WALTER MARTIN & PALOMA MUÑOZ

Las Casas Ciegas

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The new solo show by this collaborative duo of multidisciplinary artists revolves around a group of twelve photographs from the ongoing series *Blind House*, which was first exhibited at the University of Michigan's Institute for the Humanities. "These windowless houses seem to lack souls; they are not just blind, as the title suggests, but eyeless" [Sharp, S. R. (2019, April) Strangely Unsettling Photographs of Windowless Houses. Hyperallergic.com. https://Hyperallergic.com]. Alongside them are two new sculptures, a small-format one, *Splitting (*2022), in reference to the work of the same title created by Gordon Matta-Clark in 1974, and a spectacular augmented reality work, *The Bird House* (2022), that provides an inmersive experience. Small objects, whose appearance we will not reveal, and which will surprise us, observing us long before we notice them -feeling a slight shiver-, and a video, *Tree Huggers* (2022), made especially for this purpose, provide a playful and affective touch. And finally, the interactive installation *Utopia Work Station* (1998-2022). The works in the exhibition take up the theme of quarantine isolation: the loneliness that comes with "cabin fever" and the unexpected new relationships made in the absence of human contact.

Walter Martin & Paloma Muñoz began their collaboration in 1993. Regarding the moment and some of the most defining characteristics of their work, such as playfulness and black humour, Tina Teufel writes that it was just at the time when the *Gothic* was experiencing renewed attention, not only in entertainment culture but also in the field of art, due to the perception of an increasingly dehumanised and at risk world that tests our faith in human goodness, although, on the other hand, according to Jerry Saltz: *The Gothic has never left us; one hell has been replaced by another* [Teufel, T. (2020) Walter Martin & Paloma Muñoz. American Gothic. *A Mind of Winter*. *Walter Martin & Paloma Muñoz*. Museum der Moderne. Salzburg, pp. 14, 15, 22]. Their work arouses the contradictory feelings of attraction/repulsion, in the Freudian sense of the *unheimlich* - uncanny-. There are theories about the Gothic (Crowl, C.L., cit. Teufel, T. ibid. p. 15 and 22) in relation to the cathartic response it provokes in the reader-viewer, when is shown in this key that part of history which officialdom has chosen to conceal, and whose understanding may be most important for us, whereas it is a process in which the fears and wounds inflicted on individuals and societies by trauma, change and authoritarianism are confronted.

The interactive installation *Utopia Work Station* (1998-2022), is also an ongoing project, whose previous iteracy was at the Museum der Moderne Rupertinum in Salzburg, where remained inspiring new utopias until 13 March 2020, when the museum had to close its doors due to the pandemic. Sitting inside a glass box, visitors have to follow the instructions placed on top of the desk:

First, read the previous participant's utopia, which is still in the typewriter. Then, in order to write your own, remove it, crumple it into a ball and throw it into the waste paper can. Finally take a clean piece of paper from under the desk, insert it into the typewriter and type out your own utopia leaving it there for the next person to read and discard

This exercise emphasises in that one utopia can rarely coexist with another, and that if everyone has their own utopia and, morover, everyone's could be different according to circumstances, utopia is not possible for nobody; it is just only something that will never become a reality, among other reasons, because if it did, it would immediately lose its utopian essence. The reading of all the texts belonging to one iteracy and the comparison with each other and between them with those produced in different circumstances reveals very significant differences.

"Cabin Fever" is a term of uncertain origin that began to be mentioned in the early 20th century in the United States to describe a type of mental state caused by months of isolation, loneliness and boredom, due to the long and freeze winters that plagued the extreme latitudes. Settlers in the vast, desolate territories of the USA and Canada experienced similar sensations, which they described as "prairie madness" or "mountain madness". Some professions -notably astronauts- can also lead to such a state. Precisely, it is in a territory with very low temperatures most of the year -Pennsylvania- where the artists settled, which is reproduced in many of their projects. These kinds of territories are also identified with areas of encounter with the unknown due to have been frontier territories during the conquest of North America (Crow, C.L., quoted by Teufel, T., ibid. pp. 17 and 23). Extreme landscapes and environments as a projection of extreme situations through which to explore limits, taboos and depths of the psyche (Teufel, T., ibid. p.14).

