

Walking in the dark with others

Eulàlia Rovira
Adrian Schindler
+ Caterina Almirall

A possible guide
to the exhibition La part sombre

B I B R A C T É



A conversation on foot between the curator Caterina Almirall and the artists Eulàlia Rovira and Adrian Schindler, on the outskirts of the city of Fraga (Spain), reflecting on the project carried out in Bibracte.

Eulàlia — We are in Fraga, but it's actually not the city that interests us, it's what's underneath.

Adrian — Yes, actually, we're above *Prometheus*.... Above a hypothetical hydrocarbon concession that was delimited around this town and named after him.

E — On the map, it's a rectangle, and here, we are standing more or less in the centre. In addition to this concession, there are three others.

A — *Perseus*, *Atlas* and *Helios*. They are leased to a Canadian company, *Frontera Energy Corporation*, which obtained approval in 2011 to study them to determine whether it was profitable to extract hydrocarbons there. They finally abandoned the project, partly

because there were too many public demonstrations against it. Apparently, the idea was to make it a gas extraction site using the technique known as *fracking* or hydraulic fracturing.

E — Among the four rectangles, we chose this one because we liked the idea of walking on top of *Prometheus*, knowing his story: After Zeus forbade the use of fire by mankind, Prometheus was the one who stole fire from the gods to give to mankind.

A — He is a Titan, considered as the protector of humanity. His relationship with fire, energy and industry caught our attention.

Caterina — Fire is also the symbol of creation, it allows us to manipulate and create. It's for this reason that it's the power of the gods or the rulers. To steal fire is therefore to steal power, to seize creative capability and control.

A — We also liked the idea of coming here, to *Prometheus*, because it's a place that leads us to think about possible futures. Even if, in the end, the fracking project was stopped, everything remains here, underfoot, on standby.

E — Yes, this place allows us to highlight this idea of latency, to understand that with a site like this, you can see it as a landscape or as a place filled with exploitable resources.

A — In addition, this delimited rectangle straddles the border between the regions of Catalunya and Aragon. It's supposed to correspond to a mineral reserve but it has no direct link with the city, the river or the surrounding landscape.

C — It's interesting to ask how things that are 400 or 500 meters deep can be seen, felt, perceived or thought about from the surface.

E — And to think that we are able to go and get them and then crush them...

A — By digging vertical and horizontal wells and then injecting water, sand and chemicals into it.

C — Yes, actually, when you look at this process, it sounds more fantastic than the stories told in mythology. It is even crazier to imagine that they can make a hole thousands of metres underground and build an ice wall in it, than to think of the mythological characters entering and leaving the Netherworld.

A — In linking the story of Prometheus defying the gods to hydraulic fracturing, I think of what the Native Americans so often said to the white man: “Do not take things underground, be it gold, silver or oil, for one day there will come a punishment, the earth will ask its due”. And when you think that such a company gives a concession the name *Prometheus*, it would seem that they are aware that they are playing with the gods; that they are playing with fire.

C — Do you think that this stone is oil shale?

E — I don't think so. It looks too compact.

C — I was amused to see that your video consists of three parts, with three characters, three types of texts, three places and now the three of us are walking here. But I wanted to ask you, who are these three characters?

A — They may not be characters as such, but rather personalities, with their own qualities and ambiguities.

E — Yes, for me they condense different ways of approaching things, each coming from a different field.

A — In fact, their personalities emerged from the three oil shale fragments that we photographed in the Morvan region: a plant fossil, a bas-relief debris of Roman architecture, and a *pyrogenised* slice from the 19th century mining

industry [work n°5].

E — We thought that these fragments could be kinds of scripts or scores, in the broadest sense. In a way, they can be considered as inscribed surfaces, be it a natural, human or industrial inscription. From there, we ended up projecting professions or areas of expertise onto each actor.

