
THE AMAZONIAN SUBJECTS IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY In search of an image constellation

OS SUJEITOS AMAZÔNICOS NA FOTOGRAFIA CONTEMPORÂNEA: em busca de uma constelação de imagens

LOS SUJETOS AMAZÓNICOS EN LA FOTOGRAFÍA CONTEMPORÁNEA: en busca de una constelación de imágenes

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ABSTRACT

This is an exploratory study that analyzes representations of Amazonian subjects in images produced by photographers and visual artists. These images focus on typically Amazonian places. Based on them, the study seeks to understand the construction of representations of both the subject and nature, emphasizing the artists' perceptions in their process of capturing the physiognomy of the regional population. The analytical path is guided by the concept of the "image constellation," as formulated by Aby Warburg, which conceives images as a dynamic network of tensions and anachronisms. The essay moves from the first ethnographic photographs produced in the nineteenth century to the documentary and engaged photography of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

KEYWORDS: Amazon; Photography; Representation; Image constellation; Amazonian subject.

Introduction

Artistic production about the Amazon accompanies the very historical process through which the region was invented. From the earliest European iconographic representations, through the ethnographic photography of the nineteenth century and on to the committed works of contemporary photography, images of the Amazon have never been content merely to record a pre-existing reality. On the contrary, they have actively participated in the construction of what is understood today as the Amazonian man and woman. The aim of this essay is to trace a path through a selection of these visual, photographic and pictorial artistic representations, seeking to illuminate part of this complex formative itinerary. The perspective is simultaneously aesthetic and historical, steering clear, as far as possible, of the Manichean frameworks that tend to encumber this kind of analysis.

To organize our trajectory we turn to the concept of the "image constellation" as formulated by Aby Warburg. This is a network of tensions and anachronisms between images which, when traversed, reveals not only the persistence of certain gestures or visual forms but also the historical transformations that continuously recode them (Michaud, 2013, p. 39). The "constellation" is a particularly productive instrument for analyzing Amazonian images, in which the "other" — whether indigenous, caboclo or riparian, the subjects that have historically been treated as inherently Amazonian — has occupied the centre of representations produced, for the most part, by external gazes.

The images analyzed here, which together illustrate an Amazonian image constellation, range from photographers such as Walter Hunnewell, Albert Frisch, Sebastião Salgado and Claudia Andujar to painters such as Hahnemann Bacelar and Vicente do Rego Monteiro. Through these works we seek to identify both the ruptures and the continuities in the ways of representing Amazonian subjects and nature. The choice of these artists is justified by the relevance of their work within the broader field

of regional representation and by the testimony each of them bears to a particular relationship — whether asymmetrical or solidary — with the subjects they portray.

This inquiry is structured in five sections. Following the introduction, we discuss the theoretical and methodological foundations that orient the reading of images. We then examine the representations produced during the nineteenth century and their colonial markings. The fourth section addresses the modernist transformations and their relationship to regional identity. Finally, we analyze contemporary photography and the new modes of representing the Amazonian subject among regional artists.

Images, Tradition and Anachronism

The analysis of artistic images demands a theoretical apparatus capable of accounting for both the aesthetic dimension and the historical and cultural context within which each work is inscribed. In this regard, two authors are central to the approach proposed in this essay: Erwin Panofsky and Boris Kossoy, whose contributions complement each other by offering tools for reading images both in their historical depth and in their specific materiality. For the former of these two, every artistic representation inscribes itself in a tradition that precedes and conditions the creative act. No work of art belongs to a Platonic substrate; it inscribes itself within certain traditions while simultaneously anticipating new forms of reproduction. In his reflections on iconography, Panofsky suggests that: "our identifications and interpretations will depend on our subjective equipment, and for this very reason will have to be corrected and controlled by an insight into historical processes, whose sum total may be called tradition" (Panofsky, 1982, p. 28, emphasis added).

