

Photographing on the leg¹

By Rodrigo Moura

Cao Guimarães figures among the Brazilian authors who deal systematically with movies in the art field. His order could be described as craftsmanly, insofar as it empties the notion of cinema as the summation of different technical jobs—a summation in which construction layers are superimposed to create images in motion. While working with a restricted number of collaborators, and having his takes subjected to little (if any) interference, Guimarães has drawn close to the notion of documentary and created an economy of means that he has called “kitchen cinema”. He creates motion pictures that share in the articulation of artist’s film and documentary—a tradition of both past and present-day vanguard, from Vertov to Jonas Mekas. However, in the early stages of his practice, when he was under a strong influence of realism, Cao Guimarães was a photographer—someone who worked mostly by himself and, therefore, established very close and more or less warm ties with his objects. Interesting developments of his investigation are detected in manifold methods and approaches featured in the artist’s recent movies—from the direct observation of reality (*Da janela do meu quarto* [From my bedroom window], 2004) to the encounter of different subjectivities by following instructions (*Rua de mão dupla* [Two-way street], 2002). Unless our intention is to redefine the meaning of this notion, we could hardly refer to these movies as documentaries. Yet, it is not idle to note the considerable attention they have attracted within the documentary film circuit.

In the same key, ever since the late 1990s Guimarães has produced an extensive inventory of photos of *gambiarras*—a field of interest that at first he shared with another artist, Rivane Neuenschwander. Ironically, dictionaries come in handy when it comes to defining these constructions of informal nature (For an analysis of its use among Brazilian artists, see LAGNADO, Lisette. *O malabarista e a gambiarra*. In *Trópico* –

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Idéias de Norte e de Sul. <http://pphp.uol.com.br/tropico/html/textos/1693,1.shl>. Accessed on August 6, 2006.) For instance, [Portuguese language dictionaries] Aurélio and Houaiss agree on the definition of *gambiarra* as an improvised power outlet/lighting source in which one or more light-bulb sockets hang precariously from an electric wire, without any fixtures—a “paradigm *gambiarra*”, as we might call it. Yet, the definitions that both authors provide do not include the inventive, practical solutions we improvise in our everyday life, such as for example a paper clip used as makeshift bra strap adjuster, or a kitchen utensil used as wedge to hold a window open. The word *gambiarra* in this sense is precisely what interests the artist. In terms of etymology, however, the two denotations of this word have in the word “*gâmbia*” (leg) their shared, somewhat dubious and obscure origin.

Seemingly, the use of the leg image as a leading sculptural element in these constructions is rather propitious, as in most renditions the *gambiarra* is introduced as a support for some activity. It serves as counterweight for signs, prop for a tire-less automobile, makeshift for eyeglass bow, and even a barbecue-and-chair combination. Cao Guimarães’s gaze spots this type of contrivance everywhere, and yet the real challenge is to define *gambiarra*s, rather than collect them. Thus, a drawer suspended in the air by nylon strings, and a pillow shaped after a coconut could be the two extremities of this investigation on the sculptural nature of the *gambiarra*, as well as on its boundaries with absurdity and the void. On the other hand, an examination of the photographic nature of these images reveals affinities between their unassuming aspect, and that casual and furtive aspect of the constructions. Here we have images produced in passing: notes that will not be replaced, snapshots that at times are taken by third parties, and a collection that is more affective than obsessive. We are before a collecting stance that brings to mind Guimarães’s statement that he started working as an artist the very moment he became an active cinephile. These images bring us face to face with an old photography dictum: to produce images is to collect images.

Once rescued from the effacement to which they are doomed, Cao Guimarães’s *gambiarra*s come forth not only as the solution offered in view of scanty resources, but

also as denial of pre-fabricated, massified, and conforming industrial solutions. Usage and creation become one, they go against the grain, in an “opposition”, as Lagnado has defined them, *d’après* Hélio Oiticica. In his photographs, Guimarães deals with the desire to transform everyday life, not as something utopian, but as a means to create a proof that attests to this transformation taking place, on a daily basis, all over the world.