



A T L A N T I C A

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O N I G N A C I O N A V A S



1 - "Yolanda" (2011-2013)
 C-print. Facsimil from original.
 10x15 cm

Ignacio Navas's photographs invite us to rethink certain anthropological universals. The question of identity, the reconstruction of the past, and the limits of sociability are some of the issues that cut across these images charged with nostalgic potential. Having been fortunate enough to have known Navas personally well before he began showing his work on the alternative art circuit, I can safely claim — like a hipster who sees the indie singer of his youth make it big and come to be adulated by Johnny-come-latelies who finally (too little, too late) grasp the potential of the diamond-in-the-rough — that from the outset Navas has always been hunting after reality, trying to frame it.¹ In his case, though, "too little, too late" came at the age of twenty-three, the age Navas was when he exhibited at the Ponce + Robles gallery as the youngest artist on its roster. Since that time, and thanks to prizes and articles that attest to the quality of his output, he has gradually staked out a place for himself among "promising young artists," a tag that ought rightly to be regarded as unfair when speaking about a practice that is already bearing fruit in the present and doesn't have to rely on the prediction of a potential that will be realised tomorrow or the day after.

More than almost anyone, Ignacio Navas represents the virtues of leaving college when the time comes to begin working professionally. To be precise, Navas juggled his university studies with classes at BlankPaper and then subsequently worked in Berlin as an assistant to the illustrious Andrés Marroquín Winkelmann. As you can imagine, his life's motto — "offer instead of ask" — has little in common with the philosophy of those schools of fine art where you enrol with a fine paintbrush and come out the other end with a roller, thanks to castrating teachers and research programs that lack any vocational specialization (a situation that now seems to be the norm in those generally claustrophobic academic spaces). Take careful note, young people, because what we're talking about is the drama of Spanish education, about the fact that we score so low in international rankings, something that may have as much to do with budgetary restrictions as it does with any lack of initiative on the part of the students.

I remember ruining the artist's first (or perhaps it was his second) exhibition in Madrid. We were presenting the opening to some fellow writers, when I, acting as master-of-ceremonies, had a sudden romantic whim that, to cut a long story short, involved drawing a charcoal silhouette on one of the photographic projections while holding forth on some forty philosophers whose work had absolutely no bearing whatsoever, superficial or otherwise, on the work of a perplexed Ignacio Navas. Later I had to personally scrub off the traces of my pedantic creation, as a result of which I quickly learned the value of an image. I also learned the importance of (i) letting the works speak for themselves, a conviction that will be reflected multiple times in this article; (ii) speaking from the immediate appearance the works generate, from a phenomenology

of ignorant reception; and (iii) dispensing with grand theories, a precept I will do my best to obey in what follows.

According to the generally accepted model of essayistic exposition, by this point I should already have talked a bit about the artist himself, instead of going on about our personal relationship or revealing my plan for what is to follow in the text. I will do so now, fulfilling my obligations as profound theorist and henceforth following the Kantian-Baconian principle of *de nobis ipsis silemus*. Navas was born around 1989 in Tudela (Navarre), where he spent his teens; he was a student with a mixed bag of friends in Madrid, a Spanish migrant in Berlin, and finally a returnee to Madrid (for some time to come, we hope) who currently is working “freelance” — a euphemism for the precarious situation of any creative vocation — using his camera and his gaze. Ignacio Navas has the advantage of being the first person I ever heard actually pronounce aloud the word *epistemology*. Now that we’ve gotten the introductions out of the way, let’s move on to the work itself.

