

GABRIEL LACOMBA: MEDITATIONS ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHICAL PROCESS.

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I. The latter creation of Gabriel Lacomba are compositions about photosensitive material, based on antropomorphic, zoomorphic, vegetal and geometrical motives, and in abstract and gestual outlines.

We can find the human body, the cross, the Nature and the manufactured world. They are regular structures, rectangled shaped on generous dimensions, and irregular structures, small sized, performing geometrical and sometimes enormous compositions.

We have still not said that we are speaking about photographs. They are performed with the basic tools of the photographic process; camera, light, emulsioned support. The author takes the photographic medium as a starting point, to get unusual and not very conventional results. It means to reach the very first roots of the medium to create, immediately, a new dialectic, far away from what is properly understood as Photography. Obviously, he does not provoke a crisis in the visual language, but in the tradition representative. He does not doubt about the medium, he just refuses what was set up in 1839, when Photography was presented in Paris as a very new invention of the Industrial Revolution and the Positivism. What Lacomba proposes is to get another view-point against what is commonly known as Photography: literary recreation, pure documentalism, decisive moments...

Works of Lacomba are situated on the frontier, by means of the polemics of what is able to be photographic or what is not to affirm through the images what is photographic has no frontiers. What he does is to weigh the anchor from the essence of the photographic image, just to split and to expand the medium, opening it to new horizons. We must say that his work has historical antecedents, for example looking back to the first avantgardes, particularly the Christian Schad's work and the experiences of Man Ray, Raoul Hausmann, Lazslo Moholy-Nagy, to name some of the most representative authors of the photo-gram and the abstract photography.

II. The production of Lacomba is an example of a special situation on the international scene of the phography, the renaissance of the traditional photographic techniques, as the calotype and the photogram, and the definition of what is the main essence of the camera, the steneopeic.

Since the 70's, Arts are setting up a return to their roots, that could be included in those waves known as dominant conceptual poetry. What Lacomba makes is to deepen himself in a part of modern photography, that one that Manuel Santos has resumed under the denomination of "Prosecution to the medium"[1 Cuatro direcciones. Fotografía Contemporánea Española, 1970-1990, 2 vol. Barcelona, Lunberg / Ministerio de Cultura, 1991. Catalogue of the exhibition authored by Manuel Santos.], the same that make other artistic practices, such as paintry or sculpture. Turning to the roots has to do with the contemporary social and economic situation, the Postcapitalism, the high advanced technology, the Empire of the media. For some people, this return could be understood as an opposed attitude to the saturation of information and the extreme complexity of the technical mechanisms for the image production. For other people, the return reflects the necessity to meditate about the medium. It isn't about analysing each one's own reality, it's about how the reality is analysed. Turning back is therefore to study the process, to see the investigation of the process as the only right way.

Photography has taken a part of this context. You could say it has been a privileged tool. It has been used by the Pop Art, the Hyper Realism makes its creations from the base of photographic perception, and it is present at the linguistic and the media conceptals. There are now just a few of the non photographic plastic poetry tendencies that refuse using the photographic language. The photograph is the main of the question. It is the same that happened at the earlier 10's and 30's of our century, when the photograph was omnipresent through the course of the historical avantgardes.

But it is not the same to be present in the medium that to be able to question the process of the medium by itself. And that's what we can find recently in one of the areas of the photographic medium. Here is where we can place the production and the way to understand what photography is to Lacomba.

It was not the hazard that guided Lacomba into the use of the traditional tools of the photographic medium, but the entireness of the moment, and the necessity to be in the middle of the scene. That explains why he returns to the use of unfashionable and first-made cameras: why he turns back to the use of the paper as a negative, the estenope and the photograph without camera or photogram. Anyway, his reasoning goes further than so: once experimented the original medium, he's placing himself on the other side, digitizing images, clearly shown in the exhibition catalogue. Here comes out the polemics (or connections) between the analogue and digital images. The catalogue is like this: a proposal to the future, the scannergraphy (just a temporary name before Lacomba finds a proper denomination). It could be understood as a wider concept of what the photogram is, with a significant change: the silver grain film is replaced by the pixel.

