

«Second Hand Visions»

TONI HILDEBRANDT WITH PAULO NOZOLINO

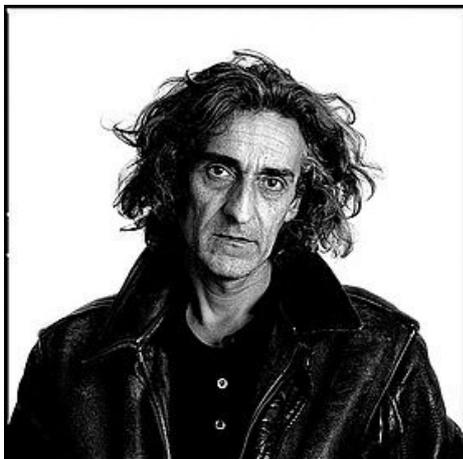


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Paulo Nozolino in conversation with Toni Hildebrandt, Lisbon, 27th November 2012

T.H.: In your most recent exhibition at BES Arte & Finança in Lisbon you showed a series of nine triptychs. The title makes reference to a poem from the Cantos by Ezra Pound. [1] The location is a bank, which finances photography exhibitions. Why Pound, and why in a bank?

P.N.: When this particular bank asked me to show there, nobody thought I would accept. I was always taught «to bite the hand that feeds you». I actually refused to take part in the BESPhoto award competition. The year before they financed my *Far Cry*, they were the sponsors for my exhibition in Serralves and they bought seven works for their collection. I had my share, I didn't want the whole cake. Anyway, last year I got an invitation to show in the bank. So I checked out the place and it was just horrible. It was all green. The space was just a nightmare, because the logo is green, the bank is green, the dollars are green... but I thought, maybe I can paint it grey, tone it down, lower the lights. I had work from 2008 that had never been shown. Political work.

Currently people are producing non-realistic photography, very egocentric, colourful and clean, even though we are living in very rough times. So I thought, what about showing them historical events from the past (translated in triptychs) and making people look at the present in a different way.

Once I decided to make the exhibition, the title came up. I've been a reader of Ezra Pound for 30 years and the *Cantos* is a book that I really love.

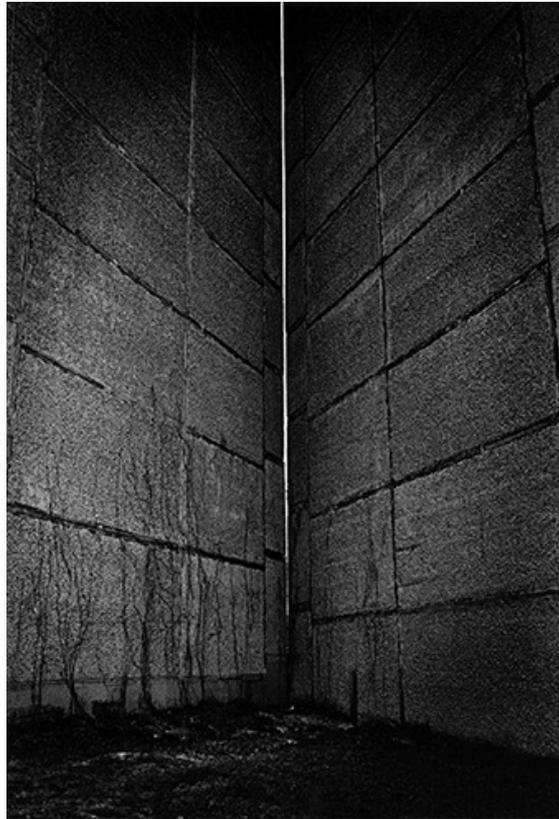


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T.H.: With this title you are particularly referring to Pound's Canto XLV With Usura. Pound himself gave a short definition at the end of the poem. Usury, according to Pound, is the charge for the use of purchasing power, levied without regard for production, and often without regard for the possibilities of production. Pound mentions as a historical example the «failure of the Medici bank».



