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# Extremely Unagitated—A Closer Look at the Artistic Practice of Lara Almarcegui

## Helene Romakin

The current situation is *uncanny, extreme, and improbable*. In the popular public consciousness, Covid-19 is a highly improbable event, perhaps comparable to Hurricane Katrina, which hit New Orleans in 2005. Had a fortune teller told us a year ago that a pandemic would strike the entire world in the near future, we would have shaken our heads and exhaled a disappointed sigh. Clearly, such a course of events would have seemed improbable—a mere storyline, nothing of the sort could possibly actually take place. After all, we are not characters from the movie *Outbreak*. The doomsday blockbuster, directed by Wolfgang Petersen in 1995, was based on the nonfiction book *The Hot Zone* (1994) by Richard Preston on viral fevers such as Ebola. The storyline of *Outbreak* pivots around the uncontrollable and furious spread of an Ebola-like virus and its containment in the USA in the late 1960s. However, both Katrina as well as the Covid-19 pandemic are very much real events regardless of how a wider public perceives them as exceptional or even implausible. I explicitly speak of a wider public because scientists and some politicians had very well taken into account the possibility of such events, which had indeed been hinted at or even predicted by previously published research. After the outbreaks of SARS and Ebola, there have been many signs and warnings that these types of pandemics would not remain singular events.

What we experience as situations of the uncanny, the extreme or the improbable is deeply linked to the culturally established ways in which our conception of time is manifest in storytelling, argues Amitav Ghosh in the tradition of feminist philosophy by Donna Haraway, author of *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. In modern storytelling, explains Ghosh, the coupling of probability and improbability plays an essential role: it was with the growing establishment of bourgeois life that modern novels began to mirror a calm and rationalized world with fewer and fewer unexpected narrative threads. Ghosh introduces *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, written in 1856, as exemplary of how narratives could bring daily life to the foreground, profoundly shaping our perception today, which over time has become unreceptive to unpredicta-

ble events. In order to understand the prevailing conception of time in the Western Hemisphere, Ghosh suggests that the geological theories of gradualism and catastrophism of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries should be considered as nothing less than studies of narrative.<sup>1</sup> Geology as a scientific discipline was established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and was still in its infancy when gradualist theories emerged. The gradualist model of geological slowness as developed by James Hutton (1726-97) and his concept of *Deep Time*, or later, Charles Lyell's (1797-1875) analysis on the predictability of geological trends, favored slow processes, not allowing for nature to take any leaps.<sup>2</sup> During the height of the bourgeois period, these geological studies led to a regime of uniformitarianism, an image of the Earth as being shaped by uniform and continuous processes. Gradually, the concept of catastrophism was perceived as unmodern. Although gradualism, as opposed to catastrophism, still dominates the popular discourse, recent geological consensus suggests a concurrence of both “continuous fluxes operating all the time or [...] the spectacular large fluxes that operate during short-lived cataclysmic events.”<sup>3</sup> However, Ghosh argues that the era of global warming

presents [a resistance] to the techniques that are most closely identified with a novel: its essence consists of phenomena that were long ago expelled from the territory of the novel—forces of unthinkable magnitude that create unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space.<sup>4</sup>

The artistic practice of the Rotterdam-based artist Lara Almarcegui provides one such entrance to challenge methods and strategies bundled in categories of time. In her projects, Almarcegui deals with geological matter in an acutely unagitated manner, avoiding the rhetoric of catastrophism while plausibly demonstrating the urgency of acknowledging the consequences of long-term land exploitation. Almarcegui's practice draws from conversations and collaborations with geologists. This essay looks into how Almarcegui's work can be seen as instrumental in creating new narratives and accessible imaginaries about land exploitation and how

her artistic research on mineral and mining rights can become relevant to scientific and legal discourse. To contextualize Almarcegui's work in current environmental discourse, this essay places it in the context of the Capitalocene, a term suggested by Jason W. Moore and Donna Haraway that answers to shortcomings of the notion of the Anthropocene, and it introduces philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's concepts of latency and the broad present.

### Mineral and Mining Rights

*I visited a community waiting for a decision on whether a rutile mine would be opened there. I was deeply impressed by this difficult moment of fear and anticipation.*  
– Lara Almarcegui, 2014<sup>5</sup>

The realization that art is possible beyond the boundaries of gallery and museum walls, and beyond the manageable scale of typical art objects designed for enclosed spaces, was a decisive moment for artist Lara Almarcegui during her studies in the early 1990s. In most of her practice, Almarcegui works with natural materials, such as gravel or volcanic lava sediment, and spends a great deal of time on mining sites and some-

times introduces massive amounts of such materials from pits or nearby quarries to museum spaces.

Over the last fifteen years, Almarcegui has been focusing on the lengthy process of acquiring mineral and mining rights for deposits across Europe to raise public awareness of the existence of these ores and to prevent their mining. In 2015, Almarcegui leased the exploration rights of an iron deposit in Tveitvangen, not far from Oslo, to prevent big companies from mining the ground. Later, she obtained the permits for another iron deposit in Buchkogel and Thal near Graz, Austria, which was recently approved for extension. The acquisition of the rights is usually privately funded by Almarcegui herself. If the acquisition is connected to an institutional project, she sometimes receives financial and organizational support from the institution involved.

