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## Photographic agents. Jorge Molder: detective, magician, actor

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**Abstract.** The *œuvre* of Portuguese photographer Jorge Molder (Lisbon, 1947) can be construed as a series of series. These series are filled with a wealth of absent presences, of possibilities that arise and fade without ever reaching actualization or confirmation, thereby contributing to create a ‘detective-story’ atmosphere. This also proves to be true as regards Molder’s own body. Indeed, his face, his hands are recurrent “subjects” running through his 40 years of work. Even so, when we ask who the man is that we see in Molder’s series, the answer is problematic. On the one hand, we know it is “him”, insofar as he himself is the model for his iconic “constructions”. On the other hand, Molder’s images are not “self-portraits” aiming to reveal the essence of his self, but rather “self-representations” creating a peculiar “character” who is and yet is not him: a *double*.

**Key words.** Image, photography, narrative, magic, fiction.

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*In any case it would be double-face*  
J. Molder, CD

### 1. A DETECTIVE GAME

The boundaries of the universe disclosed by Jorge Molder’s *œuvre* are defined by each of the series he realized in his forty years of activity (his first solo exhibition dates back to 1977<sup>1</sup>). In fact, one can construe his whole production as a series of series<sup>2</sup>. The notion of series is pivotal in his work and one might go as far as to say that the recognizable themes in it are always the result of a serial reso-

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<sup>1</sup> J. Molder, *Vilarinho das Furnas (uma encenação), paisagens com água, casas e um trailer* [Vilarinho das Furnas (a production), landscapes with water, houses and a trailer] (1977).

<sup>2</sup> See also Bragança de Miranda [2017]: 14.

nance, a product of his artistic *montage*. These themes run *through* the series composing his work, and, by saying this, I aim to emphasize the fact that, as we will attempt to show, they are never explicitly presented at any point in the series.

In fact, each of the images comprising a series entails a strain towards an invisible dimension, toward something not directly presented. To be more specific, in Molder's series each image implies a sort of tension referring to something that is not shown in the image, but whose recent or imminent presence is *reflected* within it. Often the spectator is caused to feel the absence of something that is either no longer 'there' but was perhaps present just moments before, or that has not yet manifested itself but could do so at any moment. This also contributes to the 'detective-story' atmosphere permeating Molder's work. As in detective stories, his series are filled with a wealth of absent presences, of possibilities that arise and fade without ever reaching actualization or confirmation.

At a general level, this might have to do with the very structure of what we call 'present', which cannot be reduced to the abstract notion of a punctual presence. Every 'present' moment manifests in the wake of something 'just past' and anticipates something 'yet to come'. Indeed, a 'mere' point of presence can be understood only by abstracting from the "*retentional*" and the "*pro-tentional halo*" constituting our lived experience<sup>3</sup>. However, this 'enlarged present' through which our daily actions flow can be construed in many ways, implying different forms of articulation between presence and absence. For example, at this same general level, something can be unintuitively or intuitively absent. I can grasp a reference to something absent without needing to intuit it.

On the other hand, that which is absent may be something remembered, imagined, or the like—intuitive presentifications<sup>4</sup> in which I see persons and things that are not present, giving rise to any combination of different experiences

of this kind: a recollection of a phantasy modifying something real, for instance, or a phantasy of recollections, and so on. Nevertheless, although clear distinctions are maintained for purposes of analysis, cases in which these demarcations vacillate are not uncommon<sup>5</sup>. Rather than relying upon patterns that elucidate clearly distinction between human acts (perceiving, remembering, phantasmizing, dreaming), Molder's series cause them to interact in liminal spaces, thereby giving rise to zones of indistinction, or blurring the boundaries between them. Indeed, Molder's series seem expressly designed to *play* with this idea of indeterminacy.

Molder's education in philosophy has often been referenced<sup>6</sup>. In his *Histoire photographique de la photographie*, Henri Van Lier affirms that he "is a philosopher photographer, or a photographer philosopher"<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, the Portuguese artist explained how this portrayal would not do justice to the *artistic* nature of his work<sup>8</sup>. Just to clear up any possible confusion: it would surely be misleading to construe his images as either iconic vehicles for philosophical ideas or iconic tools for philosophizing through images. His work is, first and foremost, action—it is primarily an artistic practice preceding all forms of conceptualization. Nor are his series an artistic development of a philosophical path. A qualitative divide separates these two practices. Assuredly, this is not to say that we cannot inquire into the philosophical value Molder's work may hold or the types of philosophical thought it could elicit.

As regards his relationship with photography, it should be noted that Molder defines himself as a "constructor, a creator of images"<sup>9</sup> rather than as a photographer. In doing so, he lays emphasis on the word "image" without feeling the need to

<sup>5</sup> See Molder [2010].

<sup>6</sup> He graduated from the *Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa* in 1972 with a degree in *Filosofia*.

<sup>7</sup> "Jorge Molder is a philosopher photographer, or a photographer philosopher. His work is currently achieving a philosophy of photography in action" (Van Lier [1992]).

