

## Traces

*More and more appears among us to the side. ... An impression on the surface of life, so that it tears, perhaps.* Ernst Bloch

*It says in the Bible there is a time to dance to techno and a time not to.* Joe Strummer

1

In 1930 Ernst Bloch published *Traces*, a small book made up of a mixture of aphorisms, tales, anecdotes and incidents, gathered from various sources and tacked together in the book, as the author describes, into a sort of "narration of narrations", so as to "reflect by telling stories" and bring light "into the obscurity of the lived moment".<sup>1</sup> With these narrations of narrations, Bloch points to something which seems to hover behind mundane reality, or the most simple and ordinary things. He follows the thread of these fragments to tease out and make visible feelings and experiences which might dialogue with ways of thinking and feeling in the present. Even if this present is sometimes still in the process of becoming. Or still in the realm of the possible, as if these traces were not in fact fragments of the past but signs of something still to come. In the book, Bloch develops his storytelling on the basis of the reading of traces which are, as he says, the residues and litter of places, ideas and events which resist being forgotten: "They point out a 'less' or 'more' that will have to be thought in the telling, retold in the thinking; ... It's a reading of traces every which way, in sections that only divide up the frame."<sup>2</sup>

Theodor Adorno said with respect to Bloch's book that "thought which tracks down traces is narrative".<sup>3</sup> From this it follows, that thinking based on traces lends itself to a storytelling where boundaries between reality and fiction may not be clear, or where the true and the false may be both at once. The stories pull together miscellaneous historical facts, subjective experiences and second hand information, which can both illuminate and obscure the tale at the same time. Narrations of narrations, images of images, traces of traces.

2

After the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001, at Atocha Railway Station in Madrid on 11 March 2004, and on public transport in London on 7 July 2005, the spiral of anxiety, suspicion and fear of conspiracy that constitute what Mike Davis defines as an *ecology of fear*,<sup>4</sup> has accelerated even more. In his writings on violence and the contemporary city, Davis relates diminishing state investment in tackling social inequality with the increase in private investment in security and surveillance. Unequivocally, he predicts that "security will become a full-fledged urban utility, like water, electric power and telecommunications".<sup>5</sup>

This *ecology of fear* could also be thought about in terms of what we might call an *economy of traces*. To leave traces of our daily movements and activities is more or less inevitable these days, and not only because of the plethora of security cameras scattered throughout our public spaces. Telephone calls, text messages, electronic transactions and travel cards, emails, web surfing: each of these activities generates its own traces. In which case, managing these traces, ordering them, classifying them, cross-referencing them, is no longer simply an economic necessity for communications companies, but a political imperative for the government. The constellation of traces of our public and private transit left on a daily basis in a sense marks our surrender to the management of fear by the state.

3

The British government is debating in Parliament the creation of an organisation which would manage a data base of all information from telephone calls, text messages, emails and internet traffic of all users in the United Kingdom. Telecommunications data gives the police not only the identity but also the location of the person who makes a telephone call, sends a text message or surfs the net. It is estimated that such data has formed

the basis of evidence brought in 95% of criminal and terrorist investigations in the United Kingdom since 2004. The centralized management of this information would allow the government and the British police direct access to the data, without having to request it from the relevant companies.

On the other hand we are told that to be constantly observed should reassure us, that our security depends on this surveillance, and that, in the worst case scenario, the traces we leave, archived as data on our public and private wanderings, should allow the reconstruction of the topography of our misadventure. Or not. On 12 December 2008, the verdict was announced in the investigation into the assassination of Jean Charles de Menezes, the Brazilian man killed by British police in the London Underground on 22 July 2005. He had been mistaken for one of the four men who, the previous day, had attempted a multiple suicide attack on London's public transport. The court case reconstructed, by means of security camera footage, the route taken by De Menezes and the police trailing him, from the vicinity of his home to the escalator at Stockwell underground station. The images record apparently unimportant details, and show De Menezes and the anti-terrorist police officers blending with the early morning crowds and traffic, walking, waiting to cross the road, sitting on the bus, descending the escalator of the underground station... And yet, the footage from the security cameras on the platform of Stockwell station, and from the two cameras inside the train compartment where De Menezes was killed, has disappeared. The police insist that these security cameras were inoperative, since the tapes had been removed for inspection following the attempted attacks a day earlier.<sup>6</sup>

