

## BETWEEN THE LINES

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Rosângela Rennó's art deals with the impossibility of collective memory, and the way that it tends to get siphoned off by the receptacles that we have developed to contain it. As direct as such a description sounds, however, and as defined an area of practice as the combination of photography and text remains for many contemporary artists, there are several aspects of Rennó's practice that make her work quite distinct from those of other artists working within parallel stylistic structures in other parts of the world. Still, the impact of her work extends far beyond arguments about its comparative originality, or even her considerable skills in getting it made.

On the other hand, Rennó has been deeply engaged by the visual qualities of old (or not so old), semi-anonymous photographs, especially those produced for institutional, journalistic or legal purpose, and where little if any attempt was made to produce an image of the sitter which could be thought of as artistic. In fact, it is sometimes the case that the image(s) which Rennó selects as the basis of a particular piece can barely be deciphered as the likeness of a particular person. As examples of representation, they remain marginalized, in both the literal and sociocultural senses of the world. Their focus is often fuzzy, and their challenge to the visual authority of our world – in other words, to the omnipotent role played by high-contrast photographic, computer-generated and video-based imagery in our contemporary visual environment – is almost pitiable in its modesty. Because they remind us of our own limits and imperfections (not to mention mortality), Rennó's images provoke a complex reaction on our part, made up of equal parts nostalgia for and rejection of the past.

The other important area of Rennó's concern has been in the selection and development of texts. Making her way through vast jungles of rumors, embittered slurs and sheer folklore that constitute the written press of today – especially in a country with such diverse and voracious reading patterns as Brazil –, Rennó has isolated certain fragments and given them back to us in the form of anonymous quotations. While we cannot avail ourselves of the sources for these fragments, and must therefore abandon our understandable instinct to see them as part of a narrative continuity, the original flavor and intent of each piece of text is all too clear. In fact, as we absorb the submerged meanings that Rennó's cut-and-paste techniques tend to bring to light, we are equally aware of the double fact that the intended reader of these texts is not us, and, more importantly, that the meanings we have gleaned from Rennó's re-configuration were only meant to have been absorbed on the most unconscious, subliminal level by consumer groups to which these magazines and newspaper are addressed.

In [ the installation *Hipocampo* ], Rennó has temporarily set aside photographic imagery altogether, and chosen to focus on words by themselves – or rather, on text which takes the form of imagery. Presenting these texts through the medium of a complex lighting system that significantly modifies the visitor's perceptual relationship to the room in which they are displayed, Rennó transforms the act of reading in public into a kind of play of visibility and invisibility, and of darkness and light. In particular, the act of coming-into-visibility conveyed by the gradual metamorphosis of a seemingly blank wall into a block of text assures us that the relationship to photography (in the form of darkroom techniques) is still very much present.

In a profound way, Rennó is interested in culture's leftovers – what has been tossed aside in the process of deciding what is valuable. The ironic name *Universal Archive*, which she has given to her vast collection of found materials, reflects the notion that society can often best be represented through precisely the kind of objects which it does not want to have bear the responsibility of its likeness. Her manner of representing this material strips away some of the mystique of representation, and gives us instead a collective self-portrait, based on the unquestioned half-truths that constitute a large part of the cultural diet of any reasonably literate person. But in this precise focus of detail, Rennó's activity can also be understood as an attempt to re-humanize the process of receptivity, for readers as well as spectators. Her unstated assumption seems to be that even the apparent carelessness by which words are flung about in an information – based society is merely the opposite side of the coin from the kind of measured, critical reading that she invites us to undertake. Through recognizing and capturing the human aspects of an increasingly dehumanized area of cultural production, Rennó also reminds us that the search for universal values is what making art is all about.

**Dan Cameron/1995**