

## **Survival and Ghosts. Other forms of memory in contemporary aesthetic practices**

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“I see Brasilia the way I see Rome: Brasilia began with a final simplification of ruins.”

Clarice Lispector

I will start this debate about the politics of survival in contemporary aesthetics with an installation by Rosangela Rennó, a Brazilian artist who has been distinguished during the last years for her archaeological work with photography, which had intense consequences for a discussion about a politics of memory, because of her work with archives, documents and collections. Rennó's installation is called, meaningfully, *Immemorial*, and by considering it, I would like to explore some concepts that I think are important for a discussion about the different ways in which contemporary art practices elaborate the past and work with what remains and survives.

The installation, from 1994, was introduced for the first time in an exhibition called *Reverendo Brasília* [Reviewing Brasilia], curated by Alfons Hug, who looked for (and I quote the curator's text) “un abordaje crítico de la capital brasileña, aprovechando los recursos de la fotografía artística (Melendi, 23)” [a critical approach of the Brazilian capital city, taking advantage of the resources of artistic photography]. It was an exhibition that revised, through photography, the peculiarities of a city that was proposed –according to Lúcio Costa's idea– as a centre that would irradiate development and culture to Brazil, based on the utopia of an aesthetic revolution which was truncated by the difficulties of an underdeveloped modernity and a military coup that, in less than a decade since Brasília's foundation, led the country through the path of a violent authoritative modernisation.<sup>i</sup>

Along with Rennó's installation, *Revendo Brasília* included photos by Andreas Gursky, Ulrich Görlich, Thomas Ruff, Mário Cravo Neto and Miguel Rio Branco.

For the installation, Rennó worked with the Oral History Project of the Public Archive of the Federal District and reviewed the archives of the company Novacap, which was in charge of the construction of the Brazilian capital city. From this last archive, Rennó withdrew photos which identified the workers in the construction –many of them children–, took photos of them again, and then enlarged and modified these pictures–veiling some of them with a dark layer. She then arranged them in a two-axis space, a vertical one and a horizontal one, which repeated the cross in the plan imagined by Lúcio Costa with the photos of the bodies of those who made that construction possible.

I am interested in various topics here: the work with the archive, the recovery of unknown and forgotten faces and the glazing of the pictures with the dark film–which leads us to think of a work made with absence and amnesia rather than with memory–, and the use of remains and debris (what was left of the construction), whose obstinate presence in the artistic practice, however, seems to refuse and resist any redemption or restitution.

As in Rennó's installation, there are many contemporary practices that work with remains coming from the past in compositions and structures that, while working with the presence of these remains, seem to refuse to reconstruct the facts or episodes in which those remnants had appeared. Instead, updating those remains as ruins or survival, these practices seem to look for the aesthetic power of an image that still impacts– in fragmented or ruined ways - on the present. The montage of heterogeneous times according to which these practices are structured has, I believe, a special power that I will try to describe.

Among other examples of a similar work with the survival of the past, we can mention works by Adriana Varejão–with her cracked tiles, from which the violence of the colonial past emerges –, other installations with antique photos by Rosângela Rennó or Oscar Muñoz in which diverse times and asynchronous technologies overlap, and some texts that alternate the present narration with sediments that irrupt from the past –as in *History of crying*, by Alan Pauls, or *Mano de obra* [Workforce] by Diamela Eltit, in which the story of the worker's alienation

in a supermarket within the post-dictatorial and neoliberal Chile is distributed in chapters whose titles refer to the most important workers newspapers in Chile, which have disappeared nowadays. An exhibition in Mexico city curated by Tatiana Cuevas called “Rastros y vestigios. Indagaciones sobre el presente” [Traces and remnants. Queries about the present], shows, in a similar vein, several works by Mona Hatoum, Gabriel Orozco or Francis Allys, gathered by (and I quote the curator’s text) “una característica común: el paso del tiempo como detonador de la memoria”[a common characteristic: the passage of time as memory’s detonator].

The return of remains and debris from the past come, in these practices, to interrupt an idea of linear and evolutionary history and to question the present time, understanding that the limits between the ages are porous and that the present –this moment– is built by layers of past stories which are many times truncated, promises that were not kept and futures to be challenged.

