

VICENTE DE MELLO

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## Rough Image

**“and I am back and back again for when I’m back  
I restart, I recognize, I measure again”**

**Haroldo de Camposi**

Re-Veal-Trans-Form: such is the inexistent exercise of creating images that are paradoxically sensuous and rough. A work that is at the same time elegant and grim, that peeps and inhales pure air. A miraculously sublime trick in the subtle ability of jeopardizing the automaton. And a little more: the fact of provoking a deprivation of blindness detached itself from this synthetically implacable universe destined to create agitation in the souls. It is a necessary phenomenon of creation of unexpected intervals that are strong and sublime temptations. To whom is this sublime universe destined if not for those who wish to breathe in bright light? A genesis with a sure destination in those with no ability for perfection groping for contradictions and impertinences. Fortunately, there are the art museums, institutions where the product of this enthusiasm can be conveyed to.

Vicente de Melo creates his series of photographs with a multidisciplinary encompassment and with resources of construction of the technical image. In his series one can locate the problematization of the idea of arrangement. For Foucault, “the subtle arrangements that look innocent but that are highly suspect” are constituted as part of a ‘microphysics of power’.<sup>2</sup> Little by little, each individual will, along his/her life, aggregate things, persons, objects, images, etc. These aggregations are what constitute each one’s own private universe. However, all groups are invariably similar – compositions that designate relational webs of meaning to groups of objects. But to what extent arranging things is an act of free will? In its dictionary meaning, ‘arrangement’ comes from ‘to arrange’: to put in order; to place or dispose conveniently, suitably or regularly, to set in place, to compose. The mechanical or intentional actions of acquiring and composing – regularly and infinitely – are, after all, the casing of a socioeconomic structure oriented by consumerism. Behind each aggregated item there is imperiously a broader command of a political order that generates movements of unconsciousness. And the incursions capable of eliminating the degrees of opaqueness therein instilled are rare. The photographs by Vicente de Melo have the power of instigating the exercise of imagination.

The artist confronts us with the constitution of this domestic arrangement: furniture, plants and animals are organized under his lenses to configure bestiaries, herbariums, lapidaries, galaxies, etc., in precise connection with socio-historical conditionings. This version of revelation-transformation of the domestic arrangement contrived by him problematizes the very act of photographing when encompassing also the archive of images that compose the constituted familiar photographic itinerary, most of all, by records of everyday life and postcard landscapes. There, in the personal diaries of private images, the artist intervenes as if denouncing the very constitution of the technical photographic image, attuned with Flusser who, in his *Filosofia da caixa-preta* [Black-box philosophy] declares that “behind the intention of the photographic

equipment, there are the intentions of other equipments”, and, still, that “only a series of photographs can reveal the intention of the photographer”.<sup>3</sup>

### **moiré. galáctica. bestiário**

Thus, from each series silently emerges a clever visual system of reconfiguration of arrangements that makes the notion of control and stability slip away. The artist offers as an alternative the possibility of consciousness towards the apparently stable actions. Behind the immediate seduction of each image created by Vicente de Melo there is a sublime atmosphere in which the attributes of the domestic arrangements are diluted while being rearticulated in other possible arrangements. The series configure coordinates that are devices for substantial changes. For this, each one must be taken as a retrospective incursion in a certain mnemonic file or catalogue of cultural construction. Nevertheless, the grouping of the three series – moiré.galáctica.bestiário – is conjugated within the synthesis of a new cosmogony. So, it is necessary to observe each series and how they are interconnected in their infrastructure.

One of the most impregnating bibliographic formats of the Middle Ages was the bestiary, which dates back to the 2nd century b.C., the original time of the Physiologos, the first bestiary that has become, with permanent additions and developments, one of the most efficient ways to teach the Christian doctrine to the faithful by making comparisons of the qualities and defects between men and beasts, between God and the animals and, still, between other religions and the animals. In some bestiaries, man is the first one to be addressed, followed by domestic and wild animals and fantastic creatures like the unicorn, the mermaid and the dragon. But the content always imposed itself upon the order of the representation of the beings. The most relevant one was the doctrine per se. Bestiaries frequently quoted saints and philosophers. One could find in the same publication Boethius's *The consolation of philosophy* as well as St. Augustine, Seneca and Horace. Those medieval manuscripts were composed of texts and illuminations. They were highly popular until the 17th century and will continue being along art history, retaken and reformatted by Visual Arts, as well as by literature. In Latin America, bestiaries gained new adaptations and configurations since its original Christian format up to its artistic incursions, and this is why it is indispensable to be attentive to its inflexions and idiosyncrasies. There is nothing in them but implosions and gleam.

