

. MELENDI, Maria Angélica. "Archives du Mal - Mal d'Archive". In *Vulgo [Alias]* - Rosângela Rennó. Sidney: University of Western Sydney - Nepean, 2000, p.6-15.

Archives du Mal - Mal d'Archive / María Angélica Melendi

Translated from portuguese by Charles Spencer Bacon

... Mal d'Archive rappelle sans doute un symptôme, un souffrance, une passion: l'archive du mal mais aussi ce qui ruine, déporte ou emporte jusqu'au principe d'archive, à savoir le mal radical.

Derrida¹

... because to forget is one of the forms of memory, its empty cellar.

Borges²

I

On October 2, 1992, in Pavilion 9 of the Casa de Detenção (prison) of the Penitentiary Complex of Carandiru in São Paulo, state of São Paulo, a fight between two prisoners – over of a clothes line – began a revolt that brought the riot control police to the prison. The result of this intervention was the massacre of 111 prisoners and 153 injured, of which 130 were prisoners and 23 police.

The pictures of naked bodies, stretched out in zinc coffins, with numbers painted on their skin– as identification – remain in the memory of those who saw them stamped under the headlines of the newspapers.

Inaugurated in about 1911 as a model prison, the Carandiru Complex is made up of 4 independent units: the Screening Centre, the Women's Prison, the Casa de Detenção (where the massacre occurred) and the State Penitentiary. In the latter, there is the Penitentiary Academy of the State of São Paulo (ACADEPEN) and inside it, there is the Paulista Penitentiary Museum. The government of the state of São Paulo promised to close the Carandiru Complex. So far, nothing has been done towards this.

II

In 1995, Rosângela Rennó found out about a large number of glass film negatives in the Penitentiary Academy. In May that year, she requested permission to gain access to this archive in order to restore, organise, and later, to use the images from these negatives in her work. Initially the request was refused, based on a rule that protects the identity of prisoners and of their families for a period of one hundred years. Rennó, however, received approval in February 1996, after she discovered that some of these pictures had already been published in a work on criminology.

Almost 15,000 glass negatives were piled up in cardboard boxes in the cellars of the Penitentiary Academy, without any criteria of organisation or conservation. Damaged by time and humidity, the remains of the archive had been inaccessible, forgotten for over half a century. With help from National Art Foundation, the University of the State of São Paulo and the Brazilian Archivists' Association, Rennó installed a studio in the Penitentiary Academy, where she cleaned, restored and catalogued the negatives.

Most of the pictures were identification photographs of prisoners (face and profile) and signalectic (full body, naked: front, profile and back). There were also about 3,000 photographs of tattoos, marks and scars, some of diseases and anomalies including 30 photographs of the backs of prisoner's heads.

These black and white photographs were used to illustrate the personal files of prison interns. The photographs were taken between 1920 and 1940, in the Psychiatric and Criminology sector of the São Paulo State Penitentiary. The intention was to identify prisoners by number, physical characteristics (features, skin colour, height, weight and deformities) and marks (tattoos and deliberate or accidental scars). Dr. José de Moraes Mello, the doctor who was responsible for the operation, did not leave any documentation on the ulterior use of the archive. There is no mention of the name of the photographer.

III

Since 1992, Rosângela Rennó has selected and organised the Universal Archive (Arquivo Universal), a collection of newspaper texts which, in her words, narrate "ordinary stories about people and photography"³. From the social column to the crime page, the

Universal Archive is made up of texts in which the photograph image becomes proof, fetish, object of desire, reminder or witness. In the textual collection of the Universal Archive, the photographic images are named or described. It is, therefore, an archive of images without images.

Yesterday, at M.'s house, the employee spent half an hour asking questions like: What is the household income? What church do you belong to? What language do you speak? Is there a bathroom in the house? M., who is 25, remembered the last census of the area, done by plane. Really. During the racist regime, the number of inhabitants in a district was determined by aerial photography. The houses were counted and the result was then multiplied by four, the estimated average members per household.

The Universal Archive is a virtual archive in which the texts have been edited: the names, places and dates eliminated altogether. This is an archive of written images, in which the identity of the subject is mutilated by the capital letter followed by a period. The indeterminacy of the subject reinforces and highlights a false objectivity. The anonymity of the situation allows the text to find its own destiny and meaning. In the Universal Archive we are all murderers, we are accomplices but we are also all victims.

