

Marc Ohrem-Leclef and Mazie M. Harris discuss *Olympic Favela*

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Photographs by Marc Ohrem-Leclef. With texts by Luis Pérez-Oramas and Itamar Silva.
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Mazie: *Olympic Favela* is made up of a series of portraits of residents of makeshift housing in Brazil, who are being evicted to make way for construction related to the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games. How did you come to be interested in their plight?

Marc: I had for the first time been sensitized to the issue of forced evictions as a result of a sporting mega-event during the preparations for the Beijing Olympics. The general idea of the paradox of destroying historic neighborhoods and displacing the residents for an event that historically is meant to unite people, that impressed me, and stuck with me.

So when I heard about similar events taking place in Rio, I began researching specifically the policies of evictions as enforced by the government and the concept of “pacification” of the favelas. Having been to Rio to shoot for commercial clients a few times, I felt a direct connection to the events and felt drawn to research the singular reports existing in early 2012.

Later that year I was invited to Rio for an unrelated event and began researching ways to realize my goal of creating a body of work that could illustrate the human impact the evictions are having, and ended up spending all my time in the favelas shooting once I got to Rio.

How were you able to access the communities once you were there? Were you able to just wander around?

My research consisted of two parts: find as much relevant and recent information about the removals, which in early 2012 was only of minor interest to the international press, and then find a way to get into the favelas that would be safe, respectful, and productive. Many of my requests to NGOs in Rio—which seemed like the most likely possible partner with connections to affected people—were left unanswered but I then established positive communication with the NGO Catalytic Communities. They appreciated the fact that my focus was going to be portraiture, not news-type photographs of the evictions.

So with their help I was connected with local community leaders. My guide and translator Cafe and I would meet outside the favelas, then walk into the communities with them. They introduced us to residents, and we began a slow process of explaining carefully who we are, and what I was trying to do by photographing people who were threatened with evictions, or had already been evicted. After a few hours, we often ended up walking around the favelas

alone, after our contacts had to go to work. It was a slow process to find people who I was interested in shooting, in places that offered an interesting perspective, and then to talk to them and build trust that would lead to me taking their photographs.

I used a medium format camera and shot film, which somehow complemented the fairly slow process of making these works, compared to other projects I have done.

Did that technique allow more time for conversation and help to allay any anxiety about your presence?

Well, it just worked hand in hand with a slow moving general process – I have never used a medium format camera for such an extensive project in the field, and it has its challenges but it turned out to be perfect for this! I would joke with people and say “if I was with SMH [Rio’s housing authority which implements eviction proceedings] I would NOT schlepp this heavy thing around that needs a reload every 14 photos ...”

And did your research prepare you for what you saw once you were there?

My research did not really prepare me as much as my previous stays in Rio, and the fact that I had been in some other poor communities, for example in Mumbai’s slum of Dharavi. The research was mostly to establish a connection with the residents. And to make sure we were safe. Even after recent “pacifications” of many favelas close to Rio’s center, favelas can seem dangerous at times, with drug and arms-traffickers still present, just more in the underground now. But safety was a real concern, especially since I was not going alone and was somewhat responsible for my guide. Though I was kind of familiar with the lay of the land, and the circumstances, the visuals of homes destroyed just enough to prevent people from re-occupying them were devastating.

It’s fascinating in your pictures to see how integrated the favelas are into the fabric of the city.

The favelas are an integral part of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Over many decades, beginning with a settlement on the Morro da Providência in the late 1800s, poor people coming to Rio in hopes to make a new life have occupied whatever open unclaimed space was available, leading to many such communities being all over the city, in the center along the steep hills, along train tracks and highways, and in open space along swamp land and around lagoons like the “Lagoa de Jacarepaguá” in Rio’s West Zone.

And the beauty of those locations is what makes them appealing for developers today, I suppose.

