IMAGE'S TRAVEL

DIDIANA PRATA

Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo
da Universidade de São Paulo, Brasil

[EN]

Abstract

This article deals with the 'grand tour' of indexed images on social networks and of new contexts and functions of images potentialized by the media in which they are produced, edited and published. In light of database aesthetics — a great change in paradigm in which the use of metadata information is central in the configuration, visualization and design of the narrative — we will talk about the nature of this digital and numerical image in constant transformation and how images travel on networks. Lastly, we will analyze the singularities of the 'grand tour' of mobile images, and their potentiality as travelling images (transits and trajectories), greater and more infinite than their author's journey. As an iconographic reference, we will use and edit representative images of São Paulo's landscape on Instagram, conducted by the author (Prata, 2016).

Keywords

Mobile image, Metanarratives, Database aesthetics, Instagram, Social networks.

[PT]

Resumo

Este artigo aborda o *grand tour* das imagens indexadas nas redes sociais, dos novos contextos e funções das imagens potencializadas pelo meio midiático no qual elas são produzidas, editadas e veiculadas. À luz da estética do banco de dados — uma mudança de paradigma na qual o uso das informações dos metadados é central na configuração, na visualização e no design da narrativa — discutiremos a natureza dessa imagem numérica em constante transformação, feita para viajar nas redes. Por fim, analisaremos as singularidades do *grand tour* da imagem mobile, e o seu potencial enquanto imagens viajantes (trânsitos e trajetórias), maiores e mais infinitas que a viajem do seu autor. Como referência iconográfica, utilizaremos e editaremos imagens representativas da paisagem de São Paulo no aplicativo Instagram, realizadas pela autora (Prata, 2016).

Palavras-chave
Imagem mobile, Metanarrativas, Estética de banco de dados, Instagram, Redes sociais .

●

●

The journey of images through social networks has much more to reveal than just the aestheticization of daily life of the contemporary man equipped with mobile devices, the cell phone cameras. We produce, mediate and convey different types of images over the Internet and through social networks. The day-to-day sharing in which the representation of the subject or their message is aestheticized and materialized through images has become a daily habit. They are documentary, newsworthy, artistic, affective, sociopolitical or narcissistic images, and compose several collective narratives, organized and viewed through algorithms and keywords within the informational space – especially on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The images in social networks travel in real time to anywhere on the planet, breaking the paradigms of temporal and spatial relations of documentary photography.

There is a new lexicon of communicational and aesthetic language in which the narrative potentiality and the displacement of images are intertwined with the user experience and the use of technological strategies of social networks. The mobile image, coupled with algorithmic data, reveals new database aesthetics with unique characteristics. Within this context, this paper will approach the *grand tour* of these informational images, in which the travelling (transits and trajectories) of such images predominate over the "travel" of the very photographer or author of the image in circulation.

As a reference, we start with a specific clipping established by the author in her research on the representation of São Paulo's urban landscape on Instagram (Prata, 2016). In this work, the author edited and appropriated visual narratives. This collection of imagery is critical for understanding the methodological process of this investigation: to speak of images through images. These essays dialogue with the concepts discussed in this paper. The formal elements and issues related to

appropriation and authorship — characteristic of these publications — were analyzed by using algorithmic tags, thematic "#" (hash tags) accompanied by the images. The use of this codified caption, of the common keyword, organizes a collective imagery speech, the new digital visual narratives. As images are tagged by hashtags and geolocation pins, they move, travel through networks, participate in other contexts, in infinite metanarratives.

The daily production of the contemporary nomad — new tourists in their daily drift — can be seen on the screens of cell phone cameras, a kind of prosthesis, a third eye in the palm of the hand of that person, existing simultaneously in the territorial-physical space and cyberspace (Beiguelman, 2011). The screen becomes the interface of the new travel album, viewed in continuously scrolled down virtual galleries on the application screen. We will delve into new ways of producing and consuming images from this perspective. And, to paraphrase Steyerl, we will assume that images today are made for traveling: there are new values in the low-resolution images defined by velocity, intensity, and spread; "poor images are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly" (Steyerl, 2009, p.7).

In order to problematize the uniqueness of the image produced with mobile devices, first we need to understand the cultural and technological context of this production of language. The mobility of the contemporary man — inserted in the economic and cultural globalization, of migratory flows and production of language conveyed in real time — enables the construction of new imaginaries, new experiments. It is within this context that the author, artist and also editor and producer of the mobile images is inserted.