This perspective entails recognizing that a work is not simply there as a given fact of nature or a pure act of creative genius. It enters into dialogue with earlier representations, re-enacts consecrated gestures, reworks established visual conventions against a backdrop of particular expectations. When a work about the Amazon is produced, one intervenes in a long chain of images that have shaped the perception of the region — a chain for which the famous expedition of Francisco Orellana, who first sighted the warrior women known as the Amazons, constitutes a founding discourse.

Kossoy, himself a photographer, draws attention to what remains invisible in the photographic image yet is fundamental to its full comprehension. For this author, "the trace of life crystallized in the photographic image only acquires meaning at the moment when one gains knowledge of and understands the links in the chain of facts absent from the image" (Kossoy, 2008, p. 133). Photography, in this sense, is not merely the record of an instant; it is the outcome of a series of technical, aesthetic and

ideological choices that must be dismantled if one is to understand what the image effectively says and what it silences.

Drawing on both perspectives, the Warburgian notion of the image constellation becomes clearer — one might even say operational. The constellation is not simply a genealogy but a montage of heterogeneous images which, when placed in contact with one another, reveal similarities and differences, continuities and ruptures that no single work, taken in isolation, would be capable of bringing to light. It is a methodological procedure that allows one simultaneously to respect the singularity of each work and to comprehend it as part of a broader field of historical forces.

Also relevant in this context is the debate on endogenous and exogenous representations of the Amazon, as proposed by Magali Franco Bueno (2003). For this author, there is a fundamental difference between representations produced within the region by subjects who have immersed themselves in it and absorbed their principal formative resources from it, and those produced by external travellers, researchers or artists. This distinction implies no hierarchy, but rather a continuity between what was produced by the conquistadors and by later artists. As we trace the selected images it will be possible to identify from which position each artist speaks and what effects that position produces upon their work.

Nineteenth-Century Photography and Visual Ethnography

The emergence of photography in the first half of the nineteenth century coincided with the intensification of scientific and colonial exploration projects in the Amazon. The images produced during this period reflect, to a considerable degree, the values and hierarchies that governed these projects: the photographer presented himself as an "omniscient narrator", capable of capturing the objective truth of the scene represented, while the subject — almost invariably indigenous or mixed-race — was reduced to the status of an object of study, a specimen within a racial and cultural taxonomy still under construction.

Exemplary in this respect is the work of the photographer Walter Hunnewell, active in the Amazon in the second half of the nineteenth century. In a detailed analysis of his output, Maurício Zouein observes that Hunnewell transformed the Amazon into a kind of laboratory for the study of Brazilian racial mixture, removing figures from their social context and subjecting them to a "subjective distancing" that, "whether consciously or not, of the technique and of the very material used, is stamped upon the materiality" (Zouein, 2022, p. 47). In one of his most analyzed photographs, dated 1865, a woman from Manaus (Figure 1) presents herself to the camera in ill-fitting clothes,

with exposed breasts and a visibly uncomfortable expression. The photographer's intention, according to Zouein, was to capture the mixed-race individual in service of a cataloguing ethnography in which the human being portrayed became, above all, a datum.

Figure 1
Ideas of Civilization in Images of the Amazon

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Acervo: Museu Peabody de Arqueologia e Etnologia da Universidade de Harvard. Fotografo: Walter Hunnewell. Manaus, 1865-1866.

Note. Adapted from *Ideas of Civilization in Images of the Amazon*, by Maurício Zouein (2022).

This logic of visual domination was not exclusive to Hunnewell. Albert Frisch, in a photomontage produced in 1867, represented an Umuá indigenous person from the old Province of Alto Amazonas in an equally clinical manner, albeit with apparently different intentions. In Frisch's image one already perceives echoes of the Romanticism that, from Gonçalves Dias onwards, had been transforming the Brazilian indigenous person into a stylized figure simultaneously in the condition of savage and nobleman. Frisch's indigenous subject stands in a majestic pose, surrounded by elements of Amazonian nature, as if serving as the natural guardian of a territory that Western civilization sought to conquer.

