

Clue. Photography as Proof and Revelation / Oliver Debroise

The game

Invented in 1943, in England, of course, *Cluedo* (Clue in the USA) is an elegant board game which encompasses the huge international success of *Monopoly* on the one hand, and on the other, the detective-style narrative, cunning ingenuity and logical perfection of Edgar Allan Poe, Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. Like every game of its type, the mechanisms of *Cluedo* are fairly simple: in its classic version, a crime has been committed in the closed quarters of a Tudor-style mansion (ironically called *Tudor Manor*). A dozen characters, brought together by Inspector Grey, a cross between Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, attempt to hinder the investigation. To do this they must tell a story using an array of different tools. As in *Monopoly*, the players, sitting round a table on a rainy Sunday, have to get their hands on the papers marked on the cards and act out the plot which they invent as they go along, having also to contend with the player who acts the part of Inspector Grey.

In this sense *Cluedo* recreates on a board the old – and very British – tradition of board games, *tableaux vivants* or charades, in which visitors gave expression to erudite fantasies which, at one time, stimulated the interest of the Surrealists. This, then, is a game of *alter egos*, of the *mise-en-oeuvre* of narrative devices which briefly interrupt an extreme situation: death, lying, alibis, prison, the truth, good and evil. Like the novels which inspire it, it has deep-seated moral implications underlying

its entertainment qualities which are even more perverse, perhaps, than those of *Monopoly*; that initiation into the rules and mechanisms of capitalism. As an educational game *Cluedo* is a game of justice, integrity and courtesy, however it contains its own inversion: the learning of ways to bend these rules of civic behaviour.

In its oldest, classic version, *Cluedo* included a number of playing cards which represented the possible weapons of crime: the revolver and the master key, the rope and the candle stick, the dagger and the lead pipe. These black and white cards, with a heavy black rim as obituary, drawn in the style of photographic realism, showed the object in profile, enveloped in a greyish aura which faded out towards the edge. This way of representing the weapon – particularly the use of black and white in contrast to the colour portraits of the suspects – was undoubtedly inspired by the style of Hollywood horror films, already well established in the forties after the success of *The Maltese Falcon* (1943), *The Blue Dahlia* or *The Great Dream* (both films from 1947). The marked shadows, the fuzzy aura, the very realism of the writing, denoted the icon as an “object of evil”, distinguishing it also by emphasising its importance as the determining factor in solving the crime, achieving the narrative, giving it the value of something fetishist, a sacred object almost.

And thus, in what is imaginary, the weapon of crime, the instrument of destruction, began to take on its own identity, now divorced from the narrative – to a certain extent banal – of this imitation of a detective story. The



evil aura represented in the ingenuous cards of *Cluedo* was transferred over to the very object, the revolver and the iron bar, the rope and the candlestick. In the enclosed space of the courtroom, the *presentation* of the weapon before the witnesses or the jury made it a mnemonic instrument, a trigger for confused and often contradictory stories. Isolated from all context, the weapon of crime becomes creator of its own stories.

The dead body

Lying on the sawdust, the roadway or in a coffin, the body preserves the appearance of a human being; but it is only an *image* of what in life was an individual. What died, at a precise moment, is the memory, the consciousness of the human being. Death is only a mutation, the transformation from one order into another. The body, before its decomposition, resembles the being, its form represents a transitory state which borders on life, on the one hand, and total disintegration on the other.

The idea of death affects us because it intervenes into what is most fragile, what is most secret, what we consider we own entirely: our intellect. The body, which anchors this intellect to a reality, continues existing in appearance after death and is attributed with the nature of recipient which death should not totally alter.

A duly legislated social practice in modern societies forces the dead person's relations or, in their absence, close friends to once again *recognise* the body: before the law, the relations become ephemeral substitutes of a lost memory. For use in lawsuits "body archives" have been created where the bodies lie labelled and refrigerated awaiting recognition. The French word *morgue* comes from a homonym which means arrogance or scorn: the *morgue* as the place where decomposition is held up, where life is frozen (or the image of life), where death is scorned.

Funeral rites always attempt to give some supposed dignity back to the body which death has forcibly taken away and they are manifested by rituals around the body or its effigy. Dressed up, surrounded by the attributes which signify that person's social function, embalmed so that the relations recognise it, the body remains apparently intact as long as the funeral rites last.

