

## “It looked, and I looked back”

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Throughout his first working decade, Marcos Chaves outlined what was to become his trade-mark poetic gesture, namely, the repositioning of what is already in the world with the intention of addressing *us* some heretofore unseen sense, being humor a steadfast ally in this enterprise. Thus, commonplace objects such as paper bags, brooms, wigs, globes, jackknives, shoes, thermal bags, books, shaving devices, mirrors and wood benches were lured away from their natural habitats so they could later resurface before our eyes “as though we were seeing them for the very first time”<sup>1</sup>. From the mid-1990s onward, this *modus operandi* characteristic of his work begins to migrate to photographic language, which becomes, little by little, the protagonist.

In this sense, we would do well to recall the artist’s first series of photographs, intitled “Buracos [Holes] (1996)”. In it, Chaves catches the anonymous inventive potential that permeates the cities of Rio de Janeiro as their inhabitants signal holes in the street by means of involuntary sculptures made of all types of discarded material. Urban *readymades* of a sort, symptomatic of public administration inefficiency, *Holes* marked a turning point in the artist’s trajectory. There remained the watchful gaze capable of re-signifying what was already in the world, but instead of enacting a physical relocation of found objects, Chaves proceeded to appropriate what is around him by means of the act of photographing. The works assembled in the present publication have this series, initiated twenty-seven years ago, as genesis.

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In the title of this publication – *It looked, and I looked back* –, we find a solid starting point for delving into the nature of the images presented here. The statement calls to the fore senses of motion and temporality, both central to the artist’s work and, as we will see later, evokes the idea of reciprocity inherent to visual sense. Not by chance, Chaves’ *modus operandi* has already been likened to that of a contemporary flaneur. Conceptualized in the turning of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a flaneur would be one who walks counter to the metropolis’ typical haste. Immersed in external reality, breathing the air of his time, his

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<sup>1</sup> See Moacir dos Anjos’ “Como a primeira vez”, 2007.

pace is, however, slower, closer to ambling.<sup>2</sup> It is this dissonant temporality that puts him in such a privileged position to “read” his own time. After all, one of the side effects of the advent of great cities was precisely that of obstructing our ability to perceive the space-time in which we live. The modern city, traversed as it is by all sorts of sensory stimuli, is the selfsame city that muddles vision and will not offer itself easily to the gaze. In the words of sociologist Georg Simmel, uttered in the beginning of the last century, “the metropolitan type (...) creates a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it”<sup>3</sup>. To put it another way: faced with the intensity of stimuli that floods the metropolis, we develop a sort of perception we might term restrictive.

If, on the one hand, this is a well-known chapter, masterfully scrutinized by Walter Benjamin, it now falls to us to probe the context in which Chaves plays the role of flaneur in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nowadays, besides revitalizing blunted perceptions and placing himself counter to the cities’ typical rush, it would also fall to the contemporary flaneur to restore a whole range of sensitivities at once anaesthetized and rattled by a 24/7 type world, indelibly marked by the arrival of the digital and by online connectivity via smartphones. A world in which eyes fixed upon screens signal a daily experience set most of the time in virtual surroundings that constitute territories of detachment and desubjectivation, capable

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<sup>2</sup> There remains to be written an essay on this aspect of Marcos Chaves’ work that would approximate it to the notion of “deambulation” developed by Hélio Oiticica (1937 – 1980) and ideas present in his *Environmental Program*. Equally open is the possibility of associating Chaves’ photographs with writings by members of the Situationist International and their actions based on wandering and psychogeography. For the situationists’ texts in Portuguese, see: “Apologia da deriva – escritos situacionistas sobre a cidade”, organized by Paola Berestein Jacques. Casa da palavra, 2003. For Hélio Oiticica’s writings, see: <https://projetooho.com.br>

<sup>3</sup> Georg Simmel translated by Edward A. Shils, “The metropolis and mental life”, in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. by Donald N. Levine, The University of Chicago Press, 1971, pg. 326. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, German sociologist Georg Simmel traced relevant relations between the cartography that was being inaugurated with modern cities and repercussions on the mental life of the emerging city dweller. Needing to shield himself from the innumerable shocks the great city sent his way on a daily basis, the downtown urban dweller must not only create a series of mental screens in order to protect himself, but also clad himself in an attitude of coldness and indifference, crystallized in the type then termed “blasé”. This character will, for his turn, proliferate into a sociability which has as its trade-mark an insensitivity toward the Other. What Simmel so accurately detects at the dawn of the last century is the fact that this greater proximity occasioned by the advent of the metropolis, instead of proving conducive to a strengthening of bonds, sharing, common existence, living together, solidarity, in actuality ends up by tearing them asunder. Regarding this attitude, the author states: “The same factors which, in the exactness and the minute precision of the form of life, have coalesced into a structure of the highest impersonality, have, on the other hand, an influence in a highly personal direction. There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which is so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook. It is at first the consequence of those rapidly shifting stimulations of the nerves which are thrown together in all their contrasts and from which it seems to us the intensification of metropolitan intellectuality seems to be derived. [...] Combined with this physiological source of the blasé metropolitan attitude there is another which derives from a money economy. The essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions between things. Not in the sense that they are not perceived, (...) but rather that the meaning and the value of the distinctions between things, and therewith of the things themselves, are experienced as meaningless. They appear to the blasé person in a homogeneous, flat and gray color with no one of them worthy of being preferred to another.” It does not seem unreasonable to think of Marcos Chaves’ work as a manifestation of the antithesis of this *blasé* attitude toward the world around us.

