

«Photography can make visible the transcendence of the world around us, it can also be an instrument of personal discipline, an act of meditation and, basically, an act of love».

B. H.

— **The relation between what one does and what one is, undoubtedly is an essential element to understand the achievements, projects, and dreams of almost every human being. Do you consider that, in your case, that relation is important?**

— I don't see things as finished, but as part of a process. For me photography is a personal need, rather than a way of life or of artistic creation. That is what lies behind the fact that I continue doing photography. It's something that connects me to the world in a special way.

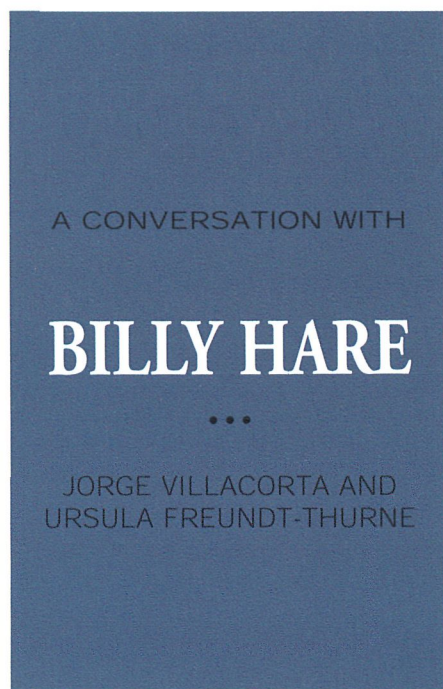
— **In any case, could it be said that your personal and professional relation with photography was the result of a search or that you met it on the way?**

— I met it on the way, though I must admit that it was a gradual process and not the result of a sudden decision. Though the precise moment can not be pinpointed, there was a moment when I decided I would stay with it.[...]

— **Do you think you had the required talent?**

— I don't know. I had technical problems. The first film I developed by reading an instruction pamphlet, shut up in the bathroom. It was very hard because we not only lacked technical references, but, as Fernando La Rosa has pointed out in an interview, «nobody would say anything». The professionals of that time would keep «their secrets» to themselves.

Undoubtedly, the arrival of Minor White in 1973 was a milestone on our way towards a greater commitment to



photography because it allowed us to shape a series of interests we had not been able to define.[...]

— **It was at the UNI where you developed also a special interest in the cinema.**

— Yes. I enrolled in a film course with Armando Robles Godoy where we had to do an 8 mm three-minute short, which was the length of the roll. I was fascinated by the experience.

— **What was the subject?**

— It was about a fisherman who caught a fish, looked at it, felt sorry for it, and threw it back into the sea. A stupid thing if we think that the job of a fisherman is to fish, and not to throw the fish back into the water.

However, making movies in the 60's was something way out of the ordinary. So I started working in studios making 16 mm black and white TV commercials. That worked because television needed the commercials. I started then to moonlight here and there doing these. I was assistant to Alfonso Maldonado, today owner of Cine 70, until Arturo Sinclair appeared. He was an

extraordinary character and a cinema lover.

Arturo was son of a English father and a Peruvian mother; he had been born and had lived in Mexico before coming to Lima where he landed a job with Pepe Casals. He then became interested in the cinema and started doing shorts. Arturo was someone who could sell you the Eiffel Tower, he was a fascinating madman who convinced a friend of his father to invest in a film production company. That is how NOVA Estudios Cinematográficos was born. We worked in a big house on Pezet Street and other than Arturo the partners were Roberto Guerra, who afterwards emigrated to the United States and continued producing documentaries; Gianfranco Annichini, cameraman and film-maker; and me. The idea was that we would acquire shares as we produced.

We bought fantastic equipment: cameras with English lenses, the first Arriflex for direct sound with a Nagra, a sound studio, editing consoles, among others. As you can imagine, it was an absurd decision; what we should have done was rent the equipment and produce a picture.

— **It was a big blow...**

— Of course. Moreover, to talk about film-making in Lima was to say a four-letter word. It was related to a business of crooks, like that story which had not been forgotten about a group of Argentinians who had convinced some people to invest in the production of a film. They rolled for two days without film in the cameras and then disappeared with the money.

— **And so, you opted for photography.**

— In 1970 I went to Cusco as assistant to the producer of the *The Last Movie*, directed by Dennis Hopper, who had also



Billy Hare. Quebrada Malanche, Lima. 1987.



done Easy Rider, that now mythical film of the sixties, that had become very famous.