FUNAI (Indian National Foundation) is suing Company C., demanding that it pay damages to the Indian X., 13 years old, who was raped and made pregnant by the technicians who were prospecting on the Indian reservation. FUNAI staff were outraged by the company's carelessness on the matter. It sent in only a list of names, but failed to deliver photographs of the technicians who were working in the area at the time, so that the adolescent might identify the perpetrators of the crime. X is deaf, mute, and mentally handicapped.

Rennó has stated that, "The way I deal with the text is exactly what I do with a photograph. I feel the text determines an image power, which is very great as descriptive information

that the photograph does not give⁴. The narratives of the Universal Archive – ordinary stories about people and photography – are irrelevant, failed, fragmented. As with our memory, the Archive proliferates from these insignificant narratives, these gaps, and these fragments.

IV

The installation *Vulgo* is defined by the author as a visual dialogue between the photographs of the Paulista Penitentiary Museum and texts from the Universal Archive. The 11 selected texts show the perversity of power exercised by the act of looking. The large photographs, laminated as black mirrors, focus on the heads of the prisoners: 9 from behind and 3 from the front. In the latter the eyes of the prisoners are closed or looking at the floor. In one of them, the identity number of the prisoner is stuck on his forehead.

The shaved heads show a clear spiral crown, coloured by the artist in tones of red, pink, and salmon. This can be likened to a kind of erotic make-up laying a mask over the skin suggesting the heat of blood, to remind us that, behind the flat surface of the photograph, there is a face. Similar to the reverse of a standard ID photograph, the heads seem to avoid recognition. However, we know that nothing escapes the sharp look of love or hate. How can you fail to recognise the back of the neck, the forehead, the roots of hair, the spiral in the person you hated or in the one you loved. But it is not a question of love or hate. It is a question of classification and identification. The photographs of the Penitentiary Academy attempted a physiognomic or phrenological study. Since no one crown is the same as any other, these could become a defining trait of individual identity.

The prison gaze, which intends to attribute meanings and create categories, fragments, crops and classifies the individuals. Those condemned by society — the riffraff — humiliated by the double weight of crime and guilt, offer to the gaze of the other a vulnerable back of the neck, almost awaiting the executioner's blade. Separated from the body, strangely anonymous, and at the same time familiar, the heads show in the spiral design, the punctum of the image and of the individual. It was not the blade of a guillotine that cut off the heads, but a camera. Through the lens of the camera, power

multiplies its identifying gaze and throws it, like a net, on the individuals. Everything is evidence, everything is index.

Rennó's work points out that the act of photographing the crowns may be the ultimate in the idea of the pan-optic. Invisible power submits those dominated to total visibility. The standard identity photograph is not enough, nor are profile and fingerprints. The individual is fragmented by the registration of his minimum specifics, which are exhibited and scrutinised as if from them it was possible to detect the most intimate and secret drives. The photographs of the heads of the prisoners in the Carandiru archive are anonymous. What was intended to be an identification index – the reddish spiral of the crown – is a symptom of the loss of identification. The failure in this attempt to categorise is clear: the point at which positivist thinking wanted to find similarities it finds an infinite sum of differences.

What is at play, again, is the erasing of identity. The work of the artist makes clear the failure at any attempt of identification. According to Rennó this is a sensation of dizziness, because in the search for data to define the Other, what is found is a gap, an emptiness, an amnesic void which makes it impossible to name. Between the obsessive registration of the details operated through the eye of the camera and the registration of smaller narratives in the Universal Archive, there is always something lost, there is always something that escapes, hidden in the interstices which proliferate endlessly.

V

Rennó has cited Barthes who knows that “the photographs are signs that do not prosper well, which go sour like milk. Whatever it gives to be seen and in whichever way this is done, a photograph is always invisible: it is not the photograph that we see⁵. The difficulty of adapting sight to the photograph comes from the adherence to the referent, when it functions like a window or a mirror, the photograph disappears.