Photography

Since its invention photography has served the Law. The precision, the so argued-over probability, the '*objectivity*', all intrinsic to the photographic image, predestined photography for this purpose. Photography became the unavoidable proof of acts, events, phenomena and, initially, the proof of the existence of the individual in a ritual which shares a great deal in common with funeral rites. In the case I know best, the Mexican police records, the introduction of photography came suddenly and very early on. At the end of the 1840s, records already included delicate photographs, sewn between the pages. The photographs, made of salted paper first, then albumin paper, bore proof of the crime, the weapon; most often a long rope, a silk handkerchief or a pistol, but also other strange objects brought to the court by witnesses and those giving evidence: buttons and buckles, scraps of cloth etc., included in the police report, since in those days the actual object was physically stored within the text of the report (if size allowed). Sometimes the portrait of the accused also appeared, particularly when this was a member of the lower classes or a Mexican Indian, who had to be *recognised* as such, identified as a member of a dangerous or harmful sector of society. In the first years, these practices – deliberately copied from regulations issued by the French government which was the first to give photography a police use – were carried out at the discretion of the judges themselves. Towards the mid 1850s, however, police use of photography was already formally legislated in Mexico, at least as far as it regarded criminal offenders when they entered prison and certain uses in courts. In the following decade, the photographic portrait of all individuals of the lower classes who, for some reason had contact with the upper echelons of society – chauffeurs, porters, postmen, domestic staff and prostitutes - was already a common practise and almost general all over the country¹.

The early approval of police use of photography in a country like Mexico before its widespread use in Europe has its own logic and explanation. Although this may be attributed, on the one hand, to an enlightened elite – judges, governors, legislators – well informed of the developments in the area of penal law and technology, and seeking to place themselves at the vanguard,

frenetically adopting technical advances then as they do now, this practice, on the other hand, also compensated for structural shortcomings in the Mexican court system, for a secular backwardness in both the legislation inherited from the colonial system, which it was being speedily attempted to renew. Secondly, at the moment of the rise of an incipient middle class, photography also served to reinforce a racial and social segregation which marked the still fuzzy divisions between the classes, (re)defining the position of each sector. This type of photography, which indicates extreme objectivity, tends to isolate the object to show it with no artifice. The context is therefore systematically eliminated (the bourgeois interior full of the rococo *bibelots* of the photographic studio or urban landscape). The operation implies a stylistic neutralisation: imprecise backgrounds (a white cloth whose scarcely distinguishable folds *hold up* the object), flat illumination which removes all shadow, eliminating any relief. To be precise, the image must be banal, focused; it cannot have any depth. In that system – which remained in force until the end of the 19th century under the Italian criminologist, Eugenio Lombroso – there is no space for imagination, and even less for ambiguity; the image establishes itself as its own discourse, creator of its own narrative, and the contexts, deliberately expelled from the image, from fact, are re-established, or rather, they are fitted into the text (the court report, the personal description, the criminal or clinical history).

The tradition of oblivion

The police practices and social uses which define photographic images in Peru where Milagros de la Torre grew up and was educated, are not very different from those in Mexico where she decided to live and undertake her most recent works. This is not only due to a common past and the sequels of colonisation but also because Peru – like Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Mexico – distinguish themselves from among the other Latin-American republics by the mechanisms which construct a national identity which imply a negation of the past in its meanest, most sordid aspects; racial segregation and the definition of a cast system. This '*tradition of oblivion*' led, paradoxically, to an exacerbation of the signs of identity and their recovery from the first days of colonisation.

Thus, the immediate restoration and continuous use in Andean communities of *huacas* (human remains carefully preserved, sometimes entire mummies, but on certain occasions, formless elements, simple sheets of paper, a personal object *touched*, even a proper name) influenced, penetrated by an aura, turned image/simulation an abstract representation of specific individuals. Photography arrived, perhaps, at a good moment, around the mid 19th century, to absorb and recreate these cults, the modes of comprehension and particular dissemination of the notion of fate, resuscitating the mnemonic component of these simulations, giving them a new presence. The complete work of a photographer like Martin Chambi, for example, or the recent mutations of the only existing photography of Sarita Colonia, saint of the Andean emigrants whose popular worship now goes way beyond all levels of Lima society, indicate up to what point photography was accepted, adopted and imbued with a sacred quality in the Andean regions?

When at the beginning of the nineties, Milagros de la Torre began to photograph young people on the streets of Cuzco using the archaic techniques of the *minuteros*, as those "bucket photographers" are called in Peru, producing snapshots by the thousand in public squares, de la Torre was also working on – and from – the notion of fate. Fate presupposes an existence and a transfer, even when this is anonymous and practically unnoticeable. Photography thus becomes proof, simulation and advocacy of this fate – its *huaca*. The images of the Cuzco series *Bajo el sol negro* imply, it is true, an inversion. (De la Torre only presents the negatives of these photographs, altered by the use of mercurochrome in the developing process which whitens out indigenous faces.) But this is a construction of identities which explains a deeply-rooted racial discourse, an integral part of Andean societies after five centuries, although it also reflects at the same time the consciousness of negation and oblivion. The very title of the series, the reference to a black streak of lightning fallen from the firmament, and the chemical treatment of the faces, altered, inverted, appear moreover to remit to the *illapa*, the sacred ray of Viracocha that signifies fate and appears constantly in the *keros*, the twin cups for the ritual consumption of *chicha*, objects of an existential affirmation of the human being, its symbolic extension.

