

# Memoranda of the human

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At present, some of the most interesting possibilities of artistic exploration into the nature and use of the photographic image, originate in the history of Western official uses of photography for documentation initially judged to be socially convenient and, then, necessary. As an efficient and rapid mode of making registers, photography has always been employed to obtain individual portraits for purposes of identification, as well as to portray objects and instruments, fabricated by the human being in a variety of situations and considered to deserve attention and study.

The use of photography as a key procedure for normative and classification tasks should not obscure the frankly informative specificity that it has attained: "The documentary importance of photography (previously that of drawing and of painting) is an aspect to be scientifically valued only in concrete cases and general situations, that is, in medical and anthropological studies, in forensic or strictly anthropomorphic work<sup>1</sup>". But taking as a starting point traditionally accepted practices, modalities of image register established by convention for documentary ends, it is conceivable for a contemporary artistic proposal to be stated in such a way as to cast doubt upon the construction of different aspects of the social, that have relied on photographic objectivity for support.

The said proposal would involve questioning the manner in which that which can be known is constructed, on the basis of an intentional displacement that begins operating from the directionality and the reliability of the purely objective knowledge that photographic exactness is supposed to supply. Not only this, but it would assert a visual dimension of the perceptually un-knowable, possessed of surplus, non-usable resonance and freighted, however, with information, that should echo what is intellectually defined as knowledge, the product of the elaboration of discourse and, in spite of this, ambiguous, indeterminate, detotalizing, at the same time<sup>2</sup>.

Since 1991, when she began work on what would become the series "*Bajo el sol negro del Cusco*" (Under the black sun of Cusco), Milagros de la Torre started to investigate the social uses and effects of certain photographic practice in Peru, defined by the trade of the "minutero" (by-the-minute) photographer, that has all but disappeared from the capital city, though it can still be detected in the public squares of cities in the provinces.

The public of the "minutero" is mainly composed of people with an urgent need to have their photographic likeness taken in the minimum-sized format required in bureaucratic procedures. Using a box-type camera, the photographer obtains a negative on prepared paper, which he then fixes and photographs again, *in situ*, to obtain a positive. After fixation, however, the "minutero" paints the face in the negative with a red-staining solution to give a whiter complexion in the positive. "Thus, the technical process of the "minutero" also becomes a powerful metaphor of the construction of personal and collective identities in a country dominated by racism<sup>3</sup>".

In the deconstruction of this practice, Milagros de la Torre chose to bring the process to a halt after obtaining the negative. Following the portrait sessions in the squares in Cusco, the paper negatives could be stained red by her and left at that. Frequently, she also photographed the paper negatives on film, which, later, when copied onto photographic paper, restored the state of the image to a portrait in the negative, processed as an enlarged print. "By resorting to the techniques of the popular photographers, as well as to their space and their public, too, Milagros de la Torre draws near them and pays them a sincere homage. But by establishing distances, too, her work reveals a scrupulous honesty and an insistent critical capacity to question the uses of the technique<sup>4</sup>.

Towards the end of that stage in her work in 1992, Milagros de la Torre used the same technique for a short series of seven negative prints of a very small format (10 cm x 5 cm). This series, which has no title, comprises images that could be taken as a return to an intimate sphere after "Bajo el sol negro...". A gender representation –and, possibly, self-representation– of sorts, seems to be affirmed, through the mediation of objects, since there are five portraits of feminine clothing against a plain fabric backdrop: "Medias" (Stockings), "Media" (Stocking), "Medias alargadas" (Elongated stockings), "El Vestido" (The Dress) and "Zapatos" (Shoes). A sixth image, "El Colgador" (The Cloth hanger) appears, from the very shape of the solitary object, to allude to the absent body, which becomes present by implication (in feminine experience, the object has a history as an instrument in fatal backstreet abortions. "Mano" (Hand), the seventh, brings to a close what could well be a pursuit of self-representation, with the irruption of a part of the body in the frame. The ghostly aspect of what appears portrayed in the image in the negative can be read as the otherness embodied by the feminine.

The scale of realization after a project that investigated the scope of photography as support of identity, the format and the choice of portrayed objects are all strongly suggestive of the creation of a space for reflection on self-identity (touching on the condition of woman). There is, however, nothing that can confirm or deny absolutely the reading of the images proposed here.

