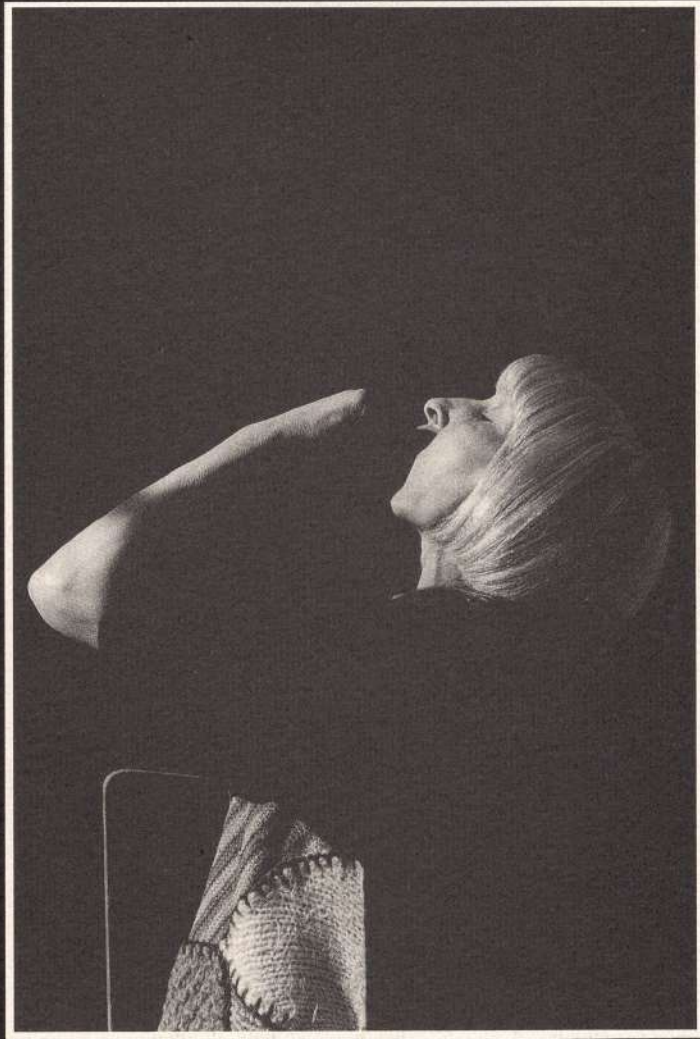


TURI RAPISARDA

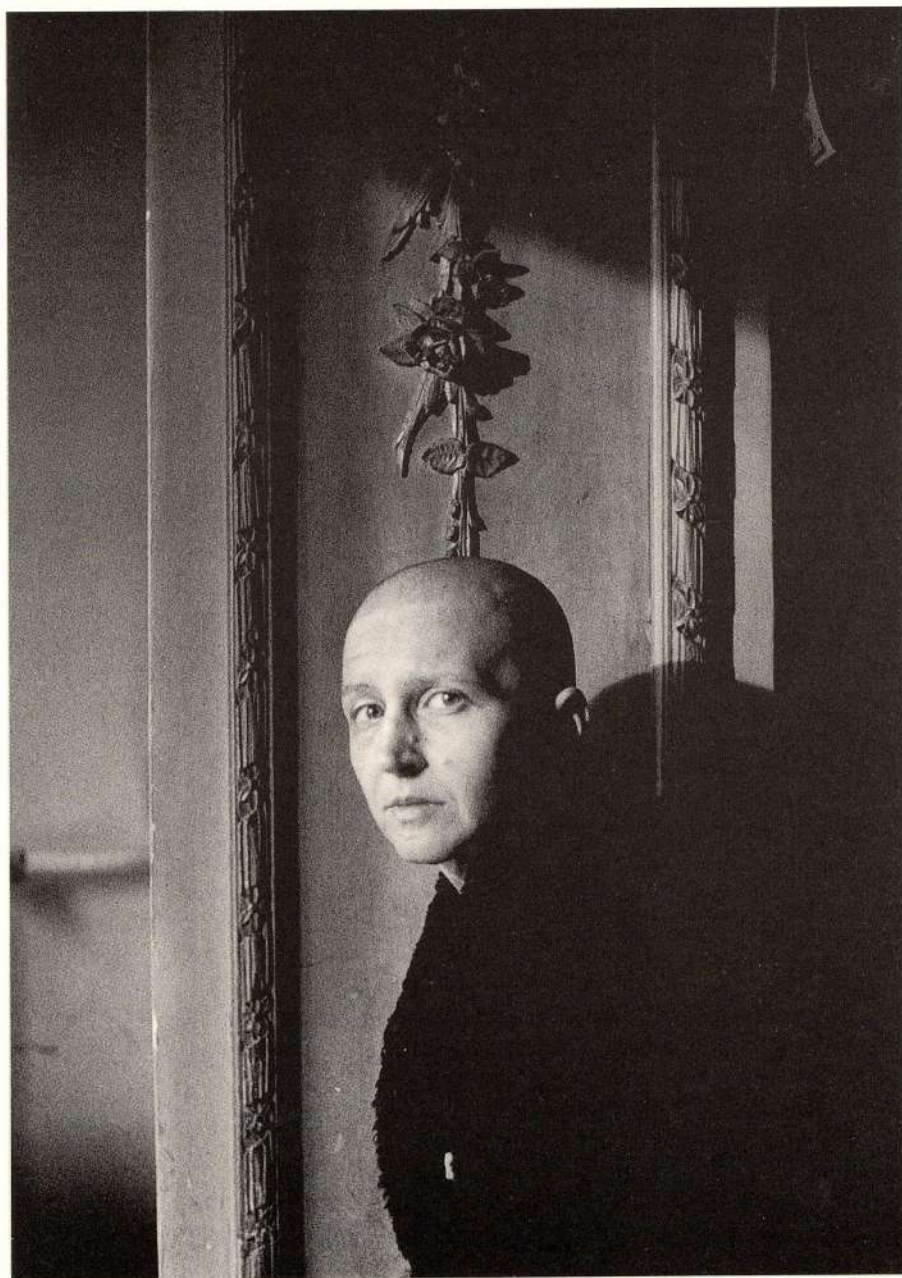


Alberto Weber

TURI RAPISARDA

Testo critico
Antonella Russo

Alberto Weber, Torino



Vampiro, 1989
Gelatino brumuro d'argento, 40x30 cm.

The darkened image.

The photographic works of Turi Rapisarda.

by Antonella Russo.

The photography of Turi Rapisarda takes part in a plan for a black-out of the aesthetic of hedonism and the superfluous that has dominated the visual arts and contemporary, especially Italian, culture, from the early eighties on.

The eclipse of colour and even of varying shades (photographic colour), with the prevalence of black constituting the background and the very support of all Rapisarda's work, corresponds to a programme for the radicalization of the image. The black ground of his photographs marks the eclipse of the seductive colour-image used in advertisement posters and commercial magazines. Photographic virtuosity, which consists in special-effect colouring and brilliant surfaces and prevails in much contemporary photography, is banished from Rapisarda's works. Against this flood of dazzling, bewitching colours, Rapisarda sets the rigour of black photography. Rather than an absence of colour, the choice of black, as the prevalent tone in Rapisarda's photographs, represents an extreme step, silencing the harmonic strains of colour, a drastic turning away from enjoyment, a banishing of chromatic hypnotism from the realm of photography. We are reminded of what Adorno wrote on this subject in his *Aesthetische Theorie*: "To survive in the most extreme and objectively gloomy moments of existence, works of art not meant to be sold as consolation must become like those moments. To speak of radical art today is to speak of gloomy art, with black as the basic colour. A great deal of contemporary production is disqualified from the start because it does not take note of this, and may even take a childish delight in colours".¹⁾

