

Contrastes



# Una evidencia *queer*: trabajo sexual y metodologías afectivas

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**RESUMEN:** Este artículo investiga dos libros que combinan fotografía con testimonios biográficos para documentar un albergue para trabajadoras sexuales de la tercera edad en Ciudad de México, Casa Xochiquetzal. La yuxtaposición de biografía y fotografía suscita nuevos interrogantes en nuestra investigación sobre la representación de la subjetividad sexual y las prácticas interpretativas que desplegamos para investigarlas. Este artículo se plantea los modos en que diferentes formas de documentación biográfica problematizan productivamente nuestros encuentros con las representaciones estéticas de la sexualidad; y cómo la presencia corporal del sujeto complica sus testimonios vitales. Este proyecto responde con la propuesta de una metodología *queer* que descompone las evidencias para valorar lo afectivo como un modo de enlazar con la alteridad.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Trabajo sexual, Metodología, *Queer*, Fotografía, México.

## A Queer Evidence: Sex Work and Affective Methodologies

**ABSTRACT:** This article considers two books that combine photography with biographical accounts to document a home for elderly sex workers in Mexico City, La Casa Xochiquetzal. Juxtaposing biographical narrative with visual forms raises new questions for our investigations of sexual subjectivities and the interpretive practices we call upon to investigate them. This project asks, how do different forms of biographical documentation productively trouble our encounters with the aesthetic representations of sexuality? How does the corporeal presence of the subject complicate testimonies of their lives? This project responds by proposing a queer methodology that undoes what functions as evidence in order to valorize the affective as a mode of engaging alterity.

**KEYWORDS:** Sex Work, Methodology, Queer, Photography, Mexico.

Este artículo considera dos textos que combinan la fotografía con la narración, lo visual con lo textual, para explorar maneras de representar las vidas de trabajadoras sexuales<sup>1</sup>. Los libros *–Las amorosas más bravas* y *The Women of Casa X–* abordan el mismo tema: las mujeres que viven en la Casa Xochiquetzal, un albergue en la Ciudad de México para trabajadoras sexuales de la tercera edad, algunas jubiladas, otras no<sup>2</sup>. Usaré estos textos para investigar cómo una metodología *queer* nos puede ayudar a entender el significado entre los objetos que estudiamos y las relaciones afectivas que inspiran.

La Casa Xochiquetzal se creó en el año 2006 para atender las necesidades de trabajadoras sexuales de la tercera edad. La casa arrancó gracias a los esfuerzos de Carmen Muñoz, quien se encontró una noche con unas compañeras durmiendo en la calle tapadas por un cartón: mujeres que, como ella, habían trabajado vendiendo sexo y ahora se encontraban envejecidas, pobres y solas. En ese momento se planteó la idea de buscar una solución para la precariedad en la que se encontraban. Muñoz solicitó la ayuda de varias feministas mexicanas, incluyendo a Maya Goded, Martha Lamas, Elena Poniatsowska y Jesusa Rodríguez, y juntas lograron recaudar fondos privados y ayuda estatal, y finalmente consiguieron un edificio e hicieron uso de los recursos del gobierno del Distrito Federal, la Secretaría de Salud y el Instituto de Atención a Adultos

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1. Bénédicte Desrus/SIPA  
USA, Casa Xochiquetzal, 2010

Mayores para proveer servicios sociales a esta población. La idea de este proyecto feminista era crear un albergue en el que se proporcionara una vida digna para estas mujeres. Le pusieron el nombre Casa Xochiquetzal, que en náhuatl significa flor preciosa. En la mitología maya, Xochiquetzal es la diosa de la belleza, las flores, el arte y el placer amoroso. Es decir, un nombre muy apto.

### Temas sexuales, metodologías *queer*

Las prostitutas ocupan un lugar singular en el repertorio visual, han servido como las musas y queridas de un sinfín de artistas y fotógrafos masculinos<sup>3</sup>. Son una fuente de inspiración y ansiedad para los que quieren rescatarlas o venerarlas, conocer los secretos sexuales que guardan o las indignidades que han sufrido. Como figuras de la imaginación popular, representan un sujeto imposible de conocer, encargadas de guardar los secretos de otros, expertas en los artes de la disimulación. La figura de la prostituta funciona como una pantalla en la que proyectamos nuestras ansiedades ante el sexo, el poder y el deseo. Ellas definen lo que existe fuera de las reglas normativas de la sexualidad

femenina, y de esa manera son constitutivas de lo que es la categoría mujer<sup>4</sup>. Pero la vejez cambia todo, y las mujeres que encontramos en estos textos –viejas, vulnerables, con kilos y canas de más– tienen poco que ver con la imagen que tenemos de las servidoras sexuales, creando un cuadro raro, incluso *queer*, fuera de las normas de lo que esperamos ver en las caras que nos devuelven la mirada [1].

Dentro del contexto de este proyecto, *queer* funciona de diferentes maneras, está menos relacionado con personas auto-designadas como lesbianas, gays, bisexuales o personas transgénero, y más con una manera de marcar lo que existe fuera de las normas sociales. Aunque algunas de estas residentes también tienen relaciones lésbicas para expresar deseo y amor, no pretendo imponer estas categorías de sexualidad a estas mujeres, sino mostrar cómo el colectivo que se encuentra en la Casa Xochiquetzal, un colectivo formado por la exclusión y por la necesidad, muestra otra manera *queer* de entender la sexualidad, la familia y los lazos afectivos. Sin embargo es importante señalar que al igual que muchas personas del colectivo LGBT, muchas trabajadoras sexuales sufren a causa de los prejuicios, el abandono y la marginalización de sus familias y la sociedad. Estas mujeres viven fuera de las reglas sociales que rigen la vida

de otras mujeres, y por tanto viven también fuera de la protección y seguridad que ofrece la sexualidad hetero-normativa. Aunque su trabajo va en contra de las normas sexuales hincadas en la monogamia y el matrimonio, su existencia es imprescindible para mantener las ficciones en que estas categorías están basadas.

Usar *queer* para marcar lo no-normativo ya está bien establecido en la literatura, pero aquí también quiero extender lo que pudiera implicar, utilizando *queer* para hablar de una metodología que reconoce modos de conocimiento no-normativos; modos que valoran el sentir como otra fuente de saber. En su libro, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz elabora lo que él mismo llama una evidencia *queer*: «una evidencia que se hace *queer* con relación a las leyes de lo que cuenta como prueba» (Muñoz, 2009: 65)<sup>5</sup>. Históricamente, comunidades sexuales que han sido criminalizadas han tenido que borrar rasgos de sus actos, de los códigos de supervivencia de sus conexiones ocultas y en una metodología enfocada en la *performance* –de la sexualidad, del deseo, de formas de crear comunidades recónditas– ha amplificado su importancia. Muñoz encuentra en la *performance* y la idea de lo efímero que surge de estudios performativos, una conexión indispensable con lo *queer*, «Piense en lo efímero como huella, los restos, las cosas que quedan atrás, que cuelgan en el aire como un rumor» (Muñoz, 2009: 65). Una evidencia *queer* reconoce que los archivos oficiales no guardan espacio para gestos fugaces y miradas escondidas que confirmen el deseo, tenemos que buscar y valorar otros modos de conocimiento.

Para las investigaciones de la sexualidad, la yuxtaposición de la biografía con la fotografía plantea nuevas maneras de entender la subjetividad sexual y las prácticas interpretativas que desplegamos para investigarlas, ubicándonos en terrenos desconocidos donde el sentir importa tanto como el saber. A pesar de los intentos de clasificar sus enunciacines o descifrar sus misterios, la sexualidad se imagina como algo desconocido e invisible. Aludir a los misterios de la sexualidad evoca la lógica irracional del deseo y la fantasía, y un archivo corporal de recuerdos y sensaciones, como asegura la teórica Gayle Salamon cuando afirma que «la sexualidad es una cuestión no de ver, sino de sentir» (Salamon, 2010: 47)<sup>6</sup>. El centrar mi investigación en estas historias visuales de trabajadoras sexuales de la tercera edad, en esas



2. Bénédicte Desrus/SIPA USA, *Las amorosas más bravas*, 2011, portada

mujeres que se imaginan como excesivamente sexuales y a la vez deficientes de sexualidad propia, me permite analizar los métodos que usamos para saber, o igual sentir, lo que es la corporalización sexual.

## Intimidaciones y fotoperiodismo

El libro *Las amorosas más bravas* fue publicado en 2011 en México, como resultado de una colaboración entre Bénédicte Desrus, una fotógrafa francesa, y Celia Gómez Ramos, una periodista mexicana. Al enterarse de la existencia de esta casa tan singular, Desrus empezó sacando fotografías de las residentes de Casa Xochiquetzal y poco después buscó a una periodista local para dar a conocer esta historia y las imágenes que había obtenido. Antes de publicarse como libro, las fotografías y entrevistas se publicaron en varias revistas y periódicos dentro y fuera de México para crear consciencia y recaudar fondos para la casa. En total, el proyecto que culminó con la publicación del libro llevó seis años –durante los cuales Desrus y Gómez Ramos visitaron y convivieron con estas mujeres por largo tiempo– documentando sus vidas en relatos y en fotografías. El resultado es el libro *Las amorosas más bravas*, una imagen colectiva de esta comunidad, escrito en el estilo de fotoperiodismo extendido [2].

La introducción empieza:



3. Bénédicte Desrus/SIPA USA, «Sacando al perrito», del libro *Las amorosas más bravas*, 2011

Convivir no ha sido fácil, aunque varias de las residentes de la casa Xochiquetzal se conocían, no eran amigas, pues siempre compitieron por los clientes. Quizá hoy tampoco lo sean. La supervivencia las hizo bravas. Son sabias, divertidas, buenas narradoras y de imaginación vigorosa. Están acostumbradas a desconfiar, a no generar lazos duraderos, a analizar los puntos débiles y fuertes de los demás. Se comen el mundo a cucharadas o a mordidas, como sea necesario<sup>7</sup>.

Las autoras no intentan pintar un cuadro donde la Casa Xochiquetzal aparezca como un espacio utópico de colectividad feminista, o presentar a estas mujeres como víctimas o santas. Por el contrario, su intención es presentar este espacio y a las mujeres que lo hacen su hogar en toda su complejidad. Aunque el libro incluye numerosas citas extensas de los residentes individuales, la protagonista que surge como el centro de la narración es la casa en sí, el espacio del colectivo, y como en esta cita, las mujeres se refieren a menudo en plural, como si compartiesen una sola personalidad. Además de ser un proyecto de documentación, *Las amorosas* también funciona como un proyecto pedagógico, diseñado para educar y abogar por estas mujeres que han sido olvidadas por la sociedad.

La estructura del libro consta de secciones alternas de prosa extendida y páginas de fotografías que no están acompañadas con ningún tipo de descripción narrativa<sup>8</sup>. En el libro, las residentes individuales son mencionadas en las narraciones citadas, frecuentemente por medio de apodos; sin embargo, en las fotografías permanecen sin identificar. A pesar de que la mayor parte del texto está estructurado en torno a historias de las vidas y anécdotas personales, no hay ningún intento de alinear las historias particulares con fotografías individuales. El fotoperiodismo como género usa la documentación visual como prueba de autenticidad en la producción de noticias. Y un albergue para las trabajadoras sexuales de edad avanzada constituye, ciertamente, un tipo de noticia, pero las circunstancias particulares de las residentes sólo adquiere valor con respecto a su capacidad para iluminar una narrativa mayor. Las autoras de *Las amorosas más bravas* enmarcaron la yuxtaposición de cuerpos envejecidos y sexualidad abierta para un público que supuestamente no tiene conocimiento de cómo viven estas mujeres, no porque sean extranjeras, sino porque son invisibles. El fotoperiodismo tiene como objetivo la novedad de hacer visible algo previamente oculto, se nutre de las narrativas de lo desconocido y lo invis-



4. Bénédicte Desrus/SIPA USA, «Juntas», del libro *Las amorosas más bravas*, 2011



ble, creando un producto binario entre el sujeto y el objeto de conocimiento.

En muchas de las fotografías vemos a estas mujeres barriendo, comiendo y compartiendo una vida juntas, pero las autoras también nos muestran imágenes de estas mujeres maquillándose, calzándose tacones y saliendo a las calles vestidas con sus mejores prendas, en otras palabras, llevando a cabo los rituales de género asociados a su profesión [3].

