thousands of kilometers away in Portugal. Polo’s photographs restore what did not exist, and her film relocates something improperly located. Reality has not been altered by either of these interventions: their futility is telling. Príncipe remains a remote corner of the globe commemorated largely on account of an astronomical occurrence and so continues to “not exist.”

In the logic of imperialism, Edward Said declared, knowledge is power, and the accumulation of knowledge automatically signifies an accumulation of power. The world maps drawn by colonial empires are associated with a control that is both symbolic (the act of representation) and real (determining the movement of populations and the heavens). Apparent Position images the principal ideal which underpinned colonial fever: an empire on which “the sun never set.”

“Fissuras” is a program that reveals interstitial spaces in the Museum (landings, stairwells, underground passages, connections between buildings), and allows visitors to discover the narrative possibilities of those intermediate zones. In Apparent Position, this “fissure” touches on levels of discourse beyond the spatial: by addressing such issues as the general theory of relativity and an undocumented historical event, it reveals the caesura between reality and our perception of it, and so offers new ways of “positioning ourselves.”

Paloma Polo
Apparent Position
25 January – 23 April 2012
Espacio Uno (E1)
Images © Paloma Polo
www.museoreinasofia.es

Paloma Polo’s project for the “Fissuras” (“Fissures”) program at the Museo Reina Sofia emerged from research into expeditions, undertaken in various parts of the world during the colonial era, that sought to observe and document astronomical phenomena. At first glance, her work addresses issues related to the connection between scientific knowledge and the imperialist projects of the European powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but Apparent Position also gives rise to less immediate reflections on the relations between events that seem to intersect at a given time and place, as in the manner of an eclipse.

The starting point is a historically and geographically verifiable event: Sir Arthur Eddington’s 1919 expedition to the island of Principe, a Portuguese colony in the Gulf of Guinea, to observe the effects of a total solar eclipse. This voyage is not, however, engraved in history with the epic dimensions of other expeditions of the colonial era. Although there are precise reports on the calculations and conclusions of the expedition, there are no photographic records of the experience. Only a stone stele, which is mounted upon a white-washed plinth at the approximate spot where the eclipse was observed, reminds us that Eddington’s achievement signified the verification of Albert Einstein’s general theory of relativity.
Apparent Position

It is here that the “apparent” referred to in the title of this project makes its entrance. The purpose of Eddington’s expedition was to confirm that light altered its linear course when in contact with a powerful gravitational field (like the sun), an aspect of the general theory of relativity demonstrable only during a solar eclipse. The position of the light of the stars is presumed to be “apparent,” and only a parenthesis in the astronomical process—a black eclipsed sun—would allow that deceptive position to be photographed and the degree of deviation of the light to be calculated. This was an event of extraordinary scientific importance. And yet, in spite of the claims of the commemorative stele, Eddington’s expedition does not appear to have been the touchstone in the verification of Einstein’s theory. Later research indicates that its scientific results were rather poor. That is, although Eddington’s expedition “officially” legitimised the validity of the general theory of relativity, such confirmation actually came only two years later.

Paloma Polo’s project is presented in three formats: a 16-mm film transferred to digital video; photographs on glass; and a printed book. The first images depict a silent scene that might well have taken place at the time of the expedition—photographs on glass illustrating the appearance of the expedition’s surroundings during the eclipse. Numerous variables enter into play: the peculiar light of an eclipse; the procedure for making a printed record of it with a photographic camera; and the constructed nature of such images. The images in question are virtual reconstructions of a space from the standpoint of the present.

We can imagine the tremendous mobilization of resources in any scientific undertaking rooted in parallel represented in her film is both evocative and eloquent. The projection shows the moment in the summer of 2011 when the stele commemorating Eddington’s achievement was moved at the artist’s suggestion, and with the support of the regional government of Príncipe, to the exact spot where, according to the astronomical observation “apparently” took place. This was but a few yards away from the original position on the same farm. If Polo’s intention is to draw a historical parallel, it is a deliberately sterile one that is set up as a testimony to loss. The film does not restrict itself to merely documenting the relocation of the stele and fixing it in time. Above all, it concerns itself with the status of the audience and its position with regard to the experience it is witnessing. Viewers never get a clear sense of the space (the camera seems to situate the viewpoint in a position that the next shot reveals to have been merely apparent, while tracking shots tend to distance viewers from the object or to dwell on details). In addition, the introduction of sounds foreign to the scene distances viewers from the events depicted, and jump-cuts prevent them from quantifying the passage of time. It is not clear where the stele has gone, how much time it took, or whether it was moved a few meters or several kilometers away.

Time and space are alternately suggested and disappear. Since viewers must re-construct them from their own vantage points, these points of view necessarily become relativised.

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