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Look Again: The influence of Vilém Flusser on Brazilian photographer Rosângela Rennó

"As inhabitants of the photographic universe we have become accustomed to photographs: They have grown familiar to us. We no longer take any notice of most photographs, concealed as they are by habit; in the same way, we ignore everything familiar in our environment and only notice what has changed. Change is informative, the familiar redundant."

Flusser 2000: 65

The Brazilian artist Rosângela Rennó investigates the afterlife of photographs, that is, images that are no longer in use or circulation. In other words, she appropriates photographs and photographic objects (such as albums and negatives) that were fated to oblivion. Domestic photographs, photo albums as well as photographs from public archives, newspapers and from professional photographic studios are the main categories of images and objects appropriated. These photographs are mostly manipulated by digital means. On occasion, she has added pigment, enlarged the images, or altered the saturation of the photographs, often resulting in images that are not easy to decipher.

Her work can be compared to the generation of North American artists who used appropriated materials in their art in the late 1970s and 1980s. This group of artists was focused on reworking the vast accumulation of images produced by modern and contemporary societies. This technique is at the heart of postmodern theories of the visual arts. The reception and assessment of such postmodern ideas has only recently begun in Brazil.

One of the obvious reasons for this belated reception of international ideas about contemporary art is the recent political and economic history of Brazil, what is known as the dictatorship period that ended in 1985. Although as Brazilian art critic Agnaldo Farias stresses (2009: 16) in a recent assessment of postmodernism in Brazil, the cultural changes of the late 1970s and 80s should not encourage the reduction of art to a mere reflection of its socio-political context. He notes that, in the specific case of Brazil, there is also the complicated issue of the gradual way in which the dictatorship period ended. He cites the analysis of journalist and political commentator, Elio Gaspari, who said that the military dictatorship "disassembled by stages, with such precision that to this day it is not possible to say when it ended." (Farias 2009: 16)

1

Rennó's reasons for appropriating already existing images relate to her opposition to the contemporary over-production and consumption of images that we apprehend only superficially. "The world", writes Rennó, "will always have too many photographs" (2003: 13) [translation by the author] and her aim is not to add more but to work with the notion of memory rooted in already existing images. Czech-Brazilian theorist Vilém Flusser influenced Rennó's decision to abandon the photographic act and to appropriate photographs. Flusser's theories were disseminated in Brazil in the 1980s, and contributed substantially to the investigation of photography in the country, even though, at that point, he had returned to Europe. Flusser lived in Brazil between 1941 and 1972. His thought is crucial for an understanding of the use of appropriation in Rennó's art.

Flusser argues that we have forgotten how to decode images after the establishment of what he calls technical images. He defines technical images as the materialization of concepts in the world. Created by the mediation of mechanical apparatuses of codification, technical images transform concepts into images. According to Flusser the first and simplest form of the technical image is the photograph: photographs are the codification of theories. Flusser contrasts the traditional image that represents something with the technical image: "ontologically, traditional images signify phenomena whereas technical images signify concepts." (2000: 14).

Rennó shares these ideas with Flusser. She wants to provoke the viewer to look very closely at her images. By revitalizing consumed visual information, she recycles discarded photographs. She reworks press photographs and various types of identity photographs, making these forgotten but familiar genres of photography less familiar and thereby worthy of greater scrutiny.
In the 1990s, interested in examining the institutional uses and abuses of photography, Rennó started to work with images and texts appropriated from newspapers and public archives. She was concerned with investigating the coexistence of the notions of memory and oblivion in the photographic medium, focusing on public depositories of photographic memory.

1. Vilém Flusser: The Need for Re-education in Order to See

"The text, for me […] was very prophetic in those years. I became extremely excited and started to work with images from my own collection, enlarging photos that had been discarded, and that changed everything. I found out that this manipulation could be extremely effective for my proposal to provoke the viewer to learn how to read an image; no more photographing." (Rennó, 2009: 78) [translation by the author]

By manipulating appropriated discarded photographs and returning them to the visual sphere, Rennó sought to engage the viewer in a form of visual re-education. By doing so, she was encouraging the viewer to scrutinize more carefully the image, to decode the image, as Flusser would put it.

Vilém Flusser's influence on theories of photography can be noticed particularly in São Paulo, not just in the academic sphere but also in the popular press. Until his death in 1991, his life in Europe did not prevent him from regularly contributing to important art and communication journals in Brazil and from repeatedly visiting the country for long periods that included an intense schedule of workshops and conferences. Some of the journals to which Flusser regularly contributed were *Iris Foto* (one of the only magazines focused on photography in the country at the time), *Revista Brasileira de Filosofia* [Brazilian Magazine of Philosophy] and *O Estado de São Paulo* [The State of São Paulo] (the most conservative daily newspaper in São Paulo).

