EXHIBITION REVIEW

Luis González Palma: Intangible Constellations
FUNDACIÓN TELEFÓNICA
MADRID
JUNE 11–OCTOBER 18, 2015

Not Yet: On the Reinvention of Documentary and the Critique of Modernism
MUSEO NACIONAL CENTRO DE ARTE REINA SOFÍA
MADRID
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Every summer many of Madrid’s museums and galleries host PHotoESPaña exhibitions. Each year the International Festival of Photography and the Visual Arts, produced by the Madrid-based arts and publishing hub La Fábrica, organizes an ever-expanding presentation of artists and venues. The theme around which many of the sixty-nine exhibitions circulated this year was “Latin American Photography.”

It is timely for Spain to consider the region so indelibly marked by Iberian colonialism and its pursuit of riches. With its faltering economy today, Spain is again casting its gaze toward Latin America for joint ventures and financial stimulus. But within Spain there is also growing cognizance of its destructive colonizing past, evidenced this year by regional rejections of annual Columbus Day celebrations.

Such concerns figured prominently among the twenty-nine exhibitions related to Latin America. Photography was featured from across periods, beginning with ethnographic documents of indigenous Ecuadorians within paternalistic missionary settings and Martín Chambi’s rich portraiture that frames both hacienda owners and ragged Peruvians in the same striking light. Early twentieth-century modernist photography was exemplified in solo exhibitions of artists such as Tina Modotti and Lola Álvarez Bravo. Most abundant were works from the second half of the twentieth century to the early twenty-first, often featured in large group shows. Particularly in the earlier decades of this period, the documentary form expressed the difficult and volatile conditions experienced under repressive political regimes and intense poverty. Though hardship continues in these regions, some space has opened for experimental treatments of photography, many examples of which were seen in Revealing and Detonating: Photography in Mexico, ca. 1925–2015, an exhibition of very contemporary Mexican photography, on view at CentroCentro Cibeles.

What was clear from these hundreds of works was the continuing legacy of conquest and colonization: lingering socioeconomic hierarchies that leave those of indigenous heritage mired in desperate poverty at the margins; social and state violence; popular resistance to repressive dictatorships; and attempts to recover identity beyond power centers in Europe and north of the border.

A highlight of the festival was Luis González Palma: Intangible Constellations, hosted in the Fundación Telefónica gallery, a venue that exemplifies the reliance of arts funding in Spain on large corporations, such as this media company, for the operation of large public cultural centers. The poetic themes and formal experiments in the exhibition evoked many of the concerns of the legacies of colonization.

But González Palma also explores other themes, such as personal relations. Most prominent here was his concern for the dispossessed Mayans. Himself a Guatemalan-born mestizo now residing in Argentina, the artist activates a symbolic and iconographic language drawn from Mayan traditions. His concerns with racial and colonized identity are worked through in relation to other histories—of aesthetics and visual technologies.

Through experimental processes engaging analog and historical media, González Palma incorporates a wide range of materials: bitumen (a central ingredient in Nicéphore Niépce’s heliography), gold leaf, sepia- and gold-toned prints, orthochromatic film, platinum printing on tissue, ambrotypes, daguerreotypes, fabric, stitched thread, layered and montaged imagery, acrylic paint, sculptural installations with anamorphic mirror devices, rolled felt, and light boxes.

The imagery within these mixed-media manipulations has varied through González Palma’s career, but often present indigenous figures engaged in ritual performance or within direct portraits, their tonal warmth deepened with sepia. Their gaze seems to transgress the bounds of the frame and challenge the viewer’s position within colonial power relations.

The subject in La Mirada Crítica (The Critical Gaze) from 1998, as one example, bears the weight of evaluative systems that came with colonialism—the ethnographic archive and Christian iconography. Her eyes, from beneath the measuring tape encircling her head, express a depth of pain comparable to Christ’s.

In other portraits, González Palma’s subjects’ brown faces appeared printed on giant rolls of felt bound by red threads; the same colored thread was also stitched into large, warm-toned or platinum portraits printed on rice paper. Many of these faces were distorted with creased or overlaid sections of the same image, or obscured by rationalist geometric shapes, suggesting an indigenous identity troubled by modern Westernization and rationalism. Haunted faces also shone from cone-shaped anamorphic mirrors (of the kind Leonardo experimented with) that collected the distorted portraits spread around them in an installation from the series Möbius (2014).

With painterly and evocative beauty, the series Passing Through the Heart Once Again (2002) presents imagery printed on gold-toned orthochromatic film overlaid on other imagery or gold leaf, creating enigmatic, magical realist narratives that transgress temporal boundaries, mythological past blending with rationalist present.

