

Photography and Myths of Origin – the Contemporary Self-Portrait

Professor Dr. Virginia Gil Araujo

UNIFESP- Brazil

The two great mythological characters of the portrait, Narcissus and Medusa, are equally part of the “origin” narratives of photography. They refer to the issue of the origins of representation, the marked presence in the portrait and in one of its versions, the self-portrait, with its impossibilities and its enunciative paradoxes in the field of index. The photographic portrait, as a discourse of the index and a reference, is a fundamental indication of the discourse of man upon himself; and, as we find historical and cultural changes in this discourse, the portrait is reconfigured and employed in the new forms of relationship between man and the world, such as those of identity. These changes have been found in the research on the profusion of photography as a micro-narrative, built from self-portraits of artists, to contest the myths of origin as the founders of identity. Self-portraits can be understood through two analytical devices, namely the Narcissus-device and the Medusa-device, where the photographic act emerges as a claim of space for the informational art.

A self-portrait is an artistic manifestation which consists of deepening the reflection upon oneself. According to the traditional viewpoint, doing a self-portrait is watching oneself reflected, becoming aware of oneself as a unified whole. Regarding the conception of a self-portrait, there are two academic schools: one which considers any work which includes the artist, and another which only considers works purposely created as self-portraits, with the character in the foreground and the face as the center of attention. Since Modernism, the portrait and the self-portrait have experienced important metamorphoses which manifested the crisis of the subject, its consequent fragmentation before the impossibility of perceiving itself as unified.

The fragmentation of the subject, an already existent concern to the modern artist, is still seen in the expansion of subjectivity in contemporary art, a topic which magnetizes philosophy and literature, both fields having as research basis the notion of the subject and the character respectively. Carla Gottlieb highlights the most important characteristics of the portrait of the twentieth century: “‘the fragmented head’, ‘self-portrait series’, ‘the object as alter ego’, ‘the disguise’, ‘the Narcissus’, ‘the visual autobiography’ and ‘the couple, the family and the group’” (c.f. Gauli, 2000, p.108).

The dialogue with the myths in the self-portraits of Antonio Manuel and Artur Barrio appear as a pretext to eminently arts issues, turning such works into paradoxes – as Narcissus, they seem to not acknowledge the frontier between their own selves and the others and, as Medusa, they face immobility to assert themselves as a time-image, i.e., as a sequential image. In this regard, it becomes evident at first the ambiguous situation of photography as transformation of the real, for by deconstructing the principle of reality, it exposes the contradictions of the act which produces it. When they both appropriate the normative code of pose, dependent on the fabrication of a fixed double exterior (the image), they promote the rupture precisely with the idea of cohesion, unity and immobility.

I begin this study by introducing one of the problems of the visual cultural field specific to photography, namely the artistic creation expressed in the appropriation of the environment which received a late accolade in the preexistent arts tradition. Such environment claims itself as space of domain discussed by the text, in a broadened approach of political art as a photographic image of the body. The latter adapted itself to the outside means of communication – the intermedia artifacts of the seventies -, where photography would take the pragmatic form of discourse of the referent so that later it would become an instrument of transposition, of interpretation, by questioning the ontology of the photographic image. According to Philippe Dubois, the logic of the index, as opposed to an icon or symbol, can tell a story in a narrative carried out by the referent and, in turn, its plot leads to the drama which is fiction.

Apparently, as I have pointed, some contradictions torment the artists, which seem to appear in their works as conceptual doubts. Thus, two hypotheses are imposed. The allegorical processes of appropriation and montage determine the form and meaning of the images of oneself. Furthermore, the choice of the photographic device can be one of the delimiting ways of the characterization of a divergent category of self-portrait. While the word “divergence” designates the central meaning of the self-portrait where the artist is creator and creature, so to speak, apparently the negativity of the term presents a situation of infraction of rules, of protest. This demonstrates the possibility of transference to the self-portrait, perceived in Art History as a search for awareness, for a behavioral dimension, into which works configure themselves. This is the reason for the questions the artists ask themselves before the level of complexity of the display of the private image, averse to the theater of appearances, as a cultural code.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes refers to the imprecise and imaginary identity. The statement considers the questioning of the subject in the portrait because it resembles a copy of the copy, the fundamental axis of *Camera Lucida* as both a meeting and confrontation point of four characters whose paths cross (Barthes, 1984, p.27). This triggers a crisis in the deep notion of subjectivity - since, to Barthes, the subject, while itself, conditioned by society, subtracts the subject in itself, thus establishing a profound change in subjectivity, in the emergence of the self as the other -, having becoming important in the course of the study because its starting point is the observation that there are some conflicts inherent to technology means, since a pose is a technical artifice and allows the construction of several masks to hide the biological aspect. To Barthes, the pose reduces the effect of reality provided by photography. This meets the expectations of the photographer and fulfills the wish of the client to show their best image. He believes this is so due to the fact that photography is a precise testimony of presence. The pose, according to the imposed rule, undertakes the character of simulacrum and the subject becomes the model in the pure theatrical game of appearances.

