

## Soft Focus

1.

In his prologue to the book of photographs by José Ortiz Echagüe, *Spain. Types and Costumes*, Ortega y Gasset elaborates an apology that the images do not appear to have solicited. Before starting his analysis, he warns that Ortiz Echagüe's documentary undertaking could well be read as a deployment of irony, and then, in what follows, he takes it for granted that what these images offer us is more of a harmless pastime than an exercise in grave solemnity. He thus manages to rest the critical potential of these portraits precisely upon the weakness that he proposes to exorcise. For Ortega it would be unbearable ("innocent and inhuman") to take these photographs for what they are: romantic reconstructions of an idealisation of the people or the popular. There is something uncomfortable and at the same time inspiring in the lack of correspondence between, on the one hand, Ortega's demystifying thesis, in which with humour and precision he explains the contrived and contingent condition of every popular tradition and, on the other, the emphatic pictorial style, so often invoked as the naïve verso of the objective condition promoted by photography, that is so characteristic of Echagüe. The textual accompaniments, evocative descriptive footnotes that Echagüe himself included in the publication of these images, maintain the ambiguity of the photographs' final intention.

But what makes Ortega's thesis on the critical distance of these photographs with respect to their object's nostalgic appeal so improbable is, of course, their form. Echagüe's recourse to the style and techniques of *softening* the image. Pictorialisation, to state it plainly, that, in his case through the meticulous manipulation of the positives using the direct carbon method, presents them as an ideal paradigm of the argument between objective documentation and impostorous artistry that has conditioned the history of photography.

His photographs of popular types add complexity to this simplistic dichotomy, from Ortega's readings of them to the vicissitudes of the prints on Fresson paper themselves. The most notorious and commented upon of these vicissitudes concerns the presence of some of those images in the pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the Paris Exhibition of 1937. It seems totally inappropriate to make them share spaces and intentions with Renau, for example, in the evaluation we make from the present of the symbolic conventions at play here. Echagüe himself regretted the use made of these photographs by "the communists", against his will, without it being on record that he showed the same discomfort with the use that the Franco regime would make of them later, appealing to the same symbolic qualities of the popular.

When the photographs of the series were acquired by the Museum of the Spanish People and later ceded to the National Museum of Anthropology (to be finally deposited in the Museum of Costume), the problem of the definition of the images must have seemed more of a technical than a symbolic one. Catalogued in the archive as descriptive documentary material, with the claim of objectivity that traditionally marks the use of photography in the ethnographic and anthropological field, their plasticity and the pompous theatricality of their compositions must, like an inassimilable surplus, have exceeded the purpose they were never intended to fulfil.

2.

Starting in 1976 and until well into the 1980s, the photographs of Sigfrido Koch Arruti became ubiquitous in the Basque Country in the form of calendars, posters and lovingly-produced publications. His portraits, of relevant personages from Basque culture and of models, generally forming groups and dressed up in folkloric garments, appeared illuminated by a golden light filtered through the same dense mist that hid the mountains in his photographs of landscapes. The characteristic visual style of those representations and their omnipresence, at a historical time that seemed to demand an idealised restoration of repressed identitarian symbols, was so efficient that it seemed to have always-already been there, as an essential style that recounted what was Basque. If the recourse to a certain catalogue of features and habits is directly indebted to the neurotic fixation of ethnotypes attempted by late nineteenth century anthropology, a context in which the contributions of Telesforo Aranzadi to Basque ethnography must be situated, there is a formal difference, which is added to these representations as a significant novelty. And it is precisely this novelty that gives the sensation of having always been inseparable from the representation of the local character: the effect of veiling achieved through diffusion or soft focus filters, softening the edges and breaking up the texture of the image into a coarse photographic grain that contributes a romantic evocation of mist. The mist, which, following Koch, has been taken for granted as an inseparable signifier of the representations of the Cantabrian landscape, had found a greater presence in the literature than in the pictorial tradition to which the photographer's style referred. And in his evocation it would serve as an index of the climatic peculiarity of the landscape made symbol, but also, in an ambivalent way, as a metaphorical reference to the vagueness of memory or dream. An allusion to a distant or dreamt time.

The link of this visual effect to a nineteenth century pictorialist tradition would seem relevant. It is, however, to a more post-modern reference that Koch himself often refers as a direct source of inspiration. The photography of David Hamilton, who establishes a type of visual canon of the erotic representation of women, with his highly characteristic *flou* effect and amber tonality that almost come to replace the object itself as signifiers of the proposed voluptuousness, is the most determinant reference in Koch's practice. The banal dichotomy between eroticism and pornography, based on the supposed artistry and the evocative character of elaborated style of the former against the brutal, pragmatic frankness of the latter, becomes highly fertile in this context. A series of perverse analogies are derived from shifting that dialectic between eroticism and pornography, *soft* core and *hard* core, to the tension between artistic and documentary photography, or in a more promising way, to the opposition between soft and hard representations of collective identity.

