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Three Women in a Garden. Alice Austen's Pictures and the Paradox of Documentary Photography

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Abstract. That so very difficult question about "truth", frequently posed in relation to both autobiographical artefacts and documentary photography, is no doubt the key query concerning Alice Austen's whole oeuvre. Taking that question as a starting point for discussion, this article explores Austen's autobiographical and documentary work as part of the same strategy, since Austen's autobiographical photography "documents" the life of New Women and the class that she belonged to. But if her autobiographic production is documentary, why not consider her documentary work autobiographical? The article works on this hypothesis by engaging canonical autobiography texts and exploring how watching an event may mean becoming part of the event itself.
Key words: Alice Austen; Documentary photography; Autobiography; New Woman; 19th Century Lesbianism; Colombian documentary photography; Daniela Rosell

[es] Tres mujeres en un jardín. Las fotografías de Alice Austen y la paradoja de la imagen documental

Resumen. La complejísima pregunta sobre el concepto de "verdad", a menudo planteada en relación con artefactos y fotografías documentales, es sin duda la investigación esencial en todo el trabajo de Alice Austen. Tomando esta pegunta como punto de partida para la discusión, este artículo indaga sobre el trabajo documental y autobiográfico como parte de la misma estrategia, ya que la foto autobiográfica de Austen "documenta" la vida de las Nuevas Mujeres y la clase a la cual pertenecía Austen. Pero ¿si su trabajo autobiográfico es documental, por qué no considerar autobiográfico su trabajo documental? El trabajo trabaja sobre esta hipótesis a partir de textos canónicos autobiográficos y explorando la siguiente cuestión: mirar un acontecimiento puede significar formar parte del mismo.
Palabras Clave: Alice Austen; fotografía documental; autobiografía; Nueva Mujer; siglo XIX; lesbianismo; fotografía documental colombiana; Daniela Rosell.

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In fall of 1891, Alice Austen photographed herself with two of her female friends – Julia Martin and Julia Bredt [IL. **1].** In *Julia Martin and Julia Bredt and myself dressed as men. Thursday October 15th, 1891*, the three women wear a moustache and are dressed in men's clothes. With cigarettes in their hands and a defiant–almost sarcastic–attitude, they looked straight to the camera in the garden of 'Clear Com-

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fort', Austen´s home in Staten Island, where she lived with her mother and other close relatives after her father abandoned the family around the same year Alice was born, in 1866.

In 1891 Austen was no more than twenty-five years old, but she already showed amazing skills as a photographer: careful lighting, impeccable framing, excellent choice of subjects. That was mainly due to the fact that she had started taking pictures long before, when in 1876 her Danish uncle –Oswald Müller– brought a camera home[2]. The then innovative artefact immediately appealed to Alice's imagination, so she soon joined the relatively high number of women who decided to devote their time and efforts to photography, an almost perfectly acceptable job for an East Coast lady at the turn of the century[3].

Photography was not taken too seriously during those years. It was not considered "art" but technical dexterity, and that perception opened an entire realm of possibilities for young bold women who aimed to change their lives and the world. A commonly held view presented photography as appropriate for women because it fulfilled some of the quintessential Victorian feminine qualities: patience, tact, having a keen eye for detail, and great aspiration for perfection–, all of which would become an ideal disguise for a number of "New Women" in 1890s. Among them, two well-known American photographers: Frances Johnston and Alice Austen herself.

Taking pictures was the perfect alibi for women to leave home, to move around, to meet people, to be somehow free and live a "man's life". Or at least that was the ambition of Alice Austen when in the mid-1890s she decided to expand her small, intimate world in Staten Island by travelling to Vermont, Massachusetts or Illinois, and later on to Europe. New York city seemed to be a very exciting venue for the young lady, as it would later be for Berenice Abbott. Some of Austen's most effective pictures were taken in New York, such as her portfolio of photogravures of workers on the streets of Manhattan, entitled *Street Types of New York City. Those* pictures –together with the series of immigrants in Quarantine Island– have been considered the key images in Austen's career, constructing her status as one of the first documentary women photographers in America, opening the path to the mentioned Abbott and Dorothea Lange, among others.

