

CABANYAL ARCHIVE In Memory of the Place

Patricia Gómez
Maria Jesús González

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Curated by Joana Hurtado Matheu.



Ajuntament de
Barcelona

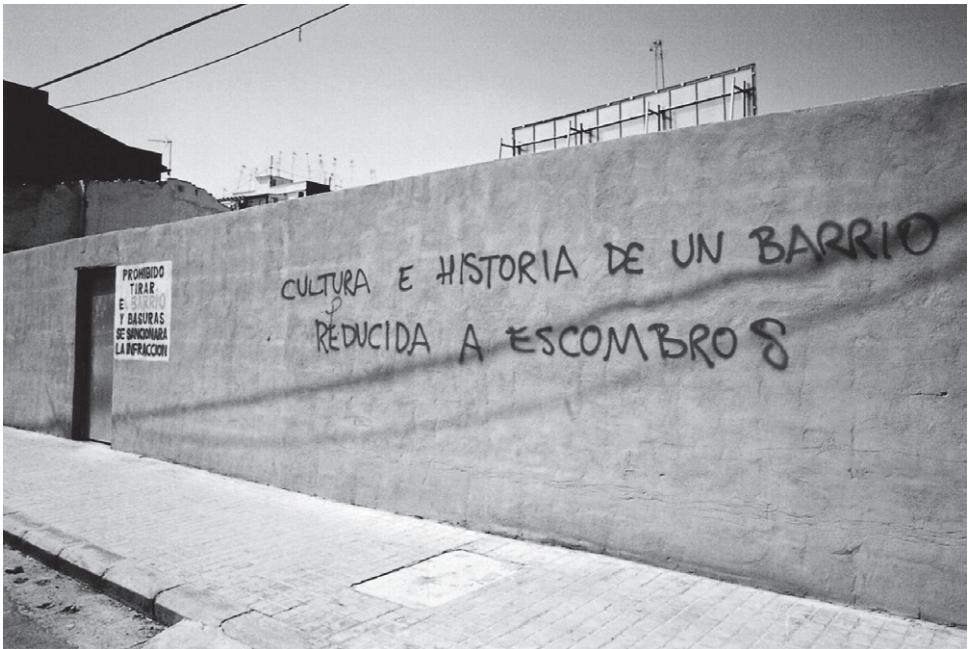
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The Cabanyal neighbourhood is a group of fishermen's houses located about three kilometres east of Valencia's old quarter. It was originally part of the old fishing village known as Poble Nou del Mar until it was annexed to the city in 1897. As such, it has an urban grid system typical of the parcelling and parallel alignment with the sea of the old fishermen's huts, the *cabanyes* that gave the area its name. Replacing the old constructions, low houses were built that were of an eclectic design, the result of a popular reinterpretation of the different styles of the time, such as modernism, historicism and rationalism.

In 1993, Cabanyal was declared a Cultural Asset of Interest by the Generalitat Valenciana in recognition of its architectural and historical value but also its social value, given that the singularity of the houses favoured a culture of its own, with a life closely connected to the street and a strong sense of identity. According to property law, this meant creating a Special Protection Plan to guarantee its conservation but in 1998, just five years later, the Valencia City Council, then governed by the conservative party, PP, announced an urban redevelopment plan to create a boulevard, extending Avinguda Blasco Ibáñez by 800 metres so that it reached the sea. This aggressive proposal, which affected one of the oldest areas and split the neighbourhood in two, involved the demolition of more than 1600 houses. Reactions were not long in coming. People from the neighbourhood created the citizens' platform Salvem el Cabanyal and a strong public opposition, led by cultural professionals and technical specialists in urban matters, denounced not only the destruction of the architectural heritage and the tearing up of the urban fabric but also the harmful consequences for the living conditions of its inhabitants and their social cohesion.

And so it was. As of 1998, the neighbourhood was plunged into a state of progressive degradation that fractured it physically and socially. The locals were divided into those who believed it was a threat to the integrity and identity of the neighbourhood and those who wanted to sell and put an end to the growing segregation and delinquency, a deterioration furthered by the urban development plan itself, which at best left empty plots and at worst, houses that were abandoned for many years and ended up with squatters, being walled up or in ruins. Despite legal action by Salvem el Cabanyal, in 2005, the Valencian City Council and Generalitat created the company Cabanyal 2010 to manage the acquisition and demolition of the houses.

At the height of the conflict, in 2005, the Salvem el Cabanyal platform called upon Patricia Gómez and María Jesús González. Between artistic intervention and heritage conservation, the work of the Valencian artists, who began their practice twenty-two years ago, consists of rescuing



spaces immersed in processes of disappearance or abandonment. They achieve this through a distinct system of physical and documentary archiving based on the investigation of the context, analysis of the spaces and their photographic and audiovisual record, as well as on direct interventions on large walls that are transferred to canvas, using what they call “printing by detachment”, which stems from combining the *principle of transfer*, characteristic of printmaking and *strappo* in fresco restoration.

