

GECZY, Adam. "A science of suppositions: Rosângela Rennó's Archive Project". In *Vulgo [Alias] - Rosângela Rennó*, Melissa Chiu (ed.). Sidney: University of Western Sydney-Nepean, 2000, p.34-39.

A Science of Suppositions : Rosângela Rennó's Archive Project / Adam Geczy

|

All sorts of traces remain after an injury or a misdemeanour: broken glass perhaps, a pool of blood or some other stain; something torn; then the silence which sustains even amidst the hubbub of helpers and lamenters which mill about as part of the extended aftermath of the crisis. These aftershock silences and hiatuses are what lure us most. In staring at the scene of an accident or a crime we stare at an enormous gap, an empty shadow of what can only be imagined, because the onlooker, during such moments, exists on a threshold of what happened and what will result from what happened. The greater the amount of testimony and research into what happened, the more we are brought up close to the fact that the event cannot be retrieved, known – even for those directly involved in the incident – because the event exists as a mixture of scenes interrupted by blanks caused by a mind in the grips of raging anxiety. Horror and radical flux can never be remembered, its spontaneity cannot be orchestrated. When a bystander looks at the scene of an accident or a crime he or she exists in a secondary moment of sorts. To be an observer of such scenes is to be an outsider; to belong to the scene is to either be blameworthy, maimed or dead. A bystander always asks, tentatively, 'how?'. The remnants of crisis, safe from the fray, work narratives. The "innocent" bystander of the crisis is the one who mentally captions the event, erasing it then writing it anew until the process becomes too exhausting or just helpless and it is time to walk away.

A similar effect comes from looking at prison records or medical photographs. They are the inadequate graphic remnants of extremity – extremity twice removed, the after event transformed under the collective aegis of science and law. They need

captions. Holiday snapshots prompt the need for subtexts and anecdotes but their role in memorialising occupy a different role in the socialising process. The first are a small component to how society regulates itself, the other way is spontaneous and whimsical, if predictable. One is security well after a critical moment, the other is security that a good moment should not be lost. (The first is the language of a system which one day hopes to lose such occasions for good) . Official records operate according to a different law of consent and they are brought out under different conditions. They do not delight the viewer. Comparing a snap or a pictorial photograph to a medical or prison record is like comparing a limerick to a routine entry on a ledger.

Say you come across two photographs, one of a body part which has been marked in some way, the other of an amorous couple posing on a picnic blanket, they are happy. Subconsciously you are first fascinated by your fascination, you like wanting to look twice, privy to these two moments into which you have casually penetrated. You have entered into the silence of each image, a silence augmented by your own rising feeling of foreignness, distance, ignorance. As a measure of compensation you step into memories and associations which may link you to these anonymous fragments.

You decide to give up on the snap of the couple, if only because you have seen too many like them. The marked body part, a rear shoulder with a non-descript tattooed shape blurred by exposure to the sun and faded by the flesh's daily hygiene, stays with you. Faceless, nameless, it is an emblem sapped of its personal and private worth, existing merely as a bodily fealty, as obligation to the eye of the institution which catalogues it. In the photograph, the body is alive, yet you are taken with just how lifeless it is; its sole purpose being but to offer the now meaningless mark to view. Cast into arbitrariness in this way, the body and the personality is betrayed, because the tattoo, a coloured scar, is there to commemorate a victory, a defeat, a love, a loss, a change of direction. It certifies for good that the body belonged to an event or a group; it certifies the body to a meaning of some kind. It is there to remind the body of the events which formed it. It sits in and on flesh, never too innocently against the random miniature geography of moles and wrinkles it is meant to outlast. The tattoo, immobilised, dumbed, now seems alien to what gave it life. For its continuing life, as an archive, is in photography, not in flesh. For this very reason – that the scars and

the body markings remain as vapid records – these images lose their association with real pain. Although they were born from trauma as a result or a memorial, it is the very absence of trauma which is here so striking.

This absence of pain is not comforting. Yet it is the purpose of records for hospitals and prisons that they attempt to convey all things objectively. Such photographs do not even attempt to intervene in the circumstance under which the mark, or the wound, came to be. The mute stare of the camera that makes the record is the same stare which, on its historical arrival had promised so much. More than the truth which photography was supposed to transmit, simply came a new condition: the photographic record, the proof that something –anything – is in the world. With the photograph the thing (a person, a section or attribute of a person, an array of objects) or the scene (a room, a street, a stairway) now has a double existence, first as changeable entity and second as static, tautological proof of itself. Changes over time transfer the record to the status of history; in the absence of the object, place or person it verifies, it gradually assumes a life of its own. Some records anticipate these changes. Like portraits or photographs of streets, they exist together with a text.

But what about a photograph of a prisoner or a refugee, which is used to assist their incarceration or asylum? Once the person dies the pictures lose their initial purpose, because the photograph is no longer needed to identify them. These photographs are not always discarded serving to catalogue a type predisposed to misdemeanours, violence or simply mishap and poverty. Since today we are more suspicious of this kind of categoric inquiry, what do we do with all the records, which are returned to a state of namelessness and limbo, remaindered from an age of science and classification now in discredit?

We narrativise. We move sporadically between two poles of unemotive, scientific utility and storytelling. Their meeting point is a kind of science of suppositions between words and images, neither the same and neither fully satisfying what we seek to know.

II

Rosângela Rennó's series of works begun in 1992 which have incorporated

appropriated photographs with doctored texts (the Universal Archive), is an operation which explains as much as it withholds. The artist's position with regard to both text and image, one of manipulative, partial ownership, enacts precisely what the viewer does to these images: groping for relationships, finding some until they slip away, then reconfigure differently. This dynamic of semantic rise and fall never leaves Rennó's work, which never condones the deadness of archives nor attempts to explain them away.