Guillaume Apollinaire was a poet who was interested in the genre. He published *Le Bestiaire ou le Cortège d'Orphée* [The Bestiary or The Cortege of Orpheus] in the early 20th century, with illustrations by painter Raoul Duffy. According to Herbert Wittemberg, Apollinaire “at the National Library, at least flipped through the first French bestiary by Philippe Thaon, which is a rhymed version of Physiologos, an alexandrine compilation of the 2nd century”.<sup>4</sup> The creatures that compose Apollinaire's Bestiary are the mythological figure of Orpheus, the turtle, the horse, the Tibetan goat, the snake, the cat, the lion, the hare, the rabbit, the dromedary, the rat, the elephant, the caterpillar, the fly, the flea, the locust, the dolphin, the octopus, the medusa, the crayfish, the carp, the mermaid, the dove, the peacock, the owl, the ibis and the ox. Another important bestiary of our times is *The Book of Imaginary Beings* by Jorge Luis Borges – the author compiled 116 items amongst animals and fantastic beings from the most varied traditions, besides beings that were created and even dreamed by authors like Franz Kafka and Edgar Allan Poe. In the foreword of his book he convokes, “the eventual reader in Colombia or Paraguay to send us the names, an accurate description and the most conspicuous habits of the local monsters”.<sup>5</sup> It is an open-ended, encyclopedic book which requires permanent updating, destined to keep absorbing beings that compose the imaginary of other cultures.

Julio Cortázar, in turn, published a bestiary consisting of an impressive series of short stories in which the author reanimates the possible figure of the bestial being, visible-invisible, who seems never to have parted from human everyday life, be it in behavioral nuances, be it in his grasp of the extraordinary. Perhaps here, together with Cortázar, this creation by Vicente de Melo may be inserted with more intimacy, except in its fantastic aspect, of course. Picabia recommended a dangerous visit to the Zoo.<sup>6</sup> But Vicente de Melo doesn't need to go very far, his Bestiary is a Domestic Bestiary, pointing out to us the disquieting and dangerous cohabitation with pets that inhabit the same space as man – the closest ones – that even take on the appearance of their owners, or vice versa. These are the cat and the dog. The initial game of discovery that certain photographs impress on us are already a trap. The images point to certain deformities due to the angles of the shots. "The photographed being is not what one imagines", the artist says. As a matter of fact, it is the opposite: there is something in being photographed that does not wish to imagine itself: the beast. Never domesticated, it may eventually equal its master. Fragments of animal or human bodies that announce a probable eruption. "The noises were heard louder, but always deafened, behind our backs", wrote Cortázar in "Casa tomada" [A house taken over].<sup>7</sup>