The powerful image

Raking around amongst the piles of police reports in the basements of the Court of Justice in Lima, Milagros de la Torre did not find photo identification numbers, or perhaps they did not interest her, on their own merits, as a register of individuals with a criminal background, like the ones which captivated the Brazilian artist, Rosângela Rennó, in the same period. What she did find was 'marked' objects; evidence found during police investigations and used in the court cases of several criminals, and she photographed these in turn, very carefully, in black and white in the very place she had found them, transformed for the moment into a photographic studio. On this occasion she discarded the criminal reports and only kept the title which was also an extensive description of the objects and the reason for the photograph: *Belts which the psychologist Mario Poggi used to strangle a rapist during the police interrogation. Shirt of a journalist murdered in the massacre of Ucchuracay, Ayacucho*. Or even more eloquent in its simplicity: *Pistol. Incriminating proof of murder*. The object which was the reason for the image nevertheless indicates a fate (that of the victim), but does not explain what was the motive for the crime (or of the murderer).

In this series of images, entitled *Los pasos perdidos* (Paying discrete homage to the founder of a "theory of significant objects", André Breton, or to one of the first creators of a post-colonial literature, Alejo Carpentier?) Milagros de la Torre explores the limits of context, the powers of ambiguity and the polysemics intrinsic to all images, but which photography, because of its pretension to objectivity, reveals much more than other visual media.

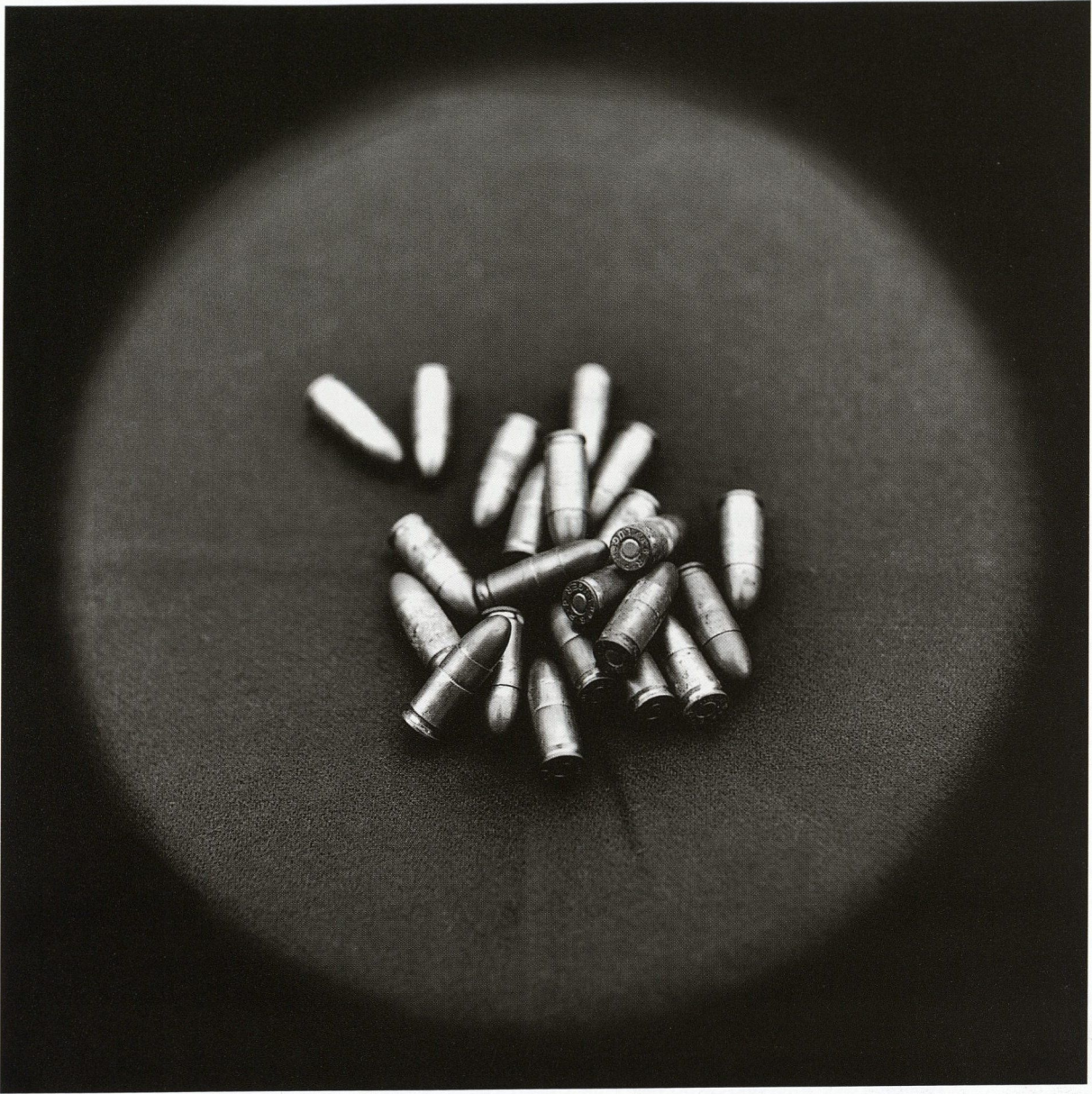
Milagros de la Torre photographs these objects in a very neat, tidy way, impeccable in their photographic classicism, to a certain degree nineteenth century-like: centred on the image, hardly wishing to be seen precisely. They are illuminated like the instruments of crime of the *Cluedo* playing cards, bathed in a greyish aura which fades at the edges, emerging from the shadows of memory to reactivate a story, suggesting it more than revealing it. She recreates in her own way, using very well established rules, the fictional place of the police file or the mystery story. In this sense, the images are imbued with mistakes: like the builder of stories with no apparent ending. Milagros de la

