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SÃO PAULO TRANSITIONAL ICONOGRAPHIES. FIELD NOTES

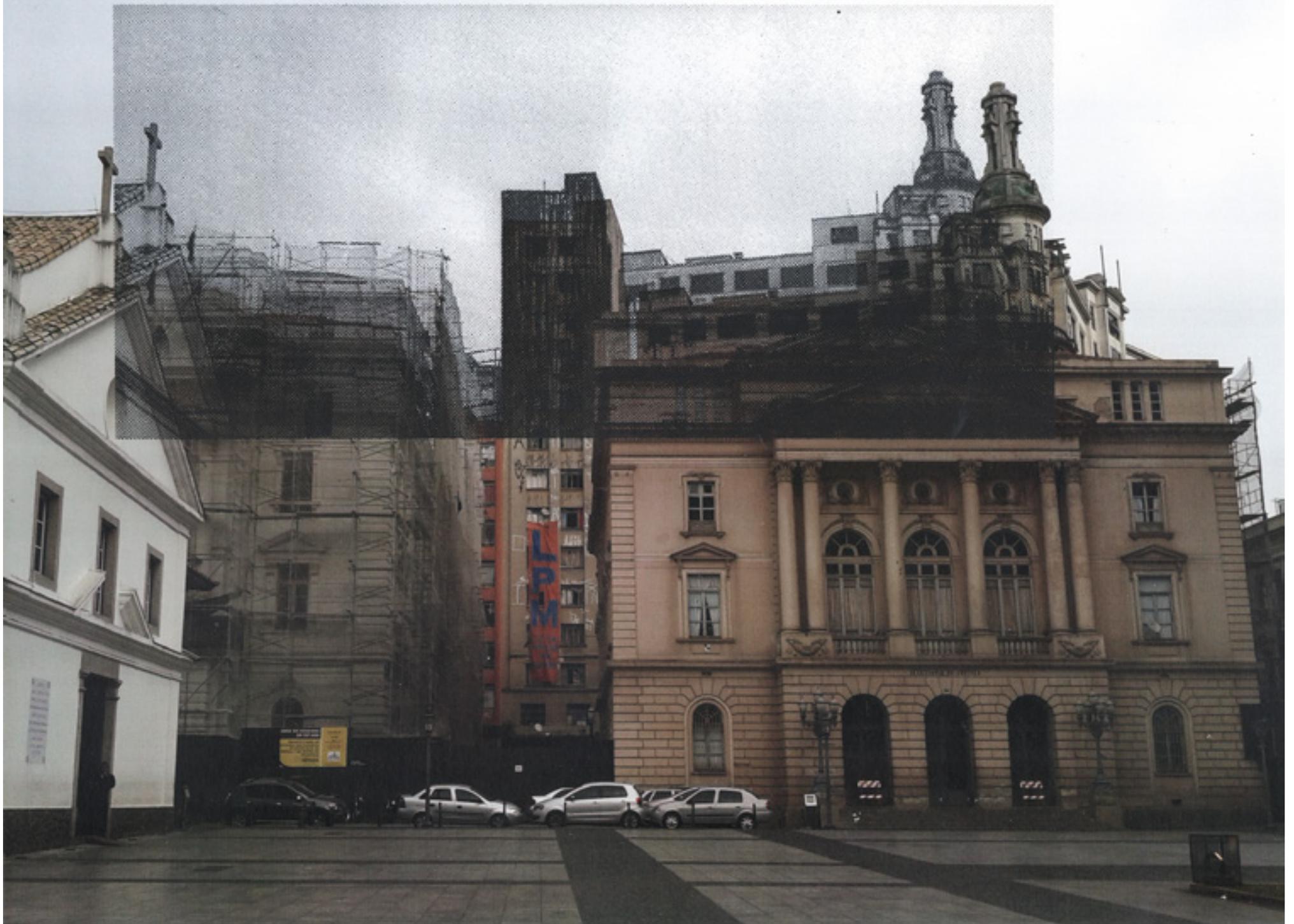


















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FIELD NOTES

FIRST DRAFTS

Before traveling, someone told me that in 2014, I would have the opportunity to know the best and the worst of Brazil. The World Cup, on which was a lot of expectation in the so called “country of football”, had been causing several criticism and manifestations for over-spending and unjustified stadiums spending, the expulsion of local residents, and because of the increase of police violence. At the end of the year, presidential elections would occur, with a complex political landscape because of the evident social malaise that had manifested in June 2013. Part of this malaise related to the urban problems of large cities and with the contrast between the boastful discourse of “Big Brazil” and the everyday experience of the people in the crowded buses, subways and in the daily budget.

