

Alexandre Sequeira:
Coexistence as a Photographic Practice

Tom Lisboa

INTRODUCTION

The photographer Alexandre Romariz Sequeira (1961), mostly known as Alexandre Sequeira, was born in Belém, the capital and largest city of the state of Pará in the north of Brazil. He defines himself as a lonely traveler who has a camera as a companion (*Alexandre Sequeira conference at TED*, 2010). On the other hand, this loneliness, as we shall see, is a prerogative to new encounters, an openness to the world. Along his way, it is the photography that introduces him in certain social contexts, the starting point from which he engages with other individuals. Even in the most distant places, like small Andean villages in Peru or Nazaré de Mocajuba in his home country, photography subjects are of universal understanding due to their connection on themes of how we see the world, identity, memory, life and death. Maybe the most appealing characteristic of his practice is coexistence; the time he spends in establishing trustful relationships with others, what he calls of symbolic exchanges. In fact, time shelters the experiences of the processes he creates, and the works produced are the outcome of his contact with a specific group of people.

The importance of Sequeira's research is how he undertakes his expeditions, interacts with different cultures in the most remote places and intertwines art and life. His travels do not have as a goal the materialisation of an object. His priority is allowing himself to be taken by his senses and emotions in each community. Sometimes, the work is not materialised, and, in other occasions, it is even difficult for him to realise when a specific work has begun due to its strong link with his daily activities (*Interview with Alexandre Sequeira*, 2016). This text will analyse two photographic series: *Meu Mundo Teu* (This world: mine and yours, 2007) and *Nazaré de Mocajuba* (2005). In the former, the artist acts as a mediator between two teenagers from different localities in exchanging letters and photographs over the course of a year. In *Nazaré de Mocajuba* we will follow Sequeira's initial work as the official photographer of this fisherman village until the moment he decides to reproduce in old textiles (curtains, tablecloths, hammocks, blankets, mosquito nets or sheets), images of their owners in real size. Even though the focus of this essay will be the *Nazaré de Mocajuba* series, *This World: mine and yours* was included in order to provide a wider understanding of Sequeira's trajectory and the original ways his living experiences are translated into photographs.

Sequeira's appreciation for the realities experienced in a certain community over the production of objects brings us closer to the two main references that will be used here: Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, where the world is the natural setting of, and field for, our thoughts and explicit perceptions, and the Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, 'a set of artistic

practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space' (Bourriaud, 2002:113).

THIS WORLD: MINE AND YOURS (2007)

In 2007, Sequeira mediated the encounter of two teenagers who did not know each other personally but started to exchange impressions about their realities by using letters and photographs. On one side of the river was Tayana Wanzeler, 14 years old, a resident of the Guamá, a peripheral neighbourhood in the city of Belém. On the other, Jefferson Oliveira, 13 years old, a resident of Combú Island, a region in the Amazon region that neither had electric lights or television, and where the main mode of transportation was done by boat (Sequeira, 2010). Sequeira bridged the connection between these two places for a whole year and it was through photography that these two adolescents metaphorically met and where these realities were shaped into an imaginary world for their relationship. "The exchange of letters between the two adolescents...served as an inductive element for the practice of photographic essays, which sought, through images made by them, to answer the doubts and curiosities that presented themselves regarding the reality of each one"¹ (Sequeira, 2010:85). It is through this search between Sequeira, Tayana, and Jefferson in finding a new reality that we understand that

The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not 'inhabit' only 'the inner man', or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself. (Merlau-Ponty, 2005:XI)

In the 15 photographs of the series, Sequeira used photographic techniques that designed the idea of contiguity and overlapping of these localities and, at the same time, transformed the dialogue of Tayana and Jefferson into 'units of affection'. For the contiguity effect, he used craft cameras of one or two holes which produced images where we can see these two locations originally separated by a river looking like an extension of each other (Figure 1). Finally, conventional double-exposure film cameras overlap territories, characters and time into one photograph that blurs the boundaries of differences and similarities (Figure 2).

