

# YES, A WOMAN CAN BE AN ISLAND... FROM SILENCE (Karina Beltrán and her settings, constellations, and Polaroids)

to Clara  
to Leo, Pipo, and Alex  
and to Félix González-Torres,  
that absent one who is silently behind you

## 1.-

When writing or verbalizing thoughts about the twentieth century, it is common to fall naturally —albeit precipitously— on the habit of labeling it as the "Age of the Image". This argument is built on the solid premise of the massification of Photography as a system of re-production of images and the proliferation of mass media and the widely disproportionate range of infinite imaginary generated.

However, precisely because of this last statement, I find it more interesting to think of the last century as the "Century of the Imaginary."

Let us pause:

An imaginary is a universe built around a set of linked images —either arbitrarily or coherently connected— by threads that transmit a narrative fiction or a testimonial account.

This places us face to face with a *corpus* of images.

It's a much more fractal narrative entity—hermeneutically speaking— than a single image.

Even when "a single picture —as the saying goes— is worth a thousand words," I prefer an imaginary.

I imagine this was never better said because I think that possibly this expression was invented by a publicist or a photo-journalist, but never by a writer, although on reflection, I have my doubts.

A thousand words are approximately three A4 pages, double-spaced using any contemporary font at 12-point type. That's a lot of space for a narrative, a reflection, or just plain writing, sufficiently powerful to express, narrate or speak, even what is not expected.

But let us return to the imaginary.

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## 2.-

The current imaginaries (not only those from the world of art) are being generated in a time of a new millennium in which polarization and radicalization or fundamentalism are still in vogue, a time in which art cannot escape from the process of the polarizing distortion of reality in which it lives.

In the increasingly binary field of art of our time, the hemispheres (and/or scholarly poles) contending for the leading role are well defined.

On the one hand, we find the "specular hemisphere/pole" (read "formalist"), which conjectures with forms as its basic research tools and also as the tool of seduction par excellence. From it springs this extremely dramatic art of which there is a certain glut, since it diminishes the reflexive substance of art, turning it into a strange "something", alien to an endogamous reality, closer to leisure and marketing than to the enriching cultural asset it should be. A "decaffeinated" sign of our visual culture that has been permeated with a light (a very light) prefabricated sophistication of the flavors of the artistic experience,

as if the culture of latex and synthetic plastic had invaded our prevailing imaginaries.

On the other hand, the diametrically opposed "conceptual hemisphere/pole" (read the "didactic narrative") is the one, which after the teachings of Duchamp, the Fluxus Movement, or the Situationists (to name only a few pioneers), took possession of the most radical diatribes of intralinguistic experimentation of Art as a system, questioning its constitutive integrity and physical materiality, transferring the primacy of its investigations from the formal to the discursive.

This path apparently disdains the most seductive formalisms -- the most colorful, the most phenomenological or the most epidermal and retinal -- in order to imbue itself in a sacramental state of militant solemnity, something uncompromising and rebellious, simultaneously iconoclastic and dogmatic, where the cult of the dogma of the IDEA displaces a circus-like, complacent bourgeois sense of the saccharine and the carnivalesque with the fiercest socio-political criticism under the pretext of "bringing Art to life, and vice versa."

This has resulted in a programmatic sense that has ultimately reached the same point of discredit and ideological-aesthetic academicism in its militancy and (apparent) intolerance with the excess of formalism (although nothing is more formal than language itself = the written word), based in documentary photography (preferably black and white) and the objectualism of the ready-made, or the verbalism of the word itself. It arrived at the same point of unease due to excess and lack of feeling, as circus-like and ceremonial as a funeral, or as pamphleteering (both) as a magazine of personal ads and/or the manifesto of a workers union. Both are artificial and contrived, advocates of an

art where everything is a burst of laughter and/or silence and a belligerent shout, where everything is a show and/or the tragic drama of becoming, thus losing the sense of humor, and the sensorial —real—experience of art, without an overdose, beyond extremes.

However, amidst these hemispheres/poles, there is a middle point. An art I prefer to call "meridian" [from zero meridian], centralist, nuanced, flexible, with nothing militant from any fundamentalist extremism.

It's an art that has not lost its ability to "feel," its ability to sketch itself as the product of a balanced emotional intelligence, capable of creating or inventing an imaginary through the construction of a poetics, a state of atmospheric synesthesia of experience, just by taking advantage of the descriptive possibilities of forms, while not betraying the poetizing narrative intent of its story.

### **3.-**

The art made by some women (feminisms aside) has that capacity (mentioned earlier), without falling into melodrama, that allows it to build an imaginary from the contemplative and whispering knowing state of silence.

Karina Beltrán, a Canarian artist born in Tenerife and living in Madrid, a visitor of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Lanzarote, and La Graciosa, a world traveler, is one of those creators who illustrates well this pragmatic meridian idea of the creative practice of art, of the gaze that distances itself, then draws nearer, reflects and feels.... while tracking and registering this very gaze.

With an evolution that traces an ellipsis from painting and drawing or watercolor to photography —the latter almost always conceived as an

installation process, arrayed within the exhibition area as serial photo-installation, presenting itself not as a single image but as a global *construct* of a micro-narrative, that is, an imaginary— and from photography to drawing again, in the course of nearly a decade Karina has succeeded in articulating a work that abounds with the female imaginaries of memory.

The imaginaries of a woman traveler who has transported her life from island to island, from the Canary Islands to Great Britain, from Britain back to the Canary Islands, and from the Canary Islands to Cuba, to the Greek Islands, to Istanbul, Iceland, or New York; always to return. Beltrán's travels always record what her gaze sees, what her gaze archives as memory as logs of her migration, her perennial nomadism, her wandering through the lands of Europe and the Mediterranean, always surrounded by sea, salt, moisture. It is an atmospheric moisture that is almost palpable or that one can almost breathe in her images that is the stamp of the author.

It's as if Karina were proposing a silent duel to the obscurantist preciousness of Ben Hansen's Caravaggio-esque photography and his most erotic manner of photographing intimate scenes of adolescents in the shadows, but in her case with a stroke of subtropical light from her island heritage. It's where light embraces and engulfs the spectator and the photographic subject with a burning light, inundating the interior spaces through which the gaze slides as a nosy, curious creature, a scrutinizing gaze that reads between the lines, between the hands, between the blinds, from behind windows, searching for crevices, fissures, cracks through which light seeps and leaks, projecting shadows and chromatic sketches on each scene, each setting, each nook where the artist makes her mark, a memoiristic fact of what her eye captures.

There is an atmospheric presence that we also find in her drawings or watercolors, always in foreshortening, in escaping vertical lines that flee frontality and choose instead the fragment, the bias, the criminal act of someone who steals a fragment of reality that does not belong to her (or does it?).

And there, in that fragmentation of the gaze (one might call it editorial) that characterizes her as a woman who fabricates for herself an imaginary of her senses, that's where I find the immutable, silent presence of Félix González-Torres, as both creators have the gift of elegance and the subtlety of poetry, closer to the compositional delicacy of the Japanese haiku, far removed from the grandiloquence of the Western novel.

It's as if both of them were reaching that zero point (the zero meridian) that only love can reach. Not just any love, but blind love, a dazzling love for what you truly love: an island, a flower, an ocean in the background, a city, a pillow, a bed, a shadow.

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