In the last decades of the Francoist period, the ambiguous and reticent relationship of the regime with the expressions of Basque folklore and, above all, the vigour of a generation of artists involved in a late avant-garde, had given rise to a replacement of the forms of the romantic tradition of nationalism by a formal abstract language, based on analytical sculpture and a severe gesturality. The *hard* abstraction of Oteiza, Chillida, Basterretxea or Ibarrola was genuinely modern insofar as it proposed to create an articulating language of utopian aspiration, projecting its idea of community towards an imagined future and, simultaneously, towards a mythical past that was no less constructed. The popular

assumption of those complex forms, an assumption that has lasted up until the present, is a peculiar case of symbolic efficacy.

Koch's photographs appeared to bypass the caesura represented by the abstract exception, once again taking up the essentialist representations that in the first three decades of the twentieth century had had recourse to the romantic vision of the people and to anthropology and ethnography as sources. In reality, this caesura cannot have been evident to Koch, since he was a representative of the third generation of photographers in his family, which, since his grandfather Willy Koch had settled in San Sebastián in 1901 and by way of his father, Sigfrido Koch Bengoetxea, had dedicated itself with perseverance to taking portraits of popular types. On the other hand, ethnography and anthropology were also crucial disciplines in the constitution of the mythical language of modern Basque sculpture. It therefore seems to me to be a symptomatic fact that the personages most frequently photographed by Koch, with whom in addition he maintained a close friendship, were, on the one hand, the sculptors mentioned above – Oteiza more profusely than any other amongst them – and, on the other, the prominent figures of Basque ethnography Julio Caro Baroja and, in an especially insistent way, father Joxemiel Barandiaran.

3.

A photograph from the private sphere of the Koch family, whose author is unidentified, shows the photographer seated at one end of a table, getting ready to photograph an elderly priest, who is seated with his back turned to us at the other end. The furniture and the general setting recall the kitchen of a farmstead, and the similarity that the scene and the photographed subject bear to uncountable earlier photographs taken by Koch led me to think that this was a photographic session with Joxemiel Barandiaran. Although I later learnt that the person photographed was not Barandiaran but a quack doctor and priest – more likely to be the object than the author of anthropological research – the scene maintained the small surprise that, in a way, redeemed the stylistic resource: Koch, in an intimate gesture, is preparing the diffusion filter by breathing onto the camera lens so as to mist it over. The rudimentary technical solution replaces the photographic device with a physical gesture nearly as meaningful as the effect produced.

4.

-In 1976, José María Martín de Retana's publishing house *La Gran Enciclopedia Vasca*, which had been publishing the complete works of Barandiaran since 1972, undertook the publication of four monographs on Basque museums. Since 1966, the publishing house had been trying to mitigate the bibliographical gap concerning what was categorised as *Basque themes* that, with the exception of what was produced in exile, had been restricted to regionalist folklore, something barely tolerated in the earlier period. The same sense of priority of that historical context had given rise to other ambitious publishing initiatives with an encyclopaedic vocation. From the enormous *Enciclopedia General Ilustrada del País Vasco, Auñamendi*, begun in 1969, to the 18 volumes of *Documentos Y*, internal ETA archives published by Hordago and Lur between 1979 and 1981, the desire to create a specific formal language seemed to find its correspondence in the bibliographical corpus as well.

The first of the four monographs on museums was dedicated to the San Telmo Museum of San Sebastián, which, created at the start of the twentieth century as an eclectic city museum, had specialised in Basque ethnography from 1914 onwards, a circumstance that strongly determined the institution's subsequent identity. The publishing house commissioned Sigfrido Koch to photograph the museum's collection.

While Koch, logically enough, abandoned his particular visual style in order to document the exhibits, the establishment of neutral criteria of composition or illumination does not appear to have been a priority in these images. The intuitive way of composing the shots and the renunciation of any attempt to separate the objects from the places they occupied in the museum, quite apart from the limitations that this might represent for a technically clean photograph, lends a disconcerting oddity to the images. Unsuitability appears as a symptom in the problem of representing the ethnographic object on the part of a person who had made an object of what was ethnographic.

A photograph in black and white, missing from that publication but held in the museum's collection, shows a typical Basque farmer seated in the kitchen of a farmstead. The composition and the theme are very clear antecedents of what would later characterise the work of Sigfrido Koch. The photograph is signed by Willy Koch, although the image was, in all certainty, taken in the 1940s by Sigfrido Koch the elder. The photograph shows a model dressed up in the typical garments of a farmer, smoking a pipe, seated in front of what in reality is a reproduction of a popular Basque kitchen, which, even today, is on display in the San Telmo Museum itself.