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The Photographic Portrait as a Field of Forces: Politics, Identity and Resistance in Contemporary Visual Culture

O Retrato Fotográfico Como Campo de Forças: Política,
Identidade e Resistência na Cultura Visual Contemporânea

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In “A Short History of Photography”, Walter Benjamin (1931/1992) identifies what the then-new medium introduced into visual culture: the possibility of expressing the optical unconscious. As the author states, “it is a different nature that speaks to the camera rather than to the eye” (Benjamin, 1931/1992, p. 119). Distinct from ocular perception — to the *naked eye* — the experience of confronting the photographic image, and later cinema, revealed the limits of human vision, which were, in part, extended by the arts of producing new meanings. In the first phase, photography fixed the ephemerality of the sensible

world, while in the second, cinema reanimated kinaesthetic space-time, thereby enhancing the potential of these perceptual capacities.

From the outset, the recording of bodies — particularly faces, as in the work of David Octavius Hill in Greyfriars Kirkyard, Edinburgh, a setting whose symbolism resonates with the ontology of the medium itself — formed part of the earliest *photographic* experiments. Hill's first images of anonymous individuals revealed faces delineated by a kind of “halo of silence”. Considering the long periods of immobility required of the sitters at this time, the intense tension involved in such an experience, understood as an operation of simultaneous appearance and disappearance, can be envisaged. Contemporary accounts of the era, referring to the period of daguerreotypy, indicate that individuals were even afraid to look at the photographed faces, which seemed to address them directly from the images.

The human face was thus one of the inaugural motifs explored in the earliest attempts at photographic fixation, leading to a resignification of the portrait as a genre. Once a privileged domain of painting, the portrait quickly benefited from the possibilities of technical reproducibility (Benjamin, 1931/1992), which enabled, for example, its commercial use as calling cards, widespread among the bourgeoisie. As Barthes (1980/1989) notes, “the painted, drawn or miniaturised portrait having been, until the spread of photography, a limited possession, intended moreover to advertise a social and financial status” (p. 28). Even while contributing to the desacralisation of the plastic arts, photography — especially portraiture — inherited a complex ontological significance, responding in a renewed way to the profound and irrepressible need to produce an apparent and artificial fixing of human bodies, capturing them from temporal flux and from the inevitable fragility of earthly life (Bazin, 2013). Moreover, the self-awareness provoked by the transformation of the subject into an object continues to haunt the photographic experience of portraiture, from the perspectives of both photographer and photographed. Sebastião Salgado, in particular, by eternalising the faces of Amazonian Indigenous peoples, provides a challenging reflection on the conditions for relating to alterity. These conditions inevitably reveal limits to understanding due to the spectral and mysterious character present in every portrait.

Far from being confined to its apparently referential and anthropological nature, which enables the identification of the represented subject, the portrait inaugurates, instead, the sense of “the unspeakable which wants to be spoken” (Barthes, 1980/1989, p. 36) or the enigma inherent to the “images of the truth”, which continually produce renewed senses of identity and image as “knowledge dissociated from and independent of experience” (Sontag, 2013, p. 335). Today, discussing the loosening of the photographic portrait's relationship to referentiality is increasingly imperative, particularly in light of recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI). From new investments in public-space surveillance technologies — especially in countries such as China — that use AI to construct databases with virtually infinite storage capacity for “parameterised” human faces, to

art–science experiments such as João Martinho Moura’s (2017) *How Computers Imagine Humans*, numerous sociotechnical transformations are generating new forms of resistance and reinvention of the (non)human.

