

ANSIGTER

TORBEN ESKEROD

RHODOS

KULTURMINISTERIETS FOTOGRAFISKE BOGPRIS · THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE'S PHOTOGRAPHIC BOOK PRIZE

TORBEN ESKEROD • ANSIGTER

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PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE FIELD OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

TEXT BY JOÃO GUILHERME BIEHL

I remember the photograph which was not taken. March 1995, in the South of Brazil, we were at a place called *Vita* where human beings thrown away from homes, hospitals and streets, alone, many without names or documents, just *wait with death*. Someone was seated on the packed ground next to the only tree, crouching near a stream of piss. At a distance we thought: a creature who no longer lives with the notion of time, as if it had been self-generated. What was it holding? Moving backwards towards the gate, we got closer to the woman who did not move. Seen from above, her head was full of holes and, enticed by serene filthy flesh, worms burrowed in the wounds and under the scalp. We did not look at the face. Dust-covered, nothing to hide, there were her genitals. She must have been old, dead by now. A dead one who one does not forget.

There is something one has to miss before opening the book.

This book begins with the words of a woman who vows not to forget the man who dies forsaken by God: the child Sister Hedvig never had.¹ Then in the beginning there it is, the verse to remember. Hedvig, Mary, Ruth, Helene: as young women they freely bound themselves to servitude, to never be of any man. Torben Eskerod invites the retired deaconesses to situate themselves in another scene. He works to make a site different from the one assigned in life. Precisely there, in the last place the Sisters call home, before their verses are inscribed on tombstones. In the living room, with the light found there, he improvises a studio against a white wall: huge windows and artificial light from the ceiling. Then the man asks the woman: would you stay with me when the others are gone?

That simple it is. In these photographic acts, life sentences are broken: the operator's, the photographed subject's and *I's* who see in the book. Things are exchanged, souls, faiths and doubts are mixed with one another. A surprising lineage is let loose. While consuming this book of *FACES*, an ethics transpires, the possibility of symbolizing otherwise, founded on what has been lived in that other scene. The present, as one opens it up, halting for a moment the destiny one dies for:

In 1927, Sister Mary consigned her body to walk in darkness with steady perseverance in order to be consecrated by light.² The heaviness of time has passed. Now the word becomes her flesh and for the first time she lets someone photograph her.

Sister Ruth looks into the machine, bearing joyful songs for the face that she does not see, but hears, talking to her.³ One recalls the tears which were sowed for the mouth to be opened by the photographs. The missing verse is a lament from long ago: "Turn once again our fortune, Lord, as streams return in the dry South."⁴

Sister Helene brings us to the end of PRAYER, there where the photographer makes room for her to endure her chosen search.⁵ Helene sees herself searching. Searching those words which never asked for the desired, for words are cruel and in vain. Searching to remember what is there, after all, to be found? Searching for a door out of one's body. Searching in the dreams for the eyes to be opened. Helene eyes that repetitious search which ends life in circuitous paths: death *in vita*.

We are faced with something simple and familiar, existing all along these paths: our condition of left-overs. While seeing this in the open, in the book, the nowhere of searching is placed. I am out of the picture as I look at these faces. Something hits and leads me from the outside, and I go into presence, for a moment.

So it happens, for this photography is a production in the field of the unconscious.⁶ These photographic acts engineered by Torben Eskerod are enough in themselves, a rare thing. In these acts, going around to leave one's life behind is present. Such terminal movement leaves traces in the machine, a hole, an eye and an unexpected hearing. Something is recollected. Repetitions are faced and extended into the film's negative. In these acts subjects re-enter themselves in the unconscious. You and I are included in a production and not further excluded from seeing others and ourselves.⁷

This process of symbolization opens the possibility of elaborating living not *a priori*, but differently; engaging in the construction of something unprecedented and other than individuals and destinies to be memorialized. Such elaboration is dependent on the possibility of making a certain tie with oneself and with strangers in the presence of the body, its stutterings, stumbling ways, writings and dwellings.

I remember the photograph which was not taken. That thing is part of the lineage of the faces and of the life and death masks that inhabit the man, and was founded on the Sisters as Torben Eskerod's primary art.

II

February of 1996, we were in Salvador, Northeast Brazil. Torben had just finished working on the life and death masks in Denmark. We were continuing the work started at *Vita* in 1995. This time we were investigating literal death, social abandonment and subjectivity at *Caasab*, a community-run hospice which shelters persons with AIDS. We placed an outdoor studio: a chair next to a wall covered with a black cotton cloth.