Es importante tener en cuenta que muchas de estas mujeres siguen trabajando, algunas prestan sus servicios a clientes que han conocido durante más de medio siglo y esta libertad de trabajar se entiende como una premisa fundamental de la casa. Como parte del imperativo del fotoperiodismo, estas imágenes confirman el hecho de que estas mujeres ancianas realmente son trabajadores sexuales, proporcionan evidencia visual de la desviación de las normas sociales y expectativas visuales.

La mayoría de estas fotografías sitúan a estas mujeres dentro de los registros visuales de la vida cotidiana, mostrando la intimidad que existe entre el fotógrafo y sus sujetos. El fotoperiodismo es una forma de ver y saber que lleva al espectador a los espacios ocultos del Otro. En el proceso,

la presencia del fotógrafo parece desaparecer, y nosotros, los espectadores, nos convertimos en *voyeurs* de la esfera íntima y privada donde estos sujetos desconocidos habitan. A menudo, en estas fotografías, estamos en una posición en el marco de la puerta, a una distancia segura, a punto de aventurar alguna especulación o juicio sobre sus vidas [4].

Lo que somos invariablemente da forma a lo que vemos dentro de estos marcos. Y cuando miramos, son nuestras asociaciones, memorias y ansiedades las que determinan cómo interpretamos lo que tenemos enfrente. Muchas de estas fotos muestran sus cuartos e igual sentimos algo de lo que pudiera ser convivir con todas las pertenencias de valor de una vida en un espacio encerrado. Tal vez estas mujeres nos evocan a nuestras abuelas, tías y ancianas queridas, y los espacios reducidos y desordenados que llaman hogar. Tal vez la pobreza o la edad las hacen parecer totalmente ajenas, o terriblemente familiares. ¿Estamos viendo la fragilidad de nuestro propio futuro?

A menudo, la cámara parece acercarse sigilosamente a su presa, la captura en un momento que jamás podría haber sido destinado a las miradas de otros. Dentro del registro visual del fotoperiodismo, la precariedad de las vidas de estas mujeres funciona como condición previa para nuestro



5. Bénédicte Desrus/SIPA, «Norma durmiendo», del libro *Las amorosas más bravas*, 2011

acceso visual. Porque también son residentes en un refugio que les ofrece cierta protección y seguridad, están expuestas a la luz pública, a la vista de extranjeros curiosos y bien intencionados que utilizan la documentación de la Casa Xochiquetzal, y la mezcla de compasión, empatía y tal vez la identificación que sus residentes inspiran, como el señuelo que asegure la solvencia financiera de la casa. Quizás la documentación sea el precio de la cama.

Aquí [5] tenemos una figura durmiendo, sus ojos cerrados, su cuerpo desnudo cubierto por una sábana de flores, haciendo alusión al calor pegajoso de la Ciudad de México. Como espectadores parecemos flotar por encima de su cuerpo, mirando hacia abajo, ella no se mueve bajo la mirada. Estamos tan cerca que podemos ver las cicatrices en su brazo, las raíces blancas de su pelo castaño y corto, el volante de color rosa de su almohada.

Páginas antes, nos topamos con una historia, bajo el título «Normota, con más vidas que un gato»:

Mis tatuajes, sí, uno en cada abrazo. El primero me lo hice a los 16 años, es la cara de una pantera, y el otro es el torso de una mujer con los pechos descubiertos y en el tope mi nombre, Norma. Otras marcas en mi cuerpo son la cicatriz que dejó el desarmador en la ceja, tres navajazos y un piquete en el pecho, de asaltos; un par de mordidas bravas en el

brazo izquierdo, recuerdo de Rosa; un navajazo en el brazo derecho, de un pleito, y el de mi infancia.

La imagen de una figura durmiendo en páginas anteriores, se despierta aquí en la respuesta de Norma a una pregunta que no aparece en el texto, sino que le incita a narrar la historia de su vida a través de un recuento de su cuerpo ilustrado, un archivo corporal de sexualidad y violencia. Aquí, el cuerpo funciona como otra manera *queer* de documentar una vida. Su biografía afirma precisamente la vida «brava» que el título del libro sugiere, mientras que la imagen confirma el acceso aparentemente sin restricciones del fotógrafo. La combinación de lo visual y lo textual produce el tipo de conocimiento periodístico que da fe de la verdad de la imagen y la historia, confirma que lo que estamos viendo es la fiel representación del sujeto. Pero la narrativa también rezuma otros elementos biográficos que van más allá de los datos que proporciona la imagen. En unas pocas páginas, Norma nos dice que es mujeriega y enumera una larga lista de amantes femeninas, incluyendo a Rosa, que fue su novia por trece años, la misma Rosa que dejó marcas de mordiscos como recuerdos. Nos cuenta que el padre de su primer hijo era un travesti llamado Arturo o Erika. Norma nos dice que estos días está demasiado cansada para las mujeres.



La historia se mueve hacia atrás y hacia adelante en el tiempo, en estas páginas habla de sus hijos y de su infancia. Nos enteramos de que a los catorce años cruzó la frontera, fue a San Francisco, California, y trabajó como niñera, y también pasó cinco años haciendo lucha libre bajo el seudónimo de *La Sombra*. Ella nos dice que «Un día me di veintitantos cortes en la muñeca izquierda con una navaja de afeitar porque no le encontraba gran sentido a la vida». Actualmente tiene problemas de corazón, y un par de kilos de más. Concluye su relato diciendo «Tengo mis clientes frecuentes... Estaré ya viejita, estaré como estaré, pero las mañanas no se olvidan». Considerado en su conjunto, el retrato que surge de Norma, la figura durmiendo y tatuada, escapa los confines de sus sábanas y su vejez, y reaparece en la imaginación del lector en un escenario de lucha libre, en un apartamento de lujo en San Francisco calmando el llanto de un bebé, en un parque peleando con su amante Rosa, que quiere más dinero del que Norma puede proporcionar. Las imágenes y las historias, parciales e incompletas, resisten cualquier tipo de cierre narrativo. Sin embargo, la aventura transnacional, amantes y amores del pasado, y el anhelo por las posibilidades perdidas, conforman un sentido profundo sobre la situación de estas mujeres, más poderoso que cualquier narrativa coherente.

## Caras ajenas

En *Las amorosas más bravas*, hemos podido ponerle un rostro a nuestra comprensión de las trabajadoras sexuales, y de esta manera ampliar el repertorio de la representación de estas mujeres. Pero siempre habrá representaciones más completas, o más interesantes. Lo que me interesa en este proyecto va más allá de la representación en sí para investigar qué interrogantes nuevos se plantean cuando juntamos lo visual con lo textual. ¿Qué significa «ver» las caras y los cuerpos de aquéllas cuyas historias de vida queremos consumir? ¿Cómo complica la presencia corporal del sujeto los testimonios de sus vidas?

El potencial de la cara para comunicar algo más allá de lo que podemos ver, o lo que podemos representar, es lo que más me intriga. Una fascinación que comparto con otros que han contemplado ese momento de encuentro con la cara del Otro. Emmanuel Levinas escribe: «La expresión, o

la cara, desborda las imágenes» (Levinas, 1969: 297)<sup>9</sup>. Giorgio Agamben aporta: «Y sólo cuando encuentro una cara, enfrente una exterioridad y un afuera se me presenta» (Agamben, 2000: 99-100)<sup>10</sup>. La teórica brasileña Milena Costa de Souza insiste en el significado político de estas cuestiones de ética, y añade: «El retrato es una imagen de la cara de un sujeto, creada por una artista y/o fotógrafa, la cual le confiere la posibilidad de ser más que cuerpo físico. Por eso, la representación de una cara confiere una existencia histórico-social a la retratada, pues permite que ella exista incluso después de su muerte» (Costa de Souza, 2015: 255)<sup>11</sup>.

Estos autores aseguran que una consideración de la cara nos lleva más allá de los modos conocidos para producir un conocimiento acerca del sujeto. El trabajo de Judith Butler acerca de lo que implica la falta de reconocimiento y legibilidad deja clara la apuesta del proyecto: «¿bajo qué condiciones algunos individuos adquieren un rostro, un rostro legible y visible, y otros no?» (Butler, 1993: 30)<sup>12</sup>. Aunque esté claro que la cara está ligada a los regímenes discursivos y disciplinarios que confieren la posibilidad de una humanidad, los intentos de nombrar aquello que «desborda las imágenes» sigue fuera del alcance de las investigaciones de lo visual.

Si las discusiones filosóficas se han preguntado cómo podemos «conocer» la experiencia del Otro, las investigaciones sobre lo visual se preguntan cómo podemos «ver» la experiencia del Otro. Susan Sontag ha señalado que las fotografías son «experiencias capturadas» y ha explorado la función depredadora de la fotografía (2001: 3). Escribe: «Fotografiar a las personas es violarlas, al verlas como nunca se ven ellas a sí mismas, al tener un conocimiento de ellas que nunca podrían tener; es convertir a las personas en objetos que pueden ser poseídos simbólicamente» (Sontag, 2001: 14)<sup>14</sup>. Esta conexión entre las metáforas sexuales de violación y el conocimiento corporal que la fotografía promete pero nunca logra, destaca un campo de óptica donde la raza y la sexualidad se presentan como espectáculos de consumo.

La fotografía etnográfica ha suscitado una fascinación por el espectáculo de la diferencia racial y sexual, y ha creado sus propias convenciones visuales de representación que tienen sus orígenes en el colonialismo. Los sujetos de este género fotográfico no tienen nombre ni historia; funcionan simplemente para alimentar fantasías coloniales que sirven para satisfacer el placer visual de los que asumen el derecho

de dominarlas sexual, visual y políticamente. Pero como hemos visto con las fotos de *Las amorosas más bravas*, incluso en la presencia del sujeto autobiográfico y su testimonio, las representaciones de la sexualidad invariablemente fallan, produciendo tanto una ausencia que no es completamente capaz de captar los contornos psíquicos de la subjetividad como un exceso que se produce a través del proceso interpretativo. En las ruinas de la representación, lo que queda es el sentido de lo sexual y lo corporal que también dejan su huella en el archivo.

En su introducción a *Feeling Photography*, Elsbeth Brown y Thy Phu reconocen que los estudios de la imagen centrados en la representación «han sido generalmente menos instructivos [...] para procurar un recuento completo de la alteridad» (2014: 19)<sup>14</sup>. En cambio proponen que un «enfoque *feeling* les brinde a los estudiosos de la fotografía un rico terreno teórico para reimaginar la compleja relación entre las imágenes, el poder y los sujetos» (Brown y Thy Phu, 2014: 21)<sup>15</sup>. Con relación a estos textos y fotografías, *feeling* implica el sentimiento y la emoción que inspiran, las huellas afectivas que dejan grabadas en sus lectores, la sombra de la figura que queda atrapada en nuestras memorias, afirmando lo que pudiera ser una evidencia *queer*.

Pasando ahora al libro *The Women of Casa X*, usará este enfoque de *feeling* y evidencia *queer* para explorar cómo un cambio de metodología puede abrir nuevas visiones a las vidas de estas mujeres. Publicado en Ámsterdam y EE. UU., el libro fue producido por el cineasta y fotógrafo londinense Malcolm Venville. Además de los retratos de Venville, el libro incluye breves testimonios, escritos en primera persona, que aparecen en inglés. Estos testimonios fueron escritos por Amanda de la Rosa, la periodista mexicana que Venville contrató para entrevistar a las residentes en el transcurso de un mes. Poco se sabe de Amanda de la Rosa, la mujer que entrevistó, editó y tradujo estos testimonios del español al inglés. Las entrevistas consistieron en dos preguntas: «háblame de tu vida y háblame de los hombres» (Venville y De la Rosa, 2013: 5). Al igual que en *Las amorosas más bravas*, tenemos un fotógrafo europeo y una periodista mexicana; hay fotos y hay relatos. Pero las diferencias también están marcadas: Venville acabó su proyecto en un mes comparado con los seis años que tardó el proyecto de Desrus y Gómez Ramos; las fotos de Venville se encuadran en el género de fotografías de estudio,

y las de Desrus, dentro del marco de fotoperiodismo. En *Las amorosas más bravas* las autoras presentan diversas fotos que existen separadas de las historias de las diferentes mujeres. En cambio, el libro de Venville está organizado en torno a un retrato, a veces dos, que siempre incluye el nombre completo de la persona, al lado de su testimonio. La otra diferencia, como vemos en la portada, es que en muchas de estas fotos las mujeres están desnudas o en diversos grados de desnudez [6].

