

Original copies and obscure traces
Ángela Bonadies' meta-photographic inquiries

In her practice, the Venezuelan artist Ángela Bonadies challenges conventional ideas about photography, creating a critical distance from which to regard the medium, its visual tropes, and historical uses. Set apart from the narrative and evidentiary impulses of the documentary tradition, which enshrined Henri Cartier-Bresson's ideal of photographers who produce unique images by putting "on the same line of sight the head, the eye and the heart", Bonadies' work is often conscientiously staged and thoughtfully premeditated. She is not interested in aesthetically dazzling feats of writing with light but in making conceptually driven visual production, which shifts without hesitation between straight photography and digital montage. The meta-photographic dimension that underpins her practice means that Bonadies is constantly questioning the medium and how it produces meaning, thus engaging photographs as indexes that fixate the past as a stable record, and as documents that can be appropriated and redeployed to alternate ends. She interrogates photography not just on aesthetic or compositional terms, but as a visual technology deeply embedded in the socioeconomic and political power structures intrinsic to modernity — a modernity that in Latin America the artist re-defines as *modernidad*, "modernity", for the irregular and syncopated way it took shape.

Composites, rather than originals, then, photographs in Bonadies' work are shifting sites where meaning cements through contact with pre-existing images and established ways of seeing, but can be destabilized through continual reappraisal. This dialogic principle is precisely what characterizes the series *Copia original* (2011–2014), in which each image is at once an original photograph taken by Bonadies and an assemblage of objects that stages points of contact between her work and that of other artists. In the pictures, the everyday spaces of the artist's home serve as a studio for *mise-en-scènes* in which photographic paraphernalia — the lights and tripods, cables and cameras — appear alongside real artworks or reproductions of them. In one image, Bonadies' kitchen sink contains a *mise-en-abîme* of interphotographic references. Next to the unwashed remnants of an earlier meal sits a book in which a photograph of similarly unremarkable kitchen sink is printed. Beyond its apparent simplicity the image is an index card of sorts, explicitly citing Thomas Demand's photographed paper sculpture *Sink* (1997) and tacitly evoking the kitchen-sink still life also made by Wolfgang Tillmans, whose name Bonadies included in the title of this work. While images such as this delve into the history of photography, others establish *sui generis* connections between the international and local art worlds, presenting reproductions of works by world-renowned conceptual and contemporary artists in dialogue with others by Bonadies' Venezuelan peers. By placing these local works in physical contact or direct

Comment [JR1]: Would it be possible to add a sentence or two here that gets to the points made at the end of the essay—about intersections of photography/the archive/state control/power.

dialogue with art books, Bonadies establishes a literal connection, revealing her own web of references while also challenging the frontiers of art history's centers and peripheries.

While the images in *Copia original* function as intersectional matrixes that link different contexts and practitioners, in a broader sense the series' underlying gesture might also be interpreted as a statement on the twentieth-century quest to establish auteur photography as an art form in its own right, perhaps implying that this struggle is a thing of the past. Indeed, with the title "original copy", Bonadies lays a tongue-in-cheek claim to originality. Her aim is not to make original images, but to use "post-production" and staged still life to establish links with other artists and thinkers, thus situating photographic production mid-way between personal realms (the home that doubles as studio) and global networks (the reproduction and circulation of artworks publications).¹

For all the international influences it reveals, however, *Copia original* is by no means disconnected from the contingencies of contemporary Venezuela. The very fact that the series was realized entirely in Bonadies' apartment attests to the complexity of photographing in public spaces where robbery and violent crime are daily realities. Similarly, the image *Martha Rosler + El Nacional + Nanni Moretti + Vestalia Pérez* directly addresses the contemporary conflict surrounding illegal citizen seizures of buildings and urban precarity (fig. 1). In the background of the image are pages from the Venezuelan broadsheet *El Nacional*, which feature news stories penned by local journalists Moretti and Pérez on governmental tolerance of illegal squats (or "invasions" as Venezuelans call them) under the late socialist president Hugo Chávez, the use of the Caracas horse racing track as an emergency shelter for flood victims, and these victims' protracted struggle to be rehoused in state-built homes. This local context provides a (literal) backdrop for the other element in the image, a spread from the book *If You Lived Here . . . The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism*, published after an eponymous exhibition by US artist Martha Rosler that addressed urban housing politics in New York.² The conjunction of the challenges of urban precarity in Venezuela and artistic responses to it here stands as an explicit nod to the issues that preoccupy Bonadies in other other projects, perhaps most evidently *La Torre de David*, and art and research project on the notorious, eponymous "slumscrapper" in Caracas on which she has collaborated with the Venezuelan artist Juan José Olavarría since 2010.³