This articulation between ethnographic and Romantic representation runs throughout the entire imagetic production of the nineteenth century concerning the Amazon. On one hand, photography pursued scientific objectivity, reducing the indigenous person to a racial specimen; on the other, Romantic painting and literature elevated him to the status of founding hero of the nation, bearer of a savage nobility that needed to be integrated into the Brazilian civilizing project. The two tendencies coexisted and frequently reinforced one another, producing a representation of the Amazonian subject in which the indigenous person was always the "other": either an object of scientific curiosity or a symbol of a longed-for Brazilianness.

This articulation of images also reveals the duality identified by Neide Gondim in the representations that "invented" the Amazon. On one side, infernalism, which viewed the Amazon as a hostile and dangerous universe; on the other, Edenism, which conceived of it as a natural paradise conducive to colonization (Gondim, 1994). In the former, indigenous peoples were dangerous cannibals. In the latter, they appeared as fertile material to be shaped by catechesis — the soil in which anything planted will grow.

These two tendencies are not necessarily opposed but complementary. Both proceeded from an external gaze that transformed the region into a projection of the colonizer's desires and fears. Nineteenth-century photography, in documenting the Amazon for metropolitan audiences, contributed decisively to the consolidation of these representations and the duality embedded within them.

The heroic indigenous figure of modernism

The nineteenth century bequeathed to the Brazilian imaginary a specific figure of the indigenous person: no longer the savage or the ethnographic specimen, but the romantic hero — noble, sacrificial, bearer of the founding values of a nation that positioned itself against the Portuguese through a visceral anti-Lusitanism (Munaro, 2022). This figure was constructed in literature by texts ranging from Gonçalves Dias to José de Alencar, whose novel *O Guarani* (1857) consolidated the model of the chivalric indigenous person in national culture. The character Peri, faithful protector of the young Ceci, performed Herculean feats such as uprooting a palm tree from the ground to save her from a current, thus embodying the imaginary fusion between the Rousseauian "noble savage" and the European medieval knight.

This literary representation found its parallels in the visual arts. The painting by Horácio Hora (1882), depicting Peri and Ceci, and the images painted between 1897 and 1899 in the Noble Hall of the Teatro Amazonas by the Italian Domenico de Angelis

(Figure 2), testify to the consolidation of the heroic indigenous figure as a founding image of regional and national identity. In the context of the Teatro Amazonas — the supreme symbol of the Manaus Belle Époque — this representation assumed a quite explicit political dimension. In it, the ancestral indigenous person legitimized possession of the territory and the construction of an Amazonian civilization that aspired to be simultaneously autochthonous and cosmopolitan.

Figure 2

Painting of O Guarani in the Noble Hall of the Amazon Theatre: The Episode of Peri, an Indigenous Man, Rescuing Ceci



Note. Photograph by Ana Luiza Morais Soares. The painting was created by the Italian artist Domenico de Angelis between 1897 and 1899 and is displayed in the Noble Hall of the Amazon Theatre.

The heroic indigenous figure also found expression in the historical character of Ajuricaba (?–1728), an indigenous leader who, according to oral tradition and the few available documentary records, resisted Portuguese colonization on the Rio Negro and, once captured, preferred death in the waters of the river to slavery. Rendered on screen in 1976 in the film *Ajuricaba, o Rebelde da Amazônia*, this historical figure was incorporated into the pantheon of Amazonian heroes, becoming a symbol of indigenous resistance against colonial structures.

