

The Exiles of Antigone (Delirium and Confinement: the Photography of Vida Yovanovich) / José Luis Barrios

ANTIGONE.— *Unwept, unfriended, without marriage-song, I am led forth in my sorrow on this journey that can be delayed no more. No longer, hapless one, may I behold yon day-star's sacred eye; but for my fate no tear is shed, no friend makes moan.*

Sophocles. **Antigone**

Because now I know my sentence: «Antigone, buried alive, you shall not die, you will remain thus, neither alive, nor dead, neither alive, nor dead...» María Zambrano, **Antigone's Grave**

Vida Yovanovich's images are a betrayal to the photographic act, especially to the one which seeks for a coincidence between an instant and beauty. But they also betray that other photographic act, the one that brings together beauty and the moment in a pretense to the document. Her images are neither the privileged instant of a glance, nor the frozen moment of an instant. Instead, her images are ethical and political denunciations of the various forms of confinement, images located within the gap of that which cannot be seen, that which we hardly notice because it doesn't make the news. Nevertheless, in the work of this artist, turning the photographic act into one of denunciation does not mean engaging in propaganda to defend the outcasts, nor into a discourse that accounts for the violence—muted or not—that may exist within a prison or a rest home. Instead, her denunciation goes hand in hand with the bodies, the subjectivities: it strides along the emotional resonances of that which is stowed away and forgotten.

If certain photographs find poetics in the ruin of the forgotten which predict the deception of objects just as surrealist images do; Vida's work crashes against that which being present, appears as already stowed away. Her images do not compromise because there is nothing over which to compromise about; instead, the objects and the subjects in them, are first and foremost, a question being posed upon photography or rather—and even better,— an act that transforms photography into a question. A question and, perhaps, something else: the origin of every question. Just like Antigone, the women in Yovanovich's photographs are condemned to a grave, to a barrow in which they are neither

dead, nor alive; and where time—their own time—is emptied out in pure waiting. Here lays the question posed by photography, as well as photography which becomes a question.

There is something in common between her portraits of elderly women in rest homes and those of women in prison. In these photographs, time does not pass by; instead, it is suspended in a state of pure wait. In them, everything is exhausted. They deal with two aspects of fatigue. In the first, the bodies are subjected to gravity and tiredness in a place where old age is not a phase in life, but the muffled whisper of an emptying out of one-self, until the body is nothing more than mere flesh that hurts in its abandonment. It is not old age, but its exile: these images merely show how life passes by when it no longer has a place in society or in family spaces. In these images the life of the elderly women lay elsewhere. Vida Yovanovich forces us to look at a place of emptiness and resonance, of the poses and the dispossessed: it is not old age, but abandonment what we see. The first denounce is found here; it is the one related to the sites produced by time as exile and understood, as sheer efficiency. As Antigone, we should think about what the meaning of a grave is when proximity to tiredness, to being locked away, becomes sinister; this is, where the ordinary becomes dreadful. This is what occurs in the series of portraits of the elderly women: they are not sinister because of their age, but because the place where they are confined in makes everything become strange, and mostly because the body—our own body—becomes a stranger to us.

But Vida Yovanovich forces us also to look at another side of confinement. In the series of the women in prison, the images turn the represented instant into a threshold through which the impossibility of any future may be seen. In them, the enclosure speaks of another way in which time is emptied out: it is no longer through fatigue and old age as an exile, but merely through the passing by. It is Chronos who devours his daughters while being in a state in which they are waiting for nothing. In these images there is no condemn and no mercy, just the coincidence of a framed object that shows the environment of the confinement: it is here where the covered bodies appear, concealed by their own bars and confined to the interior of a ward. It is as if the place itself were the resonance of passions and emotions; as if these confinement spaces were to materialize into the abandonment of the soul when it has to uselessly wait for a time to be served, a task which may not be

fulfilled from its origin. What could the meaning of the immediate be, when we know that—for the next fifteen, or twenty, or thirty years—our life is reduced to a space of waiting where one may only await for time to pass by in waiting? If, for those on death roll, waiting becomes the unchallengeable data of their encounter with death at a certain time and date—in the anguish of knowing that one will be cancelled out in a precise instant—, the waiting inscribed into an expectation as unimaginable as twenty or thirty years does not produce anguish, but a pure state of melancholy. It is melancholic because what escapes us is in the shape of desire itself: the future escapes one.

