

W.G. SEBALD'S TEXT

CARLOS AMORALES

"Although I did not study natural history later, said Austerlitz, many of Great-Uncle Alphonso's botanical and zoological disquisitions have remained in my mind. Only a few days ago I was rereading that passage in Darwin he once showed me, describing a flock of butterflies flying uninterruptedly for several hours ten miles out from the South American coast, when even with a telescope it was impossible to find a patch of empty sky visible between their whirling wings. But I always found what Alphonso told us at that time about the life and death of moths especially memorable, and of all creatures I still feel the greatest awe for them. In the warmer months of the year one or other of those nocturnal insects quite often strays indoors from the small garden behind my house. When I get up early in the morning, I find them clinging to the wall, motionless. I believe, said Austerlitz, they know they have lost their way, since if you do not put them out again carefully they will stay where they are, never moving, until the last breath is out of their bodies, and indeed they will remain in the place where they came to grief even after death, held fast by the tiny claws that stiffened in their last agony, until a draft of air detaches them and blows them into a dusty corner. Sometimes, seeing one of these moths that have met their end in my house, I wonder what kind of fear and pain they feel while they are lost. As Alphonso had told him, said Austerlitz, there is really no reason to suppose that lesser beings are devoid of sentient life."

I begin with an excerpt from the book *Austerlitz* since I was always attracted to the way W.G. Sebald wrote about the images he collected, as though an initial sequence of them would later suggest what the text was to be, or as though the text were the reason for putting these images into a sequence, something that never becomes clear since at some points they seem to illustrate the text and at others it seems that they were put there arbitrarily, only making sense pages later, if ever.

On Tracing Images or Vectorizing Them

The photographs on which I base my drawings are generally personal photos or photos that I gather for personal reasons, but which have been masked by drawing on top of them, that is, which I have traced and then made public. I think these post-photographic images exist as interfaces, which is to say that they exist between the public and the private, between an original image and the transformed image that is seen afterward. In this sense what I have been doing is finding ways of using these images to find systems or strategies through which they can exist in public space and also maintain a personal essence.

¹Winfried Georg Sebald, *Austerlitz*, translated by Anthea Bell, New York: Modern Library, pp. 93-94.

There is a decal in the shape of a bird that is put on the windows of buildings in order to keep real birds from crashing into them. This decal is pasted directly on the windows because there is the theory that when a bird sees this figure it will avoid crashing into the transparent window; it is like a "scarecrow crow." The image has always attracted me, and it demonstrates in large part some of the working processes that I have been using when I digitally trace images, or vectorize them.

By using vectorized images, I have come to understand that in the end these are nothing more than applied Cartesian mathematical equations, and that what is seen on the computer screen is only their representation. The images exist at the level of the retina only insofar as they are given certain parameters of shape, color, texture and scale on the computer screen. The images are defined in relation to the frame, which simulates a letter-sized sheet of paper to give an idea of the scale of the figure's size. Nevertheless, without the page as a point of reference we could be dealing with micro-images or macro-images. The same thing happens with the definition of a blob or a contour, which cannot be seen if it has not been assigned a color, but which nevertheless still exists numerically. That is, we would not see it, but the machine would still read it, since it functions as an interpreter of the data that is fed into it, and the machine itself is blind to the image.

Not existing physically outside of the electronic medium, vectorized figures are only visual expressions of a virtual universe that is perpetually manipulable, since they are not fixed. The image can only be materialized through a device that expresses it physically. There are many types of machines that read vectors, such as the printers that we regularly connect to our personal computers, or the other more sophisticated printing systems used by publishing houses, or machines that cut vinyl, metal or wood. Another way to make them concrete is by converting them into images constructed out of pixels that, in sequence, can create the effect of being animated.

On the Cover of *Nuevos Ricos*

The image of the bird was used to make the first cover of a compilation put out by the music label *Nuevos Ricos*, which I founded with Julián Lede in 2003. Our first major release was a compilation of bands that we were interested in, with a very simple cover: the bird on a white background, just as it appears in my archive.

