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Invisible Structures: Representing a Memory that hasn't yet been Imagined

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Xavier Ribas studied Social Anthropology at the University of Barcelona (1990) and Documentary Photography at the Newport School of Art and Design (1993) and the author's social awareness and background in these fields of study is well patent in his extended work covering several territories and places. His photographic projects also operate as both document and fiction, showing how an artistic approach can play an important role when analysing the modernity and contemporary transformation of the territory¹.

Ribas, by integrating into the photographic representations of his projects diverse concepts and ideas coming from philosophy, art and sociology² is able to create powerful landscape series where art and objectivity combine to address two ways of looking towards our contemporary territory. As Lluís Sabadell Artiga has written, "*In terms of our way of looking, the meeting between modernity and landscape has generated residual spaces where our way of looking diverges in two opposed paths: indifference and admiration.*" (Artiga, 2007). Ribas work covers the second path making us re-examine the diverse "invisibilities" of our territories.

His work is very representative of how political and economic power can control space affecting the built environment in specific ways, as well as the lives of people and their culture. Working with the ideas of invisibility and appearance, photography images are utilized to represent "what is no longer there", meaning that the images gain a depth that go beyond their appearance. Within this context, *Scopio Aboveground Territory*, dedicated to the territory transformation connected with land art or large-scale landscape architecture, as well as to regional or local planning, has decided to publish Ribas project titled *Invisible Structures*, which is a very interesting photographic project that works with the idea of "invisible" and "hidden", which consistently runs through his work since the earlier series in the late nineties, in an unusual environment and context.

We start by explaining that this work is one of the two photographic series [*Mud* is the name of the other one], resulting from the project commissioned by Photo Espana and supported by FNAC (Fonds National d'Art Contemporain). We are here confronted with an invisible evidence of a pre-Columbian Maya civilization buried in the Petén rainforest. This

¹ Gabriela Vaz Pinheiro, 2010, "The Deception of images in SCOPIO "Contrast : Michelle Domingos + Patrícia Azevedo Santos" p.78 - 79 "Through age-old tradition, photography has affirmed itself as an autonomous subject field and practice. By an even older resistance, the artistic project has been using it as a processual helping tool for supporting observation, for cataloguing the capture of fleeting moments that memory will betray and drawing will not succeed to immobilize." "It is therefore demonstrated that the deception of images often serves them as a lever for meaning and that the evidence of the artistic process may very well move from its sensitive operability to a new domain in its own right, as a marker of significance and poetics."

² "In a wider context the work is about the relationship of man and territory, engaging with the notion of the production of space (Henry Lefebvre), the experience of the landscape from the perspective of the everyday (Michel de Certeau), and the notion of anthropological place (Marc Augé). Therefore, the work intends to dialogue with the disciplines of urban studies, social anthropology and archaeology." (Ribas, 2005)

project implied Ribas to travel to Guatemala in March 2006, where he collaborated with a team of archaeologists working in the Proyecto Arqueológico Waka', directed by David Freidel (Southern Methodist University, Dallas) and Héctor Escobedo (Universidad San Carlos, Guatemala) (Ribas, 2006a).

When we are confronted by *Invisible Structures*, which comprise 19 photographs, including two diptychs and one triptych, we feel a powerful and strange feeling of uneasiness. The images of this body of work seem to make the viewer plunge into a *discontinuous* and *nonreferential*³ jungle spatiality. One can spend a lot of time in front of them trying to understand those spaces and feel helpless in terms of knowing how to deal with them: there is no hint of socio-cultural context to read. Simultaneously, we also feel a significant exuberance and density in the pictures, which come from the author's strong emotional and pictorial resolve of the jungle in its most basic and sensual form.

The author also explains how the title of this series refers to the terminology used in the context of the Maya archaeology to designate the site of a disappeared structure (Ribas, 2006a). This work has, in fact, a clear anthropological look because it discloses what is beyond the symbolic and biographical elements of that Maya civilization: the *genius loci* coming from the remnants and sediments buried under that jungle's earth.

One might say that Ribas *Invisible Structures* hold the notion that who is on top of things has a dose of structural invisibility that is not shared by outsiders and, in the case of this work, this is manifest both in terms of its ubiquitous nature and the invisibility of some images, which also seem to dissolve the vanishing point that photography usually puts into focus. Nevertheless, the existence of historical structures, which are not visible and have still to be deciphered by an archaeological work, helps to understand Ribas explanation that in *Invisible Structures* he is representing a memory that hasn't yet been imagined. In addition to this, it is also true that "In the rainforest, however, the perception and the intuition of something that is hidden offer a more appropriate framework to appreciate this historical presence. We can perceive this, for example, in the mounds, which denote buried ceremonial or residential structures, and which can be perceived at first glance as 'small jungle-covered hills'" (Ribas, 2006b). Lastly, we can also comprehend more clearly how his work interrogates issues related to the territories representation of time and memory, of visibility or invisibility of history, and of politics in the 'reconstruction' and 'discourse' of archaeology.

Reading Ribas text *Invisible Structures* in SOURCE photographic review (Ribas, 2006b) we are also able to understand better how his series of images echoes some of Robert Smithson ideas: "*The memory that is represented here is not the monument, but a projection, a threshold, a memory 'which is not yet', or that is as yet 'unthought', as in a state of 'inversion' (Robert Smithson). Or, a memory which, simply, does not let itself be thought, as if the rainforest was not only the direct consequence of the desolation*

³ "These images represent tangled fragments of jungle, with no horizon, discontinuous, indifferent, interchangeable. (It is difficult to retrace one's steps in the rainforest). These images 'bursting with jungle' represent the edges of archaeological excavations, they look outwards, trying to capture an unconstructed space. At first glance, these images make us think of a wild space, natural, undefined, as if without motif. However, this disorganized and entropic space is, in fact, a historical site, the site (niche) of a buried city beneath the rainforest floor." (Ribas, 2006b)

and the crumbling of a civilization, but also the necessary strategy for the preservation of its fragments: we could say that it hides itself, that it buries itself and that it eludes us.”