They were invited to intervene in the platform’s meeting space, located in the old slaughterhouse. The following year, in 2006, the City Council acquired Casa de la Palmera, one of the most emblematic houses in the neighbourhood and, as there were fears of its demolition, the artists also got involved. According to them, “It was a house in the bourgeois modernism style, with two floors and an attic. Inside, the characteristics of the style of the period were evident in the woodwork of the doors and windows, in the mouldings of the friezes and ceilings, in the mosaic floors and in the tiled chair rails with organic motifs.”

Based on this approach for the neighbourhood and with the help of a grant from Caja Madrid’s Generaciones programme, in 2007, the artists decided to expand the area of action and recover as many houses as possible to show the magnitude of the impact of the urban planning project. The process was long, exhausting and rather frustrating. First, because of the difficulties contacting the owners (after trying all the official channels through the company Cabanyal 2010, letters and requests to the Councillor for Major Projects, the Regional Ministry for Culture and the Directorate

General for Heritage that never got a response, the most effective way was through the Spanish Property Registry and above all the Cadastre). Finally, as in any expropriation process, there were the suspicions of wary neighbours, who didn't want to know anything about what was going on or didn't understand what these two strangers, who introduced themselves as students of Fine Arts, wanted to do in their old houses.

The project lasted a year, from January 2007 to February 2008, during which the artists printed twenty-six pieces from ten different houses. A total of 340 metres of canvas, which they sewed together and rolled into a single piece weighing 314 kilos. They also recorded two documentary videos, which explore the context and the process of detachment and printing, as well as all the printed fragments as they pass through the rolling machine. Entitled *Cabanyal Archive. In Memory of the Place*, the project is now on display, accompanied by graphic documentation, at the Fabra i Coats: Contemporary Art Centre of Barcelona. The exhibition is part of the conceptual line introduced by the centre in 2023 on the political connection between the material and affective memories of the environments we inhabit. After seeing, with David Bestué, how Barcelona can cyclically become a *City of Sand* and after excavating the first Neolithic city or immersing ourselves in the oblivion of the Mediterranean with Rossella Biscotti in *Cable City Dance Cable City Sea*, now, with the *Cabanyal Archive*, we discover the material history of a neighbourhood affected by urban speculation.

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Trained in engraving and printmaking, Patricia Gómez and María Jesús González explore the physical possibilities of these traditional artistic practices while broadening their meanings by linking them with architecture, urban planning, sociology, philosophy, anthropology and archaeology. With their particular methodology of detaching facades, walls and floors, they have extracted the material and historical memory of abandoned homes, disused prisons, closed detention centres for illegal migrants, etc.

The transformation of a three-dimensional space into a full-scale two-dimensional one reminds us of the story by Borges in which the map of an empire is constructed on a scale of 1:1. In that back and forth between fiction and reality, blurring the limits between the two, Borges' interest in creating a copy so true to the original that it can replace it, here, comes into being. Patricia Gómez and María Jesús González also create full-scale documents. However, they do not seek to explore with irony the appropriationist poetics and politics that exploit the austerity of (cartographic)

science or sacrosanct (literary) authorship but rather to generate an archive that restores the memory of an original framework and thus draws a critical map of what is habitable.

This is no empire but contemporary ruins, urban discards and evidence of life that would otherwise be forgotten. Nor is it a typical ruin. This is not one of those stone ruins entangled in wild nature that 18th-century man contemplated as the sun set in the background. Nor is it the souvenir that ruins have become today, museumised for a calculated public and political use of history, the result of the democratisation of tourist travel at the end of the 19th century and the culture of memories of the late 20th century. In the practice of these artists, there is no romanticism or nostalgia but rather an archaeological interest in a particular environment that is the bearer of memory and an engaging view of the present. This is why it is a compilation of pieces, sewn together and (un)folded, which we see in parts, to avoid any contemplation or sentimentality. This is also why they are not monuments because they do not enthrone the past but interact with it and question it, highlighting its gaps.

It is evident that the unrelenting passage of time leaves its mark on the constructed space but we are not always aware of it. Like the child that grows and changes every day in front of our eyes, it is not until the moment is left behind or the space falls into disuse (when it appears to be no longer useful) that it paradoxically assumes a new use, that of making us see and experience its singularity, as well as its observation of time and its impermanence. This is the role of ruins and also of photographic albums, which act as direct witnesses of life, indexical signs, traces that indicate an absent presence, or rather, make an absence present. This is also the aim of the *Cabanyal Archive*, which takes the house as a matrix to preserve a record in its dual sense, as a register and an inventory. It also takes a snapshot of reality, which is also dual because it is physical and representative: the layers of residual information, architectural and experiential, that time has recorded, which are transferred by contact to a new canvas support and all the visual documentation. In addition, the roll of fabric, latently, like analogue photographic film reels and film footage, hides or contains what the images and, in particular, the two videos show. Two films that, like an x-ray, invite us to go inside the object exhibited in a double narrative, that of its own production process and that which explains all those houses.