III. The Why and How of the exhibition are clearly explained in the text of the catalogue, written by the artist himself. This article was published in 1995 for the magazine FV. Fotografía-Video Actualidad, and while yet of current interest is published once again recently. The text is imaginative, well written, clear and attractive. It's difficult for a writer nowadays not to feel himself compenetrated with the text. An Art historian has the need of direct documental sources, because an artist doesn't base upon rumours and descriptions of their topic. First of all one must have in mind that an important part of the practical work nowadays has to be explained theoretically together with the presentation. That is not Lacomba's case. He's not bound to -just in case of private matters- explain or give theoretic explanations, nevertheless the non professional people show deep gratitude to this kind of didactic explanations, because it helps them to have a better understanding of the work and they cannot use the subterfuge to say that the veil on their faces doesn't allow them to look and analyse what they have in front of them. The beholder gets, in this way, all the necessary tools to enjoy the images, and the triade exhibition-article-catalogue provides him the appropriate conjunction to get a complete and safe idea about the author's work, about what is done and what will be done. Lacomba joins the practical proposal -photographs- to a very elaborate description about how they are made. His article remarks the steps, the questions and the goals, whilst Lacomba blinks his eye to the spectator.

IV. Experimentation is the key. The photographs of the exhibition are the result of a hard, complexe and slow methodology. Its concept and performance have no relation with the snap-shot photographs, and far away from Kodak's slogan (in 1888) to reach a greater number of consumers; "You push the button, we will do the rest". Gabriel Lacomba takes as starting point very clear criteria, opened to the hazard, but firmly settled. They are indispensable, because the photographs are mentally shaped before being performed. It means that Lacomba goes in for making images, building images; they don't appear suddenly, decisively, unexpectedly; they need first to be created. The methodology of work is hard, because it tries to adequate both the medium and the process to a sole idea, to a same result. He works on series, variations about a subject: Palma; 100 Pin-Hole Postcards (1987), The Man: Oh! Genesi, Oh! Death (1987), Zoosteic (1989), Zooformalin (1989), Pin-Hole Portraits(1990), Peep Show (1990), Soma-Trans-Lucid (1991). He had the need to perform the medium once again, and the process has been modified in each one of these works. It means to begin again, time after time... While having at first the images created mentally, he can then create the tools to carry them out.

First of all, his task is to decide which will be the appropriate camera for his next work. He refuses the positivist look, he hesitates about the traditional need to get the central perspective, something that seems to be compulsory for most of the companies of this sector and that has been historically applauded because it is considered like the human eye. To hesitate about the camera doesn't mean to refuse the medium, but the way how the camera is involved in its environment, how the camera looks at it. That's why he refuses the objectives, even the body of the camera. He will replace the traditional objective for a single estenope. Lacomba explains it very clearly in his text. It is a small hole -a pin-pierced hole that replaces the optic lens. The principle is very easy: when the light goes through the small hole, it projects the image of the object reflected through the light. It is a classic theory.

But it is not enough for Lacomba. He doesn't need the standard objectives and he is not interested in the conventional cameras. Making a photograph is not just to push the button, it is an action in which his whole body becomes bricked, and that's why the apparatus is hand-made. It is a brico and recycling task, because he takes supplies from his daily life, and it is also a metaphor. He uses pieces of wood, pasteboard, he chooses supplies of our daily society, he cuts, he glues, he uses pass-partout, paintbrushes, he paints and he covers. He joins the poetry of the detritus and the photographic practice. It is a mock and cynical act; companies are spending thousands of millions to experiment and create new cameras, so they can later invoice unsuspected amounts of money. Lacomba's investment is just his own hands and not very sophisticated supplies like a cylindrical pot of washing detergent - available in any shop a few years ago - hard and voluminous (really an object not very practical for domestic use), or a pot of powder chocolate or milk. He constructed the "Skip" and the "Pow-dered-milk" cameras with these elements.

His way to establish connexion with his environment -although of the difference in time - reminds of the attitude of Nouveau Realisme, in the early sixties; reminding of the wrapping of Christo, the accumulation of Arman, the pressing of César. This group wanted to be, according to their manifestation, true reflectors of the reality, simple notaries of the society. Lacomba's position is similar: he takes what he has near and gives it a new function. He also has in mind Rauschenberg's proposal in the fifties, the way he noticed the urban iconography. Like the classic painter was inspired from nature, Rauschenberg sought for inspiration in the urban and consuming reality, the one that became omnipre-sent even more for each day. It's worth mentioning that The North American artist was the first to use X-ray pictures as a plastic material and he worked the cyanographic paper, something that Lacomba knows rather well.