It is in this context that Almarcegui investigates the origins of construction materials. In her search for sites where basic materials such as gravel, iron, and clinker are extracted to be later used for the construction of buildings and entire cities, the artist traces *built histories* that surround us every day. In her work, Almarcegui reflects on concepts of land reclamation and exploitation, the recreation of topographies, and the role of geological space and time in the context of climate change.



Lara Almarcegui, *Agras Volcano Mineral Rights*, Video Still, 2019 © the artist.

Typically, Almarcegui's projects combine both working outdoors and bringing the outdoors into exhibition spaces. For a cultural institution, this would often imply granting the artist a conceptual *carte blanche*: Only from the moment Almarcegui receives an invitation to show her work does the actual research begin. She visits the sites, talks to local architects, urbanists, geologists, and many other professionals to decide what kind of project she intends to implement in the surroundings of an institution to finally transfer the results of her work and the generated documentation to the exhibition space.

For her solo exhibition at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (IVAM), on view from July 11 to October 27, 2019, Almarcegui first examined the geological matter of the museum's surrounding area. In her research, she came across the Agras volcano in Cofrentes, some eighty kilometers west of Valencia, which was subject to mining for construction materials such as volcanic ash from the 1960s to the 1980s. For a period of one year, Almarcegui acquired the mineral rights of 270 mining squares, equivalent to 8,100 acres, to explore the area for pozzolanic ash—a material historically used to produce concrete. While extraction at the Agras has ceased, other volcanic sites in the county, such as the Castilla-La Mancha region, have active quarries to this day.

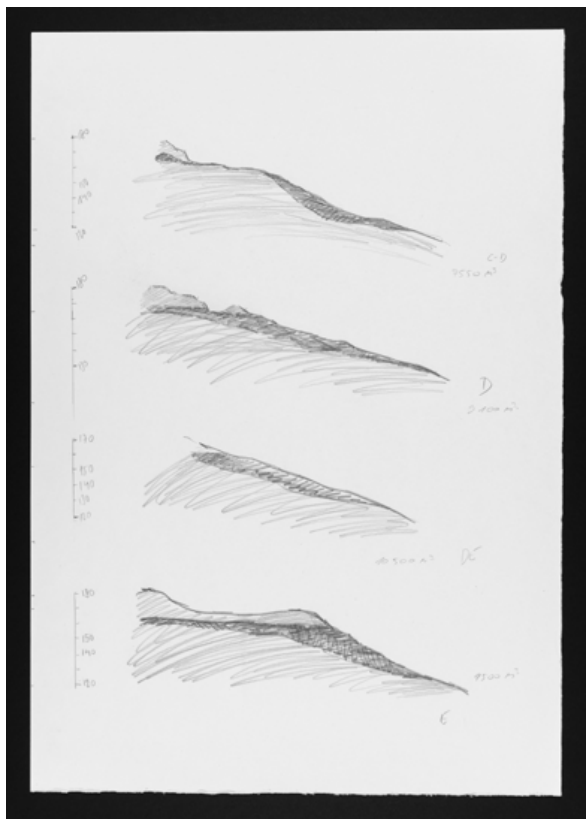
Thus, the exploitation of volcanic areas around Valencia became the central motif of the show.

In the main gallery space at IVAM, Almarcegui placed pozzolanic ashes in a single large pile that spanned over the entire floor surface, leaving just enough room for only one visitor at a time to walk between the margins of the pile and the gallery walls. The pile, spread out to the far corners, appeared almost like an organic figure enclosing the columns that support the second floor of the exhibition space. In her shows, the artist repeatedly challenges the engineering aspects of the exhibiting institutions by introducing no less than the maximum weight of material that the structure of a given building can support. Varying in form, volume, and material, the piles fill the exhibition rooms to the limits of the feasible. Although the Agras volcano is the main theme of the show, today, the quarry is defunct. For this reason, the 40 tons of pozzolanic ash were brought in one truckload from a still-active quarry in the volcanic area of Campo de Calatrava, 330 kilometers west of Valencia, which is still mining the material for cement production.

On the second floor of the exhibition space, Almarcegui created an educational section providing background information on the Agras volcano in the form of a two-channel video work, showing a survey of the volcano's



Lara Almarcegui, *Agras Vulcano Mineral Rights*, Installation view, 2019. Photo: Juan García Rosell. Courtesy: IVAM, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern and the artist.



Lara Almarcegui. *Agras Vulcano Mineral Rights, Sections of Agras Volcano*. Drawing, 50 x 35 cm, 2019. © the artist.

surface in slow-motion images and text, divided into short precise sentences, explaining Spanish national mining law and the volcano's history. In addition, the artist presented an exploration permit from the responsible regional mining authority, *Dirección General de Minas de la Comunidad Valenciana*, a map of the territory leased and cross-sectional drawings of the volcano's interior.

