

## THE FATE OF THINGS TO COME

'(w)ho amongst us is not battling with specters that implore  
Heaven and demand of us their due, while we are beholden  
to them for our own salvation?  
(Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kennel*).

How do we represent the aftermath of events or have experiences that we may not understand or recognize fully. What is the relation between repetition and representation as a way of accounting for the fissures and aporias of memory and of history? In recent years, Milagros de la Torre has turned from photographing the intimate belongings of her family, to the portrait, to the archive and to found objects. The work returns to the question of how the image comes to stand in for and serve as evidence of the absent body.

There is an insistent return to what photographs can and cannot reveal, to the displacement and substitution of the image for the missing object, and the auratic presence of the image that overcomes this loss of proximity, a world in which the trace contributes its power to signify as otherwise. 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.' (1) Transferring the world to image, photography as a representational structure produces a certain archival *effect*.

Photography becomes critical to the practice and authority of the archive insofar as it folds together history as representation and representation as history. Within these terms it renders heterogeneity and difference intelligible from a simple point of view. Both the archive and photography reproduce the world as witness to itself. Data and documents come to stand for historical evidence, usurping the function of memory as evidence of the past.

The work of de la Torre resonates with the archival desire to salvage, record and store, to recollect the past and hold it up in the light of present. And yet, her use of photography suggests a profound anxiety about our dependence upon structures of representation and technologies of remembrance. What she produces is a form of counter-archive that disrupts the authority of historical representation as adequate to the writing of history. Her work raises the question of what photography chooses to remember, for whom and what purpose.

She exposes us to the paradox and pathos of images by suggesting that the assignation of individual lives to the realm of images determine their destiny. Identity does not precede memory but is actively constituted within its forms of remembrance. In this sense the destiny of individuals is intrinsically tied to the fate of images. Yet, history cannot be told through the sum of these traces. It is as much evidence of what has been suppressed or erased as what remains and therefore constitutes the present. The photographic project of de la Torre resides here, disrupting the authority of both the instruments of remembrance and the archive as the repository of history.

In two early series *Bajo el Sol Negro* (1991-93) and *Untitled* (1992) de la Torre explores how, as Roland Barthes has remarked, photography is 'a certain but fugitive testimony.' (2) Produced in small format, the series *Bajo el Sol Negro*, representing more than 200 portraits of Cuzco youth. As such the series recalls the common photographic portrait of the 'photo carnet' and

19thc. carte-de-visite, both of which were immensely popular in Peru (as elsewhere) since the time of their invention in the 1860's. By virtue of the apparent immediacy and directness with which the body appears to leave an unmediated impression or trace of itself on the surface of the paper, gave a legitimacy to photography as an instrument of both self-representation and representation of the other. Representation is not only witness to, but bears the trace of the world. But above all it was the face in which look and identity, sight and presence would seem to coalesce, a relation that becomes the irrefutable sign of being, a true presence. The photo carnet could provide both forms of identity and identification recognized by individuals and the State alike. Photography became a document of the State as much as albums made for tourists as much as for each other, family members, friends and novias.

In this series de la Torre draws upon a local Peruvian tradition of plaza photographers or *minuteros* as they were called, whose name referred to their ability to produce a photograph within minutes. What de la Torre explores is their technique of retouching the paper negative with a red liquid, which at the moment the image is transferred into positive, gives an effect of whiteness. That is, it whitens the face, thus providing its subject with the illusion of being white rather than dark-skinned, an illusion that erases the sign of race, and therefore of class. (i) This is how they wish to be seen, to see themselves, a mask that signifies beauty, as against how they are seen. Between the *minuteros* and subject there is a complicit play of misrecognition, a play that the work of de la Torre restages. For, after taking the photographs and retouching the face with the same red mercurochrome used by the *minuteros*, she suspends the next stage by processing the negatives as negative. In this manner, de la Torre presents the viewer with the metaphoric play of conversion between the negative and positive impressions. The non-portraits of de la Torre refuse photography's claim to render the world intelligible, to provide an immediate disclosure of its presence which, above all, is to be found in its ability to represent the other. Moreover, it reveals how the image of the other serves as a vehicle for the construction of our own image of ourselves and conversely, how the image we have of ourselves informs the way we see others.

For who are such photographs that withdraw from the light, from the very source which disclosed the subject in the full light of day? De la Torre's intervention constitutes an interdiction. What she re-presents is a reflection on how identity and social difference is constructed. She exposes the function of a photographic convention and technical procedure, as if the technologies of representation have naturalized their own conditions of possibility. In the preface to his book *Otherwise than Being*, Emmanuel Levinas remarks that with Pascal's words "That is my place in the sun'... the usurpation of the whole world began." (ii) The non-identical is absorbed by the identical. It folds the other into the same.

