



Alexandre Santos¹

Oscillations between micro and macrohistory in the photography of André Penteadó²

Oscilações entre micro e macro-história na fotografia de André Penteadó.

Abstract

This article discusses the reconstruction of memory through two photographic books by São Paulo artist André Penteadó, respectively *O Suicídio de meu pai* (2007-2014) and *Cabanagem* (2015). If in the first work the artist proposes relations focused more on the autobiographical and on the micronarrative regarding the taboos about suicide and individual suffering, in the second, he offers us a broader discussion of the elements that anchor the historical erasures related to violence and collective suffering.

Keywords

André Penteadó; Photography; Photographic book; Memoir; Contemporary art.

Resumo

Este artigo aborda a reconstrução da memória através de dois livros fotográficos do artista paulistano André Penteadó, respectivamente O Suicídio de meu pai (2007-2014) e Cabanagem (2015). Se no primeiro trabalho o artista propõe relações mais voltadas para o autobiográfico e o micronarrativo, no que concerne aos tabus sobre o suicídio e o sofrimento individual, no segundo, ele nos oferece uma discussão mais ampla sobre os elementos que ancoram os apagamentos históricos relacionados à violência e ao sofrimento coletivo.

Palavras-chave

André Penteadó. Fotografia. Livro fotográfico. Memória. Arte contemporânea.

1-Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, UFRGS, Brasil.

ORCID: 0000-0002-0413-2268

2- Texto recebido em: 5/out/2019

Texto publicado em: 28/dez/2019

"Somente a arte é capaz de revelar, mas não revela jamais
 senão a infinita espessura do verdadeiro."

(Jean-Claude Lemagny)

Analyzing some African-based literature, for example Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Hommi Bhabha (2013) uncovers forms of narrative production in which the houses of the characters in question become strategic scenarios for the author to discuss the official story and his legacy. According to the Indian intellectual, whose thinking is linked to postcolonial studies, the walls of houses not only reverberate aspects of official history in the intimate world, but also propose the deconstruction of discourses that deny the micropolitical protagonism of the domestic.

This article focuses on the analysis of two photographic books by artist André Penteadó (São Paulo, 1970), in which, like Bhabha's assumption, there is a frequent tension between the autobiographical and history, as well as the latency of a poetic condition which, by problematizing the unreachable and complex thickness of the real, functions as a kind of rewriting of the oblivion. Penteadó builds narratives that distend the continuities between the private and the public world, as well as between the individual body and the collective body. In this perspective, his photography discusses the not always peaceful relations between personal memory as a microhistorical narrative - in this sense in dialogue with Foucault's notion of self-care (2006) - without, however, neglecting openings for the discussion of history as a macro-historical narrative, reviving unofficial and even marginal forms of memory to imposed narratives.

The prospect of relying on narratives through a continuum of juxtaposed images on pages to be traversed in a pre-established order is not a fluke. The appreciation for the photographic book follows the artist's trajectory since his first authorial forays into photography. Making use of the book as a strategy that is offered through the power of the image as narration or as a type of writing, is a poetic decision that evokes the very etymology of the word photography, literally a "writing of light". On the other hand, from a broader perspective, photography has also been configured in the cultural imagination of the West as a kind of imagetic writing, resulting from a mechanical and precise device, which projected an intrinsic relationship between the photographic sign and the illuminist modernity, founded on by the light of knowledge (FRIZOT, 2012).

But the connection with the book in the work of Penteadó still operates when the artist chooses to deal with the tension contained in the support that hosts his images. Traditionally filled with words, the books make pretentious discourses about the real, consolidated by the cultural tradition that welcomes them. Although we know that the words in the written texts are not synonymous with reality, since the discourses are also marked by paradoxes, both linked to the officiality of the writing of history and its intrinsic deviations from the real as well as to the permitted and even expected poetic license of fictional literary writing. The

ambivalence between the real and the fictional seems to be a recurring element in André Penteadó's projects related to photography books. On the other hand, the bet on the construction of a book of images, read or not in sequence, is always a bet on the slow, individual and subjective relationship that its content evokes in a temporality built by the viewer and his personal enjoyment/reading, aspect, which may allow a more effective involvement with what is at stake, as Sontag suggests in his classic essay *Sobre Fotografia* (2004, p.15).