The video work, and in particular its text, reflects the actual research process that Almarcegui follows in all of her mining projects: First, she familiarizes herself with the history of the site and the research already conducted by previous contractors or geologic institutions. In a second step, she starts an investigation on-site in consultation with a geologist who will later also conduct the required exploration tests. In the latter part, Almarcegui follows the recommendations and instructions of the geologist on how to proceed within the exploration permit, always adhering to non-intrusive methods so as to avoid any environmental impact. This means that any exploration Almarcegui ever commissions remains at surface and never involves any actual

extraction or digging on site. Everything stays at its place. In the seven-minute video, viewers learn more about major interventions on the site led by a company called Asland. In the 1970s, Asland was one of the leading cement factories in this region and was first to undertake geological research on the solidified lava deposits of the Agras volcano: "The reserves were estimated at almost 2 million m<sup>3</sup> of volcanic material susceptible to exploitation: 732,500m<sup>3</sup> of pyroclasts and 549,000m<sup>3</sup> of basalt," Almarcegui explains in the video text. Extracting only the pyroclasts or ashes, the reserves were almost entirely exhausted by the end of the 1980s, and the quarry was closed down due to the lack of economic profit.

As in all of her projects, Almarcegui seeks to show what lies below our feet, to enable us to grasp this site beyond our vision. Drawings, photographs, newspaper clippings, and printed statistics play a crucial role in her artistic practice.

Thus, as part of her research process, but also to visualize geological data, Almarcegui often produces cross-sectional sketches. The tradition of cross-sectional views goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Conveying the ideals of the Enlightenment, they still inform our idea of science today—rational analysis that permeates all matter, revealing the unknown and invisible. Moreover, the sketches make visible the procedures involved in the artist's considerations during the creation and research processes. The drawings presented at IVAM are based on the geological studies of the volcano's material reserves from the quarry in the 1970s and 1980s, which Almarcegui retrieved from the archives of the then active cement factory Asland, now owned by Lafarge-Holcim. In the drawings illustrating the different layers of volcanic material in Agras, she chronologically examines how, within two decades, the layer of lava useful for industry decreased. The quickly applied cross-sectional sketches are 35cm x 50cm in size, suggesting that the artist uses them more as a form of knowledge visualization than as aesthetic production.

With this work, Almarcegui underlines the importance of noticing how land exploitation and mineral extraction gradually change our environment in the long term, while the consequences on our ecosystems and the geological impact are nevertheless urgent and, likely, irreversible.



### Excavating Working Conditions

*“The image of the city, in particular, as a thing that is made of geology or on geology, increasingly has to content with the idea of the city as a thing that makes geology, in the form of nuclear fuel, dammed rivers, atmospheric carbon, and other metabolic products of urbanization whose impacts will stretch into future epochs.”*

– Seth Denizen<sup>6</sup>

Throughout her career, Almarcegui has pointed out the precariousness of conditions of production in urban environments. She questions capitalist societal values and reminds us of urgent unsolved problems of land exploitation today. Her works do not seek to elevate the viewer’s contemplation to philosophical heights, up to a point from which motifs such as the landscape or the sublime come into view—dominant themes in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Instead, she virtually pulls them back to the ground, or even under the ground, thus pointing out actual environmental damage. Her mineral and mining rights projects act as an invitation to reflect on the consequences of extraction in relation to the land and the remaining landscape, and also to one’s closer surroundings. Industrial activity, which is usually only ever a background scenario in the Western urban world, suddenly comes to the fore. Today, industries in Western societies are mostly based on so-called immaterial services. Living in urban areas, mining industries have largely withdrawn from our sight. Industries involved in the extraction and direct processing of mineral resources, for example, coal mining and heavy material industry such as iron and steel, appear both abstract and as something from the past. In her work, Almarcegui reveals to urban inhabitants that land exploitation still takes place on a daily basis, often just around the corner.<sup>7</sup> The installation at IVAM serves as an example of how the artist illustrates the scale of produced construction materials. Usually invisible and unimaginable in their volume, they become tangible in the museum space. Hence, the piles of lava rock at IVAM involve a discursive thinking that initiates further acknowledgement of one’s own surroundings.

What does it mean to exhibit the work of Lara Almarcegui? Firstly, the inviting institution and curator assist Almarcegui in producing new knowledge relevant to their location. By working with municipalities and geologists, Almarcegui uncovers the current status of present ores and consolidates different fragments of existing knowledge. Secondly, presenting the results of

this research in the context of an exhibition at a museum of contemporary art means introducing the political urban discourse to a cultural context. What this essentially means is raising awareness and reaching a public that is usually not confronted with industries of land exploitation. Thirdly, these exhibitions bring about a new dialogue between different groups and professionals. It was remarkable to see that engaged visitors who joined an artist talk or a guided tour with Lara Almarcegui had a very personal approach to the subject: they were themselves affected by urban structural changes caused by local industry. Almost everyone had their own story to tell. Either because an additional rural road was built near their neighborhoods, connecting the industrial area with the city, or they personally knew someone who had worked in the mines. In the exhibition, different biographical occurrences began to connect the dots with economic and political decision making. These moments were significant in terms of knowledge gain and social interaction. Finally, a seemingly extreme aspect in the artist’s practice consists of the visualization and confrontation with the latent and slow but ongoing violent consequences of extraction.