This is the violence at the heart of ontology. We might say de la Torre misappropriates Pascal's words: 'That is my place in the sun,' offering rather '*Bajo el Sol Negro*,' as a world at noon in darkness, a revelation that occurs within the shadows cast by the light of day. The faces in the de la Torre's photographs appear in and of shadows, pools of darkness in the light of the sun. The image remains opaque, refusing the light of transparency. It runs against Hegel's theological conception of art that revolves around the notion of presence and absence. Hegel views the image as the sensible presentation of the Idea, the visible image of the invisible God. The strategy of de la Torre is not to refuse the authority of representation, but to expose its structuring order by which the other is made intelligible through the concept of presence. It is this ontology of presence which, in thinking of being as coming-into-presence, reifies the face as the 'window of the soul,' revealing

the innermost essence of a person. The icon or portrait is invested with an onto-theological power, that is, the presentation of the Idea, the invisible ideality of the visible.

In retouching the image of the face, de la Torre adds to it a mask. The appearance of the mask performs a double gesture by both re-invoking and disrupting the concept of the image as it turns on the dialectic of absence/presence. In the photographs of de la Torre, the mask erases the sign of race, it points onto the absence, while offering itself as otherwise. This is not, however, to speak of absence as bearing the truth of the image but rather to the contrary, the necessary fiction that the image of the face presents us with the presence of the other. What is given in its place is rather a simulacrum of a presence, which however, in erasing all trace of the referent, exceeds itself as trace, assumes its own non-identity that is not conditioned on the dialectic of presence/absence.

In *Untitled* (1992) de la Torre depicted clothing and objects from her family home. The clothing signifies the housing of the body, the familiar of the home now disembodied and estranged. (iii) Singled out and highlighted against a darkened background, de la Torre creates a translucent form, a ghostlike character that conveys the sensation of the lack of body in each object. Its luminous singularity comes to stand in for the absent referent. As spectral traces of the original object, it brings the iconicity of the image into proximity with the pathos function of the trace. For while the photographic representation of objects becomes an *aide de memoire*, a form for remembering that which is no longer present, the ephemeral ghostlike quality of the images evoke a form of longing and loss of a familiar, intimate world. While bearing the marks of the body, they mark its transience. The objects are no longer an armature of the body but, in the wake of their disappearance, assume its corporeal presence. They appear as if haunted, forever estranged. Within the stillness of the frame, they hover before us, emanating a light that lures absence into presence and the silence that surrounds the departed body.

### **The body of evidence**

During 1996 de la Torre worked in local Peruvian archives to produce three bodies of work. The first of these *Los Pasos Perdidos* is based on the archive of 'los cuerpos del delito' at the Palace of Justice in Lima. And, like Dante's guide through purgatory, Manuel Guzmán, chief of the Archive became the photographer's guide retracing 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. While some of these photographs appear, most overtly, as instruments of crime, other objects appear as detached, everyday, suggesting little more than their innocent origins. These 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: the body of the incarcerated or dead. They become emblematic of ordinary human lives, lives that turn into tales of tragedy. For Guzman, each object told a story, as if summoning him to recount tragic stories of passions, beliefs and illusions gone awry. In this context, the fifteen objects she chooses represent 'witnesses to extreme situations.' Amongst them are the incriminating love letter of a prostitute to her lover; the belts that belonged to a psychologist who strangled a rapist during police interrogation and the beautiful dark satin skirt of Marita Alpaca, who was pushed by her lover from the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the Sheraton Hotel and found to be pregnant at the autopsy.

Commenting on her work, 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.' (3)