The series operate with the imaginary of the past, of the present, of the future. Because of this there is only one reason for another temporal consistency: time suspended. Besides that, time is directly manipulated on the photograph by means of technological artifices, as for instance in the series Vermelho Telúrico [Telluric Red]. So, just like a tradition originating from medieval times as the bestiary may be revisited out of a domestic relationship between men and animals, the idea of Galaxy takes shape too. The Galáctica series is created from the record of chandeliers and light fixtures, placing us at first inside a beautiful game of discovery of the images that are familiar to us and that vary from figurative to abstract. However, as it was mentioned before, this bilateral or bifacial game is only a simulation to de-condition the eye. Besides this disarticulation, Galáctica, very appropriately approaches the American repertoire of Hollywood science fiction movies. The series builds images of galaxies taken from a banal arrangement, amplifying the idea of cosmos from another point of view, inevitably juxtaposing films as dissonant as Stanley Kubrick's 2001 – A Space Odyssey and Solaris or Stalker by Tarkovsky. A confrontation that was raised by Tarkovsky himself after seeing Kubrick's 2001. Anyway, this is when we understand, by disparity, what science fiction may become without being sure that it might be the cosmos. It's a significant confrontation. As it is a significant fact that Warhol is American and Malevitch is Russian. According to a declaration by art director Mikhail Romadin, Tarkovsky used to say that "filming science fiction must be a vision only for the Earth (...) and not a futuristic space utopia".<sup>8</sup> For Romadin, "Tarkovsky chose painting to serve as the quintessence of the Earth. In Solaris, he borrowed a painting by Brueghel to create a connection between the space and the Earth".<sup>9</sup> Galaxies are not what they seem to be. They are, on the contrary, what we imagine that they are. Just as Cortázar wrote about the rabbits in his short story Letter to a young lady in Paris: "They lift their warm heads towards the lamps of the room, the three immovable suns of their day – they who love light because their night has no moon nor stars nor lamps. They look at their triple sun and they are contented".<sup>10</sup> This imaginary comes less from a scientific content, from the Nasa or from other space program agencies and more from the formation of the imaginary that is presented to us mainly via the technical cinematographic image of science fiction and via literature. Vicente de Melo's Galáctica is materialized as an amazing prism but is sublime on principle, given that its advent sustains us with a sparse appearance of borders.

Moiré, in turn, is the effect of kinetic optical illusion produced by reticular superimpositions or by the juxtaposition of warp and woof lines. In general, one sees this in fabrics but this is also observed in graphic production and, in a general way, in

the reproduction of the technical image made with reticules. Argan, when referring to visual-kinetic researches and to Op Art makes it clear that perception is “beforehand an autonomous and self-sufficient thought, precisely the one to which a great psychologist of perception, Rudolf Arnheim, gave the name of ‘visual thought’.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Op Art, as well as Kinetic Art, considering the differences between the two movements, investigated the effects of visual illusion. Artists like Victor Vasarely, Julio Le Parc and Jesus Rafael Soto explored optical illusion effects but it was Soto, more than the other two, who assimilated the moiré in his essentially three-dimensional works. Moiré, in the group of series by Vicente de Melo is, like his Mondrian Negro [Black Mondrian], a direct quotation to Art History. What we see is a solar landscape indicating at the same time rising-sun-setting-sun, west-east, where there is neither day nor night, as a consequence of time suspension, similar to Goeldi’s disquieting and startling night sun.<sup>12</sup> The notion of the passing of time is suppressed in that which guides our daily life: the sun clock. While Bestiário and Galáctica instate an imaginary vertical line indicating the nadir and the zenith, that is, from the earth to the sky, Moiré consolidates a horizontal line, in the sense that it indicates the positions of the sun: east and west. This way, an objective, non-symbolic scheme is configured with intersections that confer density to its cosmology.

His series are propositions that evoke, in each set, more luminosity for the world and for this vehicle that is photography, approaching in an unequivocal way issues that refer to time suppression, to the configuration of a notion of territory and to the decomposition-recomposition of domestic arrangements. And this happens in a rough way, that’s for sure. But isn’t the camera a rough thing? And also everything else that is capable of being photographed?

**Alberto Saraiva is the Visual Arts Curator at Centro Cultural Telemar.  
Rio de Janeiro, July 2006**

VICENTE DE MELLO

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**Day for night**  
**Alexandre Melo**

Nights are a very old stuff.

They have a unique way of always being the same and also, for that very reason, of always being the opposite of days. By day there are adventures, routines, news, the material newscasts need to be made. By night there are events. Nights are to days as the shy is to weather reports.

Nights are the sky of the living men who do not believe in god or who do not want to wait for Him.

Days are a functional and utilitarian space, structured and arranged in a hierarchy by coded situations and significations. Nights are an imponderable and emotion-filled space, inhabited by intense feelings and by changing and inconstant affections. Information gives place to emotion, logic to vibration, repetition to revelation.