### Slow Violence in the Capitalocene

*“Maybe only God can make a tree, but only that shovel, Big Muskie, can make a hole like this.”*

– Anonymous strip miner, cited by Robert Morris<sup>8</sup>

The increasing interest in the geological worldview mirrors the necessity to cope with this factual complexity and the enormous data flows in terms of scales of time and space that are constantly generated. In recent decades, and with the growing awareness of climate change, the theory of gradualism, however, poses its own pitfalls, as it “suggests a degree of insignificance and disempowerment that not only is psychologically alienating but also allows us to ignore the magnitude of our effects on the planet,” writes geologist Marcia Bjornerud in her 2018 book *Timefulness: How Thinking Like a Geologist Can Help Save the World*.<sup>9</sup> The increasing awareness and evidence of human interference on Earth has led to a general perception of both urgency and intangibility, whereas this feeling of disempowerment derives from the imbalance and inadequacy of human perception of time and space and its corresponding geological reality. These “expanded spatial and temporal scales of geology exceed human comprehension, and thereby present major challenges to representational systems.”<sup>10</sup> This is also one of the major challenges Almarcegui emphasizes in her work: “What I

seek to do is offer a vision of the island's possible destruction through an exploration of its geological origins and future exploitation," she commented on her project *Rocks of Spitsbergen* in 2014.<sup>11</sup> In this project, Almarcegui identified and calculated the sum total of the mass of the geological components that make up the island of Spitsbergen.

The discourse around our new era shaped by the consequences of climate change due to anthropogenic processes is reflected in diverse manifestations. The term Anthropocene has been widely criticized for its "terminological, philosophical, ecological, political"<sup>12</sup> inclination. Although there are many suggested alternative terms for the Post-Holocene era, in this essay I would like to place Almarcegui's artistic practice in the context of the so-called *Capitalocene*.

As a term, Capitalocene was introduced by the scholars Jason W. Moore and Andreas Malm in 2009,<sup>13</sup> and later picked up by Donna Haraway in her essay "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin" in 2015, which was adapted into Haraway's milestone book *Staying with the Trouble* a year later. "The Capitalocene helps identify the *economic* determination of our geological present,"<sup>14</sup> writes art historian T.J. Demos in his 2017 book *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*. These are only a few of the many scholars who emphasize the role of the financial and corporate elites and industrial leaders in the discourse surrounding global warming. Naomi Klein has adequately pointed out that the thesis of Anthropocene dangerously ignores the systematic and structural exploitation driving and driven by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.<sup>15</sup> From this perspective, Capitalocene seems a more precise description, as it "refers to the geological epoch created by corporate globalization."<sup>16</sup> To look through the lens of the Capitalocene means performing a deep analysis of complex economic processes and identifying the responsible industries and their interwoven exploitative structures with political lobbying. Demos dedicated an entire chapter in his book *Against the Anthropocene* to acknowledging the violence caused and executed by a Capitalocene world. Among many others, it is writer Rebecca Solnit who calls out for the recognition of climate change as a form of "global-scale violence against places and species, as well as against human beings."<sup>17</sup>

One of the most expansive analyses of the slow violence involved in climate change struggles was offered by the environmental humanities scholar Rob Nixon:

A central question is strategic and representational: How can we convert into image and narrative disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political interventions, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time?<sup>18</sup>

As Amitav Ghosh discerns, the Anthropocene is a challenge to various disciplines such as history, humanities, and the arts, "but also to our commonsense understandings [...] the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of imagination."<sup>19</sup> Along with the abovementioned scholars, Ghosh appeals to a quest for new imaginaries, alternative narratives that go beyond representational boundaries.

By acquiring archival data from companies or municipalities on geologic calculations, Lara Almarcegui draws attention to slow violence caused by land exploitation and discloses systematic abuse by structures of capitalist and governmental practices. In their directness and persistence, her projects become forceful, emphatic, and even radiant. Throughout her career, Almarcegui has acquired a connoisseurship for geology as a discipline and its political connotations, and has established herself as an artist native to geological and industrial processes that are usually withdrawn from our sight. Methods of estimating the potential wealth that can be extracted from a given area were introduced by the English geologist William Smith in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when he identified fossils as indicators for coal deposits.<sup>20</sup> In reference to this process, Almarcegui reminds us that geology as a discipline has not only introduced the Deep Time perspective on the Earth but also created new economies while mapping wealth through the precise localization and identification of resources. The geological cartography to which Almarcegui has access through the permits of exploration she receives from the responsible municipalities allow her to study geological calculations and resource mappings, and how they were exploited going back as far as seventy years. Uncovering this body of knowledge, usually buried in state archives or in the private hands of the companies involved, and presenting it to a wider public is sometimes perceived as outrageous by those involved. Usu-

ally, the inhabitants of the surrounding communities of an exploited area do not know in detail to what extent their land is being damaged. Making this knowledge accessible is perceived as dangerous and a provocation to the powers that be, i.e., the capitalist systems.

In our desire to refrain from catastrophism in order to escape the continuing consequences of climate change, we are “missing out on the bigger picture,” as Rebecca Solnit illustrates. On the contrary, “We should seek out new kinds of stories—stories that make us more alarmed about our conventional energy sources than the alternatives, that provide context, that show us the future as well as the past.”<sup>21</sup> The following section highlights some of the stories Almarcegui has to tell.

