

In the summer of 2015, Patricia Dauder (Barcelona, 1973) buried a set of works in an empty plot of land in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat. The works had been produced in the studio but were left underground for weeks to undergo the degradation caused by the climate and soil corrosion, with the risk that nothing would be left when they were dug up.

Patricia Dauder

GROUND AND UNDERGROUND

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[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



NATURAL HISTORY OF A FILM
ON *INSULANA* BY PATRICIA DAUDER
Carles Guerra

The cover of the issue of the *Paris-Match* magazine dated 26 October 1957 showed an erupting volcano, a black mass rising in the middle of the ocean. The headline below the name of the magazine read: *Notre nouveau monde, LA LUNE. Sa topographie et ses mystères* (Our New World, the Moon. Its Topography and its Mysteries). The confusion was only dispelled on reading the photo caption at the foot of the page: *LE VOLCAN DE L'OCÉAN. Gérard Gery, à bord de l'avion de Paris-Match, survole le volcan qui vient de naître aux Açores. Le lendemain, notre envoyé spécial a été le premier à faire l'ascension du cratère en flames.* (Gérard Gery, on board the *Paris-Match* plane, flies over the volcano that has just been born in the Azores. The next day, our special correspondent was the first to climb the flaming crater). The photo report announced on the cover was featured on pages 36 to 41 of the issue. The images were a testament to the formation of a new landscape. Violent explosions were recorded in sequences of images that froze the columns of smoke and materials thrown out by the volcano. The eruptions that would transform the Azores archipelago had begun on 27 September 1957, just a month before the *Paris-Match* journalists arrived. The eruptions had started underwater and lasted for thirteen months. Eight days after the first eruption, the island of Faial was completely covered in ash. The photos published in the magazine show a scene like that after a heavy snowfall. The consequences were devastating.

Sixty years later, Patricia Dauder (Barcelona, 1973) walked over the solid ash. She travelled to the island of Faial during an artist's residency at the Arquipélago Centro de Artes Contemporâneas on the island of São Miguel in the Azores. She found herself walking over the roof tiles of the buildings

that had once formed a small town and, by 2017, had been exposed by the erosion caused by atmospheric agents. The catastrophe wiped out crops and pastures, although it caused no casualties. The natural forces unleashed by the birth of a new island left the waters contaminated with ashes. The sea became a graveyard for shoals of fish, plunging the island's fishermen into poverty. On the day when Dauder walked over the site, it must have looked like the end of the world. She remembers stumbling across fragments of window glass and wooden beams everywhere. It must have looked like "Our New World, the Moon" with its "Topography and Mysteries", as the main headline of *Paris-Match* suggested, though it was not referring to the volcano.

The scene marked a stark contrast to a brilliant documentary, *Les hommes de la baleine*, that was filmed on the island by Mario Ruspoli in 1956, a year before the earthquake. The film documents the sperm whale fishery with the rigour of an ethnographic study and uses little poetic licence. The experience of the camera in the open sea and close to the most dangerous moments anticipated the *cinéma vérité* methods that Ruspoli developed so successfully a few years later. The journey of the fishermen to the northwestern tip of the island of Faial allows us to see what it was like before the eruption. It was a rough natural environment nonetheless enormously productive. The voice-over of the film, attributed to Jacopo Berenizi (the alias of Chris Marker) is utterly unaware of what will happen there. The film portrays the dramatic struggle of the fishermen, who still used nineteenth-century boats and gear. When the voice-over speaks of "a threatened volcanic land", the danger does not seem at all imminent, but the eruptions were no more than eighteen months away. Then, as witnesses testify, the water began to boil. The film commissioned by the Musée de l'Homme to bear witness to the persistence of a primitive way of life could not have foreseen the imminent destruction of the ecosystem.

In this situation it is easy to imagine that time and place become uncertain, events become less important, before and after are merged. When Patricia Dauder made her second visit to the islands of São Miguel and Faial between 4 and 20 December 2020, she found a complex geography, not because of the appearance of the landscape, but because of the density of the accumulated layers. She placed the making of the film *Insulana* (2021) in the middle of this constellation. The film is the centrepiece of the exhibition *Patricia Dauder. Ground and underground* presented at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge. Its centrality stems from its ability to structure a long-term project that also includes works that are not strictly cinematic, such as drawings and a large series of lithographs that persistently overlay images, lines and motifs. The natural history of this film includes elements that are often not part of the film-making strictly speaking.

