

The Impermanence of Looking at the World

By Bernardo José de Souza

Everything begins with an eye. Who looks where, or at whom?

Three gazes always converge in a portrait: the author, the spectator and the portrayed — assuming that the latter is aware or senses the photographic act. But even when the person is unaware of the portrait, their gaze is forcibly appropriated in this triangulation of perspectives that forges its own particular world, whose layers of meaning are simultaneously juxtaposed inside and outside the image. This external plane, or 'blind field' as Roland Barthes put it, or this extra-photographic sphere that remains invisible to the spectator, is what makes for the implicit narrative dimension in Mauro Restiffe's practice — a palimpsest of stories molded into celluloid, some of them symmetric, others asymmetric, brought together in the human survey that shapes the exhibition.

This dynamic of gazes — at times veiled and at times apparent — orchestrated by photography has its roots in painting, more explicitly in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, where we see the clash between subject and object, between audience and artwork, mediated by the gaze of the painter and of the portrayed, colliding with the spectator. In the manner of Velázquez's masterpiece, which sets out our modern awareness of artistic representation, Restiffe's images, rather than capturing a dead time, propose a staging in which everyone functions as discursive agents, where each one is intermeshed with the gaze of the others. Therefore, the spectator is engulfed in by the image, absorbed in a dimension located between past and future.

Now that we are informed by the 20th century photographic tradition, descending from Cartier-Bresson, we could be tempted to think of this temporal hiatus as the decisive moment. However, this is not what is exactly at play here, perhaps quite the opposite I would say. The moments portrayed by Restiffe contend with a flow, with a future, the passing of so many biographies, filled with dreams and life projects, their impending reality. Restiffe's photographs, therefore, are not greater than life, they are built at its exact measure. This does not mean that his work is exempt from the desire to produce a historical account, or to account for different histories, something that is clearly seen in his exemplary large political panoramas of Brazilian public life currently being exhibited at the São Paulo Biennial, where President Lula's inauguration faces Bolsonaro's inauguration in a perverse and decisive mirroring of realities. In both series, the photographer emerges as a political agent, turning his lens to the architectures of power, guided by a somewhat Marxist eagerness to reveal the superstructures of institutional dynamics. The social body thus becomes the object of his work.

Emblematically, this plane of 'reportage' on Brazilian soil is supplemented with another layer of investigation, which is equally marked by politics albeit of a different cultural nature. The trips to Russia made by the artist in the 1990s, and later in 2015, condense a gallery of distinct characters, proposing a renewed anthropological gaze and a relation to history. However, notwithstanding the investigative character of his immersion within a people that had experienced revolution and left it behind once communist utopias crumbled *pari passu* with the Berlin Wall in 1989, in his journeys, the artist was less concerned with the macro and more interested in the micropolitics, the lives that became invisible under the iron curtain: their routines, private spaces, and intimacies.

The present exhibition at Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel is conjured in the wake of Restiffe's Russian travels, similarly looking at the subjects of history, or at individuals and their many histories. This intermittent series of current portraits (that reach back to his travels to Russia) emerges from the rich archive that the artist has been compiling over his life. It greets us with the seduction of characters who are eager for their destinies, or who have given in to their destinies with grace, passion or even resignation. These are simultaneously real, fragile, solid figures, and even if they are not the full masters of their destinies, they are human agents acting on the landscape, be it built or natural.

More than the past, the archive deals with the future. To make a record, rather than preserving memory, is to constantly give it a new dimension. And this is how Restiffe's image archive works: a group of characters, of people, full of desires, in transit, moved by curiosity — the same curiosity that we share; we, the spectators of the portrayed human fabric, so sensitive and so stoic in the course of their existences. From this side of the human whirlwind printed on film, we meet, as if we were extensions of the biographies that we peek into like voyeurs, foreseeing glories and disasters that each one of us will face at some point in time.

I would also say that there is something cinematographic in Restiffe's work, a dilated time, a sort of flow-cinema that reaches far beyond the photographic field. A vital load pours out of the images, a load that is in fact capable of animating the still-lives interspersed in the sequence of portraits, as from them also emanates a provisional atmosphere calling us to look at the narratives beyond the images' plastic beauty, their formal composition — which, strictly speaking, applies to every photograph, whether they are bucolic, erotic, reflexive, political or excessively intimate.

