

Note (1)
Stefano Graziani

When I began this project I was not exactly sure in which direction I was going. The main aspect which I wished to focus my investigation on was photography as a system of observation. I began by examining the natural science disciplines and their scholars as pioneers in the field of observation, since they used and continue to use visual tools equipped with lenses; in the past, to investigate microscopic scales, while today the scales of vision are even smaller.

This work is built around the idea of the taxonomy – the classification – of the visible, as the structural quality of photography since its origin. The idea of series, sequences and repetition, present in the debate and in the development of contemporary photography since the 1970s, is one of the fundamental aspects running through this project. I asked myself whether it would be possible to refer to a thought eluding the verisimilitude of photography.

The life and adventures of Carl Linnaeus, founder of the classification system which is today universally referred to as taxonomy, have provided me with decisive points of departure for this work. Linnaeus lived near Uppsala, where he taught. In this project I wanted to consider the tropical, greenhouses, which I visited, as examples of realized utopias yet at the same time, as chronicles of failure. I am referring to Linnaeus' project that aimed at rendering Sweden economically independent through the cultivation of strategic plants – coconut trees, paprika and other spices. This unrealized project was to have been carried out, after an initial acclimatization phase in the south of Sweden, through a free cultivation throughout the territory. The gathering of seeds and plants was accomplished through missions undertaken by some of Linnaeus' disciples in tropical areas of the planet. This was probably the inception or one of the inceptive moments of the Colonial politics of many European nations. Without a doubt the binomial system of biological nomenclature developed by Linnaeus is the tool currently used to unmistakably identify organisms. Linnaean nomenclature has provided a fundamental tool for knowledge, and at the same time has laid down the foundations for the triggering of an homologation process still in act today. The collections and institution I photographed are direct results of the various Colonial politics of different countries and, in this sense, the presence of the Somalian donkey in the collection of the Museum of Natural History of Milan (c) is emblematic. The Bombay Natural History Society, preserves the name Bombay, despite the fact that the name of the city has been changed to Mumbai; one deduces from this that the institution is deeply connected to the previous British annexation of the Indian territory, and that it does not assume an autonomous value in local thought and traditions. The systematic possibility offered by Linnaeus to unmistakably identify objects was my pretext to try to verify how this system was applied in places where the script and alphabet are not of Latin or European derivation, places such as China, India and Israel. The photographs taken in Israel, are from the Sarah Racine Roots Laboratory (i): a special greenhouse which expands vertically and where only the last floor is illuminated. Throughout the intermediary floors, the roots are studied in total darkness, where different conditions and qualities of water are tested for the nutriment of plants in environments which are arid and hostile to vegetation.

The book's sequence opens with the Belize House in Cambridge, UK (a), a place in which the vegetation of Belize is reproduced in a greenhouse under controlled conditions; the dioramas, in large part come from the Museum of Natural History of Milan. Other than evoking an Italian or general European Colonial politics, diorama was the term Louis Daguerre used to call his maquettes reproducing the views of Paris which he exhibited on the streets. The interest in dioramas, beyond being evocative of a moment preceding photography as well as of a renowned project by Hiroshi Sugimoto, are reflections on the possibility of comparing conditions which transform in time, this condition, with respect to the possibility of documenting, having been permanently destabilized by Jeff Wall's last decade of work. The photographs of dioramas and those of terminated scientific collections, which therefore will no longer be modified, are photographs that wish to thwart the possibility of a comparison in time.

The tree works based on Lothar Baumgarten's book, "Die Namen der Baumen", were begun in London at the arboretum of the Royal Kew Gardens (f) and continued at the arboretum of Berlin (l), with a concentration on the bark of some black pines (Schwarz Kiefer). The figure of Carl Linnaeus is present in the photographs of the Linnaean Society in London (n), an institution which acquired and currently preserves and implements the most notable stock of books and manuscripts dedicated to Linnaeus. L'Orangerie together with the Herbarium (g), are part of Linnaeus' project for the botanical gardens of Uppsala. In his house at Hammarby, the large garden was his favourite place for the study of plants: Linnaeus' studies, like those of a photographer, took place in the open, and his garden was transformed into a botanical garden, an enclosed space for observation. By chance, while in the south of France, I discovered and photographed around the house of Henri Fabre, entomologist at Harnas de Serignan, and Mont Ventoux, where Henri Fabre carried out his explorations. I also photographed the places along the Triestan and Slovene Karst region, where Joseph Mueller, also an entomologist, founder of the collection of the Museum of Natural History in Trieste, carried out his studies. A diorama with the Panthera Tigris Tigris (o), the European symbol of India elaborated in the Romantic Age closes this book.

How delicate... this question in which everything looked like morning and evening at the same time.*

GDR, Rene Gabri, SG, Stefano Graziani

GDR: Let's begin then, with the ending. Where does your work go from here? Do you plan to continue this research?

SG: Yes, I do, but it's at a difficult point, and I don't want to be anxious about it. I have different possibilities. I think continuing doesn't mean that I'll necessarily go on taking photographs of stuffed animals or tropical greenhouses. I'm thinking a lot about Alexander Von Humboldt and questions regarding the origin of the idea of the landscape.

