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To Construct. To Represent. To Describe.

I. In Wim Wenders' "Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter" (The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick) (1971), the opening scene is filmed from behind the net, as the goaltender experiences what seems like a combination of boredom and uneasiness. This ludicrous moment, which could be duplicated by focusing our attention solely on any other player on the field, is disturbed when, suddenly, the ball whizzes by him and into the net. It has happened so fast that it seems like an illusion. The emptiness is exploded by a sudden appearance of an event. Momentarily, the atmosphere changes. Soon, however, we will be back to "normal" and the goaltender will be standing in front of an empty net, trying to keep himself mentally in the game.

One thinks of this play between stasis and movement when regarding the photographs of Maria Bleda and Jose M. Rosa, particularly in the three series entitled "Football Fields", "Campos de Batalla" and "Cities". In the former, the shape of the "nets" (the word is in quotes because, in most cases, the actual net is missing from the structure, worn away by time and the elements) is variable, as is the landscape that contains it. In "El Ballestero" (1992), the four-legged structure is on an overgrown field. It's been a long time since anyone has played football here. In another photograph ("Gran de Castellon" 1994), a similar structure is on a beach, flanked by the sand and the sea. In another ("Paterna" 1995), the structure has only two legs, making even the possibility of fixing a net to it seem ridiculous. This is a kind of middle-ground structure, between some jackets being placed on a lawn to mark the goal and the actual existence of a string net itself. In the far background, we can see the low outline of a factory building.

In the end, of course, these photographs are not just about goal posts. They are about space and about memory. Space in the sense that each work in the series makes us conscious of the other photographs and, consequently, of the difference that distinguishes them. Not just the difference in the objects being photographed, but also the ways in which the artists choose to frame those objects: to the left of the frame, to the right, in the foreground, in the background, etc. Each photograph represents a choice, a choice which emphasizes the shifting nature of what is being represented. They are like relics of the past, monuments to an activity that is nowhere to be seen within the frame.

II. In the "Battlefields" series, the same connotations of memory, of history, of the past embedded in the present are evident. What is common to the works is that the site/subject is always where a battle took place. Recorded in Spanish history books with the date, the opposing forces and the number of dead, the spaces today are empty, often with very little outward manifestation of what had taken place.

In addition, each photograph is split in two equal parts, as if geography itself is open to manipulation in the same way as history. The title for each work consists of the name of the place and the date of the battle. The simplicity that lies in the text and the image is belied, however, by the emphasis on memory, which is not so easily represented.

The uses to which these fields are currently employed are varied: "Campos de Bailen, ano 1808" now looks like an olive grove. "Mirando hacia el campamento de Pena-Redonda, Numancia, 133 a J-C" is brushland, with a sign on the left perhaps denoting a road. Some mountains lie in the distance. "Lugar de Lutos, ano 793" is a lush valley. The emptiness, the peacefullness in each site belies the historical fact of what took place there. It is hard to imagine the dead that lay on the top of the mountain in "Ante la mesa del rey, Las Navas de Tolosa, verano de 1212". And yet, even if we are not familiar with this battle, the mere naming

of the place and the depiction of the site is enough to defamiliarize the view, to imagine the horror in place of the calm.
History is often rewritten. So is landscape. One need only cite names like Waldheim, Kissinger or Samarach. Everyone can come up with their own example of a historical personnage whose past has been effaced or edited, often during their lifetimes. This is not, of course, a phenomenon which is unique to those we call "historical" figures. It is common to all of us, this selective reading of the events of a life. Yet, when the denial or obfuscation is done in public, is done in the face of "historical" evidence, the disjunction between past and present seems that much more blatant. For many, the continued use of Henry Kissinger as a "foreign affairs expert" by the media is an outrage. How can the man who engineered the bombing of Cambodia assume the face of respectability so easily? For others, he is the Nobel Peace Prize winner and that is enough. Who cares about these stories of his past? History is just another object to be manipulated. Some do it better than others.
So too with geography. A tunnel in Paris is where Princess Diana died. A stadium in Zaire / Congo is where Muhammad Ali beat George Foreman. But it is also where Mobutu had his underground torture chambers. An empty field is the former site of the house where I was born. And so on. A particular geographical site takes on identities and connotations as easily as people. Historical and personal events wash over them, each time leaving another memory, another layer of meaning. It is up to the viewer to determine whether it will be smooth or filled with fault lines.
Like the goaltender standing in front of the empty field, it all seems a matter of perspective. The glass is either half full or half empty. What is extraordinary in the series "Campos de Batalla" is the sense that history can be fixed, can be remembered, despite the changes that the years attempt to effect in our collective memory. Perhaps the space dividing the photographs can be seen as the gap in our perception. It takes an active viewer to pull them together----or to allow that the space between things (the title of another Wenders film) will always exist.

