

## ***Quadra Minerale: Rare earth and critic minerals***

A text by Blanca de la Torre

Addressing issues involving fossil resources from the optic of the visual arts without falling into some of the most recurrent commonplaces and aesthetics is a highly fraught task, which is why Rosell Meseguer tackles this subject matter with apposite precaution, taking a subtle approach in which she appropriates the conventional dictionary format in order to offer the reader an apparently simplified way of reading some of the elements of the periodic table and their fossil derivatives.

This compendium compiles knowledge on Geology, Economic Theory and Political Ecology and combines them with the personal archive of the artist's "memory" in the form of maps, drawings, photographs and sketches that have been part of her body of work since 1999, and even objects from her own family, like some beakers for soldiers in the Spanish Civil War belonging to her grandfather, and minerals she acquired or are on loan from IGME (Geological and Mining Institute of Spain).

Meseguer's decision to opt for the format of the old encyclopaedia or dictionary would seem to ironically point to a particular period, the so-called Enlightenment, key to the history of the colonisation of Nature, in which, in the name of alleged —heteropatriarchal, white and Eurocentric—knowledge, the foundations of other types of traditional forms of knowledge were destroyed, like those of indigenous communities and, in consequence, those related to an understanding of and respect for nature.

For T.J. Demos, this process of colonisation, rooted in the Enlightenment principles of Cartesian dualism between the human and non-human world, objectified the non-human world: "Destructive and utilitarian, idealized and exoticized nature has been colonized in concept as well as in practice."<sup>1</sup>

Within the context of the history of the colonialism of nature, mineral resources have always been the main object of desire. The result was the beginning of a battle to control them that is still being waged today in what is now known as corporate colonialism.

And so, the history of what I venture to call "mineral colonialism" evinces, yet again, just how misguided the term 'Anthropocene' is. On one hand, mineral colonialism contradicts the thesis that traces the origins of the destruction of the environment to the industrial era, while it also questions the equal distribution of guilt among all *anthropos*.

At the risk of sounding repetitive, on previous occasions I have argued that the term Anthropocene, introduced by the Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani in 1873 and popularised on the threshold of this millennium by Paul Crutzen, winner of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, should be erased from the media lexicon. This contentious era, under serious question by the community of geologists albeit deeply ingrained in the field of culture, would supposedly replace the previous period known as Holocene, and would assign man the blame for the planet's state of deterioration, whose vertiginous decline would have started in the Industrial Revolution. We ought to be aware of the Eurocentric connotations of the word, which washes its hands of any political, economic and particularly colonial implication in the environmental deterioration of the planet. I believe that other denominations, including 'Chthulhocene', coined by Donna Haraway, and 'Capitalocene', advocated by Andreas Malm and Jason Moore, are more appropriate. Equally arguable are 'Eurocene' and "Technocene initiated by Europeans" proposed by Peter Sloterdijk, or the "white

supremacy scene” suggested by Nicholas Mirzoeff.<sup>2</sup> Other terms worth mentioning have also made their appearance lately, like ‘Gynecene’ by Alexandra Pirici, ‘Pyrocene’ by Stephen Pyne or ‘Plantationocene’ by Anna Tsing and the aforementioned Haraway.

The next cut-off point would be the start of carbon emissions from fossil fuels. Accordingly, European colonialism would also be at the origin of the first globalised economy and, as a result, the first global ecology. From that point onwards a new order, also global, is instated, and this order reorganises life on Earth and culminates with the establishment of a regime based on the use of non-renewable resources which will reach its zenith with the Industrial Revolution and William Blake’s “dark Satanic Mills”. As pointed out by Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin “the Anthropocene began with widespread colonialism and slavery: it is a story of how people treat the environment and how people treat each other.”<sup>3</sup>

While gold was the mineral par excellence in the colonial era, its contemporary equivalent would be coltan, the mineral behind the bloodiest war so far this century, mainly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo although it also involved several neighbouring countries in a fight to control the region’s large mineral deposits. The conflict broke out in 1998 and continued until 2003. Since then, the Rwandan army transports the coltan to their country to be shipped from there to Europe, where it is used mostly in the new technologies sector.

In most cases, the profits from the mineral do not benefit in the people of Africa, and instead go towards purchasing shipments of weapons for the guerrillas in a conflict funded by many non-African countries, including USA, Germany, Belgium, Kazakhstan and several multinational corporations.

This war has left one of the world’s richest countries in mineral resources in absolute destitution, opening the episode of what David Harvey has called “the resource curse” which leads to what is known as “accumulation by dispossession.”<sup>4</sup>

Following the same train of thought, Rob Nixon states that it is vulnerable people who suffer what he calls “slow violence,” less visible but persistent in time and the by-product of ongoing environmental pollution, of militarism, of the developmental policies of imperialism, and of the ecological load imposed upon the Global South.<sup>5</sup>

In all armed conflicts there is also a backdrop of environmental causes; underlying all wars is a conflict connected with resources.