En contraste con la larga historia que presentan Desrus y Gómez Ramos de cómo llegaron a documentar la historia de las habitantes de la Casa Xochiquetzal, poco se señala en el texto de Venville sobre cómo se produjo esta colaboración creativa entre el fotógrafo, la entrevistadora y las modelos, o cómo se solicitaron o compensaron las historias o los retratos. En la breve introducción, De la Rosa afirma que «el plan original era tomar las fotos con ellas vestidas así que me tomó por sorpresa que estuvieran de acuerdo con la sugerencia del fotógrafo de que se desnudaran delante de la cámara, a excepción de Aurelia que no se quita su ropa, ni siquiera para bañarse» (Venville y De La Rosa, 2013: 5)<sup>16</sup>.

Utilizando una cámara Ebony 4X5, las fotografías de Venville usan convenciones clásicas del retrato fotográfico formal para captar a estos sujetos improbables. La imagen de un cuerpo viejo y desnudo altera radicalmente las expectativas propias de las imágenes eróticas. Aquí la falta de detalles visuales nos obliga a concentrarnos en sus miradas, sus cuerpos, sus gestos silenciosos y a buscar en ellos una evidencia *queer*: las marcas de sus historias escritas en sus miradas.

La mujer de la portada del libro es Raquel López Moreno, y en su testimonio describe su trabajo como sirvienta y como costurera. Pero desde el principio de su vida, su historia sexual ya había coloreado sus posibilidades sociales; ella declara: «Yo ya había tenido mi fracaso y una vez que ya no eres virgen, los hombres ya no te tratan bien, y no te respetan» (Venville y De La Rosa, 2013: 64). Al describir la primera vez que tuvo sexo por dinero, cuenta: «Vi a las mujeres que trabajaban en la plaza y parecía que les estaba yendo bien [...] y me dije: 'no es nada que no pueda hacer'» (Venville y De La Rosa, 2013: 64)<sup>17</sup>. Y así empezó su vida como trabajadora sexual.

Su retrato, que aparece en la portada del libro, la presenta de perfil, con los brazos a los lados, su rostro se vira

para mirarnos [6]. Está parcialmente desnuda, con los pechos destapados y unos pantis cubriendo sus bragas rojas. Su expresión es seria; no parece ni enojada, ni alegre, sino decidida o tal vez resignada. Su cuerpo está completamente recto, y ella se ve algo tiesa como si no estuviera acostumbrada a que le tomen fotos. Su edad no se indica; las profundas arrugas de su cara y sus manos contrastan con la suavidad de la piel que cubre sus pechos y vientre. Incluso aquí, parcialmente desnuda, vemos las huellas de un estilo propio: las pulseras de cuentas alrededor de un reloj digital, el toque de lápiz labial y lo que parece ser una peluca.

Su testimonio se presenta en algunos párrafos de la narración y Raquel nos dice que vive en la Casa Xochiquetzal con un camaleón mascota que guarda en una bolsa de plástico. A diferencia de la mayoría de los retratos de estudio en los que el cliente contrata al fotógrafo para crear una imagen favorecedora de la manera en que podría desear ser visto, esta imagen captura una *performance* para Venville, el fotógrafo, una *performance* que también funciona como una especie de trabajo sexual. El caballero de Londres la ha contratado para sacarle unas fotos, ha sugerido que ella podría desnudarse, la mujer que lo acompaña le ha hecho una serie de preguntas en español, y a todo esto ella ha cumplido diligentemente. La fotografía que surge de este encuentro representa este intercambio. Parte de lo que vemos en estas imágenes es la relación entre el fotógrafo y la modelo, la huella visual del trabajo sexual que compartieron. Estar de pie, desnuda ante esta figura masculina del extranjero, siguiendo sus indicaciones para pararse aquí, o mirar allá, podría ser una experiencia bastante familiar para estas mujeres. Del mismo modo en sus poses y gestos, podemos discernir su relación con el trabajo sexual que realizan y los hombres a los que sirven. ¿Son trabajadoras obedientes que realizan un servicio, expertas en el arte de la simulación, o buscan la posibilidad de placer en sus relaciones con clientes? Una metodología *queer* nos inspira a buscar lo que no podemos ver.

El siguiente par de imágenes [7] son de Sofía Priscila Aparición, una de las residentes más jóvenes, y una de las varias mujeres de la casa que todavía se gana la vida a través del trabajo sexual. Su relato comienza así: «Enamorarse es horrible. Te lo digo sinceramente; es horrible y espero que nunca me pase de nuevo ¿Cómo te puedes enamorar de algo tan inútil como un hombre?» (Venville y De La Rosa,



6. Malcolm Venville y Schilt Publishing, «Raquel López Moreno», *The Women of Casa X*, 2013, portada

2013: 54). Ella se describe empezando a trabajar como servidora sexual ya de mayor. Narra:

Nadie me dijo cómo se hace; aprendí por mi cuenta [...]. En ese entonces, tenía cuarenta años. Salía a vender dulces en mis pantalones y zapatillas de deporte; las chicas de minifalda y tacones no me roban clientes a mí [...] los hombres vienen sin tener que perseguirlos [...]. Es un trabajo como cualquier otro y no tiene nada de extraordinario. Ellos están buscando satisfacer sus instintos, te dan su dinero y todo el mundo contento (Venville y De La Rosa, 2013: 54)<sup>18</sup>.

En la fotografía de la izquierda la vemos como podría salir a vender dulces al mercado, vestida para andar cómoda y ser productiva mientras navega por las calles de la Ciudad de México. A la par, las dos fotografías intervienen para revelar lo que hay debajo, revelando no sólo su cuerpo, sino también la sexualidad que vive debajo de la superficie. Las posturas



7. Malcolm Venville y Schilt Publishing, «Sofía Priscila Aparición», *The Women of Casa X*, 2013, pp. 52 y 53

se destacan por sus diferencias. En la primera, sus manos están dobladas, cubriendo su sexo, en un gesto reservado y modesto, propio de una dama de cierta edad; un cuerpo sin sexualidad. En contraste, la segunda imagen podría ser de una revista pornográfica; una pose clásica de la feminidad erotizada, con una mano en la cadera, una detrás de la espalda, levantando sus pechos ligeramente. Sus piernas colocadas para que la cadera salga fuera, creando una silueta más curvilínea. Mientras que en la primera fotografía la cabeza se echa hacia atrás, en la segunda la cara empuja hacia adelante y sesgada ligeramente hacia un lado; la sonrisa es más sutil, con los ojos mirando hacia arriba en plan de seducción. A pesar de que podemos imaginar que Venville está dirigiendo la escena, la foto que resulta de su unión da la sensación de que ella está disfrutando de esta interacción con este extranjero cuya cámara y atención se centra sólo y exclusivamente en ella. En su cara y el tono sociable de su historia, me imagino que ella es una persona generalmente feliz. En su relato, nos dice que la vida es cara, y que está ayudando a educar sus hijos, y nos cuenta que ellos no saben el trabajo que hace, «Solo usted y mis amigas aquí saben lo que realmente hago de trabajo» (Venville y De La Rosa, 2013: 54)<sup>19</sup>.

Finalmente les presento a Paola Pacheco Juárez [8]. Su historia describe cómo llegó a la Casa Xochiquetzal después de ser arrestada, y nos cuenta que ha estado sobria diez meses. Nos dice que los collares que usa están relacionados con la santería. No menciona el tatuaje de la Santa Muerte que trae en su hombro, pero igual podemos imaginar las veces que le ha orado a esta patrona de las prostitutas, travestis, traficantes y gentes marginalizadas. Hija mayor de padres alcohólicos, Paola recuerda su trabajo en las cantinas a los 13 años, y describe: «Yo bebía y dejaba que cualquier viejo pendejo feo bañado en colonia me agarrara, pero sólo después que el dinero estaba puesto sobre la mesa. Así que terminé en una cantina de mala muerte, bebiendo pulque de una jarra hasta que las cosas se ponían en blanco» (Venville y De La Rosa, 2013: 62).

Los cinco hijos que tuvo y dejó a cargo de otros han dejado sus huellas en su cuerpo, y sueña con encontrarlos un día. Ella declara: «Quisiera que las cosas pudieran ser diferentes»<sup>20</sup>. De pie, desnuda ante nosotros, trato de imaginar los otros momentos en su vida cuando habrá asumido esta postura, a la vez sexualmente provocativa y ferozmente combativa. Trato de imaginarla a los cuarenta, a los veinte

años. Trato de imaginarla parada así a los trece años en una cantina en una esquina de esa gran ciudad y me pierdo en el *feeling* que inspira su mirada.

Los testimonios recopilados en estos dos libros dejan claro que el trabajo sexual y los sentimientos que inspiran nunca se pueden reducir simplemente a una narración o sentimiento singular. La diversidad de sus vidas, y sus maneras de entenderlas, escapan de esquemas fáciles de representación. La combinación de lo textual con lo visual aporta un conocimiento más allá de lo que podemos captar con solo uno o el otro; las caras de estas mujeres hacen que sus historias nos penetren de otra manera. Y aunque las historias de pobreza, violencia, soledad y comunidad que encontramos en estos libros son historias que se viven todos los días en todo el mundo, lo que parece excepcional son sus rostros y la comprensión que intentan comunicar. Los estudios feministas requieren que aprendamos sobre la vida de aquellas marginalizadas y estigmatizadas por sus prácticas sexuales, por su pobreza y por el crimen de vivir fuera de las normas sexuales de la sociedad. Pero el feminismo también implica buscar otras metodologías que nos permitan un espacio para reflexionar sobre lo que escapa de archivos oficiales, las huellas afectivas que las historias, las caras y los cuerpos dejan atrás; los sentimientos que desbordan la imagen. Igual, si nos permitimos sentir profundamente, reflexionar, no sobre lo que sabemos del sujeto, sino sobre las emociones que inspira en nosotros, podemos encontrar otro modo *queer* de entender.



8. Malcolm Venille y Schilt Publishing, «Paola Pacheco Juárez», *The Women of Casa X*, 2013, p. 63

## Notas

- 1 Quiero expresar mi agradecimiento a Maite Méndez Baiges y Manuel Cuellar por su asistencia editorial.
- 2 Información acerca de cómo enviar donativos se encuentra en <https://casaxochiquetzal.wordpress.com/donaciones/> (fecha de consulta: 5-5-2016).
- 3 En este texto, conservo el uso de la palabra prostituta para hablar de la figura de la imaginación; uso el término «trabajadora sexual» en referencia a esas personas que trabajan en el campo sexual. Entiendo que trabajadora sexual es una categoría muy amplia, que depende de una definición ambigua de lo que pudiera ser el sexo y/o el trabajo.
- 4 Judith Butler en *Bodies That Matter*, escribe: «This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of object beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subjective» (Butler, 1993: 3).
- 5 «An evidence that has been queered in relation to the laws of what counts as proof». «Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor».
- 6 «Sexuality is a matter not of seeing but of sensing».
- 7 Páginas del libro sin numerar.
- 8 En algunas revistas y páginas web donde también se publicaron estas fotos, sí aparecen los nombres como epígrafe.
- 9 «Expression, or the face, overflows images».
- 10 «And only when I find a face do I encounter an exteriority and does an outside happen to me».
- 11 «O retrato é uma imagem da face de um sujeito, criada por um/a artista e/ou fotógrafo/a, a qual lhe confere a possibilidade de ser mais que corpo físico. Por isso, a representação da face confere existência históricossocial ao/à retratado/a, pois permite que ele/ela exista mesmo após a sua morte».
- 12 «Under what conditions do some individuals acquire a face, a legible and visible face, and others do not».