The series titled "Los pasos perdidos" (The lost steps), a project of 1996, marked a return to an exploration of the power and limits of a photographic register. The photographer worked on the making of photographic portraits of objects belonging to the collection of corpus delicti –incriminating material evidence– of the Museum of the Palace of Justice of Peru<sup>5</sup>. She went ahead by taking a decision that contemplated the aestheticization of the object, beginning with its isolation. In the image, a beam of light shines, on it, suffusing it in the quietude of a circular halo, from where it points, in its mute condition, to a dark and sordid deed. The photographer's gaze descends upon it from an overhead position that can be likened to a God-like viewpoint. Each image of this series of fifteen acquires a symbolic resonance that remains in part unexplained and, from its apparent repose, activates in the onlooker the feeling of revelation of a tacit intertwining of causes and effects, in the manner of a history. The series as a whole has the character of a visual system of a sinister coherence, which allows it to be played against a system of religious iconography of such deeply-rooted popular appeal as that of the symbols of Christ's Passion, in an oppositional and almost obscene way.

For anyone who live in Lima between 1980 and 1992, the mention to the origin of the object in the title of the image awakens a memory of part of a history of violent times. It is a collective memory over which there is consensus between different generations. An example of an unwritten history comprising bloody and savage prison riots; the pitiful fame of unhappy victims and brutal executioners; unsolved crimes and sleazy characters involved; everyday living foundering under the terror caused by subversive attacks; the corruption of a political system through the growth of drug traffic; the generalized loss of trust in the institutions that have as their principal duty to watch for the safety and provide for the protection of civilians.

All of this was registered as it unfolded, in images obsessive and insatiably filmed by local TV cameramen that were direct and often mercenarily transmitted by Peruvian television news programs. But no history can originate from this.

Milagros de la Torre selected the objects she portrayed from among the many that make up a collection of *corpus delicti*. She had to assume that the act of gathering them had strictly obeyed judicial and legal systems and that their classification sought to display them “in a pedagogical, edifying manner”<sup>6</sup>.

Objects that had undergone classification had to be made present by “making their manifest order to be perceived as something strange”<sup>7</sup>. Milagros de la Torre in “Los pasos perdidos” resorted to a number of devices with a complex result. It could perhaps be suggested that each object acquires presence and definition as a *memento mori*, but without the mediatory promise of something in exchange, a certainty of some kind amidst the unrest: an other life, a prize or a punishment. Insofar as the titles restore the memory, they also predispose one to re-live ancient fears in a dimension, which, however much displaced, provokes the individual confrontation with an intuited plot that cannot be expressed in the language habitually used in speaking of the psycho social.

To cause them to be thus perceived, the photographer must have revealed every single object, through its presentation in an image, to originate from that which is unnamable –what has not yet finished surfacing from the subconscious–, from a “not a place”, to which Julia Kristeva points in relation to phobia: “The one who tries to utter this “not a place”, this no-grounds, can obviously only do so backwards, starting from an overmastery of the linguistic and rhetorical code. But in the last analysis he refers to fear –a terrifying, abject referent. We encounter this discourse in our dreams, or when death brushes us by, depriving us of the assurance mechanical use of speech ordinarily gives us, the assurance of being ourselves, that is, untouchable, unchangeable, immortal. But the writer is permanently confronted with such a language. The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he comes to life again in signs”<sup>8</sup>. It is possible to extrapolate with some degree of license, in order to state that it is in metaphorizing that the achievement of the photographer resides, too.

This is equally or even more patent in the triptych “Últimas cosas” (Last things), of 1996 and also included here. It is perhaps the work by Milagros de la Torre in which the artistic strategy makes a metaphysical will more frankly explicit: from the reduction

of the number of objects down to a triad of intense symbolic expectation; through the isolation in which they are presented and the precise definition of the black backdrop out to which they emerge like white apparitions; to the framing that causes the onlooker to frontally face them and makes evident the decision of the photographer to mark a distance. Not to ignore the lessons learnt from Caravaggio and Zurbaran, painters who represented the solitary and essentially human nature of the mystical experience.