“If walls could talk...”, we say. And we say it from that anthropocentric point of view, so sadly ignorant of everything that walls and many other things, say. Because it is not only walls, ceilings, floors, paintings, mouldings, tiles, coatings, plastering, textured painting, skirting boards,



stains, scratches, damage and cracks that speak. Here, elements and materials, until now barely heard in the narration of history, are rescued, bound together and exhibited to denounce the corruption that affects the space and the memory of the present and also to point out the absence of what is normally remembered. Because these site-specific interventions, reminiscent of Gordon Matta-Clark's *Bronx Floors* (1972–1973) or Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1992–1994), are the creative response to a current concern, the growing homogenisation and dehumanisation of contemporary cities, victims of urban speculation and the social impoverishment that deprives them of identity and history.

At a time of utmost dematerialisation and excess of information, materialising the disappearance of traces means giving value to the process and matter behind what is “simply” lived and shared. Today, when our everyday activity, public and private, is tracked so that it can be bought or discarded instantly, returning to physical prints without added discourse is a way of recognising the capacity for action of matter —its *vibrant*

power as Jane Bennett would say—and at the same time, gives tangibility to the invisible, entity to what is most derisory, uncertain and useless, to vindicate something that is neither productive nor consumable but which structures our lives inside and outside the home.

Through the fragment, the emptying and in negative, Patricia Gómez and María Jesús González peel the skin off the houses to trace and record the marks that condense on it as well as the multiple coatings of paint that their inhabitants superimposed in an attempt, precisely, to erase the marks. What they save are the signs we don't want to see, the signs of wear and tear, the indefinite but insistent marks of routine—that chair that bumps against the wall every time the table is cleared, the legs of the bed that scrape across the same part of the floor when we make it, walking up and down the corridor or the wind and the sun that sting the facade every day. They are also, therefore, everything that is neither seen nor spoken of, which appears between the objects, in their folds, in that *intra-* as Karen Barad says, to make us aware of the micro and macro rela-



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tionship between the individual and the world. In the interval between the object and the image, these artists give physical presence to the gestures, customs and ties (or *intra-actions*) that constitute the relational space, where there is room for the intimacy of the domestic and the identity of an entire neighbourhood, to show us the extent to which social constructions materialise in the physical world and people's lives —the extent to which the walls that support us are strong and at the same time unstable.

Making public what is private and dispensable means highlighting what is hackneyed to spotlight domestic chores in an attempt to re-sew historical amnesias in the face of what is ordinary, temporary or discontinuous but, at the same time, repeated, constant and infinite. Like the 200 minutes of *Jeanne Dielman, quai du Commerce, 23, 1080 Bruxelles*, Chantal Akerman's film about the daily life of a mother and housewife in the 1970s, which today is a tribute to care work, so enormous and so unjustly made invisible, these 340 metres of canvas is the volume that was missing from the history of everyday life. Yet, the historical narrative also draws on the remains of moments lived, incidents that leave a mark as well as second- and third-hand information that sediments. Memory forgets but it also seizes upon things that go unnoticed, "it takes insignificant events as vestiges" says Ernst Bloch in *Traces*, a compilation of stories, anecdotes and narratives from the 1930s. Like Borges, Bloch connects memory and narrative, literature and philosophy, to tell us that from the most imperceptible fragments of the present, we can extract ways of living, thinking and feeling of an entire era.

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Of the ten houses worked on from 2007 onwards, four have been demolished. Casa de la Palmera was occupied by squatters for four years, until its demolition in 2010. It remains an empty wasteland with a single palm tree. In 2015, with the change of term, the urban redevelopment plan was suspended and a regeneration strategy for the neighbourhood was initiated, which has united the government and neighbourhood to this day.

Bloch says that retracing what resists being forgotten is what thought does, that the *traces* "point out a 'less' and a 'more' that will have to be thought in the telling, retold in the thinking". As they pass, the signs of time, even the innocuous ones, help us think and at the same time tentatively illuminate what has yet to happen. Between the object and the image, between the original and the copy, between what we see folded up, voluminous and compact, and rolled out flat on the screen and in the room, the space of the archive expands to include us.

1.

Fragments of canvas sewn together and rolled up, 340×2.30 metres

2.

Videos, 11 and 30 minutes

3.

Graphic documentation made up of photographs, registration cards, photocopies, plans and diaries

Dates and Times

Tuesdays to Saturdays, 12.00 to 20.00

Sundays and Holidays, 11.00 to 15.00

Guided tours and related activities.

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