- 13 «To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed».
- 14 «[Have] generally been less instructive [...] in providing a full account of alterity».
- 15 «Focus on feeling allows photo scholars a rich theoretical terrain to reimagine the complex relationship between images, power, and subjects».
- 16 «The original plan was that they would pose dressed so it took me by surprise that they agreed to the photographer's suggestion that they can undress in front of the camera, except for Aurelia who does not remove her clothes, not even for bathing».
- 17 «I had already had my *fracaso* and once you are not a virgin, men don't treat you right, and they don't respect you». «I watched the women that worked the plaza and it looked like they were doing all right [...] and I said, 'it's nothing I couldn't do».
- 18 «Falling in love is horrible. I tell you honestly, it is awful and I hope it never happens to me again. How can you fall in love with something as worthless as a man?». «No one told me how you do it, I learned on my own [...] I was forty then. I'd go out to sell my candy in pants and sneakers, the miniskirt and high-heels girls don't steal clients from me [...] men come without me having to chase them». «It's a job like any other and there's nothing to it. They are looking to satisfy their instincts, they give you your money and everybody's happy».
- 19 «Only you and my friends in here know what I really do for work».
- 20 «I'd drink and let any old ugly cologne-drenched asshole grab me but only as long as that money was right on the table. So I ended up in a dive cantina, drinking rot-gut from a jug until things would go blank [...] I hope things can be different».

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# Contemporary Artists on Colonial Museums

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**ABSTRACT:** Ethnological museums are not only where objects from primitive societies are exhibited, but also creators of categories, parameters and models of behaviour and understanding of the world in relation to such societies. The objects collected in colonial expeditions slowly began a process of reformulation in the twentieth century, which was the century of contemporary art museums and the aestheticization of objects to which we nowadays refer as «primitive art».

Ethnological museums held great appeal for artists throughout the twentieth century. Firstly, it was there that the avant-garde got to know and came to appreciate the works of primitive art which would have such an influence on the formulation of Modernism. Later, ethnological museums prompted artists to reflect upon and develop the principles on the basis of which western society has confronted the Other, the relationship between western culture and non-western cultures. That is the case of Hannah Höch, Candida Höfer and Bertrand Lavier.

**KEY WORDS:** Contemporary Art, Ethnological Museums, Ethnocentrism, Hannah Höch, Candida Höfer, Bertrand Lavier.

## Artistas contemporáneos en el museo colonial

**RESUMEN:** El museo etnológico no es solamente el ámbito de exhibición de objetos pertenecientes a sociedades primitivas, sino también es el creador de categorías, parámetros, modelos de comportamiento y comprensión del mundo respecto de ellas. Los objetos provenientes de expediciones coloniales comenzarán lentamente un proceso de reformulación durante el siglo XX, que no será ya el siglo de los museos etnológicos sino el de los museos de arte contemporáneo y de la estetización de los objetos que hoy llamamos de «arte primitivo».

El museo etnológico, a lo largo del siglo XX, ha ejercido una gran atracción sobre los artistas. Primeramente es el ámbito en el cual la vanguardia conoce y aprecia las obras de arte primitivo que tanta influencia ejercerán en la formulación de la modernidad. Con posterioridad, será el motivo de reflexión y elaboración por parte de los artistas de las pautas con las cuales la sociedad occidental se ha enfrentado al Otro, de la relación de la cultura occidental y las culturas no-occidentales. Tal es el caso de Hannah Höch, Candida Höfer y Bertrand Lavier.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Arte contemporáneo, Museos etnológicos, Etnocentrismo, Hannah Höch, Candida Höfer, Bertrand Lavier.

From the viewpoint of European culture, ethnological museums are not only where objects from primitive societies are kept or exhibited, but also creators of categories, parameters and models of behaviour and understanding of the world in relation to such societies. The vast array of objects set out for the fundamental purpose of educating and transmitting values, against the backdrop of colonial activity, slowly began a process of reformulation in the twentieth century, which was not the century of ethnological museums but of contemporary art museums and the aestheticization of objects to which we nowadays refer as primitive art (Ocampo, 2011).

Ethnological museums held great appeal for artists throughout the twentieth century. Firstly, it was there that the avant-garde got to know and came to appreciate the works of primitive art which would have such an influence on the formulation of Modernism. Later, ethnological museums prompted artists to reflect upon and develop the principles on the basis of which western society has confronted the Other, the relationship between western culture and non-western cultures.

The three artists I have chosen are not the only ones who have deconstructed museum ideology, but they have certainly been very significant in that process. They have used different aesthetic procedures, namely photomontage, photography and installation, to reflect on what lies behind museums as reproducers and transmitters of the ideas involved in the relationship between European culture and the non-European cultures. As early as the 1920s Hannah Höch called upon viewer's analytical capabilities, deconstructing the ideas present in museums through her display methods. Candida Höfer did likewise in the late twentieth century. Bertrand Lavier has done so early in the current century, at an exhibition held on 2013. Unaccompanied by any kind of explanation, their works are intended for active viewer participation and make use of irony, even humour at times. They could be said to be «conceptual» in that they become a discourse on ethnocentrism. The titles of the three artist's series that we are going to analyse are unequivocal. Höch's is called *From an Ethnographic Museum*, Höfer's *In Ethnographic Museums* and Lavier's *New Impressions of Africa*.

## Hannah Höch

Hannah Höch's *From an Ethnographic Museum* series comprises 18 to 20 pieces. She worked on it intermittently between 1924 and 1934, the year of her solo exhibition in Brno, in which she included some of its components (Lavin, 1993: 160). In her own words, «[...] *From an Ethnographic Museum*, which was inspired by a visit Kurt Switters and I paid to Leiden Museum's abundant ethnographic collection, reflects the huge stimulus with which artistic manifestations of primitive cultures began to provide the west in around 1910, based on Fauvism and the Die Brücke movement» (Höch, 2004: 68). Höch had a very close relationship with German Expressionism and Dada through different artists, fundamentally Raoul Hausmann (Makela, 1996: 70), who became her partner and shared her passion for primitive art. However, unlike the Expressionists, whose focus was on actual pieces of primitive art, Höch took an interest in such pieces in their European context, i.e. in museums, and in what they said about cultural organization at the time. Criticism of aestheticization and fetishization, two of museum's fundamental conceptual procedures, lies at the heart of her work.

As far as aestheticization is concerned, Höch's photomontages feature an unequivocally characteristic element of museums, namely the pedestal or base upon which pieces rest, having been decontextualized, deconsecrated – we must not forget that we are talking about objects of ritual – and then placed on display. The vast majority of the components of Höch's series show the figures in her photomontages on a pedestal. *Monument I [1]*, dated 1924, depicts a strange being with three legs – a kind of animal's leg, a female leg and a trouser-clad male leg – and a body with a mask for a face, atop a pedestal. Compositions featuring human – generally female – elements and pieces of primitive art on museum pedestals are characteristic of Höch's series. Her combination of western and non-western elements, superimposed upon one another in different scales and colours, prompts reflection on each part and the meaning of the whole.

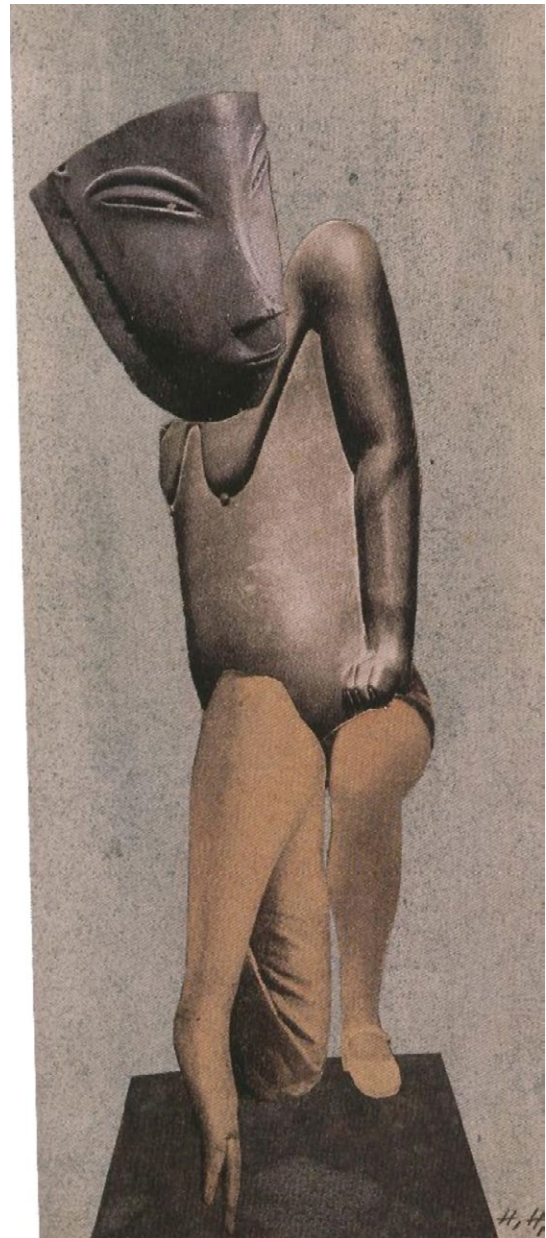
Höch goes even further with certain images that are framed by lines suggesting the presence of glass cabinets, showcases in which the depicted individuals are enclosed as if they were objects. This generates the fetishization that is the second procedure of which she is implicitly critical. The same theme features in Candida Höfer's work, as we will see later. In *Negerplastik*, Höch places a figure composed of a baby's body and an ivory mask from Benin on a very small pedestal. In the early twentieth century, it was very common to associate primitive art and children's art, and, on the basis of objects, primitives and children. Höch criticized that practice, in keeping with the avant-garde's idea of calling for recognition of the intrinsic value of both.

However, the fundamental association that Höch made was that of museums fetishization of primitive objects with the fetishization of women. That is why her figures, on their pedestals, always include a female fragment – breasts, legs –, objectified, fetishized in the same way as pieces of primitive art are in museums, decontextualized and deconsecrated. The procedure followed in museums is the same as that followed in society. Höch's photomontage entitled *Marlene* (Lavin, 1990:63) speaks volumes. It shows Marlene Dietrich's famous legs, fragmented, objectified and fetishized, on a museum pedestal, under the ecstatic gaze of a group of men. Just as ethnological museums render western culture's relationship with the other transparent, Höch uses the primitive/civilized or European/non-European compari-

son to highlight the social relationship between the genders and the way women are looked upon as fetishized objects. Höch was the first artist to adopt that perspective. While avant-garde artists had used primitive art in their criticism of Europe's social reality in their day, they had not focused on the situation of women in doing so.

The result of Höch's photomontages is disturbing and puts paid to any notion of women being portrayed as «objects of beauty». *Strange Beauty* [2] is one of her most symbolic works in terms of her criticism of the fetishization of women. Its female figure is composed of a photograph of a naked woman's body and the head of an ancestral figure of the Bushongo, an African ethnic group. The female body is in the classic pose corresponding to beauty and sensuality. The inclusion of a primitive figure's head is an ironic observation on how women have traditionally been represented in the history of European art and the consequent fetishization of the female body, making use of the impact that combining the two elements causes. In a later work, *Strange Beauty II*, dated 1966, Höch returned to the theme of the fetishization of women (Lanchner, 1996: 144), drawing on the same resource, a female body and the head of a figure deemed primitive art. In this case, however, the fetishization is the result of fashion and its tyrannical effect on women. Instead of the classic naked pose seen in *Strange Beauty*, the work portrays a fashion model and the imposition on women of the standards dictated by the fashion world and stereotypes.

1. Hannah Höch, *Denkmal I: Aus einem ethnographischen Museum (Monumento 1: De un Museo Etnográfico)*, 1924, fotomontaje, Berlinische Galerie, Berlín



2. Hannah Höch, *Fremde Schönheit (Extraña Belleza)*, 1929, fotomontaje, colección privada, París



## Candida Höfer

Although produced more than half a century later, Candida Höfer's work takes up Hannah Höch's standpoint on ethnological museums again, to a certain degree. Höfer's *In Ethnographic Museums* (Höfer, 2004) series reflects on such institutions as a mine of information on western culture's relationship with the Other, albeit less explicitly than in the case of the work of the Dada artist.

