

SPATIALITIES

ALBERTO MARTÍN

Two elements may serve to identify continuities spanning almost two decades of Xavier Ribas's career. One is to do with his method of working, involving both research and observation, specifically the cross-disciplinary approach that forms the basis of his conception and development of documentary practice. The other relates to the definition of a common thread, or an objective, that could help to draw together his different propositions. As regards his cross-disciplinary approach, to use the term posited by Dominick LaCapra¹ as being more than simply interdisciplinary, Xavier Ribas has from the outset applied a system of questioning and reading reality that cuts across various disciplines. In his case, this crossover extends from anthropology and urban planning to geography, microhistory or the philosophy of history itself, an area in which the writings of Ernst Bloch and, in particular, Walter Benjamin are key tools for research and formulating questions.

It is important to note this dynamic in order to avoid the danger of confining his work to the strict limits of the field of photography. Back in the early 1970s, Henri Lefebvre clearly advocated cutting across disciplinary boundaries, compartmentalisation and fragmentation when approaching the analysis and understanding of space, which is precisely the strategic arena that could be identified as the central aspect of Xavier Ribas's development. Over and above the various critical and terminological approaches to concepts such as place, territory, landscape or space itself, which frequently seem articulated as a play of definitions and overlapping boundaries, the aim here is to adopt W. J. T. Mitchell's suggestion, well summarised by Perla Zusman,² of addressing this juncture as 'a conceptual structure that can be activated from different angles'. Indeed, throughout Ribas's career one frequently sees the articulation of, or dialogue between, these concepts in the same work, be it the tense confluence of the perceived, the conceived and the represented, the dialectic between signifying practice, representation and organisation, or between planning, property and resistance for example.

Space, then, appears as the operational domain in which his work unfolds, analysing, identifying and recording many diverse and concrete spatial experiences and practices that might be termed spatialities or territorialities.

¹ Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

² Perla Zusman, 'Perspectivas críticas del paisaje en la cultura contemporánea', in Joan Nogué (ed.), *El paisaje en la cultura contemporánea*. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2008, p. 289.

In Ribas's case, this is a social spatiality that always bears in mind not just the social condition of space, but also its historicity, its temporality and the decisive importance of scale both in analysis and in observation. Looking back over his career, there emerge various approaches in the sense we have been discussing: the symbolic dimension of space, the dialectic between territory (planning) and territoriality (practice) or between daily life and urban planning, spatial practices and means of appropriation, places of power, of borders and subsistence, nomadic and subordinate territorialities, the historical materiality of space and finally the spatial materialisation of social and economic processes.

Tracing this inventory, we can see an evolution or shift in the focus of interest; from a more poetic, anthropological perception, bound up with everyday practice, to the imaginary of sites and to mental and symbolic constructions, toward a material and cartographic reading in which the space–time–process³ trilogy defines and guides the line of inquiry. This evolution could be summarised as a journey of progressive stages, from poetics to power, from anthropological space towards space as a social, political, ideological and strategic product. Via, gradually, crossovers with anthropology, archaeology, geography and history. The work is also marked by a continuous adjustment of scale, between micro and macro, precisely defining in each piece the most appropriate spatial frame for observation, from close-up to panoramic views, from a delimited to a flexible territory: an empty plot, a border, a flexible demarcation like the periphery or a concrete demarcation like a neighbourhood, a residential estate, an archaeological site or a settlement. This is a primary cognitive mechanism which contributes decisively to making visible a concrete and specific spatiality, at the same time organising the viewpoint and the photographic frame.

A review of the various works produced by Xavier Ribas in the course of two decades allows us to appreciate both the functioning of scale and the way he incorporates and develops in his creative process a series of conceptual tools, such as threshold; residue, imprint and trace; entropy and catastrophe; the photographic grid as an operation of montage and recomposition; or memory and history against the grain. Ribas himself has organised his works into four groups, according to a system that is both chronological and also thematic and conceptual. The first is a single extensive series entitled *Sundays* (1994–97), featuring various sites and localities on the Barcelona periphery. The second group, entitled *Sanctuary*, comprises six works produced between 1998 and 2002. The third, *Concrete Geographies*, is the largest, with ten projects carried out between 2002 and 2009. The final group, intercalated chronologically between the *Concrete Geographies*, is also a single series, *Habitus* (2007), which is a return to the urban territory of Barcelona.

