

A large, dense crowd of people is gathered outdoors, likely at a public event or festival. The crowd is diverse in age and appearance, with many people wearing light-colored clothing. In the foreground, several bicycles are visible, suggesting a cycling event or a gathering where bicycles are being used. The background shows a building with a window. A semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the text "Oggi nessuno".

Oggi nessuno

Oggi nessuno può dirsi neutrale.

Today nobody can call himself/herself neutral.

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Book for the exhibition

William Guerrieri

Oggi nessuno può dirsi neutrale.

Heute kann sich niemand neutral nennen

Today nobody can call himself/herself neutral.

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Con questa pubblicazione vorrei inoltre ricordare
mia madre e Paolo Costantini

When nobody can call himself/herself neutral.

The representation of new sociality in the work by William Guerrieri.

By Antonella Russo

In the early Nineties, William Guerrieri had already committed himself to in a re-vision of the geography of places which define public life in contemporary post-industrial and post-fordist society.

In his photographs of the series *Ambienti pubblici* (*Public environments*, 1991-1996), Guerrieri represents waiting rooms of health centres, public offices, corridors, in the main deserted, anonymous and impersonal; they are *topoi* that tell their story only with great effort or that shun a fixed narrative contest. They are characterized by a lack of specificity and are not circumstantial.

These aseptic places, wiped clean any human presence, are points of transit, devoid of all historical memory and belong to the category of nowhere as thought of and defined by the anthropologist Marc Augè.¹ The post-modern (or surmodern) nowhere posited by Augè is not only represented by airports, railway and space stations, huge shopping malls and cable networks for virtual communication but can be envisioned especially as the *topos* of the transient; it can never be identified and recognized as a definite and defined place but it composes and recomposes itself continually through the modular component structures which define its architecture. This nowhere explored by Guerrieri looks like the waiting room of a health centre, a lecture hall, an employment office, a corridor, all those spaces that have a public function assigned to them, limited to but only at fixed times, reception areas which regulate the flow of people, this nowhere is the site of a rarefied and abstract, public life. Certainly it is not by chance that in Guerrieri's photographs the presence of the individual is more suggested than represented: the furniture, the empty seats, laconical shots of notices on walls ect., refer to the absence of bodies, to something missing, exposing the anachronism inscribed in the very architecture of state assistance in a society which no longer reflects the forms and structures of the welfare society.

Analysing the new political forms that contemporary post-fordist (post-modernist or surmodernist) society is taking on especially in Italy, historian Marco Revelli points out how the transition from Fordist to a post-fordist society is connotated by the transformation of the old wage system with fixed jobs (which turned the factory into a centre of political and public life) into a free-lance temporary-work system based on unprecedented individualism and levels of unequalled competition. This transformation is bringing with it a traumatic change in social relationships and an obvious dilemma concerning contemporary definition of class and representation of workers. But above all it is bringing crumbling of the welfare state and all those forms of solidarity inherent in welfare, which are being replaced by the cynical logic of private enterprise.²

In his photographs from the series *Ambienti pubblici*, Guerrieri has reproduced the incongruity and opacity inscribed in the architecture of public offices which seem to contradict the modernist imperative according to which form follows function.

During the Eighties many photographers's made visual research on public places used for institutional purposes or spaces planned for checking-in large numbers of people, the subject of their work.

In *Untitled, Belfast* ("*Religion*" graffiti in an unemployment centre), 1988, Paul Graham focuses on the word "Religion" found among other scribbles left on a table in an unemployment office in Northern Ireland. It expresses the anxiety and sums up the social problem of that country. Instead of lingering over the perception of space, Graham concentrates on drawing attention to a trace, an element which describes and refers to the reality beyond that place and evokes a political problem in which lies the sense of the whole image.

Throughout the Eighties photographer Candida Höfer devoted herself to revisiting, visually, the interiors of museums, libraries, theaters, spas all of devoid of human presence, places which expose an estrangement

which haunts the architecture and the meaningless areas used for spare-time activities.

Very different is William Guerrieri's photographic project.

