

# Dek Unu Magazine



September, 2019

## Ricardo Imperatore “Gamboa’s Dreams”

Images ©Ricardo Imperatore



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Images: ©Ricardo Imperatore  
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## Eleven

This is **Dek Unu Magazine**. In Esperanto, *dek unu* means "eleven." Eleven Images from a single artist. Eleven artists in eleven solo issues each year.

**Dek Unu** publishes the work of a new photoartist in each issue. The artist's work and words are featured alone and in individual focus as the sole purpose for each issue of the magazine. Unlike other arts and letters magazines which might look for work from a variety of artists to support an editorial staff's theme, at **Dek Unu**, theme and imagery are always each artist's own.

## This Month

The best camera is the one you have with you. Or, as a good friend and teacher professes, the only true requirement of a photographer is to "Be there and be packing." This month's feature, multi-disciplinary artist Ricardo Imperatore, uses only what he calls a "Jurassic" iPad and an iPhone 6 to tell the story of Gamboa, Little Africa, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. His street photography, shot off-hand and "in the midst," is the opposite of the lush images of rain forests and samba dancers in the travel brochures that condition the sense that most Northerners have of Brazil. His photos and first-person commentary describe the failure of an experiment in urban renewal, his attempt to make a home and studio in Gamboa, and the memory of the neighborhood that others have since forgotten.

## GAMBOA, "LITTLE AFRICA," RIO DE JANEIRO.

Between the end of the eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth century, Gamboa was a pleasant and picturesque suburb, chosen by the aristocracy of Rio de Janeiro as a place for their farms and palaces.



Gamboa Sunset

The Gamboa neighbourhood is the site of the Cemiterio dos Pretos Novos (New Black Cemetery), also known as the New Blacks Memorial. Between 1769 and 1830, it was a slave cemetery. It is estimated that between 20,000 and 30,000 slaves are buried there. Between 1500 and 1856, one out of every five people in the world who were enslaved set foot in Rio de Janeiro, more precisely, in Gamboa.

Ex-slaves were recruited by the government for the War of Canudos (1897) with promises that after victory, each “volunteer” would receive a house as payment. Well, we know what governments and their promises are like. The authorities didn’t honor their promises, so ex-slaves took Morro da Providencia (Providence Hill) to build houses without the government’s help or approval, giving birth to the first favela (slum / ghetto) in Brazil. The name “favela” came from a plant found in battlefields in Bahia where the so-called “volunteers” had fought and died for “their” beloved “homeland.”

In 2011, anticipating a \$30 billion (USD) injection of resources from the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics, City Hall made a huge plan for massive reform and urban revitalization for Gamboa and the neighbourhoods. Promises were made. Artists, like me, moved into the “eye of the hurricane” to take advantage of an opportunity for studio space in a new, transformed community. I was among the first to move in. But, as happened 100 years before, promises were broken, chaos came to Gamboa and, in 2019, black people from Favela da Providencia are still dying, now being killed by police. Familiar, eh?

Me? I, myself, was beaten by police one night just because I was walking late in the night. And yes, they were high on alcohol and cocaine... They beat me, took my money, the whole pack. This was the trigger that made me start making photos of Gamboa, a forgotten neighbourhood and its wonderful people.



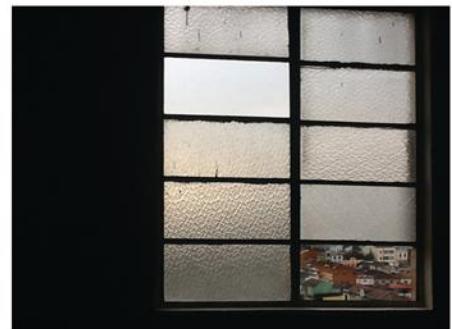
Gamboa Sunset

Rio, poor Rio. “It’s never so bad that it can’t get worse” is a popular saying. It is a total mess. Drug trafficking among kids. 500 families in a space meant for 10. Violence and misery all around. More than 60,000 gun deaths in 2018. The state governor opened fire from a military chopper on “suspects” in a favela last month. (Miracle: no one died). The mayor, who is Bishop of Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, survived a recent call for impeachment. And all five of the previous state governors are in jail. On top of all that, our President..”Narrow-minded Maybe-No-Brains-At-All Stupid Tropical Trump” ... Jair Messias Bolsonaro signed a new law this year that makes it much easier for people to buy and carry guns. Genius. Rio is triple fucked. Honestly, I don’t see a way out. Not in 50 years.

