

# Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

## *As "Inimagens" de Eduardo Kac e a fotografia experimental no Brasil*

VICTA DE CARVALHO<sup>a</sup>

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

NINA VELASCO E CRUZ<sup>b</sup>

Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil

### ABSTRACT

This study seeks to contribute to the history of Brazilian experimental photography by reflecting on the photographic series "Inimagens" (1983), by Eduardo Kac. To this end, we will briefly contextualize how this work fits into Kac's artistic trajectory and the history of Brazilian experimental photography. Then, we will discuss in more detail the images that make up the series, reflecting on the experimental gesture from the notions operationalized by Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and Georges Didi-Huberman.

**Keywords:** Experimental photography, Brazilian photography, transgression, Eduardo Kac.

<sup>a</sup> Doctor in Communication and Culture from the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7115-6545>. E-mail: [victacarvalho@gmail.com](mailto:victacarvalho@gmail.com)

<sup>b</sup> Doctor in Communication and Culture from the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1639-5329>. E-mail: [nina.cruz@ufpe.br](mailto:nina.cruz@ufpe.br)

### RESUMO

O artigo busca contribuir para a história da fotografia experimental brasileira através de uma reflexão acerca da série fotográfica "Inimagens" (1983), de Eduardo Kac. Para tal, faremos uma breve contextualização de como esse trabalho se insere na trajetória artística de Kac e, também, na história da fotografia experimental brasileira. Em um segundo momento, discutiremos mais detidamente as imagens que compõem a série, fazendo uma reflexão sobre o gesto experimental na arte fotográfica a partir das noções de transgressão e informe, operacionalizadas por Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault e Georges Didi-Huberman.

**Palavras-chave:** Fotografia experimental, fotografia brasileira, transgressão, Eduardo Kac.





### THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ART OF EDUARDO KAC

**E**DUARDO KAC, RENOWNED worldwide for his innovative work in art and biotechnology, emerged onto the Brazilian art scene in the early 1980s as part of a generation characterized by experimentalism and global recognition. Typically, discussions about this phase of Kac's career focus on comprehensive descriptions of his performative and poetic practices, overlooking his contributions to the history of Brazilian experimental photography. However, a deeper study into his output from this period reveals a diverse array of experiments across various mediums, including fanzines, graffiti, billboards, and urban interventions. Additionally, there is a lesser-known photographic series titled "Inimagens" (1983), created using Polaroid, which we aim to explore in this article.

To provide context for this proposition, it is important to clarify that this article is the outcome of the initial exploration of Brazilian artist Eduardo Kac's Polaroid photographic work within the research project titled "Chronology of Photography in Brazil: 1979-2000." This project is conducted by the research group FIP-Fotography, Image and Thought, affiliated with ECO/UFRJ. The group comprises research professors from various institutions across different states in Brazil, collaborating with curators Angela Magalhães and Nadja Peregrino. The primary objective of this project was to illuminate a specific period of Brazilian photography influenced by public policies implemented by FUNARTE and the significant role played by Infoto - the National Photography Institute.

It is important to note that the Polaroid works by artist Eduardo Kac are largely unknown. These artworks have few historical references in catalogs or art books, and there is a lack of analysis within the artist's body of work. The images presented here suffer from low quality reproduction due to the loss of the original pieces. They were discovered through this research at CEDOC - Funarte Documentation Center and were photographed in an amateur manner at the moment of their discovery. This approach preserves the originality of the appearance, including the marks of time on the frames and papers.

Photography in Brazil has historically been influenced by a referentiality that recognized its political potential in capturing instantaneous moments and the realism of mimesis. It also inherits a range of historical references shaped by the photographic experiments of notable figures such as Geraldo de Barros and José Oiticica Filho, as well as the influence of the concretist art movement. These experiments challenged the normative practices of modern photography and pushed the boundaries of the medium. When examining these experimental practices within the context of contemporary Brazilian photography, we encounter a diverse range of strategies, aesthetic approaches, and political perspectives

developed by artists like Cassio Vasconcellos, Gilvan Barreto, Dirceu Maués, Feco Hamburguer, Luiz Baltar, Letícia Ramos, Chris Bierrenbach, and many others.

These images defy the limitations of photography in its conventional essentialist form, pushing the boundaries of recognition and offering an experience of the limits through the image itself. Therefore, it is crucial to revive the visual production of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and recognize its contribution to the development of an experimental photography history in Brazil. This endeavor aims to foster a broader understanding and aesthetic-political contextualization of what experimental photography can represent in contemporary times.

While there has been significant critical attention given to Brazilian photography in the 20th century, there remains a notable emphasis on photography associated with the documentary and journalistic traditions. Within the realms of cultural production and historical research, certain texts have played a central role in recognizing the existence of experimental photography in the country. These include Helouise Costa's "A fotografia moderna no Brasil" (1995), Nadja Peregrino and Angela Magalhães' "A fotografia no Brasil: um olhar das origens ao contemporâneo" (2005), and the 2013 publication "Fotografia na Arte Brasileira Séc. XXI," edited by Isabel Diegues and Eduardo Ortega. However, in terms of theoretical reflection, there are still gaps when it comes to dissident photographic experiences—those less concerned with the representational aspect of the photographic image and more focused on exploring the medium and language in transgressive and experimental ways.