Born in 1944, Höfer trained in Cologne and, later, Düsseldorf, where she firstly studied cinema and then photography with Bernd and Hilla Becher. She began her career with an interest in anthropology, reflected in her *Turks in Germany* series (Oppitz, 2004: 13). In 1971, with her career still at a very early stage, she had photographed Denmark's National Museum in Copenhagen. Her subsequent series focus on the architecture of public places of cultural and human memory, which she photographs when there are no people present. The result is that, over and above its aesthetic qualities, each location acquires a capacity for revelation that goes unnoticed in everyday life. She has taken pictures of libraries, universities, palaces, theatres, churches and museums, showing them in all their silent eloquence. She photographs places of art and knowledge.

*In Ethnographic Museums* is particularly notable among Höfer's multiple series because it hints at what such museums mean in relation to culture and memory, and at what the organization of objects reflects in terms of categories of thought and action. Höfer is a very reflective artist. In an interview about a trip she went on to various Asian countries, she revealed that she researches and reads up on objects before photographing them. «I don't see through the camera», she said. «I see first and then I take photographs. Sometimes I don't even take photographs, I just look»<sup>1</sup>. She has observed that «in recent years, the theme has been the same but my photography has become more concentrated, denser»<sup>2</sup>. Her work is more meaningful, not aesthetically speaking but in terms of what it enables viewers to deduce about the relationship that the cultural spaces she photographs have with the creators of culture.

In the case of ethnological museums, Höfer and her camera record the different strata of time preserved in objects and the way they are exhibited. Höfer's aesthetics and working technique are of great help to viewers of her se-

ries in the task of deconstruction they are asked to perform. Nothing is made explicit. Unlike other conceptual artists, she does not provide explanatory texts. She merely identifies the museum in each photograph, the city in which it is located and the year in which the picture was taken. The scarcity of non-visual information means that it is entirely up to the viewer to reflect on what the image transmits.

Höfer does not alter the conditions of the things she photographs. She uses natural colour and light. Light is a very important element, as it accurately conveys one of the ways in which a museum presents its discourse. «I take light as I find it», she says, «as it creates the space. With regard to the way I take photographs and the work I do with them to obtain images, I suppose you could say that my method is "old school"»<sup>3</sup>. It is precisely that «objectivity» that makes it possible to concentrate on the actual museum and its approach to displaying objects, and, through that approach, its implicit cultural and ideological categories. Art museums have used light for the purpose of «focusing», i.e. to isolate an object from a context by causing the viewer to concentrate all their attention on it. They thus transmit the qualities of the work of art: autonomy, uniqueness, solitude, in that it is one of a kind in the whole world. That is the idea that placing a spotlight on a work conveys. In contrast, ethnological museums use natural light or central lighting because their objects are positioned indiscriminately in their showcases, more as examples of material life than as works of art, even in the case of those that subsequently find their way to art museums as unique works. Höfer's photographs reflect the phenomenon very accurately thanks to their use of natural light.

The ethnological museums Höfer has chosen to photograph are highly significant in terms of the history of both collecting and colonialism. She has not photographed every museum established on the basis of colonial expeditions, but those that feature in the series are «must-see» institutions. That, of course, is no coincidence, but rather a consequence of previous research on which museums would best communicate ethnological museum's significance in western culture's development. They include the *Kunstkamera* in Saint Petersburg; the ethnological museums of Dresden, Berlin and Hamburg; the Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren; the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam; the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum in Paris and its present-day successor, the Quai Branly Museum; Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum; and the



Museum of Natural History in New York. They are all «must-see» museums. Furthermore, they are institutions that reflect the process of redefinition currently occurring in ethnological museums, which are seeking to take action from within with regard to their colonial origin. This is a real undertaking applied to memory, one geared to preserving their history but also to them ceasing to reproduce prejudices, discrimination and ethnocentrism.

Ethnological museums preserve the memory of cultures through objects. Additionally though, they preserve the memory of different ways of collecting objects, as well as of the type of objects that were of interest in the past. If we were to arrange Höfer's series of images in historical order, the cabinets of curiosities that her photographs of Saint Petersburg's ethnological museum and of Teylers Museum [3] in Haarlem show would come first. It was in cabinets of curiosities that objects from non-European cultures were first exhibited, alongside natural elements that aroused interest or captured the imagination, such as prehistoric animal's bones, shells, elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns, stones and antidotes to poison. Europe's efforts to conquer and colonize Africa, the Americas and Asia led to the inclusion of hitherto unknown or rarely seen objects in cabinets of curiosities stemming from colonization (Schlosser, 1988; Le Fur, 2006: 58-103).

With the constitution of modern states, many of the objects of primitive art in princely collections became the property of state museums. However, the main influx of such objects into Europe occurred at the height of colonialism in the nineteenth century.

Scientific, military and trade expeditions brought large quantities of objects back to their respective metropolises, moulding the collections of the ethnological museums founded in Europe's principal cities as of the middle of the century. Those museum's dependency on colonial activity is entirely evident, due not only to the composition of their main collections but also to the ideology behind them and the goals pursued thereby, chiefly involving disseminating pro-colonialism propaganda. All the faces of a prismatic reality converged in the establishment of ethnological museums in Europe's main cities between the 1870s and 1900. They had a common governing ideology, under which non-European cultures, regarded as primitive or savage, were assigned to the realm of natural science and prehistory.



3. Candida Höfer, *Teylers Museum Haarlem II*, 2003

The museum that best symbolizes nineteenth-century colonialism and its expression in an approach to organizing displays is probably the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford [4], of which Höfer has taken various photographs, offering an insight into the said approach's implicit intellectual structure. The deed of gift signed by Pitt Rivers stipulated that his organizational system must never be altered, a principle that the institution has respected (Chapman, 1985: 15). Consequently, a nineteenth-century ethnological museum's typological display criterion – that of grouping exhibited objects together on the basis of form or function rather than geographic or cultural origin – can still be perceived today. It is probably in the Pitt Rivers Museum that the intention to educate and transmit scientific positions through display-related criteria is most clearly visible. For example, its founder's ideal of transmitting categories through an object's location in a space involved concentric circles starting from a central point corresponding to the Palaeolithic Age and opening out



4. Candida Höfer, *Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford*, 2004

into subsequent circles until arriving at the present (Pitt Rivers, 1891: 117).

Candida Höfer's photographic relationship with the Pitt Rivers Museum has a highly significant precedent in the work of Lothar Baumgarten. Much of his work is devoted to conceptual reflection on the relationship between western culture and aboriginal cultures. He lived in South and North America, among indigenous Amazonian groups and on Native American reservations, giving rise to multiple works and exhibitions. Between 1968 and 1970, Baumgarten produced a series of 80 slides on the Pitt Rivers Museum to be projected as part of an installation entitled *Unsettled Objects*, through which he highlighted the conceptual procedures applied to objects, such as classification, reinvention and generalization. Like Höfer, his focus was on the museum and its implicit categories, not the items contained in it. Consequently, most of his photographs are general views, pictures of shelves and showcases rather than of individual pieces. His slide called *confined*, which shows glass cabinets full of objects, is very similar to the work of Höfer years later.

Baumgarten is much more direct than Höfer, as each of his slides features a word that tells viewers what he is seeking to communicate. Höfer leaves her images wordless,

confident that they are sufficiently eloquent in their own right. The accumulation of objects, grouped together on the basis of function or form and superimposed upon one another, was implicit in the display criteria that Pitt Rivers developed for his museum. The same criteria were widely used in other museums of the time in question. As a result of the colonial process, such museums collections swelled from a few thousand objects to hundreds of thousands in a very short period. The age of capital accumulation, of the infinite multiplication of goods, was also that of the progressive museification of everything produced. As early as 1912, in a text entitled *The Artistic Expression of Primitive Peoples*, Emil Nolde (1968: 177) observed that «Our museums are becoming increasingly large and full, and are growing quickly. I am no friend of these vast agglomerations that suffocate us with their size. I hope we will soon see a reaction against these excessive collections».

The non-European human is present in ethnological museums, but in a decontextualized fashion, extracted from their culture, made a mere representative of the species, a universal human who ceases to be universal precisely because of the absence of context; hence the grouping criterion being based on form rather than meaning. The «human forms in art» showcase (Höfer, 2004: 29) contains a collection of different objects representing shamans, divinities and ancestral figures from a variety of cultures, all grouped together without distinction. However, sculptures representing European humans are conspicuous by their absence, making it clear that there is a hierarchy among the aforementioned objects and their European counterparts, which reside in art museums.

A fundamental aspect of nineteenth-century ethnological museums was the use of large showcases containing mannequins wearing clothes and headdresses, and carrying weapons and other objects, supplanting humans, giving the impression of having been snatched from their lives for a permanent, timeless exhibition. The so-called «Negro of Banyoles», undoubtedly an exceptionally shocking case, exemplifies what is symbolically underlying in these glass cabinets. The exhibit in question was a bushman who had been exhumed in Botswana and taken to the Darder Museum in Banyoles, Spain, where he was stuffed as if he were one of the animals – stuffed birds, lions, elephants – displayed in other galleries in ethnological museums. In 1992, following

a complaint by a citizen of Banyoles and the subsequent intervention of various African governments and Kofi Annan, the bushman was returned to his homeland, where he was buried with great honours by way of redress.

This example reveals what is symbolically present in showcases. It is not only objects that they decontextualize and exhibit; they also exhibit people. In the early days of the colonial expeditions, exhibiting individuals brought back from the colonies was rather common, a practice that existed in Europe's foremost capital cities (Lloyd, 1991: 31-32; Gille, 2005: 54). Where ethnological museum showcases are concerned, people from colonies, from those non-European cultures, that Other, who, once tamed, were exposed to Europeans' curiosity or genuine interest in learning, constitute a historical and symbolic reference point. The angle from which the Candida Höfer's photograph *KIT Tropenmuseum Amsterdam VII* [5] is taken shows the colonial servant, enclosed in a showcase, facing colonists and their families, painted in oils in all their dignity. Dioramas, such as that of the Museum of Natural History in New York (Höfer, 2004: 65), fulfil the same function, although the idea of an image is more aseptic than that of a mannequin in a showcase. Nonetheless, the reference to the relationship between westerners and aborigines is clear in the one that Höfer photographed.

The proliferation of objects from different parts of the world in museums established in the late nineteenth century was a metaphor for what was happening universally. Museums offered the general public the chance to experience, on a reduced scale and without leaving their city, a colonial empire and the range of beings and things found there. Museums, world's fairs and the villages set up in European zoos were a vehicle, one that both educated and entertained (Bennett, 1997:77).

The fact that the history of colonialism and of prejudices towards non-European cultures are implicit in ethnological museum's nature and their display-related principles has led them to undertake an internal process of total reform, one of the most recent examples of which is the Quai Branly Museum, which was set up from scratch on the basis of exhibits from the old Musée de l'Homme and the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie. Candida Höfer (2004: 37) photographed the original layout of the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum, conceived by Paul Rivet



5. Candida Höfer, *KIT Tropenmuseum Amsterdam VII*, 2003

and Georges-Henri Rivière, using a technique that shows the importance of natural light and its homogenizing effect on showcases. She also photographed the institution's successor, the Quai Branly Museum (Höfer, 2004: 87) [6], the aseptic storage facilities of which, looking more like a hospital's operating theatre than a space for housing a museum's reserve collection, are sufficient proof of the transformation that has taken place.

Looking through Höfer's series of ethnographic photographs in historical order would provide an overview of ethnological museum's entire development process, spanning their roots in cabinets of curiosities, their days as colonial ethnological museums and their present-day reformulation.





6. Candida Höfer, *Musée du Quai Branly Paris I*, 2003

## Bertrand Lavier

Bertrand Lavier is a conceptual artist whose works are related to Höfer's in that they always revolve around reflection on artistic activity and the cultural perception of art. Lavier says (2012:17): «Une oeuvre dont on ne peut rien dire, je suis désolé, ce n'est rien». That statement of Lavier sums up his outlook. He organizes his output as an eloquent discourse, one that is immediately graspable upon seeing his pieces and the way he constantly restructures meaning. His work is always based on a point of view and on a reflection performed through the perceptible.

Since 1995, when he was invited to the Johannesburg Contemporary Art Biennale (Gauthier, 2012: 74), Lavier has been working on the analysis of ethnological museum's display and, thus, discursive procedures and their meaning. Some of the objects he exhibited in Johannesburg subsequently reappeared in other shows, and he has also added other, new items to the series. We will analyse a particular section of his Centre Pompidou's anthological exhibition, ended in January 2013, titled *Bertrand Lavier, since 1969*. It updated a process that Lavier began in 1995 and has since revisited on various occasions.

