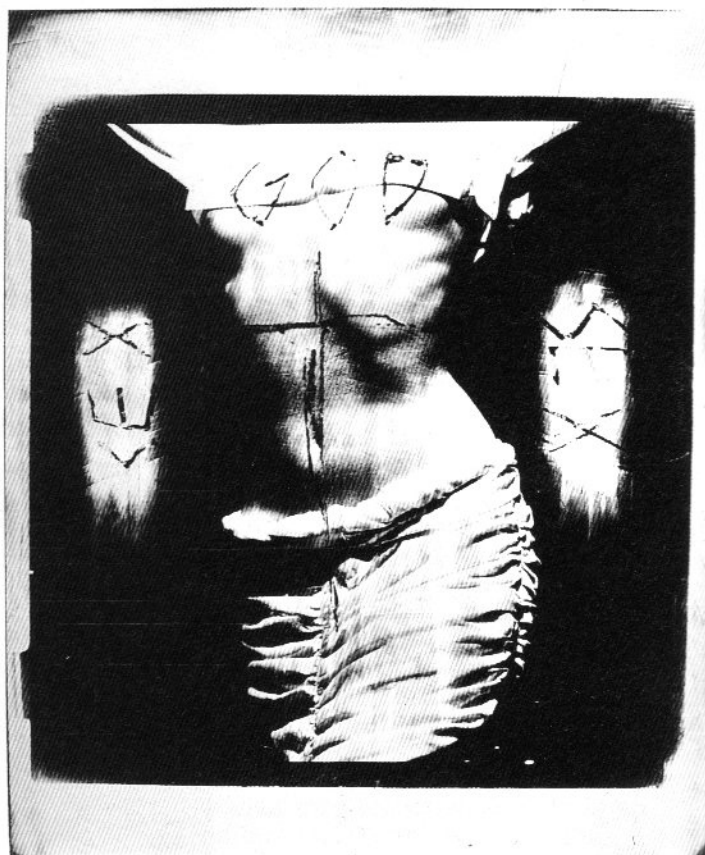


Lapiz, no. 60, Madrid, Summer 1989

Towards a Disappearance of Sides



JORGE LUIS MARZO



Schwarzkogler and Stiller, of the Viennese Actionism movement, gave a final testimony of their refusal to accept the *fallacy* of media art, and in so doing opened a door that had been visited—if not entered—since 1839. The death of these self-made martyrs confirmed once and for all Thomas de Quincey's maxim on violence as an intellectual manifestation. All we have left of these two Viennese are some fine photographs and all that remains of Charles Manson are the sounds of his recordings. Only the eye witnesses still experience a pervading aftertaste of horror.

De Quincey, knowing that the violence of his particular world could not be expressed literally, may have guessed

that the alchemy of art, its representations, cynicisms and ironies could somehow plumb these depths and provide us with a key. The ancients also believed in allegory as a valid expression of philosophy; artifice was seen as the flip-side of reality. In the current debate over *constructed photography*, the notion of artifice appears to be a central issue. The communication media has an important role in this process, as have the interdisciplinary art forms, and recently evolved theories in the fields of sociology and criticism. And in any case, photography has always moved between the dichotomies of reality and mannerism.

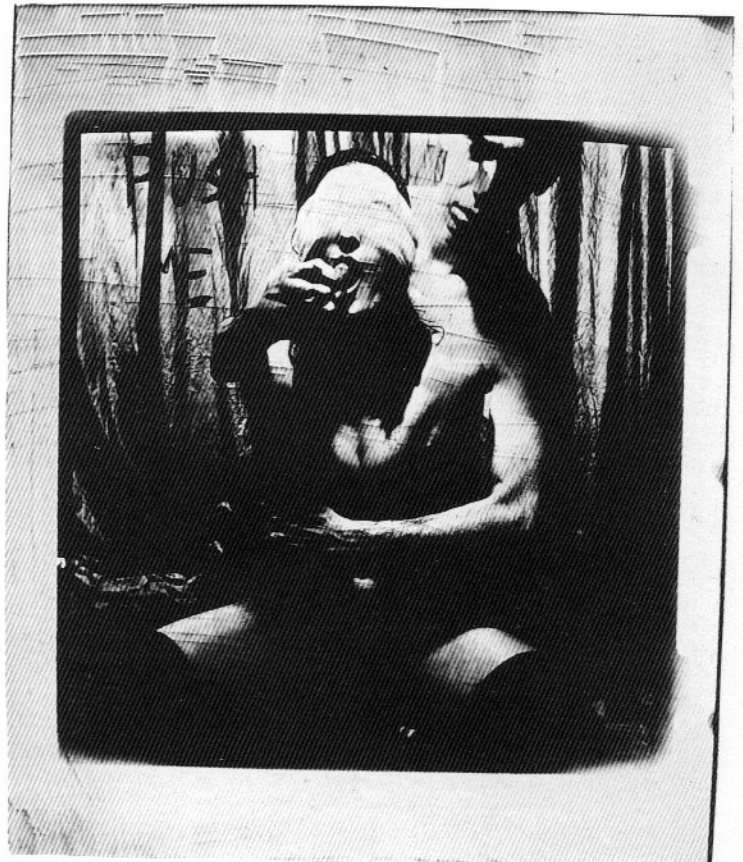
The causes for the predominance of artifice in photography could be comprehended in terms of an analysis of communication theory. The excessive,