A — For example, when writing the monologue [work n°1], we had in mind a figure close to the field of architecture. We saw in him that gaze capable of transforming matter, which, on the one hand, can erect a civilization with ambition and megalomania, and on the other, has a love, an attention to detail and things done well. They are two faces of the same mind. Then there is this second figure closer to mining engineering, which has a sensitivity for geological movements but which can also adopt the voice of capitalist exploitation of raw materials. And the third, which is closer to nature and biology, a kind of observer or philosopher, who is interested in life but also in decomposition...

C — But it makes him dizzy, doesn't it?

E — I think you can be fascinated by living organisms, by a plant for example, but when you start to look at changes in the states of matter, it becomes much more metaphysical [work n°2].

C — Yes, and if we return to the topic of the mineral world, it seems that we understand even less about it because we think we are further away from it.

A — Although in the end, our bones are very close to stone, they are composed of minerals.

C — Shall we continue in this direction?

C — When you invited me to do this interview, you told me about a book that was one of the starting points of

your project, and that you wanted to invoke again in the form of this walk: *Bermannus*, by Georg Agricola.¹ You told me that this text is considered as one of the first attempts to approach mineralogy in a more or less scientific way. But at that time, in the 16th century, there were no geologists as such, just amateurs with other professions, such as doctors, who through their own study laid the foundations of what we now know as the science of geology.

A — It's true, in the book the characters are two doctors who have knowledge in botany and mineralogy, which they use essentially to prepare medicines. And then there's a miner named Bermannus. Both doctors comment on the knowledge of Arabs, Greeks and Romans and speculate on what they see, and Bermannus corroborates their hypotheses with precise data he has learnt from his profession.

E — It is the meeting of practical knowledge and scholarly knowledge.

C — And of legendary or mythological knowledge. I think your texts are also very symbolic. They are filled with references to other writings. We know of the classical divinities because of the texts that were left to us, and these texts took the form of plays because this is the form that knowledge transmission took at that time. In your case, I don't know to what extent the reference to a dramatic or theatrical text is premeditated.

A — This is precisely what we liked about Agricola's text. It is its form that has touched us: Agricola uses the walk as a pretext to allow his characters to share information in a more informal,

perhaps less dogmatic way. He then wrote better-known texts, such as *De Re Metallica*, which are treatises that more frankly assume the claim of establishing knowledge. In Bermannus, there's much more room for doubt and speculation.

E — And then there's the subtitle of the book, *Un dialogue sur les mines* [A Dialogue on Mines], which in addition to indicating its subject also tells us that the characters literally walk on what they are discussing. That is to say that Agricola does not only place knowledge behind a desk but that he formulates the need to get in contact with the subject being studied, to step on it.

A — Somehow they follow the veins, right? Seams, invisible underground tracks, silver, uranium or hydrocarbon roads.

C — And, if they followed minerals, now we are following gas! Which seems like taking it to its natural conclusion. The gas has no body, no solidity. I find that there is a lot that is invisible, both in your work and in that which you analyse. Writing as well as the drawing that we trace while walking allows us to represent intangible things that we cannot see.

E — Or that have to go through extremely complex processes to appear. Take a stone and say, "There's oil in here"! You don't believe that at first, do you?

C — And you, do you believe it?

E — That we can really extract its juice?

A — We did try to burn it and it made some sparks. But it didn't work out very well.

E — Should we climb this mound?

C — I wanted you to tell me a little more about a fragment of the monologue, the part in which the character describes

1 Agricola, Georg, *Bermannus (Le mineur) : Un dialogue sur les mines*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1990 [1530].

daily gestures.

A — In this part, we wanted to link the question of energy to domestic spaces, the world of work and a certain productivist vision. At the time of writing the text of the character, we had in mind the figure of Janus, a god supposedly venerated in the Autun region. He's a god with two faces. One looks to the past and the other to the future. And he's also the god of gates and passages. In our case, we connected it to the idea of entering the depths of the earth, of accessing hydrocarbons. His gaze crosses the limits of time and allows us to put our finger on this formula which man developed and which links matter and progress.

