

FORMATS 3

Wounds and Cures. Photography, Artistic Expression, and the Documentary Eye

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The intensity of migrations (exodus, exile, refuge) in the photography of the past decades surprisingly reminds us of the busy circulation of ideas, rules and clichés that photography created in its beginnings. It is well known that photography had to choose between its public use, the claim of the well-known physicist Arago on July 3, 1839, in the French House of Deputies in his defense of Daguerre's invention, and the relationship that its images had and may still have with painting, beyond its nature as a document, whether artistic in nature or not. In fact, until the first decades of the 20th century, photography was an indiscriminate field of battle where victory was for the visible party, he who was seen, from both the points of view of business and experimentation. Modern visual artists, starting with Picasso, quickly understood the equation exact technique = magical value of photography, and as a recent show has proven (Kosinski, 2000), they learned from the photographic document first and then later from photographic composition considerable lessons for painting and sculpture. The independence of icons and meaning, which Walter Benjamin would call optical unawareness in 1931 (Benjamin 1973: 67) did not arise in the land of documents, strictly speaking, the land of spectators that was so well defined by Barthes in his last observations (1980); nor did it arrive exclusively by means of pictorialism, although it was quite significant.

The independence of icons and meaning in photography took place in a new territory, that of the illustrated press. Whether in photojournalism, in Europe or the Americas, in dadaist or surrealist journals, photographs became independent. (1) As such, as independent images, they soon arrived in museums; in the 1930s they were in the MOMA in New York. And the relationship between these two public circles, the press and museums, has dominated the path of photography throughout the 20th century (the other circle that photography touches, private enterprise, which is just as important for the development of photography, if not more so, has also been taken over by the public circle, especially with advertising. Nevertheless, it remains independent enough, and private photography is always a source for documentalists and contemporary visual artists.

In this network of questions, the important point is that at the turn of the century perhaps the most privileged relationship of photography with the public circle has taken refuge in museums. This hypothesis is one of a new pictorialism, one that would close the circle: photography's initial struggle to become independent from painting has now become a victory of photography over painting. Or so it seems. We should recall that photographic pictorialism alludes to photographs by imitating canvasses as much as to photographs pursuing their own place, their own identity as pictures.

My purpose in this article is to focus on a particular point of these migrations, the documental eye, which is particularly interesting from the standpoint of feedback between museums and communication. Or between aesthetics and politics, or between the photographer and the visual artist. August Sander, Margaret Bourke-White, Walker Evans, Lisette Model, Eli Lotar, Agustí Centelles, Bernd & Hilla Becher, Barbara Kruger, Muntadas, Gerhard Richter, Boltanski, Craigie Hrosfield, Martha Rosler and Nan Goldin, among others, all have a field of vision to explore, in their continuities as well as their discontinuities.

Between photographs and film. The documental eye is based on both photography and film. We may look at the case of Eli Lotar (1905-1969). One cannot separate his photographs from his work as a cinematographer with Joris Ivens or Luis Buñuel. Neither can we separate the pictures he did for commercial magazines or for the surrealists and the October group of the Prévert brothers. Lotar did the proletarian epic *Zuyderzee* with Ivens (1929) about the Dutch taking land from the sea, and then worked together with Buñuel on *Tierra sin pan* (1933), about hunger and revolution. He worked with Henri Storck, at the time the leading maker of documentaries in Europe, on *Les maison de la misère* (1937), a story of Buñuel-like obedience about workers' misery. Later, during the post-Civil War period, Lotar would make his own documentary, *Aubervilliers* (1946), about the Paris blue-collar neighborhood that ended the war with leftist euphoria. If we consider the mythical stories he did with Ivens, Buñuel and Storck, we see that they represent three closely related films in terms of their subjects—hunger, isolation, labor with no future or a future unknown to the workers, as well as in terms of their perspective and, especially, in terms of Lotar's eye.

