Gold and **Bateas: Visuality, Tactility, Representation, Politics**

**Visuality, Tactility**

The recent boom in resource extraction in Latin America and the intense conflicts surrounding extraction have attracted the notice of many communities of practice and media genres and generated new modes of representation that bring together different publics. Many of these strongly emphasize the visual as a direct and (ostensibly) accessible mode of communication. Recent visually-oriented representations of extraction and responses to it include Sebastião Salgado’s famous series of gold miners in Serra Pelada, Brazil; documentary films such as *La Hija de la Laguna* (about the conflict between the Yanacocha mining company and communities near the site of a proposed open-pit mine known as the Conga project); and photo essays in *The Guardian*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times* of informal gold mining in Madre de Dios, Peru, including aerial photographs showing the environmental devastation caused by these mining operations. These projects focus primarily (though not exclusively) on the visual presentation of gold mining and the violence and contamination associated with it. Often they present a visual contrast between, for instance, the gold that is being extracted and the water, animals, and life that are being destroyed, or between gold mining and gold as a consumable luxury or financial commodity in bank vaults, jewelry counters, or even as a tasteless (in both senses, perhaps) garnish on expensive food. These representations leverage striking visual contrasts to create an argument for the viewer—in the case of those works I have mentioned, one that is strongly critical of mining.

Another genre of visual representations of gold takes a very different perspective. These include lavish coffee table books focused on gold and golden objects, museum exhibits such as the 2018 *Golden Kingdoms* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art [https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2018/golden-kingdoms], the Gold Museum in Bogotá, and the 2018 *Gold: Treasures of the Bundesbank* exhibit at the Deutsche Bundesbank Money Museum. In Elizabeth Ferry’s ongoing research on gold as a physical object in mining and finance, she saw hundreds of caressing close-up photographs of lustrous gold jewelry, gold bars, and molten gold in the offices and publications of financial and business organizations that worked with gold. These representations also make visual arguments; however, in contrast to the examples above, these emphasize the visually apprehensible qualities of gold (luster, color) as indices of its intrinsic value, and the inevitability of human desire for it. Anthropologist Les Field provides an insightful critique of how these images serve to legitimate the supposed universality of the desire for gold, which has the double effect of naturalizing the impetus behind mining and of universalizing European views of gold. As different as these cultural products are from the critical pieces I described above, they also depend on the idea of the visual as “eye-catching” and accessible.

However, the visual is not the only sensory mode that invites and catches. Recent scholarship in many areas emphasizes the primacy but often unrecognized domain of the material. Focusing on materiality and materials, vibrant matter and affective economies refutes—or at least complicates—a long-standing privilege of sight over other senses. In an article on this turn, “Beyond Visuality: Review of Materiality and Affect,” art historian Veerle Thielemans describes how art historians have developed new understandings of the

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2. Les W. Field, “Gold, Ontological Difference and Object Agency” in *The Anthropology of Precious Minerals*, ed. Elizabeth Ferry, Andrew Walsh, and Annabel Vallard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). Europeans were decidedly not the only ones to treat gold as a distincively if not uniquely valuable substance, as we can see from evidence from China, India, and elsewhere. Yet, it is not true, as many argue, that humans are naturally or inevitably drawn to gold over other objects. Pre-Columbian groups in Mesoamerica and the Andes in different places and at different times valued jade, feathers, and *tumbaga* (a gold-copper alloy) over gold itself. Nicholas Saunders describes the significance of “brilliant” (shiny, iridescent, or sparkly) objects in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans, but gold was only one of these objects, along with shells, feathers, and crystals of different kinds (Nicholas J. Saunders, “Biographies of Brilliance: Pearls, Transformations of Matter and Being, c. AD 1492,” *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (1999): 245–57).
Anthropologist Rosalind Morris Thielemans of radio broadcasts and telephone conversations. Has focused on aural experience, as in the example given by 5. Much of this expansion has focused on aural experience, as in the example given by Thielemans of radio broadcasts and telephone conversations. Anthropologist Rosalind Morris’s article “The Miner’s Ear” exemplifies this attention to sound in discussions of extraction. 3. But there is still much to explore in the multisensory experience and representation of extraction and extractive conflict.

