

The Land Reclaimed by Photography, Álvaro de los Ángeles

A conscious scrutiny of reality transforms our perception of the real. That is where photography, and any contemporary derivative of the image, holds sway, for it constitutes and informs something based on the referent, whereas it used to represent it before. Jean-François Chevrier puts it this way: “The 20th century is, as Fernand Léger would have it, the century of ‘constructors’ [...] So much had never been said about functional creation as in this century, in which all the functions of art have been challenged.¹” It has proved to be a transforming power, and continues to be so at the beginning of the 21st century. But in its essence, photography – or at least certain active foundational practices attributed to photography – still maintains a link, however slight, with the document, with the testimonial evidence. Several concepts come into play in this operation: “reality”, “document”, “image”, “practice”, and, to mark the limits of the territory where Mariela Apollonio has settled and in which she has constructed a voice for herself, some others should be added, such as “institutional critique”, “staged pictures”, “the ‘thingness’ of the subject”, “photographic art” and “architectonic space”.

Some of the definitions contemplated will be addressed in the project *El círculo del arte* (The Circle of Art), as though it contained within it the clues to finding the most ideal description; although the opposite is very likely to occur, since it is the analysis of the project in question that will adjust to the definitions. Other definitions will be avoided so as not to embark upon a didactic play intended to move away from the intrinsic value of the images towards the semantic quality of the words: a half-hearted withdrawal, however, because it is carried out with the interpretation of the text. Susan Sontag’s maxim written in 1964 (“In place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art²”) addresses the importance of the transparency of analyses, far beyond the literal reading “against interpretation” of any image or work of art. There is a certain “stylistic debt” in this attitude.

¹ Jean-François Chevrier, *La fotografía entre las bellas artes y los medios de comunicación*, Barcelona, Ed. Gustavo Gili, 2007, p. 75.

² Susan Sontag, *Contra la interpretación*, Madrid, Alfaguara, 1996, p. 39.

In the photographs that comprise the first of the series of *El círculo del arte* dedicated to the curators of museums or art galleries, the protagonists are treated as things; they are turned into characters to be observed, and at the same time their personality is extolled within the context where they belong, the sphere of art. The white pedestal they stand on, most of them not renouncing it or insisting on avoiding it, is the fissure that disrupts the normality of the portrait and relates the whole photographic project with the artistic production and reflection that photography uses as a specific language connected with the history of art.

Staged photography is, by definition, the opposite of a snapshot. The “decisive instant” here becomes a sort of “decisive decision”, a choice about what should be photographed and how, in an artistic context controlled by performances and the performing arts, but also looking out of the corner of their eye at the history of official portraits and classical sculptures, using architecture as an indispensable frame that possesses power. Nevertheless, a “documentary value” persists in this ongoing series, whence its character as a series, which states that the event portrayed actually took place in a “certain” manner. It is not Roland Barthes’ nostalgia-loaded glance, observing the particles of the subject’s death in every grain of gelatin or silver bromide; it is rather that realisation that the scene was set up to be photographed and as a photograph will mark an unrepeatable event. The fissure in the pedestal, like the knife in the eye of *Un chien andalou*, breaks the expected narration and generates another tale based on montage and appropriation. Speaking about Raymond Depardon’s photographs, Alain Bergala remarks that “R. Depardon’s aim is to reject the glory of the decisive instant along with the nostalgia of the lost object. His photography does not tell us “this was” but simply, “this is”. This is among other things, beside other things.³” The context generated by “this is among other things, side by side with other things” is applicable to Mariela Apollonio’s oeuvre, no doubt aeons away from Depardon’s but coinciding in this point where the photographic images do not only show what

³ Alain Bergala, “Les absences du photographe” in *Écri sur l’image. Correspondence new-yorkaise* (Alain Bergala and Raymond Depardon), Libération/Éditions de l’Étoile, Paris, 1981. Quoted by Jacques Rancière in “El arte de la distancia”, epilogue of the book *Raymond Depardon, imágenes políticas*, Madrid, Ediciones Casus Belli, 2012. Edition and translation by Javier Bassas Vila.

can be seen but also offer everything we can or wish to imagine about power – empowered by the artist herself – and the trajectory of her directors.

