use of the process of curation with fragmentation and 'constellation':

...*Trafficking the Earth does not translate the extractivist project in Chile into a linear narrative of the inevitably unfolding logic of capitalist development leading to a neoliberal prototype: the export of mineral life overseen by an authoritarian regime that refuses to recognise rights in land and labour until they are detached from their source, transformed into property and exchanged as commodities through the global market of financial capitalism. This happened, and is happening, but remains an unseen, unequally shared everyday reality. Rather, Trafficking the Earth*



Trafficking the Earth
Installation view of exhibition
Museo de Arte Contemporáneo
Universidad de Chile, Santiago
7 September - 12 November 2017

explores the notion that concentrated simultaneous attention upon at least two different spatial and temporal events is required to acknowledge the close connection between the distant ruptured landscape of the Atacama Desert, its surface exploded to fire out caliche rocks containing nitrate or carved away by high-powered diggers of open cast copper mines, and the here and now, right now...

(Purbrick, Ribas and Acosta, 2020)

Photography and the photographic exhibition were seen to operate in political ways. The photographs of *Trafficking the Earth* resist the processes of exchange and degradation that are inherent in the fate of a mined commodity, and reveal the human as well as the material interchange behind the surpluses of mining. By introducing this through visual means, the curation allowed the documentation to be open to multiple eyes and new interpretations. *Trafficking the Earth* recognised and demonstrated the importance of disrupting historical chronology, and normal senses of geography and distance, in order to give political meaning.

DISSEMINATION

Exhibitions

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Universidad de Chile (MAC), Chile, 8 September – 12 November 2017. <http://tracesofnitrate.org/filter/Exhibitions/2017-Trafficking-the-Earth> [Accessed January 2021]

Centro de Arte y Naturaleza, Huesca, Spain, 24 October 2019 - 7 June 2020. <http://www.cdan.es/exposicion/acosta-ribas-purbrick-el-trafico-de-la-tierra/> [Accessed January 2021]

Resolution is not the Point. Photo 50 exhibition at the London Art Fair, 'Traces of Nitrate', 17-21 January 2018, curated by Hemera Collective. <https://www.londonartfair.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PRESS-RELEASE-Artists-announced-for-Photo50-at-London-Art-Fair-2018.pdf> [Accessed January 2021]

Collection

Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende, Santiago, Chile.

Publications

Trafficking the Earth (2017) Intuitive Editions, London - Editorial Gronefot, Santiago. Spanish and English, 25.5 x 20.2 cm. 96 pages, unbound. ISBN: 978-0-9932245-3-9

'Trafficking the Earth: Documents on Nitrate, Copper and Capitalism.' *Transformations Journal*, Issue 33: Mineral Transformation and Resource Extraction: Pasts Presents and Futures. ISSN 1444-3775, pp.1-23.

Selected presentations

Acosta, I., Purbrick, L. and Ribas, X. (2017) 'El Trafico de la Tierra'. *Visibility, Materiality and Mining Symposium*. Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad de Chile, Santiago, 8 September.

Purbrick, L. and Ribas, X. (2019) 'Traces of Nitrate: The documentation of historical loss.' *Arts Of Extraction Symposium*, University of Essex, 31 January - 1 February 2019. <http://tracesofnitrate.org/filter/Conference-Papers/2019-Traces-of-Nitrate-The-Documentation-of-Historical-Loss> [Accessed January 2021]

Ribas, X. (2014) 'Nitrate'. *Urban Encounters: Movements, Mobilities, Migrations*. Tate Britain, October 2014. Viewed September 2020 <http://tracesofnitrate.org/filter/Conference-Papers/2014-Urban-Encounters-2014-Movements-Mobilities-Migrations> [Accessed January 2021]

Ribas, X. (2016) 'Nitrate: Visual anthropology research.' *Goldsmiths' Research-Practice Seminar Series*. London, 28 September. <http://tracesofnitrate.org/filter/Events/2016-Goldsmiths-Research-Practice-Seminar-Series> [Accessed January 2021]

