

EDI HIROSE.
PORTRAYAL OF A SPACE IN TRANSITION
(Sharon Lerner – Curator)

In 2008, almost half a century after it first opened to the public, the Museo de Arte de Lima closed its doors to undertake what has probably been the most radical transformation in the institution's history. This publication gathers images taken by photographer Edi Hirose at different moments throughout the renovation of the Exhibition Palace, the building that hosts the museum. The photographer first focused on capturing different interior spaces, including the temporary galleries in the process of being dismantled, as well as the spaces that showed the permanent collection -an open floor in which artworks hang from temporary panels, in the manner of early twentieth-century museological models. Years later, Hirose returned to the museum to document the second stage of the renovation of the building, a project that considered the architectural reformulation of the space where the permanent collection is exhibited. The final product is a visual document, both diligent and impassive, of a place in transition; a series of images that explore the surroundings in a visual prospecting of the building, its spaces and the traces of its provisionally invisible collection.[1]

The first images in MALI-Intervention, particularly those with closed frames that privilege textures and abstract planes, recall the work done by Hirose in *Indicios* (2008). In that series the artist inspected minimal gestures in interior rooms of half-abandoned buildings, attentive to details such as stains and cracks on walls, opacities on seedy windows, or diverse vestiges of human use; reticent allusions still present -although in a different way— in later works such as *Expansión 1* (2013).[2] Jorge Villacorta has referred to those photographs as a project that performs a "visual auscultation of a material reality" one that does not pretend to narrate or explain anything in particular, but rather explores the surfaces of unused spaces, isolated from the exterior, that bear the marks of unknown histories.[3]

Villacorta's observation can easily be extended to the gaze that the photographer projects onto the temporarily closed museum galleries. Being Spaces whose purpose is to host art, Hirose's approach to the infrastructure and the objects it holds, aligns with one of the principles that rules documentary photography: the minimal manipulation of that which is being portrayed. That being said, this alleged objectivity is quickly put into question by the series' very title -MALI-Intervention- perhaps a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, the photographer moves away from the straightforward register and paves the way for an uncommon yet original and personal, speculative imagination. It is precisely here

where we can possibly locate the fundamental tension in Hirose's photography: the clear ambivalence in many of his works between an apparent documentary impetus and a modernist approach to an authorial line of work.

Some critics have located Hirose's practice within the context of documentary photography, inasmuch as it privileges an objective approach to the surrounding reality and pays particular attention to the edition of the image.[4] This documentary inclination could be identified in one of his most well known works, Pozuzo (2002-2004), an impressive visual document produced -as many of his long-term projects- over the course of several years. The series portrays the life of a community in the central Amazonian forest, inhabited by descendants of Austrian immigrants who settled there in the late nineteenth century.[5] Nevertheless, it is perhaps more pertinent to state that his work tends towards a more suggestive inclination: the non-literal, metaphoric use of images. It is in that line that Hirose, who belongs to a generation of photographers formed in Lima in the nineties, could be considered as the last representative of a local modernist tradition, one associated with the historic Foto Galería Secuencia.[6] Indeed, the different images of MALI-Intervention compose a visual repertoire in which some of the features of photographic modernism, such as the veiled, transparent, reflected and opaque or covered objects acquire a leading role. In some cases, these features seem to refer in an oblique way to the memory of the institutional space, which is transformed into a sort of ghostly presence. A clear example could be *Telón blanco* (White Curtain) -a backlit portrayal of the shelves in which paintings were stored, covered with a light white cloth in order to protect them. The reflections onto glass cases and vitrines -in which both interior and exterior spaces are projected- seem to permanently haunt the photographs in the series. Just as with the photographers associated with Secuencia, the modernist strategy does not imply a derivative posture. As Majluf and Villacorta have referred in relation to Secuencia, in Peru "(...) the assimilation of the North American modernist principles was never a copy. With Peruvian photographers the friction between the descriptive and the metaphorical is always resolved in favor of a specific reading of local experience." [7]

At times, Hirose's covered objects break with the illusion of pictorial representation, emphasizing their own material condition. In this sense, perhaps some of the most emblematic images in the series are those depicting the different moments in the relocation of Luis Montero's *Los funerales de Atahualpa* (Funerals of Atahualpa) (1867), a foundational painting in Peruvian art history, and one of the key artworks shown in the museum. Writing about the photographs related to this emblematic canvas, Natalia Majluf, argues that Hirose constantly insists on its material character. By showing it covered and refusing to reveal the scene it contains,

the photographer highlights its monumentality and turns it into a reference of itself.[8]

Eventually, these meta-referential allusions appear more frequently and become more evident.