<sup>8</sup> See Molder [2017].

<sup>9</sup> Molder [2013].

<sup>3</sup> Husserl [1980]: 320.

<sup>4</sup> Husserl [1980]: 6, transl. modified.

qualify it as “photographic.” Sometimes he goes as far as to say that he is not especially interested in ‘photography’ itself. In fact, he seems less inclined to explore the spectrum of possibilities opened up by this specific medium than to view photography as offering him—as a plastic artist—a powerful means of constructing images<sup>10</sup>.

The detective atmosphere we mentioned earlier is tinged with subtle irony. We might also say that Molder plays with images—in a sense that we will try to clarify in more detail—and that irony, unfolding through variations, is an essential aspect of this play. More precisely, irony is a strategic element allowing him to distance himself from what he experiences and stages in his images. It opens up spaces for reflection, in the sense of mirroring as well as of becoming aware<sup>11</sup>. Distance from *certainty*, for instance: the certainty that something has truly happened, that something has truly been said, etc. This very interplay between certainty and doubt is a key element of his irony<sup>12</sup>.

One of the ways in which this game is set in motion is deformation. Molder’s series entail a production (or, as we will see, an ‘almost production’) of sense, which arises through the resonance *between* the images—the ‘series’ effect. Rather than merely conveying a sense, they produce it—as the sense from which the series seem derived, as well as the sense toward which they seem to converge, albeit without it being located in any particular place, nor flatly fulfilled by any one of the images composing the series. Here, “sense” is never to be understood as having existed before the series. It is expressed<sup>13</sup> through reciprocal interplay between images Molder displays like cards, or per-

haps mah-jongg tiles<sup>14</sup>, alluding to a sense asking to be discovered.

For all series several ‘external’ references can be found that explicitly relate to them. Critics have already pointed out a wealth of mentions, allusions, quotations, and influences that permeate Molder’s artistic universes: Bacon, Beckett, Dostoevsky, Gombrowicz, and Perec, just to name a few, not to mention his peculiar treatment of surrealist themes<sup>15</sup>. However, it is important to emphasize that, even though each such reference can indeed inspire and interact with a series, the references are never incorporated in unaltered form. Despite the mirror being one of its fundamental gears, the Molder ‘machine’ never merely aims to mirror reality ‘as it is’ and never absorbs external sources without reconfiguring them, without creating a double that is less a copy of an original theme than a strange presence questioning its identity.

As in Dostoevsky’s *The Double*, the iconic *Doppelgänger* leads the alleged identity, the defined form of a theme, to a critical point. Each element entering the series loses any obligation to its previous sense and enters a new game, changing and questioning its essence. This also proves true as regards the series’ titles. For instance, Molder “steadfastly rejects any link between” his series *The Secret Agent* (1991) and the Conrad novel of the same name, despite the fact that this literary source “fits in with the way in which [he] builds his series”<sup>16</sup>. The “same” always presents itself differently. Something disappears and returns, recognizable and yet altered<sup>17</sup>.

Thus, these are detective games in which a

<sup>10</sup> See also Coplans, Molder [1998]: 219-220.

<sup>11</sup> See Molder [2001]: 14.

<sup>12</sup> See Molder [2001]: 14.

<sup>13</sup> “We have to understand that in the portrait or the mask, in photography or sculpture, it is less a matter of images than of ideas: the representation of a face is not so much concerned with reproducible features as with the fact that these features are configured with a mobility that is essential and substantially natural [...], a mobility that one has to call ex-pressive in a hyperbolic sense, if this is possible, of the word” (Nancy [2014]: 217).

<sup>14</sup> See Molder [2015]: 41.

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the “plethora of explicit references to texts” and “images” in Molder’s universe, see, for example, Sardo [1999]: 37, though the entire essay sheds light on Molder’s sources.

<sup>16</sup> Sardo [1999]: 42. “Molder refers to Conrad in the *Joseph Conrad* series (1991). Despite what one might be led to believe, the series called *The Secret Agent*, from the same year, does not refer to the book of the same name, written by the author of *Youth*” (Sardo [1999]: 37). See also Molder [1999]: 10.

<sup>17</sup> See Molder [2010].

tension towards an absent original fact is made tangible for the spectator, who at the same time experiences the impossibility of solving the mystery by tracing the series back to the truth of a veritable *primum*. There is no conciliatory resolution of such tensions. Rather, these series make us experience this very tension as truth, a truth of the double, of the number two, never reducible to an *unicum*. Allow me to say: in this detective atmosphere, there is no place for a murderer in the classical sense. If there is one, Molder identifies it as *Time* itself, as will become clearer later on. We are dealing with a truth of the fragment, of the reflection. Hence Molder's many uses of mirrors, to allude to these truths: to duplicate, to enlighten...<sup>18</sup>. Each fragment seems to allude to a truth happening in the next room, but merely whispered, always on the verge of being deciphered and yet never decoded. In a single image, a fracture in the mirror can function as a multiplier. On the one hand, a broken glass scatters the image in its fragments. On the other hand, each fragment, with its power of reflections, maintains and even acquires a certain "autonomy"<sup>19</sup>.