Placed against the backdrop of an entire line of Latin American aesthetic production that during the last decades was marked by a politics of memory and by the reconstruction of memory –regardless of how complex, fragmentary or disenchanting it was–, these practices seem to choose, before the reconstruction of memory, to work with remains and remnants that instead of remembering, activates a survival which is usually ghostly and paradoxical.

From this group nourished by contemporary aesthetic practices, I will discuss only two of them today, the aforementioned installation by Rennó, and the text by Diamela Eltit, *Mano de obra*.

### ***Immemorial: between oblivion and presence***

In her investigation for preparing *Immemorial*, Rennó learnt about the extremely high number of dead workers during the construction of Brasilia because of the awful working conditions, and especially in what was known as the Pacheco massacre –a workers’ riot asking for better conditions of work that ended in violent repression by the police. In the installation, the enlarged images (60 x 40 x 2 cm - 23.6 x 15.7 x 0.7 in) of the ID cards of these workers are placed on the floor and on the wall, over iron trays. The photos of the dead people were placed on the floor in an orthochromatic film, black over black, and because of this, their features

are barely perceived. However, Rennó applied a film to veil these faces, causing a silver shadow that irradiates a special and persistent glow –and I would add a fascinating one. On the wall and in vertical position, Rennó arranged the photos of the workers who are still alive. Neither the names nor the stories of the workers appear in any case: only the number of the date of their hiring identifies them in the installation. Placed against the floor as if they were tombs, the photos modified by Rennó irradiate a luminous pulsation that, while giving up to restore the individual memoir of those workers, reinstates the presences of those who built Brasilia and who were buried in their foundations. As Maria Angélica Melendi (2000) pointed out, in *Immemorial* and other works by Rennó, “as fotos que o artista arquivou não resgatam a memória mas testemunham o esquecimento (Melendi, 7)” [the photos archived by the artist do not recover the memory, but demonstrate oblivion]. While questioning photography’s authority as a memory technology (Merewether, 161), Rennó’s installation works with the spectral persistence of a story that, despite remaining in oblivion, interrupts the utopian chronology of the construction of Brasilia. With the anonymous photos of the dead workers in the construction, Rennó has built an anti-monument, whose meaning has been summarised by Paulo Herkenhoff in an enlightening way: “A obra de Rennó trabalha então sobre uma área de recalque. Seu projeto não é apenas o mais óbvio, que seria iluminar o terreno social, mas sobretudo mapear a sombra” [Rennó’s work is therefore performed on a repressed area. Her project is not only the most obvious one, which would be to clarify the social sphere, but mainly to map the shadow] (Herkenhoff, 1996, 41).

That shadow turns out to be effective to evoke the ghosts from the past without obtaining any neither recovery nor resuscitation. When using those old photos and making the new value that the artist’s intervention produces on those remains evident, *Immemorial* aims at the latent sense of a past that has an effect on the present. Committed to reveal amnesic processes that erode the images of our culture, the activation of the survival of the past lightens the truncated projects of the past with its paradoxical shadow. <sup>ii</sup> Other functionality of the past and its remains emerges from its constructions in palimpsests, where the temporalities are blended and the legibility of the archive of a culture is disturbed.

## ***Mano de obra* and the interruption of the present**

In *Mano de obra*, a novel clearly located in the landscape of a devastating neoliberalism (2002), Diamela Eltit tells –in a fragmentary and intermittent way– the anonymous life of some supermarket workers, interposing throughout the story the memory of a past with riots and massacres of the working class. The novel combines heterogeneous fragments of lost stories together with the tale of a post-dictatorial present focused on the neoliberal logic of the supermarket. From the very beginning, the montage of times built by the novel opens with an epigraph (and I quote): “Algunas veces, por un instante,/ la historia debería sentir compasión/y alertarnos” [Sometimes, for a moment,/the history should feel compassion/and warn us].