Territorial attachment is not part of the contemporary cultural expression. According to Bourriaud (2011), pop movements refer to a manifestation that criticizes mass production and consumption with a more temporal relationship between art and the world; they took a certain amount of time to develop and become noticed. Today, we are subject to a set of "ephemeral" entities, to the precarious duration of products, fads, and brands. Never before have we photographed so much, and in the midst of this imagery there are signs of a new

artistic movement, a production of language conditioned to the displacement and publications fragmented in social networks. By observing this phenomenon of translation of images produced by both the ordinary citizen and artists, we are able to apprehend how the city of São Paulo is represented in images on Instagram.

Radicant aesthetics, conceptualized by Bourriaud (2011), in which the artist gives visibility to the accumulation of references, mixing its own sociocultural roots with the multiplicity of appropriations of heterogeneous contexts and formats, can be applicable to the new manifestations of the anonymous citizen-artist on Instagram's narratives. From the radicant point of view, it is possible to establish a relation between artistic production, displacement and narrative layers, which are arranged, in real time, in the screens of applications. They are new formats of cultural and artistic expressions, mediated by texts and images. The figure of the DJ, used by Bourriaud, resembles that of the author and mediator of images, who appropriates collective production and adds it to their own. They use the logic of the sample, the remix, the ready-made and the shift of meaning.

With an approach more focused on the correlation between art and politics, Rancière (2005) affirms that it is precisely in the aesthetic domain that the political discussion, the generalization of the spectacle and the multiplication of speeches are carried out nowadays. We are constantly giving visibility to social, cultural and political relations. And it is in the field of aesthetics that our discursive manifestation takes place. The author proposes a new aesthetic regime of the arts in which "the aesthetic revolution is above all the glory of anyone" (Rancière, 2005, p. 48). This principle confers visibility to the anonymous, who is capable of producing art and also conferring beauty to other representation modalities.

In this new aesthetic regime, to which the mobile images belong, we can say that one of the great questions now is the relation between the influence of the message (or its author) and its visibility. It is a problem pertinent to the complexity of operations involved in spreading images and messages through social networks. Not only due to the articulation between art, politics and aesthetics, but mainly due to the heterogeneity of the quality of what is published and spread. Anonymous

artists possess the image, but it is not always connected to a meaningful message. On Instagram, we see the daily reality authenticated by images that follow different styles, according to the repertoire of each one. We verify this when tracing images with thematic hashtags, such as *#parqueminhocao* (below), *#ciclovianapaulista*, *#rolevilamadalena* etc.
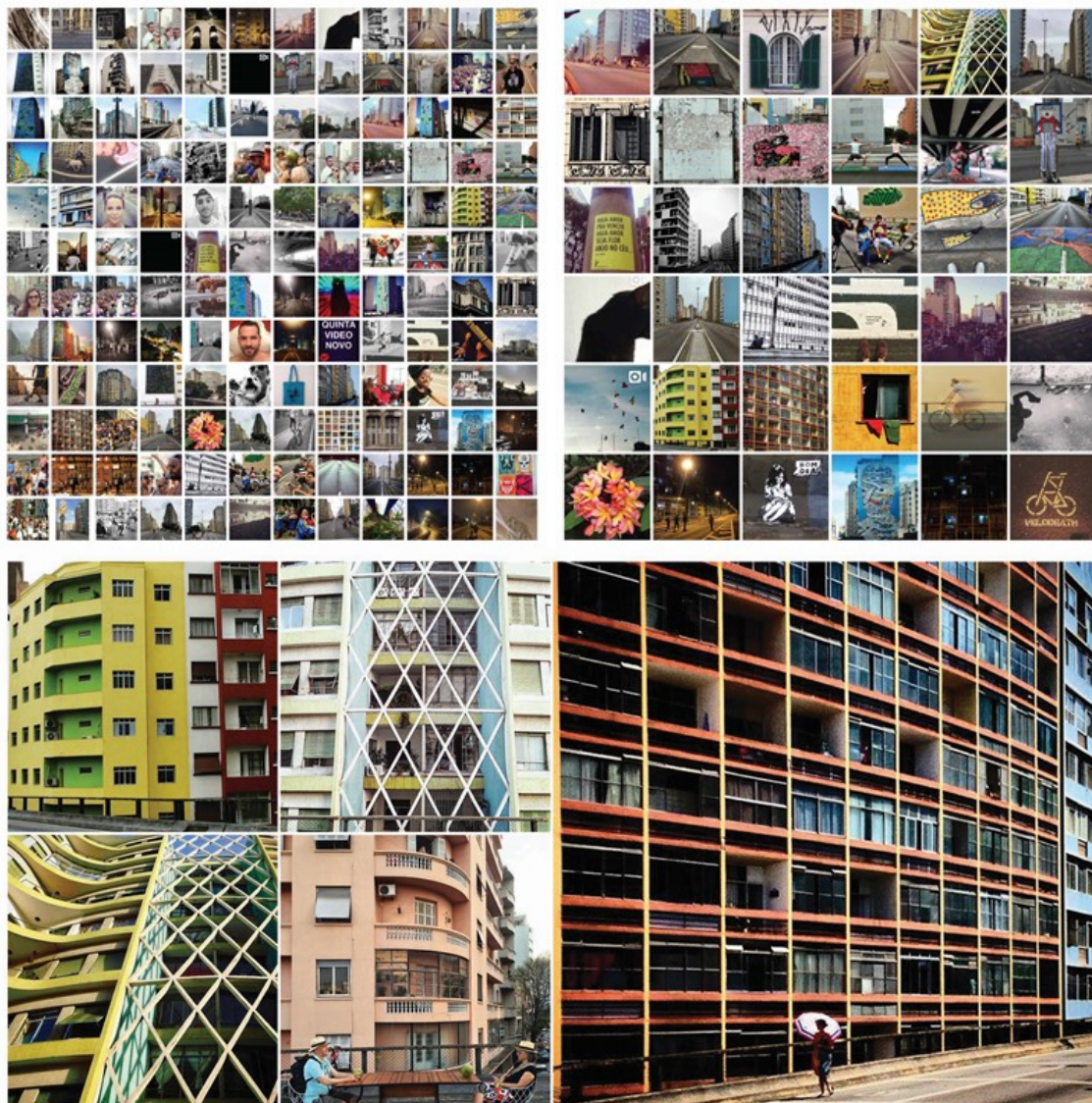
Figures 1 and 2 — *Collective imagery: screenshots from hashtag* #parqueminhocao (above); *Architectural typologies. Editing from* #parqueminhocao (below).

