

Anna Malagrida
Indices of a crisis
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As we know, the collapse of Lehman Brothers on September 15th, 2008 marked the beginning of a financial and economic crisis in the United States, which quickly plunged the world into a new recession. In response, neo-liberal austerity measures were introduced to reduce public debt and deficits, to the detriment of social protection and household incomes, whilst the downturn in economic activity and job losses caused unemployment rates to surge. The crisis weakened the working and middle classes, putting social issues back at the centre of the debate. The heightened perception of inequality fuelled an explosive sense of injustice which gave rise to new forms of social and political conflict. The Great Recession was as much a crisis of capitalism as it was of democracy. It could not leave artists indifferent.

A paradoxical documentary approach

Anna Malagrida is an artist with a strong political awareness, having closely followed the developments of the crisis in Spain, where she was born in 1970, and in France, where she now lives. Several of her series echo its insidious manifestations or, on the contrary, its flare-ups. Her *Vitrines* series (2008-2009) consists of photographs of the shop windows of small Parisian businesses covered in whiting, presumably after the owners had gone bankrupt. *Los muros hablan* (The Walls Speak) (2011-2013) shows the bottom of walls, often the bases of columns, of financial and political institutions in Madrid and Barcelona on which the Spanish Indignados wrote their slogans before they were swiftly erased. Finally, *Paris barricadé* (2018-2019), produced in the context of the Yellow vests conflict and their weekly, sometimes violent demonstrations around the Champs-Élysées, brings together photographs of banks, estate agencies and luxury stores, their facades fitted with wooden protective devices. These three urban series were conceived independently of each other, with their own distinct working methods, each producing specific forms. Devoid of any human presence, they nevertheless form a whole. Since each of the images is titled after the place where it was taken, *Vitrines*, *Los muros hablan* and *Paris barricadé* sketch out a topography of the crisis whose far-reaching tendrils crystallised around places of political, economic and financial power.

The political and social significance of these three series, and of Anna Malagrida's work in general, situate her in the contemporary resurgence of an old documentary tradition that must be distinguished from the now strictly formal approaches to the "documentary style" defined by Walker Evans in a famous 1971 interview with Leslie Katz. In addition to a critical approach, Anna Malagrida shares the choice of a camera – for her, a medium-format camera or a view camera – with artists such as Paul Graham and Bruno Serralongue. Whilst guaranteeing a degree of mobility, the camera enables her to produce series of detailed images that she shoots on a large scale, such as *Vitrines*, which give the impression of being life-size, or on a more modest scale, as in *Los muros hablan* and *Paris barricadé*, which she then combines. But she distinguishes herself from these artists with images that stand in stark contrast to the power of documentary photography to record and describe the world. In her photographs, everything is in focus and in full light, but very little seems to be visible. The subject is at the centre of the

image, but everything seems to be happening outside the frame. One might say that Anna Malagrida has developed a paradoxical documentary approach: whilst appropriating the tools, means and protocols of documentary photography, it has renounced its revelatory power in the pursuit of different objectives.

A matter of distance and time

This paradox is a matter of distance and time. In this respect, *Vitrines*, *Los muros hablan* and *Paris barricadé* represent three ways in which the photographer situates us in relation to her subject. The first show nothing but whitewashed shop windows. Our gaze loses itself in the gesture that has occluded them. At the sides, we come up against the metal frame of the glass walls, which doubles as the frame of the photograph. When we return to the image, we can just about make out graffiti in the pigment of the whiting, or the reflections of the city on the glass. Contrary to their original function, the shop windows have become opaque screens, revealing next to no information about the emptiness, inactivity and silence that have descended on these places. In *Los muros hablan*, we can see traces of erased inscriptions on the stone facings, but this time they are not reduced to the function of screens. The images focus more on the material and formal characteristics of this monumental architecture of power. But the gaze does not stumble on these massive plinths. When the corner of a building is photographed, it is drawn in to the right and left. In all cases, the space of the city invites itself into the image, no longer in the form of reflections, but explicitly, through the ground in front of the lens. Produced in collaboration with Mathieu Pernot, who favours medium to wide shots in his own work, *Paris barricadé* widens the field even further, breaking with the frontal approach of *Vitrines* and *Los muros hablan* to provide more information about the immediate urban context of the protected shopfronts. However, like the other two series, it doesn't provide the slightest hint of the events to which they bear witness – at most we can read “Macron resign” painted in red on the wall, which does little more than situate these images in time, as well as “Freedom” and “Son of a bitch,” which are more atemporal.

