

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC LOSS OF PHOTOGRAPHY: artistic collections of the world

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PRESENTATION

To say that computers have impacted and changed photography is, nowadays, nothing more than plain evidence. But computers have also transformed many other dimensions of human activity and behaviour. Knowledge, for example, is another category which has been deeply affected by computer technology.

The main purpose of my presentation today is to show how contemporary art photography has been able to include, to process, and to reflect upon the profound transformations computers have motivated, both on photography and knowledge.

More than twenty after the digital revolution, we already have enough distance to understand that the major transformations in photography did not occur with regard to indexicality (as so many scholars had initially feared). What has profoundly changed was materiality - the understanding of photographs as objects we can touch, feel, fold, collect or tear up. The way we are now storing and sharing photographs, the fact we don't print images anymore, or at least not as much as we used to, has contributed to make photography more 'immaterial' than ever.

On the other hand, and as we think of 'knowledge', it is also evident computers are interfering a great deal with our way of learning and dealing with information, altering our exercise of memory and promoting multitasking. We are also reading and accessing information in a much more fragmented and non-linear way. (And we may simply recall how, in academic books, for instance, the model of edited volumes of articles, often focusing on case studies, has become much more popular than the model of the large and comprehensive monograph)

Nevertheless, and this is an important aspect for me today, even if our reading habits are becoming less linear, the book – as the traditional locus for knowledge - the book has not ceased to exist in our lives, even if it has undergone severe ontological challenges. And moreover, as photography is becoming more immaterial, it is interesting to verify how the relationship between photography and the book appears to be more solid than ever.

From specialized publishers and bookshops, to successful photobook festivals, from the explosion of artist books, to the number of academic journals, books and conferences dedicated to the theme, it is manifest how the connection between books and photography seems to be here to stay.

Today, I will draw my presentation on the work of two particular artists who, despite different in many, many respects, have nevertheless in common the fact they both work with photography and with books – and, significantly, with the notion of *collection*.

The first author I will talk about is **Joachim Schmid**, a German artist who has been able to uncover a future for photography, as he adjusted his collecting practices to this so-called ‘post-photographic era’, as we are about to see.

Since 1982, Schmid has been engaged in a project called ‘Pictures From the Street’, a project that started when he first found a photograph discarded and abandoned on the street, and decided to pick it up and take it home with him.

With this gesture, Schmid was not only rescuing a picture from oblivion; he was starting a personal archive of mysterious, incomplete and damaged found images. He invested those images with a second life, according to what we would identify as a typically *post-modern* appropriation strategy. *Post-modern* we would say, but not yet *post-photographic*, since this collecting relied still on the physical, material existence of these photographs, as concrete objects.

But with the progressive dematerialization of images, in time, it became much more difficult to find pictures on the street. However, photographs have not disappeared. On the contrary, and as Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis have shown in their comprehensive article, we are living what they called “a life more photographic” than ever.

So if Schmid could not find pictures on the street anymore, this does not mean he had stopped looking for them. However, he did have to adjust, redirecting his quest and his look elsewhere, to the place where photographs are nowadays: not on the streets, but on the internet.

People are constantly uploading their snapshots online, turning the practice of personal and family photography, incredibly accessible, and unexpectedly public. This type of images provided the material for another project by Schmid, where he returns to his dear practice of appropriation, which this time, more than post modern, it is above all *post-photographic*.

I am concretely referring to the recent project titled *Other People’s Photographs [2008-2011]*. This work consists of a collection of 96 photo books in which Schmid proposes an encyclopaedic panorama of the typologies of amateur photography.

Based on a careful image research he conducted on Flickr, Schmid has selected recurrent patterns and themes to outline what he called “*a library of contemporary popular photography*”.

In this library, each volume corresponds to a particular concept or idea. We have volumes composed only of ‘sunset’ images, other of people photographing themselves in the mirror, or photographing their own shadow. Some books show only the ‘contents’ of handbags, others, ‘airline meals’, ‘mugshots’, ‘reflexions’, etc.

His systematization of vernacular, popular photography in *books* (the traditional object of knowledge) includes also a certain idea of stabilization, according to a taxonomy normally ascribed to museums, libraries or archives.