These groupings of fragmented and disconnected images, when assembled under the same hashtag, present the elements of the metamorphic images described by Rancière: new devices transfer new functions to images, which begin to assume empowered roles inherent to the mediatic place where they circulate (Rancière, 2013). These are technological devices that can transfer to the mobile image new functions related to criticism and curation, in an unprecedented narrative game. The metamorphic image connects to other types of images to interrupt the media flow, giving visibility to a narrative.

With the use of tags, the aesthetic of this image has a double nature. It is part of a singular narrative, contextualized by its author, and simultaneously belongs to the collective imagery, subject to displacements, new groupings in other narrative layers. These data are the new "caption" of informational images.

Mobile image, ready to travel

The overproduction of images is closely associated with the aesthetic apprehension of walkers, in their own city or in new places visited by them. Never before has the landscape been represented in images so often by the ordinary citizen, the tourist-walker and the artist, who use new formats and new strategies of poetic language.

The use of smartphones added to the synesthetic experience of the author, producer of the image, besides the possibility of immediate sharing, the aesthetic enjoyment of viewing images in infinite "collective themed albums".

It is up to us to briefly investigate the genesis of the image produced by and viewed in applications. The nature of the mobile image is digital, part of a numerical matrix. According to Couchot (2003), the numerical image is increasingly controlled, from its creation, its morphogenesis, to its spread. Numerical machines, as he calls them, record information other than the image, related to the movement of the body, to the vocal command, enabling new types of freedom of speech.

«The image is an activity that brings techniques and a subject (worker, artisan or artist, according to each culture) into play, operating with these techniques [...]. As an operator, this subject controls and manipulates techniques through which he lives an intimate experience that transforms his perception of the world: the technoesthetic experience» (Couchot, 2003: 15).

According to the author, the technoesthetic experience illustrates the synchrony between the subject-ego and the technological device. The numerical image opens a new era of the image, the autonomous image era. The numerical image brings new tools of simulation for the artist to operate with computer programs instead of matter (that is, the fixed, materialized image). The image is treated in another space, that of science and numbers. The figuration is the result of a numerical simulation, open to new enhancements. The matrix image is the basis for infinite replications, for new computer calculations and new representations, a release of the image. This image is projected onto the screen, but it is no longer a photo, nor a movie, nor is it television: «with it, a new visual order is established, breaking with the traditional techniques of image, but continuing with the logic of alphabetic writing that released the thought from the sonorous materiality of language» (Couchot, 2003, p.164).