Ribas, X. (2017) 'Notes on the Index: Photograph, Trace, Subject'. *A Handful Of Dust*. Whitechapel Gallery, 17 June. <http://tracesofnitrate.org/filter/Events/2017-Notes-on-the-Index-Photograph-Trace-Subject> [Accessed January 2021]

Ribas, X. (2017) 'Nitrate'. *Investigación / Fotografía*. Contemporaneidad y Patrimonio and CICUS, Centro de Iniciativas Culturales Universidad de Sevilla, 16 - 17 February. <http://tracesofnitrate.org/filter/Events/2017-University-of-Seville> [Accessed January 2021]

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- Blanch, T. ed. (2015) *Topografías Invisibles. Estrategias críticas entre arte y geografía*. Barcelona: University of Barcelona Press. <http://tracesofnitrate.org/filter/Publications/2016-Invisible-Topographies-Critical-Strategies-Between-Art-and> (Accessed July 2020)
- Purbrick, L. Ribas, X. and Acosta, I. (2017) *Trafficking the Earth*, Intuitive Editions, London - Editorial Gronefot, Santiago.
- Purbrick, L. Ribas, X. and Acosta, I. (2020) 'Trafficking the Earth: Documents on Nitrate, Copper and Capitalism'. *Transformations Journal*, Issue 33: Mineral Transformation and Resource Extraction: Past Presents and Futures. ISSN 1444-3775. http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Trans33_01_acosta_et_al.pdf (Accessed July 2020)
- Purbrick, L. (2019) 'Trafficking the Earth, past resistance, future reclamation'. *Photography as Resistance*. <https://photographyandresistance.wordpress.com/2019/01/21/louise-purbrick-trafficking-the-earth-past-resistance-future-reclamation/> (Accessed July 2020)
- p.09. Louise Purbrick, Masts from clippers owned by the Gibbs & Co merchant house, Tyntesfield, UK; Ignacio Acosta, Advertising billboard, Route 25 Calama, Atacama, Chile, 2012.
- p.12. Xavier Ribas, The Temple of Augustus, Virginia Water, Windsor Great Park, UK, some five hundred metres from the property where Augusto Pinochet lived under house arrest during 1999, 2015; Xavier Ribas, Oficina Paposó's slag heap, Chile 2012.
- p.13. Xavier Ribas: Louise Purbrick examining the photographic album 'Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899', Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain, 2012; Chacabuco nitrate town, Atacama, Chile, 2011. Letter from alkali manufacturers to Home Office regarding Silvertown explosion, 1917, National Archives, London.
- p.14. Photograph from the photographic album 'Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899', listed as Album 12. Reproduced by permission of Museo Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain.
- p.15. Jar containing Chilean nitrate having belonged to John Thomas North (1842-1896), c.1889. Reproduced by permission of University of Greenwich Archive, Proctor Collection, London, UK; Ignacio Acosta, Pipe, Atacama, Chile, 2012; Manuscript of 'The Nitrate Wealth of Tarapacá', written by Mabel Loomis Todd after her stay at Oficina Alianza, Iquique, in 1907. Reproduced by permission of Mabel Loomis Todd Papers (MS486C), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, Yale, USA.

IMAGE CREDITS

- p.04. Xavier Ribas, The City, London, UK, 2013; Ignacio Acosta, El Teniente underground copper mine, Comuna de Machalí, Chile, 2014.
- p.06. Chilean nitrate publicity postcard, c.1920.
- p.08. Details of three paintings from the art collection of Henry Hucks Gibbs, Lord Aldenham (1819-1907) scanned from a Sotheby & Co. auction catalogue, London, UK, 1937; Ignacio Acosta, Aerial view of Chuquicamata, c. 2013. Reproduced by permission of Servicio Aerofotogramétrico de la Fuerza Aérea de Chile (SAF); Press photograph of the IRA Bishopsgate bombing, London, UK, 1993. © Press Association / Gtresonline.

(overleaf)
Trafficking the Earth
 Presentation box of artwork
 photographs to the permanent
 collection of Museo de la
 Solidaridad Salvador Allende
 (MSSA)

Trafficking the Earth