### Uncanny Latency

In his 2013 book *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present*, literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht hypothesizes that situations of latency arise in our present. In his reflections, Gumbrecht describes an era in which the future appears to be threatening. By linking his ideas to the implementation of so-called invisible matter, he lucidly illustrates what causes uncertainties in our daily lives. The magnitude of the matters at hand plays a major role here: the topics we are dealing with are either too small (atoms) or too large (the universe), or too complex (global warming) to ever be transformed into an unmediated situation of evidence, presence, or visibility.<sup>22</sup> Gumbrecht outlines a situation in which the feeling prevails that something is there, but this “something” is too overwhelming to actually be negotiated and infiltrated into consciousness in social and scientific discourses. It never comes to the moment when the latent becomes clearly visible.<sup>23</sup> But what exactly does latency mean in this Post-Holocene age?

A latency towards global climate change is not a denial or suppression of the environmentally harmful factors caused by capital flows. Rather, it neutralizes the initial alarming agitation. The facts accumulate rapidly, but the actual irritation, such as pain, triumph, or any other kind of resonance, disappears. Being aware of climate change in Western societies usually doesn't mean experiencing its consequences first-hand. Although consequences of climate change are already in full swing, it is often simply easier not to take heed of the warning signs, even when these signs are hard to overlook. Or in the words of Timothy Morton in his essay “Being Ecological”: “Funnily enough, living in a scientific age means we have stopped believing in authoritative truth [...] Mass extinction is so awful, so incomprehensible, so

horrible—and at present it's so invisible.”<sup>24</sup> To the human eye, slow violence is invisible, and thus incomprehensible, but its existence has latently entered our consciousness. However, waiting for the moment of “redemption,” a situation of visibility and clarity, seems hopeless. Expanding on latency, Gumbrecht notes that the status quo of experienced paralysis can only be resolved when action has a prospect of a future so that motivation can be transformed into reality.<sup>25</sup> And here, the core question unravels: How can artists form and express such a future scenario so that their motivation becomes reality?

Latency is the “withdrawal from perceptibility and representability [...] [that] cannot be addressed simply as topics or themes but only as *problems of form*,” writes art historian Eva Horn, and she continues:

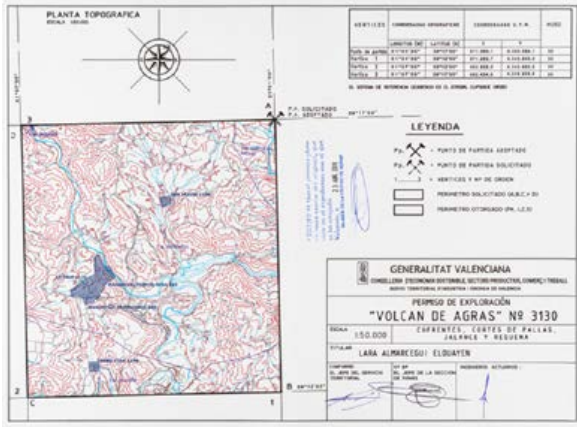
The visual arts have developed a panoply of different strategies for translating the transformative processes of the Anthropocene, such as climate change, from their latency into something tangible and manifest [...]. [They] seek to make inaudible audible, the non-perceptible perceptible.<sup>26</sup>

What is latent needs a translation or a transmission in temporal or spatial scales to become relevant to human comprehension. The increasing occupation with geological perspective and matter in contemporary art is a form of engagement with challenges of representation in the Capitalocene.

### The Geological Worldview in the Broad Present

As with everything else, latency is part of the present, which is becoming continuously broader, while the horizon of the future narrows in anticipation of a surely coming, but still seemingly distant, catastrophe: climate change. In this context, what Gumbrecht means in terms of a broader future is “that it is no longer possible to leave behind any past. Instead of losing their connection with the present as orientation, pasts flood our present [...]. Between this overflowing past and that threatening future, the present has become a spreading dimension of simultaneity.”<sup>27</sup> The ever expanding scales of time and space, as well as the immanent overproduction of facts, imply a constructed reality that emerged from a post-modern poly-perspectivism that is no longer tangible and traceable. The return of object-oriented ontology (OOO) to the academic realm is an interesting phenomenon, which again strengthens the trend of trying to understand things *in themselves* and acknowledging that nothing can be grasped in its entirety in one moment.





Lara Almarcegui, *Agras Vulcano Mineral Rights, Exploration permit*, Valencia, 2019. © the artist.

Bringing the past of destructive activities into the present, climate change discourse falls into one of the many utterances of this broad present. The engagement with spatial and temporal scales of geology is becoming essential for the confrontation of environmental challenges. As geologist Seth Denizen points out in his essay, “Three Holes: In the Geological Present,” published in the anthology *Architecture in the Anthropocene*, today, geological scientists not only reconstruct the past (as was the original idea of the profession), but they are now confronted with the question: How to produce a geological present<sup>28</sup>:

At the moment geology is asked to testify on behalf of its materials, regarding issues that concern the unfolding of ecological catastrophes, it becomes a forensic science in the legal sense. However, unlike the materials of forensic science, the geological materials that are brought to trial have not stopped speaking. Even the nature of the crime is in question. In short, geologists are increasingly being asked to answer the question what’s going on? Rather than what happened?<sup>29</sup>

Geology as a discipline also bears the potential to develop future imaginaries by providing a lens through which time can be experienced beyond human perception.<sup>30</sup> Expanding the human understanding of time is not the only significant impact. Furthermore, geological calculations provide ground for juridical decision-making on a governmental level.