I

Our photographer is well-known² for works exploring personal identity and the construction of the past. His *Yolanda* in particular made quite a stir. An immensely engaging reconstruction, in historiographic terms, the *Yolanda* project put what we generally think of in terms of abstract relations under a visual lens. How does one mine the concept of family? It’s not enough to dig up the old graduation photo, the group snapshot, nor is it sufficient to draw family trees. The goal is to work with absence itself, to make visible hypothetical pasts that never existed, parallel realities that fell by the wayside, crumbs left on the tablecloth of history. Though the rhetorical turmoil characteristic of this essay might suggest a certain intellectual transcendence, we ought to brush aside any suspicion of petulance in the artist’s intentions. Navas’s conception of the project contained a great deal of the quotidian and precious little in the way of intellectual baggage. Everything began, as Tania Pardo explained in her text in the journal *Exit*, “when Ignacio Navas discovered in a photograph of his own baptism the existence of an unknown young woman — Yolanda — [1] holding him in her arms.” From that curtain-raiser arose a moment of *anagnorisis*, a search for *who, how, and when*, that became the driving force behind a quest to reconstruct yesterday out of its ruins. Responding to the big questions of philosophy and journalism (what *was* that woman’s name?) entails a retrospective process of construction in which the boundaries between reality and fiction are set between parentheses.

“A series of snapshots taken from family albums is intermingled with recent pictures taken by the young photographer in the settings in which the life of this young woman unfolded. It is a story loaded with generational references, remnants of a life cut short, a tale imbued with considerable emotional



3 - “Yolanda” (2011-2013), C-print.
Facsimil from original. 10x15 cm



2 - “Yolanda” (2011-2013), C-print. Facsimil from original. 20x25 cm

restraint,” according to the precise analysis of Pardo, whose judgment of the process is spot-on inasmuch as it underscores the indelible presence of Gabriel — Yolanda’s partner and Ignacio’s uncle — who also proved instrumental to the truthfulness of the reconstruction of the settings by volunteering his own personal photographic archive. Gabriel offered, in addition, his testimony, because each ordinary image hides a story of drug addiction (Yolanda died of AIDS in 1996). A photo that any unthinking Instagrammer would have tagged as *#cute*, the silhouette of Gabriel walking in shirtsleeves on a snow-covered mountaintop [2] actually conceals an attempt to run away, a longing to escape from himself. In an interview with Ignacio, Gabriel regrets that “with all the money I blew, I’ve never had a holiday in my life. Every holiday we were going to try and get clean. But when you kick the habit, you have to go cold turkey. And you never feel like doing it. You’re living it up but you’re not able to enjoy it. All we did was waste our time, our money, our lives, and throw everything away.” What more can we add to the homey photograph [3] where the red eyes of Yolanda and Gabriel’s Cocker Spaniel distract our attention from the aluminium foil and lighters between bottles of Kas orange soda? The image itself suggests, without any need to appeal to Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, all of the reflections imaginable about our propensity to hide truths

right in front of everyone's eyes. Obscenity, too, can make you blind. In the final composition it's barely possible to distinguish *what* was the true past, *when* the retrospective imagination begins, or *how* much can be captured in an image that deals with *what was not to be*.

Among the images in *Yolanda*, I am particularly struck by one in which the protagonist is taking a photo of herself in the mirror. [4] We have no idea whether it was a spontaneous snapshot or whether it was carefully posed. But does it really make any difference? The very gesture of making oneself visible on a reflecting surface, the very action of believing oneself alienated onto glass, the desire to immortalise the fleeting moment, all of these things entail, to begin with, a set of dramatic registers, a battery of attitudes towards otherness that makes the very distinction inane — and so it goes. I especially appreciate this image because I also wish to perceive in it a kind of joke, one of the knowing nods mentioned by Tania Pardo, but in a direction opposite to what one would expect when speaking about the 1990s: the David Bowie poster flanked by shiny Japanese swords, that triangle formed between the windshield and the passenger window of old cars, or the bitter pill of having your hair cut for military service. The interesting thing about the self-portrait in the bathroom mentioned above lies in its capacity to foreshadow today's hegemonic strategies for the construction of specular identity, when the asphyxiating presence of digital cameras and smartphones means that nobody, not even Scarlett Johansson, can escape what a court decision has defined as a *reflecting image on a surface*.