In a different way, a self-portrait as a staging of the Self as another evidences the conceptual discomfort inherent to the photographic act, that of the resemblance and realism of the twentieth century, still persisting today due to the strong reception of the class and their apparent democratic commitment. The artistic photographic act, entirely aligned with the situation of strangeness of the reception, however, provides other meanings to photography in the cultural sphere by deconstructing in it a view of the world – the very well established one as a verdict of reality, perceived by a non-critical look as an *analogon* purpose of the real.

Barthes, as well as Dubois, sees photography as “a sign of the missing subject”, as a complex staging which makes the camera take the fictionalization of reality to extremes – he is suspicious of the realistic photography because of its radical evidence. The stripping of the model is the rhetorical artifice of theatrical character because the objective camera lens captures the idea, the mask, the secret alterity which every being bears. To him it does not matter the identity behind appearances. From this point on, we are able to understand that the effects of the real, which establish the link between the myth and the speculative image of the artists, constitute the bond which compels them to the destruction of their own identities. It can be concluded that the

accumulation of constructed identities produces the *homologation of the Self* in Antonio Manuel, and the *physiognomic construction as arbitrariness* in Artur Barrio.

Censurado – uma parada (1977) (Censored – a parade), by Antonio Manuel, evidences as an artist, starting from the allegorical process of appropriation and montage in contemporary art, does a divergent self-portrait by proposing the inversion of the (art-linguistic) octagonal structures through repetition to protest against the exterior immobility imposed by political circumstances. This work then starts to express its “resemblance” and “non-resemblance” to the social and cultural environment, which took this artist to a constant crisis of identity. Once again prevented from exhibiting his work – his short-film *Uma Parada (A Parade)* was awarded but could not be shown, and ten years before this impasse his works had faced preventive censorship, a search and seizure warrant, some of them being even destroyed while others disappeared -, and forbidden to exhibit them in institutions for two years, Antonio Manuel felt he was being censored.

By borrowing his own image, the portrait of identity, the artist worked with photography and film within the orthogonal grid pattern, graph newsprint paper, articulating these objects vertically. This way, Antonio Manuel did a self-portrait in whose external face are found two 3X4 cm photos, above the two veiled films, superimposed on the newspaper which worked as a support to a black rectangle and two other rectangles containing the words “censurado” (censored) and “uma parada” (a parade) respectively. The systematization of the geometric composition presented refers to the conditions of production of the artist at that time and, for that very reason, the use of the photography of identity is symptomatic.

The duplication of the codes manifests the Narcissus-device, the concern with the “double” in the art interpreted in two ways: the double-shadow or mirror, and the ghost of death. Antonio Manuel pronounces it because this image, which contains the portrait forced into the rules of perception, is dramatic, even drastic: it allows a glimpse of the human condition in the photography of obscure presence, placing him in permanent discontinuity with the world. The choice of this fragmented image of the body admits its loss of wholeness in the metonymic operation. It seems to us to be the main reason why the artist has added to the photographic artifact the words “censurado” (censored) and “uma parada” (a parade) along with the construction of his image. The artist’s doubt of himself is shown in the two photos. He does not recognize himself

before his mirrored image in this artificial photography, in spite of the physiognomic and dress aspects – cloistered in suits, as an ordinary man, in a fictional appearance which generates representations of himself as an abstraction with traits of “reality”.