continual, persistent information projected by the mass media has radically changed our perception of reality: the superabundant, abusive consumption of real scenes and images has downgraded or rehabilitated once clear-cut areas of representation.

Reality—verification—has become pure, aseptic information, fascinatingly available and immediate. Meanwhile, artifice—verisimilitude—appears to have found a *modus operandi* which suggests that critical commentary coexists with narrative as well as non-denotative discourse. The photograph makes artifice come true, as it enters into contact with its own inner reality.

In 1987 Marc Viaplana and Mabel Palacín (VP) address the conceptual confrontation between information and

«Untitled», series, 50 x 60 cms, 1987.



connotation as they create the work *Suicide Considered as One of the Fine Arts*, a series of twelve photographs of suicides taken from some publications of old police files. In them appropriation processes are utilized as a means of establishing a sort of screen, or filter with which to analyse the significance of a re-photographed subject. The plan included three basic perspectives: the notion of scenography implemented by the suicide (settings or landscapes which were consciously or unconsciously established by the subject); the police photographer as a utilitarian, information-gathering agent, devoid of aesthetic interests or conceptual tactics, and lastly, the present intervention in respect of these pieces, as they are re-photographed and introduced into the

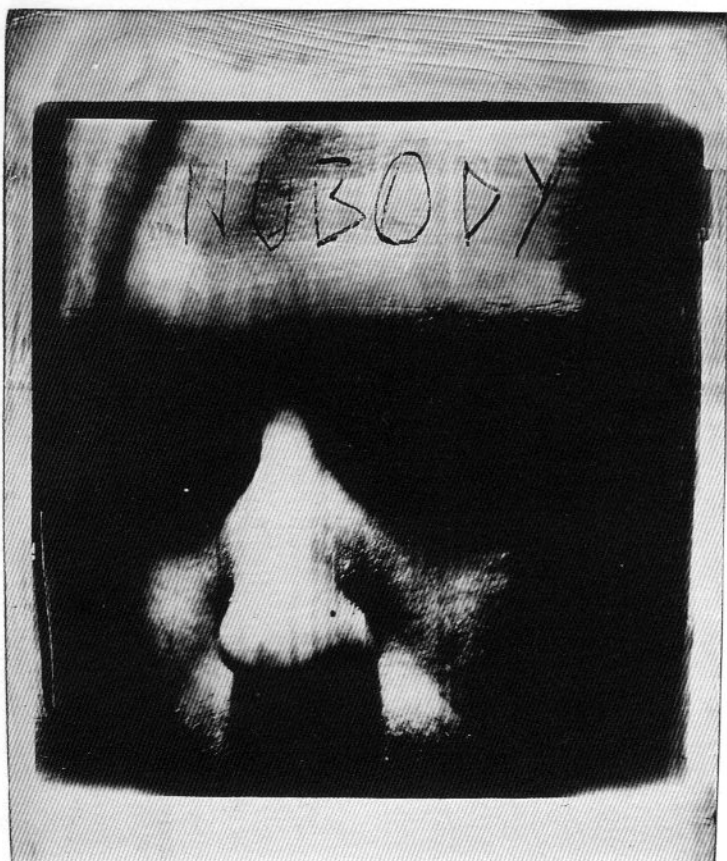
environment of an art gallery.

This point of view explores the power of the communication media to transform reality into an entirely amoral visual effect, devoid of any element of emotion or intimacy (particularly if we take into consideration the suicide scenario which in itself increases the expressive possibilities of the act), and to consequently produce a simple gesture of admiration, beyond the need to merely convince. In this light television is seen as the great paradigm. It is the generic *mediator*, capable of offering us the most fabulous murder case without registering the slightest capacity for judgement. The element of fascination is not an attribute of the subject, but of the object: the information itself.

