

Manolo Laguillo (Madrid, 1953) has been a leading figure in the documentation of the urban environment in Spain over the last four decades. In his photographs, he has focused in particular on recording the process of Barcelona's transformation from the 1970s to the present day but has also turned his attention to other places such as Japan, Beirut, Madrid, New York and the Strait of Gibraltar.

# Manolo Laguillo

## PROJECTS (1983-2020)



20.10.2020 – 07.02.2021

Throughout his career, Manolo Laguillo (Madrid, 1953) has been a leading figure in the documentation of the urban environment in Spain over the last four decades. His earliest works date from the late 1970s, when he began to take photographs of the outskirts of Barcelona and the city's old quarter. Later on, by now in the second half of the eighties and during the nineties, his images recorded the process of metropolitan transformation prior to and after the 1992 Olympic Games.

Despite his close links with our city, not only in the field of photographic production but also through his work as an academic teacher and on the theory of the medium, Laguillo undertook numerous projects that explore places as disparate as Mexico, New York, Berlin, Porto and Madrid, among others.

Even though his works tend to be in keeping with the descriptive style of the *new topographics*—an international photographic trend that emerged in the mid-seventies—Laguillo adds to the technical precision of his documents a kind of record that deliberately retains substantial features of the experience of the *flâneur*, a way of portraying the urban landscape at ground level, as if his wanderings were also being depicted.

This exhibition features a total of 205 photographs arranged into 27 series—ten of them never shown in public before—that extend from 1983, with Laguillo's group of works on the flooding of Bilbao, to 2020, in his photo reportages on the nuclear power station in Zorita (Guadalajara) and on the city of Trieste.

To an extent, *Projects (1983-2020)* is a continuation of the sequence of exhibitions that began in 2007 with the first survey of Laguillo's career, mounted by the MACBA and centred around his series on Barcelona between 1978 and 1997, followed by his retrospective entitled *Reason and City* at the Museo ICO in Madrid in 2013. Thereafter, he embarked on a change in direction, a period, as he describes it, of «relearning the craft and settling my accounts» with his earlier projects.

Notable among the series on display are *Japan 2014*, *Beirut 2017*, *Chicago 2019*, *The Strait of Gibraltar 2018-2019*, and above all *The Provinces 2014-2015*, a collection of 64 diptychs on eight cities in the Iberian Peninsula, made with the support of the Museo Universidad de Navarra,

as well as *April 2020. Barcelona*, produced during the lockdown and being shown for the first time at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge.

The book *Pseudopanorama*, edited by Moritz Küng, is being published to coincide with *Manolo Laguillo. Projects (1983-2020)*.

*On What the Photographs Show*  
Juan José Lahuerta

In the brief space available for this article, I will not talk about the relationships, the influences, the models that have been used to examine the work of Manolo Laguillo within the strict terrain of photography and its history. What I mean is that I will not discuss here what has already been extensively covered elsewhere: other authors have already brought out all—literally all—the possibilities from the background of history and criticism: from Atget to Walker Evans, from Becher to Gabriele Basilico, from Benjamin to Virilio, from «new documentary» to «new topography», and so on, including a few dozen names, tools and categories.

Of course, critics need references and universal concepts, past and present, to organize their files, but this may lead to the dead-end of self-reference and conceptual solipsism. In general, what has been done through these comparisons and categorizations is, first, to establish a series of essentially formalistic testimonies that allow the noble genealogies to be delineated: the question of black and white, the question of «dry and direct style», etc. Second, this formalistic, ultra-historic continuity, tenaciously opposed to the here and now, is projected on what is believed to be the preferred theme of these photographs: the city on the margins, the periphery or the *terrain vague*. This whole exercise concludes, finally, in the characterization of a moral position recognized and endorsed by that genealogy: that «metaphysical suspension», that «nostalgic intimacy» or that «melancholic tone» that has so often been attributed to Laguillo's work—and this takes us back to the beginning. These three steps are closed in

perfect circularity and are highly consoling, but I am afraid they are not what the photographs show us.

What these photographs show us is precisely what I would like to talk about, in the double sense of what they allow us to see and what we learn from them, from their fiction and their truth. The fiction of Laguillo's photographs, which is usually written in the present perfect tense, corresponds to their undoubtedly impressive formal power, which has allowed them to be included effortlessly in the genealogies to which I referred above: the preference for black and white, for boldness, for orthogonality. This shows the generation of an interpretation of the world that goes from the gaze to the view, which is necessarily understood as pre-seen and allows not so much criticism as opinion. However, the truth, which is incompatible with opinion according to Hannah Arendt, is contained in that same formal power, but now transformed into an act. It therefore goes in the opposite direction, from the view to the gaze: the view determines the gaze; the view gives the maximum expression to the formal power that portrays it, brings it to light, albeit, as we will see, in a «black mirror».