Despite all of that... Gamboa is magical, mystical. One can’t describe the feelings that go through the heart and soul when walking in the area. So much cultural history: *Pedra do Sal*, site of an original *quilombo* village, center of “Little Africa,” birthplace of the samba, birthplace of Brazil’s Carnaval. (I can tell you, I’ve been there, and it’s pure joy and love.) Despite all that... the people from Gamboa gave the world a very special gift, endless happiness.

When the city and state governments targeted the portuary zone of Rio for a colossal transformation, I was happy to be one of the first artists to settle my big loft/studio/home there, in an old industrial storage building. But we are in Brazil! Due to greed, speculation and government corruption, the bubble burst, many of us had to leave, and I suffer, to this day, when I think how very happy I was there.

As one moved inside my loft, that slot, empty of glass in the window frame, revealed many different views of Gamboa. I never fixed the hole. I let the wind and rain come inside. It was fun to interact with the elements. There were some days and nights that the wind and rain could reach almost every part of the loft.



Slot 1



Slot 1



*Tool Kitty*

Sleeping Beauty is her name. Given by the owner of this very humble hardware store, located in Gamboa, Rio. He's a very nice guy with a enormous sense of humor. He loves that cat. But it's a fact that *Tool Kitty* lives inside his hardware store and...sleeps ..all day...long. According to him, even if a tiny little mouse passes under her nose, she won't move a single hair of her kitty moustache. He says that Sleeping Beauty is not waiting for a prince's kiss, but to be hammered.



Tool Kitty



*Screen Jams*

In Japan, US, Europe... It would be just trash (*lixo*). Not in Gamboa. Jurassic monitors have a destination. All this goes to [e-lixo-rj.com.br/](http://e-lixo-rj.com.br/), the national electronic waste recycling cooperative. Probably public schools will receive them after anything that works has been separated from the trash.  
In Brazil, public schools are, in general, very poor in equipment and gear and facilities for the students.



Screen Jams



We are at Gamboa, Little Africa. The right model for the right people. When I work, I like to make contact with my subjects. I talk to them. For instance, I even kissed the model for this photo.

Local



Local

Raimundo, the guy playing pool, is always ready "to go" as he is the delivery guy for Bar dos Amigos. Helmet is on, every single moment. No time to lose.



*Game Over*



Game Over



*Moving*

This one is of a girlfriend, inside the loft I was renting, as I was moving out. A sad day.

Two years before the end of the lease, the owner of the building ripped the rental contact to pieces, right in front of my unbelieving eyes. He was going to sell the building once that area was reformed. City Hall promises... In order to push all the tenants out as quickly as possible, he cut the water supply for the entire building. During the next months, as I was trying to resist this absurd expulsion, I had to buy 200 gallons of water.

The water was being sold 100 meters from my place. The guy who was selling water was the same guy who was also selling other products. Including crack cocaine. "What are you up to?" he used to ask me. "Death or life? Water or crack?"

I made videos of the water operation as evidence and brought a lawsuit against the owner.

I lost the case... Power of money versus a "crazy" artist.



*Before*



*After*



Moving



*WTF*

The lady in the picture lives on the street, very near to the exit from a heavy traffic tunnel. It is very hard to breathe at that spot. Crossing through that tunnel, many times, I have had to put something, a t-shirt, for instance, over my nose to filter as much as possible the particles of the extremely polluted air.

I can't understand how she is even alive, living at that spot, taking that air, all day long. Every day. She lives in her own world.