It was during that filming that I had a talk with Dennis Stock, a Magnum Agency photographer who had come to cover the shooting. During that discussion I told him of my interest in photography, of what happened in me whenever I saw something I wanted to photograph. He was very receptive and said: «Look, you cannot decide intellectually if you are going to become a photographer. The only way is to do photography». A statement like that, made in Cusco, where I had visited previously and encountered fascinating places and things that had deeply impressed me, was very important to me.

— **What do you think is needed to become a good photographer, aside from the personal characteristics each person brings to the work?**

— It is a difficult question, but I think it is crucial to have, first, an enormous curiosity, as well as having no fear to question the world and oneself, since things are not just what they appear to be. If you believe reality is what you are told it is, then it is better not to do anything.

A photo may be perfectly composed and executed and, yet, not have anything going on in it. On the other hand, a photo where you have established a personal connection between yourself and the object being photographed, can generate something that cannot be expressed in any other way. What is it that really happens when we look closely at the world and see something special?

For me it is an affirmation —when I'm photographing I feel I'm alive.

— **What do you feel when people observe your work and they don't**



Billy Hare. Pacientes en la Laguna Shimbe, Huancabamba, Piura. 1988.

**understand it, when they cannot establish a relation to it?**

— People feel they have the absolute right to interpret an image, or to read it, without any previous preparation.

Understanding a photo can be very difficult, because visual references are also needed. As Nubar Alexanian says: «Photography has to do with that which is photographed, with photography itself, and with the photographer».

— **Do you acknowledge that your ability for noticing things is especial, that you can bring attention to things around us that the great majority look at but choose not to consider important?**

— That is, they look but do not see.

— **We look but do not see; we even look and do not value something because it is too commonplace to be important.**

— We only have what is commonplace, what is there. What is commonplace, in some cases and for some people, is what is exceptional.[...]

— [...]Your different images of Peru —Laguna Ramón, Pachacamac,

**Quebrada Malanche, among others—convey a sense of loneliness, that is, «a voluntary or involuntary lack of company», and desolation, feelings about which only you can tell.**

— About the sense of loneliness, yes, I have frequently been told this is so. It is closely related to the way I am and not a conscious attitude. It has to do too with a basic part of my vision of the country.

— **That means, then, that the sense of loneliness one feels in your photos is loneliness as a sign of the time in which the picture was made?**

— Evidently, it has more to do with an inner sense of time and a feeling, than with the shutter speed.

— **Which time is meaningful to you, Billy?**

— I am interested in time insofar as it allows me to see, and I would want the viewer to have an inner time to see. If not, he or she will not understand anything. What happens when you look at a photo? Immediately, you start, at the speed of light, a chain of unending associations.

— **And is not that an achievement?**

— No, that is the problem.

— **Why?**

— Because people are no longer concentrating on the photo. There are even people who tell you about things that are not at all in the image, that they invent and superimpose; they are talking about themselves, they are looking at themselves. The image, then, also needs a time to be seen, an internal quietness on the viewer's part to allow it to find its appropriate significance. I think that

there is a level of attentive reading; that looking at a photo is an experience that starts and ends with that image.[...]

— **What is the role shadows play in your work?**

— It can be that on occasions a photo is basically determined by the shadow, that is, the shadow generates the photo and decides its formal structure; at other times it is simply the way light falls on the scene. Sometimes there might be a desire to dramatize a little, to emphasize something. In other cases it's obvious that

it's a substantial element of the composition.[...]

— **Minor White and Aaron Siskind can undoubtedly be considered two of your most important mentors. Do you think that, especially in the sense of the photographic image as a metaphor, your photography emerges from the territory they defined? You refer to something which can be seen more clearly in the case of Minor White, who spoke of equivalent, metaphor, window...**



Billy Hare. Nasca, Ica. 1984.

— If we talk of Minor White, we have to refer more to a mirror than to a window. My encounter with him meant finding someone with a clearly defined attitude towards his work. That is, Minor White based his approach on a mystical orientation, but one realized through refined technical procedures. The Zone System —on which he wrote a couple of books— meant for him the way to intensified awareness; the pre-visualization of the tonal values he saw in reality was connected with his deeper spiritual perceptions. For Minor, the act of exposing a sheet of film followed the process of pre-visualization.

