

INTRODUCTION

This is the fourth in a series of research monographs on Latin American (including Chicano) photography, part of the first undertaking by a scholar to analyze the scope of Latin American photographic production. Nevertheless, this work does not aspire to be systematic, in that the chronological coverage and the thematic and sociohistorical approaches are not consistent. What is consistent is the sense of awe for the quality of that production and its sheer volume, and the conviction that the photographic text has been, perhaps because of its profoundly democratic nature (anyone can be a photographer, and anyone can accede to the photographic text) and its ubiquitous, public nature, underestimated as a body of cultural production coequal with literature and the performing arts. Perhaps because photography has been isolated, so to speak, as technology in most library structures, or perhaps because photographers have often been drawn from different walks of life than the producers of so-called high or academic culture, it is certainly far removed from the center of academic arts programs, and if it exists at all, it tends to be isolated from a curricular—and, therefore, research—point of view. This is even more true in the case of Latin American photography, as virtually unknown in US-based photography studies (with the exception of certain international superstars like Brazil’s Sebastião Salgado or Mexico’s Luis Alvaro Bravo) as, say, Latin American dance or Latin American theater in these

respective departments, where there are only exceptions that prove the rule. Yet there is a growing body of US-based academic scholarship on Latin American photography, including important monographs and significant scholarly essays, and the present book, like the previous three I have authored, do form part of the growing scholarly community dedicated to the subject, a conversation that complements the by-now really quite impressive US museum interest in Latin American photography and the exhibit catalogs they have generated.¹

In accordance with the heterogeneous nature of my studies, this volume on the urban photography of São Paulo has its own internal logic: the photographic record generated by Brazilians, immigrants to Brazil, and, in one case, a temporary Mexican resident of Brazil regarding the texture of urban space in Brazil's largest city and most dynamic economic and financial center (because historically its first industrial center, and, indeed, the first industrial center of Latin America). There is important photography of premodern São Paulo going back to the nineteenth century (for example, the tremendously fascinating work of Militão Augusto de Azevedo, the first photographer to attempt to capture the urban sense of what was yet still a relatively modest city).² But the terminus a quo is necessarily the photography that accompanies the immense demographic swelling of the city in the early nineteenth century and the sense of, shall we say, existential exceptionalism that are part of the *Semana de Arte Moderna*, a week-long display of vanguard art held at the neoclassic (!) Teatro Municipal in February 1922 (in its original frontispiece name: *Theatro Mvncipal*). Scandalous in nature and intentionally disruptive of tradition, the *Semana*, first of all, affirmed the validity of new art forms that went against the deeply entrenched academicism that still prevailed in Brazil more than thirty years after its political independence from Portugal (15 November 1889 was the formal declaration of the Republic)—clearly, more political than sociocultural independence. Secondly, the *Semana* sought to model aggressively a European vanguard whose time its perpetrators felt had come for, if not all Brazil (many wrote off large swaths of Brazil as still beyond the pale of civilization), at least São Paulo and, more generally, southern Brazil, whose growing immigrant populations were already bringing new cultural modalities to the country.³

Curiously, photography was not part of the purview of the *Semana*,⁴ however, and in this sense it is only coincidental that the prosperity and capitalist expansionism, with its burgeoning forms of print culture, brought with them the creation and expansion of commercial photography and, concomitantly, the growth of clubs and fan magazines devoted to photography. As several of the

photographers studied in this book exemplify, the distinction between the two is hardly worth attempting to maintain, and when journalism and documentary interests take hold, they form an easily transitable bridge between the “purely” commercial uses of photography and “purely” artistic interests. Although one can point to certain emphases and parameters in the work of specific authors, I have made no attempt to taxonomize the work represented here, attending simply to its photographic artistry and to the attempt to understand each artist’s individual project.⁵

As a consequence, the overall feature of this material is the attempt to focus in depth on individual artists and, in many cases, on what is usually recognized as their most important work. Therefore, this is in no way a history of Brazilian photography or of, most specifically, urban photography in Brazil, neither in the chronological disposition of the material nor in terms of the adequate survey of the totality of its production, even its most important production.⁶ I have not set out to survey all the work of any one photographer, and one might wonder why I study work A rather than work B of a particular artist. My only attempt at a cogent answer would be that work B resonated more in me—that is, I found it more interesting or more creative or more forceful. As in previous monographs on photography, my goal is not to be comprehensive but to open areas of research and propose research approaches.⁷ Others with other interests and priorities will fill in the gaps with their work. The one consistent priority here has been that the photography examined must belong to a photobook. The reason is a simple one: the thousands of images a photographer is likely to produce during the course of a career are often inaccessible, often appearing in difficult-to-obtain magazines, newspapers, and reviews (and even more so in the case of Latin American artists); they nowadays are most likely to appear on internet sites: here today and gone tomorrow. Even when it is a case of an artist’s own official website, there is nothing to guarantee the stability of its content. Only the published book provides such a guarantee. Since I wish very much for my reader to look at the scope of photographers as much as possible, the first thing to do is to refer them to the formally published book sources that can easily be traced with today’s electronic library databases. Therefore, every photograph examined in this study is virtually immediately available through public and research collections, and most are available for sale through Amazon (although the reader may well often be stunned by the cost of notable photobooks).

