

SOMETHING'S MISSING

The vanished meaning in photography

by Teresa Arozena

This exhibition tries to conceive an interpretive line around an elemental notion that has tormented the history of representation in the 20th century: the unspeakable character of the visual. The selection of photographic works introduced, circumscribes the problem that this idea generates to the particular photographic context, a medium that makes evident, with a special strength, the old scission between seeing and saying.

We often confirm, almost in an irrational way, that our culture is based upon the image, and it does so with an increasing intensity; however, the notion of the image should not be simplified under this affirmation, and conceived as a “pure” and split element, as a mere representation, but on the contrary, to consider the implicit tensions in its nature such as construction or artefact.

Visuality is always a complex determination that is culturally conditioned. Images are constantly re-introduced under codes, languages and contexts. We access them through interpretative filters, we endow them with arguments or we insert them into stories. Starting with that strange immaterial body that constitutes the image, we are capable of spreading the stories that warp the tissue of reality. But it just so happens that, frequently, this contextual relation, which is inherent, becomes naturalized, invisible, and it seems to completely forget the original muteness of the image, this kind of “zero experience” of the visual dimension, that photography develops in a particular way.

Such naturalization should not surprise us, for throughout the 20th century, photography became a powerful perceptive tool, practically the prosthesis of consciousness. Within the enormous cultural mutation that resulted in the achievement of modernity, the photographic medium proved itself capable of acting as a model of thinking and as a powerful discursive resource, ideal for representing the new public sphere that was devising with the rhythm of capitalist industrialization.

However, all of those snapshots taken from the streets of the cities, capturing a new industrialized society, led us to one same place, they reached a disturbing perception. It was Walter Benjamin who made us understand it: essentially they showed us the “crime scene”.¹ That place where we arrive “late” to register the leftovers of an event that has already happened, that place “abandoned by everyone”, that for Benjamin always constituted a photograph, defines, more than any other figure, the ontological photographic apparatus, and determines the special relation of the medium with the time and the event.

The Benjamin figure of the “crime scene” came to synthesize, in a mythological modern way, the dialectic relation that constitutes the profound substratum of photography: the constant tension between the “purely visual” and instantaneous element, and the

¹ Walter Benjamin, “Pequeña historia de la fotografía”, *Discursos Interrumpidos I. Filosofía del arte y de la historia*, Taurus, Madrid, 1973.

“caption”, as an added statement to the image. Such an unresolved tension is manifested under the shape of the suspense, modern modality of a temporary capture that originates at the same time as photography. Of course, if there is a group of emotions or sensations that definitely belongs to the order of technovisuality, it is those that are associated to the resource of suspense; desire-insufficiency double structure, where the fragmented sign of an irreducible visuality always seems to point towards a vanishing meaning.

This exhibition shows the trace of such a tension, exploring a series of photographic works included in the Ordóñez-Falcón Collection of Photography that covers a wide chronological frame, from the beginning of the 20th century until today. Beyond the mere semiological approximation to the medium as an autonomous language, the selection establishes, on the other hand, a transversal reading of photography as a key part to understand and interpret the social evolution and the sense of the public in our current societies.

The course of the exhibition is divided into three thematic groups that modulate the guiding idea, and that correspond to each one of the rooms that form part of the itinerary. In group I, denominated “Witnesses of nothingness”, the chosen works cover the sensation of suspense as an internal temporary form of the photographic image. The suspense or the enigma, establishes in all of these images the conditions for the view, and materializes the tension between an interpretive force that tries to give a meaning, and the broken or empty tissue that belongs to the mute image.

In group II, entitled “The code”, a series of works are shown where, through an approximation towards the urban imaginaries, the idea of “the reality transformed into text” is present; a key notion that forms an indispensable part of the modern project of reticulation and rationalization of the world. This way the tension between text and image is shown through the representation of the city, as the place where the different conceptions of the public are verified.

The works chosen for group III, named “Cartographies of the other”, reveal different incursions and reflections around what could be called a “system of social cartography”. This trail, consubstantial to the photographic medium, undertakes the risky and controversial duty of effectuating the reading of the “other”; we can recognize it in the classic type of “street photography” and in general, in the photography understood and used as a social document.

