

LAPA, Pedro. "Rosângela, Comunidade sem nome" [Rosângela, Community without a name]. In *Rosângela Rennó: Espelho diário*. Lisboa [Lisbon]: Museu do Chiado, 2002, p.7-35.

## **Rosângela :**

### **Community Without a Name / Pedro Lapa**

1.

Daily Mirror is a work entirely elaborated using video, a medium not much resorted to in Rosângela Rennó's production. Since 1997/1998, the artist has been conducting research with appropriated photography, based on its use in the most historical and social contexts. The emphasis placed on the series of photographs, negatives or archives thus falls on the organisational and representational devices of the image itself and on the functions which determine it, and which basically confine its identity. In a way, it is the determining of a field with presuppositions established in the social organization and, as a consequence, promoter of the uses of the image, which subtracts from it its illusory visual specificity so sought after Modernism. The photograph, commonly considered as a transparency given a priori of that visuality (a purely denotative statute, if we wish to apply the structuralist term), has, paradoxically, revealed itself as a preferential place of refutation of that same symbolic opacity that determines the values and the code of the image itself. In a way it was that which Roland Barthes had already stated in his essay "the photographic Message":

"The photographic paradox will then be the coexistence of two messages, one without a code (the analogical aspect of the photograph), and the other codified ( which would be the "art", or the treatment, or the "writing", or the rhetoric of the photograph); structurally the paradox is evidently not the collusion of a denotative message with a connotative one (that is probably the fatal statue of all mass communications), but the fact that the connotative (or codified) message evolves, in this case, from a message without a code. The structural paradox coincides with an ethical one: when intending to be "neutral, objective" (...) how can photography be naturally and culturally "objective" and "endowed"? it is by understanding the way by which the denotative and the connotative messages overlap, that perhaps, one day, it might be possible to answer this question." <sup>i</sup>

Many artists, mainly from the 1970s onwards, did in fact begin questioning the statute of the photographic image as a privileged trace for developing a critical work on that pressure field which organises the code, and confers it an apparently undeclared ideological value. A task of deconstructing these procedures was put into practice through multiple issues which enabled the isolation of the significant units or the represented values, so as to reveal how that imbrication is processed and which mechanisms of the symbolic order act.

Rosângela Rennó's work is inscribed in this practice in a absolutely unique way, taking her to new considerations never before approached and of vast range in the determinations of the image itself. Her photographic strategy therefore becomes not only a strict analysis of the code in the image, as pure analogy or continuity of the real, but above all of the exposure of the very rules of circulation and of the uses that are associated with the images and that their identity and visual configuration. The appropriation of images becomes a privileged process for elaborating that analysis, however, it is not with considerable circulation mediatic images, such as those of advertising or politics, that Rosângela Rennó has chosen to work with. In any case, a whole generation before hers, not only in Brazil, but also in many other countries, took up this aspect after Pop, rearticulating in a critical way the field left open by the first experiments in this sphere. The artist's choice falls mainly upon family photo albums, prison archives, obituaries and other categories of the practice of photography organised by the social institutions of regulation, power and coercion. The treatment of the image at the service of strictly pre-defined identification models, its deviations and above all, its later consideration through critically manipulated presentation, greatly distances Rosângela Rennó's work from being a mere discovery of style within Appropriationism, to open up another sphere of, up until then, unexplored matters.

If Appropriationism has developed strategies to separate the cultural dimension of the social codes from the analogical nature of photography, and with that dismantle the manipulation of the ideological enunciations, Rosângela Rennó's work approaches the core of the productive and watchful institutions of identity mechanisms directly. It's not only about deconstructing the rhetoric of the photographic image statement, but also of perceiving its understanding forged by the identity coercion institutions themselves. It is important to stress that no demonstrative pretension exists. The restitution of the different kind of images and the mechanisms of its organisation are, by these