Can we expect an event to occur and last without envisioning it in political terms? Is the image a means that can be separated from its public, and, therefore, political, character? If not its production, at least the ensuing interpretation made of it always will be political, as Georges Didi-Huberman points out with regard to a polemic sustained with two thinkers who were critical of his theories⁴: [...] “a clear sign that nowadays the ‘thinking of images’ largely belongs within the political sphere.” That is, any approach made, albeit to think the images, will be destined to think them in political terms, that is, in discussions and disagreements presented and debated in the public arena. Including in this thinking all representational, ideological, educational and, finally, political issues. Perhaps unwittingly, or deliberately with a different intention, *El círculo del arte* is a political approach to the status of power in the art world; a delimitation about who wields power and the capacity to make decisions about what is art and what is not. Underneath this statement resides the fact that Mariela Apollonio’s photographs are works of art made by photographic means, and added not the other way around, that is, they are not photographs that end up being seen and “accepted” as works of art. In fact, there is no clear line between the two routes followed to reach the same destination, except that defended by those who feel out-and-out mistrust of art – insofar as it is fiction – and prefer more documentary photography, naively subscribed as a successor of the “real”.

The all too zealous link between management and power, between cultural agents and their political counterparts, or even the mimesis deliberately generated between them, is a hackneyed, widely analysed issue. What has come to be known as “institutional critique” arose in the late nineteen sixties and seventies as the independent works or actions of a series of artists who challenged the function and power of art institutions. The proposals of Hans Hacke, Daniel Buren, Robert Smithson, Marcel Broodthaers or Michael Asher, among others, shook for the first time the foundations of art that lay in the hands of the most visible power:

⁴ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Imágenes pese a todo. Memoria visual del Holocausto*, Barcelona, Paidós Ibérica, 2004, p. 91.

institutions. This first spate of “institutional critique” was followed by a second generation in the late eighties and the nineties, where Renée Green, Christian Phillip Müller, Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser, among others, added “to the economic and political discourse of their predecessors [...] a greater awareness of the new forms of subjectivity.”⁵ For Gerald Raunig “institutional critique” needs to be rethought as a critical stance and as what I call an “instituent practice” maintained against a background that makes it difficult to consider criticism in a transversal manner, but also “without naively imagining spaces that, in one way or another, are shown to be free of domination and institutions.”⁶ Something quite similar to this is what is being called for as the third generation of “institutional critique”, heedful of its two predecessors’ past but characteristic of the present day, “post-disciplinary”, as Martí Peran would have it, and which poses the debate not on the basis of “the dialectic between institutional space and alternative space” but of “other parameters”, that is to say, “the debate of the dialectic between real capital and symbolic capital.”⁷

Mariela Apollonio’s *El círculo del arte* takes its name from the book by the same title written by the American theoretician George Dickie⁸. In this book, Dickie points out the importance of the interdependence of the different layers that comprise the world of contemporary art. In his theory the option of thinking of art or even the artist outside institutions does not exist. This is what has been dubbed “the institutional theory of art”. The art world is made up of a series of agents (artists, works of art, public, the art world, the system of the art world) whose definitions are “flexional”, that is, “they lean on one another”, thus forming a circular shape, whence the use of the figure of the circle to define what could be called the sphere of art and the interrelations of the agents involved. The artist uses this theory as a point of departure in a long series, whose first item depicts

⁵ For this information and other references to the concept of “institutional critique”, see: Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (eds.), *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, London, MayFlyBooks, 2009.

⁶ Gerald Raunig, *Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming, in cipher 4*.

⁷ Martí Peran, “La porosidad de los límites en las prácticas artísticas”, in *Perifèries 10. Des de la crisi: la vida com a desafiament*, Perifèries/Universitat de València, Valencia, 2012. It is the text of a lecture delivered by the author, transcribed for this publication.

⁸ George Dickie, *El círculo del arte. Una teoría del arte*, Barcelona, Paidós Ibérica, 2005.

museum or gallery directors in a precise architectonic context. Architecture acts as an official site, linking the person portrayed to the space in a direct fashion and establishing the institutional bases that exist in their own right in the architecture of museums, the places where art is legitimised.

In *El círculo del arte*, by Marinela Apollonio, the space enlarged by photography is land reclaimed from reality.