When representing the suicide

images, Viaplana and Palacín employ a strategy very similar to the concept of filter, or *screen*. The photographs are bordered by a dark, dingy area which serves both to isolate and to give them emphasis. This tactic strengthens the desired *artistic* effect; the viewer is thus presented with a scene which transcends its own violence to become an aesthetic consumer object. The photograph is suddenly placed on a level which both dissolves and diverts any real semantic possibilities, sublimating them beneath a mantle of objectual presence. Here the concept of *camera* is observed as an important factor.

In the portraiture of Diane Arbus, the models are involved in direct participation with the photographic act. Their posture in front of the lens, their



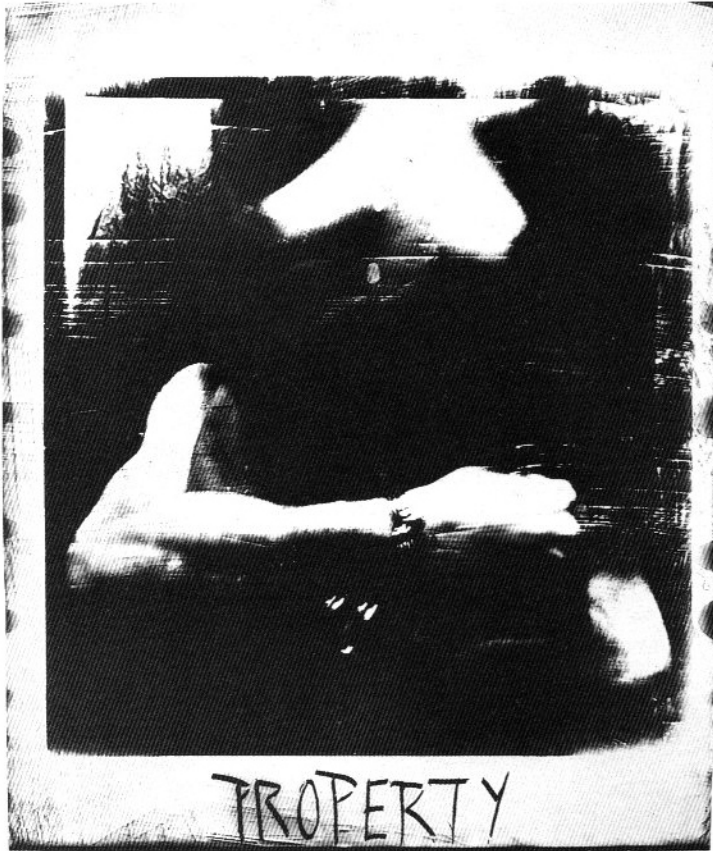
concentrated and rigid passivity, offers, as Sontag indicates, the spectacle of a personality terrifyingly exposed and vulnerable. This approach, seen in the light of our present considerations, is similar and yet we are aware of some different nuances of meaning. In studying portraits of the photographers themselves (they claim that they are incapable of working with other models for the moment), we observe a posture of constant self-representation: a *referential continuum*. In this situation the camera confronts us as the central axis, operating as a mediating balance, very much a control vector. In this relationship photographer/model camera, the scenographic element is of primary importance. It is as though our glance rebounds against this self-contained

object, which is subjected to an intense semantic bombardment. The whole process is thrown into motion automatically and provokes a feeling of *internalized pain*, obsessively charged with very precise and measured levels of meaning, which are further multiplied by marginal footnotes, whose function will be considered below.

In the work of VP it is precisely this broad symbolic structure which harbors what I would qualify as *internal violence*. Transcending the futile conflict between natural and abnormal states, the artifice dismantles the rigors of judgement with its intangible, ambiguous and inexpressible regard. The viewer feels a certain chill of uneasiness, an intimate stirring of the thought processes in reaction to the closeness of the object.

Artifice as an access route to the violent undercurrents of our psyche.

Here it would seem necessary to make a few observations regarding what has been called (and critics have used to label very diverse forms), Witkinian aesthetic, with its whole scale of psychological values. Above all, we would venture to say that Witkin's work is an in-depth assessment of the social consciousness which avoids representing any type of emotional tension. His gallery of asocial personages embodies not so much factors of instability as characteristics of alienation and autonomy, rooted in a scenographic approach to the association of objects. VP depart from the opposite point of view. Works such as *My Violence is a Dream* (1988), *Push Me* (1988), *Take me in*



your *Cruel Arms* (1988) are based on a reduction of objects within the setting, and on the restricting role of the camera-eye. This leads to a much more intimate and expressive portrayal of violence, or love (the difference being purely technical), as in *A Screw* (1987) or *You own me* (1987).

