

Josefina Oliver (1875-1956), porteña amateur photographer,
at the 12th Provincial Historical and Photographic Conference in Quilmes

By Patricia Viaña

I get to this 12th Conference, to bring Josefina Oliver, writer of a Personal Diary and a porteña* amateur photographer.

Daughter of parents from Mallorca, Spain, she is born in 1875 in Caballito, Buenos Aires. She attends public school, which she must abandon at the age of 14 to be in charge of her home in replacement of her mother, confined with mental problems.

A hundred and eleven years ago she takes pictures of the Quilmes riverbanks, as she details in her Diary those outings with friends in 1902 and 1906:



Diary 4 f_031, copy and illumination Josefina Oliver, Quilmes, Province of Buenos Aires

'[...] we had lunch by the river, under the trees, at midday, creole roasted lamb, delicious, two kinds of salad, cold meats, fruits, cheese, coffee, wine, beer and liqueurs. I took different photographic groups and we went for a walk, each one accompanied by her corresponding one. Diary 4, p.082



2doARojch MT_016 f_061

Copies and illumination Josefina Oliver, Quilmes, Province of Buenos Aires, 1902



Diary 3 photo_023

We went across the tramway street and we went to the opposite pavement to listen to a music band. On our way back we played forfeits, and we couldn't stop laughing with the wisecracks of the meeting which are a collection of good humours and funny friends [...]'
Diary 4_082.



2doARojch MT_020 f_075

Copies Josefina Oliver, Quilmes, Province of Buenos Aires, 1902



2doARojch MT_020 f_076

In 1907 she gets married with her cousin Pepe Salas Oliver, having three children Isabel, Juana and Pedro. They live eight years in Adrogué, Province of Buenos Aires and fifteen in Palma de Mallorca, Spain.

In 1937, during the civil war the couple comes back to Buenos Aires with their Argentine son Pedro, while their two daughters stay there.

The Writer

In the XIX century the personal Diary was considered a 'minor' literary genre and therefore, permitted for young girls.

Since 1892, Josefina takes notes of her daily life, which she then copies in notebooks. She learns calligraphy with a treaty to present it with care, and she follows the magazines at that time, matching her volumes with games or various cuttings, as she illustrates them with her own photos or photos by professionals.

Josefina Oliver complies with the Victorian precepts of order and duty, guidelines of her life and writing, and according to this way she records the external world, composing a great well-mannered frieze of good tenor.

Everything is there: shops, neighbourhood, meals, clubs; her beloved Buenos Aires, with the change in its physiognomy and progress; outings and theatre shows, concerts, cinema, radio, which she details with title, cast and opinion.

She adds the main political events in the country and in the world, during the 64 years along which she writes those twenty volumes, that she proudly calls, '*My Collection*'.

Her passionate character always flows in a colloquial style, full of grace and temperamental turns; prudent and humorous at the same time.

However, Josefina veils her personal I and those topics which '*cannot be talked about*'. It is impressive to see how she silences and hides her mother's illness and death in the 8400 pages of her Diary and in her letters. She obeys a tacit social mandate.

As grandniece I reviewed the family oral history and I tracked little data amid her lines, which together with records from the city of Buenos Aires, show her mother's insanity. This fact marks Josefina since her birth and, shows at a certain extent, the background of her plastic expression, together with the particular use of colour that she displays.

The Photographer

Since she is a baby, Josefina is photographed in professional studios; a habit that she will continue during her youth with her family and friends, until becoming an amateur photographer, thanks to some neighbours; she says:

'Sunday 22nd December 1895- [...] After lunch [...] Raquel called us and we went with her and Candriani...Tavaracci... and the children. They took us an instant photo at the terrace. Then we went downstairs to Raquel's to have a glass of beer and later home.'[...] Notes 1_112.

Photography, as a preferred social entertainment, was a space where there were no obstacles for the woman to get on since it was a game more, not seen as art, and nobody would have imagined that Josefina would be the object of dissertations, exhibitions, books.

She develops it as an amateur in a self-taught and domestic way, almost like crocheting or sewing. She takes pictures, develops them, copies and chooses many of them to illuminate

(colour) with patience. She shares this entertainment within her middle-class bourgeoisie circle, where they have divertimento - photos on lustre paper, on stamps -, and they benefit with the loan of cameras and occasional lessons.

