MUSÉE

ENERGY

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STEVE MILLER

Portrait by Andrea Blanch

FIOS DAS PESSOAS

With the sequence of images you've been taking of Brazil's Favelas, what drew you to this part of the world? And what interested you about favelas as subject matter?

The first trip to Brazil...it was so exotic, and so foreign and beautiful. I really felt like I had a reason to go back, but I had to find work there in order to go back. In Brazil, there is this combination of extreme beauty and extreme poverty. Poverty in the favelas (everyone knows this) is side by side with the richest people in the world. So there's a whole contrast between barbed wire mansions next to raw sewage in the streets - which is what I saw. I guess the attraction to the favelas was this incredible need, a chaotic, unorganized, and unrestrained need for resources. Brazil is all about the natural resources. On the one hand, you have the über rich who can buy these products that nobody needs, but which are very fun to have; and on the other hand, an exploding population's need for jobs, electricity, etc., which creates a dialogue. So, this conversation about the use of resources is not exclusive to the biggest users of those resources. We're all a part of the dialogue, from the most extreme end of chaos in the favelas, to the über end of consumption, which would be upscale shopping.

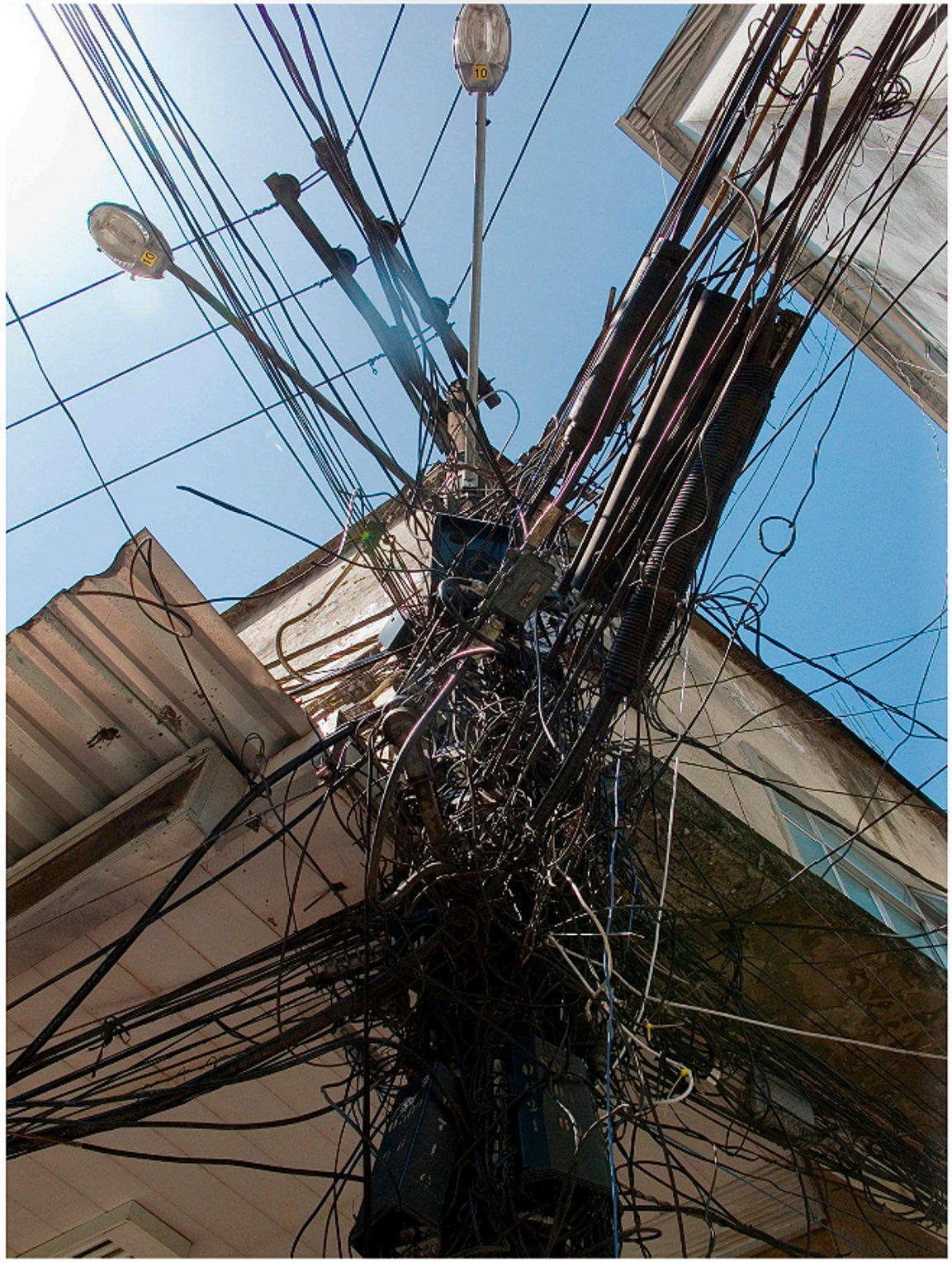
The other thing I'd like to mention are those telephone wires. They're called Gatos, and Gatos are like cats' whiskers. There's something really beautiful about them - they're like these natural drawings, these drawings that get made by human activity that you could never envision making on your own. When you visualize them though, and you see it in the flesh, you see a human drawing, a collective drawing of need and consumption.