Firstly Guerrieri's images are taken from unusual angles, giving only glimpses of whole framings; he gives up any attempt at reproducing an overall architectural effect. In his photographs Guerrieri pays great attention to the rendition of colors which are almost always saturated colors, with their luminous quality, and to the sharp juxtaposition of hues which determine the very condition of visibility of the image. The use of color in Guerrieri's work becomes a means of underlining the rhythm of architecture and design and highlighting the laconical repetitive quality of the furnishings of these public places. Most of the photographs of the places in *Ambienti pubblici* use colors to define the forms and structure of such public spaces. Even though they are intended to serve various welfare functions, these public places pictured by Guerrieri announce the unfathomable impersonality and the calculated neutrality which connotes them and which seem to prepare people in advance for their imminent encounter with an unknown already perceptible power (medical knowledge or bureaucracy).

Guerrieri's photographs reproduce various psychological states which the use of color juxtaposition of color leads up to.

In *Ambulatorio (Health centre, 1993)*, Guerrieri focuses on and highlights colors and juxtaposition used by architects. The pale green/moss green shades used for the background of the waiting room suggest the idea of nature and naturalness contributing to create a calm atmosphere favouring patient waiting and meditation preparing for the encounter with an authority. The row of red seats set against a light green wall constitute not only a complementary chromatic pole, it also contributes to enliven an otherwise extremely rarefied environment.³

In *Scuola (School, 1993)*⁴, ivory white provides the context of the image, which evokes the idea of cleanliness and purity and endows the whole environment with an almost spiritual dimension; the prevalent colors are light blue and red. The light blue used for the closed door calls up the idea of clarity but also of reflection and helps to create the right psychological balance between enquiry and reserve. In Guerrieri's images, red is also associated with the idea of strength and vital energy, it enhances and at the same time contrasts with light blue.

Golden yellow is the dominant color in *Sala convegni (Lecture hall, 1993)*⁵. It suggests the idea of magnificence and munificence to the whole environment which harmonizes with this color historically associated with knowledge and inner wealth.

The images make up the series *Ambienti pubblici* expose the absence of bodies. Rows of empty seats, bare tables, deserted corridors bring to mind those bodies which only temporarily inhabit these places, occupy these seats, take a place in these areas and settle down to wait. So, although they are intended for different social services, all these public give us a similar psychological impression of time suspended of prolonged waiting, a passive condition. In Guerrieri's *Ambienti pubblici* space is punctuated by intrusive notices which refer to an immanent authority which forbids certain behavior ("no smoking") gives information ("space for youth"); or scatters around commonly-used ideograms (fire extinguishers, emergency exit) and so on.

Ambienti pubblici reminds us of absent bodies, of the bodies of many individuals who share these public spaces all together and yet remain isolated, like the multiple seats fixed to the same supporting axis. In these spaces the individual silently, almost unknowingly shares the destiny of a multitude. The multitude as opposed to a cleared-defined social class is the absent subject of Guerrieri's work. In the post-fordist society which is gradually taking shape and which features a global economy, a vague, undistinguishable social class is emerging: multitude. According to sociologist Aldo Bonomi who has studied this phenomenon: "The shaping of a post-fordist society characterized by a tendency to a global unity marked by a timing and a rhythm of a world-

wide economy, where everything can be exchanged and bargained for, has a profound effect on the social structure. The disruption of the labour force and its transition from vertical to horizontal organization, destroys the sense of belonging and the dynamic which united everyone belonging to the same social class. But it is not only the uncertainty about belonging to a specific social class which is at stake, but also the idea of citizenship. What is being shaken is the idea of the nation-state. It is in this transitional phase and social context that multitude becomes a key word in the social make-up of the country today..."⁶

In his series of photographs entitled *Identità di gruppo* (*Group identity*, 1994-97), Guerrieri examines the representation of groups of volunteers and volunteer-based associations, a phenomenon which in the few last years has spread rapidly in Northern Italy cities, especially in the Emilia Romagna region, where the photographer lives. These associations (among which Avis, the Italian association of blood donors, district sport clubs, volunteer associations for the promotion of art and culture) are holding out against the tyranny of globalization, offering and strengthening the local community model, a sort of neo-tribalism to make a stand against the prevailing wave of globalization of economy and culture.