By delving into Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" series (1983), this article aims not only to address these gaps but also to propose conceptual frameworks that can contribute to the development of a critical and theoretical repertoire for investigating other experimental productions within the field of contemporary Brazilian photography. Our intention, firstly, is to provide context for Eduardo Kac's photographic output in the 1980s by examining the experiences in the visual arts during the 1960s and 1970s. Subsequently, we will delve into a more detailed discussion of selected images from the "Inimagens" series (1983), employing a conceptual toolkit that will aid in the analysis of this work and others associated with the experimental gestures of transgression and formless found in the works of Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and Georges Didi-Huberman.

### **EDUARDO KAC AND THE "80'S GENERATION"**

In the realm of visual arts, traditional mediums like easel painting and pedestal sculpture have faced significant criticism since the 1960s and have been



## Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

deemed obsolete or outmoded by various artistic movements. One notable group that spearheaded this shift was the Rio de Janeiro Neo-Concrete group, led by theorists and artists such as Ferreira Gullar, Lygia Clark, and Hélio Oiticica. They advocated for a new artistic relationship where the viewer ceased to be a passive, contemplative subject, and instead became an active participant in the construction of the artwork. A similar concern was shared by pioneers of kinetic art like Waldemar Cordeiro, Abraham Palatnik, and Ivan Serpa, who emphasized the importance of interaction with the observer, as well as elements such as movement, light, geometry, and mathematics. The idea that the observer could play a more active role in the artwork has gained increasing prominence in the Brazilian art scene, driving the development of works that embrace technology as a means of artistic production.

As a member of the "80's Generation," Eduardo Kac sets himself apart from many of his contemporaries who turned back to painting, as his interests lie in the realms of interactivity and technology. The early stages of Kac's artistic journey were marked by performance experiments that showcased his deep emphasis on the processes of constructing and perceiving images. He chose the body as his primary interface for artistic expression, stating, "In my work in the early 80s, the body was the tool I used to question conventions, dogmas, and taboos (...). The body became my writing medium ultimately" (Kac, 1994). This highlights the significant role he assigned to the body as a means to challenge norms and explore unconventional artistic avenues.

Creator of Arte Pornô<sup>1</sup> in Brazil, one of the last organized avant-garde movements in Brazilian art, Eduardo Kac played an active role in various urban interventions and published texts and images in diverse formats, including zines, booklets, and anthologies. During this time, Kac would gather with a group of artists every Friday at Cinelândia, in downtown Rio de Janeiro, where they would engage in improvised performances in front of an audience consisting of a wide range of individuals, including passers-by, merchants, and even those who specifically sought out the performances.

These performances, known as "poems-to-scream" or "oral poems", were characterized by the prominent use of obscene language, linguistic mockery, parodies, verbal inversions, and colloquialisms. Kac strategically employed forbidden words as a means to integrate the body into the realm of poetry in a broader sense. He developed an entire poetic program aimed at subverting the conservative and stigmatizing use of language associated with gender.

Drawing inspiration from notable figures such as Gregório de Matos, Bocage, Marquis de Sade, Antonin Artaud, and even lesser-known authors like Bernardo Guimarães and Emílio de Menezes, whose works often went unpublished,

<sup>1</sup> Besides Kac, key members of the movement were Glauco Mattoso, Teresa Jardim, Braulio Tavares, Leila Miccolis, Hudinilson Jr, Cynthia Dorneles and Cairo Trindade (Kac, 2013).

Kac went beyond mere inspiration, implementing a program that inverted the negative semantic associations commonly attached to the body. His artistic pursuits centered around questioning the suppression of the body and all aspects related to it, including bodily fluids, different body parts, and various forms of sexuality. Through his poetic art, Kac sought to challenge societal norms and provoke contemplation on the multifaceted nature of the human body.

Alongside his performance experiments, Eduardo Kac delved into the exploration of transgressive possibilities within poetic language and image representation, giving rise to a new art form that intertwined body art, design, political resistance, performance, activism, photography, and poetry: the Pornograms (Kac, 2013, p. 41). In a recent discussion with the authors<sup>2</sup>, Kac asserts that this was his most radical artistic venture during that period. A comprehensive retrospective of his Porn Art was initially showcased in the solo exhibition “Pornograms: 1980-1982” at the Laura Marsiaj Gallery in Rio de Janeiro in 2010. The exhibition presented a generous selection of Kac’s works from 1980 to 1982, including the complete series of nine Pornograms. The culmination of this exploration was captured in the bilingual publication titled *Porneia*, which was released in 2022 by Nightboat Books, located in Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Interview given to the authors on August 3, 2021.

The Pornograms, situated at the intersection of performance, design, and photographic imagery, sought to merge the visual image with the human body. Out of the series’ nine works, two were featured in the artist’s book “WRITING” in 1983, a publication that brought together poems and visual pieces exploring the interplay between artwork and the body. This collection can be seen as a significant transitional point in Kac’s artistic journey, as it foreshadowed his later experiments with photography and holography, which would increasingly shape his exploration of new image technologies. Notably, the last three Pornograms in the series were created using Polaroid, a photographic technique that played a decisive role as an artistic intervention strategy, surpassing the temporal and representational limitations of conventional modernist photography rooted in two-dimensional mimetic representations and capturing singular moments.

