THE MATTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AMERICAS

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WHAT'S THE MATTER

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THE MATTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY TODAY

The square shows nothing; there is no figure in it; it represents nothing, despite it being—according to its title and what can be recognized from its iconic shape—a type of photograph. Nothing is represented, that is, beyond the gold. Along the bottom of the square is printed the word *POLAROID* and a series of numbers: *1103904104*. Similar numbers identify every Polaroid image in the world, branding each as authentic and unique.

This golden image (fig. 1) was made in 2015 by Costa Rican artist Priscilla Monge and belongs to a series in which she gilded large digital prints of Polaroids. The images in the series are titled either *Amanecer* or *Atardecer* (Sunrise or Sunset) and always include the Polaroid serial number (see also pl. 128). What objects or worlds the original Polaroid captured, if it captured anything at all, are invisible in Monge's works. Beneath every sheet of gold lies a hidden image. The works in the series do not show a world but rather reflect whatever world is placed before it. They are, in essence, golden, sacred mirrors.

Monge's use of gold leaf is a tribute to Cuban-born artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who saw *Gold Field* (1982; fig. 2) by Roni Horn at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1990. The work moved him, he said, toward "a new landscape, a possible horizon, a place of rest and absolute beauty . . . a place to dream, to regain energy, to dare."[1] Horn's large, thin, rectangular sheet of one kilo of pure gold, placed directly on the floor, was created during a decade that Gonzalez-Torres described as one of "trickle-down economics . . . growing racial and class tension . . . defunding vital social programs . . . abandonment of ideals . . . explosion of the information industry, and at the same time the implosion of meaning . . . the fabulous decade was depressing. Especially in the face of public inaction, and the absence of an organized reaction to so many devastating statistics."[2] The 1980s were also the decade of the AIDS crisis. This dire epidemic, marking New York City and San Francisco most visibly, stemmed from a global structure whose shape traced the development of colonial networks and the structural or systemic violence of capitalism. As consumer culture reached a new peak, health and life itself became a matter controlled by pharmaceutical companies.

For Gonzalez-Torres, Horn's sheet of gold raised hope as it transformed the very matter and measure of wealth—gold—into the glowing light of dreams. The depressing state of a world increasingly hemmed in by the rise of neoliberal policies and structures from the 1970s onward achieved, in Gonzalez-Torres's eyes, a moment of redemption in Horn's artwork, lying on the gallery floor. It marked a stark contrast to the way life was increasingly monetized in the 1970s and 1980s, as markets became the only recognized measure of human and social value. If the trading of goods, which thereby established abstract forms of value, had complete control over life, then art needed to take the element most precious to the market, the standard essential to its functioning—gold—and turn it into sheer beauty, emptying it of any preestablished meaning. *Gold Field* was displayed at LAMOCA unadorned, unmediated, as "the simple physical reality" of gold itself.[3] For Gonzalez-Torres, the shiny, reflective, golden square—with nothing more to it than its material existence, not taking on or offering any stable shape—alluded to the world of commodity exchange. By extension, then, it also referred to the neoliberalization of life the Cuban artist so eloquently and indirectly described when reacting to Horn's piece. Art was placed quite literally at ground level, on the same plane and position as the lives trampled on and discarded by declining welfare states and rising market economies. *Gold Field* suggested the need for another form of value and another form of art—one that retained the auratic capacity of art in the midst of the traffic, consumption, and commodification of everything. As life under neoliberalism became more precarious, art could "redeem" (as Gonzalez-Torres argued) and critique (as I argue); it could counter the rise of social and economic precarity by offering, among other strategic propositions, ephemeral "little things," to borrow Gonzalez-Torres's term.

Monge's *Amanecer* and *Atardecer* series enact a similar critique. She takes a Polaroid—a unique, authentic, degradable physical object of little intrinsic value—and turns it into a digital image—infinitely reproducible, durable, immaterial, of indefinite value—and then covers it with gold. In a dizzying realm of digital images and computer technologies that makes everything visible, invades all privacy, and creates virtual bodies, objects, and worlds, Monge's work with Polaroids offers a reflection

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on the matter of photography and makes the image precious, fragile, and generative. The reflective, gold-covered photograph is an infinitely changing, unstable, image-producing surface. It is the bearer of aura, mystery, the beauty of what cannot be fully seen, of what does not reveal itself as a fully formed figure, and for that reason it engages the imagination and the senses. Suggesting a grounding for photography that is both physical and metaphysical, worldly and otherworldly, Monge's work is an invitation into the realm of the sensorial. Her gold-covered images resensitize us in our desensitized world of photographic and digital imaging. In her hands, photographs are *made* to matter by *taking on* matter, critiquing the dematerialization promoted by the digital and the excessive visualization brought about by the popularity of the photographic medium over the last century.