However, a closer look from a different perspective to pictures such as the one discussed at the beginning of this article –where three women in a garden posed dressed in men's clothes– could perhaps reveal an unexpected interpretation of Austen's "intimate" photography. Even more, it could add to a richer understanding of her documentary production and to documentary production in general. In fact, the picture of the three women discloses a tint of parody, a playful mockery, even though it was probably much more than that–and not only as gender subversion is concerned.

Less than a year later, in 1892, Austen took another photograph –*Self-Portrait with Fan. Monday, September 9th, 1892* **[IL. 2]**–, where she sat as an attractive but conventional young woman willing to seduce the viewer. In that picture, as opposed

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2 One of the first books of Alice Austen was the one by Novovny, A. (1976). *Alice's World: The Life and Photography of an American Original, Alice Austen, 1866-1952.* Old Greenwitch, Coon.: Chatham.. In this book Austen's homosexuality is not openly discussed, as pointed out in Kuodary, A. (2006). *Looking at the Shadows. The Life of Alice Austen. A Novel.* New York, Lincoln, Shangai: iUniverse, Inc.

3 Hines, R. Jr. (1898). "Women and Photography", *American Amateur Photographer,* vol. 10, pp.118-124 and 144-152. Reprinted in Palmquist, P.E. (Ed.). *Camera Friends and Kodak Girls: 50 Selections by and about Women in Photography, 1840-1930*. New York: Midmarch Arts Press.

to *Julia Martin and Julia Bredt and myself dressed as men. Thursday October 15th, 1891,* Austen decided to represent her image in a ladylike manner, wearing her favourite dress, just like the well-off girl she was[4]. Yet both self-portraits hide a complex strategy which puts forward an uncomfortable question often asked of women's representations: who was the "true" Alice Austen?

Of course, in neither one of the two pictures we see the "true" Alice Austen. They were both part of a masquerade –to use the term that Joan Riviere coined in her often quoted 1929 text "Womanliness as a Masquerade"–, since the two images belonged to a fluid concept of gender which the "New Woman" timidly codified at the turn of the century and which was later developed in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). Austen's peculiar family album presented therefore a blurred image of the photographer herself: a succession of gaps, silences and misunderstandings. Maybe, because all representations of the self are fictional, nothing but a cultural pact, a narrative that is impossible to write, as Roland Barthes stated in his 1975 autobiography *Roland Bathes par Roland Barthes*. When writing his autobiography, Barthes turned to alphabetical order to exclude any possibility of an established form of narration. It became his own trick to avoid what could be interpreted as "truth" simply by the selected narrative formula.

In Austen's own strategy the garden at 'Clear Comfort' became a sort of cinematic set where she assembled different versions of herself, all of them fictional. None of the two images discussed was the "true" Alice Austen. In both photographs she was not only posing, but manufacturing stereotypical images, sketching successive performances of the self. One could even go further and consider that perhaps all self-portraits are part of a performatic mise-en-scène. That would explain why the question "who is the "true" Alice Austen?" seemed so difficult to answer. That so very difficult to answer question about "truth", frequently posed in relation to both autobiographical artefacts and documentary photography, is no doubt the key query concerning Alice Austen's whole oeuvre, as it will be discussed later.

But first let us go back to what could be read as Austen's autobiographic project, depicting the photographer and her friends, "New Women" in search of novel ways to live their lives subverting the imposed feminine role in late 19th century. These photographs acted as a sort of chronicle, bringing up accurate details about the day they were taken with forensic precision, just like a meticulous "entry" in a diary. Austen became then, as it often happens in autobiographical projects, the narrator and spectator of her own life, a certain split self that is impossible to avoid in autobiographical strategies, as Paul de Man points out in his ground-breaking text "Autobiography and Defacement".

This split, this distance, is indeed the necessary strategy when writing one's autobiography. Those two subjects who never shared the same time or space –those they were, these they are–, faced one another in a mise-en-scène similar to the Lacanian mirror: the narrator Self narrates the narrated Other. Self and Other –"Seer" and "Seen"– seem to share a very complex and slippery destiny, as those two heterogeneous (almost contradictory) selves can only coexist in a narrative space. That

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4 Butler, S. (1987) "So How Do I Look? Women Before and Behind the Camera". In *Staging the Self: Self-Portrait Photography 1840-1980s*. London: National Portrait Gallery, pp. 52-53 offers a fascinating analysis between the different "bodys" Austen's (re)presents –loose in the first picture and trapped in the second one–, quoted in Merck, M. (1991). "'Transforming the Suit'. A Century of Lesbian Self-Portraits". In Boffin, T. and Fraser, J. (Eds.). *Stolen Glances. Lesbians Take Photographs.* London: Pandora, pp. 24-25.

narrative space acts as camouflage for the author too, a sort of concealment that uncovers not only the impossibility of an essential, undivided self, but also the recurrent doubts about "truth".

