

COUNTERING FORGETFULNESS

....There we are, side by side, in the salt white sand, among others who had lost children or watches, youth or opportunities, courage or their teeth, parents or money, trust or an arm, or passion, or heirlooms, or their identity, their job, or sense, their way, or strength, or life, there we can smell a corpse.....

Osman Lins, Lost and Found

The work of José Rufino has taken the trouble, virtually from the start, to slow time down and convey scenes that have been lived; letting the individual memory (his or that of others give way to collective recollection. Throughout his childhood, the artist spent frequent and long periods in the sugar mill of his father's father in the municipality of Areia, Paraíba. Taking on, as an adult, both his predecessor's name and relics, for several years, Rufino developed works that dealt with the world of books and sentiments in which his grandfather had lived and exercised the power of ownership. Documents, letters, books, chairs, writing desks, rubber stamps, old type-writers: everything provided backing for the creation of objects, installations (*Lacrymatio, Vociferatio, Sudoratio, Respiratio*) and series of drawings (*Letters from Areia*). What was private history and old became, with this gesture, a public and recent work. Today he dispenses the material traces of his loving memory to move on, through other works (*Laceratio, Murmuratio*), through other times. Intervening in documents that register business transactions that occurred in a variety of places (ports, railway lines, public departments), José Rufino has evoked the web of the daily life of those who handled them and has brought, through a process of universalizing his childhood memories, the reality of the hinterland of Paraíba to any place in the world. In addition to different periods in time, different instances also coincide in the artist's constructions. His memories of Areia thus no longer represent the inventory of the symbolic repertoire with which he first perceived life and become his own means of surrounding himself with everything in his extended vicinity. *Plasmatio*, installation that is presented in the XXV Biennial in São Paulo, is a mature work that consolidates this unique method of perceiving and commenting on the world. From the narrow corridor that leads to the central part of the area that houses the work, two towers can be seen at the back, made of piled, heavy, writing desks by the side of, and framing, a painting. Its vertical and symmetrical stains run down from the top from a small wooden box, go through the seat of a stool whose feet are supported on the towers of dark furniture and end almost at the level of the floor, suggesting the front view of a hanging woman or man. As this strange object gets closer, the eye gradually perceives that the support for the painting consists of the joining together of numerous sheets of, somewhat time-worn, written paper. The painted figure momentarily loses interest and what the eye seeks is recognition for what is exposed there, so fragile and partially covered by thin layers of dark paint. A patient and close inspection of the work reveals fragments of letters and notes made by people long departed from the loved places that placed them in the world; scant, but precise, references suggest that

they were written by political prisoners and those gone "missing" from the Brazilian military regime, or to them from relatives, colleagues and friends. They are papers impregnated with sensations of absence and loss, frustration and anger, revealing the confusion experienced in the midst of a situation that gradually loses all its original meaning and becomes merely a vague sense of withdrawnness and exile. There is a complete perception of the lack of 'the other' in these texts, as the loss suffered is of uncertain, temporary and constant duration: it can last an entire lifetime or be cured in a short time.

The persistent frustration of being unable to read what the painting hides, however, forces a new distancing from this written surface and the reconsideration of the painted image. Without a clear outline, the figure seems at times to come from the furniture or to blend into it in parts, suggesting lost pieces or shadows of a body of some sort, traces of what has been lost and cannot be recovered. At the back of the towers, another image-more tenuously painted than the first-reproduces the composite structure and reinforces the meanings shown at the front of the object. They are figures that evoke not each of the bodies of which the texts speak-all with their own name, form and smell to be remembered-, but the existence of a collective and anonymous body that resists, in spite of its imprecise and diaphanous appearance, the gradual fading of events and facts from ordinary memory. The eye further seeks, unsuccessfully, to guess the distance in which the tension between words and images approaches rupture, which empowers the visualization of the work and the approximation between intimate pain and public concern.

From the towers of desks, the shadowy and spacious hall extends on one side and on the other and holds analogous constructions. In one of them, a chair placed upside down rests on a long and slim box, attached horizontally to the top of the wall; from the central part of this box hang, almost to the ground, various other written sheets, joined and partially covered by anthropomorphic paintings. Once again, however, it is not obvious where the dripping marks of bodies end and the wood-staining varnishes and oils begin, so that the representation of the human head is confused, in the imprecise edges of the blots, with the painted continuation of the chair that tops the piece in a cross. From a tower composed of identical chests of drawers and a desk that is cut and also fixed above with a chair on top, further texts descend that are partially disguised with paint so that they relate mimetically to the furniture, in such a way that these constructions virtually resemble paintings. In this tense architecture made of texts and furniture there are still references - taken from the reports of political prisoners and formally processed by the artist - to the apparatus for interview and torture of the organs of repression maintained by the regime of exception/exclusion that for two decades ran Brazil. The description from memory of rooms, furniture and cells in the institutions that marked the passage into disappearance for many is mixed, therefore, in these constructions, with the creation of a symbolic place that remembers and reminds of these bodies and gives them the possible kind of permanence. Articulating these hybrid objects, a broad web of wires and rubber stamps runs over all the walls in the space that contains *Plasmatio*, making the environment created oppressive, and involving those who enter in the

fragmented, claustrophobic and precise narrative that the artist develops.

