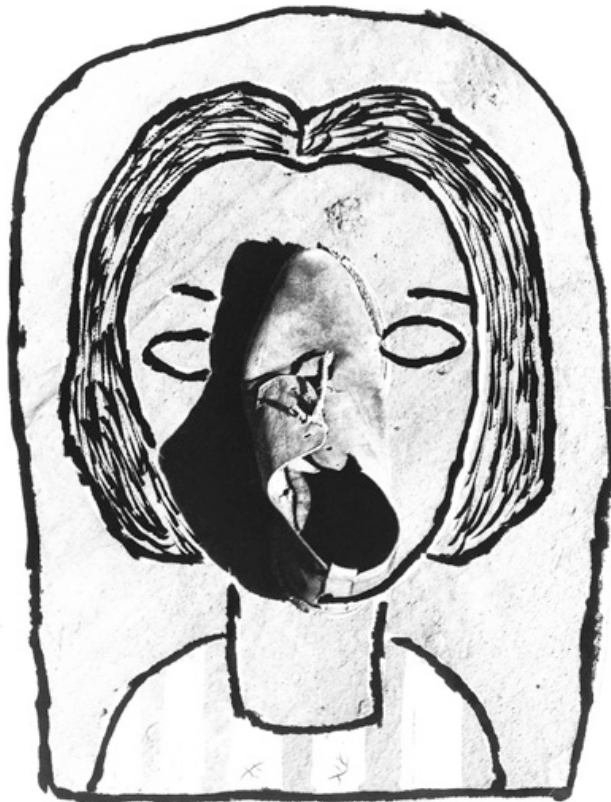


Story of a little girl with a big mouth

by Fernando Castro

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Menina do Sapato © Geraldo de Barros

The first time I saw Geraldo de Barros's *Menina do Sapato* was in the catalog of the exhibition of the first Latin American Colloquium of Photography: *Hecho en Latinoamérica* (Mexico, 1978). Had I been Brazilian perhaps I would have recognized the author's name as that of a renowned artist. But alas, I was a naïve young man and I innocently assumed that the author was another enthusiastic youngster experimenting with the medium. In said catalog there is no date for the work, so I got the impression that it was a recent work. At the time I did not really think about art, I just liked it or disliked it, and occasionally was able to voice a few opinions about it. What I liked about *Menina do Sapato* was the cleverness with which the opening of the shoe had been made to double as a gaping mouth on the cartoon-like face of a little girl vaguely resembling Mafalda, Periquita, or La Pequeña Lulú.

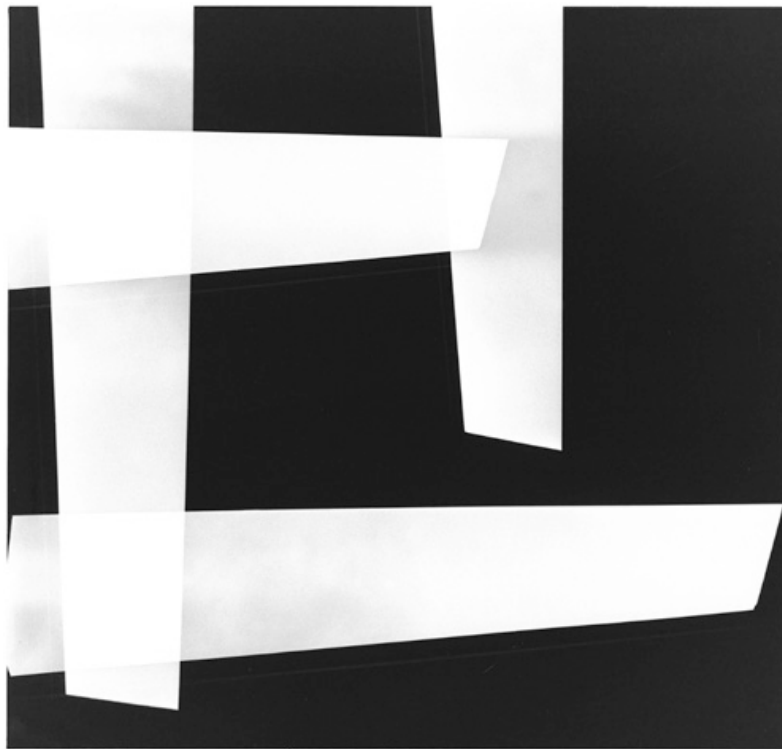
Although de Barros could have staged the old shoe for building the image, more than likely it was an object he found half-buried in the sand. The shoe part of the image agreed with the way I had learned to engage the medium of photography; namely by looking, finding and capturing. So it was easy to imagine myself finding the old shoe and photographing it. However, de Barros's work was teaching me then that I could also draw on my found images by scratching the negative and painting over it. However, ten years went by before I dared to permanently alter my negatives the way he had because in my mind that alteration was tantamount to damaging something almost as precious as reality itself. Instead, I modestly

began experimenting by cutting my prints to make photo-collages. I never exhibited these collages but a few friends who liked them ended up owning them.