The glass box that houses this work in the gallery is an existing infrastructure that made logical its use, and therefore the staging in this format, while in the Museum der Moderne, and in other spaces lacking a similar element, it was carried out in the form originally conceived, within a circular plastic structure that lead our mind directly to think in the emblematic snow globes of Walter Martin & Paloma Muñoz. For that exhibition, in fact, in other "turn of the screw", they created one of them in limited edition, *Utopia Work Station* (2019), containing a miniature of the installation.

In this occasion they have created the snowball *Splitting* (2022), a nod to Matta Clark's piece of the same name, resulting of an action, captured on video and somewhat reckless, considered to be the founding act of a new concept of sculpture. The artist, an architect who died very prematurely at the age of 35, is a reference in contemporary art, thanks, among other, to this action of splitting in two a house owned by the art dealer Holly Solomon, in Englewood, New Jersey, precisely in one of the areas chosen by the duo Martin & Muñoz to search out their *Blind Houses*. In both cases, actually, as manifestations of everyday life and reflections of the dominant social structures. Matta Clark and Solomon wanted to show their commitment to the need for art to be transformed in a socio-political context. But this work was severely criticised by the media.Most of them declared that Matta-Clark had intentionally violated "the sanctity" and dignity of these buildings. To such an extent were they considered icons of a way of life that they were given the status of sacred. The action of blinding, or rather depriving these houses of "organs" to view, with an obvious critical sense, seems not to have elicited the same counter-reactions, even though have been decisively affected their structure and typology by such an intervention.

The Bird House, takes up the theme of the tree house, a motif dealt with in different projects -*Traveler 314* (2016), and *Traveler CCCIIL* (2019) or *The Orchard at Night* (2005)- driving it to augmented reality. This technology makes possible the expansion to a virtual three-dimensionality or its escape from the snowball -travelers-, providing an immersive experience, undoing the mystery it encloses, since on this occasion its interior can be visited, while at the same time we can experience, if we face it with a proper sensibility, its inhabitants feelings. This interaction facilitates catharsis and what Ignatius of Loyola called "composition of place". The house and the tree of bare branches are two of the most recurring elements in the work of these artists, so being the object of the first work in this format of the duo is proof of its

validity in the imaginary of the authors, for whom the titles get remarkable importance and reveal the great lyricism that they pour into all their works.

On the theme of new relationships nurtured in the absence of human contact, the artists say: "The trees behind our Pennsylvania house became a renewed source of fascination. For us, the trees had always been more like beautiful scenery or mile markers defining the perimeters of our daily walks. But with isolation, we became increasingly aware of their sensitivity and found ourselves "anthropomorphising" their attributes. During the winter of 2021, we imagined them as furry and warm-blooded and embraced them. We also imagined them looking at us and our home with their new and curious eyes." Some examples of this "strange phenomenon" "hiding in plain sight", just behind the artists' house, can be seen in the Amster Yard at the Instituto Cervantes in New York, which exhibits the artists' work simultaneously, and in the video *Woke Woods*, shown in the gallery. In addition, the artists have adapted the piece for an interior space: the walls have eyes ..., they just must be found once the viewer feels observed. These small pieces take up the same theme of another from 2001: *They Can Not Speak*, while the series *Blind House* also delves in the same matter to which *You Can Not Tell the Keepers from the Kept* approached in 1998: it is often impossible to tell the spy from the spied or the keeper from the kept.