Needless to say, these paradoxes have been long known and experienced by minorities. Some "truths" are "truer" than others or, as Leight Gilmore wrote, when meditating about the "authentification" of "truth" in women self-representations: "What we have come to call truth or what a culture determines to be truth in autobiography, among other discourses, is largely the effect of a long and complex process of authorization. Thus the canonising question 'What is truth?' cannot be separated from the process of verifying that truth. These are not discreet moments in any history, including literary history, where authority is established, for the production and authorization of truth emerge jointly in the confession, as in any other exercises of truth telling. Some are positioned in closer proximity to the "truth" depending on their relation to other terms of value: gender, class, race, and sexuality among others"[5].

Dow Adams clarifies further the ambivalent significance of photographic "truth" when discussing the use of photographs as autobiographical writings and the traps photos pose for the reader/spectator: "at first I thought that the mere presence of photographs within the text might constitute an unambiguous sign of the difference between autobiography and autobiographical fiction, though now I see that photographs have been included in fiction, almost from the invention of photography, almost always used as illustration of place or atmosphere rather than of characters…"[6].

In other words, the presence of pictures in any autobiographical visual project –or any other narration, including documentary photography, one may add–, does not guarantee "truth" –as we all know and as Austen's pictures state–, just as the physical presence of a testimony does not assure the objectivity of his/her story. As Dow Adams emphasises: "Just as autobiographies are obviously artificial representations of lives, so photographs are clearly manufactured images: sitters are artificially posed and lighted, made to conform the laws of perspective and the ideology of photographic culture…"[7].

Many of these uncertainties have affected the interpretation of autobiographical projects –including visual ones– in the past years. Specific works have been reread in autobiographical codes to reflect the paradoxes and contradictions associated to autobiographical ventures themselves. Actually, if some years ago the *genre* was understood as a first-hand testimony, it is now considered a productive territory where the self as masquerade can be performed. In any case, what is and what is not an autobiographical narration seems to a be question as difficult to answer as "What is truth?", perhaps because "autobiography is not simply non-fiction", as Timothy Dow Adams points out[8].

One could say that in her exploration of the "New Woman" Austen faced all these conflicts and contradictions and described the ambivalent territory between photography and performance in relation of the construction of the self-issues explored by an

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5 Gilmore, L. (2001). *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 55.

6 Dow Adams, T. (2000). *Light Writing and Life Writing. Photography in Autobiography*, University of Chapell Hill and London: North Carolina Press, p. 1.

7 *Ibídem.* pp. 5-6.

8 *Ibídem.* p. 20.

artist like Cindy Sherman almost a hundred years later. Also like Sherman, Austen turned to filmic seriality as a narrative strategy, a ploy related to autobiographical narratives. If autobiographical work often implies an irretrievable omission –those we are, those we were–, the divided-self essence of many autobiographical projects would often be related to a fragmented visual narration. That is the strategy that autobiographical pictures share with "performatic" photography.

Therefore, in front of what we could call her "intimate" photographs –"entries" of her own dairy, as it has been suggested– we may reconstruct the story of Austen's private life, just like we visualize Lola Montez's existence in the film of Max Ophuls, when Lola tells her vicissitudes from the acrobat's swing. The richer her lovers, the higher the swing goes. Then, all the way down when telling the most tragic part of her life: becoming a student's lover.

And the spectator ascends and descends with Lola Montez, as she controls him/her through an elaborate visual narration. In the complex logics of spectacle –and performance– those who are watching think they are safe in their portion of reality. But they are not: the very act of watching contaminates the spectator and he/she inevitably becomes part of the scene that is taking place, part of the story which is being told.

