Dialogue on the Images of Memory

with Gela Garcia and Gustavo Illades

(translated from the original Spanish by James Iffland)

One afternoon and during part of an evening in May, 2004, Stella Johnson, Gela García (photography teacher), and Gustavo Illades (philologist) spoke in Spanish about photographs taken by Stella in Mexico, Cameroon, and Nicaragua. The dialogue took place in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico.

GUSTAVO: As the years go by, the viewer of a photograph remembers his or her own life by looking at it. The image secures the past, but it also opens itself up toward the future, establishing the memory of the person who observes it. Your photographs seem to condense this process; they resemble—if I may speak this way—self-portraits of other people, an ancestral family album.

STELLA: When I was seventeen years old, I went with my parents to visit our relatives in Greece. We went to towns without running water, without electricity. You won't believe me: when we got off the plane, waiting for us was a woman identical to my grandmother with her ten-year-old daughter, who was wearing a dress I recognized immediately. I said to my mom: "It's the dress that you gave me when I was ten!" It was purple and I remember it because it split at the waist and my mom sewed it with white thread instead of purple. I returned the following year; and with an Instamatic camera I took many pictures, without understanding anything about photography, without knowing my heroes yet: Robert Frank, Constantine Manos, Josef Koudelka. I was fascinated by the old women with their lined faces who resembled my paternal grandmother, always dressed in black, forever mourning the deaths of her two sons.

GUSTAVO: Everything began when you recognized yourself in other people… You reproduced their faces within a familiar ambiance by means of a camera . . .

STELLA: I was very afraid to go down the street and take photos of people I didn't know. Even now, I don't take pictures of people if they don't know beforehand that I'm going to do it. That's why I get involved with communities; I live there so people will know me.

GUSTAVO: I suppose that's out of respect for the person.

STELLA: Out of respect for them and for myself. I don't want to be a bother. When I went to Nicaragua, in 2003, I wanted to go to the Caribbean coast because it's very far from Managua and from the cities where everyone tends to go. I always go to the remotest places. I met a woman who sent me to Kakabila, with her adopted daughter, who lives there. Even though I gave no prior notice when I showed up with that girl, her family said to me: "If you want to stay at our house, you're welcome to do so, no matter how long." You see, I insert myself into people's lives. Anthropologists maintain a distance. That's their point of view. I want my camera to be close, three feet away. And how can I do that if I'm not in the middle of their lives?

GUSTAVO: Do you only look for poor rural communities?

STELLA: Yes. And more so in Africa. It took me seven days to get to there from my home. I am curious about how people live without the basic necessities we take for granted. I have always wanted to know how my grandmothers lived in "the old country."

GUSTAVO: Do you think that your photography is photojournalism or critical of their lives?

STELLA: No. My photographs don't dwell on how hard their lives are. To the contrary: My intension is to show the beauty of their lives.

GUSTAVO: I'm surprised by your ability to adapt.

STELLA: It's not such a big deal, no, no. I live in communities for a limited time.

GUSTAVO: Nevertheless, you return to visit the people you've met.

STELLA: Of course. And they've visited me in Boston.

GUSTAVO: It's obvious that your work is made possible by the affective relationships you build. I'm tempted to ask what your objective is: to acquire images or to make friends?

STELLA: Who knows what's worth more. I have friends and godchildren everywhere and I feel great affection for them. I have very strong friendships. If you live in someone's house for a month, two months, three months . . . Just imagine!

GUSTAVO: It's a bond that lasts a whole lifetime.

STELLA: You have a friendship for life. Of course you're going to have run-ins with people, but, as happens in many families, you go back to the affection you feel.

GUSTAVO: Perhaps you've lived several lives. Maybe we can look at your photographic work as a way of being other people or as a way in which other people—your viewers—can get to know you.

STELLA: I don't know. I felt very sad just now, on leaving Amilcingo [Mexico]. I was about to cry and wanted to start running. The last words the "doña" said to me were: "Don't forget me." And how am I going to forget her? She doesn't understand that I'm going to return to my home where I have tons of photos of my friends hanging on the walls. That's how I edit my photographs and how I can see my mistakes. I have a Mexican wall, one from Cameroon and one from Nicaragua. I live with these photographs. I live everyday with the people of those communities when I'm in Boston.