What is, then, the sense of this game? Once we brought in *Time*, we might say that Molder plays with the "pure becoming", more specifically "with its capacity to elude the present"<sup>20</sup>. As a point of fact, the manifestation of a 'true' image, of the face of the true self<sup>21</sup>, is perpetually suggested and unremittingly postponed. Instead, Molder seems to linger on the interstices in order to open up and *develop* their temporality, including in a technical-photographic sense. His work dwells within the fissures of time, multiplied and extended by the frag-

<sup>18</sup> See also Sardo [2005]: 25-26.

<sup>19</sup> "The mirror, the fracture. The idea that the fracture, on the one hand, fractures, and on the other, multiplies. There is an image in the series NOX in which this appears. A broken mirror: at first it produces shrapnel, but then each fragment has a certain autonomy" (Molder [2010], my translation).

<sup>20</sup> Deleuze [1969]: 2.

<sup>21</sup> "The photographs of Jorge Molder do not believe in the existence of an original or sincere self" (Pinharanda [2014]: 33).

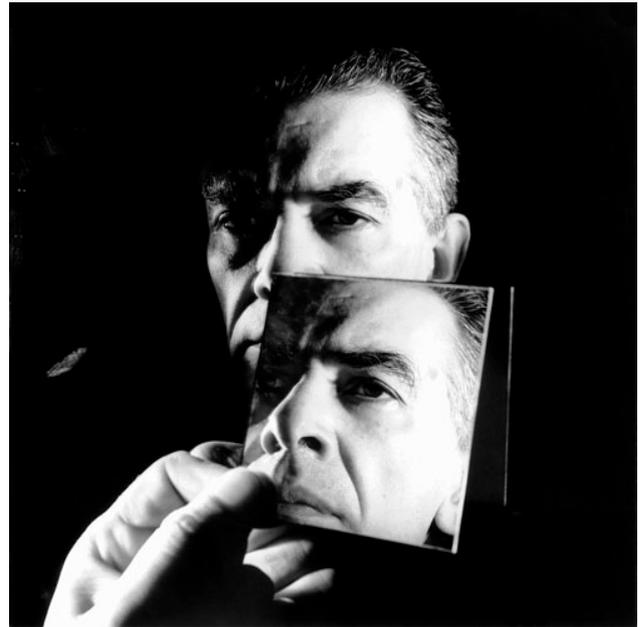


Figure 1. From: *Nox*, 1999. Gelatine Silver Print. 102 cm x 102 cm (courtesy of the artist).

mentation of the series. He inquires into temporal experiences that usually go unnoticed in our everyday lives, cracks in our chronological *timeline*<sup>22</sup>.

He explores zones hovering between reality and phantasy, between reality and dream<sup>23</sup>, in which our belief in reality is suspended or not yet established. Better still, he investigates moments of "almost recognition [*quase reconhecimento*]"<sup>24</sup>, in which nothing is definitely occurring, but potential still exists for something to develop. The artistic worlds Molder creates expand and unfold in the recesses of *uncertainty*. Molder also explores moments of 'false recognition' as more essential than those of recognition<sup>25</sup>—moments that continually play a role in shaping our everyday reality, in which we often rectify our perceptions, thereby qualifying as illusion what we had initially qualified as reality<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> The video installation *A linha do Tempo [Line of Time]*, (2000), is one example of a piece that can be read along these lines.

<sup>23</sup> See Molder [2010].

<sup>24</sup> Molder [2010].

<sup>25</sup> See Molder [2010].

<sup>26</sup> See Husserl [1980]: 52.

In this sense, the polyvalence of manifestation, the polyvalence of the ‘living present’ precedes the certain acquisition of what we call perception (Husserl, for instance, read the German word for perception—*Wahrnehmung*—as *nehmen* as *wahr*, in the sense of ‘taking/holding as true’, ‘taking as real’)<sup>27</sup>. A present moment can only be represented as a point on a timeline retrospectively. The living present is a threshold, a zone of bifurcation, or, better still, of ‘polyfuration’, which implies the coexistence of two or more possibilities hovering on the threshold of coming into being. Just like Alice, we can only ever say who we are *après coup*<sup>28</sup>—it is not until after the fact that we can describe something that has happened, in that we choose from among the many possible narratives concerning the occurrence in question.

This is not to say that such narratives are arbitrary—ours is not a regime of relativism in which we simply tack any random narrative onto any experience to shape it at will. Rather, it is a regime of perspectivism wherein, in principle, we can always change or correct our existing narratives on who we are and what we have experienced. To inhabit these zones of polyvalence also means to experience a sort of loss of the subject’s “proper name”<sup>29</sup>, a possibility that Molder’s game impels us to confront in his magical context.

Viewing his series, we may feel invited to start a narrative, yet without ever being sure of truly knowing anything about it. No narratives can be established completely since they remain virtual, ‘almost-narratives’, perennially suspended at the cusp of actualization but never transitioning completely<sup>30</sup>. This clearly also proves to be

<sup>27</sup> See Husserl [1973]: 16; 48-49.

