

AGAINST TIME

Images and memory

*At its core, photography is subversive
not when it frightens, upsets
or even stigmatizes,
but when it is thoughtful.
(Roland Barthes)*

*At once a material object and a multitude of paths,
the photograph is a useful place to begin thinking about the
threshold.
In the photograph we might dwell on the nuances of the threshold,
its ability to be an 'inbetween' and a gateway
to a 'beyond' simultaneously. (Nour Dados)*

We are in 2021. 13 years have passed since I went to the "Concentración Deportiva of Pichincha" with the desire to photograph sports scenes. The initial idea was: to take pictures of the world of sports, to see what was there. I was 42 years old then, I'm 55 now. Time has passed. I'm the same photographer I was then, and I'm not the same photographer I was then. Some things have happened in my life and I guess that's also part of the change. But not too much has happened either. Time has simply gone by.

Photography is mysterious, because it deals with two elements that for human beings have always been a problem to solve: light and time. If we also add the concept of memory, the photographic fact is enhanced with a unique aura. Maybe that's why I am a photographer, because I feel that my material is most of the time unmanageable and ambiguous, almost always surprising in the way the image appears -not only because of the process of developing the negative-, but because of the doubt of knowing whether or not there would be a photo after the shot.

Over time I began to believe that the photograph almost always appears from a place in between the intention of the shot and the constant movement of the observed world. That idea sustains my practice and craft.

The difficulties of writing this essay have come to my mind 13 years after having walked, with my camera, through the "Concentración Deportiva of Pichincha". My photos pose a question to me and shoot arrows at my memories. Memory, then, is the first path for these vague ideas about the image. In this, William Klein (New York, 1928) joins me when he says:

"I have found that I would look at a small contact and everything would come back to me, the feeling I had at the moment I took that photograph: if I was tired, if I was excited, if it was raining or if I had walked too far. It all came back to me and I think a small photograph on a contact sheet is like Proust's famous madeleine."
(Risch, 2012)

It's almost the same for me. Every image I have photographed, transports me to the feeling I had when I was there. Seeing the photo brings me back again to that person with the camera that I was: insecure, doubtful, walking silently in places that are strange to him but nevertheless attract him. But this is just a feeling because, although it happens that way, this only corresponds to a small time around the image that I am looking at. It is as if for me the photo extends a little beyond its limits, its visibility.



I took the image above during the basketball final at the Rumiñahui Coliseum court in Quito. It was the final game between the provincial teams of Pichincha and Guayas in the 2012 National Games. I look at this image and I feel like I am there again.

I feel my presence in that space and in that specific time. I feel that I am there in two different times: now and then, past and present, a sensation of two moments that happen at the same time. The one that was then, and the one that I am now; the one that continues to be, and the one that no longer am, and the one that is now someone else.

I look at the image and I feel I am there.

But something is missing, I don't remember the evolution of the character in this image. I don't remember if he arrived and sat down or if he was already sitting down and I approached him with the camera or if a second later he stood up. I don't know, I don't remember.

Sometimes it seems to me that photos don't have much to do with memory.

I take a step back, look for the negative sheet and next to it, the contact sheet. An instrument as important to the photographer as a lens or the type of film he used.



To take the contact sheet. To put it under a light and with a magnifying glass in hand. To start an observation of the path taken while photographing, is a way to face a relentless diary of the work, step by step, where sometimes, a surprise appears: a photo, a moment captured.

My memory is fragile, the photo chosen is the second shot of the basketball player sitting down resting during a break in the game. It is the negative number zero-four from a roll of KODAK TRI-X ASA 400 film.

Six more pictures appear after the chosen photo. Six more attempts to create an image. It becomes clear to me that looking at life, and looking at the images of life are two different things, two ways of looking; two different times.

I have few memories of that match. My memory and my relationship with what was photographed seem to be summarized in the chosen image, which is the one that comes closest to an idea: that moment that was best looked at.