In particular, the combination of sight and touch is central to mining and to the valuing of mined commodities. Gold’s tactile qualities form an important part of its allure and ideology, and the physical experience of mining is central to the history and identity of mining communities. Likewise, extraction moves mountains, “radically reshaping seemingly stable, unchanging landscapes and with them, entire ecosystems and ways of life.” 6. In what follows, we describe how a book we made, La Batea (2017), 7 aims to bring together the visual and tactile to capture and (incompletely) convey the experiences and politics of small-scale gold mining in Colombia.

La Batea: An Interdisciplinary and Multisensory Experiment

The authors of this work—Stephen and Elizabeth Ferry—share a family history (we are brother and sister) and came to this project after many years of working on mining in Latin America, in the fields of documentary photography and sociocultural anthropology, respectively. From 2011 to 2017 we traveled to communities of small-scale gold miners all over Colombia, documenting people’s stories in photographs and text. We also conducted extensive research on the history and current context of gold mining in Colombia.

The book’s title, La Batea, comes from the name for the wooden pan used in mining since Pre-Columbian times. As the principal implement in artisanal gold mining, the batea is a unifying practice of many small-scale miners. Historically, the batea can be understood as a symbol of freedom, being the tool used by thousands of people to buy their liberty before the abolition of slavery in 1851. The use of the batea depends on a close encounter with the rock, mud, and water and a steady coaxing out of gold through circular movements. Because of its association with traditional, low-impact mining, the batea has become a political symbol as well as a functional tool, and the title draws on that symbolism (Figure 1).

Colombia has some of the largest and richest gold reserves in the world, and gold has been central to its history. Pre-Columbian cultures, such as the Tayrona, Muisca, Quimbaya and Tierradentro, developed advanced technologies and aesthetic practices with gold, which was fundamental to their ritual and political life. When the Spaniards arrived in these lands, they brought their own beliefs about gold as a profoundly powerful economic, political, and metaphysical substance.

Europeans’ search for gold in the Americas crystallized in the legend of a city of gold, known as El Dorado (The Golden One). This famous myth arose from a misunderstanding; the term described a Muisca ritual held on Lake Guatavita, north of what is now Bogotá, but the Spaniards believed it referred to a fabulous golden city. In this ritual, as recounted in 1656 by the colonial chronicler Juan Rodríguez Freyle, the heir to the chief was covered in gold powder and transported by boat into the middle of the lake where he threw in offerings of gold, emeralds, and feathers. Rodríguez Freyle concluded his description by saying “From this ceremony was taken the celebrated name of ‘Dorado,’ which has cost so many lives.” In search of El Dorado, the conquistadores plundered countless native towns and graves.

Throughout the sixteenth century, indigenous populations collapsed because of disease, forced labor under brutal conditions, and warfare with the Spanish. To replace their labor, the Spanish introduced thousands of Africans as slaves, especially to mine gold in the Pacific and Antioquia regions. Many escaped and formed maroon communities that supported themselves through mining along with fishing, hunting, and agriculture. Others, although remaining...

enslaved until emancipation in 1851, also engaged in these economic practices.

For most of the nineteenth century, Colombia was the world’s largest producer of gold. To finance Colombia’s War of Independence, Simón Bolivar leased major gold mines, such as those in Marmato, to British concerns. In the republican period, steam technology and, later, railroads helped to establish underground mining as a major source of Colombian wealth.

