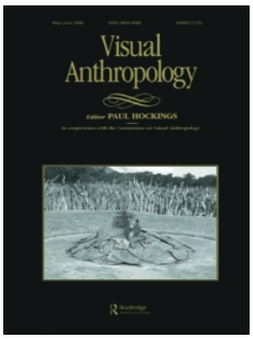

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Photography and Urban Marginality

Giuseppe Scandurra

In recent years several monographs have appeared in Italy, though even more abroad, as a report of ethnographic research into the everyday life practices of marginal urban social groups; all fall under a disciplinary subfield the author calls "Anthropology of urban marginality." The authors of these works have increasingly been using technologies other than written representation, as for instance the medium of photography. There is a question at the core of this article which could be summed as, Why and how can this medium aid in a better understanding of the phenomena being investigated?

Much ethnographic research,[1] which could fall within a disciplinary subfield that I try to summarize here as the "Anthropology of urban marginality," has been published in recent years in Italy [Barnao 2004; Bergamaschi 2009; Bonadonna 2001; Tosi Cambini 2004]. Most of these publications address a topic that first arose in the 'fifties: is it legitimate, in anthropological terms, to talk about a "culture of poverty" [Lewis 1973]?[2]

The work of Bonadonna [2001], Barnao [2004] and Tosi Cambini [2004], which gave rise in Italy to a series of ethnographic studies on urban marginality linked to old and new forms of poverty and social disadvantage, along with other more recent studies, have another thing in common: the merit of addressing specific issues in connection with the "politics of representation" [Bourgois 1995]. Indeed almost all recent authors, starting from the monographs of Bonadonna, Barnao and Tosi Cambini, ponder on the best way to show urban marginality in Italy when, over these last years and following the spread of "zero tolerance" policies directly from the United States [Wacquant 2000], the debate on poverty has been more and more polarized into immigration issues—the ever-growing presence of immigrants—and on individual choices—the increasingly common discrimination in the media between "honest" homeless, who respect the rules

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and by dint of work have been able to reintegrate themselves, and others who opt to break the law [Wacquant 2002].

Meanwhile, over the last few decades, the number of relevant publications has also increased abroad [Desjarlais 1997; Gaboriau 1993; Glasser and Bridgman 1999]. Some of the more recent works also address a tradition of studies on urban marginality that can be traced right back to the first generation of the Chicago School [Semi 2006], exemplified Nels Anderson's work *The Hobo* [1923]. Thus during 2004–2005 I conducted the study discussed here, following this line of research.

THE FIELD OF RESEARCH

The "Project Carracci" was launched in Bologna in December 2000, thanks to various social bodies and voluntary organizations responding to a call from the City of Bologna for coping with the cold emergency. They aimed to create a network that would be able to deal, in just ten days, with the urgent need to shelter the homeless who, at that time of year, would not find space at the existing city facilities [Rete Carracci 2005]. The network, comprising a varied group of organizations, won the contract for managing the facility made available by the City behind Bologna's central station, in the inner northern suburb of the city, undertaking to set up a "low threshold"[3] support service combined with a particular notion of damage limitation. The recipients were identified from the beginning on the basis of a few obvious criteria, i.e., residents in Bologna suffering from particularly difficult socio-economic conditions, Italian non-resident citizens living temporarily in the area in a disadvantaged position, foreign citizens with a residence permit, and political refugees.

The night shelter in via de Carracci opened in 2000 with 60–80 beds, but attendance gradually reached a peak of 110 beds with a yearly turnover of over 200 people. It became evident at once that the average age of the guests at the Massimo Zaccarelli night shelter was around thirty-three, that is, the lowest average age found among the other city day and night structures (at the time, seven in all). In addition, already in the early years, the presence of the largest absolute number of immigrants, the highest proportion of unemployed, and also a significant number, some 24–26 percent of people with middle, high and university education, was observed [*ibid.*].