The choice of the “double” seems filled with ambiguity because the awareness of subjectivity is melancholy when put as a kind of soul-shadow, immaterial, which assures the continuation of the Self beyond the body. However, it is associated with the repetition of codes through the notion of pair, which favors the idea of a double soul, essential to the affirmation of eternity. Self-affirmation can be verified as a homologation of the Self of the artist, as a self-creator principle which can lead to an inversion of the conditioners of looking. Despite being imposed, the frontality of the pose can be seen as an index of the eternal, as the need for continuation in a new life. According to Antonio Manuel, “films are like two towers that are raised to suspend the portraits in time”¹. There is a need, therefore, of subjective organization, of overcoming; by affirming himself as intangible, he exceeds the limits and surpasses the rules for the representation of himself.

The photographic self-portrait of Artur Barrio, **Des.Compressão (8 expressões)** (*De.compression 8 expressions*), done in 1973, can be found in one of his CADERNOS LIVROS (NOTEBOOK BOOKS) or “logbooks” as an object-book, so to speak, taking two pages where the following sentence can be read between the photos: “This work involves a clear glass on which I place the face with increasing pressure; until the moment of decompression.”

To Barrio, the dichotomy between work and a creative idea seems to cause problems of identity which place him between intellection and meaning, mind and body, the metaphysical idea of incarnation, apparently creating a terrible conflict. As he did with beliefs and personal morals, the artist could perhaps come to consider this idea of “vital limit” an ethical problem - but with an inculcated sensuality and with a special scathing sense he defied the Narcissus-device by the power of expression faced as a natural good. Thus, his natural transgression contains a role of enunciation and denunciation. We can observe in the fourth photography of the sequence the explosion of the limit in the countenance of his face with his eyes closed. From it a cry emerges with violence, with no obedience to the other senses. Such possession leads to non-

¹ Statement of the artist in an interview to the author on November 29th, 2005.

resemblance by highlighting the deviation from social belonging, from “normality”, however leading to a radical rupture with the Narcissus-device when reacting to the “limit” and being more offensive than defensive – not looking at the enemy in the eyes can defeat it. In Barrio’s work, the other is a paradox - not only a desire of wholeness of a desiring polysemic narcissism, constructed in a circularity, but a series of connected portraits which come to oppose to the Medusa-effect into the photographic act, i.e. as the mask which has penetrated in the forbidden territory of the world of the dead from which no living soul can approach and rise from the reaping hook to keep its radical alterity.

I understand that, in this case, staging can be considered autobiographic, an obsessive paradoxical representation of oneself. We can find in it the apparent destructivity of the subject, its subjective disorganization when it loses its breath. Barrio does not overcome the temptation to not recognize himself and attack his own image (such impulsive attack can be seen in the fifth and sixth photos, in the middle of the sequence; they are completely scratched in ink). However, in contrast with the Medusa-effect, when he fixes the previous portrait on the image of the blind, terrifying face, he ends up suspending the beheading by triggering his self-creative principle

