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Eva Frapiccini and 'Muri di piombo' - Interview by Rebecca Scott Bray

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Abstract

This interview with Italian photographer Eva Frapiccini explores her research and practice for the work Muri di piombo (Walls of lead) between 2003-2006. During this time she researched homicides committed during the anni di piombo (years of lead) in Italy 1976-1982. Frapiccini photographed crime scenes in the same month and at the same time of day as the original violence, exhibiting the resulting images with press reports about the crime.

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Rebecca Scott Bray: In your opening statement to your book you write of every place having a story to tell that sometimes is available only to people who know them, or remember them. For others, they are known 'only in passing' and you include yourself in this before *Muri di piombo*. What was the impetus behind the work?; and what was your aim?

Eva Frapiccini: I began the project during the first year of my photography studies in Turin in 2003. Having graduated in Art History from Bologna in November 2002, I was looking for work and applied to various art schools. I moved to Turin thanks to a scholarship that was the only one offered to the three year course in Photography at the European Design Institute there. But before I moved there I just knew Turin as the headquarters of Fiat's historic car industry. My first year in Turin was very difficult, because this new city was very different, in style and social expectations, from my university town of Bologna. Even the street life of Turin ran to a different timetable, more like some industrial city anywhere in the world. This change in my emotional landscape led me to reflect on the relationship between places and the habits of the people who live there, including the face of the city; the feelings that a place transmits in the traces of the subjects living there; the atmosphere of a room from the lives of its inhabitants; the streets of a city from the history of its people.

The place is a sponge that soaks up and collects the emotional sensibility of the people who live there, in some way constraining

it. I had seen films about the 1970s, the student protests, the war in Vietnam, and I only superficially knew about the terrorism in Italy in those years — of the left and of the right — but I thought that since it had struck various Italian cities it might be a way to test my theory about places, considering that violent death could create an echo of such intensity that it would leave a sign. I believe that the force of a project derives from personal experience, from the presence of an obsession, more than from weighing up the common interest. I look particularly for aspects of social phenomena that reconnect us to the lives of everyone else, to try to prick our sense of apathy. This could be considered a political act, [but] for me it is only a way to encourage reflection, to open up a little the constraints of our reality, first of all, my own.

RSB: Can you tell me about your research process? For example, how you undertook your research about the crimes, your selection of which sites to photograph and how long it took you before you started photographing on the streets?

EF: Before I started to photograph I wanted to understand what I would be getting involved in. I began to read books, to give myself the first outline of the events, with the basic journalistic information: who, where, when, how … I was confronted by dispatches from a war zone. From the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 70s Italy was faced with various ideas and questions with seriously violent overtones. Each day there were the counts of dead or wounded in clashes between police and demonstrators (against the war in Vietnam, for the right to abortion or divorce, for the workplace contracts of workers); clashes between groups of neo-fascists and communists; and more sporadically, but even more fierce, were the terrorist attacks, with bombs in public places (the chosen strategy of rightwing terrorists) or with gunshots aimed at selected targets, like lawyers, journalists, judges, politicians and so on (the strategy of the leftwing terrorists). I wanted to speak about the places traumatised by violent deaths, in those years, because I felt they had been forgotten, almost taboo, but faced with so many political deaths in different circumstances, with the responsibility to

so many families, I felt I had to restrict my subject matter, and at the same time find a clear method. That is how I decided to deal only with the places involved in 'red' terrorist attacks, that is to say, by the communist side, perhaps because for me it was more inexplicable, given how meticulously they had chosen and stalked their targets.

Once I had decided to talk about leftist terrorism I drew up a list of places, first of all in Turin. From the books I had the dates, from which I began to search the libraries for the microfilms of the newspapers of the time, which became a real discovery for me. They were full of detail about the place and the moment of the murder, with the feel of a detective story. After having read some of those articles I understood that the *moment* was of fundamental importance. Photography is constitutionally linked to the instant. While video encompasses a broader time frame, the photograph freezes a unique instant, that is already different after the shot has been taken. From this I decided to shoot at the same time as the death in each place. Step by step I researched the places, organising the dates and times for each city, and I arranged my trips and shoots in the same month as the attack. I began and finished my work in Turin first of all, and in the following two years I shot and did the research in Rome, Milan and Genoa. It all went in step with the research.