The Brazilian transition to modernism, in the first decades of the twentieth century, brought significant transformations in the ways of representing the Amazonian subject. The search was for the regional, for the authentically Brazilian — achieved by

anthropophagically digesting European elements. The works of Mário de Andrade — *Turista Aprendiz*, written throughout the 1920s, and *Macunaíma* (1928) — seek to represent a Brazil in formation, without a fixed identity, through subjects who constantly shift their form, language and behaviour. The Amazonian artists, particularly in Manaus, began to adopt the new perspectives by casting hitherto unprecedented gazes upon the caboclos, the rubber-tappers, the most originally Amazonian types (Munaro, 2019). In this context, the painter Vicente do Rego Monteiro (1899–1970) engaged with Amazonian subjects and legends in his paintings exhibited during the 1920s, works constructed through contact with the European avant-garde and with painters such as Anita Malfatti and Di Cavalcanti. On his canvases, the indigenous element is no longer treated as an ethnographic object or a Romantic hero, but as raw material for a modern plastic language that sought to fuse the forms of European primitivism with Brazilian visual traditions. In addition, the indigenous figure begins to cede its central place to its principal descendant: the caboclo (Figure 3).

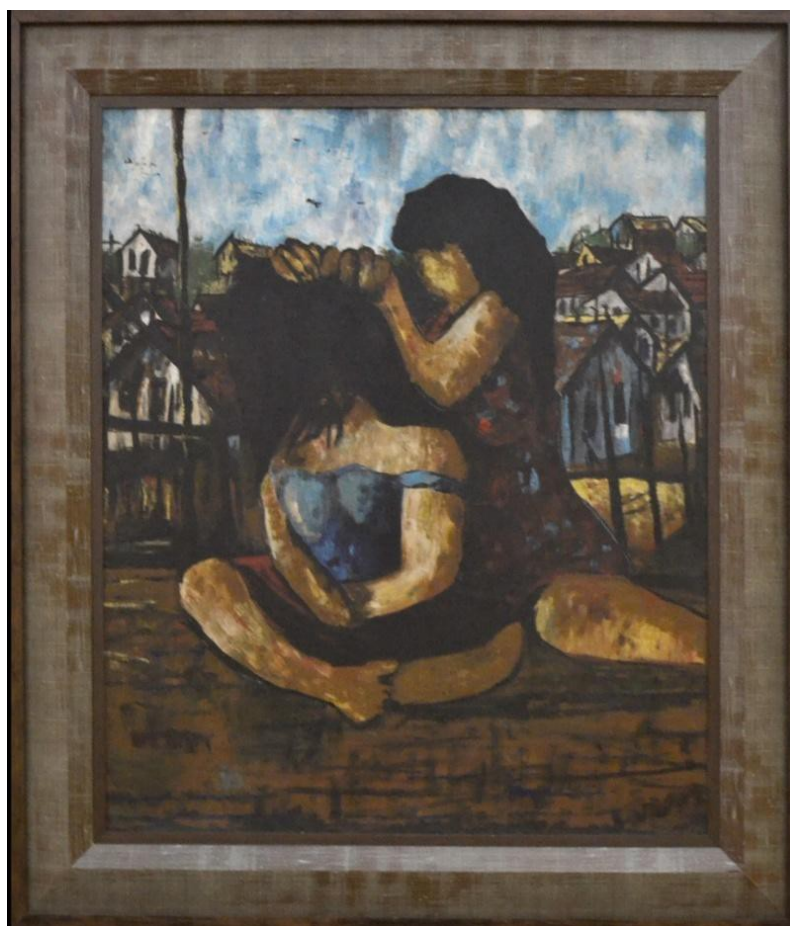
Figure 3
The Smoker



Note. Painting by Vicente do Rego Monteiro. The painting was exhibited between 1920 and 1925.

The modernist impulse to penetrate emotionally into popular cultural universes also animated the work of the young Amazonian painter Hahnemann Bacelar (1948–1971), whose brief and intense trajectory left deep marks on Amazonian art. In his already celebrated painting *Cafuné*, produced in 1964, Bacelar depicted two women engaged in the practice of delousing in a suburb of Manaus (Figure 4). The work, associated with expressionism, sought no photographic objectivity but instead, as Monik Santos observed, groped towards the artist's feeling before the object portrayed: "they are the cabocla women who live in the stilt houses near the river, who have lice, children, obligations, everyone crammed into a single room, whose bodies are not the beauty ideal of the goddess Venus. They are ordinary women, figures of everyday life" (Santos, 2018).

