

Frictions of Habitation

by Martín Tironi

In a world hyper-saturated by ever more instantaneous and omnipresent images, why employ photography to capture an experience? Why produce a visual diary when currently digital images invade and flow through every sphere of our lives? Or, to put it another way, why build a narrative of images when they're being almost automatically generated via the smartphones we carry with us at all times, which capture everything we do? If the production of images is the unavoidable driver of digital sociability, if every fragment of our lives is shared through selfies and digital platforms, what role can photographic production play today as a promise of resonance and exploration of the world?

Es lo que hay (It Is What It Is), Justine Graham's visual diary, offers an antidote or form of resistance to the banalization of images in the digital era and data-based dematerialization. This book restores the material status of the image, infusing it with ontological and critical substance and underlining the artform's capacity to intensify reality. Below, I would like to suggest three analytical keystones to reading Graham's work related to the processes of provocation, correspondence and friction.

Provocation

A hasty reading of Justine Graham's visual diary might suggest that it is a work that seeks to portray socio-cultural transformations in Chile over the past decade. Because it addresses a range of topics and aspects of the national experience (landscape, politics, food, society, health, consumption, the environment, etc.) it would be easy to confine this book in the category: 'Photography books about Chile'.

However, the nature of this work exceeds and transcends this category. Rather than reflecting a reality 'out there', this is an openly experimental exercise in which the author pushes the capacities of the photographic language to the limit so as to intervene in the reality she seeks to scrutinize. This is not a book *about* Chile, or an attempt to portray 'Chilean-ness', rather it explores different repertoires to generate a kaleidoscope of views on Chile that cannot be reduced or domesticated to single or fixed categories.

Put another way, the principal virtue of Graham's approach is not its representational quality; capturing reality in a precise, faithful manner. On the contrary, the power of this work lies in its invitation to intervene reality through exercises of photographic experimentation, constructing scenarios in which the bonds and frictions, desires and ruptures, bodies and ideologies, and concepts and places that make up the author's reality converge. The scenes contained in this book aren't a simple extension of existence, each photograph is an encounter actively designed to establish and shape a specific reality. Underlying this experimental exploration is a premise that shapes the aesthetic and intellectual project of the book. On this visual journey, the act of photographing is never a neutral, passive instrument, it is not simply a tool with which to present scenes from reality. Graham's photographic activity is a radical recognition that what we call 'real' never

speaks for itself and never allows itself to be captured or documented once and for all. Here, the encounter with 'reality' is the result of visual translation and writing, work that creates images that defy and undermine conventional parameters. This approach, which I shall call 'provocation of reality' deploys different visual techniques and concepts ranging from explicit use of filters to the superimposition of elements, compositions, abstract collages and more.

The series 'Socialization' is a particularly eloquent example of the provocation technique. Graham has decided to include within the scene not just the cables involved in the creation of the photographic setting but also her own body. The images reveal the shutter cable, making the author complicit, a co-creator of the scene. It makes explicit the fact that photography does not portray pristine, passive reality but rather it invents and provokes through the different elements in play. This act does not just topple the sacrosanct idea of the objectivity of technical documentation, it also exposes the fictional, hybrid and polluted nature of the process of capturing reality, moving away from a photogenic gaze. This gesture is a powerful visual reminder of the 'engine room' that lies behind the photographic process and the extensive network of human and non-human factors that go into its production in which the human eye and judgement are just two agents in a complex assemblage of interdependencies.

Correspondence

From this premise arises another analytical key to interpret Graham's proposal. It is related to the concept of *residence*, which is present in the title of the work. I believe that this idea defines the profoundly situated and embodied nature of the journey presented. The book must above all be understood as an in situ reflection on the relationship that photography has established in and with the territory where it resides, interwoven with different elements of biography, politics, society and the craft. The fragments of reality that Graham decides to photograph do not represent the reality of Chile but a subjective and fragmented cosmogram. It is a silent and desperate way of lending meaning to one's *correspondence* with a foreign setting.