Originally, the photographic project responded to concerns of a different etiology. The *Blind House* series began in 2013 and was conceived as a metaphor for the radical opacity necessary to survive in the age of spyware; identity theft; the mind-jamming of post-truth and fake news; and corporate or state digital surveillance that turns us into inhabitants of glass houses, not in an architectural typology sense but in the widest range of possible meanings for this concept. Tina Teufel, (ibid. p. 20, quoting Jones J. "A House Is Not a Home", in *The Gothic*, pp. 208-209), argues something similar to what happens in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), about how are closely, almost symbiotically interconnected, humans and buildings, and it seems likely that the fate of both depends more on the actions of their inhabitants than on any external influence. Teufel ends her text (ibid. pp. 20-21) with some disturbing reflections, in line with the artists' proposal: *But are our eyes always ready to see, even if there are windows and other openings? Are there things that remain invisible to our rather biologically limited visual sense? What use are our eyes if we become blind or if we do not trust our own eyes? Do we really want to be ready to see everything?*

This was at the end of 2019, now, however, with more than two years of pandemic behind our backs, these photographs read less like a metaphor and more like a series of real options in a catalogue of pandemic bunkers.

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Blind House

We live in a house with many windows, all of them problematic. The forty-five glass windows offer us views and light, but we sometimes wonder who or what might be monitoring us through them. We love to open our windows and breathe the fresh air that filters through the pine forest around us. But we ask ourselves what we might be letting in when we open them. We love our proximity to nature, but nature has of late taken a moribund turn. Arboreal diseases and gypsy moths ravage the hemlocks, maples, and oaks and every new super-storm brings down more weakened trees. The forest looks battle-scarred and though Spring brings hope it also brings ticks and rabies. The air is tainted with particulates, the ground water fouled and sunshine promotes cancer.

With Nature as a dubious entity, our dream of living in a house open to nature has been turned against us. We feel exposed and in need of protection: air filters, curtains, UV blockers, radon extractors, and water treatment. But as most of us are aware, the most problematic windows in a house are the virtual ones. In our case, if you count our mobile phone, three iPads, Alexa, two computers, and two nest cameras, our total number of windows comes to fifty-four. Unlike the real windows, these last nine digital ones resist and elude every imaginable treatment.

One approach to understanding our Blind House project is to think of it as the dystopian flower of a utopian seed. In America, that seed was planted in 1949 when Philip Johnson built his famous glass house on a nob in the center of 50 acres in New Canaan, Connecticut. (1) Real glass houses are beautiful and sexy. To be an occupant of such a house, until recently, seemed enviable. Glass houses were, in the popular imagination, sanctuaries where the privileged could look out in all directions without moving from one room to another.

Philip Johnson said of his glass house: "I claim that's the only house in the world where you can see the sunset and the moonrise at the same time, standing in the same place. Because that's an impossibility in any house; you have to walk to another room to see one or the other of those effects. But I get it all the time here in the Glass House." (2) For that very reason, the most important component of a glass house was not the house, but the view from it, as Johnson comments later: "Don't forget, it is more of a landscape park than it is a work of architecture, anyhow." The elitism associated with glass houses is not just the expense of the house, but the incredible expense of owning the view from it. Even if one owns the view, can one really control it? Today in the age of drones and stealth surveillance the answer would be no. Philip Johnson would have to come to terms with a view that could look back at him. Not only that, but a view with attitude that could record every detail of his daily life and use it against him. Not surprisingly, the untampered enthusiasm of aspirational mods for a classic glass house has waned. It is difficult to enjoy the continuous 360-degree views from your glass house without being acutely aware of the 360 degrees of continuous exposure.

The true glass house is an anachronism of a bygone era, an era that at this distance looks like a golden utopia. Now when we think of the Glass House it is more often as metaphor for transparency in the age of connectedness. Until recently, it was typical to praise this notion of transparency as a positive development. Some social media moguls claimed we were not losing privacy, but were instead advancing social evolution by gaining total transparency, that we should strive to be the sort of people that have nothing to hide and that we would be better for it. Others didn't dispute so much the loss of privacy, but suggested that if we couldn't handle transparency it would be best to stay off the internet and ditch all our devices.