The ethnographic study, which lasted about fifteen months and was later presented in Bologna in early 2006 through an exhibition on the users of the Carracci night shelter,[4] was intended from the very start to address the local civil society and institutions in order to avoid remaining a self-referential academic exercise. On the one hand it was meant as a campaign to promote public awareness and share our insight into the realities explored, in order to overcome prejudices and fears due largely to difficulties of communication between the homeless and the rest of the townsfolk, and a lack of correct information on their daily lives; on the other hand, it had the purpose of generating data and analytical readings that might have been useful for those cooperatives and associations that for many years had dealt with the problem of "social exclusion," in order to

improve the quality of their agency and the very nature of their work. From the onset the stated goal, shared with the photographer Armando Giorgini, was to deliver an exhibition, after fifteen months of research and photo workshop, to wrap up the ethnographic work done and the production of images in and out of the shelter, as a way to demonstrate to citizens how fundamental had the photographic instrument been for us in achieving the goals that we had set in September 2004, namely the promotion of forms of self-representation which made use of a somewhat unconventional medium that was capable of stimulating self-awareness in the social actors involved.

Within this context the photo workshop, in addition to being a tool chronicling the circumstances of the homeless in Bologna, was to be instrumental in building a relationship of trust and involvement during the research with at least fifteen guests of the shelter. It turned out to be an ideal tool because it would have allowed the guests with whom we shared the experience of the workshop and the organization of the exhibition to produce their own version of reality as well.

The Carracci had accommodated many homeless non-Italian guests from September 2004 to December 2005. The photographer and I built relationships primarily with Italians, mostly men,[5] and involved them in our study, simply for practical reasons, given our inexperience with migration studies.[6] In general we interviewed, collected life stories and photographed people who had chosen to live for several months in this night-care facility, but also homeless people who refused shelters and preferred to stay on the street: all were men and women who had led this life for quite some time and had been deeply affected by it. Working through networks we then lived for some time with those homeless who were in other shelters and who had daily contact with the guests at the Carracci.

The field was thus initially circumscribed to the Massimo Zaccarelli night shelter. We subsequently expanded our field of investigation, focusing on the urban routes that these people followed every day, talking to them in public restrooms, soup kitchens, city libraries and in other shelters, mostly day centers. In the latter we got to meet their friends, to know what their relationships were and how they spent their free time.

The broadening of the scope of our research from the shelter to the town and back to the Carracci was to follow the photographic work that began with the "staged portraits": the guests of the shelter had to choose a place for the portrait which they considered particularly significant, presenting their attire and facial expression. The photographer would give them advice on how to effectively pose in front of the camera, would then position the lights and select the frame after it had been illustrated and agreed upon. The long exposure time, in which the subject had to remain perfectly still, would have lent solemnity to the moment when the portrait was taken and subsequently to the photograph itself.

The self-portraits came next, using a fixed background collectively chosen or set up by guests of the shelter and coordinated by us. These were to be shot with a six meters-long remote shutter release cable that would be visible in the frame in order to make clear the nature of the image and the fact that the subject himself had taken the photo. The camera was on a tripod so that the shot would be "the same" for all subjects; to accomplish this we thought from the onset to organize

evening events in which the participants of the workshop would be required to work in groups to arrange the set.

In addition, by shifting the scope of the survey we started following the social actors involved in this project outside the shelter. Thus the idea came about of a photographic essay strictly in black and white. This would not have entailed any active involvement by the subjects being photographed. Instead the photographer, Armando Giorgini, had to capture the subjects at various times in their daily lives, and every technical or aesthetic decision would be his own.

While walking around the city with them the idea was, at this stage, also to have some photographs taken by the participants themselves with a disposable camera: the participants had to be encouraged to express themselves through the individual use of the photographic medium and thus reveal their own real and imaginary daily life. The object of the shots was to be completely free. We were only going to provide them with some basic technical instructions, standards of aesthetics and photo set-up notions.

The idea of a photo workshop that would have ended with the setting-up of an exhibition had been initially merely instrumental, as it was for a time the only way for us to gain access to the shelter. I had not meant in any way to make the representations of the homeless a central part of my research: the Carracci social workers knew that I was an anthropologist wanting to do some research, in order to narrate the stories of their guests; but the only way of access to the shelter's daily life was by organizing cultural activities. In proposing to do the workshop I had not thought at first that it could have turned out to be so useful for my research.

