

*Topography of Disappearance. The Armenian City* by Claudio Gobbi  
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*The pursuit of forms is only a pursuit of time, but if there are no stable forms, there are no forms at all.*  
Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*

Standing there, the temple first gives to things their look, and to men their outlook on themselves. This view remains open as long as the work is a work, as long as the god has not fled from it.  
Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*

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The logical and formal structure used in assembling this collection of photographs leaves it open to further developments for this very process, primarily a certain *impurity* in its seriality. It is indeed this irregularity that constitutes its skeleton, and this is what must be dealt with first, before giving each image back its sense of uniqueness and inimitability.

Aside from its various fields of application, in photography the mechanics of seriality has its origin in the repetition of a gesture which is identical to itself, and directed towards visual objects which are different every time. This process generates an entire system of differences/repetitions that can evolve infinitely. While the photographic process creates a constant scale of comparison (a standard, according to the industrial logic of the assembly line, from which it is derived), the mapping process continues to explore new types, subtypes and variations. Following a radical revision, started in the second half of the twentieth century with Sander and Blossfeldt, and continued by the Bechers, who dedicated four decades to the conceptual study of industrial archaeology, seriality today differs from its nineteenth-century prototype, which was less flexible and mainly relegated to scientific and legal uses, and is more a, *logical category in movement*. Indeed, it is more a progressive organizational system of visual objects based on their descriptive, structural and formal properties. This process contemporaneously produces a language and a metalanguage, a typological system and a historical description, a heuristic device and a general map of recurrences, derivations and intrinsic evolutions of the various situations observed.

A rather anomalous case which introduces subtle but significant shifts from the prototype (so much so as to raise doubts regarding its effective continuity), is the project on "cultural persistence" in a European scenario, developed over the past few years by Claudio Gobbi, and presented in its latest evolution in this publication. As the author explains, "attention is directed towards Armenian architecture, on its atavistic capacity to repeat the same signs and processes in

space and time for over 1,500 years, and its legacy to a land which has always straddled the East and West, and which is still searching for its most profound cultural roots". This is a serial work (evidently in a non-canonical acceptance), dedicated to a precise typology of church or certain structures historically present in the Caucasus and Armenia, in which the architectural format has remained unchanged over centuries, even after the upheaval caused by the Armenian diaspora—and which represents the prototype for the churches constructed by this people in Europe and abroad. The evolution of this process is potentially inexhaustible; whenever new resources and land are available for a new church, its construction is always inspired by one of the traditional prototypes.

The connection between this series of images and the theoretical issues that I present has required some thought, but I believe that it is important also to understand this process. After speaking with the author about this project and having received some images, I replied requesting confirmation regarding an aspect which I immediately thought was of primary importance. A similar approach is involved, and can only be resolved within a paradoxical interpretation of time and history, given that the photographic process must include all temporal dimensions. Thus, each photograph adopts a particular visual style that bears strong chronological connotations, which are somehow drawn from the context in which these architectural forms are located, and finishes by coinciding with the ideal synthesis of a single, unique architectural matrix. Consequently this establishes a sort of iconographic constant, which short-circuits both the *ad hoc* photographs and *found* images included in the project. One can see a circular relationship between identity and difference, which cannot exhaust itself within a closed-circuit logic, but necessarily implies a further development. Moving backwards, this technique (or style, form, etc.) shifts seamlessly from the contemporary to the medieval period. Each layer interacts each time with a background and a context, according to an ever-changing configuration.