Recording public figures, some more or less public, or even anonymous, Restiffe's work deals with the provisional character of history. This collection of stories and memories is concerned with both the present and the unfolding of the future. The decisive element here is the unknown within a game of mirrors between before and after, public and private, macro and micropolitics, dream and unstable reality.

Finally, as a way of closing this brief text, I must talk about a particular image, the artist's incisive gaze in his black and white portrait: those black eyes that intimately stroll over other bodies and landscapes, the punctum-gaze that distils admiration and surprise when faced with the world around it, always taking us elsewhere, to the place that photography cannot capture but yearns for or insinuates. By refraining from establishing a closed code for his images, Mauro Restiffe invites us to be adrift in the ethereal, somewhere that could have been but still hasn't, somewhere that perhaps, at some point in our life, will be relegated, if not to oblivion, then to the most recondite of memories.

Evoé!

Part II

To go back to a photographic work is like going back to a text: you may recover something that you overlooked between thoughts or find, for the first time, something unnoticed as you rushed through it — an exercise of interaction, of interpretation and affect, something emotive at first but that quickly turns intellectual.

Returning to Mauro Restiffe's portraits — motivated by a new selection of images for the second chapter of the exhibition *Laço, Rastro, Traço* [Lace, Trail, Trace] — was a chance to explore a path that, although foreign to my own experience, triggers a strong sense of familiarity or even the desire to share space and atmosphere with their many characters adrift in time. It is as if it was down to me, or to any other visitor, to borrow from these fleeting photographs, endowed with occult meanings; as if

the photos were waving a forgotten narrative at us, deleted by one of those tricks of the mind that happen to erase whole passages of our biography.

The many flowers that appear in this set of snapshots are like Proust's madeleines; they are the enchantment that triggers a sublimated affection — something that will never let fade a life memory that we had thought lost. Amongst new farewells, hesitations or misunderstandings, these fifteen images engender a whole affective framework or rather, multiple affective frameworks; in amidst wanderings, safe points and dead ends, new journeys begin, if not every day, at least every cycle, as if kickstarted or moved by the vital torrent that puts us into action, in the world.

Perhaps the real beauty in these photographs is the possibility to open up breaches in space/time, to embark on digressions that are as intimate as universal, dispersed in a constellation of crossed lives, simultaneous dimensions of encounter and abandonment. And, as such, we flirt with alterity, as if standing on equal ground: for once, we are all human. There is something of JL Borges in this mirroring exercise, a world inside another world, like in the short story *The Circular Ruins*, in which a man in a temple, deep in the jungle, dreams of another man to bring him into reality, but who ends up realizing that he is also the dream of another man.

There have been so many realities instantly lost in the last few years, and I am not referring to death only, but also about the obliteration of entire affective, or even semantic, systems — synapses that will never re-occur because life has changed, because an entire world seems to have been irremediably crushed. Perhaps in another time, I would have rushed through this raft of images, but today I find myself at the point of becoming a castaway on the island of yesterday's memories, in a world *avant ce monde, avant la lettre* — before the goodbye letter that we return to as a keen attempt to find what urgency has stolen from us.

Epilogue:

I like to think that in this intangible world, one that is pure virtuality, there would remain, underneath everything, at the bottom of a well-kept trapdoor, a spiral of celluloid maintaining intact those images erased by a sudden cosmic storm, by a colossal magnetic wave that, at the blink of an eye, pulverizing a whole universe of digital lives — an archive that we wished was unfettered but was so volatile it withered away in the solar wind, never to be sailed again. Farewell cloud, farewell internet, farewell the archives containing these images I have just seen and that have brought me these words.

This exhibition is also about the unshakable appreciation for memories that shall be dug one day by historians and anthropologists, by individuals who, like me, at some point in some distant future, shall return to them in search of a collective memory, of an archive of emotions that we once believed fatally forgotten.