### Rights of Ownership in the Capitalocene

In her mineral and mining projects, Lara Almarcegui intends to employ exactly this lens to reflect on rights of

ownership that are so deeply intertwined in our capitalist governmental systems. The mineral rights are exclusive to the company or individual who receives the permit for exploration. In all of her mineral and mining rights projects, however, as mentioned above, Almarcegui never extracts anything from the areas she receives. Returning to the exhibition at IVAM, the copy of the permit of exploration forms the actual starting point of the exhibition. In Spanish it reads: “Lara Almarcegui explains that she intends to carry out exploration work on resources belonging to section C for which she is applying for an exploration permit for pozzolanic ashes for industrial use, which will be called ‘Agras Volcano.’”

The general regulations of this permit imply further that the “exploration program must be submitted indicating the techniques to available means for its development and details of the operations to be carried out to make on the surface of the land, with the plan, investment budget, financing program and guarantees offered on its viability.”

At its core, it reminds the exhibition visitor that the project is not just representational but in fact legal reality. By committing to the project, Almarcegui is exposed to a binding contract, which demands certain exploration research results to be delivered in a year’s time. Within this particular project as part of Almarcegui’s investigation of mineral and mining rights across Europe, the artist unveils the regulations governing the ownership of exploration rights. Being a public property, the mining rights are managed by administrations, which lease certain areas to third parties, mostly big mining companies, for extraction of geologic material. Different permits are required in order to explore, research, and exploit a site. Already at the stage of the application procedure to receive a permit for exploration, Almarcegui had to hire a geologist, who would conduct the primary research necessary for the submission. As with the contracts Almarcegui signs for her Mineral Rights projects across Europe, she must deal with locally changing juristic facts and fulfill the agreed-upon requirements. Upon completion of the exploration, a report with geophysical measurements, geological surveys, geochemical sampling, geochemical anomaly charts, accounts of rock exposures, and so on, must be submitted to the state. To meet all requirements, Almarcegui is obliged to collaborate with geologists and local industrial sectors to submit this report. However, an exploration permit by itself does not allow mining, which would require a separate application process.

Considering climate change and resource exploitation, societies based on conceptions of property face the historically relatively recent challenge of reconciling property with sustainability. In his ongoing research on social ownership, philosopher Tilo Wesche discusses a new concept of property, which supports a new perspective on natural resources that undermines capitalist exploitation. Looking at nature as a source for the creation of value—for example from soil, water, wind, or the sun—nature becomes something that must be protected. The next step is to grant rights to nature for its own natural resources, because any foreign property that does not belong to you imposes a fundamental obligation that you must not damage or destroy it. And since natural resources are foreign property, belonging to nature, people are obligated to use them sustainably. As a result, obligations of sustainability have to follow the logic of property itself. Wesche claims that the law that “property obligates” should be extended to nature. This chain of thought is not so uncommon. The rights of nature, such as those embedded in the Constitution of Ecuador or the laws of New Zealand today, are also expressed in the claim that natural resources are nature’s property. This line of argument is grounded in the Green movement of the 1980s, with the British lawyer Poly Higgins and her campaign “ecocide” as one of its most prominent figures. Higgins dedicated her life to drafting a law that would make corporate executives and government ministers criminally liable for the damage they do to ecosystems.

Meanwhile, Almarcegui has become familiar with dealing with different authorities and the various mineral and mining laws across European countries. By claiming up to nine years of mining rights of iron deposits in different countries, and by then refusing to extract these, Almarcegui is effectively blocking or denying the industrial and economic exploitation of resources. In the context of the outlined property discourse, one could say: she returns nature’s property—its resources—back to nature. As long as Almarcegui legally claims an area’s mining rights, companies cannot exploit its resources. While every government has its own national regulations on mineral and mining rights, in her research, Almarcegui has discovered that for the most part it is uncommon to issue mining rights to small parties or individuals. Norway might be one of the few exceptions, allowing individuals to apply.

### Undermining the Narrative of Growth

In none of her mineral rights projects does Almarcegui seek economic advantage. On the contrary, pushing the absurdity of demand and value creation to extremes, Almarcegui applies for the mining rights of iron—a material which in today’s industry is characterized by only minor demand and correspondingly low prices. By doing so, Almarcegui indirectly criticizes the imperative of constant growth, which in capitalist societies equates to constant progress.

The persistence of slow violence grounds in dominant capitalist culture, which allows for no room for negotiation or for building new narratives while the myth of growth continues to dominate our cultural perspectives:

We also face a barrage of messages that tell us to keep moving forward, to get the newer model, to have more babies, to get bigger. There is a lot of pressure to grow [...]. Our era of human destruction has trained our eyes only on the immediate promises of power and profits.<sup>31</sup>

When “the story of pioneers, progress, and the transformation of ‘empty’ spaces into industrial resource fields”<sup>32</sup> no longer works, how to make one of the biggest challenges of our time tangible? The circulating facts and images about climate change are just as daunting, as they offer the potential incentive to rethink our perceptions of the new era, to withdraw from the “assumptions of growth,” and to accept “the heterogeneity of space and time,” argues anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. The categories of improvement and growth are still grounded in our perception of the world: “The problem is that progress stopped making sense [...]. It is in this dilemma that new tools for noticing seem so important.”<sup>33</sup>