In the first work that will be addressed here, *O Suicídio de meu pai*, carried out between 2007 and 2014, it is clear that the book presents us two well-evidenced parts. In its first half there is a proliferation of urban images of London, which, according to the artist, face the situation of having been a foreigner in another country where he lived for seven years. These are mostly night shots, somehow reminiscent of Brassai's reticent images of Paris in the early twentieth century, coincidentally also hosted in a book-holder¹. However, unlike the Hungarian photographer interested in bohemian marginal Paris, it is not from the night and its inhabitants that Penteadó's photographic interest is nurtured, but rather from the places where human presence is latent, where the low light seems to evoke a shadowy interstice of the passage and, therefore, revealing a bland, subtly dramatized and even strange city.

In almost every image in the first part of *O Suicídio de meu pai*, flash is an important element: it's railings, skating walls, dry tree branches, empty parks, barbed wire, electrical pipes, junk mail, rusty hunting traps, loose words on the walls (help, soul, among others ...). Finally, it is paradoxically illuminated by the flash London that, at the same time, emphasizes a city of fog, rain and ambiguity, marked by the record of the passage of time over things. Halfway through the book, the sequence of images is interrupted by a text: "On January 31, 2007, I had been living in London for a year when I received a call from Brazil. My father Jose Octavio had committed suicide. The next morning I flew to Sao Paulo to say goodbye to him."²

*Em seguida, mais fotos de baixa luminosidade, mas desta vez e lâmpadas fluorescentes sobre um fundo negro: "Quando eu recebi a notícia, fiquei meio em choque e não consegui chorar. Recebi primeiro a notícia de que ele teria morrido e 20 minutos depois de que ele teria se matado. (...). A primeira foto que eu fiz foi de uma luminária. É só a luz"*³

And the book goes on as if in a leap of time to the images of her dead father in the coffin, in the way of Nan Goldin, but perhaps in a more discreet record than that of the North American artist as she freezes the funeral of her friends and fellow-generation victims of AIDS, like Cookie and her husband Vittorio, both fully recognizable

1- Unnumbered page excerpt from the book *O Suicídio de meu pai*, by André Penteadó.

2- See author's *Paris la nuit*. Paris: Flammarion, 2011.

3- In an interview with the author, in 2016.

in their respective coffins. Penteadó, on the contrary, prefers to preserve the father's countenance. At night, alone in the chapel, he shoots in black and white and with an analog camera, some details of the wake, once again opting for the low light: a general take on the body, the white chrysanthemums that serve as his cloak, his hands holding the flowers, the striped shirt as the last robe (fig. 1).



Figure 1: André Penteadó, page of the book *O Suicídio de meu pai*. São Paulo: Author's Ed., 2014.

In the following pages of the publication, a letter of farewell of the suicide addressed to the ex-wife Celia, signed in intimate tone, only as "Zé Octavio". It is the ultimate message, which exposes its motivations: depression, failures, financial bankruptcy. The personal story of the deceased fuses with a broader story, one that embodies and problematizes personal failure by not meeting the expectations of a merciless world. This is not an impromptu note, but a well-written letter in which the author declares his love for his children and his former partner. And, finally, he expresses his last wishes for his ashes to remain in the morgue or, if the recipient so wishes, to be deposited on the deceased's grandfather's grave in the Consolation Cemetery.

The book goes on as a true elaboration of mourning, a true archeology of self, signaled from dialogue with one another: emptying one's father's apartment and getting in touch with one's belongings. To avoid the erasure of that life through an archivist compulsion, animated by an initial idea to record all the traces left by the parent: his personal objects, as well as the marks of his presence, as if they were his invisible tracks through the house, but expressed through of the images of the objects. The artist/child seems to need, at least symbolically, the possession

of the last sighs of the missing father. She makes some images, but the project is herculean and there is no time to register everything before returning the rented apartment to the realtor. Perhaps concentrating on the father's robes may be an alternative to getting hold of the envelopes that animated the now lifeless body. In the impasse, he decides to remove the hangers with the hanging clothes from the closet and methodically box them, as a true protocol that bids farewell to the body absent from his last home.

