

Session: S03.09 - Gateways to different perceptions and engagement of volcanoes: the role of art/science collaborations

Pompeii's Ashes: The Presence of Absence

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Photography offers infinite possibilities to depict moments of transition in society and nature that lead to irreversible changes. Through photographic processes, fleeting moments are made visible.

Analogous to a photograph, the volcanic eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD halted life in Pompeii in just a matter of seconds - freezing a moment in history. Pyroclastic flows, buried the city and its inhabitants, preserving their final instants for almost 2000 years. Past excavations exposed cavities with the reminiscence of bones inside, and in 1860, archaeologists, for the first time, poured plaster into these cavities. The process created moulds revealing imprints of human bodies, a three-dimensional photograph of the fatal incident. Over time, excavations brought more layers of Pompeii's final moments to life. Moments that were, until now, buried by the dark concealment of ash.

The ash performs here the same function as a negative in photography. It captures a moment in time and space which would otherwise disappear unrecorded, but today's earth-coloured ash hills surrounding the archaeological sites are an inconspicuous backdrop to the devastation that lies beneath.

In the series 'Cinis' (Latin for ash), mainly using camera-less techniques, further possibilities of visualizing a transient moment are explored.

Through our collaboration we transform the ash into the photographic process: high magmatic temperatures bring the ash to new life in the state of a mobile glowing melt. Melt drops flow, connect and generate new patterns and cavities. Rapid cooling, in turn, coagulates the melt recreating translucent volcanic glass pervaded by rapidly evolving fractures. Only with the light of a slide projector the molten ash is visible as an image.

Turning ash into melt and glass, we recreate images of this historical incident which has not become less of a threat today.