Nights are an exercise in smell for wise animals.

Day for nights is a cinematic technique which consists in producing certain lighting conditions in daylight which permit the creation of the same effect of a nocturnal shooting. La Nuit Américaine is how this method is called in French, and is also the title of a famous, bitterly delicious, film by François Truffaut.

Vicente de Melo's photographs are night-fallen photographs.

Deep inside our imaginations, we tend to accept that all nights are, now, or will end up by being American nights. This happens possibly because of cinema, certainly because of the peculiar atmosphere of movie theatres, and also maybe because of the night that illuminates the façades of movie houses. When I look at Odeon, it reminds me of Las Vegas, where it is night inside the casinos twenty-four hours a day, every day of the week. Time is suspended. Eternal nights are guaranteed by an artificial dazzling illumination. When I take a look at D'après Hopper, I remember the movie theatre in one of his most famous paintings. America again, cinema again.

But Vicente de Melo visits other traditions and deals with other problems.

Let us take a look at a darkened black and white photo of a well-known painting by Piet Mondrian (Black Mondrian), or at a photo of the famous Barcelona Pavilion by architect Mies Van Der Rohe (Mies Barcelona). If we want to speculate in terms of history and aesthetics, we can state that night has fallen on Modernism and that this is a delicately perverse way for the author himself to relate to the geometrical heritage of Modernism and, right now, to the tradition of abstract photography.

But the more touching nights in Vicente de Melo's photographic universe are the ones that appear as brief pauses among the pages of a traveler's diary, of an intimate diary from which the most explicit and incisive images have been suppressed. A shame-based job.

What remains of nights. Images of a creased daybreak between sheets. The drowsy awakening of a look that wants to continue looking at things as if it were at night forever (Sonâmbulo [Sleep-walker], Amanhecer em Lisboa [Dawn in Lisbon]). With this look we can see things that are left over from the reminiscence of rooms, of verandahs, of tardy afternoons in passage cities (Travessia Lusitana [Lusitanian Passage]). A bath-towel forming a swan-shaped figure (Encanto [Enchant]). An out of focus reflection in a mirror (Lira [Lyre]). A wish to make time be suspended in a night-fallen torpor.

Nights in a bedroom and in a bed are not so different from nights at movie theatres and on screens.

Nights are always nights.

**Alexandre Melo**

**Oporto – Portugal, may 2001**

VICENTE DE MELLO

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### **Photography and imagination**

One often hears comments made by some visual artists, mainly sculptors, about the impossibility of photography reproducing the material and spatial functioning of their sculptures, simply because the photograph would not be capable of translating the transparency, the void, or even the rapport of the viewer with the physical object that is inscribed within the three-dimensional field. They claim that photography flattens and reduces the object to its own image and that many objects resist being images, not letting themselves being captured by the planar and opaque surface of photography.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of the reproducibility of the artwork via photographic mechanisms that cause the work to lose particularities that are inherent to them in their original physical form ends up by being a problem of a general order, for also the ordinary objects – two- or three-dimensional – may undergo such a loss. In the case of an artwork this can be more drastic once it entails changes in properties that may bear implications in their own meaning, which doesn't mean that an ordinary object would not lose, in any representation, some considerable portion of its materiality.

This issue takes us back to an age-old discussion related to whether photography is or is not a faithful copy of reality. And, for all we know, it isn't. The fact that the camera grasps the world through a monocular view, the fact that its technology is sensitive to variables of light and climate, plus the diversity of types of films and lenses available that yield different responses are added to the interpretation of the photographer who, according to his personal view, cuts out, frames and imparts singular colorings to the image produced. A photographic reproduction does not necessarily correspond to the thing that was seen and, on the contrary, it does not correspond to it. The machine sees less (situations of volume and perspective, for instance) or it sees more, as it happens with scientific photographs that reveal details that are unidentifiable to the naked eye. The extension and the limits of the mechanism make it a vehicle with an exclusive potential whose results may be distant from the immediate visible reality. And this is a sign that photography, not only due to its technical specificity, but also to the manipulation of a private gaze, may generate 'unfaithful' images, capable of configuring a purely poetic field. If, on the one hand, it betrays reality and even simulates its traces, on the other hand it might build fabulous imagetic worlds and constitute a language of its own. The artist that makes use of photography as a medium wants to extract fictional power from it, as opposed to the idea of document that is currently attributed to it, and it may take advantage of the limitations of the mechanical conjuncture to create its motivations out of it. If the photo is unable to reproduce – *ipsis litteris* – the original thing, it certainly can confer another originality to the thing that was seen, which comes out already filtered through this eye that is simultaneously technical and poetical.

