

Vasconcellos's photographs seem to show a São Paulo that doesn't exist. It is difficult to recognize the city in those images, where old construction fences and viaducts, chipped facades and debris seem to belong to another time, in opposition to the present city. Modern constructions, deserted, bathed in an oblique light, create an intensely plastic universe, oddly scenographic. Urban elements that look abandoned, without a clear function, forever unfinished. Gigantic structures, emerging from the night, dominate the urban landscape, and the remaining fall in dimness, in the most complete entropy.

Globalization has standardized cities in the same generic universe of malls, corporate buildings, and anonymous dwellings. The same glass facades, the same electric towers and bridges. Cássio Vasconcellos, however, makes the unfamiliarity of those everyday elements emerge. He removes things from time and place: everything seems in suspension. A displacement that allows to articulate them in other constellations.

The photographer restores a vigor that things seemed to have lost when they definitely dived in the kingdom of the disposable. Bringing to surface the mystery that nests in details, in fragments, in the abandoned. He operates in the gaps of the current urban landscape's pasteurized continuum, where the prospect of new configurations and new meanings open up.

Walter Benjamin first noticed the extraordinary ability of cities to be transfigured. When, in the 19th century, the first galleries were built – the Parisian passages with glass roofs and gas lighting – the street became an habitation for the observer of the mutations that happen in a large city. Under the flickering gas light, shop windows turned into sceneries of wonderful worlds, passers-by appeared as potential characters of mysterious tales, and the most ordinary square could become a prairie full of wild Mohicans.

Our photographer roams the streets of São Paulo as a Baudelairian poet, sensitive to the unprecedented configurations that may emerge from the encounter of construction fences, aged statues and facades with aluminum bridges and glass buildings. Attentive to the unexpected affinities that such disparate elements can establish with each other.

The operation is always based on displacement. Unusual architectural elements, seemingly belonging to other time and place, appear in the forefront, questioning all immediate perception. A building's curved roof, parts of a viaduct or a tower's metal grid abruptly invade the frame, introducing in the landscape an element of rupture, almost unquietness.

There is not a narrative to serve as main thread. Nothing aids us to locate those places in space and time. Signboards show up attached to walls, advertising panels are seen from behind, statues of heroic horsemen appear metamorphosed in migrants who seem to arrive to the city at dawn. All those urban elements are recomposed, in fragments, to tell another possible, imaginary, story.

Those places are usually empty. Silence only emphasizes the mystery that transpires from the scenes. Nor even nature, that here emerges mostly as a veil, obstructing vision, escapes from this disposition, simultaneously chromatic and opaque. Emerging from nothingness, monumental, those structures seem to have remained to testify about the city in a remote future. They look as if made of stone.

In those images, modernity seems to ally to antiquity. São Paulo is a city where the successive cycles of urban and real-state renewal systematically destroyed traces of the past, the places of history and the architectural monuments. It is a city that insistently rises on its own ruin.

Just as the engravings of Paris made by Meryon, these photos capture the city's fragility, all that seems in the imminence of disappearing. A landscape approaching the catastrophe – a scenery even more current considering the financial crises that threaten the country. Images that transmit the feeling of seeing things that shortly won't be before us. Cássio Vasconcellos makes the old image of the city sprout, from what will remain when everything becomes a field of ruins, without touching any of its modern aspects.

Attempt to the unusual in this scene: in the 21st-century São Paulo – a chaotic, disfigured megacity, assailed by social crisis and violence –, someone wandering at night through deserted streets and vacant lots, with a spotlight, whose battery comes in a market cart. The character himself expresses all that, at first, there would be of quixotic in that task. Everything seems to conspire so that the adventure is frustrated.

It isn't possible anymore to see in the contemporary world. What is in stake here are the limits of figuration, the inability of the human mind to represent the metropolis' huge forces. An organization of production and of space, a net of power and control, that are difficult for our imagination to understand. We still don't have the required perceptive equipment to face those new configurations created by globalization.

These disconcerting urban spaces make impossible, according to Fredric Jameson, to use the ancient language of volumes, since they cannot be apprehended. The mutation provoked by the global city surpassed the human body's capacity to locate itself, to perceptively organize the surrounding space and to cognitively map its position in the world. A situation in which the experience of the city transcends all the old habits of bodily perception. A disjunction between the body and the urban atmosphere that indicates our inability to understand the complex restructuring processes of the contemporary metropolis, of mapping the enormous global net of production and communication in which we are bound as individuals.

All the attempts to map the city through the experience of the streets – the Benjaminian drift or the affective plans of the situationists – implied the expectation of a perception renewal. In the totally built and elaborate universe of late capitalism, however, there is no place for that renewal. If, in the traditional city, the individuals' limited and immediate experience was still able of embracing the social and economic form that regulates it, today that doesn't occur.

The legibility of the cities' landscape was related to imaginability, to the ability of evoking a strong image in the observer. It supposed visual references, a sensorial domain of the space by means of experience and visual observation. But the current configuration obstructs the mental mapping of urban landscapes. Cities no longer allow people to have, in their imagination, a correct and continuous location relating to the rest of the urban fabric. The individual subject's phenomenological experience no longer coincides with the place where it happens. Those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to the immediate experience of living, and, usually, neither are conceived by people.

It happens a collapse of the experience. Today, individual subjects are inserted in a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities. An abstract, homogeneous, and fragmentary space. The urban space lost its "locability" – a precise inscription in geographical dimensions, accessible to the individual experience.

It becomes impossible to represent. That which the photographic image, as comprehensive as it may be, isn't able of. Space today is overloaded by more abstract dimensions. The problem of perception, of the individual's positioning in this complex

global system, is also of representability: although affected in the everyday by the corporate spaces, we don't have the means to mentally mold them, even in an abstract way. A radical rupture happens between the everyday experience and those abstract spaces.

These new configurations thus demand an approach that reveals the very representational failure, the limits of the traditional location devices. They demand an interplay between presence and absence, in order to partially transmit the sense that those new and enormous global realities are inaccessible to any individual subject. Fundamental realities that are not representable, that cannot emerge immediately in face of perception.

The megacity is a territory where all the logic is apparently suspended. The undifferentiated landscapes of entropy demand to avoid any visual or structural parameter of spatial or temporal orientation. Photography here is interesting not only for its documental capability, but mainly for its potential of assembly and association.

What does rescue this photographer's solitary adventure, then? Cássio Vasconcellos doesn't intend to show where things are, to map. The intense light he throws on things actually blinds. It allows you to walk through the city as if you had your eyes tight shut. His enterprise is essentially a tactile one. It is what allows him to discover the tangible presence of everything that, at first, one cannot see.

The night wanderings through the city began in 1988, but were intensified between 1998 and 2002. The work was accomplished with a Polaroid SX-70 automatic camera. It was not used, on purpose, any technical resources. The shots were sometimes made with a flashlight or a spotlight, and colored filter. The originals were scanned and printed with ink-jet, in 11.8x 11.8inch format.

Not by accident, the copies are made on porous paper, as if they were engravings. The Polaroid image makes the city, plunged in obscurity, to emerge dazzlingly. But the extraordinary plasticity of urban landscapes, intensely colorful, is compensated by the texture provided by the paper print. It attributes materiality and permanence to all those seemingly ethereal and fleeting things. The photographer scratches, as if with a burin, the metropolis' most hidden bowels.

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