

Angelus Novus.

Bleda y Rosa: Counter-Images of History

—Nacho París

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again.

—Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History (Thesis v)*

History also teaches how to laugh at the solemnities of the origin [...] We must dismiss those tendencies that encourage the consoling play of recognitions [...] We ask historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference.

—Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*

The past that the angel of history is no longer able to comprehend reconstitutes its form in front of the angel of art; but this form is the alienated image in which the past finds its truth again only on condition of negating it, and knowledge of the new is possible only in the nontruth of the old.

—Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*

This exhibition brings together twenty-five years of the photographic work of María Bleda and José María Rosa, articulated around *Campos de batalla* [Battlefields], a project begun in 1994 and divided into three main sections—*España* [Spain], *Europa* [Europe] and *Ultramar* [Overseas]—which visits places marked by History where thousands of people confronted each other and died violently, taking battle painting as an aesthetic and conceptual point of reference. (1)

By way of an introduction, the show opens with the first of their projects to achieve public recognition, *Campos de fútbol* [Football Pitches] (1992-95). In establishing a dialectic between place, time and memory, this series anticipates the conceptual coordinates that were to govern Bleda y Rosa's later work. Through the relationship between photographic image, History and landscape it poses two questions at once. The first is about History and its presence, in the sense of "being in sight" and also in terms of sensing the manifestation of an absence, of those stories that would embrace all possible times. It questions *history* as momentous History, decisive past or ordered collective memory that dictates place, landscape, as a constituent element of national and historical identities; what Nietzsche called "'monumental history': a History given to re-establishing the high points of historical development and their maintenance in a perpetual presence, given to the recovery of works, actions, and creation through the monogram of the personal essence".(2) The second question concerns the nature of the photographic medium, its functions and potentialities. At first sight, Bleda y Rosa's work seems to be located at that moment in photography when image and reality appear indistinguishable, each forming part of the other; but it paradoxically calls into question that relationship between photograph and truth, an inseparable relationship rooted in Cartesian thought, which links the modern idea of instrumental reasoning (a purely finalistic or utilitarian form of anti-utopian reasoning) to the connection between the visible and the true. At the same time it reveals the conflict in photography between the documentary and the aesthetic and the complex relationship between text and image. And it does so through excellent formal execution, through an investigation of the intrinsic properties of photography.

Bleda y Rosa's rigorous, precise photographic practice places them in a position equidistant from the two sides in the contemporary debate on photography: from those who propound a conception of photography based on its use functions and from the formalist view, which seeks its essence in the specific nature of the photographic medium, and even further from that apocalyptic perspective which for some time now has been announcing the death of photography. And that dialectical relationship between two domains of human activity, photography and History, serves as

a starting point for questioning the essence of both, their merely discursive or language-based nature and their fundamental place in the construction of ideology.

*Bleda y Rosa's "photographic programme"
as a paradoxical project*

This questioning of the very nature of photography and History, of their uses and functions, arises from the paradoxical nature of Bleda y Rosa's project. In the first place, their work is based on a radical impossibility: using photography to record the past. Where Cartier-Bresson looked for the "decisive moment", Bleda y Rosa seem to pursue the moment and location of a "decisive past", and they do so with limitless, exhaustive determination; *Campos de batalla*, for example, is a series they spent over twenty years developing, at locations in Spain, Europe and Overseas. It is therefore not just any piece of work, but something which in its timescale and degree of commitment we could call a "photographic programme". And they carry out this programme with remarkable faith, with complete confidence in the possibilities of photography and history as forms of knowledge and in visuality as a quality connecting the world and its lore. This is the second paradoxical facet: they simultaneously call into question the possibilities of the photographic and the problem of History as the construction of a unitary past, but they do so from within, through technical and formal precision in the use of photography and rigorous historical research, making orthodox use of the investigative processes and narrative tools that photography and history place at our disposal; in other words, through what appears to be a positivist approach.

Finally, the paradox comes full circle with the feeling that the clue the image offers us is curiously "out of shot", or "beyond the text" that the image presents, to put it another way; that in order to contribute their knowledge, to cast doubt on those incomplete fables, those inadequate fictions of photography and History, Bleda y Rosa's photographs curiously bring into play what is not seen, what they do not show. The conflicted, aporetic position from which they pursue their work, seeming at once to disbelieve and to defend the modern utopia of photography, somehow reminds us of that parish priest of unfathomable doubts, Don Manuel, the protagonist of Miguel de Unamuno's *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* [St Emmanuel the Good, Martyr], in his will to live as a believer and his simultaneous inability to believe.

