

Olga Fernández López

Ovnis [Ufos] are an unmistakable imaginary product, with a function that is purely allegorical, contrary to submarines, rockets, bombs and other aerospace, naval or arm industry elements. During the Second World War, sightings were usually referred to as *foo-fighters*, a term indicative of the influence that popular culture was to have in the construction of the new modern imaginary. The non-sense of the word “foo”, transformed into a graphic signifier in the Smokey Stover comic strip, (a process characteristic of the 1930s), underwent a visual translation to nominate the bright balls of fire that pilots started to see in the aerial battlefield and that were considered Nazi potential secret arms. However, the most disconcerting fact was the sighting of unclassifiable artifacts in the U.S. sky, converted from war weapons into everyday objects. In this regard, it is significant the popularization of the term “flying saucer” after the report by businessman Kenneth Arnold, when he tried to describe what he had seen from the plane he was piloting in June 1947.

Arnold described the UFOs in several interviews as nine saucers, discs or pie pans, one of them with a half moon shape, thin and flat, convex, silvery and shiny, weaved in flight like the tail of a kite. Soon after, Arnold made a drawing of them and sketched them as oval in front and convex in the rear, adopting a more aerodynamic shape. Similar forms were also depicted in illustrations of science-fiction stories. These artefacts, half-submarine, half-ship, half-balloon, moved away from the exterior shape of planes and adopted basic geometrised volumes, along the lines of modern design. What is interesting here, in the case of the flying saucers, is precisely the principle of formal unity that underlies the industrially fabricated objects, whether dishes or ships, that referred to the same visual alphabet and that materialised a modern era style.

This unity, conceived beyond its formal approach, is Jacques Rancière's object of analysis when he asks what do have in common poet Mallarmé's words and pages, utilitarian products designed by engineer Peter Behrens, and Loïe Fuller's choreographies¹. Rancière connects this community with a new concept of surface –the surface of design-, a plane of communication where text and image, art and non-art, words, forms and things, exchange their roles in the same plane of equality. Loyal to his definition of equivalence, this surface makes possible a

¹ Jacques Rancière, “The Surface of Design”, in *The Future of the Image*, London, Verso, 2007, pp. 91-107.

shared material world that works on the shape of everyday objects from what he designates as “abbreviated forms”. For this author, symbolism and industrialism, arabesque and publicity, coincide in the search of a material expression that aspires to a model of community. Rancière finds a way to relate the forms of art and the forms of life that facilitates a “slide” between functions. Accordingly, defensive constructions slide imaginarily into flying saucers, lamps, helmets or vigilance cameras.

In the context of the Cold War, the symbolic displacement of military confrontation between blocs towards the atomic era, the space race, and the extra-terrestrial figuration, became eloquent in the new expression that North Americans coined in 1952 to designate the numerous unidentified flying objects in their territory. Edward J. Ruppelt, U.S. Army captain, championed the use of U.F.O., emphasizing its pronunciation as *you-foe*. The acronym conceptualized the increasing diversity of phenomena and tried to escape from an excessive *figurativity* in a moment of ascending abstractionism. Formalist abstraction was also capable of providing symbols that benefited from the already abbreviated signs. The documented instrumentalisation of abstract art as ideological tool during the Cold War corresponded with the UFO icon, hesitant between alien invasion and communist vigilance, between attack and communicative translation.

Technological imagination, a motivated visual alphabet and generous doses of fiction, delineated the forms of a war against the invisible, between positive science and popular belief. This clash took place also in practices such as espionage, which presupposed appearance and disappearance, discovery and de-codification, texts and images. Science-fiction and politics-fiction shared a modernity inhabited by ghosts, made of forms that materialized ironically the spirit of an era. The connotations associated with this sediment of forms are precisely what *Ovni Archive* rescues, triggering the re-elaboration of an indexical archive that insinuates what forms conceal, or what we suppose they conceal.

The archive has become one of the privileged formats for contemporary artists to approach the recent past. In the case of *Ovni Archive*, the archive is not the means to reveal a hidden truth. On the contrary, it contributes to the strengthening of the myth, constituted at the same time as process and as ends. It does not respond to a historical need, but to an imaginary, allegorical one, like Ufos. Archives have opened to poetical functions and have configured their own formal expression. This opening has also affected exhibition display systems that have started using retro-style vitrines or juxtaposition of heterogeneous pieces on the walls. Both

archive and museographic and archival installations, operate in the above mentioned surface of design, where texts and images, art and non-art, words, forms and things collapse their logics and project their dream of a common history. At this point the *Ovni Archive* presents an undoubtful generational resemblance with other artists born in the 1970s, for which the present re-enacted as past employ the forms and figures of the modern, transformed into a myth of origin, and returned them to us contaminated with fiction.