This series is, for the most part, absent of human figures, and yet still suggests urban life. Why did you choose to portray the favelas in this specific way?

I think that when you start showing human misery, a trope that's been well documented by many people, coupled with the stock images of extreme poverty...I mean, it becomes complicated, because in the favela, I went into apartments where people lived. I went into peoples' homes, and there was plumbing. I went into this one apartment, and it was clean. The notion of poverty and human misery is so complex. If you did the cliché of poverty, it'd be a crying baby with dirt all over its face, a mother breast feeding in tattered clothes, something like that.

The real image of the favela is a massive drug den, where the drug lords are running the show in a cesspool of violence. What I like about the telephone lines is that they express the chaos of the subculture of drug use. They reflect need, because everyone needs electricity. They're stealing it. The guys who work for the phone companies in the daytime live in the favelas. They go back in and illegally wire everything, so they don't have to pay for their electricity. These lines embody the illegality of the drug trade. These favelas are complete cities with their own laws; whole urban systems.

There is one image with a human figure, a young boy sil-



All images © Steve Miller

houetted and crisscrossed with power lines - why did you include this image?

That's like Black Orpheus. That's the poetic image, and I was walking by and there it was. It's an image that we all know and we've all seen, but it appeared in front of me and I was compelled to photograph it.

Your work focuses a lot on parallels. What do they symbolize for you?

They represent something about this dialogue mentioned earlier, about consumption and who gets to utilize the rapidly depleting resources. I was shooting with that Lumix, so I was always shooting up, trying to get them against a background. Once you get a picture of the power lines within the context of the actual favela, they're chaos and poetry, at once.

Is there anything that would you like to say about human energy consumption?

Well, that's the biggest topic of the global dialogue right now. We're all a part of that dialogue, and no one is exempt from it. What I liked about including the favela images is that they're not exempt either, just because they maybe need it more than somebody else, they're still not exempt from it. The obvious person to go after is the person with the Birkin bag or crocodile handbag or whatever, but I think it's a global dialogue in which everybody plays a role. This dialogue has to take place anywhere and everywhere. It can take place on a t-shirt, or in a tropical fashion mall. This dialogue is not exclusive to any one environment. The reality is, we're not going to stop shopping, or using the Internet, and they're not going to stop watching TV in the favelas. It's more a question of some kind of mindfulness and of world consumption, which has become so pressing.

Electricity has become vital to our existence; yet in your images the wires are tangled and threatening. Is this juxtaposition something that interests you?