Counter-images/anti-images

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes speaks of photography as a "counter-memory", as something that blocks memory, replacing the emotion of recollection with the certainty of an image that will never be able to "restore what has been abolished" but will only ever be a mere testimony of "what I see has been here". In this sense, if we think of photography as a representation of something, as evocation (or "counter-memory", according to Barthes's terminology), we might regard Bleda y Rosa's images as "counter-images" of History, since instead of evoking the expected story, prompting recognition, they generate the sense of a suspension of the historical narrative, or at least of its relationship of continuity with the present. And if we referred to the image not as a representation but as an intuition of something, that is, as its mental or imaginary figuration, then Bleda y Rosa's photographs would function all the more as counter-images of History. What we see in their photographs obviously has existed and may even still exist, but strangely their value as images does not lie in recognition, sharing in a reality (of that past constructed by the discourse of History); contrary to expectation, their value is based on an absence, and what they convey is precisely the discontinuity of time, the scant messianic value of the past, the dialectic of time and place that resists "monumental history". At the same time, Bleda y Rosa's photographs could be thought of, using Victor I. Stoichiță's terminology, (3) as "anti-images", that is, as theoretical objects, meta-images that reflect on themselves, having moved beyond that fetishistic moment of the reception of the image in which it captures some quality of the real, of the thing represented, something of its essence that gives the image a share in its being. This tension as meta-images is

heightened by the incorporation of text into Bleda y Rosa's works, which may be a mere caption naming the event that the image refers to, as in *Campos de batalla*, or a lengthy historical document accompanying the image, as in *Prontuario. Notas en torno a la Guerra y la Revolución* [Promptuarium. Notes on War and Revolution]. This caption or documentary explanation functions as a parergon,⁴ not in the limited sense of a decorative supplement but as something that at once adds to and opposes the work, simultaneously establishing a distance and a closeness, a belonging and an exteriority. Bleda y Rosa work as if history could... as if the image could... as if words could... but finally neither the text nor the image nor the relationship between them seem sufficient. So, as has already been noted, their images, responsive to the demands of the photographer as witness and as artist and the photograph as document and as expression, occupy a critical position between a postmodern theory, grounded in the historical and cultural uses of photography, and the formalist discourse that defends a hypothetical notion of the specific nature of the photographic medium. They thus raise the question of how far photography can exist independently of the external discursive framework, that is, a function bestowed from outside by other social practices at a particular cultural moment, and to what extent the power of the camera depends on an exogenous authority. By conveying a certain sadness with regard to the utopia of photography, they seem to suggest that the potential of images lies precisely in the indecisiveness and ambiguity of the photographic sign: in its inadequacy, its instability.

*"There are no spoils": History as erased
landscape and history without recognition*

In pursuing their photographic programme, which they conduct in an almost scientific and documentary manner, like an inventory or a rigorous, exhaustive historical archive, Bleda y Rosa seem to want to fulfil the duty Walter Benjamin assigned to the materialist historian, "to brush history against the grain", (5) by giving expression to the great questions he posed to historicism: the relationship between the notion of *history* and the essence of peoples, the narrativity of History, the momentousness of the epic moment and the construction of it from the perspective of victory in empathy with the victor. Like Benjamin, they ask themselves, and us, "whether we are touched by a breath of the air that caressed those who preceded us" (6) and through a critical review of culture (conceived as the spoils of a conflict, the product of a dominator triumphing over the dominated), they suggest that perhaps there is "a secret agreement between past generations and the present one" (7) but that quotation seems elusive, irreducible to any record, whether that of "monumental history" and identities or that of photography as an archive of the credible. Through an absence, an impossibility, their images seem to restore the silences and gaps inherent in time, those that History is determined to fill in, by tearing out and selecting moments from historical succession, constructing an arbitrary continuity that seeks to dissolve time in the unstoppable course of history. In Foucault's words: "a history whose function is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself; a history that always encourages subjective recognitions and attributes a form of reconciliation to all the displacements of the past". (8) We could say that Bleda y Rosa formulate a certain genealogy of history, in the Foucauldian sense of the term, which "does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things", nor to show a still living past or the fate of a people, but rather, on the contrary, to perceive the smallest accidents, the most minute deviations, revealing that "truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents". (9) And they do so through a narrative that we might call suspended, where there is initially no sign of that tragic moment of anagnorisis, of recognition, that narrative device described by Aristotle in his *Poetics* whereby characters discover, or have revealed to them, matters concealed until that moment that prove to be essential to the story or to their identity. Bleda y Rosa go to the place of historical peripeteia, but the image they offer us does not fill out what is known, it does not confirm or reveal History, we do not find that moment of recognition... or perhaps we do, perhaps the past delineated by our collective memory or our identity is not there, it has melted away, and the story is not what

