

MICHAEL WESELY

IMS construction site, São Paulo (17:40 – 17:45 hours, 9.12.2015)

300'' & 4'33''

Márion Strecker

"There, on the right, there is still space for people," says Michael Wesely on his cellphone, standing by the window, to someone on the other side of Avenida Paulista, in São Paulo, Brazil. "We still have a problem up there, on the right. There is a group there, behind the wires, railings and wood. So, we'll not see them," says Wesely. We are in an office facing the 20 x 50 meter plot which was to become the construction site for the Instituto Moreira Salles (IMS)'s new building in the city. The project, selected in a competition in 2011, is by Andrade Morettin Architects. The building will have a built area of 8,662m². The IMS is a nonprofit with the mission to build collections and develop cultural programs in the areas of photography, literature, iconography, the plastic arts, music, and film. It is December 9, 2015.

IMS's new building is expected to take two years to build. The works have been photographed day and night using six cameras fixed by Wesely to the facades of buildings surrounding the building site. The cameras – four analogical and two digital - take thousands of pictures, without pause. At the end of the project, the thousands of analog images will be merged into single photographs which, after being enlarged and displayed, will demand that we to spend some time looking at them, pondering, imagining and understanding them in some way.

My interview with Wesely for Canal Curta!, recorded by videomaker Felipe Luz, will take place while Wesely oversees a group photograph of the almost 100 people involved in the building project. The video we are making for the TV channel will last three minutes. Wesely's photograph will have an exposure time of five minutes.

I remember that the most famous composition by the American musician and thinker John Cage, which he composed in 1952, lasts 4'33". The work lasts exactly 4 minutes and 33 seconds without a single note being heard. The work is in three movements, distinguished from each other by the movements of the musicians' bodies. They are on stage with their instruments and read the scores, but they do not play the instruments. Silence reigns supreme and yet shows itself to be too noisy, to the extent that some members of the audience get up and leave.

The composition came to epitomize John Cage's concept that any ambient sound, be it natural or intentional, can be considered music. Can shadows or blurred images be considered portraits?

Avenida Paulista is in the highest part of downtown São Paulo, the most populous and richest city in Brazil, which is a country with the potential for wealth, but is largely poor. The city's growth really began in the 20th century, when the mansions of the coffee barons on this beautiful avenue were torn down to make space for the towers of commerce. Avenida Paulista also houses MASP - the São Paulo Art Museum - and FIESP - the Federation of Industries of the State of São Paulo. It is the stage for the largest Gay Pride parade in the world, as well as the scene of most of the city's political

demonstrations - for or against the government of the day or the cause of the moment.

“Who is going to give the signal that the photo is being taken?” Wesely asks the person on the other end of the line, pausing our interview to give instruction as he explains to me how he has abandoned the concept of exposure time as a technical requirement for photography. “I`m not the kind of person who captures the moment. I`ve been taking portraits with lengthy exposure times since 1988 and I wonder why I`ve never thought of taking a photograph with just a simple click of the shutter,” he says.

“I photograph a lot of building sites. Usually, in these photographs, the presence of the construction workers is marked by their absence. But this photograph is the opposite. It is time to reveal who these people are and to pay homage to the workers whose job it is to construct a building,” he comments. “It is another aspect of my work with urban spaces, how the cities are changing, how the buildings are being constructed.

When Wesely photographs people, his anti-snapshots are portraits of the natural restlessness of a human being. What freezes them is the passing of time, as lines and abstract forms appear where there should be sharp images. “For me, it is about space and time and how individuals present themselves in time. It also depends on how still people remain during these five minutes. If anyone moves, they become invisible. It is also a way to speak of our own fragility in life. What a fragile moment it is to take a photograph with a five-minute exposure. But it is a way of giving value to a moment of theirs.”

Will the construction workers be proud of this photograph? “I don`t know how everyone will pose themselves, if they`ll be proud of being there, or if they`ll think that it`s just a joke, or not. So, we`ll see a whole range of expressions in the enlargement. It will speak of the understanding of each one of them of themselves, about how it is to display themselves for five minutes in front of this camera. The result will be quite fascinating, I think,” says Wesely, enthusiastically.

John Cage said at a meeting of an arts society in Seattle in 1937 that we must pay the utmost attention to everything. That there is no such thing as silence - it disturbs us, when we stop to listen to it, we discover that it is fascinating.

Being guided by the silence of the musicians was a way John Cage found to synchronize his audience with the sound track of everyday life, to make them think of all the sounds surrounding them as a possible music, dismantling the idea of a sound hierarchy, in which a certain type of sound has more value than another, in which one type of sound is considered noise while another is not.

Michael Wesely appears to operate in the same way with photography, by eliminating the idea of a photographic hierarchy, in which the understanding of a moment, the snapshot and sharp images are considered more valuable than other qualities that define if a photograph is considered good and another not. He has transformed all the noise from time as it passes into the value of the image.