

Anonymous Figures ["Abstracts of Anamnesis"]

The exhibition greets us with a row of anonymous faces and speaks of memory. For whom are these faces recorded? The question would press if we knew nothing of the artist, for these figures require something of us. But if we happen to know something of Salvatore Puglia's attitudes regarding the social bases of his practice and his commitment to community (reflected already in the role friendship has played in his itinerary as an artist), then we may well take this question, in all its ethical and political reach, as the question of the exhibition. It is a question about the conditions for participation in the acts of memory presented here; or, more simply, a question about the conditions for engaging these works. To what mode of aesthetic and social relation do these works invite us? Who can engage them and "who" might leave them? These should be the first questions for an introduction, in any case, for the images invite caution: the traditional approach to the aesthetic object and the traditional notion of the exhibition may occlude their most fundamental dimensions -it may be that a manual of usage is required here, not a "catalogue."

Puglia has described his project in this exhibition as one of memory. An abstraction proper to memory as it has been conceived since antiquity (an abstraction that is irreducibly graphic) will provide the grounds for a practice of recollection that engages what the Greeks understood of the relation between memory and thought, even while questioning these grounds of intelligibility, or pointing beyond them. (And let us follow Puglia in underscoring the word "thought"-for it is a matter always of "a possible world" beyond any "specific instance" that might find its meaning there.) Is this foregrounding and superimposition of the forms of inscription Aristotle described in his account of memory (with the indelible image of a wax tablet that has provided a constant reference for Puglia over the years and is perhaps repeated in these works in the etchings he practices on glass) still in fact a form of anamnesis? There is, to be sure, reproduction here, and re-collection of a kind: the *legein* of careful transcription and spatial articulation. But it is a recollection of schemas, images, text and traces that never gathers contextual or historical meaning. These abstracts of anamnesis seem assembled by no more than the passive synthesis of a haunted psyche vainly interpreting the inscriptions it has suffered and unable to resist a crowding of associations without contextual or analogical justification. They remain signs (or text), and present themselves as such. But they form no historical record and give no coherent image of the past. The human figures that appear here remain anonymous, suspended in the notation, documentation, or graphic analysis (the reproduction of outline or the internal exposition by x-ray) that overlays them or forms their background. They remain souls in a kind of graphic purgatory -a purgatory nowhere better illustrated than in *Über die Schädelnerven*, where the figure, hovering between type and individual (the images are from clinical studies), barely more than a sign and yet almost a portrait, seems imprisoned in an apparatus that multiplies its form by exposing it to a shadowplay that redoubles the absence. These souls are refugees of the historiographic/ethnographic/scientific imaginary, with no escape from the image.

But the fact that these figures almost emerge from their sign-character as icons of themselves should not be lost here. It is true that Puglia is subverting the specular satisfactions of historiography and refusing any humanistic pathos as he critically transcribes some of the acts of disappropriation to which photography has lent itself in this age of mechanical reproduction. Further, his practice of abstraction and juxtaposition fragments the grounds of historical identification and prohibits any construction of these figures as representatives of a group, a class, or even humankind ("Man") in general -no

ideology has a hold here. Yet the figures that appear in works like *Über die Schädelnerven* nevertheless lend themselves to a form of recognition. They do so, paradoxically, by virtue of their very anonymity and the work of "abstraction" that produces it. A segment from Puglia's own series of remarks on *Über die Schädelnerven* will serve as a guide here:

To the pathos of intact memory, we will oppose a will to save the unsaved, the unidentifiable.

"Looking at things from the proper level, however, everything in police affairs is a matter of identification" (Alphonse Bertillon, *Identification anthropométrique, instruction signalétique*, 1893).

The obsession with identity and with identification transforms individuals into cases, into types, emblems. We shall restore to faces their veils.

The uncanny should occur more in the sudden familiarity of the unknown than in the surprise of the familiar. Before the composite image, I experience the revelation of finding myself in the place of the described man. This authorizes me to look at his portrait, which is my own.

It is a question of taking the head of the image and twisting its neck. (From "A travers l'image, contre l'image")

Almost everything we need lies in these juxtaposed statements. But let us concentrate on the penultimate. An unanticipated identification before the eminently recognizable character of the composite image (there is perhaps no better exemplar of reproducibility itself) is opposed to a no less sudden experience of familiarity before the unknown. Against an experience of substitutability at the level of the type (a revelation because always forgotten -the image itself is complicitous here), Puglia posits as a kind of imperative for his art the production of the event of the uncanny -the latter involving an unknown, but presupposing at least the minimal intelligibility required for an experience of repetition.

How does Puglia seek such an event? It is not by attempting images of the unknown, or heretofore unknown images. Instead, it is through an aesthetic process that does not negate, but rather suspends the abstraction proper to all photographic documentation of the human form (or what Bataille refers to as "la figure humaine," in an essay of 1929 by that name -all of the group portraits employed by Puglia cite this text), an abstraction particularly apparent in the photograph of the case or type. Puglia takes his point of departure from precisely the reproducibility of the human form given by photography and exploited by what Bataille termed the "intellectual voracity" of modern science. He foregrounds this reproducibility, and "backgrounds" with the generalization of internal structure enabled by the x-ray (Katherine Rudolph has compared Puglia's work in this latter respect with Descartes' recourse to dissection).