of eliminating life's unpredictability, usurping the dimensions of conflict and surprise inherent to movements toward public space.

The photographs assembled here are the result of a way of life that trades on the antipodes of said diagnosis. As the algorithmicized 24/7 world became an overwhelming reality (from the late 2000s onward), the artist had already cultivated a way of inhabiting his days that left him immune to this new era's most damaging features. In this way, mobile telephones equipped with social network apps and excellent photographic cameras became allies capable of expanding the possibilities of his work. We know how one of the consequences of the advent of digital images was a cataclysmic increase in the number of photographs dumped on the world on a daily basis. Anyone armed with a smartphone can nowadays be an amateur photographer. But take note: Chaves is not strictly a photographer. Here we stand before an artist who turns the photographic act into an echo of an operation in keeping with the Duchampian ready-made. What interests us here is the acute gaze that selects a frame out of the real and, by means of an abrupt cut, addresses to us what already belonged to the world through an angle unknown up until then.<sup>4</sup>

Owing to this constitutive nature of his work, the possibility of endless snaps given by cell phone cameras did not become a problem. After all, each snap of Chaves' takes place in the mind rather than the finger, being not a mechanical gesture, but a mental one. The same holds true when we dwell on the social networks destined for the sharing of photographs. If the technical reproductivity inherent to the photographic act represented a chance for desacralizing the work of art and the myth of authenticity, dissemination of images *via* social networks multiplies this effect and highlights the anonymous character of circulating imagery. And, as we know, this has always interested the artist. In seizing, on streets of many different cities in the planet, motifs for his images, Chaves turns that which was already in the world into a kind of co-author of his work.

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If, up until now, we have stressed the connection between Chaves' work and notions of movement, the present book originates during a period in which the planet was called to isolate itself indoors due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Deterred from the act that deflagrates a significant part of his work – that of taking it to the streets –, the artist turned the observation of minimal occurrences in the domestic sphere and of what the view from his apartment could reach into the *leitmotiv* for his daily image output. Images that began

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<sup>4</sup> On relations between Marcos Chaves' work and the *ready-made*, see: Chaves de Leitura, Ligia Canongia, 2000.

being posted, one per day, on a social network, thus forming a kind of diary in the age of the pandemic.

So, in the midst of funereal times, there came to us, via *smartphone*, airing out the surroundings, these brief visual poems, as though Chaves, prevented from keeping in touch, were forwarding letters that whispered: this will pass.<sup>5</sup> This repertory of images made during times of confinement echoes the general ethos of his output, which accounts for the presence of a refined sense of humor, mundane geometries, references to the history of art, plays of light and shadow, mirrored surfaces, neighboring windows, involuntary eroticism, humidities, and so on.

And what did some of these “letters” tell us?

Where we least expect it, on a kitchen sink drain, a piece of fruit evokes the horizon contained in the word *daybreak*; on a green and white dish, red leftovers meet a tea infuser, forming what could pass for a smiling face; a pear parted in half, alongside a black glass, suggests a face imbued with the erotic shape of the fruit’s inner portion; an unexpected eroticism reveals itself in the still moist lemon squeezer; a broken wooden spoon holds the memory of the shout against the abominable one<sup>6</sup>; the friendship between these inanimate beings is made explicit by two cups holding hands; ragu pots convey the dilated time necessary to culinary exploits; Antonio Dias’ constellations take in a window’s reflex; neighboring window-frames, suffused with amber and grey lights, bring to mind Lucia Koch; outside, the manifold sky colors under which stands the Sugar Loaf; many the flights of birds amid towering buildings and lampposts; from the window, one may spot a little necking, toings and froings of the motorcycled delivery boy, the formal red-and-black composition inked on the asphalt, which, alongside the peddler, recalls a Raymundo Collares; there is also the unsuspected geometry fashioned by those who, with no home of their own, must hang their clothes of many colors and sizes out to dry on the grass; at the border of the interior and the exterior, myriad mirrorings take place, amalgamating home to what is unveiled outside.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In the beginning of 2019, a pink and green flag was hoisted atop the Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR); a flag the color of Estação Primeira de Mangueira Samba School, bearing on one side the words “This will pass”, and on the other, a question mark. Marcos Chaves’ flag translated a desire for better times in the midst of a somber period in Brazilian history under Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency, while at the same time instilling doubt as to the possibility of a bright future. In hindsight, the piece, rather like a seismographer, seemed already to pick up on the upcoming tremors that would eventually shake the world the following year: the Covid-19 pandemic.