Lotar, originally from Hungary, would end up being an outstanding photographer of the Paris school, along with Germaine Krull (his teacher and companion for a time), Kertész, Man Ray, Boiffard, Tabard, and Parry. He left us a small but important group of works. (2) His pictures have revealed themselves to be among the most vibrant of the "new vision", the innovative trend in international photography from the beginning of the 1920's. His still shots are directly related to the framework of film and viceversa, and to the photographers in his group, as can be seen in the magazine *Déetective* between 1928-29. These are the photographs that, along with those by Dora Maar, Cartier-Bresson and Maurice Tabard, contributed to the radical change in the traditional look of pages printed in the press. Their proposals were far from the pictorial views or simple illustrations; they became a part of the covers and were produced with new typographics. They also became a part of the news, so that both the text and the

pictures were indivisible components in the news. Without the formulations of this sort of press (in all sorts of press, whether commercial such as *Déetective*, a 1920s sort of Parisian tabloid, or Breton and Dalí's *Minotaure*, Bataille *Documents* or the Brussels magazine of "esprit contemporain", *Varietés*), the leading magazines in documentary photojournalism, Vu, Life and Picture Post, they themselves the predecessors of television, would not have appeared in the formats they did. In other words, since the 1950s the contemporary documentary eye has run parallel to television, by adapting to the new medium or forcing it to its limits.

The committed view, willing to discuss and provoke, with viewers' eyes and their own supply of images, whether new or inherited, is what photographers like Lotar bring to film documentaries. Theirs is an eye that comes from the world of the avant-garde, from artistic and political reflection, like that of practically all photographers and film documentary makers of the time in Europe and the U.S. This view makes no difference between the subject, the topic, the referent (Barthes' spectator), the context, and the reinterpretation of tradition or the interpretation of the new ways to see the world. It is, above all, an eye that takes pictures in which that what Barthes would eventually call the *punctum*, the wound, stand out. They still bother us when we see them today.

A wound that is the subject matter as well as our own and the viewers' is when we see Lotar's abovementioned film, especially *Tierra sin pan*, where the wound has no cure. Buñuel's editing does not allow one. In Buñuel's view what you see cannot be separated from what you hear, but this separation is possible from the photographer's standpoint. It is what Godard did in his recent essay-collages about the history of viewpoint, in the hyperbolic and complete *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1998, book and video) and in the more austere but no less metaphoric short film *L'origine du siècle xxi* (2000). Five years ago, probably while he was putting together his bank of film frames, Godard had written about the harmony of Buñuel and Lotar with his usual insight: "*Tierra sin pan* is a moving experience in History." (3) The images from the film that Godard saves, files, reinterprets and proposes again follow the thread of this thought. They are images of girls at school, a short yet close-up view of them, with their black eyes staring into the camera, all dressed in rags yet fully dignified in their confrontation with the camera. They are present again, they live from 1933 to today. Without the cruel commentary of the film, nor the Brahms symphony, Lotar's picture has another level of eloquence. The girls seated at their desks, their wild dignity, the stark black and white, the school especially, the place for the eternal dynamic renovation/adaptation: What has become of the goals of those documentalists, and in particular of the people that in a solitary, backward yet famous place (like the Hurdes, Ibarz, 1999) had decided to go before a movie camera and let the camera talk for them?

From photography and film to the museum. A similar question can be asked when looking at photographs used today by visual artists; document-photographs, like those used by Richter or Boltanski. Documentary views that move the very essence of our historical awareness. In 1971 Richter paints his 48 portraits from photographs in which the faces of the icons of modern German culture are captured by photography, and then a quarter of a century later in 1998, he photographs the result and produces a new work

with the same title, in which he brings together the paintings of those original photographic portraits. Boltanski did one of his most famous pieces, *Reserve of dead Swiss* (1991) from identification pictures, from identity cards, of many people from that supposedly neutral country who disappeared during WWII. (4) In both cases, and in contrast to Buñuel's film and more generally to classic documentaries, we know what happened to the subjects: Richter's are icons of a cultural imagination that only appears to be German but in fact includes the main cultural ideas associated with Old Europe, and Boltanski's models are practically unknown yet become icons of the forgotten. But the work of these masters who can reinterpret photographic documents makes them come alive. Barthes again. Documents and wounds in operation. Art as cure. In the same way, documentary photographs, films and television have become a group of referents that has encouraged a series of attitudes on the open, bleeding wounds in the world since the 1930s.

