

A Conversation with Sérgio Mah

Sérgio Mah – After your initial experience as a photographer at the weekly newspaper *O Independente*, in 1990, you held your first solo show at the Galeria Ether. This exhibition already revealed a particular interest for the experience of travel, which is something constant in practically your entire course as a photographer. How was this interest for travelling formed, or, at least, this interest for a kind of photography between the wandering of the journey and the autobiographical register?

Daniel Blaufuks – I have always seen photography as a part of me, as being part of an ongoing experience. I have never been interested in photography as a way of changing the world, at least as a photographer myself. I think that within my work there is a social and political side, discreet yet present, but I never wanted to turn this into a banner; I have never wanted my photographs to become demonstrations. I am more interested in a literary perspective, which makes it necessarily autobiographical, although not in a literal sense, because there is also a fictional side. I wished to make photography an essential part of what I am and what I experience. Travels have always been something I wanted to do, and in being a part of my life they have also become a part of my photography.

SM – But what really interests you in the idea of travelling?

DB – It's not just an interest for an idea. What I really wanted was to travel! But I have obviously always been interested in travel literature. Maybe because travelling, just like photography, has a lot to do with searching, and this is why there is such a strong connection between both. It is not a coincidence that the photography and the tourist industry grew side by side and that many of the first photographers were travellers as well. True travellers, like most photographers, know that they will not find what they are seeking. What they are interested in is the experiment and the path.

SM – It is clear that your work is connected to your personal experience. But despite this, your images never show too much about yourself. That is, your photography is to some extent autobiographical, yet, even so, there is a certain distancing, a screening in relation to your own history. Do you manage this paradox in a conscious way?

DB – I think there are limits. I am a contained, private person. My most intimate work was the London Diaries, which were written during a stay in London, when I was at the Royal College of Arts. I was making the diary for myself, and I never thought it might be published as a diary or similar. I started it in order to have a reason to photograph, and then, after putting the images in the book, I realised that I had photographs, or sets of photographs, that needed text to go with them, and so the writing became more and more important. Other times I had too much text and I had to get images for those pages. It was basically a good reason to work. I think that when you write a diary there is always a vague idea that someone will eventually read it sooner or later. This awareness or notion stopped me from writing more intimate things.

SM – What you do goes against a contemporary trend that seems to favour the constraint of the emotional, personal and sentimental experience of the author. You are very different from this, since you aim to work using this flux of interests, experiences and personal emotions as a starting point. How do you analyse this propensity in today's photography for the impersonal, for the erasing of affectivity?

DB – I think that many contemporary artists are afraid of something very simple; they are afraid of sentiment, of showing that sentiment exists. Because sentiment always exists; it is always at the root of the work. Every single work starts from a choice linked to a sentiment related to that choice. But often, when we later look at a work, that sentiment is no longer present. And this is, I think, fear. I don't want to be afraid of sentiments, because I believe that they are a part of us as human beings, and I don't believe in an art that is totally alienated from life. I believe in an experience that starts with a creative sentiment and ends with some kind of sensation by the viewer. But when I present a photograph I don't want people to have the same thought or the same sensation that I had when I took it; I hope that they have other feelings according to their own life experiences.

SM – You photograph what you find. As a methodology, it is as if you were a photo-reporter, also because there is not a lot of staging in your work. But are you interested in giving out information, in the sense of reporting?

DB – In isolating whatever it is from the world we live in, in choosing an isolated fragment that remains within the frame of the photograph and by excluding everything that surrounds it, means already that I want to transmit precisely this concrete

information, which is a fraction of the whole. That detail empowers a statement that is mine, because I chose it. However, what I don't have to do is to inform the viewer about why I have chosen this, because my final aim is not that of objective reporting. Indeed, photography has lost a great deal of that capacity to inform objectively, if it ever had it at all. So what I am giving are images that cannot be given in words. And I still believe in the qualities that can only be found in images.

SM – In general your images always have very peculiar aesthetic characteristics, whether due to the formal circumstances of the image or due to the subjects you normally choose. There is a visual idiosyncrasy that is always very present.

DB – I think that, as an artist the only thing I can add to the world is to be all of what I see or read plus everything that I am. And I can't be someone else. There is a Jewish tale about this. About being at the end of one's life and being asked by God why you weren't Moses, Solomon or David. But the question that will be posed is far more simple, and has no possible answer; it is why weren't you yourself, why weren't you the best you yourself could have been. This is to say that when I take photographs, I don't want to do it like others do. I mean, I would like to take photographs with the genius of the photographers I admire, but I don't want to take photograph like them. I want to be different; I want it to be my work, and it is with this in mind that I choose my photographs.

