

## LACUNAS AND THEIR REINTERPRETATIONS: A CONTEMPORARY LOOK AT THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK OF TEÓFILO REGO

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Part one: Introduction to the methodology of the design, development and organization of an exhibition on the architectural photographs from the Teófilo Rego photographic archive

This paper is part of one of the themes to be researched in a project entitled: *Project IC&DT "Photography, Modern Architecture and the «Porto School»: Interpretations on the Teófilo Rego Archive"*. This research project is supported by the Foundation for Science and Technology of the Ministry of Education and Science (2013) and will take place at the CEAA | the Arnaldo Araújo Study Centre, at the Escola Superior Artística do Porto and at the Casa da Imagem of the Manuel Leão Foundation in Vila Nova de Gaia. The Casa da Imagem is a cultural centre for artistic practice and education, from which an exhibition on the Teófilo Rego archive, which the centre has on its premises, will be designed, developed and organized.

In this paper we intend to begin a reflection on specific methods of designing an exhibition of a photographic archive in the world of today, which includes the act of display associated with a view of informal artistic education in the field of study of the photograph in modernist Portuguese architecture.

The work of designing the exhibition is partly based on the capacity to simultaneously question different discussions that have developed around the perceptions and interpretations of the photographs of modernist Portuguese architecture present in this archive, around the question of how to bring the photographic images and the scientific material that has arisen as a result of the research project to a wider audience, while accompanied by a critical reflection on this topic (Argan:1995).

As an educational and informational resource, the photographic record on Portuguese modernist architecture that was gathered by photographer Teófilo Rego demands, in our view, a type of exhibition, dissemination and cultural promotion that is specific, contemporary, coherent and reflective of the stages taking place in our process of research. At a starting point in the project, in which the knowledge constructed on the archive photographs of modernist architecture is as yet undeveloped, it makes sense to develop (and will be carried out in the second part of this text) a contemporary and reflexive view on the wider theoretical context of the photographic image, from which can be inserted, in later texts, the question of the image as it relates specifically to modernist photography. In other words, the approach that we are presenting here is one that comes before the photograph as an image, document or commercial object, thereby defining a much wider and essential theme in which modernist architectural photography is included. This effort is of utmost importance for the complete, integrated and coherent construction of a discourse on the images contained in the archive in question, given that there is

a need to include, at an educational level, the discussion produced amongst the different groups of public relative to the exhibiting of the archive images.

It is this starting point that we are taking to deal with the concept of cultural *dissemination and promotion*, in proportions that lean towards the operational and (re)creational, including not only previous studies on the theme of modernist architecture and strategies for exhibiting the photographed material, ways of exhibiting that allude to the conservation and restoration of the available sources, but which also encourage the production of new and significant discussion on the subject of exhibiting photography and architecture, in this case modernist, followed by critical analysis of the different semantics exhibited.

This treatment stands out due to the artistic-pedagogic dimension contained in the design of assembling, temporarily and permanently, the material in question, as well as for the design of the exhibition model adopted by those in charge, who will be faced with the need to manage, conciliate and articulate the expectations of the cultural promotion of the object of the research with the aims of the educational service of the museum of the Casa da Imagem, due to the extreme variation in the type of observers that make up the public of the photographic archive.

Our treatment of the design of the exhibition therefore focusses on the dissemination of this archive, which, due to its subject matter — modernist architecture in the region of Porto — we consider to be of public interest. We are also looking into the concept of exhibiting previously unseen photographic images which are the subject of interpretive scientific study, given that this construction relates to the objectives of the educational service of the museum of the Casa da Imagem.

We will try to establish new connections between the different discourses on architectural photography and dynamics of the contemporary exhibition, with the latter focussing on an active perspective and interactive communication — observer and the object observed — with the planning of a specific way of seeing relative to the exhibition (Berger:1987).

In terms of the procedures for exhibiting this photographic archive and the research carried out, we will be focussing on the different stages of research, from design and technical application to the language used and the respective phased evaluation of the processing of exhibiting the work.

The possibility of each visitor developing their own individual visual itinerary is one of the basic tenets of the exhibition (instrument, technique and method of planning a new exhibition space), which calls on movement and interaction by the visitor with the exhibited material.

The mounting of the exhibition, designed for a specific space and specifically for a public presentation of an educational nature, will be carried out with the intention of creating a space reserved for the documents that identify this archive, with a photographic installation that clearly explains the process of study and interpretation of the material in question (Blanc, Claramonte, Expósito:2001).

