

Photographing What Is Most Human in Us: Brazil's Struggle for Land and Over the Image

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☒ Listen to Samba da Natureza - Lupércio

Listen to 'Samba da Natureza' (Nature's Samba) by Lupércio.

Part of the struggle for land is the struggle over the image. How do those who work the land, and how does the land itself, find visual expression through the dominant modes of representation? This dual struggle is currently exemplified through an initiative organised by the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil, one of the world's largest social movements and political forces. This year, the MST launched a national photography **campaign** called *Registros da Terra: o MST e os biomas brasileiros* (Records of the Earth: the MST and Brazil's Biomes), a cultural-political offensive designed to redefine the symbolic relationship between humanity and nature. The campaign, which emerges from the movement's decades-long struggle for land, popular agrarian reform, and social transformation, places the landless workers' vision at the centre of the global ecological crisis.

The Symbolic Struggle for the Earth



Photo credit: Juliana Barbosa.

Registros da Terra grew directly out of the MST's 2020 National Plan, Plant Trees, Produce Healthy Food. The plan has deepened reflections on environmental themes and their visual representation over the last five years. As Janelson Ferreira of the MST's communications sector explained to us in an interview for this Art Bulletin, the initiative was born from a recognition that the movement's photography often fell short and needed to change.

Ferreira pointed out that, previously, the movement's visual identity often defaulted to a generic image of nature – 'always that great forest with the little animals and such, as well as human beings'. This representation 'did not reflect the perspective we held and defended'. Even images of agroecology were unimaginative, like close-ups of hands holding seeds. These images prompted crucial questions such as, 'But whose hand is this? What human being is this? It's just a hand: it has no heart, no head, no history. Where does this person come from?'

From this self-reflexivity emerged a 'qualitative leap', in the words of Ferreira, which shifted the focus to the concrete, lived, and political relationship between the landless people and the biomes of Brazil. As Renata Menezes, an MST militant and one of the organisers of *Registros da Terra* put it, the campaign is about confronting the rupture between human beings and nature through 'the dispute of symbolism, through the dispute of images'. In other words, the idea is that the MST confronts this challenge by focusing on representing their popular agrarian reform project and reasserting the deep connection between human

beings, society, and nature through the images themselves.

The goal is two-fold: to condemn and to affirm. While the campaign exposes the role of agribusiness in destruction, deforestation, and the poisoning of water sources as ‘the destroyer[s] of our biomes’, its core mission is to showcase the alternative that the MST is already building. Menezes affirmed:

It is looking at this dimension of condemning, which I think is one of the things we would most like to showcase, because photography... is a way for us to look at the world, to relate to it, from the different visions, different lenses that are placed on this society. So, of course we need to condemn the model, but it is also important that, with these lenses, we can showcase the kind of society we want to achieve and how it already exists in small processes through popular agrarian reform.

Landless peasants, MST militants, and their supporters are invited to submit photography for the campaign interpreting the following themes:

- The MST: Protecting Biomes Through Land Struggle,
- Agroecology as a Model for Nature Protection,
- Producing Healthy Food to Protect Nature,
- Water, Common Good of All People, and
- Agribusiness, Destroyer of Our Biomes.

Menezes also stressed the importance of highlighting all of Brazil’s biomes, from the semi-arid Caatinga to the southern Pampa. This is an intentional choice to ensure that the representation of nature is not confined to ‘merely the super-valorisation of the dense forest like the Atlantic Forest, like the Amazon’, but that it also includes the diversity of the Cerrado and other crucial ecosystems.

Massification of the Extraordinary Everyday



Photo credit: Juliana Barbosa.

One of the revolutionary aspects of this campaign is its commitment to the massification of the photographic language. The MST is not looking for professional gallery photographs, but rather self-portraits of its own struggle. As Menezes put it, ‘One of the dreams we have is to break from [the privileging of] professional photographers. We want to build a process that makes this campaign part of a massification of the language [of photography] within the movement as well’.