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*P.N.: In addition to that there is a double meaning in Portuguese for that word. *Usura* means also «worn»; you can say «true usura» in the sense of «truly tired», «truly used». Since the word is that ambiguous it was perfect as a title.*



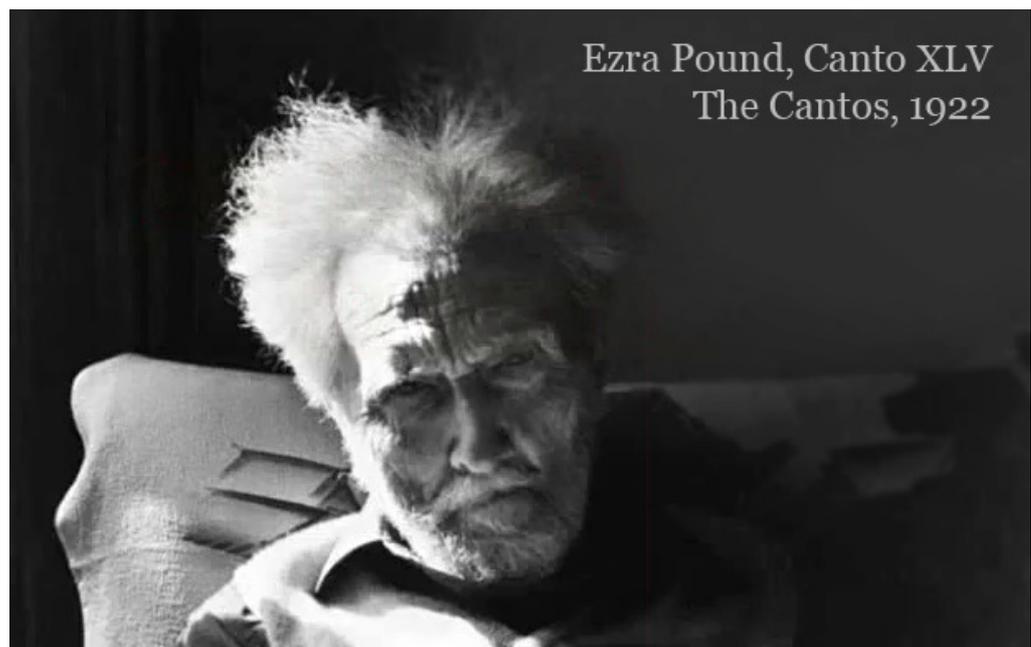
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T.H.: Usura is a central theme in Pound's political writings and his poetry, especially in the Cantos XLV-LI. Critical discussion has focussed the relationship between the economic thesis of usura and his attitude towards fascism. What's your view on this?

P.N.: Well, in some ways he was right. All these people like Pound and Céline they were anti-Semitic, but I do respect them for their ideas, even though I'm completely against them. Céline is a great writer and Pound is a great poet, so I have to respect that. *Usura* was written before the Second World War and everything is there. Pound was emphasizing that art is not for making money, because everything that is made for the purpose of money will collapse. As we are living in such a materialistic society, Pound seems pure. I thought it would be a good thing for the bank to be reminded of that, although their job is to sell money on credit.

T.H.: Was it of any importance that Pound himself was photographed by Cartier-Bresson and Richard Avedon?

P.N.: A friend of mine just sent me a press print from an archive; a fantastic photograph that was taken after Pound was tried for treason in America. It's alright that Avedon took that wonderful picture of Pound at William Carlos Williams' house, but I discovered Pound earlier and solely through his poetry when I was young. This man's life was always a mystery to me. The sound of his voice recorded reading *Usura* makes my skin shiver!



Video: 1 >



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T.H.: When I think about how you dealt with Pound in your exhibition, it almost reminds me of the way Pier Paolo Pasolini confronted Pound in 1967. I think Pasolini understood very well the ambivalence in such a politically conflicting figure like Pound. I think it is then especially interesting to confront Pound's individual biography, and his modernist view on both poetry and usury, with the overwhelming violent reality in the 20th century; the violence of the lager; the concentration camp, which we would later call the banality of evil.

*P.N.: It gets really tricky when ideas turn into violent acts. Anyway, I think we should never forget that language was invented to dominate. I am very wary of words. I'm a photographer. Poets they don't mean much anymore, but the *pure image*, the one that is not manipulated, still rings with some truth in me.*



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T.H.: Language is often a means of power; poetry might be seen as a possible, yet quite fragile counter-dispositive. This might be true for the power and meaning of images as well. The representation of money is often constructed in a numerical and analytical way, for example by statistics. The other way for you to represent money is by showing fragile pictures of the usura through pictures of the past.