So does the photographer while taking a picture: he or she becomes part of that scene by the simple act of observing. Maybe all photography is somehow performatic in essence, as the relevant part of the process usually takes place before the actual shooting of the picture –and not only in so-called "posed" photographs. One could even say that in the past years the borders between performatic work and photography have become increasingly blurred, not only because what survives of a performance is usually a picture or a series of images, but because a vast quantity of photographic material, especially the one related to documentary and self-portrait and autobiography –as it has been pointed out–, is somehow performatically experienced and organised. In other words: the basic part of the "photographic event" takes place before the actual taking of the picture, as it happens in Alice Austen's case. In this respect, one should remember Henry Sayre's seminal *The Object of Performance*, about the frequent performatic use of photography. After all, territories related to the photographic gaze are often extremely permeable and fragile: outside/inside, self/other, posed/unposed, documentary/fiction are sometimes blurred and/or mingled.

Taking into consideration those slippery grounds, one could say that Alice Austen's set of "intimate" photographs –those which picture her personal world and which have been neglected, discarded, forgotten or misread for a long time– may have meant more than the irrefutable evidence of Austen's homosexuality, as it has been discussed[9]. Perhaps they were also "documentary" photographs in a broader sense, since they explored the segment of population Austen belonged too: affluent young women ready to plunge into modernity and to have a share of a different, more exciting life that the one late 19th century American society had planned for them.

This way, Austen's "intimate" photographs transcend the specific and document the new life of "New Women", just like the 1896 photogravures of workers on the streets of Manhattan titled *Street Types of New York City* –one of the best known

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[9] Peimer, L. (2000). "Alice's Identity Crisis: A Critical Look at the Alice Austen House Museum". *History of Photography*. 24.2, pp. 175-179.

of Austen's documentary series– document the simple life of policemen, postmen, messenger boys, peddlers … As opposed to their simple existence or the sad destiny of immigrants that the photographer depicts in another series –the Quarantine Island series taken around the same year–, Austen's elegant friends –mostly female– are captured playing tennis, ice skating, on the beach… In other words, they are devoting their time to open air activities, sports that were becoming increasingly popular among upper and upper middle class young ladies in a time when leisure has turned out to be a widespread topic, as proven by the publication in 1899 of Thorstein Veblen's book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

Even when Austen took pictures for a commercial purpose –an isolated case related to Violet Ward and her book *Bicycling for Young Ladies* (1896)–, she still acted as a sort of photojournalist, a witness of a class and the behavioural changes in that class. In fact, the very aim of the publication was to create a friendly environment for young ladies wishing to ride a bike: a special bicycle was devised by Ward, and Ward's friend Daisy Eliot –a well know professional gymnast posed as a model for Austen.

Austen's approach to Daisy Eliot riding a bike seems quite different from that she took to depict the bicycle used by the messenger boy, as represented in one of her images from *Street Types of New York City.* The innocuous means for transportation in the boy's case, becomes in Ward's project a kind of statement, almost a missile for subversion. Eliot is holding the bike and wearing the notorious "bloomers", another of the suffragettes' powerful symbol (just like the bike itself), often times used in satirical postcards as the ones kept at the New York Public Library. In one of those stereoscopic postcards, a man is washing clothes, while the suffragette lady –wearing bloomers– looks at him in a patronizing attitude. The bike against the wall turns into a menacing gun, the symbol of the "New Woman" and her threat to the status quo.

Years before the book was published, around 1892, Austen had photographed Violet Ward with a female friend in the porch of 'Clear Comfort'. They were portrayed in a typical late-19th century couple pose: one was sitting and the other was standing. In the best known of the two versions –seriality again as an instrument of narration–, Ward was wearing the distinctive suffragette tie and hat and she rebelliously embraced her ladylike looking friend's leg in a determined manner.

Some of this "intimate" photographic material –for years disregarded or misread, as it has been frequently denounced in the last thirty years –has been the starting point for the discussion on Austen's homosexuality, along with some other more explicit images, like the two 1891 iconic pictures. The first of them –*Trude and I*– showed Austen and her friend Trudy Eccleston in underwear, with their face covered by a mask and pretending to smoke a cigarette, something considered a crime among women at that time. The second image –*The Darned Club*, the name local boys used to call this kind of sorority– presented Alice Austen and three of her friends– Trudy Eccleston, Julia Marsh, and Sue Ripley– embracing, in an ambiguous dancing attitude.