THE SHELTER

On November 3, 2004, we entered the Carracci with our camera for the first time. Problems were not long in coming. At seven in the evening all guests would return to the shelter. In order to make sure they would bear in mind the start of the workshop we decided to put a tripod with the camera on it at the entrance: their reaction was very dramatic. "Are you crazy? Since when do criminals have their picture taken?" [Armando, a guest aged forty-five].[7]

The workshop, rather than a photography course, was intended as a way to chronicle the daily routines of the guests, who not only were to be portrayed by us but had to learn to use the camera in order to shoot images of themselves inside and outside the shelter. The agreement with them was clear from the start: none of these photos would appear in national or local newspapers. Yet "I can't do it, I can't risk that people at work find out that I come from this world, they will send me away" [Raffaele, one of the oldest guests, who had found a job a few months before].

There were also even more basic problems, as many guests wanted to rest, eat or take a shower, and we were taking up major space in the structure. For this reason that night we went upstairs to the room where the women slept and approached the bed of Sara, who was the first to express her enthusiasm for the workshop. We explained to her what the first phase of this activity would consist of and our task, i.e., to shoot staged portraits: all participants, including

herself, had to choose a place in the shelter that they considered particularly significant in itself, choose their attire and facial expression.

Making them choose a place that felt more like their own as a backdrop for the photos enabled us to understand how they lived in the space at the Carracci. Sara, for example, like Laura, another young woman guest also in her early thirties, chose to be photographed on her bed. For many guests this was something more than a mesh base and a mattress on which to rest: under the bed Sara and Laura kept their most cherished possessions.

Other guests whom we photographed in the evenings after the first day of the workshop used to collect all their property on a bedside table. Others still had covered the small space of the wall above the bed with photos or posters, and this is where they chose to be photographed [Figure 1]. As we prepared the

Figure 1 The garden of the the Carracci free hostel, surrounded by high-speed rails then under construction. (Photo © Armando Giorgini, 2004. Reproduced by permission of Armando Giorgini. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.)

photographic set we asked Sara why she had chosen those particular objects and that space. These simple questions turned out in retrospect to be a good approach to broaden the discussion and to talk in a more general way about their lives, their loves, the difficulties they faced every day in not having a home.

Around eleven o'clock in the evening of the first day of the workshop we moved into the dormitory on the first floor where all the men slept together. It was Silvano, one of the quietest and shyest guests, who first asked to be photographed, as soon as he entered the facility: "I want a souvenir!" From that moment onwards the narcissism of each guest of the shelter came out. This also gave us the opportunity to understand the "alliances," and in a broader sense the friendships and the groups that had formed within the shelter; and to learn more and more about their personal stories, due to the fact that, since between one shot and the other at least ten minutes elapsed, the guests had time to tell their stories. The decision to do the staged portraits, which involved a long exposure time for each shot, was beneficial not only in representing the stillness, one of the dominant features of this low-threshold facility, but also because it facilitated communication between us and them.

On the following Saturday evening we worked at the Carracci from nine to midnight just as we did every Saturday, and often every Sunday, for the first three months of the workshop. On that occasion however for the first time since the beginning of the workshop we had something to give the guests: their first photos. We had wondered more than once if it would have been better to work with a digital camera, as this might have been more stimulating for the homeless there, as they could have viewed their pictures straight away on the computer of some municipal public facility. However, having seen the final result, in retrospect we can say that we were right to choose to work otherwise. When we left, after the second round of the workshop, many guests asked us when the photographs that we had just taken would be ready. It created a sense of expectation, which then lasted throughout our research and kept us in the game as comrades and accomplices.

LIFE STORIES

After three months of research we moved onto the second phase of the workshop with the self-portraits. To do so we asked the guests to choose a backdrop and we connected the camera to a squeeze air-bulb shutter release mechanism through a 6-meter long cable so that they could photograph themselves in the moment and in the pose they deemed most appropriate. From December 2004 we organized the evening events by asking the participants to work as groups to prepare the setting. Thanks to the work previously done on portraits we had got to know the guests better, yet we still didn't know much about the journey that had brought each this far.

Emanuele, who had been at the Carracci for about a year, was the first to go onto the stage setting that we had created. After about a half-hour monologue addressed to all of us, researchers and guests alike, waiting under the stage, he made up his mind and squeezed the air bulb. In those thirty minutes he felt

he was the focus of everybody's attention, and, like all the others after him, he played the role of subject/object of the workshop perfectly.