Looking at contact sheets is like going through a personal diary, like a search for clues of who you were, what you thought or believed. These sheets help me see myself as someone else. I see someone who photographs, who takes a distance, or sometimes gets closer. Who searches and doesn't find, and approaches in a different way moment and changes the position of the camera. I see someone who doubts. Cristina García Roderó, Magnum photographer says:

A contact sheet provides a great deal of information about a given photographic session. By analyzing this succession of images in the order in which they were taken, it is possible to know many things about the photographer who created them: how he relates to the characters (and whether or not he does so), how he frames, how he measures, how he looks for the most appropriate point of view, whether he uses the right optics, whether he takes risks or conserves, whether he is lazy, whether he gets bored easily, whether he explores. (Barros, 2014)

The contact sheets are visual diaries. Diaries that are almost always relentless. Most of the time they leave a bitter taste, because they reflect the constant impossibility of arriving on time. The contact sheets prove how intensely the photographer experiments the documentary approach on every photographic creation. For the documentary photographer the world slips out of his hands, the images appear as an act of resistance from staring at reality. Documentary images occur in a constant tension between reality and its dynamics, and the intention of the viewer.

There are images that resist being captured.

But from time to time, they give us certainty, and the joy of having encountered the world at the exact moment, when it revealed itself to our gaze. When everything around was ordered in a harmonious way at the exact moment when the image was shot.

These photos are halfway between the intention of the viewer and what the world has proposed. They arise from a relationship, the documentary relationship. We document at the same time what it is seen and what it is felt when seeing. To look then is also to listen to the other.

My photos are just that: the traces of a feeling that goes back and forth. Each image in this book, "Against Time", frames an arbitrariness and also an alteration of the continuity of the world. They are an evidence of that feeling that rests on both sides.

I like to believe that these characters, all young, and I, connected momentarily in the fraction of the time during the creation of the image -for fractions of a second, nothing more-, and in that moment of connection we had a shared feeling.

For me that feeling is concentration. Concentration in looking and concentration, in the hard practice of sports.

Sports is the end, the one that is practiced to be and to be part of something, not to appear or to win. The intention of these images is to honor that attitude, that of concentration, in spite of everything. That of the young early risers, who push their bodies to the limit because that is their true call.

I wonder what motivates them, ¿What are their intentions?

I think it is a matter of passion, pride in oneself and identity. An identity against the clock, when the athlete's body gradually stops responding and the practice of sport ends up pitting his or her being against time.

If one is an athlete, the time that passes is also that of the youth and not only that of the stopwatch. From those years of youth, one lives the present with great strength and feels that time will not pass, that the body will always be young and the mark, the record, the physical achievement, will always improve. You feel and think this way, but suddenly, one day the mark does not improve or life takes us somewhere else. Without further ado, time has passed and sports, more often than not, take a back seat. The race against time is lost.

These images are my small tribute to those moments in life, when youth and sport are one.

Notes from my notebook

Photographing is not only loading film and shooting, it is also thinking, walking, reflecting, and finally writing. In my camera bag there is always a space for a small notebook, for my work diaries:

2008-07-04: the moment to photograph is the moment of the pause of the physical movement. This is a world of contained intensities, of fears and flaws that are waiting for sport to cover them. The joy is not so interesting, nor the extreme defeat. What motivates the athlete is a middle ground, not delimited; that moment of reflection that they get at the end of a sport practice: when the body is relaxed and the mind is clear and thinking about what has been done.

2008-07-11: athletes live in a world of tensions, achievement is always ephemeral. It is not a matter of triumph, but of a way of living based on constant preoccupation.

Monday 28, 7:00 24th of May High School: Today's quest is for friendships, bonds and needs.

Wednesday 13: Approaching to photograph a quite distant world, is an anthropological approach. When you are very close, it is almost impossible or at least very uncomfortable. When it is an intermediate territory, when it is familiar but not intimate, taking pictures is to move constantly between the close and the distant. The territory of uncertainty makes it possible for the pictures to be taken and sometimes not. The correct distance is to find myself between the photographic act and the human act.

June 8, Box La Tola: Here in *La Tola* there is blood... the voice of a father is part of the experience.

May 31st, Rumiñahui Coliseum. Luis Hernández (36): "You can't box all the time. As you wouldn't be able to take pictures all the time, you'd get bored"



Luis questions me and his image questions me.

An image is the fruit of its time and space. Time and space as a single thing. It travels with the passing years to different times and spaces, but it never leaves aside its origins. Reading an image will always depend on those two times: the time where it was made and the time in which it is seen.

I feel Luis' photo with the same energy as that afternoon in May 2012. Both Luis and I are still intact in that shared moment. Finally it is only a feeling because most likely, nine years later we are no longer the same.

Today, in 2021, his gaze is the gaze of the concentration of one who surrenders to what he is, and to his constituent element. I am on one side of that image, I am on my own path. The path of photographic concentration, a path that I still navigate and that does not end with this book.

My path against time.

Armando Salazar,
Tababela (Ecuador), 2021.

References:

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