In choosing the places I looked for a thread connecting the attacks with the responses of public opinion and of the police. Each attack was more extraordinary than the others: on Aldo Moro, a government minister; then the first journalist killed, Carlo Casalegno; the attack on the headquarters of the Christian Democratic Party in Piazza Nicosia in Rome; the first worker killed, Guido Rossa in Genoa, an attack that indicated a split between the terrorists and the class of factory workers, that justified armed struggle as an instrument of justice. Then there were the connections between the attacks: reprisals for earlier actions, or like the killing of the cook Maurizio Allegretti by mistake, which was 'corrected' two days later with the death of Angelo Mancia, a neo-fascist sympathiser. Having decided to speak about this subversive phenomenon, I looked for a narrative thread between

the deaths, which was often given by the attackers in the phone calls claiming responsibility.

Beyond the highly descriptive articles and the photographs of the time, I also used interviews with people living in the neighbourhood where each attack happened. Some of them didn't know there had been a murder there, some remembered the position of the body, others knew but were frightened to get involved.

Finally, I had the evidence of Giancarlo Caselli, the judge who had fought together with General Dalla Chiesa against the leftist terrorism, and had caught the main offenders. That was an incredible experience for me, to meet someone who had experienced that history as a protagonist. But even beyond that, I gained access to the archives of the police and the investigators.

Then I took the photos. In each of the fifty places, I arrived before the time of the attack to orientate myself, but above all to mentally reconstruct the dynamic. Only in very few cases had the architectural scene changed. In many cases it was possible to reconstruct almost every step of the victim or of the terrorist, and the photos of the time were another aid to that. I remember spending two hours on the steps of the Salita Santa Brigida in Genoa, waiting for the exact time, but also imagining the scene, while passers by looked at me curiously, seeing a girl on the ground with an old camera. I was looking through the viewfinder, looking for the angle that matched the dynamic, choosing the one that best represented the place, its victims, that lined up with the journalistic account.

RSB: In some ways your work has a resemblance to the work of Northern Irish artists Paul Seawright and Willie Doherty who use narrative to accompany their works on political violence. Paul Seawright's 1988 *Sectarian Murder* series particularly comes to mind, with their accompanying fragments of newspaper text. Does your work bear a conscious relation to this art history around political violence?

EF: I believe I only had in mind the newspaper photographs that in some way create an imaginary: dramatic photographs that amazed me with a violence that is hard to see in today's newspapers. My visual

point of reference to begin with was the objectivity of the Dusseldorf school of photography (such as Candida Hofer and the Bechers). To show the crime scenes today is something I achieved through shooting head-on to the street or the building. My first attempts left me cold. Then my lecturer at the photography school gave me the right advice: give up small format photos for medium format. As soon as I arrived at the first place that I would portray (Lungodora Napoli in Turin) and I looked through the camera's viewfinder I understood that the image matched my sense of that place, like two halves of a broken pane of glass that fit back together. The medium format camera allows you to use a viewfinder with a 6cm x 6cm display. Opening the aperture to the maximum one can have a very tight field in focus, leaving the rest out of focus. That's how I searched for fragments of the past. A single point, a floor tile, a sign that could speak to me from the past. But I only realised this afterwards.

RSB: Can you tell me about the importance of using newspaper texts and the process of selecting the texts — such as why you chose those particular newspapers?

EF: The newspaper articles were part of my project even before the photographs, in a way, because I took them with me when I was shooting. I went back over them in my memory, and that's why it was natural to display them in the exhibition. They live in symbiosis with the photos.

When I examined the documents of the period I noticed that there were more details in some and less in others, and that usually this depended on whether the newspaper was located in the city where the attack took place. For example, *La Stampa* is from Turin, and that was the paper that gave more detail about the attacks in Turin, rather than those in Rome, where *La Repubblica* was the more detailed one, having its headquarters in Rome. So I chose the articles from *La Repubblica* for Rome, those for Milan from *Corriere della Sera*, and for Turin from *La Stampa*. On the other hand for Genoa there would have been *La Nazione*, but I found more detail for those attacks in *Corriere della Sera*. I needed to synthesise them, armed only with a pair of scissors, leaving

certain points unresolved. I have given precedence to those elements most useful to comprehension, but I tried to preserve phrases that indicated a different narrative style.

RSB: What is the place of the newspaper fragments? Do they add to or augment the work? I suppose I am wondering if the newspaper component of the work somehow operates to highlight the potential ambiguities and elisions of photography as opposed to its exactitude and 'truth-telling' capacity?

EF: Actually the newspapers of the period, just for their narrative style, are precious objective instruments, but even more evocative as a way of sharing the passions of the time, that have disappeared today. The images and the text are two languages travelling in the same direction, but at different speeds. They are both later than the deed, the photos by thirty years, the text by only a day, but together they search out that instant. At first glance, the text could seem to be an entry point for the spectator, confronted by the abstraction of an unknown place, where you see nothing happening, but then, through their descriptive style, they transport the spectator back further than a day or a month. And then the image functions as a means of transport, suspended between today and thirty years ago.