Another important feature of this study concerns the analysis of photographic texts. The examination of the photographs, typically as “unitary” texts but on

occasion as part of a suite of connected images, is in terms of their ideological discourse. That is, a photograph, even if its origin is a spontaneous shot, by virtue of its contextualization in a photographer's work becomes a narrative statement as regards the visible universe. It "tells a story" in the plainest of terms, even when we are not always able to discern the full outlines of that story (which we cannot, to be sure, ever exhaust, since stories do not yield definitive interpretations) and even when we are not always able (we are usually unable) to resolve the internal contradictions of the text. A photograph is, completely; our interpretation of it, as in the case of all cultural texts, is a process, incompletely. Toward that end, the examination of the discursive features of a photograph attempts to understand what its properties of potential meaning are and how they work in tandem and at cross-purposes to create the meaning effects we take away. To be sure, photographs have context, with each other, with the work of the individual artists and their place and time, and in what is now the staggeringly vast archive of photography as a cultural genre. As much of all this as is known or possible to know is brought into play in the analysis of the meaning effect and in the always tentative and relative effort to assert importance and artistic accomplishment. As a consequence, some readers might lament the absence of more attention devoted to the practice of photography, in the sense of the important details as regards how photographers go about conducting their projects—the workaday business of photography. This is fascinating material, and some of it does appear here where it is pertinent to the analyses of individual photographic texts. But my interest lies primarily with the photographic text and its analysis, much as a literary scholar analyzes highly selective literary texts around a common or unifying theme. I would not pretend that my analyses are definitive models of critical practice, although I would be grateful if they contributed to more of a focus in photography scholarship on the close reading of images and less on the anecdotes of photographers' careers or the otherwise fascinating history of what has become a signature cultural genre of modernity.

I have organized this presentation of photographic projects on the city of São Paulo in four thematic blocks. The first part deals with how photography is a vehicle for the discovery of the modern city. Although photography was not part of the *Semana de Arte Moderna*, there is an enormous development, as noted above, in photography relevant to the aggressive modernity of São Paulo in the early decades of the twentieth century. One of the most fascinating dimensions of this development is the work of photographers of foreign origin, whom we can associate loosely with the emigration to Brazil of highly qualified

professionals as a consequence of the rise of Nazism and World War II. Many of these professionals have Jewish connections, bringing with them the important role of European Jews in the origins and rise of photography as an important visual medium in the early twentieth century.⁸ Although Hildegard Rosenthal did not enjoy the opportunity to have an extended career as a photographer, her work is very much an inaugural discovery of the texture of modern urban life in São Paulo. Hans Günter Flieg, by contrast, enjoyed a long association with technical and commercial photography that constituted the most material face of newfound Brazilian modernity.⁹ By contrast, Thomaz Farkas, whose long career ranged over many Brazilian scenarios, is here important for his photographic relationship with one of the great Brazilian innovations of the modernist period, stadium soccer and its emergence as an integral urban cultural manifestation.

The second group of photographic activity turns its attention to photographers who have experimented with innovative ways of photographing the city. As one might well expect, there is an enormous amount of photography that is documentary or quasi-documentary in fashion, photography that undertakes to look directly at the city and to record the features of the interaction between natural setting, built environment, and human lives. Much of this photography, if not literally repetitive, captures little more than interesting surface features. Moreover, there is an abundance of tourist-type photography (although São Paulo is not much of a city for tourism) that tends to focus over and over again on a relatively reduced inventory of urban commonplaces or already well-cited singularities (the Edifício Copan, the Edifício Martinelli, the Estádio Pacaembu, the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Catedral da Sé, the Viaduto do Chá, among a few others).¹⁰ It therefore becomes important to discover photographic projects that attempt to look at the city from more original perspectives.

Unquestionably, the most interesting in this regard is Cássio Vasconcellos, who has undertaken a large number of extremely innovative approaches to representing the city. None is perhaps more innovative than his high-altitude photography captured with specially designed equipment in his own helicopter, which he pilots himself. In reality, this project explores the whole of settled Brazil, not just major urban areas, and the São Paulo work represented here must be understood in terms of that totalizing effort. By contrast to the vertical city that Vasconcellos examines, Juca Martins still sees the city as a horizontal panorama, but one that is most advantageously studied by moving beyond the tightly framed images of individual sites to give a sense of the vastness of South America's most populous urban concentration. There is, then, a lateral move, so

to speak, with Mauro Restiffe's work. Rather than concern himself with how to expand the photographic canvas to capture the geometric complexities of São Paulo's sprawl, Restiffe's camera questions the need—indeed, the possibility—of rendering a strictly documentary image of the city. It is a cliché to say that something is so vast that it is nothing but a big blur, but it is an assessment often attributed to the city and frequently captured through the use of time-sustained images. Restiffe, on the other hand, has recourse to experiment with lighting and lenses to insinuate more of an impressionistic reading of the city. Ana Lucia Mariz's photography does not feature human subjects directly, but what it does do is seek a São Paulo that has become lost or hidden or overwhelmed by its postmodern, megalopolitan growth. All cities feature abandoned buildings with interesting pasts—or at least they lend themselves to speculation as regards what their interesting pasts may have been, as they stand always on the verge of extinction thanks to the inexorable march of what we are wont to think of as inhumane monoliths. Finally, Cristiano Mascaro's work reminds us of the enormous extension of São Paulo out to its megalopolitan outskirts.

