

Materials of the Peña Forua Mountain: Lara Almarcegui

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Photo: Latitudes

Since the mid-1990s Lara Almarcegui's practice has focused on processes of urban planning and conservation alongside the infrastructural impulses of design and architecture. Her artistic approach is akin to that of an archaeologist or a surveyor: she researches, documents and analyses the past and present layers of human activity. Her work's sense of civilisation as a cycle of destruction and construction have led to comparisons with the practice of Robert Smithson, in particular his writings' concern with the notion of entropy and the contemporary ruin. Almarcegui's anti-romantic understanding of nature also brings to mind more contemporary ecological positions such as Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, founders of the think tank The Breakthrough Institute, when they write that:

“Cities, and really all human communities, are as organic and *natural* as forests. In ancient cities like Rome and Paris, dwellings, churches, and streets, like an old-growth forest, are literally built upon the ruins of all that came before them”¹

In her initial trips to Urdaibai, Almarcegui investigated many of the processes which are altering the landscape. The research included looking into the dredging of the river, the future excavation of road tunnels, the imminent demolition of farms to make way for a new highway, as well as activities taking place in abandoned quarries, or forest where shipyards deposit debris. Though these initial

¹ Ted Nordhaus, Michael Shellenberger: “Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility”, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Oct 4, 2007, p. 96.

inspections, she became initially interested in the idea of inviting a group of people to visit one of the active quarries before its further alteration, an impulse she has previously developed in related projects such as *Visiting ongoing excavations, Madrid* (2010). In this work once a month for six months, the construction site of an underground car park and a future new rail line that would link Atocha with Chamartín stations in Madrid was opened up to visitors.

In the end, her contribution to the series consisted in nothing less than the calculation of the weight of a mountain, and the display in list form of its geological composition. The Atxondo mountain is covered by Cantabrian holm oak and was known to be mostly composed of limestone, with small percentages of clay and sandstone. Once a more detailed geological analysis was concluded, a complex series of calculations took place in collaboration with geographers and speleologists which followed a 3D modelling of the mountain using the Digital Elevation Model (DEM) technique. This calculated physical volume using algorithms and mathematical formula. The final numbers were then broken down into a simple list of each of the materials which comprised the mountain followed by their weights. This list of geological composition is finally displayed within the site itself, on the wall of an old lime kiln in a nearby abandoned quarry, so that the visitor can firstly observe the staggering mountain, navigate its perimeter, before later reading its geological composition expressed in numbers. During the difficult pre-process to the final form of the work, Almarcegui and her collaborators faced two particular challenges. Firstly, the decision as to where Atxondo actually begins and ends. Secondly, the difficulty of calculating volume in a geographical site that has many internal and external chasms and caves.

Almarcegui deliberately chose to focus her contribution in a site of continuous change. The mountain is being eaten away through the actions of an active quarry, Forua, which is dynamited in order to extract limestone, a sedimentary rock mainly used as a building material or as aggregate for the base of roads. Some of the limestone is processed directly on site where it is turned into gravel and then taken to a facility 5 km away near Gernika which processes it into concrete. It is in this process that we can appreciate a destruction and construction cycle as it loops: the mountain becomes limestone which becomes construction material. During her investigations, Almarcegui discovered that the quarry is now exploited less frequently due to the “brick crisis”. The building sector is one of the hardest hit industries in the current Spanish recession, and the raw materials are simply no longer in high demand. The effects of the economy are therefore clearly translatable into the terms of landscape and ecology: the mountain's transformation and the pace of its destruction, goes hand in hand with the growing or bursting bubble of the construction industry.

Almarcegui's concern with site and context-specific exploration, for seeing what lies beneath our feet, brings to mind Gordon Matta-Clark's 1976 film *Substrait (Underground Dailies)*. The American artist explored a range of New York underground sites (railway tracks, Grand Central Station, Croton Aqueduct in Highgate) and in doing so revealed the complex subterranean life of the metropolis. Almarcegui has developed a series of works in this spirit which break down into two strands: the digging of holes (*Digging in Ibirapuera Park, São Paulo*, 2006, for example, in which the artist dug for a week without making any announcement of her action) and 'Floor removals'. The latter series most recently involved *Removal of the wooden floor, Grafisches Kabinett, Secession*, 2010, in which the herringbone-patterned parquet floor of the upper gallery of the renowned 19th Century Vienna Secession building was removed and cleaned piece-by-piece before being replaced.

The Urdaibai project finds many other links with Almarcegui's previous work. For example, the presentation of what seems like “all-you-need-to-know” about a site in a single and powerful image – a pile of demolished materials of what once was a building (*Rubble Mountain, Murcia*, 2008) for example. Or a bold recipe-like list that breaks down the materials that form the building you are

standing in, an inventory that ends with the sum of its total weight (for example *Construction Rubble of TENT's Central Space*, TENT Rotterdam, 2011). The project also links to Almarcegui's concern with the post-industrial landscape in Spain. In 2008 she developed a project for Expo Zaragoza, which entailed the agreement to preserve a terrain in the Sotos del Río area where the Expo fair took place and to keep in an untouched state for as long as possible. The artist set up a legal agreement whereby an otherwise unremarkable 700 sq.m. wasteland was put beyond the control of developers in perpetuity.

“The project is something I thought necessary ... given the speed of construction ongoing in Spain and also the construction involved in the Expo, I somehow felt compelled to stop and preserve something in its raw state.”²

Indeed Almarcegui's ongoing appeal for slowness, and for questioning what is and what isn't considered remarkable, ties the Urdaibai project with this whole other body of “wasteland” work which includes projects in diverse locations such as Sharjah's Al Khan district (2007), Bilbao's river estuary (2008), London's Lea Valley (2009) or New York's Flushing River in Queens (2010). These 'alternative' tourist guides analyse in great detail the past, present and future of a given topography. As has happened with the calculation of the current weight of Atxondo mountain, Almarcegui freezes a moment in a location's geological timeline to present a paused narrative of sites which are in fact in permanent evolution, bearing witness to the constant possibility of change.

2 Email correspondence with the artist, 9 April 2008.