means, integrated in her work, even if they are submitted to various interventions in a way as to question the structural aspects that shape the understanding and the identity of the image. It could be said that there may even exist an opacification or the interposition of an accidental veil of the memory, which records the place of a lost relation. One of the artist's first works, *Mulheres Iluminadas (Illuminated Women)*, 1988, showed a common black and white photograph from a family album, with two girls on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro, but the photograph chemically treated in order to accentuate the usage, and the backlit figures have been rendered unrecognisable by such contrasting shade. We may even know that it depicts the artist as a child, but the relevant aspect is the opacification of the identity in a photograph typical of this kind of family archive, meant to narrate someone's progress from place to place. Rosângela Rennó's photography thus begins to reveal the function which it socially fulfils or, as Paulo Herkenhoff put it, it constitutes an episteme of photography<sup>ii</sup>. In *Obituário Transparente (Transparent Obituary)*, 1991, the negatives of individual portraits found in the archives of a photographic studio are placed on a grid. The fact that they are negatives renders individual identification impossible which is reinforced by the accumulation of the archive itself. *Obituário Preto (Black Obituary)*, 1991, also uses negatives from the same source, only these are displayed on a black velvet setting which causes them to lose the visibility of their representation and renders them opaque. Aware of the role that the text or the caption plays in relation to the photographic image as functional redundancy of its connotative meaning, she tried, in projects of the *Arquivo Universal (Universal Archive)* series, worked from 1992 on, to replace the photographic image by captions or newspaper reports related to absent photographs. Names, places and dates have been eliminated from these texts, thus unveiling the alleged objectivity of the categorical nature that determines the archive, as well as its role in the suppression of the fulfilment of the identity in function of the classification.

The circulation and usage become, therefore, other configuring insistences of the image and its understanding, which are developed in Rosângela Rennó's work by a strategy of re-articulation capable of destabilising the perpetuity of an allegedly founding sense and reveal a resistance to the instrumental logic of the archive. It is thus important to understand that between the game of identities configured by the notion of archive, and the restitution of the mechanisms which act by forging that same game, the artist's works proceed to dismantle the confinements which in the course of history have defined a precise identity for the medium.

The photographic image is not considered as an absolute in itself, the interior of which would be immune or vaguely permeable to any outside influence, but rather as the result of the introjection of an instance of control and knowledge.

The absence of a pure, self founded interiority at the heart of a disciplinary field was an issue greatly debated by post-structuralist thought, with profound effects on artistic practices, which demonstrated it to be a metaphysical fallacy that happened to nourish the most essentialist facets of most of the Modern movement. Thus, there is no interiority opposed to its context, it being made up of a projection of something apparently exterior, by which the identity of the medium itself is not defined from within but always from without. All the problematic issues raised around photography and its specificity were to contribute to the pertinence of this theory.

We can therefore understand that Rosângela Rennó's persistence in the appropriation of portraits, whether they be from family, studios or prisons, aims at developing a specular relation and deflectiveness of the very identity of the portrayed person and the medium. The photograph acknowledge in this own function, fact which conferred it a statute and a social utility of wide disciplinary appropriation, is a favoured instrument for the arrangement and classification of the identities; on the other hand, that which configures it in such a way is not only present in the order of its analogical procedures but also in the symbolic inscription that prescribes a precise configuration, i.e., an identity. To erase the identity of those portrayed, whether by darkening or by censoring the name, allows to restore to the photograph the image of the very codifying instance which assimilates all the differences and submits them to one common category.

The privilege granted to the archive, as a confined disciplinary use of photography, becomes explicit.

2.

Rosângela Rennó says that she is an irrepressible collector, and that was what she did with dozens and dozens of articles published in the Brazilian daily press concerning events of the most varied nature which occurred with women named Rosângela. For years she gathered those articles about mothers, celebrities, politician's girlfriend, dead women, kidnapped women, deputies, housewives, brides, neighbours, businesswomen, lecturers, workers, artists, homeless women, jurors and many others

which she organized by dates of occurrence, professions and occupations of these women, 133 in all. The articles were then rewritten in dramatic form as short inner monologues by the writer Alícia Duarte Penna. Rosângela Rennó then took on the part of actress and videotaped her interpretation of all those Rosângelas, soliloquizing in the most varied situations on events of their lives. This work, which she called *Espelho Diário* (Daily Mirror), in an ironic reference to the British tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mirror*, consists of the projection of two synchronized videos, on a tangent to one another, side by side, forming an obtuse angle, but close to 90, so that one projection seems to mirror the other. This effect is visually reinforced by the insertion of the date which each episode refers to on the upper part of each projection, the one on the left appearing written in a symmetrical manner, mirrored. There is no continuous and simultaneous of actions, but an interpellation that links up the speech of the one and the same Rosângela with her hesitations, aspirations or even moments of suspension. This when the same woman appear in duplicate, because there are brief moments in which the double can even disappear. The sound of each projection, predominantly consisting of the voice, is broadcast throughout the side of the room in relation to the projection to which it refers, enlarging the spatial dimension of the dialogue. The framings are varied, but maintain the character in the center of the image, either closing in to a close-up, or backing away to a full shot, some are taken in low angle shots, others in high angle shots which oblige the character to tilt her face up to address the camera, but nothing that they are predominantly frontal. The organization of these shots is concentrated in a rhetoric close to that of the photographic portrait. All these shots are interlinked by an editing that oscillates between those that last a long time and sequences which all of a sudden agglutinate a greater variety of shots capable of creating strong rhythms. At times there is also recourse to fixing the film in a certain frame, which accentuates a dramatic suspension in the dialogical framework carried out by both projections.