This proposal, which questions both the meaning of the documentary photographic exhibition as well as that of the artistic project, is made real by the production of the photographic installation that is brought together in analogue and virtual environments, in which the display of photographic fragments attempts to consider the possibility of an aesthetic and educational commitment between

the photographic work and contemporary display.

However, in research of this nature on architectural photography, it is important to bring in to the discussion the words that Walter Benjamin (2012, pp.14) stated in the 1930s" (...) the decisive in photography continues to be the relationship that the photographer has with his technique". Or rather, the appropriation of a moment by a photographic record that brings with it the appearance of a social and cultural representation of its attributes and symbolization of the object photographed.

Plans for the exhibition of these photographs will therefore consider favouring a sensory perspective for the installation, that is it will contemplate a perceptive design and authorial mark, taking the view that elements of an educational service that is guided by the principles of the museum of the Casa da Imagem will be helping to set the exhibition up, producing an aesthetic effect on the visitor, when they come across both the real and the virtual in an exhibition on the work of the aforementioned photographer (Rico:1996; Arantes:2005; Calbó:2006).

We look upon this archive as a group of photographs that capture separate episodes, permitting a view of a non-linear, fragmented environment, which includes a participative educational strategy defined and directed at different target-groups, specifically that of children (Aznar, *et al.* 2000).

A global reading and analysis of this archive leads us to choose certain negatives and photographs from those available for the recreation of virtual environments and photo-installations.

From photographic records of public spaces to virtual spaces projected onto the walls of the exhibition rooms, these documents will permit a reinterpretation of a period and a photographic culture, as well as providing another view of the theme in question. These themed photographic records act as visual witnesses of an urban past which we would like to call up by use of that contemporary artistic intervention, the photo-installation. The concept of the exhibition is one in which personal itineraries are valued, as they allow greater interaction with the exhibition space, also allowing for discovery and surprise on the part of the visitors, be they observers, readers or researchers.

Part two: A brief look at the image concept present in the photographs of *Foto Comercial Teófilo Rego*

The photographic archive of Teófilo Rego (1915-1993), a huge collection of around 600 thousand photographic documents of Porto and the north of Portugal, covers a period of 50 years of activity of the "Foto Comercial Teófilo Rego" photographic studio, and is closely linked to the life of its founder. Between the 1940s and the 1980s, the riverside area of Ribeira in Porto was the object of an intensive and independent-minded study by the photographer. In August and September 1990, Teófilo Rego held an exhibition of his work at the Casa do Infante, in Porto. The exhibition, entitled "Porto, a photographic recollection", included around 80 black and white photographs of Portuguese landscapes and personalities.

#### The double nature of photographs

Given that the aim is to exhibit a photographic archive, this necessarily implies entering into a relationship with the public, who will be on the receiving end of this exhibition. It is for a public observer that the images are being offered to be viewed and understood. As the first, and privileged, observers of this collection of

images, we are attempting, with this text, to present a concept of the exhibition that is intended to start a dialogue with public observers, independent of the more specific theme of the research, just starting, on the photography of modernist architecture. There are, therefore, certain conceptual questions on which we would like to reflect and which make it possible to explain *in a certain way* the images selected from the archive.

We consider that the commercial photography of Teófilo Rego introduces the observer to an ambiguous approximation of the photographic image: The eye alternates between the representational context of the objects which are constrained by questions of commercial product sales, and arriving at a more complex understanding of those contextual references by means of their connection to a visual field of symbolic, speculative and artistic discourse. This connection will most certainly not be seen as consensual by all public observers. There exists a persistent cultural prejudice that operates a rigid distinction between two types of image in terms of the communication of a truth: a true image is one that accepts itself as such and represents reality in a direct manner. Therefore images arising from the fields of science, journalism, documentary photographs, images which are fundamentally photographic, are frequently considered to distinguish themselves from the fictional nature of the appearance of artistic images and, therefore, must be looked at in a very different light. This separation is endemic to the nature of photography: Allan Sekulla (1982) investigated the history of the artistic make-up of the photograph, and relates how the photographs portrayed in the American magazine *Camera Work* were seen as being semantically autonomous, privileged and valuable due to their extraordinary manufacture, in contrast to the poor quality informational reproductions in magazines and newspapers of the popular press. The double power of the truth in photography and its duplicate nature can therefore be outlined: as an affective object, fetish of a truth that is magic and spiritualist — supporting the acceptance of photography as art — or as a document of truth and science. The discussion on the duplicity of the photograph is central to the work of two American photographers and artists, from two distinct generations, Walker Evans and Dan Graham. The contemporary thinking of Dan Graham in relation to photography is a possible artistic and technological response to the means of production and discourse relative to documentary images from the past, which we invoke here based on Walker Evans. From these two examples, we will attempt to elaborate on the discourse relative to the double nature of the photographic image and set out points of reference for a later work of reflection and exhibition of the commercial photographic work of Teófilo Rego.