Sara: A tragic story. I still think about it, day in and day out, my love down there in Caserta … that's where my son is, but I was so young … in love ….

Marcello: Of course I have a child, a love child, but Naples is not an easy city; besides in those days there were shootings, better that I don't go back there… .

Leonardo: We are dealing with our divorce papers, no fuss huh, we were very young, things come to an end, love blooms somewhere else, so I left Bergamo …

Stories of love, of betrayal, of divorces. Throughout the days of the self-portraits, which lasted until January 2005, we listened to these stories. Sara, Marcello and Leonardo were all very young people and had been guests of the shelter for at least a year: all had become fathers or mothers before turning 18. By the time they were 20 they had traveled through most of Italy, had tried almost everything one could think of when it comes to drugs and alcohol, they had married, divorced and remarried. They all had a family that they could no longer see [Figure 2]:

Claudio: Rome is terrible from this point of view, it is an underworld, I've lived there at the Termini Train Station: it is really an underworld that should be studied, a true hell, the real one. I made some portraits of the horror, of the people who lived in this underworld, they were thousands. Like cubist portraits, all in pieces.

Armando was from Rome too; Ivan, however, had lived there for several years before getting to Bologna. They had met in the streets of the Capitoline historic center:

Do you remember those streets where we spent our adolescence, we were about thirty-odd people? We got around either on foot or on the subway, we controlled that area, we pushed drugs … once my brother called me and told me he was smoking hashish in the police car. The police would not say a thing as we were chasing the Moroccans and others out … we all came from risk areas and we would meet up there, when the old town was ours … I was from Nuova Ostia, others from Acilia, Laurentino 38, Prenestina, from the suburbs of Rome … we all did odd jobs then we would meet up there; we were a big bunch, like a generation.

There were not only groups connected by a common geographical identity. At that stage of the workshop, thanks to our work on the self-portraits, when on stage the guests freely recited their story without a need for us to ask specific questions; thus we learnt to read into the alliances that characterized the Carracci especially on a generational level. Claudio, Armando and Ivan had lived their late teens in the late 1970s; so had Federico, and like him those few guests from Milan whom we had met in the streets, who had grown up during that period marked by violent clashes and student riots in Bologna. For many of them 1977 had been the freest period in the history of our country, "before things

Figure 2 One of the guests of the Carracci resting on a bench in the historic center of Bologna. (Photo © Armando Giorgini, 2004. Reproduced by permission of Armando Giorgini. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.)

had changed," as Claudio shouted on the stage one evening; he wanted his pictures taken with two music magazines of the '70s, "Because that is when the repression began":

Federico: 1977 does not bring back good memories for me, not at all, they are almost tragic … many friends that I had back then did not make it through 1977; I lost a lot of them to AIDS and drugs … and I was lucky as I also had unprotected sex, and yet nothing; besides, as I always had a bit of money on me, I never shared syringes. I was, like others, a drug pusher. I took advantage of political demonstrations in the streets and delivered drugs uptown, to middle-class people. After all the police were busy with the student movement, and just as well.

Indeed, in those years Bologna became a favorite destination for many guests of the Carracci:

Ivan: I arrived in Bologna, as the train that took me up North always passed through Bologna, and so I stopped here; and then in Bologna I felt at home; I was young, really young, and I found the porticoes reassuring when I walked alone. It was the porticoes that convinced me to stay when I was young.

For many of them, Bologna represented a genuine metropolitan experience in those years.

Ivan: I remember that I used to go out with a girl who took me through the hall of mirrors, do you remember them when we were little? Another girl took me to the wax museum. I had come from, we had come from a dictatorship, I don't know how to explain it. It was a liberating experience, there was a lot of hogwash too for sure, however I felt free to do whatever I felt like doing here.

On a photographic level we were not able to turn our attention to specific groups within the shelter. The guests, and more generally the homeless who lived in public shelters, those whom we had the opportunity to meet during the research, lived alone and did not enjoy company in the least; friendships were very rare. Even the women living in the shelter did not let down their defenses: basically, guests were on their own. Likewise, we were never able to detect the difference—which we had observed especially at the beginning of our research—and therefore to study it as such, between the long-standing homeless who had made the street their home and the others, viewed as a group of people who had lost their home and contact with their families and were out of work. If it was true that during the fifteen months of our research the picture of the "homeless" was constantly enriched with new faces—of immigrants, students, youths—it was also true that it was made up however of individual portraits.