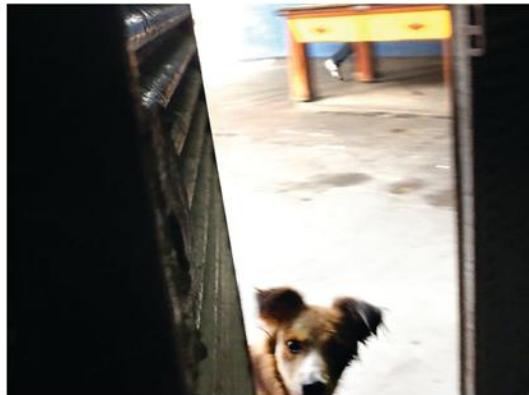
Below, the dirty glass emulates the color of the polluted atmosphere. Sometimes the air indeed is the color of dirty glass. It reminds me of the color of air in China, São Paulo, London.



*Slot 2*



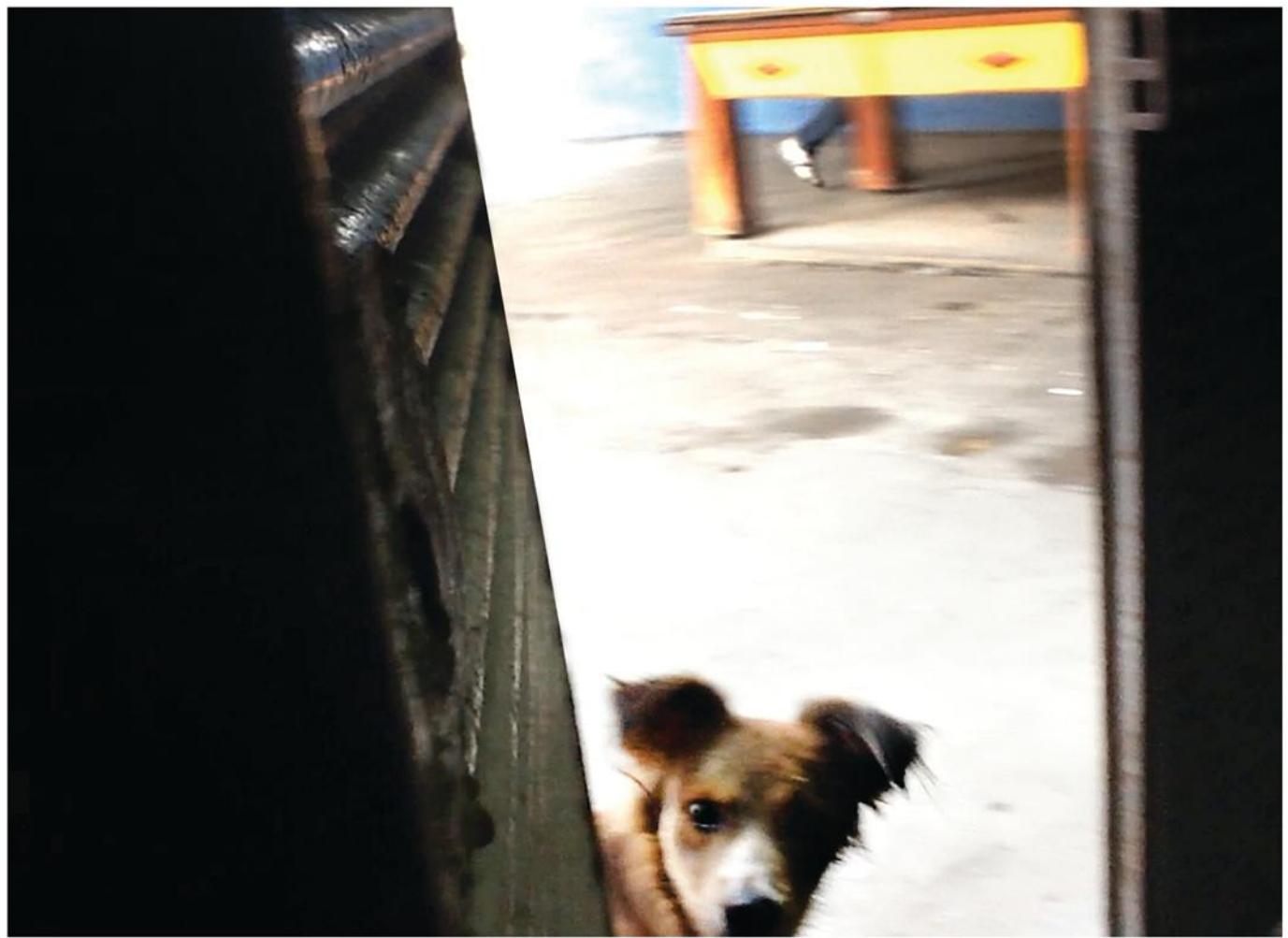
WTF



WTF 2

I am a musician, DJ, music producer and sometimes actor. Due to these activities, it's very normal for me to be working by night. Therefore, many times I would come back to sleep at my studio/loft/home at very late hours or, often, in the morning. This fellow, a nice creature, used to live inside the building. What we had in common was the fact that he, like me, is a nocturnal being.

So every morning I used to open the doors for this guy so he could enter the building and rest from whatever he was up to during the nights. He looks at me like..."Open the bloody door! I need to take my nap."



WTF 2



The only girl and the sunshine light at Bar dos Amigos.  
She's always there. The men, the customers, used to offer  
her drinks and snacks for favours. Special favours.

I asked for a picture... she said, "It's OK."

*It's OK*



It's OK



*Carnaval Kids*

Kids? Well kids are kids. They just want to have fun. For this photo, I looked at the children and made a face and asked them, "When I count to 3, everyone do the face! Ok? 1...2...3... " Click! And you can see that four of them are smiling, but there are 2 girls that imitated my face exactly.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, considered one of the greatest ethnologists of all time, lived in Brazil for some years. "Brazil is the most important experience of my life," said Levi-Strauss in 2005. As an ethnologist his fascinating target of study was the mix that Brazilian people were and still are. In fact we are a mix of races I have never seen elsewhere.