In any case, important as these "intimate" pictures may be to convey Alice Austen's and her friend's sexual option –and even vital to avoid hiding or denying her homosexuality if that may be the case–, it could again be argued that these more explicit images were also "documenting" a social class in relation to lesbianism, as it was suggested before. The sexologist Havelock Ellis was the first to connect lesbianism and elevated class position in his 1897 text *Sexual Inversion*: "It is, therefore,

among the upper ranks, alike of society and prostitution that Lesbianism is most definitely to be met with for here we have much greater liberty of action, and much greater freedom for prejudices"[10].

As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Sheila Jeffreys discussed in their seminal books of 1985[11], lesbianism in 19th-century America was a very equivocal concept all together, rooted in misinterpretations and denials from the establishment, as men could not acknowledge sexual love between two women. In her book of eloquent title, *The Spinster and her Enemies,* Jeffreys emphasizes the fact that future husbands even welcomed sexual relationships among female friends as a way to get some sexual experience before marriage[12]. Taking this misunderstandings into consideration, is was not uncommon to "read" "New Women" as lesbian, by the simple fact that they decided to keep men at bay and never get married, in order to avoid husbands' control over their lives.

Therefore, the fact that Alice Austen could have been a lesbian –as her lifetime relationship with Gertrude Tate and her determination to represent herself with her female friends in improper poses for 19th century morals may suggest– seems very important, but not as crucial as the fact that she decided to use her camera to document a portion of life that transcended "intimacy". Austen used the camera to depict the habits and customs of the social class she belonged to in a sort of political statement referring to "New Women". In that respect, one could say that her "intimate" photographs transcended the autobiographical and turned out to be part of her wider documentary project.

It is fascinating to notice that when she was rediscovered in *Life* magazine in a long article published in September 1951 with the title of "Discovered Picture World of Alice Austen: Great Woman Photographer Steps Out of the Past" none of her properly "documentary" works was reproduced. No photos of workers in New York City streets or immigrants in quarantine. The pictures chosen for the occasion were mainly "intimate" daily shots: her house, the tennis lawn, the garden, her friends… Her *Self-Portait with fan* "opened" the article. In other words, they were "appropriate" pictures for a lady, unlike the ones of workers in Manhattan or the immigrants in quarantine. Maybe, after all, those Austen's pictures in the late 19th century that were really radical were the purely documentary ones.

Nevertheless, the interesting thing is that the two more explicit pictures –*Trude and I* and *The Darned Club*– were also included in *Life*'s article. Perhaps in 1951, when happy families and perfect housewives governed the United States, lesbianism was not even considered a serious possibility in women's lives, exactly like in late 19th century. That could explain why such explicit material would have been printed in a magazine like *Life*. Besides, it could also be argued that, at least in the case of *Trude and I*, the chosen image reproduced common male phantasies as far as the

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10 Ellis, H. and Symonds, J. (1897). *Sexual inversion*, quoted in Lucchesi Lucchesi, J. (2001). "'The Dandy in Me': Romaine Brooks´s 1923 Portraits". In Fillin-Yeh, S. (Ed.). *Dandies. Fashion and Finess in Art and Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

11 Smith– Rosenberg, C. (1985). *Disorderly Conduct: Vision of Gender jn Victorian America*. New York: Alfred H. Knopf and Jeffreys, S. (1985). *The Spinster and her Enemies. Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930*. London: Pandora.

12 Jeffreys, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

representation of lesbianism is concerned[13]**.** The final result was, anyway, a good selection from an amateur photographer –something more than accepted in the case of a woman–, who based her production on ordinary things, on her everyday scenes –strictly speaking, images related to autobiographical issues.

But Alice Austen was only partly an amateur photographer. Her decision of taking photography so seriously, her use of the camera in such a daring way, her audacious representations of "New Women", her "risky" portraits of workers in the streets of New York –visiting neighbourhoods that women did not venture entering at that time–, her commercial photographs… would prove Austen understood photography as a key activity in her life and not simple a hobby. She was rigorous and genuine in her use of the camera and in her intention to leave a trace of moments in time. She aimed to portrait the world, to record it. In effect, she was one of the most accurate photojournalists of the affluent class in the turn of the century East Coast, and an enterprising witness of the more disadvantaged. For that reason, her "intimate" photographs deserved to be considered also a very relevant part of her documentary project, a means of interpretations for the rest of her production.