Far from being a mere act of physiognomic reproduction, the portrait thus constitutes a field of forces. It is within this space that notions of identity, power, memory and representation are negotiated, contested and reinvented. The 16th edition of *Vista*, devoted to the photographic portrait in visual culture, presents a range of research that illustrates the contemporary significance of this artistic form across multiple dimensions — epistemological, cultural, aesthetic, and political. Spanning the established canons of art history to urban peripheries, and encompassing contexts as diverse as prisons in Afghanistan, rural rituals in Cariri, Brazil, and feminist struggles in Argentina, the articles and visual essays compiled here offer varied reflections on the photographic portrait as a means of visibility and critical engagement: a tool to deconstruct hegemonic narratives, document and stage marginalised experiences, and cultivate aesthetics of resistance and repair.

André Melo Mendes establishes the theoretical and critical starting point in this collection in his analysis of Cindy Sherman’s *History Portraits* series (1988–1990). The article demonstrates how the North American artist appropriates the canonical visual codes of the Renaissance portrait, deconstructing them through the photographic grotesque. This strategy is, more than aesthetic, rhetorical and strategic, aimed at exposing the artificiality and ideological weight of these systems of representation, which, for centuries, naturalised ideals of beauty, gender and power. By deliberately inserting dissonant and “ugly” elements into compositions that mimic Raphael’s or Botticelli’s works, Sherman destabilises the supposed neutrality of art history. In this essay, André Melo seeks to show how Sherman’s portraits are the product of symbolic processes of de-idealisation; acts of deconstruction within the Western system of representation, reflecting on identity in general and on female identity in particular. This perspective serves as a guiding thread for the introduction to the other contributions in this anthology, where the photographic portrait is understood and analysed as a symbolic product imbued with political and civic significance.

The dimension of the portrait as testimony and denunciation in contexts of vulnerability is explored by Maria Fernanda Cavassani and Jesner Esequiel Santos in their analysis of the work of Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Kiana Hayeri. Focusing on two photographs — one depicting women in a prison in Afghanistan, and another showing a line of women awaiting humanitarian aid during the pandemic — the authors highlight a striking semantic inversion. The incarcerated women, convicted of crimes such as the killing of violent husbands, evoke freedom in the face of external oppression, whereas the “free” women in line, uniformed in burqas and subjected to strict sociopolitical and religious control, are signified as imprisoned figures. This connotative symmetry is relevant because, drawing on Jean Baudrillard (and indirectly on Walter Benjamin regarding the media status of these images), the authors argue that

Hayeri's photography transcends mere documentary function. Her work not only indexically records reality, but also symbolically constructs a narrative that questions power relations and the layers of simulacra governing Afghan women's lives. This is why her photographs become a medium of resistance, politicising art and inviting the viewer to an ethical and interpretative engagement.

The power of the photographic portrait as a symbolic tool for sociopolitical and feminist activism is examined by Gabriela Traple Wieczorek through the work of Argentine photographer Eleonora Ghioldi. The three projects analysed — *Guerreras* (Warriors), *Aborto Legal Ya!* (Legal Abortion Now!) and *Atravessadxs* (Traversed) — focus on photographs accompanied by testimonies to denounce gender-based violence in its multiple dimensions. *Guerreras* gives voice to survivors of sexual violence; *Aborto Legal Ya!* documents the struggle for the decriminalisation of abortion; and *Atravessadxs* centres on the families of femicide victims. The author demonstrates that Ghioldi's approach is intersectional and collaborative, seeking to create a sensitive space for listening that transforms the intimate pain of victims into collective political action. Drawing on the work of Rita Segato, Judith Butler, and Verónica Gago, she shows how these portraits operate as "living archives of resistance". They not only expose the structural violence of patriarchy and the state, but also activate feminised bodies as agents of their own historical representation. Notably, Gabriela Traple Wieczorek emphasises the fundamental dimensions in Ghioldi's work that reflect the artist's conception of her practice: photographic portraits cannot simply serve as memory records or archives of violence, but also as acts of engagement, intended as political manifestos for social and political transformation.

