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Developing identities / Adriano Pedrosa

Photography, like everything else, points to death. It records a past and precise moment to which we will never be able to go back. Quite mercilessly, the photograph's frozen subject is fatally younger than its powerless living counterpart (which is not so much the case in portrait painting, where Dorian Gray, albeit temporarily and with crushing consequences, masterfully inverted this relation). Facing the ever increasing distance between then and now, you may recollect what is gone and mourn what will never come back. Death, however, is inexorable. With Barthes: " ...the Photograph represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro version of death: I am truly becoming a specter."¹ Your photographs are likely to outlive you.

Identity photographs, the 3x4cm photographs used in people's documents and records, are merciless themselves. Following a set of standards -- regarding lighting, backdrop, camera lens, framing, and the subject's pose -- which may vary from place to place (the German i.d. and the American green card photographs, for example, must show their subjects in a half profile), and do change from time to time (in the seventies the subject would be photographed behind a small plaque displaying the date the photograph was taken), these small, usually black and white photographs at once mercilessly "reveal" (objectively, through no filters) and "distort" the subject (a crooked face, an asymmetrical chin), paradoxically resulting in an official image often with uncanny overtones. A poor relative of portrait photography, no studios, no punctums, anonymous (who is the photographer?), they are like numbers, six (at least) digit ones; they have a clear function: your i.d. photograph is your true image. About them, though, there is something endearing: their democratic nature: we all have the same i.d. photographs here, the same i.d. documents (not all of us however have

passports, let alone hold passports from the same hemisphere).

Period i.d. photographs are something else. They have lost their usefulness without having gained per se the aura of relics. These are just trash. Or the primary material of Rosângela Rennó (Belo Horizonte, 1962). Appropriating old and found i.d. photographs and snapshots in her work, Rosângela seems less concerned with some sort of documentary task or the writing of a history of private life, than quite simply the outing of the private into the public. Sucata fotográfica (photographic trash) is collected, manipulated, enlarged, and framed by the artist and can then go on to have another existence in a public art context.

Appropriation, also, is invariably about death (the author's, among others'): much written about in relation to postmodernism in the visual arts², photography is its medium par excellence. Rosângela's work, however, does not specifically address the issues raised some 15 years ago by the work of Lawler, Levine, Sherman, Simmons and their interpreters -- authorship, originality and, as always, the loss of the aura and the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Most of her work consists of photographs incorporated into objects, and metal framing, chrome plates, plexiglas, and light boxes make them less mechanically reproducible. But indeed you may ask: Where is the original? Who is its author? Questions which are still left unanswered. Probably rhetorical ones. Here, little else can be said. Gone are days of Jorge Luis Borges' Pierre Menard and Sherrie Levine's After series. Appropriation is a strategy. What Rosângela's work repeatedly asks me is: Where is the subject?

Imemorial is an installation project made specially for an exhibition entitled "Reverendo Brasília" ["Reviewing Brasília"], organized by the local Goethe Institute. Brasília is the epicentre. Rosângela, who lives in Rio, was there last year researching the worker's records in the archives of NOVACAP (short for nova capital, "new capital"), the government's construction company that built the city in the late fifties and early sixties. Despite the intense research involved, the desire for documentation had to be frustrated; not only were many of the records incomplete and lacking the worker's i.d. photographs, but also access to them was quite limited. During ten days, seven people went through approximately 10000 of NOVACAP's 25000 records. Rosângela then

rephotographed i.d. photographs from some of the workers records: 40 adult workers who died building the city and 10 children workers. The installation consisted of forty kodalith film prints (the dead) on the floor and ten sepia prints (the children) on the wall, screwed to metal boxes. Rephotographed and enlarged to 40x60cm, I may now spot certain punctums: a rusted staple, a torn edge. Punctums are also elsewhere:

Rosângela's original plan was to use photographs of the workers who had died in the construction of modern Brazil's first pharaonic project³. The city's first dead, its specters. During her research, however, she came across and was very much impressed with the children workers' i.d. photographs (their uncanny overtones, the subject's expression, its powerlessness), and thus decided to include them in her installation. Like the "two nuns in the photographic banality of a rebellion in Nicaragua," the children's i.d. photographs are, in this photographic setting that Imemorial presents, "discontinuous elements, heterogeneous in that they did not belong to the same world;" they become punctums.⁴

So young, modernist Brasília, a city without street corners, has a deranging attitude towards its history. In 1958, the local government built a tomb for the unknown candango (the new native of Brasília) in the Cemitério Campo da Esperança. Years later the government decided to disregard it (it is now abandoned and destroyed), and in 1985 a second one was erected. Memorials have a contradictory existence: erected to pay homage to a memory of a person or an event, they often (like old i.d. photographs and snapshots) fall into oblivion. Reaching beyond the limits of memory, calling attention to what (official) history has not recorded, Imemorial is a memorial for the lost or disregarded memory of those unknown workers who helped build the emblem of the country's unfulfilled desire for its modern era, the most eloquent landmark of (the failure of) modernist architecture and urban planning. Ironically, its recording and reproduction in these pages are somewhat precarious.

In oblivionem is an installation project made specially for last year's XXII Bienal de São Paulo. Once more, Rosângela appropriates and manipulates sucata fotográfica: old and found snapshots are rephotographed and enlarged in black and black. It's hard to see, but I managed to distinguish a young boy posing in what seems to be his

first communion outfit; a woman against a palm tree smiling at the camera, maybe in the 1950's; a couple in the 1920's posing in their bathing suits at the beach; a boy pointing a gun at a girl sitting on a chair holding a doll on her arms; a nun. These have been juxtaposed with weird fragments of news that, as white text in relief on the white walls of the gallery, somehow refer to photography and violence in everyday life. The anonymity of the characters in the snapshots are paired by the anonymity of the characters in the texts, in which all names have been preserved and substituted by initials: a French couple, X.X. and Y.X., now in their sixties, reclaim the rights of a photograph taken of them 44 years before; the tourist Y. is killed by the explosion of a bomb when he is about to be photographed; V. shows the photograph of the Australian woman who bought her kidney; kidnappers send a photograph of K. handcuffed with a note: "the next photo will be the corpse's." A text never explains an image and an image never illustrates a text. What yesterday's and yesterday's banal snapshots and odd pieces of news have in common is a vocation for oblivion. Why insist on them?

In somber prints, the subjects in the old and found i.d. photographs and snapshots of *Imemorial* and *In Oblivionem* have become specters. The two installations hence aggravate appropriation's deadly features. If the subject died of a postmodern affliction somewhere in France, sometime in the 1960's, Rosângela seems reluctant to get over this casualty. Her work nostalgically and repeatedly asks me: Where is the subject? In this context, the very titles of these installations may acknowledge and perhaps even surrender to the fatality of the artist's endeavour (recording, remembering, recollecting): it's doomed.

Notes

¹Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, New York, The Noonday Press, 1981, p.14. I would like to thank Jeff Nelson for sharing with me these reflections on photography.

²There is an extensive list on authors who have written on the subject: Chery Bernstein, Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss are some of them.

³During the sixties and seventies, "pharaonic project" became a popular denomination for the military regime's controversial multi-billion-dollar projects such as the Norte-Sul railroad, the Angra dos Reis nuclear plant, the Transamazônica highway, and the Rio-Niterói bridge.

⁴Roland Barthes, *op.cit.*, p.23.