4

All photography is a trace in itself. One could argue, therefore, that photography *as trace* of reality and the photography *of traces* of history inevitably construct parallel discourses: for example, about social conditions on the one hand, and about the photographic medium on the other. In its beginnings photography was limited by slowness; the movement of objects left an evanescent trace on the photographic image. Now, however, photography seems to be finding a new meaning for this slowness in the scrutiny of the after-effect, of signs, vestiges, and other *refuse* of history. Work which explores traces does so in ways which may remind us of Ernst Bloch's *micrology*, his allegorical fabulation, or the transcriptions and notations, at times apparently absurd or random, of Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street*.

5

The work of Sven Johne gives free rein to fabulation in order to tell stories about the determination and failure of human will. In both *Vinta* and *Ship Cancellation*, the photographs and texts salvaged from various archives, supposedly historically reliable, coexist on the same narrative level as the photographs and literary recreation of the artist. The stories mix narration in the first and third person, may include specific information regarding geographical and historical location, and tend to finish with remembrances of a tragicomic or unlikely nature, with a narrative style which reminds one of the local press. This work is a proposition on the act of telling stories, close to the writings of W G Sebald, or Italo Calvino. The spectator must inhabit the work and bear with the ambiguity and uncertainty created by the overlapping of the two narrative spaces, that of historical evidence and of the artist's imagination.

In *Vinta*, Sven Johne reconstructs the experiences and misfortunes of five characters that converge on a small island in the Baltic Sea. It is as if the biographies of these characters buried themselves in the sand of this island with a fictional name. In *Ship Cancellation* the shipwrecks of five cargo boats are recounted, based on the testimonials of the survivors. In a format which echoes that of marine *ex-votes*, the images of the open sea refer to possible sites of the shipwrecks, where the witness accounts take place, and the narration exists thanks to the survivors. Although here the hallucinatory, crazed tone of the accounts seems more in tune with the life and death situations experienced, than the clean, factual and tidy descriptions given in the *ex-votes*.

Adorno observes that the stories Bloch tells in *Traces* are closer to spoken than written thoughts and that therefore they will only strike us as eloquent if we do not read them as texts, and let ourselves be captivated by the narrative thought: "The stream of narrative-thought flows along, sweeping all before it, past all arguments, captivating us as it goes".<sup>7</sup> A certain parallel between the oral and the visual is set up here: the stories of *Vinta* and *Ship Cancellation* relate to a certain *orality/visuality*, so that the listener/viewer cannot ignore the passage of time and the specific circumstances of the remembering. So it is, for example, in Bloch's tale of the man who recounts his journey to the north of Siberia: "he told of wolves, of weary horses, breaking through the ice, his whole sled into the lake. And then? ask the entranced listeners, as the man stops talking,

can't get the words out. His mouth is full of water, he should have drowned by now- Then? says the traveler, exhaling: God help me, the whole story is a lie".<sup>8</sup>

6

This thought which tracks down traces can also materialise as a mass of references and abrupt quotes, with no narrative whatsoever, as in Walter Benjamin's *art of quoting without inverted commas*: "I have nothing to say. I only have to show".<sup>9</sup> In his book *The Arcades Project*, as in *One-Way Street*, Walter Benjamin presents himself as a man that *walks in the searching*, while at the same time he wants to get lost in the streets and public squares. Benjamin *reads* the street like one *inhabits* a book. His walking is a perpetual wandering from centre to periphery, from within to without, gathering and collecting characters and quotes, of texts and of images: the *flâneur*, the prostitute, the collector, "Construction site", "Madame Ariane -second courtyard on the left", "Underground works", "No.113".<sup>10</sup> This archaeology of useless objects, thrown away and forgotten, makes up a heterotopic landscape, discontinuous and fragmented, ideal for a way of thinking that sets out to avoid fixed definitions and hierarchical structures. So, the task of the trawler of traces, the searcher for remnants, the rag-and-bone person of history, may simply consist in giving identity to a fragment ("Asphalt was first used for making pavements"),<sup>11</sup> reactivating it and tossing it into the air.