<sup>28</sup> “Who are *you?*” said the Caterpillar. [...] Alice replied, rather shyly, ‘I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then” (Carroll [1865]: 40-41).

<sup>29</sup> “The loss of the proper name is the adventure which is repeated throughout all Alice’s adventures. For the proper or singular name is guaranteed by the permanence of *savoir*” (Deleuze [1969]: 3).

<sup>30</sup> “A series is always a narrative sequence, in appear-

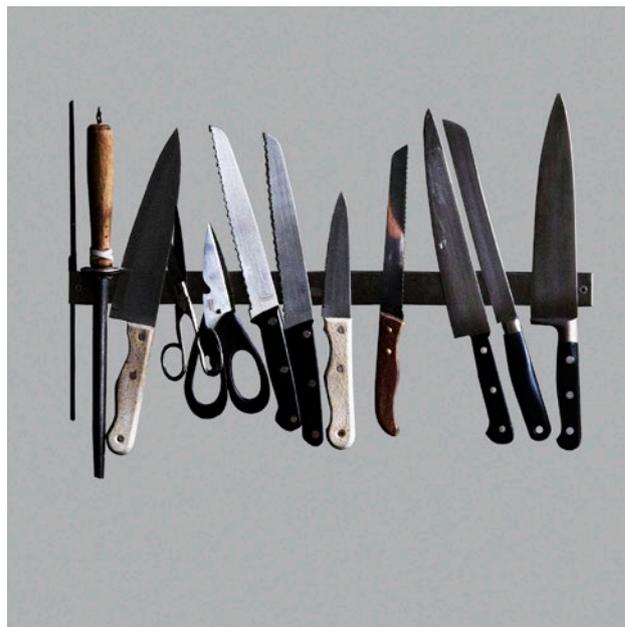


Figure 2. From: *Call for papers*, 2012. Digital pigmented print on Arches paper 640g/m<sup>2</sup>. 96 cm x 96 cm (courtesy of the artist).



Figure 3. From: *The secret agent*, 1991. Gelatine Silver Print. 102 cm x 102 cm (courtesy of the artist).

ance, where there is nothing to tell, despite it having all the necessary conditions for awakening a sense of deciphering. They are sets of suspended situations” (Molder [2006b]: 233).



Figure 4 – 5. From: *The Mohs scale*, 2012. Digital pigmented print on Arches paper 640g/m2. 96 cm x 96 cm (courtesy of the artist).

true as regards the objects called to participate in this game: clues perpetually alluding without ever unveiling. This is also why Molder has always rejected the notion of his work having a narrative character<sup>31</sup>.

We can go as far as suggest that magic is another pivotal element through which Molder extends these temporal interstices, a strategic tactic he uses in image construction. This aspect shares interesting commonalities with the “detective” atmosphere mentioned earlier (consider, for example, the interrelation between the two concepts in the cinema of Orson Welles, particularly in the well-known mirrors scene in *The Lady from Shanghai*, 1947). Thus, Molder unfurls a subtle game of suspension, a multiplication of moments preceding an occurrence, preceding the critical point of realization and certainty. One could also say: preceding *belief*.

This also proves to be true as regards facial expressions. A grimace may resolve into a gloomy-looking facial expression or a cheery one;

we cannot always anticipate which, and we are also aware that every status we are able to recognize might immediately give way to another, even its opposite. The irony, the magic, is already presenting a new expression, suggesting to us that perhaps we were only dreaming, that what we believed was happening has developed into something else. Here, the double face of the *grotesque*—terror and humor—are continuously played as being suspended in a renewed metamorphosis<sup>32</sup>.

## 2. WHO'S THE 'SUBJECT'?

Now we can ask: who is this man appearing in Molder's series? From a merely photographic point of view, when focusing on identifying what was really present in front of the camera when the image was taken—in Barthes' terms, when thinking about who “has been there”—, one could certainly be right in answering ‘Jorge Molder’. However, in broad terms, Barthes, in his famous *Camera Lucida*, was delving into the “essence of

<sup>31</sup> “They're not narrative, but they appear to be narrative” (Coplans, Molder [1998]: 242). See also Molder [1999]: 10-11 and Molder [2007]: 53-54.

<sup>32</sup> See also Nancy [2014]: 217-218.