(In response to my observation on the political sense of this project, Gobbi said that his interest was directed towards Armenian architecture as, "a prototype of great metaphorical potential". For the author, this potential evidently goes beyond the problem of the genocide and diaspora of the Armenian people, without thereby removing or emphasizing it. In this sense, the structural constriction of excluding any philological, chronological or geographical taxonomy operates on a political level: as a metaphor of a possible still "open" historical reading, one that is not overtly stated, and is in fact *unrepresentable*, except within a collective and implicitly identitarian dimension, reduced to a lowest common denominator by an architectural presence that is *original and persistent* in time and space).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As Benedetta Guerzoni underlines, the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the government of the Young Turks between 1915 and 1916, is still substantially negated by the authorities. This has created an ideological and instrumental stance vis-à-vis the scarcely existent visual evidence, hindering both the reconstruction of the facts and the historical reappraisal. "In response to Turkish negationism, the Armenian associations promoting recognition of the

This is how I presented my idea to Claudio. He replied by asking me for some bibliographic references of Warburg's works that I referred to. (This now generalized interlacing between the theory and the operative process of photography is interesting. My remarks regarding a retroactive interlacing perhaps highlights the sense that projecting theory onto the productive and imaginary processes stimulates greater awareness of the photographic process within the photographer, causing a return to the theoretical paradigm, and thus allowing the observer to formulate their interpretation).<sup>2</sup> What I had initially seen was an element of research into time, and precisely the edification of a paradox of duration. The answer primarily concerns another closely related aspect of my previous reflection: "regarding the issue of seriality, one must remember that although this is required by the subject, it is not the case for the photographic narrative that moves towards revocation and is less focused on the authorship of the photographs. This same concept also regards the other complex issue of truthfulness between documentation, fiction and simulation".<sup>3</sup>

This method poses a series of problems. Firstly, why is the revocation (or the multiplication) of *styles* of vision described as a "loss of vision"? Does vision fade to the same degree in which it becomes dialogic? (Or does it mime perceptive forms and aesthetic canons "externally" or "differently" to its own point of view?). At the point of explicit exhibition, does it *exteriorize* its implicit internal forms? And if this is true, then what remains of the photographic act? It is clear that each of these photographs postulates (and "acts" as) a vision, but all together they create a structure of relations, rather like force fields which neutralize each other, as they exist in the same segment of time-space, and with an anachronistic effect between their relative positions. This "loss of vision" is therefore the acceptance or surrender to the fact that there are many visions and times which are constantly negotiated with other visions and times.

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genocide utilise all methods considered valid, without any distinction, overlaying the historical significance on the symbolic one. Photographs consequently become an easy object of disrepute and rebuttal by the opposing party, in a game of mirrors in which the negationists also make indiscriminate use of photographic albums. Such usage, combined with the unchanging approach of publications demanding the recognition of the genocide, contributes to determining a 'sclerotized' iconography, based on the few available photographs, revolving around the depictions of atrocities and victims". Benedetta Guerzoni, *Fotografie del genocidio armeno. Memoria, denuncia, uso pubblico*, in Marcello Flores, *Il genocidio degli armeni*, il Mulino, Bologna 2015, p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> Commenting on writings by Craig Owens, Hal Foster places the origin of this phenomenon in a period which lasts, "from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s (in conceptual art, in the textual composition of documentation, in writings by artists) [a phase in which] this linguistic irruption shifts aside the visual order of modernism and prepares a textual space for the post-modern". More precisely, what is defined here as, "reputable of late-Modernist purity in favour of the impurity of post-Modernist text". Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London 1996, p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> E-mail dated 27 May 2011. The above cited text is from a brief message sent to me by the author in the same period, together with the images. Other reflections explained further on, and the relative observations by Gobbi, highlighted as quotations and not as footnotes, are from later conversations following the publication of my book *Realtà della fotografia. Il visibile fotografico e i suoi processi storici*, Franco Angeli, Milan 2012, cfr. in part. pp. 117-120.

But also the suspicion implied in the idea that this "loss" or atrophy of perception corresponds to a form of oblivion. This represents a "catastrophe", a dramatic crisis of the entire culture of vision. What emerges is a dialectical stance regarding the historical and evolutionary dimension of photography, and its capacity to catalogue cultural transitions and *different* forms of thought (persistent and "surviving", *in spite of all*)<sup>4</sup> and focused on time, like a historical metalanguage.