The title of the aforementioned section of the exhibition is *New Impressions of Africa*. This title in itself tells us a great deal. It refers to Raymond Roussel's book *Impressions of Africa*, published in 1909, and his later work *New Impressions of Africa*. *Impressions of Africa* is a text that was firstly serialized in the newspaper *Le Gaulois du dimanche* and subsequently published, at the author's expense, in the form of a corrected edition. In the text, the *Lyseus*, a ship carrying a group of characters travelling to Buenos Aires for different reasons, sinks off the coast of Africa. The shipwrecked travellers are captured by Emperor Talou VII, who demands a sum of money to set them free. While they await their release, they prepare various performances for a show called the «gala of incomparables». The novel begins with a description of the gala and the events that surround it, taking the reader completely by surprise and plunging them into a world of Surrealism avant-la-lettre. The following chapters explain the capture, the history of Talou VII and his people, and the preparation of the gala's performances, restoring a certain degree of logic to the tale. Roussel actually suggested that readers begin in the middle of the text, at page 147, and then work backwards to read the story in its logical order. The work was made into a play in 1922. However, it was a huge flop and met with violent rejection. It was only appreciated by a group of young artists who went on to shape Surrealism. Duchamp was a great admirer of Roussel, also entailing a connection with Lavier, in whose work references to the ready-made and Duchampian aesthetics are a constant. Roussel later wrote *New Impressions of Africa*, which was published in Paris in 1932 by the same publisher as its predecessor. Again, Roussel paid for its publication himself.

*Impressions of Africa* was published when colonialism and interest in primitive peoples were at their peak. Ethnological museums had generally been established for twenty five years; dealers were selling avant-garde artists African objects brought to Europe by sailors and soldiers; one international exhibition featuring non-European objects followed another; and the whole of European society was closely following the colonial process. Africa, as Roussel tells us in his book, is a place of marvels, a kind of union of the dreamlike, the transcendental and the miraculous. It is also an invented place, where the imagination can run free. It is thus no surprise that the Surrealists identified so closely with his vision. Roussel was perfectly aware that it was a question of *Im-*

pressions of Africa. And like all impressions, his were fleeting, subjective, a personal product.

The fact that Lavier titled his exhibition *New Impressions of Africa* suggests, firstly, a tribute to Roussel's imagination and experimental spirit, and, secondly, his own take on the relationship between Africa and the west, his own «Impressions of Africa», formed in the early twentieth-first century, when Europe is facing the task of doing away with many of the prejudices against Africa that were reflected in its institutions.

*New Impressions of Africa* consists of a series of objects set out on a platform or pedestal that delimits an area with a meaning: everything on it is a museumified object. That meaning stems not only from the platform, which homogenizes the objects, but also from the metal arms and stands that, like those found in ethnological museums, hold the objects in position. As mentioned earlier, Hannah Höch's work made use of the power of the pedestal or base as an element inherent to the discourse of aestheticization and fetishization. Lavier uses a ready-made – a refrigerator – as a pedestal for a mechanical jack positioned in the style of an aestheticized work (*High-Lift Jack/Zanussi*, 1986). The process of aestheticization is even more complex in this case. The piece is considered art because it is on a platform that delimits an artistic area in a wider aesthetic space, that of a museum, and which also aestheticizes an everyday object, the mechanical jack, which, based on the similarities between its form and that of a certain type of totem, plays the role of a primitive object. A pedestal has the power to separate an object from everyday life and to remove its emotive or subjective values. With that in mind, in the first version of this exhibition, in Johannesburg, one of the objects on Lavier's pedestal was a worn teddy bear (*Teddy*, 1994). Despite it being an everyday, personal object par excellence, it was neutralized by the museum procedure, mirroring the way museums treats non-western works, which are objects of ritual rather than pieces of art, in their dual process of fetishization and aestheticization. Lavier's pedestal features not only decontextualized African objects but also everyday western objects of no particular interest. Following the same procedure as museums, the artist aestheticizes those objects, alters their meaning and opens them up to interpretations related not to their value in terms of use but rather to an added symbolic value.

Lavier includes a series of dissimilar objects on his pedestal, where they are homogenized by his own artistic perspective, which, as a museum does, guides viewers on how to interpret them. The objects in question are a nickel-plated bronze sculpture of Christ, cast using a mould of a nineteenth-century wooden sculpture; sculptures of African ancestral figures, also in nickel-plated bronze, obtained from moulds of the original sculptures; a motorcyclist's helmet; a mechanical jack on a refrigerator, which serves as a pedestal; a chainsaw; a lock; a skateboard; a piece of cement; a chair designed by Marc Newson; and a kayak. Each of those objects refers to a different aspect of the processes of museumification and establishing new, symbolic meanings. In addition to their status as individual pieces, however, there are relationships in terms of approach between the non-European objects and the western objects of art and everyday life, based on similarities with regard to shape and on common areas of meaning. There are also profound contradictions and oppositions between them.

One of the most meaningful procedures is that which Lavier has carried out with a series of original wooden sculptures from Africa [7] (Lavier, 2008). Museums aestheticize objects of ritual. Lavier has gone further, using the sculptures in question to make moulds from which he has obtained pieces in nickel-plated bronze, an utterly western material that gives each of them an appearance totally unlike that of the original. Using the said material makes it very clear that each piece cannot be African, despite its form being identical to that of the original African sculpture used to produce its mould. Lavier has not only done away with the sculpture's sphere of activity – ritual – and their original culture, together with their material – wood –; through his industrial manufacturing procedure, he has also turned them into pieces only found in a western context. Additionally, the use of moulds introduces the concept of serial production, which is typical of western capitalism, commercial secularization and the preponderance of decoration without transcendental meaning.

These African objects of ritual – sculptures of ancestral figures, masks – are in dialogue with another religious figure, although in this case a European one, with which Lavier has performed the same procedure. It is a French nineteenth-century sculpture of Christ, in very poor condition, which he has also used to produce a mould and a nickel-plated bronze piece. The objects of both origins have undergone the same



7. Bertrand Lavier, *Ibo*, 2008

symbolic and technical process. However, Lavier reveals further meaning, namely that all religions are based on the relationship between humans and the transcendental, and all their objects of ritual have been aestheticized, deconsecrated and decontextualized upon entering museums. The artist has carried out the same deconsecration procedure that ethnological museums have performed on non-western objects of ritual. His nickel-plated bronze copy of Christ is no longer the cult image, although it still hints at its original function, just as the African sculptures do. The western and African cult objects belong to religious spheres that the west always thought incompatible. Primitive religion, regarded as barbaric, confronts Christianity, which Europe considered to be the only true religion throughout the colonial process. The Surrealists had already included African objects and Christian figures in *The Truth about the Colonies*, an alternative exhibition they staged in Paris in 1931 (Blake, 2002:51), where an image of the Virgin with Child was displayed as a «European fetish» alongside African sculptures of ancestral figures.

Lavier highlights other relationships based on similarities in terms of shape. To that end, he decontextualizes objects and positions them in a specific way or obliges viewers

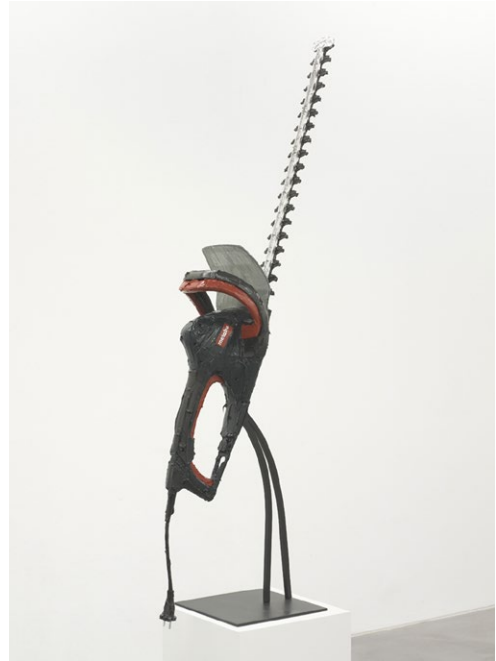
to look upon them from a particular angle. He thus gives a lock (*J.M.B. Classique*, 1994) the appearance of a primitive piece, and makes a helmet and a chainsaw (*Metabo*, 2008) look like masks. Art museums have always selected and displayed pieces of primitive art on the basis of the likeness of their shape to that of pieces from western culture. A mask is turned into a sculpture of a face. A statue of an ancestral figure becomes a full-body sculpture. Lavier has carried out the opposite process. He has turned everyday items into primitive objects by setting them out to be viewed in a certain way. The helmet, from 2011 and bearing the name «Shark», has been turned into a mask. As it fully conceals the face and head, it bears a resemblance to a mask, particularly one of the kind that covers its wearer's entire head. An individual can become another being by hiding their face. A mask's wearer ceases to be themselves and becomes the transcendental being whose mask they possess. The presence of the word «Shark» on the helmet is not meaningless. The shark is a totem animal in all primitive cultures that come into contact with the sea, and a beast regarded as a great predator in the west, with echoes of totemism. The procedure that Lavier has carried out with the *Metabo* 2008 chainsaw [8]

is similar to some extent. Its unusual position gives it a likeness to a mask, specifically one bearing a sawshark's snout, which has a pair of long barbels ahead of the mouth and is edged with different-sized teeth. Sawsharks are also totem animals in many primitive cultures. In primitive masks, part of an animal is held to be a symbol of the whole animal. We are generally accustomed to this kind of synecdoche procedure, and consequently associate the chainsaw with a sawshark straight away.

Another way in which museums deconsecrate and aestheticize objects is by setting them out in a way geared to emphasizing their form rather than their function, to the extent of turning them into entirely different objects. Consider, for example, African spoons exhibited as sculptures. Lavier has undertaken the same procedure with a western object, a skateboard [9]. On the museum plinth, an iron display arm is used to hold the skateboard in a diagonal position in midair. Made in 1995, the *Chuck McTruck skateboard* is an object that Lavier bought in a bargain store. He had its base and pedestal fitted by a specialist in performing such work for exhibitions of primitive objects. Its condition makes it clear that it has been used, although it is not its use that is emphasized but its symbolic value. The image visible on the bottom of the skateboard depicts a skater being run over by a lorry. The object no longer has an owner, a geographical origin or cultural context. And, of course, its function has vanished.

Lavier used a similar procedure in his work entitled *Embryo*, produced in 2002, which features a chair of the same name created by Marc Newson. By changing the chair's position, Lavier turned it into a horned being, in an operation not unlike that which Picasso carried out with his *Bull's Head* sculpture in 1942, when he welded the seat of an old bicycle to a rusty set of handlebars to transform them into an effigy of a bull.

Ethnological museums submerge objects in a time that stands still, that kind of limbo beyond time, in which the destruction inherent in primitive objects has been nullified. Primitive objects are always made from perishable materials and are not intended to be preserved. Either time is allowed to take its toll on them, turning them back into matter – in water, in earth –, and they are replaced by others, or they are deliberately and ritually destroyed. Museums achieve their mummification of primitive objects through a complex res-



8. Bertrand Lavier, *Metabo*, 2008



9. Bertrand Lavier, *Chuck McTruck*, 1995

toration system. In 2001, Lavier read an article about a sea kayak (Gauthier, 2012: 74) that had been disinterred in very poor condition and fully restored to be included in a museum. That inspired his work *Nautiraid*, dated 2002, consisting of a seriously damaged polyester resin kayak restored using the same methods applied in the restoration of primitive or archaic objects. Following the example of many ethnological museums, where kayaks tend to be prominently positioned, Lavier has placed a kayak on his museum pedestal. His kayak, however, belongs to our present-day culture. Taking great pains and incurring considerable costs to artistically restore an item that could easily be substituted by another

of the same kind highlights the procedures through which objects are placed in time that has come to a standstill, museum time, when outside such institutions they would be alive, engaged in a process of deterioration, destruction and replacement by new equivalents.

At different stages in terms of contemporary art, the three artists to whom I have referred have taken ethnological museums and their subsequent restructuring as art museums not only as an object of reflection but also as inspiration for the creation of work rich in aesthetic suggestion, work that speaks to us eloquently of the relationships between humans and culture.

