

## Os que habitan, de Eva Díez

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Casa das Artes. Concello de Vigo

# Who lives there?

METAMORPHOSES OF DESIRE AND OTHER GHOST STORIES

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*One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed  
he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug*

Franz Kafka

*Once up on a time there was an image that...* In some way or another, all photographic images, even the most obstinately aseptic ones, tell us a tale (or perhaps two), and the ominous edge of the frame limits the scene for that story: the borders of a storyland.

A first tale, strictly chemical and forensic, that shows - loud and clear - a very simple truth: *"that was there"*, and this, the photograph, is the proof, the deferred light of what was, the twinkle of an extinct star, a ghost revealed as it passes swiftly through this world. Put in a sentimental way the argument goes, more or less, like this: *"that photograph is for me the treasury of rays that emanated from my mother as a girl, from her hair, her skin, her dress, her gaze, on that day."* (R. Barthes).

The second tale always starts with someone contemplating a photo, *reading it*, perhaps without taking the necessary precautions given the fact that every image is a trope, a metaphor, a transaction, (*this is equivalent to that, A is equivalent to B*), that is, the proposition of a certain taxonomy: the groupings and distinctions that can be made. A clandestine operation of flowing values disguised as symbolic elaboration, for each exchange must be governed by the corresponding table of equivalencies, by a specific mode of

visibility or, to put it another way, by a political division of what can be sensed: that which rules and states *who can see which things*.

What exchange is proposed by Eva Díez's images in this barter system? Who are *those who inhabit*? First of all, and in a way that is evident and determined, it seems obvious that these photos allude to the universe of animal fables, a tradition dating back millennia, that in literary terms refers to the Greek tradition of Aesop's fables and all the folk tales derived from them. It is a tradition that, according to academics such as Vladimir Propp, could even date back to the totemic rituals of prehistoric hunters, and that since the Middle Ages has constituted a whole literary genre in the west (stemming from clear Persian and oriental roots): Aesop-like narration or apologue with an educational or satirical intention, that would usually close with an exemplifying maxim, the unpleasant moral of popular advice. In such narrations the animals act like civilised beings; they dress and behave like humans, take tea at five, greet each other, and take the burden on their animal shoulders of the faults and virtues that we human beings are supposedly endowed with.

But this is an extremely deceptive reference, a red-herring that should not be allowed to distract us, because there is nothing further from the photographs we can see in this exhibition than moralizing or judging aims; Eva's animals do not give an example of anything; they do not parody human abilities or situations; they do not propose moral precepts (or if they did in some roundabout and elusive way, they would do it from the antipodes of the inept governing mechanism of the fable). No. Nobody is giving lessons here. They drama they represent in these apparently innocent scenes in none other than that of the metamorphoses of forbidden desire that returns but cannot be present: it can only return in disguise, concealing its scars, modelled by expulsion and the absence. And to respond this demand the photograph, very skilfully, always manages to give us a hare when we expect a cat, delight instead of a fright, and it does so in a subtle way so that when we see the deceit it is too late and we have already been trapped by the disturbing atmosphere of its images.

The comfortable, Sunday-best, bourgeois atmosphere that Eva Díez recreates in her settings has been erected on the rubble and debris from real homes that are uninhabited and eroded by time; in fact, almost all the images still conserve some remnant of the ruin, as if the prop were not enough, unable to fully conceal the scene's irreparable woodworm. From those cracks emerges the sinister like a taste of the depths. For we should not forget that the sinister, in Freudian terms, deals with denial of familiar things [and that can be seen in its etymology: the sinister (*unheimlich*) bears hidden inside it the house, the home (*heim*)], and becomes manifest in repressed matters that return with a destabilising impetus. *The sinister* means the untimely return of "a familiar phenomenon (image or object, person or event) made strange by repression" (Hal Foster). What has been silenced can only present itself before us again hidden behind a mask that disfigures it, ... or disguised as an animal fable. So, what is real and what is imaginary, what is familiar and what is terrifying, attraction and repulsion, live inseparably together in the experience of *the sinister*.

In these enchanted spaces where everything happens behind closed doors, where the dreams and nightmares of former dwellers still resound, the air breathed is aged, stale and from another time. And it should not be forgotten that what is antiquated, associated with ruins, shows great symbolic usefulness inasmuch as images and objects that were formerly familiar and that have become strange because of *historic oblivion*, are now "out of use", emptied of utility, and more than willing to become receptacles for symbolic contents: "*the bourgeois interior is a perfect representation of the unconscious*" (Max Ernst). In view of the living rooms that Eva Díez shows us, these contents can be none other than those that confront bourgeois order with its repressed past, with the desire to liquidate the patriarchal institution in which the families have spun their silences. What is antiquated, like the nearly archaic, comes to us as an emblem of our own ruin. An early ruin of already renounced dreams, and also a ruin of the utopia and the civilising project of the enlightened middle class that "*have converted the symbols of desire from the previous century into rubble, even before the monuments representing them had crumbled.*" (Walter Benjamin).

We must not, therefore, let ourselves be deceived by the apparent pleasantness of these warm and cosy scenes; we must not be enticed by the tender gaze of the little animals that pose, like professional actors, to set the scene for another great drama of our time, that of the breakdown of the image from which modern culture formed all possibilities for experience: the stability of the self. What is represented in these scenes is the fragmentation of the discourses on identity. What is celebrated behind the scenes is the dissolution of the attributes of the self: the theatre of shadows and whispers that the tale of the subject has been turned into for our contemporaries. *"The force of Kafka's man/insect in The Metamorphosis, resides precisely in that it is the poetic expression of a vacuum: the thinking self that contemplates itself in the mirror and does not see a stable form, but a radical and unstoppable process of transformation instead."* (José Jiménez).

In many aspects, the theatrical tone of Eva Díez's work is clear. Each photograph constructs - among many other things - a detailed, staged picture. Her sets support the solid association that, since its very beginnings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was established between photography and dramatic arts (it should not be forgotten that Daguerre himself started out as a successful impresario); make up, sets, backdrops painted with exotic landscapes, books, paintings, mirrors, Solomonic columns and all types of props... how can a viewing of this series of animal portraits not evoke the hundreds of photos that we all still caress within our own family memories: our grandparents and great-grandparents posing in a studio while in the background the 20<sup>th</sup> century was bleeding to death in two world wars.

Perhaps these deceitful visual tricks can be taken in reality as fantasised self-portraits, placing us closer to the feminine archetypes into which Cindy Sherman mutated for her well-known series of "portraits" than other proposals that are more closely related in formal or iconic terms. These images present themselves then as records of the instability of what is sensitive, as foolish escape plans, symbolic transfigurations that point towards the assumption of expiry itself as the only possible identity: a vibrating entity that can only recognise itself in the never-ending flight from itself.