Rosângela Rennó proposes to release the photograph from this fate and, through a double operation, manages to prevent the omnipresence of the referent. On the one hand, the artist draws up the Universal Archive where only referents fit while on the other hand, she appropriates photographs which she reworks to the limit of visibility,

whether by obliteration, eliminating contrasts, fragmentation or decontextualization and recontextualization.

The texts are read in a temporal continuum. The photographs do not illustrate the written text. The text is not the legend of the photograph. Our cultural habit leads us to seek a legend which does not appear (after all, who are these people?) and some photographs which do not exist (how to recognise the guilty without the photographs? how to carry out a census through photographs?). Apparently, there is no relation between the two categories, but, in art, the connections between language and image are infinite. When confronting in the same space, images and text, Rennó creates a number of relations which are never explicit.

The Universal Archive is a series of written images, visual texts interacting with the debilitated image of the photograph. The referent – the subject – is almost barred by the indefiniteness of the image and by the lack of legends. The subject is unidentified. After all, who are these men? Why are they standing with their backs to us? Why are their eyes closed? The referent – the subject, is barred by the enigmatic initial. After all, who is M.? Who is the Indian woman Y.? This referent, however, is recovered and restored by the double exhibition – of the photograph and the texts.

For Foucault, image and text

are irreducible one to the other; however much you say you can see, what you see never fits into what you say, however much you show what is being said by images, metaphors, comparisons, the place where these shine is not that which the eyes unveil, but that which the successions of syntax define⁶.

Associated texts and images interact, never full, never finite, never total, because that which is seen does not fit in that which is said.

VI

In a rhetorical gesture, Freud commented at the beginning of chapter VI of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, that his mobilisation of the heavy archive machine to tell stories that

everybody already knew was a waste of printing, ink and paper⁷. In various places in his work, Borges lamented “aggregating one more symbol to an infinite series”. In a similar vein, Rosângela Rennó believes that there are too many photographs in the world and, consequently, only re-photographs the images of photographs (en abyme, the referent of the photograph is a photograph...). But in spite of this gesture, each old photograph that Rennó re-photographs becomes a new photograph, in the new archive, one more symbol to be inserted in an infinite series.

A posteriori, the re-photographed image shows itself full of meanings and points to a meaningful universe from which it was always removed. Destined always to invisibility, produced to be filed away and soon forgotten, the images from Carandiru advance finally to visibility in the field of art.

The forgotten photographs – the identification photographs abandoned in the penal archive – and the banal reports are recovered as proof of social amnesia, because Rennó is interested in the remains of culture, the trails of memory, in that which is forgotten or eliminated when telling the official story.

Amnesia, she repeats, not forgetfulness. Amnesia, a loss of memory, total or partial. The medical term points to the wiping out of memories. You forget that something was forgotten. Social amnesia, collective amnesia, as Heinrich Boll defines in postwar Germany with its Nazi past. At some moment, something was irredeemably lost; the photographs and the texts which the artist files away do not recover the memory but witness the forgetting.

VII

In *Mal d'Archive*⁸ Jacques Derrida set about distinguishing the archive from that to which it was reduced: the experience of memory and the return to origin, the archaic and the archaeological, the memory or excavation, in search of lost time⁹.

All archives presuppose inscriptions, marks, stamps, and their decodification as well as their storage and conservation. Every archive presupposes also a place of consignment – a place to bring together signs – and a technique of repetition.

A radical evil seems to act always in the custody and interpretation of archives, and in the relationship we have with them, in ways to remember, memorise and make monuments, the need to register everything, without surplus, without loss. But censorship and repression work to destroy the archive, even before it was produced. The drives of death precipitate the archive into forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory, the eradication of truth. Because the archive will never be a memory as a spontaneous, living and inner experience.

The Penitentiary Academy (the archive of marks, inscriptions, stamps: the archive of written bodies, described and drawn: the archive of evil) was devoured by humidity and by time unveils - wasting way - an accumulation of stratified archives. Layer under layer, Rennó's gaze exposes the scars of wounds that the system tried to hide, but are still open on the abandoned original. Under these scars, through these scars, the artist as an archaeologist, allows us to glimpse the infinite possibilities of excavations.