GDR: Has this work you have just finished opened up new questions for you?

SG: Yes, I'd say many. The main questions are left for the person looking at or reading the image to ask. I would certainly say that I didn't find definitive answers.

GDR: I hear a lot from artists that they want to provoke questions from the people who come into contact with their work. And sometimes, I have to say that I find the response insufficient, because I find that it's an excuse not to consider in advance the possible readings of one's work. And sure, one can never account for or predict these readings but these deliberations or considerations are nevertheless part of the artistic process, even in relation to oneself.

SG: I have noted that many of the times when I present this body of work to someone or to an audience, what is represented in the photographs is not the main matter of discussion, whether they are plants or stuffed animals or greenhouses. Moreover, the location is also not a point of discussion, even though I visited specific places for specific reasons. In other words, some information, like time and place, that is, when and where the photographs were taken, is basically not important, that is also why in the book there are no captions. I selected the places because, as I explained in my note, they have a specific function in the economy and in the narration of the project – more than facing natural sciences, the work faces taxonomy as a metaphor for photography, capable of opening up different questions in different disciplines.

GDR: How would you distinguish your position or interests from that of Hilla and Bernd Becher? If I think of taxonomy and photography, they seem to me a pivotal reference.

SG: Basically I think that the Bechers were concerned with photography as a medium but more from the perspective of what they photographed and how it was photographed. They were interested in industrial vernacular architecture and one could see their work, more within the frame of minimalist art, with artists like Sol Lewitt, Carl Andre and Donald Judd, For the Bechers seriality was a main subject, the repetition of objects which are always similar, so in this sense it can be seen as taxonomy and that was a part of new industrial and social possibilities which arose in the society of the '70. I think you touched a very important aspect and that is so important to see what has been done before us, then we can decide to continue, or try other ways. Personally, I just don't think seriality could still be a way at least as a photographic project. It has become a kind of excuse or alibi and has been totally consumed by mainstream culture and coffee table books.

GDR: So in editing your own material for this body of work, was there a specific or consistent criteria used to arrive at this very limited number?

SG: Well, the project consists of over 120 photographs, the book is composed of 20, but the real result would be keeping the same title and working with a single image, in a much more synthesized manner, avoiding very clearly the idea of seriality as an instrument of narration.

GDR: I would like to return to the question of the spectator. I see in your work a process of diligence, a certain care to direct the eyes, to ask a particular set of questions. And what you have just said confirms that. So I suppose my comment earlier was not to preclude the open-endedness and the necessity of observation in the completion (one could say) of this work. The question was really interested in your own process and your own observations of your work and your experiences. Often I find that as an artist, you may not arrive at answers, but more often than not, a different set, or related set of questions. I was interested in these emergent questions that would direct your future work. Having said all of this, it seems that the question of landscape and where it comes from is one that is calling you.

SG: I introduced the idea of landscape because I think the way Linnaeus built up his nomenclature structure, which basically works through comparisons and similarities, didn't consider the question of where the specific object of study comes from, that is, the difficult and complex concept of landscape. Landscape can be considered to be one of the main genre of photography since its origins. If Linnaeus studied things, I am interested in studying and examining the physical context from which those things emerge. This relation to landscape would include the relations between things, and thus, social, ecological, and political considerations emerge.

Alexander Von Humboldt contributed greatly to the contemporary idea of landscape in all the different declinations we know. So I'm thinking of putting my attention there, and seeing where it leads me. It might be to German Romanticism or to a consideration of history painting as a

possible idea of connecting the question of time. I mean the relation between the date the photographs are taken, and the date the photographs represent, as an allusion or a chronicle of a particular event.

GDR: Interesting, because you touch two very prominent strains in photography, one is the archive and the other the index in the works you describe. But how you seem to want to approach these very loaded concepts is through a kind of innocence and nonchalance. Re-approaching for example the archive, through a kind of new taxonomy of the archive itself. Somehow one cannot tell if you are touching the very fringe of such a concept or starting right from the middle. But this could open up an endless conversation so let me shift gears by coming back to the word nonchalance. I always want to ask this of photographers whose work I am attracted to, because over time, you see a particular way of looking, a manner or even style, which in your case, I would characterize as a kind of nonchalance. Has this body of work changed the way you look at the world or is it a kind of visualization of it? I gather it is both, but it would be nice to have you speak about some of these themes.

SG: You mentioned something which is really dangerous, so it's worth discussing; the point of developing a style or a particular way of seeing. I always try to be as simple as possible, but nonetheless, when I look at the photographs I've taken, I inevitably find some recurring aspects, and I don't know if I'm happy about this or not. Anyway, it's something I've noticed and it's a problem I'm facing. However, I think one photograph, or a body of photographs should be the way to make a certain number of questions and problems evident, that is, referring to your question, to visualize them, or make them visible, and provide different answers to different questions. The ghost of the style, or the particular manner we're mentioning is the exact opposite. It could be the same answer to different questions.