According to Monge, her images constitute spectral returns: the return of Gonzalez-Torres, Horn, and the history of sacred art. Gold has a long, widespread, and heterogeneous history as a spiritual medium. It has been both a reservoir of radiance, attracting all light, and a source of light—and life—itself. It has also measured wealth, value, and worth. Unlike other materials used in art from the ancient to early modern periods, gold was not a color obtained from the processing of plants or stones; it is a rare and precious physical metal in itself. Monge's *Amanecer* and *Atardecer* series are not representations of the world. They are the matter of the world.

The Polaroid collapsed all steps in the making of an analog photograph—exposing negatives, developing film, creating prints—into a single click. It was an instant photograph. Globally popularized in the 1960s and 1970s, Polaroids came to epitomize vernacular photography in the form of the family snapshot, recording intimate details of everyday life in immediate, singular images. It was this speed that made Polaroids seem more truthful than other photographs—despite always being slightly out of focus and off in their color renditions. Yet the instantaneity of Polaroids came at a cost, namely the suspension of the characteristics most closely associated with the century-old medium: seriality, reproducibility, clarity, durability. Polaroids made the serialized image par excellence—the photograph—into a unique, irreproducible image: yet the final positive image was instantaneous.

Fig. 1 **Priscilla Monge (Costa Rica, b. 1968), *Atardecer 1103904104* (Sunset 1103904104), 2015. Gold leaf, digital print on cotton paper, 31½ x 23⅝ in. (80 x 60 cm). Private collection, courtesy Luis Adelantado Gallery.**

Monge's Polaroid-based images join a group of recent works by artists who are exploring the matter of photography, the ever-shifting possibilities of the elements that originally constituted the medium: light on light-sensitive material, reflections and shadows. Today's digital world is hyperconnective and hyperconnected. Images are now data, and they travel the globe at vertiginous speed. It should be no surprise, therefore, that artists are questioning the infinite reproducibility of the photograph by making work that is irreproducible despite being photographic or quasi-photographic. The unique work (a Polaroid, for example) resists the travel, the speed, the information quality of today's image world. These artists critique the total visibility our Internet age heralds by working with

Fig. 2 Installation view of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Roni Horn*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, March 31–April 30 2005, the second in a series of two-person exhibitions exploring Gonzalez-Torres's affinities with other artists. Works shown are (clockwise from left): Roni Horn (United States, b. 1955), *Gold Field*, 1982. Pure gold (99.9%), 49 x 60 x 1/125 in. (124.5 x 152.4 x .002 cm). Felix Gonzalez-Torres (United States, b. Cuba, 1957–1996), "Untitled" *(Placebo—Landscape—for Roni)*, 1993. Candies individually wrapped in gold cellophane, endless supply, overall dimensions vary, ideal weight 1,200 lbs (544 kg). Roni Horn, *Dead Owl*, 1997. Two Iris-printed photographs on Somerset paper, each 22 1/2 x 22 1/2 in. (57.15 x 57.15 cm). Hauser & Wirth Collection, St. Gallen, Switzerland. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled," 1991. Print on paper, endless copies, 7 in. at ideal height x 45 1/4 x 38 1/2 in., original paper size (17.8 x 114.9 x 97.8 cm).

protophotographic or photographic images that offer refractions from this totalizing thrust. Their works also question representation, since nothing can really be seen in them—or at least nothing other than the effects of light and time on a sensitive surface. Monge's *Amanecer* and *Atardecer* series exemplify this trend. In today's digital world, a unique copy of a photographic or protophotographic image is a clear sign of outdatedness, of vintage-minded hipness, or a critical intervention into the medium and the state of the image world. Photographs that deny representation constitute a new ontology of light and color, refusing to be readable. They propose a radical use of images aimed at exploring matter. These artists undo what we have known photography to be and to enable.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AGE OF MASS MEDIA

Photographically illustrated magazines—such as the Mexican *Rotofoto* and *Hoy* and the Brazilian *O cruzeiro*—had appeared in the 1930s and 1940s throughout Latin America. *Rotofoto*'s mere eleven issues, all published in four months of 1938, addressed the public's appetite for visual news as a "supergraphic magazine." According to a critic at the time, the short-lived Mexican magazine was "without precedents of any kind . . . in journalism from any country, *Rotofoto* says it all through photography."[4] By that time, photographers and editors from newspapers and magazines could scan photographs and subject them to photosensitive beams that registered their light and dark tones and translated them into signals that were carried across wires. Communication technology had transformed photographs into signals, data, mere bits of information. In the early days of the mass media, images were delivered to newspapers by mail, train, or airplane, a journey that could take days. Yet in 1935 news agencies transmitted the first photograph through special telephone lines from California to New York in a mere ten minutes. Images moved across the globe, bought and sold as commodities, via wires, cables, even, briefly, radio. In the 1960s, wire photos would begin their rapid transformation into digital images, turning images into information, and speeding up their circulation. By 1989 digital transmission of photographs via satellite took just sixty seconds.