7

The ice in Matt Packer's photographs could be the remnant of a production process, for example, but it might not only be this. The future history of this place, its other temporality, which the artist was unaware of at the time he was taking the pictures, gives an inevitable double reading to the work. The images of *Ice Rink*, taken between 2001 and 2006 when the artist lived in the area, shows the accumulated debris on a wasteground adjacent to an ice-skating rink in the north-east of London. On this wasteground, generic wasteground rubbish collects: a transport container with its loading doors open, piles of wood and other demolition waste, tyres, plastic sheeting, old wire fencing that now encloses nothing... This refuse coexists here with the deposits of ice from the scraping and maintenance of the smooth surface of the skating rink, regularly tipped out at the back of the building, bordering the wasteground. The cyclical process, repeated several times a day, of the dumping of the ice and the subsequent melting of solid matter and evaporation of liquid matter, suggests a poetics of the ordinary and the discarded object, a metaphor for the unfolding of history at the very antipodes of the genealogical and the monumental. As the artist comments, "the Ice Centre is a kind of micro-climate; a place that requires the surface to be kept stable, solid, and useable to skate upon. This contrasted with less-stable surface relationships outside - in the vicinity of this Centre. The Ice Centre incongruously sat on public marshland between areas of dense residential housing and small-unit industrial estates - and like other marginal spaces, the surface was in constant flux of litter and other spillage, as well as suffering the ogle of property speculators looking to transform the area. Between these 'stable' and 'unstable' relationships, and between the inside and the outside of the Centre - the ice deposits were like a medium".<sup>12</sup>

The space represented in these images lies in a district now immersed in redevelopment in preparation for the London Olympic Games of 2012. But this series of 32 photographs involves no narrative, speculation, or indeed scarcely makes a statement, and neither can there be an archaeological intent to excavate the future of the place. It is simply a matter of a repeated, regular and obsessive exploration of a run-down space, as if it were in a state of suspension; an interpretation of place originating in the perplexity triggered by the ice deposits and the trails of water.

8

The projects of Anna Ferrer and Ulrich Gebert both set out to give visibility, not so much to processes submerged in the margins of the everyday, but to certain opaque situations and events associated with processes of violence. Ulrich Gebert's series *Amerika Part I* shows the midnight comings and goings of white vans on one corner of a street in Valencia, where immigrants hope to be hired to work on the orange harvest. The photographs bear a vague resemblance to images recorded by surveillance camera: a high viewpoint, remote, slow and silent. The sequence of ten images brings to mind the time lapses between one frame and another of syncopated and repetitive security video footage. The photographer penetrates this space of marginality while invoking Kafka's tale *The Man Who Disappeared*, published posthumously as *Amerika*, then finally making an abrupt descent onto the other side of the economy of inequality, on a patch of wasteland

where the workers are registered and distributed, in a bureaucratic act open to the elements, lit up by an enormous spotlight (*Amerika Part III*).

Anna Ferrer's work is the other side of the coin of this market of migrant labour. It is like its indentation. In *Rational*, the thoroughly urban spaces are the counterpoint to the wastegrounds like the one in Valencia. One is the negative of the other. *Rational* is based on the report *El sector de defensa en España (The Defense Sector in Spain)* published by the *Escola de Cultura de Pau* (School of Peace Culture) at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in 2006.<sup>13</sup> The research was carried out as a commission for *Medicos Sin Fronteras-España* (Doctors Without Borders-Spain). In order to establish an internal ethical code, MSF-E needed to know which of its potential donors in Spain were involved in weapons manufacture. The photographs show public and private spaces relating to eleven of the corporate bodies named in the report. Nothing in the images suggests the violence, oppression, pain and death associated with armed conflict. The apparently ordinary and everyday scenes which they represent could perfectly well be absorbed into the discourse of corporate legitimation. The text included in each image however, undermines any possible ambiguity by naming, while at the same time reinforcing the critical intent.