The first part of the book is located in the supermarket space and is composed of a series of vignettes narrated in the first person by a supermarket worker. Being reduced to his condition as a worker, no information about his personal life emerges in his monologue narrated in the present. This first part is called “El despertar de los trabajadores. Iquique, 1911” [The worker's awakening. Iquique, 1911]. The second part moves towards the private sphere of a house, where a group of supermarket workers shares expenses and the cohabitation, and is called “Puro Chile, 1970” [Pure Chile, 1970], evoking the highest moment of solidarity among the workers during Allende's government. Whereas the titles of the chapters in the first part refer to the newspapers in the Chilean working press during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Verbaroja*, *El proletariado*, *Acción directa*), followed by a date, the titles of the chapters in the second part, instead, refer to everyday events in the lives of the supermarket workers. The title of the first part is named after the name of the Socialist Worker's Party newspaper, founded in 1911 by Recabarren, and also refers, on the 1912 date, to the foundation of the Communist Party, which appeared in response to the massacre of Iquique in 1907 (Draper, 2012, 108). That montage of heterogeneous times appears as a device held throughout the novel, since the titles bring to us a past of popular struggles and rebellions that violently contrasts the demobilised present with no horizons for the supermarket worker narrated inside those chapters. According to Nelly Richard, the disruptive power of this procedure that

the novel interposes so that the end of the history set by the neoliberal capitalism is not such consists of, then, shaking the apathy of the enslaving working routines, of the serialised consumption offers, with the echo of the protests, the rebellions, the insubordinations and the revolutions that, even though virtually, never stop interrupting the monologue of the power or money with the utopian escapes of the mixed or disintegrated imaginaries] (Richard, 2015, 3).

However, it is also true that throughout the pages of *Mano de obra*, a community of bodies –that in the nature of their speech (the voice) and the irreducibility of their impulses oppose other forms of subjectivation which escape from the market logic and contrast a certain resistance, a kind of representation chaos– is assembled and disassembled in a rhizomatic way. I will quote a fragment of the novel:

Y ahora si no pagái las cuentas de inmediato, te cortan la luz o el gas o el agua los conchas de su madre, maricones culiados. Lo hacen así, rápido, para cobrarte las reposiciones, para cagarte pues. Te cortan todo sin el menor remordimiento estos maricones chuchas de su madre. Llegan abyectos con sus caras congeladas y te cortan lo que sea, impávidos y grises, idénticos los hijos de puta, sin que se les mueva un pelo a los culiados [And now, if you don't pay the bills immediately, the energy or the gas or the water are shut off by those assholes, those motherfuckers. They do it like that, quickly, to charge you the services for re-establishment, to fuck you up. They cut everything without any remorse, those motherfuckers. They come heinously, with their frozen faces, and they cut anything, fearless and grey, all the motherfuckers are the same, without batting an eye the assholes] (Eltit 147).

Among the quotes and the memory of a history of struggles that interrupt the narration and the imagination of a body with its moods, desires and instincts, the text by Eltit is made up as a powerful articulation of heterogeneous elements

and lost stories in a single narration (Draper, 2012) which succeeds in separating the worker from his exclusive condition of victim and exhibit neoliberalism's potential for domination. Moreover, that narrative organisation allows for the narration of the workers' power even when the access to power is denied to them.

The novel only mentions titles and dates: there are no stories recovered or remembered; there is no restitution of a memoir of those struggles; there is no fictionalised narration of that past. Furthermore, these are titles that are not necessarily very well-known, since they are part of a story that was suffocated by the official history –and in many cases, it was even truncated by the State. But the irruption of those titles in the continuum of the narration does not only interrupt that linearity of the demobilisation with the echoes of past insurrections. In its reading of Eltit's novel, Héctor Hoyos proposed:

“The section titles could be read as merely the names of periodicals, but it is more productive to see them also as allusions to the physical, still existing banners of those periodicals. They are not all easy to find, nor are they readily available for scholarly consultation. This is precisely the point: when Eltit names them, she is inviting a deeper, historical approximation to the supermarket. The names are material traces in a text that is closer to an art installation than to, say, a nineteenth century French novel. Against the more conventional hermeneutic impulse to regard said titles as an explanation or an illustration of the “contents” of their respective “chapters,” it is more fitting to see them as relics that interrupt the flow of words. They have a deictic function, which transcends the text itself and invites us to follow through with the tasks of denaturalizing supermarkets and resituating them in history.” (Hoyos, 109).