Couchot's thinking, from this point of view, is fundamental because it assumes the character of permanent displacement of the numerical image; it is movable, mobile. It is no longer a photograph fixed on a "graphic" medium, but rather an image whose genesis lies in the delicate relations of a subject-WE (amalgamated with the technological device), as the author defines it, and which tries to redefine its own identity in the world of arts.

Therefore, we assume that the mobile image is numerical, metamorphic and has new features such as georeferencial tagging, thematic hashtags, and simultaneously accumulates the functions of aesthetic representation and media when conveyed in social networks. It is conditioned to the possibilities of using the technological tools of applications in the network, which end up transforming representations of the real into simulations of another image, inherent to the media environment, imbricated in the field of science and art.

The transformation of the quality image into an accessible image, produced to be spread, to "travel" instantly through networks, is a feature of network architecture and appropriate in the field of media art. In this respect, Steyerl (2009) states:

> «The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility […] It is a visual idea in its very becoming, […] a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free» (Steyerl, 2009: 1).

The possibility of spreading a more conceptual and independent production is the central point of the author's defense of the circulation of "poor images". Moreover, access to very rare audiovisual material, essayistic, non-commercial work, never previously shown on conventional circuits and now available on networks such as YouTube, would justify the circulation of copies and the production of new "poor" images.

The paradox between free movement in the new system of production and mediation of images and the dependence on networks such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, controlled by big corporations, is another important point raised by Steyerl. We rely on networks, which are privatized, to convey content and our narratives, and also to organize them into editing systems appropriate to each application, as happens on Instagram.

In this scenario, one has to ask: in the long run, what is the destination of the image galleries and all others that have become representative of a new image regime, dependent on the technology of a private, online application? At the same time, these narratives would not exist without the mediation of the application, capable of giving visibility to new poetics carried out with organized images, reposted and renamed in common visual galleries, identifiable by metadata, i.e. their "caption". I believe that the future of these language manifestations on the web is uncertain, and its survival depends on an image capture or digital editing, made with the APIs (Application Programming Interfaces),[1] to guarantee their visibility, over time, on other interfaces that do not depend on the online social networks where they were originally published.

Editing "poor image" narratives on Instagram starts with the research of overproduction of images in social networks and coexists not only with the "B side" of narcissistic (selfies), pornographic, paranoid material production, but also with other images "without a defined speech" and, above all, with the control of applications. That is, we are navigating a territory of extremely controlled language production that is simultaneously liquid and, why not, volatile. The visibility of these narratives in such deterritorialized territories is part of this new regime of images and deserves to be recognized as an unprecedented manifestation of language in the history of images.

The submission of these narratives to the contemporary regime of image production and distribution sets new perspectives for the value of images. Steyerl illuminates this question with brilliance and approaches the issue of image circulation in the present day originally. After all, the works produced with images captured online, such as those of Joachim Schmid, Erik Kessels and Dina Kelberman, show that network image editing and imagery collecting work operate in the digital world of "no man's land." In these works of art, appropriated images often circulate in circumstances very different from those in which they were published by their authors, and represent the aesthetics of media art and digital image.

Figure 3 — Joachim Schmid. *Other People's Photographs* (2008-2011). The 96-book series explores everyday themes and visual patterns of amateur photographers. Images found on websites like Flickr. Source.

