



"PARAÍSO ÁRIDO"

**AUTHORS: DAVID ROMERO (PHOTOGRAPHER) AND JULIET BOHÓRQUEZ
(ANTHROPOLOGIST "IN PROCESS")**
ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY KATHERINE BAUGHMAN

DOI: 10.24981/2414-3332-2.2015.2.11

IMAG #2. InSEA Publications (2015). DOI: 10.24981/2414-3332-2.2015

The piece we are proposing is composed of photography and text. We are looking for thematics and stories with social impact that would pose an investigative challenge and would involve an interaction with society. The framework of our volunteer work with JUCUV, an international NGO that has its headquarters in Medellín and that has humanitarian work as one of its focuses, has served as a platform for the project's development. It carries out this work via health brigades, seeking to offer fundamental support to communities that are victims of involuntary displacement in Colombia.





In the specific case of “Arid Paradise,” we begin the journey 20 days before the arrival of the whole brigade team.

The year 2012 had just begun when the director of JUCUM, Misericordia Medellín, Enith Díaz— after establishing the location where the brigade would be deployed, a site located in the Department of Córdoba called “The Odyssey” which faced serious problems of water access — informed us that the trip was planned for the time of the Semana Santa. With this, we embarked on our investigation, taking factors ranging from the weather to the political situation and social conflicts into account.

It is fundamental for us to make an overview of the relevant literature and prior studies in order to determine and adopt an approach to the scene by identifying specific, problematic antecedents and getting a panoramic view of the situation. One can never generalize – the experience of different people in the same context can vary according to the life experiences and mental framework of each person. Working from these findings, we develop an inves-

tigative project that seeks to more carefully acquaint itself with our working environment and its necessities.

The NGO puts us into contact with people who have influence in the community so that we may make inroads in the area and carry out the field phase. In fact, it is imperative to have people from the community or closely allied with it even before this stage. Firstly, this is because they are a suitable intermediary for contextualizing ourselves from their point of view, but also so that they may serve as a bridge of entry—and not abrupt intrusion—into the community, making it possible to create atmospheres that mitigate the pronounced tensions that arise in places like this and which permeate daily life. Secondly, we need them because the areas that we generally frequent are charged with complex social situations. In many of them, there may be armed groups present that do not allow the use of recording devices like photo cameras or audio recorders if they don't know the intention of these recordings or if there has not been a recommendation from someone from the community that they protect.







According to the information obtained from these perspectives, we prepare a field guide, find places and concrete families to visit and begin the journey. Once we arrive we make sure to be able to stay the whole time with the community; we avoid hotels, and that way we are able to get more involved with the people—their habits, their struggles—and the experience is more enriching.

We make an official presentation of the project to our established contacts and some of them accompany us as we go out to make the rounds. We visit scenes and personalities that have been determined ahead of time and, working by the principle of photographer Steve McCurry — “make them forget about your camera, then their soul will come to light” —we make it so that the camera makes itself visible and, with the aim that the person becomes more and more familiar with our presence, we begin to photograph almost excessively, conscious of the fact that these photographs may not be used. The initial goal is to make them so used to it that they become indifferent to the camera and they don't care that he is photographing, even in the middle of a conversation. But this result is generated by getting photographs in a natural, unprepared state and is not solely dependent on photographing excessively. In fact, that is not the most important thing: it has to do with the quality of relationship that we are able to establish with the people we are photographing.

This whole issue of naturalness in photography does not mean stopping a person from looking at the camera or posing in front of it. In the act of photographing, we never indicate to the subjects to pose: if they appear that way in the image it is by their own decision. It's important to understand that a person looking at the camera is completely different from that person looking at the photographer while they are being photographed; it is a question of relationship, of respect, of interaction. It is because of this that the tour through The Odyssey for the work “Arid Paradise” could have been done in two or three days, but, to arrive at a level of greater intimacy, we invested more than 20 days (I wish they had been more). The piece does not merely have to do with the place, but with the people who inhabit and make these areas their own.







We make use of diverse tools and strategies, the most prominent of which are such anthropological methodologies as participatory observation, which in conjunction with unguided interviews, field notebooks and residence with the community (where we help in their struggles, looking to make the barrier of ignorance disappear and to allow them to act without feeling so much pressure due to our presence, which generally evokes affected performance) allow us to capture images, narratives and practices that make up the day-to-day existence of the social group. Ultimately, elements emerge that allow us to attempt, through ethnography, to understand social phenomena, to describe and interpret them from the perspective of the society's members ("actors," "agents," or "social subjects"). Only they can comprehend what they think, feel, say and do in respect to the events that involve them. These findings are used as evidence for the description that, through the text, allows us to represent, interpret and translate a culture—or certain aspects of that culture—for those who are not familiar with it. (Rosana Guber)

Generally, the topics of study that mark our path are engraved in the memory and the place. Upon bringing together all of these elements, we find ourselves with very powerful experiences that determine not only the story to be told in the final presentation, but also the procedure for arriving at the final result.

Susan Sontag expressed that "to photograph is a captured experience, it is a relationship with the world." So, this would mean something that is even more seductive as far as photography is concerned, which is that it also involves an exercise in interpretation. This captured experience becomes so powerful that a successful photography session cannot compete with it, so that it is truly important to let the photos "rest". This allows forgetfulness to begin to invade the mind after a time. This is when the photographer relinquishes power in order to transform into the medium for recording the experience—no longer competing with it, rekindling it. This process can last from the moment that the photo is taken until the end of the exposition.

On returning to the field, we begin the stage where we organize the information gathered from interviews, stories, the visual material and the field notebook to make an analysis, search for answers and make a plan for concluding our work.

In accordance with these sources and because of the nature of the final product, we have come to call them "visual novels," as they do not have anything to do with graphic reportage, besides the fact that critics have pointed out the documentary and artistic qualities of the piece. This can be chalked up to the use of certain licenses such as color editing and the alteration of the narrative structure with the aim of ex-

pressing the lived experience from the stories we listened to. It then has to do with our experience in the story of the people depicted. Lastly, besides anthropological analysis, we also use literature and take fundamental elements of cinematography into account for the final structure of the photographic work.

All this necessarily demands that every image have its own qualities expressed, from the aesthetic treatment, the selection of contrast, the saturation, and even the temperature. In this sense, what photographer Francesc Català Roca states when he says "contrary to what many photographers think, photography resembles literature more than painting," is of great impact. The presentation of the visual composition is determined by conversations we have with each person, as they tell it; we seek to include the elements and activities that they mention in the frame.

The investigative proposal not only allows for an understanding of what truly important essentials the community lacks and that are looking to be addressed with health brigades, but also that the final result will be presented as a work of documentary art in museums, allowing for periods of reflection conceived as metaphors that invite the perceiver to think about their own life, creating spaces for dialogue that encourage awareness. Combined with this, and as a project still in development, we are attempting to make the community, its reality and its needs known, as well as to create awareness in people who can bring about the resolution of these problems and to raise funds through diverse strategies such as campaigns and the sale of our work to put into the brigades and social projects.