In spite of all, the photographer goes deeper than that. Son of the poetic artistic wave from the seventies and inheritor of the conceptual practices, Lacomba makes the photography into a kind of actionism and Body Art. There are several indicating elements for that: the size of some of his cameras, the "mise en scene" when making a photography and his own presence when developing the photo. It calls to go back

to his article. To carry out the Peep Show (1990) he decided to construct a camera of such a size that the photographer could fit inside without too much difficulty. Kodak, in the latest XIX century, designed strategically cameras for everybody; one for all kind of users, others for children and others for women. Lacomba doesn't imply sexist criteria, for him it is indifferent who's trying to fit inside the camera, as long as it isn't a basket player. The resource of the size goes further back. It calls to remind for example, the Accordion Camera from 1918, photographed by Lawrence, and more recently, the Giant Camera of the Photographic Spring of 1984.

The shape and size of the camera are directly related to the type of image Lacomba wishes to transmit. That's why the appearance also is a metaphor. Zooformalin, a way to travel for animals preserved in formalin inside big jars from Barcelona's zoo, was made with the cylindrical camera, achieving a confrontation between the camera and the motif. Carrying this analogy further - as far as the toning process of the positives is concerned - using selenium as though to emulate formalin will both guarantee and durability be obtained. The selenium gives the same effect to the image as the formalin to the dead animals.

With the "Powdered-Milk" camera, a cylindrical metallic pot, he performed the serie "Palma. 100 Pin-Hole Post-cards". Analogies come back again. Palma is a paradigmatic city for the media, continually photographed by tourists, wedding cover photographs and reporters, and offered through post-cards souvenirs and printed images for press. In short, we could say that Palma is like a "tinned-product-ready-to-serve", the same as the powdered-milk pots.

"Peep Show Camera" was used to perform the homonymous serie, called Peep Show. The photographer goes inside the instrument and he begins to photograph toy figures, previously situated in front of the camera in several positions that refer to the sexual act and pornographic scenes. Now, there is a door peep-hole in front of the pin-hole. In this way, he sets out a group of associations between the photographic act and the voyeurism, between the object that is being photographed and the consumer of this kind of spectacle.

The fact of getting inside a camera has also a further meaning, because it changes the acquaintance between the photographer and his camera. Now, this one is not just an instrument of work; it becomes his own body. Getting inside the camera means that it is now the only connection with the world, the sole instrument of acknowledge and the only way to contact to the outside. Any other reality disappears... it only exists the photographic one.

Likewise it is possible to understand the necessity of Lacomba to be present all through the photographic process: when he makes the camera, just when the image is being performed (inside the camera), and finally, on the laboratory, where he is going to use his own body, or just only a detail, to be printed.

The mise en scene is just another aspect that reveals the actionism of Lacomba's work. The Pin-Hole Photo-graphy requires a long time of exposure; a few minutes for a portrait and about one hour for a view. He walks in the streets, bearing a strange object, that offers a domestic air withal it suggests some kind of unknown applications. He looks for the adequate frame, places the camera on the ground and he removes the tape-shutter from the camera. It is only a matter of time, and it is just the time that will do impossible to foreshow the results, the final image... Once the camera has got in with the object to be photographed, there will be a great number of situations out of control for the photographer: he will have to take into account the hazard; cars, people passing around, the photographer's shadow projected on the scene. People thrusting their nose into what he is doing, the policeman asking for explanations. To remove the tape-shutter from the camera means to start an action; it is a public function, in keeping with a hardly established script. The result is a puzzle of situations, in the happening fashion of the 50's.

V. The photographic process starts with the fabrication of the pin-hole camera. With its help, Lacomba will register the background of the process, that may be a natural view or one previously painted by himself. The source of the ground is a connection with the tradition in the Art- Gallery Photography. Once more, it means the revival of what is obsolete, because it keeps alive the conventional principles of the studio photography ruling since 1840; the photographer painted a landscape ground or a home interior behind the clients; so he got the scene; then he added several accessories, as a book, a small table, a wood-carved chair, a carpet with floral or geometrical motives. Sometimes, like Lacomba does, the painted ground was replaced by an enlarged photographic copy. The Majorcan Photography is plenty of examples of this practice; Guillem Bestard, Josep Truyol, Ernest Guardia. The difference is that Lacomba gives a historical appointment to get a result that seems to be far away from the traditional concept.