4 - "Yolanda"
(2011-2013)
C-print.
Facsimil from
original.
10x15 cm

II

In some of the photographer's works we can appreciate, if you'll permit me the liberty, Navas's "documentary" side. Take for instance *Linde*, a collection of instants culled from a marginalised underworld, a series of faces where we verify a kind of emptying-out,³ spaces that the pedant might mistake for *non-places*. As our essay is committed to avoiding proper names — as befits a series of captionless black-and-white images in which the subjects reveal their character through anonymity — we will spare the readers from meditation number 647 on Marc Augé and his overrated publications. We are more interested in drawing attention to detail, and not because we're looking for a way to introduce Roland Barthes's celebrated passages about the *punctum*, reflections that anyone who has reached this point in this essay will surely already be conversant with. At this juncture I have to confess that *Linde* is interesting precisely because of the urban aspects that it brings into play *from the background*, beginning no doubt with the people themselves, even if nobody pays the latter any attention.

It's by no means my intention to undermine the centrality of the main characters, who end up filling the frame with emotional content, as we can see in the photo of the traffic lights and the girl whose tresses are — along with a gaze that penetrates a thousand metres into the earth's crust — the undeniable focus of the scene. [5] Nothing could be further from my mind than refuting the objective interest of these *social postcards*, these portraits of customs collected by Ignacio Navas, of women dancing in front of the camera. [6] It's true that the visual connections they evoke often tend to engage with an outmoded symbolism, as happens when the branches of a tree hemmed in by some railings seem to want to suggest a lack of freedom, but we're talking about isolated cases, about high and low points in a catalogue that constructs a powerful counterpoint between ordinary photos and a few singular images. Why would Ignacio Navas make so many portraits of anonymous embraces in the street? What creative benefit is gleaned from these effusive instants? Besides stimulating the audience's tear ducts, what function can be served by these truncated instants of privacy?⁴ [7]

But, returning to the question in hand — the background — I'd like to draw attention to trivial details like the lights of the city, those lampposts that anyone might mistake from a distance for fireflies, those self-illuminating insects that Pier Paolo Pasolini spoke of when musing on self-organized citizen enlightenment, on the waning ability of Italian citizens, due to the decay of community life, to shine with a light of their own. [8] And what can we say about the unexpected geometric constructions composed of parked cars? Anyone who has ever played with toy cars as a child knows that any such apparent disorder, when seen from a lofty elevation, can also be seen as responding to a premeditated or suggested will. This teleological illusion, the



5 - "Linde" (2010-2011)
Glicée impression on Hahnermühle Baryta paper
315 gr, 40x40 cm.



6 - "Linde" (2010-2011)
Glicée impression on Hahnermühle Baryta paper
315 gr, 40x40 cm.



7 - "Linde" (2010-2011)
Glicée impression on Hahnermühle Baryta paper
315 gr, 40x40 cm.



8 - "Linde" (2010-2011)
Glicée impression on Hahnermühle Baryta paper
315 gr, 40x40 cm.



9 - "Linde" (2010-2011)
Glicée impression on Hahnermühle Baryta paper
315 gr, 40x40 cm.

belief in the existence of intention, but also the feeling of vulnerability that is transmitted by — among many other things — an electric rocking-horse ignored by its child riders, [9] can always be found lurking behind Ignacio Navas's photos.

The photographer manages to give meaning to neighbourhoods that have none.⁵ Madrid's urban planning policies, whose delivery on the ground we are trying to portray in images and in words, are the epitome of electorally-organised meaninglessness, a bricked expansion (who's going to *unbrick* it?) whose economic muscle has been flabby since 2008. While we wait for the new shoots of business confidence, as announced by the unexpected and extravagant new-shootism of our parliamentary representatives, of our own personal Godot, we can interrupt for a moment the cry of "every man for himself" and contemplate Ignacio Navas's photographs in a gaze to take seriously — whether we are fish or fishermen — as the troubled waters of our times grow more turbulent.