Figures 4 and 5 — Erik Kessels. *Useful Photography* (since 2005) [Source](#) (above); Dina Kelberman. *I am Google* (2011 – ongoing). [Source](#) (below).
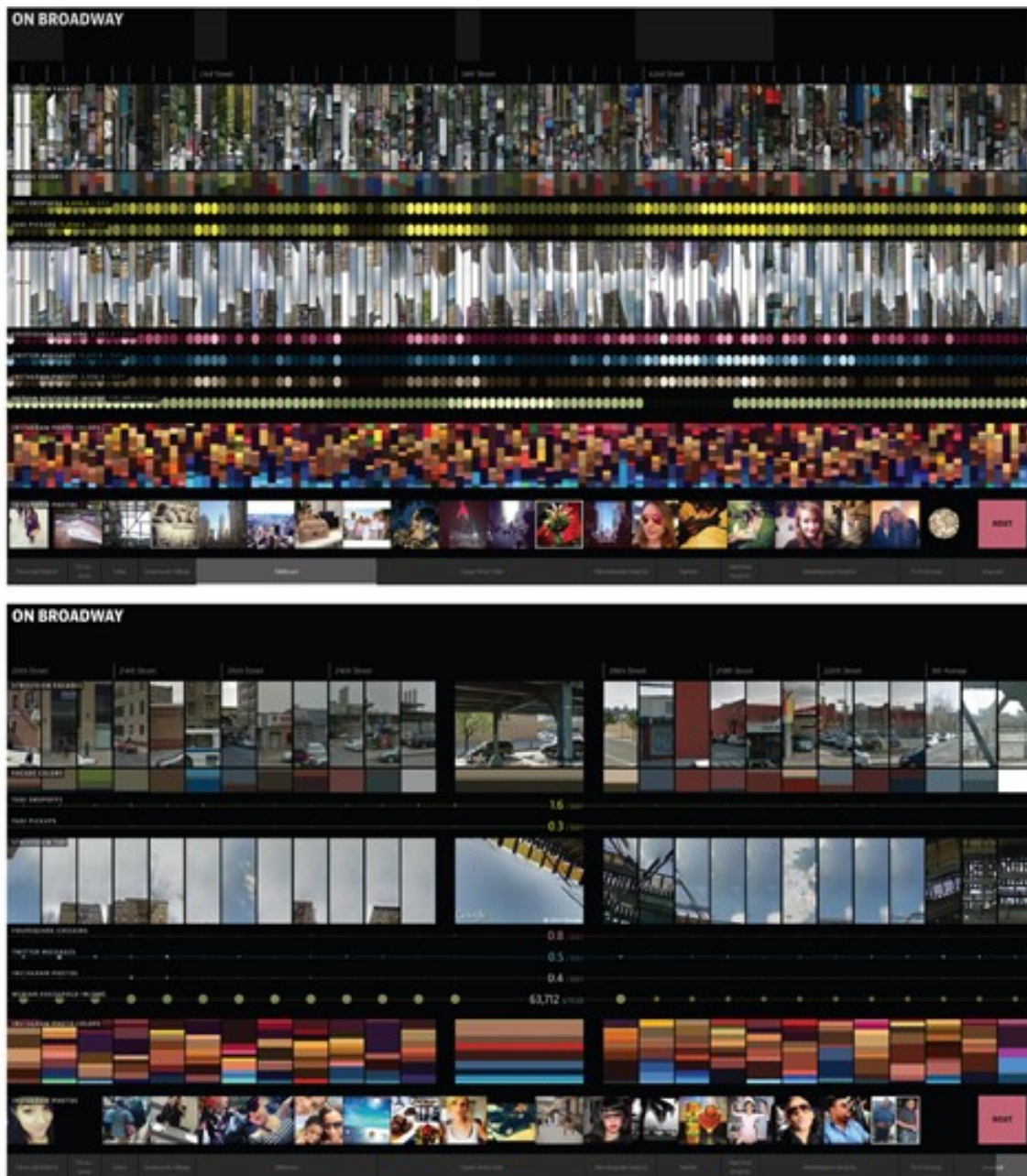
**Figure 6** — Lev Manovich. *On Broadway* (2014). Source.

Among these projects, "On Broadway", by artist and researcher Lev Manovich (2014) seems to me the most emblematic one— in the database aesthetics scope — as far as the representation of cities in the 21st century goes. The way of life of the New Yorker or walking tourist on Broadway Avenue — Instagram, Twitter, Foursquare or Google Street View user — was tracked over a period of five years (2009-2014). Manovich's team collected 660,000 Instagram images and over 8 million Foursquare check-ins, as well as data on taxi rides (within a six-month period in 2014). The developed application also includes the chromatic representation of the density of these figures and illustrates the artistic and aesthetic potential of using such data. We are in fact facing new imagery paradigms of a grand tour through Broadway.

Urban imagery — São Paulo

The simultaneous presence of the *paulistano* on the streets and social networks, as producer and mediator of imagery records of the moment, illustrates the current condition of the hyperconnected citizen, builder of new iconographic geographies.

Thousands of photographs, viewed together as *#ciclovianapaulista*, *#parqueminhocao*, *#rolevilamadalena*, among others (Prata, 2016), represent sociocultural manifestations and emblematic and touristic places in the city and reinforce the aesthetic participation in events that are often ephemeral. It is the direct image, like an "I was there" stamp.

