

Life, Images and Systems of Mechanical Reproduction

Santiago Olmo
Director of CGAC

The title of this project by Clara Carvajal, *Towards a Biology of the Image*, is an extraordinary metaphor for the visual perception of modernity, and it summarises the multiplication of images through a system of parental generation which resembles biological generation: from a source-image, new images are derived which, whilst maintaining common aspects, display an essentially different character. The hegemonic model of image circulation, which is embedded into our perception and helps to create a network of associations, mirror effects and replicas, has been consolidated in an infinite universe of screens that replicate and alter images. However, the processes that Clara Carvajal resorts to are mechanical (photography), artisanal (woodcutting) and artistic (drawing).

The exhibition brings together pieces belonging to two different series of works which, nonetheless, share this idea of the biological generation of the image from a matrix: *Dioses de la frontera* (Gods of the Frontier), inspired by photographs that are neither artistic nor documentary, rather normal and familiar, liar, or from the studio, taken in the Lebanon in the mid-twentieth century; and *Argucia* (Sophistry), an immediately successive series which adopts a sculptural and objectual aspect.

It is no coincidence that Clara Carvajal has taken as a starting point for *Dioses de la frontera* the collection of the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, in addition to the archives of the newspaper An-Nahar and of the photographer, Emile Boulos Divers, the latter deposited in the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik. The Foundation's huge archive encapsulates Arab culture's fascination with photography. The photographic or realistic image, denied (condemned as idolatrous) by the Islamic religious tradition, iconoclastic in its own way, is instead reclaimed by a solid popular tradition of family veneration and worship. A photographic vision in which the image is intimacy, even the photographer's studio is a space of family intimacy. For over twenty years, supported by private funds, the Arab Image Foundation has been recovering countless archives from the numerous photographic studios that emerged in the Egyptian cities of Alexandria and Cairo and in the Levant, that nineteenth-century construct, which included Lebanese and Palestine territories within the Syrian frontiers. The crisis in studio photography came about with the advent of compact cameras and colour film, and soon after, digital supremacy would sentence this entire world to oblivion. The studio files were on the point of

being liquidated-iterally thrown out with the trash-when the Arab Image Foundation bought, restored and preserved them, studying and publishing them in order to show that which was un seen, that which we did not want to see, or were not able to see: that Arab societies between the growing, fertile Egypt and the Mediterranean wished to be modern, free, sensual and uncomplicated, but always sin their own way, from the intimacy of photography.

The photograph in that Mediterranean cul-de-sac that squeezes Cyprus between Turkey and the Nile delta which, from the nineteenth century, became a lucrative activity meant for tourists travelling in the fascinating wake of Flaubert, Nerval or Chateaubriand, on the one hand, and, for Arab families (of any confession) who glimpsed a promising or solvent future, with one eye always on the United States, Brazil, Argentina, France, or Great Britain, where cultural references were also sought, on the other. What is particularly relevant in these photographs is their diversity and, above all, their ability to construct an Arab modernity for the first half of the twentieth century.

By generating contemporary images from matrices of photographic images, Clara Carvajal conjures up the phenomenon of turning the techniques of reproduction into something alive and fluid: that is the secret of a biology of the image.