



Bia Gayotto at the Armory Center

James Welling

Bia Gayotto: The Towers Apartments I-III, Pasadena

The Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, CA
December 7, 2003–February 1, 2004

The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960-82

UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA
February 8–May 9, 2004

Museo de Arte Contemporanea de Vigo, Spain

May 28–September 19, 2004

Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland

November 26, 2004–February 13, 2005

Bia Gayotto's recent show "The Towers Apartments I-III" at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena extends her use of collaboration in making photographic work. In early 2003, Gayotto worked with the residents of the Towers Apartments in Pasadena to create a series of seven photographs. The resulting large, archival pigment prints were hung in a tight row on one wall with caption labels beside each image. The series is an extension of Gayotto's use of collaborative systems to organize the compositions of her pictures, which she has been doing for the past six or so years. Her projects also involve humor and play. For example, in an early work Gayotto invited friends to arrange 6-8 pieces of furniture in her studio. She then photographed the setups from the same central point of the room for each shot.

Gayotto's use of serial techniques resonates nicely with "The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960-82," curated by Douglas Fogle and exhibited at the UCLA Hammer Museum. Organized by the Walker Art Center, "The Last Picture Show" is an enormous exhibition; it seems like three shows in one. Gayotto's work reminds me of the artists in the early part of the show: Bernd and Hilla Becher, Ed Ruscha, Richard Long, Sol Lewitt. Like them, Gayotto has a hands-off aesthetic; she sets up a system and lets it roll. For the Armory show Gayotto asked the Towers residents seven questions. They ranged from "What is the dominant color in your apartment?" and "What is your favorite dish or type of food?" to "Do you vote?" The respondents answered each question by turning their lights on or off for a specific evening over a one-week period. The results are revealed in seven elevation photographs of a building at dusk with differing patterns of window lights.

The Towers Apartments remind me of my grandmother's apartment block in Hartford, Connecticut. It's a 1920s building and I can imagine the faint odor of gas and cooking smells in the corridor. While the Towers are typical of pre-code architecture in Los Angeles, the buildings could be located in any city in America. I always enjoy looking at

Bia Gayotto, "The Towers Apartments #1: Do you consider yourself happy?," 2003, Archival Pigment Photographs, 17 3/4" x 40"

Bia Gayotto, "The Towers Apartments #3: What would you be willing to fight for?," 2003, Archival Pigment Photographs, 17 3/4" x 40"

Bia Gayotto, "The Towers Apartments #7: Do you know your neighbors?," 2003, Archival Pigment Photographs, 17 3/4" x 40"

windows of apartment buildings at night and in Gayotto's project I can study the color temperatures of the rows of windows illuminated side by side. I notice small things in the pictures—patterns of window glass, flowers on tables, ceiling lamps, fans in the window, molding on the wall. As I study each picture, it slowly dawns on me that many of Gayotto's questions could hardly be expressed in simple yes/no, on/off answers. How do these pictures line up with the questions? How do the lights in that ground floor apartment, which are off most of the project, square with the others, which are on some days and off others?

It's difficult to imagine any photograph without a story behind it. It's a truism that all photographs have to be of *something*. It's also true that every photograph engenders a story about its making. For Gayotto the story goes something like this: not all neighbors cooperated. Some were rude or worked at night and wanted nothing to do with the project. Others joined in enthusiastically. In order to translate the participating residents' answers into yes/no, on/off responses, Gayotto needed to interpret the responses to questions that could not be satisfied with binary answers. While the tally of windows in each image has a formal meaning or pattern, the specific "grain" of the answer is often a melding of possible answers. So what I at first thought was a simple process of reading a yes/no, on/off code is more like deciphering a bird song or interpreting an election.

To return to "The Last Picture Show," some artists in the 1960s use themselves as automatons to carry out tasks. Sol Lewitt photographed everything in his apartment; Ruscha photographed every facade between Doheny and Crescent Heights; Vito Acconci pressed a camera against his body to record space around him. However, even in these early works, seriality is tempered by illogical, contingent and local judgments about how to carry out the piece or how to display it. The "conceptual" idea carried out without aesthetic consequence is a bit of a harmless tale. What compels me about the serial work in "The Last Picture Show" and Gayotto's work is how the rules are subtly bent to give the work a voice. For Gayotto, working with all the residents' responses simultaneously, her project is to render the "answers" visually intelligible. Like Nabakov's protagonist who saw meaning in every object—reference mania—who hasn't looked at a facade of night windows and tried to decipher the grid of light shining out to us as individuals? In Gayotto's "Towers Apartment" project, when light speaks a language we might not comprehend, we are invited to give it a try.

James Welling is a Los Angeles-based photographer and film producer.