And Carnaval time is the perfect time to keep mixing...



Caranaval Kids

## Interview - Ricardo Imperatore

**Hi, Ricardo. What a pleasure to get to know you and a different view of Rio from the one we usually see!**

Yes, I am a boy from Ipanema! Although I'm now based in Lisbon and have been able to travel all over the world, this photo series is the story of my home and my life in Gamboa, Rio, at a dramatic time in its history.



©GuiMaia

**You are a multi-disciplinary artist. How did you get started?**

I'm a musician, DJ, music producer and sometimes actor, as well as a photographer. The shot above is of me, in character, for the role of a criminal bad ass in the Fox series "One Against All".  
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5822138/>

I was studying Geology when I, for the first time, sat behind a drum kit. One week later, I was studying music and had passed the point of no return from a life in the arts.

After many gigs as a drummer and percussionist and collaborations with many artists during the 1990's, (the Smartphoneless Era), I dove into my solo work, the boTECOeletro Project, playing a fusion of Brazilian rhythms and contemporary electronic music. Doing great, I won prizes, got cool gigs and tours (UK, USA, Europe, and Africa), and did sound design and production engagements for many others from 2000-2012.

Then, to take advantage of the opportunity to build an awesome studio as part of government urban renewal, I moved to Gamboa, Little Africa. When I tell the things I've been through in Gamboa, really... most people probably think that I'm inventing. But reality overcomes fiction in places like that. Gamboa is "real fiction."