Flusser's association with the art world was initiated when he became friends with Brazilian artists Mira Schendel and Samson Flexor in the 1960s. From their friendship emerged Flusser's interest in writing about art. His major contribution to the Brazilian art field, however, occurred in 1973, when he was living in Europe. In that year he curated the "Art and Communication" segment of the *XII Bienal de São Paulo*. The five artists selected by Flusser were: Swiss video-artists Jean Oth and Gerald Minkof, French artists Hervé Fisher and Fred Forest (part of the École de Sociologie Interrogative) and Romanian artist Horia Damian. According to Gabriel Borba Filho (2000: 42), Flusser's assistant for the *XII Bienal de São Paulo*, through the selection of these five artists the theorist demonstrated his interest in art that dealt with the limitations of traditional artistic languages.

Flusser also worked for the *Bienal de São Paulo* on two other occasions: in 1981 and 1985. In 1981 he participated in the series of talks entitled "Imagem-tecno-imagens" [Image-techno-images] and in 1985 he gave a talk about art, craft and artifacts. In 1985, Flusser's book *A Filosofia da Caixa Preta* [*Towards a Philosophy of Photography*] was also published in Brazil.

Flusser's contribution to the Brazilian art field occurred at a time when there was very little writing directly on the photographic medium. According to Brazilian theorist Ricardo Mendes (1998: 2-4), who focuses on Flusser's theories as well as the history of Brazilian photography, the Brazilian situation at this time is marked, not only by an absence of theorists who focused on the medium, but also by the almost complete non-existence of published material on photography, apart from isolated initiatives in the academic sphere. However, this scenario started to change at the end of the 1970s, particularly in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The number of exhibitions increased, followed by more space devoted to photography in the daily press and the gradual in-

troduction of photography to important museums in the country such as MASP (*Museu de Arte de São Paulo*) and MIS (*Museu de Imagem e Som*) [Museum of Images and Sound], also in São Paulo. Flusser's book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* was published in Brazil during this transformation of the photographic scene.

While postmodern art was taking place in the United States in the late 1970s, and the key theories of appropriation were being discussed internationally, Brazil was governed by the authoritarian military regime, and, was therefore, disconnected from the international art world. In Brazil, Flusser's theories made a significant contribution to fledgling postmodernist debates, although they were not consistently designated as such. Brazilian theorist Lúcia Santaella argues (2000: 117-130) that Flusser was one of the first thinkers to bring postmodern ideas to Brazil. Flusser's book, *Pós-História: Vinte Instantâneos e um Modo de Usar* [Post-History: Twenty Instamatic Instants and Instructions for Use] from 1983, was an important work in this regard, as it discussed the relationship between human beings and technology in the post-industrial era. Santaella argues (2000: 123) that Pós-História was one of the pioneering postmodern works published in Brazil and Flusser was an extremely visionary postmodern thinker.

In *Pós-História*, Flusser discusses the fate of the image after the introduction of technology: "Our world had become colorful. The majority of the surfaces around us are colorful. Walls covered by posters, buildings, shop windows, vegetable cans, underpants, umbrellas, magazines, photographs, movies, TV advertisements, everything is in resplendent Technicolor. This modification in the world, when compared to the grey of the past, cannot be explained only aesthetically. The surfaces that surround us are resplendent in color especially because they irradiate messages. The majority of the messages that inform us about the world and our situation in the world are nowadays irradiated by the surfaces that surround us." (Flusser 1983: 97) [translation by the author]

In *Pós-História*, Flusser begins his argument about the dominance of the technical image in framing reality. He argues that before the introduction of technical images in society, it was the written text that codified the world. According to theorist Bram Ieven (2003), the written text was invented by taking the different elements of an image (sometimes called pixels by Flusser) and placing them one after another in a linear formation. Flusser asserts that after the industrial revolution the dominance of the text gave way to the domination of the technical image. "In the recent past the codified world was dominated by the linear codes of the texts, and nowadays it is the bi-dimensional codes of surfaces." (Flusser 1983: 97) [translation by the author]

One year before the publication of *Pós-História* and three years before the publication of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* in Portuguese, Flusser published an article entitled "O Instrumen-

to do Fotógrafo ou o Fotógrafo do Instrumento" [The Photographer's Apparatus or the Apparatus' Photographer] in the Brazilian magazine *Iris Foto*. In this article, which presented part of the argument he would develop in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* and *Pós-História*, he posits the dependence of human beings on the tools that were once created to orient them in the world. "The tool does not work for human beings anymore, human beings are a function of the tool." Flusser asserts that tools, which are meant to "modify the world" [translation by the author], as he puts it, actually modify humanity. (Flusser 1982)