Well, it's interesting that you see it as threatening. I never really thought of it as threatening, but as illustrative of a need. New York is the eighth city that is going to be under water by 2050, so all of this consuming has incredible consequences. Look at the recent experience with Sandy...I mean have you been to Wall Street? Have you seen all of those buildings that were shut down for six months? You can move to higher ground (and that's not a bad decision to make), and you can make a lot of money and isolate yourself and have an armed guard, but at the same time, moving to higher ground is just stalling. I think the energy issue is urgent, and something that should be happening in your magazine. It should be happening on my t-shirts; it should be happening at the museum; it should be happening everywhere. It's not a dialogue that can be ignored any longer. You can't take the George Bush notion that global warming is a hoax - that's just an absurd, ignorant notion.
The favela is a place that expresses the possibility of this danger and lawlessness in the future. The favela is something that shows the worst that could happen. Not only is it the worst that could happen, it is happening! You also can't have these extreme differences between the rich and the poor. That's why I like the power lines. They represent the chaos...
And you realize that in the U.S., if you're a hospital technician, theoretically you can have a middle class, lower-middle class life. These people have the same jobs that you could have in New York, or any other city. But they can't make enough money to get out of the favela. They commute two hours every day to work, usually on buses that aren't air-conditioned, and which don't run on time. In Salvador, they've been building the subway for 13 years...it's...you get the picture. The corruption is unbelievable, and the politicians are immune to prosecution. They take as much as they can, and public services are non-existent. You drive in the road, and the potholes are the size of elephants. The infrastructure is just really awful in Brazil, and people are pissed and angry, as they should be. There are bad roads, no good public transportation, a bad education system, awful prisons, and hospitals for the public are not easily available, and what is available has no quality.

It sounds like a dreadful place.

It's not a dreadful place, though it's on the verge. However, they're trying to get it ready for the Olympics. I'm not an expert on Brazil, but the security issues are serious. My friends tell me, "Never have your window down, always roll your window up, and never stop at the traffic light at night - always have your door locked." That's not something we even think about. In NYC, you wouldn't think that you couldn't have your window rolled down. Well, maybe in the worst neighborhood in the city, but I mean, not in general. If you're in any neighborhood in Rio, you have to have your guard up, all the time.

So what comment would you like to make on this subject?

You know, it's what I said previously. It's not so much commentary, as inviting dialogue. That's what I would like to do if I'm successful. I would bring this dialogue into the realm of fine art. You know there are many people doing it; I'm not the only person. But it's not just formalism anymore, that notion of abstract beauty. There's a role for that, and it just seems so urgent now. It's nice to have the ability to not have to confront reality. The thing about favelas in Brazil is that they are so beautiful, even though they possess an element of danger. So, you can never relax in the beauty, and that seems to be the world we live in today.

Did you ever feel unsafe?

[Laughing] Are you kidding me? I felt unsafe in the favela. The first trip I was really, really nervous. I had been working in the school near the Jardin Botanica, and I was trying to get the kids to go in to take photographs for me. But they just didn't get what I was looking for. I couldn't get the pho-

tos that I wanted, so later I just went by myself and did it. So yes, the first time I was really nervous. But the second time, I took my girlfriend because she wanted to go. That was actually the time we ran into a drug deal. And, then another time, the last time that I went, was right after the cops invaded the favela. It was all over the papers. I was there within a week of that sort of invasion. There were convoys of cops in trucks going up and down the main street. That was a year ago, so I don't know what's happening now. I did notice that new housing has been built over a city bus terminal parking lot, in the year since I left.

So the favela's danger, is that something that draws you to it even more?