### “INIMAGENS”

From the very beginning of his artistic journey, Eduardo Kac has displayed a keen interest in the production and perception techniques of images, consistently exploring their transgressive potential. His approach to photography commenced with experimental practices and direct interventions on the image, subverting its mimetic nature and the notion of a singular, instantaneous temporality,

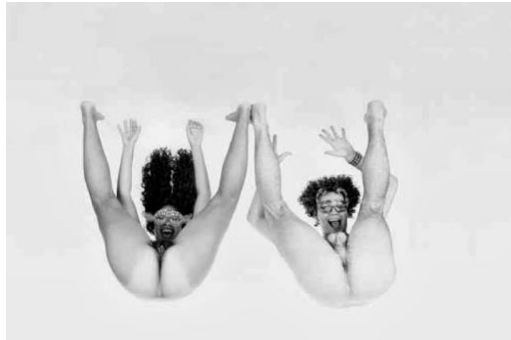
# A

## Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

that defined photography within the Brazilian context of that era. It entailed utilizing the photographic medium to uncover new spatial and temporal dimensions for visual representation. Since his work with the Pornograms, transcending clichés became a fundamental aspect for Kac, as he aimed to push the technical and conceptual boundaries associated with modern photography, which often leaned towards documentary and purist tendencies. Through the act of montage, combining diverse images on a single photogram, and blending photography with other artistic forms such as design, performance, poetry, painting, and sculpture, Kac continuously challenged the limitations imposed upon the photographic medium.

**Figure 1**

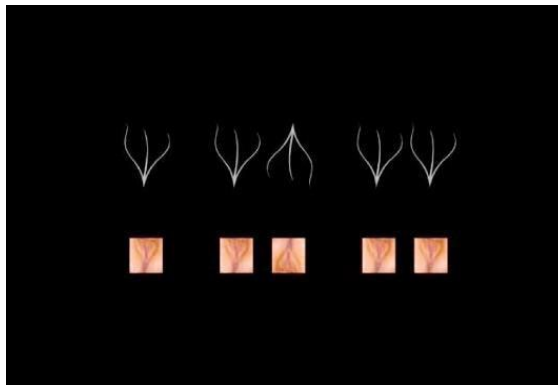
*Pornogram III, Eduardo Kac, 1982*



Note. KAC, 2013.

**Figure 2**

*Pornogram VI, Eduardo Kac, 1981*



Note. KAC, 2013.

The experimental nature of the Pornograms extends far beyond photography as a visually impure element. It treats photography not merely as a representation of pre-existing objects, often naked bodies, but also as linguistic signs that generate alternative, non-referential meanings within the images. An example of this can be seen in Pornogram II (Fig. 1), where bodies form a mirrored “U” shape, evoking the sound of booning. Faces are concealed by masks, while the foreground highlights the buttocks and genitals of the couple. A similar transformation of the image into a linguistic sign becomes even more apparent in Pornograms VI (Figure 2). In this piece, the female vulva takes on the form of a “V” with an added “I” or “M”, depending on its position. Through the sequencing and stylization of the photographs, we can discern the words: “Vi, Vim, Vivi” (Kac, 2013, p. 44). The textual quality of the photographic image propels it beyond referentiality, creating a temporal dimension tied to the rhythm of reading and the multitude of meanings that poetry encompasses.

Kac had a profound interest in challenging the two-dimensional nature of images. In 1984, he expressed his experimentation with this concept, saying, “My eyes reject the two-dimensional. If the world is three-dimensional, why can’t art be as well?”<sup>3</sup> It is within this framework that Kac presented his Polaroid photographs at the 1983 Funarte National Fine Arts Salon, held at the Museum of Modern Art/MAM in Rio de Janeiro. He titled his series “Inimages,” perhaps alluding to the inherent paradox in this body of work: are they images or non-images? If they are not images, what exactly are they? Are they unimaginable images? The two-dimensionality of traditional photography is shattered through direct interventions on the photographic paper itself. This can involve adding objects to the photograph or transforming the photograph into an object.

In “Inimages,” I transformed Polaroid photos into three-dimensional objects. In one photo, I placed a miniature revolver amidst my family gathered together. The picture of my girlfriend appeared scorched, while in another, I turned my grandfather into a rattle (Kac, 1984)<sup>4</sup>

During his peak of photographic experimentation, Kac participated in the exhibition “Polaroid - instant images” at the Photography Gallery of Funarte<sup>5</sup> in May 1986, under the coordination of Angela Magalhães and Nadja Peregrino. In the same show were Marcos Bonisson, Pedro Vasques, Rose van Lengen, and Sergio Zalis. This exhibition was part of a significant program developed by INFoto - the National Photography Institute, affiliated with Funarte, aimed at promoting and showcasing various fields of Brazilian photographic production.

<sup>3</sup> Statement given in the article “At the exit of the tunnel, Kac’s ‘Cro-Magno’. The first art door exhibited in Rio”, published in the newspaper O Globo on 02/20/1984.

<sup>4</sup> Idem.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to emphasize that during the 1980s, Eduardo Kac had been participating in several exhibitions at Funarte, especially the National Salons of Plastic Arts and the Regional Salons of Arts. Highlight for the year 1984, when Eduardo Kac participates in the Exhibition “Urban Interventions, in the Gallery of Funarte presenting his graffiti. The same year he participated in the exhibition “How are you doing Generation 80?” at Parque Lage and also in “Generation 80: young artists”, at the MP2 Art Gallery.



## Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

More than just a camera or a brand, the name Polaroid signifies a distinct process of photographic production that left its mark on an entire generation. It enabled new vernacular uses and gained enthusiasts both in the realm of canonical photography, including renowned figures like Ansel Adams and Walker Evans, as well as among artists and experimental photographers like Andy Warhol, William Anastasi, Elen Carey, Lucas Samaras, and many others. The first Polaroid camera was introduced in 1947, promising to eliminate the need for the traditional developing process and offering instant photography. Edwin Land, the process's creator and founder of Polaroid, rejected the term "instant" due to its vagueness and potential confusion. In the history of photography, "instant" referred to the exposure time of the film, which was already fast enough during that time for a photo to be considered an instantaneous capture. The focus, therefore, was on expediting everything that followed the click, rendering subsequent steps like removing the film from the camera, sending it to a lab, developing the negative, and enlarging the image on photographic paper unnecessary. For this reason, Land favored the concept of "one-step photography."

However, the initial version of the Polaroid camera still required several actions from the photographer, making the process far less automatic than initially promised. The photographer had to wait a few minutes before peeling off the paper covering the photo during the development process to prevent the film from being further exposed to light. It wasn't until 1972, with the introduction of the SX-70 camera, that the photograph was actually ejected from the device virtually ready, with no additional steps required by the photographer (Buse, 2016). All Polaroid cameras operated on a similar basic process: after the film was exposed, a sandwich of negative and positive sheets emerged from the camera through a pulley mechanism. These pulleys ruptured a bag of reagent, spreading the substance into a thin layer and initiating the development process. The SX-70 camera employed an opacifying agent, a chemical that protected the still-forming image, allowing it to develop right before the photographer's eyes in what became known as integral film.

What may appear as a time and cost-saving measure actually revealed new possibilities for photographic practice. The fact that photography occurred in front of the subject created a unique intimacy between the photographer and the subject, allowing potentially intimate or even explicit images, such as nudes or erotic poses, to remain within the realm of the photographer's gaze and prevent them from accidentally reaching an unintended audience. This use, which was certainly explored in vernacular photography, also found followers among professional photographers. For instance, Mapplethorpe extensively worked with Polaroid and had a retrospective of his work at the Whitney Museum in 2008 (Bonanos, 2012, p. 73). Other distinguishing aspects of a Polaroid photo compared



to a traditionally produced photograph include its uniqueness, ephemerality, and the thickness of the image created. Unlike traditional photos, Polaroid photos lack a negative from which multiple copies can be made indefinitely. Over time, Polaroid photos tend to degrade in quality due to light exposure. Additionally, these photos have a predetermined frame and format that give Polaroid photography its distinct brand and unmistakable style. The images produced by the SX-70's integral film also exhibited a technical limitation that became an additional aesthetic element—an inherent lack of focus resulting from the dyes having to penetrate a thick layer of white pigments (Bonanos, 2012, p. 101).

Many of these characteristics made Polaroid cameras highly appealing to photographers and artists during a period when experimentalism was pervasive across procedural, conceptual, and performative works. Examples such as William Anastasi's performative self-portrait "Nine Polaroid Photographs of a Mirror" (1967) and David Hockney's renowned mosaic montages demonstrate how the instantaneity of the Polaroid process was explored during this time. However, one of the most intriguing aspects of this process was the ability to intervene during the development of the image itself, utilizing physical-chemical alterations to produce unexpected and profoundly unsettling effects. Lucas Samaras' emblematic self-portraits and certain works by James Welling from the early stages of his career exemplify this approach.

Although Polaroid cameras did not achieve the same level of popularity in Brazil as in other countries, Pedro Vasques, the author of the exhibition catalog "Polaroid - instant images" (1986), stated that they offered "a fertile ground where the wildest imagination can unfold in endless combinations" (Vasques, 1986, p. 1). Vasques was referring to the potentialities offered by the SX-70 camera, which promised radical technological advancements, particularly in the process of self-revealing the image. Eduardo Kac interpreted this promise as yet another opportunity for image transgression, using his intervention in the conventional process of photo development. For Kac, it was about creating intermediate steps within the automatic Polaroid process, allowing for creative and unexpected interventions.

The discussion surrounding Polaroid photography encompasses long-standing dilemmas within the field of visual arts, such as its direct or indirect relationship and its role in mimesis. It has been a topic of tension for those seeking the unique qualities of photography and for those who view it as part of a diverse repertoire of inventive possibilities in dialogue with other art forms. Overall, certain practices and discourses surrounding the potential of Polaroid indicated a sense of freedom within photography—an opportunity for intervention and creation within a process that no longer required specialized laboratories and chemicals.

# A

## Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

Within this context, the articles by Florence Méredieu and Hervé Guibert (1981) are emblematic, as they associate Polaroid photography with erotic freedom from different perspectives, often intertwined with linguistic freedom, "allowing for the emergence of the freest images" (Meredieu cited in Vasques, 1986, p. 7).

To disrupt the automated process of image development, Kac frequently engaged in separating the layers of paper and chemicals that comprise a Polaroid photograph. On other occasions, his interventions took place towards the end of the process, involving the insertion of objects between the film and development layers, resulting in unrecognizable, formless, blurred, and distorted images. One particular intervention involved applying heat to the chemical compound used in Polaroid development. After removing the photo paper from the camera, Kac would ignite a lighter near the chemical base to warm its surface. The heat generated chemical bubbles, causing layers separations, and creating a volumetric dimension within the photograph—a third dimension in an image originally conceived to be two-dimensional. Regarding the exhibition at the Funarte gallery, Pedro Vasques deemed Kac's Polaroids as the most radical among the works of the six participating artists, describing them as "deliberately anti-photographic and boldly anti-aesthetic" (Vasques, 1986, p. 5), a characterization that could also be extended to the "Inimagens" presented at MAM three years prior.