The effect of de la Torre's work in the archive 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. (iv) 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 paradisiacal 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 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 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 worked in the Mental Health Hospital of Victor Larco Herrera, producing '*Ultimas Cosas*' and '*Páginas Dobladas*'. Early on in her visits to the Mental Health Hospital, de la Torre had come across a room of discarded objects. She photographed several objects, finally choosing three: a ball made of leather and cloth made to be a muscle relaxant, and old gown used to constrain people, and surgical trays – to produce the triptych, *Ultimas Cosas*. Placed together, each signifies the health and regulation of the human body. Each function as an instrument of psychiatric therapy constraining the body: the unfit body, the uncontrollable body and body of illness. More than that, the title and construction of the piece as a triptych with its central image of the hung shirt, resonates with the image of Christ on the Cross and its two companion panels of thieves. As with the shirt of *Los Pasos Perdidos*, that has been likened to the instruments of Christ's Passion, (v) this triptych resonates with a deeply engrained catholic ethos. The image evokes Zurbaran's painting Saint Serapion (1628) and François Aubert's famous photograph of Maximilian's shirt after his execution (1867). (vi) In both instances, their authors draw iconographic power from the image of the Veronica's veil in which the sacred image of Christ, the stain and trace of the body symbolizes martyrdom. In this way they acquire the iconic power of a sacred relic. (vii) While de la Torre may not be suggesting the figure of the saviour, her work takes on a symbolic load in which the nation is constructed around the sacrificial body.

In the following series *Páginas Dobladas*, de la Torre photographed the admission cards of individuals admitted to the hospital since the turn of the century. Transferred from beautiful leather-bound books to white metal boxes laid on the floor, they can be viewed as first-aid kits used to heal the sick or wounded. The photographs of de la Torre mirror the work of the hospital archive. They display the essential components that conform to the procedure, rules, and classificatory systems that govern the archive. This system not only regulates and legitimates the archive but also produces a set of knowledges that comes to stand in for its subject and serve as an administrative armature of the law. In this context, the portrait represents an indexical sign of both social and

individual identity. The production of these knowledges serves a fervent and violent desire to control and regulate the social body and identity, to fix the authority of the state.

In entering the archives of the hospital, de la Torre follows the footsteps of Foucault work on the role of institutions in the disciplining and exclusion of the body in the construction of the normal and pathological subject. Like Foucault's lives of infamous men, the folding over of the pages suggests stories of individuals locked away in the realm of the forgotten and in being confined to the archive assigned to the obscurity of the historical record. In de la Torre's re-presentation these pages are no longer folded into the pages and confined to the closure of the bound albums. It is this exposure, the un-folding which provides the artist with the title 'Páginas Dobladas'. By opening the closed book of the archive, performing a photographic transference of the image and its exposure in the public space of the museum, the image of the other makes a breach in the realm of historical remembrance and the archival function of the law. De la Torre's re-presentation takes on the work of testimony, a testimony of individuals who had been condemned to live out their lives in the shadow of the State. Placed in open boxes, the photographs take on the physical presence. No longer are the subjects the unwilling objects of the camera's gaze, but now gaze back towards to the future. Put back into circulation within the light of the present they gaze out towards us, their audience. In this regard, it subordinates what Levinas has termed as the *said* as distinct from that of *saying* insofar as the valorization of the *said* privileges the sovereignty of the subject over one's neighbor, the other.

By working in state archives, de la Torre joins with 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 Renno and de la Torre, began in the murky wake of a period of state and civil violence. 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.

The preoccupation in the work of these artists is to recover certain knowledges erased from the history of the nation. 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.' (4) He writes of liberating these knowledges from the 'coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse.' (5) 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 re-colonized into a unified discourse either by dominant or resistant practices.

In this context, the choice for de la Torre of both the Palace of Justice and the Hospital Victor Larco Herrera in Lima are far from arbitrary. The central function of creating a photographic archive concerns the destiny of the subject. The possibility of justice and emancipation represents a disruption of the governing laws of representation. The photographic practice of de la Torre represents an intervention in the archives of the nation, reminding us of the fate of those individuals who become the unwilling subject of the public archive. Around them hinges the before and after of individual histories, the movement from civil life to incarceration. The photographs are testimony to the ways in which individual identities are inscribed, so that the objects and cards become signs of their destiny. The photographs stand in for a moment in which the body will become absent.

Naming the unnamed, the unmarked, the unsigned: this force of naming that brings her into the archive, and in point of fact, drives all her work. Her engagement with the archive is counter-archival challenging the procedure and ideology of naming in the archive, to the regulating habits of the State. The State names, assigning identity status to its subject as belonging to the nation state. De la Torre's project, like that of other artists, constitutes a form of injunction in the technologies of visuality that work to create a unified subject of the state. 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 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. By recovering these portraits, the artists seek to uncover the effacement of others within the historical record. It will be in this context, then, that we arrive at the issue of remembrance and amnesia, and of the phantasm which as a spectral body haunts the archive. By drawing attention to the viewing of the object, she also raises and draws together the relation between one's own personal past and those of others in the present. It becomes in this sense a shared historical present.