In this regard, a question arises: having a photographic self-portrait been seen as a specific object of the artistic field in the understanding of its challenges in relation to the grasp of reality – given by the appropriation of codes and inversion of its mechanisms of production -, would it additionally manifest the search for self-awareness? Our hypothesis is that a photographic self-portrait can be understood by the logic of the index in the artistic activity when we observe the difficulty of the portrait as the founder of identity of the subject, for we have seen that it becomes either dramatic or fictional narrative which emerges as a photographic act in the critic production of contemporary art.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- AGAMBEM, Giorgio. *Estâncias – a palavra e o fantasma na cultura ocidental*. Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2007.
- _____. *Profanações*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2007.
- AUMONT, Jacques. *El Rostro en el Cine*. Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós Ibérica, 1998.
- BARTHES, Roland. *A Câmara Clara*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1984.
- BATAILLE, Georges. *Las Lágrimas de Eros*. Barcelona: Ensaïos Tuquets Editores, 1997.
- BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *A Arte da Desaparição*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 1997.
- BAUMAN, Zygmunt. *A Modernidade Líquida*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahara Editor, 2001.
- BENJAMIN, Walter. *Magia e técnica, arte e política: ensaios sobre literatura e história da cultura*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1994. (Obras Escolhidas; v.1)
- BERNARDET, Jean-Claude; AVELAR, José Carlos; MONTEIRO, Ronaldo P. *Anos 70 – Cinema*. RJ: Europa, 1979.
- BLANCHOT, Maurice. *A Conversa Infinita – A Experiência Limite*. São Paulo: Escuta, 2007.
- BUCHLOH, Benjamim H. D. *Procedimientos Alegóricos: apropiación y montaje en el arte contemporáneo*. In: Icazo Glória; Ribalta, Jorge. (eds.) *Indiferencia y Singularidad*. Bracelona: Gustavo Gili, 2003, pp.97-132.
- CALABRESE, Omar. *A Idade Neobarroca*. Lisboa: Edições 70, 1988.
- CAMPANY, David. *Art and photography*. New York: Phaidon, 2003.
- CANONGIA, Ligia. *Quase cinema – Cinema de Artista no Brasil, 1970/80*. RJ: Edição FUNARTE, 1981.
- COCCHIARALE, Fernando; PARENTE, André. *Filme de Artista – Brasil 1965-80*. Rio de Janeiro: Contracapa, 2008.
- COURTINE, Jean-Jacques; HAROCHE, Claudine. *História do Rosto*. Lisboa: Editorial Teorema, 1995.
- DELEUZE, Gille. *A imagem-tempo*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 2005.
- DERRIDA, Jacques. *Mal de Arquivo: uma impressão freudiana*. Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2001.
- DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges. *O que vemos, o que nos olha*. São Paulo: Editora 34, 1998.
- DUBOIS, Philippe. *O ato fotográfico*. Campinas, SP: Papirus, 1994.
- ENWEZOR, Okwui. *Archive fever: uses of the documents in contemporary art*. New York: Göttinger: Internacional Center of Photography, 2008.
- FABRIS, Annateresa. *Identidades Virtuais – Uma Leitura do Retrato Fotográfico*. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2004.
- FRIZOT, Michel; VEIGY, Cédric. *Photo trouvée*. London: Phaidon, 2006.
- GIRARD, René. *A Violência e o Sagrado*. São Paulo: Editora UNESP, 1990.
- GOTTLIEB, Carla. *La iconografía en el arte contemporáneo*. México, Coloquio Internacional de Xalapa, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1982. In: GAULI, Juan Carlos Pérez. *El Cuerpo en Venta*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2000, p.114-117.
- KOZLOFF, Max. *The Theatre of the Face- Portrait Photographic Since 1900*. London: Phaidon, 2007.
- KRAUSS, Rosalind. *Notas sobre el Índice*. In: _____. *La originalidad de la Vanguardia y otros mitos modernos*. Madrid: Alianza Forma, 1996, 209-236.
- LEVI, Primo. *É isto um homem?* / Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1988.
- MEDEIROS, Margarida. *Fotografia e Narcisismo: o Auto-Retrato Contemporâneo*. Lisboa: Assírio&Alvim, 2000.
- PEDROSA, Mário. *Mundo, Homem, Arte em Crise*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1986.
- PHÉLINE, Christian. *L'image accusatrice*. Paris: Laplume, AAPC, 1985.
- PIGNATARI, Décio. *Contracomunicação*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1971.
- POMMER, Édouard. *Théories du portrait de la Renaissance aux Lumières*. Paris: Gallimard, 1998.
- POIVERT, Michel. *La Photographie Contemporaine*. Paris: Flammarion, 2010.
- PULTZ, John / MONDENARD, Anne de. *Le Corps Photographié*. Paris: Flammarion, 1995.

- RIBALTA, Jorge.(ed.) *Efecto real. Debates posmodernos sobre fotografía*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2004.
- ROSE, Barbara. "Self-portraiture: theme with a thousand faces". *Art in America*, v. 63, n. 1, jan-fev. 1975, p.73.
- ROSSET, Clément. *Le Réel et son Double*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1976.
- SARDUY, Severo. *Escrito sobre um Corpo*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1979.
- SCHAEFFER, Jean-Marie. *A Imagem Precária: sobre o dispositivo fotográfico*. Campinas, SP: Papirus, 1996.
- SOUTTER, Lucy. *The photographic idea: reconsidering conceptual photography*. *Afterimage*, Rochester, NY, v. 26, n. 5, Mar.-Apr. 1999.
- VERNANT, Jean-Pierre. *Mito e Sociedade na Grécia Antiga*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio Editora, 2006.