It had to do with looking at reality from a meditative attitude, that is, a state where you serve as a receptive filter of that vision. Carried to extremes, one can say that if the feedback in fact functions, a third force may enter the process, which you can call «god» or whatever you like. I admit that for me it was a strong experience. My gratitude to Minor is immense. When he left Peru he insisted on finding the way for me to go to Boston to work with him. Though I did have the intention to go, it never happened. He later fell ill and the plans fell by the wayside. He died in 1976.

— **Was he dogmatic?**

— His teachings connected deeply with my own aspirations. However, I did not adopt his dogmatism. I remember that in one of our first discussions, while I was showing him some pictures, he asked why I used the square format if it did not exist in nature. I didn't answer him, but I was on the brink of telling him that photography did not exist in nature either. He used to say these type of things that I thought were dogmatic and unfounded.

However, as I said before, he introduced

me to the Zone System, a tool which if used well can be very important. It does not have to do simply with the technical achievement of a photograph, but provides a way to make contact with what you are seeing, a way of seeing in terms of photography's tonal scale. This allows you to make decisions that have a direct influence on how you are going to make that picture.

— **What was your relation with Aaron Siskind like?**

— I met Aaron in 1977 and half a year later I went to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), in the United States. With him I felt a much greater personal connection, and I admired his sense of humor, his intelligence, and his humanity, in general. Aaron opened his home in Providence, Rhode Island, to me. I stayed there a year and I saw lots of people, which allowed me to meet informally many photographers who would stay for the night or would have breakfast there. It was an absolutely extraordinary experience.

— **And who had more influence on you, Minor or Aaron?**

— There is undoubtedly a difference between the conception of photography as a means for a higher end, as Minor preached, and Aaron's, a skeptic New York Jew, son of Russian immigrants, with a devastating sense of humor, who would not tolerate any pretension or foolishness. I remember once Aaron asked me to explain to him the mystical practices that nourished Minor's photography. At the end of the long explanation, Aaron proclaimed: «We all look for the same thing. Some crawl, some kneel and others walk».

If in photographic terms I don't feel that Aaron exerted a great influence on me, on the other hand he probably did help me

to approach things with greater freedom. In addition, I admire his perseverance, dedication, and clear attitude towards his own work.

More than direct photographic influences, there was the rich experience of living with an extraordinary personality, with whom I could discuss broad subjects like photography, politics, women, and the history of the abstract-expressionist painters (in New York he had been a friend of all of them, and especially close to Franz Kline).

On the emotional level, Aaron Siskind was extremely generous with me, and I came to love him dearly.

Photographically speaking, Minor's influence weighed more heavily on me.

— **Was Aaron very gregarious?**

— He was someone who was 80 years old and was surrounded by young people because his spirit was young. When he came to Peru and realized that there were people working in photography, he became very enthusiastic. He liked to have people around and to eat out every night.

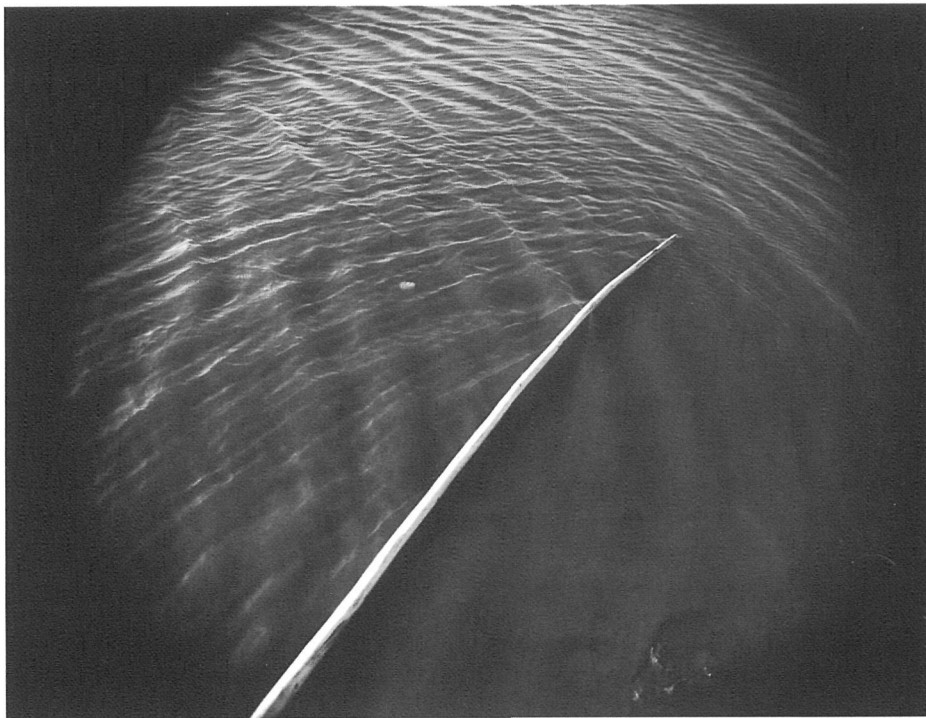
— **Maybe his photography didn't have a great influence on you because of its abstract character.**