At the closure of *O Suicídio de meu pai*, Penteadó features a sequence of studio shots wearing the costumes taken from José Octavio's closet (Fig. 2). While emptying the hangers, he lends his body to the clothes of the deceased and feels that there is still his presence in the perfume that spreads through the environment



Figure 2: André Penteadó. Page of the book *O suicídio de meu pai*. São Paulo: Author's Ed., 2014.

and adheres to the son's body by performatizing the father. All these images refer to the idea of directed photographs (COLEMAN, 2004), since they literally enact the real in different ways: in the supposedly neutral frontal pose in front of the tripod, in the careful selection of the cut, in the choice of the neutral background, in the blow of artificial light and even in the distanced celebration that the ritual recovers from something already accomplished. Also the artist's closed eyes are not a fluke, but an attempt to deviate from possible obvious readings, for example linked to photographic self-portrait, in favor of an imaginary thought that recreates the central axis of the set of images, linked to the ritual of death, mourning and sadness. As in London images, light here also engenders elements that underline the silhouettes and contours of the photographed subjects. Simultaneously, the flash generates a kind of shadow and aura around the artist's body, as if father and son were there in palimpsest.

In a subsequent unfolding of the work and external to the book, the artist records the empty hangers that, in the same order in which they were stripped of their father's costumes to inhabit their son's body, are photographed systematically, as in forensic photography, in a single registration logic purposely distanced from those taken with the garments. This is not only because they allude to the binomial absence/presence, as the hangers housed the dead man's clothes as a kind of extension of his body, but also because they signify a discursive construct that is nourished by both the need for memory generation and the emphasis on the artistic truth.

In the work *Cabanagem*, of 2015, the artist proposes an even more evident relation of memory subjected to the convenience of historical erasures. However, the intention here is to investigate the construction of collective memory by engaging in pre-photographic historical facts or events that occurred at a time when photography, still under the control of expensive techniques, had not spread as a usual documentation resource⁴. By choosing to discuss facts of Brazilian history prior to technical reproducibility, the artist wishes to avoid debate [or conflict] with what might be the photographic iconography of the time, if he had chosen facts in which there was abundance of photographic records. As he himself states, the debate that interests him is provided by dialogue with other forms of iconography, such as works of art, through painting, printmaking, drawing, or [brought up] even out of nothing in imaginary terms⁵. What is interesting about this endeavor is that Penteado always reflects on these historical facts through photography and, from this perspective, raises the discussion about the cultural and anthropological attribution of the photographic sign, not necessarily linked to the capture of truth, but to the constitution of truth regimes (TAGG, 2015).

The violent *Cabanagem* Revolt (1835-1840), which took place in the then Grão Pará Province, interests Penteado as a way of penetrating the cultural remains of the popular revolt in return for its official versions. Appreciating the permanence and even the transformations of rebellion in the collective memory and culture of the descendants of the mestizos involved in the conflict becomes a strategy that attempts to dismantle, or even anachronically reread, memories and forgetfulness, that is, what was consolidated and what was erased in the historical versions that were imposed. According to the artist:

4- As a part of the project *Rastros, Traços e Vestígios*, there are three historical episodes of the early nineteenth century that are investigated by the artist through the creation of photographic books: *The Cabanagem Revolt* (Pará, 1835-1840), *The French Artistic Mission* (Rio de Janeiro, from 1808) and *the Farroupilha Revolution* (Rio Grande do Sul, 1835-1845). There is also in the same project the possibility of "registering" Brazil's Discovery and Independence

5- Statement by the artist in an interview with the author, held in 2016.



6- In an interview with the author, held in 2016.

... em meados do ano de 2013 houve manifestações gigantes em São Paulo. Então eu pensei que este era um assunto artístico interessante, ou seja, quando o brasileiro se revoltou. (...) Eu fiz uma pesquisa sobre a história de revoltas ocorridas no Brasil. Aí deu uma lista muito grande (...). Então ao olhar os assuntos, eu percebi que na Cabanagem (...) 30 mil pessoas morreram... os revoltosos tomaram o poder e mataram o governador. Talvez em outros países eles fossem heróis. Aqui a gente não fala deles.⁶

In this work, which is also supported by a photographic book, there is a set of four distinct pieces: an envelope, reminiscent of those used in the cataloging of documents in historical archives, in which two books themselves are deposited and a kind of folding booklet with a text by the Pará native historian Magda Ricci about the *Cabanagem* Revolt. The paper used in the set - envelope, books and leaflet - is simple and its texture refers to that of popular publications such as magazines or newspapers. Similarly, the lettering used in the publication mimics that of the old typewriters. It is the choice of props and language elements inspired by the historian's tools and the poor aesthetics of public binders. The artist enters fictionally in search of documents proving the fact that investigates. And, for that, we use the artistic recreation of documents as the mission of bringing to light another process of historical investigation on perhaps dormant issues.