E — If we think about it, we produce more and more, and a large part of this production is made from materials that come from below, like cell phones, to give an easy example. But at the same time, we are moving further and further away from the reality of the production of things. We use new materials to make new products with new technologies, but we don't know where they come from, what texture they have, or what processes they undergo. We are not cultured on the subject of how things are made.

C — Culture comes in fact from cultivating and this relationship between nature and culture is very interesting. We often think that they are opposite concepts but, in reality, they are part of the same construction. The word culture induces a continuum between the two terms, meaning the relationship and control of the environment. In short, it describes how we think of ourselves in relation to what surrounds us, practically as an impossible assembly.

E — In German, the verbs cultivate and

construct have the same root, *bauen*, which originally meant to inhabit.

Therefore, how you live in a place, how you cultivate what is around you, and how you care for and cultivate yourself are related.²

C — It's visible in the etymology of the word itself, culture comes from the Latin *colere*, which means to cultivate, culture, cult, and somehow even colonise. In short, to inhabit and occupy a space.³

E — Moreover, the expansion of mining is inextricably linked to colonialism. Everything that has been extracted from the subsoil of distant countries has defined the standard by which the value of the rest of things has been measured. But the currency we know today is no longer silver, nor gold, but numbers on the stock exchange. Since the first value was given to these minerals, we have come a long way, taking a number of steps of translation and abstraction. Matter has moved away from value as society has physically moved away from the origin of the things it uses.

A — Yes, the relationship we have with extraction or production is much more unashamed, and at the same time ambiguous. Here, in Fraga, there were demonstrations against fracking to protect the environment, but in the end, the gas we consume here is extracted in Russia or Algeria, and it's that region that is damaged. This is where the text "The lights turn on, the meters speed up, the gas stove or induction hob gets hot..." comes from. You make yourself a coffee in the morning and the gas in your kitchen has travelled thousands of miles.

2 See Martin Heidegger, "Bauen Wohnen Denken" (1951), in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000.

3 See Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000.



C — Our heads could explode when we think about it in these terms.

E — I can imagine that we would need a year to track down everything we consume in a day. Retrace the origin, the production, the distribution...

A — We could say that the Netherworld is not only an underground mythological place. In fact, the term could mean anything that is not perceived at first sight.

E — Yes, but on which we depend completely. In the end, the world and the Netherworld are the same thing, just one of the two is invisible, we may not want to see it but it's essential, it crosses us at all levels.

C — The consequences of everything we talk about, in terms of health or the environment, are disastrous. It's easy to talk about it on a theoretical level, but if we talk about it from a really material point of view, it's obvious that we are approaching the exhaustion of the planet. It's therefore wiser to leave Prometheus alone, and not to wake him.

A — Even solar panels are made of rare metals, which also have an ecological impact.

E — Yes, it's important to continue to look for energy alternatives, but it seems that the one thing we will not do is question our rate of consumption and expansion. Recently we were stunned to read an article on space mining: this is insane.

A — Billions are currently being invested to exploit minerals on asteroids.

E — Yes, we all say that we must protect the earth, but where do we set the limits of our ecosystem?

C — I read that the region of Tarragona, where there is a large petrochemical complex, is the region where fertility is the lowest in the entire Iberian Peninsula. It's not surprising that what

is affected is fertility. Cancers attack the reproductive capacity of the human species.

A — Do you think that someone lives in that house over there?

C — Had you already worked with mythological figures? How do you consider them?

A — No, this is the first time. In a way, these figures function as metaphors or concepts; each crystalizes human characteristics, but also natural characteristics.

E — Yes, they can help us get closer to what we have moved away from. They're like some kind of timeless bridge. When in our video the conversation on the mine focuses on the god Plutus, [work n°3], the character explains how the miners take him out of the ground and how, when he is heated and the silver starts to flow, a smile is drawn across his face. Right after this, we describe industrial engineering and the new extraction processes invented by companies like *Shell* or *Exxon*. This description seems like pure science fiction, to the point that humans are absent, freed from any responsibility, a posthuman scenario. Although the mythological narrative seems closer to fantasy, it at least allows us to recognise ourselves in it.