However, as we look at these images separately, we realize that formal features such as composition, light and framing are often disappointing. I believe that what is at stake here is not the rigor and plasticity of photography itself, but rather the aesthetic game of collective participation in "event albums". Filters available on applications also contribute to image editing, expanding the aestheticizing possibilities of this game, in the Flusserian sense. It is the image as a fleeting, moving message.
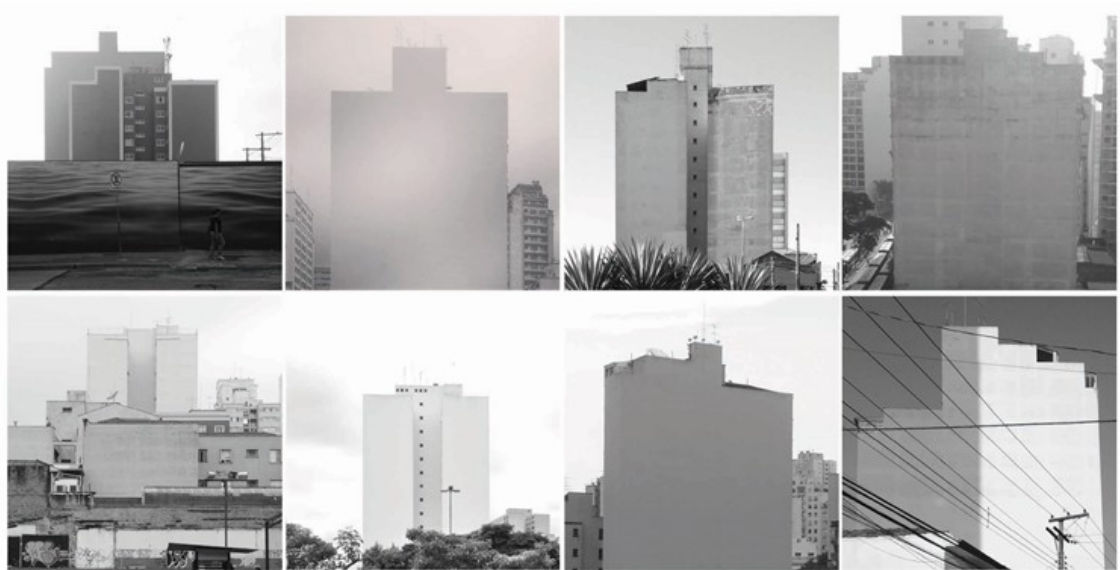
Figures 7 and 8 — Zé Vicente. *#pela_rua_com_recortes*. Artistic infiltrations in the city give new meanings to places and urban things (above); Ivan Padovani. *#campocego*. Mapping of the gables of São Paulo. These white monoliths become the benchmarks in the cognitive mapping of the photographer (below).
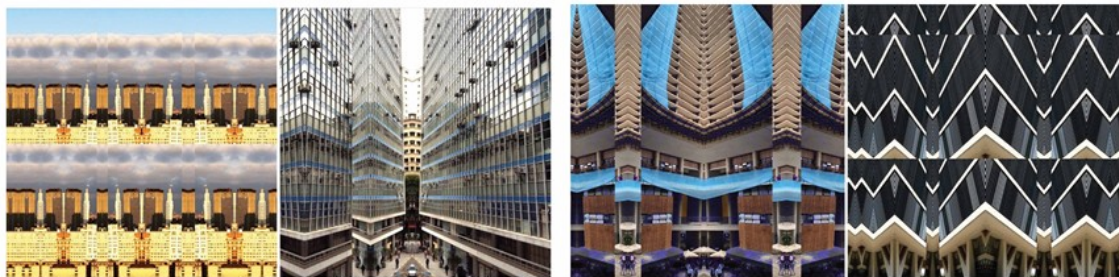
Figures 9 and 10 — Juan Esteves. *#thewarishereserie (2012 - 2014)* (above); Giselle Beiguelman *#spnoespelho*. São Paulo iconic buildings: Altino Arantes, Copan, Copan and Contemporary Art Museum — MAC, respectively (below).

Nevertheless, it is up to us researchers, editors and designers, to highlight the good use of metadata in procedures for creating and producing media art projects. The artists presented below use the strategy of tagging. Their visual narratives are organized and viewed by assigning a customized hashtag for editing an exclusive essay, a virtual gallery of images. These artists (Instagram users) are not interested in the collective participation in a thematic #, nor in the number of likes. Instead, they use strategies that are difficult to track in an algorithmic generic search, and benefit from the potentiality of the written code function, i.e. metadata, to name and convey their work with a customized #. The visibility of these works amidst Instagram's scrolling images depends on the cognitive action, on the publisher/curator's eye to identify the set of these "customized essay-albums".

