

Christian Gattinoni "Ghosts of a science of the unknown persons", 1995

What is in front of you sends you back to your image; what is behind, to your lost face".

Edmond Jabes

There is nothing less eloquent, and nothing more anonymous, than a plate from a portrait photographer's studio. From this so-called photography of "identity", there emerges the anonymity of the group. Paolo Gioli has unearthed and brought together photographic plates that date back to the immediate post-war period when the local photographer shared the responsibility of portraying society with his or her retoucher. That is the reason for the vague similarity of appearance, the negative sociology that doomed the Bertillon-style police registration scheme to failure. The only remedy is this procedure re-establishing the ownership of the faces, executed with broad angry strokes on the back of the images. It is up to us to make sense of the confusion of figures in the black of the second faces.

1 - The dark side of the Face

"The mask: to remove oneself from the visible and offer to view only that which may not be looked upon".

Jean Marie Pontévia

Every face must have a soul. We are no longer satisfied with its period atmosphere or with its similarity to the tastes of the day. Each face's portion of eternity and its transformation into a mask do not consign it solely to its own funeral. Here are dead faces born again; this is the hereafter of the face; the song of identifying features is no longer contained in the visiting rooms of judicial identity but in the courtrooms of time. Generations of fathers are reconciled with those of the sons who predeceased them. Mothers survive their dead children. The individual slips out of temporal identity to play a new role in a theatre of language after the manner of Valere Novarina. In the prologue, each face chooses its own progeny, which it then summons onto the stage of this theatre of the resurrection. In this fancy-dress parade, it is the eyes which, more than the other sensory organs, refuse to disappear. Their gaze grips us, not like Roland Barthes punctum, but rather in the way it defines our theatrical status as spectators. We are held by a gaze from beyond the image and obliged to consider in the same brief moment the passage and return from physical time to the chemical time of photography as well as our own part as onlooker-accomplice in this temporal fault. We cannot deny our own presence before those eyes, compelled as we are to acknowledge their scrutiny as it implicates us in their altered temporality and reduces us to the drab chronology of our own age. We are excluded from all possible eternities by that scrutiny. The

photographs are no longer willing to compromise, even in the metaphorical sense, with mirrors and make none of the usual concessions to apportionment of the reflected image and the reassuring acknowledgement of shared causes and similar fates. These images instate an unadulterated otherness. It is the Other itself that examines us and dispossesses us of our points of reference. Marc Trivier began his course on the portrait by quoting this passage from Autrui in which Robert Anthelme describes deportees queuing up to look at themselves for a few moments in a piece of mirror That need remains a minimum condition for the survival of the dignity of the human face. Paolo Gioli has removed even that support, unless we take the view that his photographs offer the same piece of memoryretaining mirror to all the nameless dead stacked together in the storeroom of the photographer's studio.

2 - The resistance of the Face

"The real face is an absence of face: the face of one whose face has been ripped away - absence of face has become the face of my responsibility The face of the deportees of Auschwitz and of all the camps of humiliation and extermination around the world.

Face of non-face.
Non-face of face".
Edmond Jabes

Yet these post-war Italians have a common history. A (post?)-fascist? generation?, a sample nonetheless representative? of a society still without bearings. A contingent corpus for the sociological examination of a neighbourhood, the faces are transformed in the artist's studio into an established body that has taken part in the upheavals of history Survivors of a slaughter whose causes and complicities we recognize they speak to us of our relatives, of those who left to avoid contributing to fascism, of those who stayed to face fascism every day, of those deported to concentration camps who returned with no way of forgetting, of those who never came back, and of all the others.

Then those faces appeared to me in all their starkness, enmeshed in an extraordinary fate that the individuals themselves could never have suspected while they were still alive. Death, anonymity and the indifference of their relations had consigned them to insignificance. Now the photographer has turned them into models and made them protagonists in that most disquieting of human adventures - the resurrection of the dead. They bear witness against oblivion, claiming for themselves this supreme dignity.

3 - The ghosts of History

"We live on the recovery of images of mourning that we shall never be able to count.

Image of the first day.

Image of the death that will be denied to us until death".

Edmond Jabes

If we admit that these faces no longer comply with either the temporal logic of heredity or the chronological succession of everyday experience, we may then consider them in another perspective. We may confront the sea-change in their features using different instruments of interpretation. There are memories of painting, or inherited from the "black manner" of the engraver, at work behind these images - from El Greco to Zoran Music - but, since their impact remains essentially photographic, it is necessary to understand their logic. There is therefore a need to go back to the origins of the medium, as Gioli has already done before in his re-examinations of the works of pioneering photographers using pin-hole cameras and Polaroids. A hiatus in time runs through this collection. At first, it exudes a nineteenth-century spirit - the Horia in the photographer's studio - that takes us back to pseudo-scientific insights in which phrenology, physiognomy and attempts at the illustration of the spirit find new iconic possibilities. Before the violence of the representation, an even more ancient tradition creates a reminiscence, of the anatomical waxes made in Italy at the end of the seventeenth century in Florence and Bologna. Gioli reminds us that the practice of wax sculpture, rendered obsolete by new images such as X-rays, disappeared, like the miniature, at the end of the nineteenth century. All at once these lined creations - the graphic interventions, the scored intervals that mark the faces - appear to us to be the contemporaries of the thermograph, the scintigram, the scanner and nuclear magnetic resonance. On the backs of these images, Paolo Gioli has traced a topography of pain, sensation and feeling. The dark side of the faces reveals the ghosts of contrition, together with the repressed side of the aura.

Photography proclaims the basis for a new human science: the spectrography of the resurrection of dead unknown persons.