



VISUAL

The Tip of the Iceberg

Alessandra Chemollo

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BIOGRAPHY

Alessandra Chemollo was born in Treviso on the 20th of August 1963 and lives in Venice. She graduated from the University IUAV of Venice with a thesis on the relationship between Architecture and Photography.

Her reflection on the representation of architectural works is developed in her professional work and in her self-produced projects, without interruption.

He has realised photographic projects to illustrate numerous monographic texts, deepening specific ways of interpreting architectural works from documentary sources, thanks to his close collaboration with architectural historians – starting with his experience with Manfredo Tafuri.

In her 30 years of professional experience, she ranges from historical to contemporary architecture and develops theoretical areas with didactic and curatorial purposes.

Since 1986 she has worked as a photographer; between 1991 and 2013 she worked with Fulvio Orsenigo (ORCH – www.orsenigochemollo.com). Since 2013 she has been teaching the Photography module of the Master of Landscape at IUAV.

Photography is something that has to do with our encounter with the world: we could say that it is the recording of the image that we give back when our inner self confronts the outside world, through a process of selection.

This inner image varies from person to person and is generated both by something we decide, of which we are aware and which is the result of a series of choices, and by what arises from circumstances, from what happens to us—often randomly—with something we had not anticipated.

We could also say that it has a similarity with what Carl Gustav Jung defined as synchronicity and what the world of quantum physics has defined as entanglement: it concerns something that goes beyond the dimension of cause and effect, that eludes logical processes and is inherent in the right side of our brain (which is not the part that organizes, but the part that makes us feel whole, makes us feel connected to everything).

To summarize this introductory concept, I fondly recall the words of a dear friend who was also a great teacher to me, Giovanni Chiaramonte: photography makes us feel transparent when we take pictures.

We are accustomed to looking at the photographed subject, to seeing through all the levels at which a photographer gives shape to his encounter with the world, passing through them without seeing them in order to look at the thing represented by the photograph.

And we do not realize that the very moment the photographer decides to use one lens rather than another, for example, they have already chosen a way of looking at the world (from what distance and from what point of view, with what involvement in relation to the scene and with what relationship between the parts located at different distances from each other). Not to mention the moment that is isolated from the flow, or the portion of vision that is cut out: whatever choice the photographer makes is interpretative.

And then, in the words of Ugo Mulas, there is a counter-shot in photography: the moment I photograph, the photograph photographs me.

The very moment we look and therefore select what to look at, the selection we make challenges our experience and, as Borges says, brings out memories, fears, predictions.

My job is to work on the interpretation of an interpretation. I never thought it was reductive to photograph space, a space designed by someone else, because I never thought my job was to fit the space into a frame by squeezing it in; I always thought there was something more complex that needed to be articulated. At the linguistic level, it involved bringing together a world of references inherent in photographic vocabulary with an ability to understand what architecture seeks to represent through space.

I trained by working for four years with Manfredo Tafuri, photographing Renaissance architecture and trying to understand how Renaissance architects



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referenced antiquity. This approach—which is fundamentally one of listening, but also of decoding and documenting, because I believe that documenting is the primary act—has always been mixed with a sort of stratification of meaning, in which what I was trying to convey had to do both with the object I was photographing and with what I was able to decode about the generative process of that object/space) and with other issues that have always underlie my representation. For example, the dimension of time has certainly always been part of my work, but so has the attention to capturing something that concerns the world of allegory, together with that of rhetorical figures and then irony, trying to keep alive the awareness that when I look—at the very moment I look, I am also being looked at.

While I trained with Manfredo Tafuri—who initially gave me precise instructions on how I should look at things—at the same time, while working with him, I was photographing large production and storage facilities for Benetton: reportages in which the dimension of representation was that of rapid change, told with my camera around my neck, without using a tripod, climbing around and trying to capture the very fast pace at which things happen on a construction site. I believe that these two elements are, in some way, the main ingredients that I then mixed together in my work: this slow, attentive observation—which I would dare to define as philological, even though I think it presumptuous to call it philological – and the fact of paying attention to what is happening, of being ready to capture what is happening, trying to keep together the irony, but also the stratification of meaning that the image generates, seeing how these figures can bring other figures to light, how they can have another meaning beyond what the thing gives me back.

Knowing full well that what I am doing—and therefore also the physical object of the photograph I am going to produce—is at once a testimony, a record of something that is “objectively” happening, but also always and in any case generated by the choice of a point of view: I have always thought it important to try to declare this point of view so that my subjectivity is clear.

Sometimes this point of view is imposed by the project – I can’t say that I choose it – but other times I choose it myself – by being there – because the secret is to be there – and also by imagining myself there, because, for example, in order to take some photographs I had to imagine what I would see, or decide in advance to photograph a piece of architecture at the moment it is being used, decide to work among people, take the space away from the architect’s imagination and bring it into the world.