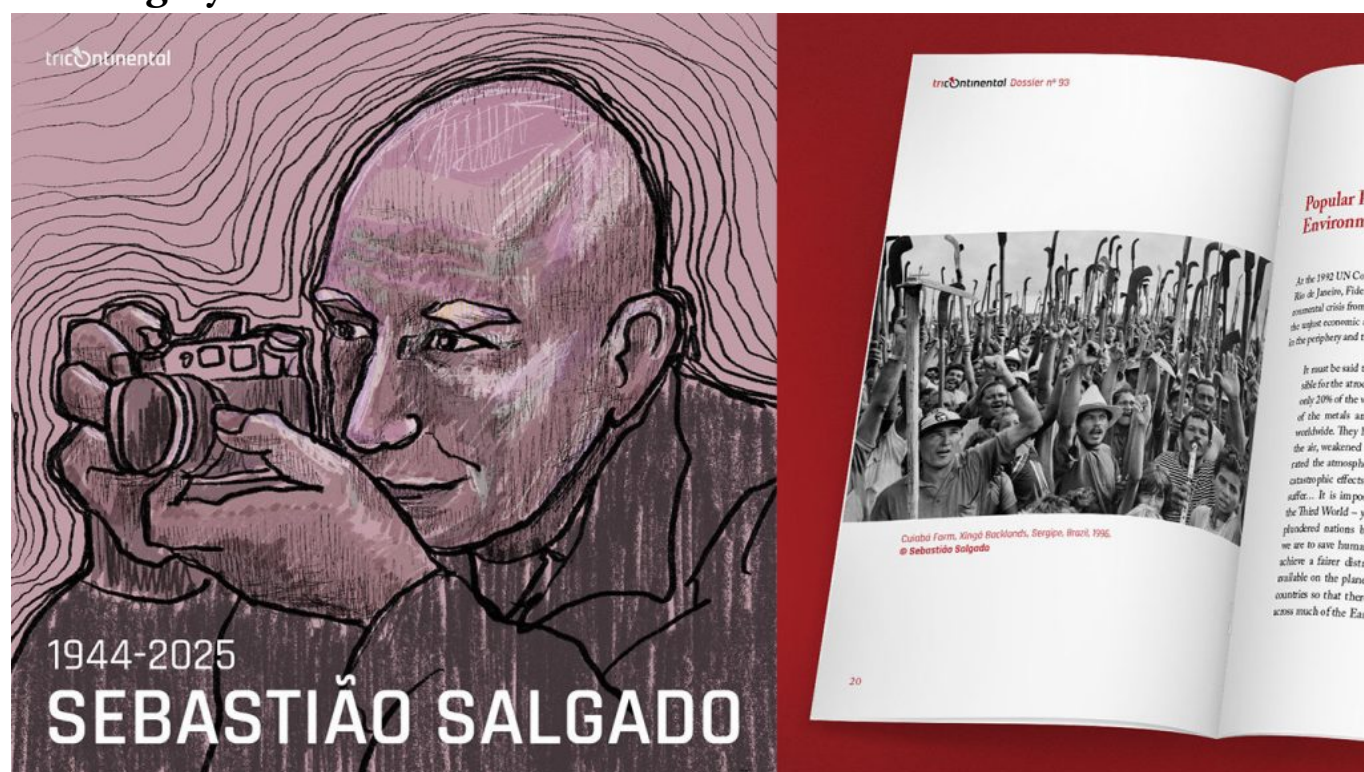
The MST encourages mass participation, actively challenging the ‘dominant position that only a photographer can take photos’. Instead, Menezes emphasised, ‘We stress a lot that people who “only” have a cell phone can send photos... The requirement is that anyone can send a photo’. This practice democratises the visual record, valorising the perspective of the peasants who work and defend the land. The peasants are not merely photographic subjects but the authors of their own images, stories, and histories.

The campaign’s organisers are currently grappling with the curatorial challenge this practice presents, seeking a delicate balance that prioritises political content over technical perfection. Menezes acknowledged the need to ‘build a balance between that image which might not be up to the technical standards... but which carries a content and a story, including the very aesthetic of someone who takes a photo with a cell phone’. This is a political statement in itself: the aesthetics of the struggle captured by its own militants supersede the formal bourgeois artistic standards. The curatorial team ensures that the political and historical context is the primary

balancer in the collection by including work from comrades in the field of photography as well as many MST landless militants. While the submissions deadline is still approaching, the photographs received thus far bear this out. They are largely portraits of daily life, ‘photos that seem to carry poetry within them’. They are the reality of the ‘extraordinary everyday’.

These are not staged scenes. They are testimonies of food being harvested, of a base group meeting, of a simple moment of beauty witnessing an endangered bird flying by in a threatened biome. The process of shaping one’s own vision to uplift and amplify the collective self-confidence and political identity of the rural workers and the defenders of the land lies at the heart of this political photographic campaign.

The Legacy of the Militant Artist



Right: Illustration from our latest Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research **dossier**, *The Environmental Crisis Is a Capitalist Crisis*.

The campaign also pays homage to the Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado (1944–2025), a figure who symbolises the power of the militant artist collaborating with social movements. Salgado, whose work documents the lives of workers and the planet’s untouched landscapes, had a long history of solidarity and collaboration with the MST. For instance, he covered the 1996 Eldorado dos Carajás massacre, in which nineteen MST members were assassinated by the military police during a peaceful protest, and created the photography book *Terra: Struggle for the Landless* (1997) with a preface by José Saramago and poems by Chico Buarque. Proceeds from the book’s sales helped build the MST’s Florestan Fernandes National School (ENFF).

Ferreira reflects on this legacy almost three decades later, noting that *Terra* is found in nearly all secretariats and other MST spaces nationwide as well as internationally. The work served as a crucial element of national

unity and political organisation, reinforcing the ‘collective self-esteem’ of the landless peasants themselves through photography. To her, this is the ‘most concrete thing’ of Salgado’s legacy. She added, ‘Our families begin to recognise themselves... to identify themselves in the works [is] an important element of unity... which, in the end, fulfils an organisational role that is essential’.

Menezes emphasised three points that were raised at the commemorative **event** held in Salgado’s honour at the ENFF: his humanist values and commitment to the histories and struggles of various peoples around the world; his care for nature, concretised through the actions of the *Instituto Terra*, which disseminates Salgado’s photographic documentation around the world to raise awareness and resources to reforest the Atlantic Forest; and his profound commitment to internationalist struggle practised through photography.

Menezes reiterated, ‘We are always vigilant’, as a way to honour, continue, and protect his legacy from potential depoliticisation. Salgado’s photos are also featured in our **dossier** this month, *The Environmental Crisis Is a Capitalist Crisis*.



Photo credit: Wellington Lenon.

The MST’s *Registros da Terra* campaign is a continuation of this vigilance. It does not simply honour the great artist. It issues a powerful call for a new generation of militant artists and activists – the landless workers themselves – to take up the camera to condemn the environmental crimes they witness and to uplift a possible

model of coexistence between humans and nature. In other words, the campaign encourages them to become the authors of a new history. It is a powerful affirmation that the struggle for the environment and for socialism is also a cultural and aesthetic one, a daily work of poetry against the brutal, hegemonic narratives and images of capital that are destroying our planet. This campaign and this vision beautifully embody the words of Salgado, 'I photograph what is most human in us: the struggle, the suffering, but also the resilience and the hope'.

With resilience and hope,

Tings Chak

Art Director, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

P.S. Don't forget to check out our portrait **gallery** of the month, honouring revolutionaries from around the world.