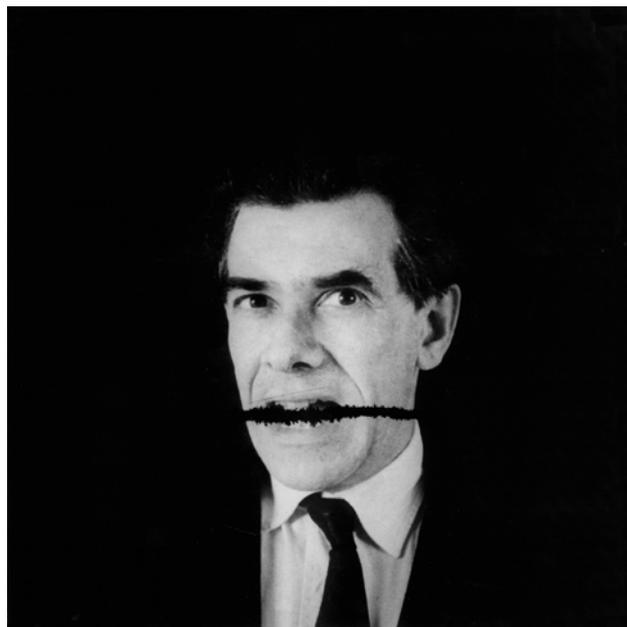
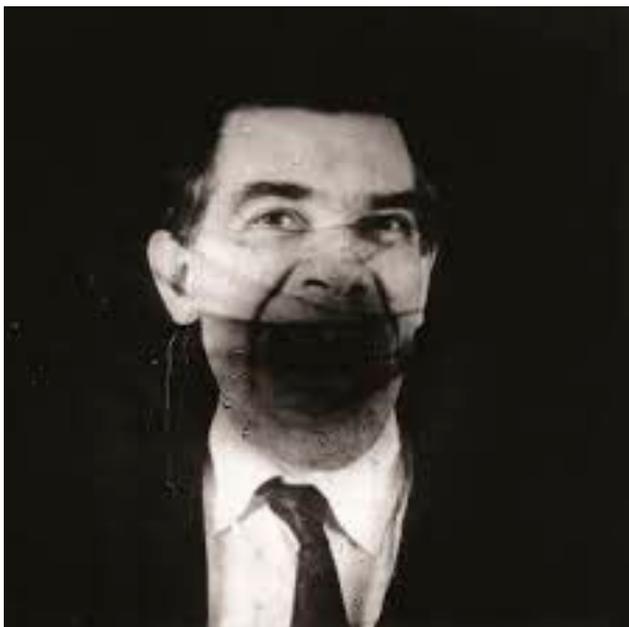


Figure 6 – 7. From: *The sense of the sleight-of-hand man*, 1994. Gelatine Silver Print. 102 cm x 102 cm (courtesy of the artist).

Photography”<sup>33</sup> as a medium, which is not of primary interest in Molder’s poetics. With fictional images, to quote Barthes again, a “domestication of Photography”<sup>34</sup> is already at work.

In fact, Jorge Molder’s art is specifically interested in fiction. As a constructor of images, the artist uses his own body to create a peculiar “character”<sup>35</sup> who is and yet is not Molder<sup>36</sup>: a *double*<sup>37</sup>. Molder, Belting writes, is an “actor of his own face [*Gesicht*]” who is “struggling in different roles and with different scripts”<sup>38</sup>, thereby creating

<sup>33</sup> Barthes [1980]: 21.

<sup>34</sup> “Do you suppose that looking at Commander Puyo’s strollers I am disturbed and exclaim ‘That-has-been!’?” (Barthes 1980: 117). Moreover, when Barthes states that “cinema participates in [the] domestication of Photography”, he is explicitly referring to “fictional cinema, precisely the one said to be the seventh art” (Barthes 1980: 117), and, we can add, exactly the one playing an important role in Molder’s work.

<sup>35</sup> “I am the actor in my photos” (Coplans, Molder [1998]: 178).

<sup>36</sup> See for instance Molder [2011]: 14. See also Belting [2013]: 167.

<sup>37</sup> See Marchand [2009]: 6.

<sup>38</sup> Belting [2013]: 166.

a perpetually unfulfilled gap between each image and *the* face allegedly portrayed therein. Interestingly, Belting emphasizes the fact that what fosters such a creation is the nature of photography itself, insofar as “photography always produces masks, no matter how often it focuses on the same face”<sup>39</sup>. From this point of view, in his game Molder specifically manages to “play[...] with the portrait [*Porträt*] in order to bring it into opposition to the face”<sup>40</sup>, giving rise to a “staging of a subject that can never be successful”<sup>41</sup>. In fact, we might add, his works are specifically *successful* in missing this subject: we will soon see how this is a strategic failing, a peculiar dodging able to reveal some aspects that would otherwise remain unknown.

It is also interesting to remark that this character manifesting between selfness and otherness—this double—can also go as far as to ‘speak back’ to ‘Jorge Molder’. This is, for instance, reflected in Molder’s written voice, which sometimes accompanies his series of images. Indeed, in some cases, a text signed ‘Jorge Molder’ introduces a series,

<sup>39</sup> Belting [2013]: 167.

<sup>40</sup> Belting [2013]: 166.

<sup>41</sup> Belting [2013]: 166.



Figure 8 – 9. From: *Anatomy & Boxing*, 1997. Gelatine Silver Print. 102 cm x 102 cm (courtesy of the artist).

creating a sort of relationship between the “constructor of images” ‘Jorge Molder’ and the double produced by the series in question. The latter can explicitly question the former, can observe ‘him’, creating another kind of doubleness involving both text and images<sup>42</sup>.