Josefina Oliver adds to this the record of her photographic work in her personal Diary, probably being the only Argentinian female photographer at that time to do it.

'[...] We went to Lepage's by car to buy plates and then to the Grau's. There I posed as a 'manola' with Amelia, and in profile and in a low hairdo. Later we enclosed ourselves in the darkroom and we were working for nearly two hours with Amelia, Fissas and I in developing 18 plates. [...]' Diary 2_073.

From 1899 onwards, Josefina stops being portrayed by professionals, since she starts taking her own photos and with them she produces, along ten years, a series of 100 self-portraits, where she explores possible faces of herself.

She incorporates the copies in the Diary under the epigraph: **'I'**, an unusual choice in a time, in which the woman - for not being a question addressee – devotes little or nothing to self-analysis.

Fifty years later, she entitles her 1948 autobiography **'I'**, stressing the thematic analogy between her writing and her photography, both organized upon the inquiry of her own self and her woman condition.

'Who am I? Which other woman, or even other man could I have been?' she asks herself in her photos.

She specializes in portraits: relatives, employees, friends, who go to her home or invite her to their houses to be photographed. It is likely that she uses Francisco Pociello's **'Modern Photography'**, which appears in her library in the year 1900. She sets stagings for some photos, and she persists in erasing the boundary between the figurative and the real.

'[...] Monday 24th September 1900. - After lunch I took various portraits of Amelia. María and Julia Ithurrá came to visit us. They went to my bedroom and there I took several groups picturing Amelia ill in my bed and Catalina as a maid and María and Julia Ithurrá as guests [...]' Diario 2_246.

The photographer Florencia Blanco, when analysing her work, is astonished by Josefina's intuition and spontaneity to solve her shots and by the confidence she generates in her portrayed ones, always very relaxed. She considers her lack of formal education as the basis of her freshness.

The Plastic

Until the beginning of the 20th century, images were black and white or sepia. However, Josefina Oliver illuminates a thousand and two hundred of her photos with albumin colours bought at Stein's or at Widmayer's artistic shops.

Pictorialist in the 9x12 small format, she illuminates (colours) in a traditional style or transforms the photos into neo-impressionist pictures, with suggestive or pointillist brushstrokes. Nowadays, that colour saturation makes an impact, then her friends wished them, as she writes to her sister Catalina:

[...] 'I took the two portraits of Porota, and they were praising them for an hour, asking me later to take a portrait of Cecilia's daughter, and colour it the same as Porota's.' [...] PostFt PV_026b 17may06.

The photography historian Abel Alexander states: *'Josefina wants to be her own protagonist in the darkroom; and she develops, she copies and when the technique 'demands to stop', she trespasses that limit by illuminating: an advanced to her time, who breaks the schemes.'*¹

Josefina makes postcards with her illuminated photos, which she pastes on designed supports, where she writes her texts. They are hundreds of high quality small works, to her people and for others from other countries as she tells:

'[...] When the fury of collecting postcards, and they asked for my portrait, I sent this photo to my correspondents who were many and from all parts of the world– 1900 – to 1904 years – I collected over 5 thousand postcards [...]' Diary 2_246.

She also stands out for the collages she makes up with her photos, with which she composes her Book of Curiosities and three more books which she calls *'blotches'*.

The Editor

Between 1902 and 1910 Josefina edits her photo albums, and only in 1922 she edits the first volume of her Diary, a work which she interrupts when moving to Mallorca until 1937, when she comes back to Buenos Aires, without resuming this editorial work.

In 1940, her daughter Juana commits suicide, after the sudden death of her little son. Josefina is devastated. Five months later, her husband and her companion Pepe dies.

However, three years later, she revives from this tragedy by placing firmly on her work, that she recovers, with determination, in an edition in which she integrates both the written and the plastic parts.

Abel Alexander considers it *'an exclusive edition of a single volume'*².

In one year, she has ten volumes bound where she exhibits, as in a gallery, her illuminated (coloured) photos and collages dating from 35 years ago.