Using photography to demonstrate his idea, he argues that photographers are engaged with the apparatus or camera, while most trades are not focused on their tools but on what they can produce. Flusser compares the trade of a shoemaker with that of the photographer, stating: "with regards to the photographer, he engages with the apparatus, which is not subject matter, but tool. It is like the shoemaker being engaged with his needles." (Flusser 1982) By engaging with the apparatus instead of the subject matter, one could say that photographers are, in Flusser's words (Flusser 2000: 27), "functionaries of the apparatus." He explains in greater detail what he means by calling the photographer a "functionary" of the apparatus in his book *Towards the Philosophy of Photography*. "Unlike manual workers surrounded by their tools and industrial workers standing at their machines, photographers are inside their apparatus and bound up with it. This is a new kind of function in which human beings are neither the constant nor the variable but in which human beings and apparatus merge into a unity. It is therefore appropriate to call photographers functionaries." (Flusser 2000: 29)

The merging of photographer and camera, nonetheless, privileges the power of the camera as Flusser's conclusion above indicates. It is the photographer who is a functionary of the camera, not the other way around. This elevation of the power of the apparatus is also evident in Flusser's account of the relationship between the world and the camera, as Flusser puts it, "the world is purely a pretext for the realization of camera possibilities." (Flusser 2000:26) In this reversal of agency where the camera dictates the way in which the world is viewed, and the photographer is a functionary of the apparatus, a typical postmodern position is articulated. Human agents are subject to the inventions they have created.

In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser discusses the possibilities of creation and freedom in art in the era of mass media, dominated by the apparatus. Flusser defines images in general as abstractions of the world, created by the "reductions of the four dimensions of space and time to the two surface dimensions." These abstractions are described by him as "mediations between the world and human beings" (Flusser 2000: 8). They are created to represent the world and make reality comprehensible. From this definition of the image, he develops the idea of the

traditional image – he distinguishes between the traditional and the technical image. Traditional images, according to Flusser, are symbolic representations of the world. A painting, for instance, is a traditional image, it is the representation of something in space and time. Considering the invention of the written text as a decisive moment in the history of perception and the confrontation of reality, Flusser asserts (Flusser 2000:14) that traditional images are "prehistoric" because they precede the written text. They are abstractions of the "first order", as they abstract from the "concrete world." On the other hand, technical images are "post-historical": they "abstract from texts, which abstract from traditional images, which themselves abstract from the concrete world" (Flusser 2000: 14).

Flusser states that according to the apparently non-symbolic, objective character of the technical images, one tends to see them not as images, but as windows, which are trusted as if seen with our own eyes. It is important to note that this book was written in the 1980s, when computer software such as *Photoshop* was not generally available. However, he believes that the apparent objectivity of the technical images is illusory: they are as symbolic as any image. He discusses how easy it is to recognize symbolism in traditional images, because there is a human agent – a painter, for example – who is behind the act of creating meaning. The painter elaborates symbols in his/her mind transferring them to a surface in the act of painting. On the other hand, in the technical image, the photographer creates concepts that are inscribed in the program of the camera and projected onto the photographic surface. In the creation of a technical image one comes across the problem of a complex apparatus: the black box, in which it is less evident how to recognize symbolism. The notion of the black box is further discussed by Flusser as a complex apparatus, which contains possibilities that: "transcend the ability of the photographer to exhaust them." (Flusser 2000: 27).

Flusser's ideas can be related to Walter Benjamin's discussion of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. According to Brazilian theorist Márcio Seligmann-Silva (2009), Flusser was the first philosopher to understand the profundity of Benjamin's ideas about photography and technical reproduction, and to expand Benjamin's ideas through his analysis of technical images. What unites these two philosophers is the notion that representation is shaped by technology. The similarity between Benjamin's auratic image and Flusser's traditional image is undeniable, as is the post-auratic image discussed by Benjamin and Flusser's technical image. Flusser's work is, of course, indebted to Benjamin's: Flusser's theories were written almost fifty years after "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936).

According to Seligmann-Silva, what differentiates the approach of Flusser from that of Benjamin is the importance that Flusser ascribes to the invention of the written text as a seminal

event for the conception of the image. As Seligman-Silva puts it (2009: 9), Flusser describes technical images as post-historical, meaning they are post-text. In other words, Flusser discusses the tension between image and text, considering the invention of the written text and the invention of technical images as the two decisive moments in the history of perception. Benjamin, however, did not examine this connection between written text and image.