RSB: Some of the images seem to suggest the position of the victim. To me this is not always a 'typical' victim position (such as being prone on the ground). For example, some photographs seem to be taken looking up from the floor or ground, while others suggest movement because of blurred perspectives (*Roma, Via Ruggero di Lauria, Autobus 991, 18 marzo 1980 ore 9 circa*). Other images have a distinct 'coolness' — shot from a distance (*Roma, Via Mario Fani, 16 marzo 1978 ore 9.15*) or proximity to a car window (*Milano, Via Teodosio, 19 ottobre 1981 ore 9.10*) that is even suggestive of another, more sinister position — the position of the assassin.

How did this difference in photographing scenes arise for you? Was it about shaking up the photographic perspective? Was it a decision made 'on the spot', or was it in any way related to the crime itself and what you had researched?

EF: I didn't try for that difference in framing. It is part and parcel of the work. I began by reconstructing the dynamic, sometimes focusing on the instant before the killing. For example, when I framed the car window in Via Teodosio it is an instant before it was broken by the bullet from the pistol. Other times I focussed attention on the point where the body lay after the murder, from a witness's point of view, for example in *Via Ruggero di Lauria, Autobus 991.* Finally, where there was such a strong sign of the past [in some places] that I didn't need to do any other research. In some places I took the point of view of the attacker, in others that of the victim, in others, that of the witness. In others again, I didn't choose beforehand, I simply let the framing match up with the strength of feeling of that murder, in that moment, in that place.

What comes first is the desire to imagine the scene, to be there, or to live the event in the first person. My work insinuates itself in that instant of involvement. One cannot remain outside the scene. Basically I work in the present on the past, but in both of them I'm looking for the voice of the subjects.

RSB: To my mind, none of the images resemble 'snapshots'. Even despite the 'everyday' aspects of some of them, they feel focused and decisive. Was this a deliberate aesthetic choice?

EF: I also started out from these images, but wanted my approach to be different. If one documents something that happens one is limited to observing, but if one wants to convey something invisible, one needs to go further.

RSB: Similarly, most of the pictures (but not all) are devoid of human 'life' or activity. In fact most of the images are 'empty'. Again, was this the happenstance of the location and time of day or was it a deliberate choice?

EF: I tried to eliminate any element that would distract from the place, from the return of the echo of the past.

RSB: Much crime scene photography is historical, in black and white, and has a very immediate impact — with images of dead bodies, blood. Did you consciously work in colour photography?

EF: I believe that black and white takes the gaze to the graphic — and so, essential — aspects of reality, while colour, by its nature, speaks.

RSB: Instead, your crime scene images are well after the fact of crime and divorced from the immediate trauma or violence. What dialogue with crime and the 'anni di piombo' do you think your images offer the viewer, as opposed to other, more historical pictures?

EF: In the 1970s it was said that a picture is worth more than so many words, so that the photo-documentary became a medium of accusation, but I believe that today we are used to stronger violence, from films, television news and photographs. I think that the imagination is gaining a more powerful space than that of the image in itself. Over time I understood that the way of photographing could represent a bridge between the past and the present of those places, but I believe that the imagination of the spectator, or their willingness to imagine, plays a fundamental role.

RSB: How would you describe these photographs as relating to contemporary life in Italy?

EF: Many places haven't changed in the last thirty years. Even the entrances to the buildings are the same. The perception of them has changed. I believe that the way of living in the place has changed the way it is felt, more than physically. The perception of the past has also changed. People feel more secure, but something of those times remains in their memories. I have been struck by the emotions that can still be felt by those who lived through those years. People who have seen my work at the Museo d'Arte Moderna in Bologna, thanks to the support of the UniCredit Foundation,[1] or in the exhibition *Mutation I*, in other European galleries, have come up to me to tell me that they had forgotten the fear they had of going out of the house in those years. They have made me understand that only now can they realise the enormity of that violence, thirty years later, after the silence, after the return to normality. It's not like the memories of the Second World War, that have been placed inside a frame, where we look for details to surprise us. The sense that I get from talking to people who lived through the years of terrorism is that they always feel surprised seeing

the return of a memory. This to me is the sign of a strongly repressed history, which has not been confronted, that perhaps we're able to look at only now, after a little peace.

Translation from the Italian by Richard Mohr and Silvia D'Aviero with the assistance of John Storey and Elisa Tosoni.

Note

1   The exhibition *Muri di piombo* at the Museo d'Arte Moderna in Bologna (MAMbo) was supported and made possible by the UniCredit Group's art project UniCredit & Art.

Reference

Frapiccini E 2008 *Muri di piombo* Skira Milano