With the idea of monitoring how the music would be consumed, we decided to upload both the musical content of the compilation and the graphic design that accompanied it to a Web site. As a result we found a whole slew of pirate copies of the compilation in street markets. These included an improved

version of the original design: since the image accompanying the CD was so dull and senseless, when the producer of the pirated copies appropriated it, he changed certain details to make it more attractive and more marketable, such as giving it a red background and including the name of the label on the cover. In particular I really like a list on the back cover which shows how only two of the eight bands we included became successful: the pirate “graphic designers” limited themselves to printing the bigger names of Titán and María Daniela. But still, they had the courtesy of putting quotation marks in the place of the other bands names, so as not to leave them out completely.

This helped us a lot because it gave a public life to the project, and thanks to the pirated copies more people began to know the music. The compilation’s popularity managed to get the attention of EMI Music, the major label that owns the Beatles’ catalog, for example. EMI invited us to do an official edition of the compilation, and I realized that we had an ideal opportunity to use the pirate copies we had found on the street and make them official.

It was very exciting to see how the pirated image suddenly ended up in the department store Sanborns and the commercial music store Mix Up. Awhile later, we learned that the pirates who had made the first copy of the disc had been shocked to see their image in official stores. In addition to revenge, this, for me, meant a sort of voyage of the image through different markets, through things and spaces, both prohibited and official. The image traveled so widely that eventually we found pirated copies of the EMI disc, which now bore anti-piracy and copyright warnings.

Something similar happened with the “Nuevos Ricos Franchise.” The idea was to do an installation that would function as art in a gallery, but that could be sold like a franchise outside the art world, so as to sell our products. Some artists in Columbia made a pirate version of this franchise of ours. Even though I never saw it in person, and only know it from photos that came to us, I realized that with this copy something was happening on another level, beyond a copying of graphic designs or music: it was a copy of a social situation.

Looking at a fan’s photo from a Nuevos Ricos concert, I like to imagine that if Britney Spears had been on stage instead of a band from our label, this picture would have been believable, since what we see is essentially a major concert, with fans, fences, security, bottles.

The real fan of Nuevos Ricos is a kid who made up his own Nuevo Rico look. Appropriating the logo of the label on a T-shirt he made himself, he wore a particular kind of bowler hat and suit jacket, using only genuine Nuevos Ricos buttons. I like how this kid appropriated the thing, reinventing it and taking it much further with his own imagination. We always used to see him at the concerts, until one day he disappeared. I imagine that these days he is

following some other musical trend, or maybe he is part of the cast of a remake of *A Clockwork Orange*.

On the Liquid Archive

In the archive with which I work there are sequences or repetitions that have been made and used for animations.

In an attempt to popularize the archive, we made an installation that is a sort of forest of furniture to sell postcards so that some of them could end up being either a bookmark or stuck with a magnet to a refrigerator in someone’s house, or so someone could send them to a friend and maybe, after a few years, we could see how the images had been scattered throughout the world and perhaps rediscover them as repetitions, or they would re-appear in transfigured form in some other place, with different intentions.

At present the archive has around three-thousand images, including everything from typefaces, world maps and abstractions to silhouettes of people and animals, hybrids, fragments, tools and tautologies.

On the Image of the Moth

The archive also includes the image of a moth, which brings us to another story about how the images from this archive have traveled. The moth was included in my archive because of an image that occurred to me in a very personal situation, when I traveled with my family to northern Mexico to visit my maternal grandmother. I was going there to say good-bye to her because she was very ill. We stayed with her for a couple weeks. One sleepless night while I was there in her house—one of those nights when you’re on tenterhooks, imagining and thinking things—there came to me the image of a space with domes covered with moths, a place completely infested with them. It was a very powerful image for me, so when I returned to my studio in Mexico City I was very eager to materialize it. What we did in the studio was to come up with a combination of folds and adhesions, making a kind of fake origami. By means of a flat cut, a pair of folds here and there and a drop of glue, we made the moths out of photo album paper and we slowly began covering the studio with them, beginning with the kitchen. We covered it from one end to the other and as the infestation advanced we had to make room in the studio out and gradually pack everything into the last room, where we kept our materials and our tools, and where we ended up working within the infested house, or rather within the infested studio.

Our neighbors were really worried! Because this also coincided with an infestation of cockroaches on the floor below us, in the apartment of some

crazy guys, and well, the situation in the building was like something out of a Polanski film, where the doorwoman spoke ill of us renters to the landlady. There was a bad vibe when we'd come in, and we were just there doing our work, until the day we decided to film the studio. When the camera, crew and everything came in, the neighbors arrived suddenly, wanting to nose around, and their immediate reaction was, "Oh, wow, what a relief! They're made out of paper!" They relaxed and I guess they thought, "At least it's for a movie."