The interruption of the supermarket neoliberal present with the echo and the ghosts of the working class' struggle thus distorts the neoliberal present and opens said present time in its multiple layers; therefore, strands emerge from it, which may be useful to imagine a different future. <sup>iii</sup>

### **Talking to the ghosts: forms of memory and forms of survival**

In “Present Pasts”, Andreas Huyssen drew the attention about the possibility that the “boom” of the memory that began in 1970’s might be accompanied – and up to a certain point could have produced– a parallel “boom” of oblivion (Huyssen, 22).<sup>iv</sup>

However, the obsession with the past and the dominion of the memory that overwhelmed many Latin American cultural constructions and practices has been accompanied by a different kind of elaboration with the past that is worth questioning, since it may be telling us something about the way a logic of presence that displaces any impulse of representation and restitution inhabits in many versions of contemporary aesthetics. Along with the need to remember, there are other ways to strengthen the remains of the past enclosed in how these practices work. The material presence –captured in objects and discourses physically present– are differentiated from other ways of representation of memory and history. These show a montage of heterogeneous times that reveal the porosity of ages and activate a survival potency with an intense evocative and, simultaneously, disturbing power. Didi Huberman, who has worked on several books about the concept of after-life and survival as it was discussed by thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg, has said about those “small lights” from the past that reappear in the survivals:

“Las supervivencias no prometen ninguna resurrección (¿acaso podría esperarse algún sentido de un fantasma que resucite?). No son sino resplandores pasajeros en medio de las tinieblas, pero en modo alguno el advenimiento de una gran “luz de toda luz”. Porque nos enseñan que la destrucción no es nunca absoluta – aunque sea continua – la supervivencias nos dispensan, justamente, de creer que una “última” revelación o una solución “final” sean necesarias para nuestra libertad.”  
[Survivals do not promise any resurrection (could we expect any sense in a resuscitating ghost?) These are but temporary flashes in the middle of the shadows, but somehow the coming of a great “light made of all lights”. Since they show us that destruction is never absolute –even if it is continuous–, survivals release us from believing that a “last” revelation

or a “final” solution are necessary to our freedom]. (Didi-Huberman, 2011, 84).

If presence and presentation are not, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, a quality or property of things, but the fact by which a thing is introduced –praeest–; if presence implies the rejection of the fact that something is already in the past, the way in which these practices work with the archive, making those remains present, appears as an operation to think of new ways of considering the facts and the events, whether historical or contemporary. More than questioning the received history, beyond the desire to show the impossibility to remember the past, beyond, yet, a consideration about the past and still very far away from showing –again– the impossibility of a total meaning, a logic of survival works in these contemporary works with a notion of post-foundational presence that places its touchstone in the present, that places the survival of the past in the contemporaneity and asks itself about how to deal, in the present, with oblivion, the remains, amnesia and live remnants, thus escaping from the teleology of history and recovering somehow the power of the past and its survival in the present.

In *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida proposed the need to

“aprender a vivir con los fantasmas, en la entrevista, la compañía o el aprendizaje, en el comercio sin comercio con y de los fantasmas. A vivir de otra manera. Y mejor. No mejor: más justamente. Pero con ellos. No hay ser-con el otro, no hay socius sin este con – ahí que hace al ser con en general más enigmático que nunca. Y ese ser-con-los espectros sería también, no solamente pero sí también, una política de la memoria, de la herencia y de las generaciones.

Hay que hablar del fantasma, incluso al fantasma y con él desde el momento en que ninguna ética, ninguna política, revolucionaria o no, parece posible, ni pensable, ni justa, si no reconoce como su principio el respeto por esos otros que no son ya o por esos otros que no están todavía ahí, presentemente vivos, tanto si han muerto como si todavía no han nacido”  
[learn to live live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, .the

company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But with them. No being-with the other, no socius without this with that makes being-with in general more enigmatic than ever for us. And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.

(...) It is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born.