P.N.: You are absolutely right. But I never intended to photograph money. Cannot be done. Photograph gold bars? A bank safe's steel door? Stupid images! I «photographed» events that were motivated by money and became major universal crimes. But the system is very perverse here. My reputation as a photographer has always been that of somebody who is sticking the knife where it hurts. It starts with myself and then obviously the others have to taste the knife too. Now a bank asks me to show in their space. It's a provocation. By doing so, they are also saying «we are not afraid of you; we are actually so open-minded, that we can take it. You are no longer dangerous». We know that the system has a very perverse way to always recuperate from the people that are angry at the world. But I am still angry at the world... No matter what!

T.H.: I think at this point any critical political efficiency in society is very hard to reach, but within an intellectual and artistic field it can still be very influential and in time will attract increasing attention. That's actually what I meant when I compared Pound himself, a historical figure with a very dark site in his own life, with Pasolini's subversive reading of both Pound's poetry and biography in the late 60s.

P.N.: Pasolini's interview with Pound is great and also important, because it was politically incorrect to talk about Pound, as it was incorrect to talk about Céline. I think that today there should be no time for intellectual guilt. For me the only thing that really matters, is that Pound was true to Pound. I like people who are true to themselves. Truth was always my question: How to be true to myself? How to deal with the world outside? I mean we are sitting here, it's raining outside, we are quite comfortable, but there are people out there shivering, they have no money and food, and it's miserable. Every time I get my camera and look at this people, I ask myself: What do I do? Do I ignore them? Do I photograph them? My photography has always come from the streets, never from the studio or from a concept.

T.H.: In 1994 you went to Auschwitz. In a conversation with Óscar Faria you said that from this point on your attitude changed and your photography «carried another weight». [2] I wonder how this changed your attitude towards the streets, with regard to what you said before, because it seems to me, that your later work had then another way of dealing with historical consciousness.

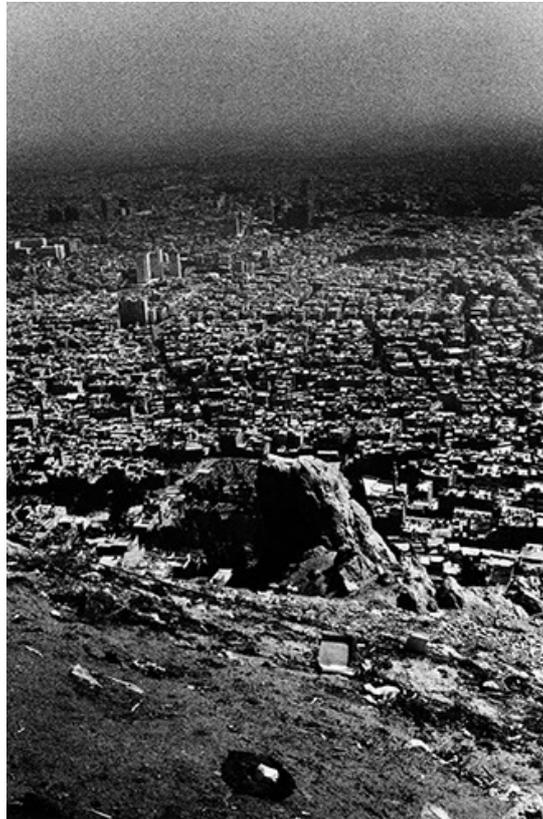


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P.N.: You are definitely right about that. I started my book on the Arab world, *Penumbra* [3], while I was living in France. Jean-Marie Le Pen was talking about the «dirty Arabs» all the time. It bothered me, so politically I was already motivated, even though I didn't want to produce political work, because it grows old very fast and in a way it's demagogical. Christian Boltanski is political without being too political. So is Gordon Matta-Clark, it's the same struggle. I was photographing Poland when I went to Auschwitz. That day remains etched in my memory forever! From then on I would never be the same. I came back to Paris and I had one more trip to do to Yemen. There I walked into a café by the desert on a very hot day. At the table in front of me sat my double. We both had the same expression in our faces. We were both victims, brothers in suffering. That moment I knew my journey was over. It was time to start working on Europe, and for me the *key* to Europe is Auschwitz.