A — And the fact that we humanize this much sought-after raw material by giving it a face is not insignificant.

C — To choose to represent the Netherworld in the form of Plutus, a god with human appearance, is to allow us to grasp that which otherwise we could not apprehend.

A — Maybe it's precisely so they can communicate with us, since we don't know how to look at things.

C — It's very much related to our

culture. In others, there's definitely more abstract thinking. Perhaps the identification process can even be done in the opposite direction, thinking of oneself as a mineral for example. Our western culture is clearly anthropocentric.

E — Shall we go back down?

C — Then there is the theme of “the dark part”; the murkiness, the black colour. I think the relationship to this darkness is very important. At the end of the video with the three characters [work n°3], there's even this allusion to the projection of a *film noir* in a mine...⁴

E — There are many strata we could talk about. If we look at this rock, what did it give us? It brought light, energy to run cars and machines... things that could be considered more ethereal, almost immaterial. But these things finally come from this solid black stone, which contains all these other stories, from the fossils of the Permian to the bas-reliefs of the Romans, passing by the mosaics of Bibracte. This black, in a way, incites us to look for the source.

C — Like redefining the idea of origin as a concentration of things.

E — Yes, but an origin that is not seen in a romantic way at all, but rather as something raw and unprocessed.

A — There's also the day and night factor. Everything is filmed in natural environments, either early, when the sun rises, or late, when it sets. In this way, we wanted to make a counterpoint between the natural cycles of light and darkness and this black rock that

allowed us to feed the oil lamps and extend the day, and by extension the working day [work n°4].

E — I was thinking of Michel Siffre, that scientist who, in the 1960s, lived underground for two months to experiment with the perception of time when it's not marked by day and night. He realized that as the days went by, his perception was completely out of phase. In this line of thought, it seems incredible to think that it is the extraction of hydrocarbons from the rocks under our feet that has allowed us to transgress the temporalities on the surface, dictated by the sun, and to play with time artificially.

A — Another aspect related to the darkness is obviously dark or sinister intentions, and in the case of energy, speculation and the desire for profits of big corporations. When we imagined these three characters and their ambiguities, we always thought of their dark side. A side we ultimately all have.

E — At the Autun Natural History Museum, we were shown thin slides with very fine samples of oil shale. Using a polarizing filter, it was easier to detect where the organic matter was located inside the rock. Unlike the rest, it was clearly black. So the black comes from life.

C — Everything becomes blurred, life and death, organic and inorganic. A stone, you consider it as a mineral, but finally it turns out that it also contains plants and fish.

A — Exactly, it suggests that what luminesces and what is dark is part of the same cycle. It was an idea that we really liked. It's for this reason that we wanted to engage ourselves in this darkness, to make it more complex.

C — I read that Plutus, who would be the representative of all that we don't see or what is underground, has a

⁴ This idea was freely inspired by the proposal of a cinema built in an abandoned mine that the artist Robert Smithson formulated in the text “A Cinematic Atopia” (1971). See Jack Flam (ed.), Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.



colourless helmet, a helmet that makes him invisible!

A — Should we go to that grove up there?

E — Yes, we've been walking in the mud for a while. Strata have accumulated under our soles.

C — One aspect that seems important to me is the relationship of your artistic practice with other disciplines, the way in which it crosses other fields of knowledge, and how Agricola's work resonates with it. Does this doctor-geologist do the same thing as you? I find it remarkable that you take as your starting point a referent like him, and not a *land-art* artist for example. And also the fact that this exhibition is first presented in an archaeology museum and not in an art space.

A — In a way, our practice could be considered as a type of archaeological work. It focuses not only on artifacts but also on the interpretation of context, myths, ways of life... In this sense, yes, it's transversal.

E — It's true that there are not many professions where one can invest time to go from one field of knowledge to another, to ask questions that may seem superficial to an expert on the subject, but then extrapolate the answers and relate them to other fields or other times. In the end, I think that it's within these bridges and these spaces that leave room for fiction and speculation, that we situate our work.