we were expecting; perhaps what is made visible and above all present to us, what we are shown, is just time, a collective memory that is not ordered.

*“The angel of history”, the angel of art
and contemporaneity*

Walter Benjamin describes “the angel of history” as follows:

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage on wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (10)

In *The Man Without Content* (11) Giorgio Agamben compares the “dialectical image” (12) of history proposed by Benjamin with Dürer’s *Angel of Melancholy*, presented by Agamben as the angel of art, who offers history insufficient redemption (or even condemnation) based on estrangement and nostalgia, but who might resolve “the conflict between old and new without whose settlement man—this being that has lost himself in time and must find himself again, and for whom therefore at every instant his past and future are at stake—is unable to live”. That conflict between old and new is where Bleda y Rosa work, in an attempt to restore History to the present, seeking, as Deleuze put it, that creative image which is creative precisely when it reveals, when it makes visible, time relations that elude us. And they do this by fulfilling two demands expressed by Georges Didi-Huberman. The first is for the image, which is to be “understood alternately as document and as dream object, as work and as passing object, as monument and as object of editing, as not-knowing and as object of science”. The second is a task common to artists and historians, “to make visible both the tragedy in culture (in order not to cut it off from its history) and the culture in tragedy (in order not to cut it off from its memory)”. (13)

With its counter-images of History, the work of Bleda y Rosa, essentially contemporary—since, as Agamben says, (14) it is capable of relating the present to other times and of reading and citing history in a new way—transcending its objective, documentary appearance, ushers in a subjective gaze, attentive to detail and freed from the power that History exerted over place; making the complex dialectics of time, memory, history, place and the here and now visible, “present” in the image, in their irreconcilable diversity, and putting *history*, in lowercase, before our eyes, history with all the shadows and complexities of time, brought into the present.

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1. The exhibition also includes a selection from the series *Origen* [Origin] (2003-), which presents a journey through territories of prime importance in palaeoanthropology, linked to investigation into the beginnings of the human species, and *Prontuario. Notas en torno a la Guerra y la Revolución* [Promptuarium: Notes on War and Revolution] (2011-) a series of dossiers organised like episodes, with a collection of notes, references and images centring on processes of uprising, war and revolution that took place during the period of the Atlantic Revolutions.
2. Foucault, Michel: “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1977, pp. 139-64, p. 161.
3. Stoichiță, Victor I: *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

4. *Parergon* is used here almost in the sense suggested by Stoichiță in “Chapter ii” of *The Self-Aware Image*, where he presents it, citing Jacques Derrida and Hillis Miller, as “a critical stage in the metapictorial tension”, an extra element capable of creating such tension that it contributes historically to the demythification of the image.
5. Cited in Sánchez Sanz, José and Piedras Monroy, Pedro: “A propósito de Walter Benjamin: nueva traducción y guía de lectura de las ‘Tesis de filosofía de la historia’”, *Duererías. Anacleta Philosophiae, Revista de Filosofía*, 2nd period, nº 2, February, 2011. (Spanish journal).
6. Ibidem.
7. Ibidem.
8. Foucault, Michel: *Op. cit.*, p. 152.
9. Ibidem, p. 146.
10. Benjamin, Walter: “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 2007, pp. 254-58. *Thesis ix*, based on Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*.
11. Agamben, Giorgio: *The Man Without Content*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1999.
12. In schematic terms we could say that the concept of a “dialectical image”, which Benjamin presents in various texts, is a type of thought that uses images to develop concepts and propose a critical reading.
13. Didi-Huberman, Georges: “When Images Touch the Real”, available online at: <http://www.montsebadia.net/spip/IMG/pdf/-3.pdf>. [Last accessed on 20 April 2017].
14. Agamben, Giorgio: “What Is the Contemporary?”, *Nudities*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2011, pp. 10-19.