The semantic field thus constructed admits the reading of that distance as emblematic of the Western attitude to death –inevitably taboo– or towards whoever suffers from physical infirmity and is set apart, together with other individuals in similar state. “Últimas cosas” can be read as an allegory of the confinement of the individual in death-in-life, that constitutes itself as an experience of solitude and abjection. The spectral quality of an inmate night-gown, floating suspended in one image, like a transfiguration in the void, strongly suggests a body not found, yet so powerfully inscribed as absent that it becomes tangibly present.

The interposed distance alternately isolates and summons. It defines the wasted and abandoned state of the object and confronts with fears both ancient and recent –the phobia to decaying corporeality, to organic fluids and masses–, that the onlooker, unable to finish knowing them, experiences in a “not a place”, approached by the photographer with signs.

Once again, in “Páginas dobladas” (Folded pages, but also *dubbed* pages), a 1996 installation work recently shown at the VIth Havana Biennale, Milagros de la Torre investigates the use of photography as a support of identity. In this photographic project, the whole of what has been portrayed comprises only the admission sheets of a psychiatric hospital in Lima. The sheets cover a period of forty years of internments in this institution, since the beginning of the century.

The sheet is, at present, the only support in which a register of the life of the individual as inmate persists. It is a biased register since it accommodates the need of recording a scientific reading and, thus, modern and advanced for the time. Apart from assigning spaces for three different photographic portraits of the same patient –frontal view, profile and one showing attitude– the admission sheet records the description of the family history as well as the family tree and a series of personal data including name, age, race, religion, profession, education, marital state.

The character of the project as testimony is not centered on the presentation of a documentation designed to classify individuals who by medical decision had been considered as needy of observation, care and study, in specialized precincts within the social-urban space that aspired to modernity. As proof of this, the photographer has applied a strategy of masking, based on a play with the out of focus and the toning of the images, that renders difficult the complete reading of the information and, even, the appreciation some of the portraits of patients in the sheets. The nature of the installation conditions the presentation of the sheet-prints in a fashion manifestly out of context, in metallic structures reminding one of boxes, hung at different heights along the vertical axis and with interior lighting.

“Páginas dobladas” is, rather, a testimony of the fragility of human memory and of how an archive sunk in forgetfulness in the museum of the institution, sparsely restores the passing through the world of a suffering humanity, that was subjected in the pursuit of the project of a modernity that never was in Peru.

Milagros de la Torre has spoken of her work in terms of operating a shift of meaning of the photographic image associated with documentation procedures, “passing from the descriptive purpose to the speculation associated with the thousand paradoxes centered upon man and to the realization of the human being as grandiose, special and unique”. Perhaps one of the aspects that most impresses one about her process is precisely the seriousness with which it has developed, through the investigation in archives and the tenacity with which it has kept a course, without deviating from the outline of a major project, in times when artistic actions tend to accommodate to the dictates of the instant.

*Translated by Jorge Villacorta*

#### Footnotes

- 1.- Rosa Olivares, “El retrato como medio de conocimiento: Cara y Cruz”, *Lápiz* 127 (december 1996), p. 34. Translated by Jorge Villacorta.
- 2.- Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn; essays in postmodern theory and culture*, (Columbia: Ohio State University Press, 1987), p. 92.
- 3.- Natalia Majluf, “Bajo el sol negro”, text in catalogue of one-woman show, (Lima: Banco de Crédito del Perú, 1995). Translated by Jorge Villacorta.
- 4.- *Ibid.*
- 5.- The title of the series plays upon the name given to the main entrance hall in the Palace of Justice in Lima, known as the Hall de los Pasos Perdidos (Hall of Lost Steps). It alludes to the nature of the Peruvian Judiciary which condemns those who seek justice to a seemingly endless and almost pointless time milling around inside the Building. In June 1996, an exhibit of *corpus delicti* was organized and displayed in the said Hall.
- 6.- James Clifford, “Coleccionar arte y cultura”, *Revista de Occidente* 141 (february 1983), p. 24. The indication of the source reads: From a fragment of a chapter of *The Predicament of Culture, Twentieth Century Ethnography, literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1988). Translation by Alfredo Taberna (retranslated by Jorge Villacorta in absence of the original).
- 7.- James Clifford, “Coleccionar...”, p. 22.
- 8.- Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror; an essay on abjection*. Translated by Leon J. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 38.
- 9.- Milagros de la Torre, “Páginas dobladas”, press release/information sheet, 1997. Translated by Jorge Villacorta.