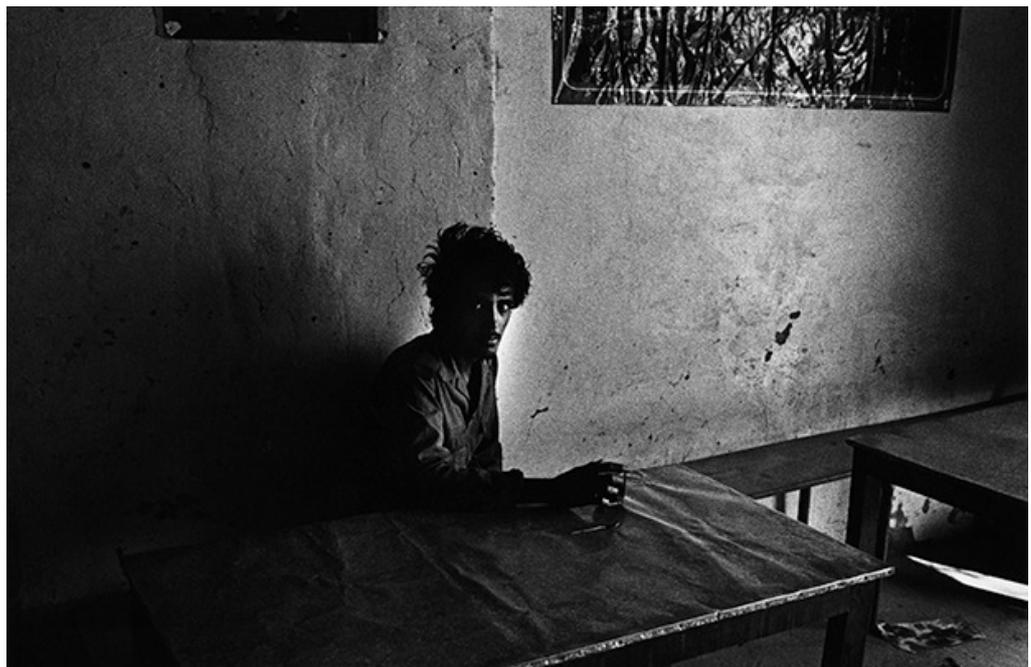


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T.H. Please tell me more about why you call Auschwitz the «key to Europe». This is a statement widely discussed in history and philosophy, but I wonder to which tradition you would relate it here.

P.N.: No tradition whatsoever!
The readings of Primo Levi, Mark Bloch, Giorgio Agamben and W.G. Sebald just confirmed my feelings.



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T.H. In one of his Cantos, Pound compares the structure of usura with a mechanism, so in other terms we might think of usura as a modern dispositive.

P.N. Yes, a dispositive to exterminate the people who have the money and the culture. If you read Stefan Zweig's *Die Welt von Gestern* [4] you understand how aristocracy felt, how the social classes collapsed and how money became the new value. The Third Reich made sure that money changed hands from the Jews to the new elite of criminals. The Final Solution, Auschwitz, was the key to building a new world: Europe. That is why we can never wash away the bloodstain!

T.H.: Were you also confronting these investigations of history and presence in the context of Portuguese society?

P.N.: No, I was living in Paris. But in Portugal when Hitler died Salazar put the flag at half-mast for three days. In my country the Holocaust is something that still now most people don't talk about. I was born under fascism, tasted it, hated it and ran away from it. I studied in England and travelled a lot. It was only then that I started to learn the true meaning of words like resistance, democracy and freedom.



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T.H.: Before you briefly mentioned Christian Boltanski as an artist who always works politically, but not in a too literal way. The photograph in the middle of the triptych may recall a famous work by Boltanski, the Dance of Death, which was recently shown at Fábrica ASA while Guimarães was the European Capital of Culture.

*P.N.: I saw that work before and I admire Boltanski a lot but his best work is way behind. He was somebody that worked with memory, and memory is something that is very important to me. The photograph of the coats, hanging in the centrepiece of that triptych, was taken in Madrid in the house of a friend of mine. He hangs his coats like that on the wall and somehow it reminded me of the Warsaw Ghetto. Clothes are important for me, they are man's second skin, especially worn clothes, second hand clothes. Photographs are a little bit like that. *Second hand visions.**

T.H.: The triptych entitled Remember the Damned, the Expropriated, the Exterminated... works somehow as the introduction to your exhibition, while Pound's poem With Usura marks an unlocked end to it. In between we find very different images of the past and the future. Usury is somehow the recurrent theme that binds them together.