The British anthropologist Tim Ingold sees the practice of correspondence as constituting the primary ontological state of people in the world. Contrary to the idea of a separate, external, pre-existing environment that surrounds us, Ingold understands correspondence as a dialogue and co-evolution with the world. In his words, correspondence is 'the process by which beings or things literally respond to each other across time, for example in the exchange of letters or words in a conversation, or gifts, or even the shaking of hands.'¹ Thus humans are not just moulded by the territory in which we reside and inhabit, we also configure it and actively respond to it through our practices, relationships and emotions. The environment, then, is not something at the margins of the experience of the senses and of creating meaning, but it is detached from it, all the whilst constituting it.

¹Tim Ingold (2016). 'On human correspondence'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23 (1), 9-27

Similarly, one might say that each series of photographs that make up this book offers a distinctive perspective of the *correspondence* between Graham and the territory in which she resides. What becomes apparent from her work cannot be reduced to the relationship between a foreign observer and a changing setting, it rather portrays different forms of corresponding with, interrogating and understanding the experience of habitation that stitch together a continuously evolving narrative. We do not only identify the aspects and transformations in Chilean society that have caught the author's eye (domestic work in east Santiago, exacerbation of consumerism and real estate expansion, new political cycles and lifestyles, etc.) but also the ways in which that society has modified her subjectivity, the author's ways of being, living and seeing.

An example of this exercise is the series on domestic work in the eastern sector of Santiago. This story does not just materialize and make visible the varied work that women do to maintain and run the homes of wealthy families in the capital—watering gardens, receiving deliveries, cleaning, taking children and pets for walks, accompanying their employers, etc.—it also reveals discomfort related to social segregation that traverses the author's quotidian, and one that defines the social life of the capital city. The type of knowledge that can be glimpsed at in the images of domestic workers, or *nanas*, as they're known in Chile, is clearly situated: rooted in specific social and geographic contexts. Although we cannot know the meaning each of the women photographed assigns to domestic work, the visual story constructed by Graham allows for reflection not just on the profound issues of social and spatial segregation that permeate and define (domestic) work but also the relations of emotional and material dependence that develop between the Santiago elite and the women who support and care for their families, women who in many cases live in the homes of their employers.

Frictions

Did the selection of the subjects for this visual diary depend on only on Graham's photographic portfolio of her time in Chile? How to qualify the genre and the typology of photographs presented in this book? It's no great leap to say that this is a radically hybrid form of visual experimentation in which the issues addressed help to define and (re)construct the geographic, social and emotional space of the author, giving a presence, — or even agency—to certain features and changes, exterior and interior, within Chilean society.

The book, then, presents a distinctive way of curating the world. It is an intimate cartography of the author's frictions with Chilean territory. Although there is no explicit common thread—and we jump from images of hanging vegetables, to scenes in malls and residential condominiums—we can speak of a process of territorialization, where different dimensions of the territory are put in relation and friction. This repertory of friction should not be read under an agonistic perspective, it adopts a generative character by allowing new relationships, connections, appropriations and reinterpretations necessary to articulate a territory.

It is important to note that this concept of intimate cartography is a long way from traditional notions of a map with its administrative and political definitions. The

photographic exercises in *Es lo que hay* are more anthropological or even speculative in nature, presenting us with a set of scales, intensities and interactions woven together to produce an imagined, experienced Chile. The images that structure the volume have the merit of showing a territory irreducible to a geographic perimeter, rather they outline a territory worked with, transited and tensioned by Graham's gaze. A space that is not just lived in but also criss-crossed with the intensities, imaginations, rhythms, processes and politics that the author seeks to explore.

If, as Barthes says in *Camera Lucida*, 'all photography is the certification of presence,' this book acts as a visual log of a journey with otherness, whilst at the same time an immersion in spaces of encounter and frictions in a zig-zagging Chile undergoing profound, unequal transformations. Graham's work opens up to the encounter of the frictions that have marked her residence, but in going to the encounter she participates in the constitution of an always inconclusive territory, making available confabulations, hidden aspects and analyses of her experience living at the end of the world.