The photographer situates a paper inside the camera, and registers the background by making a copy. Then he starts the complicated laboratory process: in the dark, he situates the paper horizontally (with the background latent) and develops the other basic axis of his work, the photogram. Next he takes a foil of transparent acetate, previously painted by him, seeking for a way of controlled horror vacui, with dense marks and often of thick materia, like moderate action painting.

Once again a historical issue, also a motive of the photogram. On the paper he puts a universe of objects that will be his personal iconography. It could be fragments of polychromous glass, details of cheap jewelry, eyes of a teddy bear, a piece of a palm tree, transparent paper, a paper weight, and principally, the human body. Like the best vanguard photographers, Lacomba uses opacous elements, transparent and translucent, but now his ones are full of foreword history, it's about materials full of memories. Lacomba says he chooses them for their capacity to illuminate, but it can't be anything physical that conduct to their selection. The eyes of the teddy bears seem like eyes of live fishes, the paper weight is very kitsch and the doll reminds of the surrealism. We can learn from this that the choice isn't arbitrary and it's inevitable not to look for other reasons than their plastic qualities, full of textures and luminous modules.

Finally the corporal presence is added, a human body or a detail, on the sensitive paper. The silhouette is pronounced, the arabesque of the hair intensifies. The figure doesn't swim in paint like Yves Klein's *Antropometries*, but it enters directly in contact with the sensitive paper.

The next step is the light. Flashes will take place in different positions and distances. During the process the photographer will take away and put in new objects, add colour through the polychromed papers and make masks to control the overcharge of light.

The result is the union of pin-hole and photogram. There is also collage, while united different papers of triptych character.

The human body imposes like a compact mass in the centre and with diffuse outlines. The outlines are not always bright because of the right position of the light. The body, the imprint, seems like a motif way to opaque, but the photographer transforms it into a kind of X-ray picture. Where the light hasn't been able to reach, the background appears: the result from the pin-hole session.

To Lacomba that means going from this to that with the photographic language essence, because he experiments with it's grounds, with the projected image inside the camera, and with the light. It also means an investigation concerning the colour. It moves in the limits of the painter and the photographer if both are confined. Lacomba comments: "I come from the photographic world to achieve paintry results". So it could be that some people consider him a photographer with painting influence, but it is only about blinking an eye to the medium and once again introduce a historical appointment. It's clear that he doesn't wish to make a photography with a pictorial appearance. What Lacomba repeatedly demonstrates is the necessity of questioning the medium and situating himself on the frontier. His work is the hybridous work, mixt, full of variation; that's why he combines photographic and pictorial resources, and uses traditional elements from the plastic repertory and other extraordinary artistics, and that's why he adopts residuary techniques.

VI. Now the frame becomes the issue. Once again the tradition rises and once again he brakes it.

The task of enframing becomes on Lacomba's work another element of experimentation: recicyng, contents and countenance, and the connections among the photographs of the exhibition; those of large format, the serie of the crosses and those of a smaller size. The frame doesn't remain indifferent to the spectator and it is not conceived to be an ornamental element for the image. The frame is just another basic aspect in Lacomba's course; the entropic element: With the views he creates photograms, with his own body and those bodies close to him he creates obscure motives, with a detergent box he makes a camera and he is able to make frames using pieces of wood or pasteboard. Lacomba's photographic universe turns around himself. The supplies he uses have many other appliances. That's why he is able to take small pieces of his serie of images of large format to create smaller ones and that with the rest of the frame he will still make new frames. It all begins and ends right there. It's also a repeated necessity to experiment with the duality of negative - positive, area - versus area, content - countenance. The position of the Cubists comes to the thought. They didn't need to stick a cut out figure of the canvas by the technique of collage, but the piece of paper remaining, in this way the figure was present in its absence.

The frame configures like a significant element. In the serie of large size, the frame is thick, materialistic and often it has the same tonality as the image. It's presence seems to transform the work into a giant box, in which the spectator peers in to contemplate a disfigured body that floats in an earthy or abstract marine background.

In the cross serie, the enormous frames turns small and irregular. They can have familiar forms, ogival arches, trceries, tear drops, spirals. It isn't precise to seek idealistic thoughts in these objects, but to seek the concept object trouvé; the casual encounter of an attractive motif or a special form. From the gathering of figures and from their spatial location the serie of the crosses appears like retables and icons. Summary: geometric and abstract forms which closes photographs that come from fragments of landscapes, corporal presences and details of an every day and urban life.

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