Despite echoing specific events, Anna Malagrida's three series never show them directly. It would have been possible to document the bankruptcy of small businesses and the effects of the crisis on individuals, and certainly to show the demonstrations and the occupations of squares by the Indignados in Spain, and of roundabouts by the Yellow vests in France. This could have given rise to spectacular images such as those widely reported in the press. But the artist's interest lay elsewhere. She preferred to visit the scene after the events. The barricaded shopfronts were therefore photographed on a Sunday, the day after the various Parisian “Acts” of the Yellow vests. Anna Malagrida's photography is “aftermath photography”: its subject is less the event than the traces it leaves, if any. Anna Malagrida has explained how she went to the banks in the aftermath of demonstrations in Barcelona to photograph the smashed windows. Following on from the series *Point de vue* (2006), *Vues voilées* (2007), *Vitrines* and the video *Le Laveur de carreaux* (The Tile Washer) (2010), the idea was to produce new work about this infra-thin, transient space between interior and exterior, transparency and opacity, the glass wall. But when she got there, all of the broken windows had already been replaced. It was then that she identified the traces of erased graffiti.

Intransitive and transitive trances

The traces photographed by Anna Malagrida have a double meaning. They are both visual and semantic, forms and signs, intransitive and transitive. The *Vitrines* are striking for the pictorial quality of the gesture that has covered them, creating surfaces that are modulated or animated by broad movements. The gesture of covering with whitening, like that of the tile washer, is reminiscent of abstract painting. What's more, taken out of context by homothetic framing, each of the *Vitrines* takes on the allure of an abstract painting, and some even seem to hark back to certain colour field or action painters. There is an obvious parallel between Robert Rauschenberg's famous *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953) and the traces left on the walls by the erasing of the Indignados' graffiti. The *Vitrines* and *Los muros hablan* feature gestures that take on an unintentional aesthetic dimension in the eyes of the artist and the spectator. The barricades on the Parisian shop fronts are also striking for the power of their forms and the regularity of their surfaces, which for their part are reminiscent of geometric or minimal abstract art. However, this link between Anna Malagrida's photographs and abstract art is not intended to underscore their pictorial nature. Nor even to inscribe them in a history of photographic abstraction. Rather, it is intended to highlight the importance of purely visual and intransitive forms in her practice: anonymous, found forms that trigger the creation of a series.

Yet the traces that catch Anna Malagrida's eye are also signs. They are transitive, referring to something other than themselves. They are indices of the crisis in the same way as the unemployment rate or the number of cessations of activity, summarised in *Vitrines* by means of repetition. In their erasure, the graffiti of the Indignados gave a voice to the people who were trying to express themselves, just as, in their silence, the barricades of *Paris barricadé* speak of the demonstrations that took place the day before. These transitive traces make use of contrast, of the lack of visibility, to better show the out-of-frame images that are the events. But these indices of crisis are also critical indices. They don't just refer to events, they interpret them. Anna Malagrida also photographed graffiti by the Indignados that had not been erased, but in the end she decided not to use these images, for two reasons. On the one hand, a slogan that is easily deciphered is consumed just as quickly, reducing the photograph to a text, whereas a liminal trace makes an image and arrests the gaze. Moreover, it is precisely this gesture of erasure that gives *Los muros hablan* its full meaning. Like David against Goliath, the Indignados seemed to have little weight in the face of banking and financial institutions with their monumental architecture and their power to render all opposition invisible. Insisting on the traces left by the erasure of graffiti or, in *Paris barricadé*, on the massive and impeccable barricades which were immediately repainted as soon as they were tagged, is a way of highlighting the relationships of domination that continue to govern a political and economic system that has nevertheless shown its limits.

Implicit images

A comparative reading of *Vitrines*, *Los muros hablan* and *Paris barricadé*, three series produced by Anna Malagrida in response to the economic, social and political crisis that began in 2008, brings to light a category of documentary images that are deliberately counter-spectacular and which might be called *implicit images*. With their eye-catching shapes and mute indices that point to the world outside the frame and appeal to the spectators' imagination,

these images run counter to the paroxysmal press images described by Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* (1957) or Susan Sontag's "shock-pictures" in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). In contrast to these spectacular and emotional images, which are nothing more than pure and immediate visualities, Anna Malagrida's implicit images offer "counter-images" or "counter-visualities" of the crisis, which aim to show less in order to help us see better. They belong to the category of photographs which, far from freezing the gaze and the mind, keep them alert, restoring time and space – in a word, making the spectator active again, at the heart of reality.