



## **MINERAL INVISIBILITY**

### **MABE BETHONICO**

The project Mineral Invisibility\* involves constituting and circulating content about the past and the present of the ever-changing reality of the fast-growing extraction industry that consumes landscapes and important sources at speed in Minas Gerais, despite not arousing public debate. It is an investigation on silencing and image control related to the issue, which must be urgently addressed. This essay follows a quest begun with a field research in 2008. It is the account of an experience, which starts and ends with issues of memory and archive?charged with potential to trigger discussion and reinvention.

Both the access and photographing in the mines are strongly controlled, allegedly due to ?industrial secret.? After almost one year seeking to research in the field, I was granted permission to follow some female workers of a large mining company. The first production made it easier for other companies to authorize visits. The images intended for the ILO?s archive on the presence of female employees in the operating areas created a number of stories about women who are outstanding in the scope of their work. They are admitted to the jobs and compete with men, without any special women?s admission programs. Dealing with increasingly larger and more automated machines, they are preferred for some functions due to their care with the equipment and owing to the dispersive attention typical of women?they deftly command the numerous controls and cameras of large trucks and excavators. Proud of their functions, they are admired in the community and by their families, due to the imaginary exoticism related to the mines, of which little is known by the majority of people.

Women workers are respected by their male peers?sometimes not totally without resistance?but they do not report psychological pressure or harassment. On the contrary, they find support from male colleagues. Even if they are in smaller numbers, they make a difference in the work areas, which are reverted into spaces of cooperation and even solidarity. However, some of them report they do not ask for help because they don?t want their male colleagues to question their ability to perform the job?still seen by some of the men as male work.

Welders, sharpeners, off-road truck drivers, belt-conveyor operators, bulldozer operators, mechanical engineers, geologists, and electricians, none of the women interviewed consider mining beyond their own functions at work. They consider the

privilege of the job. In cities where mining is the only consolidated industry, they seek a job with labor rights, stability, and growth perspective to improve their salaries on a medium-term basis. In mining cities one can hardly find opportunities in other industries, which are often nonexistent. Mining is the economic anchor of the towns, even if for a limited period of time?up to the exhaustion of the enterprise?despite all the implications of safety and local destruction.

Women are absent in small mines, enterprises spread throughout the state, often hidden and illegal. It is possible to find child labor in that field, but not women at work. We learn about these companies through the mining sector of the local Safety and Health Administration Agency of the Ministry of Labor and Employment. The inspectors of the mines, when entering the areas, often under the Federal Police protection, photograph the safety conditions at the mines. They produce images to prepare technical reports and use as evidence. They are at the service of the workers and investigate the mines infrastructure, the sanitary conditions, facilities for feeding, living, their transportation and safety equipment available. They trace areas of risk and the safe storage of explosives. Workers do not usually appear on the photos. There are places?restrooms, dormitories, cafeterias, the mines, and access routes?and materials, cutting equipment, transport, electric and hydraulic installations. What is visible is the bad working conditions?imminent risks, shortages and precariousness, makeshift.

The inspectors made their images stored in digital files available, and the material becomes a counterpoint for the seemingly ideal scene of women?s work at the large mines. The images meet the interest of the agency to publicize the broadly unknown reality of the mines. At the same time, while the importance of the inspection work itself is notable, one sees how it is performed under minimum conditions: the agents act with limited resources and the ambition to inspect not only the state of Minas Gerais, counting with a small team of individuals who take turns in travels to monitor and issue warnings, in few vehicles.<sup>1</sup>

Although the mines occupy large areas of the state, affecting air and water, health and local economies, the history of mining and its urgent issues strangely remain largely absent from the public debate in Minas Gerais. Although it is imprinted in the imaginary of the people, it is generally an unknown issue, from the extension of the excavated landscape to the size of the machines in operation, to the works involved, and their agents. It is an unnoticed, unseen, not discussed subject. In general, it is impossible to see the mines from the roads, as they are deliberately hidden by trees and bushes; the perforated landscape appears very clearly in great extensions once you overfly the state or from the highest hills. In recent years only?with Chinese investors getting involved beyond the sphere of importation, now acquiring mines and controlling more extractive operations, mining appears more frequently in daily newspapers, due to a feeling of threat to the local autonomy. NGOs try to bring into public discussion the

issue of the fast expansion of mining threatening important water resources, but they are barely noticed by the press. These are small groups of individuals who represent the only resistance, although, they pose a well-founded opposition and have been winning in court over powerful transnational companies, as in the case of the protection of Serra do Gandarela, for example.<sup>2</sup>

#### AMNESIA IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

Even if the important economic role that mining plays in the state is common knowledge, and although its social implications are evident, a collective amnesia, or lack of interest, persists in the cultural field. Minas Gerais keeps few traces of its mining history. In public archives, museums, and libraries only dispersed material can be found, rarely and generally out of context, perpetuating invisibility and abstraction.