Still, in its meta-photographic dimension Bonadies' work by no means looks exclusively at her own practice or to the field of art photography. The series *Palacio Negro* (2011) looks outward, both beyond Venezuela to Mexico City, and toward the social and

¹ Nicolás Bourriand, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2002).

² The exhibition *If You Lived Here...* was held at Dia Art Foundation in 1989. See: Brian Wallis (ed.), *If You Lived Here . . . The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism: A Project by Martha Rosler* (Seattle: Dia Art Foundation, 1991).

³ On this project, see the artists' blog at: <http://latorrededavid.blogspot.com>

political dimensions of photography's time-honored links to State power and discipline. It is rooted in Bonadies' longtime inquiry into the archive's status as an apparatus that establishes and perpetuates dominant discourses and public memory through "principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types", as Michel Foucault theorized.⁴ In *Palacio Negro*, Bonadies digs out, examines, and re-photographs select negatives held at the National Archive in Mexico City, which documented the building's former use as an infamous panoptical jail dubbed – as the title of the series mentions – the "black palace" before it was closed and transformed in 1982 into the official repository of documents preserved for civic remembrance (fig. 2). The negatives she re-photographed are interspersed with other images that Bonadies herself took of the archive's carefully maintained infrastructure and of the obsolete panopticon of the former jail. The short texts that accompany the succession of images dwell on the way that memory and oblivion converge at the jail-turned-archive, now a place where the crumbling panopticon's sinister past seems to have been forgotten as the change in architectural function redirects the public gaze to the contents of the archive, rather than the site's bygone use.

Here, then, archival photographs and photography itself are deployed critically to intersect past and present. The act of unearthing photographic records from the original penitentiary archive restores the building's darker days to memory, at the same time as it sheds light on the way that architecture, vision, and discipline are bound together at the service of the power of the State. Through her archival methods, Bonadies is clearly "concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces," to borrow the description that Hal Foster used to define the archival impulse in contemporary art.⁵ Indeed, if, as Foster argues, archival art garners critical traction when it turns "excavation sites" of bygone histories into "construction sites" for alternate narratives, then Bonadies's conflation of the jail and the archive in *Palacio Negro* certainly fits this description. By extracting and appropriating photographic documents from the archive, she redeploys them to critical ends, issuing a reminder of how photography is bound up with the impulse to discipline and punish.⁶

In this regard, as she excavates existing archives to construct new narratives, Bonadies adopts the archaeological methodology Foucault advocated as a means to speak back to power: she searches not for a beginning or a singular narrative, but rather probes and questions the already-said and, more importantly here, the already-photographed.⁷ It is this reflective approach that connects *Copia original* and *Palacio Negro*. For while distinct in their

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 2010), 22.

⁵ Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (2004): 3-22; 5.

⁶ Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 22.

⁷ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 131.

form and content, both series are driven by Bonadies' constant questioning of photography's history, norms, and uses. As she creates works that look again at the photographic medium, she turns conventional lines of sight into ramifying lines of flight, making copies that are original and bringing obscure traces back into view.

IMAGE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Ángela Bonadies, *Martha Rosler + El Nacional + Nanni Moretti + Vestalia Pérez*. From the series *Copia Original*, 2011-2014.

Figure 2. Ángela Bonadies, *Untitled*. From the series *Palacio Negro*, 2011.