

## PRIVATE ACTORS. PUBLIC SCENES

By Jorge Luis Marzo

Why on earth have all those people assembled to pose semi-nude in front of an artist's photographic camera, knowing full well that they will be in everyone's view? This question lies timidly within the dark recesses of our mind. What is it that has encouraged them to set aside their modesty and physical intimacy to become public, ready to be taken to pieces? It is not the first time that I have asked myself this question when contemplating group portraits, but when I saw Mira's photos this insidious idea started to play on my mind once again. What is there in the dark ground that marks the dividing line between the public and the private sphere? Has it anything to do with the fact that they are facing a camera or an artist? Are we talking about the same thing when referring to the private, the personal or the intimate? What compels people to reveal their private and domestic affairs to the public eye and vice-versa? Why do I find it so difficult to determine where this dividing line is drawn?

According to what Mira told me, he once spent a year and a half organising a group family photograph. This basically involved convincing a fair number of relatives to pose together in blood-stained underwear for a large photograph which Mira had in mind. What it really involved was asking them to be actors for a day. In this act of persuasion the family no doubt felt assured by the fact that the artist was a relative, someone from their own environment, a fact which offered them sufficient guarantee that their performance and the resulting picture would be treated with the utmost discretion. Furthermore, the artist had explained at length both the reasons behind the work of art as well as the set design to be used. Apparently, the grandmothers were particularly thrilled, but that's another story. Most members of the family finally accepted. They gathered on the set and the photo was taken.

A family exposed to the public. We will mention here that we are not as interested in the artist's motives in deciding to take this photo as in the agreement of all those involved in posing together in front of the camera. This of course, leads us to the

theatre. Or to art. But are these one and the same thing? Maybe, maybe not, we shall see. Would the family have grouped together to do something like this in an environment other than that of art? At the end of the day, artistic purposes are often used as an accepted guise to legitimate “morally delicate” issues. What is more, the artistic licence seems to allow the violation of the identities of those in the picture, in order for them to assume new ones. Would this be possible without this licence? We will leave aside the code proposed by the artist (something which is not entirely possible), and we shall turn our attention instead to the private individuals who wished to become actors.

I was discussing the family. A family is a group of people related to each other by ties of blood or marriage. Yet above all, and for the matter in hand we will include groups of close friends, it is the chief domain in which we place the concepts of intimacy and privacy. The family, as it has been formulated since the mid-19th century, is “the ultimate haven”, “the ivory tower”, where the individual can find a safe place in which to sort out his life, away from prying eyes. This space, says Georges Duby, is “a zone of immunity where we can retire or find refuge, a place where we can shed the weapons and armour we require in public, a place to relax, feel at ease and rest without taking shelter under the ostentatious shell we wear to protect ourselves in the outside world”. The family is in fact directly related to domesticity, in other words, an environment shared with others. It can therefore be intuited that tensions produced in this “society of strangers”, which Simmel spoke of, do not disappear on the threshold of our homes.

This presents us with an interesting point, to which relatively little attention has been paid when it comes to opening debates on the issues of public and private. The family and its domestic environment are not ultimate elements - the atom - in the chain of privacy but represent, in themselves, the individual’s first instance of socialisation, of public negotiation, due to being spaces which are “shared with others”. The dining room or the living room for instance, where the whole family gathers in front of the television, are not the same as the individual bedrooms where different degrees of intimacy are perfectly accepted by the various