1 It would be a great shame if I didn't share publicly some of the comments, disagreements, and reflections that Ignacio Navas came up with in response to questions broached in the main body of this article. In this space below the text, I will give the artist room to speak with his own voice. The idea is for these footnotes to appear like smoke signals in the face of the misunderstandings of the know-it-all critic or, to put it another way, to serve as alternative interpretations. Specifically, on the thorny question of "hunting after reality, trying to frame it," Navas has expressed his intellectual disagreement: "I don't agree with this idea of photography as hunting/capturing or other such synonyms. It's something we have got beyond by now, and photography today is elsewhere. Photographers have other needs. It's almost a cliché trotted out whenever we discuss photographers. Personally speaking, I like to think of photography as an excuse to set out on an adventure, as a tool to undertake pursuits or processes that would otherwise be fairly complicated to achieve. And the fact of making public these paths that I have taken is an act of sharing. It's not about saying that *this* is like *that*, but rather about creating a map so that anyone who cares to can take the same path if they want and how they want, and reaching whatever destination they want, through my images. It's wonderful to be able to build new worldviews from these premises."

2 "Well-known? Well. I suppose so. I've been lucky. I've worked a lot and I am grateful to many people who have put their faith in my work and have supported it. But don't forget that I've only published two collections of work, so I'm not sure whether that's the best way of talking about someone who is just starting out. But hey, don't get me wrong, I appreciate the gesture."

3 The artist is not entirely comfortable with the term "emptying-out" but he does accept the terms "emotional limbos" and "emotional restraint" to designate psycho-

logical depths that are often difficult for the camera to plumb. He continues: "This is not a 'magicalised underworld'; it is the outskirts of Madrid. I went to neighbourhoods like Barrio del Pilar and La Gavia because they don't have any kind of strong visual identity. It's just everyday life as it is, without any kind of stage setting. The emotional boundary of this context is highly visible. They are states in which we as individuals submerge ourselves and which end up filtering into the surroundings and shaping them, just as they are responsible for guiding a large part of our life decisions. I know what you are trying to say but I think it could be misconstrued. There is an emptiness in these places (and some of them have only been recently built and still don't have basic things like pharmacies, there is still no neighbourhood life even though there are people living there), but not in that sense, of the faces you are speaking about. Who am I to say that a person I hardly know is empty? I hope I never end up falling into that trap!"

4 "The tree branches" Ignacio Navas responds, "are just tree branches next to some railings. I never intended to evoke anything like the lack of freedom you mention. It's simply a question of demonstrating the ugliness, carelessness, and slovenliness that have taken over many corners of these places. Once, when I was talking to a photography curator, he told me that he loved it when I photographed things that took place in the lower part of these buildings, the part which it seems all architects overlook, but which paradoxically is the nearest to us all, and I found his observation to the point. I don't believe that this symbolism is there." Which came first, the chicken or the egg, the successive real estate booms and busts or the fragility of personal relations? And here, a commendable exercise in humility on behalf of the photographer: "*Linde* was my first step in photography, a project that arose when I was studying at BlankPaper, and for me it was a learning process and a form of position-taking as a photographer. A way of delimiting the areas I wanted to

work with, starting out in that vast jungle which is closest to us: the everyday." And he went on to add, "like any apprentice, I was awkward, but you learn things by doing them." As he explained, "my approach to the project was intuitive. I was bold enough and naive enough, and I really wanted to learn. It's like the experience of publishing my first fanzine, and the healthy arrogance it takes." And what's the story with all the hugging? "It wasn't a case of 'stimulating the tear ducts' (though the whole body of work does have an emotional quality to it) but of creating a rhythm, some visual echoes with the idea of boundary. In a certain way a hug is also a limit. That said, it's also true that in retrospect I would change a lot of things about that project. It is not well edited, the sequence is poor and as a consequence the narrative is awkward... chalk it up to a learning curve."