But what becomes significant in *Other People’s Photographs*, is the fact it defines a comprehensive photographic project in which the author does not take a single photograph.

He only selects, organizes and collects pictures from others. The artistic dimension therefore lies not on the objects, but on the *very act of collecting*.

It is precisely the *collection* that interests me here. And although these books look neutral, there is an extremely subjective charge related to the fact they constitute a collection. Generally speaking, and drawing on the work of Susan Pearce on these matters, to collect means to group different objects together, according to specific categories, exclusively defined by the collector. People may collect for different reasons, in a combination of rational and passionate motivations. But above all, the collection (contrary to the scientific and objective aspirations of the archive) is essentially defined by the identity and by the *voice* of the collector, even if this voice appears to remain unspoken.

This aspect brings me to the second collection I would like tell you about today. It is a smaller collection, of twelve books, created by the Portuguese artist **Sílvia Prudêncio**, in a project called precisely 'Colecção' [portuguese term for Collection].

Contrary to the books of Schmid in which the title leads accurately to the content of the book, in the collection by Sílvia Prudêncio, our instant desire to find out what each book is about, is simultaneously enticed and entirely frustrated – because from the outside, all twelve books look the same and have nothing to distinguish them from each other.

All we are able to see is a solid black circle, slightly reminiscent of the graphic lexicon used in encyclopaedia-like covers, and underneath the circle, and sharply contrasting with its connotation, we find a delicate calligraphic monogram - *SP*, her initials. This monogram attests an authorship, a property and a personal, subjective territory. Therefore, it sets also the tone for the practice of collection.

A peculiar aspect of Silvia Prudencio's work, is that her photographic books do not convey a collection of things, but they rather form a collection of experiences, a collection of almost imperceptible events that the artist reconfigures, aesthetically.

But Let's make it a more concrete with some examples.

As we look through the pages of these volumes, making sense out of what we see can be a difficult task at first. But such difficulty is precisely what encourages the reader to look more carefully and attentively onto the pages.

In this case for example (see ppt), page after page, all we see an enigmatic number of dark dots in a white page. In this other volume (see ppt), the dots sometimes become stains and as we flip through the book, we realize there is a different shape in every page. And of course, this sequence variation suggests a temporality, a sense that something is happening and evolving through time, although we don't quite know what it is. Only at the end of the book, we finally reach some words, which will, hopefully, explain and anchor the meaning of what we have just seen.

These words, however promising and scientific in tone, are extremely enigmatic and do not clarify. Or at least, they do not clarify in the descriptive or explicative manner we normally expect from texts accompanying images.

Our eyes continuously scan these pages searching for meaning, searching for a key, but whatever is represented in them slowly dissolves and disappears in favour of a new aesthetic experience.

Unveiling the mystery a little, I can tell you that what we see in this volume (see ppt) is actually a flying flock of swallows; and in this second one, we find a rather common sparkling birthday candle, which has been photographed from the very first second it started to burn until the moment it fade out. In the book however, the photographs have been digitally

manipulated (elements have been isolated and in the second case, images have been inverted so that the points of intense light captured in the initial photograph, were transformed into its black opposite, almost to the point of non recognition.

By doing so, Sílvia Prudêncio is interested in making visible all these random, small variations of common events, that we would barely notice in our common perception. In doing so, she awards them a sense of permanence real life does not allow.

But the recognition, or the non-recognition of the event, is not a crucial aspect.

But it is not a condition either. In some other examples, what is depicted in the book becomes much more perceptible.

Such is the case of this volume (see ppt). Here, the same elements are repeated page after page (CLIC): a hand holding a rope against the sky, in such a graphic manner, that it almost seems it is drawing a line. Although the line looks the same, its form is always different, as it was subject to the effects of the wind.

At the end of the book, the text in the final pages reads:

Differences in temperature and density.

Suspended between two positions, undecided. The pressure changes, drawing it indefinitely. It bears no relationship to what preceded it, because the dance is fast and imaginary. That's its charm.

The text is cryptic, nevertheless it refers exactly to what one should be looking at.

