

# Reading the archive

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Over the past five years Milagros de la Torre has been reading the archive, the archives of Peruvian history through the lens of the camera. By so doing she wishes to draw attention to its proximity to the archive. Pierre Nora writing on the subject of memory has remarked that “modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image.”<sup>1</sup> Photography becomes critical to the practice and authority of the archive insofar as it folds together history as representation and representation as history. Transferring the world to image, photography as a representational structure produces a certain archival *effect*. And, like the archive, photography gains its authority to represent the past through an apparent neutrality and ability to render heterogeneity and difference intelligible.<sup>2</sup> Both the archive and photography reproduce the world as witness to itself, as historical evidence, data and documents. It gratifies the desire to show what actually happened. By the use of photography in the archive, de la Torre seeks to destabilize its authority as a technology of remembrance in order to ask what is it that photography remembers and for whom and for what purpose?

In two early series *Bajo el Sol Negro* (1991-93) and *Untitled* (1992), shows, as Roland Barthes said, that photography is “a certain but fugitive testimony” of the presence of life and yet too its passing, its absence.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, de la Torre began work in local Peruvian archives. In 1996, she gained permission to photograph in the archive of ‘los cuerpos del delito’ at the Palace of Justice in Lima. Like Dante’s guide through purgatory, the chief archivist, Manuel Guzman, became the photographer’s guide. He retraced through the archive an underworld history of crime and corruption. Shifting through mountains of files, boxes and piles of evidence, he led her through *los pasos perdidos*. He had worked in the archive for thirty years and remembered with a passion the story behind each case, pulling out objects: objects of incrimination. For Guzman, each object told a story, as if summoning him to recount tragic stories of passions, beliefs and illusions gone awry. For de la Torre these objects are ‘witnesses of extreme situations.’ Yet, while some photographs appear, most overtly, as instruments of crime, other objects appear as detached, everyday, suggesting little more than their innocent origins. Yet, they belie their fateful destiny, for they appear as nothing but what remains. It is only within the context of the archive, of the archivization of memory that they stand as a sign of absence. And only then can we return the incriminating love letter to the prostitute who wrote it, or return the belts to the psychologist who strangled a rapist during police interrogation, or imagine the beautiful dress with its rightful owner Marita Alpaca, who was pushed by her lover from the 8th floor of the Sheraton Hotel and found to be pregnant at the autopsy.

One may propose that the effect of de la Torres’ work in the archive today functions in part allegorically. The title *the lost steps* refers to the name given to a hallway in the Palacio de Justicia which, once you go through, stands as a sign of your pending condemnation. Yet, it also suggests something that has past but, by being



brought into the present, by re-presenting the objects as images of a ruinous history, become emblematic of the fate of things to come. It is a course that runs against Alejo Carpentier's allegorical tale of the same name, in which the narrator finds his way back to the source, a paradisaical place of origin in the depths of the jungle. The stories surrounding the photographs by de la Torre are, rather, of a path taken which unravels the wrong way, that lead to a fateful encounter, to the taking and loss of life. There is no bright light of revelation given to these objects but, rather, an uncertain light as if uncovering the obscure origins of fate. Death haunts these photographs. They are evidence of what is absent from the scene. And this strange illumination de la Torre gives to her photographs, as if they were lit in the darkness that has befallen them, represents their entombment in the archives and a memory that, swiftly buried, lies deeply within the shadows of history.

Following this series, de la Torre produced the triptych *Ultimas Cosas*. At the beginning of her work in the Mental Health Hospital, de la Torre came across a room of discarded objects. She chose several objects to photograph, including a ball made of leather and cloth made to be a muscle relaxant, an old gown used to constrain people, and surgical trays. Placed together, each signifies the health and regulation of the human body. Each functions as an instrument of changing or constraining the body: the unfit body, the uncontrollable body and body of illness. With the ball and trays to each side, the hung shirt acquires a powerful iconic status, as if a sign of the absent body.

In the following series *Páginas Dobladas*, de la Torre photographed admission forms held in albums of the past seventy years. In entering the archives of the hospital, de la Torre follows the footsteps of Foucault's work on the role of institutions in the disciplining and exclusion of the body, on the construction of the normal and pathological subject. The interlacing of photography and the archive corresponds closely to the importance Foucault gave to the empirical gaze in his genealogical histories of disciplinary institutions. The destiny of the individual subject becomes bound to the exercise of power and knowledge by the State. Denoting the signs of the normal and the transgressive, disruptive subject, photography functions to regulate and codify the body in a manner that prepares it for transfer into the archive. They display the essential components which conform to the procedures, rules, classificatory systems that govern the archive: three photographs of the subject –frontal and profile and informal portrait– details of the person and a genealogical tree charting mental illness in the family. Based on the idea of empirical evidence that stands in for the subject, they represent the legal or official truth of the subject.