The series shown for exhibition here in Australia is entitled *Vulgo* (1998) which, as the artist points out, is a word in Portuguese used to designate common people – the *vulgus* – and an alias, a sobriquet. As with previous works, they are taken from neglected glass photographic archives from the Penitentiary Museum of São Paulo (it might be worth mentioning here that the Latin *vulgare* is to make public), which the artist has enlarged to a size well beyond their intended workable proportions, and, in this particular series, highlighted areas in red. In a similar family of photographic practice, several artists since the early 'eighties have quoted the stark physiognomic photographs from the nineteenth century to those of the Nazi regime in equally stark faces, joining them either by a common feature like eye colour, or simply presenting them as incurious, glum and forbidding, imparting a dominant blankness, vying with monochrome picture planes or the whiteness of the wall behind – a Minimalist figurality so to speak, rendering illegible and inanimate the most active and fecund of all semiotic fields, the face.

Instead of a large outward-looking face, in *Vulgo* Rennó has largely chosen the backs of heads and coloured their crowns with pale red and given them titles like, *Phoenix*, and *Scorpio* due to the shape the colour emphasises (a combination of what is there and artist's subterfuge). The red is consistent with her recent work as a gesture of false labelling, allegorising, reconstituting bodies reduced to thumbprints, ear-shapes and the direction in which hair grows. What do these men remember and how are they remembered? Needless to say, every human has a memory and every human is inscribed with physical traces of time. These men have been subsumed by the diagrams which their bodies describe, hovering with submissiveness and vulnerability contrary to the supposed force and threat of their crime (information which the artist

denies us). They are framed irregularly due to the clinical eye's aesthetic disregard, a disregard which the artist has taken care to keep and aestheticise, and so to bring us closer to the unconscious aesthetic motives of this genre (Vulgo – the Vulgate was the Latin version of the Bible prepared by St Jerome in 4th century AD; the gospel was the law, but what new unexpected laws are shed through translation?). With these part-forms which the artist seems to have fabricated on these bodies we are returned to other images such as those used in the exhibition Cicatriz, featuring tattoos. The mock-heroic shapes and names connote the visual aggressive repertoire tattoos, bodily registrations which stigmatise the criminal body forever. One gets the eerie suspicion from these images that even the most accidental or partial criminal act of which we are all capable could then find itself verified on a part of our body: signs made after the fact which say that we were predisposed to unlawfulness

III

Rennó's present work affords an apposite and timely insight into Australia's history and its art. Incarceration is, as we know, a process of making people absent, sequestering them from public view. Our country was a repository for all the people the English state wished to forget. Terra Australis was also a Terra nullis, a site of collective amnesia which in its formative stages is represented in little more than images for utilitarian purposes (science or topography) or in detritus. Conferred to silence, the voice of the repressed exists in small objects and broken pieces – one need only look to a place like Hyde Park barracks for this, where tens of thousands of remnants – pipes, money, rags, momentos, playing cards – were stowed away, lost and forgotten beneath the floor boards by the thousands of prisoners it once housed. And it is furthermore curious to see how these objects are now arranged there, once again aestheticised for our edification and amusement. Few people, I imagine, stop to think about why we are given just so many pipes to contemplate, cleaned and exhibited in serried rows, if only because of a convention which says more about us and less about the prisoner; the objects being subject to orderings analogous to the controls and inhibitions which brought them here.

Once photography is introduced to Australia, what is relevant to Rennó's work is not really the pictures of miners or chain gangs, but of Aborigines, whose images never

have the same identity or subjecthood and those of Whites. It is difficult to find an image in which an Aborigine stares at the camera with the same aplomb as a plain citizen of the colony: if the gaze is not blank it is a stare of fear trying to cover itself with an air of defiance. And seldom would these photographs be exhibited together with those of Whites, nor does the instinct of a non-indigenous viewer know to look at pictures of Aborigines in the same way. Our schooling is to look on them more as pseudo-scientific records rather than as simple pictures recording faces we never beheld physically. What we know less of is precisely what our history has chosen to know less of. What of the innumerable Aboriginal deaths in custody and, in this case, the images to which we are not exposed?

Earlier work of Rennó's, like *Fantastic Realism* (1991/4) is also exceedingly resonant to an Australian context in this regard. This work is an installation of projected black and white negatives of faces, distorted here and there owing to the angle on which they cast themselves on the wall. More nameless dead faces, stripped of name and disjunct of circumstance. Like the photographs of the backs of heads, they do not confront the spectator in any way but are like phantoms who wait the spectator's intrusion; Rennó endows the dead and forgotten with a new spectral shape where each communicates through the very conventions and controls which instigated their silence. For this reason the text and the photograph have more in common in Rennó's work than may at first appear. She does not apply text communicatively, nor uses the photograph as a vehicle for truth, rather denies the claims of texts and photographs to verisimilitude at the very point when such texts and photographs are most confident in imparting their message to the viewer. In its place Rennó substitutes several strands for a single trajectory, a fabulist's secret replaces an objective account.

Why the repressed cannot be made to speak clearly is due to us, the viewers. Rennó's work is significant in this sense, for warning us that the true outline of the generic other is distorted by the aestheticising eye of the prying beholder who arrives after the fact, a condition which this exhibition both unmasks and upholds.

Adam Geczy is an artist and writer who teaches at the Australian Catholic University in Sydney, Australia.