

## ATLAS OF INTIMACY: Affect and Intuition in Justine Graham's *Es lo que hay*

by Sophie Halart

In 1929, the German born art historian Aby Warburg passed away, leaving unfinished his monumental project BilderAtlas Mnemosyne (Visual Atlas Mnemosyne): a radical rethinking of art history's methodology and its reliance on chronology and periodization. While orthodox approaches to the discipline tended to circumscribe the meaning of an artwork to its cultural moment of production, Warburg employed a strategy of visual mapping to seek out connections beyond strictly temporal restrictions, searching for the ways in which powerful motifs mutate and resurface throughout History. Pinning black and white photographic reproductions of artworks, and cosmological and cartographic illustrations, among other resources, onto black-clothed panels, he produced visual constellations, the meanings of which frequently changed throughout the process. Followers of Warburg have underlined the encyclopaedic nature of the endeavour, yet it also relied on an element of subjectivity and intuition, drawing out new meanings from juxtaposition and displacement.

There is something of the Atlas impulse in Justine Graham's work and the visual methods she implements in her book *Es lo que hay* (It Is What It Is). The connection may not be evident at first: while Warburg sought in cultural production the traces of universal quests, the object of Graham's book is firmly rooted in a time and place, namely, contemporary Chile (2005-2022) and her own almost two decades of residence in the country. However, similarly to Warburg, Graham also relies on juxtapositions, synecdoches and other forms of material and semantic displacements to seek out motifs that run beyond the strictly contemporary. It is, in this sense, certainly not coincidental that *Es lo que hay* emerged from an encounter with a two-hundred-year-old travel diary written by a British woman who, like Graham, lived in Chile at a time of significant upheavals including, among other things, the creation of the first Constitutional Assembly. This extra-temporal perspective is also guided in Graham's book by affect and intuition, leading her to assemble an exhaustive yet intimate Atlas of a complex culture, and her own experience of it. Weaving together image and text, playing with the semantic, acoustic and symbolic associations and dissonances between the textual and the visual, the publication also inscribes itself in the long yet often marginalized tradition of the photobook, a format which, as the British photographer and editor Martin Parr explains, helps to plug the gaps separating 'art from means of mass expression, artisan from artist, the aesthetic from the contextual'.<sup>1</sup>

### *Decoding the Feminine*

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Parr (2014). *The Photobook: A History*, Volume I, Preface. London: Phaidon, 11.

In *Journal of a Residence in Chile*, María Graham –Justine Graham’s homonymous but unrelated predecessor– wrote about the emancipation process in which the country found itself in 1822: a complex struggle to emerge free from colonial tyranny. While referring specifically to the country’s institutional construction, her words resonate with the contemporary feminist struggles that [Justine] Graham documents in the series *Political Voice*. Transcribing into Morse code the slogans of the feminist marches of May 2018, the work shows the complex repertoire of emotions fuelling the movement, ranging from outrage (‘No is no!’) to fear (‘Alone, drunk, I want to get home’), and hope (‘We aren’t hysterical, we’re historical’).

In the work, the coded slogans are interpreted by material objects often associated with femininity and/or gender violence (tampons, lipstick, panties, a knife...). The presence of these objects and their association with the activist slogans consign a quality of urgency to these calls for change and reveal the ubiquitous nature of patriarchal power. In fact, the mundane quality of these objects operates as a sort of codex through which to interpret some of Graham’s other works addressing the construction and upholding of gender norms in Chilean society. While the lipstick and clothes operate as symbols of female seduction, they also invoke the normative function often ascribed to garments, a phenomenon that the artist addresses in *El delantal* (The Apron) and *Lugar común* (Common Place). The two series share an interest in examining the artificial yet powerful function of the apron as a marker of both gender determinism and social inequality. Meanwhile, the medical references to syringes and pills that figure as coding matter in *Political Voice* also resurface in the chapter on *Health* addressing the forms of medical and obstetric violence to which women are routinely subjected.