### Figure 3

*Eduardo Kac, Inimagem (matches), Polaroid, 1983*



*Note.* Image given by the artist.

**Figura 4**

*Eduardo Kac, Inimagem (face), Polaroid, 1983*



Note. Image given by the artist.

The direct interference on the photogram's materiality was the procedure used by Kac in Figure 3. By inserting two matchsticks, one vertically and the other horizontally, crossing and tearing the photographic paper, the artist establishes a sculptural relationship with the photographic image, which will challenge the main canonical definitions of photography in modernity: a static image, two-dimensional, and made with light. This work (figure 3) intrigues us by different aspects, starting by the excess of magenta, a color that occupies almost the entire paper, and that could indicate a manipulation resource, used by experimenters at the time, of turning the film upside down in the camera so that the red layer of the film - there are three color layers in the negative: blue, green and red - would be the first to receive the chemical, thus creating an effect known as redscale. We also observe some scribbles on the upper part of the image that direct the attention of the eye less to the forms captured with the light, and more to the forms added by the artist throughout the process. An unintelligible poetic writing, aimed only at the most sensitive stratum of perceptual experience. It is not possible to recognize the original photographed scene clearly, it was lost amid manipulations and layers of chemical fluids, but it is interesting to note that Kac makes sure that the image is not a complete abstraction, for the matchsticks are there to offer us a relationship with the forms, and challenge the limit of the photographic.

# A

## Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

In Figure 4, in the midst of a scorch, produced by the intervention at the moment of development, we can recognize the features of a male face, that of a friend of the artist. However, this feature resists the unity and contention of a face, as it is fragmented, without the outline of the head, floating on a two-dimensional and shadowy background. Like a worn mirror that loses part of its reflective surface, which reminds us of Raoul Ubac's "Portrait in a Mirror" (1938), the photograph does not give us a totally recognizable image. The effect of disquiet is precisely in this strange familiarity that the reflection/portrait becomes, as Rosalind Kraus observes in relation to Ubac's work (Kraus, 2002, p. 191).

### Figure 5

*Eduardo Kac, Inimagem (write), 1983*



*Note.* Image given by the artist.

### Figure 6

*Eduardo Kac, Inimagem (hand), 1983*



*Note.* Image given by the artist.

Eduardo Kac's artistic works during the Generation 80 era were characterized by a radical approach that questioned the boundaries of the body in visual experimentation. Kac viewed the body as an interface to be explored through various practices, encompassing its sounds, movements, forms, functions, and individual or social behaviors (Kac, 2013, p. 32). In Figure 5, we can discern faint traces of what appears to be a small statuette depicting two bodies, possibly human, engaged in a libidinous act. However, the image is obscured by numerous scratches and scribbles on the photographic paper, including the distinct frame of the Polaroid format. Figure 6 reveals the shadow of a hand, almost like a photogram, with minimal visibility and lacking any details. It resembles a form in the process of dissolution, except for the nail positioned in the center of the image, piercing through the materiality of the paper. All of Kac's Polaroid images bear the marks of his manipulation: cuts, scribbles, stains, bubbles, and fingerprints. These direct interferences with the image's materiality partially erase the scene while introducing another layer of observation that challenges our understanding and calls into question what the photographic image truly reveals, as well as the very nature of photography itself.

The wide range of manipulations made possible by the Polaroid medium greatly expanded its artistic possibilities, leading to the suspension of its most significant aspect according to Walter Benjamin: reproducibility. Benjamin (2012) argued that the reproducibility of photography was responsible for the most radical transformations in art and politics. Once freed from its ritualistic existence and detached from a regime of authenticity, art would assume a different social function. However, while the Polaroid restored the characteristic of a singular and irreproducible image to photography, it certainly did not promote a regression to the ritualistic constraints of an aesthetic authority like the dominant regime that existed before its emergence. Firstly, the radical shift in perspective regarding the nature of art resulting from the disruptive impact of photography within the art field no longer allowed for such a step backward. The notion of a unique photograph itself presents a challenge to both art and photography. Secondly, the uniqueness of Polaroid images experiences no longer encourages passive contemplation but rather demands an engaged, disrupted, and active observer who must engage with the image based on its technical, aesthetic, conceptual, and political nuances.

According to researcher Nathalia Brizuela, author of the book "Photography at its Limits" (2019), photography in the digital age establishes an asymmetrical power dynamic in the production and reception of messages. It reproduces and reinforces the notion that it captures a singular moment, a truth of the world, whether from the perspective of the photographer or the viewer on social media



## Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

platforms. Brizuela highlights technology and access to it as the primary factors responsible for this asymmetry, which in turn perpetuates colonialism and exploitation (Brizuela, 2019, p.10). From this standpoint, modern photography is seen as causing a complex crisis that involves both overexposure and the normalization of codes as truths, while simultaneously rendering it invisible to those without access to photography. Pushing photography to its limits, therefore, becomes a way to critique these traditions rooted in a single preconceived truth. In a previous text, "The matter of photography in the Americas," in 2018, Brizuela already argued that artists who embraced the irreproducibility of photography in their works were critiquing the total visibility imposed by the internet era: "The unique work (such as Polaroid) resists the displacement, speed, and informative quality of contemporaneous images" (Brizuela, 2018, p. 9).