As a matter of fact, in 1979, Molder began doing photographs that he himself referred to as self-portraits. However, he gradually stopped calling them this, having come to prefer the term ‘self-representations’<sup>43</sup>. To draw upon an analogy from the classical-music world, *Auto-retratos* (*Self-portraits*), an early series spanning from 1979 to 1987, might be called the “themes” that were later deconstructed in Molder’s subsequent “variations”. This upheaval of the original self-portrait opens up possibilities for a further dimension of research: that of the “self-representation”.

Molder himself qualified it as a new phase, one whose starting point can be traced back to the period from *The Portuguese Dutchman* (1990)

to *The Secret Agent* (1991)<sup>44</sup>. This passage represents a shift to a veritable mise-en-scène of the self. Molder transcends the idea of “a self-portrait” being construed as “a photograph of oneself, which, in a certain way, is supposed to highlight some intimate quality of whom is portrayed”<sup>45</sup>. This is by no means what his series are looking for. The self-representation, on the other hand, is described as “a person who photographs oneself and functions a little bit as a face”<sup>46</sup>. The term “representation [*Representação*]” can also take on a theatrical meaning here, in the sense that the artist puts the body (his own body) onto a peculiar stage: in *Anatomia e Boxe* [*Anatomy and Boxing*] (1997), for example, it takes the form of an anatomical theater or a boxing ring<sup>47</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> “I place this change in the moment of the passage from the series *The Portuguese Dutchman* to the series *The Secret Agent*. In this new phase, I continue working with myself, but find in this peculiar representation of myself a character whom I do not entirely match, yet who is not, and cannot be, anyone besides me” (Molder [1999]: 8, my translation). See also Sardo [1999]: 41.

<sup>45</sup> Molder [2013], my translation.

<sup>46</sup> Molder [2013].

<sup>47</sup> See Sardo [1998]: 26-27.

<sup>42</sup> See for example *CD* (1998) and *NOX* (1999).

<sup>43</sup> See Marchand [2009]: 5; Molder [2001]: 14, Sardo [1999]: 40.

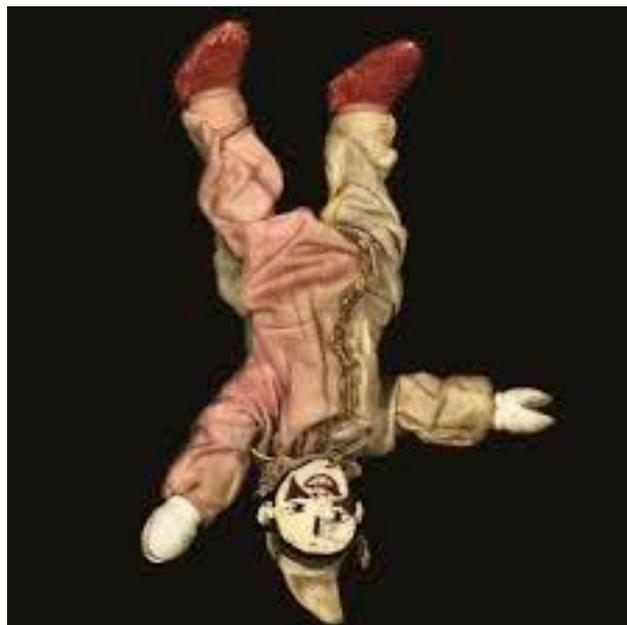


Figure 10 – 11. From: *The Mohs scale*, 2012. Digital pigmented print on Arches paper 640g/m2. 96 cm x 96 cm (courtesy of the artist).

The body subjected to the forces of these peculiar stages, as we have said, is that of a character that ‘is’ and ‘is not’ Jorge Molder. Following on from what we suggested above, such a self-representation may also be described in terms of self-deformation. The series *A escala de Mohs* [*The Mohs scale*] (2012), whose title refers to the scale the German mineralogist Friedrich Mohs created in 1812 to describe mineral hardness, seems to confront the issue of our bodies’ resistance to the action—to the inscrutable game—of *Time*. The progressive emergence of this character reveals a figure of man as a puppet in the hands of time, “mask man or marionette placed on the magma of time”<sup>48</sup>, as Merleau-Ponty writes in his *Notes de cours* at the Collège de France<sup>49</sup> in a poignant section dedicated to Claude Simon. In this same series, a puppet resonates with Molder’s double body, as a double of a double.

Moreover, as Molder himself comes to recognize, the transformation of ‘his’ own body over

time (‘his’ and ‘not his,’ as the body of a character) is an issue that gradually develops throughout all his works, until it ultimately emerges as one of his primary thematic elements<sup>50</sup>. Like the great Proustian *Bal de têtes*—that is to say, the *Masked Ball* in the last volume of the *Recherche*—Molder’s series seem to suggest that the *secret agent* of this ‘deformation game’ is *Time* (an agent also in a chemical sense), while we, the subjects, are its victims:

*I have compared him [M. d’Argencourt] to an actor, but in fact, unencumbered as he was by any conscious soul, it was rather as a puppet, a trembling puppet [...] in a puppet-show which was both scientific and philosophical and in which he served—as though it had been at the same time a funeral oration and a lecture at the Sorbonne—both as a text for a sermon on the vanity of all things and as an object lesson in natural history.*

*A puppet-show, yes, but [...] these were puppets*

<sup>48</sup> Merleau-Ponty [1996]: 212, my translation.