SM – Is that absolutely decisive for you?

DB – It is decisive and essential. It is natural and inevitable for us to make images that recall other images by other photographers, but what is important is for the body of work to remain different and unique. It is obvious that I have important influences, like everyone else. And there are influences that are more important, such as André Kertész or Stephen Shore and others have been for me, but I try not to let those influences affect my photography too much.

SM – It is interesting that in all the different phases of your work, from the black and white photographs early on and later with Polaroid and digital photography, the images always reveal a particular attention to the specific possibilities of the device you are using. But, at the same time, there are characteristics of the image that remain similar. They are usually photographs that are dense and contrasted in chromatic and tone terms, which simultaneously describe and hide. It is therefore a rather paradoxical

imaginary. On the one hand you depict something you have lived, which grants a realistic dimension to your photography, but on the other hand your style subverts and filters that witnessing aspect. Is this essential, that the photograph remains in that ambiguous space?

DB – It is just as a writer who lives out a real moment, but when he describes it, it becomes something else.

SM – Which means that you are interested in the image being a transfiguring element?

DB – Yes, because if it is a mere description of the sky, or of whatever, it is not a representation. That is where the frontier between art and reportage lies.

SM – Independently of what you are photographing, it is obvious that you are concerned about making attractive images. When one sees a picture of yours the impact is immediate; there is an appeal from the aesthetic quality of each image. What does the photogenic mean to you? How do you try to work with it?

DB – Firstly, my idea of a photogenic object is determined by my interest in the history of photography. I am an artist who sees himself within the tradition of photography, unlike other artists who use photography as a working tool. Therefore, each photograph I make deals with this issue, with my relationship with this history. For this reason I also use images that were not taken by me, but which I appropriate for my work, as can be seen in videos like A Perfect Day or Endless End. I have always been interested in the specific qualities of certain images that seduce me. More than the aesthetic side, I am interested in the visual force, that force that seduces and invites the spectator to see the image in a more aware manner. I don't think that art in general can live with a non-aesthetic side. There are artists who do this, some of whom in a very interesting way. But as a rule, art involves a certain game of seduction, that invitational side, which involves beauty or, in more rare cases, the sublime. I don't believe that people read books or visit exhibitions if they don't feel any pleasure, even when this pleasure implies displeasure or a certain discomfort.

SM – The idea of exile is very present in your work. Indeed, this is a feeling that is common to authors about whom you say you feel most connected to, such as Robert Frank, Paul Bowles, Joseph Conrad and W.G. Sebald. They are travellers who are to some extent disenchanted in relation to their world of origin.

DB – More than disenchantment, the work and the life experience of these people above all reveals a strong feeling of uprooting. They do not feel that they belong to the place they come from but they also don't think they are part of the place they inhabit. I myself, to a certain extent, felt uprooted because I grew up in Portugal, but then I lived in Germany for ten years. I read other writers and I saw other films in that German adolescence. I thus gained a distance in relation to my country, because I spent and I have spent a lot of time outside Portugal. And then there is my family history. My grandparents were German Jews; they came to Portugal before the war and were always foreigners in this country. And before that they had stopped being Germans in Germany due to the Nazis. So their exile was very different to that of the emigrant, because in this case there was no possible return. This is a story that affected me greatly, and this is why I made a film about it.

SM – In 2002 you directed the documentary *Under Strange Skies*, which is a sort of logical corollary of all your work as a photographer. The question of memory is very present, as well as the recurrent reproduction of photographs. This inclination of yours for the experience of memory is often mixed with your tendency to re-photograph and re-film already existing photographs, old ones that were not taken by you. Indeed, you have this great tendency to make photographs of photographs, images of images, even more so because in your usual process you re-photograph prints in order to produce bigger formats.

*DB – When I re-photograph a photograph in order to blow it up there is a strong relationship to my process, but it is above all a technical need. But when I re-photograph an old photograph, I try to add current elements to it, a hand that holds it, a table or a background. It is interesting to incorporate today's light over an old photograph, because you are not only adding something but you are also relying on a deposit of memory in order to recall yet another memory that becomes now the one of my photograph. A memory of a memory from a memory. It is a status of the image that has always interested me. When I make photographs, these are images that I find, but there are also other images that I find that have been already photographed, so that I don't need to photograph them again. They are found images not unlike the others. In the *Objects to view Photographs*, which I designed with the architect João Mendes Ribeiro, you have that light effect added to the effect of space. A postcard from another time and*

place is lit up in real time by the daylight of today in the outdoor space in which the objects were installed.