Both *Rational* and *Amerika* materialise a trawl of the territory in order to make visible certain economic conditions, which do their best to pass unobserved on the edge of the everyday or in the dark of the night. The photographs of Anna Ferrer and Ulrich Gebert relocate these in the mapping of the everyday.

9

The notion of periphery is relevant here, in a literal and in a figurative sense. Both Mike Davis and Iain Sinclair have discussed the strategic importance of the periphery for institutions and corporations looking for anonymity. The periphery is further from the field of vision of critical gazes and militant itineraries, at the same time allowing the construction of a more *defensible* space, fenced and gated. In Barcelona at the end of the 1980s, for example, the United States Consulate moved from the centrally-placed Via Laietana to the upper-class area of Sarrià, with the aim of getting off the route of demonstrations by students and workers who always made an obligatory stop in front of the Consulate, whatever the cause, to chuck a few pots of paint.

10

*No higher institution, within the state, should be able to say: you do not have the right to pursue the truth of things for yourself. ... Individuals and groups have the right to know and make known their own history.* Tzvetan Todorov

The critical project of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger compiled in the book *The Invention of Tradition* demonstrates, on the basis of various case studies, the political aims and agendas and the devices for legitimation and memorialisation via which historical memory and collective identity are constructed. Hobsbawm and Ranger, and later Tzvetan Todorov, note that the institutionalisation of the past is achieved through a two-fold process of commemoration and forgetting: the memorialisation of that which is to be included in the thread of history, and the forgetting or exclusion of that which is to be left out. The exemplary task which Hobsbawm and Ranger put forward is to trawl the past in search of these *historical amnesias*. In *The Abuses of Memory*, Todorov also reflects on this management of forgetting as a strategy of legitimation, of social discrimination or political repression, at the same time theorizing the right to forget as a mechanism for liberation: forgetting in the sense of *leaving aside*, forgetting in order to *live in peace*. The cult of memory is not always helpful in the service of good causes, writes Todorov, and therefore one must distinguish between "the *recuperation* of the past and its subsequent *usage*".<sup>14</sup> In order to put the past at the service of the present, memory – and forgetting – must be put at the service of justice.<sup>15</sup>

11

With *The Strategy of the Ostrich*, Javier Ayarza confronts a double historical anomaly. On one hand it is an anomaly that the "right to recuperation of historical memory" (*derecho a la recuperación de la memoria*

*histórica*) of the Spanish Civil War should have taken almost thirty years of democracy to come into law (*Ley de la Memoria Histórica* dates from 26 December 2007). On the other hand it is also an anomaly that, once made law, the business of opening the common graves of the war and its aftermath should be undertaken almost entirely without any official state presence, as if having legislated the state felt itself absolved from the act, leaving it in the hands and at the expense of the descendants of those executed and disappeared, advised legally and logistically by the *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*.<sup>16</sup> Javier Ayarza's work makes evident this withdrawal of the state from the recovery of the bodies of the victims of Franco's regime. His images are, in a sense, the trace of this withdrawal.

In the photographs, one can glimpse how the opening of the common graves unfolds with an air of the everyday: the picnic table with the loaf of bread and the bottle of water, the ladies dressed in their Sunday best, chatting, sitting in the sun on folding chairs, the relative nearness or distance of the people waiting on (or simply watching) the excavations, the man who treads down the turned earth with his feet, their body language... All suggests a certain familiarity, of collective activities planned and carried out from the grassroots. It seems as if the opening of the graves was done with the apparent casualness of any other activity, like a Sunday pastime, with few reminiscences, and without ceremony. Alberto Martín writes that Ayarza grounds his critical position in "the decision not to structure his approach through a reconciliation between memory and history, but to show the relation between forgetting and history".<sup>17</sup> Hence the picturing of the search and the wait, not the finding or the reunion.

