

IF NATURE IS THE ANSWER, WHAT WAS THE QUESTION?

Immensity, arguably, is a philosophical category of a daydream. Without a doubt, a daydream nurtures itself from various spectacles, but by a sort of innate inclination, it contemplates greatness. And the contemplation of greatness determines an attitude so special, a spiritual state so particular and specific, where the daydream takes the dreamer outside of the world around him, to a world that bears the sign of infinity.
Gaston Bachelard

Just over two years ago, the artist Roberto Huarcaya started a project that took him, along with other artists – invited by the ecologist organization WCS (Wildlife Conservation Society) – to Bahuaja Sonene, an Intangible Natural Reserve in the Amazon jungle at South West Peru. Throughout the first year, Huarcaya made several trips in which he found it impossible to “represent” the vast web of emotions that the Peruvian jungle provided. A similar stagnation, we imagine, than the one felt by photographer Frank Hurley when confronted with the vastness of the landscape on his expedition to Antarctica led by Sir Ernest Shackleton in 1914, when he placed his camera in front of the immense ice desert. Two landscapes – Amazonia and Antarctica, which are front and back of nature’s majesty – are able to generate similar uncertainty.

Huarcaya made the decision to discard the sophisticated cameras he had used during his first journeys. Instead, he chose to go back 175 years, and recover one of the first procedures used in photography: the photogram. The photogram is a technique that, without a lens or a camera, allowed accurate reproductions of objects. Its “official” inventor, William Henry Fox Talbot, while describing his first experiments with the technique, wrote with astonishment: “Nature draws her own picture.” Huarcaya’s solution to the philosophy of representation that paralyzed him, was admitting the landscape’s superiority: to stop being an author – a monolithic authority – and become a mediator. One can’t use the parameters or methods of a cartographer or biologist to represent experiences that aren’t visible. It had to be the Peruvian jungle itself, the one who wrote its own story with light; with no foreign authorship. That was the only way to activate photography’s empathic neurons, and emulate nature when she lets time go by slowly, so the circles of life can be completed. That was the only way in which he could aspire to include nature’s dualities simultaneously: - life and death, order and chaos, reality and fiction – coexisting in this primitive, overwhelming, mysterious, and aggressive mutant territory that is the Peruvian Amazon rainforest.

Through empathy, one can access knowledge; but, according to research, mirror neurons are active during childhood and it is very difficult to activate them in the adult period. Maybe 175 years is too long and now, in the XXI century, spending our time studying is no longer considered a priority in our society. According to Zygmunt Bauman, what we are now looking for, in this era of liquid modernity, are results and immediate benefits, that is, liquidity in a strict financial sense. Very few ask photography to imitate nature and to take hours or days to generate an image in the darkness of a lab. Huarcaya is one of them: that’s why he walked the lost steps of the past and achieved what he couldn’t during two years of previous visits to the jungle.

The expedition undertaken by Huarcaya probably had his own interior search as a destination; and it was that relationship between experience and introspection that gave him access to different and more effective solutions. In any process that we use to obtain answers, time is a galvanizing and protean element. A beautiful metaphor of that process is found in photographic paper, which slowly shows its latent image – it reveals its answer – within a container of developer. The examples, metaphors and allegories provide us with images that help us understand the world in its most minuscule or anecdotic dimensions, as well as its metaphysical ones.