SM – How do the series normally emerge? Is there a previous idea, no matter how vague it might be; or, on the contrary, do they naturally emerge due to the converging that you identify within a certain set of pictures?

DB – It might be both things. More than through an idea, the series appear due to a concern that is common to all the images. I start by identifying this concern and from then on this starts to determine the images that I make. On the other hand, there are also series in which I use images that were done previous to the recognition of that concern, and integrate them in the new work. And I work a lot on the editing, eventually granting particular attention to images that were secondary until then.

SM – Many of the series, namely the *Collected Short Stories*, which you presented at the Gulbenkian Foundation, reveal your acute interest for cinema and literature, arts that have an obvious strong narrative tendency. Indeed, the idea of narrative is always present through your development as a photographer. How do you work with this condition of the image, because despite of everything the photographic image has a very paradoxical narrative potential, not to say a precarious one. What I mean is that the narrative suggestion in photography finds it difficult to correspond to the parameters of literary or cinema narrative. What type of narrative do you seek in photography?

DB – Exactly the opposite of what you find in cinema or in literature. While in those fields there is a beginning, middle and end, and a film always has an end, even if it is open-ended, in photography you have neither the beginning nor the end. You just have a moment, a meanwhile. Those parameters that are left out may be used as very strong means of expression, In the Gulbenkian exhibition, to this encounter between two images I added a dis-encounter, that was provided by the title, so when you looked at the images you were pushed into a hypothesis of a possible story, and some people would be able to imagine similar stories while others completely different ones. And then the title pointed them towards a total different direction.

SM – Up to what point does this type of narrative refer above all to a narrative that the viewer mobilises from his own conscious or unconscious archive of images, in order to achieve a “credible” logic in face of the emptiness he is faced with?

DB – It is always a fictional experience. This is important because it removes its documentary side of the “this is true” kind. These are images that leave everything open, because they have an aura of mystery that I wish to create. And some images have a greater autobiographical background than others, because some of them have to do with concrete stories that I lived through or of which I was a bystander. But that does not mean that I actually want to tell them to the audience.

SM – Yet many of the combinations are random to some extent. Because we could swap images among diptychs and the ambiguity for the viewer would be similar.

DB – Yes. But I believe that in all the diptychs there is a logic that only exists between the two chosen images. Within this accident there is a will, a reason behind it. As Yehuda Safran refers in a text on my work, it is like in a story by Edgar Allan Poe (A Purloined Letter), when the police come to a house looking for a letter, which is a letter that could reveal something about a certain person, and they look everywhere, in every corner, they open drawers, they lift up rugs and go through cupboards, and the is always in the most probable place, which is in the letter rack, in sight of everyone. As it is so obvious, the police never finds the letter.

I am more and more interested in a fiction that eventually is true. As in the books by Sebald, in which he describes something and when we start to doubt the truth of what he is describing, he places a photograph that functions as proof of what he is stating. And we believe again, even though nothing tells us that the photograph is real. Yet this is a distrusting belief because we do not know whether he found this image in the garbage and whether it does not belong to a completely different story. This is a little what I tried to do in the work, inspired by George Pérec. The piece A Perfect Day has a video part, shown at the Museu do Chiado, in which one sees a succession of found postcard images, grouped according to subjects: swimming pools, hotels, mountains, etc., and then there is another part in photography and text, where the postcards are accompanied by the texts that Pérec wrote for other imagined postcards. They are very simple texts, reminding one a little of today’s e-mails.

*SM – What is the importance of text in your work, as a title but also as something that is an integral part of the image, like in the *London Diaries*?*

*DB – It is relative. It was important in that work, but in other ones it isn’t so much. In A Perfect Day it is enormous, like in *Endless End* or in my photograph *Horizon*.*

SM – But is there a textual side in your images?

DB – Yes. I am interested in that textual side, also because there is a descriptive and research aspect to it. So I would say that the idea of text is present in all of my work, but often in a very discreet way.