An inhabitant stumbled over the chair — scars from drug injections wherever blood flowed, arms, neck, forehead. Nerivaldo Souza Chagas, 28 years old. "If all was so simple...", he said as he was taking his shirt off for the portrait. Hormone induced breasts had almost disappeared. He had been in *Caasab* for a while and then returned to the streets. This time he was found begging in a church, infected with maggots, his lover dead. "I have a cataract. It is very difficult to see." His face moved around all the time, the eyes opened and closed erratically, making focusing impossible from a fixed tripod. Torben then moved the camera close to wherever the man fought his blindness. As with the others, he was also photographed eyes closed.

Nerivaldo told a dream of the night before:

"I was talking alone, to myself.
I was talking to myself with another person.
I will never know who it is."
Which face do you see? I ask.
"It is my mother.
My mother is dead.
She died giving birth to my sister.
So there is no way that I can see my mother."
What do you hear?
"She answers 'My son, my son.'
Only this, only this.
I say 'Mother, mother.'
That's how I speak in the dream.
I see nothing. I see my mother."

Returning to Denmark, Torben photographed the other half of the EQUIVALENT portraits in a studio against a gray paper background, flash and soft box light. As I look at the faces in the middle of the book, shirts off, I see an Other and I will never know who it is. That's how the lineage of these faces is constituted: in the impossibility of separating the physical and fictive powers of the equivalent. While Nerivaldo and others were being photographed, some portraits of acquaintances and the woman in thorns were already printed at home. In Denmark, Nerivaldo's yet undeveloped portraits figure in the equal and different element that combines these counterpart photographs, standing for something not yet revealed in the camera operator. The photographer is the carrier of an opacity that forces vision, of the values that make these FACES equivalent.

What are these faces equivalent to?
Love in abandonment.
Only this, only this.
"Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?"

These last words of the Son of God, are tattooed *in* the forehead of a woman our age. She is the image of these words. In the photograph she becomes the equivalent of the loneliness of dying abandoned. But this is not a verse. The lips are closed. I must live without you, my love. Here I am old and calm. I don't want to be asleep. I cannot close my eyes. You will see it, Torben. It's you. You who woke me up from the death mask. That's how I speak in the dream.

There is nothing else to be known and no mystery to be forged. Not a lament, not a silence. Not the nostalgic imperative of keeping wounds open with meaning. The photographer endures the passing of time. The machine witnesses something that disperses everywhere. Thirteen persons held in a one-to-one relationship with themselves and the animal, man to man, woman to woman, man to woman were stopped from slumbering in their maternal and paternal lineage.

The faces are frozen in a fraction of a second. There is a physiological halt. In this moment one is capable of locating this nodal point which in a certain way determined one's destiny. Not the justification of existence.

The photographer does not indulge in resolving death, in formatting its inner laws. No longer the lack of the actual parents. Rather a possibility to operationalize in a different way one's story, the one which one displays as truth. One's life-line is altered as the machine pulses. Movement without *imago* as it flees into the negative. It is this missing One that makes the equivalences possible, chemical combinations of light and darkness. Without the eyes these faces are death masks.

After the Equivalent portraits were printed, this book was conceived.

III

In September 1994, the photographer visited the Museum of National History, at Frederiksberg Castle. In the exhibition, "One Hundred Years of Writers' Portraits," he saw a life and a death mask. He approached something he had wanted to get close to for such a long time, closer than photography, painting and sculpture.⁸ Yes, the curator said, there are other masks. Come up and you will see them. In the tower chamber masks of ancestors of this country were stored — politicians, scientists, artists, writers, the makers of modern Denmark. This hidden collection of life and death masks was donated to the Gallery by the one who diligently cast them with a refined technique.⁹ Torben Eskerod continues this work. He brings the masks back, the imagined fathers and mothers who, forsaken, guide the living. They are recast in a distinct symbolic participation in Denmark's late twentieth century — the landscape of this book. Exhibited here these subjects are anonymous. They are masks.

During the Middle Ages masks of dead authorities who held the right over death and life were used to make lifesize effigies, things of ghostly reverence and memorial ceremonies.¹⁰ Later on, life and death masks were used as models for sculptors and painters to stylize the classic ideal of stillness. By the mid-1800s masks of life and death had become an object of their own. Practices of phrenology amassed masks and busts into special scientific collections of famous and infamous personae and of people of various racial derivations. Scientists of those times looked for a fundamental relationship between the certainty of facial features, the shape of the skull, mental capacity and character.¹¹ Modern individuals gained a mythical surface: the memory function of the persons' lived lives after the social bodies had died. Dead furrows were filled with meanings of good and evil. All these motives for masking are strangely blended in this century's poetic practice of mourning by families and enlightened elite in the search for the literal connection of face and soul, or the brilliance of the life of the memorable one, at the moment of death or immediately afterwards. Nonetheless, an obscure and nameless instinct, displaced by modern visualizing truths¹², finds a symbolic support in Torben Eskerod's work, *SPIRITUS SANCTUS*.