I also saw a social commentary and political dimension in *Menina do Sapato* that—not knowing the artist— I understood could have been just my own interpretation. There is something very destitute about a single old discarded shoe acting as the girl's open mouth. It is as if the abandonment and poverty of the shoe nuanced the drawing of the girl so that she was no longer the middle-class Mafalda, Periquita, or Lulú. Her disheveled hair, roughly drawn on the negative with a sharp tool, made her look like one of those indigenous homeless girls that roam the streets of Lima, Mexico City or São Paulo, clinging to their mother's skirts and extending their small hands to the passersby pleading, "Señor, una ayuda por favor." That open mouth that in Edvard Munch's *Scream* (1893) expressed a sort of existential howl of despair, in Geraldo de Barros's *Menina* was something as basic and passive as hunger, or as critical and active as asking, "why?" The hollow of that shoe is so very dark, deep and loud.

In 1992 I started writing the essay *Crossover Dreams* for the book *Image and Memory: Photography from Latin American 1866-1994* (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1998). It was then that I perused the *Hecho en Latinoamérica* catalog once again and took a second look at *Menina do Sapato*. I wanted the image to accompany my text, but how would I find it? Fortunately, somebody had the great idea to include in the back of said catalog a list of the participants and their address. Still thinking that Geraldo de Barros was a young man I wrote to him speculating that perhaps by then he had become a lawyer, a taxi driver, or both, and might not even be doing photography anymore. To my surprise, a month later I got a letter from his daughter Fabiana de Barros in which she thanked me for the interest in her father's work and cordially agreed to send me the picture for use in my essay. It was only when I received the print that I found out that *Menina do Sapato* was made in 1949! Who was Geraldo de Barros? At the time, it was not possible to quickly google and find out who's who, so answering the question became a very slow process.

Although I did not know it then, the reason Geraldo had not answered my letter himself is that by that time, he had suffered a couple of traumatic strokes that impaired his speech and motor skills. My letter had arrived at a turning point in the dissemination of his work. Fabiana, who is also an artist in her own right, had taken it upon herself to have her father's oeuvre receive the recognition it deserved. She was instrumental in arranging *Geraldo de Barros, Peintre et Photographe*, a major retrospective at the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1993. In 1994, she helped organize another exhibit at the Museum da Imagem e do Som de São Paulo: *Geraldo de Barros, Fotógrafo*. It was thanks to this last exhibit that I came upon the only book about him: *Fotoformas, Geraldo de Barros* (Raizes: São Paulo, 1994). Both shows were based on the seminal 1950 *Fotoformas* exhibit at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo her father himself had put together when he was only twenty-seven years old.



Fotoforma © Geraldo de Barros

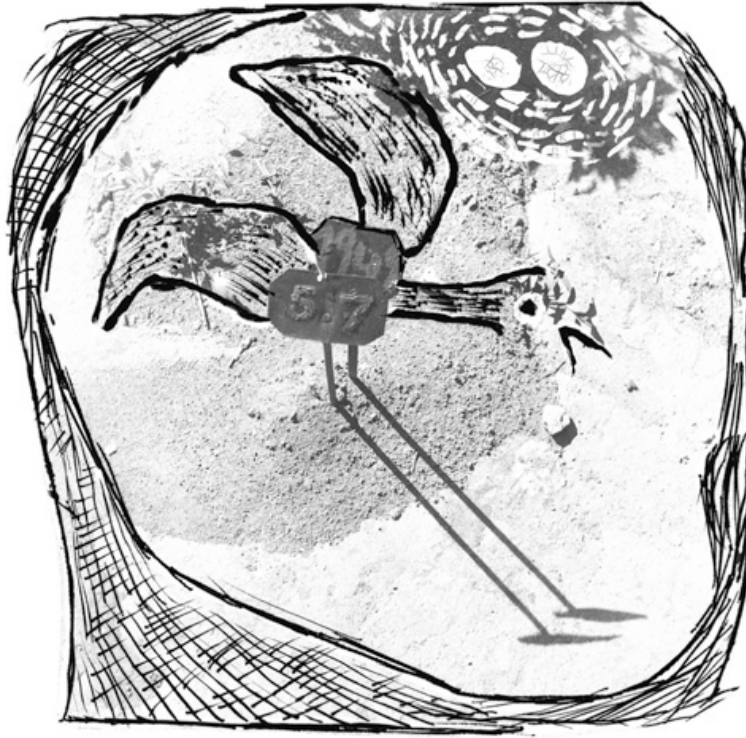
The book that bore the same name as the exhibit, *Fotoformas, Geraldo de Barros*, contained some installation photographs of the 1950 exhibit and among the works that appeared in them was *Menina do Sapato*. He showed it almost as a sculptural object: the print cut along