By coincidence, Vicente de Melo is an artist who uses the photographic support for the expression of his works, but he is also the photographer of other people's artworks. In this latter case, he doubtlessly operates with sensitivity, but he is primarily looking for the technical solutions that may better respond to the original forms and shapes of the photographed works, trying to efface himself from the sphere of interpretation. The

protagonist, at this stage, is the mere documental aspect of photography, which is nonetheless performed with mastery.

As an artist, however, things change. The gaze is dislocated to a plane of subjective options, where issues of space and time already come transmuted to us through a metaphorical vision, in an enigmatic luminosity. What previously derived directly from the vulgar scene is now reported to us as an obscure atmosphere in which the objects and bodies, transposed to the unknown, lose their references of reality. This fundamental twist neither suspends nor dissimulates the logic that is proper to the photographic camera and it does not attempt to manipulate its effects via laboratory or digital artifices. It only appropriates the technique to take the image to the levels of the imaginary and of the restlessness of the subject. It's the moment when the artist-photographer operates in a paradox, for at the same time that he circumscribes and legitimizes the mechanical act and the realistic power that is inherent to the equipment, he manages to bend it to the symbolic.

Theoretician Arlindo Machado, based on writings by Vilém Flusser,<sup>2</sup> wrote: "The true task of art is to go against this stupid automation, this robotization of consciousness and of sensitivity, reformulating the issues of liberty and creativity in the context of a society that is increasingly more computerized and dependent on technology".<sup>3</sup>

The artist, who places the machine at the mercy of his esthetic ideas, would be then a sort of critical sensitizer, capable of giving sense and attributing thought to a code originated from science. Machado then asks:

"If we have a photo in our hands, to who should the essentials of its visual concept be attributed? To the engineer that has projected the camera, to the physicist who codified the representation of space through the optical system of the lenses, to the chemist who 'translated' the different reflexive properties of the objects in relation to light into photochemical components of record emulsion, or to the subject who, making use of all these contributions, but unknowingly, updates and renders them concrete in a singular record?"<sup>4</sup>

Photography therefore, reaching beyond its technological gadgetry, seems to provide the esthetic gaze with an instrument of reflection on reality, on the possibility of constituting a language, as well as a debate on the issue of representation. The strategies of its use by the artists vary in accordance with the demands of the imagination of the work itself. And if photography is the chosen technique, it certainly will have been so because it is the precise support for the ideation of the work: a technical deliberation hinged to a formal necessity.

In the case of Vicente de Melo, the focus of the experiment falls incisively upon the light. Not due to fortuitous plays of style or demonstrations of virtuosity, but because light speaks in the first person in the 'narrative' of his fantasy, because it is capable of bending reality to the phantasmic, of turning things into traces of things, of suggesting silhouettes where previously were sharp outlines, and of making day 'become night' – eternally. For such, the use of black-and-white is essential. With it, the artist recaptures a certain atmosphere from modern expressionism, yet toning down its dramatic stress, keeping only its melancholy. To some extent, it retrieves the mysterious spirit of Oswaldo Goeldi's oeuvre,<sup>5</sup> the stark contrasts of light and shadow of the master engraver, withdrawing however from its morbid and tragic content. In Vicente de Melo, black-and-white has a multiple function: it helps to detach what is captured from its referent in reality, accentuating the emphasis in the poetic construction. The luminous



dynamics stands out not only in chiaroscuro cutouts but also in intermediate areas of emptiness and dimness and, finally, it is essential for the creation of this expressionistic mood where the subjective gaze reinvents the present time into atemporal phantasmagorias.