In Entre Raíces y Aire (Between Roots and Air), from 1997, pages of Latin religious texts, remnants of repressive religion, merge with rows of wooden crosses. Eight large pieces from the series Hierarchies of Intimacies/The Meeting (2004) include imagery of abandoned rooms with ancient paint peeling, thorns emerging from classroom chairs, beds severed by walls, and cabinets of ornithological specimens all suggest unspoken sufferings.

Themes of aesthetic representation and religious martyrdom merge in the series La Luz de La Mente (The Mind’s Light) from...
González Palma made sculptural reproductions in fabric of loincloths worn by Christian martyrs as they appeared in Baroque paintings. The sculptural reproductions were then photographed, printed on orthochromatic film, laid over surfaces of gold or silver leaf, and titled after the artists who painted them (e.g., 1626–29 Zurbarán, and so on). These artists are kin to González Palma, whose art similarly memorializes those violently oppressed through sensual visual representations. Just as early Christian victims of Roman power were being painted into seventeenth-century images, later Christians were enacting a similar violence on indigenous Latin Americans.

Very different was the contribution made to PHotoEspaña by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, whose exhibition focused on another demographic of subjugation and resistance—the working classes. Here, unlike González Palma’s poetic reference to the archive, was a more direct and didactic presentation of archival materials. The venue was also notably different from the culture-friendly face of the modern corporation: Reina Sofía is a massive, historic public institution with a collection partly drawn from crown possessions.

While many public art museums host blockbuster exhibitions to address funding shortfalls, Madrid’s Museo Reina Sofía resists such compromise, even as its own state support declines in the wake of Europe’s ongoing economic crisis. The cornerstone of its collection is Picasso’s Guernica (1937) and the ticket sales it inspires allows the museum’s continued mandate of educational and research-intensive programming. In addition to its financial leverage, Picasso’s paint-brushed rage against fascism figures Spanish resistance, and serves as model for the museum’s often critical—even radical—programming, despite Spain’s notoriously conservative leadership. Illustrative of the museum’s commitment to long-term projects were two sequential exhibitions showing in 2015: A Hard, Merciless Light: The Worker-Photography Movement, 1926–1939, first presented in 2011, and Not Yet: On the Reinvention of Documentary and the Critique of Modernism.

The first recovered a buried period within the history of photography when, in the late 1920s and ’30s, in the context of financial crisis and socialist visions, a political avant-garde collaborated with workers in the struggle for social justice. The exhibition had a distinctly theoretical point of departure: documentary photography’s use-value, as a weapon for social change, located in the pre–historical figures of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, developed in the interwar years as arbeiterfotografie within trade union culture and the Communist Party, through such publications and groups as Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung (AIZ) in Germany and the Workers Film and Photo League (after 1933, the Film and Photo League) in the US. But Cold War pressures depoliticized documentary media, its memory as activist tool replaced with an aestheticized and humanistic documentary. Emblematic of its institutionalization was Edward Steichen’s 1955 exhibition The Family of Man, its paternalistic images of universalized suffering balanced further neutralized by scenes of joy, disarming photography’s politicizing capacities.

The second exhibition was on view this summer. Not Yet examined the two-decade period following the tumultuous protests of May ’68, when during another financial crisis, a neo–avant-garde revived the buried history of activist photography, appropriated its goals and strategies of community activism, and rejected prevailing modernist aesthetics and individualism. The Spanish artist and writer Jorge Ribaltía curated both exhibitions. And in the collaborative spirit valued in both periods, significant contributions by other scholars were made through preliminary conferences and in accompanying catalogs.

The high regard for publishing within Spain is reflected in the Reina Sofía’s growing archive of art–related print media. Such materials were heavily integrated into Not Yet: historical journals, magazines, posters, and album covers were exhibited alongside photographs, slide projections, film, and video. Each of the exhibition’s sixteen rooms featured a particular geopolitical moment of the political insurgencies as they found their individual registries within the broader critical documentary trend, as divided into three particular foci: the early stages of the European movement and its spread throughout Europe; postcolonial and racial activism in Vietnam, South African, Latin America, and the US; and the “urban turn,” when attention—inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s observations—shifted to cities.

Common concerns cutting across the exhibition were community collaboration, self–representation and amateur photography—all alternatives to mass media—and social issues such as workers’ conditions, poverty, housing, equality, and citizen access to public space. To facilitate public education and engagement, artists used inexpensive materials that could be easily installed in public and community spaces.

