even in the clearest of images something unknown remains / Moacir dos Anjos

Translated from portuguese by Paul Webb

The medium of expression used by Rosângela Rennó in her work is nearly always photography, although sometimes she makes use of text or video. Rarely, however, does she take photographs herself. She prefers to draw on the vast inventory of already-existing images that can be found anywhere, investigating, in various ways, their possible and fluctuating meanings in the organisation of everyday conflict and of affection. This procedure presupposes not only the fact that photographs are kept in archives, but also the intention of laying bare the ethics underlying the production and use of such images. Unhampered by the pretensions to certitude that scientific discourse claims—guided first and foremost by her openness to the uncertain—she builds up an *archaeology* and a *genealogy* of photography, situating it as an integral part of a system of knowledge and values that anchors forms of power in society, be they clearly defined or more indistinct.[1] Her main strategy for doing this is to present photographs, which she collects from different sources and chooses for varying motives, in a way that makes them appear uncanny to the eye, even though they are familiar or banal. It is when the images are made opaque through this displacement that their meanings can be renewed.[2] Early in her career, Rennó used photographs that were easily available to her (of herself and her family). It was, however, when she started to investigate the vast corpus of images produced by other institutions and individuals that her project took on greater potency and focus.

A clear example of this is the installation entitled *Immemorial* [1994]. Covering a long stretch

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1   The terms *archaeology* and *genealogy* are used here in the sense given them by the Michel Foucault (1926-1984), the former referring to the investigation of the interweaving constitution of diverse fields of knowledge, the latter to the unveiling of the link between these and power relations in society. Foucault, Michel, *A Arqueologia do Saber*. Rio de Janeiro, Forense, 2000.

2   Rennó, Rosângela. "Depoimento". In *Rosângela Rennó*. Belo Horizonte, C/Arte, 2003.

of the wall and the floor immediately in front, dark rows of photographs display larger than life faces of men, and those of a few women and some children. As the viewer's gaze roams over the photographs some indication is provided as to their probable origin. The eye is immediately drawn to the rigid frontal posture of heads, the dignified but modest clothing, and the sobriety of the look in the eyes staring into the camera lens. We do not know how long ago these images were captured, but the clothes that drape necks and shoulders suggest that it was indeed a long time ago. These features, taken as a whole, lead us to suppose that these portraits were taken as part of the formal identification process for individuals entering employment for the first time. This impression is reinforced by the schematic way in which the faces are framed: as in the passport-style photographs widely used for bureaucratic purposes. The photographs are also all numbered, as if to be filed away in an archive that registers people as data. However, it can be seen at a glance that there is no joy or comfort in these portraits and this sensation is reinforced by the sombre tones in which the images are presented. In fact, their arrangement in space inevitably reminds one of tombstones, a metaphor of the loss of unique lives to anonymity, as the social regulation of the contemporary world requires. Above the photographs, the name of the installation (in white letters on the white wall) only points up the repression of identities to which these portraits paradoxically bear witness.

By selecting and removing these images from the files of a company and presenting them in a place and in a way that is very alien to their original purpose, Rosângela Rennó does not, however, succeed in recovering any of these anonymous identities. What is clear is exactly the act of "unremembering" that labour contracts subject employees to, remoulding their ways of belonging to life along the lines of the asymmetrical power relations on which such contracts are founded.[3] Another striking feature is the role that archive photography exercises in this operation of forgetting what is unique, contradicting its supposed purpose of remembering that which has passed and thereby coming to occupy a symbolic place once occupied by the monument. Confronted only by these portraits, the viewer does not, therefore, know the name of any of these employees, or what post they occupied, whether the children are already dead or are still alive and forgotten somewhere. However, on closer observation, the tense appearance of one, the tight and obviously unsuitable clothes of another, or the frightened look of a third, frozen in time by the camera lens, lead one perhaps to imagine the place and time in which they lived and the reason for the social amnesia into which their desires escaped.[4] It is a dubious perception that recalls the

3 Herkenhoff, Paulo. "rennó ou a beleza e o dulçor do presente". In *Rosângela Rennó*. São Paulo, Edusp, 1997.

4 Using terms introduced by the French writer, Roland Barthes (1915-1980), it can be affirmed that

words of the female protagonist in the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* [1959], by the French film-maker Alain Resnais (1922), for whom photographs reconstitute the past only "in the absence of anything else": something undefined that is no more and that cannot be, therefore, fully remembered. It is exactly this ambivalence of the photographic image—that of simultaneously obscuring what it apparently reveals, of bringing obliquely to the memory that which it does not show—that most intrigues and inspires this artist in her work.

