

Living with images

Rita Barros is undoubtedly one of the very few Portuguese photographers who can pride herself on enjoying a genuine international standing. She has lived in New York since 1980, where, besides engaging in her artistic practice, she also works as a university lecturer, regularly publishing and displaying her works at important exhibitions, biennials and collective events, all around the western world. In Portugal, as part of the Porto 2001 European Capital of Culture event, she exhibited, for the first time, images from her series entitled Room 1008 (this being the number of her room at the famous Chelsea Hotel, where she has lived since 1984). Years later, in 2014, new works continuing this theme were presented at an exhibition at the Nova University campus in Monte da Caparica, curated by Jorge Calado. Fundação Dom Luís I is now pleased to host the latest chapter in this project, entitled Room 1008: The Last Days. This includes a series of photographic prints and a book in the form of an accordion. Specifically for this exhibition, she has added to this series a set of small videos that she filmed during the various lockdowns that the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed on all of us.

As the title of her exhibition indicates, Rita Barros has chosen a very specific period from her life in this mythical New York space. Already more than a hundred years old (a rarity in New York where buildings normally have a very short lifetime), the hotel is what is known as a residential hotel, housing both famous and not so famous people, who have lived here sometimes for several decades. The former group includes such names as Mark Twain, Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, Janis Joplin and Dylan Thomas. The room where the photographer now lives is the same one in which Arthur C. Clarke wrote the science fiction novel 2001: A Space Odyssey, in the early 1950s, and, according to some people, he was already working in partnership with Stanley Kubrick, who later directed the film with the same name. A few years ago, when the hotel was sold to a company looking to turn it into a profitable business, the photographer decided to document the removal of the objects that she loves and which were then placed in safekeeping while the improvements works were taking place. Today, the Chelsea Hotel is, in fact, an entropic place, with works stopping and then restarting again, with tenants who persist in not leaving despite being subjected to all kinds of harassment, in a never-ending saga that is undoubtedly captured in this photographic work by Rita Barros.

It is important to begin by mentioning the petite histoire of Room 1008: The Last Days. Not that this is absolutely essential for fully understanding these images. But there's no denying that, once in possession of this information, the observer can more easily apprehend the profound sense

of melancholy that is conveyed by the photographs of books already packed in boxes, missing ornaments, plastic sheets covering tables and chairs, as if to prevent them from being destroyed by the dust of their abandonment. There's one feature that is common to all the images: each photograph is also the image of a second photograph, this latter one being a picture of the objects or the appearance of that precise place before their removal to a safe place. A photograph of the photograph, a photograph of an empty space that is full of photographs, and not only because we do in fact see a near double of the total image, but also because we can sense, in a fragile and delicate way, the years and years of work that Rita Barros undertook here.

For these reasons, there is a temporal dimension to this body of work, which is highlighted in the way that the artist has chosen to arrange the images. In *Untitled (fireplace)*, the image is not just related to the freezing of the moment when she chose to click the camera's shutter. It also has to do with the past time when, instead of that detail of the apartment covered with a blue plastic sheet, it was possible to see a fully functional fireplace with a lit fire, intended to keep whoever was living there warm. Other corners and niches, a wardrobe full of clothes, television or computer screens, fill the current emptiness of the walls, waiting to be knocked down and replaced perhaps with better ones that are more modern and different.

And, in the midst of all this, life goes on. Or, in other words, Rita Barros still lives here, now accompanied by the simulacra of the reality that she has kept somewhere. As she herself says, "I photographed everything before taking the objects away and decided to live with its copies. By living with them they became the 'real objects'. And since they took the energy of the space and time I decided that I needed to document this new phase in my fight to keep my home still a home."

In a certain way, what we see here is the updating of what was one of the prime functions of photography: to record what has disappeared, to create a memory of what is now past, to cheat death and its most important corollary, forgetfulness. By looking at these images, we can in fact understand how the photograph has never been far removed from death – in this case, the death of a building, but also of a lifestyle that will never return, of years and years that, henceforth, will only have their memory sustained by images in order to prevent their being completely forgotten. In talking of the shock that the possibility of technical reproduction provoked in the aura – of people, but also of places – Walter Benjamin reminded us that, in the case of the photograph, that same aura would never completely disappear¹. And he mentioned the image of the human face, the same one that is placed, inside a frame, in a clearly visible place in the living-room or bedroom, to remind us how the cult value can still override the exhibition value in this technique². And, immediately afterwards, he added that, on the contrary, when the human face disappeared from the photograph, that cult value immediately vanished, to make room for the omnipresent and dominant exhibition value.

This is undoubtedly what happens in this series of works by Rita Barros. The images are all submitted to the same purpose: to exhibit, to show, to reveal what was there, instead of being regarded as a unique and

irreplaceable object, which the photograph can still be, despite the many copies that can be made of each image – or the thousands of “shares” that each image can have in a virtual environment. In a certain way, there are some works in this series that refer to the infinite possibility of reproduction: *Untitled (shahrazad)*, for example, or *Untitled (red wall)*. In these pieces, just as in others that the observer may find in the exhibition spaces, the photograph does not create a double of the tangible reality but a multiple. In other words, it does not function as a mirror image that is fixed at a certain moment – in the digital memory of the camera or in its analogue negative, as is always the case in photography – but as a technique that produces multiple copies.

And the artist’s choice, at this moment, is to live not with the original, but with the multiple, the copy, the simulacrum of the original.

The photograph, here, is not just the result of the author’s work with a camera, but it is itself a metaphor for what it defines. It should be noted these multiple copies, this kaleidoscopic view that Rita Barros presents to us of the place where she lives is itself a closed vision, impenetrable to any interpretation or discourse about the work of art. The image becomes visible to itself, as if it were the product of two parallel mirrors which, although seeming to open up to infinity, show us the same of the same, *ad eternum* and forever more, in which this “same” is itself a double. As happens in magic, in the fantastic tales and all the mirrors that literature tells us reveal the pure truth, it opens up to the past, such as it was, just as the photographer saw it, just as she lived it. Or it is even much more than about the past. To recover Foucault’s words about the contemporary space³, the Chelsea Hotel is today simultaneously ethereal, light and transparent, but also obscure, rocky and cluttered. It is a space, like the one we have here, where the ghosts of the things that existed still remain, and where the struggle takes place for the real to return, so that the double, like the ghost, ceases to be necessary.

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¹ In “A obra de arte na era da sua possibilidade de reprodução técnica” (1942) in *A Modernidade*, Lisboa, Assírio & Alvim, 2006.

² *Idem*, p. 218 and ff.

³ In “Des Espaces Autres”, (1967) in *Dits et Ecrits*, Paris, NRF Editions Gallimard, 1994.