We must finally add a “zone zero” to this overview of the exhibition, where the exam suggested by the exhibition flows again. It is constituted, in first place by the project *FLOH* (2001), by the artist **Tacita Dean** (United Kingdom, 1965), a work that conveys in an explicit way the latest muteness of the photographic object, while making a question that should not be made obvious: how can we think today about photography, when we are in a world where photography is already -in a way- some kind of an anachronism?

To make a problem out of the reading of the images, in the same way Tacita Dean does in her *FLOH* project, is a necessary step to understand the important transformation taking place, that alters the ontology of the image. In the current *net society* –and its post-media and connective space–, the old parameters under which we used to be able to establish a valid and stable definition of the images, are no longer useful for us. There

has been a complete mutation within the visual and expositive structures that ruled till today the story of the events of the world.

Suddenly, in less than a century, we find ourselves in a post-photographical reality, completely overloaded with images. A *hyper-photographical* sphere where every possible trace of nostalgia fades before the loss of the heroic times of light and silver. The work of Tacita Dean goes through all of these questions, moving with ability along the field of nostalgia and fetishism, within the environment of disappearance and silence; the work consists of a gathering of images found by the author at European and American flea markets. In the year 2001, the investigation shaped itself into the book of an artist with a signed edition of four hundred copies. “A democratic work of art” – confirmed Dean. To celebrate the publication of *FLOH*, the London gallery Frith Street exhibited a limited edition of photographs from the book. Along with the exhibition, the artist made these declarations:

“I do not want to give these images explanations: descriptions by the finder about how and where they were found, or guesses as to what stories they might or might not tell. I want them to keep the silence of the flea market; the silence they had when I found them; the silence of the lost object. Suffice to say, that all the images were found over the last six or so years in flea markets in Europe and America. Only at a certain point did I realise I was making a collection, and nothing is more worrying to the collector than the prospect of ‘closure’; the realisation that there will be a ‘final version’ and a potential end to the collection. I have stopped going to flea markets for fear of finding an image that ‘should have been in the book’, or have distractedly turned my attention to collecting postcards: postcards that show frozen fountains or four-leaf clovers, or have seagulls in them, or have been scribbled on by someone. But now I have resolved to believe that there is no, and can never be, a final version to this collection; that *FLOH* exists in the continuum and will one day, I hope, return, ownerless and silent to its origins in the flea market.”

To say “the silence of the flea market” is like saying “the emptiness of the universe”, like listening to it with a plastic glass against the ear. The lost and found photographic objects of Tacita Dean show us small scraps of decomposing stories, erasing and disappearing in silence within the randomness of the cosmos. Through them, through their holes, it is possible to look at the nothingness.

If Tacita Dean, from a position that could be defined as a kind of “romantic conceptualism”, invokes the silence and practices the linguistic suspension, it is because *FLOH*, further more –or further less– of its romanticism, connects with a fundamental part of the language problematic that happen to be determinant when defining the photography. Who knows, the silence, the suspension, the interruption, the decomposition, the disappearance, the refusal, the secret. They are all movements of the oscillation that forms a fundamental part of the language; from it, a slide is invented, capable of taking us *beyond* the mere predicative² structure. This is the “background sound” that we can hear in the group of images that form this part of the itinerary.

² Already Jacques Derrida, in relation with the idea of the “mute image”, described the enormous apophatic tradition of the speech, the way of denial that deals with what is inaccessible or ineffable to the speech. Jacques Derrida, “*Cómo no hablar. Denegaciones*”, *Cómo no hablar y otros textos*, Proyecto A Ediciones, Barcelona, 1997, pp. 13-58.

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Autobiographical Stories (The Fake Wedding) (1992), by **Sophie Calle** (France, 1953) is the other project that, in dialogue with *FLOH*, constitutes this “zone zero”. A work that belongs to a series that started in the year 1988. In it, the artist makes up stories that reflect episodes of her supposed biography. This is about a work that deconstructs with ability, an objective, truthful and stable notion of personal identity, but that, above all, has a devastating effect on the image itself. Just like *FLOH*, Sophie Calle’s work is given over a short circuit of meaning, over a ruin and emptiness.