It is interesting to analyze this imagery, representative of the urban landscape of São Paulo, from the perspective adopted by Vesna (2007). In these artistic strategies, there is a new emerging aesthetics, characterized by the incorporation of information and data available in social networks. The author points out the database aesthetics arising from the overproduction of information available in the flow of social networks:

> «[...] The aesthetics of the project depends on the artist's manipulation and practice in dealing with data, as he navigates the "back bones" of the database networks and manages to grasp information with an aesthetic vocation for their project [...]. How information is organized and what should be published aesthetically depends on the artist-publisher» (Vesna, 2007: 10).

The data visualization strategy was also used in editing images of São Paulo, which I had appropriated as an aesthetic practice and narrative exercise. These are procedures in which we artists, designers, or researchers subvert the technology default of Instagram in order to produce language, raise questions, and spread essays.

The diptychs and polyptychs published below are composed by images appropriated from Instagram (captured from specific thematic searches). They are examples of designing narratives with network data. They are compositions made to be viewed on other interfaces (online publications, exhibitions, etc.). In these appropriated editing, one notes the importance of the cognitive action of looking; of the sensitivity of editors, designers (and why not authors?); of searching for different data to generate new meanings.
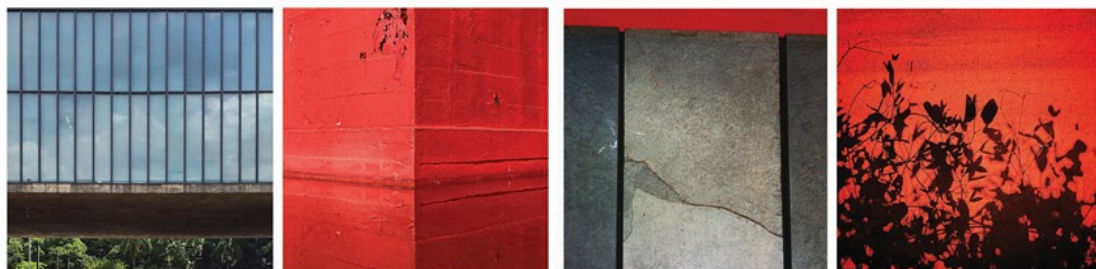

Figure 11 — *Apropriação I*. Editing from the search for keyword MASP, geolocation pin and crossing the names of authors Miriam Homem de Mello and Danny Zappa.
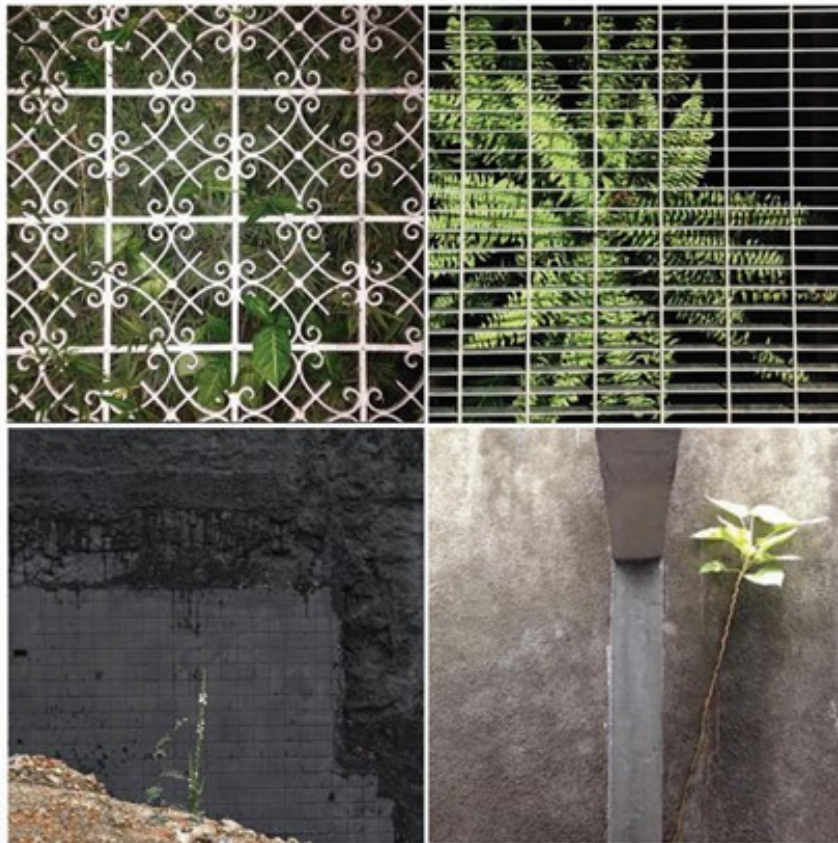
Figure 12 — *Apropriação II – Fronteira*. Polyptych composed of images by Roberto Wagner

Figure 13 — *Apropriação III – SP ladrilhada.* Polyptych composed of images by Roberto Wagner.

