

Interview concerning “Microwave” by Rogério Reis. *Public Culture*, journal published by Duke University. Durham, June 2009

The Violence of the Real:

A Conversation with Rogério Reis

Beatriz Jaguaribe

Beatriz Jaguaribe: You have a lengthy and renowned career as a photojournalist and an art photographer. Your trajectory is even mentioned in the fiction film *City of God*, by the main protagonist, the young man from the favela who desires to be a photojournalist and seeks your fictional persona in the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil* as a possible sponsor for his images. Why did you choose to reveal the violent practice of the microwave through a photographic installation instead of using photojournalistic images? Was it a form of social protest, an elegy for the murdered?

Rogério Reis: This question forms part of my actual lived experience. Violence in Rio de Janeiro began to increase in the 1980s, and it started to come ever closer. I myself was a victim of violence: my car was shot at; I have lost friends; some died, one became paraplegic. I was very moved by all these events. I come from a documentary tradition, and I find fascinating the journalistic discussion of the human condition as a daily exercise. This language is part of my repertoire. But at that moment, I was overcome by the impact generated by these acts of barbaric extermination. How drug dealers torture and condemn their enemies. I think I didn't have the language or the expression from a journalistic point of view to create a work that was capable of expressing all of this that we are living through. I was tired of presenting framed pictures in the usual format. I wanted something that had a documentary edge but was also a performance. But in regard to the *Microwave*, the only way to show this practice as a documentary is to really be there witnessing this horror in the danger zone. *Microwave* is sculptural; it is an installation, and it corresponds to my need to represent this practice in another language. The installation reworks the past and memory. I had already started to think about an alternative use of photography since my partnership with Marcelo Yuka, who was a drummer and a composer in the band Rappa. Marcelo was shot in the back six times while trying to prevent an assault on another person. Marcelo became paraplegic. We started to work together because he wanted to use my images on the CD of his new band, FURTO [the Portuguese for “steal”], the abbreviation for Frente Urbana de Trabalhos Organizados, or Urban Front of Organized Work. Besides being a musician, Marcelo is a social activist. I remember I would listen to his tape in the car, and the lyrics spoke of the smell of burning tires in the air. I made the first tire installation and told Marcelo I was delayed and still needed a week. The final installation has twelve tires, but that week I made eight. I filled the floor of the studio with coal, I turned on the lights that illuminate the images framed within the tires, and Marcelo arrived in his wheelchair, thinking he was going to see just images on a computer screen. When I opened the door of the studio and he saw the installation, he was mesmerized and immediately

wanted to put the installation on stage. That is how the career of the Microwave began. After the death of my reporter friend in the microwave, I was in despair. We assembled a group together to discuss the urban violence of Rio de Janeiro. The group was called Coletivo X, and it gathered together a diversity of people that included the writer Paulo Lins, the author of *City of God*; Marcelo; favela dwellers from the Borel; my wife, Mayra; policemen; and Cleyde Prado Maia, the mother of Gabriela, a young student killed by a stray bullet as she was leaving the subway station. Cleyde was a fantastic person who really made a difference and attempted to provide tangible solutions for the tragedy of urban violence in Rio. We would gather in a schoolroom in the northern part of Rio. Sometimes the favela dwellers couldn't return to their homes because the Borel had a curfew imposed by the drug lords. So Cleyde would take folks home to sleep in her house. The Coletivo X was a remarkable experience, because it gathered people from all different sectors of society, and it was this general discussion that fueled the enterprise. Because of their personal experiences, Paulo Lins and Marcelo Yuka are people who circulate in all domains of society. They can deal with both formal gatherings at embassies and the most violent terrains of the favelas. After we lost the plebiscite against the banishment of arms, the movement emptied out. After the death of my reporter friend, my wife, Mayra, wanted to carry out a collective demonstration where all the people who had been protesting against the violence in Rio would march to the spot of the favela where the reporter had been murdered. She wanted to enact a public repudiation of the act by symbolically taking over the place where the murder occurred. But the leaders of the protest movement thought it was an insane idea. Mayra doubted very much that the drug dealers would open fire on thousands of unarmed civilians who were protesting just after the event. For her, we lost a unique opportunity to make a statement and to symbolically regain the city.