<sup>49</sup> I am referring to the preparatory notes to the “*cours de 1960-1961*” entitled “*L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui*”.

<sup>50</sup> See the interview in this “Aisthesis” issue. See also Bragança de Miranda [2017]: 14: “Though he may wryly remark that he used his own body as material because that was what he had most readily on hand, the fact that he photographed it for 40 years means that the changes of the flesh have inscribed themselves on the images”.

*bathed in the immaterial colours of the years, puppets which exteriorised Time, Time which by Habit is made invisible and to become visible seeks bodies [...] to display its magic lantern upon them. As immaterial now as Golo long ago on the door-handle of my room at Combray, the new, the unrecognisable Argencourt was there before me as the revelation of Time, which by his agency was rendered partially visible*<sup>51</sup>.

Through the Proustian lens<sup>52</sup>, M. d'Argencourt (like all men) becomes a puppet in the hands of time, coming to express *vanitas* and assuming the status of a *natural history specimen*—two dimensions notably echoed in Molder's work as well<sup>53</sup>. In keeping with Proust's words, the subject is put on a stage having both "scientific" and "philosophical" value. As we have seen, this stage may be an anatomical theater in which the subject is dissected, fractured and reconfigured, or a boxing ring in which it is doomed to be deformed.

Yet this alteration results in manifestation of a whole range of expressive poses, making us aware of the forces distorting our bodies, which, as we have just suggested with Proust, usually remain invisible. This clearly reminds of Francis Bacon's triptychs, which Molder explicitly confronts through his creation of two directly related series, such as *INOX* (1995) and *TV* (1996)<sup>54</sup>. The viewer,

<sup>51</sup> Proust [1927]: 964, emphasis added.

<sup>52</sup> "The writer's work is merely a kind of *optical* instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself" (Proust [1927]: 949, my italics).

<sup>53</sup> See *Vanitas* (2013) and *A origem das espécies* [*The Origin of Species*] (2012). As regards the latter, see also Bragança de Miranda [2017]: 20: "It is as if what is at stake is some kind of photography-operated 'natural history'; "Molder is creating a natural history of the decadence of the body, of the catastrophe of the flesh, but what is under scrutiny in each photograph, or in each of his most characteristic series, are the forms, types and concepts of the body"; "Here is created the natural history of the body's forms".

<sup>54</sup> The title *INOX* also refers to Pope Innocent X (Bacon's studies after his portrait by Diego Velázquez are well known). The title *TV*, instead, also relates to what Pope Innocent X allegedly exclaimed before this same portrait by Velázquez, that is, "*Tropo vero!*".

too, may come away with the sense of being just another victim on the battlefield of *Time*, fighting a war we are doomed to lose<sup>55</sup>. The question, if anything, is *how* we are going to fall.

Molder's game, then, can also be seen as a struggle with *Time*, performed through an irony that faces its action through what Merleau-Ponty (via Malraux) calls "coherent deformations"<sup>56</sup>. In fact, one way to cope with *Time*'s action is to try to make it visible, to play along with its forces in order to find a way to express them. It is a matter of working out a productive way of losing, or of falling. The notion of "falling" plays a key role in this context—specifically, if we understand "the fall as a great metaphor of the creative process", a consistent loss of balance, a coherent come-down difficult to trace, insofar as "the fall is also the process through which the form limps, dissolve"<sup>57</sup>.

Above, we suggested that the secret agent in these series is *Time*. Nevertheless, Molder, too, might be viewed as a "secret agent" trying to play little tricks on *Time*, an agent awaiting the right moment to recognize the manifestation of a law in an accident, to spot a rule in what seemed to be only arbitrary. More specifically, such an agent combines the skills of a detective, a magician, and an actor: a triple function through which, as we have seen, he seeks to inhabit, explore, and play with passages, interstices, moments preceding the formation of what we call reality or following its dissolution.

He seems to share this strategy with Witold Gombrowicz (one of his work's explicit sources)—especially as regards the 'detective story' found in *Cosmos*, a detective story specifically about the process through which reality creates and dissolves itself<sup>58</sup>. In particular, like the Pol-

<sup>55</sup> See the interview in this "Aisthesis" issue.

<sup>56</sup> Merleau-Ponty [1969]: *passim*.

<sup>57</sup> Sardo [1998]: 27.