The grand tour *of images*

The construction of meaning or aesthetic representations also depends on the fluctuation of context and the movement of social networks (Paul, 2011). According to this author, "context" is related to a location and enriches the specificities of a particular place by giving it new characteristics. She investigates how the information network reconfigures these contexts and affects the production of meaning.

By applying Paul's concepts to the investigation of Instagram's visual narratives, we find that the a series of ethnographic and cultural information, which are representative of the 21st century, are made visible by the technological features of this application, such as links and filters. Through the use of informational data, they represent and give visibility to the aesthetic apprehension of the urban landscape.

The data process places the text (that is, the tags) as the central aspect of information and context, and supports a system with several "interpretative" layers. A text may be related to a specific context attached to an image, but the embedded links may give rise to new, extensive contexts, often far from the original "text". There is an increasing agency of data in the narratives, through the very users who participate in this collective editing.

The Instagram application and platform was brought forth by the ubiquity of cyberspace, as well as the new platforms of cultural production that begin to form an *ad hoc* community. Real and virtual data come together in social networks. Following this reasoning and based on the set of images presented, we can say that platforms like Instagram are the "ready for use" of distribution, acting as a true broadcast of visual narratives. As Paul states, we are increasingly moving and exchanging our aesthetic and personal experiences through a space that presents itself as "cultural common" (Paul, 2011, p.110).

The use of tags (# and georeferencing pins in the case of Instagram) brings in new classificatory paradigms to a context of collective and dynamic narrative production in which the user collaborates in the construction of new meanings.

This synesthetic experience of assigning a written lexicon to a meaning in the image constitutes a new language game. It brings the individual and technological devices together, enabling infinite metanarratives. It is possible to shift this tagged image to a collective narrative, formed by images from any part of the planet.

The informational image participates in the *grand tour* of social networks irrespective of the original post. The context in which its author has posted (or reposted) it can be modified.

Based on the concepts and narratives analyzed herein, we conclude that the mobile image expands the traditional sense of travel photography. The journey of images in social networks can be both infinite and unfathomable.

NOTES

1   API – Application Programming Interface is a set of routines and standards established by software for the use of its features by applications that do not intend to be involved with the software implementation details, but only to use their services.

References

Bourriaud, Nicolas (2011). *Radicante. Por uma estética da globalização*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.

Beiguelman, Giselle. *Arte pós-virtual: criação e agenciamento no tempo da internet das coisas e da próxima natureza*. Retrieved from <http://desvirtual.com/web/wp_content/uploads/2015/03/GiselleBeiguelman_arte_pos_virtual.pdf>. (Accessed in March 2015).

Beiguelman, G.; LA FERLA. J. (2003). *Nomadismos tecnológicos*. São Paulo: Senac,.

Couchot, Edmond. *A tecnologia na arte. Da fotografia à realidade virtual*. Porto Alegre: Editora da UFRGS.

Flusser, Vilém (2007). *O mundo codificado*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify.

Lovejoy, Margot; PAUL, Christiane; VESNA, Victoria (2011). *Context Providers: Conditions of Meaning in Media Arts*. Bristol, Reino Unido/Chicago, EUA: Intellect.

Manovich, Lev (n/d). *Instagram and Contemporary Image*. Retrieved from <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects> (Accessed in June 2017).

Paul, Christiane (2011). Contextual Networks: Data Identity and Collective Production. In: LOVEJOY, M. et al. (org). *Context Providers: Conditions of Meaning in Media Arts*. Bristol,UK/Chicago, EUA: Intellect.

Prata, Didiana (2016). *Imageria e poéticas de representação da paisagem urbana nas redes*. (Master dissertation) University of São Paulo: Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism – USP. *Available at*: http://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/16/16136/tde-16022017-095419/

Rancière, Jacques (2013). *O destino das imagens*. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto.

Rancière, Jacques (2005). *A partilha do sensível*: estética e política. São Paulo: Editora 34.

Steyerl, Hito (2009). In defense of the poor image. In *e-flux Journal*, 10 (Nov. 2009).

Vesna, Victoria (2007). *Database Aesthetics*: Art in the Age of Information Overflow. Minneapolis: University of Minessota Press.