In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* Flusser revisits his theories about the photographer becoming a functionary of the apparatus stating that people have become slaves of the technical image and the reality dictated by those images. He is convinced that images are created to document reality and to orient us in the world. However, what happens is that after the introduction of technical images, human beings forget they created images to orient themselves in the world and, therefore, they do not know how to decode them anymore. Nevertheless, their lives have become a function of the images created and reality is transformed into a series of scenes. In the age of the apparatus, in Flusser's view, the world became a collection of images instead of real experiences. "The technical images currently all around us", he writes, "are in the process of magically restructuring our reality and turning it into a 'global image scenario'." This occurs, according to Flusser, because of a problem of "amnesia." (Flusser 2000: 10):

For Flusser, the transformation of reality into a collection of images is related to a common longing to be "endlessly remembered and endlessly repeatable. […] there is no everyday activity which does not aspire to be photographed, filmed, videotaped. […] All events are nowadays aimed at the television screen, the cinema screen, the photograph, in order to be translated into a state of things. (Flusser 2000: 20)

The desire for people and events to be endlessly recorded by photographs allows the recollection of a moment in the past. Borrowing Christian Boltanski's saying that "memories are very fragile" (Boltanski 1997: 19) one can say that the photograph saves our memories from oblivion by recording a moment in space and time. This is in accordance with the common idea that photographs are an index of an event, evidence that something happened, somewhere, at a specific moment. Susan Sontag examined the notion of photography as 'evidence'. "Photographs", she writes, "furnish evidence" (Sontag 1979: 5).

Flusser's theories recall Guy Debord's ideas in his seminal book *Society of Spectacle* from 1967. Like Debord, Flusser examines the role of mediation ascribed to images in society. Debord defines the spectacle as the social relationship between people mediated by images. "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation." (Debord 1994: 12) Debord and Flusser believe that representation has displaced real expe-

7

rience. Debord believes that once social relations are mediated by images "the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings." And he continues: "[…] the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance. But any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle's essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life – and as a negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself." (Debord 1994: 14, 17) In this statement Debord presents the idea that reality is produced by the spectacle or representation. His main aim is to examine how mass media become a form of control, seducing the masses into accepting the authority of the dominant class. He is interested in understanding the effects of power on the image culture. Flusser's main concern, on the other hand, is to study the possibility of freedom in a society subjugated by the apparatus. For him, "such philosophy is necessary because it is the only form of revolution left open to us." (Flusser 2000: 82)

Flusser believes (2000: 81) that there is "no place for human freedom within the area of automated, programmed and programming apparatuses." Therefore, photographers need to come to terms with the image, the apparatus, the program and information to be able to intervene in a photographic system with awareness. They have to try to free themselves from the apparatus to create art without limitations. According to Flusser (2000: 80), in doing so photographers will be able to create images constructed according to human intention.

Rennó shares with Flusser the belief that human beings have forgotten how to decode images and therefore have become mere consumers of repetitive representation. By recycling consumed visual information, Rennó goes against the endless production of images in a culture with a vast accumulation of images. She suggests re-enchantment as a necessary strategy to overcome image saturation, stating. "I believe that we should relearn how to see, go through a certain re-enchantment. In general, photographs do not enchant us anymore. The way I found to try to promote this re-enchantment was to force a fake opacity in the image. I make it difficult to decode the image, creating a noise, a short circuit, which does not allow the viewer to perceive a precise image. Nevertheless, the original image is easy, banal. He [the viewer] is forced to go back to his references and reconstruct the image mentally, turning away from pure visual stimulus." (Rennó 2003: 13) [translation by the author] By manipulating images found in flea markets or appropriated from newspapers or public archives, Rennó defamiliarizes a familiar, banal photograph.

I began this article with an epigram from Flusser which suggests that human beings ignore everything familiar to them. Photographic images and photographic genres became familiar to us and we ignore them. In other words, in the vast accumulation of photographs that we consume

daily, mostly it is the changes to familiar things that are noticed. Rennó's practice promotes curiosity and effort by mimicking this strategy: she makes banal photographs unfamiliar.

2. *Imemorial:* Materializing Remembrance

A series of fifty manipulated photographs appropriated from the Public Archive of the Federal District in Brazil is the subject of Rennó's installation *Imemorial* [Immemorial]. The work was created for the group exhibition *Revendo Brasília* [Relooking at Brasília] in 1994. Organized by the Goethe Institute Brasília and the Fundação Athos Bulcão, the exhibition was held in the Galeria Athos Bulcão, Teatro Nacional (Brasília) from 1st to the 25th September, 1994. It travelled to São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, Porto Alegre and Belo Horizonte between October 1994 and May 1995.

Rosângela Rennó, *Imemorial* (1994), installation for the exhibition Revendo Brasília, Galeria Athos Bulcão, Brasília, 40 black-painted orthochromatic film prints, 10 colour prints, 60 x 40 x 2 cm (each iron frame).

In *Imemorial* Rennó chose to make visible the negative side of the history of the construction of the capital while the majority of artists in the show, like Mário Cravo Neto, for example, created artworks that celebrated Brasília, its people and especially its renowned architecture.