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P.N.: This exhibition starts with the Holocaust but it ends up with the invasion of Iraq, which was motivated by money, *by usura* too.



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T.H.: In the left piece of the triptych called Pandora's box there is a small found photograph of Saddam Hussein. Where did you take that photo?

P.N.: I had this Koranic table, which is a piece of a board that I got from an Arabic country. With this board kids study the Koran in poor schools. It's made of wood, it's broken and it is full of scratches. It was on top of my shelf. When Saddam was caught I ripped his portrait out of a newspaper and I put it there and I made a picture.

I wanted to go to Iraq but I always make a point of not going when things are really warm. I always like to go there afterwards. I went to Sarajevo three years after the war. I like to see how the wounds heal, how people deal with the scars. I'm definitely not a photojournalist.

T.H.: It appears to me as if you want to keep a certain distance from any literal connection to daily, let's call it «journalist politics», which is of course not necessarily a pejorative connotation...



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... At least you avoid this kind of journalistic image making of the political contemporaneity that surrounds you or that you might photograph abroad.

P.N.: I actually don't photograph other images or screens very often. In the beginning of *Solo*, which is the project I did straight after *Penumbra*, it starts with a photograph that was shot from a documentary on Hitler's youth that I was watching while I was in Berlin. I took a picture of a screen because a swastika on a woven pullover made by some mother seemed like a perfect beginning. A few months later I took a picture in Paris, which is a *fondue enchainé* between Hitler's eyes and «ARBEIT MACHT FREI». I only took two rolls of film in Auschwitz. You can't photograph that place!

T.H.: *This is where I would like to make a comparison. On the one hand there are theoreticians, like Georges Didi-Huberman, who are insisting on the possibility of images from Auschwitz, in spite of it all. [5] You have now said that you can't make a photograph of those places, and maybe we should add that you couldn't make it because of the temporal distance between the photographic gesture and the historical event it relates to.*



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When the photographs you finally took show found photographs, screens or graffiti, these traces from the past, which you also call wounds, how would you then describe the potentiality of these traces and their relation to the place?

P.N.: Sometimes they are not even real traces, because I can intervene before they're finished: like in the case of the Jewish star in the beginning of the triptych. I was walking at night in Bucharest and I saw these kids painting the star. I still don't know what they wanted to write or draw under it, because when they saw me they ran away. So I took the picture of the Star of David, but I don't do this very much. There is this whole trend about appropriation that I rather dismiss.

T.H.: What do you precisely mean by the term appropriation?

P.N.: Marcel Duchamp started it with the Readymades! But in 1980, Sherrie Levine took it to the absurd extreme by photographing Walker Evans' pictures and framing them the same size on the wall. The notion of the author disappeared! It became cool to rip off anybody's images! But it excited so many intellectuals...

Michael Schmidt does something different with appropriation, using old photographs in a political way and making a real statement. [6] As I can't go back in history and go to Warsaw in 1940, I have to find another Star of David painted on the wall somewhere else.

T.H.: The form of the triptych is also historical and memorial. When did you start using this traditional form of composition?



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P.N.: I first thought about it in Colmar in 1999 in front of Matthias Grünewald. The photographs for my first triptych were taken in Alsace in Blodelsheim. In the same roll of film I had the three images that later became the triptych. The triptych provided a solution for one of my problems while working in Mulhouse. I just couldn't explain it all with one image. There I was confronted with the banality of everyday life and racism, still very difficult issues to portray. One of the pieces I did placed four images together: a mixed-race couple, a launderette open seven days a week, a grainy television screen and a menu on a canteen's wall.



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T.H.: *The triptych is a very special composition of three images with a famous tradition in western religious painting. How do you deal with series or sequences of images in general? Are they of any importance in your work or the making of your photography?*

P.N.: Let's put it this way: pictures are taken, pictures wait in boxes, and then I wait till I have something to say. I can go for months without working, just thinking. The form is always the book. It comes before the exhibition. *Far Cry* for instance was designed as a book first and then adapted to a show. The sequence of the images for me is the key to photography. The important thing in sequences, in photography, poetry or music, is not really the images, the words or the notes; it's the space between them! How they breathe! That's why putting a book together is such a thrill.