David Drew Zingg constitutes a very different type of immigrant voice in the city, as a North American who arrived as an established professional and ended up remaining for forty years and becoming a Brazilian citizen. Drawn to the many variegated dimensions of the city, there is nevertheless a fascination with the everyday that makes him pertinent to this section of the study. I close with a return to the inescapably human dimension of cancer and the urban experience. It is a testament to São Paulo's commitment to public health that, as the largest city on the continent, it houses the largest cancer clinic also on that continent.

Experimentation with differing ways of viewing the city yields to approaches to urban problems in part 3. São Paulo is no longer merely the joyfully bustling modernist city that it was for Rosenthal and other immigrants who found a refuge there from the rising horrors of Europe. A half-century later it has come to be experienced by a good portion of its inhabitants as monstrous. As the saying goes, "São Paulo is not for beginners," and many inhabitants have good cause to wonder—as one can so vividly see in the record of contemporary cultural production—whether one can ever come to terms with all of the hard edges of urban life. A new immigrant to the city, the Mexican Carlos Cazalis, whose photography dates from a two-year residence there, now comes to provide an image of the modernist city in decay, where the city is no longer plotted through notable architectural projects but through the decayed, the collapsed, and the abandoned, accompanied by the attendant flight from the urban core by those

who can afford it.¹¹ This is an eerie São Paulo that Rosenthal might not have recognized—or might have associated with flashbacks to the decadent Weimar world she had abandoned for Brazil.

Claudio Edinger is another long-career photographer whose work is distinguished by many different projects, and some of his best-known work involves the Hotel Chelsea in New York City. However, one of his most notorious undertakings was to photograph in a barely authorized and essentially clandestine fashion the patients of one of São Paulo's mental health facilities, located, appropriately, beyond the immediate pale of the city in a rather remote provincial setting, although there is no question that the inmates are integral projections of their urban, and hardly their rural, origins. Cazalis and Edinger are responsible for perhaps the two most trenchant sets of photography of contemporary São Paulo, and their work may be the grounding core of this study of the record of that city's urban photography. I place in juxtaposition here the more minor work of Lily Sverner on the institutional care of the elderly. It is not quite as jarring as Edinger's work is on the mentally ill, but the issue of the urban warehousing of the elderly (and modern urban areas usually give evidence of an increasingly aged population) is nonetheless also a problematical issue.

And yet, of course, people do live in and survive São Paulo, as problematic as the hegemonic features of cultural production may make it appear. Part 4 is composed of essays that focus on living and surviving the city. These are hardly sentimentalized versions of urban life, but rather freeze-frames of the continuity and permanence of human life despite the dangers and complications of the urban backdrop. Alice Brill, also of European immigrant origins like so many other photographers of the city, is one of its most beloved for her images of people simply being a part of the urban cityscape. Lily Sverner, also foreign-born, provides equally humanizing images of elderly and mentally diminished people.

Whatever precise scientific and demographic links there are between cancer and urban life, while suburban in its setting, the Hospital de Câncer de Barretos is a fundamental part of the response of the megalopolis to citizen needs. Vladimir Cruz's photography is an unabashed apologia for the efficacy of the hospital, but in the process there is something as alluringly seductive about his human subjects as there is about Alice Brill's everyday street citizens or Sverner's warehoused senior citizens.

A note on the distribution of the material. The first part of the study stands alone, in my opinion, as a testimony to founding names of Brazilian urban photography. These are figures who have established themselves as master artists

whose work plays an integral role in our knowledge of the city and as exemplars as to what we might understand by foundational cultural work. The other three parts of the study introduce figures that are either not as well entrenched historically or whose work is more ancillary than crucial in foundational terms, even when we must acknowledge the considerable groundbreaking originality of artists like Cássio Vasconcellos, the audacious enterprise of Claudio Edinger, or the implacable critique of Carlos Cazalis.

If there appears to be somewhat of a chronological leap between the first and remaining parts of the study, this is a function of the history of the photography of São Paulo and the relative lack of projects brought to fruition in the form of photobooks in the period between the second Vargas presidency and the military dictatorship of 1964–1985. Much exists in the form of photojournalism, but little that matches the decision to ground this study in the phenomenon of the published photobook.

Ten chapters, ten very different views of the enormous complexity of a city like São Paulo—but also twelve projects in which photography becomes a deeply engaging way of reading a major modern Latin American city so crucial to the life of that continent.¹²