This relationship between war and the environment can also be seen in the work of Meseguer as a metaphor, like in her bunkers, her scenes of the ruins of war, and other warlike motifs, like those in her wide-ranging project *Batería de Cenizas. Metaphors of Defence* (1999-2007), which is now continued in *La disuasión. La marea y el límite*.

Razmig Keucheyan talks about a new military humanism with “non-combatant operations” whose mission also consists of “training local armies and police forces, protecting fish stocks, to guarantee the circulation of metal ores and oil and maintaining water and forest resources.”<sup>6</sup> For this sociologist, “future crises of capitalism will be inextricably both economic and ecological.”<sup>7</sup> For Keucheyan, in order to exploit nature, the capitalist state must organise and configure it: “As such, the state organizes nature and places it at capital’s disposal. The generation of capitalist value demands a ceaseless production and destruction of nature. [...] In the modern era, capitalism, nature and the state thus constitute an indissociable triptych.”<sup>8</sup>

Addressing the issue of fossil resources and specially mining is nothing new in Meseguer’s practice, who has already investigated problems associated with the industry in the south of Spain and in countries like Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Chile. In *Tránsitos. From the Mediterranean to the Pacific*, and in *Tamarugal*, a project within that larger body of work, the

artist strikes up a dialogue between past and present in order to underscore the inextricable connection between the economies of those countries and their industries, with the goal of highlighting the role of mining as an agent in the transformation of landscape, both in environmental terms as well as political, economic and social ones.

A significant part of the control of the mining industry in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, concentrated in Murcia (Campo de Cartagena), Almeria and Huelva, and in the above-mentioned Pacific countries, was mostly in British hands, although Germany and the United States also fought for control. Making up a kind of archive that spans from 2005 to 2013, the materials coming from Meseguer's research are rendered across different media, as is habitual in her work, and bring to the fore the connections among the four previously mentioned countries through history and through the power relationships derived from similar models of exploitation.

Basing his argument on the premise that energy is not a resource or a commodity, but an economical prerequisite, Emilio Santiago Muñio describes how the economy has been transformed since the 1970s, eschewing a reality that now seems unquestionable: the end of oil.<sup>9</sup> And black gold is indeed a core element of the project *OVNI Archive*, in which Meseguer brings to the fore certain issues deriving from the Cold War, like espionage, atomic energy, UFOs and the dialectic between reality and fiction, the space race, and the control of oil deposits. As is customary in her work, all these ingredients are rhizomatically interwoven and re-emerge in *Quadra Minerale (Tierras Raras)* in manifold associative links.

This whole backdrop underpins the work of Rosell Meseguer, who endeavours to rescue old formats in the construction of new narratives, to incorporate another discursive dimension to encyclopaedias, the instruments that cemented the patriarchal and anthropocentric foundations of global capitalism.

With her "aesthetic operations", Meseguer strives to bring us closer to common elements from our everyday lives, like gold and copper, or those known as rare-earth elements, urging us to reflect on the use we make of them and calling for the need to reread conventional formats for the construction of new narratives on extraction policies and what are known as "critical minerals."

Finally, *Quadra Minerale* is a further step in Meseguer's artistic exploration while at once functioning as a kind of compendium of her art work and research so far.

These dialogues with history, the past and the present, have been a constant since her earliest output. Conceptual and formal angles intermingle in these conversations with different historical periods, through the recovery of the analogical and of old techniques, particularly photogravure, cyanotype or kallitype ... and in this case also recovering the typology of the old dictionary. A small archive of her own personal archive, a reconstruction made from her own work through an original format with which, yet again, she articulates new narratives through unexpected analogies between the memory and the probability of other possible memories.

<sup>1</sup> TJ Demos. *Decolonizing Nature. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016, p. 36

<sup>2</sup> Blanca de la Torre. *Hybris. Una Posible Aproximación Ecoestética*. León: MUSAC & NOCA Paper, 2017, p. 17-20.

<sup>3</sup> Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin. *The Human Planet. How we created the Anthropocene*. UK: Penguin Random House, 2018, p. 11-13.

<sup>4</sup> David Harvey. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Rob Nixon. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Massachusetts-London: Harvard University Press, 2013. p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Razmig Keucheyan. *Nature is a Battlefield. Towards a Political Ecology*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016, p. 114.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit. p. 148.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit. p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> Emilio Santiago Muñio et al. *Petróleo*. Barcelona: Arcadia Ediciones, 2018, p. 11.