In terms of formal approach, all the series mentioned above seem to maintain a certain distance from their subject matter, resorting to visual and linguistic conventions associated with the military (*Political Voice*’s Morse Code), the anonymous (*El delantal*’s street photography) and the bureaucratic (the passport-type pictures in *Lugar común*). If this assumed distance may at first recall the figure of the ethnographer and their claim for objectivity, it is however quickly filled in Graham’s work by the introduction of immersive photographic gestures. Both intimate and performative, they enrich her exploration of the forms assumed by gender identities. In *Socialization*, the artist inserts herself into the closely-knit bubbles of female conviviality that she finds throughout the city. ‘Passing’ as a teen school pupil, an office worker or a member of the Santiago elite chatting after Sunday service, Graham undertakes highly convincing camouflage operations as it is only the presence of the cable linking the photographic apparatus to her hand (visible in the images) that interrupts our potentially distracted reading of the images and reveals the artist’s presence among the other women. The spaces of femininity traversed by Graham in this series are not, as far as one can tell, hotbeds of resistance looking to subvert patriarchal hegemony. The classification of the pictures by active verbs (to work, to congregate, to gossip, to mother) actually seems to further associate women with certain predetermined roles and attitudes. These circles do not resist, they do not escape. And yet, they carve from official space communal pockets that can be likened to Foucault’s concept of heterotopias: discrete, yet

persistent zones of difference. By inserting herself into these everyday spaces, Graham also makes them visible, underlining the agency at work in these feminine assemblies.

### *Intimate Strangers*

The changes of scale in Graham's book can seem, at times, dizzying. From the cartographic and satellite images of Chile's urban sprawl to intimate portraits of the artist's family, the swift changes speak to both global and personal experiences of de-familiarization that take different forms throughout the photographic series. In the chapter *Immigration*, Graham installs a scanning machine in a hairdressing salon located in a multicultural part of Santiago, inviting strangers and friends to scan their faces. The blurry, deformed results powerfully express the experience of migration. Devoid of contextual background, volume and proportions, the images reproduce the flattening, disfiguring effect of uprooting. At the same time, they bring into focus the personal objects (necklaces, pendants, earrings) located closer to the screen, thus restoring a sense of individuality to the subjects. Similarly, there is an epidermal element to the series: erasing the distance between subject and photographic apparatus, the scanner operates as a haptic device: in the face of the loss and disorientation associated with migration, the images become invitations to touch.

Other experiences of loss are registered in the book: close relatives passing away, the civilian victims of drunk driving, homophobia, police repression and Covid. These disappearances are discreetly expressed through the emptying out of the page and the negative persistence of a silhouette or a small circular dot. Strikingly, the same procedure is adopted in the chapter dedicated to mundanity. In the chapter *Social Life*, the artist cuts dots in the faces appearing in the society pages of the newspaper *El Mercurio*, suggesting that despite the insistence of the journalists upon giving a specific face and name to the Chilean elite, their appearance in these pages is nothing more than a means of boosting the sale of the products advertised next to them. This phenomenon of anonymity even in the face of hyper-individualization is further exacerbated in Justine's series on social media and the Instagram profiles of local celebrities. Here again, despite social platforms' claims of intimacy and authenticity, the faces are empty, the profiles interchangeable. The contrast between the scanned portraits of migrants and the erased representations of the powerful at the other end of the economic and social scale could not be more striking, inviting us to question our shared conceptions of displacement and familiarity.

The antagonism that emerges from the differences between these two series is dramatically expressed in Graham's series of portraits of members of the Constitutional Convention which, following the 2019 social uprisings and the 2021 plebiscite, were tasked with writing a new legal roadmap for the country. Considering the strong, and sometimes violent, ideological oppositions witnessed during the first constitutional process, these close-up portraits of its protagonists open a space which, while inherently political, nonetheless seems to leave –temporarily at least– party rhetoric to one side. Looking straight at the camera, the constituents were asked to draw

in sign language the word they associate with the political process. The words, ranging from 'nature', 'equality' and 'parity' all the way through to 'crisis', 'safety' and 'homeland', reveal the abyss that exists between different worldviews and alerts us to the difficult road ahead. Yet, by inviting the protagonists to lay down their weapons for a moment and open up about their hopes and fears for Chile, Graham creates a space of intersubjective exchange and returns a human face to a deeply fraught process.

Aby Warburg was no stranger to displacement, having had to flee Nazi Germany to seek shelter in London: an experience which, according to some critics, partly influenced the later stages of the Atlas project. Justine Graham also knows something of displacements and her personal experiences undeniably colour her exploration of intimate and collective forms and meanings as they evolve through time. In this sense, despite its affirmative title, *Es lo que hay* is probably just one facet of an ongoing work: a pause for reflection along the way.