III."To start a city, or refound an existing city wrecked in the process of conquest, the Romans tried to establish the point they called the *umbilicus*, a center of the city approximating the navel of the body; from this urban belly button the planners drew all measurements for spaces in the city. The floor of the Pantheon contains such an umbilicus. As in a game of checkers or chess the central square has great strategic value, so in the Pantheon: the central square of the Pantheon floor lies directly underneath the circular oculus opening up a view of the sky through the dome." (1)
The relationship between memory and representation can also be seen in Bleda & Rosa's "Ciudades" series. Based on the notion of the lost civilization, the city or culture that exists only through the particles of its past that have survived the years,the photographs refer to Iberian, Celtic, Roman, Greek and Phoenician cities which were once established on the Iberian peninsula. Today, of course, they have disappeared, but we retain something of those cultures by memories, myths and histories which have been passed down to us. Like Proust's analysis of how names of places can be used for both denotative and connotative purposes, so do words like Phoenicia indicate a "reality" that may be more imagined than real. Thus, while "Battlefields" and "Football Fields" are firmly based on geographical and historical fact, "Cities" is situated in between history, memory and imagination. What we don't know about these places, we imagine.
Sennett's description of the city that is founded on a relationship with the human body seems particularly appropriate when talking of one that no longer exists. Like "Battlefields", the photographs are "split" in two. The sizes are identical and the titles are descriptive. In one, for example, we have the title: "Escalera (Stairs), Castellar de Meca", first giving the name of the object being photographed and secondly the place, the city which no longer exists. Again, like Proust, the mere act of naming is enough to trigger associations in the mind of the viewer. Yet, in this case, there is a dichotomy set up between what is seen (the stairs) and what is not seen (the city). For, if we identify those haggard, time-worn pieces of stone as stairs, it is only with the aid of the title. Stairs lead to……? To a city whose attributes we can only imagine.

The ability to “construct” these cities, based on partial information (a few words, a photograph which is always a detail of something larger) is like the ability of imagining a body, a person whom we do not know, based on a description of characteristics that he/she shares with the rest of the human race. For the body IS connected like a city, with the function of each part depending upon that of the others. From one part we can intuit the others, just as in a city, once we get to know the “parts”, we can imagine one street leading to a square, another to a dead end, two others running parallel, etc. Eventually, we come to feel the city, to experience it physically. We come across a set of stairs and don’t even have to think that they will lead us to another part of the city, another level of experience. We trust our senses, the evidence that lies before our eyes.

IV.“In Chinese culture, garden depiction and garden description were very closely allied with garden-making, and the three arts, developing parallel, frequently coincided. If we look at Ch’ien Hsuan’s thirteenth century image of “Wang His-chih Watching Geese”, we see a famous poet depicted in a garden pavilion, from which he is watching geese on a lake. The visual image records both what we may take to be a designated landscape and a historical figure who was famous for his garden interests and for his calligraphy (a visual and verbal talent in China, as we can see from the upper left of the scene). Ch’ien Hsuan’s painting makes it very hard to draw clear distinctions between the painting of places, place-making, and, by implication, at least, writing about such places.” (2)

What is the difference between representing a place, constructing a place and writing about it? All three activities may be noted in the photographs of Bleda and Rosa. The representation is the image itself, presented in a way that draws attention to its status as photograph. Whether it is the splitting of the image in the “Campos de Batalla” series,or the implication of activity in the “Football Fields” or the detail that connotres the whole of a civilization in “Cities”, the emphasis is on the photograph as a potential trigger of memory and imagination.

The “place-making” is the choice of these sites as subject. The photographer is a “place-maker” just as much as the landscape architect, as he/she, through composition, use of colour, angle, speed, etc. defines a space that it set off by the parameters of the frame, just as the garden is set off by the edges of the ground on which is organized. Photograph and garden are the result of an organized look, a look which relies on our sense of what is happening outside the frame as well.

The “writing about places” is apparent in “Campos de Batalla” and “Cities”, where the description of the past conditions our present look. But it is also there in the “Football Fields” in the way that each disparate image is organized in the context of a series. Here, the artists write (designate) in a non-verbal fashion, by demanding that the spectator join these images, read them as sentences rather than disconnected phrases.

To construct. To represent. To describe. These three activities seem to be at the core of Bleda & Rosa’s practice. No photograph is innocent. There is not a single place which is berift of meaning.

Whether it is the kid with torn sneakers who scores a goal and then watches the ball roll down the side of the hill because there is no net to stop it or whether it is the injured soldier, resting against a tree, watching the struggle go on without him, these photographs are inscribed with different possibilities.

They exist within a rigidly defined structure which then allows our imagination to take them to another level. The description of these places is ultimately shared with the viewer.

(1) Richard Senneett, “Flesh & Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization”, W.W. Norton, New York, 1994. Page 106 – 107.

(2) John Dixon Hunt, “Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory”, Thames and Hudson, London, 2000. Page 144.