

MUME

Happiness: An Appropriation

Carlos E. Palacios

Certain cultural convention forces us to look at the photographic document from defined paradigms, such as the historical truth that it supposedly describes. However, since the seventies, semiologists questioned this convention of the image that inevitably associates it with the truth. It is important to remember that this examination of the real in photography derived, among other things, from a "suspicion about the media, in other words, about the mediation systems that inform of the real," as Victor del Río points out. This questioning had, as one of its most visible origins, "the great armed confrontations retransmitted (the allusion to the experience of Vietnam as a media phenomenon is immediate), the proliferation of snapshots of horror mutated in fetishes and cultural emblems that required a urgent review of codes, whether visual or deontological"¹.

Needless to say, it was Roland Barthes who manages to open a new way of analyzing photography, with its definitions of "obtuse" (the difficulty of "translating" a photograph into words) and subsequently the *punctum*. From his analysis, Barthes enriches the discourse of the image from the reflexive look. We can summarize the *punctum*

as that detail of a photo that is fixed in the viewer's memory.

Appropriation and Barthes's *Punctum* are the essential lines of inquiry of this curatorial essay. Titled "*Happiness: An Appropriation*" this project identifies this strategy as a mechanism to generate the *punctum* from the place of the artistic (and not from the photographic document), as it happens in the videos of the Franco-Mexican artist Marie Christine Camus (Paris, 1954) and in the work of the American artist residing in Mexico, Carla Rippey (Kansas City, USA, 1950).

The historical context of both works is the end of World War II. And in both cases, the artists appropriated images of documentary nature. Camus bases his audiovisual work on the mix of fiction and documentary films, as well as film materials found on the Internet. Rippey on the other hand draws images found in magazines and newspapers and also from the web search.

For "*Happiness: An Appropriation*" we have chosen some works in which the *punctum* is at a key moment in the image: a fleeting smile in the Camus video or an open laugh, like the one that the protagonist of the "photographic" drawing by Rippey shows shamelessly. They are gestures of joy that we would not expect. These reactions are still interesting, especially in the context of the most important tragic war conflict of the last century. Both in the subtly manipulated footage of the video based on a column of refugees and in the drawing of a photo of an American soldier, an Austrian and a young woman, the gestures of the protagonists

¹ Victor del Río, "La estética del documento. Revisiones del arte y la teoría", Lápis. Revista internacional de arte, año XIX, 2000, N° 166, p. 55-63.

are discordant and make up the *punctum* of both proposals. The intention of the artists with these appropriations is not to rewrite the history from where their documentary sources come. In fact, as an exclusively curatorial gesture to reinforce this condition, “obtuse”, Barthes would say, of these artistic images, we have included a small album or you could also say a timely archive of documentary photographs that is instituted from the same *punctum* of the works of art by Camus and Rippey: images where a smile focuses our attention. Deliberately, we have subtracted from this file the textual references that offer their historical context (Roland Barthes referred to these as “parasitic texts”) to subvert the documentary nature of the archive.

It is relevant to point out that behind these correspondences between works and archives, the intellectual exercise of artistic creation and curatorship is exposed as an editing mechanism: from the appropriation, from the techniques chosen by Camus and Rippey as well as of the exhibition and the archive as a gesture of selection, for images loaded with poetic powers that go beyond the historical anecdote, because when the speeches that accompany them remain suspended, their artistic value rises precisely and therefore their timelessness: that condition suspended in time that defines the work of art against the photographic document. Finally, this curatorial essay is worth thinking from this eloquent phrase by Víctor del Río: “there are in the most trivial photos, other hidden figures no less disturbing. The sideways glance in the background or on the second level detects the obtuse sense of

photography, just that which exceeds it, which makes it an image beyond the photographic”² and we would add: and from the point of view of art.

² Loc. Cit.