GUSTAVO: Do you think about an American audience when you snap the picture?

STELLA: I don't think about anybody.

GUSTAVO: Have you exhibited your pictures in the places where you took them?

STELLA: My photos of Cameroon are in a museum made out of adobe and straw in that village. They belong to the king and to the entire population. He invited me to return and continue working. I recently returned to Amilcingo with 500 work prints, exhibited them on clotheslines in the town square, and gifted the photos to the people. I have also shown these photographs in galleries in the U.S. and Mexico.

GUSTAVO: The photographs are a diary of your life. . . .

STELLA: That’s what I was going to tell you. It’s striking. With each photograph I remember the moment of the day I took it, what was happening that day, how I felt that day.

I don’t need to take notes. The photograph is my record and I never forget what happened in that moment. While editing photographs from my Fulbright grant work in Amilcingo, I remembered my first day in the village. I recalled all the feelings: the hot day and the dust and uncertainty. I remember how the sun goes down, month after month, in each place. The details are the most important thing. The only thing I need is light.

GUSTAVO: You’ve made thousands of images of hundreds of people. And self-portraits?

STELLA: I did some when I studied photography. They were the first attempts at getting to know myself, to know who I am.

GUSTAVO: And do you know that now?

STELLA: No, I still don’t know who I am.

GELA: Maybe your photographs are telling you. I see three focal planes in almost all of them. They give the sensation of circular movements, as in many games. There’s always tenderness in your point of view. You capture images at an ideal level to show people in their situation, to show people’s feelings.

GUSTAVO: Feelings, that’s right. Stella doesn’t use people to assert a political or religious ideology. As she said, she doesn’t create journalistic or ethnographic images. Neither does she produce material useful for some salvation army or for some kind of advertising.

GELA: She takes pictures of children, of women working, life’s peaceful moments. There’s no violence, nor is there explicit eroticism. There are many pictures taken outdoors of people moving. The constant feature is the presence of two people; one duplicates the other or both duplicate each other in their shadows. Here and there secondary characters appear, observing the scene.

GUSTAVO: Are they the "eye of the story," the witnesses who, as time goes on, will orally narrate the things they saw?

GELA: That's possible. But in any case, the elements are in balance. If one of the subjects is active, the other one is self-absorbed, but never, or almost never, in solitude.

GUSTAVO: The images of Africa show collective bodily movements, almost like an everyday unconscious dance, faithful to their culture and their origin.

GELA: In Mexico and Nicaragua people drift off [se abstraen] more easily from their circumstances.

GUSTAVO: In the Mexican series we observe the same woman in different moments of her life. The images in their totality would seem to reflect an attempt to mark out biographical stages, generations, so as to establish the story of a loveable "tribe" whose internal connections are family-related and whose kinship with Stella resides in the friendship born from living together on a daily basis.

GELA: If that were the case, it's thanks to the balance of all the elements. The point of view is located between the general shot and the close up.

GUSTAVO: Still, the balance depends on a "decisive moment."

GELA: The decisive moment of the emotions. It's part of the point of view, of the good setting/framing , of the creative handling of light. For example, the extraordinary photograph of the man—in Cameroon—with his hand raised and his head outside of the frame. The shadow of his head is projected, in profile, against the wall of a hut.

STELLA: It was a spontaneous photograph. I was walking toward my house in the village. If you look for the exact moment, perhaps you won't find it; it appears suddenly.

GELA: The man's gesture seems to bestow a blessing. His stance is very expressive, almost religious. He could be a priest, a witchdoctor , or an ordinary person. The house and his clothing are simple, but his posture is lordly. The man speaks with his hand and his feet. The

play of shadows does it all: it tells a story, it creates a phantom that can disappear at any moment. Perhaps in everyday reality that man isn't anything like that. The white wall contains a painting. . . .

GUSTAVO: Described this way, that photograph tells us that this person is all the people in the village, or rather, the photograph displays all the possible images of that same person.

GELA: Another splendid image is that of the Garífuna children of Nicaragua. One, with his back turned, throws his net into the sea; another, facing forward, looks within himself.