Throughout the course of the piece there is no temporal progression or specific intentional order given through the sequence of monologues. The dates inserted on the images, which follow the order of the calendar for the period of a year, create a more abstract sequence unrelated to any time limit or purpose whatsoever. The circularity implied by the calendar and by the title excludes therefore any beginning or end, there being only a succession of specific situation that flow and are produced in the time allotted.

A great variety of scenarios and wardrobe, albeit quite simple, provide explicit clues as to the social and professional background of each woman. Her repetitions throughout the video may lead you to think that it is the very same woman, at another time, but nothing could be more erroneous, for when one hears her discourse, it has different life-style references. If a same place in the social order that creates the apparent similarity exists, the narration of what has been lived cannot be reduced to that order.

Rosângela Rennó thus films a talking archive. Contrary to works such as the aforementioned *Obituários* (Obituaries) or *Arquivo Universal* (Universal Archive), in which the unique trace of the portrayed dissolved themselves in the similarity imposed by the order that indexed them, the many Rosângelas, enabled by the monologue, assume a discursive role about themselves revealing of the contingencies of their lives. It is not about demanding an identity based on an added value of expression, normally so claimed by the humanists' presuppositions, but inscribing what is absolutely casual and singular in their lives in spite of any previous order that intends to exert its categorical control.

3.

At the entrance of the room, on two sets of headphones, we can listen to an Introit read by Cid Moreira, a famous Brazilian announcer, who hypes up the discourse as if he were presenting a show. The continual contrast between the plural of Rosângelas and the singular of the character is expressed: "Only they was some: Rosângelas, that unitary conjunct, that periodic tithe, that singular plural. Once her desire was above all to become conscious of her own existence, Rosângelas strove to see herself in the mirror, one, head-torso-limbs, but which! Which one? They were myriad! Her mirror a kaleidoscope". There exists therefore a presentation of this archive that, by means of the pantomime of his speech inflections, deconstructs the symbolic order which becomes predominant and tends to subjugate all the specificities into one despotic signifier, as the artist has demonstrated with many other works, in order to try and articulate another principle which makes this an other-archive. In the Epilogue, included at this book, an exhaustive classification of the Rosângelas, treated as plural character, discloses the very percentages of their experiences organized by professional or other occupations and that do not cease to be characterizing attributes. The question is then in the multiplicity which refuses the multiple, subjected to the divisibility of the unit.

As we can hear in the Introit: “Not one body and various masks, not one soul and various incarnations, not one profound ‘I’ and other ‘I’s; the bodies, souls, ‘I’s was they herself: Rosângelas.”

4.

The discursive situation that introduces each Rosângela is continually repeated, with a degree of monotony characteristic of an archive. The character neither recites for an interlocutor present at the scene, nor as a supposedly self founded statement and which would exclude the receiver or, even less, directly destined for the audience. It is always a reflection or a recollection of experienced events which shape the very articulation and the subject that is thus formed through the dialogue which the monologue encloses. Now, the monologue has always been perceived as a discourse of a self which harbours a revealing silence about the receiver. It is important to notice that, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, the statement does not exist as pure affirmation, it is always a retort to another, there is only dialogism and the monologue is not an exception but a particular situation of the dialogic condition. The sender and the receiver, as well as the statement, are formed in this process, they are not previously determined parameters. Thus the monologue does not postulate a constituted subject but one being constituted. To Bakhtin all communication is a process produced by two about a third, which implies a different position to that upheld by structural Linguistics, that perceived the process of communication in an instrumental manner. According to that viewpoint a sender, endowed with a message previously defined in relation to the process of communication itself, here would be, in the course of this Daily Mirror, consecutively articulating propositions defined by some sort of anteriority essentially confined to a symbolic order.