**How did you first get into photography?**

Curiously, it was while I was making videos during a trip in the Amazon rain forest that the "click" happened. It was in 2005. I had this dv camera and started to make videos of the breathtaking landscapes, people and environment. The result was surprisingly good and special, so much so that a VJ working with me used the material in one of the best concerts I ever did. Since then, I started to be more and more interested in visual arts

**Some street photographers camp out and wait for action, others prowl around, relying on quick reflexes. Which are you?**

I definitely prowl around. When I'm taking pictures, I feel that I am the same guy who is doing a concert on a stage. I love being among the audience. I love playing the drums in the middle of the audience during the shows. I guess it's the same when I'm in the streets asking people to take pictures. Keep ears and eyes wide opened if you want to tell stories. Go outside. Go walk on the streets. Know people. Talk to people. Listen to people. Being an artist is to be outside and in contact.

### **Most artists dream of having a loft. Enough space to live, work, and store all their paraphernalia in the same place.**

There was this girlfriend, Carolina Herszenhut, who works in fashion. She was the one who told me there were junk units available for rent in a trashy industrial building in a neighbourhood that was up for urban renewal. That was great news. As she knew that I was homeless during that period...she did me a great favor.



There were eight floors, mine was the top. I was terrified by the place's conditions. There was no need for security because, I guess, the building was so trashy that even burglars didn't even think about it.

Luckily, a close friend, Celso (nicknamed) "Negão," a former gangster from Favela do Turano, was my "*faz tudo*," which means he is able to fix things, paint houses, fix hydraulic and electrical systems and whatever else might need repair. It took Celso three months to transform that insalubrious facility into my mini paradise. Those were awesome times. Our friendship grew even closer.

The original rent was fair, considering the decrepit quality of the place. But, a year and a half later, trying to get everybody out of the building so he could sell it, the owner, Antonio Governo, an un-cool Portuguese guy, raised the rent 400%. Eventually, I was the only human in residence. When the landlord shut off the electricity, all were forced out. But, guess what! As it developed, the street was excluded from renewal, he never could sell, and the place is still empty, rotting day by day..

### **You loved your quirky neighborhood and miss it plenty!**

The dream is gone. The first tram rails, in Rio and Brazil, were finally constructed to connect Gamboa, the main bus station, the Centre, and the domestic airport. Just 3 years later, the company which ran it was shutting the services down because government had bailed out. The most recent state governor, ironically named "Cabral," for the man who "discovered" Brazil, and his associates broke the state and the city, stealing 50 billion dollars. All of the billion dollar facilities constructed for the World Cup and the Olympics are TOTALLY abandoned, rotting day by day instead of serving the people of Rio. Everything is ROTTING including public hospitals, public schools, public gardens, public security, public museums, public transportation, etc., etc., etc.



The street (above) is my neighbourhood. Forgotten. Rio is a devastated city. People have shut down businesses. Many have taken informal jobs. We now have 13% unemployed. On top of that, 50% of the unemployed have stopped looking for work. The media call them "the discouraged."

## **Were there other artists who came in with you at the beginning?**

Yes, some others came to Gamboa in the same "era." One good example is the group, *Galpão Gamboa*, whose mission, through culture, sport and health, is to create training and social inclusion opportunities for residents of all ages in the poor communities of Rio de Janeiro, such as Morro da Providência and the districts of the Port Zone, Gamboa, Saúde, and Santo Cristo. These are brave, experienced, tough, nice, beautiful, resilient people. They are still doing an incredible job.

<http://galpaogamboa.com.br/sobre.html>

## **In the north, Brazil is seen as a center for music, but Brazilian visual artists are not as well known. Recommendations?**

Carlos Vergara is a monster! My favorite. Tantão is another musician who is also a visual artist. Underground. Tantão does not have a site. There is a curator who says that he is Rio's Basquiat. And guess what! He did an exhibition at New Blacks Cemetery. More about him is here:

<https://www.bolsadearte.com/oparalelo/tantao-eu-sou-o-rio>

Marcos Chaves, visual artist/photographer, from Rio  
[www.marcoschaves.net](http://www.marcoschaves.net)

Raul Mourão, visual artist, sculptor, also from Rio  
<http://www.raulmourao.com/>

Derlon, from Recife, Pernambuco, graffiti and public art  
<https://derlon.com.br/>