The photographs of de la Torre seem to mirror the work of the archive. There is an apparent innocuousness in her work. The meaning of these images would seem to lie very close to their referent. However, working with hospital cards which mark the entry of individuals into the hospital, de la Torre's re-presentation takes on the work of testimony, a testimony to confined lives, condemned to live out their lives in the shadow of the State. The preoccupation in the work is to recover certain memories, of knowledges erased from the history of the nation. Some of the cases she represents are of young children, such as a 1 year girl already considered ill as her moth-



er was a patient, or a 23 woman who would remain in the hospital for the rest of her life. Foucault would call them disqualified or subjugated knowledges, the claims of which the genealogical project entertains “against the claims in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects.”<sup>4</sup> He writes of liberating these knowledges from the “coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse.”<sup>5</sup> We may ask of both Foucault and of de la Torre, to what end is this liberation, what is the destiny of these images?

For Foucault, liberation involved creating a fractured field where local knowledges could not be recolonized into a unified discourse either by dominant or resistant practices. de la Torre’s project entails establishing a reflexive relation to the technologies of visibility that work to create a unified subject of the state. In *Páginas Dobladas* she transfers the admission cards from beautiful leather-bound books to white metal boxes laid on the floor. Reminiscent of first aid kits, the boxes can be viewed as containers which, like the hospital, contains the sick. It is this exposure, this unfolding which provides the artist with the title ‘*páginas dobladas*.’ Like Foucault’s lives of infamous men, the folding over of the pages suggests stories of individuals confined to the archives, assigned to the obscurity of the historical record. In de la Torre’s re-presentation they are no longer folded into the pages and bound to the secrecy of the bound albums. These cards, with the gaze of their subjects staring into camera, are re-exposed, put into circulation within the light of the present. Placed in the boxes, the photographs take on the physical presence of objects that have been singled out, given the chance to be seen. As in her earlier work, de la Torre’s method seeks to restore a sense of the individual subject. Reflecting back on *Páginas Dobladas*, de la Torre has asked “I hope to analyze under what circumstances a life takes its sense, when it is that the story of each person takes its meaning, when are the dice thrown. This questioning is a process full of uncertainties, doubtful, disturbing, especially when looking at the past.”<sup>6</sup>

By working in state archives, de la Torre joins with other artists, notably Eugenio Dittborn of Chile and Rosangela Renno of Brazil in addressing the institutions that watch over the representation of history. While Dittborn’s work dates back to the Seventies and the period of Pinochet’s dictatorship, the work of both Renno and de la Torre, began in the murky wake of a period of state and civil violence. Critical to the practice of each artist is photography as a technology that participates in the construction of historical meaning. The critical function of returning to the archive through photography is to disturb the historical record. By recovering and exposing these portraits, the work of de la Torre foregrounds the function of the portrait as the indexical sign of both social and individual identity. It acknowledges the way in which identities are governed by both external and internal forces, of how they can be read in multiple ways and how the technologies and conventions of visibility work to both obscure and expose the individual. de la Torre seeks to disrupt the incessant production of national identities by the state and a monumental history whose coherence is built on the regulation and erasure of the individual subject.

The choice for de la Torre of both the Palace of Justice and the Hospital Victor Larco Herrera in Lima are far from arbitrary. In the wake of a long period of vio-



lence and unrest, concepts of freedom, normalcy, and justice as defined by government has become a guide to measuring the possibility of democracy. Her photographic practice represents an intervention in the archives of a nation, reminding us of the strange fate of those individuals who become the unwilling subject of the public archive. The photographs are a testimony to the ways in which individual identities are reinscribed, so that the objects and cards become signs of their destiny. Around them hinges the before and after of individual histories, the movement from civil life to incarceration. The photographs stand in for the moment in which the body will become absent. In bringing this material into the light, exposing us to the stories they embody, de la Torre reminds us of infamous and ignoble histories which fall by the wayside, but which belong to the history of Peru, and our history. They are mute witnesses of its disappearance and hence, of the fate of individuals who, in entering the public record, are written out of history. In a time when histories of identity and nation are being rewritten, her photographs are a timely reminder of the instrumental power of state institutions to control, if not determine, the lives of its populace.

#### Footnotes

- 1.- Pierre Nora, «Between Memory and History», *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), p. 13.
- 2.- See Allan Sekula's article «Reading the Archive: Photography Between Labor and Capital».
- 3.- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 93.
- 4.- Michel Foucault, «Two Lectures», in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 83.
- 5.- *Ibid.* p. 85.
- 6.- Letter to the author from Milagros de la Torre, 23.5.1997.