Rosângela Rennó’s strategy is that of constructing an other-archive that can escape this presumption. The Rosângela character is, therefore, a multiplicity of subjects in formation through the many monologues. Something somewhat closer to Bakhtin’s understanding. Once these speakers assume different stands in the field of the relations of linguistic production, “the variation is the answer to the symbolic conditioning carried out by the relation of production. (...) What is said is a compromise (like the dream) between what one would like to say and what one can say, a compromise which obviously depends on what the speaker has to say, of his capacities of production, of appreciation of the situation and of euphemisation, and also of the position he occupies in the structure of the field in which he expresses

himself”, said Pierre Bourdieu <sup>iii</sup>.

The positions occupied by the women in this order of relations in Brazilian society is also an aspect to be taken into consideration along with all the other differences. If, as we have seen, conscience is formed in discourse, it is an objective fact and, consequently, a social force. According to Eduardo Prado Coelho, this aspect leads Bakhtin to designate “the rambling, disorderly, flowing, chaotic, non-systematic inner and outer expression which accompanies the most insignificant day-to-day acts as the Quotidian Ideology” <sup>iv</sup>. Therefore any work remains operative if its discourse relates to the Quotidian Ideology discourse of a given historical moment. This prevents the work from becoming an embalmed monument, part of an archive.

If these women form a talking archive made up of monologues, this classification of the discourse, which is always dialogical as we have seen through Bakhtin, reveals a division in the subject’s field, not presenting it as definitely constituted but in the process thereof. The parallel with the interpretation that Jacques Lacan gives to the subject’s constituting forces is also significant and pertinent here, if we wish to understand how in the identity inscribing games Rosângela Rennó defines an un presupposed strategy, far from any claiming of identity, made up of singularities.

According to Lacan the subject’s access to a symbolic order is made through language, surpassing the specular relation I-other of the order of the realm of the imaginary. The symbolic returns the regulating social structures and builds the identity the subject takes on in imaginary phase. Taking this framework or forces into consideration, the subject thus exists outside itself in an exterior to its realm of the imaginary. If on one hand it is an effect of the discourse, on the other, it says more than that of which it can know about itself, the knowledge of a previous order, of the symbolic, that makes the significant determination. But also because there is an impossibility that the whole be said, there is a real that is surplus. This real resists, as a partial or a residual object, the appropriation of the symbolic and becomes the cause of the desire which promotes its emergence in the interior of the symbolic itself. Of the real, as we have already seen, we can only talk of that flow of disorderly fragments, susceptible to organization by the Quotidian Ideology under the name of reality. It is therefore of the fragments of their lives and of the emergence of those remains of the real resisting reality, not dominated by the symbolic but in conflict, that the Rosângelas talk. It is there that the possibility of a discourse not submitted to the condition of



belonging to a Quotidian Ideology archive, comes into play.

These women are not a symptomatic reiteration of a set of attributes ascribable to the effects of a reality. The singularities which they constitute resist a collective identity or a belonging and exclude a representation of that condition. However, the question is not equally the one of specific relevance of each singularity in itself. Its inclusion in a ste, which as such refuses an identity – the symbolic function which the archive is destined to exert – becomes the real threat to this situation. As Giorgio Agamben put it: “any singularity, which wants to appropriate its own belonging, its own being-in-the-language, and declines, therefore, all the identity and all the condition of belonging, is the main enemy of the State.”<sup>v</sup>

The fact that the archive gathers and consists of these singularities and does not accomplish a symbolic order, is the possibility of an other-archive which Rosângela Rennó experiments with this Daily Mirror.

5.

In fact the recourse to video is quite rare in the artist’s work. She previously directed a video project entitled Veracruz, in the year 2000. In it the image is not conventionally registered through filming with a video camera, but by that of telecine of the cinematographic film in blank, empty, showing only the scratches and mould stains to which have been superimposed the dialogues, inspired by the Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha<sup>vi</sup>, of the Portuguese navigators who reached Brazil for the first time.

