Being Otherwise

The impossibility of not being, as the incessant insistence of the neutral, the nocturnal murmur of the anonymous, as what never begins.

Maurice Blanchot

Between 1991-1993, Milagros de la Torre produced what became a series of more than 200 portraits, entitled "Bajo el Sol Negro" or "Under the Black Sun." Photographing the youth of Cuzco in the streets, the work depicts their faces gazing directly at the camera, yet photographs that are processed and exhibited in their negative state.

FACE TO FACE

Produced in small format, the series recall immediately the common photographic portrait of the "photo carnet" and 19thc. carte-de-visite, both of which were immensely popular in Peru, as elsewhere, since the time of their invention in the 1860's. By virtue of the apparent immediacy and directness with which the body appears to leave an unmediated impression or trace of itself on the surface of the paper, gave a legitimacy to photography as an instrument of both self-representation and representation of the other. Representation is not only witness to, but bears the trace of the world. But above all it was the face in which look and identity, sight and presence would seem to coalesce, a relation that becomes the irrefutable sign of being, a true presence.

Underpinned by the idea that the intellectual and psychological faculties of an individual, and hence their character, were revealed in the physiognomy or features of the face, the face became the essential image of portraiture. And, through the exchange of the gaze, the camera assumed the privileged form of identifying its subject. The photo carnet could provide both a form of identity and identification recognized by individuals and the State alike. With the photo carnet in hand, one could then remark: "This is me," "This is how I was" or "This is the other to whom I refer," each of which speak of the image as that which evokes the recognizable essence of one or the other. In these terms, photography became a document of the State as much as albums made for tourists as much as for each other, family members, friends and novias. [1]

In "Bajo el Sol Negro" de la Torre draws upon a local Peruvian tradition of plaza photographers, or *minuteros* as they were called, whose name referred to their ability to produce a photograph within minutes. What de la Torre explores is their technique of retouching the paper negative with a red liquid, which at the moment the image is transferred into positive, gives an effect of whiteness. That is, it whitens the face, thus providing its subject with the illusion of being white rather than dark-skinned, an illusion that erases the sign of race, and therefore of class. [2] This is how they wish to be seen, to see themselves, a mask that signifies beauty, as against how they are seen. Between the minuteros and subject then is a complicit play of misrecognition, and it is this exchange which the work of de la Torre restages. After taking the photographs and retouching the face with the same red mercurochrome used by the *minuteros*, she suspends the next stage by processing the negatives as negative. In this manner, de la Torre presents the viewer with the metaphoric play of conversion between the negative and positive impressions.

The non-portraits of de la Torre refuse photography's claim to render the world intelligible, to provide an immediate disclosure of its presence

which, above all, is to be found in its ability to represent the other. Rather her re-presentation takes us further. For, in what appears to be a simple procedure, she puts into question our relation to the subject of recognition. Revealing the operation of a photographic convention and technical procedure that constructs identity and social difference, she shows how the image of the other serves as a vehicle for the construction of our own image of ourselves and conversely, how the image we have of ourselves informs the way we see others. It is this interdiction that provides the ground for a re-encounter with the other, a apprehension, that is, of the other as other and not the same. It is to this interdiction to which I wish to turn, to its possibility and to Emmanuel levinas, whose works has continued to address that question.

In prefacing his book *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas prefaced his work by saying of Pascal's remark "'That is my place in the sun.' That is how the usurpation of the whole world began." [3] The non-identical is absorbed by the identical. It folds the other into the same. This is the violence at the heart of ontology. The strategy of de la Torre is not to refuse the authority of representation, but to expose its structuring order by which the other is made intelligible through the concept of presence. It is this ontology of presence which, in thinking of being as coming-into-presence, reifies the face as the "window of the soul," revealing the innermost essence of a person. The concentration upon the face followed the idea that the intellectual and psychological faculties of an individual, and hence her character, were revealed in the physiognomy or features of the face. What is common to both is a , taxonomy of a way of viewing the world. And, the use of photography by the disciplinary practices of the State, such as criminal anthropology and popular forms of portraiture, provides a means of arresting the image. This is the power of the gaze, conferring upon its subject

Milagros de la Torre. *Bajo el sol negro*, 1991-93. Toned silver gelatin print, pigment, 3 x 8,5 cm.

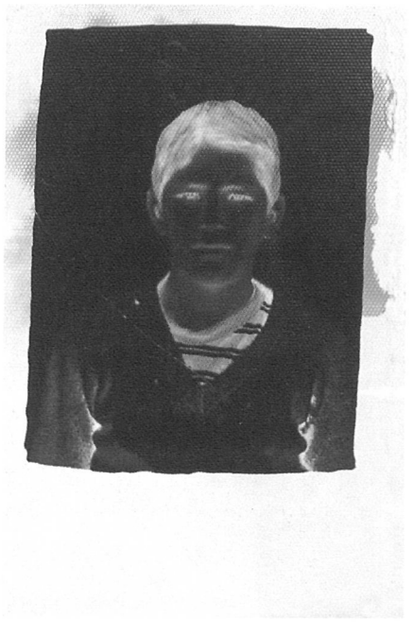
an identity while, in the same movement, fixing it within the archive. The portrait that stands for oneself or another is abducted out of this world into another [4]. It is an abduction into the archive. Portraiture, insofar as it defines the subject, functions as a model for its regulation. The intervention on the part of the *minuteros* provides a crucial means of symbolically reforming the social body insofar as it disguises the issue as an aesthetic matter.

