

A REFLECTIVE LOOK AT INDIGENOUS CULTURE

The relationship between the native Indians of Brazil and photography has never been an easy one. For a long time, the native peoples refused to be photographed, for mystical-religious reasons. They believed that each individual is covered by a number of auratic shrouds, which some tribes call *carom*, and that every time a camera photographs an Indian, it is stealing one of these shrouds, leaving the individual poorer or deprived of soul. In the case of the Kwarup festivity held regularly by various tribes from the Upper Xingu River region since time immemorial, white people were not allowed to attend initially, but were later admitted on condition that they did not take photographs or make films. Much effort in terms of comprehension and trust on both sides was required to overcome these obstacles so that we now have not only images of everyday life but also of the sacred Kwarup festivity. Nowadays, native Indians not only allow photographs to be taken without fear of losing their soul, but even appear to pose for cameras, as may be seen in Analívia Cordeiro's photographs.

While not abdicating her manifest artistic purpose, Cordeiro's photographs are also eloquent examples of anthropological research into the life and culture of the Upper Xingu peoples. In 1942, the famous U.S. cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead introduced the idea of a visual anthropology that authorized this science to use images and sounds as research tools for its methodology, which had previously been restricted to written culture alone. Anthropologists soon became photographers and filmmakers; they learned to use cameras and edit images. Even the Indians themselves, from a certain point in time started to photograph and film their own lives. But Cordeiro's case was slightly different. Coming from an artistic background, yet with solid anthropological knowledge, she cast a different gaze on the issue of working with images and sounds of indigenous peoples. This may be seen in the hybrid exhibition that consists not only of photographs and a video, but also sculpture-installations that the artist created while drawing from Upper Xingu cultural concepts and images. This "heresy", let's say, would never be accepted in the severe academic circles of traditional anthropology.

Photographing and filming the native Indians was not easy. A festivity such as Kwarup involves everybody in the tribe; many things are happening at the same time in different places and everything is equally important. But cameras cut out sections; they can only show one thing at a time within a limited framework in terms of length. Therefore, it takes a certain intelligence to cover it all through a succession of part-images that skilled editing may bring together successfully. Cordeiro realizes that a documentary cannot cover everything about the indigenous peoples' lives, or even the sacred festivity, and she says so in one of the comments taped in video format, thus leaving certain gaps and openings for viewers to fill with their own imagination.

One point of view has it that allowing white people to photograph and film may be a conscious political gesture: by posing for the camera to dramatize their culture, the Indians would be asserting their identity – firstly for themselves, and then for the nation and society to which these audiovisual statements are ultimately addressed. Perhaps the media invasion (television, in particular) is being thrown into reverse: as soon as indigenous culture starts to coexist with an alien culture's images and

procedures, the contrast may become more noticeable and the Indians may be made aware of their own uniqueness as a necessary condition for subsequent self-defense and self-assertion.

These are the issues that arise from Analivia Cordeiro's *Manuara* exhibition, which beckons viewers to admire the native Indians for their own beauty and the exuberance of their surroundings and, at the same time, ponder the meaning of this ontological difference. In the game between those living in the natural wilderness and those living in the big cities' concrete jungle, who ends up winning and who ends up losing?

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