

simone cupello: sombras sem figura

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Giving substance to shadow

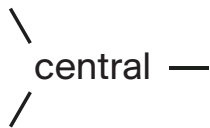
Marisa Flório Cesar

There's no such thing as a shadow without a body. An indexical sign, according to Charles Peirce, which depends on physical contiguity, touch, contact. It's there in the fables that describe the origins of artistic images: in the outline of the hand on the wall of the prehistoric cave, in the myth of the daughter of the potter of Corinth narrated by Pliny the Elder, who saw in it the invention of painting. In love with a young man about to leave on a journey, the daughter of Butades drew the outline of his shadow on the wall. A conjuring of the absence of her beloved; a fixation of the outline of his absent presence, of his present absence. Is the image a web of fear and desire, of memory and artifice, inseparable from death and disappearance? The young woman in love is overcome by the shadow whose kingdom, among the Greeks at the time, was the world of the dead.

Like the shadow, (analog) photography would have also been considered an index by Peirce and addressed as such in many of his classical theories. The "spelling of light" leaves a trail, a vestige, a body that is both material and spectral. If the images occur among us, those who look at them, and the means by which our gaze responds, the photographic medium is one of those instances in which the presence of the absent is manifested and the strange materiality of the lost body is reiterated in the visual body of the image. But it happens that the process of analog photography stops death itself in the movement of light: if to portray something it is necessary for this something to radiate in order to imprint its luminous emanations on the photosensitive film, to make the image appear it is necessary that the light, for a moment, disappear to reveal itself in the camera obscura. It is the paradox of photographic alchemy, Philippe Dubois would say: "the photographic body is born and dies in and through light" [*L'Acte photographique*, 1990, p. 221]. The shadow captures the photographic image in its web of light, in a phantasmagoria that disturbs the conception of photography as an objective image of the real. The image is only capable of emerging at the limit of its own erasure: thus is its condition of existence.

Perhaps never before have images so dramatically penetrated our daily lives, our sensibilities, mediating social and political life. Images are among us, or we are among them, with their power and their ghosts, with their ambivalence and the uses that are made of them. In recent decades, with the new digital technologies of production, circulation and exposure of numerical images, the border between those who produce and receive the images and that which is shown, seen and experienced has been further blurred. If the image was the streak in analog photography, in digital, it is the conversion into an algorithmic code. The transformation of the technical-mediatic devices of financial capitalism also displaces the relationship between visibility and subjectivity. On the internet, images and traces left on the networks are converted into data: tastes, sensitivities, behaviors – everything is turned into code that is classified, archived, sold. Image and word are radically monetized; meaning and value are political-financial functions in a strange incorporeal ghostliness.

The eye of control and vigilance becomes more spectral and widespread: everyone watches everyone, from the great political or corporate powers to our next-door neighbors. This capillary



machinery, which produces and displays images (whether analog or digital), structures the field of the possible, programs cognitive patterns and cultural habits, shapes sensitivities and social affections and configures ways of seeing and ways of life. As such, it builds worlds.

Between the dream-images (which our imagination produces) and the devices (which the images appropriate), between traces and specters, what then is the status of the image today? The realm of the image – and its seduction – has always suffered from this dual distrust, being shadow and impression: insufficient to show something that is of the order of excess (like the face of God or the Shoah) or deceitful, imprisoning the gaze and leaving us undone in an incorporeal world of shadows and illusion (Plato, Debord).

Simone Cupello focuses, through photography, on the investigation of the image – its challenging status, its constitutive indeterminacy, the places and movements of its appearance and disappearance. For this reason, the conditions of the operating visibilities are questioned: the systems that frame and the regimes that organize the visible, that shape subjectivities, that encode life and art – the machinery of the gaze established by the photographic apparatus and by the devices that produce images, whose great strategy is to remain in the shadows, concealing its mediation so that we believe we are relating to the world directly.