There are times when the compositions, casual or not, seem to posit a reflection on art history and the problems inherent in pictorial representation. For example, in *Horizonte* (Horizon), an empty frame leaned against a rectangular black shape inside a white environment, might trigger a series of readings that refer to the transformation of the picture plane since the beginning of the Modern era. Pictorial illusion is thus revealed through the simple reference to a 'horizon line.' In this way the photograph brings to mind the developments of European Romantic landscapes of the nineteenth century, the pure forms of constructivist abstraction, or even the primal act of photography: framing. It is precisely the way in which the photographer frames the shots which opens up the gaze to the interior of the museum, giving it an almost scenographic character.

If museum displays attest to the notions that operate behind certain understanding of art and culture in our societies, in Hirose's earlier pictures at the museum, the displays are shown rather fragile, recalling the so-called 'museum-void' that has characterized the lack of cultural institutions in Peru.[9] However, the later shots in the series capture the transition of the aforementioned space into a different museology, and allow the Viewer to briefly and partially glimpse the notions that shape the new institutional structures.

In *MALI-Intervention*, the old and new galleries, and impromptu displays confront the viewer with the images that dwell in the collective memory. However, the different photographs of the series also transcend the context of the MALI and its collections, offering a wider reflection on art history, the evolution of artistic media and the ideologies that hide behind exhibition spaces.

[1] The renovation process took place in two different stages. Between 2008 and 2010 the museum closed to the public, the spaces on the first floor were reformulated for temporary exhibitions and the second floor became a temporary storage for works in the collection. In 2010 the MALI partially reopened its doors with temporary exhibitions and the process of infrastructural renovation of the second floor began. The permanent galleries reopened in September 2015, with a completely new museological script.

[2] In *Expansión 1* (2013), Hirose leaves the minimal detail and projects his gaze onto the exterior surfaces of urban and semi-urban constructions. In those images the photographer's insightful

way of framing offers an unusual reading of ordinary, apparently familiar spaces, turning them into external signs of Peru's hectic urban development.

[3] Villacorta, Jorge. Introductory text to the exhibition *Indicios*. Lima, Galería Lucía de la Puente (June, 2008) [My own translation].

[4] Williams, Armando. *Visiones del arte contemporáneo en el Perú*. Lima: Galería Lucía de la Puente, 2008.

[5] Although his photographic approach to the surroundings might seem of a palpable distance, in *Pozuzo Hirose* transcends the pretense of mere objectivity and offers a compelling visual testimony of an unfamiliar geography and community in a personal way.

[6] *Secuencia* was a space that promoted locally, between 1977 and 1979, a photographic approach inspired by the American modernist canon, with salient figures such as photographers Minor White or Aaron Siskind. Some photographers associated with this space include Fernando La Rosa, Billy Hare and Mariella Agois.

[7] Majluf, Natalia and Jorge Villacorta, eds., *Momentos: Tres décadas de la fotografía en el Perú 1960 -1990*. Lima: Asociación Museo de Arte de Lima - MALI, 1997. p.19

[8] Majluf, Natalia. *Luís Montero. Los funerales de Atahualpa*. Lima: Asociación Museo de Arte de Lima - MALI, 2011. p.71

[9] The term 'museum-void' (*vacío museal*) was originally coined by critic Gustavo Buntinx, who has written extensively on the subject. For more information see Buntinx, Gustavo. "Museotopias: tres textos utópicos sobre el vacío museal en el Perú." *Micromuseo*. Lima, n. O (April, 2000): 2 - 13