This operation resembles some works of conceptual art, also related to the appropriation of documents or even their creation, as for example in the projects of Marcel Broodthaers referring to the cataloging of the eagle theme, entitled *Musée d'Art Moderne: Département des Aigles-Section Publicité* (1972) or by Dan Graham cataloging US vernacular architecture in *Homes for America* (1966-67) to publish the images in an architectural magazine. In these works, the use of images and texts are elements related to an opaque narrative, as a conceptually provocative strategy that echoes Penteadó's investigation and critical reading about the real. Where is he? Where can he be? How is it possible to capture it? The provocations - photographic and textual - created in the set that forms the book *Cabanagem* become intriguing precisely because they deal with the delicate question about what has and what has no historical document value, in contrast to the fictional:

... esta é uma discussão para mim muito importante. A fotografia é construção? Como artista eu vejo tudo que faço como algo que eu construo, mesmo a fotografia snapshot... e isso está, de algum modo, relacionado à forma como as pessoas veem a historiografia. Você lê num livro, é verdade. As pessoas não têm senso crítico e compram a versão contada. Então eu faço a minha própria versão.⁷

7- In an interview with the author, held in 2016.

The use of photographic image in *Cabanagem* follows the same system as *O Suicídio de meu pai*. Photographs repeat the strategy of generating reticent photographic writings about this revolt, starting from the tension between micro and macrohistory, as well as the clash between real and the fictional. In the larger book of the set it is mainly the Amazonian landscape and its historical marks that interest the author - ruins, lush vegetation, monuments, images of criminal newspaper pages - while in the smaller book he brings out, in an anachronistic or long-lasting portraits of characters whose life has something to do with the *Cabanagem* Revolt - the independent journalist who named his son Angelin, chief cabana leader; the person who lives in places where milestones of the revolt took place; the archivist attached to the documents about the fact; the federal deputy who considers himself a political heir to the cabanas, among others.

If in the first book of *Cabanagem* the artist turns to the paradoxical world of the Amazon and its contrasts, in the second he tells us aspects related to the life of ordinary men and their fragile and sometimes involuntary relations with history. As an egress from the social sciences course, André Penteado approaches a dimension in which art is in the interweaving of the fiction, image and history triad. (SELIGMAN; SILVA, 2012, p.112) reminds us that art as an inscription of history, through the subject's way, is first and foremost art of memory and archive preparation that - against the locked official archives - directs history to a turning point. radical. For the same author, by exploring the intimate sphere as a renewal of autobiographical discourses and as an attempt to inscribe the history of violence suffered by individuals and societies, artists today become heralds of a necessary resistance (fig. 4).

Importantly, the word written in the *Cabanagem* project is rare and only appears in what I called the brochure, as part of this dossier of submitted documents. This booklet deals with a version of the *Cabanagem* story given by the professional authorized to do so, the historian. The discourses, as Foucault (2010) demonstrates, are artificial forms of narrative that give legitimacy to what we call the real. They always dialogue with the times and are delegated to those who have the intellectual and social power to exercise them. In general, to those who have knowledge, which, for example in the nineteenth century, was related to thinking elites and knowledge hierarchically regarded as the most important by society, namely the medical sciences and the legal sciences, fields within of which photography had a strong role. The very writing of history, in the tax environment of positivism, was sustained by the importance that documents, as traces or evidence, could bring to the analysis and attestation of historical facts. The text of the pamphlet written by that historian makes no concession to the official memory of the nineteenth century conflict. Instead, it presents elements for thinking about Penteado's artwork in its critical connections in the picture books.



Figure 3: André Penteado. Page of the book *Cabanagem*. São Paulo: Editora Madalena/Editora Terceiro Nome, 2015. Portrait of Manoel Benjamim (Giju)/Barcarena, a retired farmer who grew up and still has a house on the site of the cabano leader Eduardo Angelin's farm.