By coincidence, I ended up living in downtown São Paulo, one of the areas of the city in which these contrasts were more evident in the coexistence of preparations for the World Cup, with the urban occupations. In addition, it is a space where architectural narratives about the past and the future of the city converge, where the modern skyscrapers meet with the “colonial style invented” of their historic buildings.

I started visiting the historical places of the city of São Paulo, as the *Pátio do Colégio*, *Largo São Bento*, *Praça*

da Sé, Praça do Correio, Viaduto do Chá and Praça da República. These routes had no itinerary and interested me for two reasons: a kind of “invented memory” to create meaning and identity, a historical record designed to handle the excessive growth of the city from the XIX century and how, in this urban and historical landscape, there was something that overflowed its visuality in brands and flags of the buildings occupied by various social movements.

Example of this was a photo that I registered, of the symbolic core and foundations of the city: the *Pátio do Colégio*, a 16th century Jesuit building, that in the second half of the 18th century, worked as well as the Palace of Government. Then, in the second half of the 20th century, was rebuilt fully, for the celebrations of the fourth centenary of the town. This re-creation of the past through the reconstruction of the *Pátio do Colégio* as in its early days is curious, this “back to the source”, as a foundational imagery myth, because the model was a nostalgic image of the past amid the strong urban transformations of the years 1950 (Ferraz de Lima 2003). A symbolic place that contravenes everything else to say: “Start here!”.

Near this historic monument, was one of the occupations that interested me: a building belonging to the bank *Caixa Economica Federal*, abandoned for eight years and occupied since April 2014 by the social movement for housing *Luta Popular por Moradia*. In a closer level, it was possible to see also a fragment of the restoration of the *Secretaria da Justiça e da Defesa da Cidadania*. To analyze, under image, these various layers of meaning was one of the first strategies used to visually intervene in the photographs.

THE CHOICES

The months of June and July of 2014 were fundamental to define the places to photograph and the visualities that were taking importance in the project: the urban graphics symbols as a form of denunciation. In particular, my attention was caught by the *pichação* as a form of writing and complaint in Sao Paulo, a writing that, like a code, it's understood only by those who know their language, demarcating different urban territories. Although the *pichação* has already joined and circled in artistic territory (for example, the 28th and 29th Bienal de São Paulo), still retains its power of protest on the street. For example, to mention the death, not yet fully understood, of the two taggers by military police in 2014, when trying to *pichar* (writing or scribbling on walls, using aerosol spray paint) on a building in the neighborhood of Mooca.

By walking daily through the town center, one can appreciate the transformations that have occurred in the buildings, which became the pro-

tagonists of this work. At the end of July, the facade of the occupation of Av. Ipiranga changed: it was painted red in order to cover the *pichações* that were in place. This fact, in addition to space record, meant also a mark of passage of time.

Another favorite ride is the “Minhocão”, particularly on Sunday, when close to cars, as it is a strategic place in the city. The “Minhocão”, or *Elevado Presidente Costa e Silva*, is a viaduct almost three kilometers long that allows the connection between the East and West areas of the city, showing visibly some of the city’s social and political problems. It was constructed in 1972, destroying much of central urban area. It received the name of the second president of the military dictatorship period (1964-1985) and marked clearly the option for the car in city planning. Some plans are under discussion to turn it into a park, although that decision, if it does not have appropriate regulation by the State, can cause a violent process of gentrification in the area.

On walks through the center, I registered eighteen of the more than forty urban occupations of the old center. Each one of them interested me in different issues, by geographic location, the architecture of the building or by visible marks on the outside. All this allowed a reading of how this space had been captured in an idea of power, thought and economy that made it possible.