Often called a “narrative artist”, master of simulation and famous for her “wall novels” that relate texts with photography, the works of Calle are the result of an inter-subjective experience that emerges from a game play with the other. The image and its story is an inseparable whole, which is built through the others subjects of real life to which the author constantly refers to for the elaboration of her works. The “others” act as external agents of the experiment; they become the uncontrolled or random element that opens the fiction to life. Calle’s artifice fits this way in the same heart of what is real. Everything is produced in the interpersonal plot, as a reciprocal game and public simulation. Frequently Calle’s stories reach the public first through journal notes than in art galleries. “The existence of the others disturbs me: their tastes, their stories, their lack of stories, and their emptiness”. This is the working structure of Calle, on the reverse the enormous gap of life, unapproachable, amorphous, tenebrous or boring; on the obverse the “other”, which is a trigger that wakes in Calle her immense capability of story telling, and that, like a mirror, returns the image (always her own image, the only possible image) switched in memory and legend, transformed into a myth or a monster.

Fly over the abyss and throw life into nothingness, into the fire of the simulation. Her images-with-text (that tense combination of word and photography) refute the thin frontier that separates the real from the fiction; in her work we can no longer apply the model of true to the real. The ideal of the truth is revealed as the deepest fiction, like the most hidden plot in the heart of the real.

I. Witnesses of nothingness

Something is missing, something has broken, the meaning seems to get lost again and again within the photographic cut, in that automatic action of suspension or interruption that all photography is. What happened? What is it that happened? The shape of the enigma and the suspense define a temporality proper of a photographic experience that is always given through an image to which *we have arrived late*.

What is the story? What does the image say? How did we get here? If I look at it I see a coagulated cut, a frozen fragment that can only show the disordered evidence of an event that already happened; a “crime scene”, whose meaning is found suspended, delayed. Any adhered argument would have to therefore be named *testimony*. Any word will be a superimposed mask on a *raw image*, to give it an intelligible meaning. This way, the legend or speech that accompanies, explicitly or implicitly, each photograph,

hangs under the emptiness of a mute image; the meanings that we may want to give them warp over a broken tissue.

There are photographs that project this tension in a special way. It often happens in a type of image dominated by a certain idea of emptiness, loneliness or absence. This present *nothingness* strengthens our appearance to the other side of the image. Like a mirror questions and encourages the observer to fill up the emptiness, while it reveals that the function of who looks always has to be that of a witness, of a narrator that interprets out of the leftovers and recognizes the signs, joining a possible meaning that always hangs under the decomposition.

The monumentality of the images of **Hannah Collins** (Great Britain, 1956) directly appeals to the body of the spectator. Her panoramic unfold a surrounding physical experience, where restlessness and suspicion both work as triggers that activate some kind of historical mechanism. In this gear, the track, the sign or the evidence are key elements to understand the pace of time and the cultural landscapes that the author wants to reveal. Collins' project is located within that interesting race of artists that re-edit the documentary space and the anthropologic investigation, giving a new sense to the idea of observation, where the key is the awareness of interpretation. Reverse of the communication media, the documentary practices are approached as an almost therapeutic element.

The monument enables the author to suggest juxtaposition between history and the present, between the body and the memory. These are tense images that shut down a dense symbolic content. *Signs of Life* (1992) is situated between her first series, and just like another of her first works, *The Hunter's Space* (1993-1994) –in which she thinks about the situation of areas like Poland or Silesia after the fall of the Berlin Wall– Collins looks towards the communities located within the margins, forced to displacement or in situations of conflictive transition, very much related to the territory and the globalization. *Signs of Life* was the author's contribution to the Biennial at Istanbul in 1992, and it narrates the diaspora and the life conditions of the immigrants from the East towards the West, towards Istanbul.

The selected landscape is empathic. Collins chooses an exquisitely detailed image of the desolation and the decay of social space, of the city, of the street. "To inhabit is to leave a trace", said Benjamin. Now, in the global and postmodern ruin, just like in the scene of a crime or a war, life is read through its evidence.