In the text "The Melancholy Realism of Walker Evans", John Tagg (2003, pp.37) describes the desire that Evans has for realism, of *records valid for themselves alone, of images able to reveal the movements or changes or conflicts of the past that turn into the body of the history of civilizations*. As a result of this, in the book *American Photographs* there are no captions referring directly to the images, nor texts for each one, and the images are laid out onto white pages. Evans asks for a *pure space* for *American Photographs*, understanding that the photographs do not require text because they are, in themselves, both discourse and evidence. *American Photographs* was intended to act as a corrective response to the journalism practised by "Life" and to the habit, at that time, of accompanying

photographs with enthusiastic comments. In 1966, the work by Dan Graham *Homes for America* reflected on this belief in the ability of the image to articulate a true and singular discourse without the use of text. *Homes for America* was initially the projection of a set of slides of housing developments in the suburbs of New Jersey, New York, at an event held at Finch College Museum of Art. The magazine "Arts Magazine" offered to publish the slides, thereby providing a second medium for the work. Graham turned this collection of images into a photographic essay which reported on the low cost and mass construction of those housing developments. Now, in *Homes for America*, photography is integrated into a literary discourse precisely for the purpose of intervening in the illusion that it is possible for the image to arise in a space that is independent and neutral. Allan Sekulla (1982) talks about the photographic discourse, which is understood to be a system of exchange of information, containing in itself the conditions that constrain and support their meaning and which determine their semantic target; therefore, the photograph is a message that is determined by its context. Photographs have to be read, and knowing how to read them involves an apprenticeship that needs to take place in order to break with the established myth of photographic truth — the myth of intrinsic truth and neutrality that has raised photography to the status of legal document and witness.

Dan Graham has a contemporary understanding, not only of the photographic image but also of what it is to be a contemporary observer, participating in the creation of the work of art by diversion of the point of view and by the distortion which he is able to conceive relative to the context of production, distribution and consumption of the images. Discourse about the art itself functions, effectively, as a device that permits the observer to relate in a different way to reality and its images, permitting the observer to reconfigure themselves as cultural subjects.

#### ***The Lacuna as a device for contemporary thinking about photography***

In brief, artistic work, due to the story it tells, is easily associated to the game of illusion relative to truth and reality, whereas photography is understood to be a vision of the truth and the camera as an instrument of evidence gathering. As stated by Jonh Tagg (1988), the nature of *the index* of the photograph places it in terms of the efficient transmission of meaning. But the *strength of evidence* of photography is implicated in that which is considered evident in certain power relationships activated in certain institutional and professional practices. Therefore, by the composition of the photograph itself, adds Tagg, the pre-photographic reference has connected itself to the sign by means of a technical, cultural and historical process in which certain optical and chemical devices come together to organize the experience and the desire to produce a new reality — the image on paper — *which, later on, by means of other processes, will gain a variety of possible meanings*. We can then see that photography, in order to be that which Barthes wanted it to be — a mark that confirms the physical existence of a past, permitting it to be possessed — requires the telling of a story.

Advertising images have come to make use of the belief in the photographic image as a representation of truth in order to legitimise its authenticity and to provoke in the subject a recognition of the need for the object it is representing. Teófilo Rego, by the investment of time spent on the formal correction and

consideration of the communicative functions of photographic images, was able to efficiently construct these publicity devices, which was why his work was considered so successful by his clients. Today, faced with the body of commercial images produced by Teófilo Rego, we can separate ourselves more easily from their character - that of documents that are strictly for commerce and advertising - and connect them to other narratives, with the body of work containing other material aspects that are commonly associated to art.