PLACES OF URBAN MARGINALITY

On 1 February 2005 we went outside the Carracci for the first time. The third phase of the workshop included creation of a photo-essay. The idea was very simple: we would go out with them and spend the day together, until our return to the night shelter at seven p.m. This would allow us to answer another question we had asked ourselves at the start: Which places in Bologna did these non-resident citizens pass through? Where did they meet up? How did they spend their time?

Obviously there were many and very disparate places—and in most cases it can be said that there still are, as they remain largely unchanged. On the one hand there were the shelters and all daytime municipal and private centers; on the other hand there were small informal flea markets with no fixed venue, as they moved depending on the frequency of police checks. They all took place in the historic center because it was possible to panhandle (*scollettare*) there [Figure 3].

In addition there were those places that many homeless frequented so as to hide in the crowd. Of these, the Salaborsa public library in Bologna was the most

Figure 3 Two homeless people who used to get out of the Carracci at seven in the morning so as to reach the center of Bologna. (Photo © Armando Giorgini, 2005. Reproduced by permission of Armando Giorgini. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.)

representative. Here many Carracci guests spent the day availing themselves of the restrooms, of the vending machines that distributed coffee and food, and thus enjoying, at least for a few hours, the feeling of being "Bolognesi"; besides they

Figure 4 Guests of the Carracci walking around in the underpass of the station Bologna Centrale. (Photo © Armando Giorgini, 2004. Reproduced by permission of Armando Giorgini. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.)

could also read, because books could be browsed without one being obliged to buy them [Figure 4].

SELF-REPRESENTATIONS

In the spring of 2005 we began the last phase of the workshop. Our intention was now to ask participants to take photos with disposable cameras. The shelter's guests were to do this themselves: through their own personal use of this medium they would narrate their daily lives, the city they inhabited, the places they frequented, the people with whom they spent time. Right from the start, once we began this last phase of our research, we decided that the subject of the shots would be completely open. The camera was after all the tool we had brought along every day in our ethnographers' toolbox; what had allowed us to interact straightaway with our interviewees and build strong and trusting relationships with the Carracci guests: connections that would never have been established had we not offered them the chance to express themselves, had we not traded something with them. Our decision to let them take their own pictures arose in this sense from a methodological necessity: no matter how much we could learn about the reality of the homeless we were immediately aware of how their photos would be more authentic and would enable us to understand their world better [Marano 2007].

During the fifteen months of our research there were certain places that were out-of-bounds for us, and certain people we could not take pictures of. Marcello, for example, took several photos to show us the places where he, like other homeless of the Carracci, had sex. Thus we discovered how some parks in the historic center, frequented by families with children during the day, became at night places where the homeless had sex (since men and women could not sleep together in the Carracci).

Furthermore, through their photographs other participants in the workshop addressed other questions in our research, such as how they managed to survive and get drugs without an income. Two of the guests took pictures of places subject to repeated robberies and thefts, contexts that we could not and, in some cases, did not wish to view directly. Most of the photos taken by the homeless had portrayed one or more objects. Emiliano, for example, who was barely 20 years old, took a picture of his personal possessions: a lighter, a hat and a knife.

What all the guests of the shelter had in common, in fact, was the lack of a private place, their own space: in the Carracci there were no personal lockers. This reinforced the feeling of dispossession of the users of the shelter, on a daily basis, and is also why when leaving the shelter at eight a.m., the guests used to pack their few possessions in the pockets of their trousers and jackets or in plastic bags. This allowed us to understand how the problem mostly experienced by the guests was not a lack of food or sleep but of privacy; this justified the choice of some to go back for some periods to sleep in the street even though there were vacancies in the Carracci, an attitude that was promptly interpreted by the social workers as a sign of some of their guests' mental illness (this happened with more than one user of the building during our research).

