

## **Paloma al aire**

(Luis López Navarro)

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### **Remote-controlled desire**

The pigeon breeder spends time, money and hope on his pigeons. He rears them, names them, trains them and has faith in them. When competition day arrives he turns up with childish excitement and uncertainty. Pigeon sports have rules and referees and pigeons can reach a value of thousands of euros, with bets moving even higher amounts. However, there is something much more childlike in the fascination for birds, and the man who holds a trembling bird in his hand has the same look he had when he was ten years old.

### **The most macho**

Within columbiculture we find a truly Spanish variant: sports columbiculture. The game is as follows: a hen pigeon is set loose while dozens of cock pigeons fly after her to compete for her favours. Although none of them really fully achieves this goal, the male who spends the most time close to the female is the winner. The winner is not the most athletic pigeon, the one with the most endurance or the purest bred one. The winner is the most gallant pigeon, the one with the greatest persistence and reproductive instinct, the most macho.

Breeding a winning pigeon can mean prestige and financial gain. Painted with combinations in primary colours, just like flags and football teams, the pigeon selected, bred and trained to mate, becomes a projection, a flying vector of the pigeon fancier, which will represent his sporting, economic and sexual success or failure before the community. Far from the daily grind, the pigeon fancier finds in the pigeon breeding universe a parallel life where he can reach the top. All he needs is a winning bird. The pigeon fancier remains on the ground but his vector can fly.

### **Rural anthropology**

For the photographer, the small world of pigeon breeding and racing reproduces a whole vision of life in scale. Without pigeon fanciers being fully aware of it, their activity puts into play elements such as sex, flight, competition, hopes, triumph or failure. In the rustic scenarios of the lush countryside of eastern Spain, metaphors are born by themselves. On the domestic scale of a rural and rather marginal hobby, pigeon breeding and racing offers us images of hope and longing which, out of context, take on a greater, universal, meaning. Men looking up at the sky, with their gaze trained on the flight of their pigeons, their life projectile: their bet, their bullet, their lottery ticket. Men looking up at the sky in front of their

cars, their half-built homes, men looking up at the sky with their children-vectors holding hands.

### **The game**

This work proposes a study of the game as a symbolic act, a projection, a way to relate to the world. Play, so crucial to childhood, provides a collection of elements that allow people to experiment and practice a life in scale, learning and compiling experiences quickly and safely. However, throughout life we never stop playing and although we believe we are conducting our lives in a practical and objective way, much of our activity is symbolic, metaphorical. The burly men heading out to the fields on Sundays with their pigeons are playing, though they are not aware of it. Through their flying projections they find a location and enhance it. In fact, this mechanism is not too different from the projection of a football fan on his team, but the specific and picturesque aspects of rules and rituals, the elementary and rustic elements of its equipment and the spontaneous organisation expose the mechanisms that move the player. Unlike other more popular sports where the original metaphor (of fights between clans, rites of passage) has been lost in objectification and professionalisation, here the primitive and ritual component is still completely fresh, as if it had just been created. A group of men running round the countryside after their pigeons observing their mating, discussing the rules and refereeing, is reminiscent of the ethnographic documenting of the rites of remote tribes or of a group of children inventing a game while discovering the world.

The anthropological observation of the ritual game, carried out by adults in a developed society, also makes us question the reality of what we are experiencing and our form of symbolic perception. The transformation in the gaze of the players, their regression to their ten-year-old selves, is closely connected to the capacity to experience the symbolic as real, an ability which they have rediscovered.