The image set against a black ground necessarily involves a radical choice of the subject to be portrayed and hence a dramatization of the representation as well. In Rapisarda's photographs, each subject is set at the centre of the frame of the image, keeps it in evidence and gives it a sense of urgency. The protagonist of *Strega* (Witch, 1994) or of *Vampiro* (Vampire, 1989), for example, inhabits the space of the image as if it were the stage in a theatre with the lights turned off. The almost spectral apparition conjures up ancient mythologies and remote suggestions. *Satiro* (Satyr; 1988) is probably the most powerful of all these images. Here the protagonist, stripped to the waist, hardly emerges from the shadows to perform his ritual. With his hands raised to the heavens, he seems to be in a trance, as he traces

broad gestures in space, intent of scrutinizing the paths of destiny and learning of new prophesies.

Like *tableaux vivants* in the performances of the medioeval mystery plays, most of Rapisarda's photographic works set before the spectator a series of attitudes, a gallery of bodies, all of them different but all equally anonymous, which, image after image, gradually acquire calibre in the presentation of their ordinary (im)personalities. The concept of the tableau seems particularly relevant to the interpretation of Rapisarda's photography. Indeed, not only do his image represent a formal pattern very like the *tableaux vivants*, but they also seem to be a reference to that same notion of the tableau which Barthes mentions in his discussion of the correspondence between the aesthetic of Diderot in Brecht's plays and in Ejzenštjn's films.²⁾ Barthes emphasizes the fact that the tableau is the central feature on which Diderot's theory of the beautiful hinges and on the fact that Diderot believed that the tableau constituted a point of contact between theatre and painting, the marriage of these two arts, the moment in which they are fused and confused, each adopting the modes and criteria of the other. Barthes holds that the tableau:

"[...] is pure projection, sharp-edged, incorruptible, irreversible, which banishes into nothingness everything around it, which is therefore unnamed and promoted to the state of essence, to light, to sight, everything it brings into its field; [...] the tableau is intellectual, it has something (moral, social) to say, but it also conveys that it knows *how* this must be said; it is at once significant and propaedeutic, impressive and reflective, moving and conscious of the means of emotion".³⁾

Hence the tableau is the image which justifies itself and, rather than representing a subject, reveals a moral and social condition and stages it, or as Barthes says tableaux "*set scenes* (just as we say: a *table is set*)".⁴⁾

Among the elements that make up the tableau, there is one of particular interest to photography and which Barthes unexpectedly traces once again to the aesthetic of Diderot. What most interest Barthes is the point Diderot makes about "the perfect moment". To tell a story, to represent a situation, Barthes explains, means to choose a particular moment, not only one moment which is privileged with respect to others, but also the only possible one among all the others. This is the perfect moment, that cannot be ignored. It is so concrete and definite that it becomes abstract, it is that same moment that

Gotthold Lessing defines as the pregnant moment in his aesthetic treatise antititled *Laocoön*. On considering the idea of the pregnant moment Barthes states: "the pregnant moment is certainly the presence of all the absences (memories, lessons, promises), to whose rhythm history becomes both intelligible and desirable".⁵⁾

In terms of the criticism of photography, the condition of the pregnant moment is interpreted as the decisive moment, a term that has been used and abused mainly to refer to and explain the photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson.⁶⁾ This pregnant moment, or decisive moment, is described by Barthes as a "hieroglyph", an image that portrays a gesture which can be read at a glance, immediately and unequivocally. Above all, it reveals a perfect and unique moment in which present, past and future are shown as if they were happening right in front of our eyes.

It can certainly be maintained that the idea of the pregnant or decisive moment in contemporary criticism of photography has been so drained of its philosophic and aesthetic frames of reference that it can only be understood as a sort of performance, a mere show of photographic virtuosity, a sort of magic feat on the part of the photographer.