¹ In the original: "A troca de cartas entre os dois adolescentes . . . servia de elemento indutor para a prática de ensaios fotográficos, que buscavam, por meio de imagens por eles realizadas, responder às dúvidas e curiosidades que se apresentavam quanto à realidade de cada um" (Sequeira, 2010:85)



Figure 1: *This world: mine and yours* (2007) by Alexandre Sequeira



Figure 2: *This world: mine and yours* (2007)
by Alexandre Sequeira.

In this photo we can see Tayana, on the left, and Jefferson, on the right.

In *This world: mine and yours*, we notice that Sequeira approaches Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perception in the way his work unfolds by the pleasure of knowing other places and people and on how he translates the experience with two geographically separated adolescents in a 'photo-collage' to which the impressions of two different realities converged. In *Nazaré de Mocajuba*, we will continue to see how he interprets these phenomena and also explore other aspects of his production.

NAZARÉ DE MOCAJUBA (2005)

In what is called Amazonia Legal, a 5,016,136 km² area that encompasses all seven states of the North Region of Brazil we find the Curuçá municipality which covers an area of nearly 676 km², in Pará State. Nazaré de Mocajuba (Figure 3) is a small fisherman village of Curuçá.

The centre of the place is determined by a small and simple church that is painted white and, around it, you can see the spontaneous occupation of the site through the arrangement of the houses – sometimes arranged in a random manner among the primary forest; sometimes lined up to some of the few dirty roads that run parallel to the river that gives name to the village. Leaning across the river, a small wooden pier serves the city as a port and viewpoint, where visitors can take in the view of the reflection from the amazing sunset on the calm and mirrored waters. (Sequeira, 2017)



Figure 3: View of Nazaré de Mocajuba (Google Earth, 2019)

The first visit of Sequeira to Nazaré de Mocajuba was in the 1990s. During the following years, he came back to this place on several occasions but in 2004 he decided to move to this village and for two years he lived there and participated in its customary activities like fishing, planting and talking

² **Curuçá** é um município brasileiro do estado do Pará, pertencente à mesorregião do Marajó e sede da microrregião de Salgado. Localiza-se no norte brasileiro na zona fisiográfica de Guajará, a uma latitude 00°43'44" sul e longitude 47°50'53" oeste (0° 43' 44" S, 47° 50' 53" O). Possui uma população estimada em 2016 de 38 391 mil habitantes, **distribuídos em uma área de 676,3279 km²**, em uma altitude de 37 metros ao nível do mar. (<https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curu%C3%A7%C3%A1>)

at fire through the nights with his new neighbors. His first interests were to observe scenes and customs as reflections of a human geography, but he saw his priorities changed after an old lady asked him to execute a portrait of her – a photograph for a document. When he presented her the results, immediately a lot of new orders started to come. Some people had never been photographed. By showing Mr. Carmelino's own portrait, an 84 years old inhabitant, the artist heard the following comment: "I had never seen neither myself, nor my wife and my son in a photograph before. I lost them a long time ago and I really miss them, but now, whenever I try to remember them, I just cannot visualise their faces"³ (Machado, 2011:47). Ever since Sequeira has been recognised as the official photographer of the place, not only for documents but to take individuals and family portraits and to restore old damaged photos (Sequeira, 2010:75). The experience from previous photographic works that privileged sociability, let him aware that "the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and Utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist" (Bourriaud, 2002:13). His research had reached a new dimension. Through this new function, he found new ways to communicate and learn from the relationship with this community.

The way Sequeira intertwines art and human relations can be understood as phenomenological by his decision to reawaken "our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005:239). At the same time, this experience is deeply associated with his contact with the social context of Nazaré de Mocajuba and its human conditions, the environment and the reality of the place which resound the Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics where "Art's 'sociability' is the main 'object' or 'work' of so-called relational art; all art's 'objects' are subordinate to this social or relational dimension: 'what [the artist] produces, first and foremost, is relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects" (Bourriaud, 2002:42 cited in Martin, 2007:370).