### **Traces of the Vanished**

In the recent series from 1998 *En Blanco*, de la Torre continues to press against the status of representation to stand in for the missing object. *En Blanco* is composed of a photographic series drawn from XV C. census books in the State archive, produced in the early period of the Republic of San Marino. The census book represents a record of their struggle for independence. De la Torre's intervention constituted making a photographic record of the blank pages within the census book. There is an absence of signs: Names left out of the official record. And yet, over the course of its history, the Republic has also experienced a continuing wave of emigration to such a degree that it established its own museum of emigration. Through collections and archives documenting the movement and family histories lived elsewhere, San Marino represents a rare instance of a country recognizing its emigrant community. The blank census page then appears in de la Torre's photographs as evident of those absent from the record, making the link between the local and emigrant communities.

In this manner the iconic status of the image is drawn back into the indexical. We are witness to what is no longer there, witness in fact to the trace that persists like a residue of the body, witness to the persistence of the past through the image. Throughout the work of de la Torre, she presents the object of her work as a lost object that can be referred to only at the level of the trace; a trace that always lacks presence because it is always past. This repetition points onto the question of origin in order to reveal non-correspondence between referent and sign. Repetition points to the space between, the aporia. Repetition, then, in such a context, would mean witness to a loss and therefore to recognition and remembrance that occurs within the movement of a traumatic partition. This brings us back to the constitution of the trace, to its bifurcation between that which has disappeared and that, which remains: the aporetic space between event and evidence. If we can speak of a referent, it is to be found hovering at the threshold between memory and erasure at the level of the phantasmatic. In such a space it appears by virtue of its repetition, a process of deferral that is already the mark of difference.

The work is not about the limits of representation, nor a wish or even the belief that this subject of erasure could be somehow returned to our midst. It is no longer simply a problem of the techniques or technologies of remembrance that may be overcome through a redemptive melancholy about the world or valorization of memory. Nor is it simply about filling the gaps in history, those forgotten or vanquished. The fatal paradox of the photograph is that it is nothing but a trace, never a whole, always marking absence, the fragrance of the departed body. That is to say, there is no essence to this vestige, nor can be no gift nor promise either of restoring a presence to this object by virtue of representation. Rather, what is clear in de la Torre is the sense of persistence of the past but in a way that can be neither represented nor accounted for. This persistence appears through force of repetition, a repetition that punctures representation in order to reveal the phantasmatic within its structure.

Perhaps, by way of conclusion, the movement of de la Torre's photographic series provides a way for us to think not so much about memory and remembrance, but rather forgetting and amnesia. Amnesia, as a disturbance of mnemonic function, designates a blank space, an aporia not only to be found between the lines of memory but also buried within the structures of remembrance. Her work presents us with a reflection on a history filled with silences surrounding those who were hospitalized as ill fit for society, incarcerated for crimes against one another or the State apparatus that perpetuates its authority by legalized forgetting and a history of erasure in which what is evident remains without witness. Remembrance becomes an impossible truth because there is no referent to which one can refer. What appears is a subject who recognizes an absence from within, as if something has been stolen: a self without history; and yet something that persists: an identity haunted by memory, a witness to that which can neither be remembered nor forgotten.

This text draws upon two earlier essays on the work of Milagros de la Torre. See 'Being Otherwise' in *Atlantica* #17, (Summer 1997) and 'Reading the Archive' in Milagros de la Torre (Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1997).

- i Correspondence with the author, December 30, 1996. We may recall that the image of a apopular XVII C. Peruvian image of the Virgin Mary, the fact of her dark skin was accounted for by recounting that she had been burnt by the sun.
- ii Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence Trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).
- iii From Jorge Villacorta Chavez 'Memoranda of the Human' for a brief discussion of the feminine and self-representation as it pertains to this work. Ibid. 90.
- iv De la Torre first saw the objects of this series in the hallway of the Palacio de Justicia, Lima.
- v Villacorta Chavez, Op. Cit. p. 90
- vi As with Christ's crucifixion, so Maximilian was flanked at his execution by his two loyal generals Mejia and Miramon. They were subsequently buried with Maximilian at the center.
- vii Maximilian is supposed to have said in his final words before execution: 'Persons of my rank and birth are brought into the world either to insure the welfare of the people, or to die as martyrs. I pray that my blood may be the last to be shed for our unhappy country, and may insure the happiness of the nation.' (Cited in Frederik Hall, Invasion of Mexico by the French and the Reign of Maximilian with a Sketch of the Empress Carlota. (New York: James Miller, 1868) 299.