

### **Extraphotographic (bis)**

Text by Carles Guerra. Published in Archivo JR Plaza, 2008. Ed. ProjecteSD

The development of the series out of the J. R. Plaza Archive has acquired a strange systematic condition. Iñaki Bonillas once and once again inflects the images he inherited from his grandfather. He sets them in a new order, in fresh sintagmas of meaning, and finally he proposes an exercise of photographic authorship. But -what a paradox!- the intensity and the rigor that he puts into this extraordinary work throw shadows of doubt over the contents of the archive itself. Even though we are dealing with an archive that Iñaki Bonillas got directly from his grandfather's hands (a fact that grounds the project on a realistic base) the outcome comes closer to what we would vulgarly consider a work of fiction. The many versions that Bonillas has carried out since 2003 have provided the character with an awesome versatility and depth. The remaking of the biography through the photo archive displays strategies both narrative and visual, and it all starts from an original event that we take for granted, the life of J. R. Plaza. But now, at this very point, the yielding of the limited number of images in the albums gives away the impression of surpassing the authentic life of J. R. Plaza. This is one of those instances in which the representation takes a life of its own, so much so that it can go as far as to contradict or negate that which we take for the real thing.

However, the work of Iñaki Bonillas is not restricted to assemble a new archive originated from a heterogenous set of images, but it supplies us with a clarifying commentary on the effect caused by the archive, one that affects the very images that constitute it. The photographic production of Iñaki Bonillas has ended up associated in such a high degree to a system that with each new series instead of having the objective nature of photography confirmed, submits it to a growing disreputability. There is now an excess in the systematic approach that Bonillas is practicing and it is jeopardizing the account he is dealing with. Each new series penetrates into the archive with an intensity that challenges the veracity of photography and replaces it with an objective methodology. This is how the figure of J. R. Plaza risks becoming a figure pertaining to the realm of fiction, too real to be true because of the exhaustive representation it has undergone at the hands of Bonillas. However, this effect can turn out to be the commonest feature of today's practice of photography, when a surplus of

images are here not to confirm reality but to sink it into suspicions of all kinds. So, photography is not anymore a descendant of positivism, but rather a laic religion. We still believe in those images but we know that they escape from any chance of being checked empirically.

Then we can say that there has been no use in the zeal of thoroughness that went all the way to document with slides one after another every page of the albums (*Pequeña historia de la fotografía*, 2003); or the accumulation of all the vertical photos (*Todas las fotografías verticales del Archivo J. R. Plaza*, 2004); or the elimination of all the character enemies (*Martín-Lunas*, 2004 and *Fotografías delineadas*, 2006); or the searching in the notes and scrawls that each photo glued to the albums has had hidden in its back (*Archivo J. R. Plaza*, 2005). All the effort will have been in vain. The implicit realism of the photographic medium vanishes while the narrative aspects get hold of the images. Their original meaning has been evicted, though this does not stop the archive to continue to be an unending source of versions that won't allow the choosing of the true or authentic J. R. Plaza. No J. R. Plaza flaunts more inner detail than any other. No representation of J. R. Plaza can be upgraded to the category of being the true and only image of J. R. Plaza. What is more, some of these J. R. Plasas have catalyzed their own doubles and they multiply like effigies. In the series *Una tarjeta para J. R. Plaza* (2007), Bonillas initiates an investigation on his grandfather own fantasies; he would imagine him as a "shepherd", an "agent", a "machete holder", an "administrator", a "builder", a "salesman", a "foreman", a "mechanic", a "shop boy", a "model", each with a different home address and an *ad hoc* pose for each task. The figure of J. R. Plaza is what contemporary capitalism describes as a flexible personality, expanded by its representations and making out of the production of images a surrogate of economy.

In any case, the series that has advanced in a more consistent manner J. R. Plaza *alter ego* is that one in which he narrates a trip to Rock Springs, an adventure in which Bonillas grandfather hoped to directly live the happenings of a western. In the first page of his diary: "I leave México on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1945, at precisely 12.10. A Saturday." Then near 80 brief and concise entries follow up that tell, day by day, the experience of the trip. But soon J. R. Plaza communicates his disappointment: "April, 29th, 1945. I have been here for a week now and I am already thinking and making plans for

the return..." A set of 24 snapshots in which J. R. Plaza plays at being a cowboy make up *A sombra e o brilho* (2007), one of the last series displayed by Bonillas. In these images J. R. Plaza could give vent to his passion for cowboy stories without having to even leave the sofa at his living room, or if not that then the photographic studio. The set of pictures and the entries in his traveling notebook give shape to a tale that cannot discard neither the notes nor the negatives showing J. R. Plaza posing as a genuine cowboy.

But as it usually happens in the work of Bonillas, the relationship established between these two media gets to eclipse what apparently are cardinal meanings in this series. The narrative accidents or the intrinsic quality of the photos comprised in the series are left beside and second to the exposition of a system, a way of exhibiting it that put the notes on the diary on an elongated horizontal line, and the images, on the contrary, were situated in a vertical axis, covering up one of the columns at the ProjecteSD gallery where the series was exhibited for the first time. Just as we have suggested somewhere else, what Bonillas is exhibiting is not the family album but the photographic support reduced in its components and its structure to basics. In this case, the series *A sombra e o brilho*, sums up a wide variety of events at a crossroad. This is, in fact, the picture of a historical strain that the very history of the subject has put away and forgotten along the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A most significant exclusion carried out by the discipline of photography in the last century has consisted on the forcing out of the text. The removal was executed as a mending, as a way to go looking for the essence of the photographic medium, including those cases in which the collaboration of image and writing was fundamental. Let us say that the goddess of good fortune has looked upon Walker Evans and James Agee with different eyes. Though both had an equal share in the creation of the now classic *Let us now praise famous men* (1941). Evans testimony has acquired a protagonist standing superior to that of Agee. The visual element has taken to itself the status of being the legitimate testimony, while the text has ended up as a too inaccurate, subjective and loose technique. Beyond what it represents, *Let us now praise famous men* has become in the end a monument that brings back to mind the marginalization of the text and its nullification in the face of the images.

*A sombra e o brilho* is nothing more, nothing less, than the restoration of that strain so crucial for photography. It recuperates the contingency of the visual and its dependency from the text, a connection that Walter Benjamin already identified as inherent to the medium and that is now rescued by Bonillas with no archeological zeal, but with the intention of altering a sick relation stuck in between the mean and the history of its progress. The series *Recuerdo de las navidades* (2006) falls again into this critique with a device that is a reminding of the semiotics procedures of the seventies. Bonillas takes a Christmas greeting as a motive for an anomic and nomadic drifting of photography to document the uses that every possible recipient has found for that image. The same image ends up surrounded by different ones and catalyzes slightly dissimilar meanings in every place its been sent to. Again, photography allies itself with an effect by means of which under a cloak of homogeneity a mechanism of unending differentiation is hidden, a something that trusts this mean with a paradoxical behavior: a conservative aspect and a new one each and every time. The J. R. Plaza Archive is for Bonillas a place crisscrossed by these strains. Just to observe and register them is enough to reconstruct the history of modern photography.