Open-Source Aerial Imagery as a Critique Tool

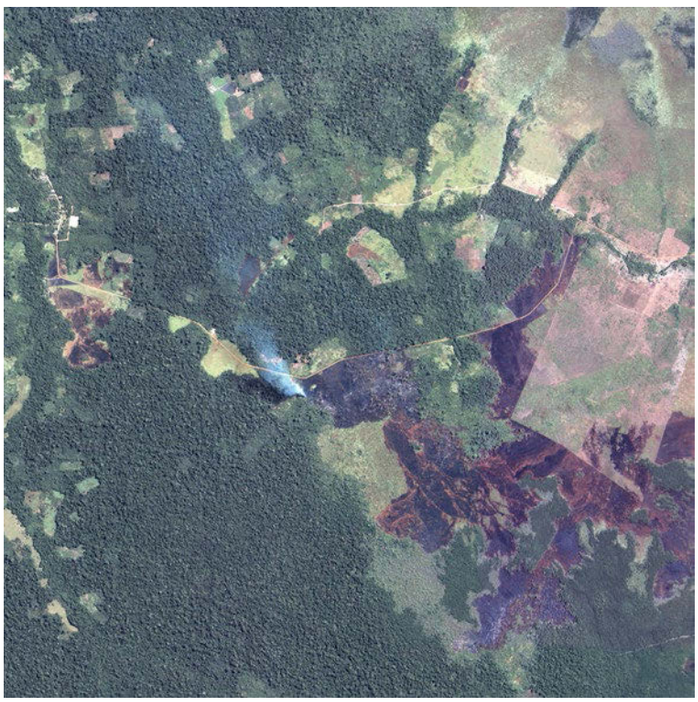
The Extractive Geopolitics Project

Imaginando Buenas

Controlled burn / 2003-2013 / Guayaramerín, Brazil

10°51'21"S, 65°30'39"W

2003



2013

Imaginando Buenas is a multi-disciplinary collective founded in 2008 and based in Montevideo. It is interested in and working with a wide range of topics from politics to design, objects to territories, music and visuals, friendship and love.

The origin of this project can be traced back to our fascination with satellite imagery, mixed with both the intrigue and indignation caused by the brutal exploitation of the face of the earth. It is too often that we are told about the impact of extractive industries and how they affect natural resources, but we rarely know its scale or location or even notice the context in which they are placed. Discussing this issue we realized that the massive transformations we knew were happening on our planet could be searched for and found in an almost playful way: The use of open data aerial imagery and the possibility to navigate the earth is now accessible to everybody.

With all this in mind, we started the hunt for globally dispersed alterations of the earth. We looked for projects that had shaped the biosphere radically in a short time span – mining industries, energy-harvesting projects or even large crops – through multiple sources – newspapers and blogs to mining conglomerate portals – which lead us to the most diverse spots on the planet. Our final goal was to list these projects, choose among the various ones we found, and finally merge the information on screen into large-scale printable images forming a canvas that was otherwise impossible to see.

The final products are 5 diptychs, one for each of the megaprojects chosen, consisting of two 85 cm by 85 cm high-resolution images, taken directly from publically available satellite imagery (Google Earth) and processed with a computer-aided design software plugin called PlexEarth. These images of approximately 20,000 by 20,000 pixels had the exact same point of view but with an average difference of seven years in time in order to show the transformations on site by comparison.

The result is dramatic: It exposes the brutality of human environmental impact. Among the sites there is a center pivot irrigation system in Australia, a controlled forest wildfire in Brazil, a coal mine in Mozambique, a hydroelectric dam in Iran-Azerbaijan and a lignite surface mine in Germany. It was our intent to show a territorial diversity that could emphasize the phenomena as global and not being relegated to resource extractions in developing countries or advanced northern industries.

These canvases were first exhibited at the Facultad de Arquitectura de la Universidad de la República and later in a collective exhibition called Perfiles Políticos (Political Profiles) at the Centro de Exposiciones Subte in Montevideo.

It is quite interesting how popular and accessible this tool has become in recent years and, with it, the capacity to raise consciousness and awareness: What could be done in secrecy or out of reach in the past can now be put in the center of the public eye. In this sense, there is a huge potential for both investigation and critical analysis that could empower citizens to mobilize and take action on what is ultimately the future of a collective and global resource: our planet.

