

BY IRMA ARESTIZABAL

In his latest works, **Tomás Ochoa** uses photography and video as his basic mode of expression. The artist "works in real communities giving their inhabitants the opportunity to express themselves in interviews and situations, some spontaneous, others prepared, sometimes of a documentary and ethnographic nature, others fictitious, focusing deliberately on symbols."¹ When we encounter his works, which are embedded in a context fluctuating between "reality," "documentation," and "historical fiction," we wonder if we are witness something real or a stage that has been built.

His works are poetic constructions that cross the boundaries between photo/video essay and documentary work.

Aware that the artist cannot be aloof from events that are not always pleasant and in an attempt to push the boundaries separating art from reality, Ochoa creates his works on the basis of a concrete situation and specific psycho-geography while generally tackling the abuse of force and power. By so doing he struggles against indifference, amnesia, and ignorance. His works are committed constructs involving research that draws an ethnographic map of the communities and characters involved. Ochoa retrieves from oblivion stories and remembrances through dialogues and interviews with the players of history, composing a non-linear narrative. A history where there are gaps that have been left unfilled so that the experience, knowledge, and imagination of the viewer can bridge them in a convergence of forces that are more engaged, analytical, and maybe even active. Sometimes, the work does not call for responses but rather provides room for silence and reflection.

6mm3-The Dark Room analyzes conflicts involving displacements, shedding light on problems such as collective memory, the rebuilding of subjectivity, and the conceptual scaffolding of the powers-that-be on the topic of progress with regard to individuals.

In the work, called **Contagion**, Ochoa suggests the twin metaphor of city and desert, a mythological chronotype of our contemporary world as an enlarged zone for art.

In his wish to portray reality, Tomás Ochoa also explores the world of jails and reformatories. Transforming the inmates of a penitentiary for juveniles of Mendoza in Argentina into actors of his work, **Five Dots** opposes their criminal records and "social portraits" with the self-portraits that the inmates have drawn of themselves on the basis of their experiences in the photography workshops conducted by the project's authors. The young people sing, tell their stories, and take pictures of themselves. With amazing technical simplicity, the video is able to transmit a direct message that moves us deeply.

Faced with an outer world that is torn apart, poetry has the power to bring it together again in a totality that has no intention of concealing its fragmented origins or emphasizing the plurality of contingent meanings.

In all of these works, the stance of the artist as an ethnographer is apparent. It is a stance that resurrects the old opposition between *esthetic quality and political relevance*. Ochoa intends to bring art closer to reality, placing art in a situation of action, interaction and participation and acting as a researcher, a collector of stories and memories, as a person going after the traces and remains of others. He sets out to draw a critical map aimed at restoring a suppressed memory, presenting works that are moving portraits of society's most neglected panoramas.

Nevertheless, we must point out that, the themes he has chosen are actually a pretext to express deeper, timeless inner structures that are therefore closer to art. In this age of uncertainty and value crisis that it has been our destiny to live, the work of Tomas Ochoa offers a reflection on life and on the values inherent to contemporary art.

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1. Horacio Fernández, "De intenciones", Itinerarios 04-05, Santander, Fundación Marcelino Botín, 2005.