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## Hidden Evidence\* / Jacopo Crivelli Visconti

*Why does it make us uneasy to know that the map is within the map and the thousand and one nights are within The 1001 nights? Why does it disquiet us to know that Dom Quixote is the reader of the Quixote, and Hamlet is a spectator in Hamlet? I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious.*

*\_J. L. Borges*

The technique of *mise en abîme* stems from the heraldic tradition of inserting a second smaller shield representing a particular scene, generally different from the main setting, within a scene adorning a shield. In terms of literature, the expression describes a simple diffused rhetoric stratagem whereby a secondary circumscribed story is inserted into the main plot to complete it. In some cases, such as the famous scene where Hamlet witnesses the staging of the homicide of his father, it is a fragment or a summary of the main story that is inserted therein. The same procedure can also be used in the visual arts, replacing the literary narrative by iconographic narrative: the "impossible" drawings by Escher, for instance, are good examples of this tradition.

Rosângela Rennó's works of art where the artist re-photographs old pictures and old negatives<sup>1</sup> can be considered good examples of *mise en abîme*, both from the mechanical and conceptual standpoints. They derive from the mechanical repetition of a gesture (the click of a camera) already performed;<sup>2</sup> at the same time, the final image refers conceptually to the original from which it is taken, superposes and completes it, eventually making it intelligible in all its nuances.

In the same way as in a fantastic story by Borges, the spectators are set before two images, but are only able to see one. Indeed, in this extraordinary *mise en abîme*, the second image is not inferior to the first neither in terms of size nor of importance – quite to the contrary, the reproduction is so true that it can be perfectly superposed on the original to eclipse it entirely...

Moreover, this procedure allows for further thought. If an eminently tautological feature has always been ascribed to photographic production, the simple act of re-photographing a photo generates a short circuit. What we see is not what we see, or paraphrasing Barthes, a pipe is not a pipe: it is the picture of a pipe.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we are before a tautology, not of the real but, on the contrary, of the realm of fantasy: by more than simply reproducing reality, the new photograph records the invisible difference between the original image and the second version. In other words it records an idea through a purely mechanical procedure. If we want to understand its real meaning, merely viewing the picture will not be sufficient: it will be necessary to know the story of its double genesis.

In defining Rennó as a photographer who does not photograph,<sup>4</sup> there is a risk of leaving out a conceptually important aspect of the work, where there is naturally a lack of concern in respect of the choice of field with which photographic praxis is generally associated, but this is so only because the problem is solved through an intellectual approach, free from considerations of a formal nature. The act of taking the photograph is therefore essential: it confirms a deliberate decision, and not an intuition or a short-lived coincidence of external factors.

*Imemorial* (1994) can be considered the first important work where Rennó performs on the basis of pre-existing photographs. Based on extensive research in the archives of Brasília, the work is made up of a series of enlargements of small pictures (3x4cm) from the identity cards of workers who died in the construction of the city. Thus, the artist sheds light on a past systematically canceled out of official history<sup>5</sup> where it would be senseless to search for any trace in the sinuous lines of the city conceived from scratch by Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer. With a degree in architecture, Rennó is perfectly aware to what extent these daring

shapes, in their vaguely “streamlined” style, betrayed the desire of a nation to throw itself, at one thrust, into the future. Viewing them today, in the light of the dramatic history of the country over the last fifty years, it would seem that these buildings have suffered under a spell: the future they craved for has never come into being, and from monuments of the future they have become remnants of the past, never coinciding with the present. By this incongruity their once futuristic ambition has become instead a melancholic fascination.