The issue is how to exceed the Hegelian concept of Aufhebung in which the nonidentical or difference is absorbed into presence or the identity of the same, thereby creating a circle of absolute knowledge or totality. For Levinas, the question would be how to enable an exposure to alterity in the face of the other. The intervention on the part of de la Torre opens a space between truth as representation and truth as unconcealment, a world that cannot become a picture.

DARKNESS AT NOON

Do not gaze down upon me as I am swarthy because the sun has scorched me (accompanying inscription to painting "The virgin of Loreto)[5]

For whom are such photographs that withdraw from the light, from the very source which disclosed the subject in the full light of day. In retouching the image of the face, de la Torre adds to it a mask, and yet, this is neither to claim a hidden essence or a refusal to disclosure. It is not, in this sense, as a deaf man, writing on the photographs of blind people by Sophie Calle, wrote: "Since your face is not available to me, why should my face be available to you?" [6]. Rather, the appearance of the mask performs a double gesture by both reinvoking and disrupting the concept of the image as it turns on the dialectic of absence/presence. In the photographs of de la Torre, the mask erases the sign of race, it points onto the absence, while offering itself as otherwise. This is not, however, to speak of absence as bearing the truth of the image but rather, to the contrary, the necessary fiction that the image of the face presents us with the presence of the other. What is given in its place is rather a simulacrum of a presence, which however, in erasing all trace of referent, exceeds itself as trace, assuming its own non-identity.



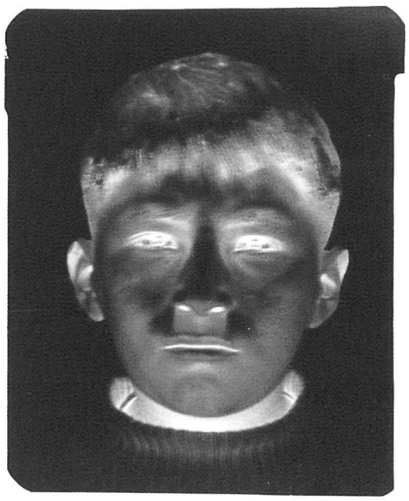
Milagros de la Torre. *Bajo el sol negro*, 1991-93. Toned silver gelatin print, pigment, 4,5 x 7 cm.

We might say de la Torre misappropriates Pascal's words: "That is my place in the sun," offering rather "Bajo el Sol Negro," as a world at noon in darkness, a revelation that occurs within the shadows caste by the light of day. The faces in the de la Torre's photographs appear in and of shadows, pools of darkness in the light of the sun. The image remains opaque, refusing the light of transparency. It runs against Hegel's theological conception of art that revolves around the notion of presence and absence. Hegel views the image as the sensible presentation of the Idea, the visible image of the invisible God. The face constitutes the image par excellence of the divine and the imprint and trace of Christ's face found on "Veronica's Veil" represents the first and true icon of Christian art. As Hans Belting notes, the face of Christ represents "the archetype of a human image in which the likeness of God was reflected. The sight of the cloth image seemed to anticipate the vision of God, though subject to the conditions of an earthly view of a human face." [7] The faces that we see in these photographs cannot be read as windows to the soul, but rather a light which reveals being otherwise.

The refusal to be recognized, the secret of identity so that representation itself fails before its subject. In the work

of de la Torre, the face of the other is blind to our gaze, although gaze there is. The reversal of light's reflection, the hollow eyes and empty gaze give to de la Torre's images a spectral quality. Writing on photography, Christian Metz refers to the snapshot as like death, an arrested image in time. While appearing to preserve its object by removing it from the real, it in fact seals its fate, its destruction. It cuts away from the referent, the body, involving a mortification of the image. [8]. As Levinas has suggested,

Art freezes time, it is about the meanwhile, a "duration in the interval,



Milagros de la Torre. *Bajo el sol negro*, 1991-93. Toned silver gelatin print, 80 x 100 cm.

in that sphere which a being is able to traverse, but in which its shadow is immobilized." Art then offers consolation because it is an interval in the movement of time and death. [9]

However, it is precisely within the space of this duration or interval in which the body is frozen in time, transformed into an object, that ironically confirms the essence of the subject. On this basis, Levinas argues against the primacy of the visual and aesthetic. He suggests that "resemblance (is) not as the result of a comparison between an image and the original, but as the very movement that engenders the image. Reality would not be only what it is, what it is disclosed to be in truth, but would be also its double, its shadow, its image." [10] In other words, the "consciousness of the representation lies in knowing that the object is not there." [11] He continues: "Being is not only itself, it escapes itself" insofar, as like an allegory, being is an "ambiguous commerce with reality in which reality does not refer to itself but to its reflection, its shadow. An allegory thus represents what in the object itself doubles up. An image, we can say, is an allegory of being."[12] Following Levinas, we can say, the visual does not reveal, rather representation guards a secret, the secret of alterity, while appearing to reveal, it substitutes. Levinas writes that:

