

Antonio Strati: From Observer to Creator

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In early September 2024 I met online with Antonio Strati to discuss his artistic practice in the wake of the publication of his latest book *Riviera Mediterranea* which he produced in collaboration with Federico Montaldo and Guilia Margherita Montaldo for the texts. The book is not so much photo essays, but poems set alongside photographs reproduced from Antonio's collection taken on Polaroid film in the 1980s and 1990s. A critical essay by Roberta Valtorta accompanies the collection.

I know of Antonio Strati through his writings on organizational aesthetics and his 1999 seminal text which is essential reading for those who study the field. In that book I recall him observing from a window, roofers disassembling tiles on a nearby building. He noted the ease with which they moved, their sense of assurance and physical balance despite the obvious dangers. He chatted with the workmen to understand more of their craft, and learned that they achieved upper body balance by feeling with their feet while ripping tiles with their hands.

It was this sense of observation that inspired me about Antonio's work, and I was keen to know him as photographer rather than scholar. By the end of our conversation, I was not sure I could make that distinction, for his work is driven by curiosity, a desire to know, and to create. Scholarship and creativity are embodied in him.

Antonio's parents moved from South Italy to Florence when he was a young teenager. While they were busying themselves with their work, Antonio was playing with cameras; first as an assistant helping develop film in darkened caves and later taking photographs. His playground was Florence with its grand buildings, churches, and spaces from the Medici Palace to the Piazza della Signoria. Dressed in collar and tie, he became a known identity among once-in-a-lifetime travellers, photographing people set against the backdrop of that magnificent city. And it was through the camera's aperture that he captured in black and white the *sessantotto* – the 1968 student protests that had spread across the country.

A turning point came in Antonio's artistic practice while he was travelling through India, together with his partner and colleague Silvia Gherardi. This two-month tour was not of the privileged wealthy, but of roughing it, including sleeping on trains while observing the locals in all their complexities. And, that journey was not of the tourist brochures he had helped produce in Florence, but of the raw experience of learning from locals living from hand-to-mouth "selling pears one day and apples the next." He returned home a changed man.

As a result of his Indian experience, Antonio decided to make art. He turned to Polaroid, the SX-70, which gave him the camera's promised immediacy, and although it produced somewhat grainy images compared to today's high-resolution cameras, it opened possibilities for invention. He became a creator.

Riviera Mediterranea contains the fruits of Antonio's creative endeavours. In his experiments with the Polaroid film T 809 invented for the professional photographer, he mastered the process of 'emulsion lift' where the image is separated from its original background and laid on an alternative surface such as paper, wood or glass. The image is first soaked in warm water allowing it to detach and is then lifted carefully by using tweezers or brush. The process tends to distort the original, giving it a unique, if unfocused appearance.

Antonio learned and then adapted the emulsion lift process by stretching the original image to make it larger. He then overlaid several copies of the picture through the same stretching process giving the piece more intensity. The several layers can be observed at the edges of the reproductions.

Take, for example, the first picture in the publication with its eponymous title 'Riviera mediterranea' (see Figure 1). The colours of the descending brick tiles on a steep pathway are made stronger through the layering, while the background foliage, sea and distant land retain their blurriness. The accompanying poem written by Federico and Giulia Margherita Montaldo evokes the tactility of the image, where, after a thunderstorm, "The air [is] left ... pungent and fresh, it makes you believe to be able to touch, down there, the Portofino mountain." I too can smell the evaporating water while looking out to the mountain which is replicated in my landscape with glimpses of Rangitoto Island. As headlined in the text, I also become nostalgic.



Figure 1: Riviera mediterranea

Emulsion lift, 1990

International Polaroid Collection

WestLicht Museum of Photography, Vienna

During our conversation Antonio discussed the picture which appears on the front cover of the book, with the title 'Riviera mediterranea n. 2' (see Figure 2). Here the layered images give the palm fronds a luminous quality that almost defy logic. Light appears from the underside and topside of the foliage drawing my gaze to the individual fronds in the foreground.