<sup>58</sup> "Sometime in May *Cosmos* appeared [...]. I gladly call this work a 'novel about a reality that is creating itself'. And because a detective novel is precisely this—an attempt at organizing chaos—*Cosmos* has a little of the form of a detective romance" (Gombrowicz [1953-1969]: 674).

ish writer, Molder appears to possess the capacity to deviate from a rule in order to draw attention to it. In this space of play, rules are disclosed through ironic differentiation<sup>59</sup>. In order to elude a rule, one has to know it, and twisting a rule might be a more effective way to build awareness of it than blindly demonstrating how to comply with it. Obedience, through the muffling force of habit, might even conceal a rule. Here, instead, it is a question of “displacements”<sup>60</sup>, deviations through which the influence of invisible presences is revealed through “lateral”<sup>61</sup> expression (that is, expression characterized by a movement different from what the etymology of “express” implies: *ex-primere*, ‘squeezing something out’—something that was already there, but concealed inside something else).

If, as Molder suggests, we are victims of *Time*’s game, art becomes for him a peculiar space within which to open up a kind of affirmative response; an *agon* where finding a space of action, a space for turning the tables on *Time*. This is a space of magical tricks, where manifestations make us strangely aware of “bifurcations, divergences, impossibilities, and discord” as “belong[ing] to the same motley world”; it is a space of *doubles*, where something can and cannot be, “a ‘chaosmos’ of the type found in Joyce, but also in Maurice Leblanc, Borges, or”, as we have just seen, “Gombrowicz”<sup>62</sup>.

It is hardly surprising that Molder himself talks about his work in terms of a *chaotic meth-*

*od*<sup>63</sup>. The viewer is brought ‘behind the scenes’ of the world, or, better, a step back from its constitution: he is made to feel the burgeoning of virtualities from which every reality arises. Molder’s work takes us into the magic zone in which things have yet to happen or have already finished happening, and when they do happen, it is only as illusions—though this does not make what is manifesting any less true, as in the *Club Silencio* (David Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, 2001), where music is playing even though there is no band (“*no hay banda and yet... we hear that...*”). It is an inquiry into the processes through which reality is constituted and undone, either before or after the moment of *belief*.

It should be clear at this point that Molder’s self-representation does not aim to unearth his *own* subjectivity, his allegedly genuine hidden self. Rather, the subject emerges as a point of convergence of Molder’s series, as a projection of a magician. The spectator confronts an artistic inquiry into the transcendental conditions, the *Conditions of Possibility*<sup>64</sup> for a subjective viewing to happen, for the expression of a ‘subject’ that is not *causa sui*<sup>65</sup>. Any trace of psychologism is swept away from this *mise-en-scène* of the self, and any threat of solipsism “vanish[es] like mist in the sun”<sup>66</sup>.

Molder’s self-representations bring his body to *express* a character as *a* life in a Deleuzian sense<sup>67</sup>, a character he qualifies as “abstract” insofar as pertaining to a “singularity” exceeding any actual

<sup>59</sup> “There are denials that affirm. The meaning [*le sens*] is beyond the letter, the meaning is always ironic” (Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 30).

<sup>60</sup> “The key thing is to find the central theme in order to subvert it [...]. Art [...] works always by *displacements*. That is why I usually say that my work is not related to symbolic issues; it is related to metaphorical issues, since a metaphor is a shift of sense” (Molder [2013], my translation).

<sup>61</sup> “After Proust, Joyce, the Americans, the mode of signification is indirect: myself-the other-the world deliberately mixed, implicated one in the other, expressed one by the other, in [a] lateral relationship” (Merleau-Ponty [1996]: 49).

<sup>62</sup> Deleuze [1988]: 81.

<sup>63</sup> “My line of work is chaotic and yet methodical, I proceed as methodically as my chaos allows it to be” (Molder [2001]: 15, my translation).

<sup>64</sup> See Molder’s text introducing his series with this title: “The title is somewhat pompous – *Conditions of Possibility* – and not original at all: it belongs to philosopher Immanuel Kant [...]. By moving from things themselves to the study of the conditions of possibility of knowledge of things, Kant changed completely Western philosophy, our mode of thinking and my own mode of thinking and looking at the world” (Molder [2006a]: 7).

<sup>65</sup> See Colli 1969: 15.

<sup>66</sup> Colli 1969: 16, my translation.

<sup>67</sup> “If we take the indefinite article as an index of the transcendental” (Deleuze [1995]: 28).

individualization<sup>68</sup>. He deforms his own body to the point that it is no more his than ours, which is why, when encountering his images, the spectator is invited to join the game and thus to participate in this “impersonal” dimension<sup>69</sup>, to ‘double up’ him/herself in turn. Even though Molder’s body functions as a unifier through all his series, his “ownness” is brought to a critical threshold at which reflects “otherness” as well, giving rise to a peculiar character having traits “common to all human beings”<sup>70</sup>. The viewer sees himself – as a life – in a mirror.

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<sup>68</sup> “By ‘abstract’ I mean something that does not actually belong to the domain of the real” (Molder [1999]: 8). See also Coplans, Molder [1998]: 178.

<sup>69</sup> Deleuze [1995]: 25.

<sup>70</sup> Molder [1999]: 10.

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