In the discourse on the Capitalocene era, numerous voices are circulating that build on a report titled *The Limits to Growth* commissioned by the Club of Rome, published in 1972. In her book *In Catastrophic Times: Resistance to the Coming Barbarism*, philosopher Isabelle Stengers questions the dominant imperative of growth, which “identified with progress continues to impose itself as the only conceivable horizon.”<sup>34</sup> The logic of growth: it invariably implies the exploitation of nature, among other processes of injustice and inequality. Stengers proposes “creating a life after economic growth that explores connections to the new power of acting, feeling, imagining, and thinking.”<sup>35</sup>

How can we think about this in light of Lara Almarcegui's work? As scholar Isabelle Doucet points out in her essay "Anticipating Fabulous Futures," "Much of architectural production may be complicit in economic growth."<sup>36</sup>

Lara Almarcegui shows with all clarity that there are still too few alternatives presented by architects and city planners. In the concreteness of abstract figures and the cherishing of wastelands, the artist illustrates the urgency and necessity of rethinking the Western world's relation to growth and progress. Her methods and themes in the project concerning mineral and mining rights place Lara Almarcegui in the field of forensic research involving interdisciplinary approaches drawn from the sciences of geology, archaeology, ecology, and historiography.

### Exchanging Research

The exact processes behind the conversations and collaborations between Lara Almarcegui and the geologists involved in her projects have yet to be discussed in more detail. The question of if the exchange is valuable for both sides remains open up to this point. By diving deeply into the subject matter, Almarcegui has evidently developed enough tools and is equipped with the necessary knowledge to ask scientists the right questions. But is this approach a mutually beneficial one? Can geologists benefit from the artistic exchange with Almarcegui? In a conversation with me, Almarcegui implied that finding geologists who are interested in collaborating with an artist on land exploration is challenging. Sometimes it takes the power of persuasion to convince the scientist to invest time for a project that is not heading toward the usual scientific outcome. It is a matter of time, communication and mutual professional appreciation that artistic and scientific approaches can merge into one shared vision of a specific project.

An insight on Almarcegui's research process, and how the mutual interest in geology can inspire critical reflection across the disciplines, is provided in the interview "Earth Calculation," published in the artist's catalogue *Béton* in 2019, between Almarcegui and Winfried Dallmann, an Associate Professor at the Department of Geosciences at the Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø. The two worked together on the project *Rocks of Spitsbergen*. With the title *Earth Calculation*, Almarcegui introduces her idea for a colossal new project, which "consists of calculating the total amount of Earth's rock materials."<sup>37</sup> After being asked if such a calculation would be of any relevance to geoscience, Dallmann replied by pointing out the difficulties of such an endeavor: "Your idea needs some clarification. When

you talk about Earth, do you mean the entire planet right down to the centre of the core, or do you mean Earth's crust? Or, as in the calculations in Spitsbergen, only the land mass above sea level?"<sup>38</sup>

After posing these questions, Dallmann provides a number of informative considerations on what needs to be considered to devise any kind of viable and worthwhile calculation. The interview is an excerpt of a three-year-long conversation between the geologist and the artist and shows how a playful approach to generating ideas can open up new scales of feasibility and imagination for both disciplines. In her projects, "Almarcegui presents both markers of geological facts and a way of narrating and abstracting: a geopoetics, a geophilosophy, or a geohistory," curators Max Andrews and Mariana Cinema Luna note in their essay "Thinking Like A Drainage Basin." Andrews and Luna argue further: "They [the works] open up an alliance between the topographic and the stratigraphic, between stones that are stones, and stones that are human resources, or abstract fictions."<sup>39</sup>

Digging deep and engaging with the vertical has proved itself to be an artistic strategy to entangle with the environment in this new epoch. This paradigmatic turn brings about a reconsidered view and understanding of nature.

Mines and quarries are still to be found on Earth in countless numbers, and they will continue to exist. The eschewing of a gaze upon the landscape or chunks of it or of seeking out the sublime, Lara Almarcegui looks straight into the eyes of the beast and addresses issues of resources and their exploitation actively and on an equal footing. Refusing to create images, but rather working on a 1:1 scale, she avoids a reduction of complexity. Her works uncover and show the correlations of the future and the past of industrial processes. In contrast, Almarcegui's direct pragmatism and engagement with concrete materiality contributes to the development of new narratives that propose methods of structural change in the midst of epochal transformation. In particular, this means grasping what landscapes and industries, which draw from these resources, surround you; what policies and legal regulations are involved; and how you can actively take care of the environment you are entangled with. Almarcegui's practice situates itself as a leading strategy for visualizing the latency of slow violence in times when the urgency of a pandemic overruns our perception. Almarcegui's practice can be summarized as follows: she shows and reports exactly what there is, and the ways in which it is there. By doing

so, the artist offers a humble narrative or, in the words of Demos and Solnit, “a revolt against brutality.”<sup>40</sup>