We also think that those images try to explore the phases of “before” and “after” of an architectural process of the dead, since they try to capture the “invisible” architecture of the past and in doing so deal with Smithson ideas of architectural entropy and ruins (Flam, 1973) in a very particular way. In fact, at first glance, those images make us think of a wild space, natural, undefined, as if without motif. However, this disorganized and entropic space is, in fact, a historical site, the site (niche) of a buried city beneath the rainforest floor.

The sprawl of the ancient Maya city, made up of 'squares' (plazas), roads and common residential structures, is of secondary archaeological interest compared to its ceremonial centres and elite residential compounds, and it tends to remain unexcavated, deep in the rainforest floor, estranged from the work of archaeological documentation and historical interpretation that begins exploring from the centre. This 'periphery' of the city, and in a sense of archaeology, or of history, is the subject of this work.

Paradoxically, the presence of this historical memory of the pre-Columbian Maya civilization can be perceived more intensely in its overgrown invisibility than in the reconstructed spaces of the archaeological parks, which are somehow disappointing in their inevitable similarity to the character and aesthetics of theme parks. It seems to us that, in doing this, Ribas is disclosing something vital and magical of this pre-Columbian architecture, which seems to be ignored in disneyfied archeological settings.

The archaeological parks tend to be spaces designed with an urban mentality and for tourism (entrance fees, souvenirs, toilets, picnic and rest areas, etc.). In the rainforest, however, the perception and the intuition of something that is hidden offer a more appropriate framework to appreciate this historical presence. The mounds which denote buried ceremonial or residential structures, and which could be perceived at first glance as 'small jungle-covered hills'; the distances between them concertinaed by an impenetrable vegetation; the traces left by the archaeological excavations, now filled in, the earth less densely packed, mediate more effectively than the reconstructed landscapes and monuments of the archaeological parks. The images here propose that we approach this historical site not from the point of view of the visible, but through the perception of an absence. Thus, it can be said that Ribas photographic project is concerned about the human experience of both past and contemporary cultures and that *Invisible Structures* is focused on our perception of “buried” landscapes and cultures” offering to us a new documentary fiction mediation of those archaeological cities.

Before ending this article, we believe it is worth looking at another work of Ribas, which is the photographs of the marginal spaces on the periphery of Barcelona, captured between 1994-1997, right after it had suffered a massive urban redevelopment as a consequence of the 1992 Olympics (Ribas, 1998).

The images of this photographic project present us with a set of residual spaces, at the edges of the city of Barcelona. These *left overs*, Augé's non-places or Foucault's "heterotopias", which are the result of the destruction of pre-existing spaces, still leave traces of the territory's original structures, portions of the past too stout or too peripheral to obliterate. These series constitute powerful visual statements, which makes us question a certain way of creating landscape, in this case, the landscape associated to the process of social and economic transformation induced by the 1992 Olympics on that territory.

It is also important to refer that Ribas's Barcelona pictures have a very particular aesthetics, which re-represent those outskirts and their residual spaces between motorways, housing blocks, industrial states and other alike suburban sprawl architectures (Ribas, 2003). The vantage point of these images and the way light and colour are mastered seem to impregnate both our retina and consciousness in a way that make us look at these territories with a new awareness, making observable what was before unseen and encouraging us to question the way those spaces are re-symbolized and appropriated by people. These territories and structures, the result of the cultural phenomenon that Marc Augé calls Supermodernity (Augé, 1995) and that are the inverse of place (non-relational and non-historical) seem to challenge Ribas both as an anthropologist and photographer.

It is manifest in this work of Ribas that he is also trying to understand why the general public went to these residual spaces in weekends to spend there their free time. Thus, behind these Barcelona Pictures, there is also a social anthropologist trying to investigate the meaning of those marginal spaces and why these people used them for their Sunday leisure. In fact, as Ribas said "The question is: Why do people turn these residual spaces into the centre of their leisure activity?" and referring to Camus comments that "*It could be argued that occupying these places is a response to a desperate situation. Or as Albert Camus puts it in The First Man, the poor person's lot is to live eternally surrounded by common names (and places). However, when I've visited such cathedrals of organized leisure as Isla Fantasia, Port Aventura or Montigalà, I've found more tranquillity in the adjacent patches of wasteland converted into improvised sunday dining rooms, than in the park interior itself. It strikes me that behind this improvisation there lies more design than accident. It is possible, then, that the interest in these spaces is due more to people coming to see the periphery as a place of freedom. Or put another way, that freedom can only arise in a residual space, and therefore presents us with an image of desolation.*" (Ribas, 2003). In view of all this, we can uphold that Ribas's rich and profound body of work recording these chaotic suburbs give an important spatial and social understanding of current developments and of how people live those spaces, strengthening in this way the perception and understanding of our contemporary landscape.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Barcelona Pictures relates to quite a few of Ribas prior concerns patent in several of other photographic projects as, for example, in the 8 series presented in his book Sanctuary (Ribas, 2005). This means, besides other things, having an interest about the relationship between centre and periphery, and for residual spaces with unpredictable practices, as well as wanting to understand how those spaces can be symbolically appropriated and on how this figurative transformation allows their domestication. In fact, we can say that the work of Ribas is a network combining, intersecting and connecting the Augé's anthropological space with Certau's practiced place

(Certeau, 1984) or, in other words, between the non-place and its transformation in a “place” by its use and symbolic transformation.

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