This fascination of the artist with common small variations in the world relate to a certain feeling of wonder, that possibly we have all already experienced.

(see ppt) I believe we would all be able to recollect this wonder, this sense of amazement and fascination, as one stares indefinitely at a twinkling flame from a candle or a fire. It is the same type of puzzlement before the never stopping movements of the waves at sea - never ending and never the same; or before the morphological changes in clouds, by which we identify all types of forms.

In each of these books, and I am not showing them all, Sílvia Prudêncio tries to capture the transience and the wonderment related to the perception of this kind of small events. By making these perceptions visible in books, she uses photographic images, not so much to record but to ultimately *transform* the original event.

What I find so appealing in this book collection relates to the way Sílvia Prudêncio uses the photographic medium to deny and question many of the typical features of photography. In order to record these small variations of the world, we could say photography would be an adequate medium.

Due to its resemblance qualities, photography has always been used to depict the world and capture the special instants what cannot be repeated. In this sense, and in principle, photography would serve the intentions of Prudencio. But in fact, this iconic conformity to the real makes photography too close, too common and prosaic for what she intends to do.

In Prudêncio's collection of books, we find a refusal of such iconic properties of photography, for she is not interested in depicting the event transparently. She is rather concerned in transposing this individual sense of wonder, making it available to someone else's perception. And she does so by isolating the movement, erasing every distractive elements, increasing the contrast, sometimes inverting the image until the original event has almost disappeared to become something else.

But it becomes always something we can still wonder at.

Interestingly enough, even if she refuses photography as an icon, her book collection strongly depends on photography as an index, as a reliable trace of what has happened. Despite all her formal and aesthetic interventions, Prudencio wants to somehow remain faithful to the nature of the event, without quite representing it.

This is perhaps more visible in the order of each book pages, which closely follows and respects the order of the photographic record of the event.

Although the temporal sequence plays a central role here, it should be stressed that these books are not flipbooks. Because of the particular way of sewing and binding the several book sections, what seems to be a regular sequence is, every now and then, disrupted by two consecutive images or by two blank pages.

Prudêncio is not only a peculiar collector of experiences, she is also a skilful and ingenious book maker, who is clearly challenging the traditional qualities of the book device. In this series *Colecção*, Sílvia Prudêncio is moved by the desire to merge form and content.

And in order to make her readers come closer to that unique feeling of amazement and wonder before these simple movements of the common world (these small variations), there is a need for a certain *distance*. A distance (in scale, in time, in recognition) that similarly to what happens in the collection, also implies a decontextualization and a reconfiguration of reality.

In this reconfiguration, the book still functions as an object of knowledge, for these books offer another way of looking, and therefore, they expand and enrich our perception of reality. It is maybe not about factual knowledge, but this book collection configures a particular knowledge, all the same.

Finally, I believe her work suggests that photography as we know it, can no longer express the emotional relation to the world, as collected in the books. Yet, it is the only way to do it, in a necessarily reconfigured manner.

It is by rendering the photographic images almost abstract, and by putting them in a manipulated sequence where nothing seems to happen, that viewers can possibly come a little closer to the subjective experience that lies at the origin of each book, and wonder again – even if in a different manner.

It is only by forging a space endangered by the photographic loss of the object, or to put differently, it is only when photography is very close of giving up all its traditional features and functions, that we will maybe be able to grasp and reach the magic and the enchantment of the original phenomena.

And in this way, we can perhaps connect and return to our greater human condition.

BIO NOTE

Susana S. Martins first studied Art History at the New University of Lisbon (2004) and worked as assistant curator at the Sintra Museum of Modern Art. She has earned her PhD in Photography and Cultural Studies from the University of Leuven (2011) and currently, she is an FCT Research Fellow both at the Art History Institute of the New University of Lisbon (IHA/UNL) and at the Institute for Cultural Studies of the Catholic University of Leuven (ICS/KUL). She is also a lecturer at the University of Aveiro, where she teaches the *Photography* and *Communication Semiotics* courses. Her recent work includes topics such as photography, travel books, tourism, exhibition display, cinema and national identities.

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