



What's up with photography in Mexico?

My first impulse is to suppose that the Photography Biennial could answer that question. And maybe it can indeed, but not necessarily. Or perhaps not necessarily in the way we usually think.

I'd like to say that the selection of works selected by the jury for the 13th Photography Biennial is representative of Mexican photography, but not in the essential sense that is generally attributed to the term "representation." This group of works does not stand in place of Mexican photography. Its representative nature arises from the fact that it seems to sum up a norm. So, what is "normal" in contemporary Mexican photography?.

Almost a decade ago, I was naïve enough to write a text in which I reviewed the notion of "constructed photography" and its relation to an array of artistic traditions, ranging from Surrealism and Constructivism to Conceptualism and Post-Conceptualism. All of this to find a place, within what was regarded as normal, for several tendencies in Mexican photography, which to me, perhaps because of my foreign or "odd" way of looking at things, struck me as extremely coherent in terms of their times, as well as with their history.

At that time, it seemed not at all unusual to find some keys in Mexican photography that were common for photographic and artistic practice in many other cultural contexts. And it also seemed not particularly surprising to discover that these keys had ties with a tradition (a tradition of rupture, but nonetheless a tradition) that dated back probably to some of the modernist experiences. Now I find that these keys persist, with the sole difference that they have moved away from "normalizing" a situation that seemed much more subversive a decade ago.

I can almost literally repeat the words I uttered eight years ago: It has changed the way of conceiving of relationships of the image with reality, probably because it has changed the way of conceiving reality itself. The photographic image has ceased to be regarded as an object enclosed in its technical and linguistic specificity; now it is regarded as a mixed object, open to exchanges in languages and textual references. Events are staged, objects are invented, and subjects are disguised. The fiction may be simultaneously the subject, the support, the origin, the context, the epidermis, and the significance of the photographic image. The photo is presented as a document of a prior aesthetic event. The visual experience sums up a cognitive act that is in itself a sort of invention of the object of knowledge. All of this is in order to reconstruct its identity or to convey a highly subjective identity. The image exists as a paradox more than as a paradigm.



Beyond appearances and particular forms of intelligence employed in each creative process, these are some of trends within contemporary photography on an international level. They correspond to a state of visual culture that is transnational and eclectic. In that situation, local contexts open up, expand, and are juxtaposed. And it is easy to suppose that the illusion of “globality” in which we live has come to standardize all processes of representation in accord with a single referent, or even worse, an absence of a clear referent.

Nonetheless, what this body of photographs shows—if there is some utility in extracting a hypothesis for a display that is so “unrepresentative”—is that globalization entails its own counterpart: the tendency to emphasize minimum identities, micro-accounts, local contexts, which certainly are incomprehensible for ambitious nationalist discourses, but that also refuse to be dissolved into a suspect universality.

What is happening with Mexican photography is that it is defining its “Mexicanness” based on fragments, through shifting terrains (still not yet institutional), through discourses that are “fragile,” compared with the grandiloquence of the epic of times past.

In these processes, a weak realism is produced, that no longer seeks a specific paradigm to reinforce itself, and that, nonetheless, serves to explore specific cultural spaces and subjects that have historically been at the margins of representation. In those variants of realism, the portrait has assumed inevitable importance, because it seems to be one of the most appropriate tools for certain enquiries and lines of questioning regarding identities.



For example, Carlos Álvarez Montero makes portraits of young people of both sexes who are trained in boxing. In the same gym where they work out, these kids, who are barely older than adolescents, pose in front of the camera with expressions that show they are highly aware of the fiction. It is extremely interesting, because it seems as if each subject were aware that the result of the photographic act will only be a representation alien to him or her. Carlos Álvarez entitles each photo with the name of the subject, as if seeking to recover some part of those identities that the camera has placed in crisis. However, the swollen faces, the expressions of exhaustion, the detached (or alienated) air of the poses and the absence of sympathy toward the camera, could be more shocking to the viewers.

With equally ambiguous results, Andrés Carretero offers a series of portraits of albinos, entitled Phenotypes. They are also images in which the identity of the subjects, which should depend on their physical appearance, contradicts the fictitious air of many of the images. The poses add to this effect, because they display the theatrical approach of the subjects to representing themselves and to defining themselves in front of the camera. But the way the photographer himself also modified the relationship of coherence between each subject and context also has an effect, seeking settings in which the individuals photographed seem to be transplanted, as if it were their fate to feel uncomfortable in any situation.

At a certain point Carretero's work touches on the ethnographic and that is where it is related to other projects, such as that of Lizzet Luna Gamboa, who started out with a survey and a computer program to develop a fictitious portrait (more of a model) of the ideal Mexican male and female. This work (in some ways recalls the series Anthropology of the Modern Body, executed by Marianna Dellekamp a decade ago) manages to filter, through forensics and anthropology, a gaze that does not cease to be ironic and critical when it comes to the induced and artificial character of patterns of beauty. In addition, José Luis Cuevas, with his series The Average Man, deals with that element of classification and typology inherent to ethnographic representations, maintaining an ironic tone. Even work such as that of Tania Jiménez D'Sahagún starts out with a methodology characteristic of sociological studies, and that is what determines the selection of subjects photographed and the formats that are shown in the portraits.



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