Exactly. The common argument by city planners and the government—that people are being moved to other areas of the city for the sake of infrastructure projects to accommodate the sporting events—is often proven to be untrue, once you visit the actual areas. Nothing will be built on the steep slopes of some of the inner-city favelas to cater to, say, athletes coming to Rio. But these locations are some of the most desirable places in Rio

once they are made more easily accessible, and that is where the real estate interests come into play.

Often it is plainly obvious that part of the motivation seems to be that a certain degree of “cleaning house” is being done all over the city, and to remove shanty towns is a part of that.

“Pacification” is the word that’s used there rather than “eviction”? That has such a militaristic tone. Has there been violence?

Pacification is a concept employed by the executive branch: units of the military police are called up, heavily armed, and more or less occupy a favela to drive gangs dealing drugs and arms out of those neighborhoods. The “pacification” is announced in advance, giving gangs the opportunity to move out of the favela without creating a scene of fighting between police and gangs—as has happened in the past, with little positive effect. So as announced, military police move into the communities and search home by home for weapons mostly, and then establish a base in the favela to maintain the new status quo. The sweeping searches of private homes being done without warrants is one big point of contention, but the pacification has positive results as well. In recent days there were organized attacks in a few of Rio’s favelas where gangs tried to actively combat police units to gain back their lost ground.

So this is all ongoing.

I photographed one of the important figures in pacification, Pricilla de Oliveira Azevedo. She was the first to successfully implement the concept of pacification, in Favela Santa Marta. She was also the only city official who would participate in my portrait project. I had also requested to photograph the Secretary of the Housing Authority, Pierre Batista, and Carlos A. Nuzman, the president of the Organizing Committee for the Rio 2016 Olympic Games.

And yes, the security situation is fluid and ongoing—and still a major concern for city officials. I decided to focus on the effect of eviction policies, even though eviction and pacification are closely connected.

It’s an intense situation, yet there’s such compassion in the portraits. That balance between anger and empathy seems reflected in the stories you tell about your experiences with the people there. Are the people you photographed involved in the resistance, or are they trying to be amenable to the changes? You include a few images of destruction, yet for the most part chose to focus on portraits.

Some of the people I photographed are community leaders and their efforts are to organize their neighbors in the resistance to the removals. There are families that accept payments of compensation by the city, generally not of fair real estate market value, and move away voluntarily. Then again, other large families are separated, as arbitrary evictions result in

removal of one family home, and not the extended family living next door. The city has deployed very subtle and changing tactics to undermine the sense of community. In the end, the most effective weapon for residents is to work with the Public Defenders Office to stop eviction proceedings. But of course that demands time and some level of education and familiarity with the legal system in order to be accomplished.

I strive to make honest portraits of whoever I photograph—so while I certainly have a lot of compassion for the plight of the residents, it really is them who contributed through their demeanor, allowing my work to capture their emotions, something that I would hope helps to dismantle the stigma favela residents face in Brazil. To that end, I was more interested in the human dimension of how the residents were affected by the removals as people, how they connect with each other and the land and homes they cling to.

That comes across quite powerfully in the images. There's a strong sense of the different generations at home in the favelas.

Most people who I describe the project to, without showing images, expect much more dire and depressing images. It was the beauty of doing this work to discover the immense sense of optimism and hope the people I photographed carry within. It was very touching, and a wonderful lesson. They deal with Kafka-esque situations of fighting large powerful institutions who disregard their rights and needs, yet along with a fighting spirit most of them still maintain a positive outlook. I think that, in part, the wonderful Brazilian "alegría" [joy] is at the base of that optimism.

The photos do convey a sense of resilience and determination that's quite resonant.

Well, the destruction *is* an important element to show, but I think a few representations of the destruction in dialogue with portraits make the point.

The point that this is a human story to which we can relate? Not simply some distant problem?

The point of the seemingly irreconcilable interdependency of destruction and construction that the mega-events bring to Rio, and the human toll it creates. Humanity is what ultimately connects us all. It makes us accessible to each other.

It's an important contradiction you brought up about the Olympics. In trying to be a unifying force the spectacle comes at a price.