## Notes

- 1 Candida Höfer, in Through the Lens of Candida Höfer. Asia Tatler.com, interview in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfAmjCyPcZw>. Accessed May 20, 2015.
- 2 Candida Höfer, in Through the Lens of Candida Höfer. Asia Tatler.com, Interview in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfAmjCyPcZw>. Accessed May 20, 2015.
- 3 Candida Höfer, interview in MARTÍN, Alberto, «La gente se hace más visible al estar ausente de un espacio», *El País*, Madrid, 14-4-2007.

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# Not To Be «Looked At»!

## Reality and Unreality in Kantor's Aesthetics of Theatre

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**ABSTRACT:** Universally regarded as one of the twentieth century's most subversive *pièces*, the *Dead Class* epitomises Tadeusz Kantor's concept of what theatre (and, more generally, art) could and should be. In the attempt to eliminate any distance between the stage and the auditorium, between actors and spectators, the Polish artist reflected on how to do away with the traditional distinction between the reality of everyday life and the (alleged) unreality of theatrical performances. Staging daily and trivial objects played a crucial role in this artistic strategy. Kantor was fascinated, in particular, by hyperrealistic dummies which seem to have more to do with *Wunderkammern* and fairground booths than with so-called «high» art. By focusing on the *material* the *Dead Class* mannequins are made of (namely, wax), the article delves deep into Kantor's essays and manifestos, exploring the theoretical reasons underlying his aesthetics of theatre.

**KEY WORDS:** Kantor, Hyperrealism, Phenomenology, Unreality, Wax mannequins, Bio-Objects.

### ¡Para no ser «contemplado»! Lo real y lo irreal en la estética del teatro de Kantor

**RESUMEN:** Universalmente reconocida como una de las obras más subversivas del siglo XX, *La clase muerta* ejemplifica el concepto de lo que, según Tadeusz Kantor, podría y debería ser el teatro (y, más en general, el arte). En el intento de eliminar toda distancia entre escenario y auditorio, entre actores y espectadores, el artista polaco reflexionó sobre cómo eliminar la distinción tradicional entre la realidad cotidiana y la (presunta) irrealidad de las actuaciones teatrales. La puesta en escena de objetos triviales y cotidianos desempeñó un papel crucial en esta estrategia artística. A Kantor le fascinaban, en particular, los maniquíes hiperrealistas que parecen tener más que ver con *Wunderkammern* y casetas de feria que con el «arte elevado». Centrándose en el material del que están hechos los maniquíes de *La clase muerta* (en concreto, la cera), este artículo profundiza en los ensayos y manifiestos de Kantor, para explorar las razones teóricas que subyacen a su estética del teatro.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Kantor, Hiperrealismo, Fenomenología, Irrealidad, Maniquíes de cera, Bio-objetos.

Krakow, November 15, 1975. Between the Krzysztofory Gallery's claustrophobic brick walls, plunged into the dark, cavernous depths of a windowless medieval basement, Tadeusz Kantor's *Dead Class* premieres. Unceremoniously sitting on simple and rather uncomfortable chairs, the audience is stunned by an enigmatically bleak scene consisting of a few rows of modest wooden school benches. Defining it as a «set design» seems to be an exaggeration, for the wings are nothing more than the naked room's walls, and the performance space is separated from the auditorium by a mere rope suspended on poles, last bastion of the traditional division between stage and auditorium. A poor, inconsistent, and essentially self-negating bastion, though, as it suggests the exact opposite of what it should be intended for: it sets boundaries which it cannot (and even does not want to) protect; it draws a demarcation line while, at the same time, it encourages to cross it; it erects what is supposed to be an impassable barrier, but no safety system has ever been easier to bypass.

A few benches and a rope to change the fate of contemporary theatre. Humble and trivial objects selected by Kantor precisely because of their seemingly so unattractive features. The purpose is clear: to bring unusual and disorienting nuances to everyday, well-known, and even banal things, thus modifying the meaning of the whole representation and, more generally, of the concept of theatrical art itself. Removing objects from their original contexts, depriving them of their ordinary functions and giving their physical existence a meta-physical value – this is what the Polish theatre reformer aims at:

To me, an object became a sign for the problem of boundaries in art. [...] An object, alien and undefinable by our minds, is fascinating. The desire to possess it and all attempts to imitate it or represent it are futile and vain. It must be «touched» in a different manner. This process – this *ritual* – is childishly simple: the object must be wrenched from its life's conditions and functions, left alone without a description that would give it a meaning: it must be left *alone* (Kantor, 1993: 72).

The *Dead Class* is this ritual, this *séance dramatique*, as the work's subtitle sounds like. The word *séance* conveys the idea of carrying out, of developing, of a work in progress. In its evident psychoanalytical connotation it refers to an intense, demanding activity. More precisely: a *shared* activity. We *attend* theatre performances, but we *participate* and are *involved* in a *séance*. By ritually manipulating all-too-familiar objects, Kantor emphasises the performative and vital essence of theatre, stressing how important it is to get the audience directly and concretely involved in the stage play, making it an integral part of a spectacle which should have nothing to do with a passive and leisurely *spectare*.

Within this context, the humblest objects turn out to be also the most suited to erase that distance which seems to be – as Moritz Geiger (1913: 632) already pointed out – an essential condition of possibility for contemplation and aesthetic enjoyment: «While contemplating a painting, a landscape, the features of a man, a poem, or a symphony, there is always a distance between the I and the object». Kantor's attempt is precisely to prevent the audience from merely contemplating the theatrical pieces with a distant and detached attitude, as if they were looking at something unfolding in a radically different (i.e. fictional, unreal) space

and time – something that could not concern or even affect them: «A theatre piece should not be “looked at!”» (Kantor, 1942-1944: 37). Trying to eliminate any distance between the concrete reality of the auditorium and the audience on the one hand and the particular «unreality» (we shall return to this expression further ahead) of staging and acting on the other, Kantor tirelessly challenges the traditional idea of theatre as a mere pastime and entertainment. He aims to cross the threshold between the stage and the audience, between the fictional realm of the drama and the physical reality of the theatre in which the drama is being performed: «The creation of reality, which is as concrete as the auditorium, rather than the creation of illusion, which makes the audience feel safe, should be the ultimate goal on stage. The drama on stage must be *created*, rather than *take place*. It must *develop* in front of the audience. The *drama is being created*» (Kantor, 1942-1944: 37).

The choice of «poor objects» (Kantor, 1963: 74), which we are all well-accustomed to by virtue of repetitious and monotonous use, is intended to bring out their latent semantic potentialities and unusual symbolic meanings, which can appear only through a truly *creative* act. To both actors and spectators – terms which Kantor, significantly, does not like, as he prefers to consider them «players» (Bablet, 1977: 23) – the «spectacle» should always concern our everyday life, not the imaginary life of the characters of a drama supposed to be mimetically translated into the visual «language» of the scene: *we*, and not alleged others, are personally involved in the play.

Kantor's fierce dispute against sophisticated stage designs, costumes, and a theatre which «protrudes uselessly from concrete reality» is rooted in the conviction that true art is only achievable «by including the reality of fiction in the reality of life». The image should be intermingled with reality, or rather the (alleged) scene fiction should give way to a new form of reality – the theatrical reality, in which nothing separates the actors from the audience: «Drama is reality. All that happens in drama is real and true» (Kantor, 1942-1944: 34-36). This struggle against naturalism as a flat reproduction of reality, espoused by Kantor and applied to the field of performative arts, culminates in the conception of an «autonomous theatre» capable of overcoming the tedious tautology and the mediocre illustration of a merely mimetic art.

Silence in the hall. It is showtime. When looking at the actors entering the stage, at those old people slowly taking their seats on those school benches which in the past had been theirs (or, more precisely, *could* have been theirs), the audience feels there is no border or distance anymore between themselves and the actors: we look at the others, but we see ourselves as if reflected in a mirror, and that classroom suddenly becomes *our* classroom, those dusty books lying abandoned on the floor and written in who knows what language become *our* books, above and beyond any possible difference. *We* are the students who are asked questions, *we* are the ones raising the hands to answer: *we* are the dead class. We can remember those youthful days in which everything seemed to be timeless because we have lived them as well, because even before the individual memory of that particular child there is the memory of *the* child *tout-court* – a memory which knows neither first names nor surnames, a *mythical* memory, «since, after all, the typical is the mythical», to quote Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers* (1942: 6).

Thus, instead of memories, it would be more appropriate to speak of re-evocations: what really counts is not whether we have ever been asked the same questions in the past, whether our benches had precisely the same form and colour as in Kantor's play or whether our classroom walls were similarly made of bare bricks. Instead, what matters here most is the very fact that we as well were once asked, sat on a school bench and had a classroom. While attending the *Dead Class*, the questions we hear, the classroom benches and the walls we look at, remind us of the questions we were once asked, of the benches we once sat on, and of the walls we once looked at in moments of distraction. It matters little whether or not we remember them exactly, whether or not we are able to recall the precise questions we were unable to answer, or whether or not we can still say what colour our benches were; what is crucial is that the particular questions, the particular benches, and the particular walls of Kantor's *Dead Class* act as *images*, i.e. as reference structures capable of presentifying whom (or what) is not present anymore. The analogical power of images – their distinctive as-if quality – lies in the ability to evoke the absents, to make them present, to presentify them. And the absents, in Kantor's play, are no one but ourselves, those children in a class which died long ago, and which can be re-evoked precisely because of its being dead.

Pondering on the notion of *présentification*, Jean-Pierre Vernant claims that the communication between the living and the dead requires:

A «grasp» of the person [...], some means to act upon it. If the person is not physically present, then one can operate through the mediation of «substitutes» or «equivalents» which presentify the person in a concretely manipulable form, even when it does not belong to this world anymore. Without resembling him, the equivalent is capable of presenting someone, of taking his place in the game of social exchanges. It does so not by virtue of similarity with the external aspect of the person (as in a portrait), but through a sharing in «value», a concordance in the matter of qualities tied to prestige (Vernant, 1990: 75).

A means is needed to make the absents present, to evoke the dead through a certain «sharing in «value»». Then the class suddenly empties, the elderly students disappear somewhere behind the scenes, before finally reappearing on stage from the depths of their memory, which are the depths of our own memory as well:

They are all carrying small children, like little corpses... Some of these are swaying inertly, clinging with a desperate movement, hanging, trailing, as if they were the remorse of conscience, curling up at the actors' feet, as if creeping over these metamorphosed specimens... human creatures unashamedly exhibiting the secrets of their past... with the crescences of their own childhood (Kantor, 1983: 36) [1].

It is the *grande entrée* of the famous *Dead Class* mannequins: «bio-objects», as Kantor defines them, perfectly suited to act as means of evocation, as they are ambiguous and even paradoxical in being neither objects nor subjects, or rather, enigmatically, objects *and* subjects at the same time. These dummies re-presenting – i.e. presentifying – children from the past seem to be symbiotic with the worn-out funeral clothes of the old people carrying them: «They are the larvae of those old people, they store up their entire memory of childhood, rejected and forgotten out of indifference, because of the remorseless practicality of everyday life, which deprives us of the means of grasping our lives as a whole» (Kantor, 2002: 42-43).

Rather than just «accompanying» their alter egos, Kantor's mannequins are – literally – as *one* with them: inextricably linked together, old and young people, puppets and real human beings form an indissoluble whole which prevents any distinction whatsoever between them. What is paramount is that the mannequins give the impression of being «like a nonmaterial extension, a kind of additional organ for the actors, who are their “masters”» (Kantor, 1975: 111); the actors do not just carry the children, they *are* themselves the children. What is at stake is the concept of an image which is undistinguishable from its referent: Kantor's actor carries on stage, attached to his body, «not his replicant, but rather a perceivable, memorial prosthesis of what he has been as well as what he could be – a possible form of existence. Not his double, but rather his constitutively missing part» (Cappelletto, 2010: 132). Mannequins are bio-objects insofar as they merge together two incongruent elements: an inorganic thing and a living being. If the puppets are additional organs of the actors, the converse is also true, as the actors become organs of the puppets. The main issue is no longer to distinguish between carrier and carried, but to understand that such a distinction is in principle impossible, as the mannequins are not just *similar*, but rather *identical* to men. The notion of similarity gives way to that of identity.