Another eloquent example of work from the perspective of the documentary eye as a starting point of contemporary art is that by Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their photographs of city buildings or industrial archaeology are usually seen from the perspective of conceptual art but they can also be related to images that starkly reflect two founders of modern photography: Atget, who reflected the Paris of the turn of the century with a group of pictures that have been and are still studied by philosophers, historians and cultural commentators, and Sandler, who in the 1920s in Cologne produced his extraordinary catalog of arts and crafts, a fundamental reference work in many ways and one that is still studied today. With the absence of people and also the absence of a public place, street or square, the Bechers' people can be seen as an alarming comment on Sander's and Atget's work. In the Bechers' absences lives the wound that they did not want to run away from, whereas with Sander and Atget the images cure the subjects' wounds, whether they be a secretary in Cologne or one of the deserted streets of 19th century Paris.

We could argue that the Bechers' work (1995) from the 1970s, like that of Richter (1971-1998) and Boltanski (1991), Muntadas (1978) and Barbara Kruger (1996), Martha Rosler (2000) or Nan Goldin (1987, 1996) is not very different from the "new vision" of the 1920s and 1930s. In all photography, and especially in the first third of the 20th century, there has always been a desire to exemplify the limits of perception and cognition, in order to distance itself from 19th century realism and its development into documentary photography. In fact, when Germaine Krull (2000), who took photographs of Paris for her friend Walter Benjamin and was also a friend of Eisenstein and Joris Ivens' companion, looked at the Eiffel Tower or a ferry crossing the port of Marseilles she was not looking to produce a document and thus did not take a documentary picture. She allowed the camera to reveal the new forms, the cognitive networks that the industrial world produces and which for the photographic lens of the time were networks of meaning and beauty. As of the 1960s, however, with the experiences of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and WWII and the Cold War, this idea of beauty will be lost and that of meaning, put on hold. We had to wait until the 1970s to return to the visual arts as a cognitive, informative, perceptive network. New artists would increasingly use photography in this sense.

At practically the same time, and in not such a radically different way, one of the most documentary photographers, Walker Evans, was to work in the United States. From modern literature (Baudelaire, Flaubert, Proust, Joyce), over the years he produced a portrait of his country as if he were a historian gathering up the traces of a civilization in danger (Fonvielle 1997:30). A historian or an expert in philosophy and the distance of seeing. In this way he saw another of his commentators on the 1933 photographs of Cuba, with which Evans began a detailed examination of the ambiguous nature of photographic realism and began a series of post-modern intuitions that would lead him to systematically explore photography and its devices (Mora 1989:22).

Walker Evans was the first photographer whose work was the subject of a museum exhibition (the MOMA in 1933). The MOMA was created with a department of photography, and also one for film. Documentaries would soon become very important in the film department, and in the 1940s it is where Buñuel spent as much time as he could reediting films like *Triumph of Will* by Leni Riefenstahl and Spanish films that Rockefeller, the museum's sponsor, would send to Latin America. Since the 1930s, then, photography and documentary films have been a part of museums. Perhaps this is the background that has marked post-1945 art, which has analyzed its own context as being essential to its own development as well as providing a mirror of contemporary society. In the case of photography, this has led photography to take on many faces; as Abigail Solomon-Godeau pointed out (1991), photography has been put on trial: photographs? painting? installations?

But the nature of photographs and the documentary eye, which so often has been qualified as ambiguous in relation to realism, lies perhaps in its dynamic nature. In its travels, according to Margarita Ledo (1998) in an insightful essay on photojournalism and its existence and reproduction, which is constantly changing.

Polis, politics and a documentary eye. Ledo wonders about the “break between truth effect and the loss of documentary culture at the roots of our limited ability to comprehend,” and notes from the very beginning that “the exodus, the passage across borders, across lenses, across methods and styles that contemporary photographic documentalists have followed as a way to formulate their identity crosses the media and the media's codes. It goes from the author's status to that which the viewer assigns to the picture, from the attitude of both author and viewer, as subjects in relation to the photograph and from the rules that shape documental truth with a view toward producing meaning, producing reality.” This exodus, however, not only crosses the media, but also art: galleries and museums, spaces in which our ability to understand is not as limited as Ledo ironically hinted in the case of the media, but rather more often than not is invoked because of its absence, as in Becher's photographs. It is as if art did not require comprehension but rather only devotion. As opposed to this attitude artists such as Becher, Richter and Boltanski, Muntadas and Kruger, Rosler and Goldin work with photography, under the tensions of the so-called documentary photography. There are more artists who do the same, with styles as varied as those analyzed by Ledo (1998), Soulages (1998), Jeffrey (1981, 2000) and Fontcuberta (1996).

