

PledgeTimes

Versions of a picture that was by no means seen

by Bhavi Mandalia

August 7, 2020

It is paradoxical that one of the most notable images in the recent history of photography has never been shown, or even confirmed its existence. Is about The Photo du Jardin d'Hiver, 1898 (The Photo of the Greenhouse), the portrait of Roland Barthes' mother in which the French thinker focuses a large part of the reflections of what would be his last book, *Camera Lucida*. Published in 1980, it ranks alongside *About Photography*, by Susan Sontag, a canonical place in the study of the photographic medium.

"The photograph was very old. Hooded, eaten corners, faded sepia, there were barely two children standing in a group next to a small wooden bridge in a glass-roofed Greenhouse. My mother was then five years old." This is how Barthes describes the image that for a few moments allows her to recover her long-lost mother, with whom she lived most of her life. "For the first-time photography gave me a feeling as sure as memory, just as Proust felt when, stooping one day to take off his shoes, he perceived in his memory the face of his real grandmother" whose living reality I met for the first time in an involuntary and complete memory".

The essay was written in 1977, after the death of his mother. Composed of 48 fragments, it moves away from any theoretical rigidity. There is no place for the arid technical dissertations or for the semiotics of photography. Nor is it a study of a historical nature. It will be his methodical reflections accompanied by the spectral image of Henriette Barthes that guide us in the search for the author towards the essence of photography. An intimate approach, tinged by love and mourning, by presence and absence, which speaks to us of the intrinsic capacity of photography to conjure life and death and also of its limitations. Intentionally the author himself dispensed with showing the image in the publication. "I can't show the Greenhouse Photography. This Photography only exists for me. For you it would only be an indistinct photo, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'anyone', she wrote.

The *Camera Lucida* It was published shortly after the author's death in 1980. Thus, four decades later Schilt Publishing publishes *Keeper of the Hearth*, (The home guardian), a project of the artist and curator Odette England, who, aware of the inspiration that the French author exerts on his readers, invited several critics, historians, photographers and writers to contribute an image or a text, or both, around the, perhaps real or perhaps invented, portrait of Henriette. She would soon receive more than 200 contributions; found photographs, images belonging to the authors' family files or their own works. Versions of that "Ariadne", as Barthes referred to his finding, which not only "allowed them to discover some secret (monster or treasure)" but would also discover "what that thread is made of" that attracts them to Photography.

Thought Series # 2571, by British photographer Bill Jacobson, serves as the cover image and sets the hazy and ambiguous tone that is maintained throughout the more than 300 pages that make up the volume, in which the invisible becomes more relevant than the visible. The absence is materialized in the authors' effort to visually interpret an image that no one has seen. An endeavor fueled by Barthes himself, since the more data he provides about the image, the less readers think they know about it. In this way, the enigma is perpetuated. It is curious that the title that gives the book its name corresponds to the French meaning of the name Henriette, a piece of information that came to light by chance during its elaboration and which continues to surprise given its convenience as a metaphor.

The works that make up this ambitious and evocative project share an intimate quality, sometimes full of nostalgia. Among the participants, we find Alec Soth, Lary Fink, Edmund Clark, Erik Kessel, Julia Fullerton-Batten, Mona Kuhn, Rosalind Fox Salomon, David Company, Eamonn Doyle, Todd Hido and Mark Steinmetz among others. Behind his delicate works are hidden, sometimes non-verbalized memories that tell us about the evasive nature of photography, but also about the medium's ability to raise questions, to resurrect emotions and also to travel between life and dreams, between the reality and the past. Photography can be a window to the world but also the reflection of an indecipherable self, due to the impossibility of transferring the meaning that an image acquires for oneself.

The images have no title and appear without the name of their author, which is revealed in an index included at the end of the book. "Most of the images we see today are immediately disposable. In the same way that words quickly fall into oblivion," writes photographer Stephen Mayes, "But, put together, this sea of images creates a new form of prayer, in which photographs are stitched together revealing deeper meanings (...) in a way that words couldn't do it."

Keeper of the Hearth. Picturing Roland Barthes' Unseen Photograph. Odette England. Schilt Publishing. 320 pages. 60 euros.