My approach is always to investigate an idea, for example the construct or fabric or situation of a community, through examining how it plays out in the human interactions by the people who are a part of the situation, willingly or not.

The images in which residents are holding emergency flares are particularly provocative. They're meant to reference the Olympic torch or iconic representations of Lady Liberty?

My idea to try and make images other than the portraits was based on two motivations: One was to find a way of moving past portraits of people who seem to have lost their most basic rights as citizens and are struggling to find their footing to fight for their rights, however positive in their outlook they may be. The other motivation was to give them a tool to show their strength, defiance, and resistance. For that I chose to tap into historic depictions of liberation. But I also used [Image Atlas](#) to see how different cultures and regions of the world today read and show symbols of “liberty,” “liberation,” “resistance,” and other keywords. It all came back to very basic gestures, and the torch as a prop plays beautifully on both sides of the spectrum: emergency and celebration, resistance and liberation.

The other motivation to making these images was that I hoped to create somewhat of an alternate “torch-relay” throughout Rio to call attention to the removals, almost by way of creating a visual campaign.

I was warned by friends that lighting torches in these communities may be dangerous, because gangs who until recently had a tight grip on them often used fireworks and gunshots to signal and communicate. But whenever I presented the idea to the residents, they immediately understood the concept and appreciated the opportunity of being represented in this moment of empowerment.

The project demanded a great deal of sensitivity to local situations. Your images definitely impart a sense of urgency, especially given the way you’ve sequenced them in the book. How do you think of the dialogue of the images differently in book form than you might as an installation? Why was it important for you to see this project as a book rather than only as an exhibition?

Seeing that this type of effect of a mega-event on its host city is almost to be expected these days, I would like to think that *Olympic Favela* can help create an awareness not only about what is happening in Rio, but to host cities of mega-events in general. In that context, the book form is a more lasting presentation and discussion of the subject. Less immersive maybe than an exhibition in the public space though, which is also desirable. I think in the end the two ways to show the work can only complement each other. In terms of creating the book it was a big learning curve to deal with the fact that most often we go through a book in a straight progression. That forced me to pay more attention to the sequence than in an exhibition, where the presentation can be more associative and free-flowing maybe, and be guided by the space the photographs are shown in.

They bring different perspectives to the complexity of the situation. How did you select the essayists for the book? Their accounts add another layer to the project.

I am honored and thrilled to be able to include two beautiful and strong voices in the book. Luis Pérez-Oramas is Curator of Latin American Art at the Museum of Modern Art. His text is poetic, both very personal and an in-depth investigation of the dynamics moving Brazil’s society today—largely based on his personal experience of living in Brazil while he curated the Sao Paulo Biennial 2013.

It was very important for me to include a voice from “the ground” in Rio: Itamar Silva has always lived in Favela Santa Marta—his powerful essay and personal view on the removals in his community add an important layer to my photographs. Itamar also is an activist in various communities in Rio, and works as a director at a local NGO, Ibase. Both texts add to my vision of lending a voice to—and creating a visual representation of—the plight in Rio’s communities as a result of the World Cup and Olympic Games coming to Rio.

Do you usually work as collaboratively as you did for this project?

This project was very different from anything I have ever done. I have not yet dealt with communities which were so deeply unsettled and at times suspicious of my presence. So being sensitive to that insecurity was crucial—sometimes a lot of conversation was involved to win the trust necessary to be able to create honest portraits; it demanded a great deal of collaboration and being sensitive to the motivations and goals of everyone involved: from the NGO who helped us make contact with residents, to the level of comfort my guide, Cafe, had in addressing strangers on the street, to the questions and hesitations the residents had.

Previous projects of mine have allowed me to work much more autonomously and spontaneously, something I do love. Observing and capturing interactions as they naturally occur in front of me, with my presence not felt in the image, is something that attracts me very much.

Thanks, Marc. The portraits are deeply expressive, and I look forward to the dialogue the book will foster.