Dominated by the archive, by the evil of the archive, the artist does not rest, because she is interminably dedicated to seek and establish the archive in the place where things don't have their own files. Re-establishing the archive, Rennó also restores certainty that the archive is irremediably lost. Gone astray in the succession of copies, the archive is illegible because all the keys for its reading have been erased. A useless archive, even if read from the memory of the archives of Lombroso or Lacassagne. A useless archive dominated by an infinite wait, a disproportionate always pending sense of waiting without a horizon: the absolute impatience of a desire of memory.

What Rennó was able to recover are only gaps, the voids, and the fragments of this desire of memory. With these remains, the artist sets up another archive which was originally latent. The images of the new archive – naked bodies, marks, tattoos, wounds; arms, hands, legs, feet, torsos, heads – belong now to an art archive, aestheticised beyond the memories of death. The last chapter of the life of disgraced men.

VIII

In Portuguese, the noun *vulgo* means people, populace, troop, crowd, plebeians, and riffraff. But *vulgo* also means nickname, that other name which family, the general

populace, the social group or even the press tend to use rather than the proper name. When used to name an installation which shows the photographs of supposed delinquents, the word vulgo multiplies in meaning. The vulgo, a surname, a metonymic name, sometimes erases the inscription of civil registration and replaces the renamed person in the cast of the disgraced; Jack the Ripper, Landrú, the Vampire of Dusseldorf, El Pibe Cabeza, the Bandit of the Red Light, El Angel de la Muerte, the Motoboy. In Rennó's exhibition Vulgo, photographs of anonymous beings are placed alongside texts about the nameless and unidentified. The vulgo are people, plebeians, and riffraff.

On the other hand, in Latin, vulgo is a verb which means to propagate, to publish. Since art is one means of reflecting on life, the condition for artistic experience is the capacity with which a work engages with the viewer. In the gallery, images and texts show, through slits and gaps, the promise of a totality that resists the irreversible fragmentation of contemporary experience. In the gallery, Vulgo propagates and publishes the possibility of inscribing, writing and printing another story: the story of those who were beaten. A story which has resisted - among the archives of evil and the evil of the archive - amnesia and invisibility.

IX

For Hal Foster, the political in contemporary Western art can be understood only through the practice of resistance and interference. If vanguard or critical art is a transgression of the official culture of an erudite society originally opposed academia, it is understood as being opposed to official modern culture, both in the mass media and in recovered modernism (the modern art of the museums)¹⁰. In another way, the collapse of representation — nowadays there can be no simple representation of reality, of history, of politics, of society: they can only be constituted textually ¹¹ — unveils the ideological content implicit in the fallacies of positive images.

By appropriating images from the archive of a penitentiary museum and exhibiting them with texts from the Universal Archive, Rennó is connecting that which is buried, the non-synchronic, with practices of contemporaneity. The Museum and the Archive, as the deposits of a kind of memory, are unmasked, when confronted with the tragic banality of the reports in the Universal Archive.

The task in which Rosângela Rennó is engaged – restoring meaning – never intended to remember the 1992 massacre. However, each installation with the photographs of the Carandiru archive never fails to re-enact the slaughter. As if this were latent, as if each shot by the police was already announced in the shots by the camera of the unknown photographer who, over 50 years ago, took the photographs.

Rennó's art does not oppose the system – history has taught that it is an inglorious task – but acting effectively from the privileged sites of the system, it allows an oblique view, not of the perversity of this system, but as Paulo Herkenhoff would have it, of one of the maps of its shadow.

NOTES

¹Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'Archive*, Une Impression Freudienne, Paris: Galilée, 1995, p.3. (French)

²Jorge Luis Borges, Obras Completas, Buenos Aires: EMECE, 1976, p.1017. (Spanish)

³Rosângela Rennó, Rosângela Rennó, São Paulo: EDUSP, 1997, p.159. (Portuguese)

⁴ Rosângela Rennó, 1997, p.159.

⁵Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, New York: Noonday, 1982, p.19.

⁶Michel Foucault, The Order of Things, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p.31.

⁷Jacques Derrida, 1995. p.21.

⁸Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever : A Freudian Impression, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998

⁹Jacques Derrida, 1995. p.3.

¹⁰ Hal Foster, Recodificação, São Paulo: Casa Editora Paulista, 1996, p.200. (Portuguese)

¹¹ Hal Foster, 1996, p.200. (Portuguese)