In the late twentieth century, the high risk of kidnapping by leftist guerrillas made Colombia a doubtful investment for foreign gold companies. However, beginning in the early 2000s, a combination of high metal prices, more efficient technologies, and greatly improved security conditions have made Colombia newly attractive for transnational corporations. The Colombian government prioritizes large-scale resource extraction as a central feature of its economic development agenda. The current mining code was drafted in 2001 in collaboration with Canadian advisers and favors large-scale projects over traditional miners. Foreign mining companies now see Colombia as a new frontier.

In all this excitement, the government and foreign corporations tend to ignore local communities that have been mining gold for centuries. At least 350,000 Colombians make their livelihood directly through small-scale gold mining activities, with many more depending on them through family ties and commerce. These miners have dense social and territorial relations with gold, customary rights, and long histories. As the “mining locomotive” (to use former President Juan Manuel Santos’s phrase) gained momentum, these local miners have come into conflict with multinational corporations and with the Colombian state. Between 2005 and 2011, the Colombian government issued over nine thousand mining titles for exploration and production, with nearly one thousand for precious metal mining. For the most part, these licenses were issued without informing or consulting with miners already working in these areas, nor with agricultural, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian communities, who are often opposed to large-scale projects that threaten their territories. This has led to many confrontations.

At the same time, the rise in gold prices led Colombia’s insurgent armies, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), along with paramilitary militias and numerous criminal gangs, to get involved in gold mining, causing tremendous violence in certain areas of the country. The Colombian government has made the elimination of such criminal mining a priority, and for good reason. However, state mining agencies and important national media tend to portray all small-scale miners as dangerous agents, applying the terms “illegal” and “criminal” indiscriminately. This language can then be used to justify violent displacements of people and communities that resist large mining operations. Furthermore, arguments by large mining companies, frequently repeated in the media, give the impression that all small-scale miners are environmentally irresponsible holdovers of an economic practice that must inevitably give way to modernity. In place of this oversimplified story, La Batea aims to document multiple mining histories, practices, and experiences.

FIGURE 1. Book cover, La Batea.
In making La Batea, we wanted to create a compelling object and one that could be apprehended not only through sight but also through touch. This emphasis emerged from our mutual interests in materiality, a sense that a work that engaged multiple senses would also be more immediate and accessible to broader publics, and, finally, from our feeling that the tactile is an under-recognized dimension of extraction and extractive conflict. For this reason, the design of La Batea and its materials were an integral aspect of the project. The book’s cover (see Figure 1) is stamped with a circle of 22-karat gold leaf of the kind used by restorers of religious paintings in Colombia. The book is intended to be an appealing object, because of the rough texture of the paper and how it feels in your hand and through the choice and sequencing of the photographs. The spiral imagery on the cover represents the way water and earth swirl in the batea.

We saw this form in part as a symbol of kinds of gold mining that have been practiced for centuries. Many of those who use the batea use only mining sluices and other non-mechanized tools to extract the gold and, instead of mercury, employ the juice of a plant called escoba babosa. They do this in spite of the fact that the use of machinery such as backhoes and mercury as an amalgamating agent extract a higher percentage of gold more quickly. These miners do not act on the same principles of efficiency and speed as other miners (much less those of mining companies), and their work is for this reason far more sustainable. In the English version of the book, we dubbed these practices "slow gold" in reference to the Slow Food International movement, which also links slowness (in food production and consumption) to sustainability and environmental and social justice (https://www.slowfood.com/). The book’s imagery and physicality are intended to evoke some of those slower and more sustainable practices.

At the same time, the batea is used in a whole range of gold-mining and -processing activities. In some places, mercury is used; in others, cyanide is used but not mercury; in others, alluvial mining with the batea occurs downstream from mills that do use mercury; and in yet others its use co-exists with limited forms of surface mining using water-jets. The occurrence of the batea in such a broad range of contexts also made it especially evocative as the title and key image for the book (Figure 2).

Over the course of making the book, we talked a lot about how to emphasize these physical aspects of the book without suggesting some kind of analogy between what we were doing and real goldwork, which is of course much more physically difficult and dangerous. We wanted to refer to that experience without in any way claiming it ourselves. We also tried not to fall into an easy or romantic fetishism of small-scale mining (sometimes called “artisanal mining”) in ways that might be reminiscent of the fetishism of the artisanal in other areas.