By 1952 she finishes 16 volumes; but unable to continue due to her advanced age, she leaves four edited volumes with precise instructions for their binding.

Conclusions

As a woman Josefina has void possibilities of satisfying her inner need of expression, of transcendence; however her talent lies in finding a crack where to evade from her time, her environment, her gender.

Her Personal Diary as much as her self-portrait photographs are causal not casual elections. Both inquire and confirm the I, and at the same time, they fix and trim time and space, conferring a particular coherence upon her oeuvre.

Manuel Hierro in his essay about the personal diary³ says:

'The diarist's deep ambition... longs for restituting through writing the flowing of a vanished present or on the verge of vanishing.'

He cites Walter Benjamin expressing: ***'the diary is about a space, moments... and about images under the figure of the frozen at the moment of the recalled'***.

And George Gusdorf, who writes ***'the diary will be one of the mediums we have to resist time or as well as to impose ourselves to it'***.

These ideas comply with Ronald Barthes's ***'this has been'*** in ***'Camera Lucida'***, and the relationship between photo and daily record could be seen as Josefina's attempts to preserve something (her environment?) or somebody (herself perhaps?) avoiding its final disappearance.

Inés Tanoira photography researcher of her visual work, underlines that this author speaks by means of images. In this way she gives rise to the idea that Josefina, makes her own wordless language, by means of which she creates with ease, expressing through the look what is impossible to pronounce or write.

This attitude of existential transgression projects Josefina to the future since she advances colour photography (that will later appear in 1942 and will be open to everyone in 1963) with her illuminated photos (hand-coloured photos).

Meanwhile she anticipates the virtuality in which we live since 1990. For Diego Fernández, photo digitizer, Josefina writes a blog (from web = net; and log = diary), that is to say a diary with its daily interwoven record.

In the complex work of this creator, there are implicit non-conscious topics and with no development, since in her time she could only considered herself an amateur deeply committed to her hobby.

To Delfina Bunge, six years younger than Josefina, her mother used to say ***'your own ideas is what you get lost by (...) though you say nothing those ideas are seen over your clothes'***⁴. Delfina will summarise women's reality by saying: ***'Je n'ai d'autre travail que mon oisiveté' I have no other work than my idleness.***

'The nurturing of intelligence was considered an obstruction or a tare, even becoming a greater nuisance for the concretion of a traditional marriage', states Axel Gasquet.⁵

The 1895 photographers national census in Argentina⁶, shows that among 473 male professional photographers there were only 12 women; but only 4 were Argentinian. Besides, on those days, photography was not considered an art.

With these variables, which sane female mind would happen to have the idea of giving a professional status to her hobby and uphold this job?

Josefina Oliver will die in January 1956, at the age of 80, with an extraordinary oeuvre and without picturing the dimension of her creativity, not even suspecting Alejandro Castellanos's⁷ words, for whom Josefina has ***'a highly complete corpus, a very important archive for Latin-American Photography'***.

Thus Josefina Oliver opens up a space for rescuing amateurs, who like her, have invisibly built the Nation's intimacy in their daily life but side by side with the professionals.

Along the years that this investigation has taken place, it is remarkable the instant adhesion that her oeuvre produces in young people who, not so interested in the historical considerations, are amazed by Josefina's vigour and update, recognizing this author as a pair and a contemporaneous.

Notes

*Argentine born in Buenos Aires City.

¹ Alexander Abel, talk upon Josefina Oliver. Buenos Aires, diciembre 2006.

² Alexander, Abel, idem.

³ Hierro, Manuel, *Literature's silenced communication: a theoretical reflection on the personal diary*. *Mediatika*. 7. 1999, 103- 127

⁴ Gálvez, Lucía. *Delfina Bunge. Personal diaries from a brilliant time*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2001

⁵ Gasquet, Axel. *Delfina Bunge. An emblematic case of feminine poetic bilingualism in Argentina at the beginning of the 20th century*. Département d'Études hispaniques, Université Blaise Pascal.

⁶ Gómez, Juan. *La Fotografía en la Argentina*, Artes Gráficas Farro, Buenos Aires, 1986, p.136.

⁷ Head of Centro de la Imagen, Mexico D.F., Mexico.