inhabitants of a house. This negotiation of space is brought about by the public tension which is also dramatised in a domestic environment. Some contemporary studies have shown the extent to which the development of homes, largely due to technology, has generated new realities and tensions as regards intimacy. The appearance of the transistor radio in the fifties led to teenagers having their own radio in their rooms, condemning to obscurity those family scenes where all members of family would sit together in the living room around the wireless. This also favoured diffusion of the modern music industry, as teenager's musical tastes grew away from those of their parents. Later, the installation of televisions and telephones in bedrooms during the seventies, or the appearance of the walkman and the personal computer in the eighties, would play similar rôles in family life. Private space is atomised according to each dweller. Everyday situations arise as a result of this, a fact which has not gone unnoticed by the entertainment and media industries (see advertisements and cinema) either. Consequently, these industries have been able to reassure viewers with messages of independence and guaranteed privacy validated by marketing techniques, especially when the young are the target. I'm referring to the loud, high-pitched music originating in a teenager's bedroom, the presence of his friends in "his" or "her" own bedroom, their obsession with locking their doors, the visual and aesthetic "mess"... behaviour patterns which reproduce the public pulse of the family environment. The image of a teenager wrecking the house in a party organised while the old folks are away for the weekend could reflect an act of aggression towards the first circle of "strangers" which we all have to face.

What does this mean? The family is not simply a "natural" agreement concerning private values in the public domain, that is to say, the street. It is also governed by the dynamics of internal negotiation on the strategies to follow in each member of the household's search for "a more intimate space". So, the fact that Mira's family meet to strip should also be considered from this angle. They have all decided to "do so" together, in the public setting of a photograph, where presumably the act of undressing projects a sense of distance not too different from the one felt before a

person from outside the family circle. Basically, what's the difference between being naked or half naked in front of your cousin or brother-in-law, to similarly appearing in front of the milkman or the local greengrocer? Not much. Unless they share a common ground of "confidence", a warranty of trust: the artistic device.

We were wondering at the start if people who appear nude in the artist's portraits would do the same for reasons other than those of an artistic/plastic order (I'm taking the liberty of defining photography in this way, although I don't really know why). Let's imagine that they were asked to do the same for an advertisement, a film or an instance of Performance Art. We'll never know what they would have done, but I imagine they would have been extremely reluctant, even if it were the same artist who asked them to do so. Art, a terrain in which heresy is permitted and the right to private interpretations is regarded as legitimate, becomes an accepted context where certain rules on "private" behaviour can be broken as it is made public, although I suppose this may prove paradoxical to some. The question is not just that the artist is a relative, but that the relative is above all an artist, a stage director. Private, intimate affairs can become socially public if portrayed in accordance with a pattern of organisation. Seeing your parents fornicate, a scene which is extremely difficult even to envisage, is not the same as seeing them have their way with each other on video. Millions of people are able to watch programmes which delight in relating the afflictions and misfortunes of the life-stories of anonymous people. However, few such spectators would be prepared to go on television to talk about their own problems or to reconstruct a commonplace drama they have suffered. This is reflected in the difficulties television production teams have in finding prey in their search for characters. In order for intimate issues to be legitimated as public images, a publicly accepted libretto is required, one which will not only contemplate nudity as a category in itself but within more general guidelines, in other words, entertainment and art.

Let's move for a moment to another area, picking up the thread offered by the artist. The exhibition space of his installations often contain "private" rooms which can be locked from the inside. Such areas are at the disposition of any viewer who

may wish to perform in front of a camera, and also offer the possibility of them covering their faces. In some cases, the spaces are fully furnished bedrooms. In a setting similar to a photo booth, the (public?) audience can act out a scene but in the framework of the inaccessible privacy of a locked room. The photos are taken. Then, each person will decide whether or not they are made public. The background image is that it all takes place in a public space. While the bedroom is locked, visitors to the exhibition are aware that “something is up in there”, something private. I will not go into the subject of the worth and force of voyeurism. What does interest us is the fact that some people have decided to enact their intimacy in a markedly public and artistically identified setting.

The circumstance which provides this setting with socially defined rules is precisely the factor that affords the recognition of the heretical representation of privacy.