With the ongoing project on architectural photography described previously, the commercial photography carried out by Teófilo Rego allows us to get an idea of the different tasks involved in the production and final creation of those images. Although we can state that images used for publicity purposes, taken by Teófilo Rego, are definitely included amongst the 5,000 images that are being dealt with as part of this project, we will have to delve deeper into the material in order to state conclusively which images they are and what they were used for. We already have a certain understanding of some of the contexts that relate to determined images, such as relative to bidding entries in tendering procedures, teaching materials and documentation used in inaugurations, amongst others, but there are still many aspects relative to the public display and exhibition of the work carried out by architects - perhaps photographs making up part of personal portfolios -, that have not yet been looked at in detail. This means that the points developed in this paper, containing facts that are based on study of the archive, must be seen as an initial outline of the questions around the need to explain and establish moments of a practical nature with a generalized public, by means of a group of commercial images and the reflections that are later associated with these.

As we progress with our research into the photographs of Teófilo Rego, we are finding groups of written material such as notes, calculations and corrections, showing signs of aging, that endow the commercial photos with the author's personal touch (as do the choice of setting and the technical decisions relative to capturing the image) a presence in time that invokes current time by juxtaposition at that moment that the image is captured and recorded for ever.

When (re)reading certain photographs, we come across visual marks, which we call *Lacunas*, marks which arise from the deterioration of the chemical compounds and/or film and deteriorated photographic paper, which we take to be the residual marks of a photographic discourse to be constructed, an open door, a contemporary aesthetic dimension (Baqué:2003). As well as these elements, the result of the direct action of time on the material, some of the photographs under analysis present us with other types of technical considerations, such as those that included the retouching and/or restoration of negatives, (Pavão: 1997; Bresson: 1997) which allows us to include a dual artistic-scientific discourse around this archive. When mounting the exhibition we can of course aim to highlight variations in technical/accidental variations, following an episodic line that is non-linear, suggested by the archive itself and taking on the technical interruptions and narratives as fragments of discourse.

The deterioration of the photographs, which present with small empty spaces on some of the photographic images that have been looked at, takes us to the interdisciplinary discussion on themes relating to Photography - Technique - Environment, photography and its deterioration, conservation and restoration,

which permits another reinterpretation, with a more *ecological* content, of this photographic collection (Rodrigues:2006).

Observing the *Lacunae* signifies taking note of the double nature of the image, entering into a game of forms that encourages the processes and relations that occur during the visual experience. The observer is exposed and submits to experimentation in form, in a dialectic process:

“à la fois *épreuve* (qui exige qu'on la soumette, qu'on ne la décide pas, qu'on attende en quelque sorte qu'elle vienne nous surprendre, nous *regarder* et nous laisser démunis devant elle) et *expérimentation* (qui exige symétriquement l'activité et la décision, l'acuité du *voir* et du *savoir*, elle qui procède par variation réglée des formes de l'expérience). (Didi-Huberman:1995).

Responding with a mode of knowledge that implicates the observer in the temporality of the experience of the image, at the same time as contacting and breaking away, accident and construction in the decomposition of the elements that it utilizes, a paradoxical and dialectic game emerges from the *formless*, through which one can observe the birth of an image.

“As nature abhors vacuum, so does the mind resist meaninglessness; it invents stories to explain haphazard incidents, and to provide reasons and origins; the amorphous, the inchoate, the formless, have beckoned irresistibly to the shaping powers of thought and imagination. Humans are polyglot creatures of language; signs attract meanings, and symbols stick to forms, verbal and visual.”

Pareidolia is the concept that we bring to this reflection as the designer of this human predisposition to attribute meaning and form to the *formless*, which in this field of the photographic image we associate formally and conceptually to the *Lacuna* and its empty spaces of the photographic *index*.

In a context of the public exhibition of architectural photography which we are proposing, the showing of the *Lacunae* can cause the viewer to feel a certain surprise at the absence of the clean, clear and objective examples that normally characterize commercial photography. This possible distancing from the common view of the commercial image can be a device to ignite contemporary thought, promoting, by means of the exhibition, the creation of an approximation between the “interior”, historic and past, and the “exterior” which is conditioned by the observer of the image. In this way, the active contemplation of the *formless* permitted by the *Lacuna*, which in this context we can call a Pareidolia, is the action, above all, of the observer. Therefore, by adding the usual viewer relationship to images of commerce and advertising that are able to provoke an acknowledgement of the need for the object, this possibility of calling the observer to become (re)involved, makes an appeal to meanings and reinterpretations of an aesthetic nature.

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