From Walter Benjamin to Roland Barthes, many (including most writers on Laguillo) have agreed that a photograph is the footprint of an absence—hence the «melancholic tone», «loss», etc., are always to be expected. Modestly and briefly, I will try to follow the reverse path, the path that leads from the act to the power, that is, from the presence to the trace and from the trace to what is (supposedly) absent, so that neither the act nor the presence end up being lost in the excellence of the photograph. Some of the texts that Laguillo has dedicated to technique clearly show that he was aware of the dangers of objectivity, a modern Chronos who conceives children only to devour them. If you review these texts, you will see how Laguillo deals with objectivity by giving it, instead of its child, a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes. Let's talk about that stone.

As stated above, it is said that what Manolo Laguillo photographs, his theme, is the city where it loses its name, the periphery, *the terrain vague*. It is also said, along the lines of the above, that his «sensitivity to the city as a ruin and

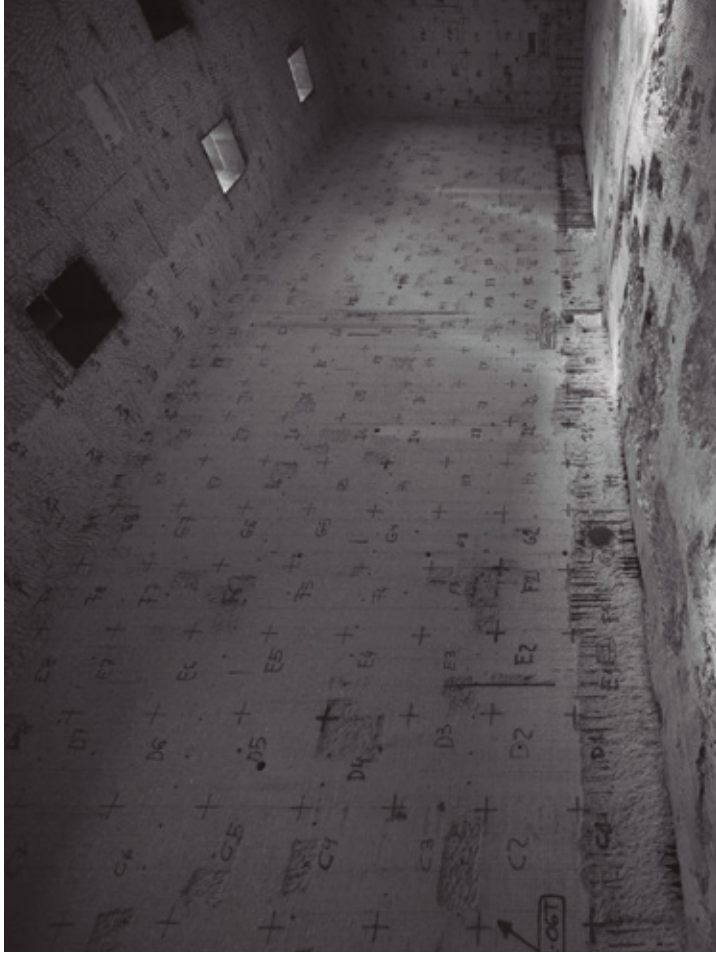
decadence» is what makes perceptible in his work that «melancholic tone» I referred to above. Finally, it is said that the condition for all this to be possible is that Laguillo is almost exclusively interested not in a bourgeois or spectacular city but rather in a low-income city, or even, as has been said on some occasions, one that is already at the limit of what is understood by a low-income city: a *shabby* city that marks the outer limits that separate us by a hair's breadth from the barbarians. The truth, however, is that Laguillo's work also contains photographs of low-income but not at all peripheral neighbourhoods (those in which the capital vents its anger, and not by chance) and photographs of the city centre, a centre always imagined as the compendium of the finished, *finite* city: in the case of Barcelona, for example, images of Plaça de Francesc Macià, Rambla Catalunya and Avinguda Diagonal, not to mention the impressive series of Eixample corners.

What happens is that, in the fascinating ensemble of Laguillo's work, those many photographs of the centre (of a city promoted by its actors not as a *terrain vague* but, on the contrary, as an artefact in which everything occupies its place) go unnoticed. The reason is, first, that they are mixed with, or literally dissolved in, the far more photographs that portray the peripheries, and second—but this is the really important thing—that what Laguillo shows in a photograph of the centre or one of the periphery are exactly the same things or, rather, they are *the same*. But, since we are talking about images, are we talking about *the same* as appearance, that is, what is *similar* or even *disguised*? Not at all. If the examples of the centre are diluted in the inertia of those on the periphery, it is because *the same* can only be understood as *identity*—and that is the only possible objectivity. In short, the virtual differences between the images that these photographs present to us are merely the summary signs of a world founded on the novelty of what is the same.