By the end of 2004, approximately 1.000 photographs were introduced in the daily life of the village. Sequeira never charged for this service or asked to take pictures of them. On the other hand, due to the difficult accessibility to other cities in the area, his skills of photographer and photography restorer were frequently solicited by the community. Every time he returned to Nazaré de Mocajuba, the material to be delivered was organised as a small exhibition, with the orders

³ In the original: "Tenho 80 anos, mas nunca tinha me visto assim [...] há muito tempo atrás, perdi minha mulher e meu filho. Hoje, ao lembrar deles, vejo eles andando, fazendo as coisas, mas não consigo ver seus rostos".

hanged on wires (Figure 4). This decision to transform their private lives into a public event was relevant not only for being received with pleasure by the population and stimulated several conversations about was seen (Machado 2011:56) but because his job of ‘restorer of the past’ and ‘photographer of the present’ developed a new identity for this place. Each inhabitant began to feel part of a collective memory and reinforced their cultural identities “those aspects of our identities which arise from our ‘belonging’ to distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, and, above all, national cultures” (Hall, 1992:274).



Figure 4: Photographies being delivered hung in wires.

As time went by, the relationship with some members of the village evolved into new levels of coexistence and Sequeira started to be invited to their houses. The house itself is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study “of the intimate values of inside space, provided, of course, that we take it in both its unity and its complexity, and endeavour to integrate all the special values in one fundamental value. For the house furnishes us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time” (Bachelard, 1994:3). His attention was immediately attracted by personal objects such as curtains, table cloths, hammocks, blankets, mosquito nets or sheets. Their colours and patterns reveal so many particularities of their owners.

I slowly identified the affective value of each object. Those simple houses had their environments separated by worn fabrics that hid intimacies...It was as if they were whispering in my ears the confidences of their residents. There I realized which elements

would bring in their materiality the missing data to talk about a relationship: time. (Machado, 2011:69)⁴

Some textiles functioned as boundaries of two territories in the house (the collective space of the living room and the intimacy of the bedroom) and others were used to block the light from a window or to cover a table where the meals were served. However, he noticed that all of them embodied the marks of time in their faded colours and tears due to everyday use. This is the starting point for every perceptive experience.

Perception opens the world to me as the surgeon opens a body, catching sight, through the window he has contrived, of the organs in full functioning, taken in their activity, seen sideways. It is thus that the sensible initiates me to the world, as language to the other: by encroachment. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968:218)

Before he put into practice his idea of permuting those used textiles for new ones and reproduce the image of their owners in real size in them, the artist executed an experiment to clarify his intentions. He negotiated with Lucas's grandmother, a boy from the community, the exchange of a sheet from his daily use by a new one. That sheet was used to support the image of Lucas which was processed on the computer, the background removed (bringing our attention to the representation of the model) and printed with serigraphy in the textile (Figure 5). Once the work was understood by the inhabitants, several proposals of exchange appeared as tablecloths, curtains, sheets, nets and mosquito nets, which were labeled with the name of the owner and preserved with all its marks as a testimony of the history of that fabric (Machado, 2011:72).

⁴ In the original: “Identifiquei lentamente o valor afetivo de cada objeto. As casas simples tinham seus ambientes separados por desgastados tecidos que acolhiam intimidades . . . Era como se sussurrassem em meus ouvidos confidências de seus moradores. Percebi ali elementos que traziam em sua materialidade o dado que faltava para se falar de uma relação: o tempo”.



Figure 5: Picture of Lucas. Nazaré de Mocajuba
(2005) by Alexandre Sequeira.