CONCLUSIONS

It is now generally accepted that the homeless, and in particular those in this research, do not constitute a social class nor a homogeneous group but rather a vaguely defined mass lacking its own form of self-representation. Furthermore, with the development nowadays of what many municipal administrations refer to as "new poverty" [Pavarin 2006], the impoverishment paths are characterized by a strong individualization, and it is thus possible to encounter a variety of life circumstances with forms of distress that exceed ordinary economic deprivation. In this sense, our research was initially meant to be a way to broaden and diversify the generally shared knowledge of circumstances linked to extreme poverty in the Bolognese area.

Our decision to choose the photographic medium proved effective not only in winning the trust of the protagonists and a better understanding of certain situations that we had no way of seeing ourselves, and specific practices we did not want to participate in. The photographic portraits in the end turned out useful also in finding a way to represent these people which would conform with the way they conducted their daily lives as homeless people. In particular, they enabled me not to view the people in this study as victims of a repressive and discriminatory system without a choice, and, at the same time, as monads capable, in every context, of choosing what to do with their own lives—a dominant form of representation of them even in the afore-mentioned recent literature on urban marginality [Wacquant 2002]. For instance, working on the images that these actors had themselves produced with disposable cameras, we managed to avoid over-emphasizing the structural weight so as not to regard the group of guests as simply passive victims of their own history; at the same time, for example by exploring the places they chose as a backdrop for their portraits, we were always careful not to omit the objective conditions that had not allowed many of these people to gamble their "careers" adequately, whether as citizens or users of municipal facilities [Colombo 1998].

Our choice of continuing the photographic work throughout the whole fifteen months of our study and not considering it simply as a parenthesis, or merely functional, has not been a random one: it has allowed the actors, often reduced by the local and national media to "pawns" moved by structural dynamics, to emerge as human beings who shape their future within the theoretical debate on the relationship between "structure and action," that is, on the relationship between "individual responsibility and structural constraints" [Bourgois 1995].

NOTES

1. This paper is the result of a study, here revisited and revised, that was carried out between 2004 and 2005 and then published [Scandurra 2005]. The data herein are therefore to be contextualized in this period of analysis. Part of the research was presented in a book edited by the anthropologist Matilde Callari Galli [Scandurra 2007], abridged for an article in the *Mediterranean Anthropological Archive* journal [Scandurra 2012], and taken up again in a work promoted by the Gramsci Emilia-Romagna Institute on "new poverty" [Scandurra 2013].

2. The anthropologist Oscar Lewis introduced the concept of "culture of poverty" in 1958 at the International Congress of Americanists in San José [Lewis 1973].
3. The low threshold, as it was conceived right from the start, had to meet basic needs such as "a shelter, a blanket, a glass of milk" [Rete Carracci 2005].
4. The exhibition, presented in February 2006 at the Cineteca di Bologna with the title "Everyone home," comprised photographs by Armando Giorgini and many images produced by the guests of the shelter who participated in the photography workshop and wrote the captions for the whole project. The exhibition was funded by me and the photographer Armando Giorgini, as well as the Laboratory and Research Project, and is the result of a negotiation with all the participants. The captions as well as the selection of the pictures were made by them. The images, all obtained through release forms, were not to be published in newspapers or magazines before the exhibition's opening. Some participants in the workshop who did not want to be "exposed" still helped to organize the event and set up the space. Thanks to the long time spent at the workshop building, trusting relationships, in fact, quite a few homeless people at the Caracci shelter decided to participate after all. As with the photo workshop, the initial reluctance of many guests to be filmed, and more generally to get involved in the exhibition as a public event, was overcome day after day through a long process of identity negotation between us as researchers and them, the subjects and actors in the research.
5. Of the women guests at the Shelter, we got to know only four of them during our fifteen months' research. Focusing our attention on them would have involved steering the scope of our survey into areas that really deserved more attention. The phenomena of prostitution that we observed outside the shelter, in fact, usually involved homeless women who paid in kind, offering their body to a male drug dealer in return for a dose; some social workers called it "third-rate prostitution.".
6. The conditions of many non-Italian homeless guests of the Carracci, at least until November 2005, was different from that of Italians as the former, in addition to facing those problems common to all homeless, had others related to residence permits, due to their particular history, and the consequent risk of being repatriated.
7. For privacy reasons I changed all the names of protagonists in this research.

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