Within the interplay of visibility and invisibility offered by images, the question of representation resurfaces in instant photographs as a boundary to be explored. In the Polaroids of artists like Eduardo Kac, for instance, we are presented with fragmented glimpses and hints of forms rather than clear representations of objects. It is necessary, therefore, to observe what these images reveal at the threshold of their own disappearance. Take, for instance, "Atardecer 1103904104" (2015) by Costa Rican artist Priscilla Monge—a Polaroid devoid of any discernible form, displaying only an infinite golden gradient that engages with the materiality of the world itself. This prompts a questioning of the photographic medium itself and serves as a critique of the dematerialization promised by the digital realm (Brizuela, 2018, p. 8). Similarly, Kac's images demand a sensitive observation, a tactile way of looking that traverses the surface, explores the folds, and responds to the sensations evoked by light.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Polaroid was embraced by many artists as a blank canvas to be filled in diverse ways (Hitchcock cited in Indrisek, 2017). Artists like Peter Beard experimented by incorporating writings, drawings, and eventually even blood into their Polaroid images. John Reuter created unusual large-format collages, while Lucas Samaras' "Photo-Transformations" (1972) became emblematic of a distinct type of Polaroid experimentation. These experiments involved errors, defects, various forms of montage during the image-making process, and the insertion and manipulation of objects onto and through the film, resulting in unprecedented visual effects. The transformations achieved in Lucas Samaras' images, for example, can be viewed as a reconfiguration of the very nature of reality and the definition of a photographic image. While the Polaroid initially presented itself as the ideal technology for capturing reality and reinforcing the belief in photographic verisimilitude, Samaras' fantastical, fabricated, and hallucinatory images exposed the conflict of an impossible

photographic truth. Eduardo Kac's images are part of this broader collection of experiments that exalted the monstrous and the psychedelic, pushing beyond the limits of visibility and representation.

## THE PHOTOGRAPHIC FORMLESS AND THE TRANSGRESSION OF THE FORM-PHOTOGRAPHY

In a broad sense, it can be said that nearly all the experimental photography in the 20th century aimed to defy the established norms of image creation. Artists sought to distance themselves aesthetically and politically from the traditional operation of the equipment in order to discover alternative uses.

Vilém Flusser's concept of the "apparatus"<sup>6</sup> and his belief that artists could subvert its intended function through playfulness appears to align with many experimental photography practices (Lenot, 2017). Flusser suggests that it is possible to playfully explore the program beyond the mere functional aspect of the device. It is evident that numerous experimental practices, across different artistic disciplines and not limited to photography, emerge from the spirit of play and the deconstruction of predetermined expectations associated with technical image production. When considering experimental photography as a genre among many others, we can observe a recurring tendency for artists to push the boundaries of their equipment, investigating its imperfections and unforeseen potentials, as exemplified by Kac's Polaroid photographs. This perspective is succinctly summarized by Michel Poivert.

The genre of experimental photography embraces the medium as a space for aesthetic exploration. It functions as a poetic practice that harnesses the full potential of photographic materials and manipulations, pushing the boundaries of the medium itself. As a result, it disrupts the viewer's conventional relationship with photography, introducing unforeseen effects. According to Poivert (2017), the experimental approach is an encounter with limits, an experience that requires a transgressive act.

To truly grasp the experience of limits, one must engage in a gesture of transgression. Foucault suggests that transgression is a relative gesture that emerges in response to a limit, ultimately leading to the direct experience of that very limit. As Foucault (2009) states, transgression continuously shifts and transposes a line that, once crossed, immediately closes again, leaving a trace in our fragile memory. This interplay of transgression and the limits it challenges unveils an inherent uncertainty, through which the limit opens up to the boundless. However, as Foucault (2009) asserts, transgression, in its violent act of surpassing boundaries, simultaneously unleashes itself upon the limit and upon that which it contains. Interwoven in a spiraling relationship, the concepts

<sup>6</sup> For Flusser, "black box devices that simulate human thought, thanks to scientific theories, which, like human thought, exchange symbols contained in their 'memory' in their program" (Flusser, 2002, p. 28). The photographic camera would be the first device of the post-industrial era, although it is commonly thought of as a simple, pre-algorithmic machine.



## Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

of limit and transgression possess a complex existence that defies simplistic oppositions. Within this intricate connection, there exists only the affirmation of the infinite and limitless possibilities that transcend conventional boundaries.

In his insightful analysis of the surrealist journal "Documents", Didi-Huberman (2015) suggests that transgression, as understood by Georges Bataille, primarily involves the transgression of form. By surpassing the boundaries of form, one reaches the limit, and it is from this point that form can establish itself, dissolve, or even reinvent itself. It is crucial to note that Bataille's notion of transgression does not entail a rejection of form, but rather signifies "the opening of a bodily encounter, a critical assault, at the very place where transgression emerges from the collision" (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 28).

Thus, Bataille's work encompasses a vast realm of philosophy by challenging and defying the strict requirement that everything must conform to a predetermined form. In his concise yet provocative article on the formless, Bataille associates the formless with the act of declassification, creating a parallelism that emerges precisely from dissimilarity. He exemplifies this concept with phrases such as "the world as spit" or "the universe as a spider."<sup>7</sup>

The formless, therefore, possesses a rebellious nature, a transformative gesture that not only rejects the initial form but actively engages in the "work of forms" (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 29), suggesting the potential for the invention of something entirely new. According to Didi-Huberman, "transgression is not a refusal, but rather the embrace of a direct encounter, a critical assault, occurring precisely at the point where what is expected to be transgressed will ultimately converge" (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 28).

