

AGAINST TIME

The documentary as inquiry

A reflection on my documentary photographic work as an integration between the intellectual, the emotional and the intuitive. My need is to talk about the documentary as an inquiry into these three aspects. The question: What happens between emotionality, intellectuality, and the intuition of the documentary photographer? First idea: The documentary is constructed in the bodily distance between the documentary filmmaker and the object to be captured.

It's summer 2012, and I'm back to face CONTRA EL TIEMPO (Against Time), a living project that has been under construction for four years now. My mission today is to go to the boxing gym and watch.

Seeing means, at this moment, after a year of not having photographed sports, recognizing my reaction to whatever happens. I have a new camera. A Leica M6, a film camera with a 35mm lens with which I have photographed my family and my ten-month-old son exclusively. The camera has yet to face the outside world. Eight rolls of black and white film in the suitcase, the light meter and the notebook in which I take refuge when I am not able to start photographing.

Photographing is, for me, an act of faith. I seek in each shot a connection with the world; each shot is always a moment of hope about the possibility of capturing a moment, a meaning, a revelation or a doubt; I have faith that each image sought generates in me a clue of who I am when I photograph, who I am when I live. When I have the camera, I seek to disappear as a teacher, as a father, as a husband, as a son, as a friend, as a filmmaker. It seems then that I seek to disappear in the sense that Cartier Bresson gave it, that of the invisible photographer: "If ever we are overcome by haste, or someone has noticed your camera, just forget the photograph and let, kindly, the children gather around you" (The Decisive Moment, 1952) but I also want to disappear as a rational human being who waits for spontaneity and intuition to take over. Cartier Bresson also said, "Photographing is a way of living. To put the mind, the eye and the heart on the same line of sight". I think it is a way of living; I don't believe so much in the second part. It sounds very romantic and utopian to me. It doesn't happen to me.

The gym is under the stairs of the Coliseum, the lights are dim, and you can feel the boxing world. Two Cuban trainers and three Ecuadorian boxers Luis, 36, and two boys of 14- or 15-years old practice shadow, mirror, rope and punch bags of all sizes. The most common mass-media images about sports almost always show intense moments, extreme efforts and feats. My search is different. I relate to photography from an inner need but also from a reaction to the massive visual stereotype, although sometimes it overcomes me and contaminates my images. It is difficult for me to access a non-violent moment.

An idea: to see what is just before the punch or just after it. I need a strobe light, and I think my best images are from the outside. Sometimes the boxers stop their intensity and pause. I approach, focus, shoot and think to myself there is an image: that moment when you feel the intensity of the life being lived, by the subject and by the photographer. The idea of photography as a trace sustains me, an idea that for me is essential when photographing film, as opposed to digital photography, where the trace is no longer as important as the idea of a sign, transformation or imagination. The most complicated thing about documentary photography is to align the head with image or emotion with image or intuition with image. My bet is that some of these dynamics or a random relationship between them allow an image to appear.

I enter the world of sports with respect and a need to learn about life and about photography, I believe that being a photographer means having respect and appreciation for the other; I expect subjects to look at me, and in that look, I seek approval of my presence. At the end of two days of photography, ten rolls of film have been exposed, and I begin to wait for the image.

I carry out my photographic projects in two areas: analog photography (photographic negative, enlargement of the contact sheets) and digital photography (scanning of negatives, printing of status copies or first proofs).

I shoot in black and white negative for the particular tone that the film negative gives (the texture is radically different from the digital image), for the ability of the medium to separate me from the idea of "the real" and to take me to a territory of abstraction (and therefore of reflection) on what is captured and also for the process that involves the passage of time between the moment of photography and the moment of observation of the image (at least a week). This pause is essential for me. It allows me to leave the feeling of the captured image and enter into the feeling of the image once desired and then observed. While I wait for the image to appear, after the laboratory work, in my head and in my feelings, I begin to recognize possible images. While I am doing other activities: walking, eating or travelling, certain moments repeat themselves in my mind as a clue of the appearance of the right picture. This process cannot happen in digital photography because of its immediacy.

The tendency to look at the photo immediately after the shot is dangerous and distracting for me. On the other hand, I believe that the existence of a film negative gives a real permanence to the image. It is important for me to create documents that survive the passage of time. The technological advance of digital scanning makes it possible to obtain better digital files from film negatives. On the other hand, digital cameras create a type of archive that cannot be improved over time. Doing photography has been from the beginning a need to document what is happening, in the words of Barthes to be able to say: "this

has been". I feel photography as the craft and activity that allows a human being to be part of something else, the camera as an excuse to be part of the historical world. I believe that the photographic process requires two types of reading, that of the captured photo and that of the printed copy.

The first: that of the captured photo, that is the reading of movement and human interaction, it is the reading of time that does not stop, and that forces us to read life as a dynamic, random and unpredictable continuum. The photographer reads life and responds to it with his feelings, his mind and his body.