In Patricia Dauder's studio in Poblenou, Barcelona, there is a large table covered by a drawing that portrays an area of the Atlantic Ocean. In the middle is the Azores archipelago. Between the profiles of the coasts of North America, Europe and Africa, the pencil lines become increasingly dense. The central band changes colour to a pinkish hue. Just at that point, other lines passing along the coast of the United States come together and then separate again towards the coast of Ireland. The drawing portrays roughly the course followed by the artist Bas Jan Ader (Winschoten, 1942-1975), who set sail to cross the Atlantic from America to Europe in a 4.5-metre-long boat in July 1975. The journey ended in tragedy. Months later, what was left of the sailing boat was found by a Galician fishing vessel in the Great Sole Bank fishing ground, but Ader's body was never found. In 2010, Pedro de Llano curated an exhibition for the CGAC Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea in which he shared five years of research on Ader's mysterious disappearance, in an attempt to bring order to an event that left very little evidence.

The exhibition allowed visitors to imagine what happened by presenting the report of the naval command on the discovery of Ader's boat, *Ocean Wave*, in addition to photographs of the boat taken in the port of A Coruña, testimonies of the sailors who found it, nautical charts and other materials about sea voyages. The story was fairly consistent with Ader's reputation as one of the first generation of conceptual artists, but his disappearance has never been fully explained. The exact spot where his body fell into the sea remains unknown. Even his boat, which had been taken to the port of A Coruña by the fishing vessel *Eduardo Pondal*, ended up disappearing. After a while it was no longer there. Who knows whether all this, a product of chance, was not part of the artist's intention, a series of uncontrollable events that led him to lose his life while working on one of his projects. Thirty-five years after the tragedy, the first part of *In Search of the Miraculous*, a material originally exhibited at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles, was also presented at the CGAC. The project that Ader conceived to take him from the gallery to the open sea and back underlines the discomfort we feel in the face of unresolved events.

Patricia Dauder became interested in the events surrounding the tragedy of this mythical figure of Conceptual Art and referred to them in the drawing she keeps in her studio. The time frame of Ader's journey is much shorter than that of the volcanic eruptions in the Azores, but its geographical scope is far greater. Dauder's drawing brings the two into relation. Moreover, the stories of the two very different events form part of the process that drove Dauder to the island of Faial in late 2020, though her film does not deal with either of them. *Insulana* shows us images of the islands of São Miguel and Faial. The camera adapted to S16 mm very often shows still shots that were superimposed in the final edit. The film is prefaced by an austere image of the artist's studio, with a table and a few drawings on the wall, as if the journey between

her studio and the outdoor spaces mimicked the scope of the project Ader wanted to carry out.

With the onset of Conceptual Art, artist's studios went out of fashion. These bounded spaces where time stands still were considered unsuitable for the new organization of the artist's work in a globalized world. Surprisingly, in the late 1990s the bohemian ways of life linked to the artist's studio were considered a model for the flexible work organization popularized by sociologists such as Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, who thought that employees should explore their creativity and work in a climate of freedom. This model was introduced by the neo-management of large technology and communication companies, which deregulated jobs to unsustainable limits. However, neither this popularization nor the dematerialization introduced by Conceptual Art put an end to the artist's studio, without which Patricia Dauder's work cannot be explained, though today it may seem an anachronistic feature of the pre-industrial past.

In the summer of 2015, Dauder left her Poblenuou studio for a few months. She moved much of her work to an empty site in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, on the other side of the city of Barcelona, where she buried sculptures and drawings in whole and in part. She also added objects and materials of all kinds. The idea was to involve environmental factors in a completely premeditated process of degradation. Sculptures made of cardboard, pigmented plaster, clay and burnt wood, as well as fabrics, photographs and newspaper clippings, suffered the effects of a slow corrosion caused by contact with the microorganisms in the soil. Two months later, Dauder dug up everything she had left there. The photographs she took on that day show the holes and cavities that were left exposed, giving the impression that the site could have been used for something resembling a burial ground. These archaeological remains contrast with the buildings behind the fence that protect the site from intruders: modern skyscrapers and glass

buildings of the type found in areas of the city with developing service economies.