In total, I followed close six occupations. The first one was *Floriano Peixoto* Street, near the *Pátio do Colégio*. The second, the building of *Conselheiro Nébias* Street, who, besides being fully marked by *pichações*, showed signs of having been reinstated and recouped. The third is the occupation of *Rio Branco* Avenue, in a building built in 1960, with a modern avant-garde architecture and was currently in a total state of deterioration, practically a modernist ruin (Jaguaribe 1994). That is, the failure of a modern architectural project that didn’t survive the city’s growth, but also a metaphor for working the modern utopia exhaustion. The fourth building is located at *Ipiranga* Avenue. In its photograph I tried to follow specifically the visual changes of its facade. The fifth building corresponds to the occupation located in front of the City Hall, a form of direct political pressure on municipal power. And, finally, a building in *Mauá* Street, which has a successful history and it is a model for the functioning of occupations. I finally get in two of them: the *Conselheiro Nébias* and *Mauá* streets.

A LOOK FROM INSIDE

In July, I entered an occupation in *Pamplona* Street, near the *Paulista* Avenue, to attend the lecture of urbanist Raquel Rolnik. After attending

the lecture, it arose in me the interest of visiting the interior of the occupations, depicting the spaces and also the graphic symbols used in the organization of these places.

Get in the occupations meant a different dimension of the initial photographic project and a challenge for me, as a photographer. I wanted to work with the marks of these buildings from the inside and register the tensions between the “outside” and “inside”. This tension implied moving from a street approach, from *flâneur*, to a confrontation that became my object of study. I understood, from the beginning, the limitations of my task: being a recent foreigner in the country, an art student, and not a militant.

Explaining to lawyers or leaders of movements of housing the relevance or importance of this work (from an artistic context) proved to be difficult. At least the fact of introducing myself as a student of the University of São Paulo put me in a supposedly “neutral” institutional framework, to evaluate research as visual memory of a critical political moment in Brazil.

These issues were approached when I contacted the organizations that supported the movement of housing and with the militants. My contact was Benedito Barbosa, best known as “Dito”, lawyer of social movements, responsible for giving me the contacts of the leaders of various occupations. That’s how I found the residents of the *Vila Guilherme*, who were interested in the project and invited me to see the place where they lived. Although my research was centered in vertical occupations of the center, that moment represented the opportunity to know an occupation that worked for over ten years.

Vila Guilherme is an occupation of the old factory of filters *Salus*, in the northern part of the city. On the day of the visit, a Sunday after lunch, I was received by Solange and Marialva, residents of the neighborhood. I planned a little this first visit to an occupation. When I was in the field, I felt I wanted to disturb as little as possible, and got a little nervous by the attention generated in the community, by my presence and my camera. I couldn’t follow the story that Solange made about the history of the occupation. I knew that the possibilities to come back were minimal and I took some pictures, concentrating on structural marks of what was the factory of filters.

In the same way, I found the occupation in the *Vila Maria* Park, a neighborhood located in the northeast of the city. Fabiana, one of the leaders of the occupation, met me at the bus stop, and made a journey around the local space. The terrain of the *Vila Maria*, of 50000 square meters, was occupied in October 2013, after staying abandoned for over twenty years. The land, where now live 2,500 families, belongs to a group of

companies that owe the National Farm 450 million reais. Checking the address on Google Maps, I had the impression that the place was further away, but an hour and a half by bus is a “normal” trip in São Paulo.

Although this immense land was relatively not long ago occupied, the development of the houses, food business, televisions, washing machines, was impressive. A whole community built in a year of occupation, even a church. At the end of the visit, even a Fabiana’s neighbour invited me to a tea and talk, at her house. An important detail is that, at the time of the visit, the residents had received the first eviction notice. At the end of October, I entered in the occupation of the *Mauá* street, 340, through the contact with Nelson, leader of the occupation. The building, the old *Hotel Santos Dumont*, was abandoned for seventeen years and was occupied for 237 families, since 2007. On the day of the visit, Nelson met me at the entrance of the building and talked about his critical position about the occupation’s objectives.

He spoke of the difficulty of militancy in social movements for housing, because most people remained in the occupation just to get a place, forgetting that the goals of the struggle were also the rescue of citizenship. He also reported the difficulty in keeping the organization of all the occupation residents and the presence of drug trafficking, showing concern about the multiplication of occupations in the center and its ambiguous purposes in relation to the economic and political powers.

