

# REVIEWS

THE PHOTOBOOK REVIEW

## Louie Palu *Mira Mexico*

The text, as it begins, is promising: "This is a concept newspaper; it has no headlines, competing articles or advertising. Instead, it is an editing project that uses photographs from Mexico. These photographs were taken during fieldwork and research on the drug war in Mexico."

And its author, Canadian photographer Louie Palu, extends an invitation to the reader to become a collaborator: "The newspaper can be dismantled and re-edited to your view of what you think the story should look like. It is also an exhibition that can be displayed anywhere you choose. You are the editor and curator."

The concept behind Palu's initial sequencing is also revealed: "On one side of each page there is a drug- or violence-related image and, on the opposite side, is an alternate view of Mexico covering a broad set of subjects. Explore the possibilities."

The individual photographs—they are all in black and white—are each printed over two pages so that, except for the cover and center spread, the reader can only see half of each image at once. Sometimes the fragments on each side of the fold make sense; at other times they seem incoherent—as do the juxtapositions. A partial image of packages of marijuana being stacked by U.S. Border Patrol agents is placed across from another half-image of migrant workers carrying tomatoes, and one of a needle stuck into the hand of a heroin addict near a river is juxtaposed with another of kids playing in a different river, one of them holding a bottle.

The "alternate" views of Mexico are stillborn when contextualized by the drug war—it is difficult to create an independent narrative of daily life next to so much graphic violence. Kids playing in the river can be seen as future recruits, migrant laborers as part of the failed economy that allows the drug trade to flourish. All of the images—of politicians, a former gang member who is heavily tattooed, children dressed as angels praying at a crime scene, various people who have been executed, workers—seem to be marked by drugs and violence.

When pulled out of the newspaper and seen on their own, some of the photographs are quite striking; Palu is a sensitive and serious photographer. When viewed whole on a table or wall, each image allowed to breathe, the reader can contemplate the character of the individuals depicted, rather than see them as montaged segments standing in for a larger concept.

But the sad truth is that for most of those portrayed in *Mira Mexico* there is no way to escape their difficult surroundings. They cannot, as with a newspaper page, simply extricate themselves from among those next to them and begin anew. Unfortunately, the most accurate depiction of their situations might well be the fragments of pictures facing one another across the newspaper's gutter—a metaphor for the perilous, limiting half-lives that circumstances require.

**FRED RITCHIN** is the author, most recently, of *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen* (Aperture, 2013).



Louie Palu  
*Mira Mexico*

New America Foundation and the artist • New York, 2012  
Designed by Louie Palu and Karin Palmquist • 12 x 15 in.  
(30.5 x 38.1 cm) • 32 pages • 16 black-and-white  
photographs • Newsprint • louiepalu.com

Mira Mexico  
Louie Palu