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T.H.: Far Cry is interrupted by a few blank pages with a marginal black edge. Do these pages also subdivide your work?



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P.N.: Those pages mark periods. The first part is about the time when I was young and I travelled. I was very influenced by Robert Frank.



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The beginning of *Far Cry* shows «road pictures», but then I came to Portugal. This uncompleted project was called *Limbo*. It was shown in Arles in 1986. [7] It was my attempt to describe Portugal. I didn't come to any conclusion. I know it's a place of nostalgia, a small country facing the sea, people have a huge inferiority complex. All this is very negative. I have to say that I hate the reasons why tourists like Portugal: always sunny, the food is good, the people are nice. You know, we are not like that. We are the opposite. You have to read Pessoa to know who we are. We are a strange bunch, somehow similar to Russians.

So I was first looking around at my friends and it was just a broken way of seeing. There are pictures of drugs and sex, some landscapes mixed with portraits. I also had my first son when I was 30. In a way it stopped the whole thing. I had a ten-year break, which is *Limbo*, the second part of *Far Cry*. After that I went on living in Paris and started *Penumbra*.

T.H.: Was *Penumbra* your first book project?

P.N.: No, I had done some books before. It actually says a lot about what I do now. My first book *Para Sempre*, self-published in 1981, had pictures from 1976 and was dedicated to my uncle and aunt. [8]

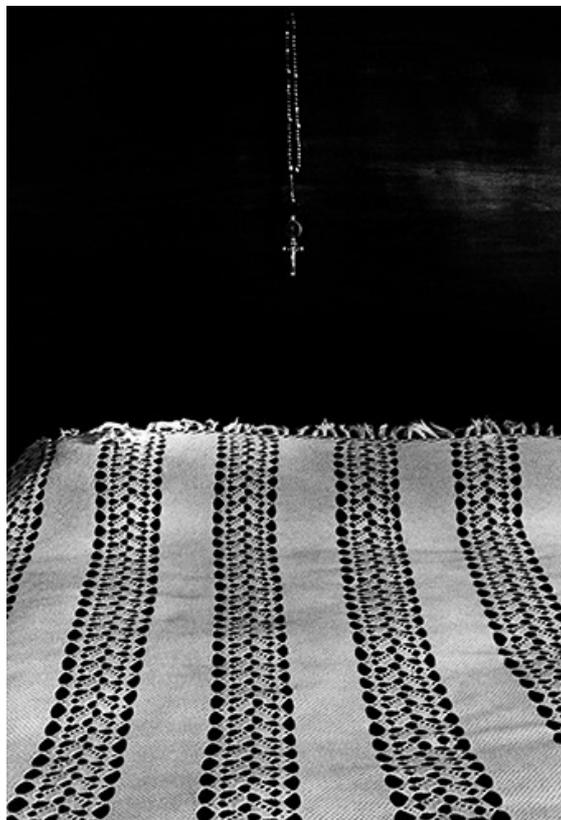


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They had this wonderful house in Ovar, in the north of Portugal where I used to spend Easter. Education and religion were already very present in this book. Surprisingly they are only verticals. In the last five years I only shot verticals. Mainly a reaction against the horizon line, against cinema... A way of conditioning the viewer's gaze.

T.H.: In these early works the texture of the pictures however seems different from your later photography.

P.N.: Well, it is there. Surprisingly I'm known for using grain, but when you print small you just don't see the grain. If you make a huge print, like you've seen in *Usura*, the grain becomes very apparent. Anyhow, grain has never been an issue to me; darkness is. The contamination of the soul.

T.H.: Since we're talking about technique: Do you use the technique of solarisation in some of your work?

P.N.: I did that only in one project, in *bone lonely*. [9] I wanted dirty prints from a dirty world.