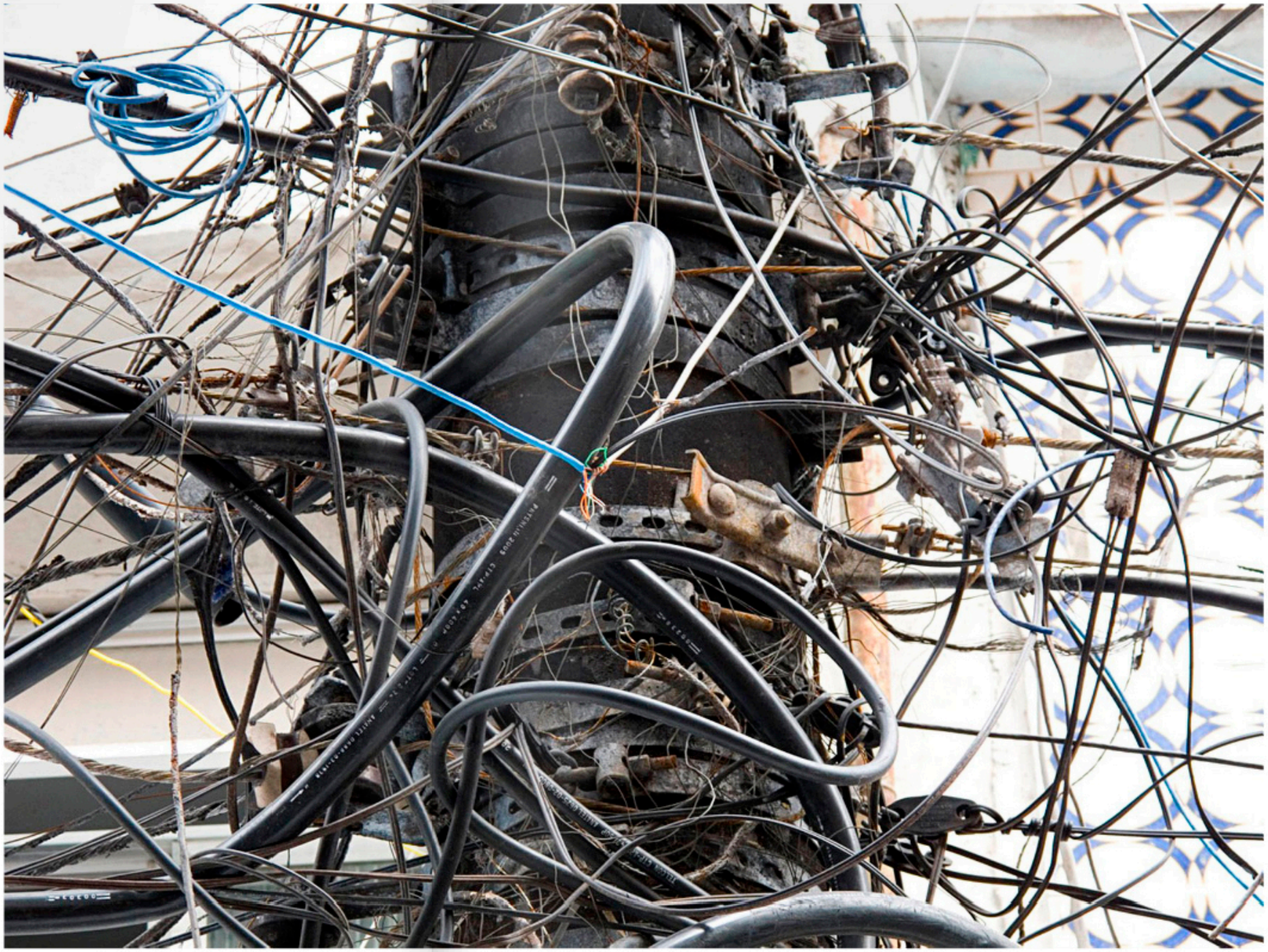
I think more so my curiosity. It wasn't the danger. The danger was the inconvenience, because I couldn't get the photographs I wanted without going in to take them myself. And for a non-resident, it's really hard to go in there on your own. They have tours that you can go through on trucks or vans, but I couldn't see myself doing that. I really wanted to walk around.

