

**TAKE A MOMENT TO FIND OUT...  
IN SEARCH OF AN AUTONOMOUS VISUAL CONTEXT  
Chus Martínez**

*Pine Flat* is a project with an immense visual ambition since it aims to establish a context for images that is not explicitly a response to any of the gnosiological paradigms of the present day, so to speak. Pine Flat itself is a small town in the foothills of California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, but it could be one of many isolated rural communities in the United States. The installation at the sala rekálde consists of four components: a suite of portraits of the children from the community titled *Pine Flat Portrait Studio*; a suite of photographs of the landscape shot at different times of the year; a room in which a vinyl record plays the voice of a boy singing cover versions of songs by well-known American bands (on one wall hangs a portrait of the child we take to be the singer); and two screening rooms. In one screening room, the viewer can see what one might term a 'moving portrait' of a solitary child; in the other, a moving portrait of groups of two or more children. Each one of these 16mm film portraits is ten minutes long and loops continuously. Entering each room, one slowly becomes aware of five other reels of film lying next to each projector and realises that to view this vast mural in its entirety, one must visit the exhibition each day of the week. The entire film will be screened several times during the run of the exhibition so that viewers can experience its accumulative effect in the social space of the cinema.

In this vast installation consisting of various elements, some of them aural, Sharon Lockhart has focused all her efforts on creating a kind of image that bears no relation to the verbal, as she concentrates almost exclusively on visual description. What we see is what is important. But what precisely can we see? The entire effort of the work points to an analysis of the elements that make up an image, enabling the artist as a photographer and as a filmmaker to create a context that is not based on a prior narrative, but is instead fashioned by the image itself. Unlike other contemporary artists, Lockhart does not dodge the evidence of the image. Rather, she produces an exercise in self-affirmation through the play between portrait painting, studio photography, and landscape painting with figures, in the manner of filmic units. Seen from this point of view, her work is extremely interesting: on the one hand, it seems momentarily to satisfy the nostalgic demands of the spectator who yearns for an art that takes into account the pleasure of the gaze; and on the other, her chosen methodology and themes put the viewer in a frame of mind for accepting responsibility for his or her own expectations.

What do we really look for in an image? Accustomed as we are to the image as a source of information, as an *arkhé*, the origin and starting point for the development of a plot, the image as representation could be a form of evasion, a way of reconnecting art and pleasure. The images Lockhart has created are imbued, in appearance at least, with that representational nature that characterises the traditional genres of painting such as portraiture and landscape. In Flemish painting of the 17th century, the *camera obscura* transformed the notion that had until then existed between the subject and painting (the photographic camera would later take this process to the limit because things could at last be captured exactly as they are); but even at that time, Johannes Kepler asserted, while attempting to discuss the parallels between the eye and the camera, that it is almost impossible to establish what truly separates reality from artifice. It is interesting to note here that artifice is a very different concept from falseness or fiction. Falseness is a

distortion, fiction an invention, and artifice the product of a sum of elements.

Pine Flat is a place with a particular reality and a geographical and human context that has not escaped Lockhart's keen eye. Even so, very little information about the location of Pine Flat, either geographically or in our imaginary, can be gleaned from a conscientious viewing of each of the portraits in the installation or from watching the film. The individual portraits of the children against a dark background, together with the fact that each figure occupies the same space in the pictorial field regardless of his or her age, and the indeterminacy of the landscapes in which each of the subjects is placed, make it clear that what we have here is a work that does not narrate, even though it documents.

The Pine Flat we see is the end result of a process of synthesis. It is a 'realisation', a task that calls for tremendous insight into the subject being analysed and a complex layering of references, points of view, and visual and sound treatments that do not contribute to our knowledge of the place, but to a different understanding of the image. There is nothing extraordinary about these images. The reason that we are invited to look at them is to see how difficult it is for us to avoid establishing equations between the various elements that make up our reality. In other words, our inability to stop reading and to pass on directly to reflection.

### **INTERMISSION: THE DIMENSION OF TIME**

A disturbing feature of all Lockhart's work is the relationship they establish with the notion of temporality. I mentioned earlier her absolute determination not to contribute to the construction of a deliberate narrative. *Pine Flat* is set in a rural environment. The revolutions that begin in the countryside, only to conclude in the city, belong in the premodern era. Traditionally, in the urban sphere, the city is the representation of all things modern in political life. The metropolis of the empire, the frame of reference and the stage for the crowd and its discontent, the city has been at the centre of the action ever since the very early days of modernity. If we want to decipher the paths it will lead us along, we need to focus our efforts on rationalising it, reinventing or rehabilitating it, or making it legible. Hence the growing interest in including architects in artistic projects and in embracing the very latest theory on the Situationist International movement: after all, every form of help seems inadequate when it comes to the task of situating the action in the multiplicity of urban models and consequently the various ways of organising power in contemporary societies. We need to ask ourselves, then, why there is this determination to shift the centre of attention.