T.H.: Can you tell us something about that book and about Makulatur, both of which were published by Steidl in 2011. Makulatur is a sincere and powerful response to the death of your parents. [10]

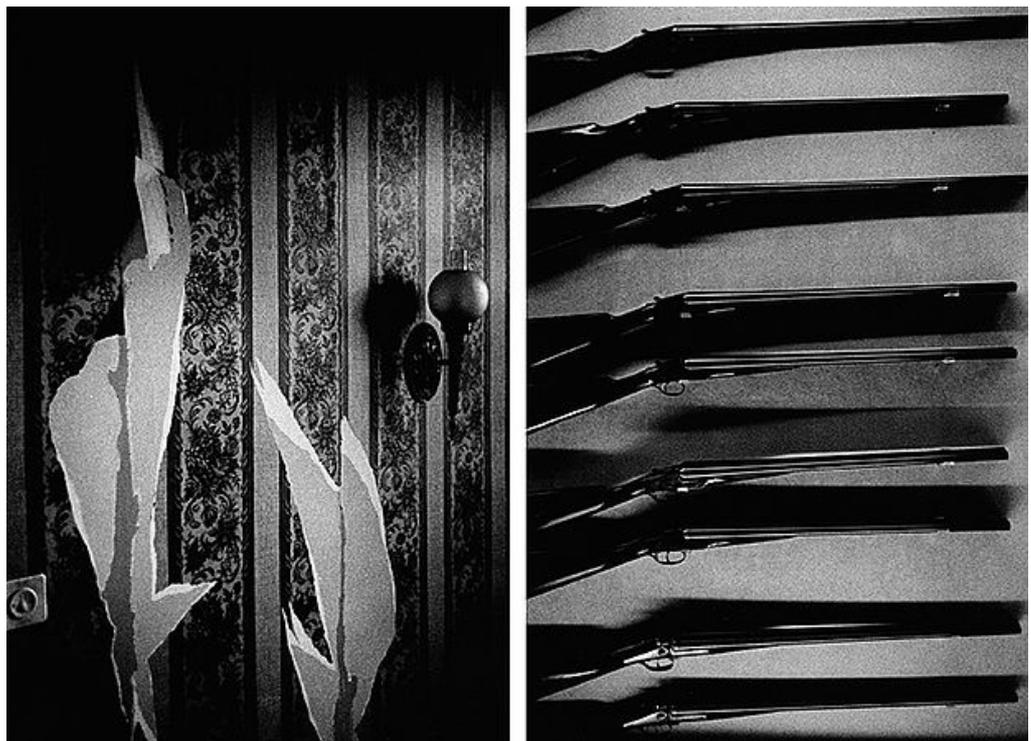


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P.N.: In my first book *Para Sempre* I talk about life from birth to death. *Makulatur* closes the circle in six diptychs.

T.H.: *What about the title? It makes me think of macule in the sense of a stigma, or even the opposite, which is present in the Latin «immaculata».*

P.N.: That's fascinating, but actually I was at Steidl's printing *Far Cry*. The first couple of hundred sheets were spoiled, they were maculated, and they put a green slip with the word «Makulatur» on them. I like the etymological associations even if my idea was actually embedded in a much more concrete situation.

bone lonely came out of a collaboration with one of my best friends and a great poet, Rui Baião. Before that we had already done *Nuez*. [11] Poets have something very much in common with some photographers: reduce feelings and thoughts to the minimum.

These two books, *Makulatur* and *bone lonely*, came out together in a way by accident. It wasn't planned that way, but for me that's what my work is all about too: accepting accidents.

T.H.: *The form of the photographic book also requires and permits another way to actually study your work.*

P.N.: I remember copying by hand Ginsberg's *Howl* when I was young, because it was forbidden material. There were no Xerox machines then! Books were always extremely important to me. Exhibitions disappear, books stay.

T.H.: *As a conclusion I would like to ask you about a statement you once made: «The only redeeming thing is to continue to work knowing that the images may be timeless. The photos must survive independently of me as a kind of legacy of my time.» [12] How do you think about an afterlife of images apart from your life?*

P.N.: I never read Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag or Roland Barthes. Never wanted anybody to spoil my mystery with photography. But it is curious that Barthes wrote *La Chambre Claire* after the death of his mother based on a picture of her. So he writes that book because he misses her and the only thing he has left is that photograph. That's the power of photography!



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Fussnoten

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Ezra Pound, «With Usura», in: idem, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, New York 1995, pp. 229-230.

