

Charles Merewether, "The Lost Steps" (Los Angeles, 1997)

Over the past five years Milagros de la Torre has been reading the archive, archives of Peruvian history. She reads the archive through the photographic lens, a technology of remembrance that constructs a history of the past. In 1996 de la Torre visited one of the archives of the State, the Palace of Justice in Lima. The choice was far from arbitrary. For, in the wake of a long period of violence and unrest, the question as to how justice is practiced in relation to issues of civil liberties, human rights, crime, bureaucracy and corruption has become a guide to measuring both the health of a nation and potential for democracy.

After gaining permission to photograph in the archive 'de los cuerpos del delito,' de la Torre worked with a Señor Manuel Guzman, chief of the Archive. Like Dante's guide through purgatory, Guzman became the photographer's guide through an archive that traced an underworld of crime and corruption. Shifting through mountains of files, boxes and piles of evidence, he led her through *los pasos perdidos*. He had worked in the archive for thirty years and remembered with passion the story behind each case, pulling out objects: objects of incrimination. For Guzman, each object told a story, as if summoning him to recount tragic stories of passions, beliefs and illusions gone awry. For de la Torre these objects are 'witnesses of extreme situations.' Yet, while some photographs appear, most overtly, as instruments of crime, other objects appear as detached, everyday, suggesting little more than their innocent origins. Yet, they belie their fateful destiny, for they appear as nothing but what remains. It is only within the context of the archive, of archivization of memory that they stand as a sign of absence. Only then can we return the incriminating love letter to the prostitute who wrote it, or the belts to the psychologist who strangled a rapist during police interrogation, or the beautiful skirt return to its rightful owner Marita Alpaca, who was pushed by her lover from the 8th floor of the Sheraton Hotel and found to be pregnant at the autopsy found with cigarette burns.

One may propose the the effect of de la Torre's work in the archive today, functions in part allegorically. The title: *the lost steps* refers to the name given to a hallway in the Palacio de Justicia which, once you go through, stands as a assign of your pending condemnation. Yet, it also suggests something that has past but, by being brought into the present, by re-presenting the objects as images of ruinous history, become emblematic of the fate of things to come. It is a course that runs against Alejo Carpentier's allegorical tale of the same name, in which the narrator finds his way back to the source, a paradisaical place of origin in the depths of the jungle. The stories surrounding the photographs by de la Torre are, rather, of a path taken which unravels the wrong way, that lead to a fateful encounter, to the taking and loss of life. There is no bright light of revelation given to these objects but, rather, an uncertain light as if uncovering the obscure origins of fate. Death haunts these photographs. They are evidence of what is absent from the scene. And this strange illumination de la Torre gives to her photographs, as if they lit in the darkness that has befallen them, represents their entombment in the archives and a memory that swiftly buried, lies deeply within the shadows of history.

Assigned to the archive, it is as if in a paradoxical manner, they don't belong. By photographing the archive, de la Torre produces an archival effect. She creates, as it were, a secondary archive that entails constructing diachronically across time a series of crime and therefore a form of cultural memory which has as much to do with the present as with the past.

In this sense it conforms to Walther Benjamin's elaboration on the emergence of history as an image and the ability of the image to appear as a history of the present. In bringing these objects into the light, exposing us to the stories they embody, de la Torre reminds us of infamous and ignoble histories which a fall by the wayside, but which belong to the history of Peru, and our history.