In the series entitled *Alias* [1998-1999], Rosângela Rennó presents blown-up portrait photographs from another archive. Again they are human heads (this time only men) and are also clearly part of a larger collection of images. It is immediately apparent, however, that these photos are different from those of *Immemorial*: instead of the stark frontal view of the passport photos, these show only the backs of the neck and the crown of the head, with hair that is always cropped very close to the scalp. In only one image can a forehead and part of a face be seen, and even in this case, looking down, as if in submission to the observer. These photographs are also much larger, thereby providing for detailed scrutiny of their content. The originally black and white images are highlighted in red around the swirls made by the hair. The size also reveals brief notes made in the margins of the portraits, suggesting that these were individuals under some kind of institutional control and that they are being studied in some way, like psychiatric patients or prisoners. In a way that is analogous to the official company photos, these certainly once served to confer authority on some *disciplinary power* that founded and justified systems of regulation. This power is known to have drawn on physiognomic types, such as the shape of the skull and face, which supposedly governed the behaviour of those who transgressed socially-agreed norms.

The photographic archive from which these images are taken is, however, a neutral collection of visual information, serving—through the selection, combination, and comparison of the portraits— not the affirmation of more or less arbitrarily chosen models, but an explanation and manipulation of one dimension of reality. Although the images depict unique lives, they also make them equal and indistinct, a mere list of elements to provide empirical proof of generic discursive statements.[5] By recontextualising a part of this specific archive in her work, the artist once again demonstrates how the photographic medium can veil what it supposedly reveals, without, however, failing

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it is the *punctum* of the photographs of these employees (that which attracts the eye and yet is difficult to name) that activates their *studium* (that which situates them in history and culture). Barthes, Roland. *A Câmara Clara*. Rio de Janeiro, Nova Fronteira, 1984.

5   Sekula, Allan. "Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labour and Capital". In Brian Wallis (ed.), *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writing by Contemporary Artists*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987.

to provide information on what is not immediately visible. As a counterpoint to the institutional generation of anonymity to which these images attest, they are accompanied by a video – *Alias/Text* [1998] – in which hundreds of real nicknames are shown (metal mouth, white devil, mad dog, bad boy, rusty…), providing clearer indication that the images are of prison inmates and making explicit one common way of rejecting and resisting the imposed loss of alterity. This defensive strategy does not, however, succeed in recovering the broken social ties; as such nicknames are soon also listed in other files and deprived of an unequivocal relation to individual subjects, as is paradoxically evidenced by their appearance in this piece. *Alias* and *Alias/Text* bear witness, like *Immemorial*, to the diffuse place that some segments of society are destined in the collective memory through the power of the photographic image.[6]

In her video, *Vera Cruz* [2000], Rosângela Rennó also juxtaposes text and image, this time in the form of a fictional register—based on the report written by Pero Vaz de Caminha to the King of Portugal – of the arrival of the Portuguese in the land that would come to be known as Brazil and his meeting with the local inhabitants. In this piece, there is almost nothing to be seen, except for the moving image of a supposedly old and scratched film, stained by fungi and in an advanced state of decay. There are sounds, apparently only of the wind and the sea. However, although the image and the voice of the Portuguese explorer are removed—thereby expunging that which individualises and confers immediate identity—the latter is at least recorded in the form of written subtitles. It is not an indistinct form of speech, but that spoken by people who perform specific functions in the group they belong to (captains, priests, soldiers, scribes...) and who react to lived experience in particular ways. This artifice bestows on the words the power to describe the encounter with the *other,* but also to define those who are strange to them (the Indians) in an undifferentiated way. If the subtitles allow the viewer to imagine the scenes that accompany them—thus in some measure recovering the images that the video suppresses—they also contaminate them with the view of a world where difference is viewed merely as a deviation from a presumed normality.[7] Using little more than the printed word, *Vera Cruz* also demonstrates

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6   Some other contemporary artists have contested the supposed neutrality of the historical knowledge generated by photographic archives. The French artist, Christian Boltanski (1944), for example, has drawn on a variety of archives to show the oblivion to which some ethnic or social groups have been consigned in the course of the 20th century. The US artist, Carrie Mae Weems (1953), has also recontextualized ethnographic photographs of slaves and their descendants taken in the USA in the 19th century, to highlight their role in constructing racially discriminated identities.