On the other hand, the large mining companies invest heavily on advertisement, boasting environmentally responsible images, stressing the outstanding role they play in the national economic growth and creation of jobs that are great for individuals. The same companies have recently implemented cultural institutions geared towards mining and life in Minas Gerais. Those institutions are strategically infantilized to be mere entertainment places, while references to work, environment, the political context, and historic legacy are overlooked.

The effort of this artistic project is not only to produce new content on the subject, but also to contribute to the circulation of information, lending visibility to mining in its historical manifestation. It aims to map texts, videos, photos, and publications (unpublished theses, articles, press cuttings) coming from various fields of knowledge, seeking different perspectives into the subject, making debate viable and, therefore, establishing a productive, critical forum. This gathering is based on research and dialogue with professionals from different areas on the absence of information, critique, and visibility about mining in the state. For example, why is it not possible to prove numerically that in the cities with large mining activities, like Itabira, the quality of life is worse, even though this is visible, as compared with other cities? (Why do the government and companies fail to publicize important rates?) Why is there an absence of representation of the mining activity and its history in the Brazilian artistic production, unlike in Colombian and Mexican art, for example? What are the strategies applied to make the worker disappear from the Museum of Mines and Metal? Why is mining poorly addressed in school textbooks, and when such is the case, why is it done through maps, and rarely through photos, and without analytical or critical content, even at schools of mining cities? And so on and so forth.

<sup>1</sup> From 1990 to 2009 the number of employed workers in Brazil went from 52 million, in 1990, to 73.9 million. From these, the number of formally registered workers,

traditional focus of inspection, went from 22.4 million to 34.4 million. In this same period of twenty years, the number of work inspectors remained the same, even until 2012, oscillating around 3,000. Data from IPEA ? Applied Economy Research Institute, technical note no. 4, July 2012.

2 See <http://www.aguasdogandarela.org/> (in Portuguese). For another movement of alert against the social and economic costs of the expansion of mining across the country, see <http://www.justicanostrilhos.org/>.

\* This project is supported by FAPEMIG. It derives from my PhD thesis presented in 2000 (That which Recurs, Royal College of Art, supervised by John Stezaker, co-supervised by Jo Stockham and Jonathan Miles), which speculates through historical visual material and alchemical metaphors the past and present of mining imbedded in the culture of Minas Gerais. It is composed by a series of essays and short stories, which developed into different works ever since: In 2007, the project Caracteres Geológicos Peculiares carried out for the event Encuentro Internacional de Medellín, together with curator Ana Paula Cohen, addressed the early history of Antioquia alongside that of Minas Gerais and the museum of mineralogy of Medellín. More recently, in 2012, the exhibition Práticas Desmembradas, at Centro Cultural São Paulo, with the collaboration of Anselm Jappe, addressed the efforts of the worker in the 16th-century mines and the work conditions of today. In yet another series, I have been working with narration of images coming from a photo archive exclusively done for a major company, belonging to the photographer of the industry who has to remain anonymous. The images, made for a major mining company, register the landscape transformations since the 1990s; their publication is not authorized. The work Invisibilidade Mineral gathers various stages of this long process staged in the past years.

\*\*The quotes on these pages do not correspond to the workers represented in the images. I thank all collaborators of this research, some of whom are quoted or photographed here: Ana Paula Mendes, Ana Paula Sales Pereira, Ana Lúcia Sales Pereira, Cibele Alves, Débora Freitas, Divina Castro, Elaine, Eliette, Eny Ferreira Lage, Flavia Arantes, Roberta Mathias, Silvana Santos, Sueli Silva, Versilane Rossoni. Special thanks also to the Inspectors of Work Mário Parreiras de Faria e Daniel Rabelo.

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