There is no doubt that the city is indeed Laguillo's subject, but only one city, the only one because it is dominated everywhere by the same laws, which are not precisely those of its use. For example, when one considers Laguillo's work as a whole, one's attention is drawn to the relative scarcity of



Belfort 1987-1990



*Nuclear Power Stations 2019-2020*



*Matosinhos 1988*





April 2020. Barcelona

human presence in it. I say this in full awareness of its radicality: that is, in a great many of these urban photographs there are literally no people, and in those in which there are, which are not few, it is as if they were absent. Almost never are the men or women who appear in Laguillo's photographs doing anything other than passing. Nobody is posing, of course, but nor is anyone being productive in the sense of *doing something*, either for or against the system that the city epitomizes: sociability, exchange (of things or not), exploitation, consumption, etc. Some speak of the fabric of the city, its connective tissue, i.e. the people who supposedly inhabit it. Others speak of the oil that lubricates its machines, which continues to circulate through the sewers even when the great factories have disappeared, because surplus value has not disappeared. In Laguillo's photographs, this essence generates the same disturbing silence as in the world realized—or, better still, hyper-realized—in the day-to-day life of the city. In these photos there are no inhabitants but rather passers-by, who disappear even when they are present. What these photos really show is the built fabric, from asphalt to antennas, «in all its splendour», to use an expression that is true but seems absurd; the truer it is, the more absurd it seems; it is as appropriate as it is jarring. In their laconism, these always magnificent photographs are not an eager attempt to confront an inhabited city with an uninhabited one—that «waste land» that is the moralizing mirror of the artefact city; instead, they show that this opposition does not exist. Laguillo's photographs nullify this opposition, both morally and materially; his truth as a fact—as an act—is opposed both to the rhetoric of the popular, to the good intentions of moralizing dialectics, always condemned to finish their music in a «melancholic tone», and to the rhetoric of the market, whose key lies precisely in the opposition between centre and periphery. These photographs are ultimately saying that there is only one law of novelty and the city is *the same*.

I said that the photographs of Manolo Laguillo show the built fabric of the city «in all its splendour»: now I want to qualify this and justify the absurdity of this expression, because neither here nor there is anything splendid. Describing Laguillo's theme as the built fabric might seem exaggerated

if we consider that the real protagonist of Laguillo's work is the empty lot or, better still, the party wall. Like monuments without memory, party walls rise with the imposing silence of what is nothing in itself, identical in the centre and on the outskirts, in Barcelona or in Beirut. They are identical from the formal point of view, of course, but above all in their meaning: the abstract cut of the buildable volume that rises from the temporarily abandoned ground of the plot for sale and that shapes in the void the city that has not yet come to be but is already speculative in its potential. The party wall, with its stepped end of successive lofts and penthouses, traces in the air the complete, infinitely interchangeable volume of the building not yet built, already built, and it projects, in its real and necessary abstraction, the perpetual movement of the city, always identical to itself as a city-commodity. Or it may be already destroyed, as often happens when, in the party wall, the mark of the building that used to occupy that plot has remained, and the terrible game of reification therefore manifests itself insolently in the two directions of the pendulum of the *perpetuum mobile* of the city-commodity: what was, what is no longer and what will be.

There may be those who feel nostalgia at such traces of a desecrated and obscenely exposed intimacy, and much of this is found in the pathetic interpretation that has so often been made of Laguillo's laconicism. However, he himself often denies this when, not infrequently, photographing a smooth party wall without marks, he chooses the moment in which the shadow of another building is cast on it, drawing its profile in the ghostliest possible way, in the most transient way: light and shadow (hence the photograph) show a terribly abstract world insofar as it is terribly authentic, a hysterically realized world, bewitched by the theological mysteries of the commodity.

The marks left on the party wall by the demolished building, in which people lived, are neither more solid nor truthful than the passage of a shadow through a vertical plane. Looking at the signs that the demolished buildings leave on the party walls (the floor structures, the stairs, the partitions, the disappeared rooms, and sometimes even the

wallpapers or tiles), I always remember the photographs of bombardments. I am thinking in particular of some by Robert Capa that were found in that exciting Mexican suitcase, showing buildings that have been split down the middle, so that those signs of which I speak, arising from the instant, with no time to move out, are filled with terrible details that struggle to catch our eyes: chopped furniture, a cuckoo clock, a bunch of flowers, petrified in the blink of an eye (never better said!) by the bomb and by photography.