Rapisarda's photographs do without the model of the decisive moment altogether, banish from the scene some of its spectacular showmanship and the acrobatics that attempt to produce the "petrified image". In Rapisarda's images, on the contrary, the perfect moment is translated into the *social gestus*, as it is in Brecht's plays, which Barthes understands as a reinterpretation of the tableau discussed by Diderot.⁷⁾

The series of photographs entitled *Piante* (*Plants*, 1990-93) and *Ruote* (*Wheels*, 1990-91) [fig....] presents a gallery of human beings, male and female, carefully chosen among insignificant individuals, whom Panofsky defines as "nobody in particular", in short, those who are considered "negligible", minor characters who go through life and History with faces and bodies inexorably destined to remain anonymous and insignificant.

These individuals deprived of identity are shown from behind, their feet in aluminium buckets, their backs bent double, to look like withered plants. In *Wheels* the anonymous characters are portrayed standing upright, with their feet trapped in cable-winders, as if illustrating their function, completely unessential with respect to the object that defines and frames them. As in *Plants*, in *Wheels* too, it is an object that decides the position, subjects the body to strict regimentation, imposes its characteristics and frames them.

To interpret these images as a denunciation of the conditions in which the mentally sick people with whom the photographer has been working for years

would certainly detract from and distort their reading. Actually, Rapisarda's images are a meditation on the subtle regimentation of the bodies forced to pose for photographs.

The dramatic quality implicit in the constricted condition of the subject is further exacerbated by the decision to produce images in series, instead of single photographs. Producing series of photographs means multiplying the images, differentiating them, and at the same time wiping them out. In the series, no image has priority over, or greater importance than any other, and since the subject portrayed is always the same, the relation to time is also of little significance, so it does not matter which image comes before and which after. Hence a series of photographs is not a sequence of images; indeed, if one photograph in a given series is missing, the interpretation of the images is neither damaged nor incomplete, so the presentation of the work is not affected. Particularly in the case of Rapisarda's photographs, which present *tableaux* all equally anonymous and impersonal, it is absolutely irrelevant to look for a sequence or speak of an order in time. Serial construction serves the photographer's purpose, precisely because it enables him to declare that single copies/printings of photographs are irrelevant, and so to avoid turning his works into fetishes. The series, on the other hand, almost seems to cancel the images by dint of multiplication and repetition of the same poses and the same framing of the shots.

The series called *Stretta* (*Grip*, 1990-93) prolongs this enquiry into the constricted condition of the subject in the image.

The photographs in this series portray objects in common use such as a pen, an electric torch, a candle, or even household pets, all placed at the centre of the space of the image and "held still" by the artist's hand. Mirella Bandini, one of the first critics to take an interest in Rapisarda's work, emphasises that the close-up includes just the artist's hand as he seizes ("grips") and places an object or animal in position.⁸⁾ Hence the artist not only sets the scene for the object or animal, but forces it into the centre of the image. For Rapisarda it is not a question so much of showing an object in a certain pose, nor while he is in the act of capturing it, but of holding it, keeping it there by force to transform it into an image. The photographer does not disguise this violent connotation inscribed in the photograph; quite the contrary, he exposes it in all its harshness and at the same time in all its vacuity. Recent photographs like the *Coniglio* (*Rabbit*, 1995) and *Bambina* (*Little girl*, 1995) belong to this same family of images. In them the and in the photograph keeps firm hold on the little animal or on the face of the child (the photographer's). "The grip", explains the photographer, "explicates the

process of domestication or acculturation to which all of us, animals and human beings, are subjected. There is no innocence, either in representation or in culture: to be represented (in painting, photography, literature or politics) means forcing, coercing, bending the body until it becomes something else, it means violating a body or a mind".⁹⁾

Geografica (*Geographic*, 1990) comprises a series of sixteen images, fragments of maps torn from atlases, crumpled into a ball and held tightly in a closed fist.

Names of countries and rivers can be made out here and there on the crumpled page, set apart against the black background of the photograph; contour lines and frontiers are reduced to a play on colour and tone. This work dates from just after the collapse of the Berlin wall and the fall of the so-called "iron curtain". The topographical representation shows that it is a purely abstract image, merely conventional and explicitly arbitrary.

