

The disturbing idea of being an accomplice

A paranoid thought about Gonzalo Gutiérrez' *admin:admin*

by Mariana Rodríguez Iglesias

There is a generalized idea that assumes that each artwork is a comment on the world from which it emerges, that every idea of art has a correlation to an idea of the world in which that artwork takes place¹. Thus, the work is expected to take a position in relation to the conditions it is signaling to. This position might adopt different tones or attitudes: It might be praiseworthy or celebratory, merely illustrative or descriptive or it might take a critical, ironic or even grotesque view, among the many possible rhetorical ways of constructing a sign. These diverse approaches are also possible in the, if you want, analogous field of dialogue. In the art of good conversation, experts say, it is more important to listen than to speak loudly, to understand what the right questions are rather than having the answers always ready. In this sense, that list of possible positions to be taken could be completed by those works that, after being experienced and analyzed, leave us with questions, stacked one on top of the other, and burden us with the proper discomfort of an unresolved problem.

Let's take as an example the works of Spanish artist Santiago Sierra and his particular way of staging uneven power relationships articulated from devices that are absolutely extended in our society, such as those associated to work relationships and workplaces. Sierra's works replicate these conditions: To produce them, the artist contracts workers who become performers. These contracts are precarious and reproduce those same conditions in such a way that the work exhibits the inequality without leaving us in comfort: If we are there to watch as spectators, we also become part of the subject, we are accomplices. Sierra's objective is not to draw attention to the need for a fairer wealth's distribution nor to the importance of improving working conditions. His goal is to contest labor itself as it has been conceived within the framework of capitalism. His workers work to work, there are no other purposes. Their work is as absurd as Sisyphus'². And we, as spectators, end up with the task of realizing that we were already involved in this cast of actors, actresses and relationships, way before the work makes it evident.

This same pathway –the exhibition of the uncomfortable– is taken by Gonzalo Gutiérrez to model his work, while this approach is intensified in his latest work *admin:admin*. In this series, the artist does not either intend to challenge the socially-agreed illusory constructions that result from the images in circulation, the current regime of hypervisibility, nor our rooted belief system; in any case, he exhibits it. Continuing with the attitude that he has been developing since his first series –which could be considered among the post-photography works, nurtured from easily recognized representations and using appropriation as a main resource– *admin:admin* shows the conditions which we are already immersed in. His works do not intend a loud judgement, they are reproductions that leave us in the awkward place between a call of attention and complicity. Just as in the pieces of Sierra it is impossible to think outside of the perverse logic of work, in *admin:admin* is unrealistic to stand out of what feeds the gaze of the current voyeur: That very gaze that strengthen the surveillance and control devices that we all use daily (almost) without realizing it. Somehow, Gutiérrez reminds us that this monster –more panoptical than ever–, has been being built by all of us and for some time.

But what exactly are we seeing in *admin:admin*? In which way the discomfort experienced in the works is something inherent to the message that the artist seeks to convey? What is the position –*the commentary on the world*– that these works offer without retouching or embellishments, with a plain language of everyday signs? What is the operation implemented by the artist and consequently what is

the power of this gesture? Let's go step by step: We propose a map that, as we know, is not a copy of the territory but it can serve to guide us and only then to lose ourselves at will. This map is composed of three concepts: Illusion, hypervisibility and appropriation.

admin:admin is the last series of the artist and it goes as follows: Organized in diptychs, we see the captures of videos that reproduce the interior of a home or a private place; they come in pairs so that in the juxtaposition of different moments of the same space we may read certain idea of the passage of time or reinforce the notion that we are attending only two moments of a continuous observation. We are shown exactly what the webcams obtained and the artist appropriated. Webcams that were installed by those same people who we are now contemplating living their lives without knowing that we are on the other side. We are able to see them because of a number of factors: In principle, because these people decided to install a webcam in their homes and, later on, they forgot to change the default passwords. Somewhere on the planet, a person with basic hacking capabilities accessed those cameras unsecured by negligence and put together a website where feeds are gathered for the curious look of its visitors; thus, they come to us after the artist's selection-appropriation in which it matters less who these people are or what they are doing than the worrying hypervisibility³ of their daily lives. I can sense what are the effect that these words have on the reader: As you read this you are wondering if you ever installed a webcam and what happened to the password. This level of discomfort, this situation that borders on paranoia, but becomes increasingly more and more common, is one of the effects sought by the artist, although not the primary one.