Emanuele de Freitas Bazílio, Daniel Meirinho and Ricardo Campos examine self-portraiture as a decolonial and reparative practice. Analysing the *Arquitetura do Desaparecimento* (Architecture of Disappearance) series by Brazilian photographer Roger Silva, the authors argue that his self-portraits, produced from the peripheries, function as symbolic acts of not merely resistance, but "re-existence". They maintain that in these images, Silva questions and subverts the regimes of visibility imposed by the colonial order. This "image-based activism" manifests through a staging-based dynamic, rendering the photographs products of a technology of self-inscription and fabulation that generates a new visual grammar. These self-portraits are embedded in a reparative aesthetic that, in response to the trauma of racism, offers the artist's reflective exploration of alternative pathways for symbolic repair and subjective reinvention within the framework of insurgent counter-visuality.

In organising this thematic issue, a decision was taken early on to accept contributions from different perspectives — not only analytical, but also artistic and conceptual (visual essays). It is in this spirit that the allegorical potential of the photographic portrait is presented through Alicia Palacios-Ferri's *TERRA: Paisaje Valenciano en el Guadalquivir* (LAND: Valencian Landscape in the Guadalquivir). Employing a literary-based magical realism transposed into photographic visuality, the artist stages portraits of the rural community of

Isla Mayor (Seville) that function as allegories. Images such as the grandfather buried in the land he cultivated (“*Terrateniente*”) or the uncle atop tractor wheels (“*Herencia I*”) are not understood as literal representations, but as allusive gateways to connotations and mythologies. Her project constitutes an “emotional archive” aimed at preserving memory and affective ties to the land, resisting both forgetting and cultural homogenisation. Palacios-Ferri demonstrates that staging and visual fabulation do not diminish the authenticity of the photographic portrait; on the contrary, they amplify dimensions that are sometimes barely perceptible in a more documentary expressive regime, such as the significations of faith, heritage and belonging. Magical realism is the expressive mode she employs to familiarise the extraordinary and reveal the hidden dynamics of rural everyday life.

Finally, Tiago Pedro Pereira contributes the visual essay “Photo-Portrait, Photo-Painting: Identities of Cariri”. This is a reflection of a documentary and historical nature, allowing the reader to enter the context of popular culture and artisanal knowledge in Northeast Brazil. His project consists of photographing masters of popular culture — specifically, *lambe-lambe* (street-photography) photographers, *bacamarteiros* (festive blunderbuss-shooter), and midwives — and subsequently submitting the portraits (captured on 120mm film) to reinterpretation by two of the last photo-painters of Ceará. Far from being merely a technique of “doll makers”, photo-painting is described by the author-photographer as a complex and plural practice, in which the photographic image is reworked to be created and re-signified. By entrusting his photographs to two masters (Júlio and Mirialdo), who use distinct materials and styles, the author seeks to demonstrate how the photographic portrait functions as a process of cultural translation and (re)construction of identity, proposing it as a vehicle of desire and affective memory — a “photography of wishes”, where clients choose how they wish to be remembered. In his words, it is a practice “preserving the faces of those marginalised by official history”.

Taken together, these texts allow the reader to outline a dynamic and heterogeneous map of the photographic portrait. They reveal, whether through grotesque parody of the pictorial representation canon (Cindy Sherman), artisanal fabulation (Mestre Júlio and Mirialdo), documentary and activist testimony (Kiana Hayeri), allegory (Alicia Palacios-Ferri), feminism (Eleonora Ghioldi), or decolonial self-inscription (Roger Silva), that it is a contemporary and dynamic visual genre and simultaneously a device of symbolic production endowed with multiple meanings and vocations. More than merely representing identities, it is a type of photography in which alternative and heterogeneous forms of discourse production intersect, meanings are contested and negotiated, hierarchies challenged, and possible futures imagined. This thematic issue of *Vista* is thus an eloquent “snapshot” of the photographic portrait as a form of knowledge, recognition and symbolic production, as well as a significant field for reflecting on the dynamics of power, memory and resistance that shape the contemporary world.

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