In the series *L.P.* (2000) **Jean Mark Bustamante** (France, 1952) takes photographs of mountain lake shores in Switzerland. These are unusual compositions, ambiguous images, in search of the doubt and the discomfort of the viewer. The reference to a reality that apparently "does not say anything" becomes some kind of formal abstraction in his work. Residential areas and industrial constructions are superimposed to the given model of natural sublime landscape, striating and recoding the space.

The protagonism of the spectator is made present in the election of great format, enveloping, propitious to make him become aware of himself in front of the work, of his activity as a viewer. Bustamante declares photography to be a place of meditation, like a "slow movement", to what the initials Long Play make a reference. There is nothing more suggestive that refers to this than the image of the lake (with its reflecting surface,

its abysmal depth and the unusual points of view that the author offers). The reflexive strength *per se* seems to be the main sense of Bustamante's work, a power that activates through the suspense and the uncertainty that he is able to create.

Literally "crime scenes", the images of **Arnold Odermatt** (Switzerland, 1925) also propose a reflexivity which directly makes his work very different to that of the other photographers who worked on police statements, as Arthur Felling (Weegee) or Mell Kilpatrick, much more dramatic in their approximation to the accident. In Odermatt the previous strangeness with all reflexivity seems to happen due to the clash between calm and beautiful, natural, Swiss landscape that surrounds the event and the violent and perfect compositions of twisted irons, that express a brutal failure of the senses, an abrupt stoppage of time, of all movement or all thoughts, summarized in these scenarios of evidences and leftovers.

Odermatt was a police man since 1948 until the year of his retirement, in 1990. His images of scenes after traffic collisions constituted a part of the file of evidences of the crash, let it be for the police file or for the insurance company, but they also formed part of a personal collection created throughout his life. It was his son, Urs Odermatt, who "discovered" and systemized the photographic work of his father in different themes that were made public through the books and exhibitions.

II. The code

The notion of a reality that has transformed into "text", into something that needs a reading or a de-codification, constitutes a fundamental part of the ontogenesis of the technical image, and fully responds to the modern model of conceptualizing space.

The expanding city will constitute the ideal laboratory to develop a new gaze through the photographic medium. In the modern city, like in a swarm, the codes that go through and striate the public space, cross and overlap with a rapid change, and map the other and the common to interpret and re-signify it. The space shows itself as a great grid, as a layout or a *reading* structure in constant and expanding movement. The catching of the flowing world of modernity will engender this way the whole photographic lineage, which has often been grouped under the label of *street photography*.

It could be thought of, however, a possible story of photography based in a basic military notion: the *recognition*. You have to know how to *recognize* what you see. You have to decode it, the interpretation is missing, the significance. The story of photography would also, therefore, be the story of its reading, of its interpreters. Under this optic, the ghost of a "direct relation with the real" would be completely refuted, and, with this, the traditional function of the photographic image would be indeed invalidated as a "deposit of truth", promoted with strength out of the most coercive uses of the medium, let these be police related or humanists. In the set of images of this section, the code is made visible through the city. In different ways, in them it is possible to capture a glimpse of the "abstract grid", and perceive a jump or a bump between the shot and its interpretation.

The work *Untitled Project* (2002-2011), of **Matt Siber** (U.S., 1972) is an investigation about the nature of power and the ways in which it manifests within the public space. It

is an enormous series of photographic images of large format, taken in the cities of the entire planet. In them, every trace of text has been digitally removed, and extracted from the referential image, creating diptychs that are greatly abstract, where a constellation of texts comes into dialogue with a public scene.

The strangeness this strategy produces, does not only highlight the literal role within the modern landscape, it also underlines at the same time, other alternative ways of communication imbricated in the codification of the public space, like the signage, the colours, the same architecture or the corporative image.

Ian Wallace (England, 1943) bases his work on the violent encounter of minimalist pictorial abstraction and the referential richness of documentary photography. His photo conceptual influence is projected over other key photographers of the school of Vancouver, such as Jeff Wall or Ken Lum, to the point of being considered somehow the father of Canadian photo conceptualism.