From many points of view, what could be called her "jet-set documentary project" –the one that seemed to interest *Life* magazine and eventually its readers, a segment of population that was not particularly concerned with workers or immigrants– had many aspects in common with the work of French photographer Jacques-Henri Lartigue, whose pictures were published in *Life* magazine some years later, in November 1963. Lartigue was also an excellent photographer who had been undervalued for years –and in a way, an amateur–, who had also documented the affluent society he belonged to, including "flappers" the 1920s version of the "New Women".

Planes, cars, dancing couples, tennis courts, beaches, fashion, splashes… built up Lartigue's strong sense of an autobiographical project, since all captured images were indeed part of his daily life. But just like in Austen's case, his production was not only autobiographical, but undoubtedly documentary, even if he also recorded that upper class he belonged to. If his work is seldom labelled under the category of "documentary" it is mainly due to a simple fact: documentary work is normally associated to war, anthropological images, working class portraits and scenes, and seldom to upper-class and elegant environments. For the customary eyes, luxury does not "look documentary" the way we commonly understand the term. Upper-class scenes look like material to be published in magazines where common people's wishes come true. When the gaze is confronted to "the Rich and Famous", it never feels it is in front of "documentary" photography, but that is only partly true.

An interesting example related to this perception could be the work of Mexican photographer Daniela Rosell, who pictured her jet-set friends and cousins in a fashion that may be interpreted as parody or even some sort of criticism. The pictures in the series *Ricas y famosas* (The Rich and Famous) –published as a photo-book in 2002–, could appear fictional at times –due to the excess and overindulgence– but were "true" characters and scenes, even if they looked inconceivable at times for the average eye. They were part of the circle she belonged to: they were not simply posing, as the term is normally assumed. That was most probably the way they acted and appeared in their everyday life.

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[13] For a seminal discussion of the problem see Grover, J.Z. (1989). "Dykes in Context: Some Problems in Minority Representation". In Bolton, R. (Ed.). *The Contest of Meaning*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.

Daniela Rossell *Untitled (Ricas y Famosas)*, 1999
C-print, 30 x 40 inches, 76.2 x 101.6 cm, Edition 1/5 (2386.1)

That is the paradox implicit in photographic gaze: what appears to be posed can disclose its unposed nature and what seems to be fictional ends up being nonfictional. Or maybe it is just the other way around, since devious concepts such as "truth", essential to autobiographical artefacts and documentary photography, are always impossible to grasp and, even more, to fixate. Perhaps all pictures imply a certain "fictionality" –performativity–, including the "documentary" ones, just as "documentary" photography is always polluted by a trace of autobiography. The documentary photographer has to adapt to an ambiguous role while taking the picture, so he/she is never safe behind the camera because, just as it happened in Alice Austen's "performatic" pictures –the ones discussed at the beginning of this article–, one becomes inevitably part of the scene just by the act of watching. In Austen's case, the documented scene turned into part of her life by the simple fact that she is watching while shooting the picture.

So, what does it really mean to be a witness of any event? Can we preserve ourselves from the event or are we part of the scene by the simple fact that we are watching? Doesn't that event we are watching become part of our life by that simple fact? In other words, can we watch and not be part of the scene, can we produce neutral, objective testimonies? Doesn't all documentary work then imply some kind of autobiographic experience for the photographer taking the picture? And more important than that, are documentary pictures "true" as opposed to autobiographical ones? Should documentary photography be unposed? What do we really mean by "documentary" all together? This may also disclose a change in the very role of the

spectator in relation to his/her position in front of a photograph and the complex identification strategy that the photographic logic rises.

In this respect, it would be clarifying to remember how the expression "documentary" was codified during the mid-1930s by British scholar and film director Robert Grierson. He applied the term "documentary" to a certain kind of cinema which was gaining momentum at that time: the cinema that aimed to focus on everyday life, a non-manipulative approach to "reality". In some rather curious way, it was a kind of cinema related to "truth". Anyway, right after inventing the term Grierson showed his own reluctance about the definition itself: "Documentary is a clumsy description, but let it stand", he wrote.