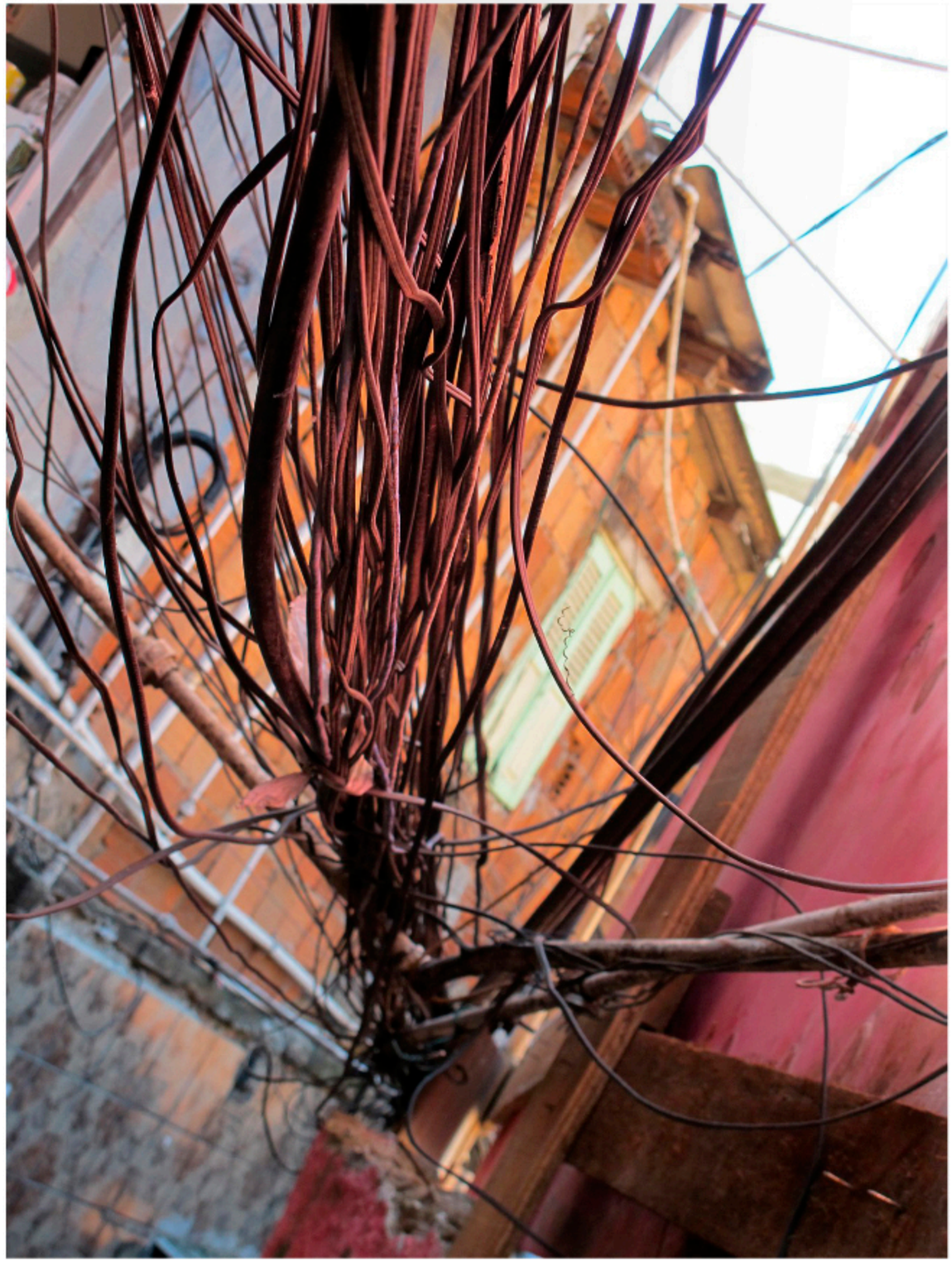
Some of the images are like tangled webs and dense knots. Is this an idea of communication and interconnectedness that is significant to your work?