7   *Vera Cruz* is one of a number of works by contemporary Brazilian artists which draw attention to the worthlessness the social fabric of the country confers on indigenous peoples. Another such work is *Zero Cruzeiro* [1974-1978], by Cildo Meireles (1948), which has the image of an indigenous Brazilian stamped on one of its sides. On the other side of this "not legal tender" bill, in an eloquent commentary on current social values in Brazil, there is an image of inmate of a psychiatric institution.

how film—even, or perhaps especially, the historical, *photographic*, documentary film—can be an instrument for inculcating hierarchies and thereby annulling the supposed right to narrate life from different perspectives with equanimity. This reinforces the idea that a text, just like an image created by someone or of something, may serve as an instrument of social forgetting.

If in *Alias/Text* and *Vera Cruz* it is the words that seek incessantly and unsuccessfully to oppose the anonymity that the archived images generate, *Universal Archive* [1992-] moves in the opposite direction to produce similar results. This piece comprises a set of prosaic writings taken from newspapers, in which there is always some kind of allusion to photographs. From such texts written to be read and practically forgotten in the course of a day, the artist removes the names of the individuals mentioned and replaces them only with initials (the farmer X.Y., the decorator D., the former member of the government M.M., the businessman A....), as well as, in most cases, suppressing information that might situate them in time and place. The writings are thus deprived of any marks of human individuation, thereby reducing their power as evidence and divesting their protagonists of any clear identity. The oblivion to which they were originally destined is thus highlighted and confirmed. Reproduced on the walls on a variety of supports and with varying degrees of visibility (framed, projected or glued), the texts are, however, treated almost as if they were images making up a "universal archive" of facts, and it is left to the observer to use them for creative thinking—anchored in the repertoire of knowledge she or he possesses—and, in this way, supposedly re-remember them. By pointing out their power as images, however, Rosângela Rennó submits the collected texts to the same rationale of indistinctness and oblivion to which archived photographs are subjected.

This offering to the imagination of an archive of images is also present in the installation *Farewell Ceremony* [2003], made up of about forty photographs of newly-weds, in which the grooms, dressed in the customary fashion, are posed inside cars or on motorbikes. Instead of capturing intimate moments, these images bear witness to scenes that existed only to be photographed and have preserved therefore their singularity. For this reason, these black and white images are somehow imbued with an unequivocally nostalgic tone. Each one pulses with a referent, coming from an unmistakable moment in life: when two people stand together to celebrate a project of shared affection. Magnified and organised as a grid on the wall—a form of spatial organisation that makes what is unique only one of a kind—, these photographs end up, however, diluting what once was of distinctive in the individual expectations of each couple, thereby confirming the annulling

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role of otherness that archives possess.[8] The unknown and irretrievable length of time that has passed since these scenes were recorded also serves to frustrate the expectation of individuality that they provide. Some of these reproductions have faded regions that dissolve parts of the faces or open up creases, suggesting that some time in the future the "originals" will decompose. These physical alterations in fact serve as indicators that, by being fixed in photographic images, these couples have not only become eternal, but also, in a precise sense of the word, dead; for they inhabit the images, from the very moment they were inscribed in them by a social ritual, as beings vulnerable to what is to come.[9] This is the ambiguous power of photography and it can be compared to the machine dreamt up by a character in *Morel's Invention* [1940], by the Argentine writer, Adolfo Bioy Casares (1914-1999), which registers and immortalises images of Morel and his friends in an idyllic situation, but, in turn, afflicts them with a disease that brings about their death.[10] This immobility of the portraits in time also reminds the viewer—by opposition to the progressive ageing process to which the men and women photographed in *Farewell Ceremony* are inevitably subject—of the inevitability of her or his own death. It is precisely this specular and sombre relation to the work—caused by the weakening of the relation between the images presented and something specific to them—which invites the viewer to remember and project personal narratives into these photographs which have been made to seem alike by the artist.

The variety of events lived through by the viewer also were, however—like those of almost anyone—, many of them registered in photographs, freeing those who participated in them of the need to remember. Instead of memories, only images can be kept, given that they prove and evoke presence in places near or far and participation in rites of encounter or passage. However, as memory is defined by imprecision, fluidity and even capacity for error, photography is the depository of the belief of one who only attests and confirms facts; while one mimics errant past events in seeking to recreate them in thought, the other reduces them to a precise and single portrait, making it less an instrument for remembering than—by subtracting doubt—an agent of forgetting.[11] For being the conventional support for photographs, putting them together in an arbitrary narrative, photograph albums are spaces for registering and forgetting individual lives, occupying a privileged position in the affirmation of the ambivalence of this way of fixing and reproducing images. They are instruments that bring together sets of photographs, prove that

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8   This annulment is also pointed to in *Elective Affinities* [1990], in which photographs of two couples are put together in such a way that they become mixed or confused in the eye of the viewer.