Thus Rapisarda's photographs represent the work of translating into images, and bring out the coercive action involved in this operation. This condition is signified by the artist holding and gripping a subject but at the same time circumscribing it. But there is still another aspect to be taken into consideration in this activity, which is that brought out in the series *Stretta nera* (*Black grip*, 1990-93). Here the artist's hand describes a dark round form, which bulges out from the completely black, shapeless background of the image. The contact described by the image evokes a physical sensation of something tactile, a mainly physical contact. The act of circumscribing shown in *Black grip* refers to an eminently sexual activity. The protuberance that swells up from the black background of the photograph brings to mind the breast, the organ around which is centred, according to Melanie Klein, not only the physiological life of the child, but the psychological and so inevitably the sexual life as well. More particularly, the act of circumscribing one part of the body, not only with the hands but above all with the mouth, suggests a primary erotic activity linked with incorporating the mother's breast, which is not just sucking the mother's milk. In this connection the critic and photographer Victor Burgin writes: " 'Incorporation' rather than 'ingestion' - the psycho-analytic concept of 'incorporation' implies a range of objects vastly more extensive than food, as for example in Melanie Klein's description of the fantasy world of the infant, in which the parental imagos fragment into relatively autonomous 'part-objects', body parts which the child may destroy, repair, identify with, combine, and of course incorporate".¹⁰⁾

The series entitled *Leda e il cigno* (*Leda and the*

swan, 1995) goes into greater detail concerning the representation of autoeroticism. The photographs in this series constitute an irreverent reference to the Greek legend and transpose it into vaguely obscene images. The photographs call to mind a kind of present-day photographic magazines which specializes in the publication of unsolicited pornographical portraits that readers send in to the editorial office.

Leda and the swan is a series of half-length portraits, seen in profile, with bent forearms, raising their hands to their mouths to suck the tips of their fingers. They are all photographed with their eyes closed, the various individuals being absorbed in their poses and intent on following their own fantasies. The multiplication of the images, conceived once again as a series, makes the obsessive nature of the autoerotic pulsion even more persuasive and transforms the pose into an urgent and impelling act.

Leda and the swan seems almost like a cruel mosaic of the contemporary person, confused and isolated ever more by choice, chasing after his own erotic fantasies.

The photographs of Turi Rapisarda express an aesthetic which we might define as an aesthetic centered on apprehension; the setting of the pose and the very objects of the images are chosen so as to procure an unbearable indefinable feeling of unpleasantness and a prolonged malaise. Rapisarda believes the photographic image has to explore this malaise, this condition of gay and absent-minded oppression which surrounds us and is inscribed in our bodies. It is that same undefined and undefinable, troubled feeling which assails us when we meet the deflected glance of the little girl in *Strabica* (*Girl with a squint*, 1995), who smiles at us seraphically from the space of her image.

Notes

¹⁾ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, p. 68.

²⁾ The term "tableau" appears in both the French and English versions of Barthes text, and develops a more complex concept than the noun "picture", used in the Italian translation. For this reason I have chosen to leave it unchanged.

³⁾ Roland Barthes, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein", in *The Responsibility of Forms*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1985, p. 90.

⁴⁾ Barthes, *Diderot*, p. 90.

⁵⁾ Barthes, *Diderot*, p. 93.

⁶⁾ *The Decisive Moment* is the title of the English translation of the book by Henri Cartier-Bresson (*The Decisive Moment*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952) that also became the formula for the interpretation of the images of the French photographer, which tended to play down their importance. The book was published at the same time in Paris (Éditions Verve, 1952), under the title *Images à la sauvette*.

⁷⁾ Barthes, *Diderot*, p. 93.

⁸⁾ Mirella Bandini, "Turi Rapisarda", in *Proposte VII*, catalogue of an exhibition Sala Esposizioni, Palazzo IRV, Turin, April 1992, p. 41.

⁹⁾ Turi Rapisarda in a conversation with the author. Turin, 21 december, 1995.

¹⁰⁾ Victor Burgin, "Diderot, Barthes, Vertigo", in *The End of Art Theory*, London: Macmillan, 1986, p. 123.