We live in a time of constant change, changes that are in all cases marked by the 'event', something that happens that is different from the everyday. The event is defined by its scale. The radical transformation of the everyday into disaster is marked by the gap between what we can understand and perceive—and which, moreover, helps to re-create the idea of continuity—and the impossibility of defining, measuring, and relating to events that call into question the possibility that there might even be such a thing as a guarantee of continuity. *Pine Flat* is outside the boundaries of the present, if we understand the present to be what Reinhart Koselleck, the German philosopher of ideas, described as "a particular form of acceleration of reality". The rhetoric of technology, and to a certain extent the rhetoric of globalisation, revolves around the idea of speed, given that machines not only make it possible to speed up the production of and access to information, but are also capable of expanding the territory and broadening the action of the subject in question by creating virtual communities that receive and bounce back information in a never-ending process of feedback.

In this particular version of *Pine Flat*, nothing happens. The entire process follows a strict method aimed at halting the flow of time. Once inside the installation, the spectator must try to forget the moment he decided to enter the exhibi-

tion and equally to forget his potential as a receiver of information. Ten minutes of our time are required from us to view the film in each screening room, so that we can grasp not just the image, but every possible dimension of it. The frontal nature of the studio portraits is such that we have to scrutinise each detail to attempt to understand the personality of each of the subjects who has deliberately placed him- or herself in front of the lens.

There is a strong link between this kind of work and many conceptual works of art produced during the 1960s. Attempts to determine the influence that temporality ought to have on a work have prompted interesting and contradictory reactions. The best-known example is Andy Warhol, who, even as he was celebrating in his painting the fifteen minutes of glory that correspond to contemporary society's total affirmation of fame, was producing interminable films that test not only the patience, but also the endurance of the viewer. But Warhol is not alone. Michael Fried, perhaps the most noted critic of the Minimalist movement, remains steadfast in his interpretation of works such as Donald Judd's 'specific objects' or Tony Smith's cubes as works that produce anticipatory and at the same time repetitive experiences. They anticipate a movement that keeps coming back to itself, a different concept of duration in art. This should not be understood as a synonym for universality or eternity. It is not a question of affirming the universal essence of the work and its continuing autonomy. The above works, and *Pine Flat* itself, redefine the concept of duration and create an almost theatre-like context in which the viewer is an essential element. Indeed, *Pine Flat* would seem to await the spectator in order to explore another major issue: the presence of both the viewer and the work in this strange co-existence of spaces, the space constructed by the artist through images and the exhibition space itself, conceived expressly so that this encounter might take place.

The installation as a whole takes the everyday concept of time to the limit. Boredom is generally felt to be a negative experience. Contemporary societies are subject to the dialectic that dictates the primacy of production, aimed at 'covering' our needs. Our own time is also structured along the same lines. An unfilled day in the diary arouses all kinds of doubts about our skill in managing our time on the one hand, and, on the other, our ability to ensure that we are productive. Tackling the dimension of time in a work in such a way that our experience of it verges on boredom means exploring the limits of our perception and our capacity for suspending *time* so that we can study the *site*. The impossibility of moving on rapidly to something else implies the creation of a different horizon in which the work situates the spectator and serves as a starting point for considering the existence of a future time that will prevail against this state of apparent inertness.

#### **THE NOTION OF SITE, THE CONCEPT OF POSITION, AND THE DESIRE TO CREATE A PANOPTICON**

In his controversial treatise *The Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes declared that man can conceive of nothing except in the context of a space. *Pine Flat* is a place that is both in and outside the world. Each portrait and each landscape belongs to this specific site. In order to pursue this argument further, we need to distinguish between site and space. The site is the physical determination of a space for a particular purpose, in order to situate something in it; the site is a modification of the space. In this sense, the image 'constructed' by Lockhart in *Pine Flat* is the site in which each of the figures is situated, be it outdoors or in an improvised studio. The still and moving images are localisations; in other words, they are sites determined by the artist in which the presence of each of these children appears before the viewer, or in which the physical interaction between them can take place. The images, as different units that feed and make up the whole, are carefully intended as an adequate site from which to begin to think about what *Pine Flat* really is.

*Pine Flat* is a space that in some way represents a utopia, the possibility of remaining outside of the hegemony of time. It is no surprise that the camera lens focuses on children rather than adults. This is a new twist on the idea of paradise lost or the possibility of a new beginning, while the project as a whole can be read as a critique of the pre-eminence attained by the concept of site in Western societies. Michel Foucault points out in *Of Other Spaces* that our epoch, more than any other, is the era of space. Aristotle believed that the fact of being in a place meant “being in the world”. Both Foucault and Aristotle, in very different ways and languages, point to the obsession of wanting “to belong”. Being part of reality means being in a specific place, a site from which we can launch ourselves to travel to other places and which is part of a network.