The Covid-19 quarantine discourse was notably quick to adopt the comparison and reference to ongoing issues of climate change. Bruno Latour was one of the first voices to bring up the topic in his short essay “Is This a Dress Rehearsal?,” published in *Critical Inquiry* in 2020, hypothesizing that the current health crisis could be a kind of rehearsal for worse days to come due to climate change.<sup>41</sup> Although a bold statement that some have been quick to criticize,<sup>42</sup> Latour’s approach invites the reimagining of possible future scenarios based on the necessary changes on so many levels we are currently living through, or in Latour’s own words: “The state of society depends at every moment on the associations between many actors, most of whom do not have human forms. This is true of microbes [...] but also of the internet, the law, the organization of hospitals, the logistics of the state, as well as the climate.”<sup>43</sup>

Lara Almarcegui helps us familiarize ourselves with many of these actors ahead of its collapse. The subject matter of Almarcegui’s work is never expressed in a vocabulary of the extreme, the improbable, or uncanny catastrophism—she simply shows us the world of extraction as it is without exaggeration or embellishment. She never speaks about any singular, hence improbable, situation, or highly distinguished cases. The sites she seeks out are never at the center of attention. They could be visible to anyone if there was just enough interest; otherwise, systematic, slow violence remains unrecognized as such. The extraction industries Almarcegui follows, the mineral laws she researches and claims—the point is to show that all this happens gradually on a daily basis. The extraction industries are highly probable, they are never uncanny, but they are dangerously extreme.

*Text written in April 2020.*

## Notes

**1** Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 18.

**2** *Ibid.*, 19.

**3** Matt Rosenberg, “Uniformitarianism: The Present Is the Key to the Past,” *ThoughtCo.Com*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-uniformitarianism>.

**4** Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 63.

**5** Lara Almarcegui, “Rocks of Spitsbergen,” in *Rocks of Spitsbergen* (Oslo: KORØ, 2014), 19.

**6** Seth Denizen, “Three Holes in the Geological Present,” in *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy*, ed. Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2013), 29.

**7** Philip Ursprung, “Bis Zum Mittelpunkt Der Erde,” *Die Republik*, September 10, 2019.

**8** Robert Morris, “Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture,” keynote address for a symposium sponsored by the King County (Washington) Arts Commission. It was delivered on July 31, 1979, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/records-licensing/archives/exhibits/earthworks.aspx#PhaseI>.

**9** Marcia Bjornerud, *Timefulness: How Thinking like a Geologist Can Help Save the World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), 16.

**10** T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 12-13. See also Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); and Elisabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse, *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life* (Brooklyn, NY: punctum books, 2012).

**11** Almarcegui, *Rocks of Spitsbergen*, 19.

**12** Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*, 85.

**13** Donna Haraway mentions her email conversations with Jason W. Moore and Alf Hornborg in 2014, stating that Andreas Malm introduced the term in 2009, in Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): 159–65, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934>.

**14** Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*, 54-55.

**15** Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada/Penguin Random House, 2014).

**16** Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*, 54.

**17** Rebecca Solnit, “Call the Climate Change What It Is: Violence,” *The Guardian*, April 7, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/07/climate-change-violence-occupy-earth>.

**18** Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.

**19** Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 9.

**20** Max Andrews and Mariana Cánepa Luna, “Thinking Like A Drainage Basin,” in *Lara Almarcegui. Béton* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2019), 15–23, 17.

**21** Rebecca Solnit, “Are We Missing the Big Picture on Climate Change?” *The New York Times Magazine*,

December 2, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/07/magazine/are-we-missing-the-big-picture-on-climate-change.html>.

com/2014/12/07/magazine/are-we-missing-the-big-picture-on-climate-change.html.

**22** Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Latenz Als Ursprung Der Gegenwart Nach 1945* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2012).

**23** Ibid.

**24** Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (London: Pelican Books, Penguin Random House, 2018), 62.

**25** Gumbrecht, *Latenz*, 44.

**26** Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities* (New York; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 111.

**27** Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Unsere breite Gegenwart* (Frankfurt/M: Edition Suhrkamp, 2010), 16.

**28** Seth Denizen, “Three Holes: In the Geological Present,” in *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy*, ed. Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2013), 30.

**29** Ibid., 30.

**30** Bjornerud, *Timefulness*, 16.

**31** Elaine Gan, Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, and Nils Bubandt, eds., “Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene,” in *Ghosts: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), G2.

**32** Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 18.

**33** Ibid., 20.

**34** Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, trans. Andrew Goffey (London: Open Humanities Press with Meson Press, 2015), 20.

**35** Ibid., 18.

**36** Isabelle Doucet, “Anticipating Fabulous Futures,” *e-flux Journal*, Overgrowth, September 24, 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/overgrowth/284918/anticipating-fabulous-futures/>.

**37** Lara Almarcegui and Winfried Dallmann, “Earth Calculation,” in *Lara Almarcegui. Béton*, 32.

**38** Ibid.

**39** Andrews and Cánepa Luna, “Thinking Like A Drainage Basin,” 16.

**40** Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*, 81.

**41** Bruno Latour, “Is This a Dress Rehearsal?” *Critical Inquiry*, March 26, 2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/>.

**42** Joshua Clover, “The Rise and Fall of Biopolitics: A Response to Bruno Latour,” *Critical Inquiry*, March 29, 2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/29/the-rise-and-fall-of-biopolitics-a-response-to-bruno-latour/>.

**43** Latour, “Is This a Dress Rehearsal?”

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