When Dauder dug up her works, L'Hospitalet de Llobregat was already one of the areas with the densest population in Europe. However, she chose an undeveloped site adjoining old factories to complete the process she had started in her studio in Poblenou. In this relocated process, she ran the risk of deteriorating the works too much by burying them. One of the drawings on paper that she buried and subjected to the effects of moisture was entitled *Waterfront* (2015). The result of the process on this drawing was entirely contingent, and it came close to being completely destroyed. If it had remained in the ground any longer, it might have been irrecoverable. The degradation of materials has since been a recurring procedure for Dauder, a reaction to the constant desire to generate ever new forms. Many of her works from this period were produced by this process of bringing them close to destruction.

In addition to the materials left exposed to the elements, there is a series of black and white photographs that Dauder titled *Groundworks - Documents* (2015-2021). The title is intended retrospectively, on the understanding that it marks a turning point in her work, a twist that took her out of the four walls of her studio to work outdoors on a weed-covered urban plot. When she had cleared the weeds, she photographed the site in sections, each one measuring a few metres. The images cover a large area of land, as if bringing together the parts of an ancient monument scattered over a site. The effect of the dug-up land with half-completed works and fragments of protruding materials is very similar to that of the “ductile and unstable earth” described by the voice-over of *Insulana*. However, we are not at the end of 2020 when the artist filmed the landscape of the Azores, but in the summer of 2015. The places do not respect the chronology and overlap as in a double exposure. They share traits and form an unprecedented geography, although the most accurate description would be that of the

observers who described the first days of the volcanic eruption in the Azores: on seeing the mutations that had occurred overnight, they referred to “a landscape that is being formed”.

INSULANA

Patricia Dauder

The descriptions of the islands by the first settlers reveal how hard it was for them to conceive the territory in their minds.

Seismic phenomena were so frequent and intense that the landscape changed considerably over short periods of time. Between one exploratory trip and another, the topographic lines of maps and nautical charts often no longer corresponded to the geographical reality.

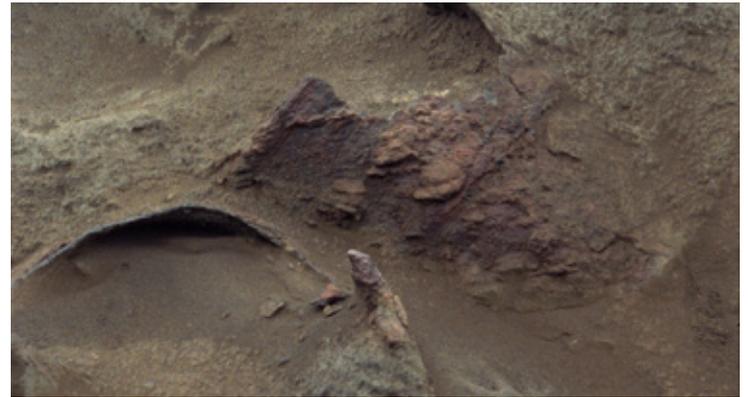
The transformations of the physical space altered the shape of the islands, but also the way of being and living of their inhabitants. Fear and misunderstanding, along with the cultural traditions inherited from the continent that they had left behind, led to the formation of superstitions and beliefs about this new territory.

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Having risen from the bottom of the ocean, these islands had never belonged to a continental mass. The dense vegetation, the abrupt relief and the constant seismic activity had made access to them more difficult and increased their isolation.