Torre shows us the true nature of objects but leaves it implicit that stories – both the motive and the crime, and photography – only belong to the observer.

The power of image resides in this forced, obligatory ambiguity. In what is read between the lines, in what is left unsaid. The *Carta de amor escrita por prostituta a su amante* (*Love Letter Written by Prostitute to her Lover*) which forms part of the series *Los pasos perdidos* is perhaps the key document for this understanding of the intentions of Milagros de la Torre because the text of the letter, by its very nature illegible, although it is the proof of a finite history, a summary of a life, does not tell us anything. We hardly have enough time to think of the uncovered body of the woman who lies, cold, immobile, absent, at the scene of the crime. These empty spaces in the narrative, which Milagros de la Torre explores in even greater depth in her recent series of large photographs of "forgotten" pages (rubbed out, removed or scored out) from the population census files of San Marino (*Blank* series), due to their enigmatic essence, become powerful images as the absence of meaning that is photographed here becomes a revelation.

- 1 For more data on this police use of photography in Mexico, see Rosa Casanova, "Usos y abusos de la fotografía liberal. Ciudadanos, reos y siervientes, 1851-1880". *La Cultura en México*, suplemento de *Siempre!*. No. 1639, 21st November, 1984. Rosa Casanova and Oliver Debroise, "Fotógrafo de cárceles. Usos de la fotografía en las cárceles de la ciudad de México en el siglo XIX". *Nexos*, No. 119, November 1987. Olivier Debroise. "Los ojos del ciudadano". *Registro del Archivo Histórico Municipal de la Ciudad de Oaxaca*. Museum of Contemporary Art of Oaxaca, October, 1996. For another point of view on these images, see Enrique Flores. "Los hombres infames", *Luna Cornea*, 13th September, 1997.
- 2 The Peruvian art historian Gustavo Buntix is currently preparing a detailed study on the iconography of Sarita Colonia, her transformations from 1940 and their ramifications in Lima society in the nineties. Thanks are expressed for notification of this work in progress.

Olivier Debroise (*Jerusalem*, 1952). Besides being one of Mexico's best known critics and curators, Debroise has published three novels (the latest being *Crónica de las destrucciones*, which won the Colima Prize in 1998). He has directed the film *Un banquete en Tetlapayac (Primer Cuadro)*, 2000. Among his many curatorial experiences the better known are *El corazón sangrante/The bleeding heart* (with Elisabeth Sussman and Matthew Teitelbaum). *The Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) Boston Ms.*, 1991; *InSITE97*, A Binational WEhibition of Site-Specific Installations. *San Diego-Tijuana*, 1997 (with Sally Yard, Jessica Bradley and Ivo Mesquita), and *Retrato de una década. David Alfaro Siqueiros 1930-1940*, Museo Nacional de Arte, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Houston Fine Arts Museum y The Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1996. As a founding member and director of *Curare*, Espacio Crítico para las Artes between 1993 and 1997.



Balas. Municiones confiscadas.

Bullets. Confiscated munitions.

Págs. 111, 114, 115,
119, 121 y 125

Milagros de la Torre

Los pasos perdidos

1996

Impresión virada de plata
sobre gelatina. 40 x 40 cm.

Perú