Between the 1930s and the 1960s the mass media became increasingly visual in its presentation and global in its reach, and these mass-circulated photographs began to make their way into works of art in Latin America and elsewhere. Photography, and more specifically photographs created for or used by news sources and in advertising, became the "raw matter" of experimentation for a new generation of artists acutely attuned to the popular press. As this publication and the exhibition it accompanies demonstrate, the elision of boundaries between mass-mediated photography and the realm of contemporary art prompted a profound rethinking of photography as an artistic medium and an aesthetic pursuit. By the 1960s something was the matter with photography.

Evidence of the impact of mass-media photographs on Latin American artists is pervasive after 1960. Brazilian Helio Oiticica's homage to a fallen hero, *B33 Bólide caixa 18, Homenagem a Cara de Cavalo* (Box B33 case 18, tribute to Cara de Cavalo; 1965–66) features a widely circulated image of his friend Manoel Moreira (aka Cara de Cavalo) after he had been shot more than 100 times by the police in a chase in 1964. Colombian Beatriz González's oil painting *Los suicidas del Sisga no. 1* (The suicides of Sisga no. 1; 1965; fig. 3) is modeled after a 1964 image of two suicidal lovers who had photographed themselves before jumping off the newly built Sisga Dam (fig. 4). Argentine Antonio Berni (fig. 5), Claudio Tozzi (fig. 6), and Roberto Jacoby (fig. 7) made use of Alberto Diaz's iconic 1960 portrait of Che Guevara wearing his starred beret. Brazilian Waldemar Cordeiro's early digital images relied on news photographs, most famously a portrait of a suffering Vietnamese woman in *A mulher que não é B.B.* (The woman who is not B.B.; 1971; pl. 99). Chilean Eugenio Dittborn's 1977 exhibition *Final de pista* (End of the track) in Santiago made use of photographic portraits collected from popular Chilean magazines and newspapers printed between the 1930s and the 1970s (figs. 8–10). These and seemingly countless other works make evident that, between the mid-1960s and the mid- to late 1970s, artists whose work evolved in different national contexts and who aligned themselves with distinct and at times even competing aesthetic and conceptual schools found in mass-media photographs a spur to creative action and matter ripe for transformation.

Looking across the region, this widespread investigation of photography's proliferation in public spheres resulted in wildly diverse works in terms of material makeup, stylistic form, and message. Latin American artists not only incorporated photographs directly into their paintings as real-world source material but also translated photographs into other mediums and visual languages. Cordeiro's slick, objectivist, profoundly antinaturalistic and anti-emotional art practice could not be farther from Berni's politically explicit figurative realism, yet at a certain moment both artists turned to photographic images printed in the mass media. Despite the wide variety of uses Latin American artists made of mass-media photography in the late twentieth century, their shared interest in and utilization of such sources spoke to a historical moment. These artists recognized the transformation of photographs into information and commodifiable data. It was a process that helped set the stage for the neoliberalization of economies and cultures. This new interconnectedness and heightened visibility engendered by mass-media photography evolved under the banner of progress and freedom—progress out of underdevelopment and freedom from socialism, communism, and populism. They recognized mass media's power.

This moment gave birth to the salient features of what today we still call "contemporary art." Artists around the world considered photographs printed in the news media up for grabs, ready-made material for any and all. As such, photographs became one more material for artists to work with at a time when the boundaries between traditional artistic media—painting, drawing, sculpture—began to break down; when encounters with other art forms—dance, music, architecture—became commonplace; and when new technologies—video, television—came to the fore. In the 1960s and 1970s artists in Latin America left behind traditional art materials to engage with the highly politicized worlds of national policy and international relations.

The images that blighted the pages of newspapers and magazines were, by the 1960s, traveling images, reproduced in multiple venues within a given nation and outside of it, generating a greater interconnectivity within a given country and around the globe. As already noted, news photographs first traveled as information through the telegraph in what were known as wire photos, a technology developed by Associated Press and inaugurated in 1935. Significantly, the very first wire photo portrayed violence—an airplane crash—foretelling their use during World War II. It was then that photographs began to travel the globe with unprecedented speed for the sake of military intelligence and journalistic use. As the first truly global war, "it posed entirely new problems of manpower, expense, transport, and communication."[5] More than representations, realistic and indexical photographs functioned as containers of practical information that could be transmitted easily across continents and oceans. Given this history, it's no surprise that the photographs appropriated and transformed by Latin American artists in the 1960s frequently featured images of the dead, nearly dead, or suffering.[6]

And then satellites changed everything. October 4, 1957, witnessed the successful launch of the Soviet Sputnik into space, marking the beginning of the Space Race of the 1950s and 1960. Then, on July 10, 1962, information went global, as satellites