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«Vivemos nem mundo sujo»: Paulo Nozolino in conversation with Óscar Faria, in: *Ípsilon* (January 9, 2009), pp. 26-29.

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Paulo Nozolino, *Penumbra*, Zurich/Berlin/New York 1996.

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Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, trans. Harry Zohn, Lincoln 1964 (Die Welt von Gestern, Stockholm 1942.)

Seite 116 / [5]

Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Paris 2005.

Seite 117 / [6]

Michael Schmidt, *U-NI-TY*, Exh.-cat. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, ed. Thomas Weski, Zurich/Berlin/New York 1996.

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Atelier des Forges, *Les Rencontres d'Arles 1986*: Martin Parr, Paulo Nozolino, Bruce Gilden, Max Pam, Miguel Rio Branco et al.

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Paulo Nozolino, *Para Sempre*, Lisbon 1982.

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Paulo Nozolino, *bone lonely*, Poems by Rui Baião, translated from Portuguese by Yara Franteschi Vieira and Eric Mitchell Sabinson, Göttingen 2011.

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Paulo Nozolino, *Makulatur*, Göttingen 2011.

Rui Baião/Paulo Nozolino, Nuez, Lisbon 2003.

«Vivemos nem mundo sujo»: Paulo Nozolino in conversation with Óscar Faria, in: Ípsilon (January 9, 2009), p. 27: «A única coisa redentora em continuar a trabalhar é saber que as imagens poderão ser intemporais. As fotografias têm de sobreviver independentemente de mim, como uma espécie de legado do meu tempo.»

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Jorge Ontalba, Portrait of Paulo Nozolino (All images reproduced with kind permission of the artist © Paulo Nozolino, Courtesy Galeria Quadrado Azul, Lisbon/Porto).

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Paulo Nozolino, Dusk, Coimbra 1980.

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Paulo Nozolino, Acid Rain, Ukraine 2008 (centre piece of the triptych).

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Usura, exhibition by Paulo Nozolino at BES Arte and Finança, Lisbon, curated by Sérgio Mah (20/09/2012-04/01/2013).

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Paulo Nozolino, Volunteers, Victims, Veterans, New York 2007. (Triptych)

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Paulo Nozolino, Sinking Sun, Tokyo 1996. (Triptych)

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Paulo Nozolino, Vii, Adormiti, Morti, Bucharest 2003. (Triptych)

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Paulo Nozolino, Salt of the Earth, 1989-2000. (Triptych)

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Paulo Nozolino, Noon, Damascus, Syria 1994 (from: Penumbra).

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Paulo Nozolino, Café de la Paix, Beirut, Lebanon, 1994 (from: Penumbra).

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Paulo Nozolino, Shibām, Yemen 1995 (from: Penumbra).

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Paulo Nozolino, Cinema, Cairo, Egypt 1992 (from: Penumbra).

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Paulo Nozolino, Remember the Damned, the Expropriated, the Exterminated..., Bucharest 2003, Madrid 2003, Auschwitz 1994 (centre piece of the triptych).

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Paulo Nozolino, Remember the Damned, the Expropriated, the Exterminated..., Bucharest 2003, Madrid 2003, Auschwitz 1994. (Triptych)

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Paulo Nozolino, Pandora's Box, 2003-2004. (Triptych)

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Paulo Nozolino, The Youth, Berlin 1995.

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Paulo Nozolino, The Horror, Paris 1997.

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Paulo Nozolino, The Victims, Auschwitz 1994.

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Paulo Nozolino, Remember the Damned, the Expropriated, the Exterminated..., Bucharest 2003, Madrid 2003, Auschwitz 1994 (left piece of the triptych)

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Paulo Nozolino, Untitled, Blodelsheim 1999. (Triptych)

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Paulo Nozolino, Routine, Mulhouse 2001.

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Paulo Nozolino, Contact sheet «Alsace/Blodelsheim», 1999.

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Paulo Nozolino, Gas station, near Houston 1978.

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Paulo Nozolino, Landscape, Castelejo 1984.

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Paulo Nozolino, Sperm, Lisboa 1978.

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Paulo Nozolino, Ovar 1976 (from: Para Sempre)

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Paulo Nozolino, diptych from Makulatur, 2008-2009

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Paulo Nozolino, Untitled, Sarajevo 1997.

Videos

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