For instance, we chose a font known as American Linotype for the cover and chapter titles. The letters in the font are irregularly broken up, like a badly serviced typewriter. In the running text of the book, the irregularity does not stand out, because the font is smaller. But it did stand out on the cover, and we felt that this intentional brokenness tipped into romanticism, so we cleaned the title up to make the letters even and unbroken.

Representation, Politics

The conflicts surrounding extraction in Colombia, as in other places, are fought through media images and language as well as with guns, rocks, and injunctions. As we discussed above, the representation of small-scale miners in the media as thugs, polluters, or simply as anachronisms was one of the impetuses for us to pursue this project in the first place. Although discussions surrounding the politics of extraction are widespread, they tend only to focus on the violence and environmental contamination caused by some forms of gold mining. We also noticed that these representations often served as arguments for large mining companies wishing to replace traditional miners with open-pit mines and other massive projects. We tried to give a more rounded picture, not shying away from the negative aspects of gold mining in Colombia, but also telling other stories.

In presenting this more rounded view, however, we did not wish to suggest these cases are entirely pure or without problems. For instance, in the chapter on Marmato, a place that has received a lot of media attention, especially surrounding a highly exaggerated story of an avalanche caused by mining, and one where miners do not use mercury and have maintained independence in the civil conflict, we were sure to include a picture that demonstrated some of the very real problems of geological instability (Figure 3).

At the same time, the media, including at times eco-art and other activist media, often depict miners in extremely dehumanizing ways, recalling insects, demons, morally

reprehensible or evil figures, or simply as part of bodies with no faces showing. If one were to depict drug dealers or sex workers (to name two other professions associated with criminality and violence) in the ways in which small-scale miners are depicted, many observers would (we think rightly) say that these representations deprived them of their agency, flattened out their humanity, or failed to recognize the structural constraints within which they operate. Yet, artisanal and small-scale miners are frequently depicted in these terms. *La Batea* aims to confront these flattened images not only with a more differentiated view of small-scale gold mining, but also with pictures and texts that captured people’s particularity—the ways in which they were themselves—through a phrase, an anecdote, a facial expression, or a way of holding the arm (Figures 4 and 5).

Gold, Bateas, and also Hippos

Gold is not the only substance that engages multiple senses, nor the only commodity that shapes the history, geography, politics, flora, and fauna of Colombia. We conclude this essay with a piece by the Colombian artist Santiago Montoya (Figure 6). The piece, titled *Hippo in Batea*, concentrates the history of resource extraction in Colombia into one three-dimensional space in which a hippopotamus made from chocolate and covered in gold leaf stands (swallows) in a batea filled with chocolate. The successive Colombian booms of gold, cocaine, and cacao are condensed in this image. That the hippopotamus stands in as representative of the cocaine economy is especially striking; the Magdalena River in Colombia is home to a growing population of hippos, now around forty. The current population is descended from four hippos that were originally part of cocaine baron Pablo Escobar’s private zoo, left to their own devices after his death in 1993 (https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/05/160510-pablo-escobar-hippos-colombia/). Their growing presence speaks to the strange afterlife of the cocaine boom and associated criminality, and to the unexpected, even absurd contingencies of extraction.
in general. Underlying the chocolate mud bath in which this creature stands, the batea seems like the receptacle for a primordial sea, from which emerge the fabulous resources that have enriched so many people and caused so much death (see Figure 6).

Montoya’s work, through its visuality and tactility (and, through the chocolate, its reference to both taste and smell) shows beautifully how complex ideas can be condensed and then communicated through art. We hope that work like this, along with that of Edi Hirose and Nancy La Rosa (shown in the Moving Mountains exhibit) will continue to take on these extremely difficult histories through multisensory encounters with the images and materials of extraction.

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