Figure 4: André Penteadó. Page of the book *Cabanagem*. São Paulo: Editora Madalena/Editora Terceiro Nome, 2015.



In the present day we are by no means removed from the discursive heritage grounded in historical proof, which separates the analysis of the historian from that of the artist. André Penteadó's work, in the reverse of this dichotomy, does not want to produce absolute truth, but to discuss the narrow boundaries between history and fiction. In other words, between what we configure as real and what we characterize as imagination. By crossing the historian's perspective with his own, the artist dialogues with the assumption that if history feeds on what has happened and that art, in turn, feeds on what could happen, then Rancière's maxim (2009, p. 58) that the real needs to be fictionalized to be thought of becomes true. According to the same author, it would be up to the cinema, after literature, to positively promote this tension, since the seventh art would be the most legitimate heir to literary fiction.

When an artist like André Penteadó deals with successive series of images through the book format, he enters a fictional field in which the juxtaposition of photographs in this medium refers to the cinematic montage. It is important to note, on the other hand, that cinema comes from photography and that the sense of staging has been imprinted in it since the daguerreotype, through stereoscopic images or purposely constructed images, as the pioneering negative combinations of photopictorialism in the first 50 years of photography history. As the artist emphasizes, his serial montages in the two photographic books presented here do not adhere to closed narratives. Their serializations are fragmentary and reticent, carrying at their core the incorporation of opacity in relation to the real, since they deal with partial aspects of the world and are motivated by the bet on promoting narrative gaps to the viewer. What does an image of a wall covered in vegetation in relation to the history of *Cabanagem* mean? (Fig. 5) Perhaps only one cause of allusion to the force of nature imbues itself in a culture and, in this line of reasoning, can

demonstrate the wild side of the cabanas and their mixed strength of caboclos, surviving over time as an alternative to violations invisible by the historical discourse and its timely deletions. In this sense, Penteado's images are extreme and sometimes their cruelty bothers. They are also extreme for following a logic of polarities, not in an analogous way. These are images that can be displayed when a window is changed, that is, to an encounter with violence, silences and modes erased by history as a kind of counter discursive force that runs through both the young student cornered by Europe and the suicide of the father as the anonymous cables silenced by the predatory meaning of history.

In the review of the *Cabanagem* Revolt proposed by André Penteado, the images tell us of the tropical world of the province of Grão-Pará, a world of biodiversity and richness that interested the European colonizers in search of the so-called sertão drugs. Interest, by the way, is still quite evident today with the burning in the rainforest that caught the attention of the world, operated by land grabbers, loggers and large landowners this last August. However, this tropical world of riches, full of moisture, insects, caboclos, is also a world of mysteries. World of diverse beings, perhaps indomitable, since they took refuge in the density of the forest when persecuted by the government forces that suppressed the *Cabanagem* Revolt, against a young nation that was sketched, but maintained in this project the intrinsic colonizing violence. This world of strange beings dialogues in some way with the firefly metaphor advocated by Didi-Huberman when provoked by Pasolini, the latter concerned with his survival in hard times such as those of the beginning of fascism in Italy. The photographic image, critically rethought by Penteado through its reticent configuration, brings some hope of the fireflies of Pasolini's speech, rethought by Didi-Huberman: they are insects that emit light and bring in their night flight the hope of desire and of mating and therefore of the potency and resistance of life in the face of historical disasters.



Figure 5: André Penteado, pages of the book *Cabanagem*. São Paulo: Editora Madalena/Editora Terceiro Nome, 2015.

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Alexandre Santos

Professor of the Postgraduate Program in Visual Arts at the UFRGS Art Institute. Coordinates the CNPq Research Group "Displacements of Photography in Art". Between 2017 and 2018, he conducted postdoctoral research at the Università di Bologna, as a CAPES fellow. Among other publications, is the author of the book *Photography as a personal writing: Alair Gomes and the melancholy of the other body*. Porto Alegre: UFRGS Publisher, 2018.

How to quote: SANTOS, Alexandre. Oscillations between micro and macrohistory in the photography of André Penteado. *Porto Arte: Revista de Artes Visuais*. Porto Alegre: PPGAV-UFRGS, nov-dez, 2019; V 24; N.42 e-98254 e-ISSN 2179-8001.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22456/2179-8001.98254>