It is intriguing to observe the prominent position the experimental genre has gained within the realm of contemporary photography<sup>8</sup>. Increasingly, we encounter works that acknowledge the current image landscape as one characterized by passages, gaps, and deviations from hegemonic image norms, as well as a growing interplay between different mediums. In this context, particular emphasis is placed on works where the image is not presented to us in a clear manner but rather appears blurred, distorted, or even partially erased, revealing a complex relationship between the visible and the invisible. It is within this perspective that Eduardo Kac's work emerges as an unparalleled reference in Brazil. His relatively unknown Polaroid production resides within a historical context marked by the transgression of the established photography-form<sup>9</sup>, pushing the boundaries of the medium itself. By subverting forms without entirely severing ties with them, Kac ventures beyond the traditional understanding of photography in modernity while still maintaining a photographic essence. In doing so, he opens up photography to new possibilities and, most importantly, fosters a dialogue with other art forms.

<sup>7</sup> According to Didi-Huberman, in both examples, the conjunction "as" would be the transgressive term, which produces a similarity between the world and the spit, capable of associating the world with the "miserable forms of subversion" (Didi-Huberman 2015, p. 29).

<sup>8</sup> We do not think of "contemporary photography" only by its chronological character, although we recognize in the term a historiographical function, as Poivert points out. The historical object designated by the term "contemporary photography" refers to "a moment when the aesthetic questions raised by photography are central to art" (Poivert, 2010, p. 10). Translation by the authors.

<sup>9</sup> Term coined by Antonio Fatorelli to refer to the hegemonic model of photography: "(...) the history of photography is marked by a hegemonic model characterized by the status of the direct and instantaneous image" (Fatorelli, 2013, p. 10).



**EDUARDO KAC AND EXPERIMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHY IN BRAZIL**

While various forms of photographic experimentation in Brazil can be traced back to the 1920s, including works like “Os trinta Valérios” by Valério Vieira or the photographs from Mario de Andrade’s “Turista Aprendiz” project, the history of experimental photography in Brazil finds its narrative through the photoclub movements, particularly the Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante<sup>10</sup> in São Paulo. Established in 1945, the Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante solidified an experimental approach characterized by geometrical compositions, abstractions, and an intensive exploration of light. Figures such as Thomaz Farkas, José Yalenti, Geraldo de Barros, German Lorca, and José Oitica Filho, among others, shaped what would later be recognized as the Paulista School of photography. This experimental aspect within the photoclub significantly influenced subsequent generations of photographers.

The fervent quest for new visual languages that propelled the artists of the 1980s inherited not only from the tradition of photoclub photography but also from the groundbreaking works of artists like Waltécio Caldas, Ana Bella Geiger, Iole de Freitas, and Antonio Dias, who also employed photographs as their medium (Fatorelli, 2003, p. 156). Since then, it is noteworthy that experimentalism has become an enduring characteristic of Brazilian photography. Among the vast array of contemporary artists who have ventured into photographic experimentation, one particular series stands out: Cassio Vasconcellos’ “Noturnos São Paulo” (1998-2002), captured through Polaroid. According to Nelson Brisac, “the Polaroid image illuminates the city immersed in darkness, bringing it to life with a brilliant glow” (Brisac, 2002). Cassio’s images, taken at night using an SX-70 camera, take on a different palette of colors, textures, and materiality, intensifying the interplay between the visible and the invisible through contrasts with the intangible and transitory nature of the urban environment.

Eduardo Kac’s engagement with Polaroids emerges within this particular context, characterized by a deliberate resistance to the dominant modes of operation observed in various visualization and reading devices. Often, these devices perpetuate manipulations within the realm of photography, aiming to induce shifts in temporality—a theme that unfolds further in Kac’s subsequent works, employing diverse strategies<sup>11</sup>. The exploration of time as a transformative force is a consistent thread throughout Eduardo Kac’s artistic practice. The concept of time, serving as a catalyst for unique experiences and perceptions of images, recurrently manifests in his body of work, spanning his entire career. This focus has propelled him to employ an extensive range of technical and aesthetic approaches.

<sup>10</sup>On April 28, 1930, the Foto Clube Bandeirante was created in São Paulo. Only in 1945 did it change its name and become the Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante (Navarrette, José Antonio. 2022, p. 13).

<sup>11</sup>The work *Retrato Suposto - Rosto Roto*, co-authored with Mario Ramiro in 1988, is a good example, combining fax and live television to create a feedback system based on the continuous exchange and transformation of images. Kac communicated from his studio in Rio de Janeiro in real time with Ramiro, who in turn was in the studios of TV Cultura in São Paulo. While the fax is normally a private and dialogical means of communication that makes possible a two-way street between the sender and the receiver, television is a vehicle that covers a large public in a unilateral way. The union of these two antagonistic and naturalized media enhanced their interactive and creative possibilities (Kac, 2004, p. 130).



## Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

Through his interventions in the conventional processes of photography, Eduardo Kac expands our understanding of the medium itself. Specifically with his Polaroid works, which researcher Philippe Dubois describes as “the most tactile of photos” (Dubois, 1993, p. 294), Kac subverts the established codes of production and reception, giving rise to new spatial and temporal dimensions within photographic images. Notably, Kac’s Polaroids were exhibited in glass frames that preserved the image’s volume, transforming them into object-photographs that allowed observers to engage with them from different perspectives. It is essential to emphasize the photographic sculpture aspect, or photo-sculpture<sup>12</sup>, within Kac’s work, which expands the boundaries of both sculpture and photography. This expanded understanding grants photography not only a third spatial dimension but also a fourth temporal dimension. For Kac, the focus was less on composing a scene and more on exploring the intricacies of time itself.