Intersections NYC (2003) is the second series of laminated photographs over canvas that the author produces regarding the city of New York, as a continuation of a first series taken immediately before the events of the 11th of September. Wallace keeps a track of the street crossings as if he wanted to reveal the latent structure under the intense amalgam of people, traffic, commercial signs and architecture. The narrative content has been reduced to the action of crossing the road, the photographic reference becomes a transit zone that emerges in the abstract frame of the painted grid.

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The tradition of aerial photography is almost as ancient as photography itself, it is known that as soon as Nadar accessed a photographic camera, his first dream was to go over the rooftops of Paris, to take aerial looks of the city from the basket of a hot air balloon. This zenithal and abstract eye, extraterrestrial look, is obviously related with the extremely early genre of war photography, such as the recent surveillance cameras and satellite views.

Aerial photography is a key to understand in its whole amplitude the consubstantial *interpreting look* at the medium, for it makes evident the inherent *reading character* of the look. From the sky, the skin of the world is approached as if it were a book, a map or a layout. But the systematic translation of the territory from the traces, fundamentally responds to the need of exercising social power, and in this sense, aerial vision is found inevitably biased by the coercive logic of the society of control and its panoptic project. The modern aspirations of domination of the totality of visible forms go through not only the need of a reading or an interpretation of what is real, but also, and with it, through an inevitable cataloguing and labelling strategy of the world, where the file is fundamental.

Peter Piller (Germany, 1968) is an author who works on the file, who reflects over the modern need of systemising and cataloguing the world, elaborating urban files out of different sources (press photography, Internet, professional photography collections, etc.) Diluting the idea of artistic authorship, he often integrates the communities and institutions in his creations. His work seems mysterious and appears to filter a kind of

obtuse or absurd sense of the file, allowing a glimpse of the last foolishness and incoherence of the project of reticulating the world.

Sleeping houses (*Schlafende Häuser*, 2004) is a series of photographs that belongs to the *File of aerial views* (*Von Erde schöner*), that Piller produces after he accesses the photographic files of a business devoted to aerial photography. The business, that had closed, owned a file of twenty thousand images of houses, taken between 1979 and 1983. During five years a plane, flying low, had systematically scanned the settlements throughout the length and width of the country. The business goal of selling the resulting product to the same owners of the houses failed. Amongst the different rejections, the one that stands out is the reply of those owners to whom their houses appeared “prettier from the ground”. Starting with this material, Piller works on different classifications that shape an enigmatic robot portrait of the German middle class. This way, collections like *Sleeping houses*, *Flower objects*, *Person in front of house*, or *Paths*, emerge, this last one based on different designs of the passages that surrounds the houses.

III. Cartographies of the other

The modern project of rationalization and reticulating of reality is also, fundamentally, a process of "codification of the other"; a process that unfolds a complex system of *social cartography* whose objective is to make legible a *common body*. Photography becomes a perfect instrument for this business dedicated to the “production of subject” and with it to the interpretation of the sense of the public. Walter Benjamin anticipated this in 1930 in his already mentioned “Little History of Photography”, where, in a comment about the work of August Sander, he described the way in which the face experimented a deep transformation under the photographic technique; a definite turn in the representation of the human portrait, that passes, he said, to “being a map”, “an atlas that exercises”.³

The *other* is a crucial theme in photography. The enormous developed tradition of social realism only confirms it. But, often, it seems that where photography starts looking for another, what it finds once and again are bodies. That “body of the other” is the first place where the language-vision needs to spread, the coding vision. Through its existence, the pragmatic understanding of its desires and needs, and the way in which they enter society and the market, photography becomes an apparatus that amplifies the limits of individuality. As an authentic “prosthesis of otherness” the photographic medium allows the single possibility of establishing a story of the life of others and trying to figure this way that elusive and ambiguous meaning of “us”, that, as Deleuze said, “is always missing”.