<sup>6</sup> Over the course of the Covid 19’s most acute period it became common for Brazilians to take to their windows and bang on pots and pans, protesting against former president Jair Bolsonaro’s criminal mishandling of the pandemic.

<sup>7</sup> In this paragraph, I mention Brazilian artists Antonio Dias (1944-2018), Lucia Koch (1966) and Raymundo Collares (1944-1986). The first two, personal friends of Chaves’.

Note that, when set within domestic environs, Chaves' works call to mind, via photographic language, a type of still-life. We know how this particular pictorial genre is known for presenting routine scenes that silently sustain the reproduction of life. In it, situations that evoke the discreet vivaciousness of the inanimate beings around us, – such as foods, plants, flowers, books, vases, tableware items, eyeglasses etc. – are untangled. Marked by the presence of the commonplace dimension of experience, so-called “still-lives” stand in opposition to historical paintings rife with battles and heroes, in which virtues such as courage and sacrifice are translated. Contrary to that, still-lives do not translate sweeping narratives, historical facts, but the little happenstances that make up the fabric of daily life.

To turn once more to Chaves' images, we can speculate how the artist presents, at the same time, both an ode to and a twist on this old pictorial genre. Ode, since what is operative there is a gaze capable of unveiling the potency contained in the rustling of little things that shape and inhabit daily life. Twist, for a deviation in the original meanings of a mundane repertoire is brought to effect through humor and irony, thus introducing a sense of mordacity non-existent in conventional still-lives.

Here, to the group of images made at the peak of the pandemic period, we add other images made before and after. Taken as a whole, they gesture toward one single common denominator that pervades all of Chaves' oeuvre: the construction of a contemporary landscaping of singular traces, capable of lending senses by turns biting and amorous to a flurry of daily scenes, while at the same time rendering visible to us the beauty of ruses anonymously invented in order to circumvent the adversities of the present time.

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Not just to see, but to *have us see*. This seems to us a central crossing in Chaves' work. If seeing in fact – that is, visualizing one's surroundings armed with a mix of sharp cognition and sensibility – already constitutes an exception in times of general blunted perception, by not only seeing, but rendering visible through his images, the artist establishes a territory of unique poetic and political voltage. With that in mind, he imbues himself with a role akin to that of a witness, at times in favor of secondary, commonplace modes of existence; at times subverting clichéd images in order to hand them back to us under angles as yet unperceived. In both cases, this eye-witness is not neutral, for he did not only see, but made visible. And, thus, brought to the surface a world we had not seen before, but was there, as if whispering to gain attention. In this sense, we can speculate

Chaves is not only one who creates, but also one who responds. As though the vast repertoire of situations rendered into images throughout this book had addressed an appeal to which the artist has reacted, therefore placing at the center of the stage a perspectivist operation – not by chance, the title *It looked, and I looked back*.

The delicate, ever so light leaf that floats on the ether, contrasting with the gravity of the tire lying beside it; the clouds in the sky, pleading for figuration; the green-pink constructivism of a corner in Estação Primeira de Mangueira's samba court, where an empty can of Brahma beer lies; the skeleton resting on a hammock in a desolate house in what appears to be an American suburb; the yellow helmets resting on moss-covered rocks, as though the workers had turned to stone, or, vice-versa, the stones into workers; the late afternoon sun that warms Reidy's architectural lines at Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Modern Art; the girl relaxing on a sandy beach, indifferent to the ruined building behind her; the mannequins without torsos that inhabit a late afternoon in some town in the Orient; the New York streetlight turned into a person; the lined-up surfboards suggestive of shark fins; the multiple sidewalk cartographies denoting the condition of an artist-ambler in perpetual motion.

In all of these images, as well as dozens of others gathered here, it is as if the artist were addressing to us not only his gaze, but also the perspectives allocated within each of these scenes. Chaves reminds us, thus, of a fundamental aspect of the ability to see: its reciprocal character. Therefore, as we train our eyes on his work, something is transmuted in us. His photographs address us a call to invent other ways of inhabiting the world, certainly less indifferent and more attentive to the myriad surprises contained in what we already deemed known. Against the grain of a time that proves increasingly overtaken by an automation of the senses and by visions impermeable to the Other's point of view, Marcos Chaves' work constitutes a powerful antidote.