

Poetic Solitude

Angela Madesani

Photography and poetry in a dialogue of equals: this and much else is what *Traslochi*, a book with poems by Paola Pennechi and photographs by Alison Harris, is all about.

The genesis of the volume is recent. In 2010 Pennechi went to see *Chiaroscuro*, a photography exhibition by Harris in Genoa.¹ The show featured black-and-white images of the Teatro Sociale di Camogli [a historic theater from the 1800s], which deeply moved Pennechi. She decided to share her writings with Harris, handing her several poems to read. She then asked whether Harris might like to team up with her on a book project she had been working on about *traslochi*—moving. Harris accepted and, from the start, the two old friends agreed that neither element of the project would outweigh the other. That is how *Traslochi* has turned out, an equal balance of words and images.

Choosing the photographs was not easy: they had been shot over a period of years. After spending a good deal of time going through her archives in Paris, where she lives, Harris decided to select only images taken in Italy.

They are relatively few in number and all were made using black-and-white film. But this is not essential to the viewer's understanding or appreciation. Each tells a tale about feelings and personal histories, starting with that of the photographer herself. They are a metaphor of her life, though not in the intimate, private sense that such a statement seems to imply. At one and the same time these delicate, intense images have much of Harris in them and much else too. It is a delight to discover references to art history, for instance, the field in which Harris took a degree from Mount Holyoke College, an all-women's institution in Massachusetts where, coincidentally, Emily Dickinson studied over a century earlier.

Staring out from Harris' bookshelves are reproductions of images by her favorite artists: from Caravaggio to Bonnard, Rembrandt to Picasso, Watteau and Morandi. They may seem to have nothing in common. But look again. What these artists' works share are the atmospheres, silences, and a conception of space.

Harris' photographic tales rarely feature the human figure. They tell silent stories, swimming against the tide of our times, times in which playing to the audience is the norm in a *société du spectacle*—a “Society of the Spectacle.” These images do not show heroics and do not shout. What is in them instead is a normality of vision, the same normal way of seeing things found in the images of a photographer like Lee Friedlander, an American with whom Harris feels great affinity. How could one not think this when viewing an image such as the one Harris took showing the number 42 with diagonal strikethroughs? To her this number recalls something from private life: the address of her grandmother's apartment in Montreal, Canada. But at the same time, an inevitable segue points toward Friedlander's *Letters from the People*. Likewise the Italian photographs of Robert Rauschenberg also come to mind.

1. The exhibition was held from June 4–July 4, 2010 at Galleria il Vicolo in Genoa.

Another of Harris' photos shows three chairs; she took it while walking in Liguria. As in most of her work the image was framed in the camera and has not been cropped or reworked with Photoshop: no trickery is involved. The image shows a kind of stage set between sea and sky. The empty chairs, as if abandoned there, evoke thoughts of house-moving—a *trasloco*—when possessions are inevitably left behind during a move into the unknown. Harris was fascinated as well by the graphic play of the iron railings in the image and the way they created a sense of space.

Yet another picture shows the half-pulled curtain of a passport photo booth, the kind often found in subway stations or other enclosed spaces and in which clients can create a self-service portrait of themselves. The curtain is threadbare, an object itself possessed of memory, with see-through wear and tear. How many people have pulled that curtain striving to affirm and therefore to fix forever their identity? Inside the booth they are faced by their own image, by their visible self, something difficult to gaze upon and immortalize. Harris' image is mysterious and ambiguous in many ways. Indeed many of her works have the allure of ambiguity.

11

Viewers are summoned to look but certainly will not find answers.

They will conclude their visual experience full of questions and doubts. No solution is offered.

One of Harris' photos is of a package covered in rough, heavy paper tied up with string. It brings to mind certain surrealist images by Man Ray or Marcel Duchamp. The wrapping paper is crinkled. Was the package just wrapped? Or is about to be unwrapped? Who knows?

Are we before or beyond the threshold? That is the question raised by the photo of the top of a battered door. Applied to the wooden frame is a view of the port of Genoa. It's unclear whether the viewer is entering or leaving town. The image is really about the voyage, the longing to explore, the attempt to go beyond human limits (to use a Dantesque expression). But finding definitions and labeling Harris' work is not important. The dialogue takes place between it and that which lies beyond the power of photography to record, as is the case here.

What are captured are traces of the surroundings that in fact contain much else.

Two of the photos in the book show busts in a park. Theirs is a mute dialogue between herms, taking place among the others busts of Villa Borghese, one of Harris' favorite spots. She played here as a child. Toys were sold from a cart and, though she longed to possess them, her wishes were not always fulfilled. Whenever she goes back to Villa Borghese she feels the same sensation of entering a time tunnel. But hers isn't the wistful remembrance of bygone days. Everything is fine—this is just a memory of one part of her life. She lived in Rome before moving to Paris. Before that it was Pakistan. It's as if she wanted to underscore the memory of place. The statues transport the viewer into a metaphysical dimension—the De Chirico of the biscuits, the bananas or the puffing locomotives on tracks. De Chirico was recalling his family's past: his father was a railway engineer. But there is also the undeniable presence of certain Italian squares. The scenography plays a determining role.

Some of the photographs appear to be abstractions. One in particular shows nautical flags against tree branches. It seems to me that in this image lies the essence of *Traslochi*; it offers a wide range of possibilities for dialogue among differing languages. The flags signal a coded message which almost no one can read. It's a question of intelligibility. This is so blatant that we might well think we're looking at Tibetan prayer flags: an invitation to pause and meditate. It's time for down-time, when the void and the absent live side by side with what is present.

Several of the images were taken recently, following the decision to make *Traslochi* a reality. For Harris photographing is a way of life. It's her way of storing sensations, taking notes, capturing in memory whatever interests her. Mnemonics play a strong role in her artistic undertakings.

“After reading Paola's poetry I took a number of photographs. There is a connection with certain poems, but the subjects of the photos also appealed to me directly, on an emotional level and because I saw a potential composition in each of them.”²

In the photos taken recently in Milan the city is not recognizable. They were shot during brief visits of Milan in Pennecchi's company. Here the lessons imparted by a certain school known as “humanist photography” are clear, meaning the work of Kertész, Brassai, Koudelka, Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank to which Harris feels an attachment.

Hers is a singular manner of seeing, of looking at things; it is the ability to find poetry in the normality of daily life.

2. Harris in conversation with the author, November 2011