It is ironic, the glass house once reserved for the lucky few, has morphed into something more akin to a common curse. To the extent that we are connected, we are all encased in this new sort of virtual glass house—a transparent encapsulation that contains everything we are,

tethered to an IP address. This paradigm of the Glass House is one we submit to reluctantly. After all, what other choices do we have short of abandoning civilization for some wilderness and taking up trapping or subsistence farming? To exist in this virtual glass house one must learn to embrace the loss of privacy at the cost of being connected. How many of us still imagine that the pictures we post of ourselves and our children on Facebook will only be seen by friends or that our conversations in the privacy of our home are private?

But is such exposure sustainable? Who can hold up to the sort of withering scrutiny, data fleecing and brain hacking that comes from being connected? Well, as it turns out, almost everyone. Though we are all to one degree or another aware that our connectedness comes at a price, we pay it. Because the truth is, for now at least, that our exploitation is more or less painless. Even if we are being used in ways we don't understand, it is an order of exploitation that can be ignored (until it can't). Cookies, malware, spyware, bots, and trolls are just the latest additions to the traditional parasites that live inside our bodies. These new cyber-parasites are like our corporal parasites in that they manage to harvest what they need from us without drawing undue attention to themselves. They depend upon us to go through our day unaware of their presence. They affect us, but in ways that are difficult to quantify. While the latter live off our intestines and skin, cyber-parasites feed on and influence our cerebral and emotional states. They sell our habits and tweak our weaknesses and desires. They hack brains and steal votes.

"It is an interesting notion that rather than fight against the losing proposition of security, we should embrace the lack of it in the openness of personally identifiable information." (3)

That was in 2012, only six years ago, but what a lot of muck has passed under the bridge since then. In 2012, it was possible to imagine and articulate a utopia of transparency that today sounds naive in the extreme. For us the idea of 'embracing' openness in the public sphere is tantamount to "the trifling inconvenience of having your brains blown out." (4)

We are a new sort of unregulated natural resource, a raw material, for every type of voyeur, be it entrepreneurial, governmental, or sexual, under the sun. They gather, then collate, and file everything. They trade or sell what's of value now, but store and hoard everything else on the principle that every datum will have its day.

The ever expanding catalog of surveillance devices reads like a bestiary. Perhaps it would be paranoid to imagine hummingbird drones hovering outside our kitchen window while little bug-size Black Hornet helicopters flit about the garden. But as we write this, Heathrow airport is closed because of drones in its vicinity. Drones keep getting smaller and stealthier. Soon enough there will be house spider drones and butterfly drones. Privacy, if you have any in the future, will be the demoralizing consequence of your status as a low value target. Only nobodies will escape scrutiny. Connect through a VPN and be careful what you write and say. Cover your windows and tape over the key holes in your devices but you will still be followed. Not only will your algorithms be refined and updated, but they may take into account your evasive maneuvers and mark them 'suspicious.'

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Blind Houses are based on real houses that shelter families like ours. People, who, we imagine, came here lured by the promise of space, tranquility and fresh air but who now find themselves more or less tethered to an invisible system of cables and culling devices. By photographing their homes and removing their windows and doors we are visualizing the polar opposite of a glass house: an opaque encapsulation that protects a secret life within. It is a symbolic remedy in lieu of a real one that doesn't exist. Privacy is a concept that can be

discussed in historical terms or as a platonic ideal but good luck experiencing it. As an attainable state of being it has all but vanished.

Our project is a visual and metaphorical one—to replace glass with wood or stone. We have already removed hundreds of windows and doors and there are so many more houses to go. But it doesn't really matter. Our project, of course, does not fix anything. Our Blind Houses are just visual protest metaphors, opaque counter points to the Glass House paradigm. As a sociopolitical statement our project is hardly more than a gesture of faint defiance in the face of an indifferent data tsunami that sucks everything up in its path and leaves chaos in its wake.

(1) Though the original glass house should be credited to the genius of Mies van der Rohe
(2) Walking tour with Philip Johnson, 1991
(3) Nemzow, M (August 31st. 2012) Public Privacy and the Glass House, Baselinemag.com
(4) May Alcott, L. (1886) *Behind a Mask, or a Woman's Power*, Public Book Domain, Kindle Edition

Walter Martin & Paloma Muñoz