The contemporary spectacle is basically defended under the premise of our capacity, our need and right to see without our vision being controlled by the fabric of moral standards we usually grant our daily non-mediated lives. That is to say, a moral diversion is produced. It is not easy for many to accept that the contemporary spectacle has long used the artistic model in order to achieve these goals. Insofar as institutionally welcomed formalist art has, for many years, earnestly defended another reality of art, and with a great influence, this model has offered a highly appropriate option for operators of “mediality” (a succulent term expressed by Zielinski). Audio-visual perception has ended up being contaminated by this strange artistic surmounting of the paradox between seeing and judging.

History has taught us that the institutional model of art prevailing since the 20th century (and in part since the 17th century) on one hand defines artists as isolated individuals with a licence to freely express themselves, a good example of which are court jesters. On the other hand, the institution tends to interpret their oeuvre within the context of the power of expression which “they have been granted” in the field of representation. Thanks to the value of illusion which this definition of art implies, by clearly marking the boundaries of the stage where the unforeseeable

can take place, it has been easy to steer these artistic foundations towards the mass media, where illusion has always been a dearly held concept in the continual exercising of power.

Sure. But there is something else that can be gathered from this situation, which is not so obvious at a first glance. If we are able to swallow the stories told on television of other people's thwarted lives without batting an eyelid (dolephagy), yet would not appear in such programmes for anything on earth, because we couldn't even stand the thought, is this not due to the fact that a certain culture, a certain illusory and institutional art industry has achieved an indisputable victory, separating the vision from the reality it creates?

In this way, the artist's family or friends who pose as a group have been able to argue that the final photo did not really have much to do with the act of gathering on the set and acting as models. They were able to distinguish clearly one thing from the other. The couple who can be seen having sex didn't seem to have any problem either. The act they were carrying out in private was consciously performed in public. No problem.

But not everything is so simple. Because if it were, then neither theatre nor Performance Art would exist. Nevertheless, it is important here to state that we are not talking about artists or stage professionals but of spectators who, because of the public setting (following a libretto, as in opera) become actors. Let's break here for a moment.

In order to understand this new rôle of actors attributed to audiences we must sound out certain important circumstances. Throughout the 20th century a fear of the exterior, namely the street, where the most brutal tensions of rising capitalism take place, produced a retreat into the family essentially, a retreat which would later affect the individual's privacy and social psychology. This domestic change would reinforce, if possible, the great phenomenon of the late 19th century, the right to individuality. However, parallel to the rise and establishment of this basic value of our day and age, a consolidated system of images has also developed whose job it is to maintain a certain notion of common interests and objectives. In this system,

the spectator is conceived as the one who has the last word in the process of legitimatisation. In the now legitimate right to using one's own intimacy as a way of upholding one's individuality, spectators are no longer considered (they do not even consider themselves) as performers on the public stage (as occurred in silent movies or in working class musicals for instance, where audiences would enter into debate on what should be vetoed), nor as solid groups based on a social hierarchy, as was the case in the Ancien Régime. The show is now fashioned as a field of dreams towards social migrations. That is, it tries to provide audiences with seductive plots in the daily battle to increase its social status, the categories of which are no longer as solid as before. Furthermore, enveloped in their receptive silence (Baudelaire's *flâneur*), viewers should be activated individually in order for the show to achieve the necessary legitimisation. In other words, they opportunely become actors. For such a purpose, viewers' own private representation mechanisms are often employed, and as a result, a collective response can be obtained. Two examples illustrate these two paths. On the one hand, we have the creation and management of an "individual" audio-visual technology, where the spectator is forced to watch and listen "alone" (as in stethoscopes or Edison's cinemascope, Bell's telephone or today's networks), even if he/she is surrounded by other people. In this way the viewer becomes the user, playing an active part in the show, making the mechanism work, just as those innocent hands lured up to the stage in magic acts as "bait" to obtain the complicity (the distraction) the magician requires on the part of his audience. That naïve hand, in the form of a lady or gentleman chosen from the audience, plays the part of the "private" individual who, placed involuntarily under the spotlight, produces a feeling of embarrassment in the other spectators, as a result of which the illusionist finds it easier to obtain the desired distracting effect. Whilst the guest is on the stage under "public" pressure, in the intimacy of the dark or of the back rows the audience (composed of sufferers) internalises the cruel disintegration of a private subject as it is publicly swallowed up. The show includes the spectator himself, who has become an integral part of the act, the main actor. As in a peep show, the spectacle does not

