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When “no” means “I know”

In *Civil Imaginations: A Political Ontology of Photography*, Ariella Azoulay shares with the reader a photograph of an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint attempting to block a potential photograph from within a car. The image of the soldier holding out his fully-extended hand towards the lens of the camera is used to remind us that no matter where we are, we are almost always facing the potential of becoming a photographic subject. Visual mindfulness is now a part of our daily reality and a necessity in this unprecedented age of photographic documentation and depiction. The photographic subjects' reactions to the lens are conditioned by the plethora of possible impacts the documentation of our lives as well as the accessibility to dissemination of photographic messages has. Unlike yesteryear, the almost universal access to photographic creation means that the power dynamic is no longer fixed, and this suggests a possibility or necessity to revisit and develop the ideas of how the relationship between the image creator and the subject is mediated and what our mediation of it says about us, the viewers.

Kent Klich's Mexican photography in his book *El niño* shows that understanding this relationship is not only essential to the control and mediation of our own visual image, but it can also be an important evidence of the agency and expression of those that are often invisible within society. Literary theorists argue that it is impossible to give voice to the marginal in society through writing (though Elena Poniatowska - the author of the written essay that accompanies Klich's book - strongly disagrees). Visual scholars have already clearly underlined that the marginal *can* be represented by photography. Contextualization of photographs, promoted by visual scholars such as John Berger and John Mraz, are key to the comprehension of the message and knowledge found within this event as well as understanding the plight of the subaltern. Klich's specific photo of a street child whose hand blocks the camera, and additional information gleaned from the artist's contacts in his personal archive, bring the point to life with precision.

For ten years Klich worked with street children in the Mexican capital attempting to understand their lives and life outside the nuclear family. On several occasions during his visual essay on these children in Mexico City, Klich photographs them forcibly trying to impede the capturing of the photographic image. What we see through the fingers of these children are evidences that these youths are much closer to our reality than we think. The uniqueness and power of the visual offers evidence that is too clear to dismiss. But what do the photos teach us? In the case of Klich's photography from Mexico, they open a door into a world that is invisible for many who are not facing such levels of poverty and marginality. His work expresses their agency and knowledge and offers the viewer glimpses into their interests and abilities. Klich's photographs show that not only do these children know how to write, as is evidenced from the graffiti that they write on the walls of their secret home within a condemned and abandoned school from

the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, but they can also do so in English: as we see from the phrase “Peace and Love” that they use. Not only do they live in our times, but they use the signs and symbols of pop culture: as is evidenced by the lyrics and symbols they choose to replicate on their walls from diverse international music groups such as The Scorpions, Bon Jovi, Magneto, and Pink Floyd. Like the viewer, they too sacrifice of their material means to celebrate Christmas as is evidenced by a swept room, a makeshift bed, and a christmas tree; or the Day of the Dead with an altar with fruit, *papel picado*, and a photograph of one of their fellow homeless friends. To forget the subaltern or to make them invisible, it is essential that we see them as something else, something distant or strange, something far from our reality. Klich works to the opposite effect. He shows us that these children who have fled their homes of scarcity and violence for a life on the street do understand the world in which we live. However, for many of them, their home life had simply become too complicated to remain.

This is why Klich’s photo of the youth by the nickname “Me vale madres” (“I don’t give a care”), reaching out with his hand to block the artist’s camera lens while he and another boy physically abuse another smaller boy, matters. The image invites the viewer to comprehend that his “no” to the photograph, his objection to the capturing of his deeds, strongly underlines his “knowing”. This photo is not about a youth blocking an image because he does not want to be an object of curiosity, a visual Mexican curio, or a photographic fetish by a foreign artist. The young boy is making evident his knowledge of the power and ubiquity of the visual image and the transgression he is committing: the fact that he is causing physical harm to another. The youth’s attempt to hide his actions is exactly why this featured photograph is of key importance. Because though Klich’s contact sheets show countless evidences of roughhousing among the homeless boys, in this case, “Me vale madres” and his friend were taking things a step too far. They had crossed the line, they knew it, and; for that reason, the boy attempted to block the camera. Klich’s keen visual sense captured this and shares this key visual message with us. The simple raised hand of this street child makes two powerful statements: these children know the power of the physical image and they are well aware of their social transgression. Their “no” makes a clear statement of their “knowing”, narrowing the gap between the viewer and the viewed.

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