STELLA: That's one of my favorites. It was at seven in the morning. The children were looking for shrimp to eat.

GELA: The extended net is very beautiful. Time hasn't stopped. There's movement and quietude, there's action and contemplation. The image is beautiful in itself, but it's more beautiful when we imagine that it depicts the same person in two different moments. Moreover, at the extreme right a hand appears, we don't know whose, an intruding hand that gives the impression that it's coming out of the photo to grab it and show it to us. That same hand reminds us of the life of the community beyond the photo. In many images fragmented subjects appear. And they're there to evoke that life for us.

GUSTAVO: The hand you're talking about frames an action, it turns it into an episode. The same thing happens with the play of shadows in the photo of the man in Cameroon. It's possible that technical aspects that balance each image are governed by a vision of the world according to which intimate moments (the self-absorbed faces) are only possible in collective situations (the daily life of the community).

GELA: The same thing happens in photographs of interior spaces. As an example I would mention the image of the two Mexican girls that seemingly play in isolation from one another. The older one, standing up with a cord/string in her hands, and the younger one, sitting underneath the table, with her hands busy and her little legs crossed.

STELLA: They're Monica and her sister Natividad. They're playing in the kitchen, without dolls, without electronic toys.

GELA: They're playing with imaginary toys. I see them as a magical apparition. The table, full of little pails and cups, looks like a laboratory, and the girls, like alchemists. Underneath the table, the tiny little one appears to be an elf. It looks like a staged scene and it isn't.

GUSTAVO: The poorer the surroundings, the more complicated the kinds of play . . .

STELLA: That's where the beauty is. You have to live it.

GELA: This photograph tells us the story the girls have made up and within which they play. They're located both within and outside of their fantasies, each self-absorbed, but still connected. They're Alice in Wonderland. It's the photograph that explains to us how complex their inventiveness is.

STELLA: They're in their own worlds. They almost forgot that I was there. That takes time.

GELA: It takes time and a sustained effort on your part that we don't see, but that somehow appears in the image. The older girl wears a watch on her arm. The watch situates the scene within a recent time. The framing makes the girl standing up look gigantic and the small one, scrunched up under the table, tiny, almost the size of the cup that lines up with her little head. The framing shows us the power of alchemy: moving the strings, the standing girl makes the little one "appear," Once she stands up, once she grows, she'll turn into her sister and will then have the strings in her own hands.

GUSTAVO: In the Mexican series we find the photograph of a family rolling around in bed . . .

STELLA: The father is recovering from back surgery. The kids are watching television and playing with him. There's much love in this family. The man feels much affection for his children. It's not an exceptional family. They need medicine and education, but love doesn't depend on scarcity or on abundance. They might not understand how much I value the love they have for each other.

GUSTAVO: Nor might they understand that you construct the memory of all they inevitably would forget. Portraiture—graphic or verbal—precedes photography by centuries. In diverse ways, life has organized itself so as to be remembered. There are more than enough pictures of festivals, wars, rites, important people, and objects. Even daily life is organized so as to establish a memory. The most significant thing, in my opinion, is that you take pictures of moments that are destined to be forgotten by the same people who are living them, the moments that those people would never tell to their children or grandchildren. You depict the everyday quality of everyday life, that which is most intangible.

GELA: For example, the dreamy look of many subjects. There's the look of the Garífuna boy lying in the hammock, nostalgic, or the look of the Garífuna woman, lovely, marked by fullness, sitting outside of her house. The world takes place within their eyes.

GUSTAVO: The external elements, the community context, the specific situation of the subjects, even the technical aspects of each photograph, help us, the viewers, to intuit lyrical moments, the intimate images of those pensive gazes. Everything happens as if you saw, in the eyes of your subjects, imaginary photographic cameras whose images reveal the images you make. Thus, your photographs show us the world their eyes look at and later dream of. In that way, I have the firm impression that you take photographs of the invisible.

STELLA: I have never thought that; but, yes, it could be.