Reality exists for the documentary photographer; without it, his work is meaningless; in the end, photographing is an act of profound love for existence. In the process of fiction, the reality is the starting point for the construction of stories. It seems to me that in the documentary process, it is the other way around: reality is the point of arrival, to make documentary work is to want to "get into" life, to be part of something. To photograph is not an aesthetic fact in itself, nor a technical fact, nor an interesting way of being and doing. To photograph is to want to be part of something, to be interested in something else, to have something to say about the world and oneself. I insist on this because the current uncontrolled fascination with technology gets into our eyes, and we lose sight of the essence of this profession. The cult of the gadget has lost us; we are its users, not those who operate it. It is this danger that motivates me to photograph film, to get into the laboratory behind the kitchen of my house, to make contact sheets and finally to scan the occasional image. My relationship with photography is affectionate, slow, thoughtful, and, I believe, profound.

The second reading is the reading of the image. In this one, the fact of "the real" diminishes and the fact of "the visual" appears; the image is never the reality. An image is the result of the possibilities of visibility that the world contains. Looking at the contact sheet is the first moment of confrontation with the image. It is a travel diary and a memory of what happened in the documentary fact. I usually see them two or three days after having photographed and after some experiences have already been erased from the skin. I take the contact sheet, put it in a window and with a magnifying viewfinder, I stick my eye to the paper and watch. The viewfinder travels over the images and, from time to time, instinctively stops. An image appears. I say it appears because it suddenly enters my vision and surprises me with its force.

What is it that surprises me? What is the force? In photography, it is the capacity to move, to touch a deep and clear inner feeling. In the case of my work, this always has to do with the feeling projected by the photographed subject and the feeling that I have as a human being. After this commotion (which comes from moving), the strength is sustained in the capacity of the photo to say and to be part of a discourse. Discourse as a territory

of evocation of the world and provocation to the world.

Randomness and Foreseen are part of the documentary work. It is a working space of no-control vs. yes-control. If documentary has always been seen as a medium for capturing the real and art as a way of constructing an aesthetic reality, I sense my work in an intermediate space, I don't think I only "record" but I don't think I only "make" images that come from my sensibility. I believe that I photograph from intuition (art), from reason (communication) and from emotion as empathy (humanism). In this dimension, I am guided by the words of Robert Frank: "There is something that photography must contain: the humanity of the moment".

The swimmer is ready to enter the pool; after an hour of warming-up and weight lifting comes the central part of the training: swimming. Taking pictures of swimming can only happen at that moment before the swim; I stand close and frame a body enters the scene, and I look for it with the lens, focus and shoot. Frame 29 is an image; frame 28 is not. In frame 30 the moment has disappeared. I believe that an image is a totality, it is a world in itself, with its own laws and dynamics; it lets itself be seen intensely and is capable of taking the observer (or reader) towards its own world and its own referents, it endures and let perceive its universal meaning.

The mind is there, the emotion is there, but what prevails is intuition as a reaction to the moment. When I get into this world and its dynamics, my eye, when it is not in the viewfinder, is scanning what is happening, my mind is alert, and the shot is an automatic response to an instant stimulus, a flicker between the real and the camera.

In the boxing gym, the photographic dynamic is different, the sport is different, the people are different, the images are different. Boxing and swimming are not the same. In boxing, there are punches and blood; in swimming there is water to flow in; in boxing, there are poor black kids; in swimming, there are white kids with more resources; two socially different sports, separated by their dynamics and their economies. The social theme is there, in the looks of the athletes, in their faces, in their clothes, everywhere, the feeling of precariousness appears.

I feel close to them in both areas. They are young people with an interior force that moves them. If boxing has already been photographed for the marginal character that gives it a special interest for the media, for sensationalism and for a constant search for urban heroes that societies need, for me, it is rather the space of friendship, of feeling part of a parallel world, different, enclosed, refugee, of a world that crouches to face the rival, whatever it may be.

In boxing, the ring is the center of attention, but getting into the ring and putting on the gloves is not the only thing that happens.

Outside the ring, friendship is present even if, in a while, the fellas go upstairs and get in a punching match. These two young men listen to their trainer; that is the only thing that happens, but it is enough for me; it is a moment that gives me clues of what I am looking for: the empathy that exists between the subjects is the empathy that I find; the communion between people is always necessary for my work where the idea of "relationship" and "need of the other," open paths and explorations towards the visual.