5 "I don't know whether these neighbourhoods have meaning or not. I don't like to think of anyone as foolish. I suppose that when they were originally planned these neighbourhoods made sense or tried to respond to a need (or interests) and now there they are," Ignacio Navas corrects me. "They serve me as an excuse, a backdrop, to photograph and explore my interests or curiosity." Regarding this last aspect, Ignacio Navas mentions a documentary (*The Century of the Self*), an interview (Jordi Évole with Arturo Pérez-Reverte), and the work of Jirō Taniguchi. And he added: "Ernesto, I really like the title of your article because I wasn't aware of it. But in one way it is true that my projects (especially the ones I told you I was working on now) do not speak about what is happening, about the bricks, but — from a really trivial, everyday perspective — about what the bricks cover over. Ultimately, that's what really matters to us. A while ago I read an interview with Javier Krahe where he made the celebrated statement that 'Spain is the land of easy money: get rich quick and line your pockets.' Our generation is the product of that idea."



12 - "El Norte" (2011-), Glicée impression on Hahn-ermühle Baryta paper 315 gr, 90x60 cm.



11 - "El Norte" (2011-), Glicée impression on Hahn-ermühle Baryta paper 315 gr, 90x60 cm.



10 - "El Norte" (2011-), Glicée impression on Hahn-ermühle Baryta paper 315 gr, 90x60 cm.

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Photographer **Jo Ractliffe** has spent the better part of the last decade photographing the effects of the prolonged civil war in Angola (1975-2002), both in the country itself and in her native South Africa. She currently has solo exhibitions at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts (extended to 29 April, 2015) and at Fondation A Stichting, Brussels (until 29 March, 2015).

Peruvian-born **José Falconi** is a fellow in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University, where he received his Ph.D. in Romance Languages and Literatures in 2010. He has contributed to several journals as writer, editor, and photographer, and has curated more than twenty exhibitions of work by emerging Latin American artists.

Raqs Media Collective enjoys playing a plurality of roles, often appearing as artists, occasionally as curators, and sometimes as philosophical *agents provocateurs*. They make contemporary art, have made films, curated exhibitions, edited books, staged events, collaborated with architects, computer programmers, writers, and theatre directors, and have founded processes that have left deep impacts on contemporary culture in India. The collective was founded in 1992 by Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta.

Spanish independent curator and art critic **Martí Manen** lives in Stockholm, Sweden. He has curated exhibitions at the Museo de Historia Natural (Mexico DF), Sala Montcada – Fundación “La Caixa” (Barcelona), AARA (Bangkok), Sala Rekalde (Bilbao), Konsthall C (Stockholm), Centre d’art La Panera (Lleida), and CA2M (Madrid), among other venues. He was a co-curator at the Turku Biennial (Finland, 2011) and (with David Armengol) directed the exhibition program and activities of Fabra i Coats Centre d’Art Contemporani (Barcelona) in 2013-2014. For five years he curated exhibitions in his own room. He has been appointed curator of the Spanish Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale 2015.

Ernesto Castro graduated in Philosophy from the Universidad Autónoma, Madrid (2012), received a Masters in Analytical Philosophy from the Universidad de Barcelona (2013), and currently is a Ph.D. candidate in Philosophy at the Universidad Complutense, Madrid. He is the author of *Contra la postmodernidad* (Alpha Decay, 2011), coordinator of *El arte de la indignación* (Delirio, 2012), and a contributor to *Red-acciones* (Caslon, 2010), *Tenían veinte años y estaban locos* (La Bella Varsovia, 2011), *Humanismo-animalismo* (Arena Libros, 2012), and *Indignación y rebeldía* (Abada, 2013).

Liliana Porter is an Argentinian-born artist whose work has been shown nationally and internationally at various museums and institutions and can be found in numerous public and private collections. Among various honors, she was a Guggenheim Fellowship recipient in 1980. She was formerly a tenured professor at Queens College, CUNY. Liliana’s first theatrical production, *Entre actos: situaciones breves*, premiered in Buenos Aires in 2014. The play was co-directed by Ana Tiscornia, a Uruguayan artist and writer whose work has been the subject of many national and international exhibitions. She is an emeritus professor at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury. Porter and Tiscornia have collaborated in the production of art works and public art installations. Both reside in New York.

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Jo Ractliffe, Roadside stall on
the way to Viana, 2007
From the series ‘Terreno Ocupado,’
Silver print
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