To this formal conclusion Rennó’s pictures add an indictment of a social nature that is difficult to disregard, shedding new light on the dream of modernity for Brazil. Supported by real vibrant tension, in this sense, and also due to the work of research they result from, they seem to belong to the universe of journalistic investigations rather than that of art; despite some formal affinity, it is precisely the ethical strictness that makes the picture of *Imemorial* unmistakable. In comparison to the works dedicated by Christian Boltanski to the “dead Swiss”, for example, there is no touch of irony<sup>6</sup> here, but only dramatic, “fragmentary interruptions of amnesia”.<sup>7</sup>

The same tension and the atmosphere of indictment also pervade her work based on the restoration of old negatives. *Cicatriz* (1996), the outcome of research from which other artworks subsequently resulted, such as *Museu Penitenciário* (1997-99) and *Vulgo* (1998), is a selection of photographs of inmates, from the extinct archives of photographs created in the State penitentiary located at the Carandiru prison complex in São Paulo, in the first year of the twentieth century<sup>8</sup>. Taken probably for the purpose of producing a complete listing of inmates, the pictures record “particular signs”, mostly tattoos, with great accuracy. Unrefined incisions on the skin, they sum up to a few rudimentary patterns: conceived as a form of identification, tattoos eventually characterized the prisoners as the silent symptoms of a diffuse illness, of an unconfessable pain.

In this case as well, the technique used is a crucial factor to understand the work. The original portraits are mechanical, cold, anonymous: an attempt on the individuality of the single subjects, they justify collective guilt. In order not to be

an accomplice, Rennó stages this assault once more, reverting the situation both technically and “poetically”. By rephotographing the negatives, the artist follows a path that is opposed to that of the institution that ordered the pictures, yet by photographing the pictures Rennó sets them in place of the prisoners, and by extension sets the prison in the place of the captives.

The nature of her gesture is social: the attempt (poetically and consciously doomed to fail) to reconstruct the identity of the subjects through the *mise en abîme* of their annihilation.

With *Série Vermelha (Militares)* Rennó moves a step forward. Beyond the major formal transformation, evident in both the choice of the subjects as well as uncommon use of chromatism,<sup>9</sup> what is most striking in the picture is their deep coherence with previous works. The protagonist of these great portraits<sup>10</sup> find a common denominator in the uniforms they wear. The reversal of the precarious universe of workers and inmates is obvious; all the subjects belong to the dominant class, and their uniforms, rather than attesting to their membership in a phantomlike distant army, certify their belonging to this élite.

Almost underscoring their privileged condition, their feeling that they are masters of the world in which they live, the protagonists of these pictures are immortalized in the open air, in vacation resorts and therefore places of leisure, of pleasure (universes that are completely forbidden both the working class and, obviously, to inmates). When the background is not a “postcard” view with the bay of Rio de Janeiro (Mad Boy), at least there is a sunny beach (Castle King), a family garden where the grandfather is portrayed first and then his grandson (Old Prussian, Young Prussian), or even – the most suggestive case – a wall upon which one can clearly see the shadow of the soldier (Shadow). This very human detail concentrates the abyssal distance that separates soldiers from workers and inmates, always photographed in the foreground with a solemn neutral background, black or with and strictly flat, not entitled to the sun light any more, nor consequently to a shadow that ratifies their belonging to humankind. Besides, the choice to highlight an apparently insignificant detail through the title<sup>12</sup> confirms

its importance to an understanding of the overall meaning of the work.

Although in the '90s the difference between the spectator and the subject of the photograph was evident, and the thought about the technique used and the meaning of the artwork could be separated and objective, in this case the procedure is more complex. In addition, the comparison with the previous artwork is essential for understanding the originality of *Série Vermelha (Militares)*. Instead of the strict identity photographs, in this series Rennó uses simple commemorative ones, which are no different from those we all have in any drawer: unpretentious and somewhat faded documents from the old days. The lack of an easily identified and disapproved social injustice disconcerts observers: like it or not, they are swallowed within the image by their "social face", identical to that of the subjects portrayed. Especially in a country like Brazil, marked by enormous social contrasts, the spectator of an exhibition of contemporary art almost invariably belongs to a social class that is in a certain way privileged. By recognizing themselves in what they see, they are forced to define themselves as accomplices of the process that led to the situation unmasked by the artist.