A particularly revealing case of the documentary migrations of photography toward art as a collective, political event is that of Craigie Horsfield and the project that, with Manuel J. Borja-Vilell and Jean François Chévier, takes place in Barcelona. The first part of this project was shown at the Tapies Foundation in 1996 with the ironic title *The people's city* (*La ciutat de la gent*), with ambiguous implications that suggest art as social work, as subsequently noted by Rosa Martínez. (5) The portraits of people and places, of residents or customers in bars or stores, in the shipyards, the center of town (the *Eixample*), from the Born to Pedralbes, in a city that is only forced to look at itself in the ostentatious mirror of the 1992 Olympics, attracted packed audiences. In a large format, the photographer's subjects, people from several neighborhoods and professions, native Barcelonans, immigrants and foreigners, are the side of the city the official version wants to forget. The exhibit did not stop here but rather would go on to utilize all the possibilities of a documentary, with the stories of people's lives narrated by the subjects of the photos themselves.

The exhibit's catalogue, the only thing that remains from the event, begins as follows. "The people's city brings together 76 photographs taken by Craigie Horsfield in Barcelona in 1995-1996. These pictures are an attempt to describe human relationships: identities of individuals and communities that make up the city, as well as their memories and private experiences. The people's city completes the first stage of a project that was jointly conceived by the artists working in close conjunction with groups consisting of architects, anthropologists, economists and social workers. The communities and individuals photographed have also taken an active role, they have explained their experiences and have point out those aspects of their environment that they themselves considered most important. This proposal, which was created in a museum, could only arise as an exhibit. Nevertheless, the project does not end in the world of art, but rather appeals to continuity: to the creation of a platform made up of people who took part in the project from the very beginning, as well as discussion arising from public opinion." In other words, the project can continue if the collective mechanisms that go beyond the media exist. It needs the same type of support that Ledo needed for documentaries derived from photojournalism, perhaps because we are referring to the same needs. On the part of the media and museums. In photographs, films, and videos.

In fact, the process begun by *The people's city* has found other paths, one of which is a repoliticized view of museums, a renewed political view of contemporary art museums. This is what is being promoted in Barcelona with the MACBA, whose current director is one of the people behind *The people's city*, Manuel B. Borja-Vilell. (6) What isn't possible in the media is perhaps possible in a contemporary art museum. That in itself is significant. Let us now return to our exploration of documentary migration between photography and contemporary visual arts in *The people's city*. Importantly, this museum initiative about the city at the end of the 20th century contained photographs and stories about people. The same elements that Walker Evans and James Agee used for their portrait of the farmer families they lived with in Alabama for three months in the 1930. They did their book in 1936, but did not see it published until 1941. Their

title was as much of a parable as the Barcelona project: *Let us now praise famous men*. Let us now praise famous men / The people's city. Sixty years have passed, and the same questions still ring true. Can we ask more for a documentary eye? Is documenting life enough? This is the open, bleeding wound that art attempts to heal, just as photography, film, and television have done in their best moments of producing feeling, of producing reality.

Notes:

(1) See the compilation of publications and photographs by Horacio Fernández (curator), as well as his introduction to *Fotografía pública* (1999).

(2) Eli Lotar's biography and pictures can be consulted in M. Ibarz (curator) *Tierra sin pan. Buñuel i els nous camins de les avantguardes* ('Breadless land. Buñuel and the new paths of the avant-garde' pp. 44-47 & 70-77) and in A. Lionel-Marie (curator) *Eli Lotar* (1993).

(3) Taken from the transcription of a press conference of the filmmaker that appeared in *Archipiélago* 22 (1995): 69.

(4) The definitive work by Richter (1998) and that by Boltanski are part of the MACBA's collection in Barcelona. See Richter's volume *Atlas. Der fotos und skizzen* (1997) about these two artists' use of photography and the monography by Didier Semin et al. (1997) on Boltanski.

(5) *Archipiélago* 41 (2000): 76-80.

(6) Especially with the workshops entitled "Direct action as one of the Fine Arts", held Oct. 23-29, 2000, with the participation of over 200 cultural agents and representatives of social movements. Patrick Faigenbaum has replaced Cragie Horsfield as the photographer, and along with Jean-François Chévrier and Joan Roca (who is from the Besòs neighborhood) worked between 1999 and 2000 on the project "Barcelona as seen from the Besòs", which will be shown throughout the city and in the near future will result in a book, and perhaps another exhibition.

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