Figure 2: Riviera mediterranea n. 2

Emulsion lift, 1990

International Polaroid Collection

WestLicht Museum of Photography, Vienna

My favourite picture is 'Le camion,' (see Figure 3) a fuzzy reproduction of an abandoned truck. Yes, it evokes memories of my student days working on farms loading hay bales onto trucks only to unload them into storage barns. The smell of diesel exhaust and the sun's intensity on my body surface in my recollections. Yet on closer examination, and

prompted by Antonio, I see the blemishes resulting from the layering process (I see four layers). The bottom right edge of one of the layers has detached and there is a tear through the centre of the piece, breaking away to the right. The lines of the truck's structure are unclear as a result. These imperfections elevate the work to a sublime encounter where I am drawn into the surface of the image as it is present to me, while holding a life that has passed past .



Figure 3: Le camion

Emulsion lift, 1991

As I reflect on Antonio's work in *Riviera Méditerranéenne* I consider the impact of surface inquiry and its importance to the ways we understand our world. The layers themselves attract attention and I make sense of this by drawing on Richard Lanham's (2003) distinctions between looking through and at text.

We usually read through text, says Lanham, seeking meaning beyond the black marks on a white page. For example, the novelist may describe a tall man wearing jeans and T-shirt, with military-style boots and a toothbrush showing from his pocket. I am caught up

with the incongruities of the image the author has crafted and then realise that he might be invoking Jack Reacher, whom I have never met, nor am I likely to, given he's a fictional character. Yet, I think I know him well because I've read through enough of Lee Child's oeuvre to be acquainted with the hero of his stories.

Along with other readers, I rarely, if ever, stop to look at the actual marks on the page.

This is the impact of Antonio's manipulated photographs. They force us to look at the layers that comprise the images, noting the varying colour intensities and rough-hewn edges. Indeed, the surface images are so complex and data-rich, that we do not need to look through and beyond to make meaning of them. The layers speak.

It is this singular idea that alerts readers of Antonio's book to the world in all its complexities. The subject matter is quotidian, banal even. Yet the layering of the scenes, and the sometimes "manipolazione chimica e manuale" of other images – in 'Portofino' (see Figure 4) for example – confront us with the extraordinary in the ordinary. And we might flip the commentary and find the ordinary in the extraordinary!



Figure 4: Portofino

SX-70, 1984

Manipolazione chimica e manual

Private Collection

With this extraordinary-ordinary dialectic in play we can now launch from the images to the political and sociological landscapes of our various locales. If we consider that there is naught beyond the surface, then we will find meaning in the evident layers of our existence

as they, like Antonio's work, stretch and overlay, sometimes with blurry inconsistencies. We may find, then, a recipe to reflect on a rich existence.

It is not my intention to besmirch the established Freudian tradition of a deep, inner landscape of the psyche and the quest to know its mysteries. I will leave that task to Nick Chater (2018) whose eloquent exploration of the surface of human existence offers alternatives to the 'depth' narrative. To be sure, the surface alone of our existence is replete with interest and intrigue.

But what of our world and the troubled places riven by war, and the irreconcilable differences that provoke acts of terror? Here, rather than being a frivolous pursuit, Antonio's work can take centre stage. With all its nostalgia and local histories, the photographs of Riviera Meditteranea call us to respond to the casual and everyday acts of violence in our local and national communities. The photographs call us to engagement and action in the same ways as he has devoted his life to understand the sociology of work and the aesthetics of organizing. They prompt us to examine the surfaces of our existence and to observe the suffering of others caught up in endless cycles of aggression and retaliation. The ethical project is clear as we seek to explore the surface layers of our lives.

Linger on the images yields another layer of intrigue. Chairs feature in many, some easily cast aside, others awaiting an occupier. Readers of this journal will note that a chair features on the cover of each volume, a connection which surfaces in the riddle which Antonio gives his students and reports on in his 1999 *Organization and Aesthetics* text. This oblique reference to the humble seat calls us again to examine our everyday encounters with renewed enthusiasm and insight.

Antonio Strati has produced a masterpiece in *Riviera Meditteranea*. He takes us through a contemplative space while forcing us to look at the photographs and be with them. In this work he has offered us a sum of his life as observer and creator, while seeking the same from us.

Antonio Strati: photographer, observer, artist, and scholar.

References

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