



ÚLTIMA ARQUITECTURA

Florencia Levy

11/04/2023 - 30/07/2023

Everything Virtual is Geological and Political

We all have a little piece of China in our pockets. A bit of the so-called “rare earth” minerals: the ones used to produce the screens and batteries of our cell phones, the large majority of which are extracted from the Baotou mining complex, one of the world’s most contaminated places, where toxic residue has formed an enormous radioactive lake that is visible from space. The fantasy of complete immateriality conferred upon contemporary technologies suppresses the precise contaminating reality that enables them to exist. There is also a powerful asymmetry between the useful life of these artifacts (programmed to be thrown away after little more than one year) and the time frame of millions and millions of years for the toxic effects of their production, which will continue to contaminate the Earth long after humanity and the life of the planet expire. These are the two sides of a disk that spins at full velocity in opposite directions (cybernetic immediacy versus the cosmic age of the minerals upon which it is based, digital immateriality as opposed to the carcinogenic waste of its manufacture), comprising the paradoxical and asymmetric substance that Florencia Levy’s work brings up for discussion: the fact that everything virtual is geological and political, that reality can only be abstracted into pure computer data at the cost of violent ecocides committed against bodies and territories.

In 2016, Levy traveled to Baotou, a city in the Inner Mongolia region where 90% of the rare earth minerals that the world consumes are extracted, on the outskirts of which lies Earth’s largest lake of toxic residue. While she was filming, agents from China’s State Security Ministry arrested her and held her for six hours. They interrogated her, searched her hotel room and erased all the material recorded on her camera. They followed her during the rest of her trip because they thought she was a spy. Upon her return, however, she discovered that the police had overlooked erasing one single photo that still remained on her memory card, which is the one exhibited in “Tierra de ciervos” (Land of Deer, the meaning of “Baotou” in the Mongol language). The photo portrays an inert, devastated space, where there seems to be no trace of the deer for which the city was named, nor of any other life form. Nevertheless, there is another reason why the photo is unsettling. It is due to something it seems to offer in terms of

being impossible to say. Both this image and the video that is accessed via QR code are less disconcerting for what they show (in a veiled manner, due to the censorship by the police) than for suggesting the very impossibility of it being represented. They say to us: even if the police had not censored the material, it is something we would not have been able to see. This is because it is not in an image, but inside our cell phones. In one blind instant, what is hidden in our daily existence's most "common" object is revealed: "rare" earth minerals and the violence with which they are extracted. Like someone who kicks away the ladder after having climbed up on it, these images do not incite contemplation, but reflection on an extraction system that destroys environments and sickens populations. In *What is an Apparatus?*, Agamben states that profaning contemporary technologies is the only way to deactivate the merchandise fetish that drives them. And perhaps what this artifact by Levy encourages is that very profanation, to disassemble batteries and screens in order to "see" what no image can represent: that the narrative of magic, seamless immateriality, of digital technology, would not be possible without the minerals of thousands of millions of years with which they are produced, and that their extraction puts the habitability of the planet at grave risk. This seems to be the syntactic mismatch between the polymetallic nodules and their exhibition in glass fish tanks as impeccable merchandise. These structures, vaguely reminiscent of something cerebral, are accumulations of rare earth and other minerals that lie in the depths of the sea, obtaining their peculiar form by way of slow accumulation on marine material bases (such as corals or shark teeth). They are so abundant at the bottom of the ocean that calculations hold that millions of tons of unexploited minerals are found there, but their extraction through dragging would generate a tremendous impact on marine ecosystems, contaminating waters and driving hundreds of species to extinction. Here, the fascinating fetish of pristine, immaterial technological merchandise is interrupted and profaned, allowing the violence of the extraction hidden within them to emerge, a geological ready-made, an *objet-trouvé* of extractivist capitalism, thanks to which the technologies that drive our everyday experience are made possible.

Levy's work activates a tension between the landscape genre and spaces decimated by capitalist extraction that defraud that manner of seeing and make it impossible. In 1948, Bernardo Canal Feijóo, an essayist from Santiago del Estero, coined the neologism "*despaisamiento*" (de-landscaping), in order to make evident the radical transformation of Santiago del Estero's vegetation due to uncontrolled cutting of *quebracho* trees. In some way, Levy documents de-landscaped visions of an un-world not only on the brink of a planetary crisis, but on the very edge of what it is possible to represent. In "Tercer sedimento" (Third Sediment), the zenithal vision of strip mines in different parts of the planet places tension on the dual fantasy of capital that is favored by satellite maps, where on the one hand the world is a mathematical, flat space that can be divided into lots and monetized, its resources extracted with a simple click, and on the other, that this visual aspect can omit the violence committed against communities and territories. In his book *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe had already stated that the vertical and aerial control of space by technologies like GPS (monopolized by the Armed Forces of the United States) is very different from the territorial experience of the colonized subject, which is irregular, vulnerable, exposed to

toxicities and to having movement restricted. Florencia Levy's work evidences precisely this violent gap between the immaterial globalized communion of space promised by these technologies at the service of capital and the environmental injustices they conceal.

Similarly, "Lugar fósil" (Fossil Place) contrasts the capitalist abstraction of the free flow and exchange of goods (expressed in the sea container, which, according to Allan Sekula is an algebraic function which, like money, translates people and things into countable units) with scrutiny of the toxins their production and extraction deposits in an abandoned city in China. The impersonal voice of a statue from the future narrates this story as the planetary archive of ruins and destruction that are revealed all too clearly in our present.

In Greek theater, the chorus has the function of reinstating stories that have taken place in different time frames and therefore cannot be presented on stage. In the year 2008, a group of geologists proposed to the International Commission on Stratigraphy that the planet Earth had entered a new geological era called the "Anthropocene", due to the marks of contamination found in rock sediment. In other words, a time that no longer pertains to humanity, since the hyperbolic accumulation of toxins produced by capitalist machinery will remain in geology for millions and millions of years after the disappearance of the human species. In some way, the chorus of Metahumans in "Última Arquitectura" (Last Architecture) restores the present that we can never see: that of a time when plastics, chemical and radioactive waste will survive as the species' last testimony after life on Earth has disappeared. These cybernetic angels with spastic gestures cannot help but evoke *Angelus Novus*, the painting by Paul Klee famously assessed by Benjamin as a parable on the advance of history like a bulldozer that leaves rubble and ruin in its path. However, in contrast to Klee's painting, these machine angels are not dragged forward in what we critically call progress. The hurricane that pushes them at a vertiginous pace—to which the metahumans turn their backs—does not hurl them into the future, but into a geological era of millions and millions of years that will speculatively be the past, a planetary era in which at some point, a species called human will have left its last footprint and whose archaeological polyphony (by way of a few cell phones that have not yet failed, we imagine) will intone this final swan song:

Micro plastics, toxins, radioactivity

it is quite possible that we may exist

in this, which we observe

This was their last architecture