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Each metalanguage, however, always conveys the unconscious side of these other languages. Here this effect of repetition/variation opens the imagination to the senses and at the same time withholds its significant dimension. It *suspends* the representation in an intermediate state between sense and significance, so much so that each photograph reflects its own presence on the others. Re-launching and disseminating a mobile and interchangeable structure of possible significances highlights that which is absent (creating infinite historical variations, which are more conceptually and sentimentally presumed than that which is effectively exhibited).

The idea of *persistence* implies a contradictory dialectic, an amphibian co-presence between that which lingers and that which fades. The incessant mutability of the whole prevails, as an insistent and sought after effect, but never quite resolved. The "mode of production" of the series, its slow and meditated assembly, the "registering" and "interlinking" of the images, allows the images to sediment one onto the other and find their "definitive" form. The prototype image of the Armenian church appears progressively and transversely throughout the photographs, rather like a volume which intersects a plane and then moves away, leaving space for a multiplicity of forms to be revealed. (I am driven to compare the object of Claudio Gobbi's work to Kubrick's monolith in *A "Space Odyssey"*: a mysterious presence of uncertain origin, mute and lingering, ubiquitous in time and space, dark but of blinding evidence).

The temporal dimension of this project is central, and by this I do not mean the historical correlation or referencing implied in the photographs, however insubstantial these may be (as in Aristotelian thought, the accident "adds" substance but does not alter the essence). I do not refer to the time *to which the images refer or allude*, but to the time that was necessary for them to appear and state their formal and structural dimension. A more implicit, subterranean and invisible time; a duration which penetrates and overcomes the work, pushing it beyond its very limits: *a duration which tends to coincide*

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<sup>4</sup> I refer here to Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and its interpretation by Didi-Huberman with regard to the famous four photographs taken by a member of the *Sonderkommando* and "saved from the hell of Auschwitz in the summer of 1944". Cfr. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in spite of all. Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (2003, *Images malgré tout*), University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2008.

*with the work as a whole, and which in its every part refers to the declarative act that establishes it as a formal and material construct.*

In this very moment in which I write, the sequence is still not defined, and the author's search for images continues in a series of incognitos, afterthoughts and changes of direction. In reply to my question regarding the time of the production and elaboration of these projects (which is the pragmatic aspect of the previous reflections on the temporal dimension of this work), he responded as follows: "I wish for nothing to finish, and indeed, nothing is presented as a closed series. There is always the possibility of adding an additional image or piece to the jigsaw, rather like in my series, *Persistence*, where even an off-cast image can add or vary significance. Nevertheless, for me this project is unique for the anomaly of the architectonic object that is always identical to itself. New churches continue to be built everywhere and my question is, what will be truly new and what will be old in two or three hundred years? The selection of the photographs commences with the inherent force of the single image, and continues with how this can be included in a series, either by analogy or contrast with other images. The geographical distribution is also another important variable, as the project contains photographs from about twenty-five different countries".

Material, form and structure of the work proceed in parallel. The enunciative instance negates the specificity of photography as it removes both its support and the historical-photographic heritage of the icon. Contemporaneously, it reaffirms the same by creating an "act" which is in some way pre-photographic and literary (akin to the printed press and narration) and also post-photographic (integrating visual and communication technologies). This occurs through a process of recodification in which the physical support of the image is reduced once again to a lowest common denominator (similar to the diverse architectonic typologies which, due to their ubiquity, are all part of the same macrotypology). "Whatever their origin, the photographs are all uniformly aligned to the same support: a sheet of paper of the same dimension. In the process of selection, I decided in a certain sense to 'negate the sources' by eliminating those images which showed some form of support, and opted for an approach aimed towards a more 'democratic' diversity. This creates opportunity to reflect on the ambiguity of the sources, characteristic of today's photography". This common denominator takes on the role of an intermediary, a semiotic *shifter* as it partakes at the same time in the physicality and uniqueness of analogue photography, and in the generic, immaterial interchangeability of digital photography. Indeed, paper is the support of the entire project. It is the terrain for dialogue between its various components; it is the intermediary between the photosensitive gelatin-silver and the digital mosaic; it forms a common platform for the unitary recomposition of fragments of a whole, which would otherwise be unattainable.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger wrote the following: "... the equipmentality of equipment consists in its utility", and "Both the design and the choice of material predetermined by that design – and, therefore, the dominance of the matter-form structure are grounded in such serviceability". In a later addition to this same essay, the

