

"I no longer wish to refrain
from the errors of my fingers,
the errors of my eyes.
I know now that these errors
are not just vulgar traps but
curious paths leading towards
a destination that they alone
can reveal to me. There
are strange flowers of reason
to match each error of the senses".

Louis Aragon,
Paris Peasant,
Exact Change, New York 1994, p. 10.

Time in Expoxure

The fact that Piritta Martikainen's photography often has to do with what are commonly considered photographic mistakes is an assertion which it is difficult to avoid in observing her works of recent years, even if it should be specified from the outset that they are by no means always mistakes. Out of focus, blurred, bizarre framings, over- and underexposures. In many of her series we find a generous sample of all these accidents that characterise the non-professional practice of photography and which any manual for amateur photographers points out as examples of inexperience that a more discerning and more knowledgeable use of the means allows us to avoid.

In Piritta Martikainen's case, however, these "mistakes" are not the unexpected result with which a beginner has to come to terms. On the contrary, they are the result looked for on the part of an artist who actually — and with great skill — controls the technical aspects of the means she uses. An artist who however seems to have taken upon herself a paradox evidenced by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*: "Usually the amateur is defined as an immature state of the artist: someone who cannot — or will not — achieve the mastery of a profession. But in the field of photographic practice it is the amateur, on the contrary, who is the assumption of the professional: for it is he who stands closer to the noeme of Photography".¹

In effect, the history of photographic mistakes — and

¹ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1982.

with this term we indicate the accidents that can happen at the moment of the release as well as during the printing phase — is both fascinating and curious and has run parallel to the evolution of photography since its beginnings. As Clément Chéroux has observed, someone who in a documented way told this history in a book published a few years ago, going by certain stories the very discovery of photography during the first half of the Nineteenth Century could have been made by the fortuitous leaving of a teaspoon of silver, forgotten by Daguerre, on an iodized metal plate.²

Initially discarded and destroyed because incompatible with the utilitarian logic of nineteenth-century photography, during the first decades of the last century these accidents began to attract increasingly more attention on the part of artists who belonged to the most important European avant-garde movements. And it is precisely thanks to some of these artists that the limits of the photographic procedure were intentionally 'sounded' in two basic directions of investigation which, according to Chéroux, can emblematically be summed up in the activities of László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray. On the one hand Moholy-Nagy, by incarnating the experimental Modernism of Bauhaus, systematically investigated photographic accidents arriving, thanks to these, at freeing photography from the mimetic schemes of the pictorial tradition. On the other hand Man Ray, who with a very apt play on words in no way casually defined himself as a *fautographe*³, in starting out from the theoretical presuppositions of Surrealism abandoned himself to the logic of serendipity, that is, to the absolute casualness of the photographic accident which in its aleatory unpredictability reveals itself as one of the most efficacious ways for offering an unusual view of reality.

Reflecting on the developments of serendipity in photography during the second half of the twentieth century Chéroux introduced the concept of wandering, which in our opinion seems perfectly applicable to Piritta Martikainen's case: "In its current meaning 'wandering' means going here and there, to walk without an aim. Although it also means placing oneself in the condition of making a mistake, as its etymology reminds us. Wandering is the nomadic form of serendipity. In other words, wandering in photography means being disposed to welcome accidents as little lay miracles, as true photographic epiphanies".⁴ These words by Chéroux clearly recall those by Piritta Martikainen who in an interview a number of years ago made the following observation regarding the "blurred" nature of her photographs: "When I take a photograph I like leaving open the possibility for the "surprise", I like being surprised by the end result. I can obtain this effect by using a long exposure time, by moving the camera or by moving myself during the shot. I often try to create an image which has something unreal about it. In my opinion one can achieve this result by completely putting the image in focus, in this way obtaining a perfectly clear and distinct photograph, or else by doing the opposite, by keeping everything a little blurred and out of focus. Given that I prefer the surprise

2 C. Chéroux, *Fautographie. Petite histoire de l'erreur photographique*, Éditions Yellow Now, Crisnée, 2003.

3 The term *fautographe*, which Man Ray used for the first time in an interview of 1960, was created by the superimposition of *photographe* (photographer) and *faute* (mistake).