To subvert the games of concealment, revelation and reflexivity of the devices of the universe of technical images is, for Simone Cupello, to return the image to the flesh, to operate in the interval between the visible and invisible, appearance and disappearance, revelation and blindness. An interval that accommodates opacities to open image and art up to unlimited encounters, but which does not cease to confide its indeterminacy and inadequacies. The (photographic) image turns away from its conceptions as a specular projection (which shows the copy of an original) or as merely an index of the real (which maintains physical and existential contiguity with the referent). The image is an articulation between what is accessible to the vision and what is stolen from it: the image summons the initiation of the gaze, as well as its limits, which are made visible there. We see through enigmas. We relate by dissonances. Hence Cupello's option to work with files of analog images, albums and collections of old portraits that she purchases at fairs or is given by friends. The artist cuts them, covers or extracts the figures depicted, stitches, glues, molds and sculpts them like an extensive body, like totems or tombstones in improbable archaeologies, spatializing them in the architectural body. A process of montage and editing characteristic of the film industry, from which the artist comes.

Returning the image to the flesh also means materializing the processes of its production and mediatization that remain invisible. Giving substance to shadow. Opening the black box and deceiving the device, as Vilém Flusser, an author who is dear to the artist, would say. Therefore, the process of disassembly and reassembly of distinct times in heterochronies, of places in heterotopies, of image-flashes for us to perceive the secret kinship, the difficult work of loss and memory, splitting and separating habitually united things and beings and fastening the bonds of filiation on other figures, bodies and shadows. As such, she creates a disturbance and a displacement in the dominant regime of ways of presenting such things and beings in the world, giving them meaning, interpreting the images. A displacement: of times, places, meanings, sensibilities.

This is how we see her veiling or cutting out the figures depicted in them. She protects them from overexposure, from dazzling blindness, from the glare of spectacle. Just like in *Pequenos Desertos* [*Small Deserts*], strips of photos stitched together with visible threads, in which the figures were cut out leaving the empty spaces and shadows projected from this present absence. Or like when the artist encrusts the images in between stones and cement chips in a dubious movement of appearance and disappearance, as if they insisted on surviving and appearing between the cracks (*Ervas daninhas* [*Weeds*]), or like emblems that sustain and



render a lost collectivity (*Totens* ["Totems"]). The lost common body is, in turn, replaced by the visual body of the image in the series *Lapidárium*, vertically overlapping photographs with words formed on the back that attest to the fragmentation of our social ties: *Sós* ["Alone"], 2021. *Besta pública* ["Public Beast"], 2021. *Hermanos, sus hermanos* ["Brothers, Your Brothers"], 2022 .

Cupello relies not only on photographic archives, but also on objects from her world, its adjacent and residual elements, its circumstantial materiality, like the strings from old portrait albums or the tissue paper used to separate the pages, images engraved on them by time like a negative, a specter. She entitles them *Álbum de família* ["Family Album"] and *Escuro amor* ["Dark Love"]: the works conform precisely at this intersection of index-traces, of the (re)constructed body-image of the word that names it.

From there (studies for Canyons), from the series *Virtualidades matéricas* ["Material Virtualities"], is one image out of hundreds of digital photos taken of a scene formed out of piles of old analog photos. *Canyons*, this enigmatic landscape, is also the shadow of the passage from the index-image to the numerical image of digital technology; it is the conjuring of this passage and this metamorphosis.

Prumos ["Plumbs"] operates at the limit of their invisibility: they're thin strips of photos of eyes, glued and attached to the ceiling by lines and held upright by the weight of stones. It is as if the space itself were solid, as if the invisible air that fills it were sliced and, from the cracks resulting from the cut and wound in its translucent flesh, myriad eyes were peering at us. For us to respond to the image's gaze, we must move our bodies closer in order to discern them. Is an exchange of gazes from affectionate and desirous bodies, in the conjunction between sense and flesh, capable of reversing mere vigilance? A question that preserves our shadows, but also our dreams and promises.