

Gerardo Nigenda: Photographing the Invisible (1968-2010)

Written by Joanne Trujillo



Gerardo Nigenda, a photographer, friend and teacher of many, died on May 9. He left us his images, a visual record of a sensorial experience beyond sight. For those who were fortunate enough to know him, he also left us his teachings and the memory of his good humor and his particular way of looking at life.

Gerardo Nigenda was born in Mexico City but spent almost half his life in Oaxaca. He lost his sight at the age of 25. He discovered photography by chance in 1996 when Freddy Aguilar, the director of the library at the Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca (IAGO) invited him to run the institute's library for the blind, the Biblioteca Jorge Luis Borges, where he also taught Braille. After a while, Francisco Toledo decided to house the Centro Fotográfico Manuel Álvarez Bravo (CFMAB) in the same premises as IAGO, meaning that, oddly enough, the blind and photographers shared the same space. The former were photographed by the latter.

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As a result of this unusual interaction, Gerardo Nigenda discovered photography. In order to photograph those that had photographed him so often, as a joke, Nigenda approached Cecilia Salcedo, then director of CFMAB, to ask her how she would teach a blind person to take photographs. She gave him a pocket Leica and told him to start shooting. Thus, in 1999, he embarked on his adventure with photography. He was 32 years old.

At the beginning of the year 2000, documentary maker Mary Ellen Mark gave him a pocket Yashika, which he would use until he died, and of which he was extremely proud, because of its Carl Zeiss lens. He did not do anything technically, as regards the focus, diaphragm or shutter speed. What mattered to him was not the form (technique) but the essence (content). If technology facilitated that part, then why bother trying to use a reflex camera? The point was to communicate something, which does not require technique, although he admitted that knowing about technique helped. However, within what could be called photographic technique, he imagined a line from the center of his camera focus to the center of the object or subject to be photographed. That way, he more or less controlled the setting. With experience, he learnt to locate the sun and tried to make sure it was behind him or to one side. Time and the process of adapting to his blindness defined his personal style of photography.

As soon as he had the camera in his hands, Gerardo began to reflect on what he would have to do with the camera, beyond merely taking photos. It was important for him to feel something, to photograph something that attracted his attention and elicited something. It began as a game, photographing things he liked: his music system, the beer on the fridge, what he came across on the way home or the loudspeakers in a Zapatista march. Within the game of experimentation, he began to take sounds and smells into account.

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