A — Yes, art for me is a tool that creates links that did not exist before and that generate new knowledge. But I also often say that artists loot. If we take a critical look at this, we could say that we are sort of miners, that we extract wealth and transform it according to our interests.

E — If we return to *Bermannus*, and to the fact that we are as interested in the narrative form of the book as in its content, we realize that whatever the discipline, there are always materials and forms of discourse: what you're talking about and how you decide to talk about it.

A — In our case, we often make sure that the genre of the text changes within the same work. This causes a certain strangeness. The conversation in front of the mine [work n°3], for example, begins with reading a book⁵ and then continues with a conversation where it seems that the characters are both talking to each other and speaking for themselves. This momentary isolation highlights the different sources of the texts.

E — We work with actors and stage a conversation, but we don't necessarily seek the naturalistic. Some situations are a little forced; the way they stand there, at the entrance to the mine, at this unusual hour, causes a certain friction between their environment and their words.

A — This point of view makes you look at things through a prism that may seem artificial. But it's the idea of invisibility that comes back. Locating conversations in these settings allows us to draw attention to places we might otherwise pass by. We forget that the Eduans and Romans extracted this stone here in the Morvan region, or that not so long ago it was transformed into energy. This artificiality, therefore, is not so artificial after all, if we consider that there were people who rested

5 It is the beginning of the novel *The Fountainhead* by author Ayn Rand, known for her advocacy of individualism and laissez-faire capitalism, whose main character is an ambitious young modernist architect. French edition: *La Source vive*, Genève : Éditions Jeheber, 1945.

and chatted at the exit of the mine. We reinvested places that had already been occupied by conversations.

C — That's the magic of language, isn't it? Point 400 metres underground and say: "There is gas". For me, this ability to evoke or invoke has something to do with a magical function. Plutus only exists in our language.

A — With art, there's also this power of enunciation. To generate a space for reflection where a diversity of things coexist.

E — It's true that this work is very stratified, or sedimented. Maybe there are even some tectonic shocks.

C — Do you think that following this path we can get back to the car?

During our residency in Bibracte, while we were following the veins of the oil shale in the Autun basin, a *terrazzo* floor was discovered in one of the rooms of the *domus* in the excavation site PC2. Among the fragments of amphorae and terracotta that make up this covering, a few plates of oil shale and limestone make it possible to still distinguish a modest geometric decoration in staggered rows. This decorative use of bituminous shale is the second recorded at Bibracte, after the discovery of large mosaics in the *domus* of PC1. The three photographs accompanying the text of the conversation on foot follow the oil shale tiles from the site to the research centre.

Colophon

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Back cover image

Block of fossilised oil shale (argillite) in which the plasticity of the swirling shale is visible. Autun Natural History Museum Collection.

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Room plan

1, 2, 3

The dark part

HD video, stereo, 16:9, duration: 4', 11' and 12'30", French, English subtitles

Text, direction, camera and editing:

Eulàlia Rovira and Adrian Schindler

Sound recording, mixing and mastering:

Nicolas Pommé

Actors: Sylvain Blanchot, Marie Julie Lemerrier and Olivier Nugues

4

A lamp illuminates a lamp that illuminates

Digital print, MDF, 200 x 80 cm each

5

When you light this rock it burns like wood*

Inkjet print, 140 x 140 cm

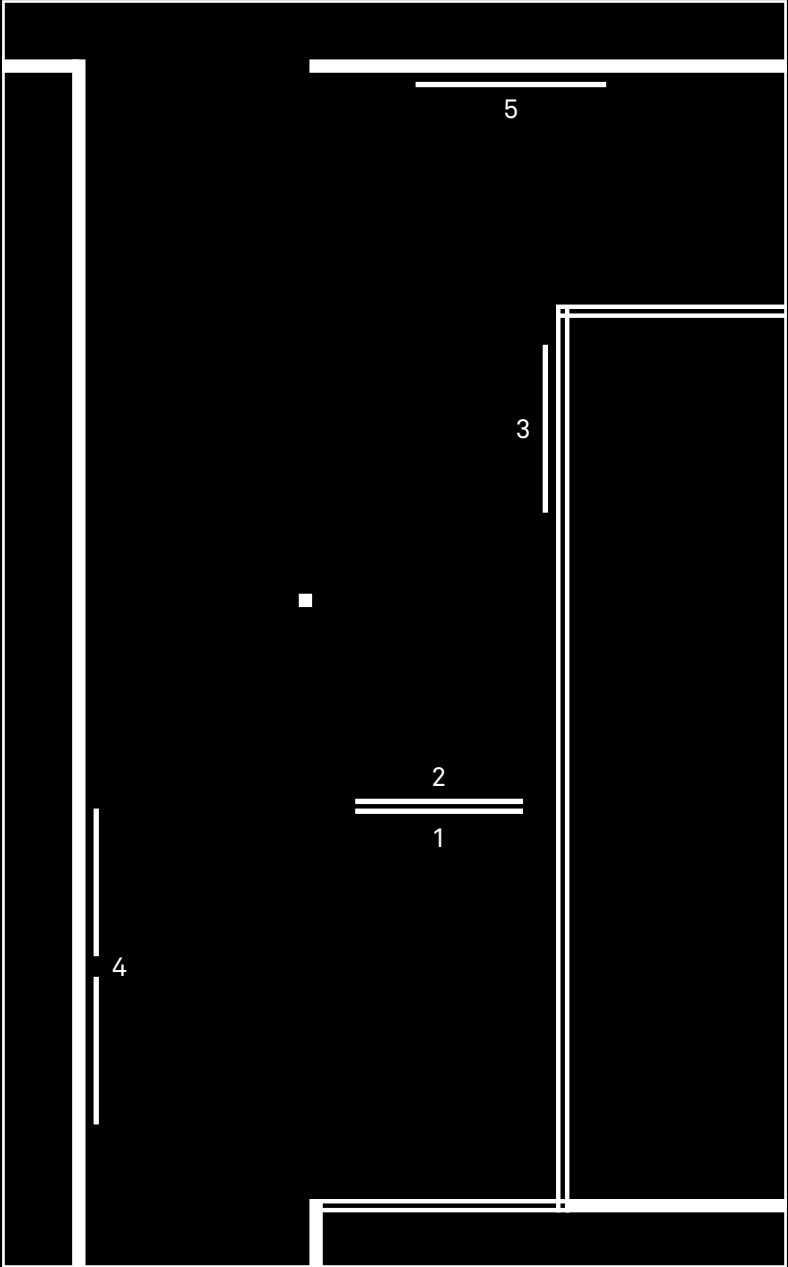
a — *Rock 1555*, Pecopteris fossil (tree fern) on oil shale, Permian period (298.9 - 251.9 million years), Autun Natural History Museum Collection.

b — *Corner of panel with moulded frame*, fragment of oil shale bas-relief from a Roman public monument in Augustodunum, 2nd - 3rd century, Rolin Museum Collection.

c — *Cooked shale*, oil shale after extraction of shale oil by pyrogenic method, Igornay deposit (1839-1899), Autun Natural History Museum Collection.

* Quote from the Arab geographer and naturalist Al-Dimashqi (1256 - 1327).

b	c
a	



After a long drive, we stop on the side of a dirt road, a few kilometers after crossing the border. We get out of the car. They seem to know where we are. I follow them and we take the first steps on the muddy path that rises slightly, turning our backs on the city. There is nothing remarkable about the landscape, only dry trees and stones. It's raining and everything seems to be the same indefinite darkish colour. But little by little we sharpen our eyes and begin to observe what surrounds us, while trying to focus our attention on what is actually not visible, on what is under our feet. Through an exercise of conceptual archaeology, the power of ancestral divinities allows us to travel five hundred meters underground and millions of years back in time, to reveal the place and moment when life took on a new form and transformed into fire.

Caterina Almirall

Published on the occasion of the exhibition La part sombre, from March 17 to November 11, 2018, following Eulàlia Rovira and Adrian Schindler's residency in Bibracte in 2017.