As had happened with photography, the consideration of the history of the practices and representation conditions of video was not absent. In the work of Rosângela Rennó the presence of the medium is extensively questioned and deconstructed in the presuppositions of its uses, that can thus, reveal the situations in which a knowledge is configured as a regulatory power. Her critical conscience gives rise to a re-articulation that allows an alterity free from prior constraints. It is in the sense that the use given to video in Daily Mirror establishes a difference in relation to the manipulations of the archives of the Arquivo Universal series, which tended to reveal their own instrumental processes. The creation of an archive of Rosângelas through a non-essential order, without representation of the condition of belonging, but only by belonging, becomes possible through the critical re-articulation of the practices of the medium.

The emergence of video in the artistic domain brought with a variety of forms of approach which also revealed profound differences concerning the respective research and considerations about its specificity and autonomy. From its use as a register of performing events or as a contraposition to the television, generator of a subjective space permeable to introspective intimacy, there were several significances, the last of which becoming predominant. Thus video was perceived as a mirror of a confessional in which the artist creates images of the self. According to Raymond Bellour, who analysed this perception <sup>vii</sup>, video did not create an autobiographic form in the traditional sense of the various historical narratives of the kind, as the narrative possibilities it offers would lead to suppose, but converged toward the self portrait, creating an image of the self. If the metaphor for video is the mirror, it was not with the subjectivist Romantic tradition that its accomplishments were articulated, but through a Lacanian understanding, that is, the issue of the narcissism. The self that is projected is a creation of the image which expands in the articulation of the order of the imaginary with the symbolic. That this practice might have revealed itself constraining to a yearning for the experience of everyday life and, on the other hand, tangent to a certain autism, is proved by the growing number of works recently produced that appropriate with various meanings, its traditional, and erroneously considered, more instrumental genres such as documentaries and archival films.

Aware of this objection, Rosângela Rennó appropriated the idea of video as a confessional and confronted it with another different historical attitude relative to this medium, and which consisted of the registering of a vast series of performative actions which she herself proposed to act out. The vast sum of these actions, which imply the construction of one image after another, limits any pretension to the mapping of the subject's subjectivism in which the narcissistic aesthetics of video had confined itself. Repetition carries out here an important role for it drains off the difference from portrait to portrait and restitutes the voices to the singularities that make up the archive.

On the other hand, the more instrumental modalities of the documentary are those where the conflict and the imbrication between a codifying order and the denotative message of the image, of which Roland Barthes spoke, becomes particularly evident. The appropriation of the categorization of the sociological inquiry allows to restore an exteriority to the narcissistic pretension of each portrait. Nevertheless

each portrait manifests in the specular construction of the self the relation with everyday life, that emergence of the real which resists the symbolic, assumed by the codifying disciplinary modality. The remainder of that everyday real and the conflict they generate with the fiction of the identities, opens up an exteriority to which the women endlessly allude to in their discourses, capable of unblocking the narcissistic oscillation between the symbolic and the imaginary and of refuting the disciplinary codification.

The strategy of rearticulation elaborated by Rosângela Rennó accepts the various significances, which have not become obsolete in relation to the medium itself and their modalities in order to restore them an active critical possibility, that of confronting the quotidian ideology.

#### NOTES

i Roland Barthes – “Le Message photographique” (The Photographic Message) in *L’Obvie et l’Obtus*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982, p.13. The quoted text dates from 1961 and was published in the magazine *Communications*, and demonstrates the pertinence and the anticipation with which the author raised a set of problematic issues, so recurrent in contemporary artistic practices, and which would be extensively developed by them. Translated into English from Pedro Lapa’s translation from the original French version.

ii Paulo Herkenhoff in his essay “Rennó ou a Beleza e o Dulçor do Presente” (Rennó or the Beauty and the Sweetness of the Present), in Rosângela Rennó. S. Paulo: edusp, 1998, refers to a subtext which runs through the artist’s work and consists of the critical portrait of photography, photographic revelation.

iii Quoted by Eduardo Prado Coelho, *Os Universos da Crítica*. Lisboa: Edições 70, 1982, p.450.

iv Op. Cit., *ibidem*

v Giorgio Agamben – *A Comunidade que Vem*. (Portuguese translation) Lisboa, Editorial Presença, 1993, p.68.

vi Translator’s note: Report written by Pero Vaz de Caminha to the King D. Manuel of Portugal announcing the discovery of Brazil in 1500 A.D., in which he fully describes the land, its inhabitants, its fauna and flora. It’s generally considered the birth certificate of Brazil.

vii Raymond Bellour, *Autoportraits*, in “*Communications*”, # 48, 1988.