It seems that it was Clausewitz who said that war is the continuation of politics by other means; well, let us say that bombing is nothing more than the continuation of speculation that reflects the party wall by other means: this is the reality that Laguillo's camera portrays. I mean that we can feel nostalgia for the traces, and we can project an aesthetic judgment on the shadow. The utopias of liberation (always sacrificial in one way or another) that art has offered and still aims to offer to humanity are based on things like that. But this is not what happens in the photographs of Laguillo, which, showing the party wall «in all its splendour», teach silence and emptiness, not as a sentimental, romanticized abyss but as true abstraction.

Laguillo's photographs also show us another condition of the party wall: its intangibility. Party walls, with their planes rising to the height of several floors, could not be more imposing, but they rise over other buildings or over empty lots that are inaccessible: the first principle of the commodity, seeing but not touching, which is also a principle of photography, is exalted in the monumentality of the party wall as much as in its redundancy. The party wall suspends its use value in its own display, and Laguillo's photography takes advantage of its own inertias as photography (indeed, seeing but not touching) to show it as a sort of fatal tabula rasa. In short, Laguillo's photographs show very clearly how a whole series of correspondences are of course formed between the photograph and the party wall, but also between everything that is shown in them both: the party wall and the empty lot, the party wall and the billboard, etc. As we see in these photos, the void sometimes speaks to us from the wall itself and sometimes

from the fences around the lot. Or we should say that speech is voided in the party wall.

Indeed, the advertisement, a modern sphinx, could not more vacuous: What could we ask it but what it already says: nothing? But if the only thing that can be written on the party wall, as on a billboard, with its «vertical dictatorship», is an advertisement, must we give up asking? Samuel Beckett once said that, although there is nothing to be done, we are obliged to do it. Laguillo follows that maxim, and that is why his photographs *show* what seemed impossible: that silence *talks*, like those magical heads that captivated our ancestors. Photographing the void is not an aesthetic option, just as reading the advertisements of decaying billboards or ruinous party walls is not an exercise in nostalgia but rather in a literality so lucid that it cannot be more devastating: the fences advertising «lot for sale» on those empty lots or the billboards that, even more redundantly, advertise advertising companies, or those that advertise «future developments» of homes or of anything at all merely show us the onomatopoeic condition of the true mechanisms of the city—a product of production, we could say again and again. In a not very different way, on those fences and on those party walls, the advertising messages can tirelessly announce the inexhaustible and hungry future, as in the one floating above one of these lots that reads: «GOLD» [«ORO», *El Estrecho de Gibraltar 2018–2019*].

Pondering capitalism as a religion, Walter Benjamin—who, oddly enough, hardly ever spoke of photography—discovered the religious spirit of capital in the ornamentation of banknotes. By other means, but with similar or at least equally devastating results, Laguillo's photography brings out that same spirit from the ornamentation of empty lots and party walls. The «metaphysical suspension» of his photographs does not come, then, from any melancholic condition (here the portrait does not withdraw) but from the fetishism of the commodity. Hence the fascination they arouse, because, in truth, what greater enchantment (and I say it with full awareness) could we contemplate than that which rises, stands, in the infinite suspension of any use value?

Laguillo's photography is epiphanic: it reveals. That is why it is incisive, exact, direct and objective, and not because it is in black and white, or deals with architecture, or the periphery, or the low-income parts of the city. Much could be said about how the topics I have covered above are epitomized in the series presented in this book: how monumentality without memory is epitomized in the cities shown in *Las provincias 2014–2015* [the provinces] as slums in suspension, with no nucleus, no longer defined by the cathedral or the wall (as in the postcards sold not so long ago) but rather by the fence, the party wall, the silo. Much could be said about how bombardment is epitomized in Beirut, where the party walls stand one above the other between the stacked buildings. Much could be said of how *El Estrecho de Gibraltar 2018–2019* [The Strait], where the turned lands wait to be filled though in fact they are already filled, epitomizes not the wasteland—the cursed *terrain vague*—but what is vacant. Much could be said of how in *Japan 2014* colour photography, suddenly jumping into view, epitomizes the (in)difference of perpetual motion; or how Vandellòs [*Centrales Nucleares 2019–2020*] epitomizes not the modern ruin but rather the ghost city, with those marks on the plots of what is no longer there yet does not cease to be there. In short, all cities are really ghost cities, from the centre to the periphery, though Laguillo's photography *shows* us well, when we look *into* his photographs, that that hierarchy may well no longer exist.



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