The unwritten history of the construction of the capital Brasília, between the years 1957-1960 is marked by many crimes. One of them is the disregard for the citizens who died working for the state and who were refused a proper burial. Another outrage that marked the history of the construction of the capital was the use of child labor. The deaths of construction workers is the theme that Rennó chose to examine in her work *Imemorial.*

Many people crossed the country, taking days or even weeks to get to the geographically central part of Brazil, believing in the words of progress and hope from the President Juscelino Kubitshek. With its award-winning modern architecture from Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa, Brasília hides the history of many anonymous people who died in search of a better life. The utopian city was built with negligence and carelessness about the safety of the workers. Many people – the majority black, *mestizo*, poor and miserable – fell from the scaffolding of the buildings that were being constructed with no safety regulations. On average, three bodies per day would fall from the buildings and disappear straight away with nobody to notice, apart from the engineers and architects. The bodies were buried right where they fell, with nobody to give the dead words of gratitude and compassion.

Rosângela Rennó, detail of the installation.

This failure to care for the workers occurred because the construction could not stop. The president wanted to inaugurate the capital on 21st April, the National Day, which celebrates the death of the legendary revolutionary Tiradentes, who was tortured and hanged because of his involve-

ment with the "Inconfidência Mineira" – one of the first movements formed in 1792 by the habitants of Brazil seeking independence from Portugal. Nothing could stop the construction, not even the absence of sun – the construction went on even at night. In *Imemorial* these individuals that helped to 'build' the history of the country now become visible after being consigned to oblivion in an unseen archive. Another group of people, who also become visible in the work, are the children and teenagers that worked in the construction of the capital.

In a warehouse of the government construction company Novacap (responsible for the execution of the project of the new capital Brasília) Rennó found suitcases containing more than fifteen thousand files concerning the employees – workers and children that built Brasília. From these files, she selected forty identification photographs of the workers who died during the construction of the capital and ten photographs of children and teenagers employed by Novacap to work on the building of Brasília. *Imemorial* is composed of these portraits that are then manipulated by the artist.

Art historian Charles Merewether refers to *Imemorial* as a "memorial of fallen bodies." (1999: 1021) The photographs are arranged like graves in a cemetery, with some of the faces looking at us from the wall – as headstones – and others from the ground – like graves. Rennó veils some of the faces by glazing them in a dark grey color – the ones on the ground – while the hung portraits were kept in their original color, giving the impression of not being manipulated by the artist apart from their enlargement. Their positioning and color suggest they are buried in the floor.

The lighter images, hung on the wall, are portraits of children and teenagers who worked in the construction of Brasília. The dark faces, placed on the floor, are portraits of adults that died during the construction. The darkness of the portraits buried on the floor confirms their lifeless status. The ones on the wall, children and teenagers who did not die in the construction are kept in their original color. Their positioning gives them a degree of visibility that the portraits on the floor lack.

The minor manipulation of the photographs involves the enlargement and darkening of the images. With such small interventions Rennó's appropriated images leave the notion of an original document intact. She does not transform the identification photographs of *Imemorial* into something unrecognizable. On the contrary, *Imemorial* reinforces the original attributes of the images: the manipulation emphasizes some aspects that are not perceived by just looking at the images themselves. For example, by darkening the images of the dead workers and positioning them on the floor, she suggests their death – something that is, of course, not visible in the identification photographs.

More than aiming to denounce the immoral side of the history of the construction of the

capital, Rennó's images emphasize the lacuna in the historical records of Brasília. The stories of these people, their deaths and their labor, point to the silences of history and more than that, the power of state institutions to control the history of a nation. Merewether, when discussing this series, refers to Walter Benjamin's warning, that "not even the dead are safe when only the victors tell the story." He continues: "Rennó's work engages in a struggle over the ownership of memory. The experience of seeing is itself subject to the forces of forgetting, and the labor of reading traces is equivalent to coming to terms with the past. Traces of identity are captured in the moment prior to the subject's disappearance, a recognition of difference brought out of the shadows of a suppressed history. The installation represents a redemptive gesture, a resurrection of fallen bodies, those sacrificed in the building of the future." (Merewether 1997: 46)

Merewether argues that societies are marked by their untold history. The atrocities that occurred during the construction of Brasília were never mentioned by the state, but Rennó (like other artists, film directors, composers and poets from Brazil) points back to the omissions in the past, thereby contributing to the creation of a more truthful and inclusive account of recent history. In relation to the artist's aim to give visibility to what has been hidden, Rennó writes: "When you consider that people and institutions like to keep the evidence of memorable and good things alive, it's very seductive to invert this process and give visibility to hidden and abandoned 'dead files' that correspond to specific periods of amnesia. Remember our long dictatorship […] Brazil is a very young country and is still learning how to deal with its own memory. I was always told that we are a country made for the future, and the rush to reach this hypothetic apogee leads our establishment to erase steps and experiences, especially when they are bad or inglorious moments" (quoted in Herzog 2002: 86-87).