admin:admin shows the shadow of the hypervisibility culture. In the culture of hypervisibility, we all are willing and participate in the constant exhibition of our lives. We say shadow because in Gutiérrez' pieces what we see is clearly apocryphal: We witness the others' lives without their knowing. It is a dystopic version, it takes to the extreme the possibilities extended by the given condition of the obscene exhibition of private lives. At a first reading, we could think that the artist is warning us about the consequences of being negligent with the security of our domestic webcams –in addition to any other security/control/surveillance instances, from the domestic webcams to the connection indicators and read messages on WhatsApp–. He would be telling us: What is happening is possible because you did not change de default passwords, because you trusted too much. Pay attention, beware! But far from being a paternalistic talk, we could extrapolate this call for attention to other practices of the visible, to other instances in the culture of exhibition where we go with the flow.

We have learned after Michel Foucault that, according to the different times variations and to different power relationships, there are visibility conditions that become apparent and other that seem to remain in shadows. We have learned that each era establishes its own regime of visibility, some social conditions that privilege certain practices and build their particular objects⁴. The privileged architecture of late modernity is undoubtedly the panoptic, that space that privileges a point of view for the control of its surroundings while not being seen –and, therefore, without the material need to exist to monitoring–. In short: the surveillance was introjected into our bodies, our habits, our desires. In the era of hypervisibility, control is a liquid that sneaks everywhere and lubricates each of our relationships. In this sense, innocence is not a political position but a moral one: We can look the other way but it will continue to happen. What emerges from this series, as a critical comment on the politics of images and *illusio*⁵ –that illusion agreed upon to continue in the race–, is the need to rethink our responsibility regarding the use and circulation of images, and thus reviewing the social constructions that we inherit and feed from one generation to the next. The discomfort that these works convey is, effectively, something constitutive to the message they carry: It is essential and attached to it since there is no way to break the fantasies that we all share as a society without shaking, without disturbing, without breaking the automatic links that give meaning to our interpretation of the world.

We could guess that this need to “call for attention” was already examined in his two series prior to *admin:admin*. In *Constructions* (2008-2012) and *2956 steps a day* (2009-2015), the artist explores the abstract constructions of the social life –the figures of success, power, and family values, among others– in the first case, and those about the routine (“a kind of walker”⁶), in the second. Both figures –the iconographies of the social life and the identification with the routine in everyday life–, appear as strategies that we all develop socially to deal with the uncertainties and anguish of having come to this world without a user’s manual. This way, the artist draws our attention to these two huge illusions and exhibits them as they are: Fantasies of common agreement, fragile but necessary strategies. Because our relationship with the world is not only made of surveillance and control devices. When looking for meaning to what is around us, to our actions, and to our feelings, the vast majority of us draws upon acquired models and standards. Places that are reached guided by common sense and that offer certain peacefulness at a very high cost: We must pay tribute to the norm and hold it up in life, with our own life. This “prefabricated tranquility” is also the other side of the coin of ennui, repetition, the lack of meaning and strangeness in life. The obsession with the illusion in our vital praxis transversally crosses the sets of series titled *Constructions* and *2956 steps a day*, and –as in *admin:admin*– what underlies is the question about the current visibility regime: What it does hide and what the images of hypervisibility are able to show.

In *Constructions*, the artist explores and questions the images of power –such as the representations of successful / famous figures, the image of the dollar bill, the fingerprint and a self-portrait–; in *Traces and Family Memories* he focuses on biographical iconographies, following two typical white, middle-class family albums. These iconographies are questioned because of their emptiness and the obvious possibility of becoming something so abstract and so strange –something uncanny, between the familiar and the unknown– as a home prison. Strange but still enjoying a good health, images that are still working and operating on whomever looks at them, we all would recognize those iconographies since we all were part of that story at some time. Whereas, in *2956 steps a day* the consideration relates to the routine, that insipid repetition of the daily life that the artist intervenes with the simple guideline of taking a low-resolution photo with his cell phone during a whole year, every day at the same time. The result is a calendar of meaningless images that say more about the format of the collective, the accumulated, the undifferentiated than about the particulars of an individual life. In both cases, hypervisibility is the pattern that connects, what promises a relief facing the anguish of knowing to be part of a network of given rules, norms and powers. Hypervisibility because what becomes too visible in both series is the idea of a kind of private life transmitted by an enunciator-author, and not necessarily identical to the true subject-author. *Constructions* shows a lot: From the fingerprint to the latest happy-family photos. It is a hyper exposure of the biographical that dissolves in the collective. In a formal sense, it is an uncomfortable tension between content and form: Content –a particular life– is dissolved in the forms –the successful subject, the good marriage, the career, the family, but also assembly formulae such as the calendar, the routes, the ritual–. Paradoxically –or as an act of desperate last resource– this hypervisibility occurs just at the moment in which the structures of internalization of models are deconstructed in front of our eyes –and our whole body– in a global tendency that tends to the subjective to dissociate itself from those foundations or bases that previously were stable and permanent frames of reference; those same frames that are pixelated in *Constructions*.