12

In *Defacing*, Gert Jan Kocken photographs the marks of iconoclastic aggressions and censoring of religious texts in the time of the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The artist's conceptual project rests on the detailed *technical reproduction* at real size of the assaulted images and texts. Thus the photographs represent, fundamentally, two times of the image: the time of iconographic commemoration and the time of the violent trace of iconoclastic dissidence. Sven Lütticken writes that the photographs in *Defacing* are "a sum of additions and erasures, of construction and destruction, representation and abstraction, symbol and blind indexicality".<sup>18</sup> This series, then, poses the question of the value of the assaulted image: whether the fragmented and incomplete image is a *remnant* of the original, a trace of it, or whether it is *another image*, with a new value, this time attached to its fracture? The question takes on a special relevance in the photograph of the damaged portrait of Queen Wilhelmina of The Netherlands, attacked during a student demonstration which stormed the official buildings of the Dutch High Commission in Jakarta on 6 May 1960. A note written on the back of the canvas, now in the collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, specifically requests that the portrait not be restored since the trace of the aggression is considered of greater historical value than the representation itself.

13

*Memorials are small incidents of civic amnesia, a way of letting go.* Iain Sinclair

In the photograph *Voetboogstraat*, from the series *Amsterdam*, the word "HELP" is a minute element within the urban landscape, practically indecipherable, which relates to an act of urban violence. The word marks the place where a murder was committed. Like the flowers which are still to be found in the station entrance at Stockwell, registering it produces something like a jolt in time and space. In *Museums of Melancholy*, Iain Sinclair goes in search of the monuments to the fallen soldiers of the First World War which are to be found in London's main railway stations. He visits them, one after another, in a kind of quest or pilgrimage, looking for the inscribed name of a distant relative of his wife, lost in the Battle of the Somme in 1917.

Iain Sinclair makes urban explorations on foot, to see and to tread the sites of the city where certain events and people have left their imprint. But also in order to *arrive at them*, by traversing their surroundings, connecting geographically distant places and reconstructing a new cartography of the city. Walking is a way of coming into contact with the street and with the amalgam of bodies and stones which leave their marks of life and death. Sinclair traverses the territory of the city looking for absences, amnesias, voids: a vocabulary of the city and of the body which brings us back to Walter Benjamin, and also to Michel de Certeau, to Patrick Keiller, to Stephen Barber. He reads the surnames from the past, long gone, in the inscriptions of the monuments. Surnames which now only exist in the memorial plaques, which in turn are tucked away in corners, overlooked, as if they were part of the urban furniture, mere curiosities trapped behind a bunch of security cameras, obstacles to memory. In his compulsive and obstinate search, the author is distracted by other things which

suddenly come to light, as if by chance, unexpected, inevitably, but which come to be part of the narration, told to him by people that he meets in the street or in an old church he finds squeezed by the building work for London's future Olympic village. The suicide attacks of 7 July 2005, however, change the course of his exploration. The flowers and pictures remembering the dead invade the bus stops and telephone boxes, "competing with cards for prostitutes". What sense can it have, he asks himself, in these moments of total perplexity, to write about the monuments to the dead of the First World War? And a few lines lower down: "The invisibles of the real city do not appear on CCTV until they are dead, until it is all over and a suitable fiction of the past is being edited by politicians and judiciary". Blunt words which also take us back, once more, to the station platform at Stockwell, where the British anti-terrorist police assassinated Jean Charles de Menezes. By mistake. And still a few pages further on: "As I approach Hackney, I record a black, newly stencilled slogan: fallujah london. bombs = bombs". The account ends in a warehouse where old and discarded objects and other junk from London public transport are stacked up. Among them is an underground train compartment with its doors open, and inside, some life-size plaster dummies, dressed for summer, sitting or standing in various poses, as if waiting, eternally, for the doors to close and the train to set off...

