



SONÂMBULO (SLEEPWALKER): NOTES ON A GESTURE IN THE SHADOWS AND THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF ANDRÉ LEITE COELHO.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this review is to describe and critically analyze the conceptual relationship between the photographic act and André Leite Coelho's photography book *Sonâmbulo*. The text exposes the photographic practice as both a consequence and an artefact of urban space. This suggests a common ontology between photography and modern cities, elaborating intersections between street photography practice and its history. The discussion also addresses the formal and aesthetic choices of the book's graphic design and layout as a possibility for a subjective representation of cityscapes in its fragmented and transitory perception through photography.

KEYWORDS:
Photography;
Photobook; Urban
Space; Graphic
Design; André Leite
Coelho.

It was a wintry morning when I met André Leite Coelho. We enjoyed cups of coffee before exploring the streets of the central area of São Paulo. Perfect time to take our cameras to test an old lens. It was mid-2019, and the cold streets of the city were warmed by a low light that lifted the veil of dawn and slowly dissipated the remnants of the night. The stroll down Santa Cecília neighbourhood eventually led us to Conselheiro Crispiniano St.

In the course of this stroll, bright and fleeting scenes were formed for a brief moment and then vanished in

a fraction of a second. The light penetrated the oblique angles of the city, found a loophole in the concrete, and became a tangible ephemeral matter. André certainly noticed these luminous phenomena. I observed him, capturing the flashes of rays between flitting lenses. Camera pointed at pedestrians who were unable to avoid colliding with its materialised glare.



FIGURE 1.
Spread of the
book *Sonâmbulo*.
Reproduction
by André Leite
Coelho©

It's interesting to observe the act of taking a photo. I believe that the gesture, the photographic act, always reflects the character of the person taking the photograph. Walker Evans once described the photographic act as a penitent act of espionage, an apologetic voyeurism (Evans 2004). Twenty years later, Henri Cartier Bresson (2017) described it as the gesture of a tightrope walker and the furtive wiggle of a pickpocket. My intent was not to refer to pickpocketing as purse-snatching, but instead frame the act of photography within the context of another Bresson: Robert Bresson, the film director who made the movie *Pickpocket* in 1959. He gave the lead role to the Uruguayan Martin Lasalle who, at that time, was not a professional actor. The pickpocket, then, is the personification of the marginal hero.

In the discovery of photography, each individual would conceive a way of proceeding that will finally shape the characteristic gestures of their photographic act. André's approach to photographing is distinctive; although, concerning the mentioned references, it has in common the need for deep concentration. And still, a subtle discretion, a moderation of gestures, an economy of movements. Perhaps, because the camera is silent and relatively small, the shot, reminisces of the swift yet fluid strikes of martial arts practitioners. To a layperson, perhaps a dance would be a well-illustrated example. The gesture is quick and smooth whilst freezing tensely for minimal moments at the instant of the shot.

Then it relaxes again, returning to the resting position, while the eyes remain continuously focused on observation.



FIGURE 2.
Spread of the
book *Sonâmbulo*.
Reproduction
by André Leite
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The photographs of the book *Sonâmbulo* were in progress at the time of our exploration. Some streets roamed that day are indeed the same as those we see on its pages. The ephemeral materiality of the bygone light is translated into a reality that concerns the experience of the photographic act. The photographs make the observer return to the bustling and convulsive life of the city's streets. In a way, the photographs challenge the impossibility of perceiving simultaneity, transience, and the inconsistency of living in a metropolis like São Paulo (Musa 2020). Street photography frames the city, infusing the streets with signs of life.



FIGURE 3.
Spread of the
book *Sonâmbulo*.
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The emergence of these images makes one wonder about the fate of the street photography genre. Colin Westerbeck states in his book *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* that street photography was deemed the vanguard of the aesthetic development of the photographic medium during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Then, there was an entirely new way of photographing: ‘the snapshot’. The author says that Garry Winogrand photographed ‘sideways’. He used the corner of his eye, as if he had an eye in the viewfinder and another in his peripheral gaze, framing and representing a reality often invisible to common perception (Westerbeck 2017, 45). John Szarkowski, sitting in the department of photography of MoMA, in the position of someone who certainly exercised total influence on the medium’s history, was a great ‘discoverer’ of street photographers. He displayed them in the museum and contributed to the recognition of the genre. Szarkowski, a fan of street photography stated that Eugène Atget is the most important photographer of the 19th century, and Garry Winogrand of the 20th century (Westerbeck 2017, 39).



FIGURE 4.
Spread of the
book *Sonâmbulo*.
Reproduction
by André Leite
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After so many years, faced with an extensive list of street photographers who actively contributed to the photographic history—expanding its language’s aesthetic possibilities — I sometimes wonder if the creative impulse, clearly recognised in previous decades, can still drive transformative works (Schellini 2021).

Sonâmbulo answers this question. However, rather than defending a genre or looking at a place in the sun of a photographic tradition. The work, above all, reaffirms photography as an instrument of observation and representation of a reality that is difficult to grasp. I am precisely stunned by its bold plunge into the abyss of the city. In its labyrinth, photography has a dual role: it was no coincidence that photography

emerged as a medium of image-making in the 19th century. Of course, the 19th century also came with the dizzying process of urbanisation that moved large populational contingents to urban settlements. This advent implied a new way of living, a new perception of space, and a new system of identification and control of individuals.

The complexity of this experience is, in turn, translated into the form of a book. The eighty pages of the book *Sonâmbulo* propose a daring design, the photographer's lens seeks to translate the fragmented perception of the city in hopes of materialising their conceptual maze. The linearity of a conventional publication is broken into multiple recombinations of the original images. Its iconoclastic edition fractures the immaculate space of the page and, consequently, the proportion of the space-time in the framed scenes. The layout suggests the impossibility of a total representation of the city and the totality of its perception. The book is an artefact excavated from the ruins of civilisation at that exact moment.



FIGURE 5.
Spread of the
book *Sonâmbulo*.
Reproduction
by André Leite
Coelho©

On that wintry morning, while we walked anonymously in the crowd, I was unaware that the city would never be the same. And that the flow of pedestrians and vehicles could not go back or go by twice in the same place or at the same time. But I suspect that André was aware of its transience. After all, that was his neighbourhood, and he was a witness to the changes and catastrophic public policies that affected the environment he lived in. He quietly photographed the accidental drawing that emerged between light and shadow, the fleeting moments of its mesmerising encounters. Every click scribbling on the frame, akin to the daughter of the ancient potter Butades of Sicyon outlining the shadow of her beloved before the irremediable departure, we see in his photographs a familiar city that never ceases to be uncanny, a place that we only find between

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the subconscious and the waking world. Certainly, there are still many other interpretations of *Sonâmbulo*, along with the cracked mirror, further fragmenting the photographic language.

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