Corresponding with these multiple planes is a multiplicity of media and modes of production that support the open and *in progress* state of the project. After identifying the architectural moment (which by existing, confirms and develops a discourse that pre-exists the specificity of each single location), Gobbi photographs it using different techniques, formats and supports, and then chooses the image which he retains as being "the most ideal or interesting in relation to the whole".

The same is true for those photographs not produced directly and sourced from professionals, amateurs, and historical archives. As he himself underlines, "ample space is left for on-line research and commissioning or seeking authorization for images from various authors, asking them to consign or produce a single high-quality image of the church inserted in its surroundings, and preferably with no human figures. No photograph comes out integral; all are more or less modified, cropped, or improved'. The idea of giving visibility to the 'concerted' aspect of this work by means of a list of authors with no specific reference to the single images, in a certain way creates an unanswerable question regarding the recognizability and ownership of the images".

The relationship with the sources and the visual referents of the images can be fluid, and in a certain sense anarchic (in the sense that one changes the parameters when need be, without applying any rule; to decide *how* or *what* to see and conserve on the basis of variables redefined for each single photograph), as it appears focused on a fixed idea, instable and difficult to identify but recurrent. "There are no notable names, with the exception of Dmitri Ermakov, a Russian photographer active in the Caucasus and East Anatolia at the end of the nineteenth century. The historical sources are varied: books, archives, family albums; there are official photographs as well as private ones; many images are anonymous. For me it is important to source a testimony of the existence of the monument in a given territory, and providing it with a new 'dignity' that renders it appreciable in relation to the whole".

Indeed, this is a truly paradoxical idea, both visually (isolating architecture and at the same time, depicting it in its context) and conceptually (reducing the image to *one's own* dimension, formal and ethical, recognizable and shared, single and collective). According to Bourdieu, we can define the result as a "middle-brow" system, which is both visually anonymous and socially connotated. A system which operates as a yardstick of the relationship between *our time* and photography, if it is true that, "it is the temporal dimension that reveals the paradoxes of popular photography. As an instantaneous shot of the visible world, photography offers a means to dissolve the solid and compact reality of daily perception into an infinity of fleeting profiles or dream-like

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philosopher remarked that, "The problematic issue that prevails here, then, comes to a head at the very place in the discussion where the essence of language and of poetry is touched upon, all this, again, only in reference to the belonging together of being and saying". Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art (Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes)*, in *Off the Beaten Track* (1950, *Holzwege*), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 10, 13, 56. Regarding our discussion, I would like to conclude that *the truth of photography has never anything to do with showing (or looking), but more with saying*.

images". So, "it is only in the name of naive realism that one can consider realistic a representation of the real which is derived from its objective appearance, and not from the concordance between reality itself and the object (as the latter is manifest only through socially conditioned forms of perception), but from the conformity to rules which refine the syntax of their social application".<sup>6</sup>

What form of socially conditioned perception can therefore exhibit today the timeless prototype, suspended in time, of the Armenian church, if not (paraphrasing a reflection by Walter Benjamin on fashion<sup>7</sup> that could be applied to the current 'fashion of photography') that of those who, by placing themselves at the margins of daily perception, continuously cross them, as they obstinately try to resist the *ravages of oblivion*?

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Social Definition of Photography*, in Id. (ed.), *Photography. A Middle-brow Art* (1965, *Un art moyen*), Stanford University Press, Stanford CA 1990, pp. 76, 77.

<sup>7</sup> "Fashions are a collective medicament for the ravages of oblivion. The more short-lived a period, the more susceptible it is to fashion". Walter Benjamin, 'Convolute B' (B9a, I), in *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, The Belknap Press, New York 2002, p. 80.