The Nazaré of Mocajuba series resulted in 10 textiles/personal objects with the image of their owners printed on them. The viewing angle is the same in every portrait: static registers positioned directly in front of the camera. The subjects invite those who see them to move the gaze to the centre of representation. As if they were saying: “We contemplate who watches us”. The choice of the pose was not accidental but an intention of the photographer in finding resonances with the traditions of Nazaré de Mocajuba. Striking a pose “is to offer oneself to be captured in a posture which is not and which does not seek to be 'natural'” (Bordieu, 1990:80). The poses that interested him the most were not those which brought influence from mass media and the celebrity world but those he recognised in the oldest inhabitants where they were standing up, motionless, the arms along their bodies and in a dignified attitude (Figure 6) (Figure 7) (Figure 8).



Figure 6: Picture of Alvaro. Nazaré de Mocajuba (2005) by Alexandre Sequeira.



Figure 7: Picture of D. Francisca. Nazaré de Mocajuba (2005) by Alexandre Sequeira.



Figure 8: Picture of D. Benedita. Nazaré de Mocajuba (2005)
by Alexandre Sequeira.



Figure 9: Picture of D. Branca. Nazaré de Mocajuba (2005)
by Alexandre Sequeira



Figure 10: Picture of Seu Carmelino. Nazaré de Mocajuba (2005) by Alexandre Sequeira

Until the conclusion of this series, artistic practices had as a starting point human relations, which were relevant to the decisions undertaken by the photographer and the quality of these relationships reaffirmed Bourriaud's statement that "Art is a state of encounter" (2002:18). The textiles were never sold, just the photos that registered them at the village and the money from the commercialisation of these images returned to Nazaré de Mocajuba to be used in its own benefit. Even though, all the pictures were taken by Sequeira, the owner of the textile organised the scene. He asked for each person to take his/her personal object back home and choose a relevant place to display them. Mrs Branca has decided to show her portrait near the garden (Figure 9), probably to allow more people to appreciate it. Mr Carmelino hung it inside his house beside his oratory (Figure 10) (Machado, 2011:84). Also, during a week, every citizen of Nazaré de Mocajuba could visit the houses to contemplate the results of the project. One of the most interesting reactions was from Mrs Benedita (Figure 8): "I did not imagine that I was so much alike with my curtain"⁵ (Machado, 2011:80). The other four works of this series can be seen in the Appendix.

⁵ In the original: "Não imaginava ser tão parecida com minha cortina".

CONCLUSION

Finally, it may be concluded that the importance of knowing how Sequeira undertakes his expeditions and interacts with different cultures is to get in contact with original possibilities in which art emerges from the interaction of a photographer in social contexts. He uses Photography to foster spaces of coexistence that aim to produce or inspire relations between people and the world. In the process of learning from other people's lives he still participating of them and establishing trustful relationships. In the series analysed in this essay the visual outcomes were a consequence of several social interactions like the exchange of letters, photographs or old textiles for new ones; assuming new roles (as the official photographer); paying visits to some inhabitants; explaining in detail the intentions of his work. The artist seems to cherish each opportunity of mimicking in new environments and blending with people's culture, the geography of a place and its nature. Probably, he knows that if he becomes invisible for a group, he will not be considered a foreign anymore. In some occasions, his presence was irreplaceable. In 2004, for example, two men from Nazaré de Mocajuba died in a tragic accident. At the wake, their images could be worshiped *in memorian*. In a certain moment, he heard from the wife of one of the deceased: "It was God who brought you to take his picture"⁶ (Sobral, 2004).

The production of Alexandre Sequeira is of significant value for us to comprehend photography as a social production, and being a social practice, it is determinant that we can analyse the quality of the involvement of a photographer in a specific set of social relations.

⁶ In the original: "Foi Deus quem te trouxe para fazer a foto dele".

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APPENDIX



Picture of Adriane. Nazaré de Mocajuba(2005) by Alexandre Sequeira.



Picture of Mr Puã. Nazaré de Mocajuba (2005) by Alexandre Sequeira.



Picture of Mrs Alice. Nazaré de Mocajuba (2005)
by Alexandre Sequeira



Picture of Mr Suzano. Nazaré de Mocajuba (2005)
by Alexandre Sequeira.