It is necessary to emphasize that the first works of Gutiérrez focused on situations close to the life of the artist: The imaginaries of private life –which the artist quickly shows as cultural stereotypes constructed among all of us and therefore falsely naturalized– and the resources that society draws upon to face the banality of life. It places, therefore, a reference to the underlying negotiations with public life: What is that others expect from us and where our desire lies in that vital struggle. While in *admin:admin* seems to have moved away from its object of study to explore the system that makes hypervisibility possible –

that feeds conventions or social illusions—. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that in *admin:admin* the artist draws as a poetic strategy once again on appropriation, which is a subtle way of assuming the role of author. In those previous series the authorial decisions were orchestrated around the decision of which images to show, how to show them, how to deform them and articulate them in another sign—for example: in *Traces* and *Family Memories* he uses pixelated digital images of a family album—, and in what protocol to follow to obtain the images and how to assemble the sequence in the space—for example in *2956 steps a day* he follows a strict pattern to take images and then to display in calendar form, making evident this way that the series is more important than each particular photo—. Now, in *admin:admin* the authorial gesture is reduced to the selection and appropriation of images that are displayed on a webpage and to take a screenshot. The gesture is completed with the decision to exhibit them in the form of diptychs. Somehow, it could be thought that in the development of these three series the artist began to move emotionally away, to de-compromise—in a good sense—of what he is pointing out. Intending a detachment from his object of study, separating himself from what he criticizes, the artist can comment on the machinery that makes these constructions and strategies possible. He can, this way, call our attention. He can tell us: beware that we all are feeding this monster.

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¹ de Solaas, Leonardo in “Razones posibles para hacer arte en un mundo repleto” in *Medium*. The quote continues: “There is no art for oneself, or enclosed in the atelier. There is always a broader underlying reality on which the work is based and with which it relates”. <https://medium.com/@solaas/razones-posibles-para-hacer-arte-en-un-mundo-repleto-229fff425a79>

² de Albarrán, Juan en “Trabajo y delito en la obra de Santiago Sierra” en *Fakta*. Teoría del arte y crítica cultural. <https://revistafakta.wordpress.com/2013/06/12/trabajo-y-delito-en-la-obra-de-santiago-sierra-por-juan-albarran-2/>

³ This term is used for the first time by the professor of Audiovisual Communication, writer and essayist, Gérard Imbert in the framework of an analysis on television (2008). There, reference was made to a specular television in which the spectator contemplates himself, transformed into an almost fictional character, distorted by the mirror of the grotesque, metamorphosed by the grotesque in his own caricature. After ten years of this analysis, in the light of new social forces and the widespread use of social networks, this term could be of great help to think of us as a society crossed by techno-social ties. It is for this last that enters as a concept to this essay.

⁴ From Grupo de Estudios Estéticos, en “De la visibilidad y la visualidad”, in their blog http://grupodeestetica.blogspot.com/2009/07/de-la-visibilidad-y-la-visualidad_4974.html

⁵ Illusio, according to Pierre Bourdieu, represents the interest that social agents have in participating in the game: it is the opposite to ataraxia (impassivity). It is the fact of being caught, involved in the game. Being interested means accepting that what happens in the social game makes sense and that your bets are important and worthy of being undertaken. This interest associated to the participation in the game, is different according to the position occupied in the same one and according to the trajectory that had to follow each social agent to reach the position in which it is. Source: Wikipedia. In this text we will use illusio and illusion as twin terms.

⁶ This is the way the artist refers to “routine” in a framework of email exchanges with me.