the edge of the image and mounted on a solid support to stand by itself. The presentation vaguely resembled the *foto-esculturas* that I understand can still be made to order somewhere in Mexico City. In addition, the book revealed a plethora of other kinds of photographic techniques with which de Barros had experimented: multiple-exposures, cut-negatives, pinhole photography, etc. Some works were labeled "*superposição da imagens no fotograma*" – a phrase in which the term *fotograma* turned out to be a false cognate for "photogram." Geraldo himself never used this terminology to describe these works. Although in the French translation the aforementioned book used a better phrase -- "*superposition a la prise de vue*"-- my confusion had begun.

The confusion originated in the fact that a Portuguese dictionary defines "*fotograma*" as "*Cada uma das imagens registradas em filme fotográfico ou cinematográfico.*" Needless to say, the English meaning of the word is much narrower: namely, "a photographic image produced without a camera, usually by placing an object on or near a piece of film or light-sensitive paper and exposing it to light." (From built-in dictionary in my Microsoft Office software). To add to the confusion was the fact that many *fotogramas* were very abstract and geometric and really looked like photograms. I believe I was not the only writer who took some of Geraldo's works to be photograms, but I did not pay too much attention to the issue because the ones that most captivated me were the ones described as "*desenho sobre negativo com ponta-seca e nanquim.*" These last works resembled *Menina do Sapato* in that Geraldo made them by scratching and painting the negatives: *Homenagem a Picasso* (1949), *Homenagem a Stravinsky* (1949), *O anjo* (1948), and *Cemitério do Tatuapé* (1949).



Homenagem a Picasso © Geraldo de Barros



Cemitério do Tatuapé © Geraldo de Barros

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O anjo © Geraldo de Barros

Five years went by from the time I finished writing *Crossover Dreams* to the time *Image and Memory* was finally published in the fall of 1998. In the interim I had begun curating photographic exhibitions for Sicardi-Sanders, a small Houston gallery that specialized in Latin American art. In 1997, when the gallery started making plans for FotoFest 1998, I suggested to Maria Ines Sicardi to show the work of Geraldo de Barros. Once again, I got in touch with Fabiana de Barros who was delighted at the attention her father's work was finally getting. In fact, she told me her father had started doing photography again in spite of his precarious health. It was only then that I found out Geraldo had suffered several strokes that had diminished his motor skills and speech. In spite of his physical impairments, with the help of an assistant he worked on a new series of photographic works titled *Sobras* --because they were made from the negatives that were leftover in his family and travel albums. However, the 1998 exhibit at Sicardi-Sanders titled *Geraldo de Barros: Traces on the Glass*, mostly included the work from his 1950 *Fotoformas* exhibit at the Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo.

One of the many illustrious guests that Fotofest brought to Sicardi-Sanders Gallery that year was A.D. Coleman, a critic who is not easily enthused. After seeing the de Barros exhibit he

told me that it was the best show he had seen at Fotofest that year. Unable to travel on account of his poor health, de Barros did not see his first solo exhibit in the United States. Shortly after the exhibit at Sicardi-Sanders in 1998, Geraldo de Barros (1923-1998) passed away.

Although I never met Geraldo de Barros, his death caused me great sadness and left me with unanswered questions. Why had he stopped practicing photography for forty-four years? If we go back a few decades we may find an answer. After the 1950 *Fotoformas* exhibit and as a result of it, de Barros spent a year in Europe that changed his artistic vision. He met Concrete artists Max Bill and Otl Aicher and the meeting reaffirmed convictions he had already been entertaining in São Paulo. On his return to Brazil in 1952 he joined other artists as a signatory of the *Ruptura Manifesto* of Concrete Art. A section of this document states the program of what Concrete artists were to avoid and what they were to practice:

THE OLD IS

- all varieties and hybrids of naturalism;
- the mere denial of naturalism, that is, the "wrong" naturalism of children, the insane, the "primitive," the expressionists, the surrealists etc. . . . ;
- the hedonistic non-figurativism spawned by gratuitous taste, that seeks the mere excitement of pleasure or displeasure

THE NEW IS

- all expressions based on the new art principles;
- all experiences that tend to renovation of the quintessential values of visual art (space-time, movement and material);
- the art intuition endowed with clear and intelligent principles as well as with great possibilities of practical development;
- to bestow on art a definite place within the scope of contemporary spiritual work, while considering art as a means of knowledge deducible from concepts, situating it above opinion and demanding, for its review, a previous knowledge.