This inevitably leads the audience to ask who actually are the mannequins: «Who are more concrete, real, living», the puppets or the actors? (Bablet, 1977: 30) It cannot go unnoticed that the actors, too, once blended together with their artificial counterparts, begin to move in a stiff and clearly mechanical way, always repeating the same jerky gestures and monotonous actions as if they were forced to do so because of a compulsion which is typical of marionettes more than human beings. To support this argument, we could examine one of the main characters in the *Dead Class*, the somnambulist prostitute who, as a child, «pretended to be a shop-window model, a licentious mannequin often standing naked publicly» (Kantor, 1983: 36), and who, once grown up, has become a proper mannequin performing on the stage of a theatre or (which to Kantor is the same) of life. The paradoxical identity between object and person is also stressed by Kantor's idea that actors, being «deceptively similar to us, yet at the same time infinitely foreign, beyond an impassable barrier» (1975: 114), are similar to corpses: both are like us,

both are perfect images of ourselves, and yet this proximity hints at an unbridgeable distance and difference – that distance, that difference which is the condition of possibility of the image itself<sup>1</sup>.

Kantor's «Theatre of Death» is based on the conviction that «the concept of life can be vindicated in art only through the absence of life in its conventional sense» (Kantor, 1975: 110). If in Kantor's poetics of the bio-objects «the actor is what the objects makes him, that is an object» (Romanska, 2004: 272), the opposite also holds true, i.e. the object – in this case, the mannequin – is what the actor makes it, that is, a subject. Physically hampered by the mannequin, the actor is forced to unnatural, mechanical movements which make him look like an automaton. Conversely, the mannequin, thanks to the symbiosis with its bearer, gains what it was still lacking, that is, the ability to move. The living suddenly becomes dead, whereas the dead suddenly acquires the features of the living: *unheimlich*, as Ernst Jentsch called (over a decade before Sigmund Freud's famous essay on *The Uncanny*) the feeling elicited by a disturbing confusion about the animate or inanimate nature of what we are looking at. Jentsch explicitly linked the uncanny to aesthetics when he remarked that «true art, in wise moderation, avoids the absolute and complete imitation of nature and living beings, well knowing that such an imitation can easily produce uneasiness» (Jentsch, 1906: 12). The unpleasant impression is prompted by a «lack of orientation» (1906: 8) which makes it impossible to decide if we are standing in front of a statue or a real person, thus causing disorientation and rising above the doubt «as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate» (1906: 11)<sup>2</sup>.

Mentioning the notion of *unheimlich* as elaborated by both Jentsch and Freud is not irrelevant: the former emphasizes that «the truer to nature the formal reproduction, the more strongly will the uncanny effect also make its appearance» (Jentsch, 1906: 12), whereas the latter, as a corollary to Jentsch's argument, gives the example of wax figures, which illustrate the concept of *unheimlich* because of their ability to make depiction concretely indistinguishable from reality: «An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality» (Freud, 1919: 636). This





1. T. Kantor, *The Dead Class. The rope and «bio-objects»*. © Jan Dalman. Cricoteka Archive

statement perfectly fits Kantor's project of breaking down the barriers which separate the reality of life from the (alleged) unreality of theatre plays.

Within this context, it also becomes immediately clear why Kantor resorts to such an unusual material as wax in order to build up his mannequins. In fact, this choice is dictated by Kantor's idea of the enigmatic nature of all objects, particularly those of the lowest rang:

Only the reality of the lowest order, the poorest and least prestigious objects, is capable of revealing its full objectivity in a work of art. Mannequins and wax figures have always existed on the peripheries of sanctioned Culture. They were not admitted further; they occupied places in fair booths, suspicious magician's chambers, far from the splendid shrines of art, treated condescendingly as curiosities intended for the tastes of the masses. For precisely this reason, it was they, and not academic, museum creations, which caused the curtain to move at the blink of an eye (Kantor, 1975: 111).

These words immediately call to mind Julius von Schlosser's *History of Portraiture in Wax*, a pioneering work which had traced, from both a historical and a theoretical point a view, the vicissitudes of «a branch of art that in our day is all but confined to a single specialization, one almost wholly sundered from the realm of "Art" as we know it, namely the formally defined and valuable expression of an individual personality through technical ability; the specialization to which I refer is found in such places as fairground booths, barbershops, tailor shops» (Schlosser, 1911: 173). In order to correctly evaluate the meaning and importance of Schlosser's masterpiece it is essential to realise the courage of its author and the difficulties he had to face: a few years after the turn of the twentieth century, one of the most illustrious art historians of the renowned «Wiener Schüle» decided to focus on the history and value of ceroplastics, a topic which seems definitely related to crafts and mere technical curiosity rather than to art. Schlosser was able to grasp and show the extraordinary potentialities of such a neglected material as

wax – those potentialities which had already been exploited over the centuries by both artisans and artists, and which Schlosser (erroneously)<sup>3</sup> thought were completely exhausted at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Kantor's notion of theatre is based on the very similar attempt to give new life to objects of the lowest order, that is, objects which are aesthetically disregarded, but precisely for this reason are best suited to redraw the only seemingly stable boundaries between what should be considered art and what should not. The selection of such objects suits the idea of a radically new form of theatre in which any trace of fiction has disappeared and the distance between art and life is reduced to zero.

The question of the indistinguishability between images and reality leads us to another crucial point regarding Kantor's choice of using wax as an artistic material. Wax allows an extremely high degree of adherence to the models portrayed: it is characterized by «a viscosity, a sort of *activity* and intrinsic force, which is a force of metamorphism, polymorphism, imperviousness to contradiction» (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 155). Wax proves to be the ideal substance to make the audience doubt of being able to find a difference, however small it may be, between appearance and reality. Thanks to their disturbing hyperrealism and their ability to perfectly reproduce the skin in (almost) all its subtlest shades and details, Kantor's mannequins challenge the traditional idea of «representation», thus raising the suspicion that the images are not «just images», objects, or mere things, but that they actually concern the life itself of the models, of the originals. Or even that the images *are* the models, and that there are no originals at all behind or beyond them. The images blend with the real persons, meant as both the actors carrying the wax mannequins and the audience, which find themselves directly, personally involved in the representation [2].

Here we are dealing with that «indecisive nature of the boundaries between the artistic and the living» which another great theatre theorist, the phenomenologist José Ortega y Gasset (1921: 188) has discussed. Schlosser (1911: 176) had already used similar words: «That the work of art, and the portrait in particular, are alive is of course one of the most primitive conceits (*conceit*), one that naive minds confronted with an artistic creation will in general most readily and easily adopt». However, whereas the use of the word «naive» reveals Schlosser's anxiety to consider culture as a powerful

*pharmakon* against the irrationality of emotional responses, Kantor's project goes in exactly the opposite direction: the audience should become, literally, *ingenuus* – it should regain the ability to be natural, free from all customary practices and all the convictions which have transformed it in just a passive beholder of a work of art that can at best be described as a mere diversion from the seriousness of «real» life.

Being so similar to real children, the wax mannequins of the *Dead Class* are intended to provide a material expression to the idea that drama is a form of reality strictly connected to and even inseparable from everyday existence. Any boundaries between the «reality» of life and the «unreality» of images should be overstepped:

Mannequins smell of sin, of criminal transgression. The existence of these creatures, shaped in man's image, almost «godlessly», in an illegal fashion, is the result of heretical dealings, a manifestation of the dark, nocturnal, rebellious side of human activity. Of crimes and traces of death as sources of knowledge. The vague and inexplicable feeling that through this entity so similar to a living human being but deprived of consciousness and purpose there is transmitted to us a terrifying message of death and nothingness – precisely this feeling become the cause of – simultaneously – that transgression, repudiation, and attraction. Of prohibition and fascination (Kantor, 1975: 112).

With their «criminal transgression», wax mannequins challenge aesthetics as both the science of perception and the theory of art. As for the former, the thorny problem is immediately evident: Kantor regards as artistic – supremely artistic – objects which are usually considered among the most banal (if not squalid) products of a handicraft aimed at nothing more than a slavish imitation of reality. It is the age-old problem of casting, of mechanical reproduction which seems to preclude a priori any claim at artistic status (it suffices to consider the long-standing controversy as to whether the «photographic act» (Dubois, 1983) should be considered as a creative or a merely reproductive one). However, as Schlosser already maintained, «if a case is to be made against wax sculpture, it cannot validly proceed from the abstract “idea”, art as object, but must proceed from the subject role of the artist; not from general considerations relating to the “genre” as such but only from the individual



2. The wax mannequins of the *Dead Class*. © Tomislav Medak  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/tomislavmedak/6169571307/in/photostream/>

case» (Schlosser, 1911: 299). It cannot, it must not be just the use of a particular material which undermines the value of an artwork, but rather the way in which that material is used. Wax can surely serve a merely mimetic purpose, but this does not mean that the hyperrealism it allows to reach is necessarily unartistic. Kantor's mannequins take full advantage of the material they are made of, but their seemingly excessive degree of realism is instrumental to a theoretical plan aimed at radically challenging any attempt to clearly separate the world of art from the world of everyday life. In the *Dead Class*, realism becomes expressionism.

Concerning aesthetics as the theory of perception, wax puppets transgress another boundary: that between (real) objects and (unreal) images. Reflecting on the intricate distinction between perception [*Wahrnehmung*] and image consciousness [*Bildbewusstsein*], Edmund Husserl argued that the former makes someone or something appear «in person [*leibhaft*]» (Husserl, 1911-1912: 367), whereas the latter does not «present», but rather «presentifies» an ob-

ject – an object which is not the real object, but instead its image, its «representant» (Husserl, 1904-1905: 20), its *Stell-Vertreter*, something which stands for it. Image consciousness is characterized by a «mediacy» (*ibid.*, 25) that is absent from perceptual presentation. We look at the representing image, but we see the represented object: we apprehend the object *through* the image and *thanks to* the image. Therefore, we should properly speak of «images» if and only if there is a conflict [*Widerstreit*] – however small it may be – between the image itself and the represented object. And we must be fully aware of this conflict, which means that we should have no doubt, no hesitation in recognising the image *as an image-of* something else, something real: «If the conscious relation to something depicted is not given with the image, then we certainly do not have an image» (Husserl, 1904-1905: 32). This consciousness, this awareness, may only arise if, beyond and despite even the most accurate resemblance between representing image and represented object, we are still able to find some mo-

ments of difference: «Despite full internal coinciding, such moments must not be missing in any way» (Husserl, 1904-1905: 33). Contrary to perceptual apprehension [*Wahrnehmungsauffassung*], image apprehension [*Bildauffassung*] has the characteristic of representation *by means of resemblance*, which presupposes the beholder's ability to «see-as», to «catch the identical *in the difference*» (Franzini, 2004: 125): we must be aware of the fact that the depicting object is only similar to the real object depicted.

Kantor's puppets are transgressive in the literal sense of the word: they are able to *trans-gredi*, to cross the threshold between art and non art as well as between perception and image consciousness. Being neither objects nor sub-

jects – or, rather, both objects and subjects – wax figures prove to be particularly suited to infringe the boundaries between the realm of representation and that of reality, showing how porous and vulnerable they actually are. Together with the simple rope separating the stage from the audience, the wax children of the *Dead Class* remind us that theatre should not be reduced to mere *divertissement* and recreation, for we are directly and personally engaged in (and involved by) the play. The images are not at all as distant as we are accustomed to believe. Those children force each and every one of us to repeat, together with Kantor (1967: 86): «The question “Is this already art or is this still reality?” become inconsequential to me».

## Notes

- 1 On the fundamental link between death and images see Belting, 2001: 84-124. On the analogy between mannequins and corpses in Kantor's theatre see Koch-Butryn, 2002: 8.
- 2 See also Andrew Bielski, «Kantor's Waxworks: Anti-theatricalism and the personnel of the theatre», in Kobialka, Zarzecka (2015).
- 3 In the *History of Portraiture in Wax* Schlosser does not even mention either Medardo Rosso's work or Degas's *Petite Danseuse*, which was also originally sculpted in wax; nor could the Viennese art historian witness the ever-growing production and diffusion of artistic wax sculptures since the Sixties of the Twentieth-Century (see Ullrich, 2003 and Conte, 2014).



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