Roc Herms by Jon Uriarte

In the face of a great technological revolution and crisis of principles which photography is suffering nowadays, there seem to have arisen two distinct and opposing camps. On one side are those who defend the more classic, orthodox definition of photography, in which neither staging nor appropriation are allowed. Meanwhile on the opposing side are those who celebrate and encourage any new expansion past the broken boundaries, even and including when the objectives sought after are not all that clear. The middle path between these opposite postures, but generally leaning towards the former, is where the majority of adherents and students of this medium lie. Analyzing the photographic works of Roc Herms offers an exceptional means to understand and explore this artistic voyage from pole to pole of the spectrum.

But beyond questioning the medium of photography and its apparent weakness in the face of technology, Herms also shows his recurring interest in collective minority identities. As clearly shown on a poster in the living room of his home*, the so called "communities" of today have been and are now motivation for documentation by the Catalan photographer. From his project in 2007 which was selected for the *Descubrimientos Photo España* in which he presented "a sleeping giant that will shake the world when it wakes" as China was in that moment. To him documenting one of the massive raves (generally illegal parties characterized by electronic music and dancing) of *AntiSónar* in Barcelona. To his current work on *Campus Party*, the annual gathering of thousands of people and their respective computers for an extended week during which, among other things, they can enjoy access to 100Mb/s download speeds.

All these early works by Herms have a singular documentary style bordering on photojournalism, close-

ly following a chronological narrative of the events which is rarely broken and where the photographer is relatively unnoticed, offering the audience a window through which they can discern a direct and distinct reality. Aside from the project on the Asian giant, his work focuses on those social groups which he is a part of, though paradoxically it isn't a first-person narrative, but rather the view of an outside observer which is offered. They are images of groups he knows well, even groups in which he was a notable figure as is the case in his work on the players of *Magic* cards (Herms himself was once ranked in the top 10 world wide). However, far from his own point of view, what's offered of these subculture is of a more documentary, even typological, nature; orchestrating a cataloging of the players, himself included but only as one more player among the rest.

In this strictly documentary vein, the great technological change which has brought about the advent of digital photography via mobile phone and unlimited roaming offered by the Internet was, for Roc, much less traumatic than it was for most others. It could even be said to have been liberating; as his humanist fondness for technological subcultures continued existing and his work continued to be documentary, a door was opened to experimenting outside the per-established norms of orthodox photography. The personal, intimate relationships he wholeheartedly delights in online have been the motivation behind experiments like *Game Boy People* and *Facebookcidades*. Here, he not only embraced subjectivity, but also threw himself into the midst of his work, presenting graphic and photographic representations of those people surrounding him and relating with him via cables and waves.

It was in that moment when *Home* appeared, a virtual platform for the *PlayStation* console where millions of people could create an identity, interact and, as Herms has documented, even go to church, publish magazines or inaugurate exhibitions. The moment this virtual world appeared to him he recognized it as a gold-

en opportunity to combine his interest in minority communities, his passion for technology and his need to take a step forward in his photography. And that is why *Postcards from Home* is the most ambitious project by Roc Herms, allowing him to approach his goals from multiple angles simultaneously and killing multiple birds with the same stone.

This is where he has found characters like *Joanna Dark*, pseudonym for someone who in their virtual life dresses and photographs themselves in various outfits which have been bought with real cash, to later share these images with followers on forums which she herself has created. And others like *Darth Granny*, a sexagenarian living in Hawaii who juggles two accounts and 18 avatars which allows her "the opportunity to be everything and anything, anyone, any age, race, color, size and so on" while at the same time writing for a magazine which is published exclusively in *Home*. Or the *Homelings*, a group bordering on being an online cult, founded by an active soldier in the United States military who is known to his acolytes by the pseudonym *Mother*, and who have organized exhibitions and practiced virtual rituals with names as intriguing as the *Dramatic Walks*.

All these characters and many more can be found by diving into his extensive project *Postcards from Home*, and they have given Roc Herms the chance to continue advancing his zeal for investigating, cataloging, and presenting in first person these new parallel societies. He has done this with photographs in the purest documentary style where, far from hiding from the camera as he did in his early works, Herms takes it upon himself to guide us in first person, navigating this graphical world. With simple and direct interviews giving depth to the people and ideas which exist behind their avatars with the extra help of a variety of documents like emails, screenshots, and chat conversations. With these we're shown how technology offers new possibilities in social relationships which previously would have been unimaginable.

Finally, the work of *oRcstaR* takes leave from documentary photography and with his extensive knowledge of lesser-known communities and his innate curiosity for new technologies, Herms presents a work in which we are invited to accompany him and immerse ourselves in those realities, which it seems we can do away with calling them "virtual".

Jon Uriarte

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