Guerrieri's photographs present us with an entirely new kind of group portraiture drawn from the literature of volunteer association circulated in periodicals, bulletins and newsletters. These group portraits are cloudy, faces are blurred and in any case unidentifiable. Nonetheless these photographs are not just misty. On the contrary, the lack of focus brings out the silhouettes of the figures and highlights the overall pattern of poses the group spontaneously takes up while being photographed.

The blurred effect in Guerrieri's photographs helps to make the image of these volunteer associations problematic and represent them as a group of anonymous individuals who take on a new, group identity, suggesting that they are no longer significant as single individuals but only as a group working for a social cause. Hence these group portraits give us a fluid image which shapes and reshapes itself continually and creates the idea of something transient and indefinite as the very essence of volunteer associations in the making. By using the out-of-focus as formal device, Guerrieri manages to reproduce an ambiguous rather than clear-cut image of the volunteer associations which present an economic model based on free social services.

In his essay Bonomi points out: "The main myth to be dismantled is the idea that as a provider of social services this kind of social enterprise has nothing to do with economy and that its supposed extraeconomic nature derives from a new sort of goods - collective assets, now very rare, such as public assistance. [...] Actually what makes these social enterprises different is not so much the product but the forms of co-operation involved in the production of social work and the experience of working for an association based on social action, that is to say the production of sociality."⁷

Sociality is precisely the subject of Guerrieri's photographs: a group of individuals, their working together, their merging together in a more or less harmonious whole, rediscovering their own identity, assuming a new place within a group in which an individual may find shelter to the threat of invisibility imposed by global culture.

The photographic project *Identità di gruppo* may thus be regarded as being at the opposite pole to *Ambienti pubblici* and at the same time it is its natural continuation. The group portraits which compose this series, which quote the very same literature published by volunteer associations, frame photo souvenirs of award ceremonies, sport teams, public meetings. In many cases Guerrieri superimposes or juxtaposes a brief text or just one sentence on the images.

As the photographs are, so the text is extrapolated from the literature of these volunteer associations and constitutes a visual comment which pilots the observer in the reading of the image. Even though the sentences seem to have an immediate impact on the observer who, thanks to the use of sharp black or grey typography,

tends to read them immediately, if taken on their own they do not help to clarify the context of the photograph. Like images, writing too is manipulated. In most cases, Guerrieri changes some of the orthography of the text by eliminating commas and leaving only full stops. In this way he obtains an effect similar to the out-of focus devices, for by suspending the rhythmic scansion provided punctuation marks, the sense of the text becomes hazy. Thus for the most part the texts are flat, uniform and repetitive like an echo, and underline their redundancy. Thus these visual comments are integral part of *Identità di gruppo* and give voice to the group portrayed which, faceless as it is, consists mainly of men. The most frequently used (unwritten) personal pronoun in the captions is the first person plural "we". So it is behind (or beside) this "we" Guerrieri places the members of the group of volunteer associations who speak a common language, the verb of "political correctness" conjugated according to the tenses and modalities of interventions formulated by these associations.

As in the *Ambienti pubblici* series, so too for this group of photographs, Guerrieri resorts to the use of colors which contribute to direct our perception of these images. Thus for the photographs of sporting events, he uses mainly light blue, which gives the images a feeling of sobriety and renders them topical and up-to-date.

Most of the prints from the series *Identità di gruppo* are sepia toned reproductions. The sepia tends to date the images and underlines the "it has been" of the photographic image, providing an ideal nuance to the indefinite outlines of the crowded figures.

Guerrieri's photographs inhabit the undefined space of the new social sphere where a battle is going on between representation of the multitude and spectacularization of the present. No-one can avoid this conflict or, to put it in Guerrieri's terms "Today nobody can call himself/herself neutral."

1 Marc Augè, *Nonluoghi. Introduzione a un'antropologia della surmodernità*, Eleuthera, Milano, 1993.

2 Marco Revelli, *Le due destre*. Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1996.

3 On color associations, their effects and characteristics see Jorrit Tournquist, *Colore, luce: applicazione basic design*. Hoepli, Torino, 1983.

4 *Forma. Visione e visioni* (compiled by Moreno Gentili). Arte, Udine, 1994.

5 *Forma. Visione e visioni*, cit.

6 Aldo Bonomi, *Il trionfo della moltitudine*. Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1996, p. 83.

7 A. Bonomi, cit. p. 109.