GUSTAVO: To take pictures of the invisible, people's interior gaze, is one of the aspects that makes your work special. But there's more. You hunt out the places and beings that are the farthest away from you. You don't exhibit their poverty nor do you turn their culture into an object of anthropological study. Your point of view is as far away from "globalization" as it is from "local color." You're interested in communal life and at the same time in individuals and their private fantasies. You live with people without ceasing to observe them from outside, through your camera lens. When one looks again and again at your photos, in all the possible sequences, one discovers the enormous difficulty of establishing an order for them, of editing them. The fact they're not titled increases that difficulty. And nevertheless they ask to be looked at one after another, given that there are kinship relations being generated between

each other [generan entre si relaciones de parentesco]. Although it's somewhat complicated, I'd like to trace out a path, among other possible ones, so as to explain the novelty of your photographic work.

STELLA: Go right ahead.

GUSTAVO: Towards the middle of the fifth century BC, the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos founded for the West the "art of memory" when he identified the cadavers of the participants in a banquet by the place they occupied before the roof fell down on them. The art of memory was systematized by rhetoricians and used by Roman orators. Thomas Acquinus reworked it so Dominican preachers would remember their sermons.

GELA: Is there any document that clearly explains that art?

GUSTAVO: According to the anonymous author of a book on rhetoric, entitled Ad Herennium, there are two kinds of memory, one natural, innate to our minds, and another "artificial" one, obtained by learning. Artificial memory can center on things (images) and words (sounds). That requires the mental design of a space subdivided into places always evocable due to the asymmetry that differentiates them from one another. Once the places are assigned, images associated with the things one wishes to remember must be invented. To each place corresponds an image, and to each image, a thing that can be remembered. These images, called agent images, must either be very beautiful or very grotesque so as to favor memory through its dramatic quality.

GELA: Each agent image [image of memory] is a picture that artificial memory makes out of something external?

GUSTAVO: That's right. Artificial memory was a kind of photographic archive two millennia before photography existed, but an archive only accessible to the person who had created it internally. With this said, I'd like to suggest a few striking correspondences between the Greek art of memory and the photographic art of Stella.

STELLA: Correspondences?

GUSTAVO: Yes. The ancient Greeks depicted their world by duplicating it, transferring to imagery their deep sense of dialogue. A statue was a replica of a god, an agent image was the copy of an event, an object, or a word. A while ago, I asked what is more important, obtaining images or winning friends. In you—I believe—one thing leads to the other.

STELLA: As I said, the walls of my home in Boston are full of photographs. They allow me to live on a daily basis with my friends from those communities.

GUSTAVO: Each one of those photos can act as an agent image that reminds you of the complete affective situation—all the sentiments, the precise hour of the day, the temperature, as you were telling us. And not only that. Many of your images present, as Gela pointed out, paired subjects, one of which is a replica of another, or subjects duplicated in their own shadows. I'm trying to say that your relationship with the photos exhibited on the walls of your home is reproduced within those same photographs, as if you were trying to reveal to the viewer the agent images of the subjects photographed within their own surroundings—the images, copies, or pictures they themselves make of their own world, which they deposit in the archive of their memory. In my opinion, you depict, by means of the external, the interior images of your subjects—the most intimate part of them.

GELA: Invisible images, but present in their eyes. That's what Stella's work is conveying to us?

GUSTAVO: I believe that her work tells us in multiple ways that the human being is his or her own memory. To build that memory requires a long journey in silence, a visual odyssey whose narration fuses together the intimate moments of hundreds of people with their respective collective situations. That memory has built a large family of which Stella is the tireless chronicler. The origin of that multiform, communitarian, and rural family, that is to say, the point of origin of the photographic work is found perhaps, according to what Stella herself has told us, in her recognition of an unfamiliar world, without running water and electricity, inhabited, nonetheless, by familiar faces; it's found in the intimate identification with a person from that distant world.

STELLA: The ten-year-old girl who wore the hand-me-down dress that I wore when I was her age?

GUSTAVO: Yes. Perhaps everything began when you looked at a copy, a living photograph of you yourself. The rest, your artistic work, has consisted of duplicating that world by exploring the labyrinth of the most remote rural communities with Ariadne’s thread of memory, a thread made of light...

STELLA: The white thread that held together the torn parts of my purple dress...