Grierson's doubts were at the core of the problem, since it is not an easy task to define "truth", as it has been discussed above. Moreover, if shooting a photograph contaminates the photographer him/herself, taking a picture modifies reality: things will never be the same after having seen them in a picture. That is the fascinating ambiguity of the photographic gaze: it forces us into negotiating opposed territories – autobiographical, documentary or artistic.

That is also the case of Austen's two series of pictures that have routinely been classified as "documentary": *Street Types of New York* and immigrants at quarantine islands, after the Public Health Service asked Austen to record the quarantine procedures. They were no doubt "documentary" series, but at the same time the autobiographical implications seemed clear. As it was said before, the risks she took visiting the places she went too –unusual for a woman those years–, the way she interacted with characters that were so physically and metaphysically far away from her elegant social environment make one think that Alice Austen was much more than the pretty lady sitting with the fun in her 1892 picture, much more than the elegant photographer presented by *Life* magazine in 1951, even much more that the masqueraded young "New Woman" dressed in men's clothes. She was a devoted photographer with great expectations from the medium she was using; and she was even politically committed with the excluded –as Richard Meyer suggested in his 2011 lecture at Stanford University *Quarantined: Alice Austen and the Secret History of American Art*–, maybe feeling excluded herself as a "New Woman" in turn-of-the century America.

Besides, if we accepted that Austen's autobiographical "intimate" pictures can be read as "documentary", why not accept her "documentary" photographs also as part of a carefully orchestrated autobiographical project? Even more, it seems evident that all three sets of pictures contribute to a better understanding of Austen's project as a whole. Can one leave one's comfortable environment and watch the excluded –as Alice Austen did and as photojournalists do– and go back to one's previous life unchanged, as if nothing had happened?

In any case, photographing impoverished neighbourhoods or working class characters does not necessarily mean to portrait their dark side –it could be quite the contrary. Austen's policemen, postmen, peddlers or street sweepers always posed in a proud way. Even the picture of the three young bootblacks showed a group of young bootblacks in front of the camera, a great event in their existences –one of them even smiling**.** Being poor, too young to be forced into going around the city polishing shoes, and feeling neglected by society did not exclude them from cheerfulness –or so it seems watching the one in the middle. If documentary photography's main task is to (re)present daily lives, it is obvious that capturing "happy instants" is part of a documentary photographer's job too.

Viki Ospina, *Gallada*, 1977. Fotografía b/n, 78 x 96 cm. Registro AP0916
Colección de Arte del Banco de la República

It is striking to perceive the similarities between Austen's three young boot-blacks picture and the one taken in 1977 –almost a century later– by Colombian photographer Viki Ospina, *Gallada* (Gatherig of Streetboys). Ospina has worked in most important media in Colombia and she has always shown a special interest in documenting daily life of workers, as part of a long tradition in that country. Such would be the case of Luis Benito Ramos and his series *El hombre y la tierra* (Man and Earth), of 1935, where he depicted scenes of the Colombian countryside and villages, using a very sophisticated point of view –representing new heroes with an intrepid framing, following Rodchenko's statement–, as shown in the picture of the working man with a donkey transporting bricks. In Ospina's *Gallada* the street boys –one of the more devastating problems in Latin America in general and in Colombia in particular– face the camera joyfully, they pose and perform, and state how a documentary photograph can be autobiographical, telling a lot about Viki Ospina herself as a wanderer in tough neighbourhoods, a kind of ethnographer in her own city, Barranquilla. Quite probably her life and the boys' story were never the same after that picture.

Luis B. Ramos, de la serie “El hombre y la tierra”.
(*Trabajo primitivo de Alfarería en tierras boyacenses*), 1935.
Fotografía, 14 x 9 cm. Registro AP2388.
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Luis B. Ramos, de la serie “El hombre y la tierra”.
(*Trabajo primitivo de Alfarería en tierras boyacenses*), 1935.
Fotografía, 14 x 9 cm. Registro AP2389.
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Unposed/posed, documentary/autobiographical, truth/fiction. Things are probably much more complicated than one may think. As it has already been suggested, those territories related to the photographic gaze are extremely permeable and fragile; blurred and mingled, as Austen "ethnographic" gaze evidenced in the late 19th century, opening the path to later off-discourse projects such as Nam Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependence*. The 700 snapshot-like sequenced portraits constitute a sort of personal diary where the artist's experiences around Boston, New York, and Berlin between the late 1970s and 1980s, blends her personal narration with a documentary approach which emphasises an entire generation's moments of loss and pleasure.