Some examples of the three series are presented by Vicente de Melo in this exhibition: *Moiré* (started in 1995), *Bestiário* [Bestiary] (started in 1997) and *Galáctica* [Galactic] (started in 2006). In all of them the artist seeks to disassociate the image from its referential matrix by means of the somber aspect of lighting, of imprecise traces, of strange cutouts or of an inversion of meaning, making it so that the images become indeterminate and turn into abstractions.

In *Moiré*, Melo suggests nocturnal landscapes with an extreme economy of motifs, landscapes that are 'guessed' through the threads of sheer curtains horizontally disposed. Light is the protagonist of all the scenes and only light produces the illusion of the lunar specter in these dreamlike landscapes where the nuance of the surfaces in gradation coincides with the randomness of the fabric folds, extracting from it the atmosphere of a delicate yet deep night. In *Bestiário*, the animals are transformed into shadows or into extraordinary projections or, still, into fragments of unidentifiable bodies, as if they were specular chimeras of hideous fables or mere whims of the eyesight. Finally, in *Galáctica*, the artist takes the photograph of 'light upon light', enhancing, in metalanguage, the very central focus of his black-and-white series. After all, light here is the 'thing' that is seen, it is the absolute 'matter' of the work: the source and the procedure. Truly rhythmical spots, loose and detached onto black grounds of impalpable dimensions, the luminous focuses insinuate astronomical systems of an imaginary galaxy, distant from the chandeliers and the ceilings that send them back to reality.

Photography then leads the gaze upwards, towards the ceiling, this place that is so common and at the same time so rejected by anthropomorphic measurements, and it captures what habitually blinds us: the everyday electric light, or better, of every night. Instead of giving us the routine portrait of these decorative luminous fixtures, it gives us the vision of an imaginary world – flaming and explosive – that does not fit into the known spatial models and outgrows the borders, like light itself.

It is important to emphasize, though, that this perennial 'night' that the lenses of Vicente de Melo stabilize is accomplished during daytime; his moon is the sun. Based on the American day for night technique, a process that produces nocturnal atmospheres in daylight time, the artist introduces remarkable references to detective thriller literature and to the 'film noir' in a special homage to François Truffaut from whose movie *A noite americana* [Day for night] Vicente de Melo took the title of another of his series, one that has been in progress since the late 1990s. In this series, the reference to the cinema goes through German expressionist, nouvelle vague and Hitchcock films, and is also expanded, as keenly observed by Portuguese critic Alexandre Melo, by the very magic of the movie palaces and the brightly lighted marquees whose displays always seemed to announce a dreamlike world. As isolated frames in a movie sequence, situations that are frozen in time with no before and no after, the photographs of the abovementioned series suggest an interrupted narrative, a plot in temporal collapse whose 'story' is for us to make it up. Grim and phantasmal as the rest of the works, these frames proclaim the morbidity that is inherent to the photographic process itself whose cut petrifies space, reduces life to an instant and paralyzes chronological time – "our time of human beings inscribed within the duration".<sup>6</sup>

**Ligia Canongia**

VICENTE DE MELLO

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### **Reddish landscapes**

At first sight, Vicente de Melo's photographs present an almost classic, monumental-like framing of landscape, which is frequently considered to be close to the language of a photographer journalist or a sophisticated tourist. Except that they appear near banality, as if they were gathered up from old geography compendia, due to the old-looking red tone of albums in rotogravure from the past, which impart ambiguity to well-known panoramic views. Their being chosen, nevertheless, presupposes that there is something else being discussed. They seem to have little to tell the viewer about the specific place they refer, and much more about what they evoke of it or of the images associated with it. They refer to the pictorial tradition of landscape photography, to its idealized nature, its capacity for constructing methods of perception, its desire for totality. So the work enunciates a reflection on the possibilities of photography, but treating it as a problem from the premiss that it is artificial, it has an iconographical, pretentiously universal character. The images present themselves as a space for meditation or a territory where the artist meets the observer, to whose constitution the multiple possibilities represented by the individual ways of perception are called together. And through their reddish tone, uncomfortably acid and bright, they inaugurate strangeness not only in the frequent contact with but also in the relationship with excessively disseminated references to the places they depict.