I approach, frame, shoot, re-frame, shoot. In the reading of the contact sheet more than one frame is an image, which one to choose. In the process, I ask my wife Paulina to help me to see, she always does. She has an eye that sees different from mine; she is able to see what I cannot. Her subjectivity, different from mine, is the means by which my work takes shape; without her gaze, which looks at me and looks at me, I cannot access the next step of the work. Subjectivity is primordial in the reading of the image. We see the photos with a personal charge, with a lived world, with a culture and a posture in front of the world; this that could sound like elements of the territory of art is for me the fact of feeling myself as an individual in front of a historical world that touches me and moves a need to be part of it in a momentary way. The chosen picture has strength, we don't know why, but it has strength.

Intuition is there, emotion is there, but what prevails is reason and the intellectual analysis of what is seen. I took the photo after a sociological and cultural analysis, although the motivation is finding the human closeness, taking a photograph in which the intention of "saying" out loud an opinion and a point of view about the world appear. Without being as obvious as a denunciation photograph, the commentary of marginality is present in the image. Marginality by itself does not strike me, I find it stereotypical in Latin American photography, but it is present even if it is not sought; even if I seek to portray friendship and closeness, the social dimension is present.

Luis Hernández is 36 years old and has been boxing for 20 years. He no longer boxes professionally, but he still trains. He goes to the training camp in the afternoons to spar with the youngsters. He arrives and starts to warm up, we talk, and he tells me about the life of the sportsman, about the difficulty of the past, he says, nobody helped them, one went out from the streets to the ring, to continue hitting each other; today things are better, the boys still go out from the street, but they are better treated, their destiny could be different. He always liked boxing and went from the streets to the gym like everyone else when he was 14 or 15 years old. I take pictures of him while he warms up outside, in the background the cars on the avenue pass fast and nobody knows about the world of sports in this place, they don't see inside this space where young people do their thing; for the hurried drivers of the city, the place is just a mass of cement on the road, a kind of capital icon where the existence of those not "important" sports is condensed, here you have everything:

tennis, wrestling, karate, gymnastics, weights, etc., everything but soccer, the only sport that catches the masses and therefore the media image. I ask Luis why he boxes, he says, "because I like it", "it's the only thing I've ever liked." He tells me that he trains almost every day because he also has to rest, "you don't take pictures every day, do you?", I answer "of course not," the first clue that I am meeting a different and special person. Julio Mitchel, a great Cuban-American photographer who was my teacher, used to say that there is no need to talk while taking pictures, that our job with the camera is to take pictures, nothing else. I think of my teacher's words when Luis talks to me, and I try not to talk. I answer with monosyllables, and I just want to shoot. It's not easy; the character is too interesting; I see him as someone out of place, an old sportsman, at 36 years old, you are not young for any physical sport. Luis is like me; even though I'm 10 years older than him, I feel he represents my feelings about the world: I'm not young anymore, but I still feel like I am.

He moves from side to side nimbly. I approach the camera and look for his face. He's fast, and I'm almost always late. The camera focus is fixed at 1m or 1.5m, and the iris gives me a comfortable depth. By the end of this search, I've shot about twenty frames, and I'm tired. I stop, I don't know if there is an image. I hope there is. I keep thinking about Luis as I rewind the roll. I feel that this craft has given me the opportunity to access the knowledge of someone whose life I bump into. Luis is a father like me (my son Elías is one year old), and he tells me while we go downstairs to the gym that he has young children; I talk to him about my job and my relationship with cinema, we talk about what it means to go to the movies; he goes to the Cinemateca (a public movie theatre that has no cost), and one day he went with his family, but because of the censorship of the film he could not enter with his little son, so he went to the park to play and wait for the end of the function. That image touches me deeply. This man with hard features and strong hands is, at the end of the day, a father playing with his son in the park. After the photo session, I am physically tired and emotionally tired. I don't know what I feel more: the presence of Luis, the athlete or Luis, the father.

At the end of the journey the image appears, it is strong and profound. Intuition is there, reason is there, but what prevails for me is the emotion of the moment, the deep relationship with a moment of life that is expressed in front of the camera and that touches what I am emotionally when I am there: a new father looking for a moment of creation and personal encounter. It is one of the most personal photos I have ever taken. The documentary work, unlike fiction, does not build a world with its own design but tries to perceive the aesthetics that the world it faces already contains. That difference, which is key in the process, is what moves me to document, to assume myself as a documentarian, I cannot easily assume myself as a creator or artist, although there is a creative vein in my work, for me they are loaded words that surpass me. My photographic, aesthetic, subjective and creative relationship is with life and the forces that manage it, it

is an approach to the world thinking that respect for chance, intuition and emotion are the basis for the appearance of the image and the constant discovery of an internal notion that is always new and known at the same time.

Against time is the title of this photographic essay, it came to me one day and for me it is an idea that summarizes what the practice of sports is: a fight against the passage of time and the traces it leaves on our bodies, it is also an idea that summarizes my photographic practice, not only because I fight against time in the capture of the image but because I feel that I am in a creative and living moment where things should speed up a little more, for now my reflexes are there, my lucidity is there and my body is there, for now, I continue.

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