The exhibition opened with the first stages of the workers’ movement’s revival in Hamburg in 1973, when artists responded to earlier workers’ photography archives, then traced its spread through West Germany and beyond. Original posterboard panels featured photographs and text showing community struggles for children’s playgrounds and workers’ factory experiences, such as in Stadtplanung—für wen? (Town Planning for Whom?), from 1978.
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Vitrines held magazines and materials developed within the movement, such as the publication *Arbeiterfotografie*, which made direct reference to the earlier interwar movement.

A crucial difference between the 1970s and the earlier period was the wave of deindustrialization, with technical schools shifting to a range of new vocations including art education and photography. University of Kassel students photographed working-class families outside of their homes to give representation to those ignored by mainstream media. The series of photographs were shown here beside photographic documentation of their billboard display within the neighborhood.³

In resistance to the aesthetics and individualism of art and commercial photography, *Volksfoto* created installations and publications with found, anonymous, and amateur photography—imagemaking that escaped the limits of mass consumer imagery. Recreating Andreas Seltzer and Dieter Hacker’s original 1980 installation, *Foto kaput*, three walls were covered entirely with small snapshots.

Another room represented worker documentary activity in France. The first strike and occupation leading up to May ’68 took place at the Besançon textile factory. Enabling their self-representation, workers formed the Medvedkin Group with filmmaker Chris Marker, who provided his camera, production facilities, and instruction. Workers’ photographs were shown alongside Marker’s *Le train en marche* (1971). The film paid homage to, and acknowledged the legacy of, Bolshevik Alexander Medvedkin, whose Cine Train engaged newly socialized Russians in agitprop filmmaking processes.

One room was devoted to the San Diego Group’s (SDG) engagement through the early and mid-1970s with issues related to workers’ health and housing. Included were works by Allan Sekula (to whom the exhibition was dedicated), and Fred Lonidier’s photo, text, and video installation *The Health and Safety Game* (1976), in which individuals described their work-related medical problems. Martha Rosler’s seminal and semiotic *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974–75), made after the artist’s return to New York City, was also presented.

From 1974, British artists Jo Spence and Terry Dennett founded the Photography Workshop, followed by the Cameraworks publication and the Half-Moon Photography Workshop, and worked to theorize and undercut social inequalities through their community and collective work. Explicitly evoking the 1930s worker photography tradition, their instructive photo-text posters outlined the value of photomontage for activism. Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson’s wall-sized murals, designed for public display, addressed poverty and health-care cuts. *Big Money is Moving in. Don’t Let It Push Out Local People* (1981), with its warnings of community displacement by the Dockland’s corporate development, showed clear lineage to John Heartfield’s hard but humorous critiques.

Other moments of art activism traversed the explosive politics of the period: documentary photographs of Amsterdam’s squatters, who learned lessons from the earlier Dutch Provos, and their violent 1975 eviction; Agnès Varda’s sympathetic film *Black Panthers* (1968), shown alongside photographs by Pirkle Jones and Ruth-Marion Baruch made as alternative media representations of the party and its self-defense role in inner city America; Afrapix photojournalism images of violent repression published in *Staffrider* magazine that helped discredit South Africa’s apartheid regime; the recreation of Susan Meiselas’s 1982 exhibition *Mediations: Nicaragua*, which analytically opened up the processes of photojournalistic representation; and documentation related to the workerist ‘77 Movement in Italy.

The exhibition demonstrates that there was plenty to struggle against during “the long 1970s.” Yet, it was when social conditions worsened with the subsequent neoliberal state of the 1980s that art activism began to decline. In the US, for example, low-income housing and social programs were slashed at a time of high inflation and unemployment and, as income disparity increased, the commercial art market boomed.
Martha Rosler’s collaborative project “If You Lived Here...” (1989) provided a series of talks and exhibitions focusing on the gutting of New York City shelters in the wake of gentrification and the resulting crisis in homelessness. Selected works here included multiple documentary video works exploring personal and political perspectives on homelessness and shelter closures, and installations such as Krzysztof Wodiczko’s Homeless Vehicle Project (1988), a mobile sleeping and storage space. Rosler’s words surface in the exhibition title, Not Yet: “[P]erhaps a radical documentary can be brought into existence. But the common acceptance of the idea that documentary precedes, supplants, transcends, or cures full, substantive social activism is an indicator that we do not yet have a real documentary.”

The value of the intensive historical research organized by Ribalta and Reina Sofia is immeasurable. Their historical tracking of activist art helps us understand the forces that either stifle or nurture it. We can ask, once more, the question: If not yet, then when? These two exhibitions suggested the wide range of photographic approaches and venues encompassed within PHotoEspaña. Most importantly, the festival afforded opportunities for immersion in the challenges posed by photography. The challenge taken up in these exhibitions is the delineation of the social histories of oppression and the many resistances to it.

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