Figure 4
Cafuné



Note. Painting by Hahnemann Bacelar, 1964.

Bacelar's image represents a significant rupture with respect to both photographic ethnography and heroic Romanticism: rather than specimens or heroes,

the women of Cafuné are subjects of a specific dailiness marked by poverty, solidarity and the quiet dignity of ordinary bodies. Bacelar proposed a representation that was neither idealizing nor degrading. The cabocla women are simply there, in their full humanity, as "figures of everyday life" that art must recognize and celebrate, even if melancholically. These paintings made a profound impression on Amazonian intellectuals, reconfiguring the Amazon's own gaze upon itself — as Márcio de Souza memorably observed (1977).

Contemporary photography and the search for the real subject

Throughout the twentieth century, the social and cultural transformations associated with late modernity — characterized by the fraying of human bonds and the fragility of "communities" (Bauman, 2018) — produced new framings for the representation of Amazonian subjects. In reaction to the objectifying gaze of photographic ethnography and the idealizations of Romanticism, major photographers began to seek a deeper, more politically conscious approach to the subjects they portrayed. This search entailed not merely technical and aesthetic changes but a thorough reassessment of the relations between photographer and photographed.

Sebastião Salgado is, without question, one of the most significant expressions of this search in the context of photography about the Amazon. Throughout his engagements with the region, Salgado produced portraits of indigenous people seeking to overcome their historical condition as objects of ethnographic curiosity. In his photograph of the cousins Hahani, Tiniru and Uganja, taken in 2017, one perceives not only the expressiveness of the faces but an entire naturalness of the women photographed before the camera that records them. Uganja, the third woman in the image, died just days after the photograph was taken, lending it a memorial dimension that deepens its ethical impact (Figure 5). Salgado's work on the Amazon treats indigenous people not as symbols or allegory but as individuals with singular histories, faces and destinies.

Figure 5
Suruwahá Indigenous Territory, Amazonas State



Note. Photograph by Sebastião Salgado, 2017.

In an equally significant trajectory, the photographer Claudia Andujar was an active participant in the process of demarcating Yanomami lands in Roraima — the Yanomami having become the most nationally discussed indigenous group. They came to symbolize the tension between the State and indigenous peoples, between business interests and environmental protection. Before picking up her camera, Andujar spent decades living alongside this people, producing an archive of extraordinary richness. Her photographs, often made using techniques that depart from the conventions of realism — long exposures, coloured flash, distorted perspectives — seek to capture not merely the external appearance of the Yanomami but their inner experience. Andujar's work is simultaneously historical document and political intervention, having been produced in a context of grave threat to the Yanomami people and functioning as an instrument of denunciation and pressure upon the Brazilian public authorities.

The political dimension of photography concerning Amazonian peoples became still more urgent in the wake of the humanitarian crises that, in recent years, have struck indigenous territories. The images of severely malnourished Yanomami children and adults, widely disseminated by the media in 2022, represent the polar opposite of

the Romantic idealizations of the nineteenth century: stripped of all aesthetic ornament, these photographs document the failure of state protection structures. At the same time, by rendering visible what the Brazilian State and society would prefer to keep invisible, these images fulfil a fundamentally critical function. In January 2023, the Urihi Yanomami association reported that the indigenous woman who had appeared most frequently in the protest photographs had died as a result of her critical health condition. Out of respect for Yanomami customs, the association requested that the image no longer be shared.

The trajectory of transformations in the representation of the Amazonian subject reveals a pattern that might be described, drawing on Warburgian logic, as a set of persistent and recurrent gestures: the exposure of the Amazonian "other"'s body to the external gaze — now to study it, now to idealize it, now to move the viewer, now to denounce it. In every case, the body of the Amazonian subject functions as a surface upon which the anxieties, projects and contradictions of the representing society are inscribed. What changes over time is the degree of awareness with which artists and photographers approach that surface.