After recording everything on film, we stored the moths and, a little bit in the style of a Dracula crossed with Córdoba Plaza, we packed everything into boxes and sent it all to New York to install it in a gallery: the infestation taking over and adapting to its spaces. Once there, some questions occurred to me: what is the limit of the installation? That is, how far should it go? Where does it end? Where is the exhibition space, and where are the offices? So the moths were installed in the public space of the exhibition as well as the offices of the gallery, their "private" space.

After that, the piece went on tour. It went to Miami, to an exhibition in an art space associated with the fair that takes place there every year; after that it headed to the museum of art in Philadelphia, an encyclopedic museum with its transitory spaces, sections on Surrealism, its important Duchamp hall, etc.: a museum where we still did not intend to limit the piece to the assigned space, installing the moths next to a Mondrian and on the back door of *Étant donnés*. Then its path moved onward, in a journey or a circuit so seemingly typical of art works in this century: from the mind of the artist to his studio, from there to the gallery, then to the art fair, from the museum to the homes of the collectors who acquired the work and then, curiously, to a church, well, an ex-church...

On Dior's Copy

And then one year later a curator asked me: "Carlos, did you put your installation in Dior Homme?" And I realized that they had plagiarized it in Paris, since theirs was identical to my piece. What to do? How to react? Not knowing whether to congratulate myself, sue them or cry, I found that Dior Homme had turned them into part of their apparel, using the butterflies as bowties, or as the elegant decoration on a jacket.

Thus, looking for more information and more proof on the Internet, I found dresses by Diane Von Fürstenberg, who in turn had plagiarized Dior and turned the image into what are surely very pretty dresses. Later still I found a version of this dress on a Chinese model, which would suggest that fakes are being produced since if there are already versions in China, these are no doubt also fakes. Fakes of fakes?

And so, what I realized is that what I have to do is re-appropriate them, that the way to escape this mess is to buy them and to make a piece out of them: something like a readymade, which would save me a lot of creative work, not to mention artistic labor. A good idea, perhaps, but with the problem that the dresses had sold out, because they'd been such a hit for the labels! I can't even find them on eBay!

Nevertheless, what I did find on the Internet was the image of a woman who wasn't able to buy the dresses, because they were too expensive. She was reduced to trying them on in a dressing room, taking a photo of herself and uploading it on the Internet.

Meanwhile, going back in time now to a few months before heading to visit my grandmother, I was reading the book *Austerlitz*, from which, as you'll recall, I was reading at the beginning of this talk. Two years later I passed the book on to my wife, who began reading it. One fine day, she asked me with surprise: "Hey, Carlos, have you seen this photo of the moth in *Austerlitz*?" The image leads me to believe that I, too, had stolen it. Or, to put it more gently, at some point it had taken up residence in me without my knowing it, and thus when I said good-bye to my grandmother in Torreón, it re-appeared as the idea that would later end up moving around so much. It was then, wanting to be honest to this betrayal of my unconsciousness, that I made a pirate copy of the book, and introduced my story into it...

Or at least part of my story, up until this point of it, since it would seem that the story continues with another version by Dolce & Gabbana, in which the attire is combined with the decorations in the store window. Let's say that here there is a synthesis of what was robbed with what this robbery influenced. Accompanying an image of the Dolce & Gabbana attire there appears this text: "One of the more artistic with the Black butterflies used as a backdrop." I can attest that it is, indeed, "very artistic."

And finally, there are also images of undergarments by Dolce & Gabbana, images that intrigue me a lot because they lead me to believe that, since we're talking about undergarments, we're dealing with another whole level of the image, a hidden level, a blind spot, insinuated, subliminal, perhaps unconscious. One could speculate that even here, among all of us present, there are people wearing this underwear without our knowing it. It makes me feel very paranoid, and when faced with paranoia there is only one solution, which is to face the truth. To this end, and with the kind support of the First Military Camp next door, I have invited the Colonel standing here next to me to unveil this mystery that torments me.

Ladies and gentlemen, Colonel Ochoa will now inspect your underwear! Please cooperate with this cause. ●