SM – Since *Earth is as Blue as an Orange*, the exhibitions have taken on the character of installations. Your shows are never exhibitions that emphasise only one optical relationship, there is always a tactile and physical component with the images. Is it important for you to construct a context of a multifaceted exhibition in the relationship that people have with the images? Sometimes you seem to present the idea that the image alone is not enough.

DB – I think it is the opposite. I think that the image is enough. I actually think that the best way of seeing photographs is in a book. That is why I am interested in books, as artist objects. But I think that photography can construct so many worlds, that for me it is not enough to regard photographs as just a piece of paper. And in an exhibition the works are going for once to be together in a specific environment, so it is interesting to build something for the photographs to inhabit this space in the best possible way. So I find it necessary to construct this space. This is not mentioned very often, but in my photographs I am very concerned about the geometry of the space; I am concerned about the relationship that people have with and within a given space, and I try to transpose this issue into the exhibitions. I never think of the images in an isolated manner, but in their dialogue with the other photographs and with the context.

SM – After a certain time you started to work in video and in cinema. How did these media appear in your work and are they incursions connected to the “photographic”, or did you seek new horizons for your work?

*DB – Both things. I work with video and with cinema as a photographer, and this is obvious in the projects themselves. In 1998 I made my first narrative video work, *Life Is Not A Picnic*, which has several different aspects connected to photography, including a great deal of frozen, fixed images. These are mediums that are parallel to photography, and they allowed me to open new doors, because you gain something that one doesn't have in photography. I had already tried to work with these possibilities in the installation *Earth is as Blue as an Orange*, which included several monitors showing photographs and videos of still lives. With video and with cinema you gain the time factor. In*

photography time congeals and wanes, while in video it expands. With video and cinema I can tell things that I can't tell with photography. The story I tell in Under Strange Skies, or the one I am telling in the film I am working on, which is called Slightly smaller than Indiana, are things that don't fit into a photograph. A photograph doesn't have the physical or temporal space for what I want to develop. And then there is the sound, the voice-over and the music, which allow other possibilities.

SM – Using all the new technologies of the image as a reference, do you think that we are moving into a post-photographical period?

DB – Not necessarily. On the other hand I think so, because photography has lost a certain amount of magic it had in its early days. But I also think that photography will continue to evolve. And let me make clear that I am not moving on from photography to video. I don't even see that possibility. It's just a parallel issue and an integral part of my work in photography.

SM – Does that mean that more than the practice of photography you are interested in working on the qualities of the photographer?

DB – Yes. But, as I said, I am also interested in the possibility of exploring things that are not possible within the medium of photography, at least with the same efficiency and productivity. I am interested in video due to the possibilities it provides, like time, movement and sound, but all this is still based on my own photography. I see myself more as a maker of images, regardless of what type.

SM – You are very concerned about scale, and more recently you have started to make variations – images with differentiated sizes, from larger prints to smaller-scale images. How do you decide on the size of the prints?

DB – What interests me in the scale of the photograph is the distance from which the spectator will observe it. That is, when I make a print larger than a meter, I know that people will be more than a meter away from the work. I am now less and less attached to conventions, so now I like to think about the size of the print according to each individual case. Each photograph needs its size, some should be bigger and other ones should be smaller. In photography in general there are too many rules. I prefer to experiment.

SM – In your photographic work you do not aim at technical perfection, also due to the fact that you work with relatively ordinary means, such as the digital camera you often use. When we get close to a large print, made from a digital image, we see the dots in the photograph in a very clear manner; we see the image dissolving as if it were the negation of the photograph itself.

DB – Exactly and I find that very interesting, because in a certain way it takes us back to painting, to the idea that the image is constructed by bits, at each brushstroke, and in which the whole is only understood at a certain distance. If I didn't wish to show that precarious side of the image I wouldn't make such large prints, because obviously that is not detectable in smaller sizes. I started to make large works from the Polaroid images, because they are always very small and I was interested in showing it on a much larger scale, which to some extent negates the very nature of a Polaroid photograph. In the diaries this Polaroid images have an intimate character, while the large prints created an antagonism to this set idea of what a Polaroid image is.

SM – Is the image of that figure with the binoculars, which was in the exhibition *Collected Short Stories*, a self-portrait or a portrait of some character? And what is he looking at?

DB – It is a character, without any doubt. The photograph was staged as a character. It was the last image that was done for the exhibition and for the book cover, and thus it was already conditioned by the context of the work. And that character is looking at you, since you are the viewer.

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