In this spirit, Amazonian photographers have been attempting to provide a new dimension to regional subjects, with whom they actively intermingle. Alexandre Sequeira's series "Nazaré de Mocajuba" is one of the most emblematic works of contemporary photography in the Amazon. It seeks not simply to "show" a place but to construct an experience of cohabitation and memory. Realized in 2010 in the riverside community of Nazaré de Mocajuba (Pará), the series is the fruit of the artist's prolonged immersion in the locality. Sequeira not only lived alongside the residents but transformed the artistic process into a collaborative production. After photographing the residents — who had become his friends — the artist printed his images onto fabric and returned them to the community in the form of everyday objects. Figure 6 shows a riverside cabocla farmer printed in front of her own house: a typically Amazonian place.

Figure 6
Nazaré de Mocajuba



Note. Photograph by Alexandre Sequeira, 2010. Available at <http://www.alexandresequeira.com/>

Seeking to revisit and put pressure on Sequeira's photographic process, Francielen Apolinário photographed a riverside community in the interior of Roraima, in the far north of the Amazon. The community, known as Vila Vintém, was gradually revealed as an important space of belonging in which the artisanal production of double-hollow bricks became a symbol not only of subsistence but of the residents' connection with the place and the waters of the Rio Branco, a tributary of the Rio Negro. Here lies the deep Amazon — on the margins of the rivers, in improvised dwellings. Throughout the series, the dance between subjects and nature began to take centre stage: the result is individuals merged with the structures they inhabit, structures to which the photographer is herself merged, as though in a single mortar (Figure 7).

Figure 7
Overlapping Realities



Note. Artwork by Leandro Apolinário. Published in the Journal of the Graduate Program in Arts at UFMG, 2025.

In this figure (Figure 7), depicting a riverside dwelling in the Amazon, human physiognomies and architectural elements overlap to create a visual narrative marked by layers of memory. The improvised domestic environment reveals the efforts of cohabitation, while the light picks out faces and objects, intensifying introspection. At the centre, a standing woman conveys authority. The structural fragility reflects creativity in the face of adversity, while everyday details suggest the daily labour of survival. Here the Amazon is seen from within — by itself.

Amazonian identity

The question of representations of Amazonian subjects cannot be separated from the broader problem of Amazonian identity as a historical and cultural construction. As Neide Gondim demonstrated, the Amazon had to be invented — constructed discursively through a long process of conceptual elaboration that mobilized travellers, scientists, writers and artists over the course of centuries (Gondim, 1994) — before finally arriving at the regional artists who seek their own contours. This invention, which began to crystallize with some clarity in the second half of the nineteenth century, involved the construction of a consciousness of regional belonging,

a "we are Amazonian" that gradually absorbed elements of local cultural life and placed the figure of the caboclo at the centre of the narrative (Munaro, 2021).

This process of identity invention is, by its very nature, a hybrid process — understanding hybridism as involving impurity, mixture and the transformation that arises from new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures and ideas (Hall, 2003, p. 34). Amazonian identity is not the pure expression of an originary culture but the product of successive encounters, conflicts and negotiations between indigenous, European and African cultures, between the local and the global, between tradition and modernity. The artistic representations analyzed in this essay are, each in its own way, expressions of this constitutive hybridism.

The caboclo — as a figure emerging from the mixture of indigenous and European colonizer, who became the symbolic protagonist of Amazonian identity — occupies an ambiguous place in the visual representations of the region. On one hand, this figure is represented as a tragic one, marked by material poverty and cultural subalternity. On the other, it is celebrated as the bearer of ancestral knowledge and an intimate relationship with nature and the rivers — whether the riverside farmer of Nazaré de Mocajuba or the brick-makers of Vila Vintém. This ambiguity, far from being a problem to be resolved, is precisely what makes the caboclo a central figure for thinking through the complexity of Amazonian identity.