The originally small black and white identification photographs (3 x 4 cm) were enlarged by Rennó, being magnified to more than ten times their original size. She enlarges the identification photographs to what Kyla McFarlane calls "museum scale." (McFarlane 2009: 4) Paulo Herkenhoff (1996: 172) refers to the work *Imemorial* as a "real mirror". The gleam of the photographic surface, printed on orthochromatic film, is reinforced by the black paint applied to the back of the photographs. With these aesthetic attributes, the images become dark mirrors, which are able to reflect the face of the viewer when approached. The subject of the photograph becomes the reflection of the viewer's face. In this regard, Herkenhoff writes: "the hazy mirror […] in which are projected these melancholic narcissists, makes one perceive that the rectangle of the [identification] photograph can be a headstone for the assembled dead." (Herkenhoff 1996: 172) *Imemorial* encourages identification between the viewer and the people on the photographs.

In *Imemorial*, Rennó gives a second visibility to the inexpressive and forgotten identification photographs. The work is a memorial that resists amnesia. Motivated by Flusser's theory of the need for re-education in order to see, Rennó goes against the tendency towards 'social amnesia' induced by image-saturation by re-enchanting banal, forgotten photographs. The final work is more than the 'banal' identification photographs of anonymous people, it is a memorial to the hidden history of Brasília.

3. *Corpos da Alma:* A Proclamation of Memory and Disruption

The work *Corpos da Alma* [Bodies of Soul] is composed of digital images made from appropriated photographs published in newspapers between 1990 and 2006. The images consist of people holding photographs of loved ones who have presumably disappeared due to wars, terrorism or urban violence and are most likely already dead. Rennó manipulated the photographs, creating images constituted by dots – in grey or in color – making a direct reference to low-resolution re-ticulated newspaper images. The work has been presented in the last four years in different formats such as engravings on stainless steel and vinyl adhesive circles placed directly on the wall. More recently Rennó has used an inkjet printer and the images are rendered in non-naturalistic colour. The more recent works from 2006-2007 are also titled: *Estado do Mundo* [State of the World].

Rosângela Rennó, from the series *Bodies of Soul*,
Napoles, (photo Robert Capa/Magnum Photos),

2003, engraving on stainless steel, 158 x 110 x 3cm.

Bodies of Soul represents the major theme in the artist's oeuvre: the intertwined ideas of oblivion and memory. In recent times, with the increase of wars and violence it has become commonplace to see this kind of image in newspapers all over the world, but the short life of the newspaper images allows us to forget them. Rennó makes the disposable newspaper images resurface, refusing to vanish. She thereby reinforces the marks of violence and conflict that circumscribe daily-life in great part of the world.

The series thus confronts a widespread problem and one that has particular pertinence for Brazil and other South American countries. As a Brazilian, the first idea that occurred to me was that this series makes a direct reference to the period of the dictatorship in Brazil during the second half of the twentieth-century. During the military years, many disappearances and deaths occurred and the pictures of people holding photographs of the disappeared became iconic images for the cruelty of the military regime. The country lost many of its citizens who believed in justice and democracy and the state has often denied knowledge of their existence. The missing people from the dictatorship period in Brazil are still a very delicate issue in the country. Up to the present time, the crimes that occurred during those years have failed to generate broad political discussion, reinforcing the idea that Brazil is marked by the tendency towards social amnesia. The title of Rennó's work guides the interpretation of the work. The title suggests that the photographs within the photographs depict not just physical bodies but also souls. In a society shaped by technology, the photograph is what is left of their existence. Like images of saints, they are held by supplicants who give them visibility by showing their faces to the camera. The work could be understood as a collection of souls embodied in the photographic images held by their loved ones.

Using images from different parts of the world, Rennó gives to these people portrayed an 'everyman' representative quality. While they are specific images of friends or relatives holding a photograph of their missing loved ones, they can also be understood as being anybody from anywhere. Their identities are not well-defined, and hence the attention shifts to the practice of holding the photograph in grief or anger. Although the images in *Bodies of Soul* appear legible in reproduction (in books and journals), when viewed in a gallery setting, they are not easy to see. The dot technique employed by the artist coupled with the highly reflective surface of some of the images makes them difficult to read, reinforcing the idea of a hidden or generalised identity. Some of the images in *Bodies of Soul* show the mourner holding the portrait of the disappeared person in what looks like the private space of their home, revealing in the photograph they hold, an intimate moment between them and their missing loved one. Others show the portraits in the

14

context of a street demonstration. In both cases, what is reinforced by the act of holding the portrait for the camera is the function of witnessing that the photograph performs. Holding the portraits of the deceased in front of the camera, the mourners try to draw attention to their loss. Rennó, like the mourners, also attempts to give to the disappeared people some visibility, however, she does so by creating opacity in the work.