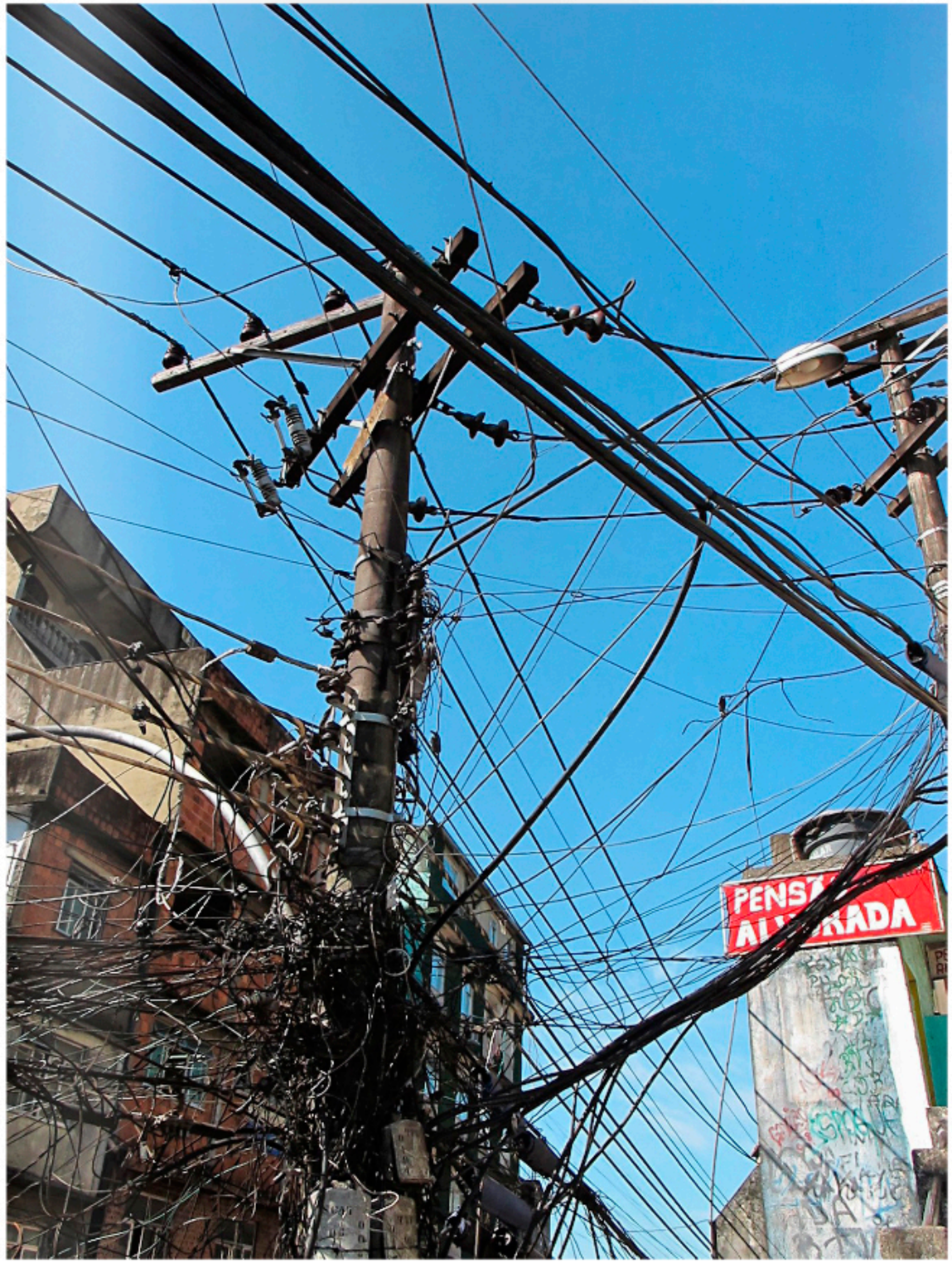
I love the way you said that. I mean, yes of course! I like that you say that it's not necessarily what I was thinking - that's something successful about a work of art, when somebody else brings something to it. And yes, the interconnectedness is something art obviously does. The telephone artists are connecting these guys to television and Internet. It's connecting them to culture, but I had never thought about that going in there. I had been looking at the satellite maps of the land clearing in the Amazon. You can see the explosive amount of clearing, and how it mirrors the explosive growth of the favelas. So, it's like two things going on simultaneously: massive poverty increasing, and massive exploitation of resources. Two different issues seem to come together in the same conceptual place.

When people look at these pictures, what are you hoping they come away with?

Well, I see craziness. There's a delirium to it, and I think that's really beautiful. However, it's a delirium with content. At one point early on, I was using these electron microscopic images, and I was shooting viruses. That was in the early form of that kind of image making, so people didn't know what they were looking at. They didn't know they were looking at an AIDS virus, they thought they were looking at a coral reef or a moon rock. I think the telephone wires have the ability to be like a Rorschach blot, to illustrate this notion of connectedness. I see delirium, but delirium isn't necessarily pejorative - delirium can be euphoric. I wouldn't say that it's a euphoric place, but at the same time I'd say there's something delirious about the Brazilian spirit, music, and passion for soccer. I think that expresses, on some level, the extremity of the whole situation.



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