In condensing textual and visual references on the brutal exercise of power, *Plasmatio* expands and fills in details in a territory invented by José Rufino since other works. In *Lacrymatio*, installation made in 1996, family letters are partially covered with gouache, fixed to the walls and linked by rubber tubes, leading to an ordinary, empty chair, a vortex of different meanings that, in the work of the artist, amalgam sensations of family attachment and fear. In another installation, untitled and only slightly preceding the first, a small area houses another empty chair to which plates of copper are fastened and in front of which the photo of a child-the artist himself-lies on the floor covered by a layer of opaque resin. From the ceiling dangles a wire that sustains the only bulb that, badly, illuminates the gallery and that bears close witness to the progressive darkening of that image that represents many. It is, nevertheless, through the appropriation of previously secluded texts that in *Plasmatio* José Rufino better conjures up distinct periods of life and confuses instances of individual action and those of public interaction. Using unusual and distinctive building procedures, he inserts documents that testify to private losses in the fluxes of collective memory and transforms them into instruments that counteract the diffuse and far-reaching power of forgetfulness that societies institute. Moreover, the very process of acquisition of these papers establishes a new circuit through which memories flow and that combat the dissipation of facts: anchored in the slow and tense negotiation necessary to convince those who had the texts to make them available to the artist-even though he himself is the son of a political prisoner-, this process prompts a network of contacts among people who have not spoken to each other for a very long time or that, even without previously knowing one another, share memories of similar experiences. The moments in which these records of losses were made are thus extended to the present and their contents begin to occupy the uncertain boundaries that simultaneously unite and separate personal memories and the country's history.

This thick impregnation of the public sphere with an individual's memory is woven during the very process of construction of the images that the artist creates on the written sheets, even though for this purpose he blocks-with paint-, the possibility of the complete declaration of those memories through words. Taking the surfaces formed by the joining of the texts, Rufino paints, on just one of their halves, forms that resemble traces or marks of absent bodies. With the stained papers still damp, he folds them and spreads, with restricted pressure, the pigment that is deposited on the dry parts of the support he uses. It is from the thus printed and strange symmetries in the fibres of documents that hold intimate records that the bony and faceless figures appear that so often characterize the artist's work. Although the written pages and images that partly cover them are antagonistic at a symbolic level to what there is to be represented, it is their proximity that makes them indicative of a sense of loss that transcends any individuation.

As they are imprecise in outline, the symmetrical ink blots encourage the eye to disclose what they really hide, inserting the work of José Rufino in the same conceptual genealogy as that of the Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach

(1884-1922): in the same way as in the images used in psychoanalysis to stimulate the projections of personality, the painted forms of *Plasmatio* elicit, in those who see them, memories, doubts and unique interpretations of past happenings. Having experienced, as a child, the composition of blotches of paint thrown onto paper, it is the artist's painting, in the 1990s, on letters and envelopes from the collection of items that belonged to his paternal grandfather (*Cartas de Areia*) and, later, on the documents that are part of the installations *Laceratio e Murmuratio*, that emerge and consolidate this cognitive operation based in the construction/interpretation of symmetrical images, suggesting a long and clear strategy of developing a method. Exhibiting disappearing figures or others from fading memories, the blots created by José Rufino on written sheets of papers further echo, in appearance and expressed intention, the spiritualist engravings made by the German doctor Justinus Kerner (1786-1862), which sought the record of human forms that, at the time they were made, no longer existed. There is, lastly, in this relation of complicity in the construction of impressions, the distant precedent of Christ's shroud, a faint, but strong trace, of a single body that the artist seeks to emulate in the joint reconstruction that he makes of the bodies of political prisoners and the missing.

There is a therefore a dichotomy, in the manner in which the artist performs the operation-repeated in his own story-of transposing times and meanings. Memories are recovered that have been long parted from their clash with the world, they are covered, at least in part, with the marks of dark pigments; meanings not shared by many are uncovered. Inscribed in this apparent indecision, there is the desire to build situations that claim, in no uncertain terms, what is suppressed, forgotten or barely considered by the erudite historiographer: the existence of a sentiment of nostalgia that transcends the individual realm and that summarizes a state of recognition for collective loss. Exposing testimonies for years condemned to social invisibility (through caution or the fear of those who once wrote them), José Rufino has not merely restricted himself to the original articulation of texts previously unavailable for consultation; he turns the very act of unearthing the fragile materiality of these writings into a fundamental element for triggering, in the realm of artistic statement, the communal sentiment of absence that they encompass. And that is what there is in common in all these personal remnants of losses that justifies and permits the intervention upon them, turning nostalgic missing into a feeling that unites many and that can, at least at certain times, define an entire community. Engendering the discomfort of inconclusive mourning and organizing the exhibition in a parted and tense manner, *Plasmatio* configures as neither monument nor memorial - agents of forgetfulness - but as disquieting ruins shrouded in trauma and silence and

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