The thesis of the primacy of history for the understanding of being constitutes a choice in which interiority is sacrificed....The real must not only be determined in its historical objectivity, but also as beginning from the secret which interrupts the continuity of historical time, beginning with inner intentions. the pluralism of society is only possible as beginning with this secret. We know ...it is impossible to conceive an idea of human totality, for men have an inner life which is nevertheless closed to some who grasp the worldwide movement of human groups. [13]

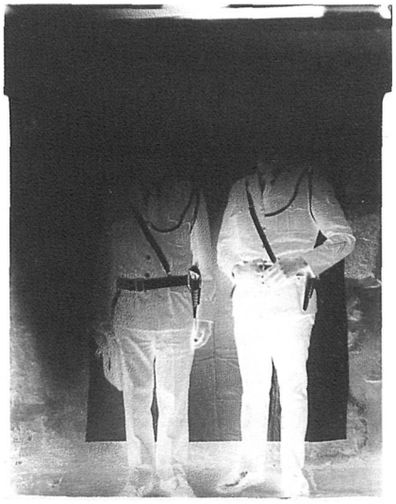
Milagros de la Torre. *Bajo el sol negro*, 1991-93. Toned silver gelatin print, 80 x 100 cm.

Blanchot argues for reading skepticism within Levinas's theory of language not because it is either "inadequate or essentially negative," but rather because it would "not allow satisfaction with absolute knowledge or allow transparent communication."[14] Blanchot explains that "we are exposed, by way of our own responsibility, to the enigma of the nonphenomenal, the nonrepresentable, within the ambiguity between the trace to be deciphered and the indecipherable..." (It is) "speech that escapes revelation, manifestation: namely, the remaining trace of nonpresence, what is still opaque in the transparent." [15] Blanchot will argue that this as an "irreducible diachrony"

–the "noncoincidence with the Other: the impossibility of being together in a simple simultaneity," a relation of "positive impropriety, of strangeness and interruption; and yet, it is a substitution of one for the other, a difference as nondifference." [16]

Levinas offers a way of being in the world, of coming into presence by putting oneself in question, a recognition of the other which precedes the relation to oneself. Being comes into presence, that is occupies the world as being there only through an encounter with and responsibility towards another human being. As he writes

The sense of the human is not measured by presence, not even by self-presence. The meaning of proximity exceeds the limits of ontology, of the human essence, and of the world. It signifies by way of transcendence and the relationship-to-God-in-me which is the putting of myself into question. The face signifies in the fact of summoning, of summoning me –in all its nudity or its destitution, in everything that is precarious in questioning, in all the hazards of mortality– the unresolved alternative between Being and Nothingness, a questioning which, ipso facto, summons me.[17]



Milagros de la Torre. *Bajo el sol negro*, 1991-93. Toned silver gelatin print, 80 x 100 cm.

The face, the encounter face to face constitutes the presentation of the other that exceeds all idea of the other in me. As Levinas remarks, "To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question." [18] This is the provocation that de la Torre provides, a provocation that constitutes the presentation of ther other that exceeds all idea of the other in me.

[1] Natalia Majluf explores some of these issues in her incisive introductory note to the photographers' exhibition of this series held at Banco de Credito del Peru, Lima in 1991.

[2] Correspondence with the author, December 30, 1996.

[3] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

[4] C.Metz, "Photography and the Fetish" in*The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*. ed. Carol Squiers. Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 158.

[5] This inscription which reads as: "Nolite me considerare quod fusca sim quaia decoloraut" is from the Psalm of Solomon. The painting of the Virgin of Loreto was by an anonymous Peruvian artist from Lima, dating ca. 1680. This beautiful painting was shown in the exhibition "Gloria en Excelsis" organized by the Center for Inter-American Relations (The America Society), New York, in 1095.

[6] See Joseph Grigley, ìPostcards to Sophie Calle, *Parkett* 36, (1993, 89-94)

[7] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 224. In the 13thc., not longer after the cult of Veronica's Veil was established, the frontespiece of a Psalter manuscript bearing the image, commended the user as follows: 'To attune the reader's mind to prayer, the Redeemer's face is honored by the painter's art.' Belting reproduces an image of Andean women carrying the image of Christ's Passion, noting that they saw their own suffering prefigured. See Belting, op.cit., 220/221.

[8] Metz, op.cit. 158.

[9] "Reality and its Shadow," in *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989), 142.

[10] Levinas, op.cit 135.

[11] ibid., 136.

[12] ibid., 135.

[13] E.Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonos Linis (Pittsburg: Duquense University Press, 1969), 28-29.

[14] Maurice Blanchot, "Our Clandestine Companion," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, edited by Richard A Cohen. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 47.

[15] ibid., 49-50.

[16] ibid., 46.

[17] Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond Intentionality...*

[18] E. Levinas in "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas with Richard Kearney" in *Face to Face with Levinas*, op.cit., 24.