Xavier Ribas's first project, *Sundays*, is also the most obviously 'anthropological', both because it is based on ongoing fieldwork grounded in the familiarity that stems from his own background as inhabitant of the city periphery, and for its unmistakable reference to the 'anthropological place',

³ See David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

to the exploration of city residents' idea of, and relationship with, the territory in which they live. In a departure from the topographical record, this series represents a shift from the usual centre–periphery opposition to an analysis of the relationship between the urban and the everyday, with particular attention to unofficial practices and uses of space, focusing thematically on the sphere of free time or recreation that is more open to individual control and administration. Ten years later, in *Habitus*, a project on Barcelona's residential estates, he revisits some of the key issues of *Sundays*, above all the dialectic between urban planning and everyday life, between institutional planning and social creativity, now formulated more clearly in terms of opposition between territory and territoriality. The history of these estates, largely bound up with urban dynamics of encapsulation and segregation, is rewritten by the appropriation of space practised by their inhabitants. The title itself, *Habitus*, evokes in relation to this the old debate between Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau about the role that the creativity or inventiveness of city-dwellers can play. Presented in grid format rather than the classic serial structure of *Sundays*, this piece inaugurates one of the most interesting changes in his development, directly related to the need to rethink order and spatial logic.

Between these two projects, Xavier Ribas produced the works brought together under the title *Sanctuary*. It is in this group, produced between 1998 and 2002, that the gradual shift referred to above, from poetics to power, begins and is most apparent. Series such as *Flowers* (1998–2000), *Stones* (2000) and even *Rooms* (1997–2000), while continuing to explore the anthropological place, owe much to the poetics of Gaston Bachelard, to space as a container of qualities, with their exploration of categories such as the house, intimate space, or the inside–outside dialectic, the latter foreshadowing Ribas's interest in developing the concept of threshold, which is articulated in the work of the same name, *Thresholds* (2001–02). *Sanctuary* (2002) and *Fires* (2002), the series that close this group, incorporate two new conceptual tools: the idea of entropy, drawn from Robert Smithson, and that of catastrophe or 'moment of danger', taken from Walter Benjamin. The interest of these new additions lies not in the separate use of these two categories, but in their interrelation. The entropic condition of place, with its irreversible dynamic of deterioration and decay, converges with the image of catastrophe formulated by Benjamin, the 'fire alarm' that signals imminent danger and seeks to warn, if not stop the worst from happening.⁴

The temporality inherent in this idea, in the sense of the connection between a present of events and a future alarm, is completed in the next group of works, entitled *Concrete Geographies*, with the inclusion of memory, of looking at history as a reading of imprints and traces. With this reintegration of history into space, Xavier Ribas introduces archaeology and history as important tools for unveiling the significance of landscapes. It is a history of

⁴ See Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*. London and New York: Verso, 2006.

dispossession, violence, exclusion, oppression and exploitation that manifests in the present, is constructed in the future, and whose past and condition can be read, almost always against the grain, in these imprints and traces. Indeed, if inhabiting leaves imprints – as explored by Ribas in his early work – so too do the strategies that operate on space, as posited in these *concrete geographies*. It is a title that highlights not just the specific materiality and temporality of spaces, but also their representative condition in this *continuum* of past and future catastrophes. The notion of threshold referred to above, seen not as limit but as transition, is reformulated here in terms of space–time – pointing to suspensions and fissures in the continuity of places, between past and future – as it appears in works such as *Incidents* (2005), *Invisible Structures 1* and *Invisible Structures 2 (Mud)* (2006), *Greenhouse* (2007) and *2761 A.V.C.* (2008). A threshold that relates spaces, sediments, archaeologies ancient and yet to come, but one that also refers to a more specifically temporal element, a ‘threshold of the present’,⁵ where past and future engage in dialectical tension. These two aspects appear clearly in the figure and background of *Student Reading a Book* (2008): a threshold, an intermediate place, between the university campus and the city, and a threshold where conflicts of the past inevitably inspire or influence the future of the student fight to protest against job insecurity and university corporatisation.⁶ Another two elements discussed above are intensified in the group *Concrete Geographies*: scale and the use of the grid, each closely related to a strategy that might be called counter-cartography. Both the operation of recomposing fragments, traces or residues, and the need to break with spatial order and its institutionalisation, call for a task of assembling, disassembling and reordering that finds its vehicle in the grid as a discontinuous form. Further, choosing the pertinent scale is vital to ensure that the landscapes and places recorded are sufficiently representative to be significant spatialities. Works like *Nomads* (2008) on the one hand, and *Ceuta Border Fence* and *Melilla Border Fence* (2009) on the other, offer two contrasting choices of scale, close-up and panoramic view, as well as illustrating the task of reassembly and discontinuity that is brought into play by the grid when it shows the obverse side of two processes of violence, exclusion and control of space, and that of making visible the absence of bodies. *Ceuta* and *Melilla Border Fences* also include a final element that continues in the recent work of Xavier Ribas with his project *Nitrate*: the construction and perception of landscape as a historical, political and economic dispositive.

Alberto Martín is a critic, curator and editor. For the last twenty years, his activity has centred on the field of photography.

⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'œil de l'histoire: Tome 1. Quand les images prennent position*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2009.

⁶ See Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm*.