The visual representations analyzed in this essay reveal, in their diversity, this same complexity. From the forged objectivity of ethnographic photography to the expressionist subjectivity of Bacelar, from the Romantic heroism of Peri to the vulnerable humanity of the Yanomami in contemporary photographs, the Amazonian subject is represented from different angles, with different presuppositions and different political and aesthetic projects. What the image constellation allows us to perceive is that none of these representations is definitive, since each captures one aspect of Amazonian reality while casting others — equally real — into the shadow.

Final remarks

The analytical journey undertaken in this essay, guided by the concept of the image constellation, has made it possible to identify some of the principal tendencies that have marked the representation of Amazonian subjects over time. In broad strokes, one can identify a movement that runs from the ethnographic objectification and Romantic idealism of the nineteenth century, through the modernist representations that sought to penetrate the cultural specificities of the regional people, to the documentary and politically engaged photography of the twentieth and

twenty-first centuries, which has endeavoured to restore to Amazonian subjects their dignity, their singularity and their historical agency.

This movement is neither linear nor teleological: it is not a progressive evolution towards ever more "correct" or "authentic" forms of representation. Rather, it is a field of permanent tensions in which different ways of seeing and representing coexist, contradict and complement one another. Images of the Amazon are, like all images, the product of historically situated choices — choices that involve who looks, from where, with what instruments and with what intentions.

The contribution of photographers such as Sebastião Salgado and Claudia Andujar represents, in this context, a significant step towards a more ethical and more responsible representation of Amazonian subjects. By replacing objectifying distance with a relationship of proximity, attentiveness and engagement, these artists have not only produced more complex and more humane images but have also called into question the presuppositions that have historically governed the external gaze upon the Amazon. At the same time, the photographs of Yanomami malnutrition demonstrate that the production of images about the suffering of Amazonian subjects remains an ethically fraught field, in which the boundary between testimony and exploitation is always fragile and must be constantly renegotiated.

Finally, it is important to note that an image constellation of the Amazon is far from complete. The images analyzed in this essay represent only a partial and necessarily limited selection from a vast archive that includes photographs, paintings, films, scientific illustrations and media images produced over the course of centuries. A more expansive constellation would need to incorporate also the representations produced by Amazonian subjects themselves — indigenous peoples, caboclos, riverside dwellers — who are increasingly appropriating the tools of image production to narrate their own history from within. This horizon, still under construction, points towards a future of Amazonian representations in which the "other" ceases to be merely an object and becomes also a subject of the gaze.

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RESUMO

Este é um trabalho exploratório que analisa representações de sujeitos amazônicos nas imagens produzidas por fotógrafos e artistas plásticos. São imagens que incidem sobre lugares tipicamente amazônicos. A partir delas, busca-se compreender a construção das representações do sujeito e da natureza, tendo como foco a percepção dos artistas em seu processo de captura da fisionomia do povo regional. O percurso analítico é orientado pelo conceito de "constelação imagética", tal como formulado por Aby Warburg, que concebe as imagens como uma rede dinâmica de tensões e anacronismos. O ensaio caminha desde as primeiras fotografias etnográficas produzidas no século XIX até a fotografia documental e engajada dos séculos XX e XXI.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Amazônia; Fotografia; Representação; Constelação imagética; Sujeito amazônico.

RESUMEN

Este es un trabajo exploratorio que analiza representaciones de sujetos amazónicos en las imágenes producidas por fotógrafos y artistas plásticos. Son imágenes que inciden sobre lugares típicamente amazónicos. A partir de ellas, se busca comprender la construcción de las representaciones del sujeto y de la naturaleza, teniendo como foco la percepción de los artistas en su proceso de captación de la fisonomía del pueblo regional. El recorrido analítico está orientado por el concepto de "constelación imagética", tal como fue formulado por Aby Warburg, quien concibe las imágenes como una red dinámica de tensiones y anacronismos. El ensayo transita desde las primeras fotografías etnográficas producidas en el siglo XIX hasta la fotografía documental y comprometida de los siglos XX y XXI.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Amazonía; Fotografía; Representación; Constelación imagética; Sujeto amazónico.