Photography is a trap because it produces a delirium, a pure surface of the imaginary in which we will never know if what we see is the truth or a mere deceit, we will never know if what is being presented is produced by the photographer's—or even by the camera's—fancies or by the reality of what is being photographed. It is also a trap insofar as we will never have enough clarity regarding the limit between spontaneity and pose, between that which happens as an accident, or that which might be captured by the camera, or the fact of knowing that one is being observed by it. Even documentary or journalistic images entail an *a priori* of the gaze—one that is conditioned by its history, by the political and ideological control of the settings, and by the circulation value of the image. In any case, it is on this border that the photographic act struggles between art and the document. Between the reality of the index and the fantasy of the image there is a gap which images plunge into, in order to reconstitute a certain emotional place of the gaze. A restitution that—in the case of Vida Yovanovich—is understood as a distension of herself in her phantoms.

Maybe this is why her recourse to montage and erasure, to sequence and repetition appears at the same time as an evanescence of the subject that looks into that which is being looked at, and as a recurring presence of the artist in the image as a resonance in the present, of the impossibility of the time of confinement. In some of Vida's photographs there is a reason that allows one to see her phantoms: the veil as veiling. In the image where the figure is erased due to the exposure time given by the shutter speed, as well as in other images where the veil appears as a motif that shows by covering the face of the artist, or of her mother, or the face of a woman prisoner that while concealing, reveals. But what is *unveiled*? Precisely the emotional impulse that underlies her work: the phantom that

defines the photographic as a fading away of the passing of time and that insists on devouring us almost to death, and to complete abandonment.

Therefore, in the work of Vida Yovanovich, time appears as a siege of the present. In the tension that exists between old age, crime, and the phantoms, her photographs do not explore confinement, but the passing of time. It is a sort of turning of tables that operates by putting the phantom, her ghost, under siege. When this ghost is inscribed upon the spaces of only waiting—spaces such as rest homes and prisons—, what it liberates, is a certain emotionality which turns the emptying out, the expectation of nothing, and the useless waiting into a political and ethical critique of society born from modernity and the forms of exclusion it has produced. By looking at herself when looking at a female subject locked in these enclosures, the artist puts time into play in relation to her own subjectivity. This operation of the gaze lays emotionality bare between the two-way mirror of what is looked at and what looks back at us; and in doing so, it corners us into places of oblivion and violence. Perhaps this is why the intimacy found between the photographer and her subjects, is a hinge where the photographic act lays bare our own fears, and in doing so, it questions the forms of exclusion produced since the nineteenth century by modern and contemporary society. Therefore, Vida Yovanovich's photographs denounce the vital status of enclosure. Confining bodies, means, cornering them into a time lapse that is nothing but an emptying out, and this is where the sinister plays in.

The invention of exclusion spaces is as proper to modernity as the invention of photography. To a large extent, even this was a tool for the distribution of social, racial and gender exclusion. Already in the nineteenth century, the images in the photographic archive of the hysterical women in la Salpêtrière accounted for the ways in which hysterical women were enclosed. The double game between the ghost of knowledge and the ghost of the image built a *pathos* of pain in which science and image configured a body confined within insanity. This exiled body is no different from the one shown to us in the work of Vida Yovanovich, at least regarding confinement. Nevertheless, it differs from the construction of hysteria insofar as Vida's gaze upsets the space of representation, and therefore, the place of the law. As Antigone, who subverts the prohibition of Creon when burying her brother, the photographs of Yovanovich denounce the perverse place of confinement: the place where bodies are condemned to let time pass them by, to empty out the wait, to

become a wandering ghost of themselves. Certainly, the gaze that makes this wandering within the confinement visible could be the same as Antigone's words: "let everyone know that I have broken the law!" So, everyone should know that the enclosure is a metaphor for—or, even better, an actualization of—a grave where, neither dead, nor alive, the body is emptied out because it has so much time, to be abandoned to its time.

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