9   Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. London, Penguin Books, 1979.

10   Casares, Adolfo Bioy. *A Invenção de Morel*. São Paulo, Cosac & Naify, 2006.

11   Almeida, Bernardo Pinto de. *Imagem da Fotografia*. Lisboa, Assírio & Alvim, 1995.

someone belongs to a family circle and to a particular age, but, at the same time, deprive them of the complexity of their belonging.[12] In extreme cases, the function of albums as depositories of memory seems to be actively put to the test, as they are often thrown out or sold for next to nothing.

Rosângela Rennó acquired around a hundred of these discarded albums (including various boxes of slides in various formats) from open markets, junk and antiques stores and exhibit them in her installation *Bibliotheca* [2002] (library). By way of a visual confrontation with this collection of archives—supposed vehicles for forgetting what is subtle and uncertain—she paradoxically seeks to find in photography the function of activating the shifting memory of a fact, and not only admitting, through the certainty that an image brings, its unequivocal past occurrence. At first sight, however—using a strategy that only highlights the position she espouses—the piece frustrates the eye, as it encounters, laid out on small tables arranged in groups, not the albums themselves, but the photographs from their covers printed on brilliant acrylic surfaces, each accompanied by a number from 1 to 100. The objects referred to—the albums for collecting images—can be seen immediately under these covers, enclosed in a transparent case of the same material and partly concealed from view. Unable to touch them and only obliquely visible in the sort of display case in which they are enclosed, they seem only to serve as proof that the photographs on display relate to originals that may not be opened. These display-cases also express, in the colours with which cover them, an order that is constructed and imposed on the articles placed therein, just as in any other library. Each of the albums on display is colour-coded by way of a double territorial belonging: the continent on which the photographs contained in them were actually taken (indicated by the colours on the lid) and the continent on which they were found (indicated by the colours of the friezes). Maps of the world installed on the wall nearby each group of four or five of these display-cases are marked with pins which inform the ultimate destination of the albums exhibited and whose heads bear their catalogue numbers and the colours identifying their place of origin.[13]

By blocking visual access to the private narratives probably contained in each album, the artist clearly unstitches the intimate relation that photographs have with the time and place they were

12   The current trend towards digital photo albums does not alter this inherent dysfunctionality. By allowing for a greater and more rapid unreflecting accumulation of images, these make it even more extensive.

13   According to the colour-coding, red represents Europe, green Oceania, brown Asia, orange Africa, dark blue North and Central America, and light-blue South America. A detailed description and analysis of this work can be found in Melendi, Maria Angélica. "*Bibliotheca ou das possíveis estratégias da memória*". In Rosângela Rennó, *O arquivo universal e outros arquivos*. São Paulo, Cosac & Naify, 2003.

taken, making them, through this imposition of blindness, belong to an indistinct place and an imprecise time. She therefore hides images so that only from the way they are catalogued can they be made available and reinvented, on the basis of various references in the minds of the observers who cannot actually see them. This desire to recover a mnemonic sense for photography, which marks Rosângela Rennó's work, is expressed in different ways by two other components of *Bibliotheca.* One is a card-index for each of the one hundred albums, in which it is possible to read descriptions of their physical characteristics and (supposed or proven) iconographic content. The cards also reveal more information on the geographical provenance of the images the albums contain and the locality where they were discovered. Once again, there is here a clash between text and photography as different ways of approaching facts. However careful scrutiny of the cards cannot match up to the experience of actually seeing the scenes contained in the sealed albums to which they refer. Not only because what is written in them is impossible to describe completely even in the case of the simplest of images, but also because the text, precisely through its descriptive incompleteness, requires the reader to recreate the images in imagination, which spills over, into the realm of re-enactment in thought, the remembrance of stories that the viewer him or herself has lived through. The content of the index cards, therefore, simultaneously falls short of and goes beyond the narrative power of the unseen photographs.

