

## Reinventing the non-place

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In a controversial thesis, the French anthropologist Marc Augé designates certain contemporary transit spaces - such as those of public transport, waiting rooms or shopping centers - with the name of *non-places*. In these, he assures, neither historical, relational or identity links are produced, but in these people absently circulate instead, in a sort of indefinite time, without establishing ties with others.

However in that wonderful place that is the Santiago Metro, the artist Justine Graham has discovered an infinity of events, relationships, emotions, commitments, bonds and sensibilities. Crossing the stations and machinery, tunnels and offices, she found a unique human ecosystem, with a life of its own, and individual and collective stories that she set out to activate.

Graham had already been working on projects that involved communities with specific identities. For example, she had done so at the Washington International School in which, with the students as accomplices, she subverted the usual photographic configurations of school yearbooks. Or, some time before, when she brought together employers and domestic workers in pairs to make them share a common portrait. Her main objective in each case had not been to edit the publications that ultimately showcases her arduous work, but rather, to interact with people, generate encounters of reflection and exchange, utilizing photography as a medium –artistic, communicative, emotional- that would allow her to extract, and eventually capture, playful or socially significant moments.

Her project in the Santiago Metro was born in a similar way. It was her interest to connect with people, to explore their imagination, to listen to their stories, which energized her to face suspicions and bureaucracies, resistance and initial fears. But Graham manages to perfection, not only the art of photography, but also that of conviction. With patience, she managed to get the authorities to understand her intentions and let the workers give free rein to her imagination. The result is a new publication that reveals an unusual side of a corporate community, which not many know in all of its complexity.

On this occasion, the project takes the form of a “photonovela” with *film noir* accents. Unlike other proposals, in this one the story plays an essential role; its development governs the organization of images as much as the mechanism of collective participation. Each chapter - identified with a Metro line or area of specialty- begins with a catalytic phrase, created especially by the Argentine writer Florencia Werchowsky with the aim to encourage the imagination. Based on it, a worker suggests a possible continuation that the following participant should continue in their turn.

Each new phrase gives rise to a unique image, that is intensely prepared and discussed. The purpose is to exercise the imagination to the fullest, abandon the institutional sphere for a moment, strengthen the group dynamic, and, above all, play. Not only because through play inhibitions are toppled and structured behaviors are set aside, but also because new ways of inhabiting spaces are delineated, generating events, building unexpected situations. Play is, at the same time, a motor skills-based activity and a learning bank, a language that crosses cultural boundaries and a conduit that connects us to the most profound depth of our personal memory.

Texts and images are developed in parallel, following the model of the *exquisite corpse*, a method invented by the surrealist artists, who knew something of play, disinhibitions and creation. To this is added the power of imagination which transforms domestic environments into fantastic scenarios, or which allows us to see where there only exists a set of buckets or a clothes rack, the cymbals of a drum set or the strange geometry of a lethal weapon.

These metamorphoses, these deviations, highlight the capacity that we human beings have to reconfigure our vital environments. They are part of that practice that French philosopher Michel de Certeau called the *reinvention of the everyday*, which always has a liberating character, in that it shows us concrete ways of operating on the immediate reality in order to transform it. However small these gestures may be, their effects are not minor. In the specific case of the adventure that gave rise to this book, there is a dislocation of routine, a reconfiguration of interpersonal ties, the creation of a very singular event, and the implantation of a memory that will not only be reflected in the pages of a publication, but, mainly, in the mind and heart of its actors.

The way the bodies of the Metro workers appropriate the institutional space deserves special mention. Because there is an abandon, a plasticity and, above all, a joy that is transmitted even in the smallest of poses. The bodies are the true protagonists of this project, whose objective is not reduced to the construction of a more or less absurd fictional plot, but rather seeks to bring to the forefront this human factor relegated to the eye of the public user. We know that thousands of employees work in the Santiago Metro, although we rarely see them. In the book, we cannot stop seeing them. But, unlike the usual corporate publications, in which we are shown through a sequence of standardized portraits, here we observe them in a display of histrionics and inventiveness that we are definitely not accustomed to.

Finally, all this comes together in the elaboration of a photonovela that explores the most diverse narrative nuances between mystery and humor. To bring it to life, Justine Graham chose an unconventional aesthetic – more so even, a decidedly artificial one - based on the use of powerful lighting that generates intense chiaroscuro. The choice bestows its own share of humor, to the extent that it evokes the instantaneity of the flash to capture scenes that in and of themselves are frozen. Another reminiscence, perhaps induced by the context, is the one that reminds us of that light that emerges from the darkness each time a train car approaches the station. In any case, it is a resource that rejects the naturalistic image to transport us to

another universe, to emphasize a strangeness that reminds us that realistic photography only shows us the reality we want to see. A resource that places the photographic medium as a tool of research over and above that of a medium that reinforces our customary ways of looking around us.

Is it possible, after all this, that we return to see the Santiago Metro as a *non-place*? Is it not now impregnated with fantasy, with potential events, with latent characters? There is nothing that highlights the transformative power of art more than the feeling that something we believed stable has forever changed. This is one of the great merits of the shared work of Justine Graham and the Metro workers. Others appear on each of the pages of this book, emotional and radical.