#

The work of **Allan Sekula** (United States, 1951), constantly reintroduces the social dimension that has been often repressed in the historical interpretation of the “art of photography”, focussing its attention in the contextual frame of the images. In order to reach them, in order to access a possible significance, we have to perceive the set of

³ Walter Benjamin, “Pequeña historia de la fotografía”, *Discursos Interrumpidos I. Filosofía del arte y de la historia*, Taurus, Madrid, 1973, pp. 76-78.

conditions in which they were generated; without its environment it is not possible to read them.

Untitled Slide Sequence (1972) is given as a meta-image, a dialogue with an absolutely essential icon: the famous sequence of the Lumière, the *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*. Also in 1995 the cineaste Harun Farocki would work on this meta-image in his film *Workers exiting the fabric* (*Arbeiter ver lassen die Fabril*, 1995), where he presents a clever reflection about the work as the reproduction of the “subject”. Genesis of the technical image, the film of the Lumière was the first film shown to the public, in 1895. This film shows for 45 seconds, the workers of the industry of photographic products in Lyon, leaving in a hurry out of the shadows of the factory towards the sun of the evening. Sekula also documents the exit after the end of the worker’s shift, in this case from an aerial space industry of the 70s. The difference between the two images is notorious, at the end of the century workers did not “go outside”, they transited over an elevated path between two buildings of the company. In the same way, the camera has also changed completely its status, and it has been forced to “sneak in”, entering a private property without authorisation.

In the postmodern space, the regime of the look is much more intrusive; the meeting of the workers with the camera-photographer is harder and direct, these bodies during the shift change almost pounce on the camera. At the end of the sequence we can even see how the camera is expelled from the facilities. In the contemporary world it no longer matters what time it is, if there is a change of shift or if the individual walks towards the “exit” direction, because the subject is inserted in the market. Each subject is a worker. The work and the production are not understood anymore as categories of the economy, but as the place of reproduction of the subjects. In any case, the place and the situation of *Untitled Slide Sequence*, reveal the deep transformation of the social organisation throughout the 20th century, the century of cinema and photography.

#

The Steerage (1907) is a mythological image within the history of photography, and a turning point in the career of **Alfred Stieglitz** (United States, 1864-1946). Most of the stories in history agree that this work represents a fundamental break: the author recedes from a pictorial vision, in order to go into a purely documental and informative dimension of the image. Stieglitz devotes himself to a specifically photographic language, and given to the extremely early moment in which it was taken, it is a real revolution. Nevertheless, the readings based on this image often insist in demonstrating its status of “master piece”, based on a compositional analysis, guilty of a formalism that seems to overlook the turn that Stieglitz makes when he assumes this image, suggesting a common autonomy in photography as a language. Captivated with the diagonals and the proto-cubist designs of the image, we would do nothing but throw again the photographic object to the aesthetic space of pictorial representation.

Of course, the complexity and the abstraction of the composition, as a substructure of the social codification reflected in the document, is absolutely present and enriches the reading of this image. However the authentic qualitative change lies in the new fact that the photographic document is accepted within a historical interpretation of the “art of photography”. The scene is without a doubt an important cultural document, which shows the inferior deck of a boat that goes from New York to Bremen, Germany. There

we see how men, women, and children, immigrants that didn't make it to the United States, are forced to return to the old continent. The image that reflects the period of great immigrant flow to the American continent (the major part attracted by the boom in construction) transmits all the social precariousness and the uncertainty of that age.

Contemplating today this old image, dated in 1907, so "purely photographic" and so full of meaning within the history of the medium, it is almost inevitable to remember once again, the words of Walter Benjamin that refer to the old daguerreotypes at the end of his "Little History of Photography"⁴. That enigmatic reverberation that Benjamin watched emerge in the intangible pale light of the first photographs, "since the darkness of the days of our grandfathers", seems to interrogate us now through this image of the past, through this inaugural work, demanding new meanings.