Illustrations
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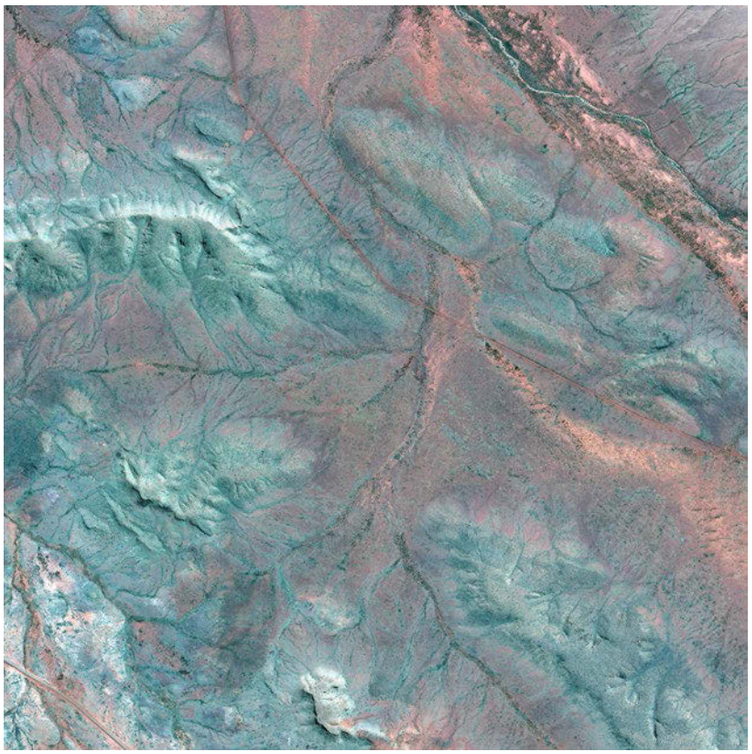
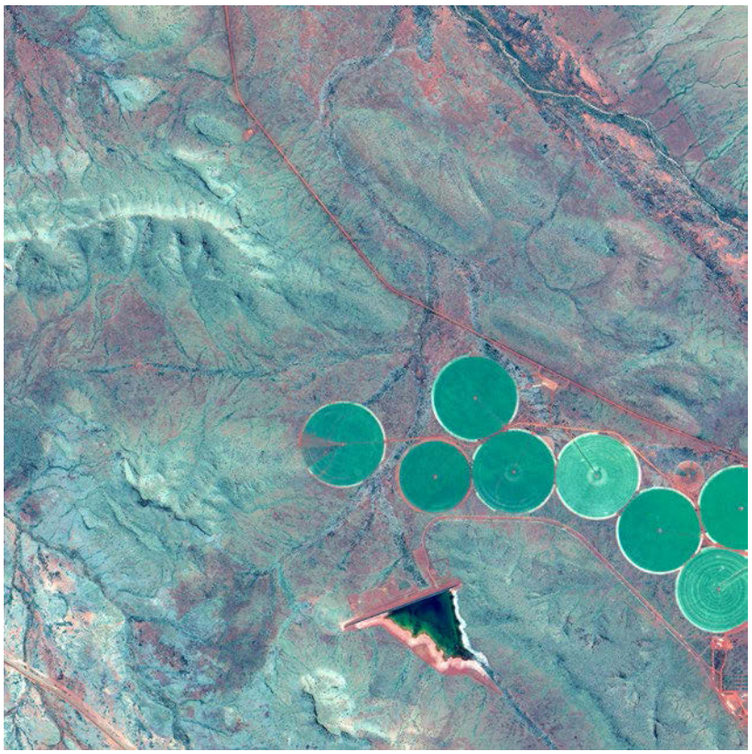
Center pivot irrigation, Karijini National Park, Australia *22°33'26"S, 117°59'25"E*



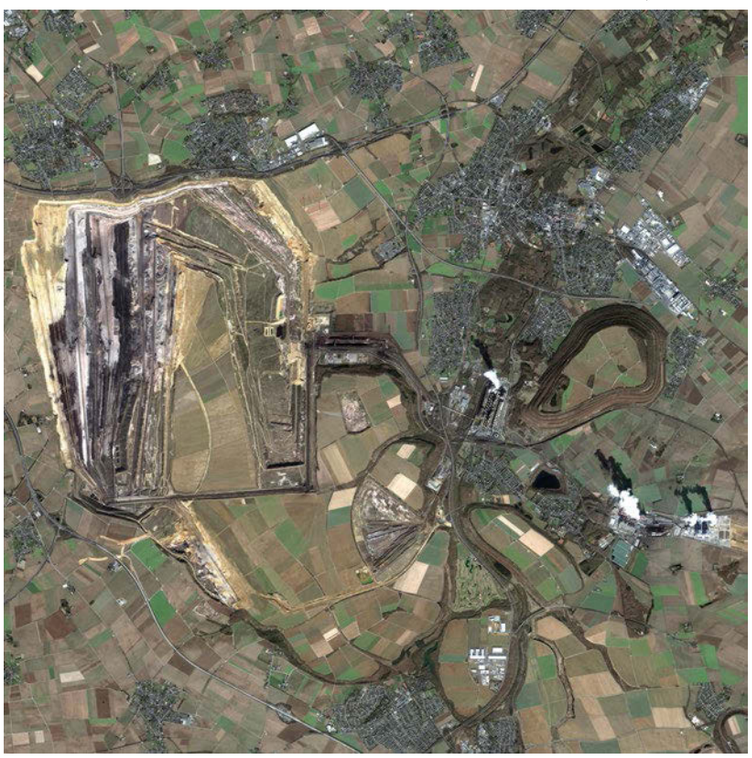
2010



2014

Lignite surface mine, Grevenbroich, Germany *51°02'37"N, 6°32'10"E*

2000



2014

Hydroelectric dam, Iran-Azerbaiyan *39°05'28"N, 45°24'08"E*

2007

2009

Coal mine, Benga, Mozambique *16°10'17"S, 33°40'25"E*

2010

2014