As a result of the mingling of disciplines which has occurred within the art forms and especially within the different patterns of communication, a new discursive, operative space has been projected in which photography emerges as one of the predominant mediums. Interchangeability of context, appropriation, ironic symbolism and ambiguity are all easily identifiable as elementary parameters within this debate, together with the recycled version of

Conceptualism as its driving force.

Within this framework of symbiosis, photography appears to have achieved a position of central importance. This has caused some critics and artists to completely re-evaluate certain basic assumptions about the medium itself, such as the powerful effect of remission it produces in comparison with other mechanism of representation. This is one of the fundamental pillars of conceptual thought; photography conceived primarily as image, and above all as a fixed, exact image within time and space, which is also affirmed in its succinct and immediate capacity for shock value. Imagery is analysed in terms of substance and attractiveness, but not as *verification*. The reference is given an exclusively objectual, physical treatment in which

context no longer has a pre-eminent role. I have already suggested the way in which scenographic apparatus operates through reduction, isolating and *minimalizing* the characters represented, as they are forcibly thrown into the environment of a non-landscape. In pieces such as *My Violence*, or *Push Me*, the image presented is not in itself so important as the idea which has produced the action: an idea which is necessarily considered from a physical standpoint.

Pascal Bonitzer affirms that violent imagery on canvas does not cry out in the same way as it does from a photograph. The photograph knows that the events or things have been there (in spite of voluntary suffering - as in the stiffened model of the last century), and

is able to represent them just as they appeared before the camera on the first day. The real effect of remission which photography produces is in its security, and not its sincerity (which at this point is totally irrelevant). It is when this security undermines the moment that pain, anxiety and violence can actually be expressed. This internal pain caused by the absence of any codes of meaning—or by an enormous multiplicity of them—is both reinforced and contradicted by an ironic game which employs the use of phrases and words.

These bits of text are treated formally, in the same sense as the imagery, as autonomous objects clearly disconnected from their original context. Here the adjective loses its meaning but gains status as an entity. These apparently hermetic elements are in themselves components of the shock factor. Their function is almost destructive, in the Derridian sense, as well as being enormously disconcerting. They also offer great possibilities for introspection as they become an ambiguous and ironic counterpart to the photographic imagery. *You Win or You Lose* (1988), *Show Your Wounds* (1988) or *Push Me* demonstrate how words emerge to control the factor of ambiguity in respect of the images which, due to this remissive quality, are made to seem less equivocal than they actually are. In this way, language is used as the key, which has the effect of modulating the intrinsic abruptness and violence of the photograph.

In the dictionary we find such definitions for the word artifice as fiction, stratagem and manoeuvre; that which is made or contrived by art, or produced culturally, by human skill. There is every indication that in our advanced, metacultural society all action and subterfuge contains a maximum degree of artifice (the *artistic qualities*, though lacking in differential content, are insured by the engineers of design). As fully integrated elements of everyday behaviour patterns, in some sense they can be



categorized as natural. This symbiosis appears to have become so evident that we could begin to speak in terms of the dissolution of this *difference*: the fiction which artifice creates has put an end to the natural/non-natural dichotomy.

One of the peculiarities that Herbert Simon, co-author of *Artificial Intelligence*, attributes to the science of artifice is that «artificial things can imitate the appearance of natural ones, without possessing their reality.» These generalized impersonations or substitutions provoke, through acts of simulation, an interchanging of roles between subjects and object in which semantic opposites are reversed in regard to their traditional relationships. This could eventually lead us to an unqualified synthesis and fusion; a centralization or encounter of the *two sides of things* within the bounds of a precise structural framework. A structure disconnected from the contents, which are thus liberated and fit for dismantling. In short, we seem to be confronted with the unequivocal suggestion of a universal *signifier*, produced by the progressive dismemberment of the signified. Objects will have reached an advanced state of perfection within their intrinsic functional order—a functionality whose dynamics cannot be explained.

Contemporary artists seem to be

involved with the inter-relation of objects and concepts. Unable to *invest* from a position of total control or perception in relation to the object, the artist *di-verts*, *re-cognizes*, and suggests the emergence of new classifications. In a world of endlessly recurring artifice he must extend himself beyond a mere seductive process in order to connect with a project whose aims find their expression in certain areas of expedience, closely related to the concept of strategies.

The artist must rise above the simulated dialogue which science and technology are attempting to establish as they dictate *the rules of the game*, knowing full well that this is part of a system which they have obliged us to accept without reservations. If, as seems likely, we are adopting systems of strategy which pretend to control the artifice, it might be useful for the artist (now no longer a creative agent) to temporarily put aside the answers in order to address the actual issues with a certain directness and simplicity. It is not a question of attaining previously established aims, but of decoding patterns, maps, games, violence in order to mark the way in which artifice can establish a new scale of values. ■