Finally, there is a book, also called *Bibliotheca*. There is no text in it, only hundreds of copies made of images contained in the albums before they were locked away, thereby justifying the fact that this object has the same name as the installation as a whole. However, there is no indication in the book as to what the photographs refer to or as to their origins. They are displayed in an order determined only by formal or symbolic juxtapositions. Furthermore, by separating these images from their original supports—the albums enclosed in the display-cases—, the artist frees them once again from their function of bearing witness to the construction of unique stories inscribed in a given historical time, turning them, in the process, into mere ruins of the course of past lives. Analogous to the discursive descriptions of the albums organised in the card-indexes, the disorderly and anonymous presentation of the images extracted from them presents anyone casually leafing through the book with the possibility of recovering and projecting onto this new and vague archive of other people's lost memories their own remembrances, themselves often almost decomposed. Thus, as users of ordinary libraries choose books, in this installation it is the visitors who, by choosing the archived images that interest them or awaken memories, make this collection of information something that belongs to each one and explain the piece in a different way.[14] There is thus not just one *Bibliotheca* but many.

The potential knowledge that any photograph contains is not, therefore, entirely anihilated by

14   Manguel, Alberto. *A biblioteca, à noite*. São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2006.

its use as a substitute for memory, which, in turn, induces amnesia. Its surface is abuzz with information ready to be brought to life as facets of cognition of that which it represents as an image shorn of flesh. Furthermore, as if to show such persistence against all evidence, Rosângela Rennó takes from sets of photographs taken by the police at four crime scenes—to register the facts as a basis for investigation—and deconstructs each one into many other images. All these pieces—each one framed as a slide ready for projection – are laid alongside one another on tables or light boxes, inviting the observer to recompose mentally the photographs relating to each of the crimes. Interrupted by the edge of the frames, the scenes lose, however, their power to provide information on the event that they supposedly register. The hierarchy of visual values they contained is broken down and the eye wanders from one fragment to another without knowing for certain where it should rest. This effect, in fact, superimposes itself on the deprivation of the corpses photographed of their alterity, which was already underway from the moment the images were archived as part of the criminal investigation. It is no accident that this series of four pieces is entitled *Erasing* [2005]. It is the very obliteration of meanings and identities that allows one to see what would be imperceptible if the photograph were preserved as a whole: papers over a wardrobe, the image of a child in a portrait frame, clothes scattered on the floor, knick-knacks on a piece of furniture, the shadow of a fence cast on the ground, rotten fruit, a window ajar, a bottle left in a corner, the hair on the legs of a corpse.

The procedure the artist uses here comes close to that of the photographer in the film *Blow-Up* [1966], by the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni (1912), who cuts and blows up a photograph taken by chance because he suspects that in a corner of the photo far removed from the main image there is proof that a crime was committed. In both cases, there is a certainty that photographs also carry an "infra-knowledge", partial and merely suggested information that cannot be reduced to the facts they present as unequivocally important.[15] Such strategies also contain the idea that a photographic image does not only register the moment of occurrence of a principal fact, but diverse instants, in which sub-events blend into each other, modify and become confused with one another in a heterogeneous way.[16] Although impossible to demonstrate, this notion becomes implicit when Rosângela Rennó superimposes on some of the "erased" crime images fragments of other photographs, thereby forming a palimpsest of scenes that allude not

15   Barthes, Roland. *Ibid.*

16   Derrida, Jacques. "The Photograph as Copy. Archive and Signature". European Photograh, 19/20, Winter 1998/Summer 1999.

only to separate places but also to different times coexisting in the same fact. The referent is thus not fixed and readily available in the photograph, but established in various ways under the scrutiny of a plurality of observations.

It is of this very imprecision and latent power of the photographic image that the artist seeks evidence in much of her work, making it an important prerequisite for the archaeological investigation of this universally applicable means of reproduction and for understanding the role it plays in social relations. By shifting the focus, blurring, blotting, contradicting, decentring, translating, fragmenting or displacing images that already exist inserted into circuits where signs move rapidly, Rosângela Rennó simultaneously immobilises them and reconstitutes, in the eye of the viewer, the power to resignify them on the basis of a subjectivity that is in part constituted by these very images. Few times this critical desire was most clearly stated than in the panels containing old photographs which were painted over in lead paint to obliterate their power to register or recall something that was lived. Of all the artist's work, this *Blind Wall* [2000] perhaps best symbolises the impossibility of finding out about the past by way of carefully catalogued and well-defined images, and makes a powerful case for the existence of "margins of visibility" in any photograph, beyond which nothing more can be seen in it.[17] Desiring to step beyond these margins entails relinquishing blind faith in the photographic image, suspending belief in its established codes and understanding the way it is ambiguously inscribed in the course of life. It entails admitting, even in the face of the clearest of images, that the not yet known may, by way of scrutiny and investigation, insinuate into it.

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17   Almeida, Bernardo Pinto de. *Ibid.*