TANGIBLE - INTANGIBLE HERITAGE(S) – DESIGN, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CRITIQUES ON THE PAST, PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Silvertown and Salitre: A heritage of global capital

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• Presentation Method. I would like to:
  i. present in person (with a written paper)

• Abstract (300 words):
On 19 January 1917 a huge explosion at Brunner Mund munitions factory, Silvertown, destroyed surrounding streets and killed seventy three people. A friction spark igniting molten trinitrotoluene (TNT) was the probable cause. The increased production of TNT to meet the Allied shell shortages in the First World War was dependent upon supplies of natural nitrate sodium, salitre, exploded from the surface Atacama Desert and mined by engancheros, gang labour from Chile, Bolivia and Peru. In the debris of the explosion and destruction of homes in East London was history of exploitation of another land and people. The 1917 Silvertown Explosion has been carefully documented by London historians. The significance of their work, which has asserted a heritage of industrial labour at the moment of its erasure through the processes of gentrification characteristic twenty-first
century financial capital, is addressed in this paper. It also adds another historical layer to Silvertown site absent from its current interpretation: that of extraction and export of mineral wealth from Chile, accumulating in profit in the City of London with corresponding losses in its peripheries, both near and far. The local historical landscape of this East London site was, and is, a site of the heritage of global capital. In the destruction and gentrification, the absences and erasure of industrial Silvertown, it becomes difficult to distinguish its tangible from intangible heritage.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Louise Purbrick is Principal Lecturer in the History of Art and Design at the University of Brighton (http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/staff/louise-purbrick). She is currently working with photographers Xavier Ribas and Ignacio Acosta on the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project, Traces of Nitrate (http://tracesofnitrate.org), which examines the political legacies of nitrate mining the Atacama Desert of northern Chile. She has published a number of works on sites of conflict, exploitation and imprisonment. She is an editor with Jim Aulich and Graham Dawson of Contested Spaces: Sites, Histories and Representations (Palgrave, 2007) and co-author with John Schofield of ‘Brixton: Landscape of a Riot’ published in Landscapes (2009). Of a series of essays and articles on Long Kesh/Maze prison in Northern Ireland, ‘The Architecture of Containment’ in Donovan Wylie’s The Maze (Granta, 2004) is the most frequently cited.