

Geographies of Transition

Libia Castro, Madrid, and Ólafur Ólafsson, Reykjavik: a duo since 1997, a shared vision that focuses on the places in which they find themselves working.

Sensitive to the context and to its changes, to the tensions and contradictions that pervade a present undergoing perennial redefinition, Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson see art as a way of stimulating and gathering accounts that will allow us to understand places, their character and the lives around us.

Their creative practice entails the use of a variety of media; recently, however, they have focused on the use of video – a technique that permits a more direct immersion in reality than any other – in combination with the documentary; out of this come stories that are important in themselves, but what counts more is the way in which they are told: in pictures or in words, and more often in pictures, words and music.

Among the phenomena of a global nature that have made the deepest impression on Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson are the ones linked to the transcultural tendency in today's world, to the dynamics and complex relationships that spring from it, to a reality characterized by a mobility that was unthinkable just a short time ago; a mobility that represents an unbounded opportunity for some but also, for many, an inescapable condemnation to a position on the margins.

Among their best known works is the music video *Caregivers*, which tackles one aspect of this new mobility.

Caregivers are increasingly common figures in society, but this does not make them more visible. Necessary in countries where an individual who is not self-sufficient becomes a burden in relation to lifestyles based on speed, efficiency and the formatting of spaces and family groups, these women, in order to help families, accept a sort of voluntary exile that takes them to wealthier nations, where they look after other people's infirmities. Solitary figures whose roles are defined but who seem to have been stripped of their individual identities, their way of life is rooted in silence and service. Thus their existence appears elusive and formless to us, since they adapt themselves to the needs of the people they care for. We tend to observe them from a distance, confining them to a state of extraneousness as if they were different from us, as if their presence did not concern us.

In their quest for a language in which to convey all this, Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson have developed a double take on reality: that of a precise and analytical journalistic reportage, published under the name of Davide Beretta, and that of a documentary recording, shot in an urban setting, of moments in the daily life of carers and the people they are entrusted with.

To these two dimensions the artists have added another, generated by music. Thus, while the text provides figures and facts and the pictures tells fragments of the stories of lives filled with a concrete and physical humanity, it is the music, which they have had composed for the purpose by Karólína Eiríksdóttir, that underscores the distance between these two views of reality, emphasizing the complex stratification of sensations, expressions and experiences and imparting a sense of surreal disorientation to the situation.

Other works that have emerged from the at once attentive and critical, analytical and emotional gaze of these two artists, always interested in identifying the many questions that the present raises and always careful to avoid simplistic answers, include the series of video-portraits *Avant-garde Citizens*. These document the life of a number of refugees through their own accounts, and include *Mpia's Story*. Mpia has had to leave the Congo. Surrounded by greenery in a Dutch refugee camp, he soliloquizes, explaining the reasons that forced him to flee his country and telling us of a vision of Europe contradicted by reality, of his frustrated dreams, of an identity denied; at times he sings his words, and his song becomes an appeal for and paean to his own country and Africa, a cry of help, but of freedom and resistance too: a still possible way of retaining his individuality. His is not escape but a description of concrete reality; and yet the singing sometimes confers on it the sense of a vision, expressing individuality, emotivity, but also a strength that comes to the aid of those who sing and that seems able to have an influence on reality.

Thus, the world is nothing but the product of stories that are at one and the same time private and collective, and for this reason is subject to constant change.

Direct immersion in reality lies at the root of other works by Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson, such as *Processing Cod*, on the work of immigrants in Icelandic fish-processing factories, and *O, holy times' thousands*, in which a baritone, in the setting of a local market, sings a deconstructed version of the constitution of the Icelandic Republic set to music.

While in the videos the music performs the task of giving a sense of individuality to the subject and almost reinventing the world, among the installations we find *Mirror Beam*: a large parallelepiped with a mirror surface that, suspended in the space, responds to the context by reflecting it, showing it to us for what it is; and in its shifting perspective it includes the image of us looking at it. Thus visitors find themselves living inside that reflected, shared space, and are not able to escape from it.

In other installations the work of Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson expresses an ironically 'contrarian' value.

In a glass case, a postage stamp. Occupying a terrain on which the official character of the state is still almost intact, this is one of the few objects whose formal qualities and celebratory or commemorative subjects are rarely questioned. Here, however, the institutional significance of the stamp is turned on its head: *Dein Land Gibt es Nicht*, 'Your Land Does Not Exist'.

The more playful *Uterus Flags*, on the other hand, is a public intervention and occupation of urban space with a series of brightly coloured flags on which the heraldic device has been replaced by the stylized shape of the female reproductive system: uterus, ovaries, etc. The innards made external, that which is individual, but belongs to every woman, made public. *Uterus Flags* can also be read as an ironic reappropriation of shared space and, by extension, as a reference to crucial and contested themes of current public discourse.

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