Vicente de Melo's photographs give the landscape they depict the atmosphere of a place already located in memory, of something seen which returns lively imagined by the look at it, but without being capable of completing any equivalence between the place and one's remembrance of it – as this operation presupposes. In the belief that memory rebuilds the place, the artist is engaged on a work of restoring landscape. He aims at well-known locations, much more remembered than observed, because they have lost their naturalness, due to their being overexposed to travelers' eyes, to countless records in the media, to endless reproduction by the cultural industry: Rio de Janeiro, the Tower of Belém, the Great Wall of China, Amsterdam, Barcelona. However, the artist does not want to be just a document photographer, someone who is in pursuit of recording truth by means of images gathered up in a red, somewhat soft focus voyager's book, but someone who wants to go beyond the mere voyeuristic observation of a reality, where the author would place himself away from events. On the contrary, he creates unnatural landscapes, monochromatic paintings, chemically reduced to the red tone, as if they were "burnt" by the sweat from excessive handling.

His images deny the now-and-forever time which landscape photography has always pretended to represent, just as the captivating aura of a color photograph resists criticism because it maintains a carnal relation with its viewer. They can only be thought as a fiction, a representation which is incapable of dealing properly with the totality of what they reproduce.

Vicente de Melo is an image-collector, a sensitive analyst of landscape. His project embodies not only the visual elements it records but the set of uses and of plastic, historical, cultural references to which they allude, setting a field of values and qualities of hard-to-be-differentiated contours in motion. His work is a generous comment on the

photographic abuse suffered by landscape and yet it is also ironical concerning the persistence of the idealistic, romantic tradition which is the foundation of this type of representation. Making use of monochromes, the photographer devises a strategy which wants to remove photography from its ordinary place, in order to restore it as a material for reading and interpretation, image and idea. Devoid of any pretension to totality, essentialism, or natural order, they can only be perceived as memory and assertion of the distance between modernity and nature, and they want to keep an almost “organic” relation with the narratives and the representation of the urban landscape, always built and artificial. What interests him is landscape photographed as a stimulus, not to photography as a document of travels with records of a variety of panoramic views, but to the references to it within a dense, multitudinous repertoire, capable of encouraging the viewer to give them a meaning according to his own imagination.

**Ivo Mesquita**

**São Paulo – Brasil, june 2001**

VICENTE DE MELLO

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### **A Photographer's Freedom**

In all photographs of Vicente Mello there is a peculiar feeling of two moods prevailing in the images, or two radically different attitudes or ways of approaching the encounter. Such encounter is often between a gently Romantic mood and a cool, almost scientific Realism. The Romantic vein comes from his way of using light to evoke atmospheric situations, combined with his keen observations of things around. The Realistic vein, on the other hand, comes from his choice of subjects. Ordinary incidents, such as a bed on which sheets you discern the imprints of the sleepers; the marks and spots of aging on the closed up skin, so that the picture starts to remind a landscape, a landscape of aging and consequently the time or marks of time as they are imprinted on the body and the complexion.

The narrative is imbedded in the subject of the photograph. Something has taken place, the lightning creates a new story that is different from the ordinary. The topology is created by light and time which underline and frame the loaded subjects into these paradoxes of the Romantic and the Realistic.

Often, in these images, the elements used are not things that we usually think about when defining beauty. Beauty is in the perfect flower in full bloom, that the artist has also portrayed in black and white, thus letting room for our imagination as to the colour of the flower - at least for those of us who do not know the colour of this particular, exotic flower.

The beauty of these pictures comes from the way they have been photographed and the way the eye and the camera have seen and been tuned to record what they have seen.

Along with the poetical use of light, time is the theme of Vicente Mello's photographs. In the new series Telluric Red the tense of the verb indicating time is getting extremely complex. It seems to be an imagined future moment, when time has caused erosion on the colour surface of the photographic print. It is the perfectly captured future, or the changes which would be inflicted on something throughout the time. On the result of his research for old photographic material, Mello inspired himself. They are the kind of pictures that we usually associate connect with the particular red colouring which comes up when all the other pigments have faded away. We then come to the last phase prior to the picture, now in red, becoming something with poor resolution, so that we can only discern some soft contours of what before was a colour photograph.