4 Ibidem, p. 97.

effect, for me the second technique suits me better. In this way I manage in part to foresee the result, even if I don't have complete control over the situation. [...] A perfectly focussed and distinct photograph corresponds to what my eye might see when I look at something. An image that is blurred and out of focus becomes something that my eye cannot create and fix without the camera. I consider that it's important to be able to see the landscape or a person in a new and unknown way for my eyes by way of the help of a mechanical device".⁵

By interposing the camera between her own eyes and the world Piritta Martikainen appears to be in perfect agreement with Franco Vaccari when he affirms: "Photography is really photography if it helps us to discover what we don't know, instead of confirming what we already do".⁶

The deviations with respect to the correct practice of the photographic procedure are in Piritta Martikainen's case not an ostentation of pictorialism or a way for retrieving the author's subjectivity as against the objective and impersonal mechanicalness of the camera release. On the contrary, it is a verification of the photographic act and of its limits. If the exposure time of a photograph corresponds to the time subtracted from the continuity of becoming and is congealed in that "was" or "has been" which for Barthes constitutes the noeme of photography, when Piritta Martikainen moves the camera during the release she ends up by capturing the essence of this mysterious time dynamic. The result is an image which is not the optically faithful reproduction of a fragment of reality transformed on a two-dimensional support but is the trace of a gesture, of a movement that dissolves the object into myriad luminous trails and spots of colour. Placing the iconic dimension in the background, these works by Piritta Martikainen merely evidence the indexical essence of the photographic, its nature of trace, because as Rosalind Krauss wrote: "Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface".⁷

Within this "wandering" by Piritta Martikainen the two themes that present themselves most frequently are light and time, as appears evident for the latter by simply reading the titles of some of her works (*Moving in Time*, *Time is Endless* and *Daytime stories*)⁸. An interest, as we have just seen, which places itself inside the constant reflection regarding the essence of the photographic act. Although certainly not extraneous is the existential dimension of a person who has really experienced the climatic and light contrasts of one of the most northerly countries of the planet. It is therefore not fortuitous that both time and light are the poles around which this exhibition revolves and that by way of fifty photographs and a video expressly created for this occasion offers us a good 'cross section' of her recent production.

As an introduction to the exhibition we have a group of photographs that treat the theme of holidays in which we observe people who in an unspecified seaside resort are living a probably expected moment, one relished beforehand and organized

⁵ *Che c'è di nuovo? Uno sguardo sulla scena artistica emergente in Ticino*, exhibition catalogue edited by E. Schenini, Museo Cantonale d'Arte, Lugano, 2010, pp. 110-111.

⁶ F. Vaccari, *Fotografia e inconscio tecnologico*, edited by R. Valtorta, Einaudi, Turin, 2011, p. 16.

⁷ R. Krauss, *Notes on the Index. Seventies Art in America*, in *October*, no. 3, 1977.

⁸ However, it is not only the essence of the photographic act that interests the artist but also the social dimension of photography. In *Daytime stories* and *Living Doll* this reflects on the way in which this art – according to the famous definition by Bourdieu – mediates and influences the construction of our identity.

months before. A holiday, however, that is nothing other than a brief parenthesis, an interlude, the experience of which has in some way already been clouded by the prospect of the return to day-to-day life. Besides, and as shown by one of the artist's photographs, holidays are often spent by incessantly accumulating photographic testimonies of these "happy" moments, with the illusion that in the future these traces will allow us to relive an experience that — everything considered — we didn't manage to fully experience in the moment in which it was produced. In some cases perfectly distinct, in others blurred, bathed by a zenithal light that annuls whatever shadow, these images seem to dissolve the materiality of the bodies, inviting us to reflect on our impossibility to live the present. Opened by the photograph of a lighthouse, the emblematic place of awaiting an event that must still come about, of a possible that is placed in the future but towards which we have already addressed ourselves, this series of images stages the continuous projection into the future which characterises our being-in-time.

Squeezed between the vice of the past and future, the present is like an extremely thin sheet, a body whose thickness is infinitesimal, almost imperceptible, that only with great effort we can try to perceive while it happens. With her camera the artist does nothing other than try continuously to capture this present. Aware, however, that in the very same moment that the shutter closes the ray of light that for an instant has shown us the epiphany of being here and now is transformed into a reliquary belonging to the past. Moving amidst the woods of Ticino and Finland, or within the context of her own day-to-day family life, or, again, when visiting museums of natural history and aquariums, Piritta Martikainen doesn't investigate, she neither documents nor 'sounds' the field. But what she does do is to offer us images of time, of a time suspended in the waiting for or expectation of a happening that never happens but that has always already happened and must always happen again, as in the video that closes the exhibition.

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