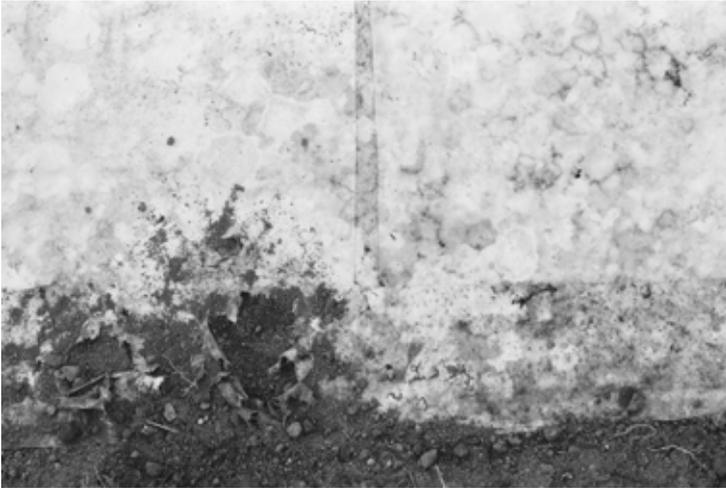
Over the centuries, small islets emerged fleetingly in the middle of the sea but soon disappeared, leaving behind strange signs. The first explorers were disoriented by banks of pumice breaking the sea surface, large numbers of dead fish floating in the water, smoke on the horizon and noises that spread over many nautical miles.

Contact with a changing reality led the colonizers to create new words for phenomena and structures that they did not





Stills from *Insulana*, 2021. A film made in S16 mm and transferred to 35 mm. Colour. Sound. 15 minutes, 25 seconds



understand. For example, they referred to areas where rivers of fire suddenly flowed from the earth as “mystery zones”, reflecting their unease and uncertainty.

The earth was ductile and unstable. In the eyes of the new settlers, it seemed like a living being that surfaced periodically to show them how fragile they were.

The “mysteries” venerated by the islanders began to be studied by explorers to determine whether they were local phenomena or manifestations of an activity that encompassed thousands of kilometres. The scientists of the time were looking for a general explanation for the relationship between movements of the earth in various areas of the planet and their effect on people, animals and plants.

This hostile place became a laboratory to test the coexistence between endemic species and colonizing ones brought from other parts of the world.

Merchants began to arrive from the new continent and created industries for the supply of raw materials. The dense laurel forests that once covered most of the islands were gradually reduced to large parks and areas for summer residences like European villas. However, efforts to make the new territory more habitable were invariably threatened by new shocks that reminded the inhabitants that any expectation of stability would be fleeting.

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On 27 September 1957, Tomás Pacheco, keeper of the Capelo lighthouse on Faial, spotted a strange movement and many bubbles on the sea surface a kilometre offshore, leading him to think that it was a large group of whales. He quickly alerted

the whalers in the nearby port of Comprido, who put to sea but soon saw what was really happening.

Around 6:45 in the morning, an elongated light blue patch began to form in the sea, contrasting with the darker blue around it. Within a few hours, a circle of smoking rocks emerged, marking the beginning of an eruption that would last thirteen months.

Within days, a crater formed, projecting clouds of mud and ash nearly two kilometres high. The seismic activity was accompanied by a strong electrical storm that formed around the clouds and could be seen from a radius of 200 kilometres.

On the fifth day after the eruption began, an ocean wind veered to the east and brought the precipitation of ash to the mainland. In a few minutes, a brown cloud with an intense smell of sulphur reached the coast, and the men and women who had approached the cliff to see the volcano watched as the particles fell on the land filtered by the bright sunlight, like a strange golden shower.

On the same day the sea turned a deep green. A group of sperm whales that were nearby remained immobile, as if dead. Seeing an opportunity, the island's whalers loaded their boats with harpoons and hunted all day until they were exhausted. However, after that providential episode, the volcano did not numb any more whales for capture and only brought adversity.

Within a week, the lighthouse and the fishing village were covered by several metres of ash that collapsed roofs and buried all the houses. A dark cloak covered the ground and softened the contours of the gates and walls, as if it were fresh snow. Everything that was green turned black.

The tremors and explosions became more intense at night and increased considerably at the equinoxes (the days in March and September when the Sun is closest to the Earth's equator).

When seawater got into the crater, the active volcano sometimes fell suddenly silent, causing even more fear than the roaring of the eruption, which returned after a few days as if it were an environmental echo.