As a photographic act we see how the artist utilizes his freedom to treat the material the way he feels his narration requires. He hastens a project and at the same time creates a possible future document while also something completely new. The first encounter with these images contains a moment of feeling of catastrophe. The feeling is close to something apocalyptic even if you can recognize places and know that they still exist unharmed. In the air there lingers a sense of a huge accident created by man. A moment after a devastating storm or a violent thunder. Something associates directly with your subconscious and it is nothing optimistic. We are then reminded that

during the Middle Ages red was associated to Hell. We are also reminded of the televised news during the Gulf War, when a new kind of camera was used to record events in the dark. These images had a particular green tone. The sense of danger can be seen as the realistic aspect in the way it digs into our subconscious fears and brings them to the surface.

It seems to be typical of the way Mello works to study an aspect of photography in several different scenes. The earlier photographic series Day for Night ( Noite Americana) consisted of studies of dark moments or dimly lit situations during the daylight. In the same way as in the Telluric Red he chooses different moments, situations and scenes which are seen through the same kind of method or way of approach.

Mello's photography tells about the constant battle within photography - the possibility of freedom within it as well as all inexorable new techniques. Vilém Flusser has said, in his Philosophy of Photography, that experimental photographers are those who are conscious that "image, apparatus, program and information are the basic problems that they have to come to terms with. They are in fact consciously attempting to create unpredictable information". It seems that, in an interesting way, Vicente Mello is now exploring the possibilities of a photographer's freedom.

The freedom, in the case of these new photographs, is about using something that is intrinsic to photography as such (fading of colours) in a way that directs us towards new symbolic understanding of the originally documented image. The document is no longer a testimony of a presence that has been but evokes a feeling of what is likely to happen sometime in the future. The artist decided the temporal aspect of the image and he is not so much interested in the formalistic aspect of these images or the way they actually explore the formal potentials of photographic expression. Instead his main interest is in their impact, in their content and in the kind of meaningful shifts they create on the objects they originated from. The topology is transformed into an imaginary site.

The space between the layers of the documentary photograph and the new meaning given by the atmospheric toning is the space of freedom that the artist has created and where he is telling his story.

**Maaretta Jaukkuri**

VICENTE DE MELLO

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### **Time apprehended**

Like a filmmaker, Vicente de Mello creates artificial realities. This series of photographs that he calls Noite Americana [Day for Night] is an overt homage to the cinematographic vocabulary of the 50s. The interiors are here represented as photo frames, that is, cutouts that form a visual encyclopedia of images that unfolds like notes in a diary. However, the diary is open to public view, thence corrupting its intimate character.

In these private, enclosed environments, the lighting element is ubiquitous with its play of shadows and gradations – a direct allusion to the dialectics of film noir. German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt in *The Cosmos* [1862] explains that the presence of light reveals the essence of matter and that the eye discloses the intuition of the world. In the photographs by Vicente de Mello this light – divine light! – insinuates itself forcibly through chinks, gaps, transparencies, reflections and surfaces. Our eyes slowly disclose the objects that inhabit there.

The Cosmic Eye reveals the image of a light burst. A simple urban landscape element – a lamppost – gains new life and is transformed into a lit matchstick. This photograph – hybrid in its analogy and shot from an apartment – eliminates the notion of what is internal and external. The ‘joke’ is repeated in Itamaraty Nacional where Niemeyer’s architecture acquires a peculiar look in the double reflection of the glass that separates the settings.

Vicente de Mellos’s trajectory is not only related to the language of black-and-white detective thrillers, but also to the tradition of early 20th-century pictorialistic photography, a moment in art history where photography enters the universe of painting. As in the pictorialistic manner, each photo in this exhibition is accompanied by a title: this orthographic intervention is intent on unveiling the mystery of the image.

**Nessia Leonzini**

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