GDR: Yes it could, but style in the Deleuzian sense could also be what connects your images or comes between the photos you have assembled in this book. In this sense, this nonchalance I am attributing to you is a style which tries to run away from or refuse a style, a look which is ambivalent about what it is looking at. And this ambivalence then is a kind of style of narration which I like, telling us to look, but cautiously, or casually?

..I'm afraid I've run out of questions, so I will take the pleasure of having the last word.

Diaphanous Collections

Stefano Boeri

Photographing collections of antique objects, plants and animal organisms, inherently implies carrying out a replication. By means of the gaze, one gathers, encompasses and circumscribes that which had been previously gathered and circumscribed – and at times even “contextualised or acclimatized” – by a systematic thought.

But of the enlightened taxonomy which generated the collections photographed by Stefano Graziani, – an ambitious, overbearing and “imposing” logic – barely the intentions remain; very little with respect to the relentless advances of dust, termites, mildew and the wear and tear of time.

And yet they do remain: the taxonomic intentions transpire in the ordering into classes of the objects and the organisms, in their nominal or numeric sequence, in their arrangement at the disposal of the observer. But today their allure is somewhere else, in aesthetics rather than gnoseologies

This is also because the model-observer, the expected receiver of that ancient taxonomic thought, left a long time ago. Or perhaps today he looks elsewhere.

To come back and stand before these same collections, is, after all, a thought which is in line with the one which once made pertinent, congruent and comparable collections; that is, taxonomies. It is just that today the taxonomic principle conveyed by photography does not seek out and select objects or organisms, but rather, their classifications. It sees the representation rather than the arrangement of the objects.

In front of the photographs of Stefano Graziani one asks, what is it that spares them from caricature. In fact, there is neither sarcasm nor morbidity for the images which reproduce those melancholy, imperfect arrangements of objects. All the more melancholy as incapable of hiding, together with the failure, their original claim to serial perfection.

The answer is perhaps in the patina of these photographs, a diaphanous veil which is not a connotation of surface, an addition, a trick of the trade. Rather it seems to be the way to keep oneself back, protect oneself from facile confusions, to clinch the diversity between these two taxonomies: the photographic and the naturalistic.

This brings to mind the chilling classifications of Boltansky and Kantor, which share with these images a precision, a cold contemplation and respect for their dead objects.

The diaphanous, precise, elegant dioramas of Stefano Graziani are a cultured consideration of taxonomies, their systematic claims, their involuntary aesthetic drifting, and their relentless, eternal recurrence.

*You tell me you try, and rub your tired eyes
But it always seems so soft inside
I can't wait that long for a time that's real
It's just another strip that I could peel*

Died Pretty, Through Another Door

Krisis

Antonello Frongia

Everything looks dead, there's nothing left to see. Move around, peruse, wait for something to happen. Nothing happens. No shadows, no time, no nothing. Not even the familiar buzz of a neon bulb. The same dull light all around – the last radiation of a star long dead. What am I supposed to be looking at? All these pictures were already posed and taken and frozen a long time ago – by a taxodermist, a librarian, a biologist.

Everything is dead. I am a living dead. The assumption of much contemporary photography is so radical that it undermines the very notion of anything contemporary: we live in a post-apocalyptic world. Sometime between the 17th and the 18th centuries, western civilization moved from the Wunderkammer to the Encyclopaedia – from naming fears to cataloguing the life of animals, plants, people, species, machines, ideas. After WWII, photographers began to consider what was about to die: one last look at a disappearing world. Perversely, photography projected a sense of mourning and loss on the image of factories, machines, ruins – things that were already dead, simulacra. And yet there was still hope in such morphology of entropy. In today's Flatlandia, to photograph is to stare at the trompe l'œil of history: the mere recognition of the world as image. Epiphany and expectation have been banned from the realm of experience.

One could see a double irony in the idea of photographing libraries, botanic gardens, museums of natural history. An artist travels the world to record artificial displays of artificial life, making photographs for the sole purpose of returning them to a library, an archive, a file drawer. But these pictures won't teach us anything. They are made to short-circuit the whole idea of organized knowledge. They undermine our pretension that there exists a rational path to comprehend what we've been – or worse, what we're bound to be. "Every few centuries the Library of Alexandria must be burned down."

Everything is dead. I am a living dead. To write about photographs today is to reckon on the shortcomings of critical discourse. If photographers are their own best critics and historians, what is left to say or see? In the late years of his life, Walker Evans still found it possible to take a picture of a "Dead End" sign – and Lee Friedlander was there to take a witty picture of Evans photographing the scene. They both stood on the safe side: "the end" was there, somewhere in the distance, or in the future, or in someone else's life; to photograph it was an act of superstition. Today's best photography is radical, unforgiving, aporetical. To think, to see and to photograph critically is to face our unescapable condition of crisis: not the cunning destabilization of the observer or the (fictionalized) "death" of the author, but the blocked scepticism of negative thought. For a new generation of global and nomadic photographers, the world has become as unknowable and mind-boggling as the universe used to be.

Where we'll go from there, we'll see. Or will we?