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GRACIELA SACCO: MIGRATIONS, BODIES, MEMORIES

*"I don't know whether art has a mission, but in the case that it did, I would hope that it would be none other than to offer someone the possibility of formulating new questions about the here and now of their existence."*

—Graciela Sacco

Vague, blurry and at times almost non-existent, Graciela Sacco's images demand a specific kind of contemplation that involves the viewer's actions, gaze and thoughts. In some cases, it takes time to identify what they represent; in others, we find ourselves in a dark room having to "develop" the image by casting light through translucent plates in order to project the printed images onto walls. The time such identification demands of viewers stimulates a moment of reflection.

Sacco's visual arguments rely on a repertoire of images that refer to the body almost without exception (faces, mouths, eyes and hands). These images function as the point of departure for her experimentation and also as a base parameter from which she proposes to revise different social constructions of meaning.

Her viewpoint on social issues points to a polemic intention that surrounds art in many of its expressions. How does contemporary society organize itself? Whom does it include or exclude? What purpose does technology serve, and

who profits? How can fissures be introduced into a symbolic order, infinitely reproduced and qualified by the mass media, using no more than the weakened traces of the restricted itinerary of art's imagery?

Graciela Sacco submits these questions by employing the visual and aesthetic discourse of images, and she elaborates them in both local and global repertoires. A photo of a demonstration in Jordan is also a photo of a demonstration some place else where the same demands are being proclaimed.

In 1983 she began an extensive series of explorations with heliography. The first technical innovation occurred the moment she discovered that she was able to obtain photo-silkscreen images based on the light and shadows projected through slides. In 1992 she perfected the process of so preparing any type of surface (metal, glass, canvas, bread, flower petals, etc.) as to produce heliographic images. This became the key to a form of artistic production that took on the challenges of handling content as well as those of technical experimentation. Sacco made disturbing images appear on the surfaces of objects (suitcases, plates, spoons, wine glasses, bread, hats, a bed, a refrigerator, Venetian blinds), dilated visions of skin, fragments of bodies or faces, that she employed to point out threatened areas of society.

In 1997, she presented *El incendio y las vísperas* (Blaze and Vespers) at the San Pablo Biennial: an image of a demonstration printed on a series of wooden pickets, similar to those used for mounting political signs. In unending chords composed of parallel shapes, the image is splintered into fragments that unleash a vertical rhythm. A crowd advances with violent gestures. Various diffuse details in the clothing situate the grainy picture as pertaining to the imagery of the seventies, photographs of the May 1968 uprisings in Paris, as well as those that shook the nation's power structure with the 1969 Cordobazo. Urban conflagrations invade the space of artistic legitimization. In Sacco's work, there is a recurring tension between urban and artistic scenes.

We need to turn our attention to the technical procedure she utilizes in order to achieve an intentional condensation of time while at once confronting different eras. Heliography allows one to infuse new life into an already intensely reproduced image. A rebirth, it is able to reestablish the inaugural moment of a representation that had been submitted to an extensive chain of mediation: from

the moment of the popular rebellion when it was captured in the documentary photographic shot, to its reproduction in the newspaper from which Sacco took the image, to the diffuse and fragmented presentation imposed by the stakes and the open grain of the photographic record.

Each one of these phases renews the power of the subject matter. Heliographic development takes on the force of all the successive strengths of the image and re-inscribes it onto a new support with the primary purpose of presenting a question. In this collective march Sacco does not purport to record the instant of that precise moment captured in the photograph, but the active latent potential of the times, the driving force with which the past can interrogate the present. It also enlivens the irrevocable sense of the demands that activate the crowd advancing in the street.

In 1997 at the Havana Biennial, for the first time Sacco presented a work that showed the theme of multitudes in transit. She printed onto a cluster of oxygen tanks a photograph depicting a group of migrants being expelled from their homeland. The image introduces a discourse of dislocation and spatial references being erased as a result of the nomadic displacement of multitudes that move imperceptibly so as to inhabit border zones. These images refer to the global traffic of individuals for whom a return to a point of origin is impossible. For these people, limits become provisional, and the border—no longer the nation—becomes a habitat, the place where daily experiences take place. This shift does not come without consequences. In contrast to travel, which presupposes an established trajectory and a return home, migration means disorientation in time and space, a disturbance that fractures the world and any sense of history into fragments, and even displaces the predetermination that previously differentiated between different centers and peripheries. The images of the migrants do not allude to particular places, and do not pretend to replace a historical explanation. Memory is called upon in terms of its performative attribute, so as to place this group of people, continually on the move, in an undetermined time and space.

During a trip to the Middle East, Graciela Sacco elaborated an iconography of transit. She projected images of eyes onto emblematic sites, onto spaces immersed in a history of entries, departures, and displacement—on the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, on the walls of Jordan, and on Egyptian monuments. She

highlighted the importance of these places, whose walls bear the marks of history. The procedure that she utilized—the materialization of ephemeral images that would appear on any wall and immediately disappear—implied a performative dimension of the theme. The treatment of the image staged the very notion of transit. Just like people, the images ceased to belong to a determined space, so as to pertain now to any surface over which, for a moment, they materialized. The photographic record of this intervention is quite perturbing. The wall's evident wear and the eyes that appear from within the cracks have an evanescent presence that exists due only to light, and the eyes disappear just as quickly as the same light recedes.

Sacco arranges series that eventually intertwine, provoking a different set of associations. Examples of this include *Cuerpo a cuerpo* (Body to Body) or *Presencias urbanas* (Urban Presence). The former is comprised of all those installations that necessarily involve viewers. It begins with images she located in the street, where she herself appears photographed while aiming the camera. *Cuerpo a cuerpo* also includes the pages of the book *Un lugar bajo el sol* (A Place in the Sun). The pictures recorded on the acrylic pages of this book include the hyper-reproduced media images of demonstrations: May 1968 from Jordan, the Prague Spring, and from Bosnia. They become visible to the extent that viewers illuminate them and they are projected onto the wall of the exhibition space. In this way, the space functions as a developing lab, like a *camera obscura* where viewers provoke the existence of the images on the walls.

The *Presencias urbanas* series refers to the scene of the citizen, to those heliographic images or those that materialize when Sacco encourages them to emerge from the city's walls, camouflaged within their cracks. During her trip to the Middle East, Sacco explored the power of the intangible, the possibility offered by the projections of eyes that appeared to sprout from those walls, already loaded with history. She further developed the series in 2001, with her participation in the Venice Biennial. This time she printed the eyes on a transparent support that was then adhered onto walls, covering the entire city. These images of multiplying eyes served as powerful iconography of contemporary diaspora, pointing to its condition of border, limits, and the space between cultures in symbolic terms.

In one of her most recent exhibitions in the Museo de Arte Moderno de

Buenos Aires (2004), Sacco presented a video installation, *Sombras del sur y del norte: vistos* (Shadows from South and North: Seen), where she included video projections of images of men and women waiting on line who observe us as viewers. Although this work turned out to be inseparable from the most common everyday reality in Argentina, of lines and waiting—images that Sacco effectively shot on the streets of Argentinean cities—the central issue was how she staged the presence of the gaze. The exhibition space was transformed by the projections and transparencies that explored the moment in which the images appeared. It was a magic moment, somewhat unpredictable and elusive, however captivating. Once again the work's principal device materializes within a span of momentary waiting. It suspends viewers in a timeframe that emerges between the first formulations of an identified form and successive reflections on its possible meanings.

*Translated by Tamara Stuby*