(Derrida, 12, XVIII)

In the same sense, a politics of survival similar to the one inside those practices opens the present at its disjunction, exhibits the non-contemporaneity of the present with itself and lets us talk with the ghosts –our ghosts– from the past. As Walter Benjamin intended it, they teach us that no event that has taken place sometime has been lost for history.

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<sup>i</sup>According to Maria Angelica Melendi: “Brasília, ícono de una modernidad autoritaria y predadora que desembocaría en el golpe del 64 sería al mismo tiempo el logro más importante y el mayor fracaso de la agenda de las vanguardias artísticas de posguerra.” [Brasilia, icon of an authoritarian and predatory modernity which would lead to the military coup in 1964 would be, at the same time, the most important achievement and the biggest failure in the agenda of the post-war artistic avant-garde.] Melendi, *La ciudad escondida* [The hidden city], p. 23.

<sup>ii</sup>Melendi states that: Her work project is an extended attempt to resist the irremediable dissolution of those images meaning. The possibility to reveal what is disqualified, forgotten, hidden, buried, and then to connect it – from the privileged positions of the system and through a prestigious cultural practice–, to the contradictions of the present, which her work represents, shows the art efficacy when exercising its political function, since it reveals flaws and gaps and an absolute impatience for a memoir desire. Melendi *La Ciudad Escondida* <http://www.esteticas.unam.mx/edartedal/PDF/Veracruz2001/complets/MelendiBrasilia.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> In that montage of times, it might also be important to remember that Eltit wrote *Mano de obra* in 2001 in Argentina –and one of the epigraphs of the novel comes from said circumstance, by the Argentinian poet Sandra Cornejo– and she witnessed the several resistances to the great crisis of 2001 with the sacking and picketing.

<sup>iv</sup> Similarly, in *Archive Mania*, Suely Rolnik reviewed the obsession with archiving Latin American artistic practices produced during the decades of 1960 and 1970, based on the policy of desire that looks for the reactivation of the critical potential of those practices that had been buried by the trauma of the authoritative regimes that ensued. Along with that policy of desire, Rolnik warns us about the risk of those archive practices to then be included in a market policy. Rolnik points out that:

“(…)en el momento en que dichas iniciativas reaparecen, el sistema global del arte las incorpora inmediatamente para transformarlas en fetiches, y se congelan así los gérmenes de futuro que apenas si empezaban a reanimarse.

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Si el movimiento de pensamiento crítico que se dio intensamente en los años 1960 y 1970 en América Latina fue brutalmente interrumpido en aquel período por el régimen dictatorial que preparó al país para la instalación del neoliberalismo, en el preciso momento en que su memoria empieza a reactivarse, este proceso es nuevamente interrumpido, y ahora con el refinamiento perverso y seductor del mercado del arte, muy distinto de los grotescos y explícitos procedimientos de las dictaduras militares. Los archivos de tales prácticas se convierten así en una especie de botines de guerra disputados por los grandes museos y coleccionadores de Europa Occidental y Estados Unidos, antes incluso de que haya vuelto a respirar aquello que se incubaba en las propuestas artísticas inventariadas. Un nuevo capítulo de la historia, no tan poscolonial como nos gustaría... [“(...)the moment those initiatives reappear, the art global system immediately incorporates them to turn them into fetishes and therefore, the germs of the future which barely started to revive are frozen. If the critical thought movement that intensely took place during the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America was brutally interrupted in that period by the dictatorial regime which prepared the country for the neoliberalism to be established, at the exact moment in which its memory starts to be reactivated, this process is interrupted again, and now with the perverse and seductive refinement of the art market, very different from the grotesque and explicit procedures of the military coups. The archives of said practices thus become a kind of war trophy disputed by the important museums and collectors in Western Europe and the United States, even before it has started breathing again that which was being built up in the inventoried artistic proposals. A new chapter of history, not as post-colonial as we would like to...] (Rolnik 127).

Rolnik proposes, so as to avoid that risk of fetichising the past, to make inventories that create the conditions for an experience of the critical strength of those practices to face issues of the present, to provide density to the creation forces affirmed in it.