Louise Botkay, super photographer !!!!  
<https://www.facebook.com/louise.botkay?sk=photos>

Cabelo, singer and visual artist  
<http://www.premiopipa.com/cabelo/>

## **Carnaval means "party" in Brazil and it is well-known around the world. Does the party transcend bad times?**

In my opinion, Carnaval has become the most important political act in contemporary Brazilian society. Carnaval has become, maybe, the most important political "party" of all. Carnaval is when Brazilians have an "all access pass." It is when we may say, "Hey, Mr. President! You are a stupid asshole scumbag." It is when you may be almost naked, dancing, screaming, on the streets. Whatever you want is okay. It's when men, very macho men, become women, dressing like women, acting like women for one week and then return to "normality." As if this was possible... hahahaha!



Carnaval: Ricardo, as "Exu"

The enduring value of Carnaval, especially in bad times, lies in the fact that people want to have fun and forget about real life. Using costumes and craziness, we can leave our normal daily personas to become whatever we want. Or, as philologist Rachel Valença, director of the Research Center of the Casa de Rui Barbosa Foundation, in Rio, says, "The explanation is in the party's own psychology, a space of inversion, in which one seeks to be exactly what one is not in the rest of the year."



### You recently moved to Lisbon.

I wasn't happy with my situation in Rio. There was the big Gamboa trauma. There was the deception with the "New Rio" that never happened. And I received a promising offer from a music agent/manager in Lisbon. It was a big, big, nice house facing the Tagus. Amazing view. Awesome atmosphere. There was a big music recording studio, six desks with people working on like 10 artists. He pitched me, "Hey, Emperor! Come to Portugal! Move to Lisbon!" I moved in July, 2017. In December, 2017, the manager/agent went out of business. So, I looked in the mirror and said "Shit happens. You're already here; so, let's do it!"

### How does it compare to life in Brazil

Lisbon is a safe city. Rio is tricky and may be very dangerous. One may be in Rio and spend a year without seeing or experiencing any violent situation whatsoever. Or one could die, 2 days later, in a violent situation. This is a big, ENORMOUS, difference. Lisbon is a tiny little city if compared to Rio. Rio has the same population as all of Portugal! Lisbon is more organized. Rio is more fun. Lisbon is scenic. Rio is indescribable.

### Are you with anyone you know from Brazil?

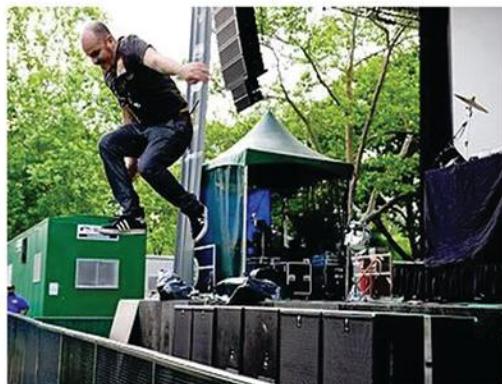
There is a Brazilian invasion currently. So, yes, I have some friends from Brazil here. However, Portuguese people, especially Portuguese women, with few exceptions, are not willing to socialize with us Brazilians. Well, what remedy? Gotta be with my own people...Actually, I would like to read the research on the subject- why are these guys so closed and formal and conservative?.

### Are you able to make music? Visual art / photography?

Yes, I am. There are two guys, nice guys, Tó Ricciardi and Silvério Canto, who are talking and proposing work. And that I appreciate. Doing my photo stuff here as well. Always observing people on the streets, bars, etc. Always making photos. Lisbon is beautiful.

### What's next? Projects? Destinations? Fantasies?

I don't know exactly what I will do next but, in my head now, the trinomial "projects, destinations, and fantasies" means travel. Trips! I am currently in Amsterdam. I will continue making music, taking photos, writing and, perhaps, acting. Whatever I decide to do next, I intend to jump right in.



### How can we stay in touch with you?

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MagCloud

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