Having overcome by far the "realistic prejudice"—that old ghost from the direct relation with the real—, it has been long since the *Barthesian noema* of photography is not enough, the *this-has-been* that was granted by its index and document condition. The real speeches no longer adapt themselves to the new reading needs; the footnotes of photographs become infinite and the icons can no longer synthesize anything. That is precisely why, to encrypt all the value of this image based in its condition of a "cultural document", of a capsule that reaches a consensus of totality or captures a moment and a place as essential features that represent an event, a social episode, would be as insufficient as placing all interest in the beauty of its diagonals and in the way in which it is included in the "history of art". This photograph has become enigmatic, it has turned opaque in the absolute iconic saturation upon which our culture has been founded. Like a black glass that could give us back our own blurred image, it interrogates us. And perhaps its strangeness is not exclusively linked to the effects of the crisis of what is documentary, to that myth's fall of the image's testimonial value, consummated in the second half of the last century.

There is something unquestionable in this inaugural icon: the image of Stieglitz is an image of the other. That "experience of the other", and the search of a story of the collective is a duty, consubstantial to the photographic medium. In this sense, maybe the value of this image could be deposited in its capability of revealing a fundamental problem and a pressing contemporary dilemma: the deep fall into crisis of that "collective matrix". *The Steerage* shows the condition of the contemporary subject, the community that comes, that expresses through those bodies in transit. The possible meanings of this photography are closed and remain suspended, refuted; the same way those "denied subjects" are kept in an interstitial space, at the steerage of a boat. Like in a purgatory, they are postponed between two lands, delayed under the veil of uncertainty.

#

The work *American Night* (1998-2002), by **Paul Graham** (United Kingdom, 1956), could be seen as the other extreme of the evolution of traditional documentary photography, centred upon a social image, a critical approach to the North American society, where the chiaroscuro of the utopia of progress and the welfare state are reflected. This author is part of a generation of British artists that proceeded since the

⁴ *Ibid.*

mid eighties to renovate and transform radically the documentary use of the images, and he is characterized by a deep social and political commitment with the themes that he covers. His work, without a doubt, can be placed, just as Allan Sekula's, inside what Carles Guerra has denominated *new post media documentary practices*,⁵ artistic practices that, from an enormous diversity, make a necessary critic to the hegemonic visualizing machine, suggesting a redefinition of the documentary-form; a renovation that inevitably has to begin a dialogue with this "veiled icon" that we have said constitutes the image of Stieglitz. Precisely the blur as a metaphor, is the resource chosen by Graham, to articulate his *American Night* series. The work mixes three types of images; the "white images" constitute the essence of the work and in them we see people walking, waiting, standing, or sitting, in an invisible marginal life. On the other hand, once the eye has adapted to that implacable and hard whiteness of a marginal and peripheral reality that has been "infra-registered", "houses" brutally emerge, images of Californian bourgeois residences, perfect and frontal, with a completely unreal and shocking colour. Finally the "dark images" close the three time rhythm of the series, and place in circulation a meta-commentary about the photographic medium. They are images of the deep interior of the cities. Within the order of the rehearsal-book of the series, they appear together towards the end, and possess a clear rhetorical character and an explicit quote towards the classic genre of street photography.

Graham's blur effectively rebels against the impotence of the document and its normalizing uses. The underexposure seems to answer *no* to the excess of vision, to the contemporary iconic mixture. The image, implacable, questions us from the blind white of the lack of light, and the meaning becomes tense between what can be recorded in the film and what is not being recorded. A Bartleby variation, where the photographer also "prefers not to"; he sabotages the photographic action, it perverts the time that it requires and the shutter closes much too soon, before the image can be formed. From that threshold, in that preliminary stadium, what is left over are exiguous landscapes, and distant and almost ghostly characters.

The raw visuality, mute and almost blind, emerges from the instant edge of the photographer's shot. Those "denied subjects" in *The Steerage*, those individuals in the periphery, never stop becoming others, to update in their problematic condition of contemporary subject. Its image, uncatchable and which cannot be encoded, reveals and restores unceasingly that mute background –power of emptiness and evasion of sense– that constitutes the deepest substratum of the photographic experience.

⁵ Carles Guerra, "Things that happen. Events, facts, actions and news to the light of the post media documentary practices". *After the news. Post media Documentaries*, CCCB, Barcelona, 2003.

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