Let us imagine a different place, somewhere anonymous, just like so many other places, that is not part of this network, as the images fleetingly allow us to see. An old and recurrent question in the context of contemporary art, but one that affects the ‘politics’ of images, raises its head again. How does the body relate to space and how can each of the individuals that comprise a community create a space for themselves and establish themselves as a centre, as a site from which they can assert themselves and articulate the future in their own terms? The question is extremely complex. Except in the six films, the six *tableaux vivants* in which we are shown the interaction between two or more children, the portraits and other film material are independent units that do not necessarily point to the group. Philosophical tradition from Immanuel Kant to Maurice Merleau-Ponty assumes that each site is created in accordance with the vital organisms and that it is human experience that constitutes both the place and the possibility of opening up new spaces. This assertion makes even more sense if we stop to reflect for a moment on the places marked by tragedy, from the Warsaw ghetto to the coast of Phuket, for example.

To put it another way, the presence of the children (who relate entirely naturally to the camera once they have grasped Lockhart’s project) gives this site an intelligible dimension. Their presence provides a sense of the scale of the individual in relation to nature but, more importantly, it gives nature a human, inhabitable dimension. Far from any sublime vision, the presence of the children points not to the image’s ability to arouse in us a sense of nostalgia for a lost paradise or to project our frustrations onto their beauty. Instead, it is about their nature, the fact that they come from a remote place that is inaccessible to us, a place that belongs to them. A place that we would all wish for ourselves given that it seems to be possible to affirm ourselves as an individual there.

#### **ARCHIVE AND PAINTING**

Ivan Shishkin is held to be the founding father of one of the first independent groups of artists in Russia, the Circle of the Itinerants (*Peredvizhniki*), established in 1870. As occurs in many other contexts and places and even in the literature of the period, one of the early tenets of the Circle was its intention to break with the teachings of the St. Petersburg Imperial Academy of Arts, which was stubbornly set upon introducing the Neo-Baroque into Russia. Disassociating oneself from the Academy was not just a stylistic, but a political choice. The Itinerants stated for themselves and announced to others their determination to focus their gaze on Russian themes and hence to search for the essence of what seems to our eyes to be a continent, rather than a nation, among its peoples and more specifically among the peoples in its vast landscapes. It is not difficult to find parallels in 19th-century America, from Thomas Cole—a painter of British origin whom history accorded the honour of being the creator of an entirely new pictorial language for depicting the American landscape—to Thomas Moran, known for his almost cinematic representations of the Grand Canyon.

These and many other references are put under the spotlight in *Pine Flat*. I am not referring here to explicit references, but to an understanding of what it means to distance oneself from possible academies or conventional ways of doing things, from the discourses that define a period and a place, and instead to embark on a different adventure. There are thousands of examples we might mention, such as Robert Frank's photographic series *The Americans* (1959), in which he sets out with his camera and for the first time portrays his country as if it were just another place, an unfamiliar landscape populated with unknown people.

Yet even though it is also related to painting and photography, Lockhart's vast installation is very different from the above works in one respect: it lacks a thesis that would determine its goal. Undoubtedly, many contemporary photographic and film projects embrace the opportunity offered by the camera to create an archive. The term 'archive' is, as Jacques Derrida pointed out in one of his most famous talks, a complex notion, as it combines two principles: the principle of agreement and the principle of authority. The principle of agreement refers to the fact that we presume that there is a correlation between the document and what happened, in keeping with the principles of nature or history. The principle of authority points to the document as the source that signals the place where the law occurs, where social order is exercised (or not).

One of the consequences of regarding information as an archive is that the archive immediately acquires the ability to initiate arguments; in other words, it can make us infer information from everything that is placed before us. This is a key point for understanding *Pine Flat* as a form of resistance to this kind of reading of the present, this kind of invention of a past—for this place—and projection of a future. The lack of data, the refusal to tell us anything specific about Pine Flat, is a way of preserving the right of this place, and thousands like it, not to become a museum or turn into a theme park onto which we can project all our desires to escape and all our frustrations caused by our fruitless attempts to alter the conditions of our day-to-day lives. The surprising thing about these portraits is that they were taken in a studio in order to avoid the overworked and time-worn notion of the domestic. In none of these photographs is a connection made with the subject's home, immediate relatives, or family tree. Similarly, neither is the 'site' reconstructed as an institution; we can know nothing about this community unless the artist wishes to reveal it to us.

At this point, I would like to return to the idea of artifice that I mentioned earlier when discussing the *camera obscura*. Far from demanding from us an interpretation of what we are looking at, this ambivalent and complex work endeavours to focus our attention on the possibility of clearing a way through each of the details that comprise the image until we become aware of the parameters that determine perception and reception in highly technological societies, as well as our ability to respond to situations that do not establish a parallel between the here and now of the spectator and what the image shows.