— He did not always do markedly abstract photography. In the thirties, his documentary photography had strong social references, reflecting his political inclinations. During the forties, he left that aside and started working on a flat two-dimensional plane, abandoning the representation of deep space and emphasizing the surface structure of the photographic image itself. There are some who assert —Carl Chiarenza, for example— that Aaron Siskind understood the meaning of working in photography on a two-dimensional plane before the abstract-expressionists did the same in painting.

— In Rhode Island you also met photographer Harry Callahan, who recently has had a retrospective exhibition in the National Gallery of Washington.

— A very special character also, to be sure. His photographic gaze has a kind of coolness and detachment which, nevertheless, is characterized by great tenderness. It is perhaps curious to say

intellectual idea, or, in any case, a distinctly intelligent (in the etymological sense of being something that has been «read from inside») and accurately focused institution. Much of what exists in Callahan's photography is carefully constructed. Nevertheless, there is the feeling that there are no traces of effort, that there are no seams. Perhaps there is a



Billy Hare. Laguna Ramón, Piura. 1987.

the same of his photography, but I feel that that is precisely what exists behind an apparent formality and distance. The photos of Eleanor and their daughter are a clear example of this. I am very fond of his work. I think that the tenderness I refer to filters through, somehow, in spite of himself. The photos he made in Cusco with a wide-angle camera are simply beautiful.[...]

— The concept of photographing nudes and sculptures in double exposure, considering them as part of the same project reveals an

generational difference, or maybe one concerning an esthetic starting point, but it doesn't seem to worry you, photographically, whether or not you leave an evident trace of the effort implied.

— Well, I think photography is a difficult medium to define. Most people read the information, the subject, only **what** is there, without realizing that it's determined by **how** it has been done, and that they both go together. The **how** tells us something about the **what** in a particular and individual way. To show

the trace of the process stresses that we are looking at a photo and not at reality. The work of a photographer cannot be judged on one isolated photo. The continuity of vision is what gives us a version of the world that renews the perception we have of it and of ourselves, that rediscovers our environment. And that is, or can be, wonderful. It's important to maintain a certain coherence and continuity in one's work. But I don't feel I have achieved it.

— Why?

— Because now that I am looking at everything, I have the feeling that my work has been done in bursts. Though certainly there have been periods when I have been able to photograph steadily, interruptions have posed enormous difficulties. Probably everybody experiences the same thing, but when I observe Aaron's or Harry's work I get the impression that they never stopped working, that their work is like one, single «travelling», without interruptions. I personally feel that even if there are elements that are connected, my photography has had gaps and deviations.

— Did you feel any difference in photographing in the United States and in Peru?

— It was very difficult for me to photograph in the United States. I remember my walks in the woods around my friend Nubar Alexanian's home. In October, with leaves in a variety of reds, yellows, and oranges, there was no doubt that I was in the middle of a calendar scene. It was wonderful, but it was not my thing. The Andean landscape seizes me in a complete way.[...]

— It is surprising that for one series,





Billy Hare. Curandero Juan Manuel Meléndez at Lake Shimbe, Huancabamba, Piura. 1938.

which one could say is, until now, your most clearly defined statement regarding the landscape, you chose to use the circular frame, incorporating an obvious device as part of the image, a sign that these pictures are, undeniably, photographic.

— The North American Emmet Gowin was the first to do it.

— But before talking about Gowin... For the great North American modernists, the main interest lies in the image articulating a metaphor, in creating a visual form where the

emotional and the real world merge, not in making the viewer aware of the process that produced the image he is looking at.

— In this case, it wasn't a pre-meditated decision. I had a view camera with a normal lens and I found a wide angle lens in a shop. What happens is that, if you are familiar with 4" x 5" cameras, one can have a lens that fits your camera, but does not have the scope to cover all the surface of the negative. The lens I used to make those images belongs, in fact, to a smaller format.