Exploring the boundaries of photography allows us to contemplate not only what photography currently represents but also its potential for what it could be. It is an endeavor to reexamine its entrenched modernist concepts, the attempts at theoretical explanations, and even the reduction to a narrow set of singular strategies associated with a static, two-dimensional representation. From this standpoint, it becomes evident that the interplay between images, the emergence of photo-cine-videographic hybrids, and the various ways of inscribing images have always existed, albeit historically categorized under the broad label of “experimental,” as highlighted by Antonio Fatorelli (Fatorelli, 2013, p. 10). Within this experimental realm, a diverse range of works can be found, spanning from pictorialist photography to the photographic productions of the modernist avant-garde, and extending to the latest hybrid configurations that challenge the notion of a single photographic model. These configurations prompt us to reassess and consider new formulations and perspectives on what photography can potentially encompass. ■

<sup>12</sup>The notion of photographic sculpture (or photo-sculpture) was widely addressed by Philippe Dubois to characterize a set of practices that for the author bring together the main challenges of contemporary art, such as the works of Stefan Der Jaeger and David Hockney, among others (DUBOIS, 1993).

### REFERENCES

- Benjamin, W. (2012). A obra de arte na era da sua reprodutibilidade técnica. In T. Capistrano (Org.), *Benjamin e a obra de arte. Técnica, imagem, percepção* (pp. 9-40). Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto.
- Bonanos, C. (2012). *Instant: the story of Polaroid photography*. Princeton Architectural Press.
- Buse, P. (2016). *The camera does the rest: How Polaroid changed photography*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Brissac, N. Noturnos. In C. Vasconcellos, *Noturnos São Paulo*. Bookmark.

- Brizuela, N. (2018). What's the matter with photography? In N. Brizuela, J. Roberts (Orgs.), *The matter of photography in the Americas* (pp. 14-39). Stanford Press.
- Brizuela, N., & Roberts, J. (2019). *Photography at its limits*. [Catálogo da exposição]. Houston Center for photography.
- Cannabrava, I., & Navarrete, J. A. (2022). *Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante. Itinerários Globais estéticas em transformação*. [Catálogo da exposição]. Almeida e Dale.
- Carvalho, V. (2005). Foto-grafias impossíveis: o desafio das imagens fantasmas. *Revista Stadium*. <https://www.stadium.iar.unicamp.br/22/02.html>
- Costa, H., & Rodrigues, R. (1995). *A fotografia moderna no Brasil*. Editora UFRJ; IPHAN; FUNARTE.
- Cruz, N. V. (2005). *Comunicação, arte e ciência: as experiências de Eduardo Kac e Christa Sommerer e Laurent Mignonneau* [Tese de doutorado, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro].
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2015). *A semelhança informe ou o gaio saber visual segundo Georges Bataille*. Contraponto
- Diegues, I., & Ortega, E. (2013). *A Fotografia na Arte Brasileira Séc. XXI*. Cobogó.
- Dubois, P. (1993). *O ato fotográfico e outros ensaios*. Papirus.
- Fatorelli, A. (2013). *Fotografia Contemporânea: entre o cinema, o vídeo e as novas mídias*. Senac Nacional.
- Fatorelli, A. (2003). *Fotografia e Viagem. Entre a natureza e o artifício*. Relume Dumará.
- Flusser, V. (2002). *Filosofia da caixa preta: ensaios para uma futura filosofia da fotografia*. Relume Dumará.
- Foucault, M. (2009). Prefácio à transgressão. In A. S. Motta (Org.), *Coleção Ditos e Escritos III: Estética: Literatura e Pintura, Música e Cinema* (pp. 28-46). Forense Universitária.
- Guibert, H. (1981). *L'image fantôme*. Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Indrisek, S. (2017). A brief history of polaroid in Art, from Ansel Adams to Andy Warhol (and beyond). *Revista Artsy*. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-history-polaroids-art-ansel-adams-andy-warhol>
- Kac, E. (2004). *Luz e Letra: ensaios de arte, literatura e comunicação*. Contracapa.
- Kac, E. (1994). Eduardo Kac – the aesthetic of the dialogue [Entrevista a Simone Osthoff]. *Revista do Mestrado de Arte e Tecnologia da Imagem, 0*. <http://www.ekac.org/intervcomp94.html>
- Kac, E. (2013). O Movimento de Arte Pornô: a aventura de uma vanguarda dos anos 80. *Revista ARS, 11(22)*, 31-51.
- Kac, E. (1984, 20 de fevereiro). Na saída do túnel, o 'Cro-Magno' de Kac. O primeiro art door exibido no Rio. *Jornal O Globo*.



## Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

- Kraus, R. (2002). Corpus delicti. In M. Lo (Ed.), *Lo fotográfico: por uma teoria de los desplazamientos* (pp. 171-204). Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gilli.
- Poivert, M. (2010). *La photographie contemporaine*. Flammarion.
- Poivert, M. (2017). Preface. In M. Lenot (Ed.), *Jouer contre les appareils: de la photographie expérimentale* (pp. 9-14). Éditions Photosynthèses.
- Vasquez, P. (1986). *Polaroid – o domínio do imaginário*. In *Catálogo da exposição Polaroid: Imagens Instantâneas*. Funarte/Instituto Nacional de Fotografia.

---

Article received on august 29th, 2022 and approved on april 20th, 2023.