After the conversation, he made me a tour through the building, allowing me to photograph the different spaces. The environment was very welcoming and the people were friendly and willing to photograph. My gaze was centered in fragments: close-ups of writings on the walls, details of small business, halls, mountain bikes. I also photographed many windows, the limit zone “outside-inside”, the public-private, a landmark that outlines the look for the urban landscape.

I highlight the only portrait work performed with Nelson, since most of the images lacks people, although you can see some walking off guard. My pictures, in the context of street photography, were always from that particular moment in which “nothing happens”. Or rather, when there are no more than everyday events, in spaces that we see daily: the city center, the squares, the streets. I decided to leave the portrait of Nelson because I believe it represents a dimension of the work that involved a relationship, an exchange with people that inhabit these places, although the final image refers more to the space and their signs.

At the end of November, I visited the occupation of *Conselheiro Nébias* Street, a building abandoned ten years ago. The environment of this oc-

cupation was more tense and the visit was quick. I took a few pictures. This building was one of the first to interest me by being completely covered by *pichações*, and with signs of having been reinstated and occupied again. It is close to the area known as “Cracolândia” an area of trafficking and crack addicts, which contributes to generate a climate of tension around it. Lili, one of the occupation’s leaders, received me in her apartment and enthusiastically told me the story of the building. It was interesting to discover that Lili was also a photographer and had a project about the transformations of the building where she lived. We talked a lot about how to keep the ethics in this type of work and if it was possible to maintain distance, being there. “The vision of the intellectual is one and that of the active militant is another. I am a journalist occupying and selling my pictures out. I live in an occupation and become militant” (Lili, said in an interview with me, in 2014).

In synthesis, the photographic work and the experience in the occupations have raised political background issues in me, though I didn’t engage in any social movement. First of all, it rose a question about public space: the occupations of the old center are abandoned buildings for at least five years, and, most of them, are old hotels. Despite the 1988 Constitution, which enshrined the social character of the property, the *Estatuto da Cidade* of 2001 and the application of Municipal Master Plans, which allow to penalize the owners of abandoned buildings, the Brazilian public authorities are still favoring urban speculation (Ferreira 2014). Occupying a public space, whether on the streets, the squares or buildings, is a political action in itself. A recovery of public space, even if it’s temporary. So, I understand also the *pichações*. In the same way, portraying them does not cease to be a political action, though bounded by the field of art. After half a year researching and developing this work, I understand that the kind of image that could create was directly related to the commitment, always at the limit of the work.

Otherwise, what would be the most appropriate image type, which technical decisions, which formats and supports, for this job? The first plastic experimentation was to build an image that is red through several graphic interferences in the urban landscape; however, the approach should also be documentary, beyond aesthetics. In this sense, it was important to emphasize the discursive and contextual function of images, making the image-text relationship fundamental. The text is presented as a way of complementing the image, away from a merely exhibitionist function. I tried to make explicit the context of these photographs, considering their production as what they symbolize to me. “We can speak of a message as an incarnation of a thesis” (Sekula 1981).

translation

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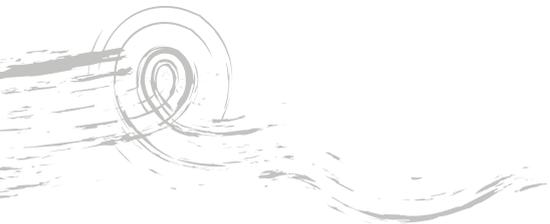
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Chilean Visual Artist. Lives and works in São Paulo since 2014. Bachelor's degree in Visual Arts with an emphasis in photography, at the *Universidad de Chile* (2007). Master's degree in Media and Audiovisual Processes at the *Universidade de São Paulo* (2016). Participated in research stages in Germany, at the *University of Fine Arts of Hamburg* (2007) and in Portugal, at the *Universidade Nova de Lisboa* (2015). Her work has been exhibited at several museums and cultural centers of Chile and Uruguay. In Montevideo, she was a teacher of photography and contemporary art at the *Universidad Católica del Uruguay* and of visual communication at the *Universidad de la República*.