

LAGNADO, Lisette. "Pequena e grande memória (sobre o trabalho de Rosângela Rennó)". São Paulo: Centro Cultural São Paulo, 2004. Folder de exposição [exhibition folder].

Lesser and Greater Memory / Lisette Lagnado

The history of Rosângela Rennó's work almost says it all: in two decades the artist's work has spanned the lines of aesthetic exploration that have transformed contemporary Brazilian artistic production. First, she grasped the political dimensions of photography, just as Oiticica did with the newspaper photo of the dead body of the famous bandit, Cara de Cavalo, who was killed by the police. She also spearheaded photography's recognition by the art world, which until the end of the 1980s still upheld the superiority of traditional forms, particularly that of painting and sculpture over mechanical forms. Moreover, this artist's acclaimed arc ranges from August Sander's cataloging of types of men and professions to the play of spatial relationships in photo-installations.

This information, well-known to those working in the field of photography, should not be forgotten for one very simple reason: the current indiscriminate use of digital cameras and their ever-more-sophisticated resources can produce 'naive' results when not combined with photographic experience and education. Rosângela Rennó's references reveal her commitment to the history of photography. She has demonstrated this by purchasing Robert Capa's famous Magnum photograph showing women carrying photographic portraits of their dead. Brazil has developed an informed eye capable of distinguishing artistic movements. Yet it cannot make the same claim regarding different ways of thinking about the "photographic act" (to use an expression coined by Philippe Dubois).

Rosângela Rennó has integrated her doubts into her work. With the recent publication of her book, *O arquivo universal e outros arquivos* [The Universal Archive and Other Archives] (São Paulo, Cosac & Naify, 2003), commemorating a major exhibit of her work at the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil (Rio de

Janeiro), certain philosophical questions remain unsolved. For example, Walter Benjamin's warnings against "the aestheticization of politics" proposing instead "the politicization of art." What happens when corpses become gorgeous? These questions create difficulties for an artist who still values the formal aspects of her work, especially when this work utilizes violent images.

Another issue, inseparable from the political nature of the photographic image speaks to the "disappeared" and the anonymous to whom Rosângela Rennó builds true monuments. Where are the characters designated by numbers (269, 447, 481, 606, 1202, 1220 and so on), letters (D., T., U., M., X., Y., J., X.X., Y.X. and so on) or codenames (vulgo, serginho da brahma, dente de lata, zé penetra, pneu, sangue bom, mosca) ? Since they are nameless and part of an endless list, are these works related to memory or entropy? A rereading of the heroic figure would be appropriate here.

At first glance, in the formal sense, the shadow of Boltansky (Paris, 1944) looms over Rosângela Rennó. Both have explored themes related to death and have a taste for reliquaries arranged as collections. Both are interested in the "history of the defeated". Boltansky makes it clear that he prefers working with what he calls "lesser memories" rather than "greater memories" which he believes are found in history books. Nevertheless, politically and artistically inscribing oneself in Brazilian history means putting oneself in the position of a citizen who is still constructing her collective memory. Only recently have personal accounts begun to reconstruct the facts and effects of the military dictatorship, a dark moment in Brazilian history. It is impossible to build any kind of future without first telling what happened.

Now, there is a "greater memory" which runs through all of Rosângela Rennó's work. It is the history of photography, discernable in her admiration for the experience of war correspondents. In her installations which demonstrate both a theatrical and pictorial talent, Rosângela Rennó stands apart from Boltansky who was partial to the symbolic, almost religious presence of light. Less interested in this kind of "sentimental" grandiloquence, her eye is distinguished by its dry, almost aseptic quality. At Rosângela's side, the spectator witnesses a massacre that has already taken place, he is already inside the morgue, trying to identify or recognize a body.

Finally, I would like to comment on the nature of Rosângela Rennó's albums and her personal collection. In the early 1990s, many artists unloaded "personal archives" on Brazilian art, using medical x-ray and a multitude of letters revealing family stories. Most told the same intimate, psychological anecdotes. It is not easy to make your own story the raw material of your art. Leonilson stands out as a rare exception, one who managed to combine desire, or a singular voice, with artistic necessity. In their own ways, Leonilson and Rosângela are two vectors that jointly influence the manner in which the urgency of the present is expressed. Rosângela Rennó honors us with the underworld, the exact layer which does not have its own voice. The raw strength of the third person comes to the surface, the face of the other which can be quite... quite close. And she forces us to understand, almost through abduction, that you cannot save your own skin without also saving that of the other.