

**Kathrin Kur**  
**Tlatelolco (El Andamio)**  
**Fraccionamientos**  
**Blow up**

**The traditional spaces that Mexico incorporates**

by Eva Sangiorgi

Kathrin Kur's formation is in philosophy and fine arts, but her body of work moves freely between photography, interactive video and computer technologies. In the three works presented at the Werkleitz Festival and created thanks to the residency provided by the centre (CMM – Centro Multimedia del Centro Nacional de las Artes, Mexico City), traces can be found of her previous artistic research. Some of the clues are to be found in her work, her sensibility and interest in architectural spaces. This leads me to comment on *Tlatelolco (El Andamio)*, a video piece set in the neighbourhood of the same name. This urban setting is a symbol of the country, its architecture representing over five hundred years of history; the ruins of the Aztec empire, the grandeur of Spanish colonization in the cathedral which soars above them, the modern architecture of the buildings symbolizing urban expansion. Here are Mexico's three cultures; indigenous, Catholic and mestizo. It is the same square where, in 1968, Mexican authorities crushed a student protest by shooting into the crowd ten days before the Summer Olympics celebrations, a significant moment for international sports when Mexico was the centre of attention.

*Tlatelolco (El Andamio)* records an athlete's nightly training session. In the background we always see the buildings looming over the square and the flashes of lightning announcing a still distant summer storm. The remaining elements are glimpsed in half shadow. The camera analyses the buildings in detail, the lights that tell us there are people inside, hidden from view. The prologue that reminds us of Kathrin Kur's previous works such as *Park Life*, in which a camera travelling over the image's details before showing it to us as a whole creates an atmosphere of suspense, like a cinematographic incipit. The fiction is voluntarily staged, taking us to the heart of the action being filmed. The protagonist jumps over beams and pipes that look like the scaffolding of a construction site (andamios), making it impossible to forget the earthquake that hit Mexico City in 1985, causing severe damage specifically to this area. The tall buildings of the apartment complex designed by Mario Pani in the sixties are therefore opposed to the space where the action takes place; an open space formed by naked structures which are nonetheless full of life. Empty spaces against full spaces. In fact, they summon several men who get together to work out at night; a powerful contrast with the energy surrounding Tlatelolco, literally a few steps away from Tepito, historically speaking the most dangerous neighbourhood in downtown Mexico City. The square's magnetic energy, in fact, seems to absorb and attract life from the area and the buildings around it.

The filming of the athlete's workout is emphasized by the amplified sound of the man's breathing. The music has disappeared; just a heartbeat and sighs. His goal is reaching the top, one attempt after the other; testing the body to the point of exhaustion.

This work by Kathrin Kur stands between two others presented at the same time, and works as juncture. *Fraccionamientos* is a series of photographs that depict the construction of housing complexes in large industrial hubs such as Aguascalientes. It is a

widespread phenomenon that stands witness to a country constantly influenced by the US, and in perennial risk of losing its own personality under the pressure exerted by its northern neighbour. The photographs portray a ghost town, summoning the ghost that persecutes and besets today's Mexico: violence and drug trafficking. The architecture recalls the features of modernist tradition, but what surrounds these groups of perfectly aligned houses is just dust: a city in the middle of the desert, or with a few sparse trees. It calls O-zone to mind, another of Kathrin Kur's photographic forays into architecture: small housing modules, places to live that resemble scale models because no one seems to inhabit them. On the other end is *Blow up*, a video about one of Mexico's oddest traditions: the celebration of patron saint San Juan de la Vega by the community of Celaya in the state of Guanajuato, a production which describes the challenge faced by San Juan in order to protect the city. During the celebration, handmade firecrackers are detonated, tied to a hammer.

This practice is very dangerous and frequently causes casualties and serious injuries, but that is precisely the point. Kathrin Kur is interested in the physical experience. The ritual is still carried out, with explosions that cause wounds and bleeding, evoking perhaps unconsciously a battle waged much closer; the battle that unsettles the country these days. As in *Tlatelolco*, the body is at the heart of the experiment. Maybe in a more remote fashion it evokes another work of hers, *Little Wars*, set in England, in a military training base built in the '90s, and in this case, headquarters of a war game. For the protagonist, reliving the experience is a way of feeling it and averting it. For the artist, recreating and filming it is a way of analysing and comprehending it fully. In this sense, Kathrin Kur's work is closer to the research of contemporary film, which uses fiction to "super-represent" the reality it documents, therefore probing its limit, or rebuilding it as the equally real synthesis of the happening and its telling. In this same sense but with the opposite rationale, the eye of the artist extracts from the same reality those details which seem to come from an invented world. The explosion caused by the blow raises a cloud of dust that makes the person who caused it to disappear for a few seconds, as in a real-life magic trick or a special effect. The empty houses in *Fraccionamientos* resembles a film studio set waiting for the action. The lights and shadows behind the buildings of Tlatelolco create a tense atmosphere; the camera which shoots from every angle, even from above, the unexpected nocturnal meeting, makes it all seem more choreographic than the prepared scene itself.

In this triptych about Mexico, the perceptive eye of the artist is what brings out the different aspects that shed light on the contemporary reality of the country. In these three works Kathrin Kur talks about a drained country, about a society that is simultaneously isolated and made up of individuals in struggle, capable of facing the harsh reality of a country at war, making its energy palpable. In this sense, all three works speak of Mexico in the present, at the same time emphasizing its roots. Its link to its traditions and the profound connection it has with places and rituals from its own history are the strength and resilience of its cultural originality. Kathrin Kur only talks about people present in places of tradition, people who are consumed by them. Where there is no tradition, life is suspended.

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