AN UNFORSEEN FIT

Interview between Helena Petersen and volcanologist Dr. Corrado Cimarelli about their collaboration for the Project 'CINIS – Pompeji'.

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Helena Petersen: Through your scientific research I found out that volcanic ash turns into glass when heated at a high temperature. This planted the seed to show the volcanic ash from Pompeji, that not only caused the death but also captured that exact moment in time like a photograph, as a glass slide. Once light projected through, it functions as an image. We recreated that moment in collaboration.
You, an Experimental Volcanologist and me, an Abstract Photographer, what an unforeseen fit. When we first met, I had seen your famous images creating the first volcanic lightning of a simulated volcanic eruption in your lab. This reminded me of my last series, Pyrographie, which captures the muzzle flash of a gun while shooting over light sensitive paper. Although different, our fascination of 'forceful' light-sources has much in common. 'CINIS - Pompeji' is tribute to this.
How did you picture a collaboration with an artist, compared to a scientific peer?

Corrado Cimarelli: *At first it was difficult to grasp the idea behind the project. Although challenging, we kept discussing and as an important first step we moved into the lab together, in doing this the project and vision became clearer and clearer. It was very unexpected for me to see how much of a scientific approach an artist would bring to the lab. I was impressed by your meticulous practice you adopted in generating the slides and systematically documenting the effect of the high temperature on the materials we used. I felt I was more working with a research colleague rather than an artist.*

Helena Petersen: As a volcanic ash expert, what do you find most fascinating about volcanic ash and has our collaboration made you see it in a different 'light'?

Corrado Cimarelli: *As a volcanologist I am used to looking at ash through the light of a microscope to analyze its texture and reveal its microscopic properties. In order to do so, ash needs to be reduced to a very thin slab of few micrometers to allow light to go through. It is a standard, though artificial, treatment that allows comparative studies at the same analytical conditions. Our collaborative work is exactly the opposite, we let ash flowing and coagulating with no interference. This process of re-melting unlocks the ash, converting it into a glowing melt able to flow again, a newly generated magma following its course. The quenching process gives the ash a newly formed three-dimensionality. Projecting light through it on a wall reveals a new universe in its integrity, a macrocosmos of new colours, fractures and voids which are impossible to grasp in a micrograph of a thin section, as I am used to.*

Helena Petersen: During the process of melting Pompeji's 2000-year-old volcanic ash, we discussed our process and that we are in fact bringing the blackened ash back to its 'former' glowing life. How did this make you feel?

Corrado Cimarelli: *From a scientific perspective, volcanic ash, in its essence, is a natural glass produced by the very fast cooling of magma erupted during a volcanic explosion. As such, it is the closest witness of a moment in time that captures the volcanic eruption from inside the volcano. A very special insider look. In the case of the Pompeji eruption, ash additionally testifies for a very precise moment in history, the dramatic and sudden end of a vibrant city and its people. The opportunity of re-melting the ash, an occurrence that is very rarely happening in nature, is specific of its essence of being a glass substance. Bringing back to life the ash of Pompeji through our collaboration, and recapture that moment again multiple times, goes beyond the value of the scientific experiment. Like infinite echoes, the projected glass slides let us experience that unique moment in time almost as direct witnesses.*

Helena Petersen: Turning ash into melt and glass, we recreate images of this historical incident which has not become less of a threat today. Currently, Campi Flegrei, a so called 'Super volcano' underneath a highly populated region around Naples is showing heightened volcanic activity. Do you believe we can create a different awareness by showing our collaborative work in the art context?

Corrado Cimarelli: *For a scientist it is quite often difficult to communicate to a larger audience. It happens frequently that we are locked into a very specific language and complicated concepts which don't stimulate the interest of the public and preclude further interactions. Art stimulates the senses, provokes emotions, speaks with multiple languages on many different levels. This is to me an additional key point of our collaboration and can be used to convoy a scientific message too, as in the case of the current volcanic hazard in the area of Naples.*

Helena Petersen: Do you believe you have learned something from our collaboration? If yes, what is it?

Corrado Cimarelli: *I surely have. It has given me a different view on the work of an artist, the motivation, the inspiration, the practice and the technique employed in producing a piece of art. I am happy that my scientific interests crossed ways with the artistic inspiration of a skilled professional photographer and I am looking forward to see further development on the exquisitely technical part more strictly related to color photography and developing, which is truly fascinating to me, and can bring us together into future collaborations. Lastly, being able to transfer my scientific background into visual art has brought a new perspective on communicating science through unusual ways and on a more personal level, and for this I am mostly grateful to you Helena.*

PD Dr. Corrado Cimarelli is a volcanologist in the Dep. Earth and Environmental Sciences at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, Germany.