In this respect, Fernell Franco –another Colombian photographers who started his career in the 1970s, like Ospina, and who has only recently been rediscovered– could be a good case in point to follow some of the innovative lines opened by Austen in photographic narratives. Franco was a "desplazado" –people from the Colombian countryside who had to leave their homes in the 1950s due to political violence. His family, in a very poor situation, moved to Cali, where he had to start working as a messenger boy, getting to know deprived and little known parts of the city. So, when he got his first job as a graphic journalist in one of the newspapers in town –he did not know how to use the camera at all– he devoted his time to photographing violent parts of the city and underprivileged situations that he knew all too well. This interest for the excluded –which makes him close to Ospina and Austen– brought him to portrait life at a Cali brothel, where for two years –1970-72– he pictured the prostitutes' life of misery and decaying environments, using seriality again as a means to construct his narrative.

Fernell Franco, "*Prostíbulos Buenaventura*", 1968.
Emulsión de gelatina de plata, 18,7 x 25,3 cm. Registro AP5481.
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Fernell Franco, "*Prostíbulos Buenaventura*", 1968.
Emulsión de gelatina de plata, 20,5 x 25,4 cm. Registro AP5482.
Colección de Arte del Banco de la República.

Fernell Franco, "*Prostíbulos Buenaventura*", 1968.
Emulsión de gelatina de plata, 18,7 x 25,3 cm. Registro AP5483.
Colección de Arte del Banco de la República.

His project *Putas* (Whores) was, no doubt, documentary photography and, as it has been pointed out along these pages, it had a huge portion of autobiography –as Fernell Franco emphasized in his self-portrait surrounded by the girls. Yet, at the same time, the way Franco played with the photographic material organizing it as a photomontage, created an even more ambiguous territory, turning "documentary" into something else, taking Austen's paradoxes one step ahead. Suddenly documentary photography became an "artistic" piece. Fernell Franco was there, documenting that precise scene, then his gaze was trapped and he became part of the scene, and finally he rewrote the scene in an unexpected way.

This is one of the points John Davis discussed when facing the problem defined as the "ethnographic present". "Anthropologists do not write exclusively in the present tenses. At minimum we generally use the past for our relevant autobiography, for the history of the people we study and for some case histories. Nearly all of us have written accounts of our fieldwork, how we came to be there, what we did, in past tenses: our biography demonstrates that we were there, and can allow a reader to judge how good our representations may be", Davis writes[14].

To what extent the traditional role of the ethnographer as first-hand testimony has been questioned in the last decades? In which manner has photography contributed to that change too? These fascinating questions seem to speak about the very problem of autobiography as understood in field work and how it seems to be related to documentary photography itself.

In his extraordinary introduction to *Argounauts*, Malinowski formulates a very strong dilemma somehow related to those questions. While he writes obsessed by the idea to create a text capable to transmit "truth" to his readers and tries to find the way to make clear that the narrated material is not simply a "subjective" invention but "objective" facts, he realizes the amazing distance that separates the ethnographer's raw material from the final narration that has to "work out", to be able to tell an effective story.

One could of course argue that a photograph is a completely different thing, far more direct than organizing field notes into solid narration. First of all, one should remember that documentary photographs are never the simple reproduction of "reality". As it has been pointed out, they have to adapt to the logics of perspective, and so forth. In other words, they transform row reality into effective narration. Besides, the commented seriality always implies some selection from the whole set of materials. This sorting out could be compared to sorting out of the ethnographers' notes, and at the same time evidences the often performatic process hidden under photography. Maybe the borders between the documentary and the autobiographic or the anthropological, the seer and the seen, fiction and truth, are never so sharp. And perhaps, due to that fact, new critical approaches to, and narratives on, images and texts are needed to explain how we are never safe in the average space or narrative. At any given moment, our traditional predictable space can be assaulted and changed for ever.

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[14] Davis, J. (1992). "Tense in Ethnography. Some Practical Considerations". In Okely, J. and Callaway, H. (Eds.). *Anthropology and Autobiography*. London and New York: Routledge.

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