The obscurity of the images created by the dots, gives to the work a certain ambiguity. While giving visibility to the mourners and their loved ones, Rennó also obstructs the reading of the image, consigning them, once again, to oblivion. Through this ambiguity one can perceive the tension between memory and its disappearance in her work. Dealing with two opposite concepts, Rennó succeeds in creating photographs that memorialize the disappeared while also accentuating their status as people who have disappeared.

Intervening in the image by obscuring the referent of the photograph, Rennó reinforces her aim to create images that are difficult to read. This series emphasizes in particular her idea of creating an imprecise image for the viewer to reconstruct. In Rennó's words by creating a "noise", a "short circuit", she makes the viewer turn away from "pure visual stimulus" [translation by the author] (Rennó 2003: 13) to reconstruct an image from what remains of the banal original photographs.

4. *Vulgo:* Accentuating Uniqueness within the Group

In 1995 Rennó came across an archive within the São Paulo Penitentiary Museum consisting of glass plate identification photographs taken between 1920 and 1940. She went through a long and complicated process to get permission to use these photographs and spent some time cleaning and filing the negatives that were previously in a dreadful state, mostly abandoned in boxes. In 1999 Rennó created *Vulgo* [Alias] consisting of twelve appropriated photographs of male prisoners' heads, showing their patterns of hair usually called cowlicks, that is, a section of hair that stands straight up or lies at an angle at odds with the style in which the rest of an individual's hair is worn.

The photographs abandoned in cardboard boxes on the floor of the penitentiary museum, impressed Rennó by their quality (according to her the photographs were taken by a very good photographer) (compare Herzog 2002: 88). Rescued by Rennó, the collection served not only as the subject matter for her series *Alias* but also for another series *Cicatriz* [Scar] (1997). Interested in showing how the state tries to erase aspects of the past, she recounts what she found inside the

cardboard boxes: "It was like a huge collection of ghosts. There was no documentation at all within this supposed museum: no papers, few photographic prints, two or three forms of famous prisoners. All the rest had disappeared. I was interested in this moment of amnesia" (quoted in Chiu 1999: 44).
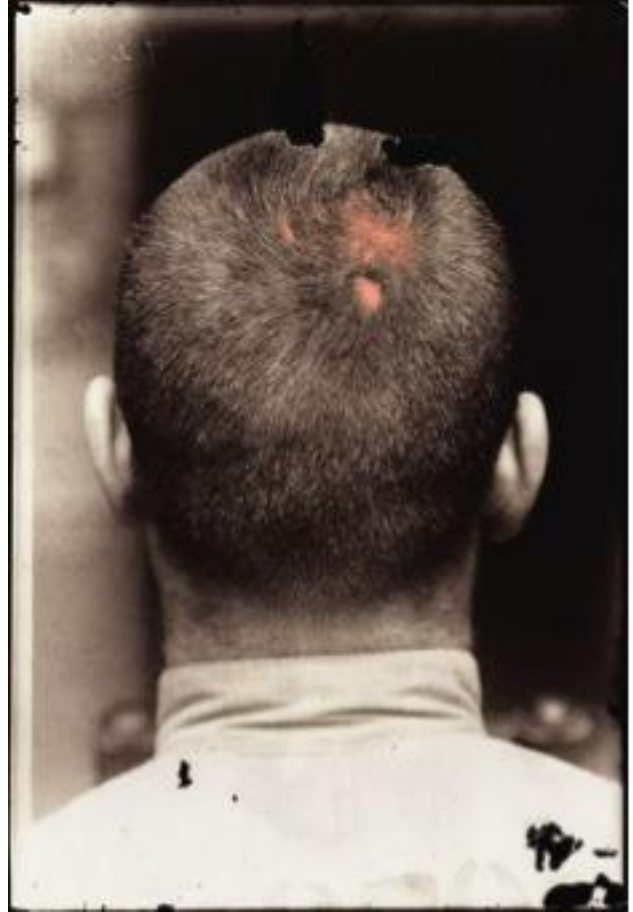
Rosângela Rennó, *Three Holes*, 1999, from the Series *Vulgo*, digital lightjet print, laminated and mounted on masonite 167 x 113 cm.

Paulo Herkenhoff sees social amnesia as a crucial issue in Rennó's oeuvre. "For the artist", he writes, "social amnesia, ideologically inbuilt or deliberately provoked, is nurtured by the photograph itself, in the perversion of its function as visual memory. […] Opposite to psychological amnesia, in which a child or an individual produces forgetfulness (therefore, it's the subject that forgets), in social amnesia the subject itself is erased by ideology and other practices of power. Each photographic image worked by Rennó is, then, a fragmentary interruption of this oblivion. It is a rescue of the subject in time, operating like the making present of the past." (Herkenhoff 1996: 144)

In the archive there were not many photographs like the ones she chose to create *Alias*. Out of five thousand photographs there were only forty of the back of the prisoners' heads (Chiu

1999: 44). For the creation of *Alias* she appropriated nine specific pictures. Another three photographs reveal the faces of the prisoners, however, they show them gazing downwards, hiding thus their identity. One of these men has an identification number stuck to his forehead. All the photographs chosen by Rennó from the archive show the strange documentation of the cowlicks of the prisoners.

