

In the face of the unknown

Quentin Bajac

Faced with Andrea Ferrari's images, an uninformed reader might initially struggle to understand them, giving rise to a sense of uncertainty. What are these compositions that seem obsessive and accidental, untidy and systematic? What do they mean? Who made them? Why? The desire to find some reassurance in the face of the unknown will lead the informed reader to recall certain works such as those by the minimalists from the '60s and '70s, from which these photos borrow repetitive composition, or the books of conceptual artists from the '70s based on the principle of the archive. Examples include Hans-Peter Feldmann's *Alle Kleider einer Frau* (1970), a set of images portraying clothes that belonged to the same woman, or – from the same period – Christian Boltanski's inventories, such as *Tout ce que je sais d'une femme qui est morte et que je n'ai pas connue* (1970) or *Inventaire des objets ayant appartenu à une femme de Bois-Colombes* (1974).

One can clearly see in Andrea Ferrari the same serial desire for exhaustion through the description of a topic, yet his photos (if we assume he is the author) only have superficial connections with these works. One could say they neither share the ridiculous size of Feldmann's images nor the slightly narrative touch of Boltanski's. His photos also do not share with these artists the belief that taking a photo is a neutral action, that photography provides the most direct access to the object itself and that it is the best tool to perform a purely denotative action. *What you see is what it is*. Feldman and Boltanski made the content of their respective works, in the form of inventories, clear from the outset. Conversely, Andrea Ferrari chooses an enigmatic, deliberately non-explicit title that makes reference to images in an envelope – hidden images that photography will help, at the same time, to unveil.

Andrea Ferrari surely believes, like Luigi Ghirri (whose work he knows and likes), that reality needs to be read like hieroglyphics and that photographic language can also help in deciphering these symbols. Photography to him is a conscious, reflective practice of a system of signs and, as with Ghirri, is linked to semiology, the analysis of signs.

However, in *The Pictures included in this envelope* the photographic sign is complex. It is not linked to the identification of the photographed object, as would happen traditionally. Indeed, readers might, in most cases, be able to describe the objects portrayed in the photos, starting from their physical elements (parcels, envelopes, cut paper, letters, pieces of cardboard, photographs, drawings, rollers, copybooks, laces...), but they would not be able to name them. Are they compositions? Sculptures? Objects? Discoveries? Assemblages? Readers will probably be even less capable of attaching meaning to them; their meaning eludes them. Thus, if they decide to take these images for their referential value as iconic signs – what they stand for – their denotative value is weak or unclear. By contrast, if readers take them for their qualities as plastic, material signs, then these photos acquire a whole new dimension that is aesthetic, almost sculptured, one might even be tempted to say, which is reinforced by the volume the shot provides for each of these compositions through the interplay of shadows. It is about shapes, colours, textures, a play on abstraction and figuration etc...

Readers will have to let go of themselves to understand this work. They will have to forget the temptation to put a name to things, because Ferrari has little time for the iconic value of photography. What you see has no value for its primary designation (being a copybook, a box or a ribbon...). *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. This is really a trace of something else. This book will require careful reading, focusing on minimal clues, colours, shapes, writings, dates and words, not so much to try and reconstruct a life, but rather to understand, within the space of the book, a physical space – Giulia Carrobbio's house – and a mental space.