14

Dust, "that monotonous, gray and useless trace of entropy",<sup>19</sup> is clearly a material little suited to grand historical narratives. Nevertheless, ironically, it has a particular connection with photography in as much as it can register images, traces and marks. In Lewis Ronald's *Projection (Dust)* a double interplay is set up between the image and its projection and between the projection and the object. The beam of the projector lights up the dust particles in the air, which seem to replicate the dust particles in the projected image. This reverberation results in a sort of *flattening* of the space between the source of light and the surface of the projection, delocalizing the object. This speculative digression, almost playful, on the photographic medium also extends to the installation entitled *Tomographic Paper Work*. In this piece, the speeded up projection of the photographs of the decreasing squares which make up the paper pyramid, seems to traverse its interior space. The photographs of each sheet of paper act as cross-sections which make the internal structure of the object visible. Both pieces seem to aim at giving identity to a trace of nothingness which might be found between objects, or between folds, or cuts through the interior space of an object, an in-between space which, finally, makes possible the vanishing of the trace.

15

Lastly, how can we think the absence of traces? Who has the ability to manage, regulate and render invisible, not the traces of others, but his or her own traces; the capacity to construct for oneself a kind of hidden political geography? Is this possibility of obscurity, of going undetected, a kind of contemporary utopia only within the reach of the most powerful, whose traces vanish in an atmosphere of discontinuous presences? Or, of the most marginal, the homeless, the nomads, the itinerants, the illegal immigrants, the clandestines? Or, of the most lunatic?

© Xavier Ribas (2009)

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Carlos Eduardo Jordão Machado, "La crítica (materialista) del mundo (discontinuo) de las cosas. Sobre 'Dirección Única' (Benjamin), 'Rastrós' (Bloch) y 'Los Empleados' (Kracauer)". In Miguel Vedda, *Constelaciones dialécticas. Tentativas sobre Walter Benjamin* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Herramienta, 2008) p. 72-73.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Traces* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Bloch's 'Traces': the philosophy of Kitsch", *New Left Review* I/121, May-June 1980, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Davis, *Más allá de Blade Runner. Control urbano: la ecología del miedo* (Barcelona: Editorial Virus, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Mike Davis, *Dead Cities* (New York: The New Press, 2002), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> See [www.justice4jean.org](http://www.justice4jean.org) y [www.stockwellinquest.org.uk](http://www.stockwellinquest.org.uk)

<sup>7</sup> Theodor Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ernst Bloch, *op. cit.*, p. 151-152.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Libro de los pasajes* (Madrid: Akal, 2005), p. 462.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Libro de los pasajes* (Madrid: Akal, 2005), p. 432.

<sup>12</sup> Matt Packer, quoted from email exchange with Xavier Ribas.

<sup>13</sup> See [www.escolapau.org/img/programas/desarme/informes/06informe020.pdf](http://www.escolapau.org/img/programas/desarme/informes/06informe020.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Los abusos de la memoria* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2008), p. 24-25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> The *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*, was created in December 2000 by Emilio Silva and Santiago Macías. It exists to recover the bodies of the victims of the Spanish dictatorship buried in unidentified mass graves. In Emilio Silva's words: "*I am the grandson of one of the disappeared. First of the Civil War, later of the dictatorship and until now of the democracy*" (quoted in Ildefonso Olmedo, "Priaranza: Removiendo las fosas del franquismo", article published in *El Mundo, Crónica* supplement, 17 March 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Alberto Martín, "Terra. Paisajes con historia ausente". In Javier Ayarza, *Terra* (Salamanca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Salamanca, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Sven Lütticken, *Gert Jan Kocken: The Art of Iconoclasm*, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, *Newsletter* No. 97, September 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Anna Botta, "The Ali Babà project (1968-1972): Monumental History and the Silent Resistance of the Ordinary". In Monica Jansen and Paula Jordão (eds), *The Value of Literature in and after the Seventies: The Case of Italy and Portugal* (Utrecht, 2004), p. 583.