BJ: What was the immediate reaction of photojournalists and journalists when they learned about the death of your reporter friend in the "microwave"?

RR: The death of Tim Lopes (the reporter murdered in the microwave) was substantive proof that we could no longer have that audacious attitude. In the beginning, we would just gather and weep. We couldn't believe that this man who had been an icon of investigative journalism had been killed in such a manner; we were all perplexed. Finally, we realized we had to change our strategy. Rosenthal Calmon Alves, ex-executive editor of *Jornal do Brasil* and currently professor in the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, as well as Knight Chair in Journalism at the Knight Center of Journalism in the Americas, arrived and started to organize workshops, and he began to instill the idea that we had to be trained in the same manner that war correspondents are trained.

BJ: Violence is all-pervasive in Brazilian cities. But the sensation of fear and violence is also spurred by the media. In fact, there seems to be an avid dispute for media visibility by the drug dealers, favela dwellers, and journalists. How do you account for this dispute over media visibility?

RR: I believe this was true in the recent past, but it is no longer this way. In the film, the main drug dealer hires a favela dweller, the young man who wanted to be a photographer, to take the official portrait of the new team in power. The newspaper prints this image on its front page, and the drug dealer uses the media to consolidate himself as a parallel power. This scene nowadays seems false. We live in a moment post – Tim Lopes, a moment where the press is increasingly attentive

to the origins of news and its social consequences. When I edit and select photographs, I try to avoid the charged attempts to gain media visibility. The most obvious examples are photographs taken by prisoners in which they hold hostages at gunpoint next to the water tanks on top of the prison building. Everything there is framed to instill this notion of power and fear. I never publish these photographs. In the episode of the hijacking of the Bus 174, the media coverage was not a neutral agent but actually a key participant in the process. The hijacker Sandro would pose in front of the cameras. I believe that the media have to expose the violence but that professionals working on this terrain have to be aware of the disputes surrounding these images and the ethical dilemmas they convey.

BJ: How did art galleries and institutions react to your Microwave installation?

RR: In general, art galleries sell art to the public, and these objects are placed in spaces where people live and socialize. Microwave speaks of barbarity, martyrdom, and death in a direct fashion, with photographs that are real footage. I would never place these images in my work space or in my home. Microwave is more appropriate for an institution interested in offering a critical reflection on this type of language. It was acquired and exhibited by the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in November 2007. I remember how difficult it was to explain to the French curators the multiple facets of this Brazilian reality.

BJ: Your carnival photographs of anonymous people in Rio de Janeiro positioned in front of a canvas cloth, where they are photographed in their homespun carnival costumes, reveals a creative imagination of hybridity, transgression, and lyric sensibility. How did you manage to capture this carnival invention that is quite the opposite of the glamorized depictions of carnival and also distinct from the realism of the photojournalistic image?

RR: I have always been interested in collective popular celebrations. I used to photograph the carnival at the Sambodromo every year. And one year I was there and realized that I was just saturated with those Technicolor images and that I didn't want to photograph carnival any longer. I noticed that the problem was not with photography itself but with what I was photographing. We all know that carnival has become a huge media event, and I decided to look for something else. And I started making these pictures at a time when there wasn't a lot of street carnival. These people I photographed were like heroes of a resistance. Sometimes it was really improvised, like when I bumped into four guys who worked in a paint factory; they decided to splash leftover white paint over their bodies. I would set up the canvas cloth on street corners, and people would position themselves in front of the camera. It was an aesthetic rupture, a search for something outside the colored rapid imagery made with a 35 mm camera. I used black-and-white film and a heavy, slow camera. The photographs were posed. But they reveal a hidden aspect of the carnival invention.