

Naturalness and Surprise in *Camp*

Álvaro de los Ángeles

A significant characteristic in the contemporary usage and analysis of images is the ability to situate oneself in the space of consciousness presupposing that which is shown is real, manipulated, or complete artifice. The question is not simple, and in the end, this positioning is not definitive, yet without a doubt it leaves a mark on the reading and interpretation of the image. A paradigmatic example was the widely publicized photograph showing George W. Bush with a plastic turkey on Thanksgiving Day in 2003; an unannounced visit to the US troops in Iraq that carried a *hidden* surprise. According to Johan Swinnen, without the appearance of what he called “extra photographic data,” or data that adds information to the image from other fields unrelated to the visual field, the photograph “remains in absolute silence”.

In the realm of contemporary art, there has been a revived interest in the search, redefinition and representation of ‘the Real’ that questions elements as disparate as the transformation of geography, culture vs. nature, quotidian gestures becoming grand themes, as well as the construction of identity in flux as a result of ongoing social, sexual, and political changes. Increasingly it seems there is a need to fictionalize elements of reality to the extent they acquire the qualities of our worst nightmares. This point of view echoes the thesis of Slavoj Žižek in his article “Passions of the Real, Passions of Appearance” included in the book, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. The capacity to transform real events into fiction is a psychoanalytic solution that allows us to overcome these events, and through a symbolic distance, ultimately separates human beings from animals. Moreover, one can consider that the representation of reality in the face of art, which can be compared to the *wolf* of “the Real” – acts as a therapeutic solution to understand, assimilate, and alter the perception of our environment.

Juanli Carrión’s *Atlas Shrugged* series incorporates within a formal serenity, a juxtaposition of elements, at times antagonistic, yet bearing an intriguing complexity. The curator, Blanca de la Torre, accurately points to one such antagonism when she defines this coexistence in his works as the reminiscence of the photography in *New Topographics* within *kitsch*. In this sense, one may further interpret this type of miscellany as a practice that is purely *camp*. In “Notes On ‘Camp’” [1964], Susan Sontag enumerates fifty-eight situations, examples, cultural references - notes that come to define the uninhibited attitude of camp in contrast with the ‘establishment,’ which is generally evaluated and measured with great seriousness and etiquette. These “notes” are dedicated to Oscar Wilde, who for Sontag represented a paradigm of what is purely camp, and from whom, she extracts phrases from his well known writings, thus leaving the reader with certain clues that bear homage to the author. Her usage of notes in place of the essay, is perhaps the closest attempt towards defining the elusive quality of this concept: “The form of jottings, rather than an essay (with its claim to a linear, consecutive argument), seemed more appropriate for getting down something of this particular fugitive sensibility. It’s embarrassing to be solemn and treatise-like about Camp. One runs the risk of having, oneself, produced a very inferior piece of Camp.” As a result, the most interesting attempt to define the concept through examples considered as jottings about camp that may compose a camp piece in and of itself, are comparable to those that Sontag enumerates in her concise text. This constitutes perhaps, the best possible homage to the Irish author’s method of writing.

For his solo exhibition and installation of seven light boxes, Juanli Carrión combines a precise gaze over public spaces, maintaining elements or vestiges of nature with the framework of the light box as an industrial montage. On the one hand, there are Carrión’s images and on the other, his light boxes are appropriated from those produced for typical Chinese restaurants; a structure within which any image may be contained yet nevertheless, carries the concrete trace of its origin

(“Made in China” acts as the slogan of a new capitalism). Therefore, Carrión’s images evoke the endless transformation, manipulation, or re-creation of nature, inevitably contaminated by the presence of industrial or recreational vestiges within the natural landscape. Uninhabitable and familiar spaces appear to become equalized through the ‘distancing’ produced by photographic representation and the use of identical light boxes, differentiated only by the mechanism of a subtle motion effect in the water. This sensation of movement enacts a verisimilitude of reality, as well as creating a virtual impression, conveyed through the photographic medium; a prison from which ‘the Real’ will never escape.

In the case of the *Atlas Shrugged* series, the semblance of the “natural” is the representation of an unattainable nature, the impossible return to an origin free of manipulation, mistreatment, and inaccessible. At once, as we confront the appearance of the ‘natural’ (not exempt from paradox) in a world where the industrial presence is a sign of progress as well as a cause of environmental, ideological, and economic conflicts, an equation remains unresolved to date. The element of ‘surprise’ in Carrión’s images, in more concise reference to the title, relays a hidden pun underlying the series of images that despite the global overdrive of visual information, remains surprising in the punctuations of illusory movement in the light boxes, while playfully avoiding reductionist seriousness. To conclude, *Atlas Shrugged* posits the dilemma of globalization in an overly exploited natural environment that homogenizes countries, their territories, and the behaviors of their inhabitants (in tune with an equalization generated by technical modes of production). Carrión’s nonchalance as if shrugging his shoulders, seemingly unconcerned with the environment or rather unable and helpless to change it, signals an apolitical stance, that is to say, according to Susan Sontag, purely camp.