Even though I knew Emmet Gowin's work, which I have always liked, I did not set out to consciously imitate it. I simply found a lens that did the same thing. In such a situation you might think: «I cannot do it because Gowin already did it». But I answered myself automatically saying: «That is stupid», and went on to think what I could do with it. I realized there were things that interested me.

Using a lens that does not cover all the area of the negative, and as a result shows its circular shape (all lenses produce a round image –it is only by convention we restrict the picture to a square or a rectangle) is, in itself, a gimmick.[...]

— Much has been written about the modern artist who in his development leaves behind religion in favor of art as the system in which, somehow, a faith about existence is invested. But in looking at your work, there is a sense in each image that there is something that eternally transcends art. To begin with, do you consider yourself someone with a feeling towards the universe which could be called religious?

— To begin with, I don't think of myself as an artist.

— **Do you think of yourself as just a photographer?**

— More than a professional photographer, I think of myself as someone whom photography gave the chance to render insights he felt he could not communicate to anyone in any other way. My connection with Minor White developed because I sensed in him a capacity to connect to a world beyond ordinary reality. For him photography was the means to transcend the world and a way to make his insights permanent. It was a mirror of his feelings. This is a belief that comes from the photography of Alfred Stieglitz and is expressed in his *Equivalents*. It corresponds to my own needs. I had a tremendously insecure adolescence, something I think started in childhood. For me, photography was the way to relate to the world without having to go through the accepted things people are accustomed to. It was a very personal thing. I think that what led me to become a photographer was recognizing that there are types of images and situations which reflect something I feel very deeply, and the only way I found to express them was through photography. It was not an intellectual proposal of the type, «I will produce an image from this and the image can then stand for something else». Basically, I think I have photographed for myself, to be able to go back to an experience, to be able to know I had a certain feeling. There are moments, states of awe in front of something, which you cannot explain: «Why is it that this bare hill impresses me?» Most people go through the desert almost closing their eyes because they think there is nothing to look at.

— **But, what is there in your photography through time?**

— There is a feeling you could almost describe as religious. In the catalogue of *Imagen x 10*, accompanying the 1976 exhibition at the Galería del Banco Continental, I said that photography could be something like an act of prayer. But the «prayer» has to be a daily exercise and I've always thought I haven't carried that through enough.

— **But it is present in your photography.**

— I think it could be in a much stronger way.

— **Ever since the beginning, there are in your images signs of an interest in the religious expressions of others. The mark of the man who believes in something beyond reality immediately attracts your attention: a cross on the roadside, the shrines or pre-Hispanic huacas, the ceremonies of All Souls' Day, the mesas of shamans, among others. Your vision certainly is not a detached one.**

— You know what? What I feel is that—though what I say may seem exaggerated or anarchistic—one forgets, or society and the cultural structure make one forget, that one is alive in a planet which, in its turn, is part of a universe. One forgets, in the majority of cases, that we are limited most of the time by laws, habits, and prejudices. The fact that most of my images are not about the urban setting says a lot, I think.

— **Of course.**

— Then it is a bit like needing to go away. I think that what is real for me is not here in the city but somewhere else.

— **Your photos of the curanderos could suggest that the shaman is like an alter ego of the artist: he gathers real elements, endowing them with a symbolic function that gives back a feeling of renewed integrity to those who go to him.**

— All is alive on earth, even the hills and the stones. What happens is that they move at such a slow rhythm and frequency that it is absolutely imperceptible to the eyes of man. It is precisely in that direction, that, at times, I think I find explanations for things I have never found before anywhere else. The curanderos are people who say they «work» with this hill or the other. But I became interested in hills, in lakes and water long before I knew what a curandero was.

— **Had it never occurred to you to think of the artist as a shaman or curandero? He seems to be one at times. Like the shaman, he seems to have the gift to see what others don't and make it visible.**

— Those who seek the advice of the shaman have faith in him. Who else will be able to discover, explain, and give a sense to what happens? In contemporary art the incidental and superfluous seem to prevail. I think there is no search for a truth that will give our lives the meaning it is lacking. So, though I would like it to be so, it is not a good comparison. We are so conditioned that people cannot perceive anything anymore. The concentrated act of looking necessary to read a finished photograph is missing. We lack both the time and the willingness. So there is a kind of devaluation.

I keep making photographs simply because of personal necessity, without thinking of the value they may have. Only then is it possible to speak of transformation, of an attentive gaze, and knowledge.

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\* Vid. in extenso: *Billy Hare. Fotografías*. Patronato de Telefónica del Perú "Telecomunicaciones y Progreso", 1997.