The photographer returns to the tower chamber and sets up a studio: a small table against a black cloth and two lights. The guards hand him the fragile masks, one by one, they are photographed in their plastic bags. He muses over the disguises for quite some time: the plastic is holding their breath. He takes only one out, for no

apparent reason. In the dark room he makes the prints and hangs them on the walls. The photographer perceives that the one taken outside is the closest to him — the trust of further creation.

Then he walks up the ladder again. This time no guards, he has the key. One by one the masks are removed from their containers. The photographer sits there with the masks for long hours. He is no longer aiming at capturing a dead naturality or to be surprised by a hidden reservoir of meaning in himself or of a figure posed motionless. Something primary emerges. He engineers disturbance. Different lighting techniques are experimented with upon the masks. At first the light is too strong; the masks become too ghostly. A softer light is arranged, as objective as the way a man sees through a standard lens. The black cloth makes it possible to print the white masks darker, in shades of grey. "I printed them in such a way that they got skin."

No body. The borders of life and death in the past are extended through the hands of this rare scientist of vision, silence and of words when there is room for them. What hits us is that these are photographs of real things. This creation leaves printed the possibility of moving things out of their hidden place: of blending light and darkness, of engineering the uncertainty as to whether the portraits are human beings or automatons. This artifice fascinates, opens up. That is *unheimlich*¹³ — all too familiar, uncanny — for one lives death in one's skin. And this skin is an effect of the machine and its operator. What a truth is here. It is that simple.

For a moment we stop hearing the whispers of death within the objects of a well-educated life — a movement which is nowhere and knows *no-words* is for real. I am not a spectator in Torben Eskerod's *FACES* — something moves outside me to print. *Spiritus Sanctus*.

João Guilherme Biehl

Berkeley, September 1997

NOTES:

- 1 Sister Hedvig was consecrated in 1924 with the words "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead." (2. Timothy 2.8).
- 2 Sister Mary was consecrated in 1927 with the words "I am the light of the world: he that follow me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." (John 8.12).
- 3 Sister Ruth was consecrated in 1929 with the words "They that sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy." (Psalm 126.5).
- 4 Psalm 126.4
- 5 Sister Helene was consecrated in 1933 with the words "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." (Matthew 7.7).
- 6 Jacques Lacan highlights that the field of the unconscious is based on the *Wiederkehr*, return, and that it is transjective, neither individual nor collective: "There may be, as in the parable, many called and few chosen, but there will certainly not be any others except those who are called. In order to understand the Freudian concepts, one must set out the basis that it is the subject who is called — the subject of Cartesian origin." Recollection "is not Platonic reminiscence — it is not the return of a form, an imprint, a *eidōs* of beauty and good, a supreme truth, coming from us from the beyond. It is something that comes to us from the structural necessities, something humble, born at the level of the lowest encounters and of all the talking crowd that precedes us..." In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, New York: W.W.Norton & Company, pp.47, 48.
- 7 Thanks to Robson de Freitas Pereira, Robert Kimball and Paul Rabinow for their comments. See Robert Kimball, *Restless is the Heart*, Bristol: Wyndham Hall Press, 1988.
- 8 Life and death masks are made using similar techniques. The head and facial hair is brushed over with a thinned solution of modelling clay or with oil, to prevent the plaster's adherence when poured. The skin itself needs no preparation. Life masks require that the subject sits motionless and that the eyes remain closed; tubes are inserted in the nostrils for breathing. Then a layer of wet plaster is applied to the face and built up with more layers. Threads are embedded in between the layers to divide the mold into two halves before the plaster sets. These parts placed together contain the negative from which the positive is cast. New molds can be made using the original mask. See Iris Gibson, "Death masks unlimited," in *British Medical Journal*, vol.291, December 1985, pp.1785-87; M.H. Kaufman and Robert McNeil, "Death masks and life masks at Edinburgh University," in *British Medical Journal*, vol.298, February 1989, pp.506-7.
- 9 Most of these masks were made by odontologist Holger Winther.
- 10 There is a death mask from Saqqara in Egypt dated 2,300 BC. Romans produced wax masks of their ancestors.
- 11 See Susanne Regener, "Totenmasken," in *Ethnologia Europaea*, vol.23, pp.153-170.
- 12 For an archaeology of the medical perception and the "loquacious gaze" see the work of Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, New York: Vintage Books, 1975
- 13 For a study on the production of the unheimlich see Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII. London, The Hogarth Press, 1955.

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