Brought to light, the hidden evidence from which the photographic work of Rosângela Rennó takes its essence shows the marks of the passage through the darkness of concealment or oblivion. The unmistakable symptoms of pathological wish for forgetting felt by a young country always projected into the future constitute, in light of the disordered longing for well-being and wealth displayed by the first world, a healthy memento mori.

#### NOTES

\* The title refers to a statement by Rosângela Rennó in the interview to Hans-Michael Herzog for the catalogue of the exhibition *La Mirada – Looking at photography in Latin America today*, edition Oerhli, Zurich, 2002, page 87: "Evidence is always evidence, even when it is hidden." The present text takes up some considerations contained in my essay *La vita degli altri*, published in the February – March 2003 issue of the Italian magazine *Artel*.

1. For reason of space, it will be possible to analyse only some works here. In addition to the great

importance of these works in the context of Rennó's career, the selection was oriented by the wish to develop a general reflection on the eminently photographic work of the artist, whose acme up to now is represented by *Série Vermelha (Militares)*, presented at the 50th Venice Biennale and entirely reproduced in this catalogue.

2. Here I do not detail specific aspects of the various techniques used. Actually it does not matter if the new image is obtained through traditional photographic means or by using digital technology: both procedures give rise to a *mise en abîme*.

3. In his *La Chambre Claire. Note sur la Photographie* (Gallimard, Paris, 1980), Roland Barthes writes: "By nature photography has something tautological: a pipe is always a pipe." On the nature of the photographic image see also A. Bazin, 'Ontologie de L'image photographique', in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, Paris, 1958.

4. Cf. Tadeu Chiarelli, in *Tridimensionalidade na Arte Brasileira do século XX*, Itaú Cultural, São Paulo, 1997, page 176, however this definition is subsequently used by other critics as well.

5. During her research in the archives of the city, in addition to the pictures that make up her artwork, Rennó found the evidence of a real slaughter of "rebel" workers, until today carefully concealed by the government.

6. On several occasions, Boltanski declared in a sarcastic way that he chose "the Swiss" as protagonist of this series because apparently "they have no reason at all to die."

7. Paulo Herkenhoff, *Espessura da luz, a fotografia brasileira contemporânea*, Câmara do Livro, São Paulo, 1993, page 36.

8. For a more detailed description of the process that led to the production of these artworks, see *La Mirada*, op cit., page 88.

9. Color was previously used in the photographs of the series *Vulgo* and in "mirror" though extremely revealing artworks, such as *Paz Armada (1990-92)*, but never with a strength comparable to that of *Série Vermelha (Militares)*. However, it is important to observe that red is always the color used, and the artist explicitly associates it directly with blood.

10. Again we are dealing with old images, now taken from home albums, rephotographed and turned red through a digital process, to the extent of becoming almost indistinguishable.

11. The importance of titles and of words in general at Rennó's artworks could be the object of an independent essay. I think of the text taken from newspapers and magazines converging on the Universal Archive, a reservoir she uses for her creation, but I also think of neologisms and calembours that are frequently the titles of her works. Recent works such as the video *Espelho*

Diário (2001) and the great installation Bibliotheca (2002) continue in this sense a theme broached in previous works, deepening the literary dimension (oral in the case of the video, and written in the case of the archive cards of the installation) suggested by the titles of the photographs of Série Vermelha (Militares) or, even before, by works such as In Oblivionem (1994), Hipocampo (1995) or Cicatriz.

Concerning the role of the works in Rennó's artworks, see also Paulo Sergio Duarte, Para reler o vermelho e o negro, in the folder published by Laura Marsiaj Arte Contemporânea on the occasion of the exhibition of Rosângela Rennó, in November 2001.

12. The same thing can also be said about artists: significantly, for a picture produced for the 50th Venice Biennale, Rennó herself used an old family picture where her brother is portrayed in uniform.