Occasionally, a kind of analysis of abstraction by hand and eye (as in *La figure humaine*) seems Puglia's primary concern. But in every case, the citation or "staging" of the anonymous figure in a complex play of framing, the remarking of its generality by the x-ray (offering also a rich play of light and shadow), and then the work of inscription and textual overlay, render the human figure a sign -a sign with no meaning beyond the vague temporal marker it bears. The effect is not easy to describe; we are dealing with art. But in

the estrangement produced by this becoming-sign of the human image, its becoming *figure*, we have a kind of offering of intelligibility without signification. A figure emerges from the veil of inscription and the play of light and shadow that might recall Hölderlin's famous line from "Mnemosyne": "A sign we are, without meaning."

"Just as there is comparative anatomy, which helps us to understand the nature and history of organs, so this photographer is doing comparative photography, adopting a scientific standpoint superior to the photographer of detail."

-Döblin's remarks concerning the "physiognomic gallery" found in the photographic works of August Sander, cited by Benjamin in "A Small History of Photography"

"If we speak of bodies and signs, we speak of anatomy, we speak of the body opening to allow the retrieval of signs. These signs can speak of themselves, or they can speak of the body that contains them, but above all these can, for the anatomist, speak of other bodies. Therefore such signs will make it possible to open up to the experience of other bodies and other things."

-Salvatore Puglia, "Telegrams" (unpublished)

We are a sign because we trace signs, Heidegger said, evoking with his reading of this line a work of the hand that would draw out the human essence and allow it to emerge in its fundamentally historical character in the time of *Technik*. It is hardly clear that Puglia would subscribe to Heidegger's own understanding of the human essence, despite their shared reference to the Greek legacy. But his way of practicing the image engages the "usage" of the human (Heidegger's "Brauch") by which something like history or historical meaning is possible -a becoming sign of the human that is irreducible to any signification and, in its historicity, the ground of any historical recognition. Here are the grounds for the uncanny recognition lie seeks. His abstraction produces an anonymous figure that is not an individual representation of "humanity" but a figure of historical intelligibility at a kind of O-degree of signification. But, once again, there is nothing "abstract" here. Puglia's aesthetic work has also restored to most of these human images a density that renders them singular, producing thereby a figure that gives us the "whatever" of a singularity in the age of reproduction, and hence the possibility for a quite different experience of substitutability than the one he evokes in relation to the composite image. The "substitutability" suggested by these figures is that of Giorgio Agamben's "coming community."

So do we find an affirmation of community, despite everything, or some sort of positive invitation, some ethical appeal? There is no question that this work engages the ethical, but we must not hasten to give the ethics here any substance, nor fail to recognize that it entails a knowledge of a transgression that is essential to it. It is ethical, first, in the sense of this term that Wittgenstein sketched when he suggested that the only possible "ethical" language would be one that presents the existence of language (Pierre Alferi alluded to such a notion in an early statement on Puglia's work). Beyond Puglia's constant recollection of the basic constituents of the photographic or x-ray reproduction, there is an effort to produce the equivalent of the phrase from his introductory statement: "What would

a painting look like if the presence of painting were precisely the quality it aimed to convey?"

Puglia's aesthetic remarking of the "parting" that is proper to the becoming-sign of the imaged being, his "ex-scription" -or "x-scription," to transform Nancy's concept in the light of *Les âmes du purgatoire* -realizes precisely such a movement in all its import. Puglia's presentation of the fact of language is moreover a presentation of the fact of history, and to mark the historicity of a "possible world" in presenting the (non)grounds of its intelligibility is to mark the possibility of a futurity, or to mark at least the claim of history on a possible present, as Benjamin saw. But there is an ethical dimension to this work too in that its recognition of an historical exigency (issuing from the O-degree of recognizability Puglia produces) is not without an acute awareness of what is given up in the becoming-sign of the human. *Les larmes d'Eros* is a disquieting reminder if we allow ourselves to recall the image of torture to which Bataille alludes in referring to a photograph he has received from a certain Borel, an image, Puglia asserts in "Telegrams," with which every photograph shares kinship. What appeal is contained in the "Please," "Please don't" of this work? What transgression is being marked? This is not just the image's attempt to hold us at the surface, its request that we not touch (a prohibition Puglia constantly violates). Rather, it is a remarking of the transgression proper to language itself ("language" in its broadest sense), a reminder of the death it brings in its murderous abstraction. Puglia is always testifying to the body of this death (the phrase is from Bill Haver: Puglia's "Telegrams" is in fact a long meditation on his tormented struggle with this body). Of course, there is no witness for such testimony (as Puglia reminds us by taking Celan's title, *Aschenglorie*, as one of his own), no legitimation for it. And this is part of what makes the testimony ethical. But there would be no "history" if there were not the trace of this body-there would be only abstraction. The sign without meaning is not abstract; its opacity derives from the fact that it is a trace of the moment and the materiality that is lost to it. In re-marking this trace, Puglia calls us to the real grounds of community as given by language.

Meditating on observances of *Kristalnacht* and on displays of the AIDS Quilt, Bill Haver has argued that the recitation of proper names in these ceremonies is a recitation of *anonyms* that lends not to identification (in sympathy or empathy) but to a knowledge of community based on the substitutability of "whatever" singularity. Of course, these instances of *mourning the stranger* engage other and more immediate (though not unrelated) experiences of our finitude. And we must not forget that Puglia's exhibition is offered as art and is partially *about* representation in figural equivalents of suchonyms. But are we not called to a similar relationality by his gestures of commemorating "the unsaved, the unidentified"? If we glimpse what Puglia has exposed of the conditions of recognition, we will grasp the ethics of this gesture and know what these acts of anamnesis offer and require in their unforgettable presence.

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