Photography is implicit in the manifesto as the kind of visual realistic representation that was developed since the Renaissance and described as "naturalism" (Elsewhere, Joel Snyder has described the evolution of the "photographic look" along the paradigm of visual perspective developed in the Renaissance). Another section of the *Ruptura Manifesto* reads, "because the scientific naturalism of the renaissance—the old process of rendering the (three-dimensional) external world on a (two-dimensional) plane—has exhausted its historical task." To put it mildly, Concrete artists were to avoid all kinds of mimetic art. Instead, they were to produce art that referred only to itself. As a result of its chemistry and optics photography not only points beyond itself (it is indexical), it is mimetic as well.

Of the works de Barros produced for his 1950 exhibit only his most abstract works seemed to be congruent with the premises of *Concretismo*. Some of these works were precisely the ones described in the *Fotoformas, Geraldo de Barros 1994* book as "*superposição da imagens no fotograma*." Judging by the abundant comparisons of Geraldo's work to that of Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in the literature, the mismatch of meanings had led not only myself, but also a few others, to believe that Geraldo de Barros had produced photograms. But the error also makes one draw the wrong conclusions about the connection of these works to *Concretismo*.

Although a photogram is still indexical, the optical portion of the photographic process that gives the medium its mimetic power is absent in it. Indeed, a photogram is a mere silhouette—closer to a shadow than to a mimetic depiction. Two very different objects (say, a coin and a tennis ball) can project the same shadow—a fact well-known by those who amuse us by making figures with the shadows of their hands. For that reason, if the silhouette is a rectangular geometric form, the photogram tends to refer to the shape that gave rise to it rather than to the rectangular object that produced it (since many objects could have produced the same form). So photograms are ideally suited to have that disconnection with visual reality that Concrete artists found so appealing because they wished their art to express only the "quintessential values of visual art (space-time, movement and material)." The problem is that Geraldo did not produce photograms. Whatever he did in photography during the 1946-1950 may have been influenced by Concrete art, but did not follow its dictates.

De Barros did profess the Concrete ideology in the decade of the fifties and practiced its social

convictions of making art accessible to most. In fact, he established Unilabor, a cooperative factory that produced inexpensive furniture with Bauhaus type designs. However, like many other Brazilian artists who bought into *Concretismo* de Barros evolved out of it. His own evolution went through Pop Art. After his strokes, however, he was once again sketching abstract works that his assistant would execute to his specifications.

A month ago in what is now simply Sicardi Gallery I had the opportunity to curate a second exhibit of Geraldo de Barros's work ten years after the first one. Since 1998, at least three books, several catalogs, and one biographical documentary have contributed information and reflections about his life and work. I reviewed the numerous essays and documents now available, and looked at the images once again paying more attention to the technical details. In my curatorial essay I decided to follow the logic imposed by a taxonomical account of the different techniques de Barros used to produce his photographic work. When I came upon those described as "*superposição da imagens no fotograma*," I was bewildered by the fact that in the gallery documents there were editions of those works. How could that be if photograms are unique? There are indeed artists who produce editions of photograms with works that are sufficiently similar albeit not identical. In Geraldo's case, the prints in each edition are identical (as much as prints from the same negative can be). I sought clarification from Fabiana de Barros and after a few emails this much was clear: there are negatives of many images that were formerly labeled "*superposição da imagens no fotograma*." Upon closer inspection, it became clear that many of those are really multiple-exposures and not photograms. One can recognize the objects from which de Barros so cleverly abstracted geometric shapes. Yet there are a few that really look like photograms although Fabiana says there are negatives of them. I asked her if perhaps her father made photograms that he later photographed to get a negative, but she firmly states her father never did this sort of thing. This much has become clear: it was misleading to label these works "fotogramas" (in spite of the fact that it was correct in Portuguese to do so) as was done in that very first book that came upon my hands: *Fotoformas, Geraldo de Barros* (Raízes: São Paulo, 1994).

The face of *Menina do Sapato* now comes to have a different expression: one of mischief. Her open mouth can also be one of surprise. After wearing our shoes down by walking along many paths we come to a surprising point of our lives. If what I believed to be photograms are actually double exposures, in spite of their abstract geometric look, they have a semantic component based on mimesis of something other than itself that lies on the other side of the camera lens. In that sense they only differ from the shoe of *Menina do Sapato* in that the shapes in one may be more or less geometric than in the other. Even in photograms the indexical nature of the medium are an inconvenience to the Concrete program –after all, shadows are *of* something. Was this inconvenience the reason de Barros gave up photography as a venue to produce art for forty-four years? The routes art and photography have traveled since the 1952 Ruptura Manifesto are proof enough that "naturalistic" art forms have not "exhausted their historical task." As to how Geraldo de Barros made by means of double exposures some of the works that most resemble photograms, I mischievously pose that as a question to the readers of this essay.

Fernando Castro R.

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