only consist of a nude girl, but of the faces of the voyeurs, framed in their peepholes. Harry Houdini was the first to describe this technique and with unsurpassed success: "Introducing the audience on the stage helps to do away with critical gazes. Distance disappears and in the closeness, where not all angles of vision can be seen, illusion is freely created, with no setbacks."

"The spectator then renounced his power of expression and conceded his potential to others who, acting in his name, were given the privilege of performing in public, like political speakers, for instance, or like artists, sportsmen or actors", remarked Richard Sennett in his study on the creation of individualism in the late 19th century. Yet this statement seems problematic in light of the new convergence between public and private realms which appeared during the last third of the 20th century thanks to the new digital communication technologies. For, while it is true that the viewer has conferred his desires of public expression onto a third party, as suggested by Sennett, this process actually takes place within the public sphere. Yet, what happens when our private activity can only be transmitted through certain public domains (such as the Internet or "interactive" systems of entertainment and information systems), with no need for our faces to be seen, no need to suffer on stage as we do when we feel embarrassed to ask questions to speakers in public fora?

This leads us back to the "private" rooms which the artist creates in his exhibitions. On the one hand, the visitors who decide to enter such rooms are aware of the fact that they will be on slippery ground, insofar as the "private" there has a public nature and vice-versa, that the current public sphere is a sum of private domains subject to an informative order. If pressed, we could almost say that nowadays privacy has to be publicised in some way for there be a social record of it. In fact, we might even dare to say that insofar as it is construed under the mantle of one's right to intimacy, privacy does not exist unless it is publicly displayed. Something along the lines of "this is mine and I want you to know it". Privacy and property thereby come together in an open embrace, a fact which comes as no surprise.



Undoubtedly, the technologies we have provided ourselves with highlight this “publicity” nature of our personal space. Suffice it to think of walkmen, cars or mobile phones. As users of these technologies, we are private actors in the public sphere, following librettos or scripts completely unknown to us all, the public presence of which legitimises each of the works. It is the mechanism itself that publicly projects privacy. When we see someone in a car, lost in their walkman or speaking on their mobile phone in the street, we are unaware of what they are listening to, of where they are going, who they are speaking to or what they are saying, but we *are* perfectly aware that the performance taking place in a private space. As a result, public space, the sum total of private experiences, seems to avoid generalisations and assume the form of a gigantic stage invaded by actors following their own librettos. At times we may even feel that when a group of actors decides to act in unison, a relative breakdown of the whole stage is produced, as if there were a traffic jam. A nuisance.

What private decisions lead us to place ourselves in this no-man’s-land between the public and the private? A family or group of friends publicly reveal their intimacy in front of the artist and of the show. An intimacy which, as we have seen, is in itself difficult given that the boundaries between the private and public in the domains we consider to be more personal are also very vague. Rooms for private performances in the framework of a public setting appear as a truly modern interface between territories which are difficult to circumscribe. The very interactive patterns of our current audio-vision make this debate, if possible, even more complex. However, I think that we should leave aside any sign of naïveté when trying to resolve these dilemmas. I am referring to naïveté as Houdini expressed it, that fascination for closeness that allows the conjuror to display his prestidigitation. A magic trick, the ultimate symbol of the contemporary spectacle, is based on the concealment of the trick by the magician. But the true problem does not lie there. The main question is that the show exists because we do not want the trick to be shown. Should we be able to see it, everything would go to pieces. For, who really wants the show to be over?