My first published photograph is a photograph from 1986, and it is the image that confirmed to me that I should work on the idea that the architect had thought of giving form to through space rather than on the form itself, that the secret lay in taking a step back, trying to work on the idea and restore that idea, translating the idea into the language of photography: this is why I think we are talking about an interpretation of an interpretation.

Photographing several works by the same architect allows us to work on the lexicon of architecture, to articulate a photographic language, to choose a coherent way to photographically convey the design vision, which is different every time, because each architect articulates his language in a different way.

My photographic campaign in 1999, illustrating the entire work of Alvaro Siza, followed a few years after my thesis at the IUAV in Venice, in which I investigated the relationship between architecture and photography in the history of Siza’s work, analyzing various publications and collecting testimonies from various protagonists, including Roberto Collovà, Mimmo Jodice, Giovanni Chiaramonte, as well as Alvaro Siza himself.



For this reason, my photographic work on Siza's work was very special to me: in every situation in which I found myself photographing, I had as a guide, in addition to the project content—which I knew in detail—the various iconographic variations developed over time, which I had analyzed during my thesis work.

When Alvaro Siza's work was presented to the Italian public by Vittorio Gregotti in 1972, Gregotti raised the issue of the indescribable nature of Siza's architecture: for this reason, early publications of his work mainly focused on details.

The first conscious action of my work was to broaden the field of vision, comparing the works with their context, populating the spaces, measuring them with a contemporary temporality.

And then, thanks to the wonderful encounters I had, for example with Giovanni Chiaramonte, I understood a number of things, such as the fact that Alvaro Siza works on non-perspective spaces and therefore working on

space with a perspective tool such as the camera—the heir to Renaissance vision—also means constructing sequences.

However, what really had a profound influence on the structure of my photographic work came from what I received directly from Alvaro Siza, from what Siza told me about his relationship with photography during the interview he gave for my thesis in September 1994:

I don't make any recommendations to photographers, and I don't take them to see my works because I think photography has its own autonomy, and with sensitivity—and sensibilities differ—you can understand a lot about architecture through fragments of the concept. The reality of a work goes, I believe, much further than what we consciously seek; many things escape us. It can be a surprise, a photograph; we can also understand, with a photograph, things that were not conscious, the product of memories [...] unconscious ones.

The monograph on the work of Eduardo Souto De Moura came three years later. My photographic campaign began with photographs of the house in Moledo and a wonderful two-day meeting with Antonio Esposito and Giovanni Leoni, locked away in Souto De Moura's studio, where Eduardo explained his work to us project by project. At the end of that meeting, I suggested shooting mainly in black and white because I felt that the photographic narrative of Souto de Moura's work placed a lot of emphasis on the quality of the materials and the quality of the details, while there was a need to bring out the spatiality that had remained almost in the background until then: in my opinion, shooting in black and white would allow us to work more on the idea of space.

We are obviously talking about work done entirely on a tripod, entirely on medium format film. I printed the photographs for the book myself, one by one, in the darkroom, except in a few cases where I chose to work in color where it made sense.

The two books by Souto de Moura and Tavora are collective works. There was a continuous dialogue with Antonio Esposito and Giovanni Leoni (and with Ivana Barbarito, with whom I shared the photographic campaign), and my photos are, I think, everyone's photos. They are the result of knowledge that was given to me, that was shared.

Eduardo says that an architect creates a single project in his entire life, and I believe that a photographer, who has the great opportunity to see everything, can try to convey this idea that he is truly creating a single project.

The latest photographic campaign, on the work of Fernando Tavora, was a very special experience. In both cases, the opportunity to work so closely with Eduardo on the one hand and Fernando Tavora and Fernando Barroso on the other was a tremendous opportunity.

Perhaps the thing that struck me most about Tavora's architecture, apart from the density of culture that permeated it, was the attention paid to the space between things. This is something that comes across very strongly in his work, this holding together of the different parts that define their space.

This, I must say, is perhaps the photo I love most of Tavora's work, but because I love what he did, which was to work around the tree. It seems to me that telling this story of how he goes around the tree is telling the story of Tavora.

A question I have always asked myself—and here I hope my photographs provide an answer—is whether there is a way in which things ask us to photograph them.

I believe that listening is fundamental, trying to restore by digesting and forgetting, as Graça Correia said yesterday. What my photographs record is always the meeting point between something I thought about in terms of framing and what happens at the moment the shot is taken.

John Berger talks about storytelling as the 'emerging of the unspeakable'. He says that the theme is to find the most appropriate way to express what I have intuitively grasped, which exists with the autonomy of a melody or a pattern of colors: the theme of this narrative is that of precision in rendering.

I believe that this is precisely the theme. I call it precision without rigidity: finding a way to be precise without being rigid. So, let what comes come, but welcome it and try to render it with precision.



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