With no electricity, telephone lines or transport, darkness and silence reigned inside the houses, interrupted by the vibration of seismic waves. A glass of water placed on the dining room table, illuminated by the fading light of an oil lamp, indicated that the earth was trembling continually.

A layer of black mud 20 centimetres thick covered the entire floor of a modest fisherman's house built decades earlier with volcanic stone and lime. The portraits of family members could hardly be identified under the coating of ash.

Of all his fears, he now remembered the one that troubled him most at night, lying in bed: that huge cracks would open under his feet and engulf everything in their way, as he had heard had happened in some areas of the island.

In the autumn of 1958 the volcano stopped erupting, leaving an inhospitable area with no human noise, no voices or sounds of cattle. There was only the roar of the wind, the sound of waves hitting the rock and the calling of birds, which had found an ideal nesting place on the new mountain.

The islanders were reluctantly forced to leave. The landscape they had so often feared now left a strange void in their bodies. It was as if, after several generations, the beating of their hearts had matched the vibrations of the dark land. Gone

were the tremors under their feet, the threatening cracks in the walls and the solitude of the island, which for centuries had kept them away from the progress on the continent but protected them from its barbarism and coldness.

Years later, sitting before a different landscape, slight images of a past came to his mind, one that was not his own but belonged to an entire community, and that he was not able to relate. Only a strong, musty smell and a familiar tune became increasingly present between the four walls of that room.

ROOMS 1 and 9

WEATHER STICKS, 2018

60 pieces of pigmented ceramic. Various dimensions

These ceramic pieces were fired at low temperature in order to preserve their porosity and enhance the absorption of moisture from the environment. The work was produced for the 19th Biennial of Cuenca, Ecuador. Before being put on display, the pieces were buried in a courtyard in the city of Cuenca. When they were dug up a few days later, the effects of the weather had left permanent marks on their surface.

Visitors can see the work complete when they have been through all the rooms of the exhibition.

Courtesy of the Projecte SD Gallery

ROOMS 2 and 8

GROUNDWORKS - DOCUMENTS, 2021

Projection of 80 slides of 5.4 x 6.8 mounted on glass frames of 8.5 x 8.5 cm

This extensive series of black and white slides is the fullest testimony to an action that Patricia Dauder carried out on a plot of land in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat in the summer of 2015. The slides document the whole plot, inch by inch. After clearing the site of weeds by hand, Dauder brought a large number of works from her studio in Poblenou and left them half-buried for weeks. The corrosion caused by the microorganisms in the soil did the rest.

Visitors can see the work complete when they have been through all the rooms of the exhibition.

Courtesy of the Projecte SD Gallery

ROOMS 3 and 7

SECTIONS, 2021

Installation of 40 images printed with a lithographic procedure on *washi*.

The visual motifs arranged on the walls were treated using lithographic techniques. Duplication, overlay, and palimpsests generate images that have an effect closely resembling that of a film projected onto another image. The arrangement on the walls of the room is the same as the one the artist often uses in her workshop. Considering the methods Dauder uses in most of her work, this practice lays the groundwork for the production of a film, *Insulana* (2021), shot between the Azores and the artist's studio.

Visitors can see the work complete when they have been through all the rooms of the exhibition.

Courtesy of the Projecte SD Gallery

With the support of "la Caixa" Foundation

ROOM 4, 5 and 6

INSULANA, 2021

A film shot in S16 mm and transferred to 35 mm. Colour.

Sound. 15 minutes, 25 seconds

The only facts that this film recounts are not those narrated by the voice-over. The film shows Dauder's experience of walking on solid ash many decades after the volcanic eruption that affected the northwestern Azores in late 1957. She travelled to the islands for the first time in 2017 and returned to film there in 2020. The film transitions between an austere representation of Dauder's workplace and the places affected by the severe earthquakes of which the narrator speaks. This is a film-project that brings together work and actions carried out outside the strict scope of film production. In order to condense various events and experiences, the images merge and mingle in a double-exposure effect that is also used in the rest of the works exhibited in the rooms on either side.

Courtesy of the Projecte SD Gallery

With the support of the Botín Foundation

Curator: Carles Guerra

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Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday
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