Rennó manipulated the images, emphasizing the cowlicks by coloring them in pinks and reds. The color directs our gaze, emphasizing the distinctiveness of each cowlick. Cowlicks, like a fingerprint, are unique to each person and perhaps are because of this a very specific way of identifying the single prisoners. Rennó, however, declared (see Chiu 1999: 45) that these images were probably not taken for identification purposes as they did carry any names. She believes that they were marks of identity, guessing that they were probably part of scientific research based on positivist theories relating to criminal behavior and physical characteristics of the head and the face.

Once again, the images suggest minimal manipulation by the artist. She enlarged the photographs and the introduced color, leaving the integrity of the document relatively unchanged. The coldness of the photographs of the prisoners' heads, magnified to human scale, makes them very intimidating. The enlargement asserts the presence of the photographs within the art gallery, also proclaiming the significance of the subject matter. It also reinforces the opposite but intertwined ideas of anonymity and individuality.

The images bear the marks of age and handling, including mould, scratches and stains, and deteriorated edges. The various marks on the photographic images make us consider their temporality. They are a proof that time has passed. Art historian Mark Godfrey comments on the many different time dimensions preserved by the pictures: "Photographs might initially show what 'has been', 'reality in a past state', but in their eventual physicality they bear witness to an expanded temporality—not just the instant of exposure, but the time of printing, storing, and gathering dust; the time of treasuring and touching." (Godfrey 2005: 20)

The titles of the images are another interesting aspect of the series. Rennó plays with the multiple meaning of words in order to create the title of each photograph that composes *Alias*. She declared (see Chiu 1999: 45) that when she first gave title to the images, it was only a way of classifying them for herself, in order to be able to identify them later. She gave the prisoners names or aliases. Prisoners in Brazil are rarely known by their real names – they often have only a nickname –, Rennó, thus, mimics that process by creating her own form of identification for the unknown prisoners. Only the images of the backs of heads have titles, apart from one, which shows the face: its title is *Number*. Their titles are: *Phoenix*, *Scorpio*, *Double-Crown*, *Fire*, *Twister*, *Trockel*, *Volcan*, *Three Holes* and *Whip*. These titles describe different cowlicks formations.

Rosângela Rennó, detail of the installation

Emphasizing the uniqueness of each cowlick, Rennó introduces the idea of individuality into an anonymous public sphere. "More than being a number", she pointed out, "the prisoners are individuals" (Herzog 2002: 88), and their cowlicks mark the difference between each one. The body of anonymous prisoners, originally identified by numbers, is, thus, opposed to the individualizing attributes of the single cowlicks. Manipulating these images and emphasizing their unique characteristics, Rennó provokes the viewer to think again about the institutional uses of photography. After the manipulation of the artist the image of the back of the head of an anonymous prisoner can suddenly be looked at again, representing now the identity of a human being that, like any of us, has unique characteristics, like a cowlick or a fingerprint.

Rennó, like Flusser, believes that human beings have become mere consumers of repetitive representations and that, because of this, photographs do not captivate us anymore. Motivated by Flusser's theories, Rennó proposes a re-enchantment of the image. She uses different strategies to capture the viewer's attention. In this series it is a surprising combination of delicate hand-coloring and the enlargement of a much smaller image that makes us think again about the prisoner's image.

The opacity and ambiguity of Rennó's photographs renews our interest in overly familiar or

18

clichéd images. This idea of disrupting the familiar circulation of images is s direct result of Flusser's theories. Flusser's assertion that we no longer take notice of photographs as they became familiar to us led him to emphasize that "change is informative." (2000: 65) By defamiliarizing familiar photographs, Rennó creates informative change, bringing the viewer's awareness back to the image. Rennó does not simply add more information to the world. Interfering in the endless accumulation of images, she converts discarded information into communication.

To overcome the modern condition we know as image saturation, Rennó incites the viewer to look carefully at familiar imagery by preserving those images and features, but also by changing them. Creating simple but effective changes, she makes appropriated photographs into something that requires decipherment. These images that might once have been regarded as a simple description of the world